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## **Slave Self-Activity and the Bourgeois Revolution in the United States: Jubilee and the Boundaries of Black Freedom**

For more than a generation, historical interpretations of slave emancipation in the US have been constructed around a shared acknowledgement that the four million African Americans held as slaves in the South played a central role in driving that process forward. While an emphasis on the agency of the oppressed might sound unremarkable to readers of this journal, its prominence in the 'new' American historiography was both hard won and long overdue. Although little of this perspective has made its way into popular understanding of the Civil War, most historians have come to accept as axiomatic a proposition that was for many years defended only by handful of black intellectuals and engaged scholars on the left. This is a critically important advance, and one worth defending. It is a perspective that seems increasingly precarious, however, as the power of the last revisionist surge recedes and a rendering more consonant with the defensive temperament of the academy comes into view.

The progenitor for the interpretive revolution of the past generation was the activist scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, whose *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935), in overturning a scholarly consensus permeated with the flagrant racism attending Jim Crow, inspired a new wave of post-civil rights era social history. Conceived against the backdrop of global economic crisis at a time when Du Bois was deeply influenced by marxist materialism, *Black Reconstruction* launched a withering assault on the prevailing orthodoxy. Significantly, it did so not by bringing new archival sources to bear or chipping away at the selective documentary evidence marshalled by earlier historians, but by calling into question the very conceptual foundations of their work and demonstrating the analytical power of a materialist approach for understanding the salience of race in US history.

Rather than a diversion from the development of 'normal' class conflict in the mid-nineteenth century US, Du Bois argued, the struggle against slavery embodied "the kernel and meaning of [its] labor movement," with black labour at the heart of the most significant class upheaval in American history. Capital's retreat from its emancipatory promise in the years after the war was key to understanding the defeat of attempts to establish bi-racial

democracy in the post-emancipation South. “Beneath the race issue, and unconsciously of more fundamental weight,” he insisted, “was the economic issue.” Underpinning the terror that sealed Reconstruction’s collapse was the determination of white elites “to reestablish the domination of property in Southern politics” – the success of a Klan-led “counterrevolution” guaranteed by the acquiescence of northern men of property, who “deserted [freedpeople] shamelessly as soon as their selfish interests were safe.”<sup>1</sup> Beyond its forceful challenge to the prevailing narrative, *Black Reconstruction* combined sparkling originality and explanatory power with a lyrical expressive form rare even in the classics of marxist historiography.

### **Du Bois and the Challenge to Racist Orthodoxy**

It can be difficult today to appreciate the intellectual courage it demanded of Du Bois to launch, almost singlehandedly, a frontal challenge against a scholarly consensus marked by “endless sympathy with the white South[,] ridicule, contempt or silence for the Negro [and] a judicial attitude towards the North.” At the hands of the most esteemed historians in the US, he charged, the profound social upheaval unleashed by war and emancipation had been reduced to set-piece battles between squabbling white elites, the revolutionary significance of the slaves’ intervention obscured or ignored altogether in “a deliberate attempt so to change the facts of history that the story will make pleasant reading for [white] Americans.”<sup>2</sup>

The malice with which so many of the most acclaimed earlier studies dismissed any suggestion of slave agency reveals what Du Bois was up against. “The American negroes are the only people in the history of the world,” the southern ‘progressive’ William E. Woodward suggested, “that ever became free without any effort of their own. They had not started the war nor ended it, [but] twanged banjos around the railroad stations, sang melodious spirituals, and believed that some Yankee would soon come along and give each of them forty acres and a mule.”<sup>3</sup>

This was a gratuitously offensive rendering, but there was nothing that marked it off from a mainstream consensus forged in the crucible of late-nineteenth century white supremacy. Some historians acknowledged that slavery had been the cause of the conflict, but across the whole spectrum of bourgeois opinion, commentators agreed that the slaves had remained unmoved by

the convulsions of war, and that freedom had been delivered to them in an act of Yankee benevolence. The capitalist-turned-patrician historian James Ford Rhodes argued that “[t]he blacks made no move to rise” and “remained patiently submissive and faithful to their owners,”<sup>4</sup> but even this was not enough for some. Virginia-born Woodrow Wilson – then a professor at Princeton, and not yet ensconced in the White House – derided Rhodes for his alleged “abolitionist prejudices,”<sup>5</sup> and the cohort of academics gathering around Columbia University’s William A. Dunning and his collaborator John W. Burgess laboured night and day to permanently inscribe their conservative interpretation into the historical record.<sup>6</sup>

In neglecting slave self-activity, liberals were indistinguishable from the most enthusiastic Confederate apologists. Often credited with breaking from the flagrant white supremacy of the Dunning School, Francis Simkins and Robert Woody asserted in their South Carolina study the “remarkable fact that during the war the blacks manifested no general desire to be free” – even while acknowledging, in the same breath, the execution of “twenty-seven negro insurrectionists” by Confederate scouts north of Charleston. Except for “a few [who] fled to Union lines,” they wrote, slaves “remained faithful to their masters”, with freedom “forced on them by abolitionist troops.”<sup>7</sup>

In these and other prominent studies churned out before the second half of the twentieth century, all the main elements of the racist consensus that Du Bois would overturn were on display. In undertaking this he had fragments of useful material at hand – a couple of pamphlets and book-length studies from the left-wing press; a handful of articles that had appeared in the *Journal of Negro History*. He was in regular correspondence with at least two prominent figures on the Trotskyist and dissident communist Left.<sup>8</sup> But neither the precariously situated handful of black academics nor the small US Left had the theoretical grounding to formulate a comprehensive rebuttal.

The meagre output of left-wing historians during the heyday of the Socialist Party was frequently as dismissive of black self-activity as the mainstream studies, and seldom went beyond the crude economic determinism later popularised by Charles Beard and the ‘progressive’ historians.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, Du Bois took direct aim at the very foundations of Civil War historiography: where Woodward

and others presented black freedom as an act of northern benevolence, for Du Bois it was the slaves who grasped their own freedom, bringing purpose to an otherwise senseless episode of industrial-scale slaughter. The oppressed managed this through the instrument of a “slaves’ general strike”, and in the aftermath of victory, he claimed, attempted to remake society in “the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions that this world had ever [yet] seen.”<sup>10</sup>

While putting the finishing touches on his manuscript, Du Bois expressed satisfaction that he had written a book of “unusual importance.” Although *Black Reconstruction* “would not sell widely,” he predicted, “in the long run it can never be ignored.”<sup>11</sup> Still, for all its audacity and interpretive power, Du Bois’s challenge gained almost no traction in the three decades following its publication. The book only began to come into its own in the context of social upheaval in the 1960s, when the black freedom struggle inspired a powerful assault on the racist foundations of American scholarship, and when a new and more diverse generation of scholars influenced by the civil rights movement and committed to re-writing ‘history from below’ launched a powerful assault on the consensus history that had long dominated academia.<sup>12</sup> Aspiring scholars coming into university fresh from the social movements looked, naturally enough, to Du Bois: in his work they found not only a model for engaged scholarship but a fertile and innovative approach to the complicated relationship between race and class in the American past.

This wave of post-civil rights era scholarship – taking its cue from Du Bois’s emphasis on black agency – has revolutionised our understanding of the war and its aftermath, permanently discrediting the myth of the ‘passive negro’. The self-assertiveness of slaves and freedpeople is on display throughout the multi-volume documentary collection compiled by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, characterised by Eric Foner (in 1991) as “this generation’s most significant encounter with the American past”.<sup>13</sup> Editors at the FSSP have laboured since the mid-1970s to put flesh on the interpretive framework pioneered by Du Bois, noting that the archival records related to slavery’s demise in the US – so conspicuously neglected by bourgeois historians for a century after the Civil War – constitute “the richest known record of any subordinate class at its moment of liberation”.<sup>14</sup> The publication of Foner’s *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished*

*Revolution* in 1988 consummated the challenge to the Dunning School, and hundreds of closely-researched monographs and articles published before and since make it unlikely that we will ever see – beyond the echo chamber of the neo-Confederate Right – a revival of the sambo-inspired folklore that for so long passed as historical writing.

### **A Developing Retreat**

While advances in excavating the buried history of slave self-activity render it difficult to fall back on the crass white supremacy underpinning older studies, there are signs of a developing retreat from Du Bois's perspective. Although this shift emanates from complex circumstances, three tendencies are worth highlighting. Just as the upheaval of the 1960s and the power of the 'new social movements' compelled a reckoning with the stale orthodoxy of the Cold War academy, so too the long period of right-wing ascendancy in the years since brings relentless pressure to moderate radical history-writing and disavow its 'excesses'.<sup>15</sup> Part of the reason that the 'new' history of emancipation has never made it into popular consciousness is that there are powerful social forces which have worked relentlessly (through the medium of 'culture wars', attacks on 'political correctness', etc.) to ensure this estrangement; not satisfied with having isolated heresies about the American past to university campuses, the Right is keen on seeing them driven out of American discourse entirely.

Compounding this is a tendency among professional historians to yield before the primacy of high politics – an adaptation to a model of historical change common in all bourgeois democracies, but which manifests itself more potently in the US than elsewhere. Whatever gains in our understanding of the past have been won through 'history from below', American academics are overwhelmingly inclined toward the liberal centre rather than the radical Left,<sup>16</sup> and for most of them real change comes from the top. In much of the recent literature one gets a sense that while scholars feel obliged to nod to the slaves' initiative, it is the machinations of politicians and military leaders that drive historical change. Increasingly we see scholarly output on the Civil War that accords slave self-activity the same narrow space on display in Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012): prominent slave rebels, individual African American soldiers, 'representative men of the race' make cameo appearances, but the wellsprings of transformation lie elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

A third factor tempering enthusiasm for the story of emancipation from below is highlighted in a recent essay charting the “antiwar turn in Civil War scholarship”. Where the history “that emerged out of the turbulent 60s was the child of the civil rights movement,” Yael A. Sternhell writes, a new literature driven by an “emphatic antiwar stance” rehashes older misgivings about whether the Civil War was worth its cost. With the Iraq invasion and a string of failed US occupations lurking in the background, historians following on the misdirected attempt by Edward Ayers to draw parallels between post-invasion Iraq and the post-emancipation US South have succumbed to astoundingly de-contextualised ruminations about the horrors of war.<sup>18</sup> “Recasting slaves not as heroes but as victims is only one of the ways the scholarship is reconfiguring the wartime history of African Americans.” And there are other consequences: “[P]erhaps,” Sternhell speculates, “the field has now reached sufficient maturity for historians to feel more comfortable pointing out some less flattering aspects of black participation in the war effort.”<sup>19</sup> One of the new studies reviewed by Sternhell depicts “a world away [from the] epic conflict between slavery and freedom”, in which “Americans are busy trying to get by or have fun”. She concludes, perceptively, that the “Civil War emerging from this new scholarship is just another messy, ghastly, heartless conflict between two parties who were both, to some degree, in the wrong.”<sup>20</sup>

