The Continuing Evolution of Reconstruction History

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In the past thirty years, no period of American history has seen a broadly accepted point of view so completely overturned as Reconstruction—the dramatic and controversial era that followed the Civil War. Since the early 1960s, a profound alteration of the place of blacks within American society, newly uncovered evidence, and changing definitions of history itself, have combined to transform our understanding of race relations, politics, and economic change during Reconstruction.

Anyone who attended high school before 1960 learned that Reconstruction was an era of unrelieved sordidness in American political and social life. Drawing on scholarly studies that originated in the work of William Dunning, John W. Burgess, and their students soon after the turn of the century, the "traditional" interpretation argued that when the Civil War ended, the white South accepted the reality of military defeat, stood ready to do justice to the emancipated slaves, and desired above all a quick reintegration into the fabric of national life. Before his death, Abraham Lincoln had embarked on a course of sectional reconciliation, and during Presidential Reconstruction (1865-1867) his successor, Andrew Johnson, attempted to carry out Lincoln's magnanimous policies. Johnson's efforts were opposed and eventually thwarted by the Radical Republicans in Congress. Motivated by an irrational hatred of Southern "rebels" and the desire to consolidate their party's national ascendancy, the Radicals in 1867 swept aside the Southern governments Johnson had established and fastened black suffrage upon the defeated South. There followed the period of Congressional or Radical Reconstruction (1867-77), an era of corruption presided over by unscrupulous "carpetbaggers" from the North, unprincipled Southern white "scalawags," and ignorant blacks, unprepared for freedom and incapable of properly exercising the political right Northerners had thrust upon them. After much needless suffering, the South's white community banded together to overthrow these governments and restore "home rule" (a euphemism for white supremacy). All told, Reconstruction was the darkest page in the American saga.

During the 1920s and 1930s, new studies of Johnson's career and new investigations of the economic wellsprings of Republican policy reinforced the prevailing disdain for Reconstruction. Johnson's new biographers portrayed him as a courageous defender of constitutional liberty; his actions stood above reproach. Simultaneously, historians of the Progressive School, who viewed political ideologies as little more than masks for crass economic ends, further undermined the Radicals' reputation by portraying them as agents of Northern capitalism, who cynically used the issue of black rights to fasten economic subordination upon the defeated South.

From the first appearance of the Dunning school, dissenting voices had been raised, initially by a handful of survivors of the Reconstruction era and the small fraternity of black historians. In 1935, the black activist and scholar, W. E. B. Du Bois, published Black Reconstruction in America, a monumental study that portrayed Reconstruction as an idealistic effort to construct a democratic, interracial political order from the ashes of slavery, as well as a phase in a prolonged struggle between capital and labor for control of the South's economic resources. His book closed with an indictment of a profession whose writings had ignored the testimony of the principle actor in the drama of Reconstruction—the emancipated slave—and sacrificed scholarly objectivity on the altar of racial bias. "One fact
and one alone," Du Bois wrote, "explains the attitude of most recent writers toward Reconstruction; they cannot conceive of Negroes as men." Black Reconstruction anticipated the findings of modern scholarship, but at the time of its publication, it failed to influence prevailing views among academic historians, or the account of the era in school texts.

Despite its remarkable longevity and powerful hold on the imagination, the demise of the traditional interpretation was inevitable. Its fundamental underpinning was the conviction, to quote one member of the Dunning School, of "negro incapacity." Once objective scholarship and modern experience rendered its racist assumptions untenable, familiar evidence read very differently, new questions suddenly came into prominence, and the entire edifice had to fall.

It required, however, not simply the evolution of scholarship but a profound change in the nation's politics and racial attitudes to deal the final blow to the Dunning School. If the traditional interpretation reflected, and helped to legitimize, the racial order of a society in which blacks were disenfranchised and subjected to discrimination in every aspect of their lives, Reconstruction revisionism bore the mark of the modern civil rights movement. In the 1960s the revisionist wave broke over the field, destroying, in rapid succession, every assumption of the traditional viewpoint. First, scholars presented a drastically revised account of national politics. New works portrayed Andrew Johnson as a stubborn, racist politician incapable of responding to the unprecedented situation that confronted him as president, and acquitted the Radicals--reborn as idealistic reformers genuinely committed to black rights--of vindictive motives and the charge of being the stalking-horses of Northern capitalism. Moreover, Reconstruction legislation was shown to be not simply the product of a Radical cabal, but a program that enjoyed broad support both in Congress and the North at large.

