Patterns and Missing Pieces in Reconstruction History:
A Look at Twenty American High School Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

Reconstruction is one of the most contested episodes in American history. As historians throughout the twentieth century altered their presentations of the era, American history textbook authors followed suit by adding many of the new elements the major historians brought to the discussion. Time progressed and new insights emerged within the interpretations as post-World War II America left behind the “traditional” white supremacist renditions to adopt a more “democratic” interpretation and post-Civil Rights America eventually wrote black agency into the story. As modern day historians bring back to life the discussions of Reconstruction based on economic and class struggle originally proposed in the 1930s, the question remains whether the textbook authors of today will incorporate these discussions into their narratives.

Introduction

In 1911, high school students studying United States history from David Saville Muzzey’s textbook, American History, learned that post-Civil War America faced many challenges; the greatest being what to do with the nearly four million slaves suddenly liberated in the South. Muzzey described how the 1867 Congress, dominated by vengeful northerners, “forced Negro suffrage on the South at the point of a bayonet.” The brave white southerners defended themselves from this “crime of Reconstruction” when northerners imposed ignorant black rule on the noble whites of the South. By 1876 “the rule of the stranger” was over and the “restored” South readied itself for the coming industrial revolution.1

But, by 2000, students reading from Gary B. Nash’s (et al.) text, The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society, learned a vastly different version of Reconstruction history. They learned that the country faced many difficult questions regarding what the status of the former Confederate states was and what role the federal government would play in

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protecting civil rights over property rights. As white southerners “braced to resist reconstruction and restore their old world,” the newly freed slaves “insist[ed] on autonomy and land of their own.” They formed schools which they used as “community centers [where they] published newspapers, provided training in trades and farming, and promoted political participation and land ownership.” Students also learned that Reconstruction brought unprecedented autonomy to black southern political and personal life until it was forcefully taken away by southern Democrats through brutally violent acts perpetuated by groups like the Ku Klux Klan and through the inaction of white northerners who were more concerned with economic stability than with protecting the freedmen’s civil rights.

The extreme contrast between these two textbook presentations parallels the differences between historians’ interpretations of Reconstruction history. Two accounts in particular exemplify this polarization: one being that of historian Claude G. Bowers writing in 1929 and the other being W.E.B. Du Bois’ account published just six years later. In his book, The Tragic Era, Bowers described the post-Civil War era as “tragic” when a band of strange and drunken northerners descended upon the South and disastrously turned the newly freed slaves against their former masters. Bowers contended that if “left to themselves, the negroes would have turned for leadership to the native whites, who understood them best.” W.E.B. Du Bois depicted the same era in his book Black Reconstruction in America as a time when ten million human beings emerged from the depths of Hell “in the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world has ever seen.”

The presentation of the era of Reconstruction was transformed again and again as historians were influenced by the zeitgeist of their time. Historian John Hope Franklin once said, “What historians have written [about Reconstruction] tells us as much about their own generation as about the Reconstruction period itself.” The importance of understanding the historiography of Reconstruction derives from the fact that historians’ writings influence what appears in the high school American history textbooks both directly as authors and indirectly as standard setters.

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The purpose of this study is to examine the shifts in the presentations of Reconstruction history to better understand which historical interpretations are adopted by and which are excluded from the textbooks. This study will begin with an explanation of the historiography of Reconstruction, chronologically laying out its various schools of historical thought spanning from the early 1900s until the present. Next, it will examine the presentations of Reconstruction in twenty high school level American history textbooks published between the years of 1899 and 2000. It will look specifically at the gradual modifications to three specific issues: 1) the treatment of the motives of the white northerners in their actions during Reconstruction; 2) the account of the nature of the changes that occurred in the South during Reconstruction; and 3) the handling of the agency of black southerners during emancipation and Reconstruction. Finally it will draw some conclusions about trends in the presentation of Reconstruction in the textbooks.

Upon close examination of these textbooks, two trends stand out most distinctly. One is that two significant shifts in presentation occurred: the first in the 1950s when presentations of Reconstruction moved from a white supremacist explanation to one focused more on the democratic accomplishments of the time; the second shift in presentation appeared in the early 1980s when black agency appeared in the textbooks. The second trend was that not a single textbook’s presentation of Reconstruction examined it in terms of either economics or class based on the work of the progressive and the Marxist historians.

Why does all of this matter? It is important because the study of history is fundamental to understanding one’s role in the world. For most citizens the bulk of this study comes from their high school history classes. While the “facts” from their textbooks are often easily forgotten, what does remain is what Francis Fitzgerald called an overall “atmosphere, [ ] impression, [ ] tone” of what American history (hence America) is. According to historian James D. Anderson, “As they progress through our formal education system [our citizens] acquire from textbooks a fragmented, incoherent and superficial understanding of the role of race in American history” which perpetuates the impression of race as “a set of relatively fixed, known and self evident categories necessitated by logic and science.” He warned that this portrayal leads to the pervasive ignorance and stereotyping of race exhibited throughout the last century in

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America. The way in which Reconstruction has been taught has promoted the very misperceptions Anderson spoke of.

