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From Cuba to Louisiana: Two paths after slavery's end

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November 4, 2024



A group photo of Freedmen's Bureau students in West Virginia. Photo: West Virginia University Center for Women's Studies.

- [Part 1: Populists fought the ruling class](#)
- [Part 2: Populism or fascism?](#)
- [Part 3: The history of Black Populism](#)
- [Part 4: Two paths after slavery's end](#)
- [Part 5: A Cuban perspective on race and revolution](#)

In the [first installment](#) of this series, I argued that the populist movement of the late

19th Century was an advance for the progressive forces in U.S. society, given both the violent, counterrevolutionary overturn of Reconstruction as well as the ongoing consolidation of power by the monopoly capitalist class. Populism was a stand against both of these trends.

It should also be noted that the populist movement was one instance in U.S. history when two-party domination of the political system was undermined. The populist People's Party effectively challenged the Republicans and Democrats. This was no small thing at the time. And now, this bit of history is significant in light of the 2024 U.S. presidential election between billionaire-backed candidates Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. Today, many despair at the increasingly obvious anti-democratic nature of the political system.

The circa 1898 government in [Wilmington](#), North Carolina, was especially remarkable. It was a “fusion” government, that is, an alliance between the People’s Party, on the one hand, and the Republican Party, on the other. At that time, the Republican Party was still the anti-slavery party. At the same time, the Democrats in the South represented the interests of the white ruling class against both Black and poor white people, with the latter making up the majority of the population. The Willmington government comprised Black and white officeholders, bucking the post-Reconstruction trend.

The progress in Wilmington was undone by a wave of violence orchestrated by a clique of white racists on behalf of the rich. Prefiguring today’s social media disinformation campaigns, they used the press to whip up racist hysteria with lies about Black men sexually assaulting white women. This should sound painfully familiar to us, as we have just witnessed the effects of Donald Trump and J.D. Vance’s lies about Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, which led to a slew of bomb threats and school closures. And we have just seen Britain erupt into anti-immigrant violence, while the working classes of both the U.S. and Britain are under

severe economic strain, exacerbated daily by the political leadership.

The remainder of this article will attempt to specify what Reconstruction was since that has not been addressed previously, even though it is essential to this whole reassessment of populism. In the next installment, I will describe how the Willmington racists orchestrated their propaganda and how people fought back while drawing parallels with the recent events in Ohio and Britain.

Reconstruction: one of the most democratic periods in the history of the country

W.E.B. Du Bois' 1935 "Black Reconstruction in America" was one of the first systematic works of history to refute the prevailing view - in both academic and the broader culture - that Reconstruction was an erroneous undertaking and a disaster. When Du Bois' book came out, many historians of the Civil War championed the "lost cause" narrative, which painted the Confederate cause as just. They argued that the war was caused by anything other than slavery.

Du Bois marshaled the Confederate leaders' own words against that argument, showing that the Confederacy was founded upon the principle of slavery and that the war was very much fought over it, even if the Washington government's aim at the start of the war was to preserve the union, not to abolish slavery. Moreover, Du Bois showed that Black people constituted the greatest factor in their own liberation. A practitioner of Marx's scientific historical method, Du Bois presented ample evidence for what he called the "general strike" of the enslaved. Masses of the enslaved left the plantations during the course of the war, withdrawing their labor and cutting the Confederate economy's legs out from under it.

Not only that. These masses of Black people who emancipated themselves went over to the Union side and fortified the Union Army with their labor in agriculture and

skilled trades. They forced the government in Washington to commit to emancipation. And through their determination, they induced the government to arm them so they could fight.

According to an [article](#) on the U.S. National Archives website:

“By the end of the Civil War, roughly 179,000 Black men (10% of the Union Army) served as soldiers in the U.S. Army and another 19,000 served in the Navy. Nearly 40,000 Black soldiers died over the course of the war — 30,000 of infection or disease.”

