Studies in American Political Development

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Reinvigorating American Political Development Scholarship through Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*

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Research Article

Cite this article: Ramanathan K (2022). Reinvigorating American Political Development Scholarship through Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*. *Studies in American Political Development* **36**, 144–147. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X22000062

Received: 1 November 2021
Revised: 30 March 2022
Accepted: 13 April 2022

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Abstract

Recent events have augured a renewed urgency among political scientists to address the instability of democracy and the structure of racism in the United States. In this article, I make the case for American political development (APD) scholars to engage more deeply with *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), W. E. B. Du Bois's masterful study of political development during the Reconstruction Era. This rich text, which analyzes an often overlooked period in the APD literature, offers numerous contributions that can reinvigorate our analyses of democracy and racism in the United States.

The events of the past five years have augured a renewed urgency among political scientists to address the instability of democracy and the structure of racism in the United States. Scholars of American political development (APD) have much to offer in this discussion. However, as the editors wrote in their call for papers, "theories and approaches of APD largely developed within the penumbra of the postwar 20th century West European/American welfare state" offer a limited basis for such scholarship. I argue that the field should engage more deeply with W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (1935).[1] In this article, I first summarize Du Bois's masterful study of the Reconstruction Era, an often overlooked period in the APD literature. I then discuss the numerous contributions that *Black Reconstruction* offers to our analysis of democracy and racism in the United States.

1. *Black Reconstruction* Summarized

Black Reconstruction opens with three chapters on the central political actors in the antebellum South: Black workers, white workers, and planters. Like other postcolonial thinkers of the time, Du Bois argued that slavery and racial oppression were fundamental components of global capitalism.[2] Black workers, Du Bois writes, were "always an important part of [the United States'] economic history and social development"—and "at once a challenge to its democracy." He argues that the social and economic position of white workers in the antebellum United States was contingent on the existence of slavery, writing provocatively that "the plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America." Distinguishing planters from white workers, he attributes the "doctrine of Negro inferiority" to the political and economic interests of planter elites. Du Bois stresses the reciprocal relationship between each group's material interests and identities, while recognizing their capacity for agency and transformation.

The book then turns to key developments during the Civil War, with a focus on Black agency (chapters 4–5). Du Bois uses the concept of a "general strike" to describe how slaves abandoned Southern plantations, becoming fugitives and sometimes soldiers. In a claim that reverberates throughout the book, he argues that the actions of slaves, loosely coordinated and massive in scale, led to a change in the Union government's position on slavery from containment to abolition. This argument converges powerfully with APD scholarship that urges attention to how marginalized populations have shaped state-building.[3]

[1]W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (1935), ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[2]See, e.g., Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); José Itzigsohn and Karida Brown, *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity and the Global Color Line* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), chap. 2.

[3]See, e.g., Carol Nackenoff and Julie Novkov, *Statebuilding from the Margins: Between Reconstruction and the New Deal* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Megan Ming Francis, "The Strange Fruit of American Political Development," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6, no. 1 (2018): 128–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2017.1420551.

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The core of the book (chapters 6–9) turns to the postwar national drama of Reconstruction policy. Here, Du Bois traces the political ideologies and strategies that circulated among Northern and Southern elites. While planter elites sought to replace slavery with "a new state of serfdom of black folk" and earned the eventual support of President Johnson, advocates of a nascent "abolition-democracy" found themselves in an uneasy but powerful coalition with industrial elites. Freedpeople's robust participation in elections, governance, and civil society bolstered Radical Republicans' efforts in the national government and threatened planter elites' pursuit of a racially subjugated labor force. Already in this period, however, there were signs that white northerners were not willing to pay "price of disaster," which would require ongoing military occupation, full political assimilation of freedmen, and restructuring of the Southern economy.

This national-level analysis is supplemented by case studies of the Reconstruction governments in South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and the border states (chapters 10–13). Through what we would now call small-*n* comparative-historical analysis, Du Bois identifies several factors as determining the success of Reconstruction governments: the relative size and electoral power of the Black population, the availability of "indigenous" leaders and professionals among freedmen, control over land, and the socioeconomic positions of white workers. Throughout the case studies, he attends closely to nascent interracial political coalitions and the persistent efforts of propertied white elites to divide white workers and former slaves.

