

CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: Reconstruction: Retrospect and Prospects

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Feature Essay

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Downs, Gregory P. and Masur, Kate. *CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: Reconstruction: Retrospect and Prospects.*

Reconstruction: Retrospect and Prospects

For the last 27 years, the field of Reconstruction history has gloried—and labored—under the sweet burden of Eric Foner’s *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*. One of the masterworks of the historical profession, Foner’s *Reconstruction* was at once conceptually powerful, rigorously researched, and clearly written. By centering the problem of free-labor ideology, the basis of his earlier work, Foner managed to combine national political and Southern labor history in a more systematic and sustained way than any historian since W. E. B. Du Bois. His book synthesized—in the Hegelian sense of the term—two somewhat antagonistic revisionist and post-revisionist strands of the literature, incorporated dramatic advances in African American history, and dealt a death blow to the most enduring and malevolent historical framework of the twentieth century, the Dunning School. More than shaping the field, Foner’s book defined it. Since its publication, more than one scholarly essay has echoed Michael Perman’s question, “What is left to be done?”

Within a decade one could see shoots of what remained to be done, perhaps first in the literature on gender and the postwar period, marked by Laura Edwards’ *Gendered Strife and Confusion* and Jane Dailey’s *Before Jim Crow*. Scholars associated with the Freedmen and Southern Society Project produced studies that deepened our understanding of labor relations and meanings of freedom in the postwar South, and Elliott West and Heather Cox Richardson wrote suggestive studies that argued that the West, too, had a Reconstruction history. Yet it often seemed possible to fold these studies into Foner’s framework, to see them as new branches on the sturdy tree rather than as fundamental challenges. Perhaps the most prominent and direct effort came from Steven Hahn, who in *A Nation under Our Feet* argued that Foner’s integrationist, arguably liberal, narrative obscured the nationalist, separatist aspects of black

politics during Reconstruction.

The concepts and approaches Foner used were – as concepts and approaches always are – shaped by the moments in which he wrote. Foner himself had drawn attention to the importance of "free labor ideology" in the making of the Republican Party in his acclaimed 1970 book *Free Land, Free Labor, Free Men*, and he was far from alone in his interests in the ideologies – latterly often called discourses – that shaped the politics of the Civil War Era and helped explain both the coming of the war and the trajectory of Reconstruction. His work was also influenced the work of labor historians in the school of E. P. Thompson and by scholars of black history including John Blassingame and Thomas Holt, who wrote essential monographs in the 1970s. Thus even as many people rightly see Foner's 1988 as something of a timeless classic, it also—as Foner himself acknowledged—built on the scholarly approaches that were current as he wrote.

Now we believe we are on the verge of a new, disconcerting, and exciting moment in Reconstruction history. With the force of the past quarter-century's work behind them, and at the beginning of Reconstruction's 150th anniversary, scholars are increasingly asking whether Foner's framework still provides the best way to organize our understanding of the post-Civil War era. With deep respect for the place of Foner's *Reconstruction* in the field, historians are more frequently—and arguably more effectively—seeking to displace Foner's focus on the meanings of freedom and his notion of an unfinished revolution.

We would not call this a school, much less a movement. In some ways it remains to be seen whether Reconstruction or the postwar era—the term we prefer—will cohere once again into a field with common central questions. But at minimum we believe we are witnessing something like a moment of recognition, in which many scholars are in different ways seeking to invigorate and reorganize the study of the era. Many of these efforts to rethink Reconstruction are contradictory. Some even end up reinforcing Foner's broad arguments through different modes. But altogether they suggest that our collective understanding of the period is changing and that a decade from now the picture may look quite different.

Instead of extending and improving Foner's framework, many recent works advance new arguments about the central themes of the post-Civil War period. In keeping with the other essays in this *CWBR* series, here we offer not a catalogue of recent scholarship but some general observations and conclusions. At a

conference and in the valuable compilation of historiographic essays, *Reconstructions* (2007), edited by Thomas Brown, historians construed the postwar period broadly and took stock of the post-Foner literature in sharp and original ways. In the After-Slavery conference at Charleston in 2010, organized by Bruce Baker, Susan O'Donovan, and Brian Kelly, historians debated a Southern-focused vision of Reconstruction centered even more directly upon labor; their work is on display in *After-Slavery: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in the Reconstruction South*, edited by Baker and Kelly.

