

### Reconstructions: New Perspectives on the Postbellum United States.

Richard Zuczek

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## Review

Zuczek, Richard

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**Brown, Thomas J., ed.** *Reconstructions: New Perspectives on the Postbellum United States..* Oxford University Press, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195175950

### Reassessing Reconstruction Scholarship

With the publication of Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* nearly twenty years ago, some scholars apparently quipped, What is left to be done? This volume claims to provide answers, as it captures the universe of Reconstruction literature and projects that forward. Oxford University Press and the University of South Carolina's Thomas J. Brown have produced a detailed, thorough, and exciting new survey of the discipline. The modestly sized volume packs eight dense essays that deliver intense, concentrated, and provocative reviews of the state of the field.

Brown's brief and focused introduction sets out many of the essays' common themes, including questions of periodization, nationalism, the timelessness of many lessons and issues, and definitions of Reconstruction itself. But the main course certainly lies in the excellent historiographic essays. Stephen A. West tackles the complex interplay between economics and race—and the emergence of new economic relations—after the Civil War and how issues of capital, labor, and racial identity were linked (10). West sees the historical dialogue, much of it in response to the work of C. Vann Woodward, building around a new sense of a capitalistic transformation linked to everything from political activity to gender roles as non-free labor morphed into free labor (15). With the works of Steven Hahn and Barbara Fields as springboards, West explores the developing appreciation for diversity in this transformation across region, across crop type, and within the respective white and African American communities. Rather than ideologies driving labor patterns and economic solutions, authors are seeing a more nuanced relationship, as social-cultural precepts grew out of regional economic arrangements.

Both free labor and Steven Hahn reappear in John C. Rodrigue's essay on agency, which examines the scholarship on the African American struggle for autonomy and independence during and after the war. Discussing the roles and impact of African Americans, and moving far beyond the self-emancipation debate, Rodrigue delves into the literature on education, political activity, economics, and even generational interests and values. He also touches upon a delicate dilemma, emerging from Foner's centrality of the black experience: if scholarship continues to bolster our perception of African Americans as responsible, active agents for change, what responsibility do they bear for the failure of Reconstruction?

Heather Cox Richardson's essay operates at a more macro-level, moving out of the South and brilliantly placing the issues and events of Reconstruction into a national context. Richardson details how historians are actively reconciling the events of the war with the development of a national political economy, a centralized, pro-business Republican Party and federal government, a vast wage-labor proletariat, and an anti-egalitarian consensus fearful of class or race equity. Richardson also notes existing gaps in the literature, such as the divorce between eastern and western history and views the rise of the federal government as providing rich material for bridging this region divide (84).

For those seeking a broader understanding of the field since Foner published *Reconstruction*, Michl W. Fitzgerald's chapter might be the place to start. Here Foner's social-economic focus runs parallel to Michl Perman's political approach, as Fitzgerald presents a more traditional synthesis of the literature. He highlights new angles, including the role of religion, new definitions of political activity, the evolution of scholarship on the Republicans, growing insights into the impact of the African American community, and the controversy over what was possible, and what was not. Mark M. Smith presents less of a review and more of a challenge, as he seeks the inclusion of foreign affairs into Reconstruction studies. Smith is not simply interested in international developments as concurrent events, but argues instead that there are unappreciated and unexplored relationships between events outside the nation and domestic concerns. What do foreign policy choices reveal about Republican values? How are American notions of race abroad indicative of race at home? What about international economic issues, immigration, class prejudices, reform agendas, even the status of Native Americans, who Smith calls both domestic and foreign (136)? Similarly, Michl Vorenberg decries the fate of constitutional history, which flourished briefly in the wake of Arthur Bestor and Harold

Hyman and then collapsed in the face of legal history. Like Smith, Vorenberg offers hope and pushes for integration—this time of social, political, and cultural studies with the context of constitutional development within the period. What of the history of legal institutions, the legal background to new relations and labor arrangements, the development of government regulation, the legal structures surrounding evolving gender, family, and property understandings, and—reminiscent of Richardson—the questions of national identity and citizenship?

