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RECONSTRUCTION POLITICS AND THE POLITICS OF RECONSTRUCTION

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The notion that historical scholarship reflects changing contemporary preoccupations and values is almost a truism. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the literature on southern Reconstruction, which has mirrored a changing national climate more than methodological innovations or wider historiographic trends. Reconstruction scholarship has been shaped by its utility in furthering one or another political agenda, or at least in expressing an evolving racial ethos. In particular, modern work has been conducted in the shadow of the civil rights movement—its stirring triumphs and unfinished legacy. For decades, the analogy with contemporary southern struggles animated scholarship. In recent years, as that parallel has become less compelling, interest in Reconstruction partisan contests has declined. This less politicized environment offers some compensations, and the time is perhaps opportune for taking stock.[1]

Revisionists and Post-Revisionists

If scholarship on Reconstruction has been present-minded, the stark previous evolution of the field explains why. Historians need little recounting of the racist enormities of the Dunning school of the early twentieth century, which used Reconstruction's presumed excesses to defend disfranchisement, Jim Crow, and even lynching. Those upholding the states' rights Democratic tradition drew such connections openly. William A. Dunning himself observed that southern

[1] For a discussion of the older literature at greater length, see Michael W. Fitzgerald, "Political Reconstruction, 1865–1877," in *A Companion to the American South*, ed. John B. Boles (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 84–302.

conditions remained "at the forefront of contemporaneous interest," adding that "the historian cannot but feel the influence of this fact." The abiding theme of the scholarship was that the federal imposition of black suffrage was folly.[2]

These trends represented the historiographic triumph of the largest stakeholders, for southern apologists long cared more about the memory of Reconstruction than any other powerful interest. Given the outright racism of the long-dominant interpretation, a seismic shift in scholarship was inevitable after World War II. Segregationists had "evoked the hobgoblins of reconstruction to advance their cause," Kenneth Stamp observed, so it was essential to debunk the "Tragic Legend of Reconstruction." This became the scholarly agenda for a generation and more. The parallels between the effort to protect southern freedpeople and events during the civil rights era were palpable. It was one of those rare moments when historians had something important to say and the educated public concurred.[3]

All of the interpretive strands of the previous scholarship came under withering assault, if sometimes in inconsistent ways. The volume edited by Leon Litwack and Kenneth M. Stampp, *Reconstruction* (1969), illustrates the themes. Reconstruction was not motivated by Radical vindictiveness or federal tyranny but by a reasonable concern for the former slaves. Black domination of the Reconstruction governments was wildly overstated. Southern taxation and corruption were exaggerated, while the Reconstruction-era expansion of schools and public facilities was long overdue. In sum, Reconstruction represented a laudable attempt to secure racial equality in the South through federal intervention.[4]

By the time the *Reconstruction* anthology appeared, a startling transformation had occurred. The authors proclaimed: "revisionism has won the day and bids fair to become the new orthodoxy." Clearly the heroic phase of the southern freedom struggle energized that sweeping reappraisal. The "Second Reconstruction" was fought over the same constitutional terrain—states' rights versus federal intervention—that had been in contention a century before. Drastic as the Reconstruction program appeared in contemporary context, it was basically a demand for equality before the law and for black political inclusion. For those sympathetic to the goals of Martin Luther King, integration and legal equality, the previous era posed few ideological challenges, certainly not of the sort that racial separatism would present to the white liberals who dominated

[2] William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865–1877* (New York: Harper, 1907), 1.

[3] Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (New York: Knopf, 1965), vi.

[4] Leon Litwack and Kenneth M. Stampp, eds., *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969).

the historical profession. Reconstruction was the moment when African Americans most unequivocally sought inclusion in American society. This gave it a certain poignant appeal for scholars facing more complex demands for black empowerment.[5]

The revisionist heyday passed with the historical moment, and the changing political currents of the late 1960s encouraged reconsideration. Revisionists generally highlighted positive accomplishments, but Reconstruction, after all, was overthrown with devastating results. Simply inverting the moral evaluation of the participants could not long remain intellectually compelling. In the 1970s, a broad tendency emerged that became the most coherent of several candidates for a "postrevisionist" label. This viewpoint stressed the conservative implications of reform and took a jaundiced view of American institutions; it thus bore a resemblance to the New Left critique of American politics. Skepticism toward narrow legal equality as a goal reflected the reemergence of Marxist ideas in academe and also the contemporary rise of Black Power.

No single book encapsulated these arguments; it was more a theme running across many works. Scholars widely decried the lack of land redistribution, and the Freedmen's Bureau in particular came under scrutiny.[6] Because historians remained committed to egalitarian goals, the inclination was to suggest more thoroughgoing remedies—and the eventual dire outcome lent alternatives retrospective appeal. For example, Michael Les Benedict defended the rationale for Andrew Johnson's impeachment. He well articulated the emerging viewpoint, that Radical Reconstruction "was not very radical after all." In a sense, this interpretation parallels the revisionists, in that it stressed the essential moderation of the Reconstruction project. The difference is the moral evaluation, and the sense that stronger remedies were essential.[7] In this context, Republican leadership during Reconstruction could only look bleak. The final withdrawal of military protection appeared as a "blind pursuit of peace at any price" in William Gillette's phrase.[8]

[5] Litwack and Stampp, *Reconstruction*, viii.

[6] William S. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Donald G. Nieman, *To Set the Law in Motion: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Legal Rights of Blacks, 1865–1868* (Millwood, N.Y.: KTO Press, 1979).

[7] Michael Les Benedict, *The Impeachment and Trial of Andrew Johnson* (New York: Norton, 1973), "Preserving the Constitution: The Conservative Basis of Radical Reconstruction," *Journal of American History* 61 (June 1974): 65–90, and *A Compromise of Principle: Congressional Republicans and Reconstruction, 1863–1869* (New York: Norton, 1974), 13; Michael Perman, *Reunion without Compromise: The South and Reconstruction, 1865–1868* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

[8] William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869–1879* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 361.

