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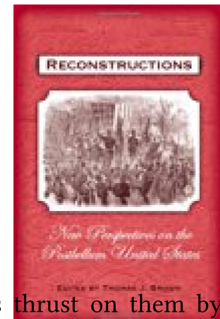
Thomas J. Brown, ed. *Reconstructions: New Perspectives on the Postbellum United States.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 256 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-517595-0.



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This volume is a welcome effort to assess scholarship on the post-Civil War United States published since Eric Foner's landmark study, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (1988). The eight historiographic essays range from topics familiar to the Reconstruction rubric–land, labor, race, and politics–to those less typically considered part of Reconstruction historiography, including diplomacy, culture (broadly defined), and the West. While the impact of Foner's *Reconstruction* is clear throughout the volume, individual essays highlight other key studies as well, including works by Gaines Foster, George Frederickson, Michael Perman, and C. Vann Woodward. Taken together, the essays do not outline any unified trend in recent scholarship. They do, however, provide an invaluable roadmap of recent work on the postbellum years and astute suggestions for future directions. The collection also highlights the formidable essay-writing skills of eight accomplished historians. As such, it should be important not only to historians of the period, but to anyone interested in recent developments in U.S. historical writing.

The pre-Foner narrative of Reconstruction historiography is, as editor Thomas Brown puts it in his introduction to the volume, "one of the most familiar chapters in the history of American historical literature" (p. 3). A generation of historians (including this one) first learned that story from Foner himself, in his preface to *Reconstruction* and other writings. From the Civil War era through the first half of the twentieth century, the mainstream history of Reconstruction was written by the victors in the struggle, who looked back at Reconstruction as a "tragic era" in which Congress, out of vengeance against the Confederacy, trampled the Constitution and imposed "negro rule" on the South. Such historians represented African Americans as hapless pawns, unprepared for the responsibilities thrust on them by voting rights legislation. A revisionist school of Reconstruction historiography emerged gradually, beginning with African American scholars in the 1920s and 1930s–importantly W.E.B. DuBois in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935)–and culminating in mainstream academic work in the 1950s and 1960s. The new work recast Radical Republicans as well-meaning progressives who sought to reconstruct the United States on the best possible basis, were fair to the white South, and believed in the promises of equality outlined in the Declaration of Independence. The next wave of scholarship, identified by some as "post-revisionism," adopted a more critical tone, emphasizing "the conservative implications of reform" and taking a "jaundiced view of American institutions," as Michael Fitzgerald puts it (p. 93). Influenced by the rise of social history, scholars of the 1970s and 1980s also placed increasing emphasis on African Americans' agency, showing the effectiveness with which they pursued their own goals, first by helping shatter the bonds of slavery and then by seeking landownership, building institutions, accruing political power, and cultivating new familial relationships. Foner represented his book as the capstone of these two generations of scholarship. But unlike many of his predecessors, he made Reconstruction a national story, linking emancipation and experiments in free labor in the South with major industrial upheaval and a reconstruction of capitalism in the North. Still, his focus remained southern and, in a refutation of the "tragic era" historiography, he placed special emphasis on the effectiveness of black political and social organization. Harkening back to the revisionists, his tone was respectful toward those who advocated radical reform and toward the entire Reconstruction enterprise. "Perhaps the remarkable thing about Reconstruction," he con-

cluded, "was not that it failed, but that it was attempted at all and survived as long as it did."[1]

Foner's *Reconstruction* was a tough act to follow, but the scholarly literature on Reconstruction continued to flourish and has included one particularly sweeping and acclaimed study, Steven Hahn's *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (2003). To date, however, there have been few systematic attempts to assess the newer literature, which is thick with local studies and does not revolve around any single question or theme. To attempt such an assessment, editor Thomas Brown put together a thematically organized volume that relies on "traditional building blocks" of Reconstruction historiography while also proposing "to widen the scope of thinking about Reconstruction" (pp. 5, 7). Half the essays deal with topics that echo the orientations of mainstream Reconstruction scholarship before and since Foner. Steven West writes about land, labor, and race; John Rodrigue addresses black agency; Heather Cox Richardson considers class conflict and the state in the North and West; and Michael Fitzgerald discusses politics. But the other four essays take up topics that, for scholars who think of themselves as Reconstruction specialists, are emergent or still submerged. Brown writes about Civil War memory and commemoration; Mark Smith discusses diplomatic history and "the foreign" in Reconstruction historiography; Michael Vorenberg writes about constitutional and legal history; and Leslie Butler considers cultural and intellectual history. The volume thus exhibits admirable breadth and depth, though as I will discuss later, its topical omissions are noteworthy.

