

Elliott West, “Reconstructing Race” (2003)

Abstract

Elliott West, historian and professor at the University of Arkansas, has written several books on the American West, including *Growing Up With the Country: Childhood on the Far-Western Frontier* (1989) and *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (1998). In this article, West examines the assumptions that underlie the master narrative of Reconstruction, highlighting the importance of a broader view of the period than offered by the typical postwar South narrative.

Introduction

The South thinks it is different from the rest of the country, and it is race that southerners use most often to explain their separateness. The tortured relations of black and white, slavery and its rage and guilt, the war that ended slavery and the tormented generations that followed, the centuries-long embrace, intimate and awful on so many levels—all that, we’re told, has set southerners apart and has made the South the central stage of America’s racial drama. Yet I have questions. I have no doubt that the South and southerners are peculiar, and I am sure that race helps explain how and why.¹ My problem lies in how we have allowed the South to dominate the story of race in America.

During what might be called the Greater Reconstruction, 1846-1877, territorial acquisitions as well as southern slavery forced a new racial dialogue between West and South, unsettled racial relations and presumptions, and finally led to a new racial order encompassing western as well as southern people of color. I would like to look again at race in America during the crucial middle years of the nineteenth century and wonder aloud what that story might look like if expanded to more of a continental perspective. Specifically, I will bring the West more into the picture. If I have a general premise, it is that the acquisition of the Far West in the 1840s influenced, much more than we have credited, our racial history—how people have thought about race, how racial minorities have fared, and what policies our government adopted. In fact, since race is always a bellwether of larger forces, I think we need to consider that the great gulping of land in the 1840s had as much to do with shaping the course of our history as any event of that century, including the Civil War that dominates the story as we tell it today.

¹ For two studies of race in America that go beyond consideration of black and white, see Scott L. Malcomson, *One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race* (New York, 2002) and Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1979). A recent approach complicates the issue nicely through study of evolving notions of whiteness and what has distinguished it. See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991), Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995), and for a survey of the literature, Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America,” *Journal of American History* 89 (June 2002): 154-73.

Question 1

What does West argue in the preceding paragraphs?

Expansion

Taken together, the acquisitions of 1845-1848 comprised our greatest expansion. The annexations of Texas and Oregon and the Mexican Cession made the United States much larger and richer—and far more ethnically mixed. Expansion triggered an American racial crisis. We have always taught that to our students, of course, but we have missed at least half the point. The connection we make is between expansion and slavery. We say that new western lands, full of opportunity, made the question of black slavery dangerously concrete outside the South. That, in turn, set loose disputes that by 1861 would tip us over the edge of catastrophe. This sequence seems to give the West a prominent role in America's racial history, but the effect is ironic. Because race remains strictly a matter of black and white, and because its prime issue is African American slavery and its central event is the Civil War, western expansion is important only on eastern terms. Once the Mexican War does its mischief, the focus quickly swings back East and stays there. The West has its consequential moment, then remains at the edge of the action.

But that's nothing close to the whole story. Expansion was double trouble. It not only sped up the old conflict between North and South. By complicating so hugely America's ethnic character it raised new questions on the relation between race and nation. These questions centered on the West. The best introduction to them is through the rhetoric surrounding expansion. In that rhetoric the acquisition of the West was both explained and justified in terms of the inferiority of its nonwhite native peoples. Mexicans were called inherently debased, unable to govern themselves, and too slothful and torpid to realize the West's potential.²

The racial rationale for conquest was one expression of the Romantic spirit coloring all aspects of the westward movement. The world of the Romantics was made up of distinct groups—the terms *races* and *nations* and *peoples* were used interchangeably. Every race had its own virtues and vices.³ Only a generation or so earlier, in Jefferson's America, such traits were said to be pliable. Eastern Indians, the Jeffersonians argued, only had to be immersed in white culture in order to evolve in abilities and manners, finally

² On racial justifications for expansion, see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), 208-48; Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York, 1985), 270-301; Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), 132-72; Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansion in American History* (Baltimore, 1935), 162-89.

³ George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York, 1971), 97-129; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 158-86.

reaching something like parity and merging into full citizenship. By the 1840s, however, the Jeffersonian view had given way to the Romantic, which drew a far harder line. Now the character of each race was said to be as innate and unchanging as fur to a cat and hoots to an owl.

