

Reconstruction: The Unfinished Revolution and Historiography (2nd Lecture on Reconstruction)

Handouts: None

Student Reader: "Nation of Nations" Counterpoint section on whether Johnson should have been impeached. P.350.

Slides: Perhaps 341, 399, 400, 520, 171, 172, 342, 173, 70, 519, 518 and 539. (Because I did not have time to show them during first Unfin. Rev. lecture yesterday)

Overheads: Overhead of Nation of Nations Counterpoint on p.450, "Should Johnson have been impeached." It deals with historiography and varying interpretations. Remarkable for a textbook, because it talks about unresolved debates that historians argue over.

Film:

1. "Birth of a Nation" by D. W. Griffith in 1915

10 Min. Clip. Starts with caption about Election Day in South Carolina. Whites can't vote. Lynch the mulatto who is controlled by Stoneman (a sinister radical republican Senator in Washington) wins as Governor because of the negro and carpetbagger vote. Outrages to "little Colonel." Black control in South Carolina. Facsimile of State House in session. Intermarriage law. Racial equality. Little colonel upset over "agony and degradation of his people. Has inspiration: starts Ku Klux Klan. Robed men terrorize blacks. "New Rebellion by the South." Stoneman promises to crush the South.

Audio: Play slave spirituals as students enter the class.

Outline:

- I. How It All Turned Out: The End of Reconstruction
- II. William Dunning and Historiography
- III. "Birth of a Nation"
(Do not put following on board initially. Only do so if I later get to them.)
- IV. Eric Foner and his Theory of the "Unfinished Revolution"
- V. Joel Williamson's take

Introductory Quote:

Have Student Read and Show it on Overhead.

This section from Nation of Nations deals with whether Johnson should have been impeached. It is remarkable, because it shares with students that historians have unresolved debates over history. It also shows respect for students. It doesn't tell you what you should think or how, but instead lets you think for yourselves.

How It All Turned Out: the End of Reconstruction

Reconstruction was a dramatic experiment. Within a few years of freedom, ex-slaves achieved suffrage and exercised a real measure of political power.

Most people think that blacks never experienced freedom of power until the 1950s and 1960s. But this is not true. For a brief moment they had. Between 1865 and 1877 ex-slaves experienced a real measure of freedom and power as long as the Radical Reconstruction Congress and the military was willing to enforce their Civil Rights.

But Congressional Reconstruction would only last until 1877. In the presidential election of 1876 the vote was thrown into Congress because neither Rutherford B. Hayes or William Tilden won the necessary Electoral College votes. Tilden the Democrat won the popular vote. As part of a back room compromise, Tilden threw his support to Hayes in exchange for Hayes promise that he would remove federal troops from the South - the only force that could keep white southerners from disenfranchising the freedmen and establishing a system of exploitative and violent segregation.

With the end of Reconstruction in 1877, white southerners were free to "redeem" the South.

As Eric Foner points out in A Short History of Reconstruction, the South became a one-party region under the control of a reactionary ruling elite. This iron-clad grip would not be broken until the 1950s when the Civil Rights movement, a Second Reconstruction period, attempted to complete the Unfinished Revolution.

Demographically, it was fairly easy for the white majority to disfranchise the minority ex-slaves. In 1868, Blacks only had a majority in S. C., Miss, Louisiana, one-quarter in Tex, Tenn, and Ark. 40% in Vir. And N.C. and a bit less in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia.

Even as early as the election of 1876 when Hayes the Republican won over Tilden, there were only 4 unredeemed states remaining: NC, Florida, Louisiana, S.C. (Redeemed meant the white political control of state and local governments.) Politically, after Reconstruction, we see the emergence of blacks as a disfranchised class - meaning no right to vote or voice in politics.

Economically, Blacks then became dependent laborers for the white agricultural elite. In 1900, 9 out of 10 blacks lived in South, 80% of these resided in rural areas. Blacks represented one-third of the southern population. By 1910, 90% of all southern blacks worked as tenants, sharecroppers, or contract laborers - the lowest tiers of southern society.

So the major reason that Reconstruction was a failure was that ex-slaves were given no land of their own to farm, so they had no economic power. Eric Foner considers this one of the main reasons that Reconstruction failed.

Socially and culturally, after Reconstruction in the New South race relations were hardened. Previously individual whites and blacks could feel and show some measure, mutual respect, but new laws prohibited intimate contact among the races. By 1905 the races were more estranged from one another and this was codified in segregation laws.

According to custom, the two races in the South did not shake hands, walk together, or fraternize in public. In white newspapers blacks were referred to as simply "a negro" or "some negroes." In face to face contact white males were known as "Mister" and the first name of a white woman was preceded by "Miss." Black males were referred to as "boy" or by his first name only. A black woman was referred to as "aunty" or by her first name only.