Taken together, these three trends – the defensive repositioning driven by a sustained period of right-wing ascendancy, the liberal centre’s predilection for high politics, and the cynicism deriving from misconceived analogies between the war that overthrew slavery and 21<sup>st</sup>-century imperial occupations – combine to encourage a drift away from the focus on emancipation from below. At times this has been marked by an aggressive assault on the so-called “self-emancipation thesis” (incorrectly) ascribed to the FSSP and fellow travellers,<sup>21</sup> and involving not only conservative scholars but also liberal stalwarts like James McPherson. In *The Union War*, Gary W. Gallagher rejects as “anachronistic” the unremarkable assertion that the “slaves [became] the prime movers in their own emancipation”.<sup>22</sup> Increasingly among liberal scholars we see a call to question “the continued hold that the ‘War to End Slavery Narrative’ exercises over our collective memory,” with the implication that the recent stress on emancipation does not match the priorities of the [white]

citizens who enlisted and fought in Union ranks.<sup>23</sup> For the war's aftermath, there is the predictable suggestion that modern historiography has over-emphasised class conflict in the Reconstruction South: "We need to stop long enough to listen to the freedpeople and let them tell us how central labor was to their post-emancipation experience," Jim Downs suggests in a recent collection that omits any mention of the ubiquitous struggles over land or labour during Reconstruction. "It was big, but was it that big?"<sup>24</sup>

A more significant and challenging intervention in this evolving debate – one that has elicited both praise and disappointment from historians associated with the Left – is found in James Oakes's Lincoln Prize-winning study, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (2012). Long identified with the 'new history of emancipation', Oakes focuses here almost exclusively on high politics in attempting to reestablish the antislavery credentials of the Republican Party. Foner has described *Freedom National* as "the best account ever written of the complex historical process known as emancipation," but others are more critical, insisting that Oakes's assertion that Republicans upheld a consistent antislavery position from the election of 1860 onward places him at odds not only with their most advanced contemporaries but also with Du Bois and a post-civil rights historiography that stresses the slaves' persistence in forcing **their** freedom onto Lincoln's agenda. Charles Post has argued – correctly in my view – that in depicting the Republican Party as unified and consistent in its approach to emancipation, Oakes downplays the range and inconsistency of perspectives that found a home in its broad antislavery ranks. Oakes insists that his emphasis on high politics can "readily accommodate the role the slaves played in slavery's downfall," but that is difficult to square with the scant attention given to slave resistance, which he'd formerly insisted had brought "the most direct and irresistible pressure" on Lincoln who, upon assuming the presidency, had shown "no intention of advocating emancipation".<sup>25</sup>

There are critical interpretive challenges raised in *Freedom National* that should be of interest to those who take inspiration from Du Bois, but any balanced critique should begin by acknowledging that Oakes is pitching his defence of Republicans against the cynical mood underpinning the antiwar turn. "Horried by the brutal realities of black life in the New South –



sharecropping, Jim Crow, disfranchisement, not to mention chain gangs and lynch mobs,” he writes, “historians on the Left have begun to say things that were once the commonplaces of conservative white southerners. The Civil War wasn’t worth it.”<sup>26</sup> Where Gallagher – downplaying both the centrality of slavery and the initiative of the enslaved – insists that the North’s war was always one for union *rather than* emancipation, Oakes reverses the formulation. Where Marx perceived a “revolutionary turn” in the conduct of the war during the late summer of 1862 – a leap from the “*constitutional*” to the “*revolutionary waging of war*”<sup>27</sup> – Oakes now denies that a qualitative shift occurred at all.<sup>28</sup> This is mistaken, but it results less from a retreat on the question of slave initiative than from difficulty in capturing in a holistic way the dynamic, evolving interaction between the bourgeois revolution directed from above and the slaves’ ground-level initiative. Oakes is obviously well aware of the argument that the slaves played a critical role, but feeling compelled to choose he has given us a fairly relentless emphasis on high politics.

The difficulties involved in integrating high politics and slave agency are not exclusive to Oakes, it should be pointed out. On the other side of the debate there is a propensity to diminish the significance of military and political developments that fell outside the influence of the slaves. If *Freedom National* and some of the compatible work is one-sided in depicting Republicans as consistent emancipationists with their eyes set on black freedom from the war’s outset,<sup>29</sup> the stress on ‘self-emancipation’ can also be carried too far, to the point where federal policy and the military conduct of the war seem to have little bearing on the slaves’ room for manoeuvre.

Union military policy shifted, in part, under continual pressure from the slaves and their allies for a more aggressive antislavery war. But often it was the dynamics of the northern military offensive which created openings that slaves could not have generated on their own. One revealing example is the episode cited prominently by David Roediger in which “the slave Sam”, responding to the commencement of Union bombardment of the South Carolina coast in November 1861, resists his master’s orders to accompany him into the interior, taking to nearby woods instead. Here is a definitive illustration of the interdependency between Union military advance and the openings for slave self-assertion presented, instead, as a dramatic example of self-emancipation – as if the

Union navy were nowhere in the vicinity.<sup>30</sup> The reality, repeatedly illustrated in FSSP volumes, is that slaves across the Confederacy operated on highly uneven terrain, in rapidly changing circumstances in which developing Union military policy formed a critical variable. Along the South Carolina coast, Union occupation underpinned “a great change [among] the negroes” but brought gloom and “great consternation” to their fleeing masters.<sup>31</sup> Despite its emphasis on high politics, *Freedom National* comes closer to capturing the interrelatedness of evolving federal policy, military initiative and the scope for slave assertion than some of the alternative renderings.

What is needed urgently in the face of the trends outlined above is a framework that can move beyond the juxtaposition between high politics and slave self-activity, and which can map with some precision the convergences and antagonisms between the bourgeois revolution and ground-level slave initiative. The point is not to find a middle ground between high politics and black agency, but to offer a framework that can explain their essential, dynamic interaction in the most important revolutionary upheaval in US history *and* offer a coherent explanation for Washington’s ultimate failure to deliver on the promise of black freedom. Potentially, such an interpretation offers a key not only to understanding the dynamics of wartime emancipation, but to the whole of the period analysed by Du Bois (1860-1880) – tumultuous years encompassing war, the attempt to construct bi-racial democracy in the liberated South, and the decisive defeat of that project in the violent overthrow of Reconstruction.

Among other advantages, this approach can allow a close reappraisal of Du Bois’s argument about slave agency – one grounded in the documentary record in a way not possible when *Black Reconstruction* went to print in 1935. Although the conceptual importance of the ‘slave’s general strike’ in Du Bois’s work has been frequently asserted in recent years, almost no one writing on the topic has attempted a detailed assessment of its scope or contours.<sup>32</sup> This article seeks to offer the first systematic reappraisal of the scale and dynamics of the slaves’ general strike, to assess its place in Du Bois’s overall framework for understanding the war, and to offer some thoughts about the complex relationship between slave initiative and the bourgeois revolution. Its starting point is the theoretical framework developed through the classical marxist tradition in attempting to come to

terms with the complexity of the bourgeois revolutions, an approach refined in the recent work of Neil Davidson, Henry Heller, Alex Callinicos and others. Only by grasping both the bourgeois character of the revolution and the radical – but ultimately unsuccessful – attempts on the part of freedpeople to push beyond those limitations, I argue, is it possible to explain the uneven trajectory and ambiguous outcome of the Second American Revolution.

### **Agency, Constraint and the Uneven Terrain of the Wartime South**

*Black Reconstruction's* most obvious contribution was its unconcealed celebration of black agency. Against every 'respectable' commentator who wrote off the slaves as passive bystanders, Du Bois placed them at the epicentre of world-changing events. It was a "general strike against slavery", he insisted, that undermined the Confederacy's ability to fight, transformed the character of the war, and saved the Union.<sup>33</sup> An obvious attempt to counter the malicious racism that had rendered slaves an inert mass, almost immediately the concept of the general strike became the focus of controversy, generating a debate that has not always done justice to the nuance and complexity of Du Bois's argument.

Without question, Du Bois emphasised the transformative power of slave initiative in "decid[ing] the war". But he set his own interpretation off against "two theories, both over-elaborated": one suggesting that "the slave did nothing but faithfully serve his master until emancipation was thrust upon him; the other that the Negro immediately ... left serfdom and took his stand with the Army of freedom." Instead, Du Bois insisted, "What the Negro did was to wait, look and listen. As soon as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike." Significantly, he countered the Confederate assertion of universal slave loyalty not with its opposite – ubiquitous resistance – but with a nuanced (though cursory) survey of a varied and uneven slave experience during wartime, one that evolved in close correlation with political and military calculations made at Richmond and Washington, and on battlefields scattered across the wartime South. It was the "Negroes of the cities, Negroes who were being hired out, Negroes of intelligence who could read and write," Du Bois suggested, who

began “carefully to watch the situation,” while the vast majority (ten to one, by his count) – those “left on the untouched and inaccessible plantations” – bided their time.<sup>34</sup>

At the time *Black Reconstruction* came into print, some critics dismissed Du Bois’s notion of the general strike as an attempt to impose conscious purpose and coherent form on the routine dislocations of war. With all of his “persuasive eloquence and literary power,” Abram L. Harris wrote, it was “impossible” for Du Bois “to convert the wholesale flight of Negroes [into] a general strike.” Oswald Garrison Villard, with Du Bois one of the co-founders of the NAACP, complained that “in portraying the [flight] of the Negro during the war...as a sort of conscious general strike” rather than the “natural, unconscious, unorganised drift of ... endangered masses in the direction of freedom and safety,” Du Bois had overstepped “historic bounds.” If, in the eyes of liberal critics, the slaves had not been completely passive, neither had they intervened consciously to tip the scales toward freedom.<sup>35</sup>

Over the past generation, the basic proposition underlying Du Bois’s notion of the slave’s general strike – that black self-assertion played a central role in transforming the war – has become widely accepted. If we understand (in biographer David Levering Lewis’s words) “Du Bois’s general strike amount[ing] to little more than the common sense of self-preservation exhibited on a massive scale,”<sup>36</sup> then there are few historians who would dissent. But Du Bois was clearly aiming to demonstrate something beyond self-preservation, stressing the conscious aspect of the slaves’ intervention and framing slavery’s disintegration as a major episode of class conflict. This, too, can be taken too far: some of the more celebratory studies of the slaves’ Civil War exaggerate their room for manoeuvre, reading Du Bois superficially and overlooking the unevenness in slave circumstance and consciousness to which he was closely attuned. Men and women make history, after all, but rarely in the conditions they choose, and seldom in history have agency and constraint rubbed up against one another more dramatically than in the wartime South. As John Cimprich has written, across the irregular landscape of the Confederacy slaves “coolly calculated the probabilities of immediate benefit before acting either loyally or disloyally”.<sup>37</sup>

In highlighting the slaves’ role in shaping the outcome of the war and casting their wartime upheaval as a formative chapter in the

history of the US working class, Du Bois pioneered a revolution in historiography. Intending *Black Reconstruction* as an interpretive demolition-job on racist historical writing, Du Bois read widely in the dismal 'scholarship' churned out to obscure the significance of emancipation, but the book involved almost no archival research.<sup>38</sup> More than three-quarters of a century after Du Bois repositioned the slaves as agents of their own liberation and a generation after the social upheaval of the 1960s inspired a turn to 'history from below', historians have by now excavated a rich documentary base for assessing wartime black agency. This cumulative record buries the myth of the passive slave, even as it allows us to be more precise in building on the conceptual framework Du Bois pioneered.