Du Bois then argues that a "counter-revolution of property" led to the end of Reconstruction (chapters 14–16). Amid a recession, labor unrest, persistent extralegal violence, and ongoing racial prejudice, the interests of industrial capitalists in the North and planter elites in the South converged. The resulting compromise enabled white supremacist control of Southern state governments and Northern industrialist control of the national government, the re-subordination of Black people, and the suppression of organized labor. The promise of abolition-democracy was replaced with a new "caste" system in the South, where Black workers were disenfranchised and subordinated while white workers were conferred higher civic status. For Du Bois, the end of Reconstruction amounted to a fatal weakening of democracy in the United States. He writes: "A new slavery arose. The upward moving of white labor was betrayed into wars for profit based on color caste. Democracy died save in the hearts of black folk."

In the final chapter, Du Bois confronts the "propaganda of history" that characterized then-dominant scholarly accounts of Reconstruction, critiquing pervasive myths of Black ignorance and corruption. Most importantly, he underscores the political stakes of historical interpretation, arguing that the denial of Black agency during Reconstruction underwrote ongoing white supremacy in the early twentieth century.

2. Incorporating *Black Reconstruction* into APD Scholarship

Black Reconstruction exhibits a remarkable analytical, theoretical, and methodological fit with the contemporary field of APD. It is difficult to imagine a work that more thoroughly meets the analytical goals that Daniel Galvin describes as characteristic of APD scholarship: "challenging received scholarly wisdom, building innovative theories, developing and refining concepts, and opening new lines of inquiry."[4] *Black Reconstruction* also shares the field's focus on "durable shifts in governing authority," tracing the emergence of a new political-economic order and investigating why an alternative possibility (abolition-democracy) failed to become durable.[5] Its analysis of how institutions and ideas explain political change also align with the theoretical commitments of APD.[6] Most centrally, Du Bois is engaged in a project of unpacking and explaining political transformation by analyzing "timing and sequence, institutional contexts, and policy feedbacks."[7]

Despite these connections, *Black Reconstruction* has received little attention in the APD literature. A rare exception is in the edited volume *Race and American Political Development*, whose editors write that Du Bois's work is "the seminal race and American political development book on the Civil War, Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras." The editors succinctly summarize its contribution as "inject[ing] black agency into the narrative of the Civil War, while also articulating the long-term implications for American political development of racialization and unequal labor and racial regimes."[8] Even in this volume, however, *Black Reconstruction* does not receive extended discussion.[9] Examining the subfield's main journals, the book has been cited only four times in *Studies in American Political Development*, twice in *Journal of Policy History*, and nine times in *Social Science History*.[10] Among political scientists, political theorists have shown the most thorough engagement with *Black Reconstruction*.[11] More broadly in the discipline, the

[4]Daniel J. Galvin, "Qualitative Methods and American Political Development," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199697915.001.0001.

[5]Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chap. 4.

[6]Suzanne Mettler and Richard Valelly, "Introduction: The Distinctiveness and Necessity of American Political Development," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199697915.013.21.

[7]Theda Skocpol, "Analyzing American Political Development as It Happens," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199697915.013.22. The analysis of timing, sequence, and institutional contexts in *Black Reconstruction* is self-evident. While not using the same conceptual language, Du Bois analyzes policy feedback in at least two ways. First, his case studies attend closely to how Reconstruction policies (such as land reform and tax policies) mobilized interests and restructured the relative political power of different groups. Second, his chapter on education reform during Reconstruction underscores that policy outcomes in this domain shaped the terms of racial politics in subsequent periods.

[8]Joseph E. Lowndes, Julie Novkov, and Dorian T. Warren, "Introduction: Race and American Political Development," in *Race and American Political Development*, ed. Joseph E. Lowndes, Julie Novkov, and Dorian T. Warren (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1–30.

[9]An exception is in Brandwein's chapter on the revolutionary character of Reconstruction. The chapter's main interlocutors are Eric Foner, Bruce Ackerman, and Hannah Arendt, but it does engage with Du Bois's account as well. See Pamela Brandwein, "Reconstruction, Race, and Revolution," in *Race and American Political Development*, ed. Joseph E. Lowndes, Julie Novkov, and Dorian T. Warren (New York: Routledge, 2012), 136–65.

[10]Across these three journals, the citation count by decade is one in the 1980s, four in the 1990s, one in the 2000s, four in the 2010s, and five in the 2020s (as of March 30, 2022).

