

David Prior. *Between Freedom and Progress: The Lost World of Reconstruction Politics*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019. 272 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-6968-1.

Reviewed by Dustin McLochlin (Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library & Museums)

Published on H-CivWar (June, 2021)

Commissioned by Madeleine Ramsey (Virginia Military Institute)

While delving into David Prior's introduction to his book *Freedom and Progress*, this reader assumed that the book would weave US federal political thinking with its understanding of the world at large. Through parts of this book, most notably with its chapters on Crete and India, this occurs. But this book is as interested in how Americans were grappling with those "others" who were within the geographical boundaries of the United States. I quickly discovered this book was dealing with how the government internalized and understood African Americans without it directly discussing African Americans. Prior is essentially asking what we can learn about how this Reconstruction era (this nebulous, complicated term Prior hopes to simplify) developed and ended by looking at those peoples who are rarely the direct focus of Reconstruction scholarship. He thus includes Catholics and Mormons in this study.

What Prior finds is that "freedom" and "progress" became central concepts in both parties' views of Reconstruction, which Prior defines as "remak[ing] the Union" and "remak[ing] the South." For northern Republicans, it was their job to defend freedom and progress against the barbarism of white supremacy, while Democrats felt they were defending freedom and progress from northern despots who were causing "racial anarchy and barbarism" in the South (p. 18).

Prior's focus on freedom and progress leads him to argue that this brought a decline in Reconstruction's supposed tenets of addressing racism in the South. For this reader, it upended my preconception that "progress" would be compatible with continuing Reconstruction's supposed attempts at providing basic civil rights. Instead, progress relates to other technological and commercial developments. Northern Republicans viewed each racial or religious group as needing to adapt to their uniform idea of what progress meant, whereas Democrats viewed themselves as the "protectors of a restricted freedom and the promoters of commercial and industrial progress" (p. 162).

For observers of politics today, it is readily apparent that people often view foreign events through the lens of their predetermined beliefs. This tendency is clearly shown in Prior's first chapter, on the Cretan insurrection that began in 1866, in the way that both sides of the Reconstruction divide characterized the conflict. Northern Republicans pointed to the commonalities between their push for "civilization and republicanism" (p. 25) and the Cretan struggle against the Ottomans, who were "akin to an elaborate slaveholding enterprise that shared the same underlying spirit of despotism with the Confederacy" (p. 41). Democrats viewed the insurrection as resem-

bling their struggle with the oppressive North, which “purportedly matched and exceeded Turkish cruelty” (p. 45).

Prior moves to a fascinating story of “a man of mixed descent who would become Reconstruction’s most popular white supremacist,” Paul Du Chaillu (p. 78). A man who made a name for himself by writing and talking about West Africa captivated audiences, and was eventually co-opted by “Democratic partisans” who embraced a new version of equating gorillas to Africans and African Americans (p. 63). Through Du Chaillu’s depictions, white supremacists were able to change the narrative of slaves and Africans as “mentally inferior,” but through Du Chaillu and P. T. Barnum’s “gorilla” (which was actually a baboon), the narrative moved towards one that suggested black people had “a natural disposition towards violence and anarchy” that only “white supervision” could prevent (p. 56).

Prior also explores the ways that black newspapers viewed the world. In the most striking parts of the fourth chapter, we find a commonality between the African American movement and anti-Catholicism. This is of particular interest when considering the 1870s, as the Republican party took on an anti-Catholic platform to garner the German vote. Why, Prior asks, would black-owned newspapers find common ground with such discriminatory rhetoric? He makes the strong case that as the First Vatican Council declared papal authority, effectively overpowering members of the council, they connected this with the opposition to “freedom and progress” that “slaveholders and white supremacists” embodied. Prior concludes, “it was perfectly natural to see Frederick Douglass and Otto Von Bismarck ... fighting the same battles” (p. 124).

The final chapter focuses on Mormonism and the differing reactions between northern Republicans and Democrats. This is an interesting addition to the discussion since Mormons were white Americans who seemed to employ the same indus-

triousness championed by their white Protestant brethren. Yet Republicans found polygamy a difficult practice to accept, coupling it with slavery as the “twin relics of barbarism” (p. 134). Democrats also disapproved of polygamy, and if nothing else, Prior seems to make the case that any defense they held for Mormonism was only as a means to oppose Republicanism. Polygamy prevented them from welcoming Mormons into the Democratic fold the way they embraced “Irish and German” immigrants, or Catholics, I might add (p. 132).

In essence, Prior’s work feels like an attempt at a “primal” understanding of Reconstruction. He seems to be asking, what were people thinking about at this moment post Civil War? Why would Reconstruction develop the way it did based on how individuals interpreted the world? In the end, Prior’s work feels revolutionary, yet obvious. It comes across as a recapping of our understanding of Reconstruction, yet it also provides a wonderful new rubric to understand our interpretations of the era. In other words, it’s good history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Dustin McLochlin. Review of Prior, David. *Between Freedom and Progress: The Lost World of Reconstruction Politics*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2021.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55438>



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