

Heather Cox Richardson. *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001. xvi + 312 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00637-9.



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How Good Workers Became Bad

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Why did “the North” allow Reconstruction to die? In *The Death of Reconstruction*, Heather Cox Richardson combines analysis of the northern popular press with ample secondary literature to chart a change in attitude among northern Republicans between 1865 and 1901. Demoting (but not discarding) traditional explanations—politics, racism, exhaustion, and corruption, among others—Richardson successfully injects class into the mix. “Free labor,” that pervasive, unifying, yet unrealistic and vague ideology trumpeted by the Republican party, included the idea that a natural state of harmony of interests existed between labor and capital. Northern Republicans in 1865 had little doubt that upon setting the slaves free in southern society, they would overcome all temporary barriers, become “the nation’s stereotypical workers,” accumulate capital, and achieve self-sufficiency (pp. xiii-xiv). America’s unique political economy made such cross-class mobility possible, even for African-Americans. That the freedpeople would readily adopt free labor and contribute to economic harmony was not in doubt.

What happened to that optimistic postwar vision? During the 1870s, Richardson explains, a competing theory of political economy emerged in the northern popular press, and northerners of both parties came to fear European-style class conflict. Industrialization helped carry the news that labor and capital naturally fought. Increasingly fearful of communism and other deviations from American free labor principles, the “better classes” in the North began to suspect that southern blacks were agents of disharmony (p. xiv). News from chaotic South Carolina reinforced northern Democratic claims that not only were freedpeople rejecting the sacred tenets of American-style free labor, but that they were seeking government handouts and protection for strikes, if not outright social revolution. Freedpeople were not just a different race, white northerners began to believe, but also a dangerous and corrupt class, seeking to overturn American government, economy, and society.

Richardson’s well-structured book is composed of chronological chapters book-ended by a prologue and epilogue interpreting two of Booker T. Washington’s most famous works. Richardson highlights Washing-

ton's "Atlanta Compromise" (1895) as an effort to reclaim the North's postwar optimism for the freed slaves. Hardly a capitulation to racism, Washington's speech was a "radical and effective statement" in favor of African-American individualism and harmony (p. 5). Richardson's dissection of *Up From Slavery* (1901) in the epilogue reveals Washington's efforts to prove to northern whites that, in contrast to popular opinion, responsible, educated, and hard-working African-Americans of the free labor model did indeed exist, and were in fact thriving at the Tuskegee Institute.

In chapter one, Richardson dissects the "Northern Postwar Vision" Washington sought to resurrect. Traditionally an integral part of Republican party platforms, but generally adopted by many northern Democrats, the free labor ideal encompassed a labor theory of value in which private property was sacred, and everyone profited when production increased. Politicians were supposed to construct government policies that did not destroy the "natural operation of the economy" (p. 7). Within this worldview existed good workers and bad workers. Good workers were models of the free labor ideal, living by the Protestant work ethic, and in a harmonious world with their employers, whose class they would eventually join. Bad workers, on the other hand, did not have a strong work ethic, and, following labor leaders within the Democratic party, believed that class conflict was inevitable.

Republicans and Democrats disagreed on government's role within the theory. Firmly believing that all Americans shared common economic interests, Republicans felt by 1865 that government should actively promote economic development. Fearing conspiracies, authoritarianism, and encroachments on personal liberty, northern Democrats demanded limited government.

After the Civil War, northern Republicans viewed freedmen as good workers. With jobs and wages, ex-slaves would make an "easy transition" to free labor and start climbing the American ladder of success (p. 11). There were motives behind this postwar vision. By focusing on black workers and the South (an "undeveloped wilderness" full of potential), northern Republicans could continue what had begun during the war, the submersion of ethnic and class tensions under national crisis (p. 22). Hardly devoid of racism, and not eager to welcome more blacks to the North, northern Republicans preferred an improved South that maintained its black population. They also wanted the South to succeed, if only to complement northern industrialization and to make the nation

prosperous.

At the end of the war, Republicans joined with Democrats in the belief that freedpeople needed little assistance from the federal bureaucracy. In formally ending slavery, the Thirteenth Amendment "completed" the process that northern Republicans felt was necessary to make African-Americans part of the free labor system. However, Richardson observes that the amendment—passed by Congress in January 1865—potentially expanded federal power because it promised freedom that was government-guaranteed. Unlike Eric Foner who nods to the Fourteenth, Richardson argues that it was the Thirteenth Amendment that "linked" freedpeople to big government.[1] From then on, the slope was slippery. Throughout the rest of 1865, in the face of presidential restraint and southern-white defiance, Republicans increasingly became united in the belief that the government had to "enforce a true labor system in the South" (pp. 14-15).

Richardson declares that by 1867 "Northerners' patience was exhausted" (p. 29). The South's economy had not recovered, and the Black Codes and Ku Klux Klan made a mockery of free labor ideals. Moderate northern Republicans who had resisted the expansion of federal power to enforce free labor in the South moved closer to the Radical camp. In Republican eyes, freedpeople compared favorably as workers to young white southerners and northern urban immigrants, most of whom were Democrats. Reports of the newly-freed having a passion for education and seemingly adopting free labor values reminded northern Republicans of Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick. Impossible to sustain, the northern postwar vision peaked in optimism in 1867.

