

# EINSTEIN FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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HIS LEGACY IN SCIENCE, ART, AND  
MODERN CULTURE

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## SUBVERSIVE EINSTEIN

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UNLIKE THE DISTINGUISHED EINSTEIN SCHOLARS who appear in this volume, my relation to Einstein was purely accidental. I didn't choose him; you might say he chose me when I took over the direction of an institute founded to nourish Einstein's heritage as a public intellectual. I might claim that before 2000, my attention was simply elsewhere, and I felt no more than the distant respect that people in the humanities feel for Newton or Kepler. But I'd rather confess it at the outset: when I began to work at the Einstein Forum, I didn't even *like* Einstein. This was something I hardly admitted to myself, because it wasn't until later that I understood the reason why: I don't like *Luftmenschen*—and Jews don't have saints. (I used to think *Luftmensch* was a German word, but it's one of the few Yiddish words that sounds German but isn't. It means someone who has his head in the clouds, or seems to live on air. In practice, of course, since none can live on air, it means someone who keeps his head in the clouds and lets someone else worry about putting food on the table.)

Was Einstein a *Luftmensch*? Here's part of the *Time Magazine* article declaring him person of the century: "Einstein was the iconic 20th century scientist, the bumbling professor with the German accent, a comic cliché in a thousand films. . . . Yet he was unfathomably profound, the genius among geniuses who discovered, merely by thinking about it, that the universe was not as it seemed."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps only in America could a German accent count as a sign of bumbling. But even that aside, here are all the clichés: comic and faintly ridiculous; a sweetheart perhaps, but who would chose to follow him? If the price of what *Time* calls "profundity" is to become a comic cliché, wouldn't you rather be superficial?

Now you may not expect much of *Time*, but what about *Die Zeit*? The material in one of its recent issues devoted to Einstein is predictably written in a

more ponderous voice than the American quickie, but its content is surprisingly similar. Einstein is described as an eternal child. At first we're told of a *wise* naivety, but the wisdom drops out quickly, for soon he's described as a sad fool, *ein trauriger Narr*.<sup>2</sup> Nor is the cliché confined to the news media. J. Robert Oppenheimer called him childlike and wholly without sophistication, Isaiah Berlin called him innocent, and even Fritz Stern writes that his views were "well-meant in the usual sense, but lacking a certain closeness to reality." Now, only clowns can be both comic clichés and sad fools; so all in all, the picture of Einstein as clown is alive and well on both sides of the Atlantic. But not even circuses lead me to have much patience for clowns.

The other side of the clown is the saint, and they have much in common. When Einstein isn't regarded as comic, he's enveloped in an air of solemnity he couldn't escape whether he put his tongue in or out of his cheek. St. Albert, we know, was in favor of peace and helped little children with their math homework. But even these can be given a faintly ridiculous spin. Who, precisely, is not in favor of peace? Einstein's unofficial canonization provokes worse things than ridicule: where there are saints, many will suspect clay feet and hunt for what is sententiously called "the man behind the myth." Einstein's engagement for peace is countered with the false claim that he fathered the atomic bomb, while his fondness for strangers' children is countered with the slightly more plausible claim that he rather neglected his own. Sainthood provokes demasking—one reason why Einstein, who realized he was being canonized in his lifetime, did what he could to make it a matter of irony.

I suspect I speak for other non-Einstein specialists when I say that neither the air of piety nor the touch of derision that surrounds the man was remotely appealing, so I took detours around him wherever I could. But when I came to the Einstein Forum, I had to approach him somehow, and the first thing that surprised me were the pictures. Well into his sixties, every photo shows immediately that this was a man of extraordinary power, with the sort of charisma that drew the attention of men and women, small American children and aging European aristocrats, and virtually everyone else in between. *Luftmenschen* attract pity and a bemused sort of affection, but they're never charismatic. And saints may be luminous, but they really aren't sexy. Einstein was clearly both. So what evidence do we have for the stumbling professor?

