

### Reconstruction in a Globalizing World

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## Review

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**Prior, David, ed.** *Reconstruction in a Globalizing World*. Fordham University Press, \$30.00 ISBN 9780823278312

The desire to contextualize American history in a more global framework derives from numerous sources. Harvard's International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World began in 1995 with the goal of identifying the trans-national linkages that bound together the history of the region. Taking inspiration from the social history of the 1960s and '70s, which looked to ordinary people for both the content and the cause of historical change, the 2000 LaPrieta Report of the Organization of American Historians observed that "not all historically significant forms of power are coterminous with nations."<sup>1</sup> The experience of 9/11 fueled this shift, as scholars in all disciplines recognized a need for students to understand the nature of America's interactions in other countries. The result has been a vibrant rethinking of the processes that have shaped the American past. Histories of the colonial era now feature a much richer cast of actors, the nineteenth-century processes of industrialization and urbanization are told in relation to the related changes in Europe and elsewhere, and historians of the twentieth century are more attentive to the reciprocal flow of influence and change.

Reconstruction, perhaps alone among the major historical eras, has remained resistant to this process of reinterpretation. As David Prior's edited collection, *Reconstruction in a Globalizing World*, explains, there are good reasons for this relative insularity. Even for historians long committed to recognizing the role of contingency and uncertainty, Reconstruction retains the imprint of a true American tragedy. Revisionists and post-Revisionists may disagree about chronology and causation, but they retain a shared appreciation for a (maybe *the*) pivotal moment in shaping modern America. The victory of southern white supremacists and the acquiescence of northern ones, in particular, helps explain why, despite the triumph of emancipation, we continue to live in a society structured by racial inequality. If we globalize or recontextualize this moment, we risk losing the protean meaning this interpretation plays in our own history. Recent histories of emancipation have offered global comparisons, drawing the West Indies, Cuba, Brazil, and South Africa into the story, but the traditional framework of Reconstruction continues to structure research.

Because of the global reach and market for cotton, economic histories of Reconstruction have long considered the impact of foreign purchasing and production on American farmers, but the ideological and cultural processes of the period have typically been regarded as *sui generis*.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oah.org/about/reports/reports-statements/the-lapietra-report-a-report-to-the-profession/>

Such a stance is no longer tenable. The contributors to this volume demonstrate that Americans of the 1860s and '70s observed and engaged with people and ideas from around the world. For instance, Alison Efford's essay on a scandal surrounding American arms sales to France during the Franco-Prussian War reveals the willingness of American reformers to look abroad for models of governance and reform. The reverse was true as well. Evan Rothera shows the inspiration that Domingo F. Sarmiento, the later president of Argentina, derived from American educational reformers like Horace and Mary Mann.

Several of the essays here reveal significant work in foreign-language sources, a hallmark of new global histories. German-language sources enable Julia Brookins to explain the absorption of German immigrants into Texas's political culture. She shows how they capitalized on their wartime Unionism as the state was being reconstructed. The authors also identify parallel processes that have gone unnoticed or under-appreciated by previous generations. Mitchell Snay's essay on the relationship between the 1867 Reconstruction Acts, which enabled the expansion of black suffrage in the South, and the English Reform Act of the same year, which doubled the size of the electorate, is a perfect example of how scholars can enrich our understanding of the history of both places and the process itself. Before the trans-Atlantic Progressivism described by Daniel Rodgers in *Atlantic Crossings*, Snay identifies the global conversation surrounding suffrage. Americans observed the English debate and vice versa. Reformers in both countries appreciated what they believed was a historic turn against entrenched power. Without diminishing the contemporary importance of these changes, the conception of universal male suffrage as the apogee of liberalism also reveals the limits of the era. Prior offers a thoughtful introduction and a closing essay that tackles the global etymology of "reconstruction," a project that merits the same attention as similar efforts to understand how people at the time conceptualized revolution and war.

As Prior and his contributors know, the essays here are illustrative of the types of interpretive innovations that await historians who venture beyond the traditional boundaries of Reconstruction historiography. Big questions await: to what extent did reformers and obstructionists draw on global patterns and practices as they constructed a new racial order in the post-war US? How did the successes of liberalism intersect with the new industrial capitalist system that developed rapidly in the 1870s? The innovations introduced into American governance, most significantly the issue of citizenship and its parameters, clearly drew on contemporary European discussions. The relationship between the end of slavery and the white settlement of the Western territories, part of what Elliott West has identified as "Greater Reconstruction," had parallels in other colonial settler societies around the world. What was the exact nature of this dynamic? Prior's volume reveals the promise in asking these questions, as no doubt other scholars are doing at this moment. I look forward to learning the answers in the years to come.

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