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ERIC FONER'S "RECONSTRUCTION" AT TWENTY-FIVE

What follows is a written reproduction of a forum held at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in San Francisco in April 2013. The forum commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*. Kate Masur (Northwestern University) organized and introduced the discussion, and the commentators in order of speaking were the following:

- Heather Andrea Williams, The University of Pennsylvania
- Gregory P. Downs, City College of New York and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York
- Thavolia Glymph, Duke University
- Steven Hahn, The University of Pennsylvania
- Eric Foner, Columbia University

The written version on the following pages largely preserves the feel and tone of the original oral presentations by the contributors. However, given the opportunity for reflection inherent in the published word, the authors and editors have made some small changes to enhance readability.

INTRODUCTION BY LUKE STASZAK

It is likely obvious to most of this journal's readership why it is worthwhile to publish a retrospective on Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*. As Kate Masur outlines in the following pages, *Reconstruction* has proven a critical addition to the historical record and to the historiographical canon of this seminal era of American history. The participants in this forum describe the impact of Foner's book on scholarship on Reconstruction. But first, the editors have invited me to write an introduction to this forum and explain my own relationship to Foner's work and this journal.

I have served as an editorial assistant for this journal while in the Masters in the Teaching of History program at the University of Illinois at Chicago and transcribed, edited, and compiled the following piece for publication. While working on this piece, I completed student teaching, obtained my master's degree, and was hired as a high school social studies teacher in the Chicago Public Schools system. I am committed to making history relevant and interesting to all levels of students—a sentiment I know the editors of this journal also hold.

I would like to take the opportunity to share an anecdote about a personal connection of mine to Foner's *Reconstruction*. In a serendipitous moment, upon arrival for my first day of student teaching in the spring of 2014, I found that the students had just finished their study of the Civil War and had begun a unit on Reconstruction. One of the major texts already assigned included an excerpt from *Reconstruction*. I would like to think that I gained some major historical "street-cred" with my new students that first day when

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I told them that I had recently exchanged e-mails with the author whom they were reading. While this was entirely coincidental, and "street-cred" is almost certainly an amusing exaggeration, I will fondly remember that the first connection I helped high schoolers make to history was largely due to my intimate familiarity with Foner's *Reconstruction*.

As I took over this class and began leading my students from Reconstruction deeper into the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, I frequently thought of a statement made by Foner in the forum that follows. He said that Reconstruction should be seen as a "historical process, which goes well beyond that time period—a process by which the United States tries to come to terms with the destruction of slavery." This is a message that resonated with me personally, because through my own course of study I have certainly found the following to be true: late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American history (or all American history) is inseparable from the legacies of slavery and abolition. So, I made a deep effort to make this message part of my curriculum, and I found that my students not only understood this outlook, but that it helped make Reconstruction and the GAPE more interesting and relevant to their interests and lives.

Beyond my classroom and the scope of the pages that follow, it is my hope that this journal continues to be a platform for debating what, exactly, the legacies of slavery and abolition are. I think the forum that follows is essential reading on this topic. Finally, it is also my hope that this journal remains committed to producing content that is readily relevant to teaching and classrooms of all levels. I appreciate the journal's openness to a teacher's voice such as mine.

KATE MASUR

Welcome to this session on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*. This book has been crucially important both for historians of the post-Civil War period and for the field of United States history writ large.

Reconstruction as a historical period is humbling in its complexity, its rawness, its possibilities, and its tragedy. Eric Foner's *Reconstruction*, the book we are here to recognize and celebrate, is humbling, also, for its capacity to bring some order out of the chaos; its comprehensiveness and variegation; its subtle treatment of local, state, and national affairs; and, despite all this diversity, for its narrative, which provides momentum and coherence without lapsing into oversimplification.

Published in 1988, the book enjoyed great acclaim at the time and won many of the profession's most prestigious prizes, including the OAH's Avery O. Craven Prize, the Francis Parkman Prize, and the Bancroft. Another mark of the book's importance, however, is its extraordinary longevity. Together with the abridged version, the three wonderful essays in *Nothing but Freedom*, and other published work, Foner's *Reconstruction* has fundamentally shaped our collective understanding of the United States after slavery.[1] The existence of this panel, which was commissioned by the OAH's program committee, is itself a testament to the book's ongoing importance in the field of U.S. history.

Before we hear from the panelists, I will mention several aspects of the book that stand out for me. Eric Foner wrote *Reconstruction* in an era of burgeoning interest in the history of labor and social life. As the book's organizational structure makes

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clear, he sought to balance the story of national-level policy making with a careful examination of the local histories of emancipation. In particular, he was concerned with how African Americans helped abolish slavery and how they mobilized in its aftermath, not just in formal politics but also in communities, churches, schools, and families. His focus on freed people as agents of change and on the impact of Republican governance in the South helps us understand what really happened during Reconstruction and why it mattered.

