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“The American Blindspot”: Reconstruction According to Eric Foner and W.E.B. Du Bois

Noel Ignatiev

In the teaching of U.S. history, Reconstruction occupies a position analogous to the Revolution in France or the Khyber Pass in military affairs: whoever controls it controls the terrain below. Among the changes brought about by the Civil Rights Movement was the emergence of a school of historians who, breaking with the Redemptionist Burgess-Dunning school, viewed the Reconstruction regimes with sympathy. Eric Foner’s book, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*, is the synthesis of three decades of revisionist scholarship. As such it is the closest thing that exists to a standard work; Foner, more than any historian of his generation, owns the period.

In his preface to *Reconstruction*, Eric Foner calls *Black Reconstruction in America* by W.E.B. Du Bois “a monumental study.” Du Bois, according to Foner, “in many ways anticipated the findings of modern scholarship.”¹ Since he nowhere in the book refers to any disagreements with Du Bois, the reader may conclude that the differences between them result largely from the advances of scholarship in the fifty years since *Black Reconstruction* was published.

That would be a false conclusion; Du Bois’s interpretation of the period stands apart from Foner’s. In this essay I shall attempt to demonstrate the truth of this assertion, and to suggest some additional issues raised by the discussion.

Du Bois described the slaveholders not merely as a wealthy elite, but as owners of capital. The world market “set prices for Southern cotton, tobacco and sugar which left a narrow margin of profit for the planter.” (37) If the slaveholders were capitalists, it followed that the labourers were proletarians. He expressed this notion

¹Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York 1988), xxi. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York 1935). Subsequent references to page number only. The germ-idea for this essay I owe to Theodore Allen, who many years ago introduced me to Du Bois’ book. I wish also to acknowledge the contributions of Peter Coclanis, the late Nathan Huggins, and Peter Linebaugh.

Noel Ignatiev, ““The American Blindspot’: Reconstruction According to Eric Foner and W.E.B. Du Bois,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 243-51.

throughout the book, beginning with the title of the first chapter, which he called not “The Black Slave” but “The Black Worker.”

Foner identifies capitalism with the wage form. His references to the slaveholders as a “reactionary and aristocratic ruling class” (46) and as “Bourbons” (130) imply a model based on the French *ancien regime*. He carefully avoids using the terms “worker” or “proletarian” to describe the slaves. To him they were — slaves.²

Because Du Bois identified the slaves as proletarians, he applied the categories of the labour movement to them. The fourth chapter of his study focuses on the mass withdrawal of labour power from the plantation that led to the downfall of the slaveocracy. The title of the chapter is “The General Strike.” Foner makes no mention of the general strike. Slaves, apparently, could rebel, but only the worker could strike.

Was there a general strike? Du Bois reported that some 500,000 black workers transferred their labour from the Confederate planter to the northern invader. Behind them stood 3.5 million more still on the plantation; how much work they were doing after 1863 is hard to say. Hegel wrote, “The truth is the whole. The whole, however, is merely the essential nature reaching its completeness through the process of its own development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only at the end is it what it is in very truth...”³

To determine whether there was a general strike it is necessary to take the story further. The War ended; had the slaves (now freedmen) receded into passivity, or become merely supporting actors in the drama, one could deny that the strike ever happened. As both Du Bois and Foner document, they did neither of these things. In whose interests did they act? Here the difference sharpens.

Foner places Reconstruction squarely with the bourgeois revolution. In the South, it produced “a new class structure ... the consolidation ... of a rural proletariat ... and of a new owning class ... subordinate to Northern financiers and industrialists.” (170) In the north it led to the “consolidation of the capitalist economy” under “an increasingly powerful class of industrialists and railroad entrepreneurs.” (460) Du Bois saw not one, but two Reconstructions. “By singular coincidence and for a moment, for the few years of an eternal second in a cycle of a thousand years, the orbits of two widely and utterly dissimilar economic systems coincided and the result was a revolution so vast and portentous that few minds ever fully conceived it.” The first was the effort of “a little knot of masterful men [to] so organize capitalism as to bring under their control the natural resources, wealth and industry of a vast and rich country and through that, of the world.” Alongside it was the effort of black labour “to establish a dictatorship of the

²In an earlier work, *Nothing But Freedom* (Baton Rouge 1983) Foner commented on Du Bois’ use of the term “worker” instead of “slave.” (5) His decision not to use the term in *Reconstruction* is, therefore, significant.

³Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (New York 1967), 81-2.

proletariat ending in industrial democracy.” (346) It is this latter effort he had in mind when he called Reconstruction “a revolution comparable to the upheavals in France in the past, and in Russia, Spain, India and China today.” (708)

From the two writers’ conflicting views of class relations follow differing estimates of the Radicals. Foner says they were “a self-conscious political generation” whose social and economic program “derived from the free labor ideology,” men hoping “to reshape Southern society in the image of small-scale competitive capitalism of the North,” for whom “class relations [were] beyond the purview.” (228, 234-7)

The Radical Republicans, Du Bois acknowledged, shared the American assumption “that any average worker can by thrift become a capitalist.” He called Phillips, Sumner and Stevens representatives of the “abolition-democracy, the liberal movement among both laborers and small capitalists, who ... saw the danger of slavery to both capital and labor.” So far the two descriptions sound similar. But, Du Bois added, under the pressure of southern intransigence, “abolition-democracy was pushed towards the conception of a dictatorship of labor.” (183-5) By this formulation, he shifted the most extreme of the Radicals out of the framework of the bourgeois revolution into the camp of the proletariat.

At issue, more than an assessment of the Radicals, is the algebra of revolution. The desires of a social class can change from one epoch to the next. While the French bourgeoisie showed after 1789 that it could live with the peasants’ seizure of the feudal estates, in the specific circumstances of the post-Civil War South, land redistribution, advocated by Stevens, Julian, and Phillips, carried implications too subversive for any sector of capital. Again, while capital generally tends to reduce all distinctions between one individual and another to impersonal relations of the marketplace, in America, where consensus depended heavily on the existence of a colour line, Stevens may have threatened the social order more by his decision to be buried in a “colored” graveyard than by the way he manhandled the Constitution. The notion of abolition-democracy stands astride two phases of a single revolutionary process. By introducing it, Du Bois revealed a revolution without fixed limits, in which one phase could pass over imperceptibly to the next. Phillips personified the historical movement: beginning as a Garrisonian, by the time he was finished he was speaking out in defence of the Commune and may have joined the International.⁴

In what was perhaps the boldest assertion in the book, Du Bois called black political power in the South “one of the most extraordinary experiments of Marxism that the world, before the Russian revolution, had seen ..., a dictatorship of labor.” (358) In a revealing footnote to chapter ten he commented, “I first called this chapter ‘The Dictatorship of the Black Proletariat in South Carolina,’ but it has since been brought to my attention that this would not be correct....” He finally

⁴Samuel Bernstein, *The First International in America* (New York 1962), 81-2.

settled for a more restrained title, but continued to insist that South Carolina “showed tendencies toward a dictatorship of the proletariat.” (391)

Engels called the Paris Commune an example of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat (upper case). The most drastic economic reform introduced by the Commune was the abolition of night work for bakers. Compared to the moderation of the Commune, the accomplishments of Reconstruction in South Carolina seem like the wildest radicalism: abolishing property qualifications for holding office, apportioning representation based on population not property, abolishing imprisonment for debt, founding the public school, extending rights for women, building asylums for the insane and the handicapped, modifying the tax structure, and other reforms. A program of this sort, carried out against a background of mass movement, may not yet be communism, but it is no longer capitalism.

Just as the great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence, the real story of Reconstruction was the actors: of one hundred twenty-four members of the South Carolina Constitutional Convention, seventy-six were black. Of these, fifty-seven had been slaves. The total taxes paid by all the delegates was \$878, of which one white conservative paid \$508. Fifty-nine of the black and twenty-three of the white delegates owned so little property that they paid no taxes whatever. (*BRA*, 390) Was either the Paris Commune or the Petrograd Soviet of purer proletarian composition than the South Carolina Convention of 1867?

