

**Paper Synopsis, “The Politics of Reconstruction Politics,” by Michael W. Fitzgerald,
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Paper to be presented at The Historical Conference, Baltimore, June 2008

Note: this is an updated synopsis of my essay, “Reconstruction Politics and the Politics of Reconstruction,” in Thomas J. Brown, ed., Reconstructions: New Perspectives in the Postbellum United States (Oxford, 2006), 91-116. This longer article can be downloaded from the conference website.

Reconstruction politics is an unusual field of study; there are few topics in American history so consistently fraught with the weight of contemporary racial issues as the era after the Civil War. It is also one of the rare fields in which a single work, Eric Foner’s Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, has enjoyed such long-standing preeminence.¹ These two factors make it timely for a reexamination of the state of the field, twenty years after Foner’s magnum opus appeared, and particularly now that the Obama candidacy suggests a reshuffling of America’s landscape of race relations.

Reconstruction has always been a politicized topic. After the turn of the Twentieth Century, the students of William A. Dunning dominated the field with an interpretation viewing Reconstruction’s Congressional grant of black suffrage and legal equality as a mistake—both in execution and intention. Radical Reconstruction was depicted as an exercise in egalitarian extremism and Federal tyranny, and ideas of racial incapacity and northern “carpetbagger” cupidity received interpretive stress. The

scholarship of this “Columbia School” had the overt political intention of defending states’ rights from outside intervention, and upholding legal segregation and black disfranchisement, and even palliating lynching. This style of writing, expressive of the pro-Klan theme of the popular film “Birth of a Nation” (1915), dominated academic discourse for decades. As late as 1947, some established scholars like E. Merton Coulter were still describing Reconstruction as a “Short Cut to Civilization” and “The Blackout of Honest Government” in chapter titles.²

With the sea-change in race relations after World War II, it was inevitable that this whole framework would come under withering attack. The core political issue of Reconstruction, states’ rights versus Federal oversight, would become the battleground of the southern civil rights campaign of the 1950s and 1960s. Scholars naturally gravitated toward this topic, and the analogy with the southern struggle for racial justice inspired decades of engaged “Revisionist” scholarship. Scholars affirmed their political intent openly, and they commonly depicted the contemporary struggle as a Second Reconstruction.

The moral polarity of the topic was neatly inverted in works by Revisionist scholars like John Hope Franklin and Kenneth Stampp.³ Reconstruction was a laudable, if flawed, attempt to secure basic liberties for all citizens. The Klan became terrorists, pure and simple. Corruption and taxation were exaggerated, legal equality rather than black supremacy was the norm, and the Radical Republicans became the moral protagonists rather than a vindictive cabal. Virtually all the modern writing shared a partisan preference for the Republicans, and by the 1970s, a common emphasis was on the excessive moderation of the Reconstruction program, the sense that it had not gone

far enough. This “post-Revisionist” interpretation can be seen as a Reconstruction analogue of the New Left currents common elsewhere. Rather than being vindictive, as in the Dunningite view, scholars were increasingly prone to complain that it had not secured land redistribution, or even the effective Federal presence that could have guaranteed equal rights.

Eric Foner’s Reconstruction takes a different direction. It is the summation of decades of Revisionist scholarship, and of much else in the profession besides. His work combines the favorable modern view of the goals of Reconstruction with a defense of its democratic accomplishments, temporary though they proved. More crucially, Foner interprets the political events as the counterpart of the social struggle over the post-emancipation plantation regime. This feat of synthesis of social and political history won nearly universal approbation by historians. Indeed, one can scarcely find another scholarly work that has enjoyed such preeminence in an important scholarly field.

Still, whatever the brilliance of this work, the historical landscape has changed, and the time is perhaps ripe for a reappraisal. The analogy with the southern civil rights struggle, which animated the scholarship on Reconstruction, seems less compelling in the twenty-first century. One sees this reflected among students in contemporary classrooms, and also in the popular market for scholarly books. With the retreat of the issues of the civil rights era from the front pages, and the wider movement of the historical profession away from political topics as old-fashioned, one doubts that the study of Reconstruction politics will regain the public salience it once enjoyed. An optimist might hope that the sharp sectional divide over racial issues has finally lessened, so that the Reconstruction analogy is unlikely to look so unhealthily relevant to matters of grave national concern.

