

The civil rights movement essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Human Rights](#)



Introduction

This paper will historically examine the roots and causes of the Civil Rights Movement. The phrase “ Civil Rights Movement” refers to the collective effort of African Americans to advance socially, economically and politically in American society. Civil rights in the U. S. have legal implications such as specific rights guaranteed in the Constitution, for example, freedom of religion, of speech, and equal protection under the law. Civil Rights Movement to legislations which changed the landscape of racial and gender interaction not only in the United States but in other parts of the world. In connection, three themes will be highlighted: (1) the early period of the Civil Rights Movement; (2) Black Power and urban rebellion; and (3) the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement

Historical Background

Civil Rights Movement arose from the need to have equity in the American society. For more than half a decade after the end of the slavery, there was widespread racial discrimination and gender inequality in the society. The Civil Rights Movement was pursued in an effort to fight oppression and discrimination. The main roots of the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s were the transformation and experience of Black in the Second World War (Dierenfield, 2008). There were a number of jobs that had been previously closed to black people but were now available leading to surge in migration towards the North. The patterns of migration during the decades after the first world clearly illustrated the need homogeneity in American society. Before the First World War, more than 90% of blacks were in the

South. There was continued movement northward due to oppressive laws in the South. The widespread migration of Blacks towards the North gave them a chance to express their cause in the capital of the country. In order to understand the Civil Rights Movement well, it is important to look at three distinctive themes as had been highlighted in the introduction.

1. The early period of Civil Rights Movement

Fitzhugh (1997) asserts the early struggle for civil rights in the United States can be traced to Jim Crow period. The term Jim Crow originated from an 1830 act by Thomas Rice who danced after a crippled elderly black he had seen while traveling south dancing to a song ending with term Jim Crow. By 1850, the term Jim Crow had become a racial slur especially in the South directed towards black, colored and their white sympathizers. Henceforth, there were different acts of racial discrimination directed towards the blacks which were referred to as Jim Crow Laws. From the 1890s, there was systematic codification or strengthening of racial discrimination and subordination of African Americans in southern states. Jim Crow era saw separation of races in most public spaces including schools, accommodation, transportation, and many others.

African Americans were not given the right to vote in the former Confederacy states. This segregation and disfranchisement of African American was in full operation by 1910 and white supremacy legacy cut across all southern states. Fitzhugh (1997) asserts that between 1889 and 1930, more than 3,700 African Americans were reportedly lynched although it is reported that there were thousands of brutal murder cases of African Americans that were

not reported to the press. The sharecropping economic system further confined African Americans to their former slavery status. In deed, throughout the towns where African Americans had settled, there were several racial riots which in a way served as precursors for the Civil Rights Movement. For example in 1919, there were at least twenty five riots cases that were reported leading to numerous deaths and injuries. This year especially in summer was so violent that it later came to be known as Red Summer of 1919.

According to Hale (1998) the system of racial discrimination advocated by Jim Crow laws was further strengthened by a number of court rulings. These ruling gave significant impetus to the continued enactment of Jim Crow laws. The first court ruling was in 1883 when the Supreme Court ruled that Civil Rights Act of 1875 was unconstitutional (Dierenfield, 2008). The Civil Rights Act of 1875 had been enacted as a part of the reconstruction era and stipulated that every persons were equal and were entitled to full enjoyment of equal rights and use of public amenities. The ruling was in light of that the Fourteenth Amendments did not in any way protect black people from acts of discrimination especially in business. After this ruling, southern states gained momentum in enacting segregation laws. By 1890, most southern states like Louisiana had law requiring African Americans to ride in separate railroad cars. In reiteration, blacks in the Louisiana state tested the constitutionality of this law by letting light skinned African American Homere Plessey to board a white train (Fitzhugh, 1997). He was consequently arrested for using a car reserved for whites.

The local court ruled against Plessey and this judgment was also upheld by the Supreme Court in 1896. This ruling which famously came to be known as “separate but equal” ruled that separate facilities for blacks and whites were upheld to be constitutional so long as they were equal. The implication of this ruling asserted that any legislation which made distinction based on race but which does not deprive anyone rights and privileges is constitutional. The decision by Supreme Court also implied that the legislation did not have power to wipe racial instincts or to abolish any distinction that was based on physical differences. This separate but equal doctrine was henceforth adopted in different areas of public amenities like restaurants, theatres, restrooms, and even public schools. Hale (1998) argue that the Plessey case was one of the historical obstacles to equal rights for colored people. This case led to series of court decisions which also undermined the rights of African Americans. Among the famous cases included Slaughterhouse cases, United States vs. Reese, United States v. Cruikshank, Civil Rights Cases of 1883, and many others. All these cases systematically enacted decisions segregating blacks.

