The Meaning of the Civil War

BURIED IN the sixteenth chapter of Ulrich B. Phillips's monumental study *American Negro Slavery* (1918) is an extraordinary footnote. To document his rhapsodic account of "plantation life" in the antebellum South, Phillips cited his "own observations in postbellum times in which, despite the shifting of industrial arrangements and the decrease of wealth, these phases have remained apparent." He bolstered his case with two additional postwar memoirs, a traveler's account and the journal of an eighteenth-century plantation tutor. Yet in his preface only a few hundred pages earlier Phillips told his readers that throughout the book "Reminiscences are . . . disregarded, for the reason that the lapse of decades has impaired inevitably the memories of men." Instead the author would rely on the "contemporary records of slaves, masters, and witnesses." With one stroke he disregarded his own good advice in three different ways: first by relying on memoirs, second by citing his own recollections of plantation life, and finally by failing to cite even a single "contemporary" source from an antebellum master or slave.[1]

There is more involved here than mere inconsistency. What Phillips "observed" in the late nineteenth century was a radically transformed social hierarchy topped by a landlord-merchant class that was anything but a reincarnation of the antebellum planter élite. Yet his interpretation assured readers that the postwar landlords were continuous with their antebellum counterparts. Phillips was not the only historian of his generation to emphasize the continuity of southern history. But it is not enough to point out that he observed his region's past from a perspective common to the Progressive Era. For southern progressivism was itself the cul-

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mination of a profound social and political upheaval, set in motion by emancipation, and accompanied by a startling reinterpretation of the meaning of the Civil War. To appreciate the connections between what Phillips and his contemporaries wrote and the world they observed at close range we must return briefly to the social and political history of the South from the moment the slaves won their freedom.

Emancipation did not settle the meaning of the Civil War. Revolutions do not define themselves so readily. Not only are they chaotic and unpredictable by their very nature, they are often followed by counterrevolutions whose leaders inevitably attempt to redefine the revolution in their own terms. The American South was no exception. Formal freedom was followed by several years of tension and suspicion between the ex-slaves and the former masters. No one could be sure what it all meant, because no one could predict how it would finally turn out.

Imagine how volatile the years after 1865 must have been. With the freed people in possession of their own labor and their old masters still in control of the land, the stage was set for a substantial reorganization of labor relations. Within a few years landowners and the freed people began to reach an arrangement that had no precedent in the history of southern society. It was called sharecropping, a system in which a farmer agreed to work someone else's land for a full year in return for a "share" of the final crop. This arrangement gave most of the freed people far more autonomy than had slavery. Sharecroppers usually worked their own plots in family-sized units rather than in large gangs. As free laborers, they had the right to move about in search of whatever opportunities were available. By one estimate as many as one in three sharecropping families changed employers each year.[2]

Yet after several generations of freedom, most sharecroppers remained dependent for their livelihoods on those who owned the land.[3] Emancipation had destroyed the master class, but it had not significantly altered landownership patterns. The planters therefore retained substantial control of a thoroughly reorganized labor force as well. And there were few alternatives to sharecropping for the former slaves in the postwar South. In mill towns and cities

they were locked out of the best jobs; in the countryside freed men and women found it all but impossible to purchase their own homesteads. The majority remained in agriculture, and they had no choice but to continue working for those who owned the land.

The postwar social order was no mere restoration of slave society, however. This was graphically illustrated by the dramatic increase in the number of merchants. Many landlords, devastated by the war, were in no position to provide credit and supplies to the ex-slaves. Local merchants quickly filled the void, taking their business directly onto the plantations and thereby competing with landlords for authority over sharecroppers. Croppers contracted with local merchants who loaned them food and other necessities over the course of the year. After the harvest the merchants claimed payment from the freedmen's "share" of the crop. Because both planters and merchants claimed a lien on the products of the sharecroppers' labor, this arrangement was fraught with potential conflicts. By the 1880's, landlords and merchants reached a *modus vivendi*, in part because planters won the right to the prior lien on the sharecroppers' harvest. In practice, the two classes effectively merged into one as merchants became landlords and landlords became merchants. Thus it was that by the end of the nineteenth century a consolidated landlord-merchant class dominated the rural economy of the plantation South.[4]

