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## ERIC FONER'S RECONSTRUCTION: A FINISHED REVOLUTION

Michael Perman

**Eric Foner.** *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877.* New York: Harper and Row, 1988. xxvii + 690 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, and index. \$29.95.

Ten years ago, when David Donald decided not to continue with the volume on Reconstruction for the New American Nation Series, the editors invited Eric Foner to take on the assignment. This was an unusual decision because previous contributors to the series had been historians already acknowledged as experts in the field they were asked to cover. At the time, the Reconstruction period as well as the history of the South where most of the post-civil war action took place were areas in which, it could fairly be said, Eric Foner had not worked and published. Nevertheless, this New York carpetbagger soon made up for lost time. By 1982, he was contributing the essay on Reconstruction for the important historiographical volume celebrating this journal's tenth anniversary. He gave the Fleming lectures in southern history in 1982, which were later published as *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*. And now, with the appearance of *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, a massive volume of 690 pages, Foner has established himself as the leading authority on the Reconstruction period. This book is not simply a distillation of the secondary literature; it is a masterly account—broad in scope as well as rich in detail and insight.

Foner's rapidly-acquired authority is based on two elements. The first is the extent and depth of his coverage of the literature in the field. Besides reading the significant secondary scholarship he has tracked down relevant articles in obscure journals, consulted innumerable Ph.D. dissertations, scoured the public record through official documents and newspapers, and has even carried out considerable archival research in the National Archives and in manuscript collections of private correspondence. This meticulousness has enabled him, not only to gain a remarkably thorough knowledge of the field, but to impart freshness and immediacy to his account because of his discovery of new and quotable first-hand observations and because of his close familiarity with the people and events of the period.

The kind of book he has written is the second aspect of his authoritative-ness. As befits the New American Nation Series, his volume is comprehensive and synthetic in nature. What is being synthesized in this case, however, is thirty years of extremely disputacious scholarship that revised and, in effect, overthrew the orthodoxy established at the beginning of the century by the Dunning, or New South, school. Foner's book represents the mature and settled Revisionist perspective on the period and thus appropriately supersedes William A. Dunning's *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (1907) which was the Reconstruction volume—number 22 actually—in the original American Nation series.

Nevertheless, there is scarcely any mention of this tenacious New South interpretation that held sway in American culture until the 1960s. Indeed, few books published before World War II are even cited in Foner's volume. Unlike the early Revisionists in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Foner is not concerned with refuting a view that he regards as discredited and irrelevant. Instead, his more complicated task has been to bring coherence, and possibly resolution, to the divergent viewpoints of the initial Revisionists and those writing in the 1970s who have been called post-Revisionists. This has required him to develop an interpretation that acknowledges the accomplishments and innovations of the era, while also recognizing the post-Revisionist view that the policies of Reconstruction were still far from adequate, indeed were rather cautious and unimaginative. So the task he set himself was to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory positions. That he has done this—rather brilliantly, in fact—means that his book represents the culmination of the Revisionist revolution: its final form, so to speak. In this sense, *Reconstruction, 1863-1877* breaks little new ground and sets no new agendas. But, in another sense, it is a highly imaginative approach to the history of Reconstruction.

The book's innovativeness stems from the author's decision to place blacks, in essence, the freedmen, at the center of his account. He does this in two ways. First, he presents their actions and objectives as primary, if not formative, in the developments of the era. In chapters 3 and 4, "The Meaning of Freedom" and "Ambiguities of Free Labor," Foner establishes at the outset the contours of black life in the postemancipation South, namely their building of their own communal institutions, their aspirations and disappointments as laborers after slavery, their early political awareness and initiatives, and their chilling encounter with pervasive terror and violence. Thereafter, Foner emphasizes the shaping role that blacks played, both in the struggle to determine the form that the postslavery labor system would assume and in the emergence of the new Republican party in the South after 1867. In fact, southern blacks, particularly the freedmen, become the major protagonists in Foner's portrayal of the drama of Reconstruction.

This startling reversal of the New South version in which blacks were either ignored or mentioned only incidentally or derogatorily is the outcome of the Revisionist scholarship of the past two decades, concentrated as it has been on the black experience during Reconstruction. But Foner's *Reconstruction, 1863–1877* is the first large-scale treatment of the entire period in which all these findings have been assembled. In his hands, moreover, their potential is developed fully and goes far beyond what the early Revisionist surveys by Kenneth Stampp and John Hope Franklin had indicated.

