

Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Number 693

November 4, 2022

Reconstruction: The White Version

I ended the last Nygaard Notes by asking, “So, what was ‘Reconstruction,’ actually? I’ll explain in the next Nygaard Notes.” Well, here we are at the next Nygaard Notes. But it’s not that simple.

The first thing one notices when looking back at the period after the U.S. Civil War from the vantage point of 2022, more than 150 years after that war ended, is that there have been—from Day One—two very, very different versions of this history.

One version became the dominant narrative among mainstream historians and thus of generations of children educated in the nation’s public schools. I could call this the “Standard” or “Orthodox” version of the story of Reconstruction, but I’ll call it the White Version, for reasons that I hope will become clear as we go along.

For a summary of the ideology that produced and supported the White Version of Reconstruction history, let’s start with the amazing W.E.B. Du Bois.

In 1935 Du Bois published a book called *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. Of particular interest here is Chapter 17, entitled “The Propaganda of History,” which summarizes the state of historical scholarship in the United States at the time. Chapter 17 begins with this epigraph:

“How the facts of American history have in the last half century been falsified because the nation was ashamed. The South was ashamed because it fought to perpetuate human slavery. The North was ashamed because it had to call in the black men to save the Union, abolish slavery and establish democracy.”

The chapter begins by asking “What are American children taught today about Reconstruction?” He then cites Helen Boardman [a white NAACP staff member]

who “has made a study of current textbooks and notes these three dominant theses: 1. All Negroes were ignorant; 2. All Negroes were lazy, dishonest and extravagant; 3. Negroes were responsible for bad government during Reconstruction.” Boardman supported all of these statements with numerous examples.

Just last month historian Eric Foner reviewed a book called *Teaching White Supremacy*, which “traces how the writing of American history, from Reconstruction on, has falsified and illuminated [sic] our racial past.” As part of his review, Foner refers back to Du Bois’s earlier effort to do the same thing, that is, assess the history being taught in the nation’s schools. This is how Foner summarizes what Du Bois found:

“Students learned that Reconstruction was the lowest point in the American saga, a time of corruption and misgovernment caused by granting the right to vote to Black men. The violence perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan, the books related, was an understandable response by white southerners to the horrors of ‘Negro rule.’ The heroes of this narrative were the self-styled white Redeemers who restored what they called ‘home rule’ to the South, the villains northern abolitionists who irresponsibly set North against South, bringing on a needless civil war.”

Foner neatly summarizes the implications of such “education”, saying that “Du Bois was well aware that what is said in history classrooms has an impact beyond the schoolhouse. The history of Reconstruction taught throughout the country ‘proved’ that nonwhite peoples are congenitally incapable of intelligent self-government.”

Constructing a Dominant Narrative

Du Bois was writing in 1935, decades before the
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Greetings,

As this issue's "Quote" of the Week indicates, the way we experience political and cultural questions, in the present, has been shaped in part by "the legacies—plural, not singular—of Reconstruction."

References in the news to "a new Civil War" are becoming more common these days, but far less common are references to what might be called "a new Reconstruction." And that's too bad, because the lessons to be learned from looking back at the period after the "old" Civil War are numerous and powerful. Some people say that what we are living through today should be called The Third Reconstruction. Reconstruction #1 would be the one that followed the Civil War. #2 would be the Civil Rights struggle of the past century. And Reconstruction #3, I am arguing, is the current era, the era of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, a Black president and a United States in which white people are on track to lose their status as the majority of the population. All of these things promise to usher in era of what I hope—and many fear—will be a time of true racial reckoning in this country.

Here in the year 2022, all this talk of a new Civil War conjures up emotions that threaten to carry us away. That is, talk of war might obscure talk of change. Real change. Change that might be called a New Reconstruction. And, since we can't understand a new thing without some understanding of the old thing that preceded it, this issue of the Notes is about the history of post-Civil War Reconstruction, which took up the better part of the second half of the 19th Century, from 1863 or so to 1877, or 1890, or 1907, or whatever date you like. The dates aren't nearly as important as the historical processes that become visible when one looks at the period overall.

You'll notice, as you read, that there is some repetition of a few of the main points, and that's intentional. I noticed that some of this stuff is so different from what I was taught that I couldn't "get it" until I heard it said several different ways. I thought the same thing might apply to you, too.

