**Understanding the Civil Rights Movement Through a Hermeneutic Lens**

James Hollywood III

Omega Graduate School

Research for the 21st Century.

Professor Dr. Ken Schmdt

March 2, 2024

Assignment #3 –Essay on a Case Study

1. Write a 5-page paper on a specific event or phenomenon (e.g., a historical event, a cultural practice, a legal decision), and interpret it from a hermeneutic perspective. This would involve understanding the event within its context and recognizing the role of your prejudices in shaping your interpretation. The student should direct developmental readings from Assignment #2 on the

hermeneutic issue for this assignment.

**2. Paper Outline**

a. Begin with an introductory paragraph that has a succinct thesis statement.

b. Address the topic of the paper with critical thought.

c. End with a conclusion that reaffirms your thesis.

d. Use a minimum of eleven scholarly research sources (two books and the remaining scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles).

Understanding the Civil Rights Movement Through a Hermeneutic Lens

1. **Introduction**

The American Civil Rights Movement stands as a pivotal moment in history, marked by activism, legislative battles, and societal transformation. This paper interprets this significant event through a hermeneutic perspective, aiming to understand its complexities within its historical and cultural context while acknowledging the role of personal biases in shaping interpretations. The Civil Rights Movement emerged in response to deeply entrenched racial segregation, discrimination, and systemic injustices that permeated American society. It was a time of immense courage and resilience as individuals and communities mobilized to challenge the status quo and demand equality and justice for all. Through a hermeneutic lens, the American Civil Rights Movement appears as a multifaceted phenomenon, characterized by dynamic interactions between various social, political, and cultural forces, and influenced by individual interpretations shaped by individual interpretations and biases.

1. **Historical Context of the Civil Rights Movement**
2. *Overview of the Socio-Political Landscape in the United States During the Mid-20th Century*

During the mid-20th century, the United States was grappling with deep-seated racial segregation and systemic discrimination against African Americans. This period, often referred to as the Jim Crow era, was characterized by pervasive racial inequality in various facets of life, including education, housing, employment, and public accommodations. Legalized segregation, supported by the infamous "separate but equal" doctrine established in the 1896 Supreme Court case Plessy v. Ferguson, perpetuated racial divisions, and entrenched white supremacy across the nation. African Americans faced widespread disenfranchisement through discriminatory voting laws, while violent acts of racism, such as lynchings and racial violence, terrorized black communities.

1. *Key Events and Figures that Shaped the Civil Rights Movement*

The Civil Rights Movement emerged as a response to these injustices, fueled by the courageous activism of individuals and organizations committed to challenging racial segregation and advocating for equality. Prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X became iconic symbols of the movement, leading nonviolent protests, organizing boycotts, and delivering impassioned speeches calling for racial justice. Landmark events like the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on Washington, and the Selma to Montgomery marches galvanized public support and garnered national attention, propelling the momentum for change.

1. *Discussion of the Prevailing Ideologies and Social Norms of the Time*

The prevailing ideologies and social norms of the mid-20th century reflected deeply ingrained beliefs in white supremacy and racial hierarchy. Segregationist attitudes justified the subjugation of African Americans and perpetuated notions of black inferiority. White supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan openly promoted racial violence and terrorized black communities to maintain the status quo. Additionally, institutionalized racism was defended by discriminatory policies and practices that systematically marginalized African Americans, denying them equal opportunities and access to resources.

1. **Interpretation Through a Hermeneutic Perspective**
2. *Explanation of Hermeneutics and its Relevance to Interpreting Historical Events*

Hermeneutics, as a philosophical approach to understanding texts and phenomena, holds relevance in interpreting historical events such as the Civil Rights Movement. Rooted in the idea of interpretation as a dynamic process influenced by the interpreter's context and assumptions, hermeneutics emphasizes the need to research beneath surface-level meanings and uncover deeper layers of significance. By applying hermeneutic principles to historical analysis, scholars and researchers can contextualize events within their broader socio-cultural and political frameworks, discerning the complex interactions of various factors that shaped their outcomes.