A key to understanding the western racial crisis is to see it in a dynamic relationship with that of the South. The new questions raised by expansion were distinctively their own—they took their shape from the West’s own conditions—but they also played on, and were played on by, older issues rooted in the South and in black slavery. What emerged was a dialogue between regions that tells us a lot about America’s genuinely continental racial preoccupations. Some were deeply disturbed by the mingling of nonwhite peoples of the South and West. When Senator Thomas Hart Benton looked at Florida’s Seminole conflict, then looked westward, he saw the prospect of a continental race war—an alliance of blacks and Indians that would set loose “the ravages of the colored races upon the white!”⁴ Others feared not conflict but intimate union. Romantic racists held that sex across the racial divide dragged the superior partner down toward the inferior. They explained Mexico’s defeat by its mixing of European blood with Indian—the term of the day was *mongrelization*—and pointed at what they considered the sorry state of southern mulattos to warn what might happen as triumphant Anglos mingled with the West’s motley of peoples.⁵ Other commentators concentrated on the obvious differences between West and South. At the heart of the southern dilemma was the fact that blacks were enmeshed in white society. They were considered always a threat, yet they were economically essential, from cotton fields to kitchens, and so had to be kept close. From the white perspective, the problem with blacks was that, metaphorically and literally, they were inside the house. The problem with Mexicans and Indians was the opposite. They might have been technically inside the nation’s borders in 1848, but they were far removed from white control. The possibility of bringing the new country fully under control raised a further problem. We had justified conquest by calling western natives cultural simpletons, political knuckle walkers and violent drifters. We said they were hopelessly incompatible with our way of life. How then would they ever fit in once the West was made truly part of the republic?

Out of this conversation of West and South we get a sense of the full racial crisis triggered by expansion. It was partly about Free Soil, the question of whether southern slavery, with its nonwhite peoples as essential insiders, would spread to the West. But equally pressing were questions about nonwhite peoples already there, racial outsiders, beyond the government’s reach and with no obvious part to play in national life. Should they—could they—be brought inside? And if they should, how? And if not, what should we do with them? The quick and facile answer, commonly heard at the time of the Mexican War, was that Indians and Mexicans would simply melt away before the expansion of superior white society. What exactly melting meant, how it would happen,

⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 25th Congress, 3rd session, Appendix, 5 February (Washington, DC, 1839), 162.

⁵ To Thomas Jefferson Farnham the same “law of Nature” that left the southern mulatto inferior to either of the races that produced him cursed the mingling of white and Indian races in California and Mexico. Weber, “Scarce More Than Apes,” 295.

and where the residue would go—all that was vague. In any case, this notion of ethnic evaporation kept the potentially explosive issues comfortably out-of-focus.⁶ White America could tell itself that as time passed the problems would solve themselves. As Anglos took possession of the West, they would never need to live in any numbers for very long as close neighbors with nonwhites.

And then, within roughly two hundred hours of the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, that glib expectation vanished. Gold was found in California. What melted away was not Mexicans and Indians but the easy conceit that whites and nonwhites would never have to face each other. If you are looking for examples of how regionally lopsided we historians have been in our treatment of race in these years, nothing shows it better than how we have told the California story, starting with the name we give to those who supposedly first found and dug the gold: *fortyniners*. The rush, of course, began the year before. By the time easterners showed up, the diggings had some whites from California, Oregon, and Australia, but mostly Indians, Californios, Sonorans, Chileans, Peruvians, and Hawaiians. These first gold diggers, the *fortyeighters*, blasted the easy comforts of racial supremacy. Far from twiddling away their time, these crowds of lazy colored people were energetically and efficiently pulling money from the ground—wealth that white Americans presumed was theirs. Then, only a few years later, came the Chinese, more alien in appearance and custom than any voluntary immigrants in American history. Now they too worked, and worked well, this field of dreams.⁷

The 1850s saw two violent episodes. Both arose from the prospect of white settlement, and both concerned the role of race in controlling natural resources. One we've made the center of our attention. The other we've virtually ignored. The first was in Kansas. Its question was whether southern slavery, that system of nonwhite insiders, would have a part in the new agricultural economy of the Plains. Every survey text covers in detail the Free Soil fight, its characters and events. The second episode was in California. The question there concerned nonwhite outsiders and their place in the new economy of mineral wealth. This episode was just as revealing and a lot uglier. First Chileans, Sonorans, and others from South and Central America and Mexico were forcibly expelled or confined to marginal diggings. Then much the same was done to Chinese through physical and economic harassment. And throughout this period and the decade that followed, white Californians waged a brutal campaign against Indians.⁸ The term

⁶ Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, 12-31; Hietala, *Manifest Design*, 155; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 210, 230, 243-4.

