

Think About It: How Have Historians Viewed Reconstruction?

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This U.S. History course has covered a lot of ground, and examined a variety of diverse subjects. You likely began this class thinking that "history" simply meant the written record of the past, perhaps based on what you encountered in a history textbook. However, the creation of historical narratives is a complicated and ongoing process.

This tutorial examines how historians have interpreted Reconstruction, in five parts. Many believe that Reconstruction was the most significant period (except for the American Revolution) in American history:

1. What is Historiography? A Refresher

The term **historiography** has been used in this course to refer to the study of historical writing, or the "history of history".



TERM TO KNOW

Historiography

The study and interpretation of historical writings.

Historians' interpretations of past events have changed over time. They have an obligation to approach historical subjects objectively, and without bias. However, historical interpretations of Reconstruction have changed continuously since 1877.

These interpretations have been influenced by the debates and politics related to race and race relations in the United States. To show how views of Reconstruction have changed over time, this tutorial begins by providing an overview of the African-American experience in the southern United States between 1877 and 1900. Next, it examines Reconstruction historiography in three categories:

- The Dunning School
- Revisionist Interpretations
- Reconstruction as an "Unfinished Revolution"

2. The Aftermath of Reconstruction

Most African Americans in the South, as well as many poor White people, were unable to achieve any measure of economic independence following Reconstruction. As a result, **sharecropping** gradually took root by the end of the 19th century.



TERM TO KNOW

Sharecropping

A system in which poor farmers used the crops they grew to pay rent on land they farmed, but did not own.

Sharecroppers paid their landlords with the crops they raised—sometimes as much as half of their harvest. High-interest payments on debts they incurred siphoned additional money from poor farmers. Many sharecroppers were trapped in a never-ending cycle of debt, unable to buy the land they worked, and unable to stop working because of the crops and money they owed to landlords and creditors.

African Americans continued to suffer the effects of racial hatred following the Compromise of 1877. The most alarming trend in this regard—one that occurred with increasing frequency by the late 19th century—was the rise of **lynchings**.



TERM TO KNOW

Lynchings

Public hangings, often of African-American men by white mobs, for perceived offenses or challenges to white supremacy.

➞ **EXAMPLE** According to researchers at the Tuskegee Institute, approximately 3,500 lynchings and other murders were committed against Black people in the South between 1865 and 1900.

By the end of the 19th century, many state governments had effectively excluded African-American men from the political process by enacting voter restriction measures, including poll taxes and literacy tests.



DID YOU KNOW

According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1965), Black voter registration in Mississippi in 1867 was 66.9%. By 1899, it had declined to 9.1%. By 1955, it had dropped to 4.3%.

A lack of economic independence, public displays of racial violence, and voter restriction contributed to the rise of a segregated society in the United States, one in which the races were socially and physically separated from each other.

3. The Dunning School

Segregation had an impact on how White historians interpreted Reconstruction in the early 20th century, as did the desire among White Americans to reconcile sectional divisions between North and South.

By the 1900s, commemorative ceremonies at Gettysburg and other Civil War battlefields celebrated the sacrifices that White soldiers on both sides made, and asserted that these sacrifices had made the nation stronger. These ceremonies omitted references to the role that slavery played in the Civil War and ignored the contributions of African-American soldiers to the Union war effort.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Between July 1st and 4th, 1913, approximately 50,000 White Civil War veterans (Union and Confederate) gathered to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. No mention of the sacrifices of African-American soldiers was made, nor did the ceremony include any Black veterans. African Americans were only found behind the scenes: as laborers, and providing other services to the White veterans.

Efforts toward reconciliation between North and South ignored much of what had occurred during Reconstruction. Many historians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries portrayed the South as a victim of federal overreach and misguided racial policies—rather than as a backward, intransigent region that had resisted Congressional efforts to establish racial equality.

A generation of students who studied under John W. Burgess and William A. Dunning contributed to an era in Reconstruction historiography that became known as the “**Dunning School**”.



TERM TO KNOW

Dunning School

The view of Reconstruction developed by William A. Dunning, John W. Burgess, and their students; interpreted Reconstruction as a disaster for White southerners resulting from the abolition of slavery and attempts to grant civil rights to African Americans.