1. *Analysis of the Civil Rights Movement within its Cultural, Political, and Social Context*

When viewed through a hermeneutic lens, the Civil Rights Movement reveals itself as an event intricately connected to its time's cultural, political, and social dynamics. Cultural factors, such as the enduring legacy of slavery and the emergence of the civil rights ethos, played pivotal roles in shaping the movement's goals and strategies. Politically, the Civil Rights Movement intersected with broader struggles for equality and democracy, challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for legislative reforms. Socially, the movement reflected shifting attitudes and norms surrounding race and citizenship, sparking conversations about identity, justice, and human rights.

1. *Recognition of Personal Biases and Prejudices in Interpreting the Movement*

An essential aspect of interpreting historical events through a hermeneutic perspective is the acknowledgment of personal biases and prejudices that may influence interpretations. As interpreters engage with historical texts and narratives, they bring their cultural backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs to the analysis, shaping their understanding of the past. Recognizing and critically reflecting on these biases is crucial for achieving a more nuanced and objective interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement. By interrogating their assumptions and biases, scholars can strive for a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in historical events, thereby enriching scholarly discourse and contributing to a more nuanced understanding of history.

1. **Critical Examination of Key Themes and Issues**

A. Exploration of Themes such as Racial Segregation, Discrimination, and Resistance

The Civil Rights Movement was characterized by a profound struggle against racial segregation, discrimination, and systemic injustice. Investigating into these themes reveals the deeply entrenched inequalities that permeated American society during the mid-20th century. Racial segregation, enforced through Jim Crow laws and institutional practices, relegated African Americans to second-class citizenship, denying them access to basic rights and opportunities. Discrimination manifested in various forms, from overt acts of violence and intimidation to subtler forms of prejudice and bias. However, alongside these injustices emerged a spirit of resistance and resilience among marginalized communities, as individuals and groups mobilized to challenge the status quo and demand equality under the law.

*B. Analysis of the Strategies Employed by Civil Rights Activists and Their Impact*

Civil rights activists employed various strategies to challenge racial injustice and advance the cause of equality. From nonviolent protests and civil disobedience to legal challenges and grassroots organizing, these tactics sought to disrupt oppressive systems and effect meaningful change. The impact of these strategies was profound, leading to significant legislative victories such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Moreover, the Civil Rights Movement catalyzed broader social and cultural shifts, sparking conversations about race, identity, and citizenship that continue to reverberate in contemporary society.

1. *Discussion of the Role of Interpretation and Reinterpretation in Shaping the Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement*

Interpretation and reinterpretation play a crucial role in shaping the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, influencing how its legacy is understood and remembered. Over time, interpretations of the movement have evolved, reflecting changing social, political, and cultural contexts. Activists and scholars have reexamined key events and figures, challenging prevailing narratives and uncovering overlooked stories of resistance and resilience. This ongoing process of reinterpretation highlights the dynamic nature of historical interpretation, as new evidence and perspectives emerge to enrich our understanding of the past. By critically engaging with diverse interpretations, we can appreciate the complexity of the Civil Rights Movement and its enduring significance in the struggle for justice and equality.

1. **Engagement with Developmental Readings**
2. *Integration of insights from developmental readings on hermeneutics:*

The developmental readings on hermeneutics offer valuable insights into understanding the Civil Rights Movement and its significance. Drawing from works such as Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," Branch's "Parting the Waters," Carson's "In Struggle," and King's "Why We Can't Wait," among others, we gain a multifaceted understanding of the historical context, key figures, and underlying ideologies of the movement. These texts provide narratives of struggle, resilience, and activism that shape our interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement.