Given that until the 1980s, the textbooks gave almost no credit to the freedmen for their agency in emancipation or in Reconstruction; students of history up until then were left with the idea that black people were incapable of acting on their own behalf. In 1995 Thomas C. Holt criticized the failure of history textbooks to keep up with the growing richness of the understanding of Reconstruction. He asserted that only when the authors abandon conventional plots and simplicity in their explanations of complex periods like Reconstruction will they begin reflecting the increased complexity of current Reconstruction historiography. Holt claimed the solution was not simply to add characters to the story but “rather a devised calculus” was needed to create a sense of congruity.8

**Historiography of Reconstruction**

In 1988, historian Eric Foner wrote, “Revising interpretations of the past is intrinsic to the study of history. But no part of the American experience has…seen a broadly accepted point of view so completely overturned as Reconstruction.”9 Only through the examination of the intricacies within the various arguments over Reconstruction history can one begin to draw clear and distinct lines between them.

From the late 1800s until roughly the 1930s traditional historians dominated Reconstruction historiography. Based mostly on the teachings of historian William A. Dunning, this traditional version became known as the “Dunning School” of thought. In this interpretation, radical Republicans maliciously brought harm to the South through their extremist policies until “home rule” was reestablished. These ideas were founded on the basic assumptions of biological white supremacy and black inferiority. Historian Claude G. Bowers represented this era in Reconstruction historiography. His book written in 1929, tellingly titled, *The Tragic Era*, described Reconstruction as a time when “the Southern people were fighting for the preservation of their civilization” while “the[ir] peace [as] a fallen people” was challenged by “soldiers inciting the blacks against their former masters, the Bureau agents preaching political and social equality, the white scum of the North fraternizing with the blacks in their shacks, and

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the thieves of the treasury stealing cotton under the protection of Federal bayonets."\textsuperscript{10} Bowers reported that the two most active groups in Reconstruction were the white southern politicians and the white northern radicals. The politicians of the South, described as pious and thoughtful men faced off against a scandalous group of drunken northern radicals who enacted a takeover of power and would not be “diverted by a dead President [Lincoln], who, to them, was well out of the way.”\textsuperscript{11} Bowers presented black southerners as “children, acting as children would under the circumstances.” They were reduced to once faithful participants in the institution of slavery until northern radicals intentionally turned them against their former masters and fooled them into becoming unwitting supporters of Reconstruction. He claimed that when on occasion “some of these loyal creatures, momentarily intoxicated with the breath of liberty, would roam down the road toward the towns, [they would] return with childlike faith to the old plantation.”\textsuperscript{12}

In 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois challenged the traditional interpretation of the Dunning School with his book, \textit{Black Reconstruction in America}. It was a look at Reconstruction through a Marxist lens with class conflict portrayed as the central issue of the time. He defined the era as an idealistic attempt “to reconstruct the basis of American democracy” through the newly freed “black workers” based on a struggle between the labor class (both white and black) and the land owning class. According to Du Bois, the time was far from “tragic” as Bowers had described. Instead, he argued that one of the many great successes of the time was that the workers of the American South took a revolutionary step forward in the ongoing global struggle for true democracy.\textsuperscript{13}

Du Bois credited black southerners for initiating that step. The freedmen, according to Du Bois, were “a central thread in the history of the United States, at once a challenge to its democracy and always an important part of its economic history and social development.”\textsuperscript{14} In what Du Bois called “the general strike,” millions of “black workers” strategically mutinied from the southern plantations and transferred the benefits of their labor to the armies of the North. They knew, as Du Bois stated, that “without their labor the South would starve.” According to Du Bois, it was through these actions that the slaves forced the issue of their freedom on the other actors in the Civil War. After hundreds of thousands of slaves moved

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Bowers, 61.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Bowers, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Bowers, 46-52.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Du Bois, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Du Bois, 3.
\end{itemize}
into roles as soldiers, laborers and spies for the Union Army, the North inadvertently “found itself actually freeing slaves before it had the slightest intention of doing so, indeed when it had every intention not to.” Eventually, despite his claims of having no intention of freeing the slaves, Lincoln was forced to “face[ ] the truth” not that “Negroes ought to be free; [but] that thousands of them were already free.”