In some ways, we might also see *Reconstruction* as a sequel to Foner's crucially important 1970 book, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*.[2] In that book, Foner revealed how the Republican Party coalesced around a conviction that slavery was incompatible with economic modernization, democracy, and territorial expansion. In *Reconstruction*, Foner continued the narrative, exploring how the Republicans governed during the period of remarkable dominance that followed the Civil War. Rather than moralize about Republicans' inability to imagine or accomplish a structural transformation of the South, he emphasized the relative coherence of their vision and what happened when it met the reality of Southern labor relations and political norms. He also emphasized the demise of the Republican vision on the proving ground of the industrial North, where strikes and anti-labor violence demonstrated that the party's antebellum ideal of upward mobility and a "harmony of interests" between labor and capital had become obsolete. By the end of the book a transformed nation comes into view; *Reconstruction* shows that the abolition of human bondage was inseparable from both the growth of industrial capitalism and the remaking of the physical, legal, and ideological boundaries that defined the nation and its citizens.

Finally, there is the matter of *Reconstruction*'s relationship to scholarship that came before it and has emerged since. Foner framed his book as a synthesis of two schools of thought: the "revisionist" interpretation that had already done so much to debunk the Jim Crow scholarship known as the "Dunning School" and the "post-revisionist" approach more characteristic of the 1970s, which had emphasized the shortcomings of the Republican vision for the South. Foner "reconcile[d] these two seemingly contradictory positions … rather brilliantly," Michael Perman wrote in a review. Yet an "unsettling question" inevitably followed: "what is left to be done?"[3]

Something *was* left to be done. It had to be! The period's remarkable dynamism—its popular mobilizations, its democratic possibilities, and its extraordinary violence—continued to capture historians' attention, despite, or perhaps because of, Eric Foner's great accomplishment. Today we will hear from several scholars who bravely waded into post-Civil War history in the wake of Foner's *Reconstruction*, and we have the pleasure and honor of hearing from Eric Foner himself. I asked the panelists to speak briefly about a topic of their choice—something that inspired, guided, or challenged them about *Reconstruction*. Professor Foner will follow them with some remarks of his own.

HEATHER ANDREA WILLIAMS

Rereading Eric Foner's *Reconstruction*, I realized how much of what I know from this period comes from the book. *Reconstruction* and a few other books: Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long*; the books by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project; and, of course, W.E.B. DuBois's *Black Reconstruction in America*, had tremendous

influence on my understanding of the period.[4] As I went back to Foner's *Reconstruction*, I realized how much I have learned from it and how much I have perhaps taken Professor Foner's findings and arguments for granted or taken them as my own. As I went back, I thought, "Oh boy, I sure hope I have cited him in all the places I should have!"

For example, if I came across this sentence in my notes without quotation marks, I might well think that I had written it: "Rather than passive victims of the actions of others or simply a 'problem' confronting white society, blacks were active agents in the making of Reconstruction. During the Civil War, their actions helped force the nation down the road to emancipation, and in the aftermath of that conflict, their quest for individual and community autonomy did much to establish Reconstruction's political and economic agenda. Although thwarted in their bid for land, blacks seized the opportunity created by the end of slavery to establish as much independence as possible in their working lives, consolidate their families and communities, and stake a claim to equal citizenship." I could have written that … after reading this book!

I would like to take up two topics this morning. First is the relationship of Foner's *Reconstruction* to the field of social history. Second, I want to discuss the question: does periodization matter?

Foner posited *Reconstruction* as using a broad interpretive framework to produce "a coherent, comprehensive modern account of Reconstruction." He said that after scholars had debunked the Dunning School's philosophies, thoughts, and ideas, historians had turned to writing social history, which he thought was very important—histories about family structure, social mobility, popular culture—and that this shift had enriched our understanding of the period. However, he also said that it had also produced a fragmentation of historical scholarship, and so his book was going to produce a coherent vision of the past.

Foner's *Reconstruction* could not stop fragmentation from happening. In some ways, the chapter "The Meaning of Freedom" reads like a partial blueprint for the work produced since 1988. His chapters briefly discussed family separation, education (two topics that I, for one, have written on), religion, labor, conflicts over whether former owners or parents have would control over children, the idea of women absenting themselves from the fields, and violence.

Of course, since the publication of this book, many of us have written on these topics, and I think in many ways we then turn to Foner and perhaps to DuBois and a few other scholars to give us the broader political context for the social history that we are producing. Whereas Foner had a chapter that touched on these issues, scholars have written full books that discuss family, religion, education, the work of women, or gender during Reconstruction. I am thinking here of books including Reginald Hildebrand, *The Times Were Strange and Stirring* (1995); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage* (2008); Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child* (2008); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We* (1997); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women* (1999); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction* (1994); Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion* (1997); and my own work on African American education (Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (2005)) and the forced separation of enslaved families (Williams, *Help Me to Find My People* (2012)).[5]

And so, some questions that we might consider: What is lost and what is gained by focusing on particular aspects of Reconstruction (such as family, for instance)?

