

Week Seven Reading Guide: Vietnam War protests

This week is devoted to discussion of how natural and social scientists protested the US war against communist forces in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The anti-war movement was strong among the general population, and eventually forced the US withdrawal in Nixon's ironically named "peace with honor." Opposition to the war by scientists did not have a large impact on the public, but it did have a large impact on many college campuses including MIT and, more broadly, on the nature and conduct of science. As essayist Lev Levidow [has emphasized](#), science and politics are entangled despite claims to the contrary: "Professional experts have often seen the science/politics binary as a strategic protection against political interference, yet the binary has effectively concealed policy assumptions within expertise." The Vietnam War exposed the difficulties with maintaining this binary separation, which we discussed earlier in Week two in the discussion about J. Robert Oppenheimer.

This week we will also hear three 15-minute summaries by students of their final paper concepts.

October 23, 2019

Chomsky, N. 1967, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," The New York Review of Books, [February 23, 1967](#)

Noam Chomsky's long essay had and still has great influence on academics and students, as he relentlessly challenges us to think about social responsibility. He writes, "It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies." As a statement about science, this is uncontroversial. Chomsky meant a much broader application to "expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions." He argues that this responsibility arises not from the technical expertise of scientists but instead from the privileges granted to the intellectual class. Chomsky is a linguist but does not use his linguistic expertise in his social activism. For him, paradoxically, politics and science are separate. He is passionately political in his activism.

Chomsky's accusations of governmental propaganda, complicity by the mainstream news media, and a presumption of public approval of deception, have strong resonance in the US today. Based on that, what might you guess Chomsky to be writing about now? What is he actually writing about? (Web search his speeches and writing over the last 12 months.)

Chomsky presents several examples of deception by presidential advisors and others concerning American intentions in its international engagements ranging from central Europe to Iran, China, the far east, and the Caribbean. What do these examples have in common? According to Chomsky, what were the American government's aims? Can you think of similar examples of possible deception about US involvement abroad happening now? What might be the government's aims today?

Chomsky criticizes the academics working for the government who provided rationalization of US policies during the cold war. He says that the motivation for these policies is the American value of individualism combined with fear of communism, alongside some broader sense of "our religious and ethical value systems." Make arguments, for or against, that the same motivations underly current US

engagements around the world. (The relevance for our course is that science activism occurs in a broad social and political context.)

At the conclusion of his analysis of an article by Irving Kristol, Chomsky asks a series of questions about the role of intellectuals in questioning governmental decisions. Do you agree that it is the responsibility of intellectuals to ask these questions? What is your personal responsibility?

Where is Chomsky being sarcastic and where is he direct? Why do you think he utilizes so much sarcasm? What do you think its impact is?

In a paragraph beginning “In this implicit disparagement of traditional intellectual values,” Chomsky explains some reasons why he sees science and politics as completely separate. Explain.

Near the end of the essay, Chomsky reveals his preference for the outcome of the Vietnam conflict: a political solution in which the NLF be granted power. What does this mean? Is it the way the war ended?

Articles in *The Tech*: [April 14, 1967](#); [March 1, 1968](#); [November 1, 1968](#); [November 8, 1968](#).

Noam Chomsky was not the only person at MIT speaking out against the US role in Vietnam. Several faculty and many students participated in protests as part of a national student protest movement. These issues of the MIT student newspaper contain numerous articles about protest events during 1967 and 1968.

Give details on the protest events described in these articles. Who organized them, how many people participated, how were they related to protests outside MIT, what did the protesters call for, what actions took place, what were the outcomes?

Do these issues of the newspaper contain evidence of differences of views in the MIT community about the war and protests? What other national issues besides the war are raised in these newspaper issues?

What do you recognize as being familiar in today’s MIT compared with 50 years ago? What is most different? What non-protest related articles were most interesting to you, and why?

Moore, K. 2008, *Disrupting Science: Social movements, American scientists, and the politics of the military, 1945–1975* (Princeton University Press), Chapter 5 (excluding the section on the March 4 Movement).

