

A Review Essay: Reconstruction Compared to What?

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When the War Was Over: The Failure of Self-Reconstruction in the South, 1865-1867. DAN CARTER. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press. 1985. 275pp. £15.55.

Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877. TED TUNNELL. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press. 1984. 252pp. \$25.00.

There are three elements to every complete historical interpretation: a descriptive comparison, a causal argument based on the description, and a justification of the comparison. For instance, historians of Reconstruction in the U.S. often ask how different the political, social, or economic systems were before 1860, between 1865 and the mid-1870s, and/or after 1877; or they compare the experiences of the freedmen in the U.S. to those of their counterparts in the Caribbean islands, Brazil, or Russia; or they contrast southern postbellum economic growth with that of other regions of the country or the world; or they counterpose some part of the American experience, such as Andrew Johnson's political ineptitude, to a hypothetical counterfactual situation.

Descriptions lead naturally and inevitably to causal inferences, and disagreements over the proper characterization of end states imply conflict over that of intermediate stages as well. Thus, some have asserted that protection of fundamental human rights was nationalized because the Civil War brought to power a Republican party that blended a Whiggish friendliness to governmental solutions with a Democratic commitment to equal rights, which were forged together in the antislavery struggle. Others believe that such protection was not nationalized, and depict the Whiggish element in the 'GOP' (the Republican party) as satisfaction with a hierarchical social order, and the Democratic, as states' rights dogmatism. The antebellum southern social system was destroyed, according to one thesis, because it rested on slavery and its extraordinary profits; or, in the view of others, it continued because its basis was racism. The black vote made a major difference, says one school, because it increased the resources that

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blacks had in bargaining with whites, because they could help to set policy, and because some blacks could exercise authority over whites; whereas opposing scholars say that it made little difference because blacks could not use the franchise to make radical changes in the only sphere that mattered, the economic. Southern economic development was retarded, one line has it, by the abolition of slavery, the physical destruction of the Civil War, or the establishment of the crop lien system; or, contrarily, apart from fluctuations in the international cotton market, the growth of the south continued on roughly the expected course after 1865.

Self-conscious historians who frame causal hypotheses must make explicit and argue for the appropriateness of their analogies or counterfactuals. The much higher proportion of blacks on the Caribbean islands and their colonial political position may make them irrelevant objects of comparison for the southern U.S. The fictive counterfactual of 'forty acres and a mule' may be too unrealistic a revolution to consider in a fairly thickly settled country. Differences in technological development in northern and southern agriculture or in the perfection of capital markets may devalue the comparison of postbellum regional growth rates.

These two unusually well-written and deeply researched books provide the material for many such comparative hypotheses, even though they do not always make them explicit. In particular, they add to our understanding of the two central questions about southern Reconstruction: how radical was it, and why did it fail? Because the arguments of Carter and Tunnell are incomplete, however, we are still left with the great dilemma of the period's historiography – what are the proper temporal and spatial criteria for judging its radicalism and success?

The Dunningites and their photographically reversed image, W.E.B. DuBois, compared the antebellum to the postbellum south, found the latter very radical, and believed the failure to place the bottom rail on top inevitable because political power eventually, in the nature of things, had to give way to socioeconomic. Historians during the 1950s and 1960s often introduced new comparisons and painted Reconstruction as a rather more tepid affair. Southern state constitutions merely copied features of northern ones; Reconstruction was much shorter and less secure than the succeeding era of segregation and one-party dominance; the bright visions of Thad Stevens and Charles Sumner were less influential than the gray normality of William Pitt Fessenden and John Sherman; the postwar amendments, at least as interpreted by the Supreme Court, paled beside the nationalistic structural innovations adopted during the Civil War; the freedmen got

no land from the government; Republicans north and south were infected with racism. Other historians glorified the struggles of blacks, poor whites, and northern radicals, or, like Kenneth Stampp, preserved radicalism by stressing the eventual fulfillment of its promises over a century, but this branch of revisionism, too, implicitly recognized that the immediate results were limited. The 'post-revisionist' view of William Gillette and Raoul Berger in the late 1970s was darker still. The Republicans, they asserted, did not really mean what other historians and modern judges believed the Reconstructionists had said in the postwar amendments and the various civil rights bills. Although Berger claimed to deplore this alleged state of affairs and Gillette undoubtedly decried it, their case was Dunningite social Darwinism all over again, this time with tears.