He hated formal clothing and wore his hair long, possible grounds for thinking someone out of touch with reality in the 1940s and 1950s—remember the Beatles?—but his own attitude about this was anything but silly. (One of his better remarks was uttered in Caputh, where his second wife Elsa, always more enamoured of bourgeois convention than he was, fussed at him to get dressed before a delegation of dignitaries arrived. Einstein fired back, "If they want to see me, here I am. If they want to see my clothes, you

can open the closet.")<sup>3</sup> His biographers revel in stories of forgetfulness: Einstein forgot the key to his apartment and had to wake his landlord after his first wedding, which, says Fölsing, shows *something*—without telling us what. (Isn't that the day when one is supposed to have other things on one's mind?) Others make something of the fact that he left a suitcase on a train. (Wouldn't the objects that have been sacrificed to train systems by those who are reading this volume suffice to stock a department store, or at the very least an umbrella shop?)

Did Einstein pretend to be a *Luftmensch*? It's a pose that can be useful. There are smart men who assume it just to avoid doing the dishes. If Einstein did play at being more unworldly than he was to preserve himself from too much worldliness, he had an awful lot to avoid. Einstein is called the first intellectual superstar, but no intellectual before or since, and possibly no superstar, was ever treated like this. Recall what happened on his first trip to America in 1921: Reporters stormed the ship when it docked, an impromptu parade, Stars and Stripes as well as blue and white Magen Davids lined the streets of New York to greet him, and crowds reacted similarly elsewhere. And all this was *before* the Nobel Prize. After it, the circus got larger: On his next visit to America, nine years later, he addressed a mass meeting to celebrate Hanukah in Madison Square Garden, was handed the keys to the city by New York's mayor, gave advice to Rockefeller about his educational foundation, and was escorted by Charlie Chaplin to the world premiere of *City Lights* in Hollywood. (There the crowd not only rioted but shrieked.) According to the German consul at the time, "Einstein's personality, without any clearly recognizable reason, triggers outbursts of a kind of mass hysteria, not only among . . . romantic dreamers . . . but also among relatively level-headed circles."<sup>4</sup> One final story: When I. F. Stone received a check from Einstein to subscribe to his newsletter, he called and asked if he might simply frame the check. His secretary sighed, for it was a common request, which made it extremely difficult to keep his bank account balanced. She appealed to Stone to cash the check, and promised to send it to him once it was cancelled. This is a sort of superstardom that Mick Jagger, or even Dylan, may not match. Confronted with *this much world* wherever he went, Einstein might be forgiven most any pose he took up that would allow him to withdraw from it once in awhile.

But the more I have learned about Einstein, the more I suspect that he wasn't a *Luftmensch* at all, genuine or fake. Rather, I've come to believe that the myth of Einstein as *Luftmensch* is one that was invented to cope with him. Einstein himself said the one good piece of news in the otherwise intolerable cult surrounding his person was the fact that "it is a welcome phenomenon in our supposedly materialist time that it makes heroes of men whose

goals lie exclusively in the spiritual and moral domain."<sup>5</sup> Alas, that cult is marked by ambivalence. For by turning Einstein into a saint or a fool, we can pretend to celebrate the intellectual while actually undermining it.

To question this apotheosis, there is all sorts of evidence that he had his feet on the ground: from the testimony that he made an excellent patent officer—a profession he seems to have enjoyed, and hardly a calling for *Luftmenschen*—to his extraordinarily savvy self-awareness. Einstein knew exactly how he was perceived and used, and made use of it when he wanted. He often complained that he was liked, but not understood; one person who understood him quite well was David Ben Gurion. It's well known that Einstein was asked to become president of the State of Israel; less well known is Ben Gurion's remark after the invitation was made: "Tell me what to do if he says yes! I had to offer him the post because it's impossible not to, but if he accepts it we are in for trouble."<sup>6</sup>

It's the business of public intellectuals to speak truth to power, and as one whose task was consolidating the fledgling State of Israel, Ben Gurion knew what he'd have on his hands if Einstein were his partner. The first record we have of the way Einstein made people in power nervous stems from a teacher's remark that, although he didn't do anything wrong, the way he sat in the back of the class and smiled violated the feeling of respect a teacher needs from his class. Einstein radiated not only charisma, but a distinct and steady antiauthoritarian aura from the time he was young. He was not conventionally religious; Spinoza was one of his heroes. But no less than the 17th-century philosopher, Einstein's works exude a sense of awe toward the Creation. Unlike those skeptics whose goal is to admire nothing, Einstein's antiauthoritarian standpoint never degenerated into the purely negative. As I will shortly sketch, his was a Kantian idealism: never merely skeptical for its own sake, his refusal to accept received wisdom was always in service of an ideal.

