**[Struggle and Progress](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/eric-foner-reconstruction-abolitionism-republican-party-lincoln-emancipation/)**

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Eric Foner on the abolitionists, Reconstruction, and winning “freedom” from the Right.

W. E. B. Du Bois

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| W. E. B. Du Bois | **Brief Intro Bio of Interviewee** [**Eric Foner**](https://www.jacobinmag.com/author/eric-foner/)\*No living historian has done more to shape our understanding of the American Civil War era than Eric Foner. A rare scholar who is both prominent outside the historical community and esteemed within it, over the course of a fifty-year career Foner has acquired virtually every award, tribute, and professional honor available to a historian in the United States.Yet the true measure of his legacy lies not in accolades but influence. Foner’s most important books have transformed the way we see — and the way we teach — the origins of the Civil War, the significance of slave emancipation, and the politics of postwar [Reconstruction](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/29/opinion/sunday/why-reconstruction-matters.html). |

Foner grew up in a New York family equally devoted to historical scholarship and left-wing politics. His father, Jack, and his uncle, Philip, both taught history at City College before they were dismissed and blacklisted as Communists.

For the elder Foners, a radical approach to US history involved placing the [black freedom struggle](http://www.haymarketbooks.org/bio/Philip-S-Foner-1) at center stage. “In the 1930s,” Eric later wrote, “the Communist party was the only predominantly white organization to make fighting racism central to its political program.” It was no coincidence that the family was friendly with W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, or that Philip Foner’s five-volume selection of Frederick Douglass’s writings and speeches, which he completed while on the blacklist, was the first collected edition of its kind.

Foner’s family background has produced occasional clumsy efforts at red-baiting, including a 2002 [*National Review* essay](http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/book-reviews/6841329/lefts-lion) which denounced him as a Soviet sympathizer and “left-wing polemicist.” In reality, Foner’s own contemporary political interventions have generally remained within the American liberal mainstream. Yet it would not be unfair to credit his Old Left upbringing with a major influence on his scholarly career.

Foner’s first book, [*Free Soil, Free Labor, and Free Men*](https://global.oup.com/ushe/product/free-soil-free-labor-free-men-9780195094978?cc=us&lang=en&) (1970), which remains the standard work on the rise of the Republican Party, showed how antebellum Republicans were not merely critics of slavery, but exponents of a powerful political-economic ideology of their own. His most celebrated book, [*Reconstruction*](https://books.google.com/books?id=K-rtAAAAMAAJ&q=isbn:0060158514&dq=isbn:0060158514&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CB4Q6AEwAGoVChMIw4Sc9KquxwIVhY8NCh1ycgGi) (1988), provided a synthesis that decisively rejected the racist folklore that had informed popular and scholarly treatments of the post–Civil War period for much of the twentieth century.

In these and other works, a central theme in Foner’s scholarship has been the contested terrain of freedom in American history. (This is no less true of his most recent book, [*Gateway to Freedom*](http://books.wwnorton.com/books/Gateway-to-Freedom/), on the antebellum underground railroad.) The Civil War era, in his view, represented a revolutionary clash of political ideas and forces — a period that unmade and then remade American society. The revolution, of course, remained unfinished — but it was a revolution nonetheless.

Three *Jacobin* contributors sat down with Foner to discuss the achievements and failures of Reconstruction, how to reclaim the idea of freedom from the Right, whether the antislavery movement has any lessons for the contemporary left, and why Karl Rove is one of his biggest fans.  **Interview begins on the following page.**

**So what’s this story we’ve heard about an argument you had with your eighth-grade history teacher about Reconstruction?**

This was a long time ago, probably 1957 or ’58 — it was tenth or eleventh grade. And yeah, it was American History class, in Long Beach, Long Island, and the teacher was basically giving us the old, traditional *Birth of a Nation* view of Reconstruction. She said the [Reconstruction Act of 1867](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Reconstruction-Acts), which gave the right to vote to black men in the South, was the worst law in all American history.

So I raised my hand and I said, “I don’t agree with you, Mrs. Berryman, I think the Alien and Sedition Acts were worse.” I don’t know where I got that from. And she said, “Alright, Eric, if you don’t like the way I’m teaching, you come in tomorrow and you give a lecture on Reconstruction.” Which I did — my father was a historian, Du Bois was a friend of the family, we had *Black Reconstruction* at home. So we used that.

I came in and I gave my presentation, and at the end of the class the teacher says, “All right, we’re now going to have a vote as to who’s right: me or Eric.” Well, she won by a landslide, let’s put it that way.

**When would you say high school students started learning a new way of seeing Reconstruction?**

Maybe the 1970s, or even after that. Of course, Du Bois’s [*Black Reconstruction*](https://archive.org/details/blackreconstruc00dubo) had been out there since 1935, but it was ignored in the mainstream [white] universities. It was taught in the black colleges. In the black colleges you had a different view of Reconstruction, but that was totally sealed off from the larger academic world.

But I think a real turning point was in 1965, when Kenneth Stampp published this book called [*The Era of Reconstruction*](http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/imh/article/view/9141/11995), which was not a very detailed research book but it gave a more positive view of Reconstruction. And because of the civil rights revolution, people wanted a different history. People were talking about the “New Abolitionists,” the “Second Reconstruction.” Little by little people started chipping away.