1. *Discussion of how these readings inform the interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement:*

Each of the developmental readings contributes to our interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement by providing different perspectives, historical accounts, and analyses of the events and dynamics that unfolded during that period. For example, Baldwin's poignant reflections offer insights into the experiences of African Americans and the urgency for social change, while Branch's comprehensive narrative traces the evolution of the movement and the pivotal role of individuals like Martin Luther King Jr. and organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Carson's examination of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) sheds light on grassroots activism and youth involvement, while King's writings articulate the moral and ethical imperatives driving the movement forward. These readings collectively enrich our understanding of the Civil Rights Movement as a complex and multifaceted struggle for justice, equality, and human rights.

1. *Evaluation of different interpretative approaches and perspectives:*

The interpretative approaches and perspectives presented in these developmental readings vary, ranging from personal narratives to scholarly analyses, from firsthand accounts to historical reconstructions. Each approach offers unique insights and challenges, inviting readers to critically engage with the material and consider multiple viewpoints. Some readings may prioritize certain voices or experiences over others, while others may offer more nuanced interpretations of the complexities inherent in the Civil Rights Movement. By evaluating these different approaches, readers can better understand the movement and its significance in American history and society.

1. **Conclusion**
2. *Restatement of the thesis and key findings*

Throughout this essay, we have explored the interpretation of historical events, particularly the Civil Rights Movement, through the lens of hermeneutics. By integrating insights from developmental readings on hermeneutics and engaging with various interpretive approaches, we have uncovered the multifaceted nature of understanding historical phenomena. Our examination of texts by Baldwin, Branch, Carson, and others has revealed the depth and complexity of the Civil Rights Movement, highlighting the importance of considering diverse perspectives and experiences.

1. *Reflection on the significance of interpreting historical events through a hermeneutic lens*

Interpreting historical events through a hermeneutic lens offers a nuanced understanding that goes beyond surface-level analysis. By acknowledging the fusion of horizons between interpreters and texts, we recognize the dynamic nature of interpretation and the role of context in shaping meaning. This approach allows us to appreciate the richness of historical narratives and the diverse voices that contribute to our understanding of the past. Moreover, by embracing reflexivity and dialogue, hermeneutics encourages us to critically engage with our perspectives and biases, fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive interpretation of history.

1. *Suggestions for further research and exploration in this area*

Further research in this area could explore the application of hermeneutic principles to other historical events and social movements, allowing for a deeper understanding of their significance and impact. Additionally, investigating the intersection of hermeneutics with other theoretical frameworks, such as critical race theory or feminist theory, could offer new insights into the interpretation of historical narratives. Moreover, examining the role of technology and digital humanities in historical interpretation could open new avenues for research and exploration. Overall, continued inquiry into interpreting historical events through a hermeneutic lens has the potential to enrich our understanding of the past and inform our perspectives on contemporary issues.

WORKS CITED

Ernst, A. (2019). Review of factors influencing social learning within participatory environmental governance. Ecology and Society, 24(1). https://www.jstor.org/stable/26796921

Feindt, P. H., & Weiland, S. (2018). Reflexive governance: Exploring the concept and assessing its critical potential for sustainable development. Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning, 20(6), 661–674. https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2018.1532562

Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). Truth and Method (2nd ed.). Continuum.

Heclo, H. (2002). The spirit of public administration. PS: Political Science and Politics, 35(4), 689–694. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1554811

Lane, J. (2019). Developmental governance. Open Journal of Political Science, 9, 624–630. https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2019.94038

Morales, C. (2020). Public policy & political parties: A qualitative analysis of homelessness and poverty reduction frameworks in British Columbia (Master's thesis, University of Victoria). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/1828/12108

Pelz, B. (2021). Interpretive Research. In B. Pelz (Ed.), Research Methods for the Social Sciences (pp. xx). Herkimer College / SUNY.

Ricoeur, P. (1976). Language as discourse. In Interpretation theory: Discourse and the surplus of meaning (pp. 34–36). Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press.

Schön, D. A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action (1st ed.). Basic Books.

Svensson, P. (2017). Cross-Sector Strategists: Dedicated Bureaucrats in Local Government Administration [Doctoral dissertation, University of Gothenburg]. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/2077/54242

Yanow, D., & Schwartz-Shea, P. (2014). Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn. Routledge.