What I want to illustrate in this series, in part, is that the best response to the learning of new information is not to simply replace "Narrative A" with "Narrative B". The best response is to replace Narrative A with a more complex understanding that is expected to change over time. So I don't talk about the White Version and the Black Version of Reconstruction. Instead I talk about the White Version and the Inclusive Version.

I have to offer a rare Nygaard Notes correction: In Nygaard Notes #692, I said "We start with a brief look at the Civil War of 1860 to 1865." Doh! That war started in 1861, not 1860. Sorry.

The Democratic Party during Reconstruction was "the white man's party," intent on disfranchising black voters and imposing the racial caste system known as Jim Crow wherever they controlled state governments. The white man's party today is the Republican Party. Please vote on November 8th.

Toward a New Reconstruction,
Nygaard

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mainstream was able to hear him. Indeed, historian Foner tells us that "anyone who attended high school before 1960" was taught the White Version of Reconstruction – here called the "traditional interpretation." Foner explains: "Originating in anti-Reconstruction propaganda of Southern Democrats during the 1870s, this traditional interpretation achieved scholarly legitimacy around the turn of the century through the work of William Dunning and his students at Columbia University. It reached the larger public through films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*."

In the history world, this "traditional interpretation"—in which the story was that of an oppressive form of "Black Supremacy" that was imposed on the South—came to be attributed to what was called The Dunning School, which in turn was only one strand in the complex web of White Supremacist ideology that extended far beyond the South.

The White Version of the Reconstruction story was under construction before the war even ended, but it reached perhaps its greatest influence with the 1907 publication of Dunning's principal book on the subject, "Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877." The political significance of this timing was captured in a 2019 entry in a blog called "The Reconstruction Era," by scholar Patrick Young:



→→ “The views of the Dunning School were transmitted through elementary and high school textbooks. In some Southern colleges, Dunningite volumes became the acceptable histories of Reconstruction. But the Dunning School scholars attracted an audience beyond the South. When they were writing, white Americans were coming to terms with the emergence of the United States as a world power, controlling non-white peoples in places like Puerto Rico and the Philippines. The role of whites as a world-wide ruling race was more popular in 1900 than perhaps at any other time in American history. The ‘unnaturalness’ of ‘imposing Black rule’ over white Southerners seemed apparent to many Northern whites four decades after the fact.”

I’ll close with a related comment by Eric Foner who, as you can probably tell, is my favorite Reconstruction historian. In a 2015 interview in *The Nation* magazine, Foner said:

“The traditional or Dunning School of Reconstruction was not just an interpretation of history. It was part of the edifice of the Jim Crow System. It was an explanation for and justification of taking the right to vote away from black people on the grounds that they completely abused it during Reconstruction. It was a justification for the white South resisting outside efforts in changing race relations because of the worry of having another Reconstruction.

“All of the alleged horrors of Reconstruction helped to freeze the minds of the white South in resistance to any change whatsoever. And it was only after the Civil Rights revolution swept away the racist underpinnings of that old view—i.e., that black people are incapable of taking part in American democracy—that you could get a new view of Reconstruction widely accepted. For a long time it was an intellectual straitjacket for much of the white South, and historians have a lot to answer for in helping to propagate a racist system in this country.”

I promised that my reasons for calling this version of Reconstruction history the “White Version” would become clear as we went along. I hope it’s clear now. It’s not that all white people believe the story. Rather, it’s that such a story could only be believable and useful—indeed, could become the dominant narrative for nearly a century—in a nation that conceives of itself as “white” and which believes that white people are, and should be, “a world-wide ruling race”.

So, we return to the question: What was ‘Reconstruction, actually? Let’s have a look. ◆

Reconstruction: The Inclusive Version

I’ve just summarized one version of the story of post-Civil War Reconstruction that I call The White Version, by which I don’t mean that all white people believed it, but simply that it was the version created by whiteness and that served the historical process known as white supremacy.

Eric Foner states in his 1988 book *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*, that from the very beginning, even as the White Version was being constructed, voices of dissent had been raised, “initially by a handful of survivors of the Reconstruction era and the small fraternity of black historians.”

From the beginning, then, glimpses could be seen of a more complex and accurate narrative. But that narrative remained in the margins, unseen and likely unimagined by the general public, especially the white majority of that general public. Until, that is, it pushed its way into the general consciousness in the context of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s. The creation of the conditions for a radical re-thinking, or revision, of the White Version of Reconstruction history must be seen as one of the huge successes of the 20th-Century Civil Rights movement. It’s one reason why that movement is sometimes referred to as The Second Reconstruction.

