

At the end of the Civil War, the North emerged victorious and the South was in shambles. Following this came a period of Reconstruction, in which the North attempted to rebuild the South. However, Reconstruction failed to deliver economic independence to freed people. I argue that this was because the objective was never to deliver economic independence to freed people in the first place. Instead, the North had always kept their eye on the “Free-Soil Dream” - the ideal economic position. The institution of slavery would continue to keep black people toiling for the Southern economy, which the North could benefit from by providing capital or using products like cotton in industrial manufacturing (lecture). On the other hand, slavery was to keep inside the bounds of its territory, and not to domineer over the North economically and politically. In the American history of slavery, there was the pendulum of society; on one side was “radical tyranny”: a massive slave state that brutally beat out value from their slaves. On the other was “radical freedom”: slaves as freed people, completely independent and autonomous. Neither extreme was economically beneficial to the North, the Free-Soil Dream was somewhere in the middle. The Civil War and Reconstruction demonstrate the North attempting to push the pendulum of society closer to the Free-Soil Dream, and a calculus of economic and political advantage drove its policy. Because the North had pushed too far towards radical freedom in the Civil War, it began to push back, instituting a system of economic dependence on freed people to make them conform more with Free-Soil Dream.

Pre-Civil War, the North attempted to institute the Free-Soil Ideology. It argued that slavery should continue, but that it should not expand, because it would threaten Northern economic and political power. However, the South was not willing to uphold their end of this perfect compromise; through repeated aggression, the South continued to push its borders into new territory. This threatened already established legislation like the Missouri Compromise that

embodied the Free-Soil Ideology. With the occupation of new land came new political power, which bolstered slaveowners' tremendous control over the Supreme Court, Congress, and the Presidency, among other governmental positions (lecture). The passing of the Fugitive Slave Act required the North to direct their dollars and actions towards perpetuating the expansion of the very system that threatened their economic and political power (lecture). These actions by the South represent a pushing of the pendulum towards the end of radical tyranny; the slave state was expanding and strengthening. After many failed attempts to push the societal pendulum away from radical tyranny through legislative means and continued Southern aggression, the North initiated the Civil War to push back on the pendulum.

It was a fight for Northern economic and political strength; the North wanted both the South as an economic powerhouse to do business with and to have strong political representation (du Bois). Because the South had pushed the pendulum so far towards radical tyranny, the North could only push towards radical freedom to get closer to the Free-Soil Ideology. In the process of fighting against the South, the North found it advantageous to leverage fugitive slaves (du Bois). The fugitive slaves could do labor for Northern troops and produce crops to sell to the Northern economy; meanwhile, their absence in the South weakened the Confederacy. As the economically advantageous nature of slaves in fighting against the South became fully realized, the North became more abolitionist (du Bois & lecture). In the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln freed the slaves in strategic areas that would benefit the North in the Civil War. The North did not free slaves out of some moral reconciliation, but instead out of an economic calculus that concluded the North needed to push the societal pendulum towards radical freedom. Even after the Civil War ended, radical Republicans continued to urge in that direction, passing three monumental amendments and placing troops in the South to enforce them (lecture). This

was a continuing fight to burn the last embers of the “slaveocracy” that had caused the North so much trouble. Hence, from the Civil War to the early days of Reconstruction, the North was economically and politically motivated to push the societal pendulum towards radical freedom.

In the process of pushing the pendulum away from radical tyranny, the North had swung too much past the Free-Soil Ideology. Even during the Civil War, there were internal rumblings: white soldiers and military laborers often refused to work with fugitive slaves (du Bois). Lower-class Northerners anticipated economic struggle with the newly freed people (lecture). In their eyes, the North had pushed much too far towards radical freedom: they had not only stopped the slave state from expanding but dismantled it. In the process, the Free-Soil Ideology, arguing for the slave state to neither expand nor shrink, withered. However, the Free-Soil Dream, which argued for the continuation of the South as a strong economic partner, persisted. Now that the North had regained their political power, the goal of the North shifted from moving the societal pendulum towards radical freedom to moving back towards the Free-Soil dream – in the direction of radical tyranny.

The North had gotten a taste of the valuable labor freed people could provide during the Civil War and expected it to continue postbellum. The North believed that freed people would remain intensely productive and happy to work for a larger economic system if they were no longer formally slaves. On the other hand, freed people viewed their work during the Civil War as a stepping stone towards greater freedom. During the Civil War, fugitive slaves labored hard for the North, the side that was supposed to liberate more of their people from the slavery of the South. However, it was a bleak and far-from-ideal condition to labor in: families were routinely separated, in part because black men were frequently conscripted (Jones). When the Civil War ended, freed people sought to work not for any large economic system but themselves – their

family and their kin. This directly contradicted with the North's vision for their role in postbellum society: that freed people would continue to labor slavishly, just not under the formal institution of slavery. This clash drove the North to pressure freed people into a system of economic dependence. Sharecropping was used as a 'compromise': freed people would be allotted some land and loaned tools, technically working alongside their kin but still for a plantation owner. Soon, though, most freed people would fall victim to debt, forever paying off on high-interest rates and poor crop yields (lecture). They had become economically dependent, laboring for the very people that had been their slaveholders a decade ago. This was, logically, what the North had been pursuing all along: moving in whichever direction would lead them closer to the Free-Soil Dream. Although the sharecropping system was a tremendous decrease in economic production from slavery, it was much more advantageous to the North than complete radical freedom. Economic dependence would keep the freed people directly serving the economy and the large corporations. Economic independence would let freed people truly serve and work for themselves, an unacceptable proposition.

Thus, freed people were forced along an arc from radical tyranny in slavery, to radical freedom in early Reconstruction, to the Free-Soil Dream in later Reconstruction. The Civil War improved the lives of black people, but only to the extent that they would continue working under a labor system reminiscent of slavery. In the end, it was never really about slaves and freed people, but instead the North's economic motivations. The North entered the Civil War seeking to destroy and dismantle any remnants of the slaveocracy that had pushed the societal pendulum so far away from the Free-Soil Dream. The North approached Reconstruction, on the other hand, seeking to move back towards an economically advantageous but less free economic position.

Thus, Reconstruction was a closing of the gap, sealing off what real economic freedom black people may have gotten during the Civil War and the years directly following it.