

Andre Ye

Dr. Reagan

TS History

3 December 2020

This week, readings included excerpts from *Black Reconstruction* by W.E. Burghardt Du Bois and the Emancipation Proclamation, released by Abraham Lincoln.

In *Black Reconstruction*, W.E. Burghardt Du Bois seeks to explain a seeming contradiction in which black slaves continuously escaped to the North when they were not treated well or often worse. Du Bois writes that black slaves objected not to work itself but to the *conditions* of work. Thus, as the North realized this, the black fugitive went from a second thought in the war to valuable labor and leverage over the South. This made fugitive slaves valuable; not only could they provide capital, labor, and information to the North, their absence in the South weakened its economic prowess and drove divisions between poor whites and wealthy slaveholders. Hence, the war, which was not initially so, centered around slavery, highlighting the agency and importance of slaves in determining the war's tone and outcome.

In the Emancipation Proclamation, President Lincoln declared that all slaves would be free in certain states and parts of states, which excluded border states. The executive government of the United States would recognize and enforce this freedom, militarily, if necessary. Furthermore, Lincoln normalizes the role of former slaves in society, recommending they work hard for reasonable wages and to fulfill military positions. This declaration was, Lincoln asserts, an act of justice warranted by the Constitution and God himself.

In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois characterizes the North's transition from against to for the abolishment of slavery as being primarily economic, instead of being driven by morality. Initially, Du Bois asserts, the North was driven primarily by the Free-Soil argument and were not willing to accept the prospect of freed slaves nor Southern slave plantations increasing competition. The North, so motivated by maintaining markets and trade, in fact were willing to uphold slavery for these economic reassurances¹. However, as the wartime economic usefulness of slaves was realized – slaves could provide labor and fight when white soldiers weren't willing to – the North eventually became decidedly pro-abolition². Although Du Bois makes it clear the gradual and tentative nature of this shift towards becoming abolitionist, he does not address sufficiently what happened of the initial economic reasons the North was *not* abolitionist. Did the North abandon its initial economic interests? If slavery was an institution so deeply engrained and valuable to the generation of wealth in the American economy, why would the North dismantle it? This series of questions need to be more deeply explored as an expansion of Du Bois's work to paint a more complete picture. I argue that one important component towards reframing his argument was that the South, in their overbroad actions and aggressions, eliminated the possibilities of these economic concerns from ever becoming resolved. The North's position on slavery was two-fold; it benefitted from slavery in that it provided a solid market for the consumption of industrial goods and for investment of capital.³ On the other hand, it strove to limit the expansion of slavery because of economic risk of competition.⁴ As the South became increasingly aggressive in the expansion of slavery, largely because of the land-

¹ W.E. Burghardt du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Towards the History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 56.

² Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 83.

³ Michael Reagan. "A Slave Society: Economics and Culture of American Slavery." TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington. November 19, 2020.

⁴ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 56.

consuming nature of cotton slavery,⁵ the one solution both the South and the North could agree on – limited expansion but upholding of slavery – deteriorated. Du Bois hints at this: if only the South had been more careful in negotiations with the North, he asserts, a compromise that solidified slavery in place for generations would have been made.⁶ The Free-Soiler argument was increasingly becoming soiled as the South refused to respect land boundaries, like the Missouri Compromise.⁷ In another instance, the North opposed the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which required Northern states to return fugitive states, because it was perceived to be an encroachment on their agency.⁸ Behind this feeling of invasion, however, lied an economic premise; the North would not dole out resources to support the expansion of the system they wanted neither to expand nor to cease. If slavery were let to expand, future economic liabilities in the form of a legislature dominated by slave-owning states would continue to berate the North. Hence, only two remaining options remained: to support or fight against the expansion of slavery, and the former was too economically disadvantageous. Thus, the North pursued abolition as the lesser of two economic costs. In the process, the North, forced by the South to take a diametrically opposing stance, alienated many lower-class Northern whites, which would have suffered from both the expansion and abolishment of slavery.⁹ This group held onto the Free-Soil argument – a position that the South had rendered impossible to take. Hence, racial hostilities between blacks and whites, even in the North, ran rampant. In this sense, the South’s aggression in pushing

⁵ Michael Reagan. “A Slave Society: Economics and Culture of American Slavery.” TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington. November 19, 2020.

⁶ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 56.

⁷ Michael Reagan. “Civil War: Politics and Control of the State.” TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington. December 3, 2020.

⁸ Michael Reagan. “Civil War: Politics and Control of the State.” TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington. December 3, 2020.

⁹ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 80.

slavery forced the North in opposition to slavery but set the stage for racial conflicts decades after the abolition of slavery.