In chapters two and three, Richardson follows the decay of the postwar vision over the next eight years. While they joined Radicals in passing the Fifteenth Amendment, the last necessary step to making permanent free labor in the South, moderate and conservative Republicans increasingly began to equate politically-minded freedmen with the bad, or disaffected, worker. In doing so, middle-of-the-road Republicans began to be more receptive to negative images of African-Americans in the northern Democratic press.

Radicalism initiated by ex-slaves in 1867 served to increase northern fears that freedmen sought to perpetuate class struggle, not a harmony of interests. As freedmen came to occupy prominent places in southern Republican governments, Republican northerners increasingly equated black politicians and their constituents with Eu-

ropean revolutionaries who would “harness the government to the service of disaffected workers ... to confiscate the wealth of others” rather than work hard and save (p. 82). Newspaper coverage of events throughout the South served as catalysts for the erosion of Republican support for Reconstruction.

Of particular appeal to this reviewer was Richardson’s third chapter, a case study of South Carolina between 1871 and 1875. As a historian of this period in the state’s history, I was especially interested in her analysis of northern press coverage, and the ensuing links to fears of class conflict. Here in the early 1870s—several years before the Great Strike of 1877—Richardson detects a fundamental shift in the way Republicans viewed laborers, especially African-Americans. New black legislators and tax laws in 1868, followed a black state militia and various “rings” in 1870, led to complaints by white Democrats that were amplified by the northern popular press.

In March 1871, the Tax-payers’ Convention made little headway in changing state laws, but, as a cause adopted by the politically-ambitious Horace Greeley, had a big impact on northern Republicans. Greeley’s *New York Daily Tribune* publicized “anarchy” in South Carolina, and in doing so, connected northern Republican fears of class struggle with northern Democratic charges that the black vote would control certain elections (p. 91). Worse yet, the Paris Commune made world headlines during the same month. Were South Carolina’s freedmen going to lead a social revolution or merely plunder the government? Other northern Republican papers reminded readers that South Carolina’s corruption was being duplicated in New York’s Tammany Hall. Northern Democratic newspapers joined the chorus, further swaying the North’s conservative and moderate Republicans into viewing freedmen as bad workers who had rejected free labor principles and were intent upon class struggle. Richardson convincingly argues that the demonization of freedmen workers began in South Carolina and elsewhere as early as 1871.

Chapters four through six complete the story of the transformation in the eyes of America’s “better classes” of southern blacks from paragons of free labor ideals to disaffected, lazy, and dangerous rabble (p. 119). The civil rights debates of the 1870s only confirmed the obvious, that southern blacks were trying to enact class legislation to gain from government what successful Americans had attained through hard work. To gain those privileges, they sought to expand the national government, a vir-

tual guarantee to moderate Republicans and Democrats that more corruption would follow. No further legislation was necessary because African-Americans were essentially equal. As proof, northern Republicans pointed to, and celebrated, African-American success stories, especially the landowning small farmers.

To the better classes, however, most southern blacks appeared to be disaffected workers. Richardson argues that by 1880, northern Democrats and Republicans believed that in order to safeguard American civilization, this dangerous mob should lose its access to government. By the 1890s, white Americans in the North concurred that not only was disfranchisement justified for the “Un-American Negro,” but that he was by nature confined to a state of “permanent semibarbarism” (p. 224).

Death of Reconstruction is at once more simple and more complicated than this review suggests. On the one hand, Richardson confronts one of the big issues of Reconstruction from just one vantage point, that of white northern public opinion, and from only one type of source, the North’s popular press. Richardson does not claim to write a comprehensive history of the decline of Reconstruction, but certainly feels that the transformation of white attitudes that she illuminates deserves a prominent place among other explanations. While she promises to explore “the relationship between freed-people and white Northerners,” and recognizes agency and complexity within the African-American experience, Richardson places black southerners in the background (p. xii).

The heavy reliance on the northern popular press makes this a more narrowly-focused work than the main title would suggest. Contemporary press reports, political cartoons, and editorials did not reflect the wide variety and richness of political opinion in the North, but they were nonetheless important indicators as well as shapers of public opinion. The source base is not necessarily a weakness, especially when combined with a sophisticated reading of secondary sources, and it provides the engine for a narrowly-focused look at a slippery but crucial actor in the Reconstruction drama, white northern public opinion.

On the other hand, *Death of Reconstruction* is complicated. While some readers may question Richardson’s generalizations (northern Republicans believed this, or northern Democrats thought that), following the shifting sands of public opinion adds complexity to an already complicated history. Richardson does recognize Republican divisions, and demonstrates why they cre-

ated temporary alliances to each other or with northern Democrats. Plunging into an era of rabid political alienation, this work follows the creation, and the consequences, of American public opinion during and after Reconstruction, and helps explain more than a few strange bedfellows. Most importantly, Richardson provides a more detailed interpretation of the abandonment of African-Americans during Reconstruction. *Death of Reconstruction* is a well-written, strongly-argued book

with a convincing, plausible, and attractive argument that will appeal to popular as well as academic readers.

Note

[1]. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York and London: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1988), pp. 66-7, 256-9; Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction 1863-1877* (New York and London: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1990), p. 114.

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