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Mary Farmer-Kaiser. *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2010. xiv + 275 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-3211-6; $26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-3212-3.

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Protecting Freedwomen and Children: The Gendered Presumptions of Reconstruction

Established by an act of Congress in March 1865, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands was a hasty improvisation designed by Republican congressmen to avert mass starvation and suffering, protect the rule of law and the rights of laborers, and provide the foundation for economic health and peace to return to the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. Its task was unprecedented, and highly controversial, for an agency of the federal government. Prevailing economic theories left little room for government intervention into the economy on behalf of labor, while matters of courtroom justice and disaster relief were traditionally left to local administration and private charities. But, these were unprecedented times and the Republican-led Congress felt a weighty responsibility. The immense social crisis looming that made the bureau necessary came as a direct consequence of U.S. policies–namely the physical destruction of the South wrought by the U.S. armed forces, and the socioeconomic upheaval that resulted from Lincoln's policy of emancipation. Dubbed the "Freedmen's Bureau," the bureau's efforts quickly became consumed with the plight of former slaves and the political objective of establishing the success of emancipation. It would have to do so with limited resources and in the face of a furious opposition (that included the president of the United States) tirelessly denouncing it as an unconstitutional abuse of federal power.

Understandably, in light of its importance, historians of Reconstruction have scrutinized the actions of the Freedmen's Bureau in painstaking detail in plentiful local and generalized studies. It is unsurprising, too, that the reputation of the bureau has risen and fallen along with the broader historiographical trends on Reconstruction. In the 1950s, revisionist historians John Cox and LaWanda Cox rescued the "misrepresented Bureau" from the vilifications of the Dunning school scholars who depicted it as a corrupt and partisan Republican machine. The Coxes helped launch the modern debates over the bureau by emphasizing its achievements, especially in protecting freedpeople's rights and upholding the law.[1] Others were not as impressed. A loosely defined wave of scholarship from the 1960s through the 1980s–known to specialists as "post-revisionism"–highlighted the conservatism of the bureau's agenda, which they regarded as compromised by its commitment to capitalism and hamstrung by paternalistic attitudes toward freedpeople akin to those of the southern planters. Eric Foner's 1988 historiographical landmark work *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* elegantly synthesized these contrasting viewpoints by arguing that the bureau's genuine commitment to black advancement was constrained, and at times undercut, by the predominating "free labor ideology" of the Republican Party that placed too much faith in market solutions and failed to reckon with the cultural power of an entrenched racial caste system in the South. Yet, Foner clearly admired the dogged determination of the bureau's leaders in the face of entrenched opposition and regarded the bureau's achievements as considerable in light of the political and ideological constraints of the times.[2]

More than twenty years after Foner's Reconstruction, the historical literature on Reconstruction and the Freedmen's Bureau continues to thrive and expand. Mary Farmer-Kaiser's *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau:*

Race, Gender and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation is the latest of a number of important new works to highlight the role of women and gender in Reconstruction, joining notable books by Nancy D. Bercaw, Peter Bardaglio, Laura F. Edwards, Carol Faulkner, Thavolia Glymph, Susan E. O'Donovan, Hannah Rosen, Leslie A. Schwalm, Amy Dru Stanley, and Karen Zipf.[3] In both her approach to the evidence and her argument, Farmer-Kaiser speaks directly to the prevailing historiography on the Freedmen's Bureau.[4] First, she seeks to correct the widespread presumption, echoed by many of the above-named authors, that the Freedmen's Bureau administered its policies without taking gender into consideration. Secondly, she asserts that freedwomen were active agents in forcing bureau agents to consider gender by appealing to the special need for government to protect and assist them as "defenseless" women. In order to demonstrate this, she looks beyond high-level policymakers at the state and federal level and combs through the records of the bureau on the local level in four states–Virginia, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas–to uncover the "gendered responses" of local bureau agents to complaints registered by freedwomen (p. 12). She finds that the duty to protect mothers and children was deeply ingrained in the minds of the white middle-class men who served as local agents for the bureau. Close examination of these records show that freedwomen often, but not always, made allies of these agents by appealing to their predisposition to protect mothers and children.