The systematic segregation of African Americans continued throughout the First World War. Segregation in the south was been cited as key factor that led to increased migration of African Americans to the North. During the Second World War, there were a number of African Americans who participated in the war and gained a different perception of the whites (Hugh, 1990). In 1942, African Americans led by James Farmer formed the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) which was a civil rights organization that advocated for use of non-violent direction action against racial

discrimination. At first the organization aimed at promoting better race relations and end racial discriminations especially desegregation in public schools in Chicago. Later it would expand this program to the south where discrimination was rife. Later in 1961, CORE was to gain substantial recognition when it sponsored Freedom Rides which ended segregation in interstate bus routes. It also sponsored 1963 civil rights march in Washington.

Although there had been race riots especially in the south, there was not any substantial revolt against the whites in the United States. In 1955, the brutal murder of Emmett Till marked a turning point in civil rights struggle in the country. Emmett was a fourteen years old intelligent but mischievous streak boy who had gone from Chicago to visit relatives in Mississippi (Hugh, 1990). Though he was accustomed to racial segregation in the Chicago, he had never experienced such an extensive segregation like in Mississippi. Emmett went to a store to buy candy and while leaving he just said “bye baby” to the wife of store owner. Two days later, the boy was fetched at the middle of the night by the store owner and his brother in law. The body of Emmett was later found dumped in Tallahatchie River with eyes gorging out and the head crushed.

This incident horrified whites and black in the locality. The two men who went with the boy were arrested for kidnapping and no local white lawyer accepted to take the case. It was reported that even white decent people were astonished by the cruelty of the murder and justice had to be done. This case attracted national attention and the body of the boy was flown to

Chicago where an open casket funeral was held with thousands of people viewing the body. Pictures of the body appeared in the newspaper and circulated all over the country. These pictures moved blacks than any other act had ever done before. While it was difficult to find blacks who could testify against the two, the uncle to the boy stepped forward and testified positively identifying the two men (Frum, 2000). However, this did not make a difference as judge found the accused not guilty and released them on September 23rd 1955. This case had a greater implication on the black community in the United States as it became evident that the problems affecting blacks in the south could also affect those in the North. In her own words, the mother of the boy said that she never thought what happened in the south could affect those in the north but she had realized that the cause of black person in United States was one.

This case united all African Americans to fight against discrimination. Civil Rights activist used this case to rally the cry of civil rights and called for widespread protests. The heinous crime therefore became the springboard for social justice in the country. Later actions like the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 were inspired by this act. Rosa Parks, who was the character in Montgomery Bus Boycott, said that she had just thought about Emmett Till when she refused to give up her seat to a white passenger. Rosa Parker remains the mother of the modern Civil Rights movement but the case Emmett served as a precursor for her disobedience.

According to Sullivan (2005) the 1950s therefore saw the birth of Civil Rights movement in the United States. There are a lot of civil actions and

disobedience that were meant to spearhead the cause for civil rights. In the early days of the movement, there were different strategies employed which recorded different victories. Let us look at some of the early strategies and victories.

Legal means remains one of the most successful strategies in the civil rights struggle. Although the previous experiences had shown that courts were biased in their ruling, African Americans continued to use legal means to fight for their rights. One good example of such strategies was the Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954. This case was important in civil rights movement as it overturned previous court rulings going back to Plessey v. Ferguson in 1896. This case ruled that state laws which had provided for separate black and white students was an obstacle to education of black children as it denied them opportunities. The unanimous (9-0) decision showed that separate education facilities were unequal. The court upheld that racial segregation violated Equal Protection Clause in the Fourteenth Amendment and this decision paved way for the Civil Rights Movement (Dierenfield, 2008).

According to Kasher (2000) there were prominent lawyers who also worked for the cause of African American. One of such lawyer was Thurgood Marshall. Marshall had worked tirelessly to secure civil rights for African Americans and is remembered for his victory against the Central High School. Thurgood was the first African American to serve in the Supreme Court and he used his position to fight for the rights of African American during the Civil rights struggle. He successfully led a case and won against segregation in Arkansas Central high School

Under the leadership of Martin Luther King, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was founded. This was an American civil rights organization which played a huge role in the cause of Civil Rights Movement (Sullivan, 2005). This movement was formed after the Montgomery Bus Boycott by 60 Black ministries and leaders who met in Atlanta. This movement was in the forefront in support of non-violent direction actions to desegregate bus systems in the South. While most African American had called for legal means in civil rights struggle, SCLC called for mass boycotts. SCLC later organized protest like Citizenship schools, Albany movement in 1961 and 1962, Birmingham campaign in 1963, famous march on Washington in 1963, St. Augustine protests, Selma Voting Rights campaign and March to Montgomery, Grenada Freedom movement, and many others (Dierenfield, 2008).