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Is anyone currently writing histories of Reconstruction, or slavery for that matter, which try to adopt a broad framework that would not focus in on one particular topic? How are we doing within our focused histories to encompass broader issues? And then, is it possible … is it even possible to provide some coherent vision of all of a particular moment? Does something have to give?

The second issue I wanted to discuss is the matter of periodization. In doing this work, some of us have found that we need to move backward in time, so that we may start with a problem that begins in Reconstruction, but then we find that we need to go back into the antebellum period, into slavery. For example, my first book was on education, and I started with a question about what African Americans wanted after the Civil War in regards to education. Where did that lie on their list of priorities? I realized when I read the conversations they were having during the war and after, that they had been having such conversations long before freedom came. And so, I needed to go back to find out who they were and what they were thinking. Others of us have done similar work in starting what at first appears to be a Reconstruction project in an earlier period.

Foner did something similar in his book in terms of moving the Reconstruction period back to 1863, instead of starting it at 1865. What happens when you move backward in time is that you are able to see details that you could not see when you begin in a later period. In moving back to 1863, Foner was able to see African Americans taking steps to achieve their freedom, and to see the Emancipation Proclamation, for instance as in part the result of these mobilizations. I am actually very interested in knowing what Professor Foner thinks about the work that has moved back to slavery, back to the antebellum period, before getting to Reconstruction and going beyond in some cases.

GREGORY P. DOWNS

Naturally, that question "what remains to be done?" is often posed when considering *Reconstruction*, especially when considering the contributions of Foner's monumental book. It is possible that no field has ever had, or even deserves, such a book. In other fields, for example, crucial works often define poles and ongoing debates. But *Reconstruction* is almost literally a landmark. It defines the territory. You know you are in Reconstruction-land when you are in Foner-land and vice versa.

Typically, this is less a book with which people argue than one with which they associate themselves. And, given its literally monumental status, it would be well deserved to just come here today to praise a justly famous book, and to humbly note new areas that have risen in prominence over the last twenty-five years and have been incorporated within the framework: Western and Indian history, gender history, racial construction, consumption history, legal history, religious history, to name a few. But, I think the measure of Foner's book lies less in its accolades than in its central arguments. So, I want to take those seriously by raising the concept of revolution in shaping Foner's work and in shaping the field since then.

I must acknowledge that it does not take any special deconstructive tools to discern that Foner's book is about revolution—it's right there in the title, in his introduction, and in his justly famous preface. There, he aimed to defend Reconstruction's revolutionary potential against scholars who asserted continuities between the Old South and New South, between slavery and freedom, between antebellum and postbellum.

Notoriously, revolution can have as many definitions as interpreters. Foner drew particularly on the Beards' vision of an economic displacement of planters by the Northern bourgeoisie and upon W.E.B. DuBois's pathbreaking claims of the potentially revolutionary implications of black political and economic empowerment. Interestingly, though, even as Foner's *Reconstruction* completed the overthrow of the white supremacist Dunning School, it also retained and defended—on extremely different grounds—Dunning's sense that Reconstruction had in fact been a transformative, revolutionary moment. Of course, his stance toward the revolution differed from Dunning's, to put it mildly. In fact, most major syntheses of Reconstruction from Dunning to DuBois to Steven Hahn's *A Nation Under Our Feet* (2003) have emphasized its revolutionary break.[6]

Beneath these syntheses, however, many—perhaps even most—monographs have pursued lines of continuity. Recently, once again, the monographs seem to be edging away from the revolutionary nature of Reconstruction, this time without quite acknowledging or perhaps even recognizing the gaps between some of the claims in the literature and those of Foner. Recent studies of emancipation have undercut the revolutionary thesis by examining areas such as labor relations, law, violence, gender relations, and health. By recapturing freed people's disappointments in the transition from slavery to freedom, normalizing emancipation as a common and not necessarily revolutionary nineteenth-century outcome, and emphasizing racism and other limitations, they have made emancipation less transformative, the moment less revolutionary. I suspect more is coming as the field wrestles with new work in scholarship on state formation and Western history and the history of capitalism, much of which emphasizes continuities rather than revolutionary breaks.

One can see then the possibility of a broader anti-revolutionary synthesis of these works that portrays a nation less shaken, an economy less interrupted, a politics less transformed, a freed people less free. This portrayal, in fact, would match the work of many social scientists. Despite our optimistic invocations of Reconstruction, most political scientists and sociologists do not include the Civil War and Reconstruction in their lists of the world's significant revolutions. An explicitly anti-revolutionary synthesis might sweep together existing historical works in a way that reflects the judgment of political scientists and sociologists that the Civil War era was not, in their terms, revolutionary.