As work from those conferences enters the field, other scholars have pushed Reconstruction scholarship in quite different directions. In a recent synthesis, Mark Wahlgren Summers has claimed that the freedom and revolution paradigms obscure a fight that was in fact centered on restoring the Union, an extension of Gary Gallagher's well-known arguments about the Civil War. Earlier, Michael Fitzgerald, in his brief survey of Reconstruction, re-centered internal political struggles in a fragmented Republican Party. Douglas Egerton synthesized a generation's worth of fine scholarship on the centrality of violence to overthrowing Reconstruction. In other monographs, some scholars have questioned, as post-revisionists did decades ago, the transformative impact of Reconstruction and emancipation, asking whether we should see it as revolutionary at all. Others have suggested the utility of frameworks of equality, state expansion, dependence, and the transformation of the legal system.

It is far too early to predict exactly what will come next. What the field needs now is not a new synthesis but engaged, well-grounded arguments, not just arguments in the sense of theses, but actual disagreements where scholars might flesh out what is at stake in these different frameworks. For our volume, *The World the Civil War Made*, forthcoming in September from UNC Press, and in the preceding conference at Penn State's Richards Civil War Era Center in 2013, we brought together about a dozen scholars to wrestle with the question of how we now understand the post-Civil War United States. Beyond the exciting new research they presented, we asked them to grapple with the distinctions—even the incompatibility—of their different claims, to flesh out new arguments, and to consider how their claims spoke to older debates. From our work with this volume and our observation of exciting new scholarship bubbling up, we see a number of interesting themes that may help re-center the scholarship on the post-Civil War era in coming years.

The Period Formerly Known as Reconstruction? We begin the introduction to our volume by proposing, somewhat insouciantly and surely unrealistically, a moratorium on the term “Reconstruction” itself. We are not unsympathetic to the ways recent scholars have pushed and pulled Reconstruction: writing about a long Reconstruction that edges into the early twentieth century or even into the present, expanding Reconstruction geographically to the West and North and world, and making Reconstruction a metaphor to capture all kinds of different changes in the postwar world. Yet the proliferation of “reconstructions” in this context also suggests continued fealty to a traditional historical (and historiographical) framework that carries with it associations and narratives that may occlude our vision.

Rather than arguing for a return to a narrower vision of Reconstruction, we suggest envisioning a broader *postwar era* as a way of shedding the assumptions built into Reconstruction, finding a ground where non-Southern transformations enter on an equal footing, and—we hope—provoking a more thoroughgoing reassessment of the period. That’s not to say that we are uninterested in the federal policies most conventionally associated with the term Reconstruction. We consider those central to the story. Rather, we want to open up the discussion of those policies *and* all manner of other phenomena without being bound by the meanings already associated with “Reconstruction.”

Governance and the Postwar State: New scholarship reveals a powerful growth of interest in governance — that is, in how power works and how public and private institutions intersect to create and uphold social orders. Drawing from work in the Political Science field of American Political Development, from policy history, and from the continuing struggle to define the size and nature of the American state, new scholarship examines the workings of the state itself. Rather than assuming that the state reflects the ideological contradictions of the people who founded it, we see historians of the postwar era examining problems that emerged as people struggled to create a state capacious enough to remake the nation. The government aimed to assert the nation-state’s relationship to—and at times control over—individuals through the creation of new forms of national citizenship and by the forcible overthrow of apparently competing forms of power and social organization, especially slave ownership and Indian tribal organizations.

Such questions were not unique to the United States. Elsewhere, nation-states sought to regulate individual citizens and police borders, and they

aimed for—and were vulnerable to appeals to—a more coherent, homogenized form of government than they were capable of delivering. Technological changes including the development of railroads and telegraphs helped them envision new forms of power and authority. Yet they also grappled with the growing availability of firearms, which people routinely used – in more and less organized ways – to challenge states’ monopoly on violence. In the U.S. context, many scholars are examining the challenges of imposing new visions of citizenship and power on a recalcitrant, violent society. Disappointments or failures, once read as evidence of ideological or racial limitations, now seem more likely to be understood as evidence of the challenges of state construction.

Thinking through the implications of the new scholarship, we came to envision the federal government not as what Richard Benseal once called a “Yankee leviathan” but as a Stockade State. In the South for some years after the war, military detachments remained on the ground to protect the rights of former slaves and white Unionists. But their authority was limited; there were never nearly enough soldiers to cover the vast expanses of the former Confederacy, and they faced an almost uniformly hostile white population on its own home territory. The government contended with restive populations elsewhere as well. In the Midwest and on the Great Plains, settlers and Indians alike resisted federal oversight; in New Mexico the Army struggled to implement the anti-peonage policies that emerged from the Civil War. New scholarship on the history of government policy toward Native Americans – including landmarks such as the end of treaty-making in 1871 and the Dawes Act of 1887– suggests that more work remains to be done in connecting questions of race, sovereignty, and citizenship in the South, the West, and the overseas empire that emerged at the end of the century. Scholarship on governance that crosses traditional regional boundaries helps us understand the history of an American state that was simultaneously strong and weak, that produced great change but always fell short of its architects’ expectations.