The revision is ongoing. As it should be. That’s what historians do, they keep learning more, and that learning often leads to revisions. In fact, there’s a branch of history known as “historiography,” which is the study of *to page 4* →→

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how historical recording and interpretations of the same events shift with time as a result of many different factors. The history of Reconstruction is a shining example of this shifting. But I digress.

Where We've Come From

Just to review what it is that the revisionists have been revising, here's a one-paragraph summary of the White Version of Reconstruction that, while it doesn't mention the underlying racist assumptions that shaped it, still rather succinctly captures the essence of what was for decades the conventional thinking on the subject. The writer is Baylor University historian James M. Sorelle:

“For the better part of a century following the war, historians typically characterized Reconstruction as a total failure that had proved detrimental to all Americans—northerners and southerners, whites and blacks. According to this traditional interpretation, a vengeful Congress, dominated by radical Republicans, imposed military rule upon the southern states. Carpetbaggers from the North, along with traitorous white scalawags and their black accomplices in the South, established coalition governments that rewrote state constitutions, raised taxes, looted state treasuries, and disenfranchised former Confederates while extending the ballot to the freedmen [newly-emancipated blacks]. This era finally ended in 1877, when courageous southern white Democrats successfully ‘redeemed’ their region from ‘Negro rule’ by toppling the Republican state governments.”

Sorelle again: “It was not until the 1960s that the full force of the revisionist wave broke over the field. Then, in rapid succession, virtually every assumption of the traditional viewpoint was systematically dismantled.” Starting with the assumption that Negroes were less than human.

“One Fact and One Alone”

In his 1935 book “Black Reconstruction in America,” W.E.B. Du Bois stated, “One fact and one alone explains the attitude of most recent writers toward Reconstruction; they cannot conceive Negroes as men; in their minds the word ‘Negro’ connotes ‘inferiority’ and ‘stupidity’ lightened only by unreasoning gayety and humor.”

Writing nearly 50 years later, in a 1983 article in *American Heritage* magazine entitled “The New View Of Reconstruction,” historian Eric Foner responded to the changing realities in the telling of the story of Reconstruction in the years since Du Bois’s book was published.

“Imbued with the spirit of the civil rights movement,” wrote Foner, “and rejecting entirely the racial assumptions that had underpinned the traditional interpretation . . . historians evaluated Reconstruction from the black point of view. Building upon the findings of the past twenty years of scholarship, a new portrait of Reconstruction ought to begin by viewing it not as a specific time period, bounded by the years 1865 and 1877, but as an episode in a prolonged historical process—American society's adjustment to the consequences of the Civil War and emancipation.”

In the revisionist version of Reconstruction history, says Foner, “Southern freedmen were the heroes [and] the ‘Redeemers’ who overthrew Reconstruction were the villains...” That’s true enough, but the process of revising the history of Reconstruction was never a matter of simply reversing the heroes and the villains. The complexity of the period was acknowledged by Du Bois [Black Reconstruction in America, Chapter 17]:

“The North went to war without the slightest idea of freeing the slave. The great majority of Northerners from Lincoln down pledged themselves to protect slavery, and they hated and harried Abolitionists. But on the other hand, the thesis which [revisionist historian Howard K.] Beale tends to support—that the whole North during and after the war was chiefly interested in making money—is only half true; it was abolition and belief in democracy that gained for a time the upper hand after the war and led the North in Reconstruction; business followed abolition in order to maintain the tariff, pay the bonds and defend the banks. To call this business program ‘the program of the North’ and ignore abolition is unhistorical. In growing ascendancy for a calculable time was a great moral movement which turned the North from its economic defense of slavery and led it to Emancipation. Abolitionists attacked slavery because it was wrong and their moral battle cannot be truthfully minimized or forgotten. Nor does this fact deny that the majority of Northerners before the war were not abolitionists, that they attacked slavery only in order to win the war and enfranchised the Negro to secure this result.”

→→ Even if we take into account the historiography of Reconstruction—that is, the complexity of the story, the changing understandings, the ongoing disagreements—Foner is still correct when he states that “By the end of the 1960s, the old interpretation had been completely reversed.”

What Have We Learned?