Leslie Butler's essay exhibits a similar anxiety, as it attributes the decline of intellectual history to the growing productivity of social and cultural studies, which have in effect co-opted the intellectual discipline. Butler assesses the impact of such path-breaking scholars as George Frederickson and, more recently, Louis Menand, but argues that we have just scratched the surface in understanding the major intellectual transformation wrought by the late 19th century (174). Going beyond the classic shift from romantic to pragmatic; from idealistic to realistic, Butler touches on ideas articulated in essays by Smith and Richardson, such as the growth of the state, the nature of citizenship and identity, and the intellectual, social, and political developments in Western Europe. In the growth and acceptance of bureaucracies, the birth of the managerial world, the appearance of scientific convention, and the coming of a national media, the author not only recognizes rich areas of future study, but also reflects upon a consistent theme across these essays—consolidation.

This intersection between intellectual developments and consolidation is reflected also in Thomas J. Brown's chapter on Civil War remembrance, as the volume editor traces the development of an alternative commemorative tradition in how Americans reconstructed the war and its aftermath (222). Building on key works by Gaines Foster, David Blight, and Nina Silber, Brown documents how and why the discussions, symbols, recollections of events and people have evolved as the war and Reconstruction faded into the past. The critical component that has captured historians' attention is not how our reflections have changed, but why. The timelessness of Reconstruction issues are clear as different generations, organizations, and social groups recreate the past to serve their own interests and forward their own agendas. Other themes noted in previous chapters also resurface, such as the growth of national culture, the consolidation of national identity, regional reconciliation, and the growing use of international perspectives to gain domestic insights.

These rich essays depict a vibrant discipline that has evolved far beyond the dated arguments regarding Redeemers, revisionists, and Republicans. Readers see converging themes that include the timelessness of Reconstruction issues, whether they involve race, economics, governmental power, the nature of the family, the struggle of classes; the natural and complex diversity of human action and thought, as communities, institutions, and groups divide, collide, and re-form; the interconnectedness, or blurring if you will, of politics, economics, gender, race, class, the role of institutions, even foreign developments; the interconnectedness of the period with the larger context of 19th American and even Western Civilization development; and the need for new definitions of once-linear concepts, including politics, economics, identity, community, even reconstruction itself.

Yet the very depth and vitality of the collection evoke some ambivalent observations. First, the vast inclusiveness of the essays dilutes the identity of Reconstruction itself. In some of the chapters, the nature, purpose, and period of Reconstruction nearly fade altogether, as the authors seem to focus more on the war, the national scene, or thematic approaches, and marginalize the traditional Reconstruction period and process. I concur that Reconstruction is part of a larger tapestry, but too much integration can extinguish the significant and nuanced attributes peculiar to the Reconstruction period. Other authors keep Reconstruction in view, but try to make it part of some larger change at the generational or national level; but as they debate the impact that Reconstruction had on the macro shift, they find few clear answers and little hard evidence. Clearly, there is more work to be done.

The second observation also stems from the thoroughness of the research presented in this volume, and pertains to odd gaps in the coverage. While some essays touched on literature and legal scholars, there was little time given to the sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists who are doing exactly the sort of redefining that historians in the volume clamored for. Other gaps are those of historical substance, such as the ties between the West, South, and North in the Reconstruction economy, migration, federal land and racial policies, and even violence and crime. Much was made of identity and national consolidation, yet this reader found little on the nationality and citizenship debates between America and Great Britain occurring at the time. Although raw political studies are passable, the discussions here on national consolidation and the growth of the state deserve more attention, as America joined a trend that began in Europe and would redefine nation-state culture for the next century. Technology, while

addressed by Leslie Butler, remains understudied; what of the coming of photography? The growth of the press, railroads, farm technology? How did these influence perspectives, shape opinions, allow new opportunity, recast roles and expectations? Another odd omission was the role of the military in law enforcement and reconstruction procedures, which easily forks into many of the themes identified by the authors: constitutional change, federalism and federal consolidation, and institutional studies are the obvious targets. Why aren't scholars examining the military during Reconstruction, considering that in 2007 a web-based search for reconstruction will bring up more sites on Afghanistan and Iraq than on the American South? Is this not an element of timelessness as well?

Nonetheless, this volume is a model survey of the field, far deeper and more imaginative than many of its ilk. Everyone working in the field should consult this important book.

*Richard Zuczek is an Associate Professor at the United States Coast Guard Academy. He has authored and edited several works on Reconstruction, most recently the Encyclopedia of the Reconstruction Era (2006).*