Social History and Its Impact

The postrevisionist works on Reconstruction politics collectively enhanced our understanding, but they have worn less well as an overarching interpretation. As America moves politically ever to the right, stressing the limitations of Reconstruction change appears counterintuitive. A more enduring 1970s era influence on the direction of Reconstruction studies was what was once the "new social history." The point of the enterprise was recovering the historical agency of subordinate groups, and slavery's centrality in the literature made emancipation a pressing concern. The representative work was Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm so Long* (1979). One emphasis was on the freedpeople's desire to put the practices of slavery behind them by sending children to school, withdrawing women from field work, and resisting overseers, gang labor, and other hated holdovers. The attention to freedpeople's social aspirations had direct implications for the study of Reconstruction politics.[9]

Social history nudged traditional narratives away from center stage, and political history will likely never regain the professional preeminence it once enjoyed. For scholars of Reconstruction politics, these trends posed challenges, but the interest in emancipation as a process also brought new energy. In particular, the new work highlighted the evolution of the labor regime. For political historians, the point is that military reconstruction coincided with the disruption of the centralized plantation system, particularly in cotton. My own *The Union League Movement in the Deep South* (1989) pursued this basic insight, examining the labor impact of the politicization of the freedpeople. Julie Saville's *The Work of Reconstruction* (1994) likewise socially situated the region's popular mobilization and the terrorist response. And, to anticipate, Eric Foner's work centers the era's whole political history in the conflict over the plantation system.[10]

The labor emphasis of Reconstruction studies has been augmented by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project. This ambitious documentary editing effort exercises an ongoing influence, because the relevant materials in the National Archives are so scattered that tracking evidence is invaluable. The project thus facilitates exploration of the social basis of popular politics.[11] The interpretations put forward by the editors of *Freedom* (1982–) have been influential,

[9] Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

[10] Michael W. Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change during Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

[11] Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982–).

too. Ira Berlin contends that slaves' behavior pushed federal authorities toward freeing them. This formulation, sometimes labeled a "self-emancipation" viewpoint, highlights African American choices in ways relevant to Reconstruction politics. Subsequent scholars have pursued the wartime origins of black political consciousness. In addition to this direct interpretive influence, the project's former associates have been prolific, prominent among them Barbara Fields, Joseph Reidy, John Rodrigue, and Julie Saville. Each examines emancipation in a specific locale, and their work combines strong original research with attention to wider, even global, economic implications.[12]

The social basis of "scalawag" sentiment among whites has been explored too. For decades, the class-based dissent theme has been common in Civil War scholarship, though some recent correctives have appeared. Still, historians concur that anti-Confederate sentiments were strongest in the highland nonslaveholding enclaves. As a result, W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of Reconstruction as a biracial democratic coalition achieved a certain renewed vogue. In Armstead Robinson's formulation, "[e]conomic issues arose during Reconstruction in ways that divided the classes in white society more than racism united them." The groundbreaking contribution on upland whites was Steven Hahn's *Roots of Southern Populism* (1983). Hahn interpreted the self-sufficient "yeomanry" as resistant to full incorporation in the cash economy. Hahn's dual economy model socially situated scalawags within the tradition of upcountry political dissent.[13]

The Modern Syntheses: Perman and Foner

Since the revisionists overthrew the prevailing racist paradigm, a diversity of approaches has characterized Reconstruction studies. Synthesis has become correspondingly more complex, in part because social history is often local in focus. One hears complaints in many fields that the eclipse of political history has undermined a coherent narrative. However, two landmark 1980s works inte-

[12] Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction*; Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862–1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

[13] Allen W. Trelease, "Who Were the Scalawags?" *Journal of Southern History* 29 (November 1963): 445–468; Armstead L. Robinson, "Beyond the Realm of Social Consensus: New Meanings of Reconstruction for American History," *Journal of American History*," 63 (September 1981): 287; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

grate the transformed modern understanding of southern Reconstruction and emancipation into a political narrative. Michael Perman's *Road to Redemption* (1984) and Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (1988) remain the touchstones of contemporary study. Decades later, the interpretive differences between these two works still frame many of the debates.

Perman's *Road to Redemption* is straightforward political history but is unusual in focusing on the Redeemers. Perman sees Democrats as divided between those favoring rival "competitive" and "expressive" political strategies. Support for "conciliatory" policies "lay in the black belt," presumably among Whiggish planters who thought some appeal for freedmen's votes would be politically astute. Favoring Republican railroad subsidies, these conservatives accommodated to the Reconstruction regimes. On the other hand, former secessionists and agrarians emphasized the bedrock values of small government, states' rights, and white supremacy. This approach endorsed intimidation of black voters as necessary and legitimate.[14] On the Republican side, similar factional divisions unfolded in reverse. The "moderate" faction, mostly led by scalawags, downplayed civil rights to appeal to the white majority. These leaders emphasized economic development, but such priorities increasingly were challenged by a Radical opposition, led by "carpetbagger" federal office-holders and dependent on the black constituency.

Having conceptualized the issue in these terms, Perman depicts a straightforward evolution. President Grant's election in 1868, in which Klan atrocities figured prominently, sidelined Democratic extremists. Leadership passed in both parties to moderates, and a "politics of convergence" resulted. Moderate Republican governors promoted economic development, while Democrats sought tactical alliance with disaffected Republicans. These policies culminated with the presidential election of 1872, in which the Democrats endorsed the coalition candidacy of Horace Greeley. Crushing defeat undermined relative moderation, just as national depression sapped continued federal oversight in the South. Democratic fundamentalism now reemerged, in the form of White League campaigns of outright violence. It was under this leadership of racial extremists and agrarians that Redemption finally triumphed.

Perman's framework adeptly synthesizes individual state variations into a region-wide interpretation. Inevitably, though, the narrow focus on political history obscures certain realities. The framework normalizes Reconstruction politics, taking the emphasis off of its quasi-military character, as Perman perhaps tacitly concedes in a later essay.[15] He also contends that there was a contradiction between moderate politics and Klan-style terrorism. That makes logical sense, but the actual behavior of the planters is less clear, frustrated by labor turmoil as they were. By starting his study in 1869, Perman lops off the previous year's quasi-insurrectionary presidential campaign. Conservative restraint was not much in evidence until Grant won and Reconstruction looked permanent. The book's narrative is most persuasive when it addresses how political tendencies evolved, as opposed to how real people behaved.

One could not make similar observations about Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, for it fully integrates social history into the political narrative of the era—indeed, the interpenetration of these spheres constitutes the overarching interpretation. This feat of synthesis explains why it remains the outstanding contemporary work on Reconstruction. As his subtitle suggests, Foner distances himself from the postrevisionist emphases of the 1970s, observing that depicting the era as conservative "does not seem altogether persuasive." To take one important illustration, Foner agrees that land redistribution was an important aspiration for the freedpeople, but equality itself was perhaps even more fundamental. Foner's treatment of the Freedmen's Bureau also demonstrates his nuanced approach. The bureau inculcated northern conceptions of free labor, in a region shaped by slavery's coercive legacy; the bureau thus acted in some tension with the freedpeople's desires but considerably more with the planters'. Foner updates the favorable revisionist version of Reconstruction, but with central emphasis on the interrelationship of racial and class struggle. In keeping with this positive approach, he attends more to what Reconstruction temporarily achieved than its limitations.[16]

Foner centers the freedpeople's desires in his narrative, explicitly, and he contextualizes formal politics as paralleling the issue of labor control. In a previous comparative study of emancipation, *Nothing but Freedom* (1983), he found that former slaveholders everywhere used political power to preserve the plantation system. In the United States, however, Reconstruction uniquely vested freedmen with suffrage, which gave them the leverage to push for agricultural change. In *Reconstruction*, Foner expands on this insight. In terms of law enforcement, local officials, and labor legislation, the vote tangibly expanded freedom. In areas where freedmen numerically predominated, the effect on their lives was dramatic. The violent terrorist reaction was itself a measure of "how far change had progressed."[17]

Foner's emphasis on the labor struggle focuses attention on the planters, casting them as the major adversaries of black freedom. His treatment of the Ku Klux Klan exemplifies this theme. While terrorists admittedly mobilized a

[14] Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869–1879* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 66.

