

## *History in Focus*

### 9. Black Reconstruction

Wednesday, December 7, 2022

#### **W.E.B. Du Bois speaking to the Southern California Chapter of the Peace Crusade in 1953**

*What is life, but the attempt of human beings to be happy and contented in a world, which with all its ill, has a mass of sun and waters, of trees and flowers, of beauty and love? To realize this at its highest, we need food, clothes, and shelter. We need health of body and balance of mind. We want to know what this world is, how its wonderful laws act, who its peoples are, and how they think and act, and how what they have done in years and ages past may guide us today. We want to see, realize, and conceive beauty in form and line and color. We want to know our own souls and the myriad sided souls of others. And then to imagine what might be if what is should grow to what we wish.*

#### **Daniel Story**

That unique and powerful voice is none other than W. E. B. Du Bois, speaking in 1953 to the Southern California Chapter of the Peace Crusade. Du Bois as scholar, public intellectual, and social and political activist was—indeed continues to be—a towering figure in American experience. Over a life and career that spanned nearly a century from the late 1860s into the 1960s, Du Bois was known for his profound and beautiful book *The Souls of Black Folk*, his work with the NAACP, voluminous and groundbreaking sociological and historical studies, among many other contributions and achievements. In fact, it would be hard to overstate just how profound, insightful, and generous was Du Bois's life and is his legacy. In 1935, Du Bois published what many have since deemed his magnum opus: a history titled *Black Reconstruction in America*. In it, he tackled the subject of the American Civil War and, especially, the decade or so that followed, a period known as Reconstruction, during which, for a time, it seemed the South, and the United States as a whole, might be remade as a radically more equitable society. What was achieved during Reconstruction and by whom, and why these efforts ultimately failed, is what concerns Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction*. Likewise, correcting the racist histories of Reconstruction that were prevalent in both popular and academic circles in his day. *Black Reconstruction* is a widely respected, even celebrated book today, but many of its early readers were dismissive, perhaps none more than the academic historians who Du Bois was very justifiably calling out. The *American Historical Review*, for its part, ignored the book entirely. No review. Well, until now. Almost a century later, the AHR will publish a review of *Black Reconstruction* in the December 2022 issue, penned by Yale historian

Elizabeth Hinton. For the next few minutes, Elizabeth will serve as our guide, with the voices of other scholars and activists popping up along the way as we consider the multifaceted impacts of this work of Du Bois. I'm Daniel Story, and you're listening to *History in Focus*, a podcast by the *American Historical Review*. This is episode 9, "Black Reconstruction."

### **Elizabeth Hinton**

Okay, hi, I'm Elizabeth Hinton. I'm a Professor of History, African American Studies, and Law at Yale University and Yale Law School and author of *From The War on Poverty to The War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* and *America on Fire: the Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellions Since the 1960s*. Mark Bradley approached me in fall 2021 about the lost books review series that the AHR was doing and asked if I would be interested in doing the kind of kickoff review on *Black Reconstruction*. So this is like one of those emails that you get that I'm completely like, "Oh my god, how am I going to do this?" How do you review the greatest history book ever written? So I was completely flummoxed and overwhelmed. I assigned the book in my survey course, African American History from the Civil War to the Present. You know, I've engaged with it a lot and never thought I would be in this position. You know, I was frankly like, surprised, not surprised. It [was] something that I knew, right, that the AHR didn't review it. But I didn't expect to be approached about writing a review. But, of course, I was stymied, in a way, but I couldn't say no.

W.E.B. Du Bois is this really unique and special mind. I think he's one of, if not the only academic that is claimed as the father or the pioneer of many different fields; sociology and history both claim him. Du Bois broke many barriers within the academy, you know, he was the first Black person to receive their PhD in History from Harvard, was the first to present at the American Historical Association Conference, the first to publish in the AHR. And from the late 19th century, as he was writing his dissertation, which was a history of the slave trade laws, and then conducted this massive ethnographic and survey based study of Black Philadelphia in *The Philadelphia Negro*, which was very sociological. So by the early 20th century, he had already published these monumental works, both in History and Sociology. 1903's *Souls of Black Folk* really kind of put him on the map in a lot of ways. And of course, during this time, Du Bois is active in Civil Rights causes, he's beginning to engage in critique and debates with Booker T. Washington. But beginning with *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois starts articulating an important counterview or counternarrative to the dominant historiography of Reconstruction, which, at the time, had portrayed Reconstruction as a kind of low point in US history, a period of Black misrule, a period of corruption and graft. And Du Bois really was attempting to force not only historians but also the wider public to recognize the accomplishments of Reconstruction, which he saw as key to combating Jim Crow and continued economic

exploitation, racial segregation, and disenfranchisement. This radical reinterpretation of Reconstruction became, really, I think central to Du Bois's thought and historical work through the first three decades of the twentieth century.

