

AQA A-Level History – Component 3:
Historical Investigation (non-exam assessment)
Black Civil Rights Movement (1865-1975)
Key Opposing Historiographical Arguments

About the author:

This Teacher CPD resource was created by Professor George Lewis, Professor of American History in the School of History, Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester. Professor Lewis researches race and racism in the United States, with a particular focus on ideologies of white supremacy. His expertise in modern US history also includes civil rights, segregation, the ideologies of Americanism and un-Americanism and the American South. He is currently exploring long histories of the idea of un-American activities.

Professor Lewis' research is key to placing current upheavals in US activism and politics in their longer historical context. He has published widely on civil rights and ideologies of white supremacy in the US context. His project to create a long history of the idea of un-Americanism helps to place recent events – notably the 6 January 2020 'Capitol insurrection' – into an arc of national contestation over what constitutes 'patriotic dissent' that reaches back into the eighteenth century.

Historiographical Summary: Most historiographical shifts relating to black civil rights have been a response to either a) the nature of the source material historians have used to formulate their arguments or b) the changing political contexts in which those historians have written. In terms of a) that has most often been through the use of oral histories, especially where civil rights activists of the 1960s have been concerned, which have deconstructed the “top down” approach favoured by historians who previously based their work on newspapers and national accounts. On occasion, though, those oral histories have stretched back further, perhaps most notably with Kathleen Blee’s use of interviews with women of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan. Point b) reflects the continued politicisation of black rights in the USA, which is most recently obvious in the responses to the killing of George Floyd.

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester

University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

The “dating and defining” issue (Hall v Fairclough)

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (Mar., 2005), pp. 1233-1263.

Topic of argument:

How to define the Civil Rights Movement, and how to decide when longstanding traditions of civil rights “activism” becomes a “movement.”

Summary of argument:

Hall argues that all black protest against racial oppression in the United States effectively forms a seamless single Civil Rights Movement.

How it differs from Fairclough:

Other historians have traditionally argued that the Martin Luther King Jr. era of civil rights activism, running from either the *Brown* decision of 1954 or the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Voting Rights Act of 1965, represented a different phase in African American protest. Often referred to as the “classical phase,” this period saw sporadic civil rights activism become a unified movement.

Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890 – 2000* (London: Penguin, 2002)

Topic of argument:

The Civil Rights Movement, as opposed to civil rights activism, was much shorter than historians have traditionally argued.

Summary of argument:

Although there are myriad examples of black protest from the slave era to the present, the actual Civil Rights Movement was dynamic but brief. The Movement only really began when students brought a dynamic mass mobilisation of non-violent direct action with the Sit-ins of 1960.

How it differs from Hall:

Hall argues for long continuities of black protest, and that all of this protest counted as a Movement; Fairclough argues for long continuities of activism, but a much shorter period in which there was an organized Movement.

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E hypir@le.ac.uk

The “national vs local” issue (Thornton v Sitkoff)

J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002)

Topic of argument:

the origins of Civil Rights protest in the USA.

Summary of argument:

Thornton argues that civil rights protest was shaped at every turn by local, municipal politics, rather than by the top-down decision making of national figures and organisations. Protests erupted because changes in local politics shut off the possibility of constructive dialogue between civic leaders and African Americans, leaving no alternative other than direct action. Thus, Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma were not the direct product of Martin Luther King, Jr. and SCLC's decision making, but were instead grassroots initiatives shaped by local politics.

How it differs from Sitkoff:

Before Thornton, many others, most notably Sitkoff, believed large-scale protests were created by top-down decisions from national civil rights organisations and leaders.

Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (1981)

Topic of argument:

the origins of Civil Rights Protest in the USA.

Summary of argument:

Sitkoff takes the “great man” theory of history, and places ultimate power in the decision-making of Martin Luther King Jr. and SCLC. Thus, for example, the Birmingham demonstrations took place because King and SCLC decided upon a confrontation there.

How it differs from Thornton:

Thornton agrees MLK was important in sustaining the Birmingham demonstrations once they had already begun, but argues that local Birmingham blacks had already initiated protest long before MLK arrived, and did so on the basis of local politics. Sitkoff skips over the local political level altogether.

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The “international vs domestic” debate (Dudziak v Crosby)

Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* (2000)

Topic of argument:

whether US civil rights should be viewed as part of the international Cold War rather than as a purely domestic political phenomenon.