[11]See, e.g., Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Lawrie Balfour, "Unreconstructed Democracy: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Case for Reparations," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 33–44, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055403000509; Juliet Hooker, "'To See, Foresee, and Prophesy': Du Bois's Mulatto Fictions and Afro-Futurism," in *Theorizing Race in the Americas* (Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190633691.003.0004; Ella Myers, "Beyond the Psychological Wage: Du Bois on

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X22000062 Published online by Cambridge University Press

book has been witnessing a surge of interest since 2020, after a long period of inattention.[12]

Deeper engagement with *Black Reconstruction* would offer numerous contributions that can strengthen APD scholarship. I detail three such contributions here, not as an exhaustive list but rather to invite further engagement. First, *Black Reconstruction* offers a rich text on an undertheorized period in the APD literature. Compared to periods such as the Progressive Era and the New Deal, Reconstruction has received less sustained attention among APD scholars as a critical juncture in political development.[13] For example, in the *Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, references to the Reconstruction Era appear in chapters on suffrage politics and race, but are absent from chapters on political economy, liberalism, federalism, political parties, and social movements.[14] *Black Reconstruction* offers a fertile ground for APD scholars to consider the role of Reconstruction in political-developmental analyses of these subjects.

Second, *Black Reconstruction* can contribute to ongoing debates in APD and related fields about the relationship between racism, capitalism, and class conflict. Rather than portraying either race or class as taking priority over the other, Du Bois theorizes them as interlocking features of a political-economic system. Throughout his analysis, he identifies several distinct social groups (industrialists, planters, Northern laborers and farmers, "poor whites" in the South, and emancipated slaves), each of which have a set of material and ideational interests shaped by their racial and class statuses. The interaction of these interests in a historical context explains the outcome of Reconstruction's various conflicts as well as the transformation of the political-economic system itself.

To see this approach in practice, consider how Du Bois explains the possibility and eventual failure of cross-racial workers' alliances in the postwar South. At the start of Reconstruction, Northern industrialists found themselves allied with freedpeople through the Republican party, arrayed against a common enemy in the former planter elites. Some political entrepreneurs in the South sought to forge a cross-racial alliance between freedpeople and poor whites, which posed a clear threat to planter elites. Meanwhile, freedpeople's demand for land redistribution, along with other developments, threatened industrialists' commitments to protection of property ownership and market society. As industrialists and planters forged a new compromise, the latter secured support from poor whites by constructing a "public and psychological wage" that afforded them clear material benefits and civic status. This "caste" system then generated new interests and reinforced conflict between racial groups, making future attempts at workers' alliances more difficult. Du Bois's analytic approach here does not theorize either race or class as more fundamental than the other, but rather investigates how they interact to produce specific, historically contingent hierarchies.

Third, the book prompts a rethinking and reorientation of democratization narratives. If we take seriously the concept of a nascent and ultimately defeated "abolition-democracy," democratization in the United States cannot be viewed as a linear progression toward further inclusion.[15] As such, Du Bois's analysis offers a fruitful point of comparison for theorizing about democratizing reforms and democratic backsliding in other periods.[16] For example, Du Bois's identification of mass violence and unstable cross-class alliances as proximate causes of the collapse of abolition-democracy invites comparison with recent patterns of democratic backsliding in the United States.[17]

More deeply, closer attention to Du Bois's analysis of abolition-democracy's defeat can enable a reframing and reinterpretation of contemporary developments. Understanding Reconstruction as a *failed* democratization process troubles assumptions that democracy in the United States is durable. Rather than investigating why otherwise stable democratic institutions are in crisis, reading *Black Reconstruction* in 2022 prompts

White Dominion," *Political Theory* 47, no. 1 (2019): 6–31, https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591718791744.

[12]To estimate the number of citations to *Black Reconstruction* in political science journals, I downloaded citation data from the Google Scholar index using Harzing's Publish or Perish software and cross-referenced the results with a list of 313 political science journals compiled by Resul Umit. From 1980 to 2007, the citation count was four or fewer each year; from 2008 to 2019, it was ten or fewer each year. The count rose to fifteen in 2020 and twenty-six in 2021 (as of October 25, 2021). The political science journal that cites the book most often is *Perspectives on Politics*, with a total count of fourteen citations (half of these are from 2018 onward). Due to issues with the Google Scholar Index, these are likely slight undercounts; see Jerry E. Gray et al., "Scholarish: Google Scholar and Its Value to the Sciences," *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship* (Summer 2012), https://doi.org/10.5062/F4MK69T9. For the software used, see Anne-Wil Harzing, *Publish or Perish* (2007), https://harzing.com/resources/publish-or-perish; Resul Umit, *psjournals* (2021), https://github.com/resulumit/psjournals.

