

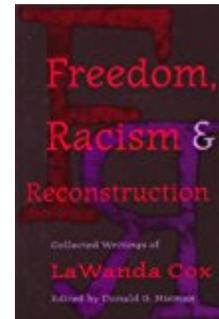
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LaWanda Cox. *Freedom, Racism, and Reconstruction: Collected Writings of LaWanda Cox*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997. xviii + 425 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1901-8.

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This volume more than justifies itself as both a fitting tribute to a fine historian and a handy assemblage of seven journal articles, two excerpts from Cox's books, two essays from edited collections, and a previously unpublished piece. Yet it has greater value still, for it should prompt fresh thinking on the part of all those who had thought they had their minds made up about emancipation, Reconstruction, and Abraham Lincoln. The writings offered here span nearly half a century, but almost all were posed as challenges to what, at the time, had become comfortable ways of thinking. Some might yet trouble the complacent.

Joining a broader revisionist assault in the 1950s on prevailing views of Reconstruction, LaWanda Cox and her husband and collaborator, John H. Cox, did more than say "yes" where the old school had said "no," though in "General O. O. Howard and the Misrepresented Bureau" (1953), the Coxes did stand traditional judgments on their head regarding alleged partisanship and incompetence in the Freedmen's Bureau. The reigning orthodoxy was not single-minded, bearing the imprint of William Archibald Dunning—the Columbia historian whose proconsuls produced uniformly unsympathetic studies of Reconstruction in individual southern states—but also of the eminently heterodox Charles Beard. Both the Dunningite and Beardian understandings of Reconstruction, however, rested on the assumption that the Republican commitment to civil and, eventually, political equality for African Americans was somehow more or less than met the eye. At the core of much Dunningite scholarship lay the belief that black people were unequal to the demands of citizenship. Accordingly, those who pressed black citizenship were necessarily either fuzzy-minded visionaries heedless of the realities of southern life or, more likely,

vindictive Radicals wielding the black franchise as a tool to punish and rule. For their part, Beardian interpreters of Reconstruction, most prominently Howard K. Beale, viewed Reconstruction chiefly as an episode in the subordination of an agrarian South by an entrepreneurial and industrial North and were, therefore, hardly inclined to regard the issues of civil rights and suffrage as its most important aspects. They were, more likely, the means by which a struggle of economic interest groups was carried out—if not conscious diversions from that struggle.

The Coxes' signal contribution was to undermine this common assumption that establishing the legal and political rights of African Americans was, at best, a means to an end. Their according these rights pride of place in Reconstruction politics was not the product of new research into the experience of freedpeople but close study of northern Republican politicians and their relations with President Andrew Johnson. In essays like "Andrew Johnson and His Ghost Writers" (1961) and in their 1963 book *Politics, Principle, and Prejudice, 1865-1866* (chapter ten is reprinted here), the Coxes fleshed out findings of some contemporaries that, contrary to Beardian-Beale expectations, the congressional Republicans who had shaped Reconstruction had divided over economic issues and that northern business had similarly differed over southern policy. The Coxes' archival research made clear that rather than economics, it was precisely the issues of race and civil rights that had sorted politicians into opposing camps in 1865 and 1866. By late 1865 the point upon which most Republicans agreed was some federal guarantee of equality before the law for black southerners (the Coxes were careful to distinguish this from the tardier embrace of black suffrage or any very thoroughgoing purging of racial prejudice from Yankee

souls). And, since the Coxes did not assume black incapacity, they could not simply write off this consensus as the product of insincerity or expedience. Indeed, they detected genuine conviction among these Republicans. Race issues were found to be central to defining the other side as well. By carefully examining the drafting of Johnson's crucial 1866 vetoes of Freedmen's Bureau and civil rights legislation, the Coxes made clear that it was not simply constitutional principle or mere obtuseness but also racism—Johnson's own and that of the northern Democrats he was evidently eager to cultivate—that drove the president to defy the Republican consensus, occasioning the cataclysmic split that eventuated in congressional control over Reconstruction.

It did not take long for the newly burnished reputations of Reconstruction Republicans to acquire a fresh tarnish. Much of the Coxes' revisionism had focused on Washington, D.C., and northern politics. Even LaWanda Cox's seminal 1958 essay on the land issue in Reconstruction politics attended chiefly to how provisions for the redistribution of confiscated and abandoned rebel land had found their way into the 1865 Freedmen's Bureau bill. As more scholars began further to explore the southern and black experience of emancipation and Reconstruction, there emerged what Eric Foner has labeled a "postrevisionist" interpretation of the era. To these scholars, Reconstruction seemed insufficiently radical, having been compromised, even betrayed, by the Republican's own racism, timidity, entrepreneurial orientation, and rather hidebound understanding of the powers and role of government. Those ideological shortcomings combined with the absence of any meaningful redistribution of southern land meant that, with the blessing, even connivance, of government officials, a dependent black labor force continued to work for its old masters.

