

H-Net Reviews

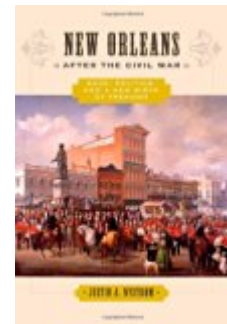
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Justin A. Nystrom. *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 344 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9434-3.

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Published on H-CivWar (May, 2011)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle



I Would Stop Talking about the Past If It Weren't So Present

The last antebellum decades were New Orleans's golden age. By 1860 the port handled the largest volume of exports of any of the nation's coastal cities, and much of what was exported to the North and abroad was financed by the city's well capitalized banks and insurance companies, augmented by several hundred commercial agents or factors. The city and its hinterland enjoyed an economic independence few places in the United States would ever experience. Secession, occupation, emancipation of the slaves, and defeat turned everything upside down. Many of the commercial banks survived the war, but within a matter of three years, it was clear that business would never return to the antebellum status quo. For instance, in 1869, the directors of the Citizens Bank reported to the bank's bondholders in Europe that it was no longer possible to profitably and safely deploy the bank's resources in discounting commercial paper for factors.[1]

Justin A. Nystrom's book is a major contribution to the literature on New Orleans during this difficult post-war era. The war left the city with a legacy of abject poverty, monumental racial tensions, and a political culture that was, at best, chaotic. How these themes played out in the South's only large city is a fascinating and complex story that Nystrom's narrative incisively clarifies to a degree no work before has managed to accomplish. As such, his book is a must read for all students of both Southern and American history.

There is little to fault in Nystrom's complicated but perfectly clear presentation of the mind-boggling paradoxes that descended on New Orleans in the wake of Appomattox. Nystrom argues that at least in the first few years after 1865, before the Radical Republican ascendancy in Washington, the formation and reformation of unstable political parties in Louisiana was all about power and patronage—not redemption and the systematic purge of African American voters from the rolls. Indeed, Louisiana was “redeemed” only after the passage of more than a quarter of a century.

Nystrom's grasp of details and weaving of even small particulars into a rich tapestry is where he is at his finest. He takes none of the received wisdom for granted and patiently teases out the truth from the mythology that informs a political debate still very much alive today. Indeed, he presents a fascinating account of political manifestations in the most unlikely places (i.e., the Pickwick and Boston Clubs and carnival organizations). At the same time, the usual players make an appearance (i.e., carpetbaggers, scalawags, disillusioned Confederate war veterans, and overt opportunists), but Nystrom conjectures that most of these actors were, at heart, placemen or wanted to be. Most were slow to realize that the halcyon days of 1860 would never return or that decades would pass before New Orleans's economy more or less reinvented itself.

All of these actors espoused the need for political sta-

bility, but personal ambitions, especially power struggles, often crowded out what was in the best interest of the metropolis's nearly two hundred thousand residents. Pragmatism, not ideology, best explains what motivated conservative whites to join forces with carpetbaggers, like Henry Clay Warmoth, the state's Republican governor from 1868 to 1872. Racism was certainly manifest, but it had not yet been codified into law. Many among the city's elite were sincere in their espousal of reform, up to and including racial toleration and acceptance of freedmen's enfranchisement. For instance, the formation of the Krewe of Rex was a response by moderates among the elite to counter the overt racism of the Krewe of Comus. Yet, almost from the beginning, most whites were not prepared to recognize freedmen's right to access public accommodations. This refusal remained a fact of life even after Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and the first postwar state constitution codified desegregation of public accommodations.

Nystrom, then, rightly debunks the story of Reconstruction as told by the Dunning School of historians, and he also deflates the claim of modern civil rights historians that a failed Reconstruction was a prototype for those who worked to end racial segregation in the 1950s and 1960s. As Nystrom makes sufficiently clear, there is nothing black and white in this story, even racial divides. For example, New Orleans had a relatively significant population of educated and affluent Afro-Creoles. In the antebellum decades, racial boundaries were fluid; many Afro-Creole gentlemen had sought to enlist in the Confederate army, and many ended up fighting for the Union. Their caste probably lost the most in the post-Reconstruction era when distinctions of race hardened and their twilight world vanished.

Throughout his narrative, Nystrom deftly traces the fortunes of eight men who became significant players in the decade-long period of political turmoil that followed Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox. The most important is Governor Warmoth, who had begun preparing himself for great things even before the peace. A native of Missouri, he fought for the Union and built a political network among the most influential members of the national Republican Party. He quickly grasped the imperative of restoring order and set about reorganizing the city's police force. The Metropolitans, as they became known, were a powerful weapon in his arsenal. He organized the state militia and placed the former Confederate general, James Longstreet, at its head. For a time, he succeeded in attracting supporters from the city's most elite clubs. Warmoth, who has become the *bête noire* of Recon-

struction in Louisiana, emerges in Nystrom's story as a complex figure, brilliant, opportunistic, and gifted with perfect pitch when it came to realizing harmony from a cacophony of howls. It is perhaps not surprising that before his short career ended, he was generally despised by all sides, though the "sides" were always changing.

