

Socialism and the Human Condition: Reclaiming Our Social Nature from Capitalist Individualism

Dr. Madhusudhan Reddy Andem¹

¹ Government Degree College, Wardhannapet, Warangal, Affiliated to Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana, India

Abstract: This article restates Albert Einstein's 1949 essay "Why Socialism?" and develops it through Rousseau and Sandel. Einstein treats socialism as a social-ethical end. Science can supply means, but it cannot choose those ends. Human beings are both solitary and social. Capitalism breaks that balance. Private capital gathers in few hands, hides dependence behind the free labour contract, and uses unemployment to set wages. Formal democracy cannot, by itself, restrain an oligarchy of private capital. For Einstein, the worst evil is not only poverty. It is the crippling of individuals: people learn to see society as a threat and to worship success.

Rousseau helps name this harm. Particular or actual wills seek private gain; the will of all is only their sum; the general will aims at a shared good. A true society is an association, not a heap of separate units. Sandel's critique of meritocracy describes the same cult of deserved success: even a fair race would teach winners that they made it alone. Einstein therefore rejects socialism as a mere change of tools. Social ownership and production for need must be joined to an education in responsibility. He also warns that planning is not yet socialism if bureaucracy enslaves the individual. Any system should be judged by whether it isolates people or makes devotion to society reasonable.

Keywords: Albert Einstein; Socialism, General Will, Meritocracy, Capitalist Individualism, Social Nature

Introduction

In his 1949 essay "Why Socialism?" written for the first issue of *Monthly Review*, Albert Einstein himself being a scientist enters social and economic critique with unusual directness. He opens not with a model of production but with a question of intellectual authority: is it advisable for someone who is not an expert on economic and social issues to speak about socialism? His answer is yes. Socialism, he says, is directed toward a social-ethical end. Science is meant for supplying the means by which already chosen ends might be pursued. Ends themselves are conceived by personalities of high ethical ideal and will be taken up by the many who, often half-consciously, tend to be for the slow evolution of society. For that reason, Einstein warns that "we should be on our guard not to overestimate science and scientific methods when it is a question of human problems," and that we should not assume only experts have a right to speak on the organization of society

(Einstein, 1949). The argument therefore cannot be settled by expertise alone. It requires a judgment about what kind of human beings we wish to become.

This opening is more than a disclaimer. It establishes the essay's governing distinction between ethical orientation and technical knowledge. Economics, as Einstein found it in 1949, still belonged to what Thorstein Veblen (1899) called the "predatory phase" of human development that societies born of conquest turned privilege into law and then into habit. Priesthoods and later educational systems taught the conquered to experience hierarchy as a moral order. Because the purpose of socialism is precisely to pass beyond that phase, existing economic science could throw little light on a future socialist order. The argument therefore cannot be settled by expertise alone. It requires a judgment about what kind of human beings we wish to become, and about which institutions enlarge or cripple the capacities that make a shared life possible.

This article seeks to restate Einstein's critique of capitalism and his case for socialism. It seeks to bring in two other thinkers: Rousseau on the general will, and Sandel on the cult of merit. Neither of them is a socialist in Einstein's sense. But they are included only to clarify his main point -- Capitalism's tendency to weaken our feeling of responsibility for one another. He believes that the way we organize the economy shapes who we become, splits the common good, and can weaken social responsibility.

The Dual Nature of Humanity

Human beings are at once solitary and social. As solitary beings we seek to protect our existence and to satisfy personal desires; as social beings we need recognition, affection, and the chance to improve the conditions of others. Neither side is complete in itself. Both are constitutive. A liveable society is one where they are complementary in relation so that self-preservation does not devour solidarity and solidarity does not erase the inner life of persons.

Under capitalism, Einstein argues, this balance is broken. Private ownership and the race for profit strengthen selfish drives and weaken social nature. People grow isolated and insecure. They lose simple joys and stop caring about the good of others. This "crippling of individuals," he writes, is "the worst evil of capitalism." The main harm is not only poverty. The system also trains people to see society as a threat. The result is solitude.

Schools make the problem worse. They inculcate an "exaggerated competitive attitude" and train the young to "worship acquisitive success." Einstein is not against learning or effort. He is against treating money, rank, and beating others as the highest good. Once that attitude takes hold, care for others looks weak or naive. That is why he later says socialist education must grow "a sense of responsibility for his fellow men in place of the glorification of power and success." Institutions do not only distribute goods and services but they also shape what people want.

The Economic Anarchy of Capitalism

Einstein's picture of capitalism is familiar, but the moral point is easy to miss. Private capital gathers in few hands. Workers compete for scarce jobs; owners compete to take the surplus. The "free" labor contract hides dependence. Wages are not a fair measure of what people produce. They are set under the threat of unemployment. New machines that could ease work often swell the "army of the unemployed" and deepen fear. Unchecked competition brings waste, instability, and repeated slumps (Einstein, 1949).

Einstein clearly says that a democratic political system cannot, on its own, restrain concentrated capital. The rich dominate parties, control much of the information people receive, and limit what can be debated. People may still vote in a democracy, yet live under an "oligarchy of private capital." They are legally free, but their many real choices are already closed. That is why Einstein does not treat "the market plus elections" as a full answer.