### **The Slaves' Politics**

Crucially, we now know that although they were excluded from formal politics, slaves in many parts of the South were engaged in antislavery agitation, and that their engagement accelerated as the crisis over slavery intensified in the 1850s. In his early work Oakes argued that in their frequent decision to take flight from the plantations, slave runaways forced the issue of slavery onto the national agenda, provoking deep sectional antagonism over the return of 'fugitive' slaves, the passing of personal liberty laws, and the enlistment of the federal government in the business of slave hunting. Communities of escaped slaves and free Blacks – confronting deeply entrenched racism in the North – were not mere appendages to northern abolition, but were centrally involved in every aspect of organizing and internal debate within the antislavery ranks.<sup>39</sup> Comparing northern settlements of fugitive slaves and free blacks to maroon communities in other slave societies, Steven Hahn writes that northern blacks "did the hard work of developing and sustaining radical abolition ... [keeping] the emancipation process alive and deepen[ing] the crisis of the Union."<sup>40</sup>

Beyond day-to-day resistance – the routine acts of defiance that affected virtually every plantation – the slave South saw at least four major attempts at organised rebellion in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. These disproved the white South's claims about black 'contentment', but their ruthless suppression was carefully staged to instil terror in the slave quarters. Twenty-six slaves were hung alongside the alleged ringleader Gabriel on Richmond's public gallows after a plot was

exposed there in 1800; a decade later 66 slave insurgents were killed in battle in Louisiana and more than thirty sentenced to death, their heads severed and “stuck on poles...along the river levee from New Orleans to LaPlace in an attempt to discourage similar rebellions.” More than 130 (including four whites) were arrested at Charleston in 1821: Denmark Vesey and 34 others were hung in front of an “immense crowd” of “white as well as black,” and another thirty-one deported to Cuba. Weeks after the suppression of Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831, Virginia authorities were continuing to report the “the slaughter of many blacks without trial and under circumstances of great barbarity”.<sup>41</sup>

Everywhere the reaction against the insurrectionary threat included harsh new restrictions on the slave community: thirty years later a traveling abolitionist concluded, after hearing a Charleston slave insist that the blacks “wants to be free very bad...and may be will fight before long if they don’t get freedom somehow,” that they were astute enough to hold off until they had some prospect of success. “They know and they dread the slaveholders’ power [and] are afraid to assail it without first effecting a combination among themselves.” This was the predicament confronting rebel slaves across the antebellum South: their calculations about the feasibility of open rebellion were informed by a shrewd appreciation of the masters’ overwhelming power.<sup>42</sup>

Slaves were acutely attentive to any shift in the political winds, and the national crisis that began to intensify in the early 1850s presented them with new opportunities. The 1856 presidential election, heralding the emergence of antislavery politics through the candidacy of John C. Frémont, antagonised proslavery whites just as it aroused the hopes of watchful slaves. Among the escaped slaves who would later enlist in the Union military was Florida-born Prince Lamkin, who claimed that slaves there had “expected all this war ever since Frémont’s time.” Another veteran recalled that upon landing ashore with the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts (Colored) Regiment in 1862, blacks in lowcountry South Carolina informed him “there had been a conspiracy hatching among the slaves, as far back as 1856, the year Frémont was up for the Presidency.”<sup>43</sup> One of the most illuminating antebellum slave memoirs – from the Tennessee-based agitator William Webb – offers clear evidence of the link between the intrusion of the slavery controversy into national politics and a sharp increase in grassroots agitation among the enslaved: “There arose a great

trouble in the Southern States, about Frémont running for President,” Webb recalled. “[White Southerners] commenced having great meetings...saying the streets would run with blood before the North should rule”:

The name of Frémont sounded in every colored person’s heart [and] meant freedom to them. They held great meetings, and had speeches among themselves, in secret. They knew if the slave-holders heard about them holding meetings it would be death to them. And when Frémont ran and was defeated, a great anger arose among the colored people, but the slave-holders were rejoiced. Then the slaves began to study how they would get free[.] They would make speeches among themselves [about] what steps they would take. Some would speak about rebelling and killing, and some would speak, and say, “wait for the next four years.” They said they felt as if the next President would set the colored people free.<sup>44</sup>

Lincoln would be late in assuming this role, but reports from across the South show that slaves everywhere shared Webb’s conviction about the meaning of the war and the trajectory along which events were moving. Lamkin recalled “the secret anxiety of slaves to know about the election of Pres. Lincoln, & their all refusing to work on March 4<sup>th</sup>,” the date of Lincoln’s first inauguration. “The negroes are all of opinion that Lincoln is to come here to free them,” a plantation mistress at Charleston complained when election results became known. Near Pensacola slaves presented themselves to the command at Fort Pickens even before the war began, “entertaining the idea” that federal troops “were placed here to protect them and grant them their freedom.”<sup>45</sup> A year after the outbreak of war the situation had become far more explosive. New Orleans planters reported that there were “a great many Negroes out in the woods [who] think Old Lincoln is fighting for them.” After her husband went off to join the Confederates, a Texas mistress complained that her slaves were “doing nothing,” and that “nearly all the Negroes around here are at it,” with some “getting so high on anticipation of the glorious freedom by the Yankees that they resist a whipping.” The coming of war dramatically expanded the possibilities for slave resistance and, as Du Bois insisted, those held in bondage across the South would watch impatiently for opportunities to assert their claim to freedom.<sup>46</sup>

### **Confederate Mobilization Opens the Breach**

The first significant openings for slave self-assertion were created not by a benevolent Lincoln administration, nor by Union Army officers who would later come to play a crucial role, but by the Confederacy. The supreme paradox of the bloody, four-year conflict is that the white South's ability to prosecute the war depended on impressed slave labour. From the construction of fortifications around Charleston harbour at the war's outset to the "monuments to negro labor" in trenchworks and artillery installations vital to defence against McClellan's Peninsula Campaign in the spring of 1862, impressed slaves played an indispensable role in sustaining the war-making capacity of the Confederacy.<sup>47</sup> But in a war organised to defend their own enslavement, black labourers could be pressed into military work only so long as Confederates wielded the necessary coercive power, and by the summer of 1862 there were signs that the system was collapsing under the strains of war.

"The credit of having first conquered their prejudices against the employment of Blacks," the antislavery editor Horace Greely conceded, "is fairly due to the rebels." Reports that impressed slave labour bolstered the Confederacy began to figure prominently in abolitionist appeals for black military enlistment. "If Abraham Lincoln does not have the negro on his side," Wendell Phillips told an audience in the spring of 1862, "Jefferson Davis will have him on his."<sup>48</sup> But in deploying slaves as military labourers throughout the South, Confederate officials opened a perilous breach in slavery's defences. The organization of an elaborate system for transporting labourers back and forth across the region – mainly from the interior of the Gulf and seaboard states toward the vulnerable coast – presented serious problems for slaveholders and military officials alike. Among other things, the traffic brought intelligence about the blows being inflicted on their 'invincible' masters to slaves in remote plantation districts. Planters expressed concern that slaves returning from the labour camps brought "new and dangerous ideas which they imparted to the other slaves[,] complicating the problem of control and discipline at home."<sup>49</sup>

As early enthusiasm for war began to wane among southern whites, planters increasingly resented the Confederate military's intrusions on their prerogative, and in places began to withdraw



their cooperation. Compelled to work under dangerous, often lethal conditions, slave labourers frequently escaped, fleeing to the interior or – when within range – making a break for Union lines. By late 1862 the impressment system was on the verge of collapse, and chronic labour shortages began to seriously impact the Confederacy's war-making capacity. The war launched to make slavery permanent and unassailable was unleashing the very forces that would bring it crashing down.

### **Slave Consciousness: a Varying and Fluid Context**

Even in his brief elaboration of the scope of the slaves' general strike, Du Bois was careful to acknowledge the uneven character of slave consciousness and opportunity during the war. The evidence accumulated over the past generation reveals regional variation and change over time in a fluid military situation, confirming the slaves' initiative but also very substantial limitations on their ability to shape events. Frederick Douglass wrote that during the war abolitionists in the North vacillated "between the dim light of hope and the gloomy shadow of despair," and that condition – rooted in the excruciating gap between aspiration and possibility – must have been even more pronounced among the slaves chafing under Confederate rule.<sup>50</sup>

At the most basic level, uneven consciousness emanated from the demographic, geographical and productive diversity of slavery in the US South, from the division of labour common to the larger plantations, and from the basic humanity of the slaves themselves. The highly localised characteristics of the slave economy generated an uneven landscape for slave resistance. Beyond structural variations, important differences prevailed at a more intimate level. Slavery inevitably produced widespread discontent, but the system tended also to fragment the 'slave community' and militate against a cohesive, organised challenge to white power.

Looking back over a century and a half later from within a society in which 'free labour' assumptions can seem natural, the hierarchical divisions imposed by the slave system appear clear-cut. But the plain demarcation between free and unfree was not always transparent to those living under its sway. Rosa Starke, a slave reared in the South Carolina piedmont, insisted that while there were but two classes among whites – masters and poor whites – "[th]ere was more classes amongst the slaves." Among house servants comprising the "first class" she included butlers

and maids, nurses, chambermaids and cooks – distinguishing them from carriage drivers and gardeners, carpenters, barbers and “stable men” just below them. Wheelwrights, wagoners, blacksmiths and slave foremen figured next, with “cow men” and those that had “care of the dogs” lower still. “All these,” she noted, “have good houses and never have to work hard or get a beating.” But such privileges were denied both to “cradlers of wheat, the threshers, and the millers of corn and the wheat, and the feeders of the cotton gin” and to the “lowest class” of “common field niggers.” Starke’s impressions were based on personal experience on a plantation large enough to sustain an elaborate division of labour, and the record of slavery’s disintegration disproves familiar assumptions about the loyalty of slave domestics, but as a caution against assuming a natural, intrinsic solidarity among the enslaved her recollections are instructive.<sup>51</sup>

“The four million slaves of the South were not homogenous either in condition or outlook,” Bruce Levine observes. They made calculations about how best to take advantage of the war in a variety of settings, and “like any section of humanity, displayed a wide range of personalities. Some were quick; others were not. Some were audacious, other were not[.] Some attended closely as possible to political news; others simply accepted that their lot, whatever its rights and wrongs, was fixed and unchangeable.” Editors of the *Freedom* series concur that “[t]he lives of Southern blacks were no more at one than those of Southern whites. Black life in bondage assumed distinctive forms as a result of the pattern of the slave trade, the demographic balance of whites and blacks, the size of the slaveholdings, and the labor requirements of particular crops.” Moreover, as the foiled plots at Richmond and Charleston revealed, “the presence of loyal slaves and the masters’ practice of rewarding informants had always made conspiracy dangerous.”<sup>52</sup>

On top of this were piled a wide range of circumstances that could either encourage or deter collective action. The ‘grapevine telegraph’ – the clandestine network of slave communication – was often remarkably efficient in transmitting news and intelligence across the plantation South, but there were considerable gaps as well. Slaves in cities and market towns or those brought into early contact with Union occupation had little trouble keeping abreast of developments, and played a critical role in moving information along roads, waterways and railroad lines into the interior. Female

domestics in the urban South were likewise an important source of intelligence, but the gendered nature of long-distance transport (and later, of wartime impressment) meant that rural women were almost completely denied the mobility that gave slave teamsters and boatmen access to the world beyond the plantation, and were more likely to figure in 'stand and fight' confrontations than play a role in geographically ambitious conspiracies.