Beyond being useful surveys of the literature in particular areas, the essays are exemplary for asking big questions about history. Leslie Butler, for example, grapples with the crucial question of how historians link cultural and intellectual changes with "on the ground" developments in the economy or society. Rather than assume anything about how the war changed the nation's intellectual life, she proposes that historians ask the question again and again as they examine the histories of philosophers, creative writers, political theorists, scientists, and educators and their institutions. "As work progresses toward a synthesis of this period's intellectual preoccupations," she writes, "it should become clearer how Reconstruction per se did or did not matter to American thought, and also how ideas operated in the process of establishing a second American republic" (p. 205). Michael Vorenberg adroitly offers a framework for thinking about relationships among individuals, the state, and the nation. He surveys developments in constitutional and legal history over the past fifty years to explain the curious absence of recent legal history on the Civil War and Reconstruction. Vorenberg advises historians to draw on the close-up orientation of the "new" legal historians to examine people's everyday experiences of citizenship and reconfigurations of nationhood, and he usefully describes his own work on Civil War sailors' conceptions of citizenship as an example. At their most ambitious, he suggests, future histories will "at once examine the social consequences of legal and political institutions while also analyzing the transformation of those institutions themselves" (p. 158).

Several essays explain not just what historians have written, but why. For instance, Steven West helpfully reminds us that undergirding historians' debates over the origins and nature of sharecropping in the postbellum South were much larger questions about the advent of southern capitalism and the nature of regional distinctiveness. His delineation of the major stakes in what sometimes seem minor disagreements allows readers far outside agricultural history to appreciate why it matters whether poor farmers in a certain county tended to work on shares or for wages. Michael Fitzgerald is most direct in linking historians' present-day concerns with their conclusions about history. Noting that "modern work" on Reconstruction "has been conducted in the shadow of the civil rights movement," he predicts, "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" (pp. 91, 99). The current "less politicized environment," he argues, makes it easier for historians to write about ethically complex situations, such as oppression within already oppressed African American communities, or corruption among progressive black and white politicians. Still, Fitzgerald cautions against "the danger ... that in moving beyond the revisionist emphases, historians lend unwitting credence to the racist misunderstandings that have been so destructive in the past" (p. 116). This is a fascinating and bold account of how our own milieu might shape the kinds of questions we ask and conclusions we reach.

In its entirety, the collection raises provocative questions about what constituted Reconstruction, both thematically and chronologically. The title, *Reconstructions*, refuses the idea that there was one unified "Reconstruction," but it nonetheless asserts that postwar rebuilding and reconfiguring are the volume's central

themes. On the other hand, the subtitle names an era ("the postbellum United States") not a topic or an event. But are Reconstruction and the "postbellum" period coextensive? In other words, did Reconstruction happen only in the postbellum period? Was everything that happened after the Civil War "reconstruction"?

Many essays range far beyond the traditional 1877 cut-off (an artifact of political history) to bring under the Reconstruction umbrella such topics as the continuing exploits of the nation and its state, ongoing black participation in formal politics, and commemorations of the Civil War. Indeed, Heather Richardson argues that Reconstruction is "a process, not a time period" and suggests that the process will not be complete until the nation is unified "on principles of freedom and equality" (p. 90). Yet Steven West, in his essay on race and economic change, draws the chronology more narrowly, viewing Reconstruction as a bounded period of transition (ending in about 1880) that "established many of the social and economic relations that would define the region for decades to come" (p. 12). The essays invite, but leave for readers to answer, the question of what is gained and what is lost in opening up the end point of Reconstruction.