If segregation codes and disfranchisement were not enough then violence was the ultimate means of racial domination. Reliable statistics on lynching are only available after 1882. From 1882 to 1936 there were 4,672 persons lynched in the United States, of whom 3,383 were Blacks and 1,289 whites. From 1890-99 average was 154 a year.

What really sealed the fate of blacks was that more and more the federal government ignored their plight. For example, anti-lynching legislation was frequently introduced in Congress. Bills were passed by the House in 1922 and 1937, but the Senate was unable to pass the measures because of southern filibusters. As late as 1937 Franklin Roosevelt did not dare risk political capital and offend the South. He refused to support anti-lynching legislation, even when Eleanor Roosevelt begged him to do so.

Most of the lynching was done by the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was founded as a Tennessee Social Club in 1866. That the Black belt Klan was an instrument of the planter class, rather than an organization of only poor whites, is often overlooked. The Klan was used to perpetuate the South's repressive plantation labor system and keep Blacks in their proscribed place.

After Reconstruction, lynching suddenly appeared as a distinctly interracial happening in the South. Most of the rhetoric and justification for lynchings focus on the sexual assault of white women by blacks. All forms of segregation and violence were closely linked to gender: the more closely linked to sexuality, the more likely a place was to be segregated.

The Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 made it a Federal offense to deny citizens the right to vote and equal protection under the law. But this Act was more of a symbolic protest. The North did not have the political will to enforce it.

William Dunning and objective history

Now, as a part of the story of Reconstruction, I want to return to the philosophy of history. Reconstruction provides a powerful example of the problematic nature of achieving objective history and the fact that historical interpretations can and do change over time.

Remember on the first day of class, we talked about the possibility of historians being biased in their interpretation of the past. After all, like everyone else, they - and we - are products of their time.

No part of American history has been more riddled with bias than black history. In the last 20-30 years blacks' have been included onto the center stage of history. This has radically altered our understanding of history.

I want to tell you about William Dunning. He was the historian who most influenced the historiography of slavery and Reconstruction from the turn of the century, until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s demolished his interpretation.

Dunning was an eminent historian at Yale and an early President of the American Historical Association, and he spent his career writing about slavery and Reconstruction at the turn of the 20C. He was "the" authority on Reconstruction. His "Dunning School" of history produced hundreds of historian disciples who continued his interpretation of Reconstruction.

Dunning prided himself on his historical objectivity. He even wrote a book called *The Truth of History*, in which he talked about the need for objectivity and how he had achieved it in his own writing. He was praised widely for his impartial scholarship. That is the frightening thing. When I first read his book, I was deeply shaken. This great scholar had got it all wrong. He spread the bias of his time, but he did not even know he was doing it, nor did his supporters at the time. I wondered deeply about my own hidden biases. It was actually a good experience, however, because it taught me professional humility.

In regards to slavery and Reconstruction, he took the white Southerners viewpoint. He wrote that slaves, as plantation owners had insisted, had been happy in slavery and were treated well by their masters. In terms of Reconstruction Dunning painted a picture of whites as the victims - not the ex-slaves.

Most fundamentally, like most people of the time, he held the insulting and profoundly wrong assumption that the black race was inferior to the white race. That was the starting point for his entire interpretation of Reconstruction.

In Dunning's view of Reconstruction, Republican radicals, unscrupulous northern carpetbaggers, (define) Southern scalawags, (define) and ignorant Freedmen took control in the South after the Civil War and ushered in a period of corrupt state governments in the South.

Dunning charged the Presidential Reconstruction under Johnson would have saved the nation the agony of Reconstruction. To him Radical Reconstruction by Congress was a plot by sinister Northern Republican politicians to destroy the Southern society.

He also insisted that sectional healing between the North and the South only became possible after much needless suffering by Southern whites at the hands of northern radicals who manipulated ignorant black persons.

According to Dunning's interpretation, Southern whites finally and rightfully redeemed their governments and Reconstruction was ended. Dunning even justified the actions of the Ku Klux Klan as an understandable method of restoring white's rightful control of Southern politics and society.

How could Dunning and other historians write a history that was so one-sided in its sympathy toward southern whites?

1. In part it is because by the turn of the century, blacks had been put back into a kind of slavery. They were sharecroppers for former plantation masters and they were isolated in a system of segregation. They had been silenced. Dunning, like the rest of America did not hear the voice of former slaves - nor did he care to.

History forgot the black experience and banished them from the textbooks.