As if to prove that conservative contemporary eras do not necessarily breed conservative historiography, the 1980s have witnessed a rejuvenation of a more radical view of the postemancipation settlement, and again, the lever has been the use of different comparisons. Following C. Vann Woodward's earlier lead, Stanley Engerman, Thomas Holt, and Eric Foner have recently pointed out that freedmen in countries outside the U.S. were often subjected to the near-slavery of 'apprenticeship' and were granted neither the vote nor legal guarantees of equal civil rights. A solution to capital shortages and market uncertainties, sharecropping was adopted in many countries and many periods, and its acceptance by southern blacks now seems much more voluntary than it used to. The realization that black participation in politics, attempts to form interracial coalitions, and northern Republican efforts to guarantee black civil rights continued long after 1877 raises new questions about when, how, and therefore why Reconstruction subsided. The stress that Michael Perman and others have recently put on factionalism within the southern Republican party has made it appear at once more like other parties in other times and places, and, at least in part, notably radical, and it has made the overthrow of the Republicans more of a matter of their own divisions than of solid opposition to them. Although choosing different vantage points from these from which to contemplate the era, Carter and Tunnell seem to me to reinforce the reemergent view that Reconstruction reflected an attempt to bring about fundamental changes in the south.

Carter focuses on the Johnsonian Reconstruction governments throughout the south in 1865-66. His prime comparison is with antebellum white politicians, and the implications of his description are that post-1866 Reconstruction really was quite radical, compared to what southern white moderates were prepared to do, but, at the

same time, that the Republicans' chances of attracting these moderates were tiny from the beginning. The resurrected Whig strategy that some historians touted during the 1960s was highly improbable. Narrowing his lens to take in only Louisiana, Tunnell contrasts the Republican interlude there with wartime unionism, the prewar differences between the free *gens de couleur* and the slaves, and the relatively nonviolent party battles in the north. Loyalists, he asserts, were too scarce and insufficiently radical to provide a solid base for a party committed to black rights; the occupation government was no rehearsal for Reconstruction, but a sideshow to the military prosecution of the war; ex-free coloured/freedmen splits hampered the black cause; and the continual, shockingly high level of anti-Republican violence in the state doomed attempts of even the toughest, best intentioned whites and blacks to establish a two-party system. How convincing is their evidence and how apt are their comparisons?

Carter's Johnsonians were reluctant secessionists with a sprinkling of wartime neutrals and even loyalists, generally prewar Whigs or upcountry yeoman Democrats who did not share the libertarian ideologues' antipathy to any governmental action except that which upheld slavery, advocates of a somewhat new south that encouraged industry and investment from outside, moderate pragmatic racists who recognized that, whatever they as southerners might prefer, the Yankees were not about to allow the freedmen to be confined to semi-slavery – hardly the Bourbon 'secesh' (secessionists) of northern bloody-shirt rhetoric. For instance, in every state that has been studied, the overwhelming majority of the delegates to the 1865 legislatures and constitutional conventions had opposed secession, and in all but Alabama, they were predominantly prewar Whigs (pp.65–7). Of the 80 men elected to Congress from the south in 1865, 70 had opposed secession before Lincoln's election, and 31 of these were either unionists or 'outspokenly neutral' during the war (pp.229–30). Their dilemma was that they were too few, and neither loose definitions of 'straight-sect' unionism nor aggressive employment of patronage or the pardoning power could build voting majorities for them, especially with Andrew Johnson undercutting their efforts.

Most white southerners seemed at best resigned to defeat, not repentant about slavery or treason. A Georgia minister who, months after the war's end, denounced slavery as sinful was forced to resign his pulpit. The search for votes therefore led inevitably to black suffrage, but this, in turn, alienated some previous supporters, and the provisional Reconstructionists' own racism made what Carter calls a 'genuine' interracial coalition impossible (p.59). Southern disunity there was after and had been before the war, and the failure of the

rebellion allowed it to flourish briefly (p.104). In their subsidies to railroad and other corporations, their attempts to extend public education to the rural white masses, and their frantic efforts to deal with capital shortages, the provisionals foreshadowed the policies of their successors. The trouble was that the range of white opinion was much too narrow on what Carter considers the basic issue, race, to provide enough reliable white allies for a party of anything approaching racially equal rights.