Du Bois saw that the Black freedom struggle was a revolutionary labor struggle with global significance. So did Karl Marx. In Black Reconstruction, Du Bois included Marx’s Jan. 28, 1865, [letter](#) to U.S. President Abraham Lincoln. Marx stated:

“The working classes of Europe understood at once, even before the fanatic partisanship of the upper classes for the Confederate gentry had given its dismal warning, that the slaveholders’ rebellion was to sound the tocsin [alarm] for a general holy crusade of property against labor, and that for the men of labor, with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic.”

The Freedman’s Bureau

Various experiments in Black self-governance and cooperative economic activity were carried out during the war. These anticipated aspects of Reconstruction, including the formation of the federal Freedmen’s Bureau at the end of the war in 1865. Du Bois said of the Bureau:

“In the Freedmen’s Bureau, the United States started upon a dictatorship by which the landowner and the capitalist were to be openly and deliberately curbed and

which directed its efforts in the interest of a black and white labor class. If and when universal suffrage came to reënforce this point of view, an entirely different development of American industry and American civilization must ensue. The Freedmen's Bureau was the most extraordinary and far-reaching institution of social uplift that America has ever attempted. It had to do, not simply with emancipated slaves and poor whites, but also with the property of Southern planters. It was a government guardianship for the relief and guidance of white and black labor from a feudal agrarianism to modern farming and industry. For this work there was and had to be a full-fledged government of men."

The Freedman's Bureau organized the economy in the devastated South. It built schools, including many of the historically Black colleges and universities that still exist. It helped poor white people for whom the rich planters had never shown the slightest concern.

Reconstruction was one of the most democratic periods in the history of the country. It brought the first public schools to the South. Before this time, only the children of the wealthy were educated. With Reconstruction, masses of poor white children were finally able to attend school, along with their Black counterparts. The formerly enslaved who had been forbidden to read and write began learning by the thousands. Many schools were not segregated at this time. The Louisiana and South Carolina constitutions even prohibited segregation.

The extension of education to poor white Southerners demonstrates the universal character of the Black freedom struggle. This labor struggle - as both Marx and Du Bois understood it - necessitated the uplift of all the oppressed and laboring masses. In Capital Volume 1, Marx wrote:

"In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot

emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black, it is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours agitation, that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California. The General Congress of Labor at Baltimore (Aug. 16, 1866) declared: 'The first and great necessity of the present, to free the labor of this country from capitalistic slavery, is the passing of a law by which eight hours shall be the normal working-day in all States of the American Union. We are resolved to put forth all our strength until this glorious result is attained.'"

During Reconstruction, suffrage was extended to Black men. (U.S. women of any race were not able to vote until the movement won that right in 1920, three years *after* the socialist Bolshevik Revolution gave women the right to vote throughout the old Russian empire.) Not only did Black men vote, but they also held office. Sixteen served in the U.S. Congress, and over 600 in state legislatures. Hundreds served in other offices.

A necessary military occupation

All of this was tremendous progress, which was ensured by the federal government's military occupation of the South, which lasted for 12 years. The last troops to leave the South withdrew from Louisiana on April 24, 1877, a date often cited as the end of Reconstruction. Proponents of the "lost cause" decry the occupation, but it is analogous to the Allied occupation of Germany after World War II.

To the East, the Soviet Red Army helped the people of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and several other countries build their own workers' states and begin the process of reversing the damage done by their Nazi-allied governments. The Soviet role in establishing the socialist German Democratic Republic is an especially apt comparison.

Germany - which had a long tradition of revolutionary working class struggle and one of the most powerful communist movements in the world - had been decimated by Hitler's rule. He had beaten back the working class revolution. Under Hitler, Germany had murdered 6 million Jewish people. But, the post-war socialist government in Eastern Germany was aiding the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and supporting the liberation fighters in Vietnam. The U.S. and capitalist West Germany supported apartheid. Washington branded Nelson Mandela a terrorist.