The damage is also inward. People stop feeling society as a bond that protects them. They feel it as a threat to their rights and their living. Selfishness is rewarded; social feeling withers. Einstein says, "Man can find meaning in life, short and perilous as it is, only through devoting himself to society." Capitalism makes that devotion hard, because it trains each person to treat others as tools or rivals.

Rousseau and the General Will

Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762) helps strengthen Einstein's contrast between weak social feeling and devotion to society. Rousseau distinguishes three wills: Actual Will, Real Will and General Will. The Actual or particular will is what a person wants for private gain. The will of all is only the sum of those private wants. The Real Will what a person wants for public good. The general will be summing total of Real Wills and what citizens share, the common good after private advantages are set aside. Freedom, for Rousseau, is not doing whatever one prefers. It is being able to will as a member of a public, under laws one can recognize as one's own.

Rousseau does not say people are born selfish in the modern market sense. Institutions teach them to pit themselves against others. Property, competition, and faction can turn that lesson into a scramble for status and power. Private wants then multiply and present themselves as the fake public interest. What looks like freedom is often only the will of all: many private aims added together, not a shared project of the collective good.

Seen this way, capitalism does more than allocate goods poorly. It favors particular wills. Private ownership of the means of production, market competition, and the profit motive split society into separate actors, each seeking advantage. Public speech may still mention the common good, but the rewards pull the other way. Einstein's point that people under capitalism feel society as a threat, not as a bond, restates Rousseau's fear:

social life can teach us to distrust the very social feelings it claims to civilize. Devotion to society then looks unrealistic, not because we have no social nature, but because our institutions train us against it.

The comparison has a limit. Rousseau was not calling for socialized industry in Einstein's sense, and he often pictured civic virtue in a small republic. The use of Rousseau here is to diagnose a problem, not to copy his institutions. It shows why Einstein treats the moral psychology of capitalism as more than a side effect. If the general will can appear only when citizens are not wholly captured by private interest, an economy that rewards that capture will not produce the public spirit that voting in a democracy is supposed to express. Elections alone do not turn the will of all into the general will.

Merit and the Cult of Success

Michael Sandel's *the Tyranny of Merit* (2020) gives a current name to the "success attitude" Einstein condemned. Market meritocracy promotes the feeling that outcomes are deserved and rewards are due to one's talent plus effort. Winners are made to see themselves as self-made. They forget luck, family, public institutions, and the fact that markets prize some gifts and ignore many others. Those who lose are taught to read their place as personal failure. Pride on one side and shame on the other replace a shared sense that fortune is partly chance, and therefore a public concern.

Sandel's key claim is this: the problem is not only that the race is unfair. The ideal itself is flawed. Even if everyone started equal, and winners truly rose by talent and effort, the story of merit would still harm us. It would teach the successful that they made it alone, and so owe little to anyone else. Help would look like pity. Sharing would look like taking from those who earned it. Fellow feeling would have no clear place. That is why Sandel argues that people should remember how much of life depends on chance. He suggests that, but for the accident of birth or the mystery of fate, the successful person might have stood in the place of the unsuccessful one. In other words, he claims that the person who lost could easily have been oneself. That recognition, he holds, makes pride harder to sustain and humility easier to feel. It is, in his view, a first step away from the harsh success ethic that splits winners from losers (Sandel, 2020).

The link with Einstein is close, but not the same. Einstein attacks capitalist property and production. Sandel attacks the moral story of desert inside market societies. Both see the same educational harm. Competitive institutions not only rank people but also teach a story about why the ranking is just. In both accounts, weak social feeling is not a side effect of inequality. It is what a culture of deserved victory does to winners and losers alike.

That is why Einstein does not treat socialism as a mere change of economic tools. Changing who owns factories is not enough if people are still taught that life is a contest for rank. A country could put property in public hands but cannot prevent its citizens from looking down on those who finish lower and appeals to

humility will also stay weak while people must beat their neighbors to keep a job. Telling people to care about others is not enough if the system punishes that care. So, Einstein wants two changes together: First, social ownership and planned production, so people are not forced to fight one another for a living and second, an education that grows responsibility for others, instead of worship of power and success.

What Socialism Means for Einstein

For Einstein, socialism is not about having all of public industries. It is a way of fitting economic life to both sides of human nature: the need to stand on one's own, and the need to belong. Society would own the means of production and plan their use, so goods are made for need, not for private profit. Work would be shared among those able to work, and a living would be guaranteed to everyone. The first aim is security: no one should have to treat neighbors as rivals for bread. The deeper aim is moral. When fear of joblessness fades, care for others can become more than a luxury.

Education would still honor talent. Einstein does not want everyone to be made the same. He wants talents to be used differently. Ability would be developed, but turned toward responsibility for others, not toward the worship of power and success. Using Rousseau's language, the goal is to build institutions that help people recognize what they share, not only what each person wants for himself. Life would regain meaning through devotion to society. That devotion would not be an empty duty from above. It would be the working-out of a social nature that capitalism had treated as a weakness.