To think about what it means to serve ideals without forgetting the real, let's recall some high points in his career as subversive. Einstein's work as a public intellectual can be divided into four distinct causes: his work against war, against political repression, against racism, and in favor of socialism. In all but the last case, his position was quite similar, and it was both clear and complicated. He insisted on the rule of law and on strengthening international law, but when law itself failed, he championed nonviolent but decided civil disobedience. The volume of material he wrote shows that this was very clearly work, not merely a hobby. The first time he put his reputation into political service was shortly after the outbreak of World War I. It's one thing to be in favor of peace today, when even those who valorize war do it with Orwellian language praising peace that no one is really fooled by, but most of us have learned to swallow. It was another in 1914, when the heroic language with

which boys marched off to die had not even been called into question. Most of Europe marched with them. While scientists like Planck and Haber, and artists like Reinhardt and Liebermann, were urging support for the war effort, Einstein was one of only four German intellectuals, out of a hundred approached, who was willing to sign a manifesto at the beginning of the war calling for its ending and for the creation of a united Europe. He went on to join the harassed League of the New Fatherland and was so outspoken that French pacifist Romain Rolland wrote: "Einstein is incredibly free in his judgments on Germany, where he lives. No German enjoys that freedom."<sup>7</sup>

At the time, even less bold actions put people at risk. The civilized and aristocratic Bertrand Russell, in civilized and aristocratic England, spent time in jail for pacifism during World War I. And everywhere he went, Einstein was subject to pressures Russell never knew. There were so few Jewish professors at the time he became one that a letter testifying he was free of unpleasant Jewish qualities was seen as necessary for his first professorship. Though his commitment to the religion ended when he was twelve, Einstein never dreamed of hiding his origins, which could spell doom for anyone who wasn't willing to blend into the background. His courage on this score should be underlined: this was a time when many Jews still took conversion as the price of entry into the local culture, and even those who didn't, leapt to military service and displays of patriotism to show what good Germans (or French, or Americans) they'd become. Einstein's refusal to blend into the background hardly escaped notice. A Berliner who offered a reward to anyone who managed to kill Einstein was merely sentenced to a fine—reason enough for Einstein to leave Berlin briefly after the murder of Rathenau, with whom he'd been friendly. But though he confessed that the assassination left him on edge, he was soon back to provoking whenever he thought it was needed.

Though he had been one of the few pacifists during World War I, he enraged those who remained unremitting pacifists later with his support for any step in the war effort that would serve to defeat the Nazis: after World War II was over, he returned to support everything that could be done to defuse the cold war. Addressing the U.N. General Assembly in 1947, Einstein urged the United Nations to "strengthen its moral authority by bold decisions," and in clear and concrete terms took America to task, over and over, for its share of responsibility for the Cold War. While insisting on the need to strengthen international institutions, he was hardly naïve about their limits. Where they prove ineffective he urged defiance, for he argued that the judgment at Nürnberg confirmed what he held to be self evident: Where the law is immoral, we have the duty to follow our conscience instead.

Einstein's instinct for political repression was born under the spell of the Nazis, but it was never confined to them. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to

criticize the Nazis, but keeping eyes open for other dangers took both more acumen and more courage. Unfortunately, the need for vigilance did not cease when Einstein reached the safety of American shores, though he praised the country for a democratic spirit second to none. But his troubles with the United States started even before he emigrated. In 1932 he became target of a group called the Women Patriots, described in their own newspaper in 1918 as antisuffragists waging an unceasing war against feminism and socialism. Having lost the battle against women's suffrage, they turned all their attention on socialism, whose world leader, they claimed, was Einstein—worse than Stalin himself. Some of their charges:

Albert Einstein . . . advocates "acts of rebellion" against the basic principle of all organized government. . . . He advocates "conflict with public authority"; admits that his "attitude is revolutionary" . . . he teaches and leads and organizes a movement for unlawful "individual resistance" and "acts of rebellion" against officers of the United States in times of war.<sup>8</sup>