So in the seventies there was a lot of scholarship being done, but exactly when it got into the high schools I don’t know. Maybe the eighties. You’d have to look at the textbooks for that.

Today I think all the textbooks are good, but I still find, wherever I talk about this, that there are plenty of people — and not just the older ones — who say, “All I know about Reconstruction is corruption, carpetbaggers.”

The main thing is that people know next to nothing about Reconstruction. And what they do know is just not correct. I mean, just basic myths. People say, “They gave the right to vote to blacks but they disenfranchised all the whites.” Well, that’s completely untrue, they did not disenfranchise all whites. But people think that’s a known fact.

**What percentage were actually disenfranchised?**

A tiny percent. The people disenfranchised were people who held during office before the Civil War. Nobody knows how many that was. It might have been 8,000, 10,000, nobody knows, but it was not all whites. Your average Confederate veteran was not disenfranchised.

Oh, and the idea that all the blacks in office were illiterate and ignorant, also a total myth — we could go on about this but the point is, there are still a lot of misconceptions. I’m hoping that with the 150th anniversary of Reconstruction coming up there will be a little more interest.

**There’s a 2011 Pew Poll showing that Americans still don’t even agree on the cause of the Civil War. There’s a plurality saying it was “states’ rights,” rather than slavery — and it’s not a North-South divide, either.**

Yes, I see that all the time. It isn’t regional. The thing is, it’s an index of cynicism about political life. Which is totally understandable. The idea that anyone could do anything for an idealistic reason, or that you can believe anything that politicians say . . .

You look at our own world, with politics today, it’s easy to say, “Hey, it must have been just a bunch of Northern capitalists trying to control the South,” or “It was just states’ rights.” Whenever I lecture, someone raises the issue of states’ rights, and the thing I like to say is: “Yes, you’re right, the South believed in states’ rights. And the right they were interested in was the right to own slaves.” And that was a right created by state law, so naturally they wanted to protect states’ rights.

And then I say, if that was really the issue, then explain the [Fugitive Slave Law of 1850](http://www.nationalcenter.org/FugitiveSlaveAct.html) to me — which was a federal law, probably the most powerful federal law before the Civil War in terms of overriding local judicial procedures, overriding local law enforcement. Federal troops, federal marshals, going into states, you think that’s a reflection of states’ rights? No.

When it came to vigorous federal action in defense of slavery, the South was perfectly happy to go that route. So they did not dogmatically believe in states’ rights . . .

Just look at the [Mississippi Declaration of Secession](http://www.ucs.louisiana.edu/~ras2777/amgov/secession.html#Mississippi). Or Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens’s “[Cornerstone Speech](http://web.archive.org/web/20130822142313/http%3A/teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/cornerstone-speech/).” One thing I admire about these guys is that they didn’t beat about the bush. They were very candid. “We are seceding because the future of slavery is in danger.”

**After the war, the myth developed that everybody had already agreed that slavery needed to go.**

Yes, slavery got washed out of the writing on the war. But it didn’t happen in a straight line. When it comes to the Civil War, what historians write is a reflection of the world they are living in at the moment.

During World War II there was an upsurge in people seeing the Civil War through its lens, through the fight against fascism and the knowledge that entrenched evil is not going to go away without violence. So in that period they saw slavery as the root of it.

But later you get a post-Vietnam thing, which was a little more cynical. I think even today we’re in a post-Iraq moment, where the idea is basically, “War is hell and politicians justify it with all this rhetoric which has no meaning, so how can you believe anything anyone says?”

My view on this is Du Bois’s, actually. Sometimes the “neo-abolitionist” historians get a little too gung-ho for war, the glorifying of the war. I agree with Du Bois, who says that war is murder, chaos, anarchy. But sometimes good comes out of it. I don’t think it’s a good thing that all these people got killed in the Civil War. I’m not glorifying it and waving the flag for it. But what I’m saying is that I’ve never seen a peaceful scenario for the abolition of slavery in this country.

Now, a lot of people say it would have died out as a result of being uneconomical. How do you know that? When would it have died out? It was plenty economical before the Civil War, why would it suddenly die out?

People say, “Oh, well Brazil abolished slavery.” Brazil abolished slavery partially because we abolished slavery. Do you think Brazil would have abolished slavery if we hadn’t? I think political economy is very important here. The clash of two fundamentally different societies with two fundamentally different labor systems is what’s going on, in my opinion.

**Do you think it makes sense to talk about the Civil War and Reconstruction as a “bourgeois revolution”?**

I tend not to use terminology like that, which I feel is an insider terminology. I try to write as clearly and accessibly as possible. So I understand what it means to call it a bourgeois revolution, and there are a lot of ways one could say it is. But I don’t think you would find that phrase in my writings.

But I do call it a revolution. I call the Civil War the [Second American Revolution](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/second-american-revolution-civil-war-charleston-emancipation-lincoln-union), as historian Charles Beard did, and as abolitionist Wendell Phillips did. But the Revolution is the destruction of slavery, that’s the revolutionary quality. That’s Du Bois’s point.

