

Book Review

RADICAL REFORM: INTERRACIAL POLITICS IN POST-EMANCIPATION NORTH CAROLINA DEBORAH BECKEL

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Abstract: As Edwin Alderson, a prominent North Carolina educator stated biracial organizations attracted “plain people ...demanding their share in the government, and their right to be trained for its responsibilities”¹ and created more self-reliant and resourceful people who were wiser when it came to local government.

I found Beckel’s book reads like an interesting historical story about how North Carolina was affected by civil equality. Beckel starts out her book with an Introduction about biracial relationships. This led to interracial cooperation, and eventually influenced North Carolina organizations. The State’s organizations were massive, and the North Carolina Knights and the Alliancemen had plans to pass some labor laws and get involved politically. At this time, around 1890, the Knights of Labor has 250 locals in 50 counties with the members half and half, Black and White. The Alliance had 55,000 Blacks and 90,000 Whites. In the last chapter “Race and Home Rule,” (p. 178) Beckel shares with us that the voting rights were expanded for both the Blacks and the Whites. In conclusion, Beckel tells us: “Many of the state’s most energetic citizens simply left for what they hoped would be greater rights and opportunities outside North Carolina.”(p.211).

In 2010, North Carolina statistics showed 21.6% of the registered voters are Black, where there are 73.2% registered voters who are White.²

Key-words: social exclusion; improving the situation of minorities; racial, creed, and class equality; disenfranchisement; racial discrimination

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¹ Edwin A. Alderson, *A Brief History of North Carolina* (1898).

² Voter Registration Statistics by District: N.C. Senate-Civitas Institute, Data from NC State Board of Elections-BERT Database Current as of Sep. 7, 2010, at <http://www.nccivitas.org/election-analysis/voter-registration-statistics-district-n-c-senate/>.

On November 6, 2012, the United States will have their 2012 presidential election (between an African American seeking a second term and a Mormon), a process regulated by a combination of federal and state laws to decide by ballot the question, "Who will be the next U.S. President?"

The United States apparently has made great social strides, especially in the area of discrimination based on race, creed, or position in society. Many would agree, the United States has accomplished much toward preventing social exclusion and has improved the social situation for those considered "undesirables" in U.S. society's recent past. What would be considered the best practices or guidelines used to implement this in other countries?

During its pro-democracy period, the U.S. Constitution declared all men equal in 1776. Although, the first step was to declare equality for all men, Blacks and Whites still did not have equal rights-this was further confounded, during the post-revolutionary war era, when the U.S. convention delegates voted (66 to 61) that suffrage rights were the privilege of White men only adding a constitutional provision defining the qualifications of "freemen." This table which is posted on Wikipedia, under Disfranchisement After Reconstruction Era shows many states still had disenfranchisement based on race in 1900.¹

*Laws Or Constitutions Permitting "White Primaries"
In Former Confederacy In 1900*

	No. of African Americans	% of Population	Year of law or constitution
Alabama	827,545	45.26	1901
Arkansas	366,984	27.98	1891
Florida	231,209	43.74	1885-1889
Georgia	1,035,037	46.70	1908
Louisiana	652,013	47.19	1898
Mississippi	910,060	58.66	1890
North Carolina	630,207	33.28	1900
South Carolina	782,509	58.38	1895

³ Table is posted on Wikipedia, under Disfranchisement After Reconstruction Era. It was created by getting information from the Historical Census Browser, 1900 Federal Census, University of Virginia (last accessed Aug. 14, 2012); Julien C. Monnet, *The Latest Phase of Negro Disenfranchisement*, 26 HARVARD LAW REVIEW 42 (1912). Data obtained from existing data in table. Number of African Americans total obtained by 827,545 + 366,984 + 231,209 + ... + 661,329=7,199,364. Percentage data: 827,545/45.26%=1,828,425(rounded to nearest whole) for total population of Alabama, 366,984/27.98%=1,311,594(nearest whole) for Arkansas, etc. Total of all state populations=18,975,448. 7,199,364/18,975,448=37.94%.