2. But there is a second reason for the slant of Dunning's interpretation. The north had gotten weary of Reconstruction and the bitterness that kept northern and southern whites divided.

In essence, the compromise of 1877 reflected the north's desire to abandon the fate of the black man and find reconciliation with southern whites.

Dunning and the history profession told a story that fit this new mood.

Birth of a Nation:

Now I want to show you a ten-minute film clip from a 1915 silent movie called "Birth of a Nation." It was made by D.W. Griffith. It perfectly expresses the early 20C interpretation of Reconstruction that even the most prominent historians like Dunning shared.

You will find out that Joel Williamson discusses this film at length in *A Rage for Order*. On technical grounds it is still considered one of the most important movies ever made. It is hard for us to appreciate it, but for its time, it was a path-breaking work in the early years of cinematography.

By the way 'talkies' were not yet invented. This is a silent film. But, the version I am showing you is a recently edited and re-release of the original. Some of the sound effects have been added and were not part of the original.

The film was the most popular movie ever produced up to that time. It became part of the American culture. Huge audiences flocked to see it. And what is strange is that its message appeared "normal" and non-controversial. But then again, it was a different time.

When President Woodrow Wilson received a private showing at the White House, he declared to the nation that it was the finest piece of entertainment he had ever seen. By no means was he called a racist Virginian, which he was, in 1915.

Let me warn you that from our modern perspective it is both a bazaar and deeply offensive film in its portrayal of race relations.

When I first decided to show students a cut from the film, I worried that many students would be shocked and offended by its blatant racism. To get an objective opinion, I ran the idea past the Chair of the History Department. He responded as I hoped he would. He said: revealing the past means sharing the good, the bad, and the ugly if it is to be honest. These young people can handle it. They are adults now, he said.

Let me tell you the characters, because it might be kind of confusing when you see only a short slice out of the film. One character named Stoneman represents a Radical northern Republican and member of Congress. Charles Sumner is supposedly out to destroy the white South. He manipulated a mulatto (white/black racial mix) named Lynch to do his evil deeds. The Little Colonel, who forms the KKK in the movie, represents, according to Griffith, all that is good and noble in southern white society.

SHOW A CLIP from "Birth of Nation" to go back to the turn of the Century and reveal the popular interpretation of Reconstruction at the time.

Ask Students: What do you see as the interpretation of Reconstruction in this film?

Answers:

1. southern whites as victims
2. sexual theme
3. blacks incapable of exercising power, so cannot be part of democracy
4. because inferior
5. south justified in redeeming its govt. and culturally by any means necessary

Eric Foner

Now let's jump to modern time and discuss what is called the "New History" and an historian who gives an entirely different interpretation of Reconstruction.

As opposed to the absence of black perspective in Dunning's work, Eric Foner, who has written the most recent and most definitive work on Reconstruction, called *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, is able to contradict Dunning because of his emphasis on the centrality of the black experience in Reconstruction. He does not take for granted the white southern point of view.

Since he wrote this book fairly recently, in 1988, he also learned the historical trade at a very different time than did William Dunning. By the mid-1950s and 1960s, it became absolutely impossible for historians to tell Dunning's version of history. The Civil Rights Movement had exploded the myth of black inferiority and the myth of happy black and white southern relations that underpinned the earlier historiography.

In his version of Reconstruction, Foner agrees with Dunning that Reconstruction was "tragic" as old historians said, but for very different reasons.

Foner says that change did not go far enough; it fell short especially in the failure to distribute land to the former slaves and thereby provide an economic base for their newly acquired political rights.

Foner argues that Reconstruction failed by not completing the social and political progress for blacks that it had begun.

Joel Williamson

In *A Rage for Order* by Joel Williamson. Williamson uses a combination of race, sex and class analysis to explore the problem of race relations in the South. Williamson claims that the South was ruled by a white elite. Neither black nor northern carpetbaggers ever gained control in the South during Reconstruction.

This Southern elite managed to gain hegemony (define) over black and white masses. Elite rule was premised on conception of an "organic society which underpinned race, class, and gender relations in the South."

White people could not prescribe and enforce a precise role upon black people without prescribing and enforcing a precise role upon themselves. If blacks were to be held in their "place", white people would have to assume a place to keep them there. If there were to be Sambos, there would have to be Sambo keepers. The keeper role, being superior, had to be even more firmly fixed than the role of the Sambo, whose wrongs moved the abolitionists to wrath a tears...suffered less than any other class in the South from its "peculiar institution."...The majority of slaves were...apparently happy....There was much to be said for slavery as a transitional status between barbarism and civilization. The negro learned this master's language, and accepted in some degree his moral and religious standards. In return he contributed much besides his labor—music and humor for instance—to American civilization.

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