Carter's principal exhibit on this matter, the development of the black codes, constitutes the best chapter of his book. The most important of these infamous laws were not drawn up casually by pro-slavery extremists, but by sober ex-Whig lawyers appointed to special commissions. Nor were they merely reprints of the laws for antebellum free people of colour, which were much harsher, prohibiting black education, requiring passes and white patrons, severely restricting property ownership, and even, in the late 1850s, promoting re-enslavement. As indices of southern white moderate opinion in 1865, the new laws show, by contrast, how advanced the post-1867 Reconstruction was, for their core was the vagrancy and contract statutes that sought to insure that blacks would go to work for white masters and stay at work. Utterly misreading northern opinion, which was outraged at the discriminatory, draconic provisions, white southerners, emphasizing paternalistic features spelling out the duties of employers as well as employees, considered the black codes 'humane' (p.226).

Carter's snapshot of the honest preferences and actions of southern white moderates from April to December, 1865 is subtle and impressively documented, but as a prediction of the future course of these men, it is deficient, and certain actions of the provisionals as early as 1866 – actions Carter treats summarily – cast a different light even on their 1865 self-portrait. If Carter is right in depicting the pragmatic, non-radical character of the ex-Unionists and the extent of their control, as well as the moderation of the Fourteenth Amendment, then why did the southern legislatures so contemptuously reject that amendment, bringing on an entirely predictable Congressional response? Why did they condone when they did not applaud the police riots that massacred black and white Unionists in Memphis and New Orleans? If they were more competent and politically 'savvy' than previous observers thought, why did they so badly misread northern opinion? Were they, moreover, as wedded to their 1865 beliefs as Carter apparently assumes? Politicians are always opportunistic to some degree, and, like other people, they change their minds. While one may not approve of the apparent conversions to a sympathy for black rights

of men like Tennessee's Parson Brownlow, North Carolina's William Holden, or Georgia's Joe Brown, value judgments ought not to cloud historians' empirical judgments about what course politicians are likely to follow. Without studying their responses to events after 1866, therefore, one cannot accurately forecast the probabilities of Reconstruction coalitions or the post-1866 behaviour of those men who led the south's fatally flawed attempt at white 'self-reconstruction'.

The field of Louisiana Reconstruction being flooded, Tunnell does not attempt to navigate it all, offering instead a series of nine interpretive essays on mainstream topics. If 'un-southern' experiences and economic ties to the north were the keys to Unionism, as Tunnell documents in more detail than any previous scholar, if the extent of Unionism was the best predictor of southern white Republican prospects, and if a large and well-led black community provided a necessary foundation for the radical phase of the movement, then Louisianians should have welcomed Reconstruction. John C. Breckinridge received only a plurality in the state in 1860; 43 per cent of its white population lived in greater New Orleans, which was more than four times as large as the Confederacy's second most populous city; more than 40 per cent of the whites in Orleans parish were born in the north or in foreign countries, a marked deviation from the general southern white homogeneity; New Orleans traders raised their capital in New York; south Louisiana sugar planters needed high protective tariffs to survive; and Louisiana had the largest, richest, and best educated group of free people of colour of any state in the prewar south. But perhaps because even the first of the three Yankee attempts to remake Louisiana, that of 1862-65, was dominated by 'outsider' Unionists, the effort raised what Tunnell calls 'a question of cultural identity' and initiated a continuing 'crisis of legitimacy' that dyed the swamps blood-red through 1877 and beyond. Compared to the antebellum era, Tunnell believes, Louisiana whites were united; compared to the north, their politics was murderous; compared to the White League, the white Republicans were faint-hearted; therefore, Reconstruction failed.

It began in a muddle, and Tunnell makes somewhat different sense of that confusion than others have. Lincoln's '10% Plan' and General Nathaniel P. Banks's dismissal of Thomas J. Durant as Free State governor in 1864, he believes, were measures aimed at winning the war, not preparations for a relatively quick and conservative reunion, as Peyton McCrary claimed in *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*. Durant was not so radical on black suffrage and civil rights and Banks not so conservative as McCrary contended, and to attribute the

Durant-inspired Congressional opposition to Lincoln's policy for the state to an ideological difference between Durant, Banks, and their followers is, Tunnell thinks, misleading.

