

History and Politics of the Civil Rights Movement

Research paper

For your major paper for the semester you have two options, so read the following carefully.

1. A research paper on any topic that falls within the province of the civil rights movements since the end of World War II. You are limited only by your imagination - and the availability of sources (which is what I can help you with). You may pursue a topic outside the three movements - the black, women's, and gay rights movements - in our syllabus. As I noted at the beginning of the semester, I'm acutely aware that this class doesn't address, for example, the Latino movements for social justice in modern American history; this is your chance to focus on a topic in that area if you wish. You can write on an individual, a place, an organization; you can write about material culture, literature, art, music, style, fashion, modes of protest. The only criterion is that if you pursue one of these you must show how it was intimately connected to a movement for social change.

One other observation: the temptation to write about a well-known figure or movement is understandable, but you're unlikely to write something original. I'd strongly recommend that you instead have a much narrower focus, whether it is a person, place, time. Some of the best social history focuses on, say, a locality or an individual but in the process pursues universal truths from the particular. For example, if you have a relative or family acquaintance who was active in a movement, interview him/her. How does their experience fit with the larger movement? What did they contribute? Were they changed by their participation? If so, how?

Finally, bear in mind that this paper should be based on primary sources. You will of course need to lean on secondary sources (books like D'Emilio's biography of Bayard Rustin or Ruth Rosen's book on the women's movement), but primary sources - that is, original, contemporaneous sources such as letters, diaries, court proceedings, newspapers, autobiographies, sermons, oral histories, and so on - are the fundamental materials that historians use to try to describe and understand the past. Like most human productions, primary sources are open to interpretation, which is why doing history - doing it well, in any case - is almost as much an act of the imagination as it is of simply compiling evidence.

2. I've been very interested in the recent debate over the appropriateness of monuments around the country - most notably Confederate statues and ones of Columbus, the defeat of Native Americans, and so on. I happen to disagree with the argument that those monuments should be removed because it seems to me that that would be as much an erasure of history as the *lack* of representation of individuals and movements that have fought *for* human dignity.

So, if you don't want to do a research paper, instead write a cultural resources report advocating and explaining why a person, group, movement, place - a town, a plaza, a building - is worthy of a monument or recognition as a place of national historical significance. (If you haven't figured this out, you're actually still doing a research paper but just by another name.) Go online and look up what a cultural resources report looks like. They are almost invariably top-drawer scholarly pieces, models of clarity that provide guidance to decision makers on the whys and wherefores of a claim for recognition. As for

choosing the focus of your report, you are constrained only by your imagination and the availability of sources to support the claim to significance.

Whatever option or topic you choose, you *must* clear it with me first. I will be unforgiving about this: If you write on a topic you have not cleared with me, you will receive an F for the assignment.

And bear in mind my admonition on the syllabus about plagiarism. If you are in any doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, come and talk to me. You must submit your paper to Turnitin; details on that to follow

Your paper should be at least 12 double-spaced pages - that is, 3500 words - in length. You must document your work, providing citations and sources in footnotes following the MLA format. All you need to know about MLA style you can find here, <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>.

Leave one-inch margins on all sides of the paper, and please use at least a 12-point font size and preferably one of the “cleaner” fonts like Candara, Calibri, or Helvetica (rather than, say, Times New Roman or Bookman).

The paper is due in class on **Thursday, November 30.**