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Black Reconstruction: An Introduction

B*lack Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* is a complex, frustrating, but indispensable book. Its analysis is highly sophisticated, and its language often approaches the poetic, yet the reader may well become lost in the welter of details about Reconstruction in each state of the old Confederacy, which takes up the middle two hundred pages of the book. In this essay, I want to elucidate some of the key themes that unite *Black Reconstruction* and help explain why nearly eight decades after its publication, it remains one of the landmarks of US historical scholarship.

When *Black Reconstruction* appeared in 1935, both scholarly and popular understandings of the Reconstruction era that followed the Civil War were dominated by the Dunning school, named after William A. Dunning, who, with John W. Burgess, trained the first generation of historians at Columbia University at the turn of the century. In this view, Reconstruction was a travesty of democracy, an era of corruption and misgovernment presided over by unscrupulous carpetbaggers from the North, scalawags—traitorous white Southerners who cooperated with these outsiders who plundered the defeated South—and the freedmen, who, either from genetic inferiority or a childlike

propensity toward being manipulated politically, proved incapable of exercising properly the political rights Congress had thrust on them.

The heroes of the story were Andrew Johnson, who sought to defend constitutional government against assaults by the Radical Republicans in Congress, and the Ku Klux Klan and kindred groups who eventually overthrew Reconstruction and restored “home rule” (that is, white supremacy) to the South. The Radicals were the villains of the piece—their effort to remake Southern politics motivated by a desire for vengeance against the South, or in some later versions, by the aim of imposing capitalist domination on the region. Overall, Reconstruction was the lowest point in the saga of American history.

A widespread popular audience imbibed this representation of history in D. W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which glorified the Klan and presented blacks as uncivilized savages, and the great best seller of the 1920s, *The Tragic Era* by Claude Bowers (1929). The underlying principle of all these works, scholarly and popular, was the assumption of black incapacity. And they conveyed a clear political lesson—the white South was justified in disenfranchising black voters and in rejecting criticism of the system of racial inequality that followed the end of Reconstruction. The alleged “horrors” of Reconstruction formed one ideological pillar of the Jim Crow South.

Du Bois had long sought to counteract the Dunning school interpretation, which he saw as a severe impediment to any hope for improvement in the condition of blacks in twentieth-century America. Reconstruction had been a brief moment when blacks enjoyed the basic rights of citizenship, rights that he long struggled to see restored. For him, the era was tragic not because it was attempted but because it failed. As early as 1903, Du Bois included in *The Souls of Black Folk* sympathetic accounts of the Freedmen’s Bureau and of Northern teachers who ventured south to teach the freedmen after the Civil War. His 1910 essay, “Reconstruction and Its Benefits,” published in the *American Historical Review*, sought to counteract the Dunning school but outside the black colleges had little impact on scholarly teaching and writing. (This was the last article by a black writer in that august journal until the publication seventy years later of John Hope Franklin’s [1980] presidential address, which also dealt with Reconstruction.) Among the most powerful sections of *Black Reconstruction* is the final chapter, “The Propaganda of History,” a devastating and irrefutable indictment of a historical profession that had sacrificed the search for historical truth on the altar of racism. Remarkably, however, while Du Bois differed profoundly with the Dunning school in outlook and moved far beyond it in introducing black

sources, much of the historical evidence in the book is culled from the Dunning studies of Reconstruction in individual states. Du Bois rejects their racism and uses their findings for purposes quite different from what these authors intended.

Black Reconstruction is replete with insights that have become almost commonplace today but were revolutionary in their implications for the scholarship of the 1930s. Du Bois begins by expanding the framework for studying Reconstruction, both in time and space. The dates in the book's subtitle—1860–1880—implicitly make the point that Reconstruction cannot be understood apart from the Civil War and the complex historical process of emancipation. Indeed, the first chapter, on slavery, pushes the time frame back even further, insisting that without understanding the history of slavery it is impossible to understand the Civil War or Reconstruction. (Slavery, Du Bois asserts forthrightly at the outset was the war's "underlying cause" [1935: 15].) The book also places Reconstruction in a global setting, anticipating the current impulse to "internationalize" American history. The fate of American blacks, Du Bois makes clear, was intimately connected to the condition of nonwhite peoples in the colonial world—"that dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa" (15).

The book's title, of course, drives home perhaps Du Bois's central point—that blacks were the chief actors in the drama of Reconstruction, not simply recipients of the actions of others. The first sentence of chapter 1 announces that the black experience is "a central thread in the history of the United States" (3), an idea uncontroversial today but virtually unknown when Du Bois was writing. Throughout the book, Du Bois emphasizes the role and accomplishments of black political leaders and of ordinary former slaves seeking to breathe substantive meaning into the freedom they had acquired. He made a special effort to locate sources in which the voices of Reconstruction African Americans could be heard.