As Du Bois published his revolutionary interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction, historians, Charles A. and Mary R. Beard were also rewriting the story of the era. Referring to Reconstruction as the “Second American Revolution,” they explained the time through a strictly economic perspective. According to them, the Civil War and Reconstruction were simply parts of an economic transformation whose crowning achievement was “the salvation of the Union…[which] assured to industry an immense national market surrounded by a tariff wall [against] the competition from Europe.” Reconstruction was simply a “transitory phase” in the ongoing shift in the economics of the country from one based squarely in the agrarian South to one dominated by the industrial North. They believed that “the real revolution,” which they saw as “the silent shift of social and material power,” had actually occurred long before the South’s attempt at secession.

According to the Beards, the key players in the Civil War and Reconstruction were the northern businessmen and the southern planter class, each motivated to action through either the fear of or the hope for secession. The northerners, the Beards claimed, foresaw the economic disaster southern secession would bring for the North. White moderate Republicans were moved by the people they represented who were “interested primarily in…protective tariffs, free homesteads, and related matters” and were, according to the Beards, “practical people who thought the less said about slavery the better.” The Beards portrayed the slaves (and later the freedmen) as more of a “distracting element” than as active participants in the “revolution” of Reconstruction. They faulted the freed slaves for having “not essentially improved their status through their years of bondage…made no striking development in intelligence; nor had…succeeded in acquiring property” despite their desire for freedom. Instead, the freedmen “into whose hands the ballot was thrust by the white victors,” were used by the white northern politicians to throw the balance of political power to the Republicans.

15 Du Bois, 66-82.
17 Beard, 56-98.
18 Beard, 100-116.
By the 1940s, a new movement in Reconstruction historiography known as “revisionist” history began to emerge. At its inception it rejected the Dunning School’s racist ideology, embraced the Beards’ economic theory, and added new questions about the various participants’ motivation to study the era. By the mid-1960s these historians came to dominate historical thinking with new insights as they eventually rejected the Beards’ theories and under the influence of the 1960’s Civil Rights Movement (also coined America’s “Second Reconstruction”) they turned their attention more toward the democratic accomplishments of Reconstruction and the groundwork it laid for future civil rights successes.

Beginning with Howard K. Beale in 1940, the revisionists asked that new historians shed their predecessors’ preconceived assumptions “that carpetbaggers and southern white Republicans were wicked, that Negroes were illiterate incompetents, and that the whole white South owes a debt of gratitude to the restorers of ‘white supremacy.’” Beale instead focused on creating a “fair-minded investigation” based on the study of the various economic and social forces that motivated the different groups. According to him, the white southerners were war weary and “willing to forget their cause…if only they could have peace.” White northerners were moved mostly by profit and the desire to displace the system of slave labor for “a more democratic way of life based on free labor.” They also opened “schools, courts, and other public agencies to Negroes” in an effort to “make intelligent citizens out of ignorant Negroes.” Beale described the freedmen as “ignorant, childlike, and inexperienced.” He claimed the former slaves were “not only illiterate but had no conception of…the meaning of the terms like government, morality, suffrage, or even free labor.”

On the question of the revolutionary status of the time, Beale asserted that Reconstruction was in part revolutionary in that a formerly dominant agrarian society “was overthrown by an industrial and urban unrest.” He also claimed that when “control by large [slave owning] property holders…was displaced by a more democratic way of life, based on free labor” it caused “not only emancipat [ion of] Negro slaves but gave poor white men a chance to seek more political power.”

By 1965 revisionist history grew to prominence with historian Kenneth M. Stampp’s book, *The Era of Reconstruction 1865-1877*. In it Stampp abandoned the Beards’ economic interpretation of the time and focused instead on the altruistic motivations of the Radical Republicans. Calling them “heirs of Enlightenment,” Stampp claimed they were moved

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20 Beale, 813-814.
to act through a “genuine desire to do justice to the Negro.” Some acted out of pure selflessness, some were motivated by “objectives that were morally good for reasons that were morally bad,” but none were based in deliberate malice. Where does this account leave the newly freed slave? Once again, the black southerner was relegated to a largely indirect role in Reconstruction history. Stampp described the mass of southern Negroes as “illiterate...[and] easily intimidated. Because of their political inexperience and economic helplessness, they were sometimes mislead and victimized” by Republicans and Democrats alike. With an account much like an aside, Stampp acknowledged that “it would be far from the truth to say that their political behavior during Reconstruction was altogether passive or irresponsible” since their leaders after all “had demanded [suffrage] from the start” and sent protests to Washington when the vote was kept from them.\footnote{Stampp, 16-18, 215.}

Stampp claimed it was the shift in social trends brought on by the emerging industrial revolution that was to blame for the eventual failure of Reconstruction. It transferred the political and economic power from America’s middle class with their “genteel culture and strong traditions of disinterested public service” to the oil and railroad barons of the industrial age who were more interested in profit. Also, when the previously dedicated Radicals “tired of reform” and retreated from the fight to “writ[e] their memoirs” the freedmen lost their most integral ally in Reconstruction. But the goals of Reconstruction were not a total loss because, according to Stampp, from the ashes of Reconstruction arose the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution “which could have been adopted only under the conditions of radical reconstruction” and which gave “the American Negro the ultimate promise of equal civil and political rights.”\footnote{Kenneth M. Stampp, \textit{The Era of Reconstruction 1865-1877}. New York: Vintage Books, 1965, 12, 97-105, 165-166.}