[15] Michael Perman, "Counter Reconstruction: The Role of Violence in Southern Redemption," in *The Facts of Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of John Hope Franklin*, ed. Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 121–140.

[16] Foner, *Reconstruction*, xxiii.

[17] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 425; Foner, *Nothing but Freedom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983).

cross-class constituency, elite motivation receives primary stress. The Klan was "a military force serving the interests of the Democratic party, the planter class, and all those who desired the restoration of white supremacy." Labor discipline appears as an important goal, and if "ordinary farmers and laborers" constituted the bulk of the Klan membership, so-called respectable citizens "chose the targets and often participated in the brutality." This emphasis likely overshadows certain issues. That small landowners might have their own motives for violence receives little attention, nor does the issue of petty theft, despite its universal prevalence in contemporary discourse.[18]

Foner's *Reconstruction* is a complex work, with a variety of interpretive threads. Not surprisingly for a scholar with extensive work on northern politics, he stresses the role of national economic developments in undermining southern Reconstruction. Like much of the modern literature, moreover, the book emphasizes the phenomenon of native white Republicanism, viewing it as growing out of class-based resistance to the slaveholders' rebellion. While the alliance with freedpeople was a "marriage of convenience," it also meant an "entirely unprecedented" commitment to protect civil rights.[19] This favorable attention to the Unionist yeomanry fades as most gradually abandoned the Republican cause. A broader lack of attention to the later phases of Reconstruction is apparent in Foner's book, in contrast to Perman's work. Only the last one hundred of over six hundred pages deal with the period after Grant's reelection in 1872, with interpretive emphasis on a decisive end to Reconstruction in 1877.

Foner concludes with an assessment of what Reconstruction meant for America. He does see the mobilization of the black community, the network of autonomous churches and social institutions, and public education as permanent changes. Furthermore, Radical Reconstruction foreclosed a more directly repressive labor regime. These gains notwithstanding, Foner offers a dispiriting verdict. Redemption was "a disaster" that "shifted the center of gravity of American politics to the right for generations to come."[20] The view of a revolution decisively turned back, however, may be too bleak. More recent scholars have contended that meaningful black political participation continued for decades. The Reconstruction amendments remained lodged in the Constitution, which made the issue of equality difficult to ignore entirely. Reconstruction also permanently secured African Americans the suffrage in most of the free states, which became vital with the Great Migration northward. Finally, the triumph of racial extremism did indeed cast a long shadow over the region, but it thereby also set the stage for a self-immolating response to the renewed threat of federal intervention. If inclined toward optimism, one might view Reconstruction as an eventual triumph through disaster, with even the Dunning-style apologetics contributing to later transformation.

Between them, Foner and Perman's books illuminate complementary aspects of southern politics. However, one interpretive difference suggests that Foner's synthesis of political and social trends might flatten partisan complexities. Foner questions Perman's "politics of convergence" idea, believing that it existed primarily as Democratic rhetoric for northern consumption. The contention that moderates helped rein in the Klan by the early 1870s, Foner says, "cannot be sustained by the evidence." But Foner himself notes that in several overwhelmingly black regions, Klansmen never appeared, which suggests that some planters thought nightriding illadvised. If Perman's work is thin on how whites actually behaved, Foner's interpretation deemphasizes the differences among the plantation owners. Whiggish planters often distrusted former secessionist Democrats as extremists, hotheads who had repeatedly led the region to disaster. These convictions might logically have inhibited the resort to violence. Subsequent historians have been slow to engage this key issue, with Richard Zuczek's *State of Rebellion* (1996) being the exception. Zuczek emphasizes racist unity, contending that differences were only tactical: whites utilized terror whenever it seemed effective. Maybe so, but Stephen Kantrowitz's biography of Ben Tillman dramatizes the glaring Reconstruction disagreements over means among South Carolina's political elite. The broader interpretive issue is central enough to Reconstruction politics to merit further scrutiny, perhaps in a different venue from blood-soaked South Carolina.[21]

Since the two major works by Foner and Perman, few broad reworkings of the Reconstruction era as a whole have appeared. A recent historiographic essay on Reconstruction politics actually concluded with the mid-1980s, an indication of a certain maturity in the literature.[22] One possible explanation is that the creative energy liberated by the civil rights struggle has finally spent itself. Both revisionism and the rise of social history transformed the field, leaving the future agenda for political historians less clear. As the memories of the sixties recede, and as the analogy with the civil rights era becomes less compelling, scholarly interest in Reconstruction's racial politics will likely diminish, and public attention to the era will probably decline too. This prospect, disqui-

[18] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 425, 432.

[19] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 303.

[20] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 602, 604.

[21] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 434; Richard Zuczek, *State of Rebellion: Reconstruction in South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[22] Michael Perman, "The Politics of Reconstruction," in *A Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction*, ed. Lacy K. Ford (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 323–341.

eting as it is, at least suggests a more intellectually challenging environment. One can see the impact on any number of topics previously thought marginal or simply out of vogue.

New Topics in Reconstruction Studies: Religion and Gender

The long-overlooked subject of institutional religion provides an excellent example of this wider tendency. Because militant sectionalism characterized Protestant churches during the Civil War era, Reconstruction politics had religious ramifications, but revisionists generally paid limited heed. The emergence of independent black denominations received most of the attention. Noteworthy is Clarence Walker's 1982 account, which offers an unromanticized look at the contentious African Methodists. Also insightful is Reginald Hildebrand's *The Times Were Strange and Stirring* (1995), which examines the ideological implications of Methodist rivalries.[23] Hildebrand describes a contest between the proto–black nationalism of the African Methodists, the anticaste radicalism of the white northern Methodists, and the old-style racial paternalism of the southern church. All won a black following, but the evident appeal of racial empowerment rhetoric has political implications. In the writing on religion, the hierarchically organized Methodists receive most of the attention. Other churches could use similar attention, though Paul Harvey's *Redeeming the South* (1997) does examine Baptist interracial contacts during the era. Overall, Daniel W. Stowell's *Rebuilding Zion* (1998) provides the best modern overview of the politics of religion. Stowell describes an ecclesiastical Reconstruction that mirrored political trends. He highlights southern whites who rejected sectionalism to reunite with a national church. Many of these religious scalawags, as he terms them, wound up as Republican partisans. None of this should surprise specialists, but it is useful to have Reconstruction struggles examined across the leading Protestant denominations.[24]

Edward J. Blum's *Reforging the White Republic* (2005) explores the influence of religion in less institutional terms. The focus is on how northern Protestant