For historians of Reconstruction governance, this is a challenging climate in which to operate, the popular audience having turned its attention elsewhere. But the situation has its compensations. Writing in a less politicized environment makes it easier to discuss topics that long tended to get ignored. My sense is that few have any interest in revisiting the long-discredited Dunning school, certainly not outside of some odd websites bearing suspiciously Germanic script. Among scholars, the Republicans are likely to remain the protagonists, on the basis of their relative racial enlightenment and their opponents' well-substantiated anti-black fanaticism—and wholesale violence. But it is more appropriate now, perhaps, to talk with more nuance about what the Republicans were able to achieve in power. One of the things that political historians can still provide is a real-world check on what scholars pursuing other approaches, like social or cultural history, say about the partisan realities of the era.

The rehabilitationist emphasis of Revisionist writing long made it difficult to critique the Republicans, to talk the limitations of their rule. There has, however, been some undercurrent of pragmatic reassessment since the 1980s, especially among those rooted in the institutional history of politics and governance. J. Mills Thornton, for example, wrote an influential article contending that postwar property taxation was dramatically higher than antebellum rates, enough, he thinks, to explain a substantial measure of the white opposition to Reconstruction.⁴ Lawrence Powell similarly argued that white Republicans leaders were inordinately addicted to factional struggles over patronage, in part because of the economic marginality of many newcomers.⁵ More recently, the late Richard Abbott offered a nuanced exploration of the Republican press, emphasizing both its tendency toward factional entanglements and its desperate need for

patronage from hard-pressed Republican governments.⁶ Perhaps Mark Summers is the scholar most identified with a nuts-and-bolts critique of Reconstruction's governance. His book on the Republican railroad program contended that it was probably too ambitious, disastrously implemented, and often characterized by malfeasance. In several works, Summers has made something of an industry of reexamining the issue of Gilded Age corruption, and his latest work examines the era's vein of conspiracy theories driving the Congressional architects of Reconstruction.⁷

Moving beyond the rehabilitationist impetus allows a more critical reassessment of African American political behavior. Revisionist historians long tended to see an essential racial unity, but of late there has been more attention to the divisions within the black community and their antebellum origins. One suggestive study along these lines is Dylan Penningroth's examination of de-faction property-holding among slaves, and its implications for emancipation.⁸ My own Urban Emancipation, for example, found persistent friction in Mobile between prewar residents and the newly-emancipated freedmen migrating in from the countryside. Two leadership factions emerged, one predominantly freeborn, of mixed-ancestry, literate, and propertied, while the other was largely composed of poorer newcomers, "Radicals" inclined toward direct action tactics. This encouraged Republican factionalism that rose to the level of occasional street violence. My sense is that throughout the South, urban areas had similar intra-racial divisions of class and origin, and these patterns tended to encourage the patronage struggles so evident in Republican politics. Such stories might not be edifying, but it does impart a contemporary flavor to the urban politics of the era; it at least imparts political agency to the freedmen in an overlooked venue.⁹

Political historians have often tended to emphasize the institutional limitations of what the Republicans could realistically deliver to their constituents. Labor historians have also been critical of what the Republicans were able to achieve in power, though from a different direction. Perhaps the most critical recent reassessment is that of Steven Hahn, who views white and black Republicans as tied to legal means and electoral politics, and less than supportive of popular aspirations for land redistribution.¹⁰ Hahn's work is important in another way: most of the Revisionist scholarship sympathized with the inter-racialism of the Radical Republican movement. This was after all the goal of color blind equality that would drive the later civil rights movement as articulated by Martin Luther King. Hahn instead conceptualizes Reconstruction in different terms, as a chapter in the collective struggle of working-class black people for land and autonomy. Patrick Kelly's forthcoming work on the labor struggle of the South Carolina low country comes to much the same negative viewpoint of formal officeholders and what they could achieve.