	No. of African Americans	% of Population	Year of law or constitution
Tennessee	480,430	23.77	1889 laws
Texas	622,041	20.40	1901 / 1923 laws
Virginia	661,329	35.69	1902
Total	7,199,364	37.94	—

To complicate things more, “Southern [B]lacks and [W]hites forged a variety of associations: personal, economic, and political.”(Beckel, 2011, p. 2) Creating these affiliations opened up doors of opportunity in the New South’s social order allowing racial diversity. Along with this diversity also came conflict (“violence, brutality, and exploitation” (2011, p. 2)), however, these biracial organizations were committed to freedom, civil equality, and worker’s rights regardless of race, creed, or position in society which attracted many of the working-class, agricultural workers, and small farmers. As Edwin Alderson, a prominent North Carolina educator stated these biracial organizations attracted “plain people ...demanding their share in the government, and their right to be trained for its responsibilities” (Alderson,1898) and created more self-reliant and resourceful people who were wiser when it came to local government. But the combination of diversity and the old and new ideas made the organizations fragile. What exactly can an organization (mostly consisting of poor Black workers and 30% or less of Whites) achieve when it has a lack of trust within its membership because of racial issues? How did the elite White leaders support society’s current ideals of “equality for all” when their concerns were torn between this and their own interests of maintaining their privileged position in society? And what does it say to other nations that are going through a pro-democracy period and how they should achieve equality for all and the prevention of social exclusion?

People who are interested in the answers to these questions should read Deborah Beckel’s *Radical Reform: Interracial Politics in Post-Emancipation North Carolina* (Deborah Beckel, 2011) Because of the book title’s political slant, it sounds like something that would be boring and dry, only about politics, and I almost didn’t get to review it for this journal. I found instead that Beckel’s book reads like an interesting historical story about how North Carolina was affected by civil equality. Beckel, who is descended from many of the families she writes about, has authored a book which is vivid in its literary style and shows the many sides of prejudice and mistrust and why we need to protect against social exclusion and its violence and fraud. Although this book certainly delivers the details about the politics that went on in post-emancipated North Carolina (in an unvarnished story-like manner), the reader soon forgets that he is reading a book about society’s social problems and politics and begins to get caught up in the hopes and dreams of those the book is about such as

William Holden and G.W. Logan who used the Heroes of America network for the state's peace effort; the state Union League's top officers which included, Holden, James Harris, and James Jones; John Nichols, the Masonic leader who cast the deciding vote to create the first permanent orphanage in North Carolina; and numerous other North Carolinian figures of history. Beckel even takes the time to give an excellent conclusion to the book to discuss its highlights.

Beckel starts out her book with an Introduction about biracial relationships. She argues that many of the problems that existed back then and still today are because of ideologies or "ingrained conceptions" (or personal belief systems that people hold regarding "race, class, and gender"). She states that the Republicans were made up of mostly Black politicians and the Virginia "Readjuster" Coalition at first composed mostly of Whites, later gained the Black vote by expanding rights for non-elite Virginians, such as a ban on public whipping, removing the poll tax and lowering taxes on farmers, and chartering labor unions. William Mahone who was a Senator in Virginia would reward those who were loyal to the Readjuster Coalition with positions in the organization. This led to interracial cooperation, and eventually influenced North Carolina organizations. Although, the Readjusters saw this as a victory and "the rejection by White men of race as a political issue," (Dailey, J., Gilmore, G.E., Simon, B., eds., 2000) Beckel states firmly that "her research indicates that race was always a political issue in the post-emancipation South" (p. 9) and continues to be integral in American culture.

Her book consists of nine chapters, but I have basically broken it into four sections: The first two chapters talk about the two groups involved who were the "Rebellious Southerners" (p.17) who had a strong conviction that Blacks had no rights as citizens and those who were "Becoming Republicans" (p.36) who were mostly free Black men who fought against the indignation of being considered unworthy.

Beckel's next three chapters deal with the evolution of society and North Carolina's struggle: "Reconstruction and Home Rule" (p.54) where home rule refers to state home rule and local county home rule, "Battling over the Public Good" (p.75) which discusses the beginnings of the Ku Klux Klan (The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow, 2002), a social club started by six confederate veterans and their desires to maintain White rule in order to "bring honest, fiscally responsible government that did not overburden citizens with racial strife, taxes, and Northern schemes" (p.75) and Republicans who promoted ideas about African American advancement (but then argued about how to deal with the White supremacists inside and outside of their organization), and "The Quest for Common Ground" (p.94) speaks of the deterioration of the communities and the many problems in the Republican party from mudslinging to rampart fraud throughout.