Tunnell's analysis seems to me to be founded on two false dichotomies. Americans have often combined fighting wars and preparing for peace, and politicians like Banks – he was never much good as a soldier – could not resist intervening in partisan affairs. Even the most principled politicians are always concerned with power – how else can they effect their ends? – and Tunnell admits that Banks and Lincoln were not publicly committed to breaking the colour line in the electorate, as Durant was. Much of Tunnell's revisionist case for Banks's radicalism is circumstantial, and even if the Massachusetts General was as forward-looking as Tunnell says, his apparent conservatism may have convinced Durant and Company that there was an ideological split. Furthermore, Tunnell would have had a broader basis for generalization had he more explicitly compared Louisiana to the military-civilian experiences during the Civil War in the Atlantic coastal islands and in Tennessee, and perhaps to the extensive U.S. planning for peace during World War II. One of the persistent problems with single-state studies is that they misunderstand events in their own bailiwicks because they ignore parallel events elsewhere. Tunnell's account is not entirely free of this failing.

Nevertheless, his graphic recounting of crucial events does often capture the headline-making happenings that affected public opinion. His portrait of Johnsonian Reconstruction contrasts rather sharply with Carter's fuller but grayer picture. Although Governor James Madison Wells, a conservative Whig Unionist, substituted reactionary for moderate and radical officials, he could not coddle ex-rebels fast enough or fully enough for Andrew Johnson's taste. Appealed to by the chivalry, Johnson subverted the few liberal gestures that Wells made and sought to instal the leaders of the bayou versions of the Klan in office. 'My policy' succeeded in New Orleans, and when desperate Unionists sought to reconvene the 1864 state constitutional convention, an officially-sponsored riot slaughtered a few whites and more than 40 blacks. Tunnell's narrative – he is excellent at recounting not only this violent event, but also the later massacre in Colfax and the assassinations in Red River parish – shows more revealingly than anything in Carter's book why the north was so horrified and why Congress overturned provisional Reconstruction.

Correcting counts accepted by previous scholars, Tunnell demonstrates that blacks formed a majority at the state's 1867 constitutional convention, but apart from guarantees of integration in schools and public accommodations, which Tunnell thinks proved largely un-

enforceable, it is difficult to see how the constitution that they adopted differed from those in other reconstructed states. Tunnell makes no effort to compare those constitutions explicitly or to evaluate systematically the policies on schools, taxes, the administration of justice, etc. implemented by the radical Louisiana governments from 1868 to 1876. Emphasizing the role of carpetbaggers, who held the state's major offices, the dependence of the Republicans on federal troops and patronage, and the failure of the contradictory efforts to conciliate ex-rebels through appointments while at the same time counteracting fraud and intimidation through the device of the 'Returning Board', Tunnell never really explains what the Republicans offered various groups of Louisianians and why their appeals apparently fell so flat.

To have lasted, Tunnell thinks, Reconstruction would have to have been even more radical than it was, redistributing land extensively and guarding the government with a black militia able and willing to prevent, or, if necessary, to retaliate for Democratic atrocities. Republicans failed to encourage black landholding at least partly because black delegates to the 1867 constitutional convention were too 'dim-sighted' (p.133), and they did not create a state militia because they feared full-scale race war and may have believed that arming blacks would have enabled politicians from that race to take the offices that whites held (pp.216-18). Yet if Marshall Harvey Twitchell, the wealthy, well-connected Vermont carpetbagger who was the political boss of an upcountry parish, could not hold onto his plantation or protect himself or his relatives from assassination, how could obscure freedmen have maintained control over land that an 'illegitimate' government helped them to buy or that had been confiscated from white folks? State and local militias elsewhere neither threatened white Republican control of the highest offices nor prevented Democratic redemption. That redemption, moreover, was not necessarily so complete or so secure in 1877 as Tunnell seems to believe. Despite the slaughter of the Twitchell group, the Republicans carried Red River parish in 1876. Blacks continued to vote in Louisiana until 1898, and even, in some cases, to have their votes counted as cast, and, as members of a coalition with white sugar planters and Populists, came very close to ousting the Democrats from the offices of Governor and U.S. Senator in 1896-97.

Carter and Tunnell may not have intended the reader to draw all the conclusions that I have done from their works, and they may have answers to these and other criticisms and defences for the analogies or implicit counterfactuals that they used. No historian's argument is

ever sufficiently complete to satisfy every critic. Nonetheless, until historians realize the extent to which the explanations that they make of circumscribed sequences of events rest on comparisons and on generalizations based, at least potentially, on numerous cases, they will not move very far toward agreement on fundamental questions of description and causality.