I call it a capitalist revolution. I don’t know if that’s the same thing as a bourgeois revolution. It destroys a system that is both capitalist and non-capitalist in ways that are quite difficult to explain, but the consequence of the Civil War is capitalist hegemony throughout the entire United States.

But that’s not the *cause* of the Civil War, because the capitalists were perfectly happy with the slave South. They made a lot of money off the slave South and there was no reason for them to go to war. But the *consequence* of the war was certainly the hegemony of Northern industry and finance throughout the entire country.

**American Jacobins**

**I wanted to talk about Karl Rove, who is apparently a big fan of your book *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, on antebellum Republican ideology.**

He said he learned how to build a political coalition from that book.

A student came up to me one year and said, “You might not approve of this, but I’ve got an internship in the White House working for Karl Rove this summer.” I said I don’t disapprove, they need all the help they can get down there. He said, “I’m glad you feel that way,” and he whipped out his copy of my Reconstruction book and said, “Mr Rove asked if I could get you to sign this for him.”

**I think this kind of thing scares off the young contemporary left, because they see the legacy of antislavery being claimed by this vicious capitalist force.**

Anything can be claimed by anyone! I mean, Glenn Beck held his [civil rights rally](http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/44980/) a little while ago.

**The*National Review* does something on Frederick Douglass from time to time.**

We shouldn’t allow them to take possession of these struggles. By the way, Obama absorbs all of this into his narrative of American history, obviously, and what’s objectionable about all this — from Obama’s vision of American history to Karl Rove’s — is that they see all these things as struggles within a stable system, so to speak.

Instead of denying, like the Right used to, that we’ve ever had inequality in this country, the Right says, “Well of course slavery was horrible, but we abolished it. *We* abolished slavery.” We! We! Who’s this “we,” you know?

And then they say, “Jim Crow, it was terrible.” No one’s defending Jim Crow anymore. We had a great civil rights struggle, [Martin Luther King](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/restoring-king/) is a hero to everybody left, right and center, but it’s a defanged Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King is the guy who gets up at the Lincoln Memorial and, you know, says one sentence — I want my children to be judged by the content of their character — and that’s Martin Luther King. You don’t get the King who spoke out against the Vietnam War, or the [Poor People’s Campaign](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/martin-luther-king-socialist/) King.

King was a radical guy. King said that the Civil Rights Movement was a fundamental challenge to American values. The people who absorb it into a feel-good thing now say it was an *expression* of basic American values. In other words, there is a stable thing called Americanism which all these struggles are just improving all the time.

So I can see how people can be cynical about the appropriation of that, but I don’t think we should let it be appropriated. I wrote a book about the history of the idea of freedom, and then shortly thereafter George W. Bush took control of the idea of freedom for the War in Iraq. Operation Iraqi Freedom — freedom, freedom, freedom, that’s all it was. It turned a lot of people off the idea of freedom.

Obama doesn’t even talk about freedom much, except when he’s going to war. Freedom is the last refuge when they want to go to war.

I don’t think we should cede freedom to the Right. Absolutely not. We should not concede the common sense idea of freedom. In my book there are many other concepts of freedom equally embedded in the American tradition, which have a lot more to do with equality and economic rights, which we should insist on. It’s not just owning a gun and getting the government off your back.

So yes, I can understand that people look back at the abolitionist movement and say, first, “Well, the whites were racist.” Well some of them were racist, no question about it. But hey, they were willing to put themselves on the line to end slavery, so what else do you want?

This is a pseudo-politics, a psycho-politics, that says people ought to be loving each other. That’s not what politics is, people loving each other. It’s people acting together, even if they *don’t* love each other, for a common purpose. If you’re going out to a labor picket line, are they all loving each other, the people on that picket line? Probably not. But they have a common self-interest that they’re pursuing.

Then they say, “It didn’t succeed. They abolished slavery, but racism is permanent, and another form of slavery came in.” Of course, terrible injustice came in. But it wasn’t slavery. I think that’s a very cynical view of social change — that if you don’t get utopia nothing has happened.

**There’s a related myth that emancipation happened, but immediately it was replaced by Jim Crow. But in reality there was a long period between Reconstruction and complete black disenfranchisement, and across the late nineteenth century there were all these struggles in the South, with whites and blacks acting together.**

You’re absolutely right, it didn’t just end in 1877. There was Radical Reconstruction, which I think was a very idealistic effort to, as Du Bois said, create democracy. Du Bois’s subtitle talks about “the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America.” It’s not about black people, it’s about democracy — are we going to have a democracy in this country or not?

But then there was a generation at least which was kind of inchoate, as you say. There was a tendency towards more and more racism, but there were also struggles like the [Readjusters in Virginia](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Readjuster_Party_The%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), the Populists of course, and other things. It’s not until around 1900 that Jim Crow, which is a shorthand for comprehensive white supremacy in the South, comes in.

The struggle is the story. I don’t think we should romanticize it, but the idea that racism is permanent and there’s nothing you can say or do and that’s it — that’s a totally unhistorical way of thinking about it.

**Among other things, it’s a story of attempts at interracial cooperation from below, which ultimately failed by 1900. It’s sometimes argued that the political failure of Reconstruction in the South was due to the fact that Republican support among Unionist whites, which was significant at the beginning, seemed to have disappeared or diminished by 1877. Why do you think that happened?**

That’s one of the reasons for the failure of Reconstruction — it’s one reason. Of course, there were some states where they never had any white support, like South Carolina and maybe a couple of other places. Louisiana had very, very little.

