

Book Reviews

Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy. ERIC FONER. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press. 1983. xii, 110 pp. \$14.95 and \$5.95.

Now that the three Fleming Lectures that Eric Foner gave in 1982 at L.S.U. have been issued in paperback, teachers in courses that touch on the postemancipation American south or the Caribbean will be faced with a difficult dilemma. Should they assign this succinct, clear, and pleasantly written summary of important facets of the latest scholarship to their students, or should they merely crib lecture material from it themselves? Concentrating on comparative reconstruction, labour history, and what might be called 'indirect political history' or 'political history once removed', the book slights race relations and developments in world markets, southern cities, and the largely white upcountry areas, as Foner acknowledges, and essentially ignores electoral and national politics and constitutional issues. Marxist in his central concern with class relationships, Foner turns Marx or at least Harrington on his head with his pervasive and persuasive argument that political power crucially shaped economic conflicts. That the Dunningite Walter Lynwood Fleming himself would probably have barely recognized the work as a book on Reconstruction, that it is dedicated to W.E.B. DuBois, whose *Black Reconstruction*, Foner points out, has never been reviewed in the *American Historical Review*, and that it attacks the currently fashionable notion that emancipation made little difference to blacks or to white planters is an indication of its revisionary tone and contents.

American slaves received more than just freedom when compared to those in Haiti or the British Caribbean, Foner emphasizes, giving an ironic twist to his title. They gained the ballot and the (quite inadequately fulfilled) promise of constitutional protection. In an attempt to preserve or restore the immensely profitable system of cash-crop, export-oriented agriculture by continuing coerced plantation labour, a series of black Haitian dictators imposed draconian labour laws; Trinidad, British Guiana, and other former colonies imported hundreds of thousands of Indian and Chinese contract workers; and the Johnsonian Reconstruction legislatures in the south wrote the black codes. When blacks and mulattoes began to organize politically, colonial legislatures first stiffened suffrage requirements and then voluntarily ceded power to the increasingly racist and completely white British Parliament. In the U.S., by contrast, sympathetic Republicans scuttled the black codes and, in what he calls a 'stunning experiment' (p.90), armed Afro-Americans with the vote during the crucial early years after emancipation. When conservative whites recovered control, the 'redemption' was incomplete, for blacks retained some political power until the early years of the twentieth century, and the post-war constitutional amendments and the continuing, although lessened northern Republican concern with black rights constrained southern whites from imposing a thorough racist settlement. Comparison with similar societies makes clear how radical Reconstruction was in North America, and, contrary to the views of such 'post-revisionist' scholars as William Gillette, how crucial and effective politics was.

Leftist scholars of the 1960s often confidently pointed to the refusal to distribute land to the North American freedmen as the root cause of the failure of Reconstruction. Foner's understanding of the predicament is much more complex and sophisticated. Freedmen in Russia, in underpopulated areas of the Caribbean, and in some parts of coastal South Carolina managed to receive, squat upon, or buy

small plots of land, but lacking capital and unwilling or unable to produce large quantities of staples for sale, they devolved into poor, backwards peasants. As the experience of twentieth-century agrarian reform programmes further emphasizes, a patch of dirt is no guarantee of prosperity. Had substantial amounts of better land been passed out, what would have happened to the recipients when federal protection was withdrawn? If the erstwhile slaves had managed to keep their holdings, would the former plantation areas have been blighted by even worse poverty? Could they have obtained the credit and the subsidies to infrastructural development, particularly railroads and highways, that many planters eventually managed to command?

Post-emancipation societies were not shaped so much by the character of the previous regime, Foner argues, as by the conditions of freedom itself – most crucially, by the land/labour ratio and the ability of the ex-slaves and planters to influence state policies. (I would add to this list the scope of the competitive market for labour and the unity in economic matters of those who controlled land and credit.) Presciently drawing parallels with events in southern Africa at the turn of this century, he points out that a series of drastic laws there robbed Africans of the best lands altogether and created a rural proletariat that could then be attracted to mining, agricultural wage labour, and domestic service at very low wages. Apartheid and extreme economic inequality in southern Africa were consequences neither of slavery nor of the inevitable working of the free market, but of visible white hands manoeuvring the levers of state power.

Free labour was hardly unconstrained in the Americas, either. Believing, like some more recent governments, that the poor would not toil unless driven to it by dire poverty and the force of law, elites everywhere attempted to compel workers to return to the latifundia and to deny them the ability to set themselves up as independent farmers. Heartlessly, regressive taxes were used in some parts of the Caribbean to subsidize the importation of hundreds of thousands of nonwhite contract labourers, whose presence drove wages down and profits up, rather than to provide any public education or other services whatsoever for those who bore the brunt of the taxes. In North America, by contrast, even after 'redemption', southern states offered some schooling for blacks – in many places, roughly equal to state-supported education for whites until disfranchisement took place – and schemes to introduce coolie agricultural labour came to nothing, partly because enfranchised blacks and their white northern allies opposed them.

While Foner has made his case, to my satisfaction at least, for the centrality of politics, and, in politics, for the importance of labour issues, three problems remain inadequately resolved in his book and in the secondary works on which he draws. First, in legislatures and in referendum campaigns, just who favoured and who opposed the crop lien, fence, anti-poaching, dog tax, educational expenditure, and general tax laws that Foner believes were crucial to the development of class relations? A quotation from a southern 'agricultural reformer', for instance, denouncing the 'unintelligent masses' for refusing to back a requirement that animals be fenced in (p.64) is hardly sufficient evidence of the class character of the groups on each side of the issue. Second, exactly how were the interests of various groups affected by particular laws? Is it so clear, for example, that the poor suffered when their few scrawny pigs and cows and other people's larger herds were no longer allowed to run wild through everyone's fields and gardens? Why couldn't sharecroppers include forage for their animals in negotiating their often complex and detailed contracts with landlords? Did they? Third, how were the laws administered? Recognizing the gravity of this point, Foner includes an original and impressive chapter on the successful 1876 strike by rice workers in the Combahee River region of

South Carolina, but, suggestive as it is, this test case does not settle the issue in general. How were the crop lien laws carried out before and after landlords were, in some states, guaranteed primary rights to their tenants' production? In a vast area in which restrictions on geographic mobility and on competition among planters for labour were impracticable, were large numbers of croppers really reduced to peonage, as some scholars have claimed?

Reconstruction, this admirable brief synthesis demonstrates, has become a focal point for the intersection of economic history, labour history, and political history. That several vital questions do not yet have agreed-upon answers is a sign of the vigour of the field.

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