[23] Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

[24] Reginald F. Hildebrand, *The Times Were Strange and Stirring: Methodist Preachers and the Crisis of Emancipation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); Daniel W. Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863–1877* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

thought evolved in the postwar decades. Blum tells a tale of declension, of how reconciliation with southern whites meant abandoning commitments to equality for African Americans. Northern religion "played a critical role in reuniting northern and southern whites," so that by the turn of the century "white ethnic nationalism" prevailed. The interpretation and tone echo the work of David Blight on Civil War memory, but with a specifically religious focus. Though effective as an interpretation of where Protestants were headed, Blum's interpretation may be less sure-handed on the Reconstruction decade itself. For example, Henry Ward Beecher's postwar embrace of reconciliation left him out of step with religious sentiment; he is not a representative figure after the war. The very figures Blum cites to show diminishing financial commitment to the freedpeople could be interpreted differently, as demonstrating how many people continued giving money. One could argue that Protestant churchgoers remained far more supportive of Reconstruction, and for longer, than most other northerners. Blum's focus on the longer term trend may obscure that aspect, and his discussion of Reconstruction politics slights the constraints under which policy-makers operated. It seems odd to emphasize President Grant's pardons of Klansmen, given that contemporaries perceived his overall policies as aggressive antiterrorist intervention.[25]

Gender, of course, is far more central than religion in contemporary Reconstruction scholarship. The development of women's history is the crucial cause, though the decreasing urgency of the revisionist project likely contributed as well. Because constitutional debates bore directly on women's suffrage, feminist scholars gravitated first toward that traditional political topic. Ellen DuBois's *Feminism and Suffrage* (1978) stressed the expedient abandonment of women's suffrage by postwar abolitionists. DuBois explains the single-issue suffrage movement as resulting from this betrayal, an insight that has been widely accepted. Still, subsequent scholars have perhaps been more interested in reformers less single-minded than the feminist icons Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Lyde Cullen Sizer's work on women writers sees them as pursuing a muted gender-empowerment strategy, through intervention in the political issues of the war and emancipation. Rebecca Edwards's *Angels in the Machinery* (1997) explores how gender issues fared in mainstream politics. She not surprisingly finds the Republicans committed to Victorian values, contending that they were consistently more supportive of women's social activism and political involvement than their Democratic opponents.[26]

[25] Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 3, 107, 108. See also Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole, eds., *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2005).

[26] Ellen DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978); Lyde Cullen Sizer,

Given the priorities of modern scholarship, freedwomen have been the obvious focus for gender analysis. Emancipation allowed the ex-slaves to reconfigure their lives with family needs in mind. This is an important insight, but what is less clear is where the formal political process fits in, given that women didn't enjoy the vote. Elsa Barkley Brown's work on black women and politics provides one answer. Before the war, gender exclusion had not characterized the forms of community participation available to slaves, but Reconstruction privileged male political involvement. Freedwomen were only somewhat inclined to respect Victorian gender constraints, given the urgency of public issues. Brown argues that female involvement marked Reconstruction politics, and many subsequent scholars have found that freedwomen intervened in moments of crisis. On the other hand, Julie Saville instead contends that suffrage and self-defense efforts primarily empowered men. Other works are under way to substantiate that position as well, among them Susan O'Donovan's forthcoming study of emancipation in southwestern Georgia. The issue remains unresolved, as does how it intersects with the larger evolution of postwar gender relationships.[27]

White women in the South have received less attention, perhaps reflecting the field's racially egalitarian emphasis. As Jane Censer observes in *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood* (2003), for no period have elite females been "so little studied." While Victorian expectations sidelined them from political life, these women shared the regressive social views of their men. Censer describes a racially motivated effort by upper-class women to limit reliance on free domestics. Censer's interpretation suggests elite women's irrelevance to formal politics, in stark contrast with the freedwomen's role as described by Barkley Brown. As for gender issues among the nonelite, the engaging topic of then-transgressive sexual behavior has received sustained attention. Victoria Bynum's *The Free State of Jones* (2002) examines the legendary Unionist Newt Knight, tracing how his black and white descendents contested his public memory. Martha Hodes's *White Women, Black Men* (1997) explores the politics of sexuality. She demonstrates through court proceedings hardening attitudes toward interracial sex after emancipation. During slavery, disrespect of poorer white women encouraged quiet tolerance of interracial liaisons, but after emancipation the stress on female purity intensified, with violent public implications. Diane Miller Sommerville's provocative article and recent book on antebellum rape trials suggest the same thing.[28]

For Reconstruction scholars, these works suggest the need to broaden the definition of politics. In emerging fields of study, such as women's history, fresh insights are continually mainstreamed into the political narrative. Where this is conceptually easiest, as with the suffrage struggle, formerly neglected topics move easily into textbooks and classroom lectures. After Stephanie McCurry's pathbreaking book on antebellum South Carolina, there has been a tendency to bring women into the political account indirectly, through the concept of the household. The premise is that even though women were excluded from power, policy-makers necessarily took account of gender, especially in the slave South, where social order represented such an overriding concern. Peter W. Bardaglio, in his study *Reconstructing the Household* (1995), traced the Reconstruction legislatures' reworking of statutory law. Republicans sought to institutionalize equality, so they granted black men all the legal control over their households that white men enjoyed. Under the doctrine of coverture, this conveyed expansive power, and as Laura Edwards observed in *Gendered Strife and Confusion* (1997), the redefinition was turned to racially repressive uses after Redemption. The Republicans expanded male privilege on egalitarian principle: this is a major if unsettling insight into Reconstruction politics. Edwards depicts this as a conceptual flaw, but other interpretations are possible. Radicals seldom prosper by spelling out the ultimate implications of their reforms; nor does embracing revolutionary gender changes seem a promising tactic before an all-male electorate. One could as easily treat Republican policies as a measure of the lawmakers' pragmatism as of their devotion to regressive Victorian expectations.[29]

The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850–1872 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[27] Elsa Barkley Brown, "Race, Identity and Political Activism: The Shifting Contours of the African American Public Sphere," in *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 111–150; Julie Saville, "Rites and Power: Reflections on Slavery, Freedom, and Political Ritual," *Slavery and Abolition* 20 (January 1999): 81–102; Susan E. O'Donovan, *Slavery's Legacies: Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

[28] Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865–1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 1; Victoria E. Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), and also see Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Diane Miller Sommerville, "The Rape Myth in the Old South Reconsidered," *Journal of Southern History* 61 (August 1995): 481–518, and *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[29] Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Peter W. Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

The household concept has also been utilized in examining the conservative opposition. The most important such work is that of Stephen Kantrowitz, who reconceptualizes partisan politics through a biography of the agrarian tribune Ben Tillman. Kantrowitz gives Tillman's well-known career a gender dimension and situates it more explicitly in Reconstruction terrorism. Tillman defended the independence of his male agrarian following, imperiled as it was by outside economic forces and dependent on subordination of black workers. Physical protection of dependent households became an empowering white male responsibility. As a minority surrounded by those they assumed to be resentful racial inferiors—now dangerously liberated—white men wanted their own women and children under close control. Southern historians have seldom articulated the issue this way, but the grim logic is evident: racial oppression and the subjugation of women reinforced each other.[30]