In the same decades an entirely new landlord-merchant class emerged and expanded its influence among yeoman farmers in many parts of the South. The legal conflict with the landowners in the plantation districts sent many merchants searching for opportunities in the upcountry. With the spread of transportation, credit, and marketing facilities into those areas, an increasing number of yeomen lost their land to merchant-creditors and eventually fell into tenancy. This gave the landlord-merchants more direct economic influence over white farmers than the slaveholders had ever enjoyed. Market integration, therefore, involved a significant loss of independence for many southern yeomen. In fact, tenancy rates are merely the statistical manifestation of a profound and disruptive transformation of the social relations that had long shaped the history of the upcountry South. Local arti-

sans could no longer compete with the flood of cheaper manufactured goods that flowed into their communities as they were absorbed into the national market. And with the breakdown of a local economy of farmers and artisans, traditional patterns of exchange could no longer be sustained. Independent farmers became steadily more dependent on the encroaching cotton economy, with its crushing cycle of debt and poverty.[5]

Locked into the market by a largely irreversible process of economic development, the average yeoman farm shrank in size dramatically, while the number of farmers who lost their land altogether rose steadily. The social character of tenancy changed from a temporary stage in a life-cycle to a permanent condition. By 1900 a tenant farmer was as likely to fall into wage labor as he was to rise into landed independence. This was a dramatic departure from antebellum conditions. Until 1850 as many as 70 percent of slaveless farmers owned their own land. To be sure, the slave economy had restricted the areas in which yeomen farmers could thrive, and in the late antebellum decades slavery's expansion threatened the economic independence of the upcountry. But it was not until the late nineteenth century, especially after 1880, that the proportion of family-owned farms dropped precipitously. By 1910 nearly half of the South's white farmers no longer owned all of the land they worked. By the turn of the century, the new landlord-merchant class that emerged after the Civil War had come to exercise significant and unprecedented social and economic influence among those who remained in the agricultural economy.

Clearly the social structure that Phillips observed in the rural South of the late nineteenth century bore only a superficial resemblance to its prewar antecedent. There is no discounting the poverty and oppression that still marked African-American life after emancipation. But it was not slavery. No landlord in the late nineteenth century enjoyed the legal right to break up a family, to buy and sell a human being, or to extract labor by sheer physical force. Sharecroppers worked not in slave gangs but on family farms in a free-labor system with its own structure of incentives, its own

relations of production and exchange, and its own economic consequences. The prewar planters whose papers Phillips so diligently uncovered were not the landlord-merchants he had observed in his youth. The power and wealth of the antebellum masters had rested on their ownership of slaves. The power of the postwar planters rested squarely on their ownership of the land, and this tied them to their plantations in a way that slavery never had. Only then did the land take on the legendary significance it had lacked in the years before 1860.[6] Nor were yeomen farmers untouched by this transformation. Enticed into the staple economy by the spread of transport and credit facilities, smallholders steadily lost their economic independence to a landlord-merchant class that had scarcely existed in the antebellum years. The planter class and the plantation system that Phillips saw in the late 1800's were not the remnants of the prewar South but the products of a fundamental restructuring of the social order.

Like the antebellum slaveholders, however, the postwar planters were defined more by their power than their wealth. In many cases postwar landlords were poorer than antebellum masters, and they could scarcely claim the kind of authority over their employees that owners had once exercised over their slaves. Yet as the decades passed and the legal nature of sharecropping was settled in southern courts and legislatures, it was clear that while the slaveholding class was destroyed by emancipation the postwar planters had succeeded in winning considerable legal authority. And legal authority implied political influence. At every point in its rise to power, the postwar planter class had to translate its economic interests into legal doctrines, making the social transformation a political as much as an economic process.[7] Who controlled the legislatures, how judges were appointed, and who had the right to vote would all determine how effectively the planter class could consolidate its power. Who would write the lien laws that established whether sharecroppers, tenants, merchants, or landlords could make a legal claim on the crops? Who would write the fence laws that could protect or destroy the security of small farmers? Who sat in the appellate courts that arbitrated the dis-

putes between tenants and landlords, sharecroppers and planters?[8] Clearly the political power of the landlord-merchants was a critical part of what defined them as a class.

