

H-Net Reviews

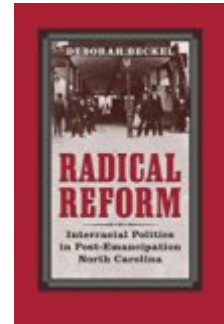
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deborah Beckel. *Radical Reform: Interracial Politics in Post-Emancipation North Carolina*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. x + 298 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3002-2; \$45.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-8139-3052-7.

Reviewed by Caitlin Verboon (Yale University)

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Republican Reformers

More than twenty years after Eric Foner famously called Reconstruction an “unfinished revolution” in *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988), our understanding of the period remains unfinished. Over the last two decades, historians have fleshed out this complicated period, expanding our cast of characters, broadening our understanding of the political arena, and acknowledging cooperation between black and white southerners. Not only are we learning more about how people experienced Reconstruction, but we are also learning that we may need to rethink how we approach Reconstruction in the first place.[1]

In her book, *Radical Reform*, Deborah Beckel takes up this very question. What *was* Reconstruction in North Carolina? Furthermore, where did it come from? Beckel maintains that Reconstruction was part of a reform impulse that spanned the 1850s through 1900. Conceptualizing both Reconstruction and the solidification of white supremacy as moments in a larger reform effort, she argues that the post-Emancipation Republican Party in North Carolina had its roots in antebellum coalition building. Viewed in light of this long tradition of reform, it becomes clear that the fusion triumphs of the mid-1890s were built on historical precedents.

Beckel begins by looking at antebellum North Carolina politics. Unlike other southern states, North Carolina maintained a vigorous two-party system throughout the 1850s. Beckel shows how white men from across

the state united around ad valorem (property-based) tax reform. In essence, these politicians strove to make North Carolina’s government more responsive to its citizens and less a tool of elites. A diverse group of politicians thus “reconfigured state politics ... to transcend political, geographical, and class allegiances, in order to support a new coalition” (p. 23). Uniting around tax reform, they also strove to save the Union. Secession was met in North Carolina by a deeply divided population.

Beckel takes up the issue of “local home rule” after the Civil War. She distinguishes between “home rule”—the efforts of white Democrats to oust the federal government and local Republicans, and by extension, to stunt black dreams of citizenship and equality—and “local home rule.” According to Beckel, “local home rule” denoted popular election rather than appointment of county officials. It harkened back to antebellum efforts, like ad valorem tax reform, and had the potential to attract a wide swath of white North Carolinians. After Emancipation, “local home rule” had the potential to put African Americans in positions of power, thus appealing to black North Carolinians as well. “Local self-government would pose a threat to traditional racial as well as class relations,” Beckel writes. “With these advances in representative democracy, the interracial Republican Party could transform elite lines of white authority” (p. 55). The dual nature of these potential transformations—class and race—made for a peculiar coalition.

The Republican Party tried to minimize the potential for racial transformation and promoted ideas antithetical to black goals. “They endorsed black men’s political rights,” Beckel argues, “but they also assumed that most black men would continue to labor on white-run farms and plantations” (p. 79). While African Americans recognized the ingrained prejudice in the Republican Party, they joined them in the fight to keep Democrats out of state government and to defend the 1868 state constitution that had safeguarded many aspects of their freedom. Black and white Republicans, while they might not have liked each other or agreed on most issues, did agree that the Old Guard was not representative of the general population and must be defeated. The ends would justify the means, and the means in this case was interracial cooperation. Beckel shows that North Carolina politicians were nothing if not pragmatic.

It was the pragmatic goal of making government more representative that made fusion possible in the 1880s and 1890s. Despite setbacks, Beckel maintains that “the biracial labor movement and the white farmers’ movement both worked to build mass organizations for political and economic change” (p. 113). Though Republican rule had been defeated in the 1870s, she argues, the coalition tradition behind it persisted as a vibrant part of North Carolina political culture and continued to challenge entrenched Democrats.

The problem with uniting disparate elements was that individuals pushed slightly different reform agendas. The combination of new and old ideas required constant coalition building. Willing to unite in election season, once in office, many coalition leaders pursued their own agendas and splintered along class, racial, political, and regional lines. “Leaders,” argues Beckel, “harbored conflicting ideologies that led to the organization’s unraveling and ultimate demise” (p. 3).

Post-Emancipation Republicans are a hard lot to pin down. Perhaps as a function of this, Beckel’s narrative suffers somewhat from a lack of focus and fragmentation

of her main arguments. As she zeroes in on the shifting political beliefs and allegiances of leaders, like William Holden, J. C. L. Harris, James Harris, and Zebulon Vance, it is unclear exactly whose story she is telling. One way she attempts to overcome the centrifugal nature of her story is by imposing a theme of reform. Reform acts as a sort of catchall. While it is a useful idea in thinking about post-Emancipation politics, one is left wondering how related these efforts really were and whether the participants would have thought of themselves as connected. Though she repeatedly claims a connection between antebellum and postwar political efforts, the nature and significance of that relationship remains somewhat unclear.

Beckel sets out to reinterpret politics from the 1850s to 1900. Though she falls short of such a dramatic reinterpretation, she encourages us to think of Reconstruction as a period of broad reform rather than as a period of black-white struggles for rights. *Radical Reform* invites us to continue broadening our ideas of what constituted Reconstruction, and Beckel convincingly argues that we should take a panoramic view of postwar politics. Future scholarship will undoubtedly continue to flesh out the nature of the relationship between antebellum and postbellum coalitions and extend her arguments beyond the borders of North Carolina.

Note

[1]. See, for example, 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); Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

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