[13]Some notable exceptions are Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859–1877* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Pamela Brandwein, *Reconstructing Reconstruction: The Supreme Court and the Production of Historical Truth* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Richard Valelly, *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Pamela Brandwein, *Rethinking the Judicial Settlement of Reconstruction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Kimberley S. Johnson, "Racial Orders, Congress, and the Agricultural Welfare State, 1865–1940," *Studies in American Political Development* 25, no. 2 (2011): 143–61, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X11000095; Pavithra Suryanarayan and Steven White, "Slavery, Reconstruction, and Bureaucratic Capacity in the American South," *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 2 (2020): 568–84, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000933; Boris Heersink and Jeffery A. Jenkins, *Republican Party Politics and the American South, 1865–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Jeffery A. Jenkins and Justin Peck, *Congress and the First Civil Rights Era, 1861–1918* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021); Paul E. Herron, "'This Crisis of Our History': The Colored Conventions Movement and the Temporal Construction of Southern Politics," *Studies in American Political Development* 36, no. 1 (2022): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X21000122.

[14]Richard Valelly, "How Suffrage Politics Made—and Makes—America," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2016); Kimberley S. Johnson, "The Color Line and the State," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman, (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199697915.013.009.

[15]As Bateman puts it, "the story of progressive democracy is a powerful political myth" that elicits "amnesia" about recurring patterns of disenfranchisement; see David A. Bateman, *Disenfranchising Democracy: Constructing the Electorate in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

[16]Valelly pursues this kind of comparison between Reconstruction and the 1950s–60s, focusing on suffrage extension; see Valelly, *The Two Reconstructions*. Du Bois's broad conception of democracy also opens up avenues for comparison of other outcomes including constitutional reform, policy developments, and institutional change.

[17]For an example of such comparison, see Megan Ming Francis, "Can Black Lives Matter within U.S. Democracy?" *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 699, no. 1 (2022): 186–99, https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162221078340.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X22000062 Published online by Cambridge University Press

us to trace and explain the stability of undemocratic features of American political institutions.

In rediscovering *Black Reconstruction*, APD scholars would be following the lead of our colleagues in other disciplines. Upon its initial publication, the book received a muted reception in the academy, with the notable exception of Black scholars.[18] Mainstream academia showed newfound interest in the book in the 1960s, amid the civil rights movement and a revisionist turn in Civil War and Reconstruction historiography.[19] In recent decades, the book has sparked much debate and theorization in several social sciences and humanities fields.[20] In sociology, growing attention to *Black Reconstruction* has been part of a broader incorporation of Du Bois's work into the discipline's canon.[21] The book's rising prominence is also reflected in three new editions from academic publishers (from Transaction Publishers/Routledge in 2012, Oxford University Press in 2014, and Library of America in 2021).

There are numerous ways in which APD scholars can incorporate *Black Reconstruction* into our field: We can assign the text in graduate seminars, design conference panels on it, or organize symposia in journals. Doing so would offer us the opportunity to think more deeply about the Reconstruction period, apply the book's theories and concepts in new research, and reinvigorate our study of democratization and racism.

[18]Eric Foner, "Black Reconstruction: An Introduction," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 3 (2013): 409–18, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2146368. For early reviews by Black scholars, see L. D. Reddick, "A New Interpretation for Negro History," *The Journal of Negro History* 22, no. 1 (1937): 17–28, https://doi.org/10.2307/2714314; Howard K. Beale, "On Rewriting Reconstruction History," *The American Historical Review* 45, no. 4 (1940): 807–27, https://doi.org/10.2307/1854452; John Hope Franklin, "Whither Reconstruction Historiography?" *The Journal of Negro Education* 17, no. 4 (1948): 446–61, https://doi.org/10.2307/2966233.

[19]Foner, "Black Reconstruction"; Daniel Walden, "W.E.B. Du Bois: Pioneer Reconstruction Historian," *Negro History Bulletin* 26, no. 5 (1963): 159–64; Cedric Robinson, "A Critique of W.E.B. Du Bois' Black Reconstruction," *The Black Scholar* 8, no. 7 (1977): 44–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1977.11413913.

[20]For a sampling of such work, see the symposium in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 3 (2013).

[21]See, e.g., Itzigsohn and Brown, *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois*; Aldon D. Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X22000062 Published online by Cambridge University Press