Large swathes of the plantation South remained cut off and isolated, even after the war's end. Early in the conflict, an older study concluded, "Except in invaded regions, and in areas near the Federal lines, the war seems not to have wrought any great changes in the life to which the slaves were accustomed." In the late-settled cotton frontier of southwest Georgia, Susan O'Donovan found more recently, the outbreak of war "barely stirred [the] slaves," and "antebellum rhythms [of] life remained largely intact." Even here, though, war was eroding the planters' control: they worried about sending impressed slaves to labour on the coast near Savannah, where "the negroes are [as] fully informed on the [war] as we are."<sup>53</sup>

The pattern of antebellum slave insurgency suggests that urban areas and districts home to long-established slave communities allowed greater space for clandestine organization than isolated rural districts. It was often militant slaves in the port cities – brought into contact with the wider Atlantic world – who managed to give a lead to the struggles of plantation labourers in the surrounding countryside, a trend that persisted through the war and beyond into Reconstruction. With Union naval and land forces pressing upon the coast and occupying strategic terrain from early in the war, substantial disparities in opportunity developed between coastal slave communities and those in the interior. Union capture of Port Royal on November 1861 made the South Carolina sea islands a beacon for escaping slaves from three surrounding states, with Beaufort earning a reputation as a "Negro heaven"; the taking of New Orleans six months later detonated a slave rebellion across southern Louisiana from which planters never recovered. Large-scale slave movement – a heaving before slavery's coming disintegration – was concentrated along the coast until Union forces began to win strategic victories up and down the Mississippi, culminating in Grant's triumph at Vicksburg in July of 1863, which accelerated slavery's collapse throughout the Mississippi Valley.

This close correlation between Union military advance and the expanding scope of black freedom is an essential feature, though it has to be acknowledged that the dynamic operated in both directions. Early on, for example, the northern military command regarded Port Royal as a valuable prize mainly for the role it could play as a fuelling station for their Atlantic fleet. It was the continual insistence of slaves and their allies that the area might more advantageously serve as a beachhead for dismantling slavery that, by early 1863, allowed federal forces to begin to inflict heavy blows against the heartland of secession. A similar dynamic was evident elsewhere, and in light of this the sharp distinction that Gallagher and Oakes have attempted to draw (from very different perspectives) between union and emancipation is an artificial one.<sup>54</sup> It was the transformation of the war into an armed antislavery crusade that made defeat of the slaveholders' rebellion possible, and that transformation was inconceivable without the slaves' initiative.

### **Convergence: Union War Aims and Slave Aspirations**

How might we understand slave self-activity during the war in such a way that acknowledges *both* the critical role they played, as a class, in transforming the war *and* the highly uneven levels of consciousness and circumstance that characterised the slave South? Steven Hahn has argued that there is "good reason" to regard the slaves during wartime as "discrete, ever-developing political and military bodies moving in and out of alliances as the circumstances of power and politics allowed."<sup>55</sup> While in places there is clear evidence for this, such an approach seems to ascribe a high level of coherence, uniformity and premeditation to a process that was more complex and irregular, and one in which the constraints on slave assertion varied dramatically from one locale to another – sometimes changing dramatically in a matter of weeks, days, or even hours. Consider, for example, the tragic final days in the life of Amy Spain, the 16 year-old slave who ventured out to cheer Sherman's troops as they took Darlington, South Carolina, in the spring of 1865, but who met her death on the gallows a few days later after Union forces had moved on and Confederates retook the town.<sup>56</sup>

Abolitionist James Redpath's observations in the urban South on the cusp of war convey the disparities in the slaves' predicament and the caution they had to observe in deciding whether to shift

from “watching and waiting” to open defiance. At Richmond and Wilmington he found slaves “discontented, but despondingly resigned to their fate.” At Charleston, though, they struck him as “morose and savagely brooding over their wrongs.” Their hesitation would dissolve, Redpath believed, with an open declaration of war: “[I]f the roar of hostile cannon was to be heard by the slaves, or a hostile fleet was seen sailing up the bay,” he predicted, Charleston’s “sewers [would] be instantly filled with the blood of the slave masters.” His judgment on the varying disposition among slaves is worth noting, even if Redpath underestimated the obstacles to open rebellion in Charleston, where only in the war’s final weeks Union military success made it possible for the city’s slave majority to show their hand. In the early stages of the war, at least, slaves in the Confederate capital at Richmond thought it inconceivable that their masters might come out on the losing end: “Thousands of Troops were Sent to Richmond from all parts of the country,” one recalled, so that it “appeared to be an impossibility, to us, Colored people, that they could ever be conquord.” In such circumstances it was unremarkable that “some slaves preferred to retain a familiar way of life and its known benefits rather than hazard ... affiliation with the Federals.”<sup>57</sup>

On the issue of slave ‘contrabands’, too, it makes sense to acknowledge a wide disparity in circumstances. It is no doubt true, as Hahn suggests, that the contraband camps served, in part, as “schools of citizenship” – the staging sites for a vibrant political discourse among runaway slaves. But the same camps were also hosts to epidemic misery, destitution, violence, and death. Despite the paternalism he brought to organizing relief in the Mississippi Valley, Superintendent of Contrabands John Eaton is credible in describing the situation he confronted as the camps filled with refugees.<sup>58</sup> As word of Union advances spread via the slave telegraph across the western theatre of war, the military faced a steady flow of escaping slaves seeking refuge behind Union lines.

These refugees make up a substantial number of those included by Du Bois as having taken part in the ‘general strike’, but as Eaton attests, the sequence by which slaves made their way to the camps varied. As Union control over the region tightened, probably a majority came in on their own volition through a more or less organised process of escape. But in the early period commanders were often compelled to bring under military protection slaves left

to fend for themselves by fleeing masters. Comprised overwhelmingly of the elderly and the infirm, “encumbered” women and their young children, this early majority had, according to Eaton, “become so completely broken down in spirit, through suffering” that “it was almost impossible to arouse them.”<sup>59</sup> If their condition on arrival did not render slave refugees unlikely agents for taking the war to their masters, the desperation they encountered in the camps (including abuse at the hands of Union troops) had a demoralizing effect. “[W]e have never witnessed an aggregate of wretchedness and misery equal to what we were here called to look upon,” commissioners reported after having toured the camp at Nashville. A black soldier at Chattanooga told his commander that “the suffering from hungar & cold is so great that those wretched people are dying by scores – that sometimes thirty per day die & are carried out by wagon loads, without coffins, & thrown promiscuously, like brutes, into a trench.” Eaton’s testimony, supported by other grim accounts, suggests the need to differentiate between those slaves in a position to actively pursue emancipation and those carried along by events beyond their control.<sup>60</sup>

In light of these circumstances, which prevailed well beyond the Mississippi Valley, does it make sense to regard slaves as a *discrete* element in the war? The relationship between slaves and the Union military is complicated, but it seems plain that the dynamics set in motion during protracted war brought about an increasing convergence of interests. The crisis that generated new openings for slave self-assertion did not arise simply because whites had ‘fallen out’ with one another, as some have suggested: the fact that it was *over the question of slavery* that civil war erupted was hugely significant. Union forces benefited in tangible and important ways from slave intelligence, from their labour in the camps, and eventually from black military service, but the relationship worked both ways: it is difficult to see how the slaves’ room for manoeuvre could have been so dramatically expanded absent the strategic military advances won by the Union military. It makes more sense to acknowledge the increasing convergence of Union war aims and slave aspirations rather than to view the slaves as a discrete or self-standing entity negotiating a series of pragmatic, ever-shifting alliances.

There are, to be sure, striking examples of autonomous or semi-autonomous organization in which particular slave communities

negotiated with the Union military on their own terms. In his biography of Abraham Galloway, David Cecelski recounts the experience of Edward Kinsley, a white recruiter attached to the Mass. 45<sup>th</sup> Colored Infantry, who'd been unsuccessful in trying to convince black North Carolinians to enlist until the spring of 1863, when he was invited to a black-owned boarding house in New Bern, blindfolded and led to a room in the attic to be interviewed at gunpoint by Galloway and others. There he was put "under a solemn oath, that any colored man enlisting [should] have the same pay as their colored brethren enlisted in Massachusetts; their families should be provided for; their children should be taught to read; and if they should be taken prisoners, the government should see to it that they were treated as prisoners of war." Kinsley agreed, and "the next day the word went forth, blacks came to the recruiting stations by the hundreds and a brigade was soon formed."<sup>61</sup>

The New Bern episode stands as a clear example of an organised attempt by slaves to steer events, and there are others. William Webb recounts his role in creating elaborate networks of slave resistance across parts of Tennessee before the war; by late 1862 these extended south into Mississippi and northern Louisiana and north into Kentucky. In his suggestions for expanding organization throughout the Mississippi Valley readers of Webb's memoir get a rare glimpse of the logistics of the slave telegraph: during clandestine meetings with co-conspirators Webb advocated "establish[ing] a king in every State[.] I thought it best for each king to appoint a man to travel twelve miles, and then hand the news to another man, and so on, till the news reached from Louisiana to Mississippi." Winthrop Jordan unearthed the bones of a slave conspiracy in Adams County, Mississippi, that began within four weeks of the outbreak of war, with intelligence likely traveling along the path laid out by Webb. By early May of 1861 local whites were reporting that "a great many carriage drivers" in and around Natchez seemed to be implicated in a conspiracy known simply as "The Plan." In her study of the Battle of Milliken's Bend, Linda Barnickel confirms that underground leaders in the same area played a crucial role in recruiting slaves into Union ranks in the spring and summer of 1863.<sup>62</sup>

If the dynamics evident at New Bern and in parts of the Mississippi Valley in early 1863 were unexceptional, they also did not typify relations between escaped slaves and the Union Army, much less

illuminate conditions universal across the Confederacy. At the other end of the spectrum we have credible testimony from slaves living on remote plantations that word of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation never reached them until after the war, that even after word arrived at the war's end that they were freed, some felt so intimidated by their former masters' presence that they refrained from marking the occasion in any way – even though, as one put it – their “joy was unspeakable.”<sup>63</sup> Oakes estimates that less than 15% of the region's slaves had been liberated by the war's end,<sup>64</sup> and we have testimony from planters as late as August and September of 1865 expressing their resentment that just now – four or five months after the Confederate surrender – they were finally being ordered by passing federal commanders to inform labourers that they were no longer slaves. All of this reaffirms the conspicuous unevenness that Du Bois pointed out in his cursory qualifications about the scope and limitations of the slaves' general strike.