Kelly Moore is a sociologist who studies the relationship of knowledge and power, as well as activism and protest movements, as mediated by gender, race, and class. Her book *Disrupting Science* provides a great deal of background relevant to this class. I didn’t assign it as a textbook only because it is fairly advanced, and I thought it better to start with first-person accounts by science-activists. Chapter 5, “Confronting Liberalism: The Anti-Vietnam War Movement and the ABM Debate, 1965–1969,” tells about the growth of liberal and radical activism among scientists and science students during that period, leading to three interrelated movements and organizations: the March 4 Movement led by MIT students (we will postpone this for next week), the Union of Concerned Scientists started by MIT faculty, and Science for the People, started by physicists at Stanford and UC Berkeley.

Compare the critique of liberalism by Science for the People presented on p. 131 with Chomsky's critiques. What is similar and what is different? Moore outlines the chapter goals to explore "the roots of the rejection of the liberal and conscientious objection models, and the embryonic attempts by scientists and science students to articulate an alternative." What is meant by the liberal model? The conscientious objection model? Which one(s) characterize Martin Luther King, Jr.'s methods? Why do you think "a new generation of activists" in 1970 were not satisfied with appeals to personal responsibility? (The article goes into this in some length.) What was the context in America at that time? How does it compare to now?

Why did scientists at MIT and Harvard begin using emotion and morality in their appeals to the public? Compare this language with that of Rachel Carson, Randall Forsberg, and Helen Caldicott.

What is an ABM system and why did many physicists (including the head of the theory division in the Manhattan project) oppose it? How did they organize opposition to the installation of ABMs near big cities?

How did physicist Charles Schwartz challenge the apolitical stance of the American Physical Society (APS) concerning the role of physics in military activities? What similar efforts took place in other scholarly disciplines? Why do you think scholars organized around their professional societies more than their university campuses? In what ways did their efforts succeed? Why was the physics society so resistant?

How did the APS resistance stimulate the formation of Science for the People (initially called Scientists for Social and Political Action, then Scientists and Engineers for Social and Political Action, SESPA)? When and where did the first meeting occur, and what happened there? Where were some of the active chapters located? Note how quickly the efforts spread without the internet.

How did the liberal-radical debate play out in SESPA/Science for the People during 1969? What was happening in the larger society that might have encouraged scientists to adopt direct action and other radical approaches?

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Articles in *The Tech*: [September 26, 1969](#); [October 3, 1969](#); [October 7, 1969](#); [October 14, 1969](#); [October 21, 1969](#); [November 4, 1969](#); [November 7, 1969](#); [December 12, 1969](#); [May 5, 1970](#); [May 18, 1971](#) (Makowski editorials pp. 3, 4).

The 1969–70 academic year was perhaps the most turbulent in MIT's history. The articles above are a sampler; almost every issue of *The Tech* during the year had articles and/or letters about protest and activism.

Answer the same questions listed above for the 1967–68 articles. You might find it helpful to start with the last one; *Tech* editor-in-chief Alex Makowski gives a timeline and reflects on how things have changed a year later.

Jerome, F. and Taylor, R. 2006, Chapters 9–11.

Chapter 9

- Why did Einstein advocate a world government, and how did the US State Department react to that? For a more balanced view of William T. Golden, read the New York Times obituary by Dennis Overbye, October 9, 2007.
- The ACLU, NAACP, and CRC (Civil Rights Congress) responded differently to McCarthyism. Why? What effect did that have on their impact then and later?
- How did Einstein help acquit W.E.B. DuBois in a federal trial in 1951?

Chapter 10

- Why did Einstein decline the invitation to become the president of Israel? How were his concerns reflected in the situation today?
- How and why did Einstein oppose McCarthyism increasingly strongly during 1951–53?
- What do these events say about Einstein's motivations to encourage civil disobedience?

Chapter 11

- Who was Harry Morton, and what light does he shine on Einstein's character?
- Find online the April 20, 1955 edition of the Princeton student newspaper, The Daily Princetonian. What does the photograph of a black boy say about racial dynamics in Princeton, NJ in 1955?
- Review the documents from Einstein's FBI file, pp. 154–60. What stands out to you, and why?

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