

R. Scott Huffard. *Engines of Redemption: Railroads and the Reconstruction of Capitalism in the New South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 324 pp. \$32.50, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-5281-8.

Reviewed by Chris Fobare (Worcester State University)

Published on H-CivWar (May, 2020)

Commissioned by G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

In recent years, the relationship between slavery and capitalism has drawn the interest of numerous scholars. Monographs by historians such as Edward Baptist, Sven Beckert, and Joshua Rothman illustrate that chattel slavery relied on inherently capitalist processes like creative destruction, thus challenging the once dominant theory that the antebellum South represented a peculiar antithesis to modernity.[1] R. Scott Huffard Jr. points to this growing body of scholarship as evidence of the need to examine the New South with fresh eyes. *Engines of Redemption: Railroads and the Reconstruction of Capitalism in the New South* traces the pivotal role railroads played in ensuring “white and black southerners directly interact[ed] with the forces of capitalism” (p. 6). It was the railroad, according to the author, that both literally and figuratively served as the vehicle for an alliance between northern capitalists and southern Redeemers, the latter of whom used “the specter of black domination or empowerment” to solidify Bourbon Democratic political control over the South while masking the “distinctly pernicious impacts of the railroad” and the “dark forces of capitalism” (pp. 8, 12).

Engines of Redemption relies heavily on historian Walter Benjamin’s contention that capitalism

represented a “phantasmagoria of progress” which resulted in a “collective hallucination that obscured the new forms of exploitation and misery” (p. 8).[2] For Huffard Jr., this process began as fragile Reconstruction governments drew the ire of the South’s dethroned planter elite. Lashing out against southern Republicans’ support for northern investment and bond measures to finance the construction of a modern rail network, Bourbon Democrats championed an unprecedented campaign of political violence that shattered the tenuous alliance between freedmen, northern carpetbaggers, and scalawags. Democratic calls to “redeem” the South took on an entirely new dimension when the nation’s economy imploded in 1873, leading northern investment in railroads to dry up as a result of the instability white paramilitary violence created throughout the region. Once in power, Redemption governments and southern boosters suddenly embraced the same internal improvements they had previously claimed were the source of corruption. Following the collapse of Reconstruction, a “dream-like” state set in as boosters like the *Atlanta Constitution’s* Henry Grady and other New South promoters combined appeals for white supremacy and economic alliances with northern investors to promote Bourbon regimes that promised to deliver the type of regional stabil-

ity Redeemers had zealously undermined during Reconstruction (p. 34).

Huffard Jr. divides *Engines of Redemption* into two parts, the first of which traces the methods Bourbon Democrats employed to “cast the spell” of capitalism. In “moving beyond the rail car,” *Engines of Redemption* points to the railroad as a site of political, economic, and cultural struggle, ultimately demonstrating that the “magic” of modern capitalism had limited powers (p. 47). Initially, Redeemers and New South boosters masked potential criticism by ensuring ex-Confederates served as the face of new railroads. Additionally, sensationalized events like the World’s Centennial Cotton Exposition in New Orleans during the mid-1880s built on Bourbon Democratic claims that portrayed the railroad as “a metaphor for progress” (p. 66). Redeemers’ struggle to consolidate their control began at the ballot box, but Bourbon Democrats shifted their focus to integrated railroad cars as the destructive nature of capitalism revealed itself. The push for segregation ordinances established a racial hierarchy of space which served as a distraction from the fact that the railroad threatened to replace New South boosters’ phantasmagoria of progress with a dystopia.

The second part of *Engines of Redemption* follows how Bourbon Democrats, New South boosters, and businessmen responded to the yellow fever epidemics, crime, and train wrecks that exposed the inherently destructive aspects of capitalism. In these moments of crisis, the author contends, “alternatives to capitalism came into clear view” only to be crushed, thus ensuring “the downsides and disasters of capitalism are written out of history” in favor of a narrative extolling long-term progress (p. 8). One of the earliest signs pegging railroads as potential agents of chaos emerged when yellow fever epidemics spread along train routes. As the very stability and order Bourbon regimes purported to represent broke down, local communities instituted “shotgun quarantines” and other efforts to protect themselves from the

human collateral damage railroads spread throughout the region. Redemption governments, New South boosters, and railroad officials met this challenge head-on by developing boards of health and promoting sanitation societies, but local communities often persisted until they ran low on supplies and were forced to relax travel restrictions in what became a powerful recognition of how reliant they had become on railroads. In order to reclaim control of the narrative linking railroads to progress, Bourbon officials and their New South allies cycled through a series of responses that reverted back to the time-tested tropes of the black bogeyman and white supremacy.