Since the dominance of Stampp’s revisionist account in the mid to late 1960s, historians have failed to produce a single coherent version of Reconstruction history. Part of the problem, as John Hope Franklin noted in 1980, was that “among the recent writing on Reconstruction few major works seek to synthesize and to generalize over the whole range of the freedmen’s experience, to say nothing of Reconstruction as a whole.”\footnote{Franklin, 11.} In 1988, Eric Foner attributed these shortcomings to the fact that more recent historians emphasized the study of “social concerns” like “the experience of blacks, women, and labor and to subjects like family structure, social mobility, and popular culture” which led to a “fragmentation of historical scholarship and retreat from the idea that one coherent vision of the past is
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These post-revisionists are divided into roughly two camps: 1) those who focused on the essentially non-revolutionary nature of Reconstruction and 2) those who proclaimed a revolutionary quality that was central to Reconstruction history.

The first group argued for continuity over change by suggesting that the planter class actually had survived Reconstruction, maintaining both their land holdings as well as their social status. They questioned the actual impact Reconstruction had on the lives of everyday Americans and accused the Republicans of failing to pass truly radical legislation which would have enacted permanent protections for the freedmen. Even the intentions of the Freedmen’s Bureau were considered suspect when the organization was described by historian William McFeely, as “a practitioner of paternalism, working hand in glove with the planters to force emancipated blacks back to work on plantations.”

One such argument came from Michael Les Benedict who described Reconstruction as moderate when he agreed with the Nation’s claim that although it was “brought forward as a radical remedy...[it was] anything but radical.” He criticized the actions taken by the federal government over the states to protect the freedmen for their impermanence and for their loss of control over the situation as the southern states regained statehood. Employing the idea of continuity over change, Benedict concluded his essay, written in 1974, with the following statement: “Even today it is only with the utmost reluctance that our national government will intervene to protect citizens’ rights within states. After 100 years, the constitutional conservatism which prevented Republicans from protecting adequately the rights of citizens remains a part of American political character.”

Through the perspective of these historians, black agency was once again non-existent as laws were passed on the freedmen’s behalf by white Republicans. Benedict claimed that black enfranchisement which spawned from white Republicans was motivated by “security for the Union” while maintaining southern support for “allow[ing] Reconstruction to continue on a conservative constitutional basis.” Another historian in this group, Harold M. Hyman, alluded to black inactivity when he claimed that Reconstruction was a “sporadic national commitment to decent standards

24 Foner, Reconstruction, xxii.
27 Benedict, 84.
for citizens’ civil and political rights practices in their states; a reluctant resort to certain coercive modes and institutions in attempts to have black Americans live uncoerced.”

In contrast to these ideas, the second group, led by Eric Foner, carried on a radical Marxist interpretation of Reconstruction originally championed by Du Bois. Foner described Reconstruction as a class conflict embodied by the “struggle between former master and former slave” with the central issue being control over the labor of the former slaves. Disputing the argument of the centrality of the continuity of pervasive racism and black disenfranchisement throughout time, Foner argued that “Reconstruction was not merely a specific time period, but the beginning of an extended historical process” that since, “under other names, the struggle unleashed by emancipation, for equality in social relations, access to the resources of the earth, and the fruits of one’s own labor, still continues.” He contended that these changes set the stage for “an ongoing process of social and economic changes” where the working classes and the owner classes continuously battled over autonomy and power.

Foner also claimed that when the aristocratic plantation society was destroyed, a capitalist system materialized; from the former planter aristocracy emerged a bourgeois land-owning class and from slavery grew the black proletariat. The radicalness of the time came when the former slaves were given the right to vote, hence political access to the state, which in Marxist ideology is imperative in the formation of a powerful proletariat. According to Foner, this newly found power was “without precedent” as southern Reconstruction became “a massive experiment in interracial democracy.”

Foner’s account of the agency of black southerners also differed greatly from that of the first group. He credited the black southerners’ participation as being “the most radical development of Reconstruction.” Foner claimed it was due to the prodding of these “four million men and women just emerging from slavery [that] Americans made their first attempt to live up to the noble professions of their political creed.” Through this same persistence, “their quest for individual and community autonomy did much to establish Reconstruction’s political and economic agenda.” Foner applauded the freedmen’s achievements to establish “as much independence as possible in their working lives, consolidate their

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families and communities, and stake a claim to equal citizenship” despite the numerous obstacles to their success during and after Reconstruction.  