Lincoln's slow conversion to an antislavery war – and the North's ability to turn to its advantage the networks of slave resistance that Webb, Galloway and others had prepared – was in important ways forced by the impossibility of suppressing the ‘slaveholders' rebellion' through the tidy, limited war the Republican leadership set out to oversee in April 1861. After the scale of the disastrous failure of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign became clear in the summer of 1862 a *New York Tribune* correspondent concluded “that it is utterly impossible for us to subdue the rebels without an alliance with their slaves.”<sup>65</sup> By this time the northern public – and Lincoln himself – were moving rapidly toward the same conclusion.

“When Northern armies entered the South they became armies of emancipation,” Du Bois wrote: “It was the last thing they planned to be.”<sup>66</sup> Both sides of that assessment are worth bearing in mind. Before his election and into the second year of the war, Lincoln publicly disavowed at every opportunity any intention to tamper with slavery where it already existed. This was a key element in his First Inaugural Address, and here it makes sense to take Lincoln at his word – he had “no purpose” at this point “to interfere with slavery in the States where it exists” and “no inclination to do so.” The determination to exclude slavery from Union military strategy in the early phase of the war – to “spare the [Confederacy's] most vulnerable spot” – profoundly affected its early conduct.<sup>67</sup> Though he refrained from attributing the North's poor military performance



in the early period of the war to political weaknesses alone, Marx insisted in the summer of 1862 that “the military causes of the crisis are connected with the political ones.”<sup>68</sup>

Alongside the Confederacy’s durability, it was the slaves’ relentless insistence on slavery’s destruction that drove the war’s transformation. Du Bois was the first prominent historian to assert this publicly, and he did so without equivocating. We don’t have to view slaves as acting independently of the Union military to acknowledge their critical role – Du Bois didn’t do so in his own work. Such an approach only hinders a nuanced understanding of the ways in which the bourgeois revolution in the United States at critical points converged with – and was pushed forward – by the slaves’ revolt from below. John Ashworth offers a useful assessment of the relationship between these: “[T]he class conflict that existed between slave and master, though enormously important, was not of itself enough to unravel the southern social fabric.” It is mistaken, he insists, “to assume that the South in 1860 was on the verge of a servile rebellion or that the resistance of the slaves, without outside pressure from the North, was sufficient to destroy slavery in the region.”<sup>69</sup>

Some have argued, based on a shallow engagement with Du Bois, that the upheaval is best understood as a “proletarian revolution ... undone by a bourgeois counterrevolution”.<sup>70</sup> In the remainder of this article I attempt to demonstrate that the framework developed by classical Marxism for understanding the bourgeois revolutions makes it possible to grasp the seeming paradox in these events – slave self-activity as a critical component of a social revolution led and consummated by northern capital – in a way that can both assimilate Du Bois’s vital theoretical contribution in recognizing “black workers as central participants in the class politics of the Civil War”<sup>71</sup> and identify the source of the new constraints on black freedom that became painfully apparent after emancipation.

### **Reconstruction: Triumphant Capital and the Emancipated Worker**

While northern victory was an essential precondition for establishing capital’s dominion over an expanding, rapidly industrializing United States, Du Bois was right to extend his analysis beyond the war years, designating 1860 and 1880 as the outer markers of a protracted revolutionary upheaval. Despite other limitations, progressive historians like the Beards had rightly

understood the long sweep of the war and its tumultuous aftermath as a Second American Revolution. Will Herberg, whose *Heritage of the Civil War* (1932) influenced Du Bois, had distanced himself from the “vulgar” determinism of the Beards while affirming that the “heroic period of American history” – encompassing abolition, war, and reconstruction – constituted “one organic epoch” whose “essential and fundamental aims [were] those of the classic bourgeois-democratic revolution”.<sup>72</sup> If defeat of the slaveholders’ rebellion cleared the way for the remaking of southern society, it also opened up an extended period in which triumphant northern capital would assert its supremacy over popular elements mobilised by the emergency of war. By a long stretch the most significant of these were the emancipated slaves.

Without going into extensive detail about the depth and power of grassroots mobilization among freedpeople during Reconstruction,<sup>73</sup> three aspects of the post-emancipation upheaval are worth noting. Most significantly, all the tendencies arising in wartime were forcefully on display, in exaggerated form, in the early years following Confederate surrender. Buoyed initially by the perception that they had the power of the federal government behind them, ex-slaves moved onto the offensive against their former masters, in places seizing land and demanding the breakup of the large estates, engaging in work stoppages over a range of grievances well beyond the issue of wages, arming themselves and organizing militias to protect their communities from bellicose, heavily armed whites. A significant feature of this upheaval was the prominent organising role assumed by freedwomen – an ‘unladylike’ posturing that outraged white Southerners and offended more than a few of their northern ‘allies’.

From the outset this mobilization was marked by the same variability manifest in wartime: where blacks enjoyed a clear demographic advantage, where particular groups of labourers had developed traditions of collective assertion (including the strike weapon) under conditions of slavery, where freedpeople’s resilience was fortified by the presence of black troops or effective local leaders, or where access to arms or nearby federal garrisons could shield them from white retribution, former slaves were able to mount impressive campaigns for deep transformation. Charleston dockworkers provided the backbone for four major strike waves that engulfed that city during Reconstruction, for example, and formed the core of at least two groups of organised

Republican militants (the ‘Live Oaks’ and ‘Hunky Dorys’) that physically confronted white supremacist mobs intent on overthrowing Reconstruction. In much of the interior, however, where grassroots organization had been continually pulverised by white paramilitaries from the 1868 election onward, freedpeople’s morale had all but collapsed. Freedman Sam Nuckles, refuged in Columbia after being driven out of the upcountry, testified as early as 1870 that the Republican grassroots were “scattered and beaten and run out ... just like scattered sheep everywhere. They have no leaders[.] If there are, they are afraid to come out and declare themselves leaders—colored men or white men.”<sup>74</sup> Across the most vulnerable areas of the plantation South, ‘exodus’ – the urge to escape the impending restoration of white supremacy through emigration to Liberia, to Kansas or points further west – began to spread like wildfire.<sup>75</sup>

A corresponding feature of Reconstruction was the early, decisive retreat from any prospect of radical transformation of the South. In insisting that their own emancipation was the central question at stake in the war, slaves had pushed an otherwise timid bourgeois leadership toward revolutionary action. Union victory brought an end to slavery, but it became clear very quickly that the Republicans’ cramped ‘free labour’ vision fell far short of freedpeople’s aspirations. Here the conflict between the limited aims of an ascendant bourgeoisie and the ex-slaves’ desire to set about constructing their ‘new Jerusalem’ were bound to clash. In an astute observation, David Montgomery concludes that although they demonstrated unwavering loyalty to the party of Lincoln, “black field workers neither created nor led state [organizations].” The Republican Party, “created in the North [for] purposes different from those of the field hands ... simultaneously politicised and restrained the action on the plantation.”<sup>76</sup>

In the early aftermath of victory, with the most determined elements of the northern bourgeoisie propelled into ascendancy within the Republican Party, freedpeople’s expansive vision coincided briefly with the outlook of party Radicals. Washington oversaw not only the granting of the franchise to (male) former slaves and the imposition of military rule aimed at guaranteeing protection against white violence; some among the Radicals urged the breakup of the large plantations and their redistribution among ex-slaves and landless whites. Freedpeople viewed this as just compensation for generations of unpaid labour. Their allies among

the bourgeois Radicals – men like Thaddeus Stevens – urged redistribution as a necessary step to establishing a viable capitalist democracy in the post-war South. Stevens insisted that

The whole fabric of Southern society must be changed, and never can it be done if this opportunity is lost. Without this, this government can never be, as it never has been, a true republic. Heretofore, it had more the features of aristocracy than of democracy. The Southern States have been despotisms, not governments of the people. It is impossible that any practical equality of rights can exist where a few thousand men monopolize the whole landed property[.] How can republican institutions, free schools, free churches, free social intercourse, exist in a mingled community of nabobs and serfs: of the owners of twenty thousand acre manors with lordly palaces, and the occupants of narrow huts inhabited by “low white trash”? If the South is ever to be made a safe republic, let her lands be cultivated by the toil of the owners, or the free labor of intelligent citizens. This must be done even though it drive her nobility into exile. It they go, all the better.<sup>77</sup>

Ultimately the debacle of Reconstruction’s collapse – the failure to realise bi-racial, bourgeois democracy in the former Confederacy – was rooted in the unwillingness of northern capital to follow through on the reforms demanded by former slaves and endorsed, for a time, by a minority among the Radicals. “Above all,” Eugene Genovese observed, former slaves “wanted land – not because of some sentimental attachment [but] because they knew that land alone could anchor everything else.” Nevertheless, “the Republican ‘moderates’ buried their hopes early; by 1868 the matter was settled”. Herberg concluded in 1932 that “[i]n a very real sense, the Radical course was defeated when the Northern bourgeoisie ... rejected the plan of confiscating the large estates[,] for without land emancipation was robbed of its economic foundation.” “By 1868,” William McKee Evans concurs, “the idea of ‘forty acres and a mule’ was virtually dead[;] Republicans undertook to promote political equality in a society characterised by equality in almost nothing else.”<sup>78</sup>

Across much of the plantation South, Reconstruction had become by the late 1860s a holding operation for emancipated black workers. They demonstrated immense courage and extraordinary

organising capacity in continuing to turn out the Republican vote during elections marked by widespread paramilitary terror, but absent a fundamental change of direction at the North the opportunity for real transformation had by then passed. After a period of post-war despair, southern conservatives sensed increasingly that momentum was shifting in their direction. Where Reconstruction hadn't already been overturned, they moved from the covert, clandestine night riding of the Klan to brazen armed mobilizations carried out by parading 'rifle clubs' in broad daylight. White paramilitary violence played a critical role in overpowering freedpeople, but it could never have done so absent a scandalous retreat on the part of Republican 'moderates'. Andrew Zimmerman notes, astutely, a growing tendency among pundits and scholars to hold up changes in "the law, the constitution, and individual civil rights" as a kind of consolation prize for freedpeople's inability to secure social and economic freedom. Such an approach gives undue credit to American liberalism in an episode where it is plainly implicated in blocking an expansion of democratic freedom and throwing a life line to white supremacy.<sup>79</sup>

Northern capital's complicity in what Du Bois termed a 'counterrevolution of property' is the third critical feature in the trajectory of Reconstruction, and one that has intensified confusion about the class character of the revolutionary upheaval that destroyed slavery. There have been various attempts to characterise the upheaval as a "proletarian revolution". Noel Ignatiev did so in a caustic critique of Eric Foner's work some years back,<sup>80</sup> and there have been others since, but the most serious recent attempt appears in an extended essay by Zimmerman, who distils his argument in an introduction to International Publishers' reissue of Marx and Engels's writings on *The Civil War in the United States*. There he argues that "[f]or Du Bois, as for Marx and Engels, the Civil War was not a bourgeois revolution, but a workers' revolution carried out within a bourgeois republic that was finally undermined by that bourgeois republic." The same assertion is repeated, in slightly amended form, several times in a longer essay, and seems to have taken hold in wider circles over the past several years.<sup>81</sup> Tempting though it is to argue that Zimmerman's claims are merely problematic, the truth is they are completely unfounded, and based on fairly obvious misreadings.