The problem of getting poor white support was very difficult and was exacerbated by the difference between the Northern Republican Party and the Southern Republican Party. In some of these states, like North Carolina or Georgia, there were poor whites, Unionists, and so on, who were interested in supporting the Republicans for economic advantages like debtor’s relief.

But the Northern Republican Party was not interested in supporting them. They rejected Georgia’s Constitution because it suspended the collection of debts, and they said, “Hey, I’m sorry, you guys have got to pay your debts.” It’s like Greece, they were acting like Angela Merkel.

I actually think the failure of Reconstruction was not solely or even primarily on that basis. Rather, you have to go to the federal level and look at what was basically a failure to enforce the law. There were these constitutional amendments — the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth — but you get a withdrawal from enforcement after a while, and that reflected changes in Northern society — political, economic, and intellectual. And without a willingness to enforce the law, the power structure in the South — the economic power structure — is going to take over eventually.

It’s possible to imagine continued federal intervention — not, you know, military intervention for forty years, but enough to make it clear that these laws will be enforced. Like what happened in the Civil Rights Movement. There was a social movement, but there was also the National Guard, federal courts, other things just making it clear to people, not that they have to love each other, but that they have to act in certain ways and they can’t act in other ways. That if people act in ways that are in violation of federal law, they will be punished. And if that becomes clear, then people eventually abide by the law.

**This is the point where Karl Rove’s attempt at appropriation fails, because when you’re looking at that moment, where Northern support dries up and people are beginning to doubt the effort to enforce the law, they have exactly the same kinds of concerns that Karl Rove has, that the Republican Party today has.**

Yes, exactly. Rove would probably say this was an outside imposition on the South and therefore whites were never going to accept it. Maybe there’s some truth to that. But as you said, there were the Populists, the Readjusters, there were grounds for white militancy in the South all through this period, which occasionally come to the fore and helped work out things with blacks. But they were usually overturned by violence.

So you go back to the question: are you going to allow political violence to determine elections and political power in this country? If you are, that’s what’s going to happen. And if not, you’re going to need federal intervention to prevent it. I think the national story of Reconstruction and its failure is very important, not just the local story.

**Of course, there’s an old argument about corruption in the Reconstruction state governments, but newer scholarship has looked more closely at the problem of state government revenue, and the new property taxes imposed after the war.**

Yes, these state governments faced a real*Catch‑22*. Before the war, state revenue was basically from the tax on slaves, not on landed property. Planters could accumulate large tracts of property and not be taxed on it, but be taxed on their slaves instead. And this left the poorer whites not paying taxes on their land. Most people owned land, but they didn’t pay taxes.

This was a weird fiscal system, where it’s the tax on slaves that’s supporting the government, but it does allow a lot of fiscal autonomy to poorer areas. After the Civil War, there are no more slaves, so no more tax! It becomes a general property tax. That’s bad for the planters, but it’s also bad for the poorer whites, who are now paying a tax on their land they didn’t have to before.

So that becomes a big problem. These governments are setting up school systems, and they’re now serving a doubled citizenry where blacks are now suddenly getting benefits from the government as well as whites, but the fiscal resources are very, very weak. And that’s why they were issuing bonds that were deteriorating in value. And you get corruption out of that.

But even the way you posed the question, which pops up in a lot of this literature, shows the hold of modern day politics: corruption and taxation are thrown into the same bag. But taxation is not corruption! This notion that levying taxes is bad is part of this critique of Reconstruction.

**But surely if these are poor farmers who want schools, and you raise taxes to build these school systems and stuff — if it had been done well, wouldn’t they ultimately have benefited from it?**

The immediate problem was that they couldn’t get debtor’s relief. They were all in debt. The Republican Party was divided, because a lot of Republicans — including black Republicans — thought they shouldn’t alienate planters too much. They wanted to get the planters into the Republican Party.

So it was very hard to have a radical party, to have a populist party, because the local parties were dependent on the Northern Republican Party, which more and more was the party of industry and sound finance. It was a political coalition that was very difficult to maintain. It was a coalition between the poorest people in the country and the richest people in the country!

And then there was the need for cotton. That’s one of the reasons they didn’t distribute land to the former slaves: because they thought they’d have to grow cotton. The problem is, there was actually an overproduction of cotton after the war, because the British had encouraged cotton in India and Egypt during the war. There’s a lot more supply in the world than there had been before because the Civil War had cut it off.

The thing is, the agricultural system in the South was not a racial system. It affected blacks more severely but there were more white sharecroppers than black in every census. The crop lien system (which left indebted farmers dependent on cash crops) forced people to grow cotton. So yes, the expansion of cotton production was in the white areas, and that was very detrimental to them because the price was falling throughout this whole period. There was overproduction, so growing cotton was a losing game.

So here you get into total counterfactual fantasy: if they had changed the whole credit system — if, if, if! That’s what the [Populists called for](http://www.georgemullins.com/chapter13.htm) [in the 1890s]. Get out of dependence on merchants and banks. Let the government be the one who loans the money to the farmers. It didn’t happen, of course. (Now it happens, but that’s with agribusiness, that’s a different story.) So there are a million problems.