⁷ Rodman Wilson Paul, rev. ed. by Elliott West, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West, 1848-1880* (Albuquerque, 2001), 226-52.

⁸ For an excellent work that has gotten too little attention from historians of race during this period, see Tomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, CA, 1994). On ethnic and racial conflict spawned by the gold rush, see Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), 220-9; Paul and West, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West*, 204-6, 228-30, 239-42, 244-7; James J. Rawls, *Indians of California: The Changing Image* (Norman, 1984), 171-201; Clifford E. Trafzer and Joel R. Hyer, eds., *Exterminate Them! Written Accounts of the Murder, Rape, and Enslavement of Native*

“genocide” is tossed around far too easily in discussions of Indian policy, but this was the genuine article—roundups, assaults, destruction of families (including child-stealing), and organized hunts of extermination. This second conquest of California took a human toll hundreds of times that of the Kansas raids and bushwhacking.⁹ Yet it gets at most a line or two in our texts and rarely a sentence in our lectures.

These twin episodes, Bleeding Kansas and Bloodier California, were fitting preludes to the 1860s, years of unmatched violence rooted in our racial dilemmas. The toll of those years, of course, was incomparably greater in the East, but the level of carnage there should not obscure the fact that the Civil War’s racial consequences, like its preliminaries, were truly continent-wide. While the war resolved part of the southern question by ending African American slavery, it made western issues more pressing than ever. The war accelerated developments that drew the West into the nation more quickly and fully than anyone had predicted. That, in turn, made it impossible to avoid the West’s racial questions. Put another way, the Civil War did for much of the West what the gold rush had done in California—destroyed the illusion that whites somehow would never have to answer how they planned to live with free people of color. More generally, the war shattered or shook institutions regulating race from coast to coast. It jumbled identities and began a time of unprecedented racial disarray.

Question 2

What are West’s contributions to our understanding of the importance of territorial acquisition in the 1840s?

Question 3

Why does West juxtapose “bleeding Kansas” with “bloodier California” in his analysis?

Race Science

In the years after the Civil War, all America was a kind of borderland where racial edges and meanings were shift and blurred. First expansion had vastly complicated our human composition, then more aliens had arrived out West by the tens of thousands. Old issues and new were compounded by unprecedented distances and unimagined wealth. Then war dismantled the nation’s most elaborate racial institution and brought western questions to a boil. Never had America’s sense been so uncertain of how its racial parts fit together, or even what those parts were.

Small wonder, then, that many Americans looked hard for unconfused racial boundaries, and how predictable that they found answers in the area they trusted more

Americans during the California Gold Rush, 1848-1868 (East Lansing, MI, 1999); Robert F. Heizer, ed., *The Destruction of California Indians* (Lincoln, 1993); Albert L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven, 1988), 100-92.

⁹ Dale E. Watts, “How Bloody Was Bleeding Kansas?: Political Killings in Kansas Territory, 1854-1861,” *Kansas History* 18 (Summer 1995): 116-29. Watts tallies fifty-six killed in politically motivated violence in Kansas.

and more to understand the present and predict the future—the field of science. One of the most startling points that pops up when we look at race continentally, when we bring the West into the story, is this: our moment of highest idealism, as we ended slavery and as some talked genuinely of racial equality, was also the moment when we gave the gravest credit to the most rigid racial divisions imaginable.

Race science had long overlapped with Romantic racism. Now it came to the fore. While Romantics defined races intuitively through gauzy notions of tribal and national spirits, scientific racists said they could puzzle it all out by carefully describing, physically measuring, and comparing this group and that. But the implications were the same. Races were distinct. Some were better than others. And mixing them was risky business, especially for those at the high end of the scale. The most radical race scientists were the polygenecists, who argued that races had separate origins—that, in effect, Africans, Asians, Europeans, and Indians were different biological species.¹⁰

Before 1861, not surprisingly, race scientists focused on slavery and differences between blacks and whites. Slavery apologists like Josiah Nott said that science made clear that African Americans would forever be intellectually and morally inferior and so must remain slaves.¹¹ This argument depended ultimately on showing physical distinctions among living peoples and those long gone, especially among skulls, the subject of the new field of craniometry, the measurement of angles, slopes, and above all brain capacity. When African Americans ended up last in the skull rankings, Nott and others concluded that science declared slavery to be the natural order of things.