It is in this context that the struggle over political rights for the freed slaves takes on its historic significance. In the United States, as in no other modern slave society, the former slaves had won the right to vote and hold public office. Only in the American South could the freed people participate extensively in the lawmaking process that was so critical to the shape of post-emancipation society.[9] Certainly the planters appreciated the threat to their interests represented by the voting power of blacks. At the critical moment in the 1880's, when the economic supremacy of the landlords was being legally secured in southern courts, black-belt planters inaugurated a concerted and ultimately successful attack on the democratic franchise. When the process was complete, for example, the votes of only 5 or 6 percent of Virginia's adults were enough to win election to the governorship. A paltry electorate and grossly malapportioned legislatures preserved the domination of the black belt. Landlord-merchants and a shrunken class of independent farmers formed a tacit alliance against the majority of landless Southerners, urban and rural, black and white. In those states that granted suffrage to the descendants of Civil War veterans, the right to vote became, in effect, a hereditary privilege.[10]

The means by which the planter class achieved such power were many and varied, but all depended on the failed efforts to build a biracial alliance among white and black farmers. Having won the right to vote, the freed people quickly discovered that this was in many ways a Pyrrhic victory. To begin with, the black vote profoundly disrupted the class relations that had long shaped southern politics. Slavery's "dual economy" had physically separated most yeomen from most slaveholders, making geographical and class divisions coincide. Before the war, therefore, when the yeomen pushed for democratic reform, they generally aimed at taking power from the black belt. The success of antebellum democratic reform can be measured in the steady elimination of property requirements for voting and officeholding and by the repeated reapportionment of the state legislatures. Once blacks se-

cured formal admission to the polity, however, the same reforms had radically different consequences. Indeed, they implied a wholesale realignment of political power, for universal male suffrage in the postwar South gave heavily populated black-belt counties unprecedented influence. For many white yeomen, the enfranchisement of the freedmen meant not black power but planter power.[11]

The political rise of the planter class, therefore, began with the reapportionment of the state legislatures under the terms laid down in the Reconstruction constitutions. The more democratic the prewar political structure, the more dramatic were the effects on the postwar legislatures. Mississippians, for example, had apportioned their prewar legislatures on the basis of white population, leaving the wealthiest plantation district along the Mississippi River with surprisingly few seats in the state legislature. The Natchez region was overwhelmingly black; three out of four residents of Adams County were slaves who counted for nothing in the apportionment of legislative seats before the Civil War. But the Reconstruction constitution of 1868 defined the state's adult black males as "qualified electors," instantaneously doubling the size of the voting population. Accordingly, Mississippi's black belt reaped the political harvest from this deceptively simple constitutional readjustment.[12]

The effects were visible in the actual distribution of legislative seats in Mississippi. Today every district elects a single representative, and district boundaries are periodically redrawn to assure that each representative has roughly the same number of constituents. But in the nineteenth century the most common method of apportionment was to give heavily populated counties more seats in the legislature than sparsely settled counties. Mississippi's Reconstruction constitution gave three or more seats to only thirteen of the state's sixty counties. Every one of the thirteen most favored counties had a black majority in 1860, and seven of those thirteen could not have qualified for so many seats under prewar rules. Tishomingo County is a classic example. With 879 adult white males in 1860, it had only one legislator in the state's House of Representatives. But after the war, when its 4,300 adult black

males were added to the ranks of the county's "qualified electors," Tishomingo automatically earned the right to a second representative. Other heavily black counties—Adams, Lowndes, and Warren, for example—increased their representation in the lower house of Mississippi's General Assembly in 1868, reversing a process that had prevailed for decades.[13]

Opposition to the black vote thus became one of the few rallying cries around which the majority of southern whites seemed capable of uniting. Black-belt planters resented black voting power, upcountry yeomen resented the power of the black belt, and both groups nurtured a powerful animosity toward the Reconstruction governments. For nearly two decades this hostility persisted, its effects extending far beyond the dissolution of black voting power. Where fraud, terror, and manipulation reduced the political significance of the black vote, the collapse of competitive party politics effectively narrowed the political options open to white voters.