The second way that Foner employs the new evidence about blacks is really very imaginative. The vantage-point of blacks, their perspective, is used as the lens through which the story of Reconstruction is viewed. For instance, the chapter on the beginnings of political reorganization in the South opens with the observation that, "Like emancipation, the passage of the Reconstruction Act inspired blacks with a millennial sense of living at the dawn of a new era" and their initiatives set the scene and the mood for later political developments during 1867 (p. 281). The next chapter, on the new Reconstruction governments, begins with the assertion that, despite their repudiation as illegitimate by the former Confederates, "To blacks, these governments possessed a greater claim to authority than any in the South's history" (p. 346). By this ingenious device, the freedmen's voice and that of the historian in his role as interpreter become closely identified. Thus, Foner is able to give an assessment of Reconstruction—its achievement or failure, its radicalism or conservatism—from a vantage-point that is historical and not presentist or external to the historical context. Besides avoiding the kinds of ahistorical and moral judgments that past writing on Reconstruction has been plagued with, this procedure makes it possible to reconcile the sympathetic verdict of the Revisionists with the harsher criticism of the post-Revisionists. And this is achieved by introducing an internal historical evaluation from the perspective of southern blacks who had most to gain from Reconstruction but who were nonetheless quite aware of its limitations.

Rather conveniently, this approach also fulfills another purpose because it provides a connecting link between the lowliest in society and the most powerful, thus relating the bottom to the top, which is something that social historians who study history "from the bottom up" have too often failed to achieve. But, in this case, the repercussions go even farther since the account becomes not just history from the bottom up but history viewed from the bottom. And the perspective of this particular bottom rung of society is not just one of many but is given a special significance and authority.

Although a much-needed corrective, Foner's accentuation of the role of blacks nevertheless restricts him from examining in similar depth the rest of southern society and how it was affected by Reconstruction. Because of this,

one rather significant development is insufficiently explored. In his opening chapter, Foner asserts that there was an "Inner Civil War" within the South between the ascendant planters of the black belt and the upcountry yeomen who, during the crisis of secession and war, "discovered themselves as a class" (p. 13). Soon after, in the constitutional conventions of 1865 and 1868 and in the Reconstruction state legislatures, this political hostility and divergence of interest manifested itself further in demands for democratization of the political structure, reapportionment according to white population only, disfranchisement of the Confederate elite, measures for the relief of debtors as well as opposition to increases in taxes on land and to schemes to offer state aid for economic development. But this incipient "civil war" turns out to be little more than a skirmish, even though, as the author shows, the lot of upcountry farmers worsened considerably during Reconstruction because of the closing of the open range, the dispossession of small landholders, and the commercialization of agriculture. What exactly was happening and why these dislocations and resentments did not pose a greater social and political threat, particularly because of the existence of the unpredictable and unfamiliar Republican party, really needs explanation. The finessing of class conflict through the stirring-up of racial hostility cannot alone account for this modest outcome. Perhaps questions like these which have not really been investigated thus far are beyond the scope of a work of synthesis. All the same, the failure of the South's "inner civil war" to break out does require careful analysis if the dynamic relationship between race and class in the Reconstruction era is to be understood.<sup>1</sup>

If the emphasis on the role and perspective of blacks is *Reconstruction's* predominant feature, the fate of what Foner calls the "free labor ideology" is its main theme. According to his own study of the Republican party in the 1850s, free labor was the party's basic tenet. A historically specific creed of social mobility and equal opportunity, it affirmed that "the wage laborer [could] rise to the status of independent farmer and craftsman" (p. 29). And it was also the exact antithesis of the idea of "slave labor" that prevailed in the South. Since the Republican party fought the South on behalf of this ideology, Foner naturally wondered what happened to it after the war. And he discovered that, after being accepted as unquestioned orthodoxy in the 1860s, it went into decline in the mid-1870s and was replaced by a conservative frame of mind that viewed society as stratified and disharmonious and now worried about "the labor question." This shift in attitude, Foner believes, contributed to the abandonment of equal rights and the emergence of an unapologetic racism after the jarring shock of the depression of 1873.