You know, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, he centers the accomplishments of the Freedmen's Bureau in an attempt to say, you know, look, like this is actually a really amazing moment when, for a decade, the federal government was really committed to addressing racial inequality and to improving the social condition of poor people in the Southern states. And this is something that should not be scorned upon but something that should be celebrated. He expands upon his reframing of the Freedmen's Bureau in an address to the AHA in 1909 at the meeting in New York, an opportunity that opened for him because his advisor, Albert Bushnell Hart at Harvard, was the president of the AHA and wanted his star student to have a platform to speak. And Du Bois gave this really well received address called "Reconstruction and Its Benefits," which kind of expanded on his discussion of the Freedmen's Bureau to look at Black elected officials, to look at the role of Black soldiers, and, again, trying to push the historiography forward, recognizing the impact of the historiography on the conditions of Jim Crow in the early 20th century. Du Bois wrote a few other essays shortly after he became editor of the NAACP's organ, *The Crisis*. He wrote more on Reconstruction from that position—a chapter on Reconstruction in 1924's *Gift of Black Folk*. But by the 1930s, right in the context of labor uprisings and the Great Depression and kind of a new moment when it seemed like interracial mobilization and coalition building seem possible, Du Bois was motivated to tell the story. And also, you know, because in the 20s, early-30s the kind of racist pseudo histories of Reconstruction had gripped the public imagination, especially Claude Bowers' 1929 book *The Tragic Era*, which essentially argued that enslaved people were sad upon emancipation and, you know, essentially put forward the D. W. Griffith/Dunning School view of Reconstruction. And I think many Black activists because of the success of *The Tragic Era*—it was a best seller, it was chosen as a literary guild selection, and really was the most widely read book on Reconstruction for generations—urged Du Bois to kind of take the work that he had been building on Reconstruction through the twentieth century to write the book that he had intended to or imagined in his mind. So it just came together at this really crucial moment for him. And although he wrote the book, I think, relatively fast (I think in a period of three or four years; he received an advanced contract and some fellowship money to do research), the ideas had been percolating for some time and just kind of explode on the page in this nearly 900-page doorstopper of a book that must be his magnum opus in the sense that its contributions to Marxist political philosophy, to US history, are monumental. Even though it wasn't fully appreciated in its time, it forever changed our interpretation of Reconstruction and

the kinds of frameworks through which we understand racism, classism, and exploitation in US history.

### **Eric Foner**

I'm Eric Foner. I'm a retired professor of American History at Columbia University. Most of my scholarly life and writings have been devoted to the era of Reconstruction, and therefore, Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* has played a very important part in my intellectual development. I should add that I met Du Bois when I was in high school. He was a friend of my parents. He was very old, in his 90s, in 1960 I think it must have been because my family, my brother, myself, my two parents, visited him in his house that he was living in in Brooklyn, and my brother and I had come from picketing Woolworths, you know, five and dime stores in New York, in sympathy with the sit-ins, which were going on in Woolworths in the South. I encountered the book for the first time in a seminar at Columbia, where I was an undergraduate, taught by a great teacher, James Shenton, who made us read the whole thing, seven or eight-hundred pages. Some of the key insights of Du Bois have been very important in my own way of thinking about the Civil War / Reconstruction Era: number one, that African Americans, freed slaves, were the key actors, so to speak, in trying to set the national agenda in Reconstruction and demanding that democracy be made, to use a modern phrase, colorblind, and that the land issue, which many historians previously had not really emphasized very much, was critical to the whole question of the transition from slavery to freedom. *Black Reconstruction* is a book which still speaks to our present moment. It's about an effort to create an interracial democracy in this country, and the violent acts that overthrew that experiment by people who could not accept a democratic verdict in elections and could not accept African Americans as equal members of our society here.

