

The rise of antisemitic arguments against Einstein's theories of relativity since 1920

A close look on the evolution of arguments against Einstein's theories of relativity will reveal that the few competent critics (e.g. the physicists Gehrcke, Lenard, Mohorovićić and Stark) up to 1920 all confined to what they regarded as 'scientific' arguments (esp. missing 'Anschaulichkeit', contradiction to common sense, contra-intuitiveness, imputed confusion of mathematical fictions with reality and neglect of experimental science). Up to 1920, occasional antisemitic polemics have only been raised by a group of persons without scientific qualification (e.g. Weyland, Braßler).

Einstein and his defenders took the coincidence of both types of attack against the theories of relativity as a sign for the need of a broader counteroffensive against latent and open antisemitism (e.g. in Einstein's reply to the "Anti-Relativitätstheorie GMBH", 1920).

As Einstein soon realized, this was a strategic mistake, since now those critics who did not use antisemitic arguments up to then took the Einsteinian polemic (not distinguishing between the two groups of critics) as a "propaganda-trick", circumventing a satisfactory answer to their own arguments. Together with their complaints about the extensive pro-relativistic literature appearing in journals and newspapers, they developed an animosity against what appeared to them as "mass-manipulation", as "propaganda", initiated by ominous Jewish backers. It is in this context that antisemitism for the first time appears on the scene as an argument of physicists attacking the theories of relativity.

From 1921 on, the full extent of antisemitic arguments is to be found occasionally (e.g. in a treatise by Fritsch, published under pseudonym in 1921), in articles by Lenard and Stark, and after 1933 in papers by Dingler, Wilh. Müller, Recquard, Thüring, Weigel and others, typically published in NS-organs such as Völkischer Beobachter or Zeitschrift für die gesamte Naturwissenschaft.

Very often, antisemitic arguments are linked to other arguments such as priority claims and chauvinistic invectives. The "Deutsche Physik" (Lenard, 1936) was then constructed in direct contrast to Einstein's relativity theories as alleged incarnation of 'Jewish physics'; it had to be "anschaulich", in accordance with common sense, intuitively convincing, non-formalistic and experimental.

But even after the installation of anti-semitism as an official doctrine in 1933, antisemitic critics of Einstein remained a minority, and their arguments remained ineffective against a majority of scientists keeping their conviction of science as an international and interreligious enterprise. Apart from the courageous rejections of the legacy of antisemitic arguments by non-fellow-travellers such as Bavink or v. Laue, this is also proved by Ramsauer's "Eingabe an Rust" (1942), citing the result of the "Münchener Einigungs- und Befriedungsversuch" (1940), where a majority of scientists voted against any further upholding of criticism of the theories of relativity in terms of race or "Weltanschauung".