Until the crisis of the 1850's, two-party politics had provided an important mechanism for expressing the political differences that separated yeomen from slaveholders. After the war, however, the Republican party became the virtually exclusive voice of the freedmen, while the Democratic party could organize itself around no principle greater than white supremacy. Sustained political competition within the white South declined substantially, even as the potential for class conflict swelled. Some whites continued to vote Republican; others enlisted in Independent or Greenback movements. But by the 1880's radicalized Southerners began to step outside the confines of the major parties altogether. Across much of the South, whites and blacks joined Farmers' Alliances and the Knights of Labor, and both organizations soon translated economic needs into political demands.[14]

Nervous reformers reacted by promoting a structural change even more significant than the domination of state legislatures by the plantation districts: the systematic disfranchisement of blacks. Some advocates of disfranchisement argued that suffrage restrictions were necessary in order to restore healthy political competition to the white South. In the words of one Alabama disfranchiser, the "grant of unrestricted suffrage to the negroes . . . has prevented any division of our people on economic or political questions." In the face of radical third-party threats from blacks and whites, constitutional reformers asserted that the revival of stable party politics among whites hinged on the elimination of the black voter. This was no easy task, however. Given the Fifteenth Amendment's ban on explicit racial discrimination, electoral reformers developed an ingenious variety of devices to weed out black voters. Among their more effective accomplishments were the white primary, in which the omnipotent Democratic party declared itself a private club closed to blacks; grandfather clauses, which exempted the descendants of Confederate veterans from obnoxious registration restrictions; and the ubiquitous literacy test, which even the most educated blacks seemed unable to pass.[15]

Although aimed primarily at the disfranchisement of blacks, the constitutional reform movement of the late nineteenth century often solidified the political power of the planter class. In some states constitutional changes combined legal disfranchisement of blacks with legislative reapportionment. But this did not necessarily return power to heavily white counties. In states like Alabama, where legislative apportionment was based on total population, the disfranchisement of blacks simply enhanced the power of black-belt whites. And although its effects varied from state to state, certain forms of disfranchisement—especially poll taxes—successfully reduced the voting power of the poorest whites along with that of most blacks. Blacks loudly protested these constitutional "reforms." But even among whites there were objections from those who understood that disfranchisement threatened the voting power of the growing body of propertyless whites. In the end, electoral reform gave tiny white minorities in the black belt political power equal to that of overwhelming white majorities elsewhere in the South.[16]

By the late nineteenth century, when Ulrich B. Phillips looked about his native Georgia and began to formulate his interpretation

of the Old South, he was bound to be misled by what he witnessed. The political power of the plantation owners was evident for all to see. Nevertheless, postwar politics were as different from prewar politics as slavery was different from sharecropping. In the Old South the formal exclusion of blacks from the polity and the growing threat to slavery at the national level had compelled slaveholders to seek the support of white yeomen by acceding to their demands for democratic reform. In sharp contrast, postbellum planters had every incentive to undermine all political opposition, black and white. By playing on pervasive racial prejudices, the postwar élite successfully defended the enhanced power of the black belt and at the same time prevented fundamental issues from arising within the omnipotent Democratic party. For all the superficial resemblances to slavery days, the South of 1900 was a very different place.

That difference notwithstanding, turn-of-the-century reformers sought repeatedly to justify their political programs by locating them deep within the South's past. By defining slavery not as a labor system, which had clearly been destroyed, but as one of "race control," which was now being restored, leading Southerners argued that the social order of their own age was largely continuous with its antebellum counterpart. They carried the argument for continuity still further by equating the inequitable distribution of rights in the postwar South with the complete denial of rights to antebellum slaves. Finally, they defined the Civil War as an independence movement whose termination required only that the seceded states be reincorporated into the Union. By this reasoning, the central theme of Reconstruction was not the transition from slavery to freedom but the unwarranted interference of the Radical Republicans in the government of the defeated states. Reconstruction should have ended with the simple restoration of the *status quo ante bellum*.