This should not be treated as a dream. Planning can fail, and Einstein offers no detailed blueprint. His essay is a moral sketch. The test he sets is simple. Judge any system by this: does it isolate people and train them to worship success, or does it make it reasonable to care about others? Making goods for use rather than profit changes what work is for. It also changes which qualities work honors: care for others, rather than the drive to outdo them.

Individuality and the Danger of Bureaucracy

Critics often say socialism destroys individuality in order to create solidarity. Einstein says the opposite. Want, and the fight for a competitive living that want creates crush curiosity and creative work. Security and solidarity do not erase the inner life. They give it room, so a person need not live only to survive. Individuality is not the same as beating others. It is the growth of each person's inner talent in a shared world that does not turn that talent into a weapon.

Einstein also sees the opposite danger. "A planned economy is not yet socialism," he warns. Planning can fall into the hands of a powerful bureaucracy and end in the "complete enslavement of the individual." He leaves a hard question open. If modern production needs central direction, how can individual rights be protected? How can democracy keep the bureaucracy in check? His essay does not provide answer and remains honest.

Public ownership without democratic control would only create another oligarchy, like the one Einstein already saw behind formal democracy under capitalism.

This unsolved problem should check easy hope but should not cancel the diagnosis. Private capital already holds great power over work, information, and politics. The choice is not innocent markets versus dangerous planning. It is a choice between kinds of power, and between the ends they serve. Einstein bets that social ownership and production for need, joined to an education in responsibility and to democratic checks he knew would be hard, give both sides of human nature a better chance. The alternative in capitalism he saw was a predatory order that calls itself free while forcing people for solitude.

Leaving the Predatory Phase

Veblen's (1899) phrase, the "predatory phase" of human development, gives Einstein a historical frame. Societies born of conquest turned privilege into law, then into habit. Later, school's taught people to accept hierarchy as if it were moral order. Modern capitalism, for all its technical power, still belongs to that phase while the fruits of common labor are taken by private command, and while care for others is treated as a private hobby. Socialism, for Einstein, is the attempt to leave that phase. It does not deny conflict or scarcity. It refuses to organize the whole of life around taking from others.

The "success attitude" praised under capitalism is not a neutral spur to effort. It is the moral mark of the predatory phase, worn in democratic dress. To reject it is not to reject excellence. It is to refuse the story that excellence means beating others to scarce rewards, and that those left behind have only themselves to blame. Capitalism produces lonely competitors chasing a false self-sufficiency. A socialist ethic would treat society as the medium of our humanity: the source of language, tools, knowledge, and the recognition without which a solitary life is barely human.

The world of 1949 is not our world, but the shape of Einstein's argument still holds. Extreme wealth, privately owned media, ecological harm from production for profit, and a culture of ranking by credentials all repeat his themes in new forms. Sandel helps explain the bitterness of winners and losers. Rousseau helps explain why more private choice does not, by itself, create a public. Einstein's contribution is to insist that these are not separate cultural accidents. They are what one should expect when the organization of production trains people against the social half of their nature.

Conclusion

"Why Socialism?" is a short essay not too narrowed one to dismiss. It is an argument that the decisive question about an economic order is ethical and anthropological before it is technical and scientific to be explained only by an expert. Capitalism, as Einstein describes it, cultivates the solitary, egoistic side of human beings and weakens the social drives that give a short life its meaning. Through Rousseau one can see this as a politics

that multiplies particular wills and mistakes their sum for the common good. Through Sandel one can see the moral psychology of that politics in the cult of deserved success: fame for winners, shame for losers, and little would be the remaining space for solidarity.

Socialism, in the sense Einstein defends, does not abolish individuality. It tries to free individuality from the war for subsistence and from the worship of acquisitive ranking. Societal ownership and planned production for human needs are proposed as ways of ending the structural antagonism that makes neighbours into rivals. Education oriented toward responsibility is proposed as the cultural counterpart of that change. The bureaucratic peril remains real, and no serious reading of the essay should hide it. But Einstein's standard is clear enough to survive that difficulty: an economy is to be judged by whether it restores the possibility of devotion to society, or whether it continues to manufacture isolation and call the result freedom.

In an age still marked by insecurity, ecological strain, and a brittle ethic of merit, that standard has not lost its urgency. Science can tell us a great deal about means. It cannot, Einstein reminds us, choose our ends. The end he commends is not a utopia of abundance without conflict. It is a more modest and more demanding aim: a society in which people can achieve some inner equilibrium because their institutions no longer punish the social impulses that make collective life, and personal meaning, possible. Our highest purpose, therefore, lies not in the worship of success but in conscious devotion to one another and to the society that sustains us. This idea seeks to counter the increasing evils of practical life in capitalism.

References

- Einstein, A. (1949). "Why Socialism?" *Monthly Review* 1(1). Correct: first issue, May 1949.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1762). *The Social Contract*. Correct. The aggregation/association contrast is Book I, chapter 5.
- Sandel, M. J. (2020). *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Veblen, T. (1899). *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

Publisher's Note: *The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher, editors, or the editorial board.*