The charges go on for sixteen single-spaced pages. They led to interrogation by the U.S. Consul in Berlin, to whom Einstein pointed out that he hadn't asked to go to America but was invited there, and would cancel his trip if the visa wasn't delivered in twenty-four hours. His wife then relayed Einstein's words to the *New York Times*: "Wouldn't it be funny if they won't let me in? The whole world would be laughing at America."<sup>9</sup> The combination of chutzpah and media savvy at work here, neither of them qualities much in evidence with *Luftmenschen*, impressed the State Department, too, for he was issued a visa immediately. Though a group of Women Patriots tried to prevent him from getting off his ship in California, they did indeed appear ridiculous. A year later Einstein was offered unconditional citizenship through a special act of Congress, citing his qualities as a genius, a humanitarian, a lover of the United States, and an admirer of its Constitution—all of which were true. Since he rejected special treatment in speeding up the process, formal citizenship didn't come until later, but his right to stay in the country was thereby assured. His safety, however, was not, and he was urged to blend quietly into the background in just the same way smart Jews were urged to do in Wilhelminian Germany. Arriving in Princeton, he was met with this letter from the director of the Institute for Advanced Study: "I have conferred with the local authorities . . . and the national government in Washington, and they have all given me the advice . . . that your safety in America depends upon silence and refraining from attendance at public functions. . . . You and your wife will be thoroughly welcome at Princeton, but in the long run your safety will depend on your discretion."<sup>10</sup>

It was advice that Einstein ignored. He spoke and wrote to virtually everybody he could stand, about virtually everything he cared about, in virtually

every format, large or small, and as anticommunist hysteria swept over America, he became increasingly outspoken. Though he was one of the few leftist intellectuals never tempted by communism, he thought anticommunism posed a far greater danger for America. Einstein's engagement during the McCarthy period took several forms. One was simply supporting prominent people who were under siege, appearing for a photo-op, for example, with Henry Wallace and Paul Robeson at a time when supporting either was taking a risk. After Robeson, whom he much admired, had his passport revoked, Einstein wrote to Wallace describing America as half-fascistic, and to Queen Elizabeth of Belgium expressing his fear and sadness that America reminded him of Germany in the 1930s. By that time McCarthyism was in full swing, and the House Un-American Activities Committee had compiled lists of subversive organizations. Anyone associated with any of them was ipso facto suspected of treason. Einstein was connected with thirty-three.

Even more impressive than his willingness to support people and organizations who were already in the limelight was his willingness to support those who weren't. He used his influence to help young people who were threatened for refusing to serve in the army or to go along with the HUAC. The letter that he wrote to a young teacher who refused to testify, William Frauenglass, was published on the front page of the *New York Times*. Unfortunately, the letter has again become so timely that it should be quoted at length:

Dear Mr. Frauenglass,

The problem with which the intellectuals of this country are confronted is very serious. The reactionary politicians have managed to instil suspicion of all intellectual efforts into the public by dangling before their eyes a danger from without. Having succeeded so far, they are now proceeding to suppress the freedom of teaching and to deprive of their positions all those who do not prove submissive, i.e., to starve them. What ought the minority of intellectuals to do against this evil? Frankly, I can only see the revolutionary way of non-cooperation in the sense of Gandhi's. Every intellectual who is called before one of the committees ought to refuse to testify, i.e., he must be prepared for jail and economic ruin, in short, for the sacrifice of his personal welfare in the interest of the cultural welfare of this country. This refusal to testify must be based on the assertion that it is shameful for a blameless citizen to submit to such an inquisition and that this kind of inquisition violates the spirit of the constitution. If enough people are ready to take this grave step they will be successful. If not, then the intellectuals of this country deserve nothing better than the slavery which is intended for them.<sup>11</sup>

Would the U.S. government really jail the world's most famous scientist at the age of seventy-three? The fear may seem exaggerated, but Einstein had

reason to worry about going to jail in the days before this letter was published. Two years earlier, the older W.E.B. DuBois had been brought to court in handcuffs, and one of Einstein's closest friends had just been denied a passport. Einstein was the target of a flood of hate mail; one right-wing commentator urged the Senate to ban refugees altogether so that America would not "get another Einstein"; and even liberal sources like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* called his letter "extreme" and "unwise." The letter made international headlines and greatly strengthened the morale of those brave young teachers who refused to testify. A few of them found their way to Einstein's door, where they discovered he was not only willing to tell them to prepare for economic ruin in the interests of their country, but to try to prevent it, and he spent some time working to help those who had been fired find new jobs. He was not himself molested; try as he might, J. Edgar Hoover could never find anything that was *criminally* subversive. But it's important to recall one reason why the popular view of Einstein as father of the bomb is false: even if he had wanted to work on the Manhattan Project, he couldn't get a security clearance. Alerted to his socialist convictions in the early 1930s, the FBI director opened an investigation that didn't succeed in deporting him, but did prevent the world's greatest scientist from working on classified defense projects.