By the time we reach the sixth chapter “Workers and Farmers Organize,” (p.113) Blacks are emigrating out of North Carolina leaving for better work to support their families. This is because although they had fought hard to get their rights, they were being denied them and still being treated as second-class citizens. Plantation owners were concerned about their dwindling workforce and were unable to recruit the needed White agricultural laborers. A non-political organization, the Knights of Labor sprung up (prior to this it was a secret organization, but now has become an educational vehicle to counter the anti-labor bias of government) (Knights of Labor: An Early Labor Organization). Through educational self-promotion in publications such as the *Journal of United Labor* (American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives) using statements like: “We are dependent upon an employer, a boss, a master... We obtain in exchange for the most severe labor a salary which hardly prevents us from dying of hunger... What have we, as workingmen, done in order to change it?” (p.117) Locals of the Knights of Labor were springing up everywhere, all the way up to the State capital, and the leaders of these biracial organizations were active in religious and community organizations and their influence on public policy led to economic development, civil rights, and of course, political reform.

The last section of the book includes “Southern Democracy” (Beckel, p.135) sharing the Southern Farmers’ Alliance¹ joining with the national Knights of Labor leading to the U.S. reform of organizations representing millions of people. The State’s organizations were massive also, and the North Carolina Knights and the Alliancemen had plans to pass some labor laws and get involved politically. At this time, around 1890, the Knights of Labor has 250 locals in 50 counties with the members half and half, Black and White. The Alliance had 55,000 Blacks, and 90,000 Whites. But, because the Knights and Alliance organizations endorsed a 25% increase in public school tax, many Knights members were unable to pay their dues so they did not have enough money to try to change farm and labor problems. In the eighth chapter “The Rise of Populism,” (p.155) Beckel explains that there is so much fraud in the Democratic Party that a new People’s Party is formed and promoted by J.C.L. Harris called the Populists (Populists of St. Louis, Review of Reviews (1896)). By the end of 1894, North Carolina was able to oust their Democratic party and five African Americans were elected to the state legislature. In the last chapter “Race and Home Rule,” (p. 178) Beckel shares with us that now the voting rights were expanded for both the Blacks and the Whites. But by 1904, we see that the Black registered voters went from 120,000 to 6,000.

¹ The Farmers’ Alliance did not allow Blacks in their membership, but created a separate organization known as the Colored Farmers’ Alliance. The New Georgia Encyclopedia, Farmer’s Alliance, Origins and Growth, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2505>.

In conclusion, Beckel tells us:

In North Carolina racially segregated and unequal education, not decent jobs or popular rights, become the foundation for “progress.” Without changes to the economic structure, there was little hope for improvement in most North Carolinians’ lives. Many of the state’s most energetic citizens simply left for what they hoped would be greater rights and opportunities outside North Carolina.(p.211).

Pointing out the reason behind racial prejudice or social exclusion W.E.B. Du Bois wrote “[The] greater problem which both obscures and implements [social exclusion]: and that is the fact that so many civilized persons are willing to live in comfort even if the price of this is poverty, ignorance and disease of the majority of their fellowmen.” (p.211) (quoting Du Bois, “50 Years After,” xiv).

In 2010, in North Carolina only 21.6% of the registered voters are Black, where there are 73.2% registered voters who are White (Voter Registration Statistics by District). We no longer have U.S. disenfranchisement laws based on race, although some may argue the U.S. felon disenfranchisement laws are a form of racial discrimination, because it covers 38.2% of the Black population in the United States (Are Felon Disenfranchisement Laws a Form of Racial Discrimination?, Felon Voting).

Beckel’s history lesson is honest and at times shocking to read how desperate human beings can be toward fellow humans because of ignorance and fear. She portrays these visual images writing respectfully about both sides of the issue, the people involved, and their cultures. Those who are debating disenfranchisement laws should consider reading Beckel’s book and ponder the significance of the issues.

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