

The Legacy of *Black Reconstruction*

BY

ROBERT GREENE II

W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* thrust African Americans into the role of historical actors and showed that the black freedom struggle has always been one for radical democracy.

On February 23, 1968, less than three months before his assassination, Martin Luther King Jr rose to speak at New York's Carnegie Hall about the life and legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois. His address — delivered as part of a celebration of Du Bois on what would have been his one-hundredth birthday — focused on the contributions of this “intellectual giant” and his efforts to “teach us something about our tasks of emancipation.”

Among the elements of Du Bois's life that King felt merited special attention was the book *Black Reconstruction in America*, which Du Bois had written in 1935 at the height of the Great Depression and, by 1968, was slowly gaining more attention and influence among radical historians. *Black Reconstruction* mattered for King because it was Du Bois's attempt to “demolish the lie about Negroes in their most important and creative period of history.” According to the dominant telling, depicted in popular works like *Birth of a Nation* and scholarly works by white historians, Reconstruction had been an ignominious failure — proof that blacks couldn't be trusted to participate in American democracy.

King knew the importance of historical narrative in giving people something to believe in. “The truths he revealed are not yet the property of all Americans,” King argued, “but they have been recorded and arm us for our contemporary battles.”

Since its release, *Black Reconstruction* has influenced and galvanized radical activists in the United States. Written during an era when assumptions about race and capitalism were being questioned as never before, *Black Reconstruction's* Marxist framework pushed it to the center of growing debates on the Left about the past, present, and future of American political economy. More than that, however, the lessons of *Black Reconstruction* — that forging a radical democracy requires combating both racism and the degradations of capitalism — have informed the Left's understanding of the Reconstruction era, and of the present, too.

The Abolition Democracy

Du Bois wrote *Black Reconstruction* just as his politics were beginning to take a sharp left turn. The horrors of the Great Depression, as well as the national turn to the right in the 1920s, had radicalized Du Bois and pushed him to probe the connections between race and class in American society.

Black Reconstruction reflected that radicalization. Written in lyrical, often soaring prose, Du Bois described how black and white workers in the South possessed, for a brief moment, a common economic and political project before it was undone by white Democratic regimes in the South and a federal government reluctant to further intervene in the South's violent politics. Du Bois believed, as more American radicals during the Depression came around to see, that forging a unity across the color line was the only way to build a genuinely free American society. He described the movement against slavery as “abolition democracy” and showed how the fracturing of the working class had redounded to the benefit of oligarchy. Such ideas were critical to an American left dealing not only with segregation at home, but the rise of fascism around the world.

Du Bois opened *Black Reconstruction* by describing the racially inflected class system of Southern society (the white worker, the black worker, the white planter) before turning to a central argument of the book: that the Civil War had been won thanks to a “general strike” of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans.

Simply by stopping work, they could threaten the Confederacy by starvation. By walking in to the Federal camps, they showed to doubting Northerners the easy possibility of using them as works and as servants, as farmers, and as spies, and finally, as fighting soldiers. . . . It was the fugitive slave who made the slaveholders face the alternative of surrendering to the North, or to the Negroes.

The Union victory in the Civil War represented an enormous advance in American democracy. But what would come next, and how would it be enforced? The Freedmen’s Bureau, the federal agency set up to assist millions of emancipated slaves and poor whites, was the Radical Republican answer to that question:

In the Freedmen’s Bureau, the United States started upon a dictatorship by which the landowner and the capitalist were to be openly and deliberately curbed and which directed its efforts in the interest of a black and white labor class. . . . The Freedmen’s Bureau was the most extraordinary and far-reaching institution of social uplift that America has ever attempted. It had to do, not simply with emancipated slaves and poor whites, but also with the property of South planters. It was a government guardianship for the relief and guidance of white and black labor from a feudal agrarianism to modern farming and industry.

The rudiments of a welfare state were constructed (hospitals, schools, housing), educational attainment was promoted, and for the first time, black men were guaranteed the right to vote. The Radical Republican fervor for reshaping Southern society was matched on the ground by newly freed, newly empowered African Americans. Du Bois wrote of the fertile promise of Reconstruction in South Carolina, noting with approval the attempts to turn the hotbed of secessionist ideology into a radically democratic state by 1869. His chapters “The Black Proletariat in South Carolina” and “The Black Proletariat in Mississippi and Alabama” examined the tumult of Reconstruction through the lens of labor, race, and democracy.

