

## The Unfinished Task of Grounding Reconstruction's Promise

*Reconstruction's promise certainly exceeded its accomplishments. Yet so long as Reconstruction survived, so did the possibility of change. . . . Its legacy deserves to survive as an inspiration to those Americans, black and white alike, who insist that the nation live up to the professed ideals of its political culture. —Eric Foner, 1982*

In his introduction to a 2006 collection of essays reviewing recent scholarship on Reconstruction, Thomas J. Brown begins: “Once likened to a dark and bloody ground, scholarship on Reconstruction now thrives less as a form of combat than as a collective building on a solid foundation.”<sup>1</sup> Brown alludes to Bernard A. Weisberger’s award-winning 1959 essay regretting that, despite calls about twenty years earlier to change the course of Reconstruction study, “the indicated tide of revision has not fully set in.”<sup>2</sup> Weisberger brings special attention to the failure of textbooks to incorporate new research and the lack of a synthesis to replace that of Claude Bowers’s popular 1929 *The Tragic Era*.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the most recent synthesis was E. Merton Coulter’s 1947 old-fashioned *The South during Reconstruction: 1865–1877*.<sup>4</sup> The conflict between new research and the portrayal of Reconstruction in textbooks and synthesizing accounts created what Harold M. Hyman still in 1967 called the “dim and gory terrain of Reconstruction studies.”<sup>5</sup> Fifty years after Weisberger, Brown could reassuringly assert that Reconstruction scholarship has found a firm footing, because textbooks no longer perpetuate images of corrupt carpetbaggers and childlike African Americans imposing vindictive rule on the South and because in 1988 Eric Foner produced his masterful synthesis: *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution: 1863–1877*.

Foner’s strength is his ability to link the institutional, economic, and racial forces that preoccupied previous scholars with those leading to westward expansion and urbanization. In the ten years since Brown wrote, however, there have been signs that the foundation Foner provided for a generation is starting to exhibit a few cracks. In the first part of this essay, I claim that much of the power of Foner’s book is generated by productive paradoxes contained in his title. But I also claim that those paradoxes expose potential contradictions that his synthesis cannot completely

contain. The next two parts look at the relationship between his synthesis and past historiography. Six years before his book, Foner laid its groundwork by reviewing past scholarship.<sup>6</sup> His account remains the standard one in the field. Nonetheless, in the second part I argue that a close look at that account can also shake the foundation of his synthesis. The major reason Reconstruction was a dark and bloody ground of study was partisan political debates about the proper course of action in the past. There may, however, be deeper reasons why it is so hard to put its scholarship on a solid footing. A synthesis depends on the ability to bring competing forces together in a coherent narrative. But perhaps Reconstruction involved forces that remain in contradiction. If the second part reevaluates some of the partisan debates of the past, the third speculates on how to write a history of the period, with all its contradictions, by revisiting a less well known, but significant, debate about how to relate the era's facts and forces.

I should note from the start that my training is not in history. I am a literary scholar. It might seem pretentious for someone from literature to make claims about Reconstruction historiography. But, as Steven Hahn notes, "historians generally become invested—subtly and not so subtly—in ways of thinking about the past that discourage us from taking full measure of new episodes, new evidence, and new historiographical challenges. Through our training in graduate school and our reading of historical literature, we come to accept certain periodizations, vectors of conflict and change, political cartographies, and ideas about legitimate participants, even if new findings raise doubts about some or all of these."<sup>7</sup> With different training, I hope to offer a somewhat novel perspective.

■ We can start by revisiting a challenge posed shortly after Weisberger's essay. In "Explicit Data and Implicit Assumptions in Historical Study," David Potter took a seemingly uncontroversial sentence—"The Radical Republicans defeated Lincoln's mild [Reconstruction] program and inaugurated the era of drastic reconstruction."—and showed how it is based on three "generalizations, each one treacherous in the extreme." First, it ascribes to various individuals a group identity powerful enough to defeat one policy and inaugurate another, while, in fact, scholars had trouble defining what unites Radicals as a group. Second, it posits a chronological unity, while, in fact, the process of Reconstruction differed from state to state and complications of racial relations "continued to be important long after the so-called Reconstruction was 'ended.'" Finally, it assumes that Reconstruction was more drastic than normal in cases of a "defeated belligerent," while, in fact, measures like the Amnesty Act indicate the

opposite and other measures like the establishment of public education, were clearly positive.<sup>8</sup>

Following Potter's lead, we can examine some of the assumptions contained in Foner's title: *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution: 1863–1877*. As Potter pointed out, the dates of Reconstruction are not certain. Coulter uses 1865 to 1877. In his 1892 *Division and Reunion*, Woodrow Wilson designates 1865–70. W. E. B. Du Bois's 1935 *Black Reconstruction* uses 1860–80. Acknowledgement of that uncertainty has increased in recent years. Over half of the essays in Brown's collection question whether 1877 should mark Reconstruction's end. Likewise, even in 1988 the use of "America" to stand for "the United States" was challenged. With the recent stress on transnationalism, it has come under increased scrutiny.