With guaranteed housing, child care, health care, employment, and more, socialist East Germany was a beacon for the revolutionary peoples of the world. This is an incredible transformation in a very short period of time. Again, the transformation was backed up by the early occupation by the Red Army and the later Warsaw Pact - the military alliance of the socialist camp in Europe. The Washington-led imperialists relentlessly plotted to overthrow these progressive workers' governments and used the offensive military alliance, NATO, to threaten them.

However, there are many big differences between what happened in the South after the Civil War and what occurred in Eastern Europe following WWII.

Land reform

About a century separated Reconstruction and these events in Eastern Europe. These were quite different periods. A major difference is that with the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, a new global era of socialist and national liberation struggles had been inaugurated. Starting in Russia, countries that had socialist revolutions carried out land reform. This involved breaking up the wealthy exploiters' big agricultural estates and dividing them among the peasants working the land. This was also true for the Eastern European countries after WWII.

Land reform destroyed the power of the old land-owning classes and empowered the

peasants. This had also been the dream of the enslaved in the U.S. and should have been the foundation stone of Reconstruction. Land reform did not happen in any meaningful sense. It is not the case that nobody at the time understood this necessity. On the contrary, radical champions of Reconstruction democracy like U.S. Representative Thaddeus Stephens and Senator Charles Sumner articulated the problem. They knew that having *political* rights was not enough. Black people needed their own economic resources, most especially land.

Nevertheless, as Vince Copeland says in “Southern Populism”:

“The revolutionary U.S. Freedmen’s Bureau had distributed some 800,000 acres to ex-slaves during Reconstruction. But this was relatively, very small. It would have come to less than one acre per Black family had it all been evenly divided. Furthermore, most of this land was taken back by the ex-slaveholders after the 1877 counterrevolution, some of it even before that time.

“By 1880 there were over 6 million Black people in the South. According to Dr. Rayford W. Logan in his ‘Betrayal of the Negro,’ there were 120,738 Black-owned farms in the whole country, most of them in the South. There were three times as many Black tenant farmers, says Dr. Logan, as there were owners. Most of the tenant farms, too, were in the South. Few of the independent farms could trace their origin to any division of the land – least of all to the revolutionary expropriation of slaveholders’ land that never really did take place.”

The U.S. did not have the necessary revolutionary leadership, and thus, land reform was a limiting factor in the Reconstruction process. The fact that this did not occur meant that a new white economic elite could assemble itself in the South, and masses of Black people were subjected to new forms of hyper-exploitation in tenant farming and sharecropping. So, despite the extensive political transformations opened up in this era, the material, economic basis for the oppression of Black people remained in place, and the new Bourbon Southern elite – with their Klan

terror - were able to overturn Reconstruction.

All of this is to emphasize that the Black populists (and, by extension, the whole populist movement, which depended on organizing across race lines) was in a disadvantaged position from the outset.

Here is more from Copeland:

"The white Populists were land-hungry, especially in the West, where they saw the railroads and ranch-owners grabbing land a million or more acres at a time. But the Southern Black Populists needed land not only as a way of competing with big business and of growing prosperous. They needed it desperately in order to assert their human right to exist at all in the modern world - that is, in order not to sink into the same slavery that existed before the Civil War. This was only vaguely understood among the whites, who confined themselves to supporting the right of Blacks to vote and did not stir themselves to make an active alliance to help the Blacks get the land."

A note on Cuba

The question of military occupation notwithstanding, perhaps Cuba is the workers' state whose experience is most apt to compare with the South. Like the U.S. South and Haiti, Cuba was part of a bigger Caribbean world dominated for centuries by slavery and the plantation system. Slave rebellions shook Cuba in the 1840s. One of the most famous insurrectionists was Carlota Lucumí, a Yoruba woman who led an uprising at the Triumvirato sugar mill. She is counted in the immortal ranks of revolutionaries like Haiti's Toussaint L'Ouverture and Charles Deslondes, who led a slave rebellion in south Louisiana in 1811, inspired by the Haitian Revolution. But, the "peculiar institution" of slavery was not abolished in Cuba until 1886, 21 years after the end of the U.S. Civil War.