So, we’ve looked at the White Version of Reconstruction, and we’ve introduced some different viewpoints and the complexity that comes with them. Now, after all that, what do we end up with? Here are a couple of paragraphs from “The Inclusive Historian’s Handbook,” which I think offer the best nutshell summary I could find of the story of the Reconstruction era, the story of a beautiful flower that was planted in the unforgiving soil of post-Civil War America:

“During the Reconstruction era, voters ratified three new constitutional amendments, including one that redefined citizenship in the United States, and Congress passed the first federal civil rights laws in American history. Black men and women sought to define freedom through reordering their daily lives; asserting their rights as free laborers; pursuing access to land; establishing community institutions such as schools and independent black churches; and reestablishing family bonds that had been torn apart under slavery. Black men began to organize politically, and after 1870, to exercise the right to vote, even in the face of intense and frequently violent opposition from southern whites.

“Free public school systems emerged across the South during Reconstruction, and constitutional conventions rewrote southern state constitutions. Economic modernization and debt relief became key economic issues across the formerly Confederate South, and the first black colleges in the region opened their doors. In the American West, Reconstruction propelled the expansion of the reservation system and the end of federal willingness to treat tribes as sovereign nations, as well as gave rise to heated conflicts between a federal government that sought to ‘subdue’ native populations and Native Americans who had no desire to enfold themselves into the expanding American republic. Economic panic struck the nation in 1873, the women’s rights movement fractured over the issue of black male suffrage, and a series of fraudulent and violent elections unfolded across the South. In the 1870s and 1880s, the Supreme Court issued a series of decisions that rendered

the Reconstruction amendments nearly unenforceable; and mass-scale violence and political terrorism paved the way for the restoration of white supremacy in the South.”

The White Version of the story of Reconstruction, in essence, was that the attempt to reconstruct the South, to take a defeated slaveholding society and make it into a vital part of a multiracial democracy was doomed to failure from the very start because Black people are less than human. That’s why it failed, whiteness tells us, “and a good thing it did, too.”

This idea of “failure” was addressed, eloquently, by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1935. The following words appear at the end of Chapter 16 of *Black Reconstruction in America*, as Du Bois reflects on the generally-accepted idea that Reconstruction not only failed, but was “unnatural”, a “tragedy.” I’ll let his words be the last words on the subject of Reconstruction. [Editor’s note: You’ll see the latin phrase *Athanasius contra mundum*. This is a reference to the African Catholic Saint Athanasius, who stood famously, and heroically ‘against the world’ in defending his faith.]

“The unending tragedy of Reconstruction,” said Du Bois, “is the utter inability of the American mind to grasp its real significance, its national and worldwide implications. . . It seems to America a proof of inherent race inferiority that four million slaves did not completely emancipate themselves in eighty years, in the midst of nine million bitter enemies, and indifferent public opinion of the whole nation. If the Reconstruction of the Southern states, from slavery to free labor, and from aristocracy to industrial democracy, had been conceived as a major national program of America, whose accomplishment at any price was well worth the effort, we should be living today in a different world.”

“The attempt to make black men American citizens was in a certain sense all a failure, but a splendid failure. It did not fail where it was expected to fail. It was *Athanasius contra mundum*, with back to the wall, outnumbered ten to one, with all the wealth and all the opportunity, and all the world against him. And only in his hands and heart the consciousness of a great and just cause; fighting the battle of all the oppressed and despised humanity of every race and color, against the massed hirelings of Religion, Science, Education, Law, and brute force.” ♦

“Quote” of the Week: “*The Legacies of Reconstruction*”

Americans’ poor collective understanding of the triumphs and failures of the Reconstruction era also affects our ability—as a society—to have thoughtful, honest, and historically-informed conversations about many issues that are hotly contested in today’s world. The definition and boundaries of citizenship; the relationship between political and economic freedom; the appropriate federal response to episodes of terrorism; concerns about election fraud and voter suppression; and the relationship between the federal government and individual Americans may be contemporary questions, but the way we experience them in the present has been shaped in part by the legacies—plural, not singular—of Reconstruction.

Those words are from “The Inclusive Historian’s Handbook,” a project co-sponsored by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) and the National Council on Public History (NCPH). They have a section of their website devoted to Reconstruction. Just aim your search engine at “The Inclusive Historian’s Handbook,” or go [HERE](https://inclusivehistorian.com/reconstruction/):
<https://inclusivehistorian.com/reconstruction/>

In the next Nygaard Notes:

*Radical Republicans,
Redeemer Democrats,
and the White Supremacist interpretation of the Civil War
known as The Lost Cause.*

Coming your way soon...

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