

H-Net Reviews

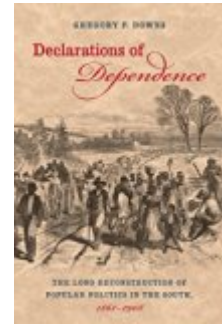
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gregory P. Downs. *Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861-1908*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 346 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3444-2.

Reviewed by Bruce E. Baker (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Published on H-SHGAPE (September, 2011)

Commissioned by K. Stephen Prince



Realpolitik of the Weak

Despite what you read in book reviews, it is not every day that a book makes us really rethink a historical field. More often than not, a book explores a nook or a cranny that had been overlooked by earlier scholars. It might use a new set of sources or a new mode of analysis to tell us things we did not know about a topic, or it may push us to reconsider the relative importance of various components of the past. Sometimes, though, a book arrives with a new enough analysis, often drawing in unfamiliar concepts with which to examine familiar topics, that it does indeed call for reconsidering what we thought, especially when that new analysis goes very deep into some of the big ideas we used to think about the world. In earlier generations, history went through a phase where these new ideas were about gender, class, and race. In the case of Gregory P. Downs's new book, *Declarations of Dependence*, that big idea is power itself and how power is used in politics. For a very long time, historians have changed the way we think about the latter half of the nineteenth century by demonstrating, convincingly enough, that various groups of people had more power than we had previously given them credit for, or were able to use power in ways that we had been slow to recognize. A *vade mecum* for this approach is the work of agrarian anthropologist James C. Scott in his books *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), and perhaps the best example of these ideas in action is the award-winning work of Steven Hahn in *A Nation under Our Feet: Black*

Political Struggles in the Rural South, From Slavery to the Great Migration (2003). Downs argues almost exactly the opposite, or at least a refinement of this approach that is so nuanced as to amount to something entirely new: the weak may have used subtle tactics to outfox or ambush the strong, but probably more often, they appealed to the strong for favors on the basis of their very weakness. They put themselves in the position of voluntarily admitting their dependence in hopes of getting what they needed from those in power.

This insight is a major change from the existing historiography. At first glance, it could be a return to the "enormous condescension of posterity" and Stanley M. Elkins's Sambo thesis: the poor, African Americans, and women had no real power and could not affect their world, so they had to beg crumbs from the table of the rich, white men.[1] But Downs's move is not a circle, but a gyre, keeping the best of what we have learned and spiraling back to reclaim some of what we once knew. There has been a trend in the historiography to dash the hopes raised by the new social history that perhaps the powerless had more power than we thought. Eric Foner named this trend "post-revisionism" in reference to Reconstruction.[2] Downs's view is not quite so pessimistic, perhaps, but it is certainly a realpolitik of the weak. The people he writes about had a clear-eyed acknowledgment of their lack of power, but they were at the same time finding ways of using that very lack of power to get what they needed. If this sounds familiar, it is because histori-

ans have described it before, just not in the United States. It is what Latin Americanists would know as patronalism, a system where “services are distributed by big men on behalf of favored clients” (p. 5). Patronalism works where the state is weak, and the weakness of the state in the South during the latter nineteenth century is key to Downs’s argument. Using patronalism as a key framework for understanding the relationship between individuals and their government in this period brings the United States into closer comparison with the rest of the world and also dispels the myths “that political history can be told largely through the centrality and contested expansion of citizenship rights, that Americans deeply resist relationships of dependence, that the United States possessed a weak government, and that its people, by and large, expected nothing more, at least not before the New Deal” (p. 1). In fact, Downs argues that the expansion of state power during the Civil War pushed people to want much more from the state than it could provide, and patronalism became a way to mediate this conflict in the decades when the state was expanding to meet the needs and expectations of its citizens. Clearly, this goes directly against a deeply entrenched line of argument that suggests that most people in this period were coming to idealize independence and atomism at the same time that the state was actually expanding.[3]

The sources Downs uses are nothing new: governors’ correspondence, Freedmen’s Bureau records, and newspapers. What is new is the way he uses them, giving careful attention to the text and the ways that people ask for things, actually hearing the voices and wondering why they phrased things in particular ways. What did it mean when a semiliterate farmer called a governor “my friend” or when a widow invoked heaven’s blessing on a Freedmen’s Bureau agent? Where earlier historians had brushed these surface coverings away to get at the real substance beneath, Downs suggests that these surfaces contain substance of their own. He has a real strength in taking seriously the religious language people used as well. The book examines North Carolina because with its geographical diversity and the fact that it was involved in all the major political movements of the period considered, it makes a perfect laboratory. Despite the single state focus, *Declarations of Dependence* introduces ideas that should seem familiar to students of any corner of the South during and after the Civil War.