The third of Einstein's political concerns, racism, was also nurtured in the womb of the anti-Semitism he and other Jews experienced, but his intolerance for mistreatment of minorities was never confined to mistreatment of Jews. Einstein's deep commitment to the fledgling State of Israel was always accompanied by universalist concerns; in 1929, in a famous letter to Chaim Weizmann, he warned that without better policy toward the Arabs, "we will not have learned anything from our 2,000 year old ordeal."<sup>12</sup> His hatred of racism showed itself in the same mixture of public and private behavior he showed in other cases. Shortly after arriving in Princeton, for example, upon hearing that singer Marian Anderson played to a sold-out concert but was denied a room at the Nassau Inn, he promptly invited her to stay at his house, beginning a friendship that lasted for the rest of his life. Einstein often compared American treatment of African Americans to German treatment of the Jews. Those who find this extreme should know that in 1946, racist violence in the United States killed fifty-six black people, most of them veterans returning from service in World War II. Far more appalling than this is the fact that an anti-lynching campaign, headed by Robeson and others, was initially unsuccessful. One might assume that lynching was murder, and therefore already considered to be criminal, but the FBI found the group's left-wing origins more threatening than lynching itself, and a multiracial delegation failed to convince Truman, who argued that the Cold War was no time for passing controversial laws. Einstein was too ill to join the delegation, who took a letter

he wrote for Truman, but he continued to work with Robeson as long as he could.

Finally, a few words about Einstein's commitment to socialism must be mentioned. Einstein has been described as a temperamental socialist. Despite the best efforts of his second wife, he had virtually no interest in consumer goods, and his convictions were shaped accordingly. What's particularly unusual was the way he consistently managed to maintain his own set of convictions without bowing to *any* set of dogmas. His intellectual and practical courage were shown in stories like this one. When Einstein received word in the chaos of 1918 that a group of revolutionary students and soldiers had taken over the University of Berlin and imprisoned the rector and several professors, he went with two friends to the Reichstag. There, armed revolutionaries denied them entrance until somebody recognized Einstein. They were astonished when he argued against their attempt to create a program in which only socialist doctrines would be taught. Though well known as a socialist, he was appalled at the breach of intellectual freedom the revolutionaries proposed. They nonetheless allowed him to reach the newly elected Social Democratic president, whom Einstein persuaded to write the note that released the imprisoned academics.

Yet his essay "Why Socialism"—written in 1949, hardly an opportune time—goes so far as to say that "the economic anarchy of capitalist society as it exists today is, in my opinion, the real source of evil."<sup>13</sup> Socialism, for him, is the reasonable response to a crisis of value: he thought the present situation to be a result of the lack of connection between the individual and society. That break itself is furthered by the fact that the media are so thoroughly controlled by economic interests that individual citizens cannot use the political rights they have, while fear of unemployment makes them docile and tame. Einstein doesn't pretend to offer original political theory here or elsewhere. Rather, what he gives are standard arguments for the idea that capitalism cripples the lives of those who seem to benefit by it, as well as those who don't. What's unusual in Einstein's arguments are, first, his unequivocal rejection of Soviet-style communism: "No purpose is so high that unworthy methods in achieving it can be justified." And second, his equally un-Stalinist claim that socialism can never be scientific. Einstein's socialism was a moral commitment, the only one he thought could give life meaning.

My survey has been brief, but I hope it's been sufficient to suggest that the popular picture of the good-hearted bumbler is sorely in need of revision. Einstein was a man who knew exactly what he was doing in the world. This is not Don Quixote, well meaning but looking backward; if some of his views seemed *weltfremd* at the time, the world has been catching up to him ever since.