Another aspect of the decreasing relevance of the analogy with the civil rights struggle is that it opens up the era to other political issues besides race. To take one striking example, the first full-scale reexamination of elite women after the war in decades has recently appeared, that of Jane Censer.¹¹ Of course, racial issues are never far from the surface, anywhere, but the era featured a dramatic reshaping of the legal landscape with respect to gender. Several scholars have noted that since slavery had deprived black families of legal protection, postwar Republican legislators strove for racial equality. This meant, ironically, giving black men the same sort of power over their wives and children that white men traditionally enjoyed, as head of the patriarchal

household. In the legal sphere, scholars like Peter Bardaglio and Laura Edwards have emphasized how Reconstruction transformed the terrain, empowering freedmen.¹² Scholars are currently pursuing analogous insights in the social history of the plantations. Emancipation posed more practical issues for freedwomen, especially those on their own burdened with small children. Our colleague, Professor O'Donovan, will doubtless have more to say along these lines too, based on her recent book on emancipation and gender in southwest Georgia.

I might also note, before concluding, the recent reemergence of religion as a sub-field in Reconstruction studies, that had often been overlooked in the longstanding emphasis on the racial politics of Reconstruction. One interesting study, that of Reginald Hildebrand, analyzes the political implications of the several different brands of Methodism, especially the challenge that the two racially-specific African Methodist denominations posed to the color-blind Republicanism preached by the northern Methodist church.¹³ This redresses, I think, a general tendency in the literature of Reconstruction to overlook black nationalism in this moment of Radical Republican interracialism. In addition, several substantial works have appeared in the last decade on the religious politics of southern Reconstruction, especially Daniel Stowell's overall study.¹⁴ There is also a major synthesis on the capitulation of Protestantism in general to white supremacy, Edward J Blum's Reforging the White Republic.¹⁵ All these works are centrally focused on race, but I suspect the future of Reconstruction scholarship will witness a resurgence of interest in religion more broadly, as the declining salience of the civil rights analogy allows other areas of study.

These are, I think, some of the major developments reshaping the field of Reconstruction and Emancipation. I might, in closing, add that the moment is perhaps ripe for a reappraisal of Reconstruction in another respect, in terms of the popular audience. The partisan valence of the topic has shifted in recent decades, with the movement of the majority of southern whites into the Republican party. This may have beneficial effects in terms of the wider audience for Reconstruction scholarship; the long-standing defense of the states-rights Democratic tradition will be less compelling, now that the partisan polarity of the topic has shifted. A more civil popular reception for discussions of Radical Reconstruction may result, now in the era of Barack Obama, as dominant political discourse moves in the direction of a post-racial future. Perhaps some modern Republicans will even seek a useable past in the origins of the southern party in the egalitarian crusade of the era. Probably not, but one never knows what the future holds, that always being the safe conclusion for a gathering of historians.

¹ Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877 (New York, 1988).

² E. Merton Coulter, The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877 (N. p., 1947), 47, 139.

³ John Hope Franklin, Reconstruction: After the Civil War (New York, 1961); Kenneth M. Stampp, The Era of Reconstruction (New York, 1965) .

⁴J. Mills Thornton III, "Fiscal Policy and the Failure of Radical Reconstruction in the Lower South" in Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York, 1982), 349-394.

⁵ Lawrence N. Powell, "The Politics of Livelihood: Carpetbaggers in the Deep South," in Region, Race and Reconstruction, Kousser and McPherson, eds., (New York, 1982), 315-347.

⁶ Richard H. Abbott, For Free Press and Equal Rights: Republican Newspapers in the Reconstruction South (Athens, 2004). This book was edited posthumously by his former colleague, John Quist.

⁷ Mark W. Summers, Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity: Aid under the Radical Republicans, 1865-1877 (Princeton, 1984); Summers, The Era of Good Stealings (New York, 1993); Summers, The Press Gang, Newspapers and Politics, 1865-1878 (Chapel Hill, 1994); Summers, Party Games: Getting, Keeping and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics (Chapel Hill, 2004).

⁸ Dylan C. Penningroth, The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill, 2003).

⁹ Michael W. Fitzgerald, Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890 (Baton Rouge, 2002).

¹⁰ Steven Hahn, A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).

¹¹ Jane Turner Censer, The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895 (Baton Rouge, 2003).

¹² Peter W. Bardaglio, Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill, 1995); Laura F. Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction (Urbana, 1997).

¹³ Reginald Hildebrand, The Times Were Strange and Stirring: Methodist Preachers and the Crisis of Emancipation (Durham, North Carolina, 1995).

¹⁴ Daniel F. Stovall, Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863-1877 (New York, 1998).

¹⁵ Edward J. Blum, Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898 (New York, 1998).