While there was certainly a change of mood throughout the country by the late 1870s, there are two problems with Foner's particular account of it. In the

first place, one wonders really how firmly held and vital was this notion of free labor after the Civil War. As Foner himself clearly points out, northerners involved in the southern postwar labor system, either as individuals or as agents of the Federal government such as Freedmen's Bureau officials, made little effort to introduce free labor concepts into the region after emancipation. Yet this was precisely the moment when they at last had the opportunity to do so. Instead, work in groups (gangs or squads) on plantations or under a mandatory year-long contract system appeared to be the only alternatives they could recommend for the South's free and independent laborers. In effect, there was to be no free marketplace for labor, just for the products of that labor. Free labor, it seemed, was little more than a slogan, a negation of slavery. Quite evidently, it was not to be an agenda for action, particularly when plantations and blacks were involved. Conceivably then, the free labor ideology did not "erode"; it was simply irrelevant in the one location where slave labor had existed and could be replaced by free labor.<sup>2</sup> A second observation about this theme of the erosion of the free labor ideology concerns its relationship to the decline and collapse of Reconstruction. Although it appears to help explain how and why that process occurred, it actually does not do so in any precise way. On several occasions, the author suggests its relevance to the problems encountered by Reconstruction, but it is not developed into an explanation and then incorporated into the narrative. It remains therefore a relevant theme or insight, but it does not constitute a causal explanation.

Indeed, the reader may finish reading this book and still be left wondering exactly why Reconstruction did not work out. So many problems and difficulties arose to undermine it—and all are discussed—that it becomes difficult to assign priority or relative significance among all these contributing elements. In the conclusion, even Foner himself acknowledges that "Perhaps the remarkable thing about Reconstruction was not that it failed, but that it was attempted at all and survived as long as it did" (p. 603). In that case, no explanation for the outcome is needed. The mere citing of the immense and innumerable difficulties would appear to be sufficient. More inexplicable then is not why Reconstruction failed, but why it was undertaken in the first place. On several other occasions, however, the author does suggest that the dismantling of the plantation system was an essential prerequisite for achieving any significant social and economic change. But this observation also does not become the basis for a fully-developed explanation of why Reconstruction ultimately failed.<sup>3</sup>

Significant though they may be, these qualifications do not detract from Eric Foner's considerable achievement in *Reconstruction*. His comprehensive statement of the revisionist approach to the period, not only concludes a

phase of historiographical reconsideration, but it also manages to harmonize, or in some way reconcile, controversies that had seemed impossible to settle. It is hard to believe that the acrimonious debates over Andrew Johnson's approach to Reconstruction: over the motives and policies, even the identity, of the radical Republicans; and over the nature and significance of the Compromise of 1877 could be taken care of so effectively. But leaving no old issues unsolved and raising no new ones is, of course, the objective to be achieved when striving for synthesis. Ironically, because this synthesis is so successful and thorough, it does raise one unsettling question and leave it unanswered—what is left to be done?

*Michael Perman, Department of History, University of Illinois at Chicago, has recently published a short survey of the Reconstruction period, entitled Emancipation and Reconstruction, 1862–1879 (1987).*

1. Besides the social and geographic division between upcountry farmers and blackbelt planters, there were even divisions within the two major political parties. Foner discusses them but tends to reconcile these apparent conflicts, or at least make little of them. Thus, they become merely differing points of view within each party rather than manifestations of more significant and deeper cleavages. See pp. 291–307 and 364–92 for the Republicans and pp. 412–44 for the Democrats.

2. Parallel with the author's discussion of the preexistent free labor ideology, there are, throughout the book, references to another earlier ideology, republicanism. By this is meant the classical republicanism of the 1780s and 1790s, or even later according to some historians. If there are links with this earlier strain in American political thought, those that Foner makes are somewhat tenuous, such as that the definition of citizenship after the Civil War in terms of loyalty is really a redefinition of the republican idea of "civic virtue" (p. 42). On other occasions, as for example, the requirement of "consent" from the South in each of the Federal proposals for readmission between 1865 and 1867, the author suggests that this was evidence of republican thought. Yet consent is contractual and majoritarian, which is exactly what classical republicanism was not. Why there is this concern to find examples of republicanism in Reconstruction after a lapse of several generations is difficult to understand.

3. Very astutely, Foner rejects the oft-repeated claim that provision of a farm, or homestead, for the freedmen—forty acres and a mule—would have ensured their economic independence and guaranteed the success of Reconstruction. An end to the plantation system of agriculture was the primary structural change that had to be made to revolutionize southern agriculture. The redistribution of parcels of land while keeping the existing system intact would only have been a palliative.