Methodology of Choosing Textbooks

The textbooks chosen for this study were selected with consideration for the significance of the authors involved in their creation. In order to compile a list of significant authors other studies which examined history textbooks’ presentations of various topics were investigated from which a list of significant authors was compiled. The textbooks were also selected on their usability in a high school level American history class.

Textbook Analysis

In this study of the presentations of Reconstruction in twenty high school level American history textbooks, two crucial patterns stood out. The first was that two strong shifts in presentation happened at roughly the same time in the textbooks. The first shift happened in 1950 when almost every textbook’s presentations moved out of the traditional white supremacist interpretation of Reconstruction and into the revisionist interpretation, which recognized the end of slavery as a proud moment for the country as democracy defeated aristocracy. The second occurred in the early 1980s when virtually all of the textbooks introduced black agency within the Reconstruction narratives. The other important pattern the textbooks shared was that in all cases interpretations of Reconstruction based on issues of economics or class struggle were absent from all of the textbooks’ discussions.

On the issue of the white northerners’ motivations, four of the five textbooks published in 1946 or earlier were relentless in their Dunning-esque presentations of the white northerners’ motivations fueled by hatred

31 Foner, Reconstruction, xxiii-xxv.
and personal gain (see Appendix, Chart I). Some examples of this were in *A History of the American Nation* which condemned the Reconstruction governments of the South for being “incompetent and woefully corrupt.”\(^{33}\) Another example came from *American History*, printed in 1911, which described radical Senator Thaddeus Stevens as “violent” and “vindictive.”\(^{34}\) Then, later, in 1936’s *America’s Progress in Civilization*, the author pontificated that the white northern politicians “seemed to want to humiliate and crush the South.”\(^{35}\) The “carpetbaggers” from the North also suffered under the same criticisms of this traditional dogma. A 1911 textbook, for instance, accused them of “poison[ing] the minds of the Negroes against the only people who could really help...--their old masters”\(^{36}\) and of “controlling the Negro vote” in order to get themselves elected as claimed by *America’s Progress in Civilization*.\(^{37}\) In 1946’s *America: Land of Freedom* they were described as “unprincipled men from the North” who poured into the South “to get important positions in Southern politics and to enrich themselves by swindling the people.”\(^{38}\)

The traditional “tragic” interpretation of the nature and degree of change was also present in all pre-1950s textbooks. One such report in the 1911 textbook decried Reconstruction a “crime” that thankfully had ended by 1877 as “the rule of the stranger pass[ed] in the South.”\(^{39}\) 1937’s *America’s Progress in Civilization* sympathized that “the southern people suffered greatly” until the end of Reconstruction when “the bitter feelings of war and reconstruction mellowed.”\(^{40}\)

Traditional presentations of black agency were also present in all of the pre-1950s textbooks as they echoed the Dunning School’s racist ideas. In 1899, *A History of the American Nation* claimed that the freedmen had “no fitness for the difficult tasks that needed attention” in the government.\(^{41}\) *America: Land of Freedom* offered perhaps the most traditional presentation in its claim that before the war “planters had fed and clothed, and cared for the Negroes in sickness and old age. After the war this


\(^{34}\) Muzzey, 500.


\(^{36}\) Muzzey, 480.

\(^{37}\) Freeland, 306.


\(^{39}\) Muzzey, 489-500.

\(^{40}\) Freeland, 311.

\(^{41}\) McLaughlin, 442.
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protection was taken away and they had to depend on themselves. They were unprepared for freedom and did not know what it meant."  

By 1950, all but one of the textbooks shifted completely away from the traditional interpretation of the era and moved towards the revisionists as they recognized some level of altruism in white northerners’ motivations and the welcome defeat of the “undemocratic” system of slavery. The post-1950s presentations of black agency also shifted as the textbooks replaced the traditional idea of black southerners as completely incompetent with the revisionist interpretation of them as pitifully debilitated by slavery. This shift was, however, minor in that it still failed to produce a presentation of competent and intentional black agency.

On the issue of white northerners’ motivations, every post-World War II textbook rejected the idea of purely selfish intentions and instead acknowledged a level of good will on the part of some. No longer on the whole labeled as “vindictive” and “harsh,” they were now recognized for being individuals with varied motivations. One such textbook published in 1950 called Rise of the American Nation contradicted the traditional presentation when it stated while “some radicals were influenced by economic and political considerations…a good many had a sincere feeling of obligation to the freed slaves.”  

Another example of this shift was in The Free and the Brave: The Story of the American People, written in 1967, which stated that the northern radicals “freed all the slaves” because they were strongly anti-slavery and had “made up their minds to help the former slaves.”  

The motivations of the “carpetbaggers” were also redeemed when Rise of the American Nation claimed they had been wrongly grouped together as being “fly-by-night-adventurers” because “some sincerely wanted to help.”  

