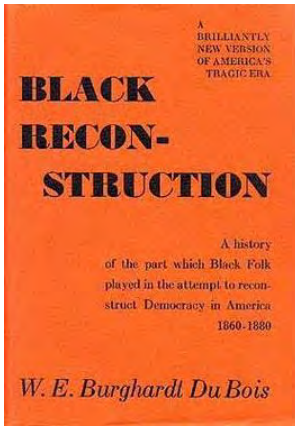


Book Review: W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction in America: A History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*

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W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction in America: A History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. Routledge, 2013. 686 pp. ISBN: 9781412846202.

W.E.B. DuBois published *Black Reconstruction in America: A History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* in 1935. At the time of the book's publication, America was in the fallout of the Great Depression and experiencing a capitalist crisis. Following the crash of the Stock Market in October 1929, America faced the largest economic fallout in industrial, economic history. In his work, DuBois sought to expand the period recognized as Reconstruction from twelve years to twenty, and although it was criticized at the time, the book has grown in relevance since its publication. *Black Reconstruction* revised the narrative of Reconstruction, identified propa- ganda and misinterpretation in historiog-

raphy, and drew connections between slavery and America's capitalist society.

Black Reconstruction was criticized at the time it was published, but pushed to change the historical context surrounding Reconstruction. According to historian Claire Parfait, W.E.B. DuBois changed the rhetoric being used by historians in the 1930s on the Reconstruction Era (266). Parfait alludes to the fact that prior to the publication of this work, African-American history was not studied inside mainstream history the way it should have been. The effect of W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* was a change in the rhetoric of contemporary Reconstruction historiography. In the book, Reconstruction is defined as a twenty-year period, from 1860-1880. Most historians, even current historians, still recognize Recon-

struction as the twelve years following the Civil War. DuBois makes it clear in his book that history has been misinterpreted by white, male historians, and even propagandized. Culture and race were major themes of Reconstruction, but to Dubois, privilege and property played a larger role. He wrote, "It was not, then, race and culture calling out of the South in 1876; it was property and privilege, shrieking to its own kind, and privilege and property heard and recognized the voice of its own" (39). For example, the movie *Birth of a Nation* and the book series *The Clansman*, published around the same time, were both racially charged and produced false assumptions of reconstruction. Public consumption of the film *Birth of a Nation* grew rapidly after it was screened at the White House during the Wilson administration. The film's negative depiction of African Americans influenced public opinion throughout America.

DuBois intended to revise this historical argument. This is the main reason *Black Reconstruction* is still widely studied among historians—to understand African-American history and Reconstruction. Dubois worked to decontaminate textbooks that were riddled with incorrect assumptions and unfair accusations about African Americans as a whole. The three main myths that DuBois wanted to end were as follows: "Negroes are ignorant;" Negroes are lazy, dishonest, and extravagant; and finally, Negroes bear the responsibility for poor government during reconstruction (267). This is an issue that goes deeper than the fact that white historians were producing historical

works. University presses and publication companies needed to appeal to the country as a whole, not just part of it. This led to many misconceptions and interpretations in the field of history.

W.E.B. DuBois was the first African American to receive a PhD in History from Harvard (269-270). As Claire Parfait pointed out, in the year 1935, over two thousand PhDs in History were awarded in America, but only six of them to African Americans. These overwhelming issues of the moment, inequality in higher education, racism in the American South, and inequality in scholarly publication encouraged the misinterpretations that DuBois denounces in his writings. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* was criticized at the time of its publication; however, it was still recognized as an important work in the historical community. *The Journal of American History* and *The American Historical Review* featured excerpts of his book, and did not publish another African-American author for almost seventy years.

Historian Cedric Robinson summarizes DuBois' written work best by calling it a contradiction. At the time of its publishing, *Black Reconstruction* was in a lane of its own. In 1935, the other published literature on reconstruction was swayed and filled with white-bias. As Robinson notes, DuBois had a keen sense for noticing and researching propaganda within history and historiography, and was not afraid to label it as such (44). This book was published during the fallout of the Great Depression and of a capitalist crisis, and as Robinson

put it, DuBois seized the historical moment. Certain texts and publications thrive in various economies and culture changes, and DuBois met this moment with *Black Reconstruction*.

Perhaps W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* became popular because it tied slavery directly to capitalism, and it was published during a capitalist crisis. The beginning of the book is focused on addressing the issue of slavery and the economy. DuBois makes the effort to show that American society was built on the backs of slaves (45). He wrote, "How the Civil War meant emancipation and how the black worker won the war by a general strike which transferred his labor from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader, in whose army lines workers began to be organized as a new labor force" (27). DuBois explained how African Americans developed the South, helped the North win the war, and continued to shape America after Reconstruction ended.

W.E.B. DuBois' opinion was in the minority when he addressed the

topic of Reconstruction in the 1930s. At this time of *Black Reconstruction's* publication, most historical texts were written by white historians who viewed issues surrounding race relations through a different lens. Almost a century later, DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* has grown in popularity and relevance. Historians like Claire Parfait and Cedric Robinson have credited the publication with revising the public view on Reconstruction. In addition, DuBois exposed propaganda and misinterpretation in the historical profession. At the time, most historians were white men, who were influenced by films like *The Birth of a Nation* in their research. DuBois recognized these misinterpretations and the ways in which African Americans were portrayed. DuBois linked slavery to capitalist American society and fought to debunk myths that African Americans were lazy, among other misconstrued opinions about his race. As the first African-American, History PhD graduate from Harvard, W.E.B. D.Bois rewrote history, as his relevance to historians increases as time passes.

References

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