I don’t think Reconstruction in its utopian phase could have succeeded, but I don’t think it’s crazy to imagine more modest kinds of success which would have made the shift over to Jim Crow more difficult.

**What do you think about land redistribution, as a counterfactual?**

Well, in an agricultural society it’s a lot better to have land than to not have land. Would it have been a panacea for everything? No. The credit system, you’d have had to change that too, because land is not the only scarce resource. It certainly would have given blacks more bargaining power in the system, but it was not the end-all, be-all answer. Most white farmers owned land after the war, but they were losing it through this whole period.

**To me, the key thing wouldn’t necessarily have been the direct benefits to African Americans, which were significant but still limited. I’m thinking of the political dynamic. Because that’s the divide that arose later on, the poor whites who owned land and poor blacks who owned nothing. Steven Hahn called them the “propertyless poor.”**

Though a lot of whites are losing their property too.

But you know, you can take that even farther. To Thaddeus Stevens, the biggest thing this would have accomplished was to destroy the planter class. Take away their land and they’re gone, and that would have changed the whole political configuration of the South.

**I mean, he wanted to sell it to Northerners too.**

Forty acres to the blacks and then sell the rest. Then you’ve got a whole different society. That’s a great counterfactual. Blacks would have ended up at the bottom of the economic ladder anyway because they lacked resources, but the whole system would have looked very different.

Okay, let’s do counterfactuals. But let’s say in 1867 blacks get the right to vote, and there’s a general white uprising in the South and you have to send the Army back in. Then people might have said, fuck these guys! This is impossible, we’re gonna take their land away again. Crisis creates that kind of radicalism.

**In the dominant discourse, the American Revolution was very moderate, it was legalistic, and that’s good because it was relatively peaceful, unlike the French Revolution. Yet it left slavery in place. And then even the Second American Revolution ended up so moderate and legalistic that it prevented them from doing a lot of radical things — the kind of things you’d imagine the French Jacobins doing had they been in the United States.**

Well you know, Georges Clemenceau was here after the war and he was reporting for a French newspaper. He called Thaddeus Stevens the Robespierre of the Second American Revolution. So he saw what was going on. But on the other hand, the abolition of slavery seems so normal and inevitable in retrospect, yet it was an incredibly radical act. Especially the *uncompensated* abolition of slavery, the liquidation of what was by far the largest concentration of property in the country — slaves. No compensation was a pretty radical thing. I guess you’re right, it wasn’t radical enough, but it was certainly pretty radical for the nineteenth century.

**Lessons for Today’s Radicals**

**What if some young socialist came up to you and asked, “Is there anything here, in antislavery and Reconstruction, that’s useful for an anti-capitalist, socialist project?”**

Yes! First of all though — the abolitionist movement was not an anti-capitalist movement.

**But it was a radical movement.**

Yes, it was a radical movement. The abolitionists show you that a very small group of people can accomplish a lot by changing the discourse of the country. After the Civil War, everybody claimed to have been an abolitionist. But they weren’t!

There weren’t a whole lot of abolitionists before the war. There were a few beleaguered individuals scattered about, in upstate New York, for example. There were only a couple dozen abolitionists in New York City!

Now, there was a free black community, they were very militant, and you could say they were abolitionists, but I’m talking about the organized [abolitionist movement](http://americanabolitionist.liberalarts.iupui.edu/brief.htm). That was very small. Nonetheless, they managed to actually accomplish quite a bit. They pioneered the use of the media of that time — the steam press, the telegraph, the petitions, the traveling speakers — to change public discourse. If you want to learn something from the abolitionists, that’s what you learn. The first thing to do is intervene in public discourse.

And the [Occupy movement](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/06/occupy-after-occupy/) — success, failure, gone, still around, whatever you want to think about it — it changed the public discourse. It put this question of the 1 percent and the 99 percent, inequality, on the national agenda. That doesn’t mean they’re going to do much about it in Washington, but it is now part of our consciousness, just as by 1840 the abolitionist movement put the issue of slavery on the agenda in a way it had not been. Now, it took twenty years for anything to happen, but I think that’s something to learn from them, how they managed to do that.

Here’s the point. I am a believer in the abolitionist concept — that the role of radicals is to stand outside of the political system. The abolitionists said, “I am not putting forward a plan for abolition, because if I put forward a plan, people are just going to be debating my plan. ‘Oh, it’s going to be two years, five years, seven years.’ No: I’m putting forward the moral imperative of dealing with slavery.” And if people are convinced of that, then politicians will come up with a plan to do it. That means politicians are eventually going to pick up those ideas and use them in other ways and turn them into political strategies.

A guy like Lincoln was not a radical abolitionist by any stretch of the imagination. He was a moderate. And yet by the 1850s Lincoln understood that abolitionists were part of — to use a Karl Rove term — his “base.”

Lincoln understood that you don’t win by just appealing to your base, but no politician is going to kick his base out and say “I don’t want to deal with these guys.”