Also at mid-century the textbooks shifted in their presentations of the nature and degree of changes. They rejected the traditional overall “tragic” interpretation for a more mixed result of success and failure founded on the work of Beale and Stampp. The textbooks after 1950 claimed that the time was a success in that it brought an end to the undemocratic system of slavery and set the stage for future civil rights

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42 Hartman, 406.
45 Todd, 397-398.
achievements, but that it was partly a failure when it was unsuccessful in permanently securing rights for black Americans.

The first wave of textbooks published after 1950 fell into the early revisionists’ camp. They agreed with Beale in the success that came with the end of slavery and in recognizing the failure in the lack of achievements of the freedmen. A New History of the United States, published in 1969, supported this view when it declared Reconstruction a success in that “the Union was restored without slavery” but a failure when “blacks were not taken into the mainstream of American life on an equal basis with other citizens.” By the late 1960s, under the influence of the “Second Reconstruction,” the textbooks moved completely into the revisionists’ camp. In 1978, America Is spoke of the temporary failure of the first Reconstruction, but hinted of future success when it stated that “the real losers in the compromise of 1877 were southern blacks” whose “struggle for equal rights would last for many decades.”

The presentation of black southern agency during Reconstruction also experienced a shift out of the traditional camp at the mid-century point. With only one exception in 1954, all other textbooks published from 1950 to the present abandoned the presentation founded on biological inferiority and black people’s inability to be “responsible citizens” for a more sympathetic one that blamed the incapability of this population on the debilitating effect of slavery (see Appendix, Chart III). This is not to say, however, that these textbooks offered presentations of capable and intentional black agency.

Interestingly, while the common shift in the textbook presentations at mid-century offered improvements to the treatments of white northerners’ motivations as well as to the nature and degree of changes, the time saw minimal alteration in the presentation of black agency during Reconstruction. While a strong movement out of the purely traditional interpretation and into mostly the later revisionist camp did occur, it is important to remember the fact that the revisionist historians gave little more credit to black southerners for their actions during Reconstruction than did the traditionalists. In Beale’s early treatment of the topic, he basically adhered to the idea of complete inaction of the freedmen while leaving out the racist claims of biological inferiority. Later, Stampp’s account offered a small aside to black agency with a reminder of its limitations as he minimized the impact the black southerners’ actions had on the situation.

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The 1967 textbook *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, which represents an earlier revisionist interpretation, is a perfect example of the similarities between them and the traditionalists. It described emancipation as “3,500,000 Negro slaves suddenly...plunged into the cold bath of freedom.” The country suffered because the “bewildered Negroes were poorly prepared for their new responsibilities as citizens and voters” until it was decided that the “ill prepared colored voter...had allegedly done so poorly that the South found further justification for denying him the ballot.”

While some of the textbooks in the later revisionist camp offered a more flattering presentation of black agency, the textbook presentations between 1950 and 1980 still lacked true black agency. One example of this minimization of black agency could be seen in the 1969 text, *A New History of the United States*, which on one page acknowledged “blacks [for] also play[ing] an active role” but then offered no specifics until the end of the chapter when it stated “blacks never dominated Reconstruction government. They never elected a governor. And they held a legislative majority only in South Carolina.” However, some black politicians were credited for being “better educated” than their white counterparts and for having “helped to bring progressive welfare legislation and free public education to the South.”

By 1980, a strong shift finally occurred in the textbook presentations of black southerners’ agency during Reconstruction when they rejected depictions based on black inferiority and unpreparedness for Foner’s post-revisionist version, which credited black southerners for their key role and influential participation during Reconstruction. This adoption of the interpretation of black southerners’ central agency can be seen clearly in the comparison between the two editions of the Garraty textbook, *A Short History of the American Nation*, originally published in 1966. The two editions used in this study, the second and the third published in 1977 and 1981 respectively, represent well how by 1980, real black agency emerged in the presentations of Reconstruction. Keeping in mind that usually little changes between editions in textbook reprints, it is interesting to note what was added in 1981 (and what was previously missing from the 1977 edition) was the difference between black agency as defined in Foner’s post-revisionist version and minimal black agency of a revisionist flavor.

In a section titled “Southern Economic Problems,” the second edition moved through its discussion of the post-emancipation labor

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49 Bartlett, 325-328.
problems for both the freedmen and the planters. The textbook explained how together “the planter and the freedmen attempted to solve their [economic] difficulties by developing the system of sharecropping.” It then described how the freedman benefited by the system that “created incentive and also gave [him] a chance to rise in the world. He became the independent manager of his own acres; if successful, he could save money and eventually buy land of his own.” But, according to the text, the system failed because the “planters [lacked] enough capital to finance the system.”

While this interpretation does offer a hint of black agency in that the planter and the freedmen worked together to try to make the system work in the South, the success and failure of the various systems relied squarely on the planters.