While keen to move on to a substantive engagement, a brief

response on these particulars seems necessary. For Du Bois, context is essential. The main task he set himself in *Black Reconstruction* was to counter the prevailing racist consensus. Partly this involved vindicating the Reconstruction-era Republican regimes in the face of their relentless denigration by the Dunningites – an approach Howard Rabinowitz described as “rehabilitation history”<sup>82</sup> – and doing so on the basis of what was in 1935 an extremely thin sympathetic historiography. The result was an interpretation that extolled Republican achievements at the same time it understated the gap between the Party leadership and its constituency among (mostly destitute) former slaves. But even at a time when research in this area was completely undeveloped, the fact is that Du Bois carefully considered *and then withdrew from* characterizing the regime in South Carolina<sup>83</sup> as a “dictatorship of the proletariat”. Here it is important – as it was in relation to the slaves’ general strike – to read Du Bois carefully, attentive to his motivations. Fortunately he left behind a trail of correspondence that leaves little room for confusion.

In the note included on the title page of his South Carolina chapter, Du Bois wrote that he had “first called this chapter ‘The Dictatorship of the Black Proletariat in South Carolina,’” until it was “brought to my attention that this would not be correct[.]” While “there were signs of such an object among South Carolina Negroes, [this] was always coupled with the idea of that day, that the only real escape for a laborer was himself to own capital.” This conceptual reconsideration came out of discussions with a small circle of left-wing black intellectuals and with the Trotskyist journalist Benjamin Stolberg. Du Bois contacted Stolberg in late 1934 for advice on whether to retain the ‘proletarian’ characterization, explaining his rationale that “there were distinct evidences of a determination on the part of the black laborers to tax property and administer the state primarily for the benefit of labor.” Acknowledging that there was also evidence “of the triumph of the petty bourgeoisie, both white and colored,” he nevertheless regarded his disclosure of the class dynamics underpinning the war and its aftermath as a critically important advance – one that “revolutionizes our understanding of Reconstruction[.]”<sup>84</sup>

While aspects of Stolberg’s response seem pedantic,<sup>85</sup> the core of his advice was sound: “though the term ‘The Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ describes in a *literary* way very much [freedpeople’s] heart’s desire,” he advised, “as *social* theory it is bound to be mere

*analogy*.<sup>86</sup> [emphasis in original] Du Bois was certainly amenable to such an adjustment. In the one place in the finished book where he raises the possibility that southern labour might have assumed power, he notes that “[f]or a second, for a pulse of time,” contending, class-rooted visions of a reorganised South “crossed and coincided”. South Carolina “*showed certain tendencies toward a dictatorship of the proletariat*,” he observed. [emphasis added] “Unfortunately” however, the “power” to launch a government run by workers rested in “the military arm of a government [more and more] falling into the hands [of] wealth organized on a scale never before seen in modern civilization[,] wielding vaster and more despotic power than European kings and nobles ever held.” There can be few more unambiguous descriptions of bourgeois dictatorship.<sup>87</sup>

In relation to Marx and Engels, Zimmerman unearths some valuable material, particularly on German émigré radicals’ influence on their grasp of the Civil War, and he is correct in pointing to the ways in which – by shining a light on slave self-activity – Du Bois restores a critical element of class struggle mostly absent from their analysis. His central argument rests, however, on a fundamental misunderstanding of the framework through which they understood the war, and on the erroneous assumption that framing the events as a ‘bourgeois revolution’ originated in Popular Front historiography.<sup>88</sup> Zimmerman writes that Marx and Engels “did not apply ready-made concepts of revolution to the US Civil War,” and that American events “changed the meaning of revolution profoundly, from the overthrow of a political sovereign to the transformation of society.” Actually the latter meaning was already deeply embedded in their outlook by mid-century, shaped by study of the French Revolution and by their experience of the 1848 revolutions in Europe. While the explanatory force of their analysis owes much to having immersed themselves in the particulars of American developments, there can be little doubt that they understood the US Civil War (including the timidity of northern capital) as an almost classic unfolding of their understanding of bourgeois revolutions. The repeated assertions that Marx and Engels “recognized in the Civil War a proletarian revolution” are simply without foundation.<sup>89</sup>

### **Popular Mobilization and the Bourgeois Revolutions**

There are ancillary elements of the argument advanced by Ignatiev, Roediger, Zimmerman and others about the proletarian

character of southern slaves that deserve careful analysis beyond the scope of this essay, including the implausible suggestion that the Mississippi Valley was at the outbreak of war “home to arguably the most proletarianized workforce in the world.”<sup>90</sup> The more fundamental problem, however, is the implicit assumption running through this literature that bourgeois revolution is incompatible with proletarian - or even plebeian - mobilisations. In reality some configuration of complex and uneasy alignment of disparate class forces had been the norm throughout the experience of the bourgeois revolutions. As we shall see, Du Bois’s framework for understanding this critical period – including both his qualified assertion about a transitory situation approaching dual power during Reconstruction<sup>91</sup> and his clear indictment of northern capital in the ‘betrayal’ of freed slaves– is compatible with a Marxist understanding of the bourgeois revolutions.

Even taking into account their lack of uniformity, some form of popular mobilization was more often the rule than the exception in the significant upheavals through which the bourgeoisie assumed power. “In every great bourgeois movement,” Engels observed, “there were independent outbursts of that class which was the forerunner, more or less developed, of the modern proletariat.” Fundamentally this was the case because despite their growing social power, the rising bourgeoisie was everywhere (necessarily) a minority. In order to prevail in seizing state power for itself the bourgeoisie was compelled to mobilise social forces far beyond its ranks, including not only sections of the oppressed peasantry but embryonic proletarian elements as well. Indeed for Engels it was the “general antagonism of exploited and exploiter” that “made it possible for the representatives of the bourgeoisie to put themselves forward as representing not one special class, but the whole of suffering humanity”. In rallying popular support during the French Revolution, Daniel Guérin noted, the bourgeoisie proclaimed that “the reign of liberty and equality was beginning for everybody.” Only with the consolidation of the new republican order did it become clear that “compared with the splendid promises of the philosophers, the social and political institutions born of the ‘triumph of reason’ were bitterly disappointing caricatures[.]”<sup>92</sup>

A glimpse of dual power like the one Du Bois perceived during Reconstruction had flickered briefly, three-quarters of a century earlier, in Paris. For a moment, according to Engels, “the ‘have-



nothing' masses [were able] to gain the mastery," though this could not be sustained "under the conditions then obtaining". In his study of the role of the *bras nus* of Paris, Guérin saw in this "an embryo of proletarian revolution within the bourgeois revolution," though it is worth bearing in mind Norah Carlin's caveat that we should register both the celebratory element in Guerin's account of "the first manifestation of the modern class struggle" *and* his recognition that in prevailing conditions this could only be ephemeral, that proletarian power "could not [then] survive outside the womb of bourgeois revolution".<sup>93</sup>

Why then, given the prominence of developing proletarian elements in the Paris upheaval, do Marxists regard the French upheaval as a bourgeois revolution? In broad form its post-revolutionary trajectory – the re-subordination of poor peasants and workers in a republic ruled by French capital – shares many of the features of the retreat from Reconstruction. Are there not grounds here for characterizing the upheaval as a 'workers' revolution undermined by a bourgeois republic'? Henry Heller summarises the rationale for framing the upheaval as a bourgeois revolution in spite of these features:

Millions of peasants and hundreds of thousands of workers and craftsmen rebelled against the existing order alongside the bourgeoisie. Why then do we label the revolution a bourgeois revolution? In the first place it is because the bourgeoisie assumed leadership[.] Mass urban insurrection and peasant revolt were indispensable features of the revolutionary process[.] But revolution is supremely a political event entailing the seizure of control of the state, [and] it was only the bourgeoisie, increasingly self-conscious as a class and endowed with sufficient economic, political and cultural resources [which] could challenge and overthrow [the old order] and establish a new state.<sup>94</sup>

Combined, these elements of a nuanced approach to the bourgeois revolution – one capable of grasping both the fundamentally capitalist nature of the deep transformation underway and the space that such an upheaval could open up for precocious self-assertion on the part of plebeian and developing proletarian forces – offers a framework fully compatible with Du Bois's prolific analysis. There are obvious parallels in the profound originality of Du Bois's major work and Guérin's study, and even

more striking similarities in their mixed reception on the Left.<sup>95</sup> Here Zimmerman's conflation of two very different critiques of *Black Reconstruction* renders the task of situating Du Bois's work in a broader corpus of Marxist historiography unnecessarily difficult. The book's hostile early reception by the Communist Party – the largest organisation on the mid-1930s US Left – was conspicuous. Loren Miller wrote disparagingly in the *New Masses* that while the study was “valuable as a source book for dates and figures[,] Du Bois' confusion [on the bourgeois character of the revolution] destroys its utility for wider use.” In *Reconstruction: the Battle for Democracy* – published in 1937 and clearly intended as the CP's riposte to *Black Reconstruction* – James Allen reproaches Du Bois for “failing to grasp the fundamental bourgeois character of the revolution.” While in purely formal terms Allen's critique genuflected in the direction of historical materialism, its transparent motivation was to rationalise the dubious alliances being pursued by the CP under the banner of the Popular Front. In seeking to resurrect a ‘progressive bourgeoisie’ that had, more than a half century earlier, shown its hand decisively in the retreat from Reconstruction, Popular Front historiography pointed 180 degrees away from Du Bois's emphasis on the ‘independent outbursts’ of the ‘forerunner ... of the modern proletariat’.<sup>96</sup>

Antecedents for a more sympathetic reception to Du Bois were present in some of the left historiography that predated *Black Reconstruction*. In *Communism and the Negro* (1933), Max Shachtman had acknowledged that the slaves had been “the decisive force in re-establishing the national unity of the country”<sup>97</sup> – an important advance over Herberg's pamphlet emphasising the role of abolition as an expression of bourgeois radicalism. But the most mature early application of the classical Marxist understanding of the bourgeois revolution in evaluating *Black Reconstruction* came from C. L. R. James, then (in 1949) associated with the Fourth International. Like Allen, James acknowledged that, formally at least, Du Bois had overstepped the mark in characterising the Reconstruction state governments as “a sort of dictatorship of the proletariat.” Here, however, his own assessment diverged sharply from the disapproving tone of the CP: “Far from doing harm,” he insisted, “the conception that lay behind the mistaken formula was the strength of Du Bois' book: he recognized that the Negroes *in particular* had tried to carry out ideas that went beyond the prevailing conceptions of bourgeois democracy.” [emphasis in original] Echoing the conclusions drawn

by Engels in 1880, and consonant with Guérin's findings on proletarian mobilisation in revolutionary Paris, James shared Du Bois's enthusiasm that *Black Reconstruction* disclosed – as no other study had contemplated – the ways in which freed slaves had attempted to push beyond the bourgeois limits of the revolution. A year later James's close collaborator Morris Goelman developed the point further: in his chapter on the general strike, Du Bois was “seeking an historical anticipation of the modern proletariat in the Civil War Negro.” Whatever “errors and exaggerations” he made merely “underscore[d] the extent of his effort to incorporate the Negro into modern proletarian history.” This was, Goelman wrote, “part of a larger conception that the Negro in the South was not simply a long-suffering but essentially a revolutionary laboring class which attempted ‘prematurely’ to remake Southern society”.<sup>98</sup> Here was a rounded appraisal, rooted in an astute grasp of classical Marxism, which stands the test of time.