A speech made in Tallapoosa County, Alabama by a man named Alfred Gray showed the character of the movement. Gray was speaking at a meeting on the eve of elections for the state constitution which were to take place on 4 February 1868:

The Constitution, I came here to talk for it. If I get killed I will talk for it I afraid to fight the white man for my rights? No! I may go to hell, my home is hell, but the white man shall go there with me

My father, god damn his soul to hell, had 300 niggers, and his son sold me for \$1000. Was this right? No! I feel the damned spirit of damnation in me and will fight for our rights until every rascal who chased niggers with hounds is in hell....

Remember the 4th of February. And every one come in and bring your guns and stand up for your rights! Let them talk of social equality, mixed schools, and a war of races. We'll fight until we die, and go to hell together, or we'll carry this constitution.

A speech like that, made by a legislator serving in a militia of the propertyless class, is a sign that we are no longer talking about a bourgeois parliament.⁵

Foner, of course, knows all about the activity of the freedmen. Indeed, he lists “the centrality of the black experience” as one of the broad themes unifying his narrative, and offers a great deal of information about “the political mobilization of the black community.” (xxiv-xxv) Because he ascribes no distinctive class

⁵James S. Allen, *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy, 1865-1876* (New York 1937), 123-5; Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill 1990), 39.

character to that mobilization, he in effect makes it an auxiliary, albeit a radical auxiliary, of a modernization project led by northern industry.⁶

That is the difference, reduced to its essentials: Du Bois wrote “an essay toward a history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880.” (subtitle) It is the story of the striving of a group of labourers, taking advantage of conflicts among the propertied classes, to advance their own interests. Foner tells how the industrialists manipulated the freedmen to overcome the resistance of the former slaveholders and reconstruct the South along capitalist lines. The two books are not about the same revolution, that is all.

Nowhere do the differences between the two writers emerge so clearly as when we compare what they have to say about the labour movement. Du Bois, as we have seen, considered the black worker, during and after slavery, the vanguard of the working class. Foner is willing to recognize the existence of a southern black proletariat after Emancipation, including timber workers, longshoremen, and others, but he limits it to those who worked for wages. He says that the great rail strike of 1877 “ushered in two decades of labor conflict the most violent the country had ever known” (585) — this just a few pages after he recounts the Hamburg Massacre, the Colfax Massacre, the battle of Vicksburg, the insurrection at New Orleans, and other incidents which antedated the rail strike and were part of a wave of terror in which thousands of black labourers died. Because his category “labour conflict” coincides with the contours of trade unionism, it cannot encompass the struggle over black worker power in Reconstruction. (At one point he describes the 1869 [colored] National Labor Union Convention as “composed mostly of politicians, religious leaders, and professionals, rather than sons of toil.” [480] Would he describe the 1917 Russian Congress of Soviets, dominated by Lenin, Trotsky, and other editors and publicists, in the same terms?)

Foner attributes the defeat of Reconstruction to several causes. He recounts how the increasing demands of the northern poor “helped propel the urban bourgeoisie to the right,” leading to “the growth of bourgeois class consciousness.” And then he writes, “The erosion of the free labor ideology made possible a resurgence of overt racism that undermined support for Reconstruction.” (517-8, 525) That is a curious statement and merits closer examination.

“Free labor” was the ideology of the producers at a time when that group included both labourers and manufacturers. As the ideology of free labour gave way among the industrialists and railroad entrepreneurs to the gospel of wealth and

⁶In *Politics and Ideology in the Age of Civil War* (New York 1980) Foner noted that “Du Bois referred to the Reconstruction regimes as the rule of the ‘black proletariat.’ The terminology is exaggerated, but Du Bois did have a point,” he conceded. (120) In a review of *Reconstruction*, Vincent Harding notes that Foner’s decision to condense the struggle of Afro-Americans against white hegemony within southern Republicanism “tends to undermine his own commitment to demonstrating the centrality of the black experience.” (*American Historical Review*, 5 [Feb. 1990], 264-5)

monopoly, they lost their sympathy for the labourer, black or white. So far, so good. But to attribute the defeat of Reconstruction to changes in ruling-class attitudes is a tautology, like blaming the French bourgeoisie for the defeat of the Commune. The capitalists opposed labour's rule because it was in their class interests to do so; any "resurgence of overt racism" *among them* explains nothing, since they opposed Reconstruction for reasons having nothing to do with race.