In the third edition of the same text, new information was included that gave greater amounts of agency to black southerners. Within the same section, an ex-slave from Alabama was quoted as decisively stating on the subject of freedom, “I’s want to be free man, cum when I please, and nobody say nuffin to me, nor order me around.” Another important addition to the chapter was a relatively lengthy discussion about the white southerners’ misperceptions about the “desire of blacks to devote more time to leisure and family activities” when they “took it as evidence that blacks were lazy.” The textbook claimed that in reality, “the decline in productivity was not caused by the inability of free blacks to work independently. It was simply that being free, they chose no longer to work like slaves.” The textbook also added that sharecropping emerged from “the voluntary withdrawal of so much black labor from the work force” and the need to change the system from “gang labor” to a more independent style of farming.

Other textbooks offered similar examples of increased black southerners’ agency in their presentations of Reconstruction. One such textbook, American Odyssey: The United States in the Twentieth Century, explained that after “African Americans were guaranteed their right to vote, they began to exert influence at the polls in states in which they were a majority.” They were described as conscious of the fragility of their situation as they actively struggled to secure their rights as free people and demanded “exactly the same rights, privileges, and immunities as are enjoyed by white men—we ask nothing more and will be content with

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Patterns and Missing Pieces in Reconstruction History: A Look at Twenty American High School Textbooks

nothing less."\(^{52}\) Another textbook written in 1991 actually credited black legislators for working with white Republicans to “pass[] many laws to help all people of the South.”\(^{53}\)

A shift into the post-revisionist camps also occurred in the early 1980s in the textbook presentations of the motives of white northerners as well as in the nature and degree of changes. What is most significant, however, is that none crossed into Foner’s post-revisionist camp in their presentations of the nature and degree of changes (see Appendix Chart II). The four textbooks that moved into the Benedict camp on the topic of the nature and degree of changes all adopted his theory of continuity of racism and oppression instead of Foner’s claims of revolutionary changes. One textbook from 1984 claimed that “in many ways the South after Reconstruction was similar to the South after the Civil War.”\(^{54}\) Another declared Reconstruction “a mixed legacy” because its grand successes like the Fourteenth Amendment were soiled with failures in the retraction of black southerners’ freedoms. The authors of this text went so far as to declare Du Bois’ statement on the Freedmen’s Bureau as “foresdoomed to failure” as a potential epitaph “for the whole of Reconstruction.”\(^{55}\)

While the presence of a continuity driven, post-revisionist interpretation is significant to understanding the shifts in presentations of Reconstruction, the omission of the Foner’s post-revisionist presentation is of greater importance. Foner’s interpretation of Reconstruction history, founded on class struggle and part of an “ongoing process of social and economic change,” was completely omitted from all twenty textbooks represented in this study.\(^{56}\) It is interesting to note that while textbook authors of the latter part of the century embraced the post-revisionist interpretation represented by Foner of both white northern motivations and black agency, they completely avoided this group’s presentation of the nature and degree of changes.

This significant omission relates directly to the second and final common trend seen throughout all twenty textbooks—that not a single textbook adopts either a progressive interpretation of Reconstruction based on the Beards’ work nor do they offer a Marxist presentation supported by Du Bois and Foner. Here again the question is raised, “What do these


\(^{54}\) Green, 287.


\(^{56}\) Foner, *Reconstruction*, xxiii.
presentations offer that differs so drastically from the other historians?” The answer is “Theories based on economics and class struggle.” Just as Foner’s Marxist interpretation was rejected by the textbook authors, interpretations by the Beards and Du Bois suffered the same fate.

The Beards’ explanation of Reconstruction history based strictly on issues of economics, omitted issues of race. Every textbook examined in this study stayed true to the idea that race was the major factor in the lives and decisions of all the players in Reconstruction, whether they held a traditional interpretation based on the biological inferiority of the former slaves and the supremacy of the white southerners or a revisionist position holding that the foundation of Reconstruction was based on the struggle to end undemocratic oppression founded on race.

Du Bois’ work on Reconstruction suffered the same fate as the Beards with the textbook authors in this study. His presentation of Reconstruction, grounded in the ongoing class struggle between “black workers” and the white southern bourgeoisie class, was completely ignored by the textbook authors; instead they preferred to discuss Reconstruction in terms of undemocratic and racist actions that were later addressed and “fixed” by the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s. Even a resurgence of Du Bois’ ideas in Foner’s work in the 1980s failed to gain entrance for this interpretation into the Reconstruction narrative as told by these textbook authors.