In many ways, Farmer-Kaiser's book exemplifies much of the post-Foner writing on Reconstruction by upholding Foner's paradigm while modifying some of his conclusions. In particular, she begins with Foner's premise that adherence to the "free labor ideology" controlled the response of the bureau agents to conditions in the South, but she adds a gendered dimension to northern ideology that was largely absent from Foner's account. At the heart of Foner's thesis is his judgment that "The Freedmen's Bureau was not, in reality, the agent of the planters, nor was it precisely the agent of the former slaves. It can best be understood as the agent of the northern free labor ideology itself."[5] Farmer-Kaiser strongly endorses this assessment, but she deepens our understanding of this ideology by exploring the "gendered" notion of freedom embedded within it that structured the bureau's attitude towards freedwomen. Her first chapter describes the importance of "true womanhood" to the free labor economic model. From the viewpoint of bureau agents, freedwomen were natural dependents whose proper social and economic role was to cultivate domestic order as wives and mothers. Thus, encouraging women to embrace marriage, motherhood, and middle-class morality was as essential to the free labor ideology as labor contracts and market hegemony.

After providing the intellectual contours of "gendered freedom" in chapter 1, Kaiser-Farmer goes on to examine how presumptions about gender roles shaped the major day-to-day tasks of the Freedmen's Bureau. In four separate chapters, she examines how the bureau performed the following tasks: 1) distributing emergency relief; 2) negotiating and enforcing fair labor contracts; 3) reuniting families and determining custody of freed children; and 4) administering justice in bureau and military courts. One famous area of the bureau's work that Kaiser-Farmer chooses to exclude from her study is its leadership in facilitating the establishment of both public and private schools. Because the bureau did not actually run the schools once they were opened, its relationship with schools was mostly advisory and thus she considers it beyond the scope of the bureau's official duties. This exclusion makes sense within the restricted definition of her study, but it contributes to what may be an overly tight focus on *official* bureau duties that obscures the collaborations between the bureau and other public and private institutions. As a result, this study portrays the bureau agents and freedwomen somewhat in vacuum, with a laser-like concentration on their direct interactions that sometimes neglects the wider context in which the bureau agents worked hand-in-hand with missionaries, teachers, and school administrators who were carrying out their own "gendered" reconstruction of the South. How these allies influenced the bureau's agents, and how the bureau shared some of its responsibilities to these organizations are important questions left unexplored by this study.

Farmer-Kaiser offers copious evidence to support her theses. In the early days of the Freedmen's Bureau, the bureau favored freedwomen and children over freedmen in distributing relief. She presents stunning statistics that indicate that freedwomen received the bulk of relief support–as much as 85 percent in some places–as agents sympathized with widowed wives and abandoned mothers in need, while often rejecting the claims of able-bodied men. Farmer-Kaiser attributes this phenomenon to the Victorian presumptions of bureau workers, who feared that relief to men would promote idleness and create a dependency on government charity–an especial concern of General Oliver O. Howard, head of the bureau. For stern moralists like Howard, widowed/deserted wives and mothers constituted "the de-

serving poor" while unemployed men were often "undeserving" idlers. Freedmen's Bureau agents reflected this attitude in their expectation that freedmen ought to assume the role of household provider, which resulted in a willingness to assist women and children whose male providers were absent or unable to perform their role. The men themselves received little sympathy.

One aspect of the "free labor ideology" that Kaiser-Farmer illuminates is the silent gendered presumptions of free market theory. Whereas men were presumed to possess the freedom to enter into a binding contract, married women were not. Marriage contracts trumped labor contracts in the minds of most bureau agents. The question of whether freedwomen ought to work as laborers in the fields was a vexed one. In the North, women's work outside the home violated middle-class gender norms, though it was commonly accepted for working-class and immigrant women, while in the South white planters demanded that black women work in the fields as they did in slavery times. Though often anxious about "idleness" among married freedwomen, agents tended to defer to freedmen to determine the terms of labor for their wives (and children), even to the point of nullifying contracts that did not meet the husband's approval. Although the bureau's official policy was to regard those who refused to sign labor contracts as "vagrants" who could be compelled to work, this policy did not extend to women whose husbands prevented them from laboring in the fields (or limited their laboring hours). While empowering men as rulers of their household on the one hand, the free labor ideology opened a path for women to demand more of their husbands as well. Freedwomen lodged numerous complaints with the bureau against husbands who were abusive, spendthrift, or who otherwise failed to provide adequate support. Interestingly, bureau agents found themselves arbitrating discord within many a household and chastising husbands on behalf of freedwomen.