If we pull back from conflating emancipation (in which slave initiative was critical) with the wider revolutionary project driving confrontation between the North and South, three things are clear. First, although it is not an essential feature of the bourgeois revolutions, in the US example northern capital directed conquest and reorganization throughout this extended period. As Charles Post has observed, “Capitalist manufacturers and commercial family-farmers, organized in the Republican Party, [took] the lead in organizing the political and military struggle to remove the impediment posed by slavery and its expansion.”<sup>99</sup> Secondly, in the rare instances where black workers in the Reconstruction South were able to mount a serious challenge to the direction of events, invariably they were at a decisive disadvantage, and seldom able to engage in more than episodic resistance. Unremarkably, the exodus ‘fever’ was in many places accompanied by a turn toward (or a revival of) black nationalism, but it was also a response borne of pessimism and a sense of impending defeat.

Finally, and significantly for the argument I have made here, the sometimes dramatic clashes that mark Reconstruction in the South can obscure the fact that the reorganization of class rule was never confined to the former Confederacy, but was taking place nationally. If we compare their circumstances in 1855, on the eve of war, with the predicament black Southerners confronted forty

years later – at the ‘nadir’ – then the gains won through the long upheaval of war and reconstruction seem meagre. Metaphorically, at least, who could quibble with Du Bois’s poignant assertion that after their “brief moment in the sun,” freedpeople were pushed “back toward slavery”? On the surface, therefore, it seems paradoxical that from the vantage point of northern capital – the main force directing the bourgeois revolution – they had succeeded in seeing through a fundamental transformation. As Steven Hahn has written, “what began as a slaveholders’ rebellion in the context of an intense struggle for federal power, turned into a social and political revolution, bourgeois in nature, that simultaneously made for an imperial nation-state [on] the North America continent, as well as for a massive capitalist transformation ‘from above’”. Though compelled to destroy slavery in the process of staking their claim to undiluted power, nevertheless black freedom had never been the aim of their operation.<sup>100</sup>

It is significant that the abandonment of freedpeople in the post-Civil War South was in the main not motivated by racism, but by the Republicans’ general retreat from the egalitarian aims they had claimed to embrace in the build-up to war. Like their antecedents among the French bourgeoisie, they had proclaimed the beginning of the “reign of liberty and equality”, but sounded retreat almost as soon as the Confederacy was vanquished. This retreat was driven **in the main** by a fear that the rhetoric which Republicans had themselves put into circulation was at the war’s end being taken up in a serious way by workers North and South, and that this threatened to spill over beyond the limits of what ascendant capital would tolerate. It was in this context that rapprochement between northern capitalists and their former Confederate adversaries began to take shape, leading by 1877 to the North’s abandonment of Reconstruction and the restoration of white supremacy across the South. “It became expedient,” James McPherson writes, “for Northern political and business interests to conciliate Southern whites, and ending federal enforcement of Negro equality in the South was part of the price of that conciliation.”<sup>101</sup>

In many ways the Civil War formed a bridge between the early nineteenth-century ‘artisans’ republic’ so frequently idealised by Lincoln and the Republicans in mid-century clashes with the ‘Slave Power’ and the conflict-ridden, industrial society that came after. In a post-war age marked by “endemic, ideologically suffused social

conflict”, Nancy Cohen writes, Republicans were forced to confront, for the first time, “the [full] implications of universal suffrage and mass democracy”. In this context their “trepidation over democratic majoritarianism in the new landscape of organized labor, agrarian populism, and large financial and industrial capital prompted them to reevaluate earlier political ideas and commitments.”<sup>102</sup> Having vanquished its rivals among the slaveholders of the South, the northern bourgeoisie now turned on the emerging labour movement – of which freedpeople’s organizations (notably the Union League movement) formed an important and threatening component. “Class conflict,” David Montgomery wrote, was the “submerged shoal on which Radical dreams floundered.”<sup>103</sup>

Barrington Moore, Jr. characterised the American Civil War as “the last revolutionary offensive on the part [of] bourgeois capitalist democracy”.<sup>104</sup> Though prosecuted under a banner of universal freedom, that offensive was aimed above all at establishing capital in power throughout the US, and like all the great bourgeois revolutions its results were extremely contradictory. If we welcome the defeat of slavery, which the bourgeois revolution was compelled to achieve in order to vanquish its slaveholding rivals, we must reckon also with other consequences of capital’s ascent to national power. Emancipation sits incongruously alongside the accelerated concentration of capital and the militarization of the state for a new era of explosive industrial confrontation, and with the brutal conquest of the Great Plains for full-throttled exploitation of the vast resources of the west – itself a dry run for more ambitious imperial endeavours beyond the North American continent. Yet all of these were key components in a single process of consolidation of bourgeois rule in the late nineteenth-century United States. With the Age of Emancipation receding more and more into distant memory, the turn to egalitarianism that had cast the northern bourgeoisie, fleetingly, in its heroic role, gave way overnight to the rampant exploitation of the Age of Capital – and in ideological terms, to the war of all against all underpinned by the mantra of *laissez-faire*.

This the context in which the failure of the Civil War to deliver on its promise of universal freedom and equality should be reconsidered. It was this unwillingness, this inability of the northern bourgeoisie to bring about the ‘reign of liberty and equality’ that remains unfinished, and which Marx was alluding to when he wrote

that the proletarian revolution “cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.” Time to “let the dead bury their dead” and acknowledge the limits of that upheaval, one in which “words went beyond the content”. Any fundamental advance in the modern United States – one that can deliver on the rhetoric of the bourgeois radicals and on the dashed hopes of freed slaves and generations since, must be one where “the content goes beyond the words”.<sup>105</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Du Bois 1935, pp. 353, 378.

<sup>2</sup> Du Bois 1935, pp. 719, 713.

<sup>3</sup> Woodward 1925, p. 372.

<sup>4</sup> Rhodes 1917, p. 381.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson 1893, pp. 272-4.

<sup>6</sup> Foner in Smith and Lowry, eds. pp. ix-xii.

<sup>7</sup> Simkins and Woody 1932, pp. 12-14, 24, and fn. 42.

<sup>8</sup> See his correspondence with Will Herberg and Benjamin Stolberg in *Du Bois Papers*.

<sup>9</sup> I explore the weaknesses in this historiography in Kelly 2016b, pp. 49-50.

<sup>10</sup> Du Bois 1935, 51 (and all of Chapter 4); 727.

<sup>11</sup> Du Bois to F. P. Keppel, 17 Nov. 1934, *Du Bois Papers*.

<sup>12</sup> Foner 1988, xxi-ii.

<sup>13</sup> Foner 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Berlin et al. 1985, p. xvii.

<sup>15</sup> The corrosive effects of this retreat are evident in Adam Fairclough 2012, pp. 155-88. See also the response: Ross and Rowland 2012, pp. 249-70.

<sup>16</sup> The incessant attacks from conservatives convey a false impression of vast left-wing influence. For a more sober reading see Hamilton and Hargens 1993, pp. 603-27.

<sup>17</sup> Masur 2012, Robin 2012; Kelly, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Ayers 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Examples of this unflattering behavior include the curious phenomenon of “black counterterrorism”. Scholarly misgivings about freedpeople’s excesses are also evident in Rodrigue 2006, pp. 40-65 and Fitzgerald 2006, pp. 91-116. .

<sup>20</sup> Sternhell 2013, pp. 239-256.

<sup>21</sup> The FSSP has never argued that the slaves ‘emancipated themselves’. “The war provided the occasion for the slaves to claim freedom,” editors suggest in their introduction to the first volume, “but three interrelated circumstances determined what opportunities lay open to them[.] the character of the slave society...the course of the war itself [and] the policies of the Union and Confederate governments[.] Together [these] made the destruction of slavery a varying, uneven, and frequently tenuous process.” See Berlin et al. 1985, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Gallagher 2012, pp.147-150 *et passim*. Quote p. 148.

<sup>23</sup> Levin 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Downs 2017, p. 165.

<sup>25</sup> Foner quote on back cover of Oakes 2013; Roediger 2015, pp. 6-8; Post 2012; Oakes 2013, p. xviii; Oakes 1986, 89-107. Quote p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> Oakes critique of the “counterrevolutionary thrust of...recent scholarship” is compatible with my own argument here. See Oakes 2014. For a perceptive critique of recent historiography, see Oakes 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Marx 1984b, pp. 227-8. Italics in original.

<sup>28</sup> “Like most historians,” Oakes writes (2013, p. xxiii) in his introduction, “I always believed that the purpose of the war ‘shifted from Union to emancipation’ but over the course of my research that familiar transition vanished like dust in the wind.” Later, however, he notes (2013, p. 242) a shift from the “limited emancipation” that accompanied a “limited war” to a “harder war that included a call for universal emancipation”. On the “shift to hard war” see

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also Oakes 2013, pps. 372-3: "It is from this point," Oakes suggests, that "evidence of truly large numbers of slaves "collected" or 'captured' by Union troops begins to appear in official reports as well as in the letters and diaries of individual soldiers."

<sup>29</sup> McPherson 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Roediger 2015, p. 2.

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<sup>32</sup> The only notable recent efforts are Hahn 2009, pp. 55-114, and Lause 2015, 55-67.

<sup>33</sup> Du Bois 1935, p. 51.

<sup>34</sup> Du Bois 1935, pp. 57, 59, 66.

<sup>35</sup> Harris 1935, p. 367; Villard 1936, pp. 3-4, 15. For a defense of Du Bois's originality on this point, see Kelly 2015, pp. 11-15.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis 2000, p. 372.

<sup>37</sup> Cimprich 1982, p. 339.

<sup>38</sup> It is doubtful whether Du Bois could have gone that route even if he'd wanted: as late as the mid-1950s, African American historian John Hope Franklin found himself excluded from archival collections across the Jim Crow South or forced to work in segregated side-rooms as he labored on *Reconstruction after the Civil War* (1961).

<sup>39</sup> Oakes 1986, pp. 89-107.

<sup>40</sup> Hahn 2009a, 43.