In a valuable essay that also helps to undermine the picture of Einstein as unworldly, Yehuda Elkana pointed to continuities between the epistemology behind Einstein's scientific and moral views. It may be helpful to add that both of them are extremely Kantian. Though we know that Einstein first read the *Critique of Pure Reason* at the age of thirteen, standard discussion of Einstein and Kant concentrates on space and time. At least as worthy of further scholarship would be Einstein's own remark in the Schilpp volume: "I did not grow up in the Kantian tradition, but came to understand the truly valuable which is to be found in his doctrine . . . quite late. It is contained in the sentence: 'the real is not given to us, but is put to us (by way of a riddle).'"<sup>14</sup>

To view reality as a riddle that is put to us is to question statements like Fritz Stern's, which I quoted in beginning, and with them the picture of Einstein as far from reality. Such statements assume that we know what reality is: what is certain and what is not, what can be known and what can only be dreamed or intuited, what is given to us from objects outside ourselves and what we contribute to their structure, what can be confirmed by experience and what calls experience into question. To view reality as a riddle is to ask all these questions and more. Kant's major reason for doing so was to call attention to the difference between the way the world is and the way the world should be. The first is the object of science, the second of ethics, and we confuse them at our peril. Those whose only reality is what we experience leave no room for experience to be changed by ideals of justice and progress that challenge the authority of experience itself. Yet those whose lives are guided by ideals without regard to experience are in danger of becoming merely utopian, or even totalitarian. Both in science and in ethics, Einstein was aware of the risks of tradition-bound empiricism as well as of foolish idealism. More than anything else he was a Kantian idealist, with a commitment to maintaining ideals that are not derived from experience, but that shape it. While maintaining a clear-eyed view of the way the world is, he never forgot the way it should be, and always acted according to the latter. Did this make him unrealistic? Telling someone to be more realistic is a way of saying, Decrease your expectations of the world. Einstein never did.

When we look at the positions he took, what's astonishing is how often he was right. To recapitulate: his reputation skyrocketed after 1919 not only because observations confirmed his bold theoretical speculations, but also because experience confirmed his lonely opposition to World War I. The Weimar government was eager to use him to represent the new republic, for he was one of the few German public figures who'd opposed the war from the start, and that position was suddenly in demand. Einstein had nothing against being useful. He continued to argue for clear and complex positions—supporting any means to stop the Nazis, whether a united front at a time when most of

the left found cooperation impossible, or a race to build the bomb before the Nazis did—while never losing sight of longer-term goals as soon as the war was over. His fears about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were extraordinarily prescient. Albrecht Fölsing calls his proposals for a secret council of Jews and Arabs "of course both arbitrary and unrealistic."<sup>15</sup> What such a council could have accomplished under the British Mandate is hard to say, but in past decades, secret meetings between Israelis and Palestinians have been major steps toward peace. Even George W. Bush, who found the demand for a strong United Nations to be obsolete in 2003, has since been forced to acknowledge its necessity, at least in principle. And those who find Einstein's call for world government to be Quixotic should know that global governance has become not just a buzzword but the focus of attention by such great utopian institutions as the Deutsche Bank.

Einstein's instinct for the right position, far in advance of his time, has been so clear in the cases of racism and political repression that it would be tempting to claim that reality has been running after him ever since, until the Bush administration turned the word "terrorist" into the sort of epithet "communist" was for McCarthy. Progress may be possible, but it is hardly inevitable. Backsliding is always an option, and it would not have surprised Einstein: his universalism always recognized universal possibilities for failure. Socialism may seem the one issue on which history supports the picture of Einstein as a sad fool. But the real, no-longer-existing socialism that's been consigned to the dust heap of history was never the socialism Einstein supported. His anti-Stalinist warnings were as clear as his conviction that unrestricted capitalism could not provide humankind with either the justice or the meaning it deserves. As for the latter, the jury's still out. Not two decades have passed since the break-up of the U.S.S.R. and all of Eastern Europe in 1989, but the view that unrestrained capitalism is the solution to global development is already opposed by many of its earlier partisans. The more we're confronted with the reality of globalization, the more realistic social democracy may come to appear.