So yes, there are some radical guys in the party, like Joshua Giddings, like Salmon P. Chase. But you know, Giddings represented one very unique district. He was like [Bernie Sanders](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/bernie-sanders-president-vermont-socialist/). Not too many Giddingses are going to get elected.

**Then how do you interpret the debate among abolitionists, like the split that eventually happened between William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass?**

You know, this is where I differ from the tradition I grew up in. I don’t believe there is one true party line that every movement has to have. The [Maoist view](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2011/06/advice-from-the-nlf/) is better: let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred tactics bloom. Let some people go into politics and other people not go into politics, let some people work above ground and others not. You know, you have the Underground Railroad, you have people working illegally, but you also have people working totally legally and openly. There’s no one correct tactic. The more different tactics you have, the better.

**I totally agree with that, but in some ways, Garrison was making the argument that you started out with just now: let’s just stand out and say what’s right. And Douglass said, look, at a certain point, you have to intervene.**

But Douglass’s concept of politics is still politics as agitation. He doesn’t support the Republican Party. He supports the Radical Abolition party which gets twenty votes! But the point of that is just to get the idea out there. Politics is another venue for getting your idea out there.

**But the idea *is* out there! In your most recent book, you quote Charles Sumner talking about the “anti-slavery enterprise” as an inclusive movement. Isn’t the striking thing about this moment in American politics the fact that even though they’re at each other’s throats, they’re working towards a common goal? Even though Douglass is trashing Lincoln in his editorials, fundamentally they still build through the Republican Party. This is the real radical moment, in the mid 1850s — when the Republican Party, the antislavery party, wins control of the North. Just a few years earlier that was unimaginable.**

No, you’re right. Yes, I make this argument, but I think one should not homogenize things. Douglass and [Wendell Phillips](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Wendell-Phillips) are trying to get rid of Lincoln in 1864! They nominate John C. Frémont to run instead. Lincoln and the abolitionists have this odd, interesting relationship. It’s partly symbiotic, it’s partly antagonistic, but these guys are not holding Lincoln’s coat by any means.

Very good historians make very big mistakes talking about this because they look at Douglass’s speeches about Lincoln. But Douglass is a very shrewd guy. He understands you’ve got to get Lincoln on your side, especially after the Civil War. So suddenly Lincoln is the guy who we were all really wrong to criticize, and he was actually a believer in racial justice. By the 1870s he’s trying to invoke Lincoln to get people’s support for Reconstruction.

**But as you said, this is politics, right? It’s not about loving each other — it’s about changing the world.**

Absolutely. But even though there’s an antislavery enterprise, I still think there’s a fundamental difference between abolitionists and the politicians. I mean, I hope that people on the Left do not just throw up their hands and say, “Well, there’s nobody you can trust.” It’s politics! You make deals. But I also believe that this is the luxury of an intellectual with a full-time job, so I don’t have to worry about it.

But I think radicals shouldn’t be involved in the day to day business of politics. I’m on the board of the *Nation*, which is not as radical as*Jacobin*, but in our current political climate it’s to the left of the mainstream, let’s put it that way. A lot of our editorial board meetings are about: “Oh God, should we support Hillary? Should we support Obama?” and I say, “Hell no, that’s not even what we should be talking about! We should not be getting involved in Democratic Party internal battles. That’s not what our job is.”

Our job is to put out new ideas, different ideas, pressure people, and I don’t care fundamentally if Obama or Hillary gets the nomination in 2008. Sure I have an opinion about it but I don’t think that’s our job to worry about it. All of this maneuvering, “Oh, what do we do in this or that election.” We are not politicians. Politicians do it better.

In 1864 Lincoln absolutely outmaneuvered these guys, because they weren’t politicians. I mean they put up [John C. Frémont](http://www.civilwarhome.com/fremontbio.html). Who the hell is that? Lincoln controlled the machinery.

**But there had to be a point at which people with abolitionist views decided that they were going to involve themselves in the process — even if it was the [1848–54] Free Soil Party, or something like that. There was a process of coalition-building in which people who didn’t like each other, who thought they were too radical, or not radical enough, worked together on a common project. It was anti-sectarian, or non-sectarian.**

I agree with you. On the other hand, Douglass welcomed the [Free Soil Party](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Free-Soil-Party) because its politicians were moving toward antislavery. He did*not* welcome the [1840–44] [Liberty Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberty_Party_%28United_States%2C_1840%29) — even though it was more radical than Free Soil — because that was abolitionists moving towards politics. He thought that was a deterioration of the abolitionist statement.

I’m giving you a rigid kind of view of what radicalism is, when what I actually believe is that people should be doing everything at the same time. There is no one correct way. If people want to work in the Democratic Party, let ’em. There are good people in the party, in some places, running.

I’m certainly happy [de Blasio](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/de-blasios-doomed-housing-plan/) was elected here. De Blasio is not Thad Stevens but he’s certainly an improvement on what we’ve had. And I think that’s great. But I don’t think the role of radicals is to just jump on board and say de Blasio’s our man.

Maybe a good example is Thaddeus Stevens. He’s a party man, he’s a politician, but he’s certainly as much an abolitionist as anybody, and more of a racial egalitarian than a lot of people on the Left then.