But the centrality of the black experience in the book lies even deeper than this. Contrary to existing historiography, which saw slavery as peripheral to the main themes of American development, Du Bois emphasizes the institution's crucial economic importance not only to the Old South but also to the economies of the North and of Europe, whose prosperity rested on the cotton produced by black labor. Moreover, blacks, Du Bois insists, again anticipating modern historical writing, were pivotal actors in the Civil War. Rather than being "freed" by Abraham Lincoln or by the Union Army, blacks emancipated themselves. Black soldiers played a critical role in winning the

contest, and from the war's outset, slaves ran away to Union lines. Indeed, Du Bois writes, their refusal to continue to act as slaves constituted a "general strike" that crippled the institution long before the war's end. By withdrawing their labor from the Southern economy, blacks played a crucial part in determining the war's outcome.

When it came to making slavery a target of the war effort, slaves took the initiative, and the Union government "followed in [their] footsteps" (Du Bois 1935: 81). The Civil War was a second American Revolution, but not only in the Beardian sense of marking a transition in national power from Southern planters to Northern industrialists, but in the actions of Southern slaves, who transformed a war for the Union into a struggle to overthrow the central institution of Southern life. And when the war ended, blacks organized petitions and conventions to demand civil equality and the right to vote. The suffrage was not simply thrust on former slaves but came, in part, as a result of their own demands. "For the first time in history," Du Bois writes, "the people of the United States listened not only to the voices of the Negroes' friends, but to the Negro himself" (230).

But it is important to note that Du Bois does not ignore the role of many other groups in the drama of Reconstruction. His canvas and cast of characters are remarkable in their breadth. He pays close attention to the titanic battle between Johnson and Congress that rewrote the laws and Constitution and launched the experiment in Radical Reconstruction. He writes of Northern labor and Northern industrialists and their part in the story. Du Bois introduces white labor at the very outset of the story: chapter 2 is titled "The White Worker."

Indeed, one of Du Bois's key themes is that among other things Reconstruction was a pivotal episode in American labor history. Blacks were not only freedmen and freedwomen but part of the American working class, a point he drives home by titling his first chapter not "Slavery" but "The Black Worker." And the key issue of Reconstruction was the new status of black labor—would it be genuinely free? The answer to that question, he insists, could be worked out only in conjunction with white labor. In the end, the tragedy of Reconstruction was that white laborers, in the North and South, failed to see that their interests were intimately tied up with the condition of the emancipated slaves. Reconstruction represented a lost opportunity, a moment when black and white labor could have united to seek common goals but failed to do so: a "union of democratic forces never took place" (239).

While Du Bois is attentive to the power of racism in shaping white responses to Reconstruction, he also stresses the importance of class conflict in the era's politics. During the 1930s, Du Bois had been influenced by Marxian ideas, which he assimilated into his own long-standing political outlook. In *Black Reconstruction*, the fate of Reconstruction is worked out via a complex set of class relations involving capitalists, laborers, and farmers in the North and planters, emancipated slaves, and "poor whites" in the South. The Civil War was won by an alliance between Southern blacks and Northern capital, farmers, and parts of Northern labor. But contradictions were inherent in this cross-class, cross-race alliance, contradictions symbolized by the land issue (Du Bois was the first historian to stress its centrality to the era's history). The freedpeople's demand for land—the famous forty acres and a mule—to provide an economic underpinning to their newly acquired freedom posed a threat to the sanctity of private property. Northern capital insisted that blacks must acquire land by working for wages and slowly accumulating capital, like everyone else in a market society—a totally unrealistic recipe in a postslavery plantation society. Radicals in the North like Thaddeus Stevens supported the black demand for land but lacked the political power to implement a program of land distribution. Thus, the political revolution went forward but the economic revolution was stymied.

Nor did Northern labor recognize the relevance of black demands to its own increasingly unequal situation in an industrial society. Labor "never had the intelligence or knowledge, as a whole, to see in black slavery and Reconstruction, the kernel and meaning of the labor movement in the United States" (Du Bois 1935: 353). Racism was one reason for this outcome. Northern workers did not want to give up the benefits of white privilege. But there were other reasons as well. Northern labor was itself divided—skilled versus unskilled, native versus foreigner—making it difficult to develop a coherent political position. Labor also shared the dominant ideological outlook of Northern society—what Du Bois called the "American Assumption" (183) that a market society offers opportunity to all for social advancement (later historians would call this the free labor ideology). White workers were not conscious of themselves as a working class with its own identity and interests; rather they celebrated the promise of social mobility, the opportunity to escape the status of wage labor altogether. While blacks, because of slavery, were acutely aware of the inequalities in American life, white labor saw the society as fundamentally just. For their part, the Radical Republicans and abolitionists, the cutting edge

of democratic change in the North, had no real connection with organized labor and little comprehension of its interests.