Although I hope an anti-revolutionary synthesis does not come to dominate the field, it would help us resolve one current problem. Even works that incline away from Foner's interpretation tend to mute their critiques; books very rarely pose themselves in opposition to Foner. It may be one of the ironic legacies of one of Foner's work. It is so good that few people want to take it on. It is like stepping into a ring with Mike Tyson. You think, "I'll settle for being the number two contender!" While understandable, I think this is a mistake both for the field and in relation to Foner's book. Both would be better served if we could articulate more clearly the places of divergence and of convergence between our work and his book. In doing so, we might end up isolating new directions or arguments about the utility of freedom as the main conceptual paradigm of the era.

If we confront more explicitly Foner's argument that Reconstruction was a revolution, we might once again have to confront the utility of the concept of revolution for explaining the period of the war and Reconstruction. This, I think, would be a highly useful move for the field and one that might lead us to understand the stakes and meaning of Foner's bold

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interpretation. By shying away from critiquing his thesis, we have—paradoxically—underestimated it, softened it into something milder and less disruptive than it actually is. By differentiating other work from Foner's, we might see the limits of his argument about revolution, but we might also—and this is my hope—take those arguments more seriously by laying out their contours, their weaknesses, and their enduring strengths. We might even decide that it is worth arguing about the nature of revolutions and the concept's utility for Reconstruction. By asking where and when Foner's work is limited, we might more fully appreciate the moments when it is bracing, disruptive, and necessary.

There is a great deal to be gained by thinking seriously about revolution. It could help us, like Foner, connect the concerns of other fields and disciplines with American history. How might the massive sociological and political science literature on revolution change our understanding of Reconstruction as a revolution? Might recent and sweeping reinterpretations of the Glorious, French, Haitian, Chinese, and Russian revolutions help us to sharpen our understandings of revolutionary moments?

As technological triumphalism finds revolutions in every piece of machinery we put in our pockets, how do we distinguish the useful definitions of revolution from the dross? How do we separate the truly transformative revolutions from the transitory? Terry Eagleton observed recently that "Successful revolutions are those which end up by erasing all traces of themselves."[7] If we look for revolutions not just in battlefield bloodshed, or labor uprisings, or political maneuvering, but also in the cultural work of normalizing and thereby protecting a revolution's gains, how might we rethink the vexing problems of Reconstruction? How might we come to see it not as a quest for a perfect politics but as an abiding struggle to establish new cultural norms?

Such ideas may lead us back, inspired and perhaps chastened, to what I continue to find most powerful in Foner's work—his double view of politics embedded in his idea of revolution. Foner reminds us to be dissatisfied with narrow definitions of politics as election results or laws, but he also reminds us to be just as dissatisfied with explanations that dismiss politics altogether. Once properly defined, politics matters a great deal, even if its outcomes are ultimately disappointing.

If we can pursue with vigor and intellect the study of politics as capacious as our understanding of the world and yet precise enough to capture the role of the state in defending and obstructing change, then I suspect that we will, over the next twenty-five years, produce a literature that, however it may at points differ with Foner's interpretations, be a tribute to his work and to his legacy.

THAVOLIA GLYMPH

On a daily basis in the summer of 1863, a black woman made her way through the wards of a Union hospital in New Orleans, distributing treats she carefully prepared and secreted for the soldiers, along with a soothing word here and there. She further boosted the soldiers' sprits with an apparently inspiring rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner." Like millions of other black Southerners, she stood as evidence of the war's revolutionary impact not only at the level of the state but also in how African Americans helped to give the Civil War new meaning. Indeed, the actions of the enslaved had stayed the hand of President Lincoln and notably, his general, George McClellan, who had vowed to "with an iron hand crush any attempt at insurrection" on the part of black people.[8]

In *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), W.E.B. Du Bois famously indicted the historical profession for having sacrificed scholarship for "passion and belief," truth for myth. Had Du Bois undertaken to revise *Black Reconstruction* before his death in 1963, he would have had little reason to change his opinion. Just a few years earlier in 1956, for instance, Kenneth Stampp introduced his *The Peculiar Institution*, by noting that as a result of new scholarship "from the natural and social sciences about the Negro's potentialities and about the basic irrelevance of race … we are slowly discovering the roots and meaning of human behavior." Thus, Stampp wrote, he now "assumed that the slaves were merely ordinary human beings, that innately Negroes *are*, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more nothing less." For Stampp the insight served to provide "quite a new and different meaning to the bondage of black men" and gave "their story a relevance to men of all races which it never seemed to have before."[9] By the time Foner published *Reconstruction* a little over five decades later, historians had begun to catch up with Du Bois. Revisionist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s emphasized the revolutionary impact that enslaved people who took matters into their own hands and ran away during the war and resistance on the home front in combination with the enlistment of black men as Union soldiers had on the war. It called attention to the fact that with the exception of slave emancipation in the nation's capital, emancipation liquidated without compensation slaveholders' most valuable asset. The stories of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people secured a larger and more prominent place in the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction. These stories are as much at the heart of Foner's *Reconstruction* as Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction.*