The rollback of Reconstruction torpedoed African-American political and economic power. But it also hindered the broader labor movement: “Labor went into the great war of 1877 against Northern capitalists unsupported by the black man, and the black man went his way in the South to strengthen and consolidate his power, unsupported by Northern labor.” In scholarship that would inspire later historians like Eric Foner, Heather Cox Richardson, and Lerone Bennett, Du Bois made it clear that the Reconstruction of the South, and the labor movement of the North, were far more linked than most historians wanted to admit in the 1930s.

The book’s most memorable chapter may have been its last. Entitled “The Propaganda of History,” it found Du Bois thundering against the “Lost Cause” ideology that informed so much of the Dunning School of Reconstruction history — which cast the white South as a victim and ignored the destruction of black political and economic freedom. As Du Bois argued, Reconstruction and the history of slavery in the United States had been shaped by “one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings” through the use of public education and public memory.

Black Reconstruction had an immense impact on radicals, particularly in the South. When Du Bois was invited by the Southern Negro Youth Congress to speak at its annual conference in Columbia, South Carolina in 1946, the theme of biracial

democracy during Reconstruction dominated the convention proceedings. The chill of the Second Red Scare was beginning to set in, and the young activists were holding out hope of a better tomorrow. This hope was sustained partially by looking to the past, to the Reconstruction era. “Slowly but surely,” Du Bois told the assembled crowd, “the working people of the South, white and black, must come to remember that their emancipation depends upon their mutual cooperation.”

Two decades later, in 1968, the Black Panthers included *Black Reconstruction* on their reading list alongside such titles as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts*, and Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*. For the Panthers, being widely read about the history of race and class in America was an essential part of radical organizing and strategizing. So recommending *Black Reconstruction* made perfect sense.

The plaudits weren’t limited to American radicals. Ferruccio Gambino, an Italian leftist, wrote that *Black Reconstruction* helped him make sense of the radical uprisings on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1960s. He also praised Du Bois for pushing back against the framing of African Americans and labor as separate issues in American history. *Black Reconstruction*, in his estimation, “was a milestone of historiography for all those whose history had been denied or stolen.”

A Third Reconstruction

The premise of *Black Reconstruction* was as simple as it was rare: African Americans are living, breathing historical actors. As Du Bois explained in his prefatory note, “I am going to tell this story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience.”

The prevailing view among historians at the time was that the period after 1876

was one of “Redemption” — of saving Southern governments from Republican rule. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*, in rebutting this narrative, revealed all that had been lost when Reconstruction fell. And he reminded readers that history is about interpretation of the past — interpretation often tied to events in the present.

Today, as activists like William Barber press for a Third Reconstruction — to finish the work begun by the First in the 1860s and the Second of the civil rights era of the 1960s — we can continue to take valuable lessons from Du Bois’s tome. Working across racial, gender, and sexual-orientation lines is the only way such a vision can be realized.

A Third Reconstruction would combine the radical democratic dreams of the previous two Reconstructions: the fight for land and political rights from the first one, which evolved into a push for guaranteed jobs and universal health care as part of the Freedom Budget of 1966. It would take the demand for education among recently freed African Americans from the 1860s with the continued struggle for decent public schools in the 1960s.

A Third Reconstruction would be, in other words, the culmination of what America has always claimed to be: a just, free, and fair nation for all. If the Third Reconstruction does not succeed — if, like the previous two, it is destroyed by an elite backlash, severe repression, and political demobilization — we may not have a chance at a fourth one. Du Bois, Bennett, and so many others realized just how fragile American democracy was. Today, the struggle for a Third Reconstruction shows how fragile it still is.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Greene II is an assistant professor of history at Claflin University and the book review editor for the Society of US Intellectual Historians' blog.

FILED UNDER

UNITED STATES

RACE / BOOKS

DU BOIS / RACISM / RECONSTRUCTION