By 1872 the Republican Party in Louisiana had split, as had the Democratic Party. Among the former were the Warmoth and Customs House factions. There was also a Liberal Republican Party, an outgrowth of a national movement that nominated Horace Greeley in an effort to defeat Ulysses S. Grant. The Democrats who had not gone over to one of the Republican factions began the process of redefining themselves as either "reformers" or "Bourbons," a rupture that would last into the twentieth century.

From this confusion, an interesting coalition emerged in the 1872 election. The "fusion ticket" included Democratic Reformers, white conservative Democrats, and the Warmoth faction. It was a strange brew and unstable. Still, as Nystrom observes by way of a postscript, it might well have legitimized black political participation in Louisiana and blunted growing racial polarization in the state. The fusionists probably won the election, but the Customs House-controlled returning board, with heavy lifting from the Grant administration, prevailed. The victorious Republicans, however, clearly were in decline. By 1874 violence had appeared in the rural parishes and was spreading to the city, as well.

Another strange but intriguing group of "bedfellows" emerged in the 1874 election. Called the White League, it included black supporters, many from the Afro-Creole community. The White League wrested control of the city and state governments from the Republicans, and almost immediately, there was conflict between its incompatible factions.

If there is one drawback to Nystrom's narrative, it is that he assumes the elite still possessed a measure of wealth that simply was not the case. In Appendix A, for example, he presents a sample of the Committee of Fifty-One, the Reform Party's leadership. In some cases he was able to make some assumptions about their individual wealth. The aggregate is less than five hundred thousand dollars. In 1860 there were at least a dozen factorage firms with upwards of one million dollars each of assets.

It is a pity that there is no body of literature on New Orleans's and Louisiana's economic condition in the crit-

ical decade after 1865. Economic difficulties surely account for much of New Orleans's political instability. As I read Nystrom's work, I found myself recollecting some discoveries I had made more than a decade ago about the collapse of the factorage system and the end of plantation agriculture. By 1874, the old factorage network, which had been the golden goose of the Crescent City's economy, was gone. Labor relations in the rural parishes, where the staples were produced, were still unsettled more than a decade after the war. What eventually emerged did nothing to salvage the fortunes of the South's most important city.

One invaluable barometer is the New Orleans *Price Current's* weekly quotations for warrants on the state treasury. Money, and there was precious little of it, was the glue that held political coalitions together. Reconstruction may well have collapsed under its own weight because of the Republicans' disastrous attempt to fund spoils by helping themselves to what was in the public purse, both at the state and local levels. By 1874, warrants were quoted at pennies on the dollar.

Warmoth had early on resorted to printing money by issuing warrants on the State Treasury. Reckless, corrupt, and irresponsible, he used warrants with impunity to hold his coalition together. Funding the warrants was sporadic, and Warmoth took full advantage of his position to get his and those of his friends funded from whatever money found its way into the treasury. He no doubt speculated in them as well, buying them from the bill brokers and then funding them. All of this happened at a time when thousands of properties of every description were going up for sheriff's sale because the owners had been unable to pay their property taxes.

Nystrom provides a splendid vignette about Michel Musson, the uncle of Edgar Degas and one of the city's preeminent merchants in the antebellum decades. Degas's much-celebrated painting of his uncle's counting

room in the heart of the city's financial district is in fact an allegory about one of the last surviving factorage firms in the city and its failure. In the words of one civil court judge, "merchant princes had become bankrupts."^[2] One of Nystrom's protagonists, Edmund Arthur Toledano, a commercial agent or factor before the war, and one of those who died fighting with the White League when it successfully overpowered the Metropolitans, is probably the same man who, along with his partner, availed themselves of the state's insolvency law in 1866.^[3]

Much can be gleaned from the succession records in the civil district courts of Orleans Parish. Family fortunes that had once aggregated to hundreds of thousands of dollars now inventoried sums of hundreds or thousands of dollars. The wealth destruction vortex lasted for more than a decade after the war. Before the economy finally stabilized, as much as 90 percent of prewar wealth had vanished from large swathes of formerly opulent regions.

Ultimately, no matter how contradictory people's political yearnings may seem, it is largely economic conditions that shape political discourse. The proudest achievement of New Orleans's first postwar reform mayor, Edward Pilsbury, consisted of slashing the city's budget by half when he took office in 1876. The remaining decades of the nineteenth century would find both the state and the city trying to rationalize their debt loads to make them less burdensome.

Notes

[1]. John G. Gaines to Messrs. Hope & Co. of Amsterdam, June 6, 1866, Citizens Bank Collection, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Louisiana State University.

[2]. *Shiff v. Shiff*, Orleans Parish, Second District Court, Docket # 26,067 (1866).

[3]. *Toledano & Taylor v. Their Creditors*, Orleans Parish, Fourth District Court, Docket # 18,834 (1866).

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Citation: Richard Kilbourne. Review of Nystrom, Justin A., *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

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