The publication of Eric Foner's *Reconstruction*, Vincent Harding wrote, constituted "a gift to the nation and to the profession." This gift, a magisterial synthesis of three decades of revisionist scholarship combined with painstaking original research brimmed with rich new insights. This session on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Reconstruction* acknowledges the prescience of Harding's assessment and our continued debt to Foner. Foner's *Reconstruction* has overshadowed every study of wartime emancipation and Reconstruction that has been published since. It was initiative and action on the part of black people, Foner emphasized, that "helped force the nation down the road to emancipation, and in the aftermath of that conflict . . . did much to establish Reconstruction's political and economic agenda."[10] Or, as Julie Saville cogently concluded in her review of *Reconstruction*, "Northern wartime policies had been joined to the democratic ideology of a levee en masse."[11]

For twenty-five years, Foner's seminal work has been the touchstone of scholars' understanding of Reconstruction and enjoyed a wide readership among the larger general public. My remarks focus briefly on one aspect of its conceptual contribution: the question of freedom highlighted in the book's subtitle, "America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877," a subject that has formed a central theme in the larger body of Foner's work. The first chapter opens with Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation. In dating the period of Reconstruction from 1863, Foner challenged the traditional chronology of Reconstruction that effectively forged an understanding of the making of freedom no less than Reconstruction as a process, while simultaneously elaborating the contingency and the revolutionary import of each. It is not my objective here to detail the historiographical debates that continue to surround the study of emancipation—its long history, what kind of freedom was achieved, or whether it was freedom at all. Rather, it is to stress the

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signal impact that Foner's insights had on scholars who followed him, how *Reconstruction* paved the way for scholars to pursue even more complex stories of emancipation and the making of freedom.

Reconstruction helped to foment a revolution in our thinking, more broadly, about the transformation of "the very meaning of freedom in the American Republic."[12] The work of Moon-Ho Jung on the ways in which "Coolies reflected and complicated the shifting and expanding terrain of slavery and freedom in the nineteenth century," for example, reflects this influence.[13] Other scholars have also demonstrated how these complications played out in California, the Pacific Northwest, Hawaii, and the American Southwest, where U.S. white settler colonialism and its attendant tactics of violence and political repression, aimed to construct regimes premised on white supremacy.[14] There were, of course, important differences in the dynamics at play in these various places, but the belief that American freedom was the prerogative of white men and, through them, white women, lay at the heart of each. In the Pacific Northwest, white settlers portrayed Asian men as not men at all, claiming the same theoretical ground as the Columbus, Georgia, slaveholder who saw slavery as vital to protecting his wife and children "'from a state of horrors," "a horde of free Negroes" who, turned loose, would compete with white labor to the latter's detriment. His contention that "every white is, and feels that he is a MAN," like so much white supremacist ideology, ironically spoke to the naked contingency in such claims.[15]

Reconstruction was published at a time when studies of comparative slave emancipation and their aftermaths were in their infancy. Foner saw how comparative studies could "broaden our perspective, introduce new questions and concepts, and illuminate what was and was not unique in the American experience of Reconstruction."[16] It is here that Foner took us back to Du Bois's insistence that "The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black."[17] In *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*, Foner noted even more explicitly that "it is the ongoing struggle over the definition of freedom and the control of labor that unites the experience of the American South with that of other post-emancipation societies."[18]

Some of the most exciting of the recent work on the meaning of freedom and its economic, political, and social consequences has indeed come from comparative approaches. This new body of work has made clear that Reconstruction was more than a problem of the South and illuminated the ways in which the politics that animated the overthrow of Reconstruction were replicated in other parts of the nation, including the West, as Steven Hahn notes.[19] Placing black people and freedom at the center of the story also worked to make more legible the larger struggles for freedom in America. "Here, [in the US] as elsewhere," Foner writes in *Nothing but Freedom*, "the adjustment to emancipation appears as a saga of persistence and rather than change, stagnation rather than progress, the resiliency of an old ruling class rather than the triumph of a new order."[20] Yet, *Reconstruction* reminds us that to speak of freedom's contingency is absolutely not to confuse Reconstruction—a period that witnessed unprecedented and sustained black political mobilization among women and men—with slavery.

In placing the Southern story of Reconstruction within a broad national context, Foner argued for seeing the emergence of a powerful nation-state with "an unprecedented commitment to the ideal of a national citizenship whose equal rights belonged to all

Americans regardless of race" as a radically new and distinct one. No one doubted that there would be obstacles and setbacks aplenty—many deadly—going forward. But "prodded by the demands of four million men and women just emerging from slavery, Americans made their first attempt to live up to the noble professions of their political creed—something few societies have ever done."[21] It was a sobering reassessment of which Du Bois would have been proud. Reconstruction was tragic, but not for the reasons scholars of the Dunning school of interpretation and many revisionists claimed.

STEVEN HAHN

One of the really irritating things about rereading Eric Foner's work is that whenever you think you have identified a conceptual weakness, or a topical oversight, or a misstep of some small or large sort, you go back to it and realize, no, actually he did say something about that.