By the end of the century this argument was commonplace among leading white Southerners. It was clearly discernible in the rhetoric of southern Progressivism, beginning with the disfranchisement conventions that swept through the region between

1890 and 1910. Because electoral reform required constitutional amendment, Progressive historical revisionism began with a wholehearted repudiation of the Reconstruction constitutions. The delegates to the disfranchisement conventions made repeated reference to the "dark and perilous days of the Reconstruction period," when a " 'Congressional Aristocracy' . . . in its imperious, disdainful and revengeful legislation, absorbed all executive and legislative powers." At Louisiana's 1898 constitutional convention, Dr. J. L. M. Curry tied disfranchisement directly to the repudiation of the Reconstruction Acts. "These acts annulled the State government," Curry told the assembled delegates, "enfranchised the Negro and disfranchised the largest and best portion of the white people."[17]

A year before Curry spoke, as the disfranchisement movement in the South reached its peak, William Archibald Dunning at Columbia University gave his scholarly imprimatur to the Progressive interpretation of Reconstruction history. Dunning defined the Reconstruction years almost exclusively in political terms, stressed the "revolutionary" nature of the black franchise, and assured his readers that the protracted experiment of Radical dominion—"seven unwholesome years"—was doomed to fail on racial grounds alone. If whites were destined to rule, blacks were destined to lose the vote. And if the black vote was the chief legacy of Radical Reconstruction, it followed that disfranchisement was the final phase in what Dunning called "The Undoing of Reconstruction."[18]

That was Dunning's urgent message in his influential *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Fully aware of the immediate significance of his writings, Dunning interjected arguments countering those who saw that disfranchisement would eliminate poor, uneducated white voters along with blacks. As reformers in several southern states prepared to launch their campaign for disfranchisement, Dunning reinforced their sense of historical purpose. "With the enactment of these constitutional amendments by the various states," he wrote in 1897, "the political equality of the negro is becoming as extinct in law as it has long

been in fact, and the undoing of reconstruction is nearing completion."[19] Only then could the status quo of the prewar years be fully restored.

The theme of restoration implied a vision of the Old South that was compatible with the realities of the New South. Accordingly, the movement to disfranchise blacks was necessarily tied to a specific understanding and defense of the prewar social structure. Here, too, the relentless emphasis on white supremacy became a rhetorical device for discounting the centrality of slavery in antebellum society. By focusing on the attitudes that persisted rather than on the social structure that had been transformed, turn-of-the-century Southerners backed into a revisionist interpretation of the entire sectional crisis. "The ultimate root of the trouble in the South had been, not the institution of slavery, but the coexistence in one society of two races so distinct in characteristics as to render coalescence impossible," Dunning wrote. Slavery had merely been a "*modus vivendi* through which social life was possible," he concluded, and "after its disappearance, its place must be taken by some set of conditions which, if more humane and beneficent in accidents, must in essence express the same fact of racial inequality."[20]

The same set of assumptions infused the rhetoric of educational reformers in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century South, for their goals were inseparable from those of the disfranchisers. "Ignorance at the ballot box" was the ostensible enemy of good government, and so literacy tests and better schools sprang from the same reforming impulse. Not surprisingly, educational experts were conspicuous at many of the disfranchisement conventions. They reassured delegates that a good education was the best guarantee of the right to vote wherever literacy was the standard. But it was a guarantee offered only to white children. Taking their cue from recent Supreme Court decisions that legalized segregation, reformers set out to build an educational system suitable for whites, secure in the conviction that what was best for black children was best determined by white planters. Their logic was simple, and like so much of progressive ideology it rested on a particular vision of southern history. The same themes of res-

toration and continuity were evident in the words of a distinguished educational reformer at the turn of the century:

> I find in the State men who think that the negro has gone backward rather than forward and that education is injurious to him. Have these men forgotten that the negro was well educated before the War? Do they not recall that he was trained in those things essential for his life work? He has been less educated since the War than before. It is true that he has been sent to school, but his contact with the old planter and with the accomplished and elegant wife of that planter has been broken. This contact was in itself a better education than he can receive from the public schools, but shall we, for this reason, say that he is incapable of training. Ought we not, on the contrary, to study the conditions and realize that the training which he needs has not been given to him since the war?[21]

It was left to Dunning's most prominent student, Ulrich B. Phillips, to complete the circle of logic embedded in this view of history. More than anyone else, Phillips provided his contemporaries with an interpretation of the Old South that progressive-minded Southerners would find comfortably familiar and strikingly useful. In language that closely paralleled the words of educational reformers, Phillips explained how in the antebellum South "the plantation was a school." He went so far as to compare the plantation schools with the settlement houses established by urban reformers in the early twentieth century. "The white household taught perhaps less by precept than by example," Phillips explained. "It had much the effect of a 'social settlement' in a modern city slum, furnishing models of speech and conduct along with advice on occasions, which the vicinage is invited to accept."[22]