### **Elizabeth Hinton**

*Black Reconstruction* was actually widely reviewed; it's not like it was ignored when it was released. It was reviewed in the popular press. The NAACP had a campaign to promote the book among its membership. And its reviews in major newspapers, the *New York Herald*, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, I could go on, were positive. In the popular press, the book was recognized as a significant achievement, and some reviewers acknowledged the fact that the lies about Reconstruction that had been told could never really be seen the same or viewed the same in the aftermath of this book. What's interesting is that the academic reviews of the book in, you know, a dozen or so journals were much more critical than the popular press and certainly the Black press. The *Journal of American History* and historian Avery Craven's review in the landmark sociology journal essentially said that it wasn't history, that it was all Du Bois's opinion, that it reflected Du Bois's bitterness—the word "bitter" or "bitterness" appears very

frequently in these academic reviews—that it's full of generalizations, that Du Bois was guilty of the, kind of, same bias and interpretations as the historians, like Dunning and Burgess, who he critiqued in *Black Reconstruction*. And, of course, the *American Historical Review* did not review the book at all, despite the fact that the journal had previewed some of its arguments twenty-five years prior in “Reconstruction and Its Benefits,” which was the article version of Du Bois's remarks at the annual meeting.

### **Daniel Story**

Do we know of any of the circumstances around the decision by the AHR to not review it at all? Or can you surmise anything from what you've looked at?

### **Elizabeth Hinton**

I can't. You know, I know that that people have been through the AHR archive, so I wonder. But yeah, I can't. The AHR didn't review Claude Bowers' book either. So I just think it was, it's just that the AHR didn't think it was real history and that it was a, you know, quote, unquote, "objective history" and therefore not worthy of treatment in the journal.

### **Chad Williams**

My name is Chad Williams. I'm the Samuel J. and Augusta Spector Professor of History and African and African American Studies at Brandeis University. I specialize in modern US and African American history with particular focus on African Americans in the World War I era. I first encountered *Black Reconstruction* as an undergraduate writing my senior thesis on Reconstruction and Black political leadership and Reconstruction in Louisiana. I subsequently encountered *Black Reconstruction* again in my first year in graduate school, and I read it with a different eye, a different sensibility. And reading that book, in the context of my training as a historian, really fundamentally shaped my approach to US history, to African American history, and my larger sense of vocation as a Black historian. So the the passage that I'm going to read is from the opening of *Black Reconstruction* titled "To the Reader": "It would be only fair to the reader to say, frankly in advance, that the attitude of any person toward the story will be distinctly influenced by his theories of the Negro race. If he believes that the Negro in America, and in general, is an average, an ordinary human being, who under given environment develops like other human beings, then you will read the story and judge it by the facts adduced. If, however, he regards the Negro as a distinctly inferior creation, who can never successfully take part in modern civilization and whose emancipation and enfranchisement were gestures against nature, then you will need something more than the sort of facts that I've set down. But this latter person I am not trying to convince. I'm simply pointing out these two points of view, so obvious to Americans, and then, without further ado, I'm assuming the

truth of the first. In fine, I'm going to tell the story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will, from the first, seriously curtail my audience." This is how Du Bois opens *Black Reconstruction*, with a message to the reader. He very clearly lays out the stakes but also the position from which he's writing, from a position that centers the humanity of Black people. And recognizing that in the context in which he's finishing it, in 1934, that the humanity of Black people, according to some in the United States, and in the world, was still very much in question. So he understood that his book was going to be received in such a way that his arguments, his findings, would be questioned. But he wasn't going to let that deter him. By centering the humanity of Black people, by taking for granted that Black people, as he says, you know, were fully sentient human beings, he was able to tell a story that exposed the complexities and full drama of Reconstruction in a way that would have a lasting impact. *Black Reconstruction* is a fearless book. Du Bois is writing against the grain of dominant White historiography, but also dominant ideas of race and ideas about the humanity and the capabilities of Black people to shape history. Du Bois also wrote an incredibly prophetic book: his views on, certainly, Reconstruction, Civil War, the aftermath of Reconstruction, are widely accepted today. But also, the idea of Black people as central agents of American history is, I think, also taken for granted today and widely accepted. But I think more than anything else, *Black Reconstruction* is a deeply human book. It centers the humanity of Black people, and that's something that I take very seriously as a historian and I think all historians have something to learn from.