I first became acquainted with Eric Foner's work not because I was interested in the coming of the Civil War, or in the ideology of the Republican Party, but because I was interested in social class and the history of capitalism. *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* was drawn to my attention because I was already reading about the political economy of the slave South and I wanted to know more about the political economy of the free North. I immediately recognized the book as a remarkable example—and in some ways better than what I was finding in the Southern history literature—of how one could demonstrate the complex intersections of class, politics, economic development, and ideology.

This, of course, has been the burden of Eric's work, whether for an earlier period of American history, and let us not forget *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (1975), or on an international stage in *Nothing but Freedom* (1983).[22] And, there can be little doubt, at least in my mind, that class and capitalism are at the center of *Reconstruction*. This is not always clear to readers, especially of a somewhat younger generation, who seemed to lose interest in capitalism until it shattered all around them, in part because the book begins by setting itself in the historiographical context of emancipation rather than these issues.

Yet it seems to me that *Reconstruction* is primarily about class formation, state building, and the advance of American capitalism, and about what it took to bring those transformations about. Its story is of the destruction of the slaveholding class and the social system over which it presided; of the emergence of a nation-state that looked to extend its authority over far-reaching territory and nurtured powerful allies towards those ends; of the rise of new working and employing classes, chiefly in the South, but also in the North and West; of the growing power of industrial and, especially, finance capital that had been enormously strengthened by the wartime state and then came to direct the new postwar state. And most of all, it is the story of the centrality of politics and political struggle to how the process unfolded.

Although earlier historians, such as the Beards, saw the Civil War and Reconstruction as advancing the interests and power of industrial capitalism and capitalists, not since DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935) and David Montgomery's *Beyond Equality* (1967), has the conflict between labor and capital, and over property relations more generally, emerged so strikingly as the motor of change.[23] Implicit in Foner's account is the notion that Reconstruction witnessed the greatest political mobilization of working

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people in the nineteenth century, and surely the greatest political mobilization of rural working people in our history.

To be sure, for all of Foner's insistence of looking at Reconstruction in a national frame, and for all of the book's wide-ranging grasp, there is insufficient attention to the trans-Mississippi West. But, on rereading the book, it is also clear to me that even this does not escape his notice. And there is little doubt that greater inclusion of the West would simultaneously strengthen Foner's overall arguments about capitalism and suggest the rather distinctive ways that capitalism and class developed in the United States during the last four decades of the nineteenth century.

Now I confess to feeling more than a little confusion over what Reconstruction really is, how it is framed, what it encompasses chronologically as well as topically, and how to think about it internationally as well as nationally. Thavolia Glymph pointed to some of these issues. Foner's book pretty well demolished the idea that Reconstruction began when the Civil War ended and was simply about putting the Union back together. Slavery, emancipation, and the transition to free-labor society were at the center and needed to be seen in relation to other emancipations in the broad Atlantic world.

But, if this is so, how should we think about the earlier emancipations in the United States, and their aftermaths. Were they part of the Reconstruction story? Is it reasonable to talk about Reconstruction actually beginning in 1780? Or, were they more sensibly rehearsals for the later Reconstruction that have important meaning for us to understand. I am not sure. And, this I think is worth talking about.

Finally, I would say that the Reconstruction that Eric Foner considers, and the way in which he considers it, provides what I think is the best and most complete example of a bourgeois revolution and undoubtedly the most radical of them in modern history and in the historical literature. This is also to say that *Reconstruction* is not, I think, about an unfinished revolution; it is actually about a finished revolution.

ERIC FONER

I want to thank Kate Masur for organizing this session and to the panelists for their stimulating comments. To have a group of such excellent scholars talk about your work is really a dream come true for any academic, and it is an honor to be here and listen to them. Kate sent me instructions in which she said, "Eric will speak for about ten minutes responding to the comments or telling stories." She knows me, because I do like to tell stories.

But, I am not 100 percent comfortable doing that about my own work because, in general, historians are not all that self-reflective. Autobiography is en vogue in English departments and anthropology departments, but not necessarily among historians. But, I do want to talk a little about how this book came about and some of the issues raised in the comments, which I did not see prior to today, so I will be talking about them off-the-cuff.

Thinking back about how this book came to be, I am struck by—and this is I guess a sort of lesson for all historical writing—the accidents that led to its creation. The first accident was a completely unexpected invitation from Richard B. Morris in 1975 to write a book on Reconstruction in the *New American Nation* series. I had not written about Reconstruction very much, and this invitation came unexpectedly. But, I thought it would be

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an interesting project, and that it would take me a couple of years because the *New American Nation* books typically synthesize the secondary literature.

The second accident was being invited to teach at the University of South Carolina in Columbia in 1978, where I encountered the wonderful state archivist Wilma Waites and the South Carolina Archives. While it is a lively town, I found there was not much to do after a while, so I spent a lot of time at the state archives, and she introduced me to what are called the "Governors' Papers." No one has ever looked at this stuff, she remarked, but there are 121 boxes of letters to the governors of South Carolina during Reconstruction.