On the working-class side, the erosion of the free labour ideology accompanied an increase in militant labour struggles. Foner says these struggles were marked by "Unprecedented cooperation between ... black and white." (585) We shall take up this claim below, but there is an evident contradiction in attributing a rise in both cooperation and race hatred to the erosion of the free labour ideology. Any cooperation that did not entail support for Reconstruction could be at most ephemeral. The waning of such support among white labourers suggests that the "resurgence of overt racism" was not confined to the employers.

Foner writes, "The failure to develop an effective long-term appeal to white voters made it increasingly difficult for Republicans to combat the racial politics of the Redeemers." (603) If the subject and predicate are reversed the statement will be true: the attachment of white voters to racial politics made it difficult to win their support for Reconstruction. The problem was not that the Radicals failed to develop an appeal to whites, but that the emancipation of the labouring class in half the nation never came to constitute such an appeal.

Before the War, white labour "refused, in the main, to envisage black labour as part of its problem." (*BRA*, 29) The first Congress of the (white) National Labor Union, meeting in 1866, addressed the issue of black labour. Unable to agree on a position, the Union called for the organization of trade unions and eight-hour leagues among blacks, to prevent the employers from using them against white labour. "Here was a first halting note," commented Du Bois. "Negroes were welcomed to the labor movement, not because they were laborers but because they might be competitors...." Three years later, at its Philadelphia Congress, the NLU urged black workers to organize separately. "Through this separate union, Negro labor would be restrained from competition and yet kept out of the white race unions where power and discussion lay." (354, 356)

The differences between the NLU and black labour came to a head over the issue of the labour party. At its 1870 meeting in Cincinnati, the privilege of the floor (which had earlier been extended to a white former Democratic congressman) was denied to a black Republican. The Congress then voted a labour party resolution, over the objections of some black delegates that in the South the Republican Party was the party of labour.

White labour, notwithstanding its increasing awareness of its distinct interests, was unable to sever its ties with capital; whereas black labour, in pursuit of the American dream of every man his own master, steered a course which led it into collision with all sectors of wealth. Here is the solution to the famous problem, why no socialism in America?

The labour radicals of that time, like their counterparts in later generations, were unable to recognize labour's struggle when it appeared in a dark face. As Du Bois noted, "The main activity of the International was in the North; they seemed to have no dream that the place for its most successful rooting was in the new political power of the Southern worker." (360) An example of how what Du Bois called the American Blindspot (367) afflicted radicals was the eight-hour day parade in New York City on 13 September 1871. At least 8,000 marched behind the red flag bearing the slogan, "Workingmen of All Countries, Unite!" A company of Frenchmen carried a banner inscribed "Comite International" and were greeted with cries of "Vive la Commune!" A mass meeting following the march voted unanimously to throw off all allegiance to the Democratic Party in the Fall elections — but there was no mention of black grassroots political power in the South. The *Herald* called the demonstration "a fraternization of the laboring classes of this city with the great Internationale of Europe." Apparently, American Internationalists were able to look across the ocean to the Paris Commune, but could not cast their eyes southward to the South Carolina Commune.⁷

Foner makes much of the St. Louis general strike of 1877, which he claims "brought together 'white and colored men ... in one supreme contest for the common rights of workingmen'." (584) In that strike the white leadership of the Workingmen's Party turned away five hundred black workers who sought to join it, did their best "to dissuade any white men from going with the niggers," and called off public activities rather than open them to black participation.⁸ Du Bois summarized the shortsightedness of white labour:

The South, after the war, presented the greatest opportunity for a real national labor movement which the nation ever saw or is likely to see for many decades. Yet the labor movement, with but few exceptions, never realized the situation. It never had the intelligence or knowledge, as a whole, to see in black slavery and Reconstruction, the kernel and meaning of the labor movement in the United States. (353)

The point is not to excoriate people dead for a century, but to observe that they were not the last to suffer from what Du Bois called "the blindspot in the eyes of America and its historians." (577)

Du Bois took for granted the "Counter-Revolution of Property" (title of chapter 14); to him it was simply a matter of time until the owners of industry and the owners of land patched up their differences: "Northern and Southern employers agreed that profit was most important and the method of getting it second...." But

⁷Accounts of the march are given in Allen 178-9 and in Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots* (New York 1990), 233-4, and various other places, from reports in the *Times*, *Tribune*, *Herald*, and *Sun* of 14 September 1871.