Phillips wrote those words in 1928, just as the social and economic system of the postbellum South was entering its death throes. Already weakened by the boll weevil, which had spread across the cotton states in the early twentieth century, and further disrupted by the great migration of both blacks and whites out of the South during World War I, the southern rural economy limped through the 1920's only to confront the devastating effects

of the Great Depression. With World War II, a second and even greater wave of migration sucked tenants and sharecroppers out of the cotton economy into northern factories and southern cities at the threshold of the Sunbelt. Progressive politics—grounded in the power of the landlord-merchant class—were rendered hollow and brittle by these changes. The final blow was dealt by the steady force of legal and political challenges that reached their climax in the massive civil rights movement that erupted in the 1950's.

For all its majesty and scope, Phillips's scholarly legacy could not withstand, much less explain, the events that were once again transforming the South in fundamental ways. As the earliest leaders of the NAACP pursued their cause beyond the notice of most white Americans, so did pioneer black historians set about to overthrow Phillips's interpretation of southern history. And just as the civil rights movement burst into public consciousness in the 1950's, so did the debate over slavery at last assume a central place in the reinterpretation of American history.

Phillips's vision was overthrown, of course, but through the 1950's and 1960's it remained unclear what image of slavery would take its place. As had always been true, the political divisions of the age were reflected in the modern debate over slavery. A northern liberal interpretation, sometimes labeled "neo-abolitionist," marched forward to reclaim the field once Phillips's forces had been vanquished. But neo-abolitionism was quickly confronted by the challenge of black nationalism, as students of slave culture uncovered the vibrancy of the African heritage within the black community and with it a new perspective on the history of slavery. As the struggles against overt forms of racial bias passed and the militancy of the civil rights movement waned, the tenacious realities of class domination took center stage in the debate over slavery as well.

Yet Phillips's great intellectual shadow still hovers over all discussions of the subject. He wrote as a member of the generation that sought to remove the most distressing social problems from the realm of politics. Disfranchisement of blacks and poor whites was only the most extreme manifestation of a more general de-

mobilization of the electorate in the United States (a tendency that would eventually produce one of the lowest rates of voter turnout among the western democracies). It was no accident that Phillips wrote about slavery as though it had no political content, as though it were somehow lifted from any political setting. Nor is it surprising that when Phillips wrote about antebellum southern politics—which he did with characteristic acumen—he made almost no mention of slavery. He separated slavery from southern politics in much the same way that his generation sought to strip black sharecroppers of their ballots, defining disfranchisement as a restoration of the prewar order.

The separation of politics from society persists in the scholarship of our own day. It is the source of some of the greatest contention among students of slavery. To be sure, southern history would not be what it is without civil wars forever raging among its most accomplished chroniclers. But there is perhaps no greater dividing line than the one separating those who study slavery as social and cultural history from those who take southern politics as their point of departure. Historians who emphasize southern distinctiveness are usually concerned with society and culture, while those who see the South as fundamentally "American" are most often political historians. Where the former usually turned away from the history of southern politics, the latter generally failed to appreciate the historic distinctiveness of slavery.

There are signs, however, that this conceptual barrier is finally breaking down. The social turmoil at the heart of Reconstruction politics has become more fully understood in recent years. Political historians have made concerted efforts to show how thoroughly the slavery issue entered into antebellum politics in subtle and indirect ways. Underlying these developments is a growing recognition that societies and economies, however natural and immutable they appear to their participants, are in fact the handiwork of ordinary human beings engaged in ordinary politics.

The political underpinnings of the relations that define our place in society—as working people or as family members—are increasingly appreciated. The "revisionist" historians who once cursed the sectional crisis as a needless conflict missed this when

they argued that the Civil War was the deformed offspring of a relentlessly partisan politics. We have learned in the last generation that the war was, inescapably, a fight about slavery. We are only beginning to understand why it was therefore a political struggle over the meaning of freedom. Once this last lesson is learned, our generation will have reached its own understanding of the Civil War.