By contrast, these historians are much less interested in broadening the chronology in the opposite direction. Vorenberg, in his essay on constitutional and legal history, makes the greatest effort to connect events of the Civil War years with the debates that animated Reconstruction. On the whole, though, relevant wartime phenomena such as emancipation, black soldiers' civil rights activism, and Congressional debates about reconstruction policy (to name just a few), remain outside the scope of the essays. Although most historians acknowledge that Reconstruction began before the war's official end (and although Foner himself began with the Emancipation Proclamation), the volume thus does little to bridge what remains a significant gap between the literature of Reconstruction and that of the Civil War. And as long as we are thinking creatively about chronology, why not also ask about the impact of the Civil War on themes in antebellum history? An earlier generation of historians discounted the significance of the war for the unfolding of capitalism or the liberal tradition in politics. That the authors in this volume are relatively unconcerned with assessing continuity and change from the antebellum to postbellum eras is an indication of the current consensus, particularly among Reconstruction specialists, that the war marked a definitive break from the past. But beyond "break" or "no break," questions about what changed, and why, remain of great interest. Historians of African Americans, for example, are increasingly reaching back in time to better understand the implications of emancipation.[2] And in other subfields, as Leslie Butler points out in her wide-ranging and astute essay, historians have yet to parse where the war made a difference and where it did not.

Reconstructions is dedicated to "graduate seminars in History," and in the spirit of collegial critique supposedly found in such places, I offer two comments on what the volume lacks. First is sustained attention to gender. Although several contributors note that a focus on gender has been one of the hallmarks of the post-Foner literature, the volume contains no essay devoted to recent scholarship on women, gender, and the household. Although we get glimpses of that literature in most of the essays, we are never treated to a sustained analysis of how the related, but relatively separate, strands of women's history, gender history, and the history of "the household" as a social and political configuration, speak to one another.[3] Perhaps the feeling was that such work supplemented but did not fundamentally change historians' understanding of the period. Fitzgerald, for example, appreciates recent work on gender and acknowledges that it has pushed political historians "to broaden the definition of politics" (p. 103). But, he claims, "the gender scholarship does not generally challenge the long-prevalent favorable description of Reconstruction" (p. 105). Scholarship on gender, women, and the household may not substitute "bad" for "good" in what Fitzgerald calls the "ethical calibration" of Reconstruction historiography. But an essay bringing together the last twenty years of work on women, gender, and the household–and assessing the extent to which such work is illuminating in its own right and how it might or might not change conversations about related areas of inquiry (race and racism, class, and power, for example)–would have been both timely and instructive.

Second, the volume misses an excellent opportunity to provide a groundbreaking essay on transnational and comparative history. On one level, it would have been difficult to produce such an essay, for, as Steven West notes, a "comparative or international approach ... [is] more admired than emulated" (p. 25). But the building blocks do exist, in the form of a growing body of comparative and transnational work on the period and the extensive literature on the often-intertwined phenomena of slave emancipation and nation formation in other places, including Russia as well as the British, Spanish, and Portuguese empires. This is not to underestimate

the importance of Mark Smith's essay on the literature of U.S. foreign relations, which insightfully brings together traditional scholarship in diplomatic history with newer work on ideologies of race and civilization. But no one in the volume substantially engages with non-U.S. focused scholarship, even though it is widely acknowledged that comparative perspectives, besides being intrinsically interesting, can help us better understand U.S. history itself. To be fair, some excellent transnational work involving the United States was published too late to be considered in this book.[4] But, if the topic had been considered broadly, as I am suggesting here, even several years back a historian well-versed in non-U.S. literatures could have written an essay that would now be indispensable in helping scholars of the United States not only formulate comparative or transnational questions, but also understand what is to be gained from a broader historical and historiographic outlook.

Fortunately, the authors of this path-breaking book have left some work for others. But the volume stands as a great accomplishment and a service to all who seek to better understand the postbellum United States, how historians do history, and–especially for graduate seminars–what constitutes a superb historiographic essay.

Notes

[1]. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 603.

[2]. See, for example, Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Enslaved Women and the Geography of Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South, 1830-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Laura F. Edwards, "Status without Rights: African Americans and the Tangled History of Law and Governance in the Nineteenth-Century U.S. South," *American Historical Review* 112 (2007): 265-393; Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); and 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).

[3]. The literature is large, and much of it is cited in the volume under review. Book-length studies include Nancy Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861-1875* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Jane E. Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Post-Emancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Sharon Ann Holt, *Making Freedom Pay: North Carolina Freedpeople Working for Themselves, 1865-1900* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); Stephen D. Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

[4]. I am thinking, in particular, of Sven Beckert, "Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War," *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 1405-1438; Beckert, "From Tuskegee to Togo: The Problem of Freedom in the Empire of Cotton," *Journal of American History* 92 (2005): 498-526; Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). For advantages of transnational over comparative history, see Frederick Cooper, "Race, Ideology, and the Perils of Comparative History," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 1122-1138.

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