

Week Six Reading Guide: The Civil Rights movement

This week's readings center anti-racist activism during the Civil Rights movement in the US. Very few scientists in the US participated in the Civil Rights movement; I know of none besides Einstein who were prominent, and Einstein's anti-racist activities were essentially never covered by journalists. Fortunately for history, they were followed in detail by the FBI as part of their secret file on Einstein.

This period is typically identified with the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, though many assign its beginning to the murder of 14-year old Emmett Till in 1955 (a case that was reopened by the US Justice Department in 2018), the year of Einstein's death. As our readings show, there is a richer history going back much earlier through the activism of Paul Robeson and others, with an important linkage to Albert Einstein. Remarkably, no biography of Einstein mentioned his advocacy of African Americans until the book by Jerome and Taylor; not even more recent popular biographies include this. Einstein would be appalled.

If you're interested in learning the reasons for this suppression, this [lecture](#) by Jerome and Taylor provides important insight into the mechanisms of white supremacy. Be sure to watch through the audience question and answer, which provide further wonderful insights on Einstein, racism, and activism. Some of the discussion questions below use terminology with which you may be unfamiliar. If so, look it up.

October 16, 2019

Jerome, F. and Taylor, R. 2006, Chapters 1–8.

Chapter 1

- What actions did the Nazis take to vilify Einstein in 1929–33?
- What might Einstein have learned about W.E.B. DuBois in the 1931 "Who's Who in America"?
- In his Letter to American Negroes, Einstein urges them to avoid what today is called internalized oppression. Why might he have done so?

Chapter 2

- What role did the College of New Jersey play in the American Revolution?
- Despite its presence in New Jersey, Princeton was widely described as a Southern university. Why? What role did the US economy play in how Princeton was regarded?

Chapter 3

- Why did an African American neighborhood grow in Princeton?
- Did New Jersey enact Jim Crow laws?
- How did white Princetonians terrorize and oppress African Americans?
- How did reading this chapter make you feel?

Chapter 4

- What did you find most striking about Einstein's interactions with Blacks in Princeton?
- How do you reconcile, or not, Lena Sawyer's questioning with her grandmother's fondness for Einstein?
- What acts of protest do you see in this chapter? Who was involved, what was their motivation, and what were the outcomes?

- In what ways are the contradictions of the Princeton Plan of 1948 still present in America today?

Chapter 5

- How was Paul Robeson discriminated against? In what ways was Princeton a Jim Crow town?
- Many leading intellectuals in the US publicly supported the Spanish government (the “loyalist” side) during the civil war of 1936–39. Can you think of similar movements during your lifetime?
- Why might Robeson or Einstein say that both art and science are powerful tools for justice and humanity? What would you add, from your perspective, to their reasons?

Chapter 6

- Why was J. Edgar Hoover so concerned about Robeson, Einstein, and others who favored socialism or communism over American capitalism?
- Agree or disagree (and explain why): In 1940 there were three world superpowers: the US, the Soviet Union, and Germany.
- What was the intended outcome of the Wall of Fame? Was this outcome achieved?

Chapter 7

- Why might the FBI and HUAC have conflated anti-racist work with communism?
- Was J. Edgar Hoover a symptom or an instigator of US white supremacy?
- In what ways are race relations in America today similar to those during World War II? How are they different?

Chapter 8

- What role did the US Army play in desegregation, if any?
- Einstein’s 1946 anti-racist actions showed both boldness and humility. Explain.
- Was Einstein qualified to speak about the moral climate of a society? How does he try to appeal to Southern Whites?

October 21, 2019

Dreier, P. 2018, “Was Albert Einstein a Racist?” *The American Prospect*, [June 19, 2018](#)

Last year, newly published travel diaries from 1922–23 revealed that Albert Einstein held racist and xenophobic views, contrary to the impression given by his engagement with African Americans. Many news articles were written about this discovery, including this one, which is more balanced than some. We cannot know what was in Einstein’s mind and heart, but we know that impact often differs from intent. After reading this news analysis piece, read some others written around the same time (easily found by web search). What conclusions do you draw about Einstein, about the news media, and about American society during both Einstein’s life and today?

King, M. L. Jr. 1967, “The Role of the Behavioral Scientist in the Civil Rights Movement,” <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1968.tb01465.x>

King’s speech at a meeting of the American Psychological Association was insightful and poignant, as he was assassinated while his manuscript was being finalized for publication. His words provide a fascinating duet to Einstein and Robeson. For example, King writes, “White America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its soul by racism,” compared with Einstein’s “Segregation... is a

disease of white people.” King’s words are both powerful and all the more disturbing as we imagine adding 50 years to the dates he writes, yielding contemporary echoes of racism and white supremacy. His article is very helpful for understanding one of the reasons why the civil rights movement stalled: northern whites thought the problems were solved with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Black protests against northern racism took the form of urban riots. His speech was intended to educate sociologists and social psychologists who seemed ignorant of the existence and extent of structural racism. King’s written speech includes several of his most famous lines, including “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

When did the Detroit riot occur? Why did it happen? Compare King’s analysis of the underlying causes with current analyses (via web search).

What forms of activism does King advocate? To what end?

Who were Kenneth B. Clark and E. Franklin Frazier, whom King refers to on p. 7? Some social scientists did study racism but they worked within a racist framework that failed to recognize the role of bias in white people and also failed to recognize the role of class (or other forms of intersectionality). What research programs does King suggest social scientists pursue?

In turning to political rights for African Americans, especially voting, King is more hopeful than political scientists of his day. Both were right. For decades black voting power has been diluted, but since 2008, it has been important nationally, especially in the 2018 Congressional midterm elections.

How did King take a key concept from psychology and turn it around to deconstruct and reconstruct the American image of itself?

Which of King’s many brilliant metaphors stands out most to you?

Beckwith, J. 2002, Chapter 7

Why did the Eugenics movement start and grow first in the US rather than in Europe? How did racism support the ideas of Eugenics?

Beckwith note that in the 1970s he and Benno Müller-Hill had similar scientific and political interests and discussed them, yet they did not discuss the social impact of science. Why not?

Beckwith asks why geneticists forgot about the horrors of eugenics after WW II but physicists never forgot the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What might be some reasons?

How did Beckwith reconcile continuing to work in genetics with his strong opposition to the harm it had caused and could cause again? How did he seek to prevent further abuses?

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

WGS.160 / STS. 021 Science Activism: Gender, Race, and Power
Fall 2019

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.