### **Elizabeth Hinton**

You know, there's so many different threads that I could have taken in the review, and just thinking about what are the important elements of *Black Reconstruction* to bring out in this moment. And I think the book's contributions are many. But Du Bois's theory of the general strike as a kind of theory of Black history, and his idea of abolition democracy as a kind of theory of US history, I thought were the, kind of, two key ones. In Du Bois's theory of the general strike—again, from that radical proposition that Black people are human and from a radical proposition within the historiography, which did not see Black people as central actors in world events—Du Bois's, part of his radical reinterpretation, or reframing of the period, places Black workers and their allies at the center and argues that, you know, slavery itself, enslavement, constituted a kind of slow, stubborn mutiny of enslaved people, as Du Bois says, over centuries. And that is, you know, reflected in the way that enslaved people work, which is to not work productively but to work enough, to not work well, as Du Bois said. So in the way that they labored, Black people were consistently challenging the means of production in order to eventually seize it and liberate themselves. And Du Bois argues that the moment of the Civil War, the destabilization of Southern society, and then, of course, the arrival of Union troops on

plantations created that opportunity to fully disrupt the means of production and take ownership over oneself. And this is the general strike. When the Union army arrived, Black workers stopped working on plantations and transferred their labor power to the Union army, which, you know, that, in and of itself, meant the end of Antebellum slavery. And Du Bois estimated that 300,000 Black workers went with the Union Army, and then another 200,000 were actually enlisted as Union soldiers. So this half a million group of kind of active, mostly formerly-enslaved people involved in the general strike force the issue of abolition and the course of the Civil War. I mean, in some ways, Du Bois presents the Civil War, or encourages us to think about the Civil War, as a massive slave revolt. The theory of the general strike gets critiqued the most as an overstatement, that Du Bois kind of takes it too far and puts too much weight on the role of Black workers in the Civil War. But I think the problem with the general strike is that Du Bois really only is dealing with agricultural labor. He's not dealing with sexual and reproductive labor, or domestic labor really, which completely removes, in a lot of ways (and of course, Black women were agricultural laborers as well), but removes a really, kind of, key part of the plantation labor economy and Black women's work. I think the most interesting critiques of Du Bois and the general strike come from Black feminist scholars—Thavolia Glymph, Saidiya Hartman, Angela Davis, and many, many others—to say that Black women's expression of ownership over their reproductive freedom was actually really key to contesting the means of production during slavery (and that is the very reproduction of the labor force) but also during the war in a way that Du Bois, you know, does not appreciate. I, to be honest, have very little criticism of the book. I don't know, maybe that, you know, is just my blinders on, my love of Du Bois and the book. But I think that is the point that Du Bois should be held accountable for, and I think that that he has. And so I wanted to highlight that.

### **Sue Mobley**

Let's see. I am Sue Mobley. I'm a New Orleans-based organizer, advocate, urbanist, and I am Director of Research for Monument Lab. I think my first introduction to *Black Reconstruction* was in high school—one of those books that outside of my very weird, tiny high school in New York it's, like, not common reading. And for years there would be like the occasional person that I would meet who would read it, or who had read it, or it would come up in conversation. And then, like, maybe ten years ago, I started, like, handing it to people, or having conversations where I'd be like, "Have you read *Black Reconstruction*? You should do that." And in organizing spaces, and in workspaces, and certainly in whatever post-Katrina New Orleans spaces being like, "You might want to go check this one out." And then, suddenly, over the past few years, it went from being something that I was getting eyerolled at by students at Tulane, who were like, "I don't want to read that chapter, that's stupid," and then they'd come back and be like, "Maybe it wasn't stupid," to being something where, like, there are reading

