

Nothing But Freedom
Study Guide
TAH Grant at The Hermitage
July 13-14 2005

Teacher-Scholars are asked to read *Nothing But Freedom* for our discussion on Wed. July 13th. The Study Guide questions will provide us with a context for discussion and debate. Our objective for our discussion is historical inquiry, investigation, and the analysis of debatable issues. Dr. Foner will moderate the dialogue and the purpose of this study guide is to provide Teacher-Scholars with a framework for historical thinking rather than a Q/A structure.

The Introduction:

1. Do you agree with Dr. Foner that “slavery was the fundamental cause of the Civil War, blacks played a central role in that conflict and its aftermath, the land issue was crucial to the fate of Reconstruction, an account of Reconstruction based only upon the testimony of whites must be hopelessly flawed”? (p. 5) Be sure to have specific examples for our discussion or challenge Dr. Foner’s thesis with the views of another historian.

The review by Dr. McPherson “Reconstruction Reconsidered” is on a different book by Dr. Foner, *Reconstruction. America's Unfinished Revolution*. Read the book review below and decide if you agree with the analysis.

James McPherson, "Reconstruction Reconsidered" (book review) *The Atlantic* Vol. 261 (No. 4), April, 1988, pp75-77.

And reconstruction was radical, according to Reconstruction.' America's Unfinished Revolution, Eric Foner's volume in the New American Nation Series. Indeed it was a revolution, though the success of the southern counterrevolution made it an unfinished one.

The revolutionary nature of the Civil War and Reconstruction would seem self-evident: they not only emancipated four million slaves (at a cost of at least 620,000 lives) but also granted those slaves civil and political equality with their former masters and elevated a number of them to political office within three years of their emancipation. Contemporary observers certainly perceived this as a revolution. British and French journalists reporting from the United States during the 1860s described Emancipation and Reconstruction as a "mighty revolution" and "one of the most radical revolutions known in history." Thaddeus Stevens, they told European readers, was the "Robespierre" of "the second American Revolution." None other than Karl Marx wrote extensively about the "world transforming... revolutionary movement" going on in the United States. A northern journalist, visiting the South a decade after the war, wrote, "I do not believe that the ruin of the French nobility at the first Revolution was more complete than . . . that of the proud, rich, and cultivated aristocracy of the low country of South Carolina," where former slaves now owned considerable land and held most of the government offices. Speaking in behalf of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which granted ex-slaves equal citizenship and empowered federal courts to enforce civil rights, a senator from Maine conceded that "this species of legislation is absolutely revolutionary." He went on, "But are we not in the midst of a revolution?"

Revisionist historians in the 1960s accepted the notion of Reconstruction as revolution, and praised its achievements. Some of them believed that it was not revolutionary enough; in particular they regretted that Thaddeus Stevens's proposal to confiscate the land of wealthy "traitors" (Confederates) and grant it in forty-acre plots to the freed slaves was never adopted. Without the basis of economic independence that this might have provided them, the largely landless ex-slaves were vulnerable to the white counterrevolution that swept away many of their civil and political rights. Without land reform, one revisionist scholar wrote in 1969, "Reconstruction was a revolution manqué."

Several historians who asked these questions about contemporary America began taking a hard look at Reconstruction. Not surprisingly, they found that whereas northern Republicans had enacted civil-rights laws in the 1860s and 1870s, these lawmakers represented racist constituencies who cared little about black equality per se and watched with indifference, or satisfaction, when the rights were taken away; that although ex-slaves did vote in large numbers for a few years, they remained impoverished sharecroppers on land owned by their former masters, whose economic dominance was never interrupted and whose political dominance quickly recovered. In this post-revisionist view the Freed-men's Bureau became not the coddler of lazy blacks portrayed by traditionalists or the protector of exploited freedmen pictured by revisionists but an agency to get ex-slaves back to work on terms favorable to landlords. Even one of Reconstruction's proudest achievements--the creation from scratch of public-school systems for blacks (and indeed in some localities for whites as

well), capped by teacher-training academies and colleges supported by northern philanthropy --became in post-revisionist eyes merely an instrument for the social control of black workers by the inculcation of docility and decorum. Thus, as one post-revisionist phrased it, the Civil War and Reconstruction produced no "fundamental changes" in the "antebellum forms of economic and social organization in the South." No real revolution took place because the abolition of slavery caused no "specific changes either in the status of the former slaves or in the conditions under which they labored."

