Einstein and Racism in America

Fred Jerome

In September 1946, Albert Einstein called racism America's "worst disease." Earlier that year, he told students and faculty at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, the oldest black college in the Western world, that racial segregation was "not a disease of colored people, but a disease of white people," adding, "I will not remain silent about it."[1]

That was then

Disease? A skeptical reader may wonder if Einstein was overstating the case. To appreciate his choice of the word requires examining specific symptoms of the segregation sickness so widespread in America some fourscore years after the abolition of slavery. Black soldiers—a million of whom took part in the war to defeat Nazism—when allowed into combat at all, fought only in segregated units under white officers.

Racial segregation was the rule in most of 1946 America, with separate and decidedly unequal public and private facilities, from housing and schools to buses and beaches, throughout the South and many other parts of the country, including Einstein's adopted hometown of Princeton, New Jersey. Some textbooks and documentary films have since depicted the separate waiting rooms in Southern bus and train stations and separate drinking fountains marked "colored" and "white." But the disease went deeper.

Even the blood donated to save lives was given only at racially segregated blood banks (when blacks were allowed to give blood at all), with "white" and "colored" blood kept in separately labeled storage units. In 1942, in the midst of a world war, the American Red Cross met in Washington and concluded that while there was no difference in the blood of the races, "most men of the white race objected to blood of Negroes injected into their veins." The policy of racially segregating blood continued in some parts of this country well into the 1960s![2]

Einstein's pledge not to remain silent about racism has an ironic echo today: Virtually all traces of his passionate commitment to civil rights, including his friendship with and support for African American thinkers Paul Robeson and W. E. B. DuBois, have been erased from his image—the grandfatherly, absent-minded genius too preoccupied with abstract equations to think about the day-to-day cares that consume most mortals. Indeed, Einstein's speech at Lincoln is nowhere to be found—nor even quoted—in the scientist's archives or in the plethora of his biographies and anthologies. Were it not for its wide coverage by the black press at the time, we would have no inkling of what he had said. Yet the great scientist was far from silent, speaking out and joining numerous campaigns for social justice. Just a few months after his talk at Lincoln, he co-chaired the American Crusade to End Lynching with Robeson. In the year following the end of World War II and the defeat of Nazism, a wave of lynching hit the US (mostly but not only in the Southern states), primarily targeting returning black GIs who many white southerners felt had to be reeducated as to their proper place.

This is now

For physicists concerned about racism today, the first step might be simply to join in Einstein's pledge: "I will not remain silent about it." One can envision the impact of such a statement signed by one or two thousand physicists and published in newspapers across the country. (Although one wonders if a physics society or other scientific association would circulate such a pledge today.)

But aren't you making this too much of an issue, our skeptical reader will argue: America has made great strides since Einstein's day; black people are no longer barred by law from housing, schools, beaches, or buses, and just look at all the African Americans in public office!

To be sure, thanks to the dedication and sacrifices of the civil rights movement, a number of the more blatant back-of-the-bus bylaws of bigotry have been overturned, but a closer look shows something that will come as no surprise to people of color in this country: America's long river of racism is not so much dammed up as it is diverted.

It doesn't take an Einstein to identify racial inequities in today's society. US Labor Department reports continue to show that the jobless rate among black workers is far higher than among whites; the Institute of Medicine has documented that African Americans and other minorities receive inferior health care; and in New York City, officials recently announced that after a project that lasted all of two years, they simply can't do anything to change the woefully inadequate education in the city's poorer, darker-skinned districts.[3]

If you teach at a major university in this country, try counting the number of African American physics professors. A recent survey of physics faculty members at the 50 top-ranked departments revealed that 12 people out of a total of 1988—0.6%—had identifiable African heritage.[4]

But racism in the physics community today is more than a story of numbers. In this case, the dearth of black faculty members illustrates underlying attitudes. The following story was related by S. James Gates, director of the Center for String and Particle Theory at the University of Maryland and former president of the National Society of Black Physicists. "A young African American PhD recipient applies to a well-known university for a postdoctoral position. His application is via paper and the scientist carrying out the evaluation is sufficiently impressed to invite him for an interview. At the appointed time, the young aspirant is seated in the secretary's office. The senior scientist sticks his head into the office, looks around, and retreats without comment. Some minutes later, he does so again, and then again, and finally asks the secretary whether she has heard anything from the postdoctoral student due there for an interview."[5] It may not come as a total surprise

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that some African Americans question university administrators' explanations that they simply cannot find qualified minority applicants for positions in physics and other science departments.