Contemporary interest in gender, and specifically the emerging concept of the household, are pervasive trends. The sparse treatment of such issues in Foner's 1988 book, noted in reviews at the time, stands out now more starkly. One byproduct is that Redemption as an endpoint seems less natural. For instance, Barbara Welke's study of gender and race in public transportation, *Recasting American Liberty* (2001), spans the postwar decades. For Welke, women travelers' needs redefined liability law, forcing greater corporate responsibility for the safety of customers by the Progressive Era—and contributing to the codification of legal segregation as well. Jane Dailey's analysis of post-Redemption insurgent politics and its gender limitations likewise extends the Reconstruction process. Virginia's "Readjusters" demonstrated that interracial coalition politics could succeed well into the 1880s. White dissidents tried to separate issues of social equality from fair treatment in the civil sphere, but this expedient insulation proved unstable. Dailey emphasizes that racial justice long remained central to black politics, touching upon white sexual sensitivities in explosive ways. An anthology highlighting the gender politics of the 1898 riot in Wilmington, North Carolina, also extends the time frame of Reconstruction-style struggles. Redemption clearly makes more sense as a dividing line on race and politics narrowly defined than for the gender-related issues currently under study.[31]

[30] Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Anne Sarah Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861–1868* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[31] Barbara Young Welke, *Recasting American Liberty: Gender, Race, Law, and the Railroad Revolution, 1865–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); David S. Cecelski and Timothy Tyson, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

These changes notwithstanding, the gender scholarship does not generally challenge the long-prevalent favorable depiction of Reconstruction. If some are critical of the Republican regimes, the Redeemers come off worse, on gender issues nearly as much as race. Nor is this scholarship focused on the political issues that animated the revisionist critiques of the Dunning school. However, other contemporary currents impinge on the basics of the now-entrenched revisionist viewpoint on politics. As the civil rights parallel becomes less salient, more political space opens to reconsider the modern narrative. Traditional political historians have reasserted themselves in recent decades, suggesting that issues of Reconstruction governance have been neglected. Given the changing climate, historians can more readily address subjects that are less consistent with the revisionist project of rehabilitating Reconstruction. The moment is thus opportune for a reassessment of what it was able to achieve in practice and what it could not.

Revisionism Reexamined

Second thoughts about the revisionist consensus are not altogether new; what one might term pragmatic strains of revisionism long existed. The choice of protagonists in southern Republican factional struggles furnishes one example. Most revisionists tacitly approved of the Radical "carpetbagger" faction because of its inclination toward civil rights. Some, however, expressed misgivings about the implications of the Radical carpetbaggers' factional predominance. Several revisionist state studies, often by southerners, depicted native Republicans as plausible leaders. The idea was that only those rooted in the community had the requisite legitimacy to neutralize white hostility. For example, William C. Harris's *Day of the Carpetbagger* (1979) defended the conciliatory policies of Mississippi's Whiggish governor James Alcorn. These works usefully highlighted the practical issue of how Republicans might have sustained an electoral majority.[32]

The favorable interest in scalawags has grown lately. Hyman S. Rubin's forthcoming study of South Carolina's tiny cohort emphasizes dissident origins and diverse class backgrounds. He views them as pushed by circumstances toward a democratic reform agenda. Though Margaret Storey's *Loyalty and Loss* (2004) similarly emphasizes the Unionist origins of postwar white Republicans, she

[32] Elizabeth Studley Nathans, *Losing the Peace: Georgia Republicans and Reconstruction, 1865–1871* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968); Sarah W. Wiggins, *The Scalawag in Alabama Politics, 1865–1881* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1977); William C. Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbagger: Republican Reconstruction in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

challenges the impoverished mountaineer image. Drawing on the underutilized Southern Claims Commission records, she describes a cross-class subculture solidified by common persecution. One arresting finding is the cooperation between dissident Unionist planters and the slaves, a collaboration that prefigured the later Republican coalition. In *The Scalawags* (2003), James Alex Baggett also articulates a favorable view. His ambitious collective biography demonstrates that prominent scalawags were nearly as prosperous and well-educated as their Redeemer counterparts. They mostly had Whig backgrounds and opposed secession overwhelmingly. One sees a logical unfolding of Unionist beliefs, which rather absolves these leaders of the traditional taint of opportunism. The account suggests, however, how little their commitments had to do with racial equality. Treatment of this issue is problematic for sympathetic studies of the scalawags. These works often deemphasize such topics, rather than engaging fully with how native whites addressed black concerns.[33]

Since the 1980s, a skeptical reappraisal of the Reconstruction leadership has become more common. Lawrence N. Powell's article "The Politics of Livelihood" (1982) was the first modern examination of Republican factionalism. Powell's previous book on northern migrants, who generally lost large sums in postwar planting, provides the social underpinning for his study. Yankee newcomers, and Republican politicians more broadly, were so proscribed by white society that they depended financially on government patronage and public office. This contributed to the infighting that characterized the party's predominantly white leadership. Many of the internal battles thus boiled down to "naked struggles for spoils between the ins and the outs." Powell's reexamination of the social basis for the older negative stereotypes represents a striking departure.[34]

The revisionists were partisan toward the Republicans, but the literature on politics is becoming more heterodox. Following Perman's lead, historians have engaged more readily with what conservative whites were thinking. For example, Anne Sarah Rubin's *A Shattered Nation* (2005) emphasized the emotional loyalty to the Confederate legacy that united most of the white population; she carefully assesses the role of racial supremacy without allowing it to overshadow everything else. Along these lines, studies of Reconstruction governance have explored what besides racism motivated white opponents. J. Mills Thornton's important 1982 article examined the impact of Reconstruction financial policy.

[33] Hyman S. Rubin III, *South Carolina Scalawags* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006); Margaret M. Storey, *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama's Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); James Alex Baggett, *The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

[34] Lawrence N. Powell, "The Politics of Livelihood: Carpetbaggers in the Deep South," in *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 315–347 (quotation at 333).

Revisionists generally minimized the impact of changes in tax policy, but Thornton demonstrated that state and local governments increased property levies dramatically. Thus the Republicans' fiscal policies "drove" small landowners "into the arms of the Redeemers." Thornton downplays racism in this process, perhaps too much, but his account demonstrates that Republicans offered poorer whites little. Richard H. Abbott's posthumously published study of Republican newspapers illustrates this theme vividly. *For Free Press and Equal Rights* (2004) demonstrates that class arguments appeared opportunistically, especially at election times, but the party made little headway among whites with a coherent anti-elite economic appeal. Given what the Republicans stood for nationally, perhaps this was not a realistic option, but the issue needs exploration.[35]

