

Introduction

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In *Black Reconstruction* (1935), W.E.B. Du Bois declared that his purpose was to show how “the real hero and center of human interest” during Reconstruction was “the slave who is being emancipated.” If emancipated slaves were the “chief witness[es] in Reconstruction,” he wrote, they had been “almost barred from court.” The African American written record was either destroyed or ignored by historians—especially historians of the early twentieth century describing Reconstruction as a failure that resulted from what they described as “black incapacity.” Du Bois disagreed vehemently. Every effort, he wrote, had been made by these historians of Reconstruction to reduce black participation “with silence and contempt.” The prevalent understanding of the Civil War and its aftermath meant that “we have got to the place where we cannot use our experiences during and after the Civil War for the uplift and enlightenment of mankind.” In the “magnificent drama” of human history, no story was more compelling, Du Bois wrote, than the transportation of ten million Africans into the New World—how they “descended into Hell; and in the third century they arose from the dead, in the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions this world had ever seen.” That truth had been obscured, Du Bois wrote, because of those who “would compromise with the truth in the past in order to make peace in the present and guide policy in the future.”¹

Du Bois’s rendition reflects the contested nature of Reconstruction—in 1935 and today—and how central it remains to understanding American history. But what was Reconstruction, exactly? Freedom for four million enslaved people defined, at a basic level, its revolutionary implications,

but Reconstruction also involved many elements central to American life. Put simply, Reconstruction involved, among other things, struggles about what defined the American nation, what citizenship meant, and how and to what extent relations between law and government existed across national, state, and local levels. Reconstruction coincided with the emergence of two further important developments: the triumph of an industrial order and the early development of the United States as a global economic and, to some extent, military power.

Understanding Reconstruction must start with how Congress reshaped the nation at the end of the Civil War. The governments established in the defeated Confederacy during the two years after the war reinstalled some of the South's antebellum leadership and reestablished a regime of white supremacy over freed slaves in the Black Codes. In response, in March 1867 the Thirty-Ninth Congress identified the terms under which the defeated South could reunify with the nation. Over the veto of President Andrew Johnson, Congress seized control of post-Civil War reunification, imposed military control over much of the South, and established a new process by which state constitutions were written. These Reconstruction Acts remade the political and constitutional landscape and altered the terms under which Reconstruction would occur. The most important part of the 1867–68 revolution was the enfranchisement of adult African American males, leading to the adoption and ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in 1868 and 1870, respectively, and constitutional protections for black citizenship and voting.

For more than a century, historians have examined the meaning of the Civil War and its aftermath, Reconstruction. A vast literature has reflected Americans' perceptions of themselves and what nationhood, citizenship, and international place has meant. Early-twentieth-century historians, most notably William A. Dunning and his followers, portrayed Reconstruction as a mistaken process that disrupted post-Civil War reunification and prematurely empowered freedmen. Beginning in the early 1930s, this Dunningite paradigm—based on obviously racist assumptions—came under attack. Du Bois famously criticized the presumptions of black incapacity—and, implicitly African Americans' responsibility for the failure of Reconstruction—and shifted focus to the destruction of slavery and the emancipation of four million people from it as the centerpiece of a world process.² Revisionist scholars, replacing the Dunningite paradigm,

generally ignored Du Bois but agreed in their assessment, seeing Reconstruction as benign and even beneficial. In 1988, Eric Foner's magisterial *Reconstruction*—still the best synthesis—established still another paradigm. Foner portrays Reconstruction as a flawed process whose liberation of black people would not reach fuller fruition until the civil rights era.³

Since the publication of *Reconstruction* three decades ago, our understanding of the nineteenth century has undergone renewed scrutiny and, as a result, the widening of our understanding of what the post-Civil War era meant. Much of that scholarship has emphasized the global implications of the Civil War in politics, economics, and ideology. Not only was the creation of a new American nation a result of the war, but this creation occurred in concert with a worldwide emergence of modern nationalism. This meant not only stronger nation-states but also weakened ones. Irredentism—the centrifugal power of nationalism—affected empires across the globe, and the breakup of the American Union reflected an assertion of regional particularism that adopted a nationalistic flavor.