**Even than a lot of Underground Railroad types.**

Absolutely. But Thaddeus Stevens is central in the political system. He doesn’t control the Congress, but he’s important. He’s almost like John Boehner today. He’s a key guy in the House of Representatives. So Stevens is another way of looking at it. He’s an abolitionist using a position of power in the political system.

But Stevens also knows how to compromise. He sees what you can get and he takes it. On the Fourteenth Amendment, Charles Sumner initially says he won’t accept it because it recognizes the power of the state to disenfranchise people — it punishes states in terms of numbers of their members in Congress if they don’t allow blacks to vote, but it still allows the possibility of doing it.

Stevens says, “Hey, this is a step toward what we want and we have to do it. It’s imperfect, but we’ve got to take it.”

**Same thing with Frederick Douglass on the Emancipation Proclamation: “This is one step.”**

One of my numerous differences with President Obama is that a few years ago he went to a college and he was chatting with some students, and he was complaining about liberals criticizing him, and he said, if these guys were around when Lincoln issued the [Emancipation Proclamation](http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/primarysources/emancipation.html), they would have said it’s no good. And I said, wait a minute, the abolitionists didn’t say it was no good! They said it was great, but you’ve got to do more!

**I guess why we’re so interested in this juncture between abolitionists and Republicans is just that we’re wondering about the process. You have a situation where Wendell Phillips is invited to the White House in 1862. Thinking about it, that’s like, what, the equivalent of Noam Chomsky being invited to the White House by Obama? That would never happen — it seems impossible for Obama even to say anything about the 99 percent.**

I wrote my book about Lincoln, and I wouldn’t say it was written for Obama but I had hoped Obama would read it. Because it’s about exactly how a political figure and a social movement can somehow, not exactly coordinate with each other, but influence one another.

I would like to see Obama inviting the equivalent of Frederick Douglass today, whoever that is, to the White House and listening to him and talking to him about things, asking his advice about things. Lincoln didn’t care when these guys came in and criticized him, he was perfectly happy to learn something from them.

Obama isn’t like that. He’s very thin-skinned. He doesn’t like differences of opinion within his own party. I think that’s a serious flaw. I think for *Jacobin* — and I say this to the *Nation* — the number one thing is to put out a [different worldview](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/07/why-were-marxists/) than the dominant one today.

I think the financial crisis has cracked open the old consensus. I read two newspapers in the morning, over breakfast, the *New York Times*and the *Financial Times*. I don’t read them online, I get them delivered to my door, the old-fashioned way. The *Financial Times* is more radical than the *New York Times*! You read the *Financial Times*on the fiscal crisis, the financial system, they’re up in arms that no banker has gone to jail, about the austerity program. The *Financial Times* tells you what’s actually happening, it’s amazing.

My point is that the consensus has cracked open, and therefore publications like *Jacobin* have to put forward an alternative point of view, and worldview, an alternative vision.

The problem is the abolitionists *had* a vision. It was a society without slavery and with equality for all. And that’s what they put out, but I don’t think they had any concept of what abolition would mean economically, what would be the implications for the country. Yes, they wanted the South to be like the North — more farms, little towns.

But the funny thing is, in New England the factory system was very powerful in the 1840s and the abolitionists didn’t look in their own backyard and say, “What about Irish laborers in the factories?” That’s why I say their vision was basically a moral one.

**So let’s talk a little about the vision of the Republican Party. The early GOP brought together both ex-Whigs and ex-Democrats, but the majority had been lifelong Whigs. It was almost sort of an offshoot of the Whigs. The traditional view is that the Whigs were basically elitists. But in the context of the time wasn’t there something historically progressive about their kind of bourgeois liberalism?**

You’re right. Of course the Whigs were very skeptical of democracy. In the 1830s, you have the Jacksonians who seem to represent a popular politics of democracy, and yet they’re anti-Indian, they’re racist. Then you have the Whigs who seem to be more forward-looking, but they’re capitalists.

But the guys who come to the fore are the ones who combine things. Lincoln and Seward are more small-d democratic Whigs who see that you can’t run in this country in the 1830s in favor of the elite and say, “Vote for me, I’m for the elite.” Although some Whigs tried. So you get these democratic Whigs who have this forward-looking economic view, but also have a mass politics, which many Whigs are not that comfortable with.

Lincoln’s got the economic progress, free-labor notion, but not the kind of elite finance capitalist thing. Going into Reconstruction, Thaddeus Stevens is actually into inflation, greenbacks. Guys like him have this vision of uplifting everybody through money and credit, low-interest rates. Every man his own capitalist, but without big capitalists out there.

Seward is a very interesting guy, because he tries to get the Whig party to appeal to immigrants. But the Whigs were very nativist, and that’s part of the reason he didn’t get the nomination in 1860. The Know-Nothings didn’t like Seward because when he was governor twenty years before he’d tried to get public money for Catholic schools.

**What I meant by the question about the Whigs is that, the way I see it, the Democrats, in addition to their racism, represented a very agrarian, decentralized, yet small-d democratic vision that was opposed to improvement of society through collective means. That’s a very American thing in the sense that Europe, where the suffrage was restricted, really had no equivalent of the Democratic Party.**

You’re right. Because in Europe the Industrial Revolution happened before democracy came in. People were excluded as a class and that encouraged class consciousness because people were excluded from the political system as a class. The labor struggle and the political struggle were interconnected with each other. That’s the point of[E. P. Thompson’s book](https://monthlyreview.org/books/pb4437/) on the English working class. That book is about politics as much as labor, it’s about the struggle for the vote for working-class people.