Mark W. Summers best exemplifies a more skeptical tone toward the Republicans in his various studies of political corruption. His *Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity* (1984) explored the southern railroad subsidy program. His was the first examination of the topic since the Dunning school, an "astonishing" gap, as Summers notes. He understands the rationale for the aid program but finds it shot through with malfeasance. On the basis of their performance, "the Republican leaders deserved to lose power," personally "bitter" though this conclusion is for Summers. As with other criticisms of Republican rule, few of these observations would surprise specialists, but such issues long saw little open discussion. Summers's subsequent work *The Era of Good Stealings* (1993) takes a similarly disillusioned look at how the corruption issue undermined support for an active federal role. The Republicans clearly figure as the protagonists of modern writing, but this bleak account of the Grant administration might make one question why. Summers's latest nuts-and-bolts study, *Party Games* (2004), also detracts from the Republicans' moral luster.[36]

The implications of such ideas for Reconstruction politics are substantial, if indistinct. In keeping with the corpus of revisionist scholarship, Foner's *Reconstruction* can be read as an endorsement of the era's constitutional changes, especially an expanded national government that could protect citizens' civil rights. Foner knows Republican rule facilitated corruption and corporate power, but these appear as secondary issues relative to racial justice. However, Summers's work, as well as an essay by Benedict, "Reform Republicans and the Retreat from Reconstruction" (1991), suggests that another ethical reading of the Grant era

[35] J. Mills Thornton III, "Fiscal Policy and the Failure of Radical Reconstruction in the Lower South" in Kousser and McPherson, *Region, Race and Reconstruction*, 349–394 (quotation at 350); Richard H. Abbott, *For Free Press and Equal Rights: Republican Newspapers in the Reconstruction South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

[36] Mark W. Summers, *Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity: Aid under the Radical Republicans, 1865–1877* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), ix, 295, *The Era of Good Stealings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and *Party Games: Getting, Keeping and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

might be plausible. In his study of education policy *Religion, Race, and Reconstruction* (1998), Ward M. McAfee is so appalled by Republican exploitation of anti-Catholicism as to downplay their other claims on sympathy. Though that response is extreme, over time the scholarly consensus may well become less partisan, especially with respect to the liberal Republican challenge to Grant's reelection. Andrew L. Slap's dissertation, "Transforming Politics" (2002), argues for a more favorable evaluation, emphasizing the reform movement's origins among a cadre of idealistic and racially enlightened journalists. On the other hand, the era's mainstream Democrats were so steeped in white supremacy and violence that historians probably will never find them attractive. That is, unless society shifts much farther to the right, or, conversely, America achieves such interracial amity as to render Reconstruction's ugly race relations less relevant. The likelier prospect is for reevaluation of Republican rule as the moral urgency of defending Reconstruction lessens. Of course, postrevisionists of the 1970s often took a critical view of Reconstruction, but the new writing abandons the assumption that more radical measures would have worked better. More common now is the grim suspicion that nothing would have yielded a decent outcome. As Perman recently concluded, the political issues were so intractable that Reconstruction now looks more like an unfolding tragedy than failure.[37]

The practical constraints posed by northern opinion are Heather Cox Richardson's point in *The Death of Reconstruction* (2001). She examines the national press, finding that concern with restive laborers determined responses to southern events. The freedpeople became a proxy for discomfort with the industrial working class, and blacks won approval on the basis of their resemblance to the ideal of hard-working, independent laborers. It was a tenuous lease on sympathy, and Richardson suggests that the freedpeople's class interests were not that consistent with those of prosperous northerners. To illustrate, Richardson emphasizes press treatment of the scandal-ridden South Carolina government, which was depicted as a fright-mask of proletarian misrule and corruption. The implication is that nothing could have sustained support for civil rights enforcement indefinitely, given northerners' competing priorities. Here, too, postrevisionists had emphasized the limits of northern sympathy, but Richardson is less condemnatory and explicitly downplays racism as a factor.[38]

A tone of practical-minded reconsideration is evident with respect to national policy-makers. The Freedmen's Bureau, for example, remains a focus of attention, but scholars are now less inclined to find fault on grounds of paternalism. For instance, LaWanda Cox presented a moving biographic sketch of an obscure agent who threw himself into his work, caught up by the importance of what he was doing. The most carefully researched of the newer works is Paul A. Cimbala's study of Georgia, *Under the Guardianship of the Nation* (1997). Cimbala offers a sympathetic portrait of Davis Tillson, long regarded as one of the more conservative bureau state heads, on the grounds that his apolitical profile enabled him to mediate with the planters. Cimbala's work, like most of the recent scholarship, is indistinct on what the bureau was actually able to accomplish. The prevailing emphasis is that the bureau men were well-intentioned, probably achieving what was realistically possible. An anthology on the bureau, edited by Cimbala and Randall Miller, takes a similar position. A striking dissent is *Women's Radical Reconstruction* (2003), by Carol Faulkner, which critiques in gender terms the humanitarian limitations of the bureau and its allied aid organizations. The male-dominated body sought to discourage dependency and to appear before the public as tough-minded, so that it downplayed the desperate need that female teachers and missionaries saw so vividly.[39]

The realistic—or politically resigned—emphasis in the newer Reconstruction literature is evident with respect to presidential leadership. Criticisms of Abraham Lincoln's racial policies grow more muted. Michael Vorenberg's examination of the Thirteenth Amendment stresses Lincoln's positive leadership. William C. Harris's sympathetic *Lincoln's Last Months* (2004) likewise defends Lincoln's moderate Reconstruction policies, with the implication that Andrew Johnson was following existing precedents. Despite this, historians' distaste for Johnson's leadership only intensifies, both on the grounds of his racism and his political rigidity. Still, one wonders if recent developments will prompt rethinking of the Nixon-era scholarship favorable to Johnson's impeachment.[40]

[37] Michael Les Benedict, "Reform Republicans and the Retreat from Reconstruction," in Anderson and Moss, *The Facts of Reconstruction*, 53–77; Andrew L. Slap, "Transforming Politics: The Liberal Republican Movement and the End of Civil War Era Political Culture" (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2002); Ward M. McAfee, *Religion, Race, and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the 1870s* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[38] Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post–Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[39] LaWanda Cox, "The Perception of Injustice and Race Policy: James F. McGogy and the Freedmen's Bureau in Alabama," in *Freedom, Racism, and Reconstruction: Collected Writings of LaWanda Cox*, ed. Donald G. Nieman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 172–243; Paul A. Cimbala, *Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865–1870* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997); Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, eds., *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999); Carol Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). See also Barry Crouch, *The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Texans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Katherine Masur, "Reconstructing the Nation's Capital: The Politics of Race and Citizenship in the District of Columbia, 1862–1878" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2001). In reference to Cimbala's work, one should also acknowledge his role in making Fordham University Press an important venue for strong monographs in Reconstruction.