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was an important organization in the Civil Rights Movement. This movement was organized by Ella Baker and later grew to include supports in the North. SNCC played a key role in sit-ins and freedom rides especially in the 1963 March on Washington, Mississippi Freedom Summer, and many others. Its main contribution was in field work where it organized voters and carried out registration drives.

There were various massive civil actions that pressurized the government to put legislations for civil rights movement. The March on Washington in July 1963 attraction more than 300, 000 participant and was a great step in the civil rights movement. In 1964, there was the Freedom Summer which was

aimed at registering as more many African Americans as possible to participate in voting. The Civil Rights Act was enacted in 1964 which was an important step in outlawing racial segregation in school. The Selma to Montgomery marches held in 1965 was the peak of American civil rights struggle and finally culminated in enacted of voting rights in Selma, Alabama.

1. Black Power and Urban Rebellion

Malcolm X was one of the critics of U. S involvement in Vietnam War. He collaborated with The Nation of Islam to strongly condemn the Vietnam War. Together with Elijah Muhammad of Nation of Islam, they argued that Vietnam War was oppression of Vietnamese by the United States.

The Black Panthers developed from Black Panther Party for Self-defense. It was an African American organization which was aimed at promoting Black Power and was active in the United States between 1960s and 1970s (Sullivan, 2005). It was a significant social, political, and cultural movement in the civil rights movement especially in protection of African American neighborhoods from police attacks and brutality. The organization had ten points program which including land, bread, education, clothing, justice and peace and many others.

During the era of civil rights movement, there were also widespread rebellions in urban areas. Most African Americans had settled in towns in urban areas and they spearheaded their civil rights by holding several rebellions in urban areas. Right from the time of Jim Crow racial riots, African

Americans held several riots in urban areas. These riots were held even in major cities like Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago, and many others.

Kerner Commission Report 1968 was a report commissioned by Federal Government to investigate urban riots in the country Patterson, (2001). This report was commissioned by President Johnson after widespread riots in hot summers in Detroit and Michigan, Los Angeles, Chicago, Newark, and others. According to Toonari (2008) the report found out that the riots were caused by frustrations of inner-city blacks because racism was deep in the American society. The report also confirmed that if nothing was done, America would develop separate and unequal black and white societies. However, most of the recommendations of the report were ignored by President Nixon who took after Johnson.

1. The legacy of Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement was important for liberation of African Americans not only in the United States but to other parts of the world as well. Although there were systematic efforts to eradicate the movement through murder of its leading members like Martin Luther King Jr the movement survived and its ideals have not lost ground up to date. The civil rights movement also gave way to other movements like the Immigration Rights Movement which is instrumental in inspiring rights of immigrants to today (Loevy, 1997). For example the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act was enacted which removed quotas that had been imposed by 1924 Immigration Act (Sullivan, 2005). The act also put a cap of 170, 000 visas annually in the Eastern

Hemisphere. This act set the country on different demographic course that had not been achieved in the previous three millenniums.

Apart from achieving advancement of civil rights in the United States especially on granting of equal rights to African Americans, it also inspired freedom movement in other African states. For example some African countries like South Africa, Angola and others were still under colonial rule and Civil Rights Movement was important in inspiring African struggles. Raymond and Sussman (1997) Assert that the Civil Rights Movement also inspired other social movements including American Indian Movement (AIM), Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), The National Organization of Women (NOW), League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and many others. These social movements have been instrumental in inspiring rights of special groups.

The hallmark of the civil rights movement has been the election of the first African American President, Barack Obama in 2008 elections. The election of Barack Obama is widely seen as fulfillment of Martin Luther King last speech before he was shot in 1968 when he proclaimed that he had been on the top of mountain and his earlier speech in 1963 in which he said that he had a dream that on day, his children will be judged not by the color of their skin but by their characters (Dierenfield, 2008). The election of Barack Obama is a major victory for civil rights movement in the country and evidences the fruits of a more than a decade struggle.

Conclusion

The Civil Rights Movement is led to change in racial interaction in the world. The civil rights movement began in Jim Crow era when the state perpetrated racial segregation through the constitution, and culminated in massive civil disobediences, riots, marches, and other legal means to achieve racial equality. The 1950s and 1960s can be described as peak years in the civil rights movement. There were different heroes and heroines of civil rights movement including Ella Baker who is considered the mother of the movement, Martin Luther King who was assassinated in 1968, and many others. Different organizations like SCLC, SNCC, CORE, and others spearheaded civil rights movement. Civil rights movement also inspired colonized African countries to fight for their freedom. However the hallmark result of the civil rights movement has been the election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States of America which is seen as fulfillment of Martin Luther's vision as expressed in his last speech. Civil rights movement shaped racial relations in the country and led to the current rights enjoyed by all races in the country.

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