Reconstructing Democracy: Grassroots Black Politics in the Deep South after the Civil War

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For the past five years, American historians have been knee-deep in the American Civil War. The 150th anniversary of this historical moment has brought on a deluge of writing on the subject: an exhilarating, exhausting experience. A mountain of work on the war now strains already groaning library shelves. The result, however, has yielded some surprises. Whereas an earlier generation of scholars interpreted the war as a necessary, noble effort to end slavery and bring the country in line with its highest ideals, historians are now more circumspect about the struggle. Earlier debates about whether the Union government ended slavery, or whether black slaves did the heavy lifting themselves, has given way to a more nuanced understanding of causation. Historians have augmented a focus on emancipation and the application of national power in the American South, with a more expansive historical horizon that now includes the history of Native Americans and the republic’s western territories. Even the war’s end has received due attention and worthwhile complication. All of this literature has pulled at the threads of a story we thought we knew. What’s more, this work has opened up the tantalising possibility that as historians turn their attention to the period that followed the Civil War, the story of Reconstruction might be just as thoughtfully reexamined.

We ought to be careful about what we wish for. If the history of the Civil War remains the beating heart of America’s civic religion, the history of what followed that conflict, Reconstruction, has long been the republic’s cautionary tale. No matter the generation, Reconstruction has been a darker moment in which Americans have found abundant tragedy. For scholars in the early 20th century –reared on stories of lost causes and craven attempts by northerners, who were hellbent on turning a racial order upside down – Reconstruction served as a story of overweening federal power. For scholars who experienced the civil rights movement, Reconstruction was tragic, not because emancipated African Americans were elevated above their rightful station, but because of endemic white violence. By the last decades of the 20th century, historians of Reconstruction adopted a broader view on the period, creating a rich literature that demonstrated the chaotic way in which African Americans battled against their former owners, various levels of government, internal contradictions and the inconsistencies of capitalism, all to secure a meaningful freedom.
Yet, even if the work of historians has laid the groundwork for a new history of Reconstruction that honestly reckons with the triumphs and the tragedies of the period, recent events have made it clear that this particular anniversary will remain as contentious as ever. Racial violence in Ferguson, Missouri, Baltimore, Maryland, New York City and dozens of other American cities and towns over the past two years have forced the nation to confront the gap between a worn-out triumphalist history about equality in a post-civil rights America, and a much harsher reality. Activists, pundits and historians claimed victory when southern state governments lowered the Confederate battle flag in reaction to the shooting of nine innocent black men and women in Charleston in June 2015. Yet, the white terrorist movement that gave shooter Dylan Roof’s life its meaning remains alive and well, and endemic police brutality and the carceral state continue to threaten African-American communities all over the country. All of which makes it clear that any anniversary of Reconstruction will be seen through the prism of a country as racially divided as it has ever been. If black Americans have to remind the nation at the beginning of the 21st century that black lives do in fact matter, what kind of history will be written about the moment in which African-American freedom was at its most contested?

It is in this light that one of the first new books on Reconstruction aims to kick off a new discussion about race, politics, citizenship and the meaning of emancipation in the Civil War’s aftermath. Taking the Natchez region of the Lower Mississippi Valley as his focus, Justin Behrend attempts to show how civil war and emancipation created opportunities for African Americans to build a viable, vibrant political culture and a set of durable institutions. The author argues that this culture and those institutions withstood the opposition of white opponents, the ambivalence of federal officials, and the internal problems of a people freed from slavery but lacking the economic power to match their hard-won political rights. What Behrend intends is to excavate the political history of emancipated black communities; to ask ‘how citizens develop a political consciousness and how and why ordinary people’ practice politics (p. 4). The result is a study that demonstrates that when historians throw terms like ‘democracy’ about, we ought to be more careful about how we define them. Rather than emerging from slavery with static ideas about what democracy and democratic practice was, Behrend argues that African Americans in Natchez fashioned their own ideas and their own practices, drawn from their own experience and purpose built to suit their own circumstances. Like all good studies, Behrend makes it clear that his work stands on some broad scholarly shoulders. Building on the work of historians like Steven Hahn, Elsa Barkley-Brown, Julie Saville and others, Behrend argues that any study of black politics cannot be stripped from the regional and even local context in which African Americans fought for freedom, or the unique building blocks of black communities. Traversing the chronological limits of the field, the author delves into not only the war but its aftermath, providing readers with an expansive picture of a part of the South wracked by upheaval, war, occupying Union armies and profound conflicts over land and labour that gave meaning to black political struggles throughout. With an eye fixed on his influences, Behrend makes a contribution of his own, by making it clear that black politics was dynamic, often contradictory and complicated in its application.