Change and Continuity: The venerable question of change versus continuity across the Civil War has always intrigued historians, and the “revolution” paradigm tends to emphasize the former. In the profession, we see a renewed interest in what remained the same. For instance, recent scholars have emphasized the violent and harrowing aspects of emancipation and have drawn attention to continuities in black struggles for freedom that began before the war and endured long after it. Some of these studies seem to raise a pointed – if understated – challenge to Foner’s paradigm; rather than an unfinished

revolution, emancipation and Reconstruction appear hardly revolutionary at all.

More convincingly—at least to us—we see people returning to the question of transformation and examining it in more detailed, less rhetorical terms. Some historians have turned their attention to the precise differences that emancipation and the extension of federal power made. They explore the failures and disappointments of the period while still capturing what changed with the end of the regime of slavery. Even as they acknowledge the limited capacities of the new nation-state, historians describe how access to it could change people's lives. New or augmented kinds of coercive authority – in the form of federal agents or commissioners, the army, government-run schools, or federal courts – might create venues in which marginalized groups could make claims and alter social relations of power on the ground, and might also change people's perceptions of the potential of the nation. These forms of engagement made the postwar moment different, both practically and in popular expectations, from anything that had come before. At the same time, internationally oriented historians have explored the revolutionary nature of the Civil War through the eyes of contemporary rebels in Europe and the Americas.

An Illiberal Land? Recent scholarship, some of it influenced by work in postcolonial studies, has also reexamined the ideologies central to the remaking of the United States in this period. Earlier scholarship examined the limitations and contradictions of free labor ideology and liberal visions of contract, revealing how American ideas about freedom could also be wellsprings of inequality. More recent scholars, noting that American policymakers (and many of their constituents) continued to understand the world in terms of gender and racial hierarchy, have investigated how liberal discourses of citizenship, civilization, and uplift construed certain groups of people as dependent and civilly incapacitated. Some have explored Protestant missionary efforts that, particularly when merged with or sanctioned by the government, pushed culturally specific visions of assimilation onto reluctant or outright resistant non-Protestant groups. For a host of reasons – including growing class inequality and immigration, the abolition of slavery, and the final conquest of Native lands – the postwar period raised pressing questions about who would be included in the nation and on what terms. To the extent that the United States continues to grapple with such questions, the challenges of late-nineteenth-century liberalism remain with us into the present.

Yet it remains unclear whether we should characterize the post-Civil War period as one of ascendant liberalism in the first place. If we understand the limits of postwar governance more clearly than we did in the past, it naturally leads us to ask whether liberalism actually describes the extraordinary range of locally based, narrowly coercive regimes that emerged after the end of the Civil War. Of course no political ideology is ever enacted consistently or completely; an era can be defined as liberal even if its implementation is partial or incomplete. But is there a tipping point where we no longer say an era is defined by liberalism at all? The growing number of studies that emphasize violence, resistance to state authority, and racist and exclusionary practices suggest that new ways of characterizing the period's political culture are in the offing. In addition to revealing a state often incapable of realizing its stated goals, historians have shown that people's strategies for survival were often shaped not by any single ideological framework but by their best calculation of what would work to preserve their lives, families, and communities. If the nation-state was one thwarted actor among many in a country shaped by thousands of locally based, customary, violence-enforced social practices, then its hallmark liberalism – whether construed in a positive or negative light – also appears as but one of many ideas pitted against other ideas and against people whose minds were very much their own.

A Postwar World? Most broadly, the post-Civil War era should be a place where scholars ask new questions about the connection between domestic changes and the nation's shifting place in the world. Scholars of the postwar era seem particularly well placed to explore the significance of politics and policymaking in the transformation of global capitalism that characterized the late nineteenth century. Postwar developments in the United States helped shape political debates in other contemporary nations, changing arguments about citizenship, democracy, inclusion, and centralized power. As Steven Hahn argues in the epilogue of our book, we should collectively know more about the nation that emerged from the war, its impact upon global commerce and politics, and the relationship between its political economy and its external policies.

We do not believe we can prophesy what we will come next. Nor would we want to. But from the profusion of new work that strains against existing paradigms—and from the prospect of future scholarship that pushes further into uncharted territory—we believe an exciting reinterpretation of the post-Civil War United States is already under way.

Gregory P. Downs and Kate Masur are co-editors of the upcoming volume from University of North Carolina Press, The World the Civil War Made (2015), and together are working with the National Park Service on the 150th anniversary of Reconstruction. Gregory P. Downs is Associate Professor of History at University of California, Davis and author of, After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War (2015). Kate Masur is Professor of History at Northwestern University and author of, An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington D.C. (2010).