I started going through these boxes and I found this unbelievable record of grassroots history, of letters from former slaves and former slave owners, of Klansmen and victims of violence, of church leaders, of teachers, the local history, which, it did not seem to me, was reflected in the secondary literature. This convinced me that I could not write the book as a synthesis of what was out there and that instead that I had to *re*-research the whole period, which I did.

Then, another accident came a few years later when I gave a talk about the work in progress at Duke University, and a graduate student came up to me and said—and this shows the limitations of my own education—"you know, a lot of those issues you're talking about were also debated in the British West Indies and in Africa." I said, "Really? Is that true?," and she said, "Well, I'll send you a reading list," which she did. I said to myself, "My god, she is absolutely right." This insight brought me into the realm of comparative emancipations, which opened up these questions of labor and property rights because they were debated everywhere. This was not just a unique American experience, although the way those questions have worked out depends on the specifics of the national context.

As we have heard already here today, the shadow of W.E.B. DuBois's *Black Reconstruction in America* hangs over, or should hang over, all writing on Reconstruction. A central insight from DuBois's work that shapes my own book is that the freed people were the central actors in the story of Reconstruction. DuBois also emphasized seeing Reconstruction as a pivotal moment not just in Southern history, or in African American history, but in the history of democracy, and the history of freedom, as we heard, not just in the United States, but in the entire world.

I was fortunate when I started working on this project, to know of DuBois's work, which was still not that really widely read in the academic world. I knew of it partly because my family knew DuBois and I had actually met him when I was quite young. Of course, I would not have known who DuBois was—to me he was just an elegant old man. I did not realize whom I was meeting. But also, I had read *Black Reconstruction* in college in 1961, thanks to the great teacher at Columbia, James P. Shenton (some of you may remember or have heard of him), who put it on his reading list at a time when that was not done outside the black colleges.

In fact, and here is a story—as Kate anticipated—which some of you may have heard. A few years earlier than that, when I was a junior in high school in Long Beach, Long Island, my American history high school teacher Bertha Berryman, known as "Big Bertha" by the students after a piece of World War I artillery, had said in the class, following the typical point of view at the time, that the Reconstruction Act of 1867, which inaugurated Radical Reconstruction in the South, was the worst law in all of American history.

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I raised my hand and said, "I don't agree, Mrs. Berryman, I believe the Alien and Sedition Acts were worse." She said, "I'll tell you what, Eric, if you don't like the way I'm teaching, you come in tomorrow and give a talk on Reconstruction." Which I did, with the help of my father admittedly, and *Black Reconstruction in America*. At the end of my presentation, Mrs. Berryman, in a democratic fashion, said, "Okay, class, you've heard me and you've heard Eric, and now we're going to vote on who is correct." I wish I could say that I carried the day, but in fact, only one student, my best friend, Neil Kleinman, voted for me. That was around 1957 or so, and it was probably at that point that I subliminally decided that I had to get back at Mrs. Berryman one of these days!

Like any book, *Reconstruction* was a product of the time in which it was written. It appeared at the end of an incredibly creative twenty- or thirty-year period of scholarship on emancipation and Reconstruction. By the time my book appeared, the traditional Dunning view had been laid to rest, really, by many, many monographs, and the building blocks of a new point of view were being created, partly in the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, which was well underway, and partly in wonderful works that were coming out almost every year.

As I was working on it, many scholars were working in similar areas. During my research and writing, books appeared on the origins of sharecropping, black political leadership, on the American state, for example. Books such as Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long* made it clear that the old excuse—that you could ignore the voice of the former slave because there wasn't any evidence out there—was unacceptable. He uncovered this incredible array of evidence about the actions and ideals of former slaves. Whether you agreed or disagreed with his interpretation, he proved that that material was there, even though it had been so largely ignored in previous generations of scholarship.

There was also this debate going on, which Heather alluded to, of so-called synthesis in American history: Is synthesis desirable? Is it possible? And, there were debates in the AHR and other places about this in the 1980s. I said that my book was an intervention in that debate also, that I thought synthesis is possible, and I boldly claimed that this book is a synthesis. It's regional, it's local, it's national, and it deals with social history, political history, economic history, and other things in a coherent narrative. So, it is an attempt to demonstrate the utility of making that effort. That is a reflection of a debate going on then and perhaps still going on now.

We have heard today many interesting comments on current themes in Reconstruction historiography. I just want to point to a couple of them. One is a number of expansions of the subject, which gets back to Steve's point, "What is Reconstruction anyway?" In my book, I said Reconstruction is two things at the same time: it is a specific time period of American history, which I said was 1863–1877, but it is also a historical process, which goes well beyond that time period—a process by which the United States tries to come to terms with the destruction of slavery. That process does not end in 1877, and maybe it does not even begin in 1863 or 1861; maybe it begins earlier than that.