The manner in which Cox—by the 1980s widowed and in her seventies—answered the postrevisionists surely helped guide historians toward the richer and more historically informed understanding of Reconstruction that has found its most complete expression in Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (1988). Cox insisted that an emphasis on how far their subjects fell short by the modern measuring stick obscured the very important difference between the Republicans' commitment to civil and political equality (however prejudiced they might otherwise be) and the unalloyed racism of Democrats. With others, she reminded scholars that the United States went considerably farther in empowering its freed population than other post-emancipation societies of the nineteenth century. These

points have been incorporated into a new synthesis (meta-postrevisionism?) that recognizes both Reconstruction's revolutionary aspects and Republican limitations. The Northern Republican understanding of freedom was considerably less expansive than those of either the freedpeople or classical republicanism, but considerably more expansive than any "freedom" that the white South might have constructed for former slaves.

Several of Cox's critiques of postrevisionism, though, have been less completely assimilated by historians. In "Reflections on the Limits of the Possible," the chapter of *Lincoln and Black Freedom* (1981) reprinted in this volume, Cox questioned scholarly assumptions that Reconstruction might have been substantially more coercive than it was by wondering whether "a century ago the amount of force necessary to realize equal civil and political rights in the South was impossible to sustain in a nation whose democratic tradition and constitutional structure limited the use of power, exalted the rule of law, and embodied the concept of government by the consent of the governed" (p. 266). And while the aborting of land reform in the postemancipation South was certainly momentous, Cox was undoubtedly correct in asking whether petty proprietorship would have provided as solid a base for black independence as is sometimes assumed, given the fortunes of southern agriculture in the late nineteenth century. More recent scholarship reinforces Cox's suggestion that, had they been maintained, the civil and political rights Republicans extended in 1866-67 might have gone as far as land in providing security and opportunity for the African American community, given the significance of black suffrage at the state and local level in shaping class relations, the administration of justice, the tax burden, and public services.

While LaWanda Cox's place in Reconstruction scholarship seems secure, her legacy is less settled with respect to Lincoln and emancipation, precisely because consensus about the sources, depth, and impact of Lincoln's commitment to black freedom and equality still seems far away. In painting Lincoln as "a consistent, determined friend of black freedom" (p. 63) whose acts as president were vitally important to the destruction of slavery, Cox had to fight on two fronts. The old school and postrevisionism oftentimes converged in portraying Lincoln as a reluctant or tardy emancipator, driven to free slaves by military and political exigencies or by the fact that slaves had already gone a long way toward freeing themselves. Given Lincoln's zigs and zags, his political acuteness and talents at dissimulation, his administration presents scholars with a sort of Rorschach blur. What

Cox has seen in it was not a man driven to emancipation, but one kept from more thoroughgoing enforcement of freedom and equality by his understanding of the Constitution and the necessity of guarding black freedom against white backlash. Arguing that Lincoln's political style obscured the extent of his commitment, Cox resolutely declared every glass half full by finding less significance in the shortcomings and circumlocutions of policy than in its emancipatory content. She nowhere made an implausible case, but even those convinced that Lincoln took most every step he believed he could toward black freedom might suspect that it was a more tortuous progress.

Cox's understanding of Lincoln naturally led her to stress how profoundly he differed from Andrew Johnson in political skill, racial attitude, and constitutional principle. Whatever might be concluded about Lincoln's motives, her discussion of his protean, very conditional Reconstruction policy should give pause to anyone for whom the identification of Johnson's program of Reconstruction with Lincoln's remains an article of faith. This emphasis on discontinuity led Cox to wistful counterfactualizing on the subject of Lincoln living out his second term and employing his formidable talents to forge a more enduring basis for black equality.

Even those well-versed in the historiography of emancipation and Reconstruction will be richly rewarded by dipping into this volume for the admirable scholarly legwork manifested in Cox's discussions of the Freedmen's Bureau bill, Andrew Johnson's vetoes, and Lincoln's developing reconstruction policies; for Cox's early essays on farm tenancy and farm labor before 1900; and, most particularly, for a previously unpublished essay. Cox clearly perceived in the 1980s that the story of Reconstruction would remain incomplete until we had a

richer understanding of the white northern public—why a good many Yankees, for all their prejudice, came to support the congressional mandate of equality before the law and at the polls and why they soured on that commitment in the 1870s. Having mined the literature of the behavioral sciences, Cox has tentatively proposed not idealism or principle as a driving force as much as a more visceral “perception of injustice” that focused first on the plight of black southerners and then on the indignities done white southerners by Reconstruction government. Cox has not had the opportunity to argue this point at length, but the project has yielded the intriguing case study published here of an apparently average white Indianian who seems not to have been terribly concerned about black people either before the Civil War or after Reconstruction but who nevertheless served as a vigorous and dedicated agent of the Freedmen's Bureau in Alabama. While the essay is not sufficient to make the case for an ingrained aversion to injustice, it offers a finely detailed study of the local experience of Reconstruction, something that we need far more of.

If any complaint is to be made regarding this volume—beyond its alarming price (which does not even pay for an index)—it might be with editor Nieman's generally valuable, but incomplete, introduction. Though John H. Cox co-authored three of the journal articles reprinted here as well as the essential *Politics, Principle, and Prejudice*, nothing substantive is said of—and little attention drawn to—his contribution to what by all evidence was a most fertile intellectual partnership.

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