Foner did not intend his dates or his use of "America" to cause controversy. But he was self-consciously provocative in calling Reconstruction an "Unfinished Revolution." When Bowers subtitled his book *The Revolution after Lincoln*, he used "revolution" pejoratively. For him, Radical Republicans produced a tragedy by turning what should have been a harmonious reunion of North and South into a political and social revolution. Bowers followed the tradition of Thomas Dixon, who in *The Clansman* called his figure based on Thaddeus Stevens a revolutionary imposing a reign of terror on the South. To be sure, Bowers did not explicitly justify counterrevolutionary terror in response, as Dixon did in calling his Clansman a revolutionary as well. But supporters of Reconstruction were not hesitant to use the rhetoric of revolution to describe the response to it. In *A Fool's Errand*, Albion W. Tourgée speaks of the Klan's own reign of terror. Implying a negative comparison between the events of 1876 and those of 1776, Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk* twice refers to the "Revolution of 1876."<sup>9</sup> Whereas 1776 started a revolution against colonial rule, 1876 led to what Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction* labeled the return "Back toward Slavery."<sup>10</sup>

Foner appropriates the term for his own purposes. Responding to accounts like Bowers's, C. Vann Woodward insisted that Reconstruction was "essentially nonrevolutionary and conservative." In contrast, Foner considers Reconstruction revolutionary. If Charles and Mary Beard called the Civil War "The Second American Revolution," because it transferred power from the South's "planting class" to the North's "capitalist class" of financiers and industrialists, Foner stresses the revolution Reconstruction made possible in racial relations, changes so revolutionary that "it took the nation fully a century to implement [Reconstruction's] most basic demands, while others are yet to be fulfilled."<sup>11</sup>

The notion of an unfinished revolution is one of Foner's most original contributions. In addition to countering Woodward's view that Reconstruction was conservative, it counters the claim that Reconstruction failed. For Foner, even southern redemption did not undermine Reconstruction's revolutionary potential. Reconstruction may not have succeeded in the nineteenth century, but it made possible radical changes realized through the civil rights movement a century later. Of course, only someone writing after 1964's Civil Rights Act and 1965's Voting Rights Act has that perspective. In Foner's account, however, Reconstruction did more. Unfinished, it poses a challenge to us, the living, to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us to bring about a new birth of freedom. But that challenge raises the question of what "Reconstruction" in his title means. Is it a period or an unfulfilled promise? On the one hand, Foner calls "Reconstruction" revolutionary because "contemporaries all agreed [it] was both turbulent and wrenching in its social and political change."<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, by acknowledging that this period of turmoil left the promised revolution unfinished, Foner implies that Reconstruction is an ongoing process that cannot be fit into the dates he designates. For Heather Cox Richardson, "reconstruction is a process, not a time period."<sup>13</sup>

Gregory Downs and Kate Masur note that scholars use "Reconstruction" to bring together a "particular problem—the struggle over how the rebel states would rejoin the nation—with the broader and more general phenomenon the term implies: crisis, rebuilding, and historical change itself." They also note that today the term is "used more boldly and broadly than ever before, surfacing in studies of other regions and in other disciplines" to describe a "Greater Reconstruction" of the nation. For precisely this reason, they decide not to use it to make sense of "the many histories of the post-war United States. When historians stretch the concept of Reconstruction to cover the conquest of western land, changing racial dynamics in the North, or the rise of industrial capitalism, the term becomes metaphorical rather than descriptive, emptied of its core meaning. It alludes to everything and nothing."<sup>14</sup>

The question of whether "Reconstruction" is the proper label for the postbellum world is not new. Potter pondered whether that world is "pre-eminently significant [for] 'Reconstruction'" or "for other developments such as industrialization."<sup>15</sup> The Beards are given an important place in accounts of Reconstruction historiography, but not one of their chapter titles mentions Reconstruction. They devote about four pages to it, and, as a period term, it is not even an entry in their index. Instead, the volume in which their chapter "The Second American Revolution" appears is called

*The Industrial Era*. Allan Nevins's 1927 volume for the series *A History of American Life*, *The Emergence of Modern America*, covers 1865 through 1878. Its crucial intermediary date is 1873 because of the economic depression, not any direct association with Reconstruction politics.

Downs and Masur want "Reconstruction" to refer specifically to "the dynamic period of political debate and social upheaval in the South that followed the Civil War."<sup>16</sup> But for Reconstruction truly to promise a revolution, it cannot be confined to the South. Indeed, for Foner to accomplish his revolutionary aims in relation to other scholarship, he needed a national framework. According to Brown, Foner "presented a synthesis of social and political history wide-ranging enough to complete the displacement of the Dunning school."<sup>17</sup> The "Dunning school" is notorious in part because of state-by-state studies by students of William A. Dunning at Columbia. But Dunning himself produced a national synthesis. In *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877* he insisted that, whereas most studies of Reconstruction focus on the South, when we "regard the period as a step in the progress of the American nation . . . the North claims our principle attention." The "facts and forces" transforming the nation were "manifested chiefly in the politics of the North and West."<sup>18</sup> Dunning also included a chapter titled "A Critical Period in Foreign Relations" with a map of "North America and the West Indies," including Mexico and Central America. Likewise, economic revisionists like the Beards and Howard K. Beale focused on the role of northeastern capital, comparing its effects on the South and the West. Foner produced his synthesis self-consciously hoping to supplant such accounts. In chapters like "The Reconstruction of the North," he insists on placing "the Southern story within a national context," including developments in the North, the conquest of western land, and the rise of industrial capitalism.<sup>19</sup>

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