Summary of argument:

The Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision of 1954, which effectively ended the constitutional basis for racial segregation, was the product of a “Cold War imperative.” The US State Department realised that domestic racial segregation and the denial of equal rights within the USA was playing badly on the international stage of Cold War, especially as newly-independent non-white nations were deciding on Cold War allegiances. Thus, the decision to end legal segregation was in effect a product of the Cold War.

How it differs from Crosby et. al.:

Dudziak therefore differed from all of those historians who preceded her, by altering the prism through which US civil rights protests were viewed and understood. Local, community studies in particular had long neglected the Cold War view.

Emilye Crosby [ed] *Civil Rights History From the Ground Up: Local Struggles, A National Movement* (2011)

Topic of argument:

whether US civil rights should be viewed as part of the international Cold War rather than as a purely domestic political phenomenon.

Summary of argument:

Crosby’s work focuses on local, grassroots organising, and that this intensely local level of organising led to a national civil rights movement. There is no mention of the Cold War or State Department concerns, instead Crosby and her fellow authors explore the way in which different local communities organised protest on their own terms, for their own particular goals, and in defence of their own particular rights and concerns: we can only understand the Civil Rights Movement by knowing what was going on at local, community level, where Cold War international relations concerns were, at best, irrelevant.

How it differs from Dudziak:

Utterly!

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The “inevitability” of Segregation in Southern States (Woodward v Rabinowitz)

C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955)

Topic of argument:

why southern states reverted to “Jim Crow” racial segregation at the end of the nineteenth / early twentieth centuries, post- Reconstruction.

Summary of argument:

Woodward argues that there was a window of opportunity, during which southern states might have taken a more racially enlightened path and not reverted to the slavery-era of rigid racial segregation and second-class citizenship for non-whites. Thus, the “Jim Crow” state laws and ordinances which reimposed racial segregation were not inevitable, and the South could have ended racial segregation a full half century before the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision sought to do so in 1954.

How it differs from Rabinowitz:

The crux of the debate here is the question of “inevitability”: Rabinowitz states no window of opportunity ever really existed; a return to caste politics and racial segregation was always inevitable.

H. Rabinowitz, "From Exclusion to Segregation: Southern Race Relations, 1865-1890", *Journal of American History*, 63 (1976) 325-350.

Topic of argument:

why southern states reverted to “Jim Crow” racial segregation at the end of the nineteenth / early twentieth centuries, post- Reconstruction.

Summary of argument:

Rabinowitz counters Woodward’s “window of opportunity” thesis by showing that the only real alternative to segregation was complete and total exclusion for southern African Americans. State governments, and white southern segregationists, were never going to share any form of power or equality with African Americans, so the choice they considered was one of a return to a clearly segregated society or the complete exclusion of southern blacks from society altogether. Tellingly, Rabinowitz and Woodward use completely different source bases to come to their respective viewpoints: Woodward concentrates on “de jure” local laws and the dates and frequencies with which they were passed, while Rabinowitz looks at “de facto” sources reflecting what daily life was like for African Americans with or without the passage of laws.

How it differs from Woodward:

By looking at very different sources, Rabinowitz takes a fundamentally different – and much less optimistic – approach that Woodward.

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White Supremacy: Organised and Open Opposition to Black Rights

Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (1994) and Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (1991)

Topic of argument:

how to understand the mass appeal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s.

Summary of argument:

The 1920s incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan attracted somewhere between 2 and 4 million members. MacLean and Blee remain at the forefront of a wave of scholars who have changed the way in which we understand this mass organisation of race hatred and white Christian nationalism. They argue that the Klan was not a marginal group representing the outer edges of US society, but rather was a mainstream organisation reflecting the true nature of majority sentiment in the first half of the 1920s.

How it differs from Wade et. al.:

Shows that the 1920s Klan was not made up from society's disenfranchised fringes, but rather represented a national, mainstream mood of xenophobia, nativism, and religious white nationalism.

Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (1987)

Topic of argument:

how to understand the mass appeal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s.

Summary of argument:

That, although the Klan's second coming in the 1920s saw a surge in membership, it was nonetheless not "mainstream" in the same way that MacLean, Blee and others now argue. Klan membership was instead drawn from the marginal and disenfranchised.

How it differs from Maclean:

Fails to acknowledge Christian white nationalism as a mainstream phenomenon in a crucial decade for the development of modern American identity.

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