Then there were Southern “poor whites,” the class for which Du Bois expresses little sympathy and probably reveals the least understanding. Degraded, ignorant, racist, and under planter domination, they were incapable of playing anything but a retrograde role in Reconstruction. Johnson was their representative and avatar, a deeply racist politician whose conception of democracy was limited to the white population and who ended up, despite a prewar career based on criticism of the planter class, doing everything in his power to reinforce planter hegemony in the South. Johnson’s Reconstruction policies opened the door to the Southern Black Codes of 1865–66, which attempted to return blacks to a condition close to slavery. Du Bois’s portrait of Johnson stands in sharp contrast to the adulatory accounts in the historical writing of the 1920s. But he tends to ignore a larger class of nonslaveholders, Southern yeomen, who were neither poor nor affluent, and who represented a majority of the South’s white population.

Despite the book’s title, Du Bois insists that Reconstruction represented far more than a piece of African American history. As the book’s long subtitle proclaims,¹ it was a pivotal moment in the history of American democracy itself and must be recognized as such, not as the bizarre aberration portrayed by the Dunning school. One way of looking at the period, for Du Bois, was as the conflict of two ideals both deeply ingrained in American culture—the democratic ideal and the industrial one. The former was represented by the strivings of the former slaves and by the egalitarian impulse represented by abolitionists and Radicals (groups generally vilified by mainstream scholars at the time Du Bois was writing). For Du Bois, Charles Sumner, Stevens, and their allies were not misguided fanatics who helped bring about a needless war, but the most forward-looking democrats in white society. Their defeat led to the triumph of the industrial-capitalist ideal that dominated American life after the end of Reconstruction. The year 1877 marked the watershed, when Northern capital, beleaguered at home by the rising demands of farmers and workers, formed an alliance with their erstwhile planter enemies, resulting in a bargain whereby planters resumed control of the South and the allies of Northern industry solidified their hold on the national government. The result was not only the abandonment of the freed-people but the use of the federal government’s power to suppress labor, as in the deployment of troops to crush the national railroad strike of 1877. All this marked a retreat, in the broadest sense, from democracy, not only in the South but for the nation at large and, indeed, the entire world. After 1877,

Du Bois writes, “the United States was turned into a reactionary force,” a pillar of the new imperialism (1935: 631). With the overthrow of Reconstruction, “democracy died save in the hearts of black folk” (30).

And what of the Southern Reconstruction governments, the first in American history elected by manhood suffrage, including large numbers of blacks? Du Bois devotes much attention to refuting the misrepresentations of these governments and their black leaders that pervaded the works of the Dunning school, challenging their exaggerations of Reconstruction-era corruption and noting that the corruption that did take place could hardly be blamed on “the Negro voter” when malfeasance in office was mostly the work of white businessmen and officials (408). He counteracts the vilification of black officials, emphasizing their education and talent, and points to the many accomplishments of these regimes. But Du Bois goes further. Influenced by a recent immersion in Marxism, he calls them governments of the “black proletariat” (381, 431, 487). To the Communist Party, this was a misuse of Marxian terminology. Within two years James Allen (1937), one of the party’s chief theoreticians, produced *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy*, which insisted that the era embodied a bourgeois revolution, not a proletarian one, since it failed to challenge the system of private property and the industrial working class did not come to power. (Allen’s book, much briefer than Du Bois’s, contains many insights and remains well worth reading.) For many years it was communist and black historians who kept alive an alternative, positive view of Reconstruction—whether in the Du Bois or Allen mold—that challenged the prevailing Dunning orthodoxy. Not until the 1960s would mainstream historians abandon the traditional view and come to accept many of the insights advanced by writers like Du Bois, Allen, Herbert Aptheker, and Franklin, among others, in the 1930s and 1940s.