I think the fundamental thing is that in the US in the nineteenth century, the mainstream of radicalism is based on individual autonomy, equality, and small property. Whether it’s a homestead thing, or even the [Knights of Labor](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/02/wage-slavery-and-republican-liberty/) later. That’s what the Socialist Party breaks with — the idea that small property will solve capitalism. They say you’ve got to find a more collective solution to this.

Eventually the free labor ideology dies out. But in the nineteenth century the free-labor ideology was the source of much of American radicalism, and there’s no point in going back and saying, “Hey, they shouldn’t have thought that, they should have been socialists.”

**That’s the peculiarity of this 1850s moment, isn’t it? This free-labor vision develops that bequeaths industrial capitalism and laissez faire, but at the same time it’s inchoate, it’s undetermined, and labor struggles can come out of it too. And that’s how Lincoln in the 1850s could say nobody should remain a wage earner for life.**

But there is no real connection between that and socialism, and indeed there were plenty of socialists then and later, who said, “This is retrograde, this idea of small property being the essence of freedom. It’s a barrier against a collective view of society.” To say that today, however, is unhistorical anyway, because socialism was not on the agenda in 1850.

**One thing about free labor is that when it emerges in the fifties, conservative elites in the South had no hesitancy finding anticapitalism in antislavery. They talked about Red Republicans and Black Republicans. They thought the way the antislavery people fundamentally challenged property was dangerous, that it cracked the egg.**

The abolitionists always insisted they were not attacking property. They were attacking property in man as an illegitimate thing. Of course, others picked this up, and radical laborites called themselves the new abolitionists later on. When Thaddeus Stevens was proposing confiscating land in the South, there were Northern Republicans who said, “Wait a minute! The Irish are going to start talking about confiscating factories.” Even then they said, slavery was *different*, it was not legitimate property.

Let’s put it this way: after the Civil War, the free-labor vision becomes the essence of a radical labor critique of the Industrial Revolution.

**Yet it also becomes the seed of right-wing laissez-faire . . .**

Yes, free labor cracks up on class lines. The labor movement in the twentieth century — it’s not just rhetoric when they said, “We’re the new abolitionists.” Because the free-labor ideal was now under assault.

What we should be talking about is maybe the old [Socialist Party](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/debs-socialism-race-du-bois-socialist-party-black-liberation/), before World War I, Debsian socialism. Because what they had, which the abolitionists didn’t quite have, was an umbrella under which all sorts of groups could find a common ground, whether it’s birth control advocates, labor activists, anti-monopolists, and socialists, people like Debs who had a vision of socialism.

The idea of socialism they had was kind of a vague one, and of course the great historical fallacy is to view it back through the lens of World War I and the Russian Revolution. But before that, this was a large umbrella radical movement, with [all sorts of people](http://spartacus-educational.com/USAwaylandJ.htm) with very specific aims who could get together.

Today one of our problems is we have a lot of movements going on and they’re sympathetic to one another but they don’t seem to connect with one another. Whether it’s antiracist movements, gay movements, environmentalist — they all seem kind of fragmented. Whereas the Socialist Party, they all came together. You had Emma Goldman in there, you had Debs, you had municipal reformers, Jane Addams, progressives — it was part of the political dynamic of the country.

Even though in 1912 Debs got his million votes — 6 percent, that’s not a hell of a lot — but we’d take it now. But I think that’s a different model than the abolitionist model.

**Maybe part of the reason they were able to have this unity with all these different causes was that it was a *socialist* party, which meant that even though their ideas were vague, what gave form to them was this idea of a different kind of society. People could invest their hopes in that.**

**Whereas today, with all the various struggles, we don’t have that, there’s no clear alternative.**

Well, maybe we need a new word. Socialism unfortunately has gotten a bad name in this country.

**It’s pretty popular with our generation, if you believe polls.**

Good! If people are willing to talk about socialism, I think that’s great.

\* From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Eric Foner** (born February 7, 1943) is an American [historian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historian). On the faculty of the Department of History at [Columbia University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbia_University) since 1982, he writes extensively on political history, the history of freedom, the early [history of the Republican Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_United_States_Republican_Party), [African American](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_American) biography, [Reconstruction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reconstruction_era_of_the_United_States), and [historiography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historiography). Foner is the leading contemporary historian of the post-[Civil War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War) [Reconstruction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reconstruction_era_of_the_United_States) period, having published *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988), winner of many prizes for history writing, and more than 10 other books on the topic. His free online courses on "The Civil War and Reconstruction," published in 2014, are available from Columbia University on ColumbiaX.

In 2011 Foner's [*The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fiery_Trial%3A_Abraham_Lincoln_and_American_Slavery) (2010) won the [Pulitzer Prize for History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulitzer_Prize_for_History), [Lincoln Prize](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_Prize), and the [Bancroft Prize](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bancroft_Prize). Foner also won the Bancroft in 1989 for his book *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*. In 2000, he was elected president of the [American Historical Association](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Historical_Association).