To make their case, however, scientific racists relied far less on Africans than on Indians. The argument ran: Indians were separate, always had been and always would be; the same was true of blacks; both were inferior to whites; because blacks were necessary, inside the house, they had to be controlled by whatever means possible. Science and common sense demanded it. Thus, scientific racists held up Indian skulls and pronounced them proof that black slavery was good and proper.¹²

By the Civil War, the focus of race science was shifting dramatically westward, where expansion had muddled America's racial identity. Scientific racists addressed, for

¹⁰ For examples of work on racial science, see William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815-59* (Chicago, 1960); Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas, 1963), 54-83; Robert E. Bieder, *Science Encounters the Indian, 1820-1880: The Early Years of American Ethnology* (Norman, 1986); David Hurst Thomas, *Skull Wars: Kennewick Man, Archaeology, and the Battle for Native American Identity* (New York, 2000), 36-43; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 116-57; Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancients [sic] Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London, 1999), 63-96; Joseph L. Graves, Jr., *The Emperor's New Clothes: Biological Theories of Race at the Millennium* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2001), 86-104; Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York, 1981), 30-72.

¹¹ For a succinct statement by Nott, see Josiah C. Nott, *An Essay on the Natural History of Mankind, Viewed in Connection with Negro Slavery* (Mobile, 1851).

¹² Stanton, *Leopard's Spots*, 22-44, 82-9.

instance, the perplexing issue of the Chinese. Here were people at least as alien in appearance and custom as Africans, yet free to move through society, and unlike Mexicans it was impossible to picture them as lazy. They were frighteningly industrious. As their numbers grew, so did the anxieties of white Americans. The rhetoric was up-to-date. It was staunchly scientific. Besides the usual cranial measurements, much was made of the immigrants' smaller stature, relative hairlessness, and delicate features, all suggesting a innate femininity that would dilute America's vaunted Anglo Saxon manliness.¹³

Race science also shifted westward in its field work. America's prime material for racial measurement were Indian remains, and the lands acquired in the 1840s offered bounteous opportunities for bone hunters. The most aggressive collector by far was the federal government. The Army Medical Museum began gathering remains soon after its founding in 1862, and in 1868 it formally asked its field officers to acquire large numbers of "adult crania," past and present, to provide "accurate average measurements."¹⁴ Over the next quarter century more than two thousand skulls arrived in Washington.

The purpose of anthropometry, the measurement of living and dead to document racial divisions, was to describe a statistically average specimen for every category. All then could be set within a descriptive schematic that showed relations of races to one another and, through that, an intellectual and moral hierarchy of peoples, sort of a racial flow chart. There were some setbacks—the brain capacity of the Apache leader Mangas Coloradas turned out to be greater than that of that legendary pumpkinhead, Daniel Webster—but the quest continued.

This vigorous government bone-gathering—this three decades of publicly funded skull-duggery—is remarkable by itself. It is also revealing, especially when we bring its western perspective together with that of the South. At the moment we took the most dramatic step in our history toward racial justice, freeing one nonwhite people from slavery, we were gathering up skulls of another, and doing it on the premise that this nation was composed of starkly defined races that learned men could tabulate into an obvious hierarchy from best to worst. As some *white* Americans were considering how and how much *African* Americans might be integrated into public life, others (and sometimes the same ones) were thanking the fates that hopelessly unfit *Hispanic* Americans would soon melt away to nothing, were hunting to annihilation *Native* Americans in the hills of California, and were warning that *Asian* Americans were a human pestilence—were literally an intrusive disease in the body politic. Never had this nation been so mixed and multicolored in its human makeup. Never had our presumptions about race been so jangled and divergent. And never had we faced such

¹³ A western editorial, for instance, advised that "the Chinese are half-made men.... As the strong races fall back before their hordes, there is, of course, a weakening of the State, for they have none of the elements of the men who make formidable soldiers." *Territorial Enterprise* (Virginia City, NV), 23 June 1877.

