

# THE PLACE OF CUBA IN THE GLOBAL HISTORY OF RECONSTRUCTION

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Review: DOWNS, Gregory P. *The Second American Revolution: The Civil War-Era Struggle over Cuba and the Rebirth of the American Republic*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2019. 232p.

**O**n April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1888, Frederick Douglass addressed a crowd that had gathered in honor of the twenty-sixth anniversary of emancipation in the District of Columbia. Douglass, the most prominent black abolitionist of the century, had recently turned seventy. He might, at this age, have been expected to look back proudly on a career that had helped bring about the liberation of four million slaves. Instead, he despaired. On that day, he described in stark terms what he had witnessed on a recent tour of the Southern States. In the South, “the landholder imposes his price, exacts his conditions, and the landless Negro must comply or starve... we shall find him a deserted, a defrauded, a swindled, and an outcast man—in law free, in fact a slave; in law a citizen, in fact an alien; in law a voter, in fact, a disfranchised man.” Emancipation, Douglass

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concluded, was “a stupendous fraud—a fraud upon him, a fraud upon the world.”

This scene—and others like it—have dominated the recent historiography of Reconstruction in the United States. Over the past two decades, scholars have engaged in what Carole Emberton calls “Unwriting the Freedom Narrative”—challenging a standard historical synthesis that still focuses on Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation as the moment when the Civil War transformed into a war for freedom.<sup>3</sup> These narratives have also laid siege to the foundational text in Reconstruction literature—Eric Foner’s *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*. In 1988, Foner argued that the end of slavery marked a moment of revolutionary possibility for interracial democracy in the United States. For a brief time, a significant number of Southern whites “were willing to link their political fortunes to those of blacks,” in a massive democratic experiment “without precedent in the history of this or any other country that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century.”<sup>4</sup> Since then, historians including Amy Dru Stanley, Stephen Kantrowitz, Ari Kelman and many others have questioned the revolutionary potential of Reconstruction. Their work has exposed the deep continuities between slavery and freedom, whether by revealing the roots of contract labor in white anti-slavery ideology, by highlighting the ambiguous meaning of freedom for black abolitionists, or by centering the devastating consequences of Northern victory for indigenous people across the continent.

In *The Second American Revolution: The Civil-War Era Struggle Over Cuba and the Rebirth of the American Republic*, Gregory P. Downs seeks to restore the revolutionary possibility of Reconstruction. The first part of his story points to the forceful, extralegal transformation of the U.S. Constitution between the years 1865 and 1870 as proof of the revolutionary nature of the times. During these years, the Radical Re-

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3 Carole Emberton, “Unwriting the Freedom Narrative: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 3 (May 2016): 377-394.

4 Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), xxiv.

publicans in Congress relied on military force to compel Southern states to ratify three amendments that radically altered the Constitution. The 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments—which destroyed slavery and granted freedmen full citizenship rights—were only passed because Congress extended its war powers past the date of surrender. This story, largely familiar to U.S. historians, has one important analytical twist. Downs characterizes the Radical Republicans in Congress as “bloody constitutionalists.” In moments of bloody constitutionalism, he argues, “managerial revolutionaries temporarily turn to violence to implement new political systems, then try to return to peace.”<sup>5</sup> After the U.S. Civil War, Republican congressmen did not want to enter a state of permanent revolution. Rather, they sought to force through a specific legal transformation—emancipation—and then return to “banal, normal time.”<sup>6</sup> To Downs, this category can help explain why Americans so frequently overlook the radical “re-founding” that took place during Reconstruction, and instead hold on to a comforting idea that the Civil War saved the nation.

The second part of Downs’ story moves U.S. Reconstruction out into the Atlantic World. Here, he argues that U.S. Reconstruction was part of a series of “revolutionary waves” that began in Cuba and Mexico, reverberated into the United States, and eventually swept back out again into the Spanish-speaking Atlantic World.<sup>7</sup> In order to support this claim, Downs begins chapter two by exploring the role that Cuba played in U.S. antebellum politics. He argues that Cuban annexationists, slaves, and revolutionaries all helped push the questions of Cuban slavery and annexation into center stage in the United States, deepening the divide over slavery that culminated in the secession crisis of 1861. In chapter three, he turns to the revolutionary possibilities that U.S. Reconstruction opened up in Cuba and Spain. Here, he

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5 Downs, *The Second American Revolution: The Civil War-Era Struggle over Cuba and the Rebirth of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 6.

6 Downs, *The Second American Revolution*, 6.

7 Downs, *The Second American Revolution*, 7.

argues that U.S. Reconstruction created widespread, international expectations for the end of slavery and the triumph of democracy.<sup>8</sup> In the late 1860s, Cuban and Spanish revolutionaries both embraced these possibilities to launch republican revolutions. In Spain, these men toppled a monarchy; in Cuba, they launched a ten-year war for national independence. In Downs' telling, the failure of Radical Reconstruction in the United States undermined Cuban independence. In 1870, President Grant refused to intervene on behalf of the Cuban insurgency. As a result, slavery "limped along" in Cuba for another twenty years.

One aspect of this story represents a remarkable challenge to the existing literature on Reconstruction. Throughout *The Second American Revolution*, Downs sidelines the question of whether Reconstruction marked a moment of lost "promise" for American democracy. Instead, he claims, Reconstruction history demonstrates the likely need for a third re-founding of the United States. "It may be safer to pretend that we live in a self-governing and perhaps self-correcting political machine," Downs writes. "But the past does not confirm to our wishes. Nor does the future."<sup>9</sup> This stance marks a sharp break with Foner, who has recently suggested that the Reconstruction-era Constitution provided civil rights activists with the foundation for success during the twentieth century.

Yet, the role of Cuba in this argument is never entirely clear. According to Downs, the outcome of Reconstruction was determined by "managerial revolutionaries."<sup>10</sup> These men operated within the boundaries of the U.S. Congress or the U.S. military. Actors outside of the nation-state bear no causal force in bringing about the radicalism of Reconstruction, or its demise; rather, Cuba appears in the narrative as a new way to highlight the revolutionary nature of Reconstruction. As he puts it, "once we see the Civil War within international events,

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8 Downs, *The Second American Revolution*, 97.

9 Downs, *The Second American Revolution*, 54.

10 Downs, *The Second American Revolution*, 6.

it no longer looks moderate or restorative, in its leaders' intentions, in its methods, or in its effects."<sup>11</sup>

This disconnect is the result of a major omission. In more than a hundred pages, Downs barely mentions the tens of thousands of Republican voters who *did* desire permanent revolution: the freedpeople themselves. The Republican Party only triumphed as a coalition. Northern industrialists depended on abolitionists and former slaves to destroy the planter class in the United States. Cuban revolutionaries understood this. In 1868, at the height of Radical Reconstruction, liberal elites launched the first war for Cuban independence. Within three months, they had declared all slaves behind enemy lines free. As in the United States, it was the slaves who transformed a conservative war for the nation into a radical war for abolition and democracy.

The radicalism of this moment, then, was rooted in black politics across the Atlantic World. While *The Second American Revolution* breaks new ground by calling for revolutionary change based on the historical experience of Reconstruction, Downs misses an opportunity to explore the roots of this revolution in a transnational struggle for black freedom. Still, as Downs explains, "this book is less a finished argument about the outcome" of Reconstruction than an invitation to engage in new explorations of transnational history.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, the book will certainly succeed.

## ***Bibliography***

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<sup>11</sup> Downs, *The Second American Revolution*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Downs, *The Second American Revolution*, 10.