In strictly Marxian terms, Allen’s use of language was correct, but that did not undermine Du Bois’s basic point, which was that black laborers were the main constituency of the Southern governments of Radical Reconstruction. Moreover, Du Bois pointed out, the charge of corruption essentially boiled down to the fact that “poor men were ruling and taxing rich men” (1935: 419), something quite unusual in the American experience, black or white. In other words, the Reconstruction governments upset the class order as well as the racial one. To be sure, this situation created a contradiction between the national Republican Party, increasingly attuned to the interests of Northern capital, and the Southern party, which was based on black labor. Yet Du Bois was also keenly attuned to the class differences between Reconstruction leaders and ordinary former slaves. In

an anticipation of work by Thomas Holt and others four decades later, Du Bois chided Reconstruction's black leadership, largely derived from privileged slaves and the antebellum free black community, for being "not at all clear in its economic thought" (351) and for failing to recognize the crucial interdependence of political and economic freedom, instinctively understood by ordinary former slaves.

Thus, Du Bois writes, "the slave went free; stood a moment in the sun; and then moved black again toward slavery" (30). The defeat of Reconstruction was a tragedy for blacks, for the nation, for democracy itself, and for nonwhites throughout the world. But if Reconstruction failed, it was a "splendid failure" (708). Why? Partly because it did not fail, Du Bois writes, for the reason its critics assumed it would fail—black inadequacy. Indeed, Reconstruction demonstrated irrefutably blacks' capacity for democratic participation. Moreover, the era laid the foundation for future struggle and future progress—in the constitutional amendments that, while flagrantly violated after 1877, placed the ideal of racial equality in the nation's fundamental law, and in the South's first public school systems, created during Reconstruction. Indeed, Du Bois devotes an entire chapter to the efforts of former slaves, the Freedmen's Bureau, and the new state governments to establish public education in the South. As in *Souls*, he lavishes praise on the female teachers who ventured south during Reconstruction, who for the first time "established between the white and black of this country a contact on terms of essential social equality and mutual respect" (190). But more was involved here than social relations. "Had it not been for the Negro school and college," Du Bois writes, "the Negro would, to all intents and purposes, have been driven back to slavery" (667). Du Bois, of course, had long believed that political leadership should spring from an educated elite—the talented tenth—and with its black schools and colleges, Reconstruction made the emergence of such an elite possible for the first time.

Du Bois's focus on the future sources of black leadership may help explain an odd omission—the book's lack of consideration of the emergence of the independent black church, one of the signal developments of the Reconstruction era. Du Bois was fully aware of the black community's intense religiosity, which he conveyed in his moving description of how slaves interpreted the coming of emancipation as "the coming of the Lord," the fulfillment of the divine will (122–24). But he deeply disliked the denominational church and thought most black ministers—fundamentalist and anti-intellectual in outlook—could never provide the modern, forward-

looking leadership blacks needed. He ignored the church, perhaps, because he did not want to face the consequences of its centrality in black life.

Of course, as in any work of history, some of the arguments of *Black Reconstruction* are open to question. Does the notion of a “general strike” during the Civil War exaggerate the degree of coordination among slaves? Was Northern capital as yet a coherent plutocracy capable of enunciating a unified position on Reconstruction and imposing its will on the national government? Yet what is remarkable, as I have noted, is how many of Du Bois’s insights are now taken for granted. Slavery was the most fundamental cause of the Civil War and emancipation, in which blacks played a central role, its most revolutionary outcome. The land issue was crucial to the fate of Reconstruction as was the struggle over control of the labor of emancipated slaves. The Radical Republicans and abolitionists were idealists who, whatever their limits, sought to create, for the first time, an interracial democracy in the United States. The Reconstruction governments had many flaws but also many accomplishments. And methodologically, any account of Reconstruction based solely on white sources, ignoring the voice of the former slave, must be hopelessly inadequate. Other insights remain to be fully assimilated into the era’s historiography, including the global context of Reconstruction and global consequences of its failure, as well as the need to bring into play all the classes and regions of American society in explaining the course of events after the Civil War.

While *Black Reconstruction* was widely reviewed in newspapers when it appeared, it had little immediate impact on academic historians. To this day, in fact, it has never been reviewed in the *American Historical Review*, the profession’s premier scholarly journal. It was never mentioned in my own graduate education (although the brilliant, iconoclastic Columbia College historian James P. Shenton assigned it in an undergraduate seminar I took in the early 1960s). Today, while many of its arguments have become commonplace, it is not widely read. But *Black Reconstruction* remains one of the finest single volumes on Reconstruction and a challenge to a historical profession that has yet to fully come to terms with the issues it raises or its own historic complicity in the long history of white supremacy.

Let Du Bois, the poet and historian, have the final word on the meaning of Reconstruction (727): “The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell; and in the third century

they awoke from the dead, in the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen.”

Note

- 1 The subtitle is “A History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880.”

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