As a school of Reconstruction historiography, post-revisionism has lasted a shorter time than did Reconstruction itself. The thesis that the Civil War, this country's largest and most violent upheaval, caused no significant change lacks credibility. Eric Foner's rich, complex, exhaustive study gives post-revisionism the coup d' grace. Reconstruction constituted a "dialectic of continuity and change," he maintains, and we must not lose sight of the importance of the change. Foner's thesis is all the more persuasive because he came to intellectual maturity during the Vietnam era and shares many cultural values and theoretical viewpoints with the post-revisionists. But his disappointment with the documented shortcomings of Reconstruction is tempered by an appreciation of the difficulties it faced and the successes it achieved.

Foner agrees with post-revisionists that the problem of labor relations between former planters and former slaves was the central issue of Reconstruction. But rather than seeing continuity from slavery to sharecropping, he subtly analyzes the dialectic between landowners who wanted to restore gang labor under white supervision, and freedmen who wanted autonomy as independent farmers. The result was tenantry and sharecropping, which allowed freedmen some autonomy and a higher standard of living than they had known as slaves. Drawing on a rich body of recent scholarship on post-Civil War southern agriculture, Foner shows how an oppressive credit system and the restoration of political control by landlords in the 1870s turned sharecropping into a powerful engine of poverty and stagnation. But this is precisely the point that illustrates the radicalism of the brief Reconstruction interlude. As long as Republicans with a largely black constituency controlled southern state and local governments, they could largely protect the legal rights and economic welfare of those constituents....

The success of this counterrevolution, however, confirms the revolutionary dimension of Reconstruction. "It is a measure of how far change had progressed," Foner writes, "that the reaction against Reconstruction proved so extreme." And though largely a failure in the end, Reconstruction left some positive legacies in the form of black educational and social institutions, a tradition of black activism, and constitutional amendments that helped ensure that U.S. race relations would not go in the direction South Africa's have taken and that provided the legal framework for the second Reconstruction of the 1960s.

2. How relevant are the case studies used by Dr. Foner in comparing the American experience on slavery and emancipation with that of other countries? What is the utility of comparative history? How can high school teachers apply the analysis of Dr. Foner to their students?

The Anatomy of Emancipation:

3. What lessons were learned from the revolutions in the Caribbean about laborers after emancipation? How did the planter class respond to the need for cheap labor to rebuild the plantation economy? Were there alternatives? (pp. 16-20)
4. How can power be defined and explained? Who had the power in the Caribbean (the state or the freedmen)? Who had the power during the Reconstruction years in America? (pp. 30-38)

The Politics of Freedom:

5. How would a history teacher analyze the following statement on P. 46:
“Black suffrage fundamentally altered the terms of post-emancipation conflict in the United States. Far more than in the Caribbean and Africa, where white planters, farmers, and mine owners monopolized local political power, state, and local government in America became a battleground between contending social classes, including the black laborer.”

6. Why are the Black Codes and the Civil Rights Act of 1866 both revolutionary and radical in altering the economic power of the South? (pp. 50-55)

7. How should history teachers engage their students in the debate over land and property for the freed slaves? “It was not that blacks challenged the notion of private property per se; rather, they viewed the accumulated property of the planters as having been illegitimately acquired.” (p. 56)

“The “right” to subsistence, however, had no place in a free labor society. Indeed, the end of slavery required a complete overhaul of the law; in a wide variety of instances, what had once been ‘rights’ were now defined as crimes.” (p.57 -59). [Note the influence of blacks in the local judicial systems.]

8. How did the debate over fences and taxes impact the debate over power between the state and the freedmen? (Q. 5 on the Study Guide and pp. 61-73 in the book)

Do you agree with Dr. Foner’s conclusion: “Yet for a moment, American freedmen had enjoyed an unparalleled opportunity to help shape their own destiny.” Explain with historical or empirical evidence!

The Emancipated Worker:

9. How is the labor issue the essential question of Reconstruction? (pp. 79-85)

- Why were prices of commodities inflated to unprecedented levels? (p. 85)
- How effective was the task system? (p. 79), the wage system?, and the ticket system? (pp. 88-89)
- Why did strikes become more prevalent during Reconstruction? How effective were the courts in ending strikes? Contrast the experiences in different states. (Georgia, Arkansas, South Carolina)

10. Why did two contrasting experiences for freedmen emerge in the low country?

”By 1890, 72 percent of the farms in Beaufort County, 71 percent in Colleton, and 81 percent in Bryan County, Georgia were cultivated by their owners, the vast majority of them blacks?” (p. 108)

“The average size of black landholdings, well below fifty acres even in the 1880s declined from year to year as lands were divided and subdivided among family members. (p. 109)

11. How do you evaluate the advantages and disadvantages faced by blacks as a result of their emancipation from slavery? Explain your thesis and basis for your historical argument!