Historians have, for several decades, seen slavery and freedom in their international context. Peter Kolchin's invaluable work compares the destruction of U.S. slavery with the end of Russian serfdom. The comparisons are especially apt in the Atlantic world. Eric Foner's *Nothing but Freedom* (1983) outlines in lucid prose how the end of slavery interfaced with the demise of African slavery in Western history. Using comparisons, Foner asserts, "permits us to move beyond 'American exceptionalism' to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the problem of emancipation and its aftermath."⁴

Nonetheless, Foner's *Reconstruction* mostly omits mention, as do even recent assessments, of where the literature might go in a post-Foner paradigm.⁵ It is the contention of this volume that Reconstruction, with all its implication for national self-identity, cannot be understood unless we extend our analysis beyond national borders. Emancipation, nationhood and nationalism, and the spread of market capitalism—all central to U.S. Reconstruction—were interwoven with patterns of post-Civil War global political, social, and economic developments. In common, these essays answer these questions: How can an internationalization of Reconstruction—by considering national history as part of a process involving several state actors—enhance our understanding? How did the Civil War reshape the United States' relationship to the world, regionally and

internationally? In what respects did international developments affect the South's transition from a slave to a free society?

The three essays brought together here use various approaches, assumptions, and methodology to explore the international implications of Reconstruction. We make no claim that this book is “transnational” history, but we believe that the international contexts of what occurred in the United States are essential. *United States Reconstruction across the Americas*, which includes the essays of the distinguished international scholars Rafael Marquese, Don Doyle, and Edward Rugemer, provides different answers, reflecting the contested nature of how historians are interpreting the end of the Civil War and its implications.

If slavery's demise was central to Reconstruction, how had it changed during the pre-emancipation era? Scholars have, in general, dispensed with the once-common depiction of U.S. slavery as static, eccentric, pre-modern, and isolated—and, implicitly, removed from global developments. Instead, they have seen the American slave system as intimately interconnected with global forces driving world capitalism. The American South, by 1860, contained the world's largest and most valuable enslaved population, while southern slaveholders, as a group, reaped fortunes in cotton, rice, sugar, and tobacco. Slavery's profits drove exports, trade, and capital benefiting American and global financial centers. Meanwhile, the protection of slavery remained deeply embedded in the U.S. constitutional system and guided how the national government conducted itself at home and abroad.⁶

Slavery's demise and the transformation of the global plantation system are the subject of this volume's first essay. Rafael Marquese compares the impact of emancipation in the United States and Brazil and the transformation of the coffee and cotton economies. Here, the matter of how to periodize Reconstruction emerges. Traditionally, historians have used the twelve years between the Confederate surrender in 1865 and the final withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877 to mark the beginning and end of Reconstruction. Marquese, arguing for a wider view, adopts what some historians call a “Long Reconstruction,” which encompassed the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. He argues that “spatial expansion”—the globalized understanding of American history—should be matched by “temporal expansion” into the twentieth century. Marquese is concerned primarily with what he calls a “profound reorganization of the national state and American capitalism

that took place between 1870 and 1914” (16) Marquese connects American Reconstruction with larger global processes. An especially crucial concept is Dale Tomich’s “Second Slavery,” in which Atlantic slavery—including North America and Latin America—underwent, during the first half of the nineteenth century, a transformation in response to the spread of capitalism and the increasing unification of the world economy. For Marquese, the Second Slavery provides a model for understanding both the “integrated trajectory of slavery in Brazil and the United States” (17) and how the coffee and cotton economies of these nations interacted after emancipation.

In both the United States and Brazil, slavery revitalized itself because of plantation economies that became ever more tightly integrated in the world economy. In the U.S. South, cotton drove a rapid economic expansion throughout the country, the physical and demographic expansion of the enslaved population, and an empowered slaveholder class. In Brazil, the production of coffee, a commodity new to the nineteenth century, spurred the expansion of slavery in northeastern Brazil. Emancipation and its aftermath played out differently in the two countries, however. While in the American South slavery was destroyed only through violent struggle, in Brazil this process occurred more slowly.

After American slavery ended, the economies of the two nations became more integrated, but Brazil’s planter class consciously avoided the U.S. model of plantation organization and labor. Rather, they reshaped the labor system by using free labor—cheap immigrant labor, primarily from Italy—under the *colonato* system of small shareholders. The coffee economy flourished under this system. “Although distinct from southern sharecropping,” Marquese writes, “both strategies tried to solve the same problem: how to recover the high levels of labor exploitation of slavery times in the post-emancipation period” (29). Although the U.S. South expanded cotton production rapidly under sharecropping and tenancy, this system of land tenure and labor was extremely decentralized and differed significantly from the more centralized enslaved work regime it replaced. In contrast, the *colonato* system centralized planter control over labor and production, work discipline, and harvest and processing of coffee beans. Marquese concludes that “the reconfiguration of the North American capitalist order in the Reconstruction era was an essential constituent part of the crisis of the Second Slavery and the passage from empire to republic in Brazil” (39).