For a scholar who is so well versed on the debates in a crowded field of historiography, what Behrend brings to the literature is painstaking research. This is one of the most richly documented, beautifully rendered research projects on Reconstruction one is likely to see, and it is a testament to the writer’s skill as a historian that he manages to build a clear argument, with all of what he has unearthed. In addition to working with a variety of documents from the National Archive, Behrend has done some impressive digging into records from a variety of state and local repositories. This is no mean feat, particularly in a part of the country where local records are not always easy to work with. In the best tradition of Reconstruction historians, who traverse social and cultural history to lay bare a political story of ordinary people, Behrend also adds to the field through the contribution of an online database of black officeholders in the Mississippi and Louisiana counties that make up the Natchez district. The author has found more than four hundred African Americans who secured local political offices, or who served in positions of local and state party leadership. The result of all of this work is a fine-grained study that forces the attention of readers to a gritty lived experience. True to his word, the author has reconstructed a political culture with incredible vibrancy.
Reconstructing Democracy comprises three sections that trace the roots and emergence of a black political culture in Natchez, as well as the origins of an opposition movement to African-American power. The first chapter excavates the social origins of this political culture, with a particular focus on the social networks that, according to Behrend, freedpeople translated into an elastic political network that stretched the length and breadth of Natchez. Borrowing his interpretive lens from the work of sociologists and political anthropologists, Behrend conceives of Natchez as comprising a few key hubs of social and political networking, with spokes expanding outwards to connect places like the towns of Natchez or Port Gibson to plantations all over the region. During the Civil War, Behrend argues that black political networks passed news of the conflict and the prospects of freedom to black communities, but that the individuals who made this network go were the mobile hack drivers and jobbing black artisans, who moved from plantation to plantation, passing news.

When it became clear that Union forces had their sights trained on not only the occupation of Natchez but the emancipation of slaves, Behrend argues that the black relationship with the federal government was a complicated one. The author is at pains to make it clear that African Americans responded to northern ambivalence towards them with a canny awareness of what the federal government and its army could not, or would not, do. While they hoped for protection from white reprisal, black communities in Natchez still stayed close to Union encampments during the war. While they offered their help to Union forces when it was called upon, freedpeople did not lend a hand without making demands. And when the war was over, African Americans did not wait for the federal government to bestow political rights upon them. Rather, ‘they plunged ahead into the political vacuum that emerged in the wake of the war to make a claim for their rights and their place in local society as well as in the nation’ (p. 45).

To do this, African Americans augmented their local network by strengthening their local institutions: the churches, schools and political associations that formed the cornerstones of their postwar political culture. By focusing on this institution building, Behrend pushes past the argument that freedpeople naturally gravitated towards God and schoolrooms. Rather, he argues that all of this effort had a clear social and political purpose. As he writes, ‘membership in a church, participation in a school, or activism in a mutual aid association gave freedpeople more security and allowed many to step free from the influence of white patrons’ (p. 76). Building as Behrend does on a rich secondary literature, specialists in the field will not be entirely surprised by this assertion. Though the author supports this part of his argument with abundant evidence, Reconstructing Democracy does not break new ground, so much as deepen the existing work which has already been done.