In fact, there's only one important question where I think he turned out to be wrong: his universalist convictions weren't strong enough to withstand the spectacle of Nazi Germany, to which so many of his colleagues capitulated. He never forgave Germany, nor believed it could be the home of a decent and democratic society. Of course, forgiveness is a private matter, and Einstein was one of many emigrants who refused to set foot on German soil after the Holocaust. These are private decisions. But it is worth questioning Einstein's judgment that the Germans would never be able to reject the militarism and authoritarianism that led them, and the world, into its greatest war. It is hard to say he was wrong without at least a shiver of trepidation: we all know what

happened to Weimar. Yet the 100th anniversary of relativity theory that occasioned the Einstein Year turned out to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. Empiricist that he was, I believe Einstein would have been impressed by the strength of contemporary German democracy, and by the depth of its attempts to come to terms with the moral ruins that once made up its landscape. Through those attempts, the Federal Republic earned the right to take Einstein as a model in the year-long state-sponsored celebrations devoted to his legacy. Had he known, he might even have agreed to an appearance.

For let us be clear: what the Einstein Year sought was not a man behind a myth. A year of festivities, and however many millions the bill ultimately totalled, would not be devoted to celebrating a man. What was sought is a model, and we should ask which ones are available. Neither the saint nor the *Luftmensch* is borne out by the facts, so why are those models so widely accepted?

People like *Luftmenschen*, and they've liked them for a long time. The image of Thales, called the world's first philosopher, cannot be proven, but it's comforting to think that intellectuals have their heads in the clouds and stumble into the well before their feet. It allows us to feel that having ideas, and ideals, is vaguely ridiculous, and ultimately futile. If those who have the courage to think further than the rest of us are made to look like sad or silly fools, who will be tempted to follow them? *Luftmenschen* are useful for the same reason saints are useful: we don't want to be the one, and we know we're not the other. Turning Einstein into either is a way to tame him and to ensure that his life cannot challenge us into asking questions about our own.

In fact, I think Einstein is something much rarer: he's a genuine Enlightenment hero. Heroes make us uneasy. We're often too quick to diagnose that unease and to dismiss the notion entirely: the word sounds bombastic at worst, kitschy at best, and false notions of heroism have surely wreaked any amount of havoc in any number of cultures. But heroes make us uncomfortable because they represent ideals we *could* follow, demands we *could* make: to increase our expectations of our own lives, to become a little less certain about what's realistic, and a little more daring about which pieces of the world might be changed.

For the question is not merely whether the world caught up to him, but whether Einstein's own efforts had anything to do with the process. *Luftmenschen* are by definition ineffective, and saints (or their body parts) generally work miracles after their deaths. Einstein himself asked what a handful of intellectual workers can affect in politics, and his answer in a 1946 radio address was hopeful: ". . . but they can see to it that concise information about the situation and possibilities for successful action be made widely available. By

spreading enlightenment they can prevent able statesmen from being impeded in their work by general prejudice and reactionary opinion."<sup>16</sup>

Telling good news today always gets you in trouble. For any reason you give them to be hopeful, any bright teenager can give you ten reasons for despair. But if we don't remember the good news that's been made, we're unlikely to have the will to make any good news of our own. Let us take a moment to remember the post-Hiroshima world with one quote from another Nobel laureate. In his 1950 address in Stockholm, William Faulkner declared, "There are no problems of the spirit. There is only the question: when will I be blown up?"<sup>17</sup> Now the nuclear danger is anything but past; Mohammed el Barradei argues it has never been so great. But our best hope of combating it lies in continuing the work that Einstein and others began. It was tireless, it was repetitive, it teetered between pathos and boredom, and it played no small role in keeping us from the brink.

I began by saying that when I came to the Einstein Forum, I didn't really like him; and there were moments during the hoopla surrounding the Einstein Year that my skepticism only grew. But the more I've had to do with him, the more I've changed my mind, so that hearing recordings of his radio speeches finally put me in danger of joining the Einstein cult myself. Einstein had guts, good sense, and humor. He was subtle where you need to be subtle and clear where you need to be clear. He knew how to attend to the details, and when to keep his eye on the ideals that go beyond them. He maintained an extraordinary balance between modesty and chutzpah, and the claims that each of them make on our lives, much in the sense of Kant's most famous quote:

Two things fill the mind with awe and wonder the more often and more steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. . . . The former view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates my importance as an animal creature, which must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter from which it came, the matter which is for a little time provided with vital force, we know not how. The latter, on the contrary, infinitely raises my worth as that of an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals a life independent of the whole world of sense . . . a destination which is not restricted to the conditions and limits of this life but reaches into the infinite.<sup>18</sup>

Few lives reflect this passage as much as Einstein's did. It's a privilege to be able to honor him.