⁸Philip S. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (New York 1977), 182; David Roediger, "'Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome, But Also the So-Called Mob:' The St. Louis General Strike of 1877," *Journal of Social History*, 19 (Winter 1985), 225.

he looked elsewhere for the condition that made the counter-revolution possible: "When white laborers were convinced that the degradation of Negro Labor was more fundamental than the uplift of white labor, the end was in sight." (347) Let that stand as Reconstruction's epitaph.

Just as northern capital sought to attach the freedmen to its own reconstruction project, so Foner enfolded *Black Reconstruction* into his "coherent, comprehensive modern account of Reconstruction." (xxiv) It will not wash. Far from "anticipating the findings of modern scholarship," Du Bois' book occupies a unique interpretative space. As he wrote, "The unending tragedy of Reconstruction is the utter inability of the American mind to grasp its real significance, its national and world-wide implications." (708)

Foner was not the first to view Reconstruction as America's bourgeois revolution. In 1927 Charles and Mary Beard, in a chapter called "The Second American Revolution," had drawn the parallels between the triumph of "northern capitalists and free farmers" over the "planting aristocracy" and the Puritan and French Revolutions.⁹ In 1937 James S. Allen restated the thesis in Marxian terms, calling the conflict begun by the Civil War "basically a revolution of a bourgeois democratic character, in which the bourgeoisie was fighting for power against the landed aristocracy." Appropriately he placed greater emphasis than the Beards on the activity of the former slaves.¹⁰ Foner includes Allen's book in his bibliography, without discussing it. A comparison of the two works shows their consistency.

Allen's book was less important as a historical study than as a political statement. He was a member of the Communist Party, and one of its theoreticians on the "Negro question." At the time he wrote it, the Burgess-Dunning School dominated Reconstruction historiography. If his aim was to oppose that view, he must have known that Du Bois' book was a powerful polemic; indeed he called it "a spirited defense of the Reconstruction governments." (91) Allen's book must be seen, therefore, not as the Communists' answer to "Birth of a Nation," but as their reply to Du Bois. To underscore this point, the editor's foreword criticized "Du Bois' failure to grasp the fundamental bourgeois character of the revolution," which had led him "into the error of characterizing the Reconstruction governments of the epoch as dictatorships of labor (that is, the proletariat) despite the fact that at the time such a dictatorship was out of the question." (11)

Why did the Party feel called upon to reply to Du Bois on a historical issue in which both held minority positions? The explanation is to be found in the political alignments of the time the books appeared. Although Du Bois later developed friendly relations with the Communist Party, and even applied for membership (on the eve of his permanent departure for Africa), relations between them were not cordial in those years. A resolution drafted for the Party's 1934 Convention linked Du Bois with Walter White and William Pickens as "the chief social supports of

⁹Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York 1927).

¹⁰Allen, 18.

imperialist reaction.”¹¹ That was during the days of the “Negro Soviet Republic” slogan.

In 1935 the Party changed to the policy of the Popular Front, which entailed, in place of the old “class against class” approach, an alliance with liberal capitalists. As part of the new line, it discovered the liberal tradition in America, stretching back to Paine, Jefferson, and Lincoln (and up to Roosevelt). Reconstruction became the task of the bourgeoisie, which it had unfortunately failed to complete.

Allen concluded in his book that the failure of Reconstruction had “chalked up on the scoreboard of history [a good example of popular front language] a whole series of obligations which only the new revolutionary and progressive forces of our epoch can fulfill.” (215) In the context of the Party’s actual maneuvering with CIO leaders and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, his conclusion could only be taken as a call for an alliance reaching from Browder to Roosevelt.

Du Bois was having none of it. Relentlessly he insisted that “the rebuilding, whether it comes now or a century later, will and must go back to the basic principles of Reconstruction in the United States during 1867-1876— Land, Light, and Leading for slaves black, brown, yellow and white, under a dictatorship of the proletariat.” (635) Du Bois’ book was not then, nor is it now, a historical justification for the Popular Front.

¹¹Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (New York 1971), 92.