Where Behrend does depart from the literature is in his assertion that when called upon to step into the body politic as citizens, African Americans proved to be complex political actors. In a fascinating third chapter, Behrend does away with the idea that black allegiance to the Republican Party was a given. Taking African Americans seriously as voters, the author shows how black political choice was informed by a range of circumstances and hard-headed political alliances, sometimes with white southerners. Given their wartime experiences with the Union, freedpeople did not automatically support the Republican Party at the expense of all other options. Rather, they proved to be quite shrewd about who they voted for on election day. While many blacks voted the Republican ticket, others bolted the party and the local Union Leagues, when it became clear that white leaders were cool to the idea of African Americans taking an active, leadership role in the organisation. Equally, black voters did not automatically oppose the entreaties of white Democrats, who, according to Behrend, were forced in changed circumstances to reach out to black voters in ways that would have been unimaginable a few years before. What the author makes clear is that African Americans proved to be more willing to compromise, more willing to reach across the racial divide, and were more comfortable than many white Republicans at coalition building. As a fourth chapter makes abundantly clear, black political leaders in the late 1860s proved able to cater to their base, ‘while also developing a biracial politics that accommodated some of the concerns of the indigenous white elite’ (p. 121).
By making it clear that black political leaders in Natchez had their sights set on building a lasting coalition across racial lines, Behrend argues that the real threat to a white establishment was not simply that African Americans held positions of import in state and local government. Rather, black efforts to build a more robust state held out the promise of building a coalition of poorer Mississippians. Again, this intervention builds on the existing scholarship. The work of historians like Steven Hahn, Jane Daily and others have all shown the agile nature of black political culture, and dating as far back as C. Vann Woodward’s work on the Populist Party, one can see the threads of a similar argument about the willingness of African Americans to work with whites in coalition. What Behrend adds to this debate is an awareness of not simply the fault lines in black political culture in Mississippi, but an understanding of the white reaction to African-American political power as emanating from something more than blunt racial hatred. The virulence of the movement to ‘redeem’ Mississippi from black government, not to mention the timing of it, stemmed in no small part from the fact that African Americans succeeded in building a grassroots political system, one that could only be threatened through extralegal means.

Behrend is clear that the ultimate strength of the black political system was also its greatest weakness. By avoiding the centralisation of power and rooting black political action in communities, white vigilante violence could pinpoint individual counties and institutions and lay siege to them, one by one. Yet, as Behrend argues in the final chapters, this determined effort by whites, as part of what has become known as the ‘White Line’ movement, threatened, narrowed but did not foreclose black politics in Natchez. Based on their strength in numbers, and the African-American willingness to reach out to form coalitions or ‘fusion tickets’, African Americans maintained some semblance of power, until white oligarchs from outside of Natchez bore down hard on black counties in earnest at the close of the 19th century. In the end, black democracy ‘proved to be remarkably resilient to economic coercion and racist intimidation’ (p. 256). Disfranchisement hammered the final nail in the coffin, though as with much of the literature on Reconstruction, historians like Behrend detect the vestiges of political mobilisation in the black freedom struggle that would follow.

The parallels between Justin Behrend’s Reconstruction history of Natchez and the present-day, only adds weight to the author’s central claim: that egalitarian, grassroots democracy has long found its purest expression in African American communities. For every stealth, state-sponsored policy that targets black communities, or for every act of violence that serves to exemplify the second-class citizenship of black Americans in the 21st century, one need not look long to find a grassroots effort to mobilise communities to push back. Behrend’s work succeeds in highlighting the back story to this mobilisation. His study does not make a set of bold historiographical claims. It doesn’t need to. Reconstructing Democracy deepens, elaborates and adds to a broader debate over Reconstruction, with careful argument and the patient accrual of evidence. In the meticulous work found on every page – and in the abiding devotion of the author to the idea that common people have a political history – Behrend’s work is the perfect place for scholars to begin the work of re-imagining the history of America’s most tortured historical moment.

Notes


9. In the interest of full disclosure, the author is a friend, and was a fellow student when we were in graduate school.


The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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