[40] Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); William C. Harris, *Lincoln's Last Months* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

As for Ulysses S. Grant, opinions of his southern policies have grown more favorable. In several works, Brooks D. Simpson emphasizes Grant's evolving commitment to racial justice. In *The Reconstruction Presidents* (1998), he notes that Grant faced strong political constraints on military intervention in the South. Nothing practical could be done when white majorities freely voted out Republicans. In the black majority states, the showdowns came after the depression of 1873 undermined Grant's power. Perhaps, Simpson concludes, Reconstruction's failure "simply wasn't his fault." Simpson similarly finds that Rutherford B. Hayes had few options but to withdraw federal protection from the last Reconstruction regimes. The state of northern opinion, and the possibility of a bloodbath, made the decision all but inevitable. Recent biographies of Hayes by Ari Hoogenboom and by Hans Trefousse concur. All depict President Hayes as crediting Redeemers' guarantees of free suffrage and legal protection. When this proved mistaken, he repeatedly vetoed congressional attempts to repeal election laws. Subsequent Republican electoral victories demonstrated northern public support.[41]

The recent writing mitigates the censorious view of Redemption as a culminating, decisive betrayal. It now looks more like a signpost on a winding downhill road. The current emphasis is that northern Republicans maintained some interest in civil rights. Robert R. Dykstra's quantitative study *Bright Radical Star* (1993) demonstrates Iowa's intensifying electoral support for equal rights. The bloody shirt energized Republican voters for a generation, precisely because southern events long troubled them. And in *The Trial of Democracy* (1997), Xi Wang argues that the federal government's lingering commitment had real-world implications. Contested elections before Congress and periodic Republican enforcement of election laws constrained the Redeemers. Only when Democratic control of the federal government resulted in repeal in 1894 could southern whites eliminate black voting safely. Brooks Simpson, however, offers a qualification in a recent article: northern voters responded better to antisouthern symbolism than actual federal intervention, for they had little stomach for another serious Reconstruction attempt.[42]

[41] Brooks D. Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction, 1861–1868* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), and *The Reconstruction Presidents* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 299; Ari Hoogenboom, *Rutherford B. Hayes, Warrior and President* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Hans L. Trefousse, *Rutherford B. Hayes* (New York: Times Books, 2002).

[42] Robert R. Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Xi Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997); Brooks D. Simpson, "Reforging of a Republican Majority," in *The Birth of the Grand Old Party: The Republicans' First Generation*, ed. Robert F. Engs and Randall Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 148–170.

Recent legal scholarship follows much the same trajectory. Lou Falkner Williams's study of Ku Klux Klan trials illustrates the practical limits facing even courts inclined to prosecute terrorists. Due process hamstrung effectiveness in confronting massive violence. Michael A. Ross has demonstrated how conservatives used the state courts to tie the Republican government of Louisiana in knots. Legal scholars have also reexamined the widely decried Supreme Court decisions of the era. Rather than depict the *Slaughterhouse* decision as surrender, Ross viewed it as preserving core civil rights protections in the face of a national retreat from Reconstruction. His recent biography of Justice Samuel Miller likewise emphasizes his subject's continuing commitment to equal rights. Wholesale surrender by the federal courts only came later, when they gave up the effort to enforce the Constitution. Scholars still agree with the revisionists on the eventual depressing outcome, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, but differ on the route taken to arrive there.[43]

African Americans' Choices and Reconstruction

The previous examples suggest what might be termed the ethical recalibration of Reconstruction studies. The trend probably represents a benign updating of the revisionist literature, rather than a resurrection of long-discredited views. However, the movement away from an exclusive stress on race has a problematic feature: it deemphasizes African Americans' political behavior when their views most counted. To take one example, Summers's study of railroads looks at almost every angle but black politicians' role. Nor does he examine how black voters responded to the railroad issue, though they decided scores of local bond referenda. Finding black perspectives on these issues can be difficult, but more is involved. Historians have been slow to engage with such matters, perhaps for fear of reflecting poorly on black leadership. The result is that scholars unconsciously sanitize black politics through omission. For example, a 1995 biography of Robert Smalls presents strong evidence that the congressman took bribes but refrains from saying so clearly; the book actually ends with a celebratory conclusion.[44]

[43] Lou Falkner Williams, *The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials, 1871–1872* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Michael A. Ross, "Obstructing Reconstruction: John Archibald Campbell and the Legal Campaign Against Louisiana's Republican Government," *Civil War History* 49 (September 2003): 235–253, "Justice Miller's Reconstruction: The *Slaughter-House Cases*, Health Codes, and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1861–1873," *Journal of Southern History* 64 (November 1998): 649–676, and *Justice of Shattered Dreams: Samuel Freeman Miller and the Supreme Court during the Civil War Era* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

[44] Edward A. Miller, *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress, 1839–1915* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 245–250. For one of the few studies

Decades ago, Thomas Holt's pathbreaking *Black over White* (1977) raised the issue of the influence of caste and class divisions within the African-American leadership. Few then pursued the issue, but in recent years, a more skeptical tone toward individual black leaders has become evident. John David Smith's study of the conservative gadfly William Hannibal Thomas, *Black Judas* (2000), is expansive on his varied moral lapses. The most forthright foray into this terrain is Tunde Adeleke's *Without Regard to Race* (2003), a reassessment of the emblematic black nationalist Martin Delany. Because the literature on African-American history privileges critiques of American society, Delany's conservative Reconstruction views long received little attention. Delany was "appropriated by the militant and radical generation of the 1960s as their ideological mentor and guru," in Adeleke's tart phrase.[45] Adeleke's depiction of the postwar Delany as integrationist may be oversimplified, but his account does highlight how patronage concerns drove activists' ideological choices. Adeleke's explicit criticisms of the African-American literature are analogous to the pragmatic strain now evident in Reconstruction scholarship.

The prevailing tendency on African-American politics has long been for an upbeat emphasis, understandably in view of the racist biases of the older literature. But if one is trying to understand black political agency, a candid modern reexamination is necessary, and on a wider range of public issues than civil rights. One suspects that African-American leaders will come off at least as well as their white Republican counterparts, and far better than their blood-splattered opponents, but the research remains to be done. The time may be opportune, moreover, for more complex studies of African-American motivation. In *The Claims of Kinfolk* (2003), Dylan C. Penningroth observes that prevailing assumptions of racial unity can "romanticize the experience of black people." His study of de facto property ownership by slaves, drawing on black testimony before the Southern Claims Commission, offers insights into class divisions after emancipation. For Penningroth, one cannot conclude that the slave community was "any more harmonious than the white community, or any more 'egalitarian' than it is today."[46]

Local politics allows fresh examination of African-American choices, along with the still crucial question of what Republicans in power actually accomplished. Christopher Waldrep's *Roots of Disorder* (1998) explores the politics of law enforcement around Vicksburg. He finds, strikingly enough, that African Americans eagerly availed themselves of the legal process even under the harsh Black Codes. Congressional Reconstruction vastly expanded legal participation, as the black majority increasingly used the courts against whites and even one another. Black participation on juries was substantial and notably even-handed; those selected were disproportionately literate and had property, and they routinely convicted black defendants. Jurors were, however, unreceptive to charges of malfeasance against Republican office-holders, which suggests how partisan loyalty could overshadow other civic goals. Another local study, my *Urban Emancipation* (2002), examines different aspects of political behavior. In Mobile, rival groups of black activists, with contrasting class backgrounds, seized upon Republican factional divisions for individual and collective advantage. The underlying social cleavage was between longtime residents and the destitute rural freedpeople surging into the city. The implication is that factionalism emanated from within the African-American community, as well as from the Republican leadership. Such struggles among activists have not been much examined in the literature, but they had civil rights implications. If one is looking for African-American agency, the grubby mechanics of patronage politics are an important vehicle.[47]