¹⁴ Quoted in Robert E. Bieder, *A Brief Historical Survey of the Expropriation of American Indian Remains* (Boulder, CO, 1990), 36-7.

fundamental decisions about the arrangement of our racial parts—their standing and social prerogatives, the reach and limits of their political due, whether indeed they should be here at all.

Question 4

According to West, how did the majority of white Americans conceptualize race during the period of American territorial expansion?

The Greater Reconstruction

The term for this era, Reconstruction, has always thrummed with racial implications, but when broadened to apply seriously from coast to coast, the term strengthens and its implications deepen. In the twenty years of tumult after 1846, attitudes and institutions of race were in fact being reconstructed, and more thoroughly than we have recognized. Consolidation, racial or any other kind, means finding common ground. There must be standards to measure the parts of the nation and to decide what fits where. In bringing West and South and their peoples more tightly into the union, two standards were most important. The first was economic. From Virginia plantations to Nevada mines and Nebraska homesteads, the nation would be pulled together under the ideals of free labor and yeoman agriculture and through the realities of corporate capitalism. The second standard was a union of mores—custom, religion, language, and the rest of what we call, inadequately, “culture”—nurtured from Boston to Charleston to Tombstone. A national economy and a national culture—together they would provide the common ground of the new America. America’s racial parts would have to find their place, if they had a place to find, on that ground and inside its boundaries. Watching the results, West and South, is a revelation, not just about our racial drama, but also about the entire process of expansion and the remaking of a nation.

The case of the Chinese was the most extreme. They were America’s most anomalous people. In language, dress, foodways, religion, and customs they seemed beyond the pale, and with their vast predominance of men, they lacked what all other groups, however different, had in common: the family as their central social unit. Culturally, then, the Chinese were uniquely vulnerable. Economically, their potential was much more promising, but ironically that made them a special threat. Close to the heart of the Chinese image as hopelessly alien was the notion that they were sheeplike, easily controlled, and utterly without the individual gumption to stand up to their bosses. This made them free labor’s ultimate nightmare: a race of automatons used by monopolists and labor-bashers to undercut wages or cast out honest workers altogether. In the end, the Chinese found themselves without either a cultural or economic base in the new nation and with virtually no natural constituency. They suffered the most excessive answer to America’s racial question. As of 1882, they were excluded.¹⁵

The case of Hispanics was the oddest. Their numbers were greatest in relation to whites in the Southwest, our least populous region with resources that were, for the moment,

¹⁵ Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences Series, 24:3 (Urbana, 1939).

the least exploitable. This corner of the nation consequently was the last to be brought close and consolidated, which in turn lessened somewhat the pressure to resolve its racial issues. Mexican-Americans still carried the burden of the old rhetoric, the images of listless, unenlightened people, but they were not as alien as the Chinese. After all they were Christian, albeit Catholic, and were family-oriented farmers. And they fit the emerging economy. They did the grunt labor in mines, and they worked the land in a system of debt peonage strikingly similar to southern sharecropping. Hispanics, that is, posed little cultural threat and played useful economic roles. Mexican-Americans were either rendered invisible, segregated in cities and countryside, or they were reimagined as a bit of American exotica in a region we could afford to fantasize as an escape from fast-paced modern life.¹⁶

That left African and Native Americans. Their case was most revealing of all. Since the 1840s, southern blacks and western Indians had been counterpoised in our racial thinking: insiders and outsiders, enslaved and free-roaming, the essences of South and West. Now they converged. They were brought together as events of the 1860s shattered older arrangements and assumptions. Emancipated blacks still were insiders—they were, in the fine phrase of Frederick Douglass, close under the arm of white America—but they were no longer controlled through slavery. While not as free-roaming as Indians, they were definitely on the loose. Indians, meanwhile, contrary to the claims of the 1840s and 1850s, were obviously not vanishing. In fact, their lands were being pulled into the national embrace far more quickly than anyone had guessed possible. Indians were not as enmeshed in white society as the freedmen, but they *were* being brought inside the house. Blacks and Indians found themselves suddenly moving from opposite directions into the national mainstream.