Opposing racism today doesn't require organizing a march on Washington. At many colleges and universities, student groups are turning up the volume of their demands for more professors and students of color. A faculty group seeking more African American professors could have instant allies among students. Indeed, building a multiracial teaching staff, from postdocs to tenured professors, should attract support from every corner of the campus. *Diversity is not an African American issue.* In today's increasingly tribalized world, a multicolored, multiethnic faculty of women and men is, in itself, an educational asset for all teachers and students.

Truly equal opportunity in higher education, it should be emphasized, cannot be won without eliminating racial tracking in the public school system, and that also involves the struggle for equal housing and affordable health care. With an administration whose education policy is to eliminate evolution rather than racism, all those issues will likely lead to political battles on the local and national levels.

But we are scientists, our unconvinced reader eagerly interjects. Our mission is research, not meddling in politics.

As a writer, I am hardly qualified to offer suggestions to physicists. But in Einstein's view, scientists have both a special opportunity and a responsibility to speak out for social justice. Because "the scientist as a citizen has influence," he argued, "it follows that the scientist has the duty to be active on political questions. He must have the courage to stand for his opinions—in the area of politics and economics, as well as science—as a teacher and public figure."[6]

Challenging the status quo

When my coauthor Rodger Taylor and I give talks about *Einstein on Race and Racism,* the question people most frequently ask—besides "Why haven't we heard about this before?"—is "Why was Einstein so concerned about racism?" The question itself opens a window onto the nature of our society: If we were discussing the life of a black scientist, or any black person in America, no one would ask why he or she was against racism. Racism, it seems, has become a problem only for its victims. For the majority of European Americans, racism may be unfortunate but it brings only an emotional shrug: "It's not my problem."

Einstein served his anti-intolerance apprenticeship in Germany where, before moving to this country as America's most famous refugee from Nazism, he faced years of anti-Semitism. More than any other scientist, arguably more than any other human being, Einstein—a genius who was also a Jew, a democrat, and later, a socialist—gave the lie to Hitler's Nazi theories. He was invited to speak and was hailed by audiences around the world.

Einstein's commitment against racism began with, but grew beyond, his own experience into what is often called a social conscience. It was, and is, a commitment dangerous to society's once and would-be slavemasters because it is contagious.

Perhaps Einstein's approach to the world was influenced in part by his approach to the universe—a boldness in challenging the status quo. "Race prejudice," he told a student newspaper at Cheyney State Teachers College, an African American school in Pennsylvania, "has unfortunately become an American tradition which is uncritically handed down from one generation to the next." In a 1946 article for *Pageant* magazine, he explained, "The more I feel an American, the more this situation pains me. I can escape the feeling of complicity in it only by speaking out." And he invited the magazine's mostly white readership to join in the anti-racist struggle: "I do not believe there is a way in which this deeply entrenched evil can be quickly healed. But until this goal is reached there is no greater satisfaction for a just and well-meaning person than the knowledge that he has devoted his best energies to the service of the good cause."

References

1. References for these and other quotations can be found in F. Jerome, R. Taylor, *Einstein on Race and Racism*, Rutgers U. Press, Piscataway, NJ (2005).
2. D. Starr, *Blood: An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce*, St. Martin's Press, New York (1988).
3. D. M. Herszenhorn, *New York Times*, 12 May 2005, p. B1.
4. D. J. Nelson, *AWIS* magazine **31**(1), 28 (2002), published by the Association for Women in Science.
5. Gates told the story to me in an interview, and at the 25th Annual Conference of the National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers, 17 April 1998, in Dallas, TX.
6. O. Nathan, H. Norden, *Einstein on Peace*, Simon & Schuster, New York (1960), p. 283. ■