In his 1902 book, *Reconstruction and the Constitution 1866-1876*, Burgess wrote the following regarding Congress’ establishment of the Freedmen’s Bureau. Remember that the Bureau had been established to help former enslaved people succeed in the transition to freedom. Recall also the motivations behind the creation of the Black Codes, which sought to control the lives of formerly enslaved people:

John W. Burgess, Excerpt from *Reconstruction and the Constitution 1866-1876*

“There is no question that this [the Freedmen’s Bureau] was a most humane measure. It would have been a moral outrage for the Government of the United States to have taken the slaves away from the support and protection accorded them by their masters, and to have thrown them upon their own resources without any means of sustenance during the transition into the new states. But there is also no question that this measure was so administered as to do the race for whose benefit it was intended almost as much harm as good. When the Government began to furnish them with food, clothes, fuel, and shelter gratis, they, like the children that they were, conceived of this, to them, very agreeable state of things as something that was to last forever....The danger was that the newly emancipated would quit work altogether and throw themselves entirely upon the charity of the United States Government. Many did do so, and formed thus a sort of privileged class throughout the whole South under the special protection of the Government of the United States.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. How does Burgess describe the work of the Freedmen’s Bureau and the motivations behind the Black Codes?
2. Do you notice any persistence of the ideas that supported *planter paternalism*? If so, what might explain the expression of these ideas in the early 20th century by a professional historian?



BRAINSTORM

What does “privileged class” mean, in the context of Burgess’s assessment of the Freedmen’s Bureau? How has this perception of groups who receive federal support as a “privileged class” influenced American political debates?

Burgess and Dunning inspired an entire generation of historians who viewed Reconstruction similarly. In his 1929 book, *The Tragic Era*, historian Claude G. Bowers accused the Freedmen’s Bureau, Union Leagues, and other organizations that encouraged Black political participation of teaching southern Black people “to hate” the White people of the South. He claimed that formerly enslaved people had no agency when it came to working with such groups: “the simple-minded freedmen were easy victims of their guile”.

4. Revisionist Interpretations

Initially, only African-American writers challenged the Dunning School's interpretation of Reconstruction. Among the most notable was **W. E. B. Du Bois**.



TERM TO KNOW

W. E. B. Du Bois

A prominent African-American civil rights activist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; a prolific writer and scholar who was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.



DID YOU KNOW

Du Bois was the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University (1895).

Du Bois rejected White supremacy throughout his career. In 1935, he challenged the Dunning school’s interpretation of Reconstruction by publishing *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*.



DID YOU KNOW

Though sub-titled “An Essay”, Du Bois’ book is over 700 pages long!

Du Bois' book challenges the Dunning School by placing African Americans at the center of the Civil War and Reconstruction. In response to Burgess’s characterization of African Americans as “children”, Du Bois portrayed formerly enslaved people, free Black northerners, and their white allies, as key agents in the fight to abolish slavery, restore the Union, and establish democracy based on racial and economic equality. Du Bois emphasized the attempts by Republican-led state governments to secure voting rights and promote land distribution among formerly enslaved people in the South. He argued that these efforts were thwarted by White property owners, as well as by northern business interests that sought to extract profits and exploit Black labor.

While the Dunning School used racism to portray all of the White South as victims and explain the failures of Reconstruction, Du Bois argued that racism and economic interests worked together to limit opportunities for African Americans and poor White people alike. These factors prevented Reconstruction from succeeding, and left much of the South in poverty:

W. E. B. Du Bois, Excerpt from *Black Reconstruction*

“Put all these facts together and one gets a clear idea, not of the failure of Negro suffrage in the

South, but of the basic difficulty which it encountered; and the results are quite consistent with a clear judgment that Negro and white labor ought to have had the right to vote; that they ought to have tried to change the basis of property and redistribute income; and that their failure to do this was a disaster to democratic government in the United States.”



THINK ABOUT IT

According to Du Bois, why was Reconstruction a failure?



BRAINSTORM

Analyze Du Bois’s claim that African-American and white workers should have benefited from a change in “the basis of property” and a redistribution in income. Were such changes possible during the Civil War and Reconstruction? Are they possible today?

5. Reconstruction as an “Unfinished Revolution”

Despite the significance of Du Bois’ book and his worldwide renown as a scholar and activist, *Black Reconstruction* went largely unnoticed by American historians when it was published. It would take the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century, which challenged and undermined segregation, for a new generation of historians in the field of **social history** to discredit the Dunning School entirely.



