



Hilary Green. *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. 272 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8232-7012-5.

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Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890, by Hilary Green, centers on a seemingly straightforward and narrow question: how did black urban southerners build an educational system during the transition from slavery to freedom? Her answers, however, are more expansive. Black people's struggle for quality public schools, Green writes, "was not merely a fight for access to literacy and education, but one for freedom, citizenship, and a new postwar social order" (p. 15). She argues that in using black educational activism as a lens, we can more fully understand the broad transition from slavery to freedom. In the post-Civil War South, the city schoolhouse became both the symbol and the vehicle for freedom, and it opened a physical and metaphorical space for newly free black people to forge a collective identity.

Green uses Richmond, Virginia, and Mobile, Alabama, as case studies. While they shared important similarities—their roles as port cities and their antebellum common school systems—their experiences after the Civil War diverged in significant ways. Black Mobilians, for example, had to overcome internal class divisions between African American and Creole communities in order to forge a united movement. By exploring these two

cities so deeply, she is able to show how local circumstances such as this one profoundly impacted black education activists' efforts. At the same time, by looking at two cities side by side, we can also clearly see how broader events and statewide and regional circumstances influenced local experiences. For example, black Richmonders took advantage of the Readjuster movement to secure more substantial funding and brief tenures on the Richmond school board. By contrast, Mobilians could claim none of these successes. Green's focus on two cities largely pays off, though readers may be left wondering how educator-activists in cities with less robust common school systems fared in the postwar period. How does this story look different in cities where African Americans were unable to forge the key partnerships needed to build successful educational movements?

Educational Reconstruction is organized chronologically and Green's analysis is divided into four critical phases: educator-activists' partnership with the Freedmen's Bureau, normal schools' cultivation of black schoolteachers, the creation of state-funded public schools, and finally, urban African Americans' increasing reliance on the federal government support in the form of a national funding bill (the Blair education bill). This

careful chronology allows her to trace the development of a cohort of public school educator-activists. More importantly, Green shows that community activism and organizing lasted longer than federal troops' presence. Though it is not an argument for a complete reperiodization of Reconstruction, *Educational Reconstruction* does reveal continuities across historical periods in the form of common actors and activist strategies. This long trajectory also reveals a central irony of black educator-activists' efforts. "The success of Educational Reconstruction," Green writes, "facilitated the defeat of the Blair education bill by making it easier for some white northerners to abandon southern African American education" (p. 192). African Americans and their allies had forced Virginia's and Alabama's state governments to extend funding to public schools for both black and white students, and in turn state funding of black normal schools had led to a substantial class of "productive citizens." Educational access may not have been convenient, but its existence allowed many northerners to feel like they had fulfilled their duty in helping African Americans transition from slavery to freedom. Decades of activism however, Green shows, had proven that black urban southerners would not be satisfied with mere lip service. Time and again, they "redefined their activism beyond mere access and legitimacy with a series of campaigns centered on improving the overall quality of the schools" (p. 108).

Historians have long acknowledged the connections between formal education and politics, but in most studies of Reconstruction education is treated in one of two ways: either it plays a supporting role to the fight for the franchise and legal rights, or it joins a laundry list of rights for which black people fought. One of Green's most valuable contributions, then, is how she illuminates connections between citizenship and education. Schools were not merely training grounds for future electoral participation, she argues, but were political battlefields themselves, where activists forged partnerships, agitated for change, and fought to

enshrine their interests in state-sponsored projects. She also underscores that it was during this period--after the common school revolution--that access to state-funded education became considered a citizenship right, and it was in large part due to black educational activists. Like Heather A. Williams (*Self Taught*, 2007), Green emphasizes the active role black southerners played in establishing viable southern public school systems, but her study goes beyond the initial period of success to explore how educator-activists organized in the face of mounting obstacles and changing alliances as state and then federal support waned.

Throughout the book, Green employs the phrase "Educational Reconstruction." She defines it as the process by which urban African Americans built networks "to yield a sustainable system of schools for the largely under- and uneducated masses from emancipation to the failed passage of a federal funding bill" (p. 2). By doing so, she gives the period 1865-90 internal coherence, binding many activists and allies in a common cause, and her periodization (the end of the Civil War through the failure of the Blair education bill) is clear and logical. However, her usage of the phrase throughout the book is slippery, and it is not altogether clear whether she means it as a historical period, like Presidential Reconstruction, or as a movement, like Progressivism, or as an ideology, like republicanism. I suspect that Green's definition of "Educational Reconstruction" lies at the intersection of all three, but both the syntax and the concept are cumbersome, and her imprecise usage threatens to confuse readers and may obscure her valuable claims.

Educational Reconstruction is a timely addition to the fields of education and Reconstruction history. As we face a president and an education secretary nominee who have championed school choice and decreased federal oversight, we would do well to remember Green's words: "Education and literacy symbolized full citizenship in a literate society" (p. 6). Voucher programs threaten to

siphon money out of already cash-strapped public school systems, rendering the hard-won guarantee of quality education as a state citizenship right shaky at best. The work educator-activists began during the long postwar period remains unfinished, and Green's story of "continual negotiations, vigilance, perseverance, compromise, and above all, patience," continues to have relevance today (p. 197).

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