<sup>41</sup> On Gabriel's rebellion see Egerton 1993 and Sidbury 1997; on the Louisiana revolt see Rasmussen 2011; on the Vesey conspiracy see Egerton 2004; on Nat Turner's revolt see Greenberg 2003. Quotes from Bacon-Blood 2011; Egerton 2004, p. 197; *Richmond Whig*, 3 Sept. 1831, quoted in Aptheker 1937, p. 301.

<sup>42</sup> Redpath 1859, pp. 57, 52.

<sup>43</sup> Looby, ed. 1999 [entry for 4 Dec. 1862], p. 59; Gooding 1999, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> Webb 1873, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> The slaves were "delivered to the [Pensacola] city marshal to be returned to their owners" by federal commanders at Fort Pickens. See Berlin et al. 1985, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Jane Pettigrew to Charles Pettigrew, 7 Nov. 1860, in Channing 1970, p. 272; First Lieut. A.J. Slemmer to Lieut. Col. L. Thomas, 18 March 1861, in *Official Records of the War of Rebellion*; Gideon Pillow to Jefferson Davis, 26 July 1862, in Robinson 2005, p. 180; Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 18 Aug. 1863, in Faust 1996, p. 66.

<sup>47</sup> On 'monuments to negro labor' see Brasher 2012, p. 122. Black labor was critical in part because of the racial stigma attached to menial labor in the South – white soldiers objected being assigned to essential work involving the pick and shovel. "Our people are opposed to work," Robert E. Lee wrote to Jeff Davis. See Brasher 2012, p. 171.

<sup>48</sup> Greeley 1865, p. 522; Phillips quoted in Brasher 2012, 79. A distinction must be made between impressment and black military service on behalf of the Confederacy – a favorite myth of Confederate apologists. Although a debate over slave enlistment developed, out of desperation, in the closing weeks of the war, military service in the Confederate ranks was never on offer to slaves. See Levine 2007, pp. 40-45.

<sup>49</sup> Wiley 1938, p. 125.

<sup>50</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Hope and Despair in These Cowardly Times," An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, 28 April 1861, in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, available at <http://frederickdouglass.infoset.io/islandora/object/islandora%3A2135/pages>.

<sup>51</sup> Rosa Starke Interview, in Rawick, ed. 1972-6, pp. 147-148. Starke was one of more than a thousand slaves owned by her master, Nick Peay, living on one of his nineteen plantations comprising 27,000 acres. On the existence of an "enslaved aristocracy of labor" among the slaves, see also Dusi 1996, p. 276, a point elaborated in his chapter on 'Privileged Slaves', pp. 319-349.

<sup>52</sup> Levine 2014, pp. 91-93. Berlin et al. 1985, p. 4; Cimprich 1982, p. 344.

<sup>53</sup> Du Bois 1935, pp. 59, 69, quoting Eaton 1907, pp. 2, 3, 19, 32, 134; Wiley 1938, p. 43; O'Donovan 2010, p. 80

<sup>54</sup> See Gallagher 2012, and Foner's critical review (Foner 2011).

<sup>55</sup> Hahn 2009b, p. 78.

<sup>56</sup> "Hanging of Amy Spain," *Harpers' Weekly* [30 Sept. 1865], p. 613.

<sup>57</sup> Redpath 1859, p. 52; Richmond slave quoted in Brasher 2012, p. 29; Cimprich 1982, p. 337.

- <sup>58</sup> Du Bois quotes Eaton's report extensively – one of the few primary sources he makes use of in *Black Reconstruction*.
- <sup>59</sup> Eaton 1907, p. 19, citing a letter from Vicksburg. Cimprich (1982: p. 341) notes the gendered dimension of slave flight, but reverses Eaton's account: "Most of the first runaways...were males aged sixteen to thirty-five," he asserts. "Gradually family units came to dominate in the stream of runaways."
- <sup>60</sup> Lt. Jos. R. Putnam to Brig Gen WD Whipple [30 Jan 1865] in Berlin et al. 2012, p. 461.
- <sup>61</sup> Cecelski 2012, pp. xv-xvi.
- <sup>62</sup> Webb 1873, p. 18; Jordan 1993, p. 11; Barnickel 2013, pp. 63-66.
- <sup>63</sup> Lowery 1911, pp. 120–121.
- <sup>64</sup> Oakes 2013, [preface](#).
- <sup>65</sup> Samuel Wilkeson of the *New York Tribune* quoted in Brasher 2012, p. 196.
- <sup>66</sup> Du Bois 1935, p. 55.
- <sup>67</sup> There are complex strategic considerations in the debate over early military strategy. Frederick Douglass (among others) argued that Lincoln could not have carried the northern public with an early commitment to emancipation. Arguably, however, Lincoln's attempt to conciliate the Border States by (as McClellan put it) continually "dodg[ing] the nigger question" merely delayed a day of reckoning. His determination the war should not "degenerate into a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle" won him the (temporary) admiration of McClellan, who declared the president "perfectly honest and...really sound on the nigger question." For Marx and for many of the most astute abolitionists, Lincoln's "anxious regard for the wishes, advantages, interests of [Border States slaveholders] blunted the Civil War's point of principle [and] deprived it of its soul." See Douglass 1876. McClellan quotes from Sears, ed., 1989, p. 128; Marx 1861a, p. 151.
- <sup>68</sup> Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address" [4 March 1861], in Basler, ed. 2001, p. 263; Marx 1984b, p. 226.
- <sup>69</sup> Ashworth 2007, p. 3.
- <sup>70</sup> Zimmerman 2015, p. 324 et passim.
- <sup>71</sup> Zimmerman 2015, p. 317.
- <sup>72</sup> Herberg 1932, p. 3.
- <sup>73</sup> See, in addition to the relevant FSSP volumes, Litwack 1980; Foner 1988; Fitzgerald 1989; Saville 1994; Rodrigue 2001; Glymph 2003; Hahn 2005; O'Donovan 2010.
- <sup>74</sup> "Testimony of Sam Nuckles", in US Congress 1872, p. 1161.
- <sup>75</sup> Kelly 2016a.
- <sup>76</sup> Montgomery 1995, p. 123.
- <sup>77</sup> *New York Times*, 10 Sept. 1865.
- <sup>78</sup> Genovese 1980, p. 40; Herberg 1932, p. 18; McKee Evans 1967, p. 251.
- <sup>79</sup> Zimmerman 2015, p. 305.
- <sup>80</sup> Ignatiev 1993, pp. 243-51, with response in Glaberman 1995, pp. 209-214. The core of Ignatiev's objection is that while claiming to base his study on the framework laid down by Du Bois, Foner omits the 'slaves' general strike' and characterizes the upheaval as a bourgeois revolution rather than a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. "Compared to the moderation of the [Paris] Commune," Ignatiev suggests (1993: p. 246), "the accomplishments of Reconstruction in South Carolina seem like the wildest radicalism." The Republican program, "carried out against a background of mass movement," he writes, "may not yet be communism, but it is no longer capitalism." The argument rests on a misreading of Marx and Engels's enthusiasm for the Paris Commune – based not on its economic measures (regarded by them as moderate) but on the model it provided for a workers' state – and on a hyperbolic rendering of the Republicans' record in black-majority South Carolina, where despite impressive examples of working-class mobilization black laborers never held power. For a striking example of the bourgeois character of the Republican regime, see Kelly 2006, pp. 375-414. On the gap between elected officials and the Republican grassroots, see Holt 1977.
- <sup>81</sup> Zimmerman, ed. 2016, p. xxix. Andrew Hartman (2018), for example, ascribes to Marx the notion that the war represented "a proletarian revolution within a bourgeois republic".
- <sup>82</sup> Rabinowitz, ed. 1982, p. xvii.
- <sup>83</sup> South Carolina, one of two black-majority states in the South, was arguably the most advanced of the Republican state regimes; its collapse in 1876 brought the end of Reconstruction.
- <sup>84</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to Benjamin Stolberg [1 Oct. 1934], *Du Bois Papers*.



- <sup>85</sup> In essence, Stolberg suggested that since the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat had not yet been developed, its establishment was not yet possible.
- <sup>86</sup> Benjamin Stolberg to W. E. B. Du Bois [3 Oct. 1934], *Du Bois Papers*.
- <sup>87</sup> Du Bois 1935, pp. 346, 391, 345.
- <sup>88</sup> For a useful elaboration of Marx and Engels's evolving understanding of the bourgeois revolutions that predates recent debates, see Draper 1978, pp. 169-200, and Callinicos 1989, pp. 113–171. The most detailed and engaging development of this framework is Davidson 2012; for an application of this framework to the US Civil War see Davidson 2011.
- <sup>89</sup> Zimmerman 2015, pp. 316, 317, 324, 325. The mischaracterization seems based on an untenable reading of a single letter from Marx to Engels on 29 Oct. 1862. For the original see Marx 1862c, pp. 419-21.
- <sup>90</sup> Zimmerman 2015, p.315.
- <sup>91</sup> Certainly there are instances where black workers mounted powerful challenges to the moderate course pursued by Republican state regimes: what seems most striking though is the difficulty of sustaining these or spreading them beyond particular isolated geographical locations. I discuss one of the most potent of these in Kelly 2006.
- <sup>92</sup> Engels 1880, pp. 287, 286; Guérin 1977 rep. [1946], p. 4; Engels 1880, p. 289.
- <sup>93</sup> Guérin: "Could not the *sans culotte* vanguard exploit the revolutionary situation created by the bourgeoisie itself, and the popular torrent overflow through the floodgates so incautiously opened? The objective conditions of the time did not allow the vanguard to beat the bourgeoisie at their own game." Quoted in Carlin 1990, p. 201.
- <sup>94</sup> Heller 2009, p. 7.
- <sup>95</sup> Miller 1935, p. 24; Allen 1937, p. xx. Guérin's study, Ian Birchall recalled, had posed "a challenge to the whole popular front tradition (specifically "the myths of national unity and the 'progressive bourgeoisie'"), and to the use of the analogy of the Terror to justify Stalinist repression"; thus it "had a rough ride from Stalinist historians." Their influence over left historiography in postwar France meant that the book was "banished from academic respectability." Birchall 1988, pp. 176-7; Birchall 2004, pp. 24-5.
- <sup>96</sup> On the CP and the Popular Front, see Post 1996; on the Popular Front and Civil War historiography see Kelly 2007; On the CP and African American history see James 1949a, 1949b.
- <sup>97</sup> Shachtman 2013, p. 15.
- <sup>98</sup> James 1949a; Goelman ['William Gorman'] 1950, p. 84, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/fi/vol11/no03/gorman.htm>.
- <sup>99</sup> Post 2011, p. 163; Post 2012. See also Dawson 2003.
- <sup>100</sup> Hahn 2015, p. 340.
- <sup>101</sup> McPherson 1984, pp. 430-431.
- <sup>102</sup> Cohen 2002, pp. 3-4.
- <sup>103</sup> Montgomery 1981, p. x. On northern capital's fear of black labour mobilization, see Cox Richardson 2001, pp. 83-121.
- <sup>104</sup> Moore, Jr. 1966, p. 112.
- <sup>105</sup> Marx 1979, p. 106.

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