The first chapter begins the story in the Civil War, with white North Carolinians appealing to Governor Zebulon Vance for all sorts of things: help in managing unruly slaves, food or other support as times grew hard,

and furloughs or assistance in evading the clutches of the Confederate army. These Confederate citizens wrote to Vance to take him up on his January 1863 promise to support the wives and children of soldiers. Just as Vance had personalized his promises to voters, citizens personalized their appeals for his assistance, asking for special help even while acknowledging that this was out of the ordinary. The state could not help everyone, but perhaps it could help me, they thought. Chapter 2 considers the contraband question, focusing on Freedmen’s Bureau superintendent Horace James as the patron. Here Downs gives us an even more nuanced view of how freedpeople negotiated their freedom than we have come to expect from the wave of scholarship emerging over the years from the Freedmen and Southern Society Project. Freedpeople made a difference not just through exercising scarce power themselves, but also by finding new people at various levels who could serve as patrons and who could be played off against one another. This culminated in the set of legends surrounding Abraham Lincoln, who was thought to have traveled through the South visiting enslaved and recently freed people, promising them help. Earlier scholars had always had a hard time knowing what to do with these stories, but they make perfect sense in the framework of patronalism that Downs uses.

For such a long time, we have told the story of Reconstruction as the story of a triumphant national state imposing its righteous will against surprisingly resilient, recalcitrant ex-Confederates that it comes as a bit of a surprise to be reminded in chapter 3 of just how weak that national state was. Downs traces this weakness to the premature demobilization of the army starting in mid-1864 because of fears that the federal budget had to be trimmed. By the autumn of 1866, North Carolina, like the rest of the South (not counting Texas, which was different), was being run by a skeleton crew. A mere fifteen Freedmen’s Bureau agents were responsible for covering the state of a million people scattered across an area nearly as large as Britain, with the support of only 1,226 soldiers. In May 1866, a Freedmen’s Bureau agent had to leave the body of a murdered soldier to rot in the road because he could not muster a sufficient force to go retrieve it.

Chapters on the leadership of William W. Holden during the struggle against the Ku Klux Klan and of Vance during and after Redemption continue the story. Holden tried to implement a democratic government, but lacked the power to do so. This contest between expectations and abilities meant that the state (in this case, the state government rather than the federal government)

could not offer services and protection to everyone in a modern, depersonalized way, which emphasized the territoriality of power. For Vance, the key issue was dispensation of patronage jobs and pardons. Vance fought a rearguard action against the end of patronalism, opposing civil service reform when he was in the U.S. Senate. "If a man's friends take him up and enable him after a great struggle to arrive at the point coveted by his ambition he owes something to them," claimed Vance, in an attack on the meritocratic, or aristocratic, bureaucracy that was replacing the personal relationship between patron and client (p. 155).

Chapter 6 follows the career of Tom Settle Jr. in the 1890s to show how ideas about patronalism inflected the Populist campaigns of that turbulent decade. Supporters of the gold standard criticized the Populists' demand for silver as a "craze" or "fetish," and the dominant strand of historiography, exemplified by Lawrence Goodwyn's *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (1976) has patiently argued that free silver was a very logical, financially sound position to take. Downs does not get into that argument but looks at why support of silver was seen as a craze and how the circulation of rumors affected political outcomes. In this context, the focus again shifts to the national stage, with William Jennings Bryan becoming the patron to whom the weak appeal. Unsurprisingly, given Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech, Downs has plenty to work with here to tease out the religious meanings of the debates over free silver.

The book's last full chapter tells again the story of the rise of the modern state on the back of the white supremacy movement. Downs does a very thorough job here of explaining the intellectual origins of the group of progressives who emerged at the end of the 1890s. Embarrassingly for those of us who like to remember what a force for progress and racial tolerance Chapel Hill was from the 1920s onward, it was the University of North Carolina in the 1870s and 1880s that took the lead in im-

porting European ideas about society and fusing them with local ideas about race to shape men like Charles Aycock, Edwin Alderman, and Francis Winston. Once in power, these white supremacists rationalized government and finally created a state that dealt with its citizens as abstractions rather than as individuals who each had a right to ask for special treatment. A coda takes the story up to the New Deal and a brief resurgence of the patronal style when Franklin Roosevelt asked radio listeners to write to him directly with their concerns.

No doubt, Downs has not got everything right in this book, and arguments can be made about particulars and whether he put too much emphasis on this or on that, whether he left out something else that should have been included, and so on. What is not in doubt is that he has brought an important new way of conceiving of how power worked in the late nineteenth century and the nature of the evolving relationship between state and citizen. It is a book that will make each of us who studies the period look at our own materials with new questions, and that is the best kind of book.

Notes

[1]. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 12; and Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

[2]. Eric Foner, "Reconstruction Revisited," *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1982), 83. Brian Kelly makes a similar point about Hahn in his review of *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, From Slavery to the Great Migration*, by Stephen Hahn, *Labor* 1, no. 3 (2004): 145-147.

[3]. Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

Citation: Bruce E. Baker. Review of Downs, Gregory P., *Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861-1908*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33171>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.