groups where, like, it's in common parlance in leftist organizing circles, and really seeing this sort of resurgence of interests. And, I think, the insertion of maybe the right book, at the right moment, to understand our current political climate, which is, in some ways, wonderful, because certainly the analysis is needed, and, in some ways, horrible, because we are in a political climate where this is the analysis that's needed. So we organized a reading group, a sort of organic series of conversations and one-offs on Twitter amongst a group of people who are loosely South Louisiana-affiliated, loosely left-organizing-affiliated. And it started as a joke. You know, we would see something happening in the news and be like, "Did you read *Black Reconstruction* yet?" Or somebody would say, "I don't understand why these people are threatening electoral violence" or "Why they can't organize across racial lines," all of the sort of ills that *Black Reconstruction* gets at the root of. And one of us would respond, "Did you read *Black Reconstruction* yet?" And so Ryan Lee proposed a hashtag of "Did you read *Black Reconstruction* yet"—#DYRBRY. And Megan Romer, who was in Lafayette at that point and is now in New York, had run book clubs on Twitter before, and she was like, "The thing that you can do with a hashtag is that you can have a synchronous/asynchronous book club. Here's how you run it. Sue, will you help me go get people signed up?" And I was like, "Of course, you are a great organizer, so you have the spreadsheet ready to go. And yes, let's go get people." And so we ended up with sort of that group of folks and a larger group of folks from across the country who once a week would get together. And each chapter had a chapter leader. Your job was to come up with the four, sort of, broad questions that would start us off, and then everybody responds to one another, as well as to the main question. And so it's there under the hashtag. You can still go look and find all of the answers and all of the threads, which is lovely. And it also happens real time so that you are in conversation with each other. And then someone who wasn't there that Sunday evening can come in a couple days later and be like, "Oh, I have something to say!" And the conversation starts again. And it was a really great group of people. Folks who are new to thinking about American history, folks who are new to organizing, folks who are, like, deeply embedded in various places in academia. Those aren't conversations that often happen with that much generosity and trust. And it was wonderful. It was the best part of my week for as many weeks as there were chapters and then some, because we missed a couple (there were holidays). Afrosocialists and Socialists of Color Caucus had a reading group. They were on Zoom, and I heard reports from that one, that it was very good. I didn't attend that one. CJ Hunt's group used the Twitter Live rooms. It seemed like each of those spaces had similar dynamics around the sense of welcome, the sense of questioning, and the sense of, like, being able to come at this huge and seminal work from one's own perspective in a way that was safe. Ours was the best, though, the best.

## Elizabeth Hinton

So abolition democracy—it's an ideal, right? But it's also this theory of US history, at least the way that I interpret it, that US history is about the struggle for full economic emancipation and full political representation and enfranchisement. And, you know, Du Bois argues that the general strike was not just about ending slavery but was about economic enfranchisement and political representation. And together with poor White southerners and Northern allies, the abolition democracy vision of government was able to take hold—establishing public schools for people across the South, diversifying political representation, providing social goods and resources for poor people, providing medical care for people; a really tremendous moment that was undone by racism and the kind of continued, perhaps accelerated, capitalist exploitation. So understanding the role of oppressed and disenfranchised people in historical progress, and in moving history through the theory of the general strike coupled with the idea of abolition democracy as the ultimate goal for not only the United States but the world in terms of creating a humane and equitable set of social conditions for people to live under as we consider how to create a more just and equitable society. Reconstruction, both its successes and its failures and shortcomings, offer a guide, and that's why the book, too, is so key and important.

In order to make the case for abolition democracy, Du Bois has to mythbust; he has to shatter all of these gross notions about Reconstruction and also about Black leadership during Reconstruction. Because the argument is, you know, essentially, a group of people who were unfit to rule ruled during Reconstruction, and that's why it was a complete disaster. Therefore, Jim Crow was justified, and that actually reflects the kind of natural order of racial hierarchies. And Du Bois really has to then come in and point out the errors of this argument in order to show that abolition democracy is a worthy goal. So Du Bois spends a lot of time documenting the kind of struggles and the successes of Black elected officials during Reconstruction to say, "No." When we think about the way that Black elected officials during Reconstruction are portrayed, you know, we think about that scene in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* when they're in the Senate chamber, and Black senators are, like, eating chicken. They have, like, their bare feet on the desks. They're leering at White women in the gallery. And Du Bois says, no; these were, like, noble men, they were great men. A lot of them came from abject poverty, had been enslaved, and we're trying to use American political institutions in order to create a better society, a more equitable society, and in order to help achieve justice for people who have been enslaved. And so he smashes that idea that Black elected officials were ignorant or buffoons. And then he also takes on the idea that Reconstruction was this like moment of horrible debt and corruption and greed, and all of that. And, one, he makes the argument, like, everyone was corrupt; to blame the corruption on Black leaders is completely arbitrary. He uses the state of

Virginia, which was a state that never came under a majority Black rule and that incurred an enormous amount of debt—I think 40-some million dollars in debt—to say debt during Reconstruction is not about Black rule; it's about the period, and it's about also, like, how do you rebuild society after it's been completely transformed after civil war and, also, in a context where there's graft and corruption and money moving hands across the United States. The big focus is, like, really looking at the evidence to challenge the kind of dominant historical arguments against the period.