TERM TO KNOW

Social History

The history of the average person, especially in terms of demographic groups.



DID YOU KNOW

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is sometimes referred to as the Second Reconstruction. Historians of the mid-to-late 20th century observed the contemporary debate over civil rights in light of Reconstruction, particularly its failure to establish democracy based on racial and economic equality. They viewed this failure as a cause of persistent racial and social injustice in American society. They conducted studies that included groups that were omitted from previous examinations of Reconstruction: Southern Black politicians, women and families, poor White southerners, etc.

Social historians contributed to the creation of a new narrative for Reconstruction, one that challenged the Dunning School's conclusions, by the end of the 20th century. It took changes in views on race and race relations in the U.S. into account, and incorporated perspectives that scholars had previously overlooked. Although these new histories celebrated Reconstruction's potential to transform southern society, they blamed White Southerners—and Northerners—for its failures. As a result of their historiography, Reconstruction became, in the words of historian Eric Foner, “America’s Unfinished Revolution.”

In his 1988 book *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (a book that many historians continue to use today), Foner presents his understanding of Reconstruction in light of several key themes, including the following:

- Like W. E. B. Du Bois, Foner emphasizes “the centrality of the black experience”, and argues that African Americans played an active, positive role in Reconstruction.

- Foner highlights the importance of free labor ideology, writing that “[t]he transformation of slaves into free laborers and equal citizens was the most dramatic example of the social and political changes unleashed” by Reconstruction. According to Foner, this transformation had the potential to remake southern society in subsequent decades.
- Unlike the Dunning School historians and Du Bois, Foner underscores the importance of the federal government during Reconstruction, arguing that the period marked “the emergence... of a national state possessing vastly expanded authority and a new set of purposes,” among them equal rights and protections for Americans of all races. Foner and other modern scholars have argued that the Civil War and Reconstruction marked the beginning of “the activist state”, in which the federal government played an increasing role in the lives of its citizens.

According to Foner, issues of equality and the role of government in people's lives “were the questions on which Reconstruction persistently turned.” He writes that these questions are “as old as the American republic, and as contemporary as the inequalities that still afflict our society.” In his view, Reconstruction remains “America’s Unfinished Revolution” because it did not solve problems that the United States continues to face today.



THINK ABOUT IT

How does Foner define Reconstruction? How does his definition differ from those of the other historians presented in this tutorial?



BRAINSTORM

Consider the different interpretations of Reconstruction presented in this tutorial. What is the primary factor that changed interpretations of Reconstruction?



SUMMARY

The creation of historical narratives is a complicated, highly debated, and ongoing process. Despite their efforts to be objective and avoid bias, historians often allow their assumptions about race and other issues to enter their analysis. The historiography of Reconstruction shows that this can have devastating effects, as historians from the Dunning School legitimized the processes of racial and economic exclusion that southern Democrats implemented after 1877. It would take African-American scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois, and a new generation of social historians in the late 20th century, to discredit the Dunning School and present more accurate interpretations of Reconstruction.

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Claude G. Bowers, The Tragic Era (1929), p. 198, Internet Archive . Retrieved from bit.ly/2lfveTV



TERMS TO KNOW

Dunning School

An understanding of Reconstruction developed by William A. Dunning, John W. Burgess, and their students; interpreted Reconstruction as a disaster for White southerners because Congress abolished slavery and attempted to extend political rights to African Americans.

Historiography

The study and interpretation of historical writings.

Lynchings

Public hangings, typically of African American men by white mobs.

Sharecropping

A system in which poor farmers paid rent on land they farmed (but did not own) with the crops they grew.

Social History

The history of the average person, especially in terms of demographic groups.

W. E. B. Du Bois

A prominent African-American civil rights activist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; a productive writer and scholar who was also among the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.



DATES TO KNOW

1865–1877

Reconstruction era is the period where the United States attempts to redress slavery after the Civil War.

1900–1910

"Dunning School" of Reconstruction historiography emerges.

1935

W.E.B. Du Bois publishes a revisionist Reconstruction historiography with *Black Reconstruction*.

1960–1970

Social historians reinterpret the Reconstruction once again.

1988

Eric Foner publishes *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*.