

# H-Net Reviews

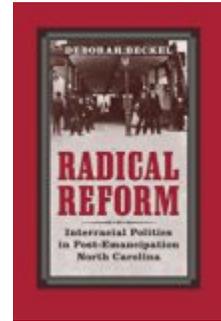
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

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## Toward a Reevaluation of Fusion Politics in North Carolina

Historians working on post-Civil War North Carolina have struggled to explain the relationship between two complementary issues. First, the state's vibrant antebellum two-party political system continued into the Civil War. Even as Confederates decried the influence of partisanship, many North Carolinians' prewar political sensibilities persisted and formed a relatively competitive two-party system. Second, a strong state Republican Party emerged by 1868 and continued into the 1890s when it cooperated with Populists to wrest control over the state from the Democratic Party. What has troubled historians of post-emancipation North Carolina is the relationship between this wartime political system and the later "fusion" of Republicans and Populists in the 1890s. Deborah Beckel attempts to explain these developments in *Radical Reform*.

Beckel connects North Carolina's antebellum and post-emancipation political cultures by emphasizing debates over the level of democracy in state politics. Before North Carolinians argued over the Union's future, they quarreled over ad valorem taxation and representation in the state legislature. Beckel argues that concerns over equality between whites made the Republican Party's promises of "Free Speech, Free Labor, Free Ballot and Free Schools" appealing after the war. Emancipation and Reconstruction created new opportunities to achieve long-standing goals. Lower-class whites and African Americans called for "local home rule" while former Confeder-

ates clamored for "home rule." The latter desired to retake control over the state after congressional Reconstruction, while the former represented lower-class white and black North Carolinians' desire to expand the people's control over local governmental officeholders. The compatibility of lower-class whites' wish for greater representation and African Americans' efforts to secure their civil rights coalesced in the Republican Party, which Beckel dubs "the most resilient and effective interracial organization in post-emancipation North Carolina" (p. 3).

The strength of Beckel's research comes in the post-Reconstruction portion of the book. To people who see the Republican Party as dominated by African Americans from the eastern part of the state or the product of federal patronage, Beckel offers a possible corrective. She places an ideological commitment to workingmen's rights and labor organizations at the heart of the party's appeal and its successes. Raleigh became the home to the state's first locale of the Knights of Labor in 1884. The Knights added a valuable organizational component to the Republicans' class appeals during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Still, there was no ideological conformity among the Republican leadership. Division over such issues as temperance forced the party to be flexible. Beckel argues that political fusion was not limited to the 1890s; Republicans had practiced forming voting coalitions throughout the post-emancipation period.

Beckel offers a possible explanation for the emergence and influence of the Republican Party in North Carolina, but her work suffers from a number of shortcomings that diminish its overall contribution. First, she largely neglects the geographic diversity of the state. A dismissive—and I would argue faulty—claim that nineteenth-century North Carolinians viewed “the west” within their state as everything west of Raleigh is troublesome. Even if true, the assertion leads Beckel to barely skim the surface of the scholarship on the state’s mountain counties. She fails to use John Inscoe’s *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (1989), which makes a number of important arguments about the state’s antebellum political culture, opting instead to use a short summation article that he wrote in 1984. Furthermore, within the confines of the portion of the state that she actually studies, Beckel largely limits her focus to Raleigh. Second, the first several chapters of the book are almost entirely synthetic. Beckel offers no original research on antebellum, Civil

War, or Reconstruction North Carolina, despite the fact that four of her nine chapters cover those years. Third, the author neglects several important manuscript collections. The papers of the state’s various governors (including Republicans William W. Holden, Tod R. Caldwell, and Curtis H. Brogden) are ignored. Records of the Freedmen’s Bureau, critical to the racial politics of the post-emancipation period, are also neglected. Finally, the entire project revolves around the leaders of the various political coalitions. Readers will encounter both familiar and new names in that regard, but the connection between those political leaders and their rank-and-file supporters is tenuous, at best, in this book. This is particularly troubling because Beckel acknowledges divisions within the Republican ranks. By not taking the Republicans’ political maneuvering to the local level, the depth and significance of those divisions raise damaging questions about the author’s overall argument.

All in all, *Radical Reform* offers some new insights while leaving the door wide open for future scholars.

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