Although the voices of freedwomen are rarely heard directly in the bureau's records, Farmer-Kaiser does a nice job of culling a few representative stories, and partial stories, that convey the agency of freedwomen had in shaping the policies of Reconstruction. Freedwomen's agency comes through the strongest in their determination to assert their "parental rights" in establishing custody and control over their children. Freedwomen often enlisted the support of the bureau to reclaim their children from former masters who used apprenticeship laws–or outright kidnapping–to gain custody of minors to provide cheap labor. Complicating matters, no doubt, was the fact that these "fatherless" children were sometimes the unacknowledged offspring of the white families who claimed them. When seeking justice from the bureau, it became more difficult when black women were accused of being immoral or sexually promiscuous, which chilled the sympathy of the middle-class bureau agents. Bureau agents would not hesitate to remove children from households that were deemed immoral or from parents that could not provide the necessities of life. Though achieving mixed success, freedwomen nevertheless showed an unflinching determination to use whatever power they had to reunite their families and regain custody of their children.

Because of the limitations of her sources, Farmer-Kaiser's book reveals more about the "free labor ideology" and public policy than it does about the thoughts and perceptions of the freedwomen. To what degree did the freedwomen accept or reject middle-class domestic ideals? Were their attempts to play upon northern gender presumptions in their dealings with the bureau merely strategic, or did they share in some of those presumptions? One wonders how the relationships between freedwomen and the middle-class northern white women they encountered in bureau-founded schools and Protestant missions compared with the dynamic between them and the male bureau agents. To what degree were northern white women mediators or facilitators of their complaints to the Freedmen's Bureau? This is not to rob freedwomen of agency, but merely to complicate the context–a complex cultural encounter with northern men *and women*–that provided circumstances of their agency.

Examining the bureau agents' interactions with the private organizations and missionary groups might shed some light on their actions as well. What might appear as a cold-blooded adherence to free market doctrine may appear differently if the same bureau agents who refused to provide government "charity" to able-bodied men did not hesitate to send those men to the missionaries next door. The line between public and private was certainly blurred in the project of Reconstruction, and the extent to which the existence of other sources of northern philanthropy and relief shaped the interactions of freedpeople and bureau agents needs to be considered. Facing the harsh political backlash, the agents of the Freedmen's Bureau surely thought it wise to place as much responsibility for Reconstruction as possible in private hands to deflect the accusation that it provided a government dole to "lazy" blacks. More attention to public-private collaborations is needed, generally, in the study of the Recon-

struction period.

Farmer-Kaiser's contribution to the literature is significant in that she is the first scholar to examine in a book-length study how the policies of the Freedmen's Bureau were shaped by gender ideologies. In this endeavor, she has succeeded admirably. The myth that bureau agents remained steadfastly blind to gender differences as the strictures of free labor theory seemed to imply has been definitively exposed. This book is also an important contribution to the history of gender and public policy that follows in the path of scholars like Theda Skocpol and Linda Gordon who have analyzed similar gender presumptions at work in the evolution of the modern welfare state prior to the New Deal. Future studies of Reconstruction, I hope, will explore the ramifications of this insight in a broader context and begin to explore the other ways in which the agents of Reconstruction–both governmental and nongovernmental–acted in ways that did not conform to gender-blind economic doctrines and free market mantras.

Notes

[1]. John Cox and LaWanda Cox, "General O.O. Howard and the 'Misrepresented Bureau,' " *Journal of Southern History* 19 (November 1953): 427-456. Although W. E. B. Du Bois made a strong revisionist case for the Freedmen's Bureau decades in advance of the Coxes, the historical profession largely ignored his work until the 1960s. The revisionist wave of scholarship that the Coxes inaugurated culminated with the landmark studies, John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); and Kenneth Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).

[2]. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). Two influential examples of post-revisionism are William S. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O.O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); and Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

[3]. Surprisingly, the explosion of works that examine gender in the Reconstruction period failed to warrant a chapter of its own in the otherwise comprehensive review of the historiography edited by Thomas J. Brown, *Reconstructions: New Perspectives on the Postbellum United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). The major works are: Nancy Dunlap Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861-1875* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003); Peter Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinios, 1997); Carol Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Susan E. O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight For We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998);and Karin L. Zipf, *Labor of Innocents: Forced Apprenticeship in North Carolina, 1715-1919* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

[4]. What has been called the "New Freedmen's Bureau Historiography" is reviewed in John David Smith, " 'The Work It Did Not Do Because It Could Not': Georgia and the 'New' Freemen's Bureau Historiography," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 82 (Summer 1998): 331-349; Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, eds., *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999); and Robert Harrison, "New Representations of a 'Misrepresented Bureau': Reflections on Recent Scholarship on the Freedmen's Bureau," *American Nineteenth Century History* 8 (June 2007): 205-229.

[5]. Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 101.

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