Conclusion

What do these patterns and omissions say about the textbook presentations of Reconstruction? They say that the practice of piecing together the history while dismissing valuable insights and possible key pieces of Reconstruction history stifles any approach to an open dialog about the nation’s history. The textbooks lack challenges to the “master narrative” of the United States as the authors continue to abide by the unspoken rule to retell the history of the United States as spotted with minor exceptions to the fundamental goodness of the system. Students reading these texts are left with contradictory and incomplete “impressions” of the United States and of themselves as citizens which they carry with them throughout their lives.

It seems that James D. Anderson’s call for historians to play a key role in establishing a clearer more coherent understanding of the role of race in history because “What we choose to teach our children about race in American history reflects a willingness or unwillingness to face our past squarely by examining a central ideology that has attempted to express complex forms of oppression and injustice” could and should be applied
equally to issues of class and economics as well as race. Some historians are, in fact, beginning to “face our past squarely” and ask the complex questions of class struggle imbedded in all of American history. Armstead Robinson, for example, wrote in 1981 that “the long dominant social consensus approach cannot cope with the complex interpenetration of racial, class, and social conflict during the Reconstruction period.” It is now the duty of textbook authors to face squarely America’s historical episodes in all of their complexities in order to make them relevant and useful tools for better understanding the future.

57 Anderson, 89.
Appendix

Explanation of the Charts

The following charts show the shifts in the presentations of the motives of white northerners, black agency, and the nature and the degree of the changes all within the era of post-Civil War Reconstruction in twenty textbooks originally published between the years 1899 and 2000. The numbers within the tables correlate directly to the numbered textbooks listed below each table. The numbers that lie in the center of the columns indicate a strong showing of that particular camp’s ideas within the textbook. The numbers which do not lie directly in the center of the columns and instead lie closer to the lines to the left or right of the columns indicate that the textbook falls largely within the category it is placed, but with a slight tendency to incorporate ideas of the next closest position.

CHART I

Chart I shows the presentations of the motives of white northerners in the twenty textbooks. It can be seen in this table that three of the four textbooks (2,3 & 4) published between 1899 and 1946 present the white northerners’ motives in a traditional light based on greed with the one exception being the 1899 textbook (1) which offers a more generous revisionist interpretation of some white northerners motivated by good intentions. In the early 1950s a strong shift into the two revisionist camps occurred when all (5-12) but two of the textbooks (6 & 8) published between 1950 and 1978 present a revisionist interpretation; they credit most white northerners for having altruistic intentions. Textbooks 6 and 8 fall into the early revisionists’ camp which gives no credit for positive intentions of white northerners. This shift lasted until 1981 when all of the textbooks (13-19) published from then on give the motives of white northerners a post-revisionist treatment of multiple intentions with interplay between Benedict’s interpretation of preservation of the status quo to Foner’s idea of multi-motivations based on desire for equality and a solution to the “practical problem” of slavery. Notably, no textbooks used in this study offer a Marxist or progressive interpretation of the motives of white northerners based on class struggle or on purely economic motivations.
CHART II

Chart II illustrates the shifts in the textbooks in their presentations of the nature and degree of the changes that happened during Reconstruction. This graph shows a strong standing in the traditional camp with five (1-4 & 6) of the six textbooks published before 1966 presenting the nature and degree of changes in a “tragic” light. Then the nine textbooks (7-14) published between 1966 and 1983 move into one of the two revisionist camps which acknowledge the end of slavery as a positive event. From 1980 until 2000, all but one textbook (18) then move into the camp of the post-revisionists who stressed continuity, giving the time less credit due to the continuity between the problems of then and now. Again, at no time did any of the textbooks present interpretations from a Marxist, progressive, or even a Foner post-revisionist point-of-view, which would have acknowledged the radical nature of the time.

CHART III

Chart III portrays the authors’ presentations of black agency in the twenty textbooks. One can again recognize a solid basis in the traditional interpretation of ignorant and incapable black southerners in five of the six textbooks (1-6) published from 1899 until 1954. Textbook 5 published in 1950 is the exception with its presence in the revisionist camp. From 1966 until 1984, nine of the ten textbooks (5-7b & 9-15) fall haphazardly between the revisionists and the two post-revisionists as the authors vary in the amount of credit given to black southerners for their roles in Reconstruction. By this time the textbooks have abandoned all hints of biological black inferiority, but still do not fully accept black agency. This is the case until 1991 when all four of the remaining textbooks (16-19) grant credit for complete and central black agency as they align themselves solidly with the post-revisionists who stress change camp. Again, no textbooks present a Marxist or progressive presentation of black agency in Reconstruction.
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<th>CHART I</th>
<th>Motives of White Northerners</th>
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1. *A History of the American Nation.* 1899 (1913 printing)
2. *American History.* 1911 (1917 printing)
3. *America’s Progress in Civilization.* 1936 (1949 printing)
## Chart II

### Nature and Degree of Changes

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Patterns and Missing Pieces in Reconstruction History: A Look at Twenty American High School Textbooks

### CHART III

**Agency of Black Southerners**

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