Even more startling was the revised portrait of Republican rule in the South. So ingrained was the old racist version of Reconstruction that it took an entire decade of scholarship to prove the essentially negative contentions that "Negro rule" was a myth and that Reconstruction represented more than "the blackout of honest government." The establishment of public school systems, the granting of equal citizenship to blacks, and the effort to revitalize the devastated Southern economy refuted the traditional description of the period as a "tragic era" of rampant misgovernment. Revisionists pointed out as well that corruption in the Reconstruction South paled before that of the Tweed Ring, Credit Mobilier scandal, and Whiskey Rings in the post-Civil War North. By the end of the 1960s, Reconstruction was seen as a time of extraordinary social and political progress for blacks. If the era was "tragic," it was because change did not go far enough, especially in the area of Southern land reform.

Even when Revisionism was at its height, however, its more optimistic findings were challenged, as influential historians portrayed change in the post-Civil War years as fundamentally "superficial." Persistent racism, these post-revisionist scholars argued, had negated efforts to extend justice to blacks, and the failure to distribute land prevented the freedmen from achieving true autonomy and made their civil and political rights all but meaningless. In the 1970s and 1980s, a new generation of scholars, black

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revolutionary and conservative Reconstruction really was."

In emphasizing that Reconstruction was part of the ongoing evolution of Southern society rather than a passing phenomenon, the post-revisionists made a salutary contribution to the study of the period. The description of the Reconstruction as "conservative," however, did not seem altogether persuasive when one reflected that it took the nation fully a century to implement its most basic demands, while others are yet to be fulfilled. Nor did the theme of continuity yield a fully convincing portrait of an era that contemporaries all agreed was both turbulent and wrenching in its social and political change. Over a half-century ago, Charles and Mary Beard coined the term "The Second American Revolution" to describe a transfer in power, wrought by the Civil War, from the South's "planting aristocracy" to "Northern capitalists and free farmers." And in the latest shift in interpretive premises, attention to changes in the relative power of social classes has again become a central concern of historical writing. Unlike the Beards, however, who all but ignored the black experience, modern scholars tend to view emancipation itself as among the most revolutionary aspects of the period.

The most recent effort to provide a coherent account of the Reconstruction era is my own Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, published in 1988, and with an abridged version, A Short History of Reconstruction, set to appear in 1990. Drawing upon the voluminous secondary literature that has appeared in the last thirty years, the book seems to provide a coherent, comprehensive modern account of the period. Necessarily, it touches on a multitude of issues, but certain broad themes unified the narrative. The first is the centrality of the black experience. Rather than the passive victims of the actions of others or simply a "problem" confronting white society, blacks were active agents in the making of Reconstruction, whose quest for individual and community autonomy did much to establish Reconstruction's political and economic agenda. Black participation in Southern public life after 1867 was the most radical development of the Reconstruction years. Other themes include transition from slave to free labor and the evolution of racial attitudes and patterns of race relations.

The book also seeks to place the Southern story within a national context, especially by stressing the emergence during the Civil War and Reconstruction of a national state possessing vastly expanded authority and a new set of purposes, including an unprecedented commitment to the ideal of a national citizenship whose equal rights belonged to all Americans regardless of race. Originating in wartime exigencies, the activist state came to embody the reforming impulse deeply rooted in postwar politics. And Reconstruction produced enduring changes in the laws and Constitution that fundamentally altered federal-state relations and redefined the meaning of American citizenship. Yet because it threatened traditions of local autonomy, produced political corruption, and was so closely associated with the new rights of blacks, the rise of the state inspired powerful opposition, which, in turn, weakened support for Reconstruction. Finally, the study examines how changes in the North's economy and class structure affected Reconstruction, and especially the retreat from the commitment to equality that accelerated during the 1870s.

My account of Reconstruction begins not in 1863, but with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, to emphasize that Reconstruction was not merely a specific time period, but the beginning of an extended historical process: the adjustment of American society to the end of slavery. The destruction of the central institution of antebellum Southern life permanently transformed the war's character, and produced far-reaching conflicts and debates over the role former slaves and their descendants would play in American life and the meaning of the freedom they had acquired. These were the questions on which Reconstruction persistently turned.

They were also questions that confronted every society that abolished slavery in the Western hemisphere, from Cuba and Jamaica to Brazil. Indeed, it may well be that the future of Reconstruction studies lies in comparative analysis of the differences and similarities between various aftermaths of slavery. I made a brief beginning in this direction in my Nothing But Freedom, published in 1983. But comparative study of the economic, political, and social consequences of emancipation remains in its infancy. As was true for the study of slavery, a comparative approach to emancipation can broaden our perspective, introduce new questions and concepts, and illuminate what was and was not unique in the American experience of Reconstruction.

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