

The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post–Civil War North, 1865–1901. By Heather Cox Richardson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. 336 pp. Index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-674-00637-2.

Reviewed by Michael S. Green

In 1959, Bernard Weisberger wrote a critical analysis in the *Journal of Southern History* entitled “The Dark and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography.” The literature of the ensuing four decades has shed a great deal more light on that still controversial era of American history. With Eric McKittrick’s *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction*, published the next year, historians began salvaging the once demonized Radical Republicans and dehumanized African Americans. Central to this historiographic revolution was Eric Foner’s award-winning *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, published in 1988. Foner placed African Americans at the center of debate but made no effort to claim a completely original interpretation; he duly noted that, half a century before, W. E. B. DuBois’s *Black Reconstruction in America* offered a similar point of view.

Now Heather Cox Richardson, author of a study of Republican economic ideology in the Civil War, has entered the debate with *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post–Civil War North, 1865–1901*. Among her many claims to a different—and courageous—approach, she begins and ends with an analysis of Booker T. Washington, whom DuBois criticized for urging African Americans to “cast down your bucket where you are” and at least momentarily to accept a degraded station. Richardson argues that Washington saw this as the road to betterment. She writes of his Atlanta address of 1895 that he “publicly reappropriated for African-Americans the Northern image of the traditional laborer, who would begin his career in the fields or at a manual craft, and would rebuild the South as he became part of a constantly rising middle class.” She continues: “Reclaiming the Republican vision of African-Americans as traditional mid-nineteenth-century workers, he was attempting to erase the negative images of political, civil rights, and labor agitation of the past decades,” thus making a powerful statement for the advancement of black Americans (p. 5).

In this volume, Richardson tackles the view that Reconstruction failed due to the racism of southerners determined to maintain white supremacy and northerners unwilling to go to the

mat to stop them. Rather, she focuses on class and labor, arguing that whites and blacks distinguished between those who cast down that bucket and those who expected someone to fill it for them. She describes and analyzes debates over actions designed to ease the transition from slavery to freedom that read like an embryonic argument over affirmative action.

When the Civil War ended, northerners preferred freed people to southern whites: they would work. Accordingly, Republicans eyed universal suffrage to add southern blacks to their coalition, but northern Democrats convinced already queasy moderates and conservatives that “voting African-Americans would harness the government to the service of disaffected workers, who hoped to confiscate the wealth of others rather than to work their own way to economic success” (p. 82). Richardson shows that charges of corruption involving newly empowered southern blacks resonated with northerners, but the problem went deeper. To Republicans, free labor meant the freedom to labor; having received that freedom, blacks should take care of themselves. The corruption and labor strife of the Gilded Age, the rise of social Darwinism, and efforts to expand federal power persuaded the less radical that “disaffected black workers” might prove “dangerous to America,” making the government “ beholden to their special interests. Republicans had attached to that argument the fear that those interests would reflect the ideas of those who believed that society was not, in fact, harmonious but was an ongoing struggle between labor and capital” (pp. 183–4). The result, they claimed, would change the American governmental system and breed conditions equated with the worst aspects of communism and antithetical to the nation’s Jeffersonian ideals.

Unlike many historians of Reconstruction, Richardson draws a link to world events. She cites reactions to the Paris Commune of 1871 to show that Americans feared the possibility of communism reaching their shores. Analyzing the frequent labor violence of the late nineteenth century, she demonstrates that concerns crossed racial boundaries. She also takes the conflict to a local level, focusing first on South Carolina and then on the Exodusters, the black migrants of 1879 and 1880, to show the subtleties in northern views of southern blacks and whites. Both implicitly and explicitly, she takes the valuable step of changing the boundaries of Reconstruction: the Compromise of 1877, which she never mentions, may have settled certain issues, but Reconstruction itself proved to be a far more extended, ideological process.

For Richardson, that ideology is related more to class than to race. Yet she hardly makes a Marxist case. Rather, she argues that racial issues have been overemphasized, generally to the exclusion of the thought that financial matters had anything to do with the treatment of African Americans. Given the events of the late nineteenth century, from the strikes of 1877 to the Haymarket and Homestead violence, her case is compelling, at least in part because she never

makes the mistake of denying that race was an issue. Thus, she restores class to the discussion, and a welcome addition it is.

Still, no book is perfect, and this one is no exception. The index is incomplete and, cosmetically, the book would have benefited from some of the striking Thomas Nast cartoons she mentions. Richardson's writing is clear but would have benefited from more graceful editing.

More important, Richardson makes occasional errors or takes risks by going out too far on an interpretive limb. To say that Ohio radical Benjamin Wade was "turned out of the Senate in 1867" is a misstatement: that year's legislative election made his defeat almost certain two years later, and not to say so may puzzle readers who find Wade in the Senate the next year (p. 66). She overstates the significance of Ulysses Grant's election in 1868 by focusing more on his large electoral majority than on the deceptively closer popular vote. She gives Republicans too much credit for advancing in their racial views during the Civil War; the evidence suggests less improvement. She makes a good case for the meaning of the split in 1872 that led to the short-lived Liberal Republicans and Horace Greeley's presidential candidacy but seems not to take into account Greeley's lifelong habit of oscillating on some issues. While she does discuss social Darwinism and its importance, she does so late in the book; bringing it up earlier could have strengthened her points.

These criticisms are not cavalier, but they should not detract from the inestimable value of this book. Antebellum Republicans thought deeply about class-related issues such as labor and capital, and the Civil War drove them closer to capital. Richardson shows the importance of capitalist ideology and economics in an era that is all too often explained by resorting exclusively to race, with no reference to class. Scholars of Reconstruction will have to turn to *The Death of Reconstruction* and will be forever in her debt for this important work.

*Michael S. Green is a professor of history at the Community College of Southern Nevada. He has written "Freedom, Union, and Power: The Ideology of the Republican Party during the Civil War," for the series The North's Civil War: The Sectional Crisis on the Home Front, edited by Paul A. Cimbala and Randall Miller (forthcoming).*