Where exactly they would end up, and how they would get there, would be the self-appointed job of the newly centralized government, and nothing in the history of Reconstruction is more illuminating as the programs that resulted. As usual, we have treated events in the West and South as if they rolled along utterly independent of each other, while in fact Washington's treatment of blacks and Indians ran as a stunning parallel. Official strategies were virtually the same. Economic integration for freedmen was to come through forty acres and a mule, or at least some measure of agrarian self-sufficiency; for Indians, the answer was to be allotment in severalty. For cultural integration, ex-slaves would be educated under the Freedmen's Bureau; for Indians, it would be agency and boarding schools. For both, Christian service and evangelism directed and suffused the entire enterprise, mixing religious verities with the virtues of free enterprise, patriotism, and Anglo American civilization.

This Greater Reconstruction was even more morally ambiguous than the lesser one. It included not one war but three—the Mexican War, Civil War, and War against Indian America—and while it saw the emancipation of one non-white people, it was equally

¹⁶ David G. Gutierrez, "Significant to Whom?: Mexican Americans and the History of the American West," in *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, (New York, 1996), 68-71; George I. Sanchez, *Forgotten People: A Study of New Mexicans* (Albuquerque, 1967).

concerned with dominating others. It included the Civil Rights Acts and the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, but it began with U.S. soldiers clashing with a Mexican patrol on disputed terrain along the Rio Grande in 1846. And it closed, practically, with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and symbolically, in 1877, with Oliver Howard—former head of the Freedman’s Bureau who had risked his life and given his arm for emancipation—running to ground [Chief Joseph](#) and the Nez Perces along our northern border, forty miles shy of freedom. Always the Greater Reconstruction was as much about control as liberation, as much about unity and power as about equality. Indians were given roles they mostly didn’t want, and freedmen were offered roles they mostly did, but both were being told that these were the roles they *would* play, like it or not. There has always been a darker side to *e pluribus unum*, and when we look at the parallel policies toward Indians and blacks, we can see it in its full breathtaking arrogance.

Question 5

What does West mean by his use of the term “Greater Reconstruction”?

Conclusion

Look at Reconstruction’s racial policies, not on strictly southern terms, narrowly, as an outgrowth of Civil War, but rather as a culmination of a development that began in the 1840s. Its first stage began with the expansion of the nation, and with that physical growth we were unsettled profoundly in our sense of who we were and might be. This stage raised a series of new racial questions and aggravated older ones. The second stage, the Civil War, brought those questions to the sticking place. By ending slavery and bringing the West closer into the union, the war left the nation as mixed and uncertain in its racial identity as it ever had been or would be. By revolutionizing relations of power, the war also opened the way for a settlement of a sort. In the third stage, from 1865 to the early 1880s, the government used its confirmed authority to flesh out the particulars of a new racial arrangement. Some peoples it excluded, some it left on the edges, some it integrated on the terms and by the means of its choosing, including in some cases by conquest and coercion.

The larger point, of course, is a broader awareness of the most troubling theme of our past. Race is not the burden of southern history. Race is the burden of American history. Its questions speak to all of us, whichever region we call home, and press us all to ask where and how far we have fallen short in keeping promises we have made to ourselves. In 1869, near the end of the Great Reconstruction, the reformer and spiritualist Cora Tappan took this continental perspective when she offered her audience an observation that, in its essence, is still worth making today: “A government that has for nearly a century enslaved one race (African), that proscribes another (Chinese), proposes to exterminate another (Indians), and persistently refuses to recognize the rights of one-half of its citizens (women), cannot justly be called perfect.”¹⁷

¹⁷ *Standard* (Boston), 29 May 1869, quoted in Kerber, “Abolitionist Perception of the Indian,” 295.

Question 6

According to West, what does expanding the period of Reconstruction backward in time to the 1840s accomplish?

Concluding Thoughts

Elliott West seeks to reorient our understanding the nineteenth century. He criticizes the traditional narrative that segregates the West from the North and the South. He sees the story of the nineteenth century as one of national consolidation, the integration of a divided America, in which Americans dealt with the “problems” of not just African Americans, but also Native Americans, Chinese, Mexicans, and so on. West sees the Civil War as the culmination of one of these struggles, and he sees Reconstruction as a continuation of this process. This movement toward national consolidation collides as southerners and northerners moved west in the aftermath of the war and united in their opposition to the non-white peoples already living there.

Source

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