I made the decision not to, to not extensively engage with the "Propaganda of History" chapter, which is the final chapter, partly because I feel like that's the part of *Black Reconstruction* that most people have read. But that's where Du Bois is, like, in a boxing match with the secondary literature, and he's, like, going line-by-line and showing the falsehoods and how this history lends itself to the propaganda of racism.

### **Kendra Field**

I'm Kendra Field, and I'm a Professor of History at Tufts University and Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy. I'm also the Project Historian for the Du Bois Freedom Center, which is a public history project, which will be the first museum and living memorial dedicated to Du Bois in North America. I chose a couple of passages from the last chapter, "The Propaganda of History": "Three-fourths of the testimony against the Negro and Reconstruction is on the unsupported evidence of men who hated and despised Negroes and regarded it as loyalty to blood, patriotism to country, and filial tribute to the fathers to lie, steal, or kill in order to discredit these Black folk. This may be a natural result when a people have been humbled and impoverished and degraded in their own life. But what is inconceivable is that another generation and another group should regard this testimony as scientific truth when it is contradicted by logic and by fact. I write then in a field devastated by passion and belief. Naturally, as a Negro, I cannot do this writing without believing in the essential humanity of Negroes and their ability to be educated to do the work of the modern world, to take their place as equal citizens with others. I cannot, for a moment, subscribe to that bizarre doctrine of race that makes most men inferior to the few. But, too, as a student of science, I want to be fair, objective, and judicial, to let no searing of the memory by intolerable insult and cruelty make me fail to sympathize with human frailties and contradiction in the eternal paradox of good and evil. But armed and warned by all this, and fortified by long study of the facts, I stand at the end of this writing, literally aghast at what American historians have done to this field." He's writing about the historiography of *Black Reconstruction* conceivably in this chapter. But he's also saying so much about what African American historians and historians of the diaspora are up against—the kind of marriage of racism and the myth of objectivity, which

shaped so much the founding of the historical profession; ideas about history as a science, which were emerging during the same period that Du Bois was kind of developing his ideas about the material that would become *Black Reconstruction*. All of this, I think, is still with us today. It's just so far ahead of its time. It's really not until the late Civil Rights Era through the present that that you see a widespread questioning of the idea of objectivity.

### **Elizabeth Hinton**

*Black Reconstruction* was way ahead of its time. I think that Du Bois's arguments didn't really begin to take hold within mainstream historiography until the 60s, until the Civil Rights Movement, until the Second Reconstruction, right, when the ideas of abolition democracy returned to the fore. And that period, of course, also coincides with the emergence of Black Studies as a discipline. And I think the idea of the general strike and the premise that Black people, and people of color, and oppressed people, right, are the kind of central movers of history, not the men in suits who make the decisions or pass the capital back and forth, is central to African American Studies, ethnic studies, and radical history in general. In that sense, one wonders where we would be as a field without the kind of guidance, the methods, and the framing that Du Bois provides us to consider the history of exploitation and oppression in US history.

### **Elizabeth Hinton (reading from here review of *Black Reconstruction*)**

Perhaps better than any other work, before or since, *Black Reconstruction* captures the tragedy of US history. Du Bois sees abolition as an inevitable development that resolves the quote, "paradox of a democracy founded on slavery." What came after was a disaster with global implications that could have been avoided. Du Bois writes, "To have given each one of the million Negro free families a 40-acre freehold would have made a basis of real democracy in the United States that might have easily transformed the modern world." Unquote. In the absence of land and political power in the hands of workers, quote, "A philosophy will prevail teaching that the submergence of the mass is inevitable and is on the whole best not only for them but for the ruling classes." For Du Bois, redistribution of wealth and political power was not just a socio-economic issue but a spiritual and a moral one. When the radical experiment of abolition democracy collapsed, Du Bois writes, "God wept, but that mattered little to an unbelieving age. What mattered most was that the world wept, and is still weeping and blind with tears and blood." And so the United States stands in the 21st century. If America is to overcome racism and inequality, Du Bois argues, the Reconstruction period offers our best guide. The events of 2020 forced Americans to confront the lies that trail the conventional narrative. We are still asking the questions Du Bois raised of the period that called the very notion of American democracy into question. Will there be another mass mobilization to force

the nation to embrace the principles of abolition democracy championed initially by enslaved people? Is there a Third Reconstruction on the horizon, as scholars and activists have suggested in recent years, that will fulfill, finally, the incomplete aims of emancipation? Or will history repeats itself? With authoritarianism rising around the world, and with the interpretation of US history advanced