Cuban revolutionaries won independence from Spain in 1898. With the Spanish out, Washington and Wall Street took over, turning the country into a sugar plantation neo-colony. Havana became a mob-run haven for foreign sex tourism.

Dictator Fulgencio Batista's Cuba of the 1950s was a nightmare for the great majority; he was Washington's hand-picked stooge. Countrywide, per capita income was half that of Mississippi, the poorest state in the U.S. The average Cuban was living on 312 pesos or \$6 per week. Few rural areas had schools, and children often died early from infectious diseases. Most workers were employed on the huge farms and were out of work - suffering from malnutrition and other plights - during the off-season.

But between 1959 and 1963, Cuba's revolutionary socialist government carried out land reform, breaking the cycle of rural poverty. They did what the radical Reconstructionists dreamed of doing. So, even though Cuba has a very similar history of colonial genocide against the Indigenous people and enslavement of Africans, its social reality today is starkly different from the U.S. South. Cuba is as multinational as the U.S. but is infinitely further along on the road to racial equality and is not riven by economic inequality.

This author [visited](#) Havana as part of the U.S. Friends Against Homophobia and Transphobia delegation in May 2023. Being from southern Louisiana, this author was struck by how much the old city looked like the New Orleans French Quarter. The architecture is similar - Spanish colonial. But there was one tremendous difference. The beautiful old houses were being used as homes. Colonial mansions were transformed into the headquarters of democratic mass organizations like the Federation of Cuban Women and the National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX). There were no homeless people.

New Orleans' French Quarter used to be residential, but today is an adult

Disneyland. Very few people can afford to live there, and tourist shops and short-term rentals take up the historic buildings. Contrasting Cuba and the U.S. South - and U.S. society generally - shows what happens for the common people when the exploiting classes are expropriated vs. what happens when they are not.

The working-class unity that was needed

The Civil War involved a tremendous revolutionary upsurge of the Black masses. It wiped away the power of the planters and advanced many of the unfinished bourgeois revolutionary tasks that were not on the agenda in 1776. But, the crucial economic task of land reform was blocked by a lack of political will. This great labor struggle of the Black masses posed the question of a broader revolution of the laboring classes against not only the retrogressive Southern planters but also Northern industry and finance.

This is perhaps a characteristic feature of revolutionary processes; they carry the seeds of their own overcoming within them. The bourgeois French Revolution necessarily relied upon the laboring masses whose interests did not perfectly coincide with the rising middle class (the bourgeoisie or capitalists) against the aristocracy. It thus posed the question of a laborers' revolution. This was realized some 70 years later with the Paris Commune of 1871 when the workers of Paris established the first workers' state, which lasted for 72 days. The second workers' state, the Soviet Union, lasted about 70 years. The workers' states of China, Cuba, Vietnam, Laos, and the DPRK are still standing.

There was a possibility inherent in the post-Civil War situation for freed Black labor, poor Southern white people, and Northern industrial laborers to form a solid bloc. This was the potential, *general* power of labor made possible by the Black freedom struggle. They could have made common cause with the Indigenous people, too; the U.S. government was carrying out genocide against them before, during, and after

the war.

The entrenched nature of racial prejudice (stoked by the rich and their propagandists in the press), the lack of land reform, and other factors kept working-class and oppressed unity from fully developing. The defeat of Reconstruction in 1877 and the unleashing of Klan terror turned the clock *back* - not just for Black people but for the whole working class and all the oppressed. This meant the industrial capitalists could consolidate power, now unencumbered by the backward slave system. Just a few years later, the populist movement would come to challenge the capitalist dictatorship under the hard conditions of Jim Crow.