Steven Hahn's *A Nation under Our Feet* (2003) presents the most ideologically forthright recent reinterpretation of black politics. In his brief introduction, Hahn observes that on this topic, "most of the relevant scholarship has been governed by a liberal integrationist framework." This highlighted certain aspects, like "inclusion and assimilation" and the "pursuit of individual rights." Hahn instead emphasizes collective empowerment, seeing a rural tradition of popular black nationalism stretching from before emancipation to Garveyism. He agrees with Foner and others that the struggle over the plantation system was the core political issue. But he returns to the postrevisionist stress on land reform, and the Union Leagues appear prominently as an agrarian movement. For Hahn, Reconstruction was something of a dead end, and the trappings of law and elections muffled the true "paramilitary politics" of class struggle under way. Blacks supported the Republicans avidly, but the prospects for social revolution at the ballot box were "virtually nonexistent," and even most black office-holders "appeared to pursue relatively moderate objectives." Like most of the recent literature, Hahn does not see a sharp break in 1877. Black voters kept trying to utilize their suffrage, and if Hahn's previous work on the white yeomanry

from the era emphasizing corruption, see Euline W. Brock, "Thomas W. Cardozo, Fallible Black Reconstruction Leader," *Journal of Southern History* 47 (May 1981): 183–206.

[45] Thomas Holt, *Black over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); John David Smith, *Black Judas: William Hannibal Thomas and the American Negro* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); Tunde Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race: The Other Martin Robinson Delany* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), xxiv.

[46] Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 8.

[47] Christopher Waldrep, *Roots of Disorder: Race and Criminal Justice in the American South, 1817–1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860–1890* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

offered too optimistic an assessment of interracial insurgent politics, this book corrects it. Insurgent white offers of alliance were so weak or halfhearted that the straight-out Democrats often seemed a better bet. The prospects for influence were limited, and disfranchisement eventually eliminated them altogether. These developments strengthened the grassroots emigrationism, emanating from the rural poor, that culminated in the Great Migration.[48]

Hahn's book is the most ambitious rethinking of emancipation since Foner. The black nationalist strains of Reconstruction politics have long gone without systematic exploration, precisely for the ideological reasons Hahn describes. At this writing, it is unclear how this book will influence the wider Reconstruction literature, in part because Hahn engages that topic only glancingly. But the political tone, at least, is different from previous writing. Rather than viewing Reconstruction as an interracial movement for social change, Hahn emphasizes a tradition of race-based communal resistance. In contrast to the upbeat revisionists, Hahn's book suggests a different analogy between emancipation and the civil rights movement: in both, white participation and northern opinion remained tangential to the remorseless black liberation struggle. This would be quite a different implication from the story others have seen in the Reconstruction era.

Where does this, finally, leave the study of political Reconstruction? A reconsideration of the era is under way, much of it in a pragmatic direction, but Hahn's work would suggest that its ultimate meaning is again up for grabs. In assessing where this field should go, several recent positive trends seem likely to continue. One important emphasis has been on reevaluating what Reconstruction meant in practice. Racial issues naturally have received predominant emphasis since the revisionists, but much more was going on in Reconstruction governance. For instance, Elizabeth Lee Thompson's *The Reconstruction of Southern Debtors* (2004) is the first modern examination of bankruptcy laws, which congressional Republicans rewrote in ways surprisingly favorable to plantation owners.[49] Political patronage, railroad promotion, state militias, or even public education—all these topics bear upon the wider struggle for racial justice, and all could use reevaluation by energetic graduate students. We still need to separate fact from fiction on corrupt practices and other issues the Dunning school emphasized so invidiously. Scholars also need to explore continuities of black participation extending into later decades. The inadequacy of traditional political periodization is similarly highlighted by the themes of gender scholarship. And perhaps most important, exploration of the social origins of black political behavior should illuminate all these other issues.

[48] Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6, 237.

[49] Elizabeth Lee Thompson, *The Reconstruction of Southern Debtors: Bankruptcy after the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

Reconstruction Politics and Contemporary America

Since the time of Dunning, changes in the political and racial climate have driven reinterpretation in this field, and they are certain to do so in future. Controversies over the display of the Confederate flag have encouraged scholars to think about the uses of public memory. David W. Blight's magisterial study of the racist appropriation of the Civil War's legacy, *Race and Reunion* (2001), reemphasizes the point.[50] Reconstruction has not been much emphasized in this body of work, perhaps because the political and racial implications were overt in the literature all along. Historians have been uncomfortably aware of the gulf between the revisionist scholarship and what substantial segments of the public wanted—or were willing—to hear. As Mark Grimsley observed, for most Americans, Reconstruction is "shrouded by a fog of tragic era mythology, on the one hand, and densely argued academic studies, on the other."[51] No one would disagree who has encountered undergraduate notions of the subject, or spent much time conversing with genealogists at southern archives.

The current trends might help narrow this gap, with a less partisan scholarly viewpoint toward Radical Reconstruction facilitating public outreach. America's recent difficulties in the Middle East might also encourage reflection upon earlier military sponsorship of social change. The term "Reconstruction" now elicits an unfamiliar crop of titles in database searches, which itself suggests a transformed relevance for contemporary America. Comparisons along these lines have appeared in the press, and Edward L. Ayers reflected on the tendency of these efforts to go sour in a recent essay.[52] Moreover, in domestic politics, there is another factor potentially at work. The contemporary surge of southern whites toward the Republicans has reversed the traditional partisan polarity. Conservative southerners no longer identify automatically with the states' rights Democratic tradition. In the long run, this might allow a more thoughtful public engagement with serious scholarship, at least with respect to Reconstruction. That would seem logical, though as yet southern Republicans show little sign of embracing their party's egalitarian origins as a usable past.

This essay has generally applauded the recent reconsideration of the field, on the premise that overstating the chances for dramatic transformation of race relations in that era helps us little now. If the realities of biracial governance, or the choices made by the black community, now get more notice, that might

[50] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[51] Mark Grimsley, review of *A Year in the South*, by Stephen V. Ash, *Journal of American History* 91 (June 2004): 248–249.

[52] Edward L. Ayers, "Exporting Reconstruction," in *What Caused the Civil War?Reflections on the South and Southern History* (New York: Norton, 2005), 145–166.

encourage wholesome reflection on avoiding a future backlash. Still, it might be appropriate to end on a cautionary note, calling attention to the multiple constituencies for historians' work. The danger is that in moving beyond the revisionist emphases, historians lend unwitting credence to the racist misunderstandings that have been so destructive in the past. It would, therefore, be well to bear in mind how innovations might sound to those with different social agendas. Academics may find that somebody out there is paying attention, possibly in disquieting ways.