Train wrecks and the spread of crime along southern rail corridors added to the hysteria that accompanied the transmission of yellow fever in posing an existential threat to the New South in general and Bourbon Democratic regimes in particular. Examining a wealth of popular publications and press accounts, the author contends that sensationalized stories of black train wreckers, equally exaggerated stories of black train robbers like Railroad Bill, and a spike in lynchings shifted blame away from capitalism. Huffard Jr. adds to our understanding of the ways Bourbon regimes and New South boosters wielded race as a cultural weapon, ultimately bringing about the consolidation of Jim Crow as an extension of capitalism’s reconstruction throughout the former Confederacy.

The voices of African Americans are prominently featured in this study. Whereas planters and industrialists seized on the railroad to consolidate power and make their vision of the New South a reality, African Americans “conjured the railroad” to struggle against the restoration of white supremacy (p. 74). Similar to the way that the Underground Railroad was a metaphor for freedom, the South’s postbellum rail network functioned as a “proving ground of citizenship” since it provided the type of mobility long denied to slaves (p. 85). As evidence, the author reminds readers that the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision began as

an organized effort by black civil rights activists in Louisiana to claim freedom of mobility as a right guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment. Yet even in the wake of the Supreme Court enshrining the concept of “separate but equal” into law, African Americans continued to conjure the railroad by fleeing the South’s racial nadir during the Great Migration.

In noting that capitalism is both an economic system and a culture, the author explains that understanding the tensions resting at the heart of capitalism requires us to place sources privileging white elites like railroad archives and newspapers in conversation with those of everyday people. Southern whites, for example, viewed convict labor as a way to “ameliorate concerns over the human costs of rail construction” by exploiting socially constructed images of black criminality (p. 78). In turn, convict laborers worked to the rhythm of “train songs” that evolved from black spirituals slaves had sung in the cotton field. When African Americans joined in the Great Migration and escaped the South along the same train tracks convict laborers played a leading role in constructing, blues songs recounted the separation of families set in motion by the New South’s brand of capitalism. This cultural legacy culminated with Big Bands of the 1930s and 1940s who “played the train” (p. 101). Taken within this context, culture becomes both an extension of class struggle and a form of resistance to the inherently exploitive nature of capitalism. As a result, histories of political economy and capitalism can only benefit from thinking more broadly about the role culture plays in reinforcing the strictures of capitalism.

Engines of Redemption is a well-argued and thoroughly researched study that achieves its goal of situating the New South within the broader history of capitalism. Other than repeating the problematic claim that the Compromise of 1877 ended the “Northern occupation” of the defunct Confederacy, readers who are familiar with Barbara Young Welke’s *Recasting American Liberty: Gen-*

der, Race, Law, and the Railroad Revolution, 1865-1920 (2001) and Richard White’s *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (2012) will find much to like in R. Scott Huffard Jr.’s explication of the relationship between railroads and the reconstruction of capitalism in the New South (p. 31). In much the same way that Welke traced the relationship between gender and railroad regulation, and White offered a comprehensive overview of the destabilizing and destructive aspects of railroad corporations, Huffard Jr. establishes that the alliance between Bourbon Democratic regimes and northern businessmen paved the way for the South’s forceful assimilation into the nation’s industrial political economy because of the railroad. Scholars and graduate students interested in the histories of capitalism, political economy, the railroad, or the New South should read this study. Additionally, popular audiences and undergraduates in upper-level seminars will find *Engines of Redemption* an engaging and approachable monograph.

Notes

[1]. Joshua Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens: University Press of Georgia, 2012); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

[2]. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999).

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Citation: Chris Fobare. Review of Huffard, R. Scott. *Engines of Redemption: Railroads and the Reconstruction of Capitalism in the New South*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2020.

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