And such variation in periodization has continued. As was mentioned, Reconstruction is being pushed backward, into slavery itself. It is being pushed forward into the 1880s, 1890s. We almost now have, as with the Civil Rights movement, a long Reconstruction. When it ends is hard to say. Maybe Reconstruction does not end until the turn of the century, when the Jim Crow system and disenfranchisement are fully in place in the

South. Maybe coming to terms with the legacy of slavery is still going on, in this country. It is, but you cannot have Reconstruction become so expansive that it becomes coequal with American history itself.

Of course, besides the temporal expansion the historiography has also seen an expansion of the geographical framework since my book came out. This can be seen in considering the West and its role in the Reconstruction era. There is also an expansion of subject matter, most striking in work on women and gender and how men and women experienced emancipation differently. These works are extremely valuable. And then there is this question of freedom, of course, and I think Greg Downs is quite right that even though most of these books are not posed directly as a challenge to my work, there's a kind of disillusionment with freedom. Current work emphasizes the limits of freedom, the failure of freedom.

A few years ago, the Gilder Lehrman Institute at Yale had a conference called "Beyond Freedom." Freedom was not enough; one had to go beyond it. Steve Kantrowitz recently published a book called *More Than Freedom*(2012).[24] In other words, freedom is under critique. Perhaps it is not the right concept. What should it be? Should it be equality? Fraternity? Something other than freedom? One could imagine writing about Reconstruction and displacing freedom and putting some other category in its place.

I want to finish by saying this: Reconstruction scholarship is more overtly political, in a broad sense, than writing on many other periods in American history, though we all know that political questions always affect the writing of history. We know that the Dunning School was part of the edifice of the Jim Crow South; it was part of real life, not just a historical point of view. It was an intellectual justification for the disfranchisement of African Americans and helped to legitimize the deep resistance to change in the South of the first fifty to sixty years of the twentieth century. Reconstruction issues are as current as today's newspaper. Questions of citizenship, affirmative action, the relationship of political democracy and economic democracy, race relations, federal and state relations, terrorism—all these are Reconstruction issues. How we understand their nineteenth-century history may affect how we think about what is going on in our society today.

They are political issues, but they are also moral issues. I think writing on Reconstruction history is morally inflected in a way that perhaps writing about other periods in American history is not. It forces historians to think about where they stand on key issues of the society today, not just in the nineteenth century. I really do think that regardless of the particular interpretation, what we think about Reconstruction *does* matter. I hope we never, regardless of the ebb and flow of interpretation, lose the insight—that DuBois gave us, which I tried to reflect in my book—that something very important for the nature and future of American democracy was happening in the Reconstruction period.

NOTES

[1]Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy* (Baton Rouge, 1983); Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York, 1990); Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (New York, 1993); Foner and Olivia Mahoney, *America's Reconstruction: People and Politics after the Civil War* (New York, 1995); Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York, 2005).

[2]Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970).

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[3]Michael Perman, "Eric Foner's Reconstruction: A Finished Revolution," *Reviews in American History* 17 (March 1989): 74, 78.

[4]Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979); Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867: Volume 1: The Destruction of Slavery* (New York, 1980); Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era* (New York, 1997); W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (Philadelphia, 1935).

[5]Reginald Hildebrand, *The Times Were Strange and Stirring: Methodist Preachers and the Crisis of Emancipation* (Durham, 1995); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York, 2008); Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future After Slavery* (New York, 2008); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Champaign–Urbana, 1997); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington, 1999); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860–1870* (New York, 1994); Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Champaign–Urbana, 1997); Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill, 2005) and *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 2012).

[6]Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (New York, 2003).

[7]Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven, 2011), 181.

[8]Major-General Geo. B. McClellan to Virginians, Cincinnati, May 26, 1862, Department of the Ohio, OR, II: 1, p. 753.

[9]Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), vii–viii.

[10]Foner, *Reconstruction*, xxv.

[11]Julie Saville, Review of Foner's Reconstruction in *International Labor and Working-Class History* 36 (Fall 1989): 97.

[12]Foner, *Reconstruction*, 3.

[13]Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, 2006), 33.

[14]See, for example, John McKiernan-González, *Fevered Measures: Public Health and Race at the Texas-Mexico Border, 1848–1942* (Durham, 2012); Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, 2013).

[15]As quoted in Stampp, 426.

[16]Eric Foner, "The Continuing Evolution of Reconstruction History," *OAH Magazine of History* 4:1 (1989): 13.

[17]W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York, 1935), 16.

[18]Foner, *Nothing But Freedom*, 72.

[19]See Steven Hahn's recently published "Slave Emancipation, Indian Peoples, and the Projects of a New American Nation-State," *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, 3, no. 3 (September 2013): 307–330.

[20]Ibid., 72.

[21]Foner, *Reconstruction*, xxvi–xxvii.

[22]Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1975); Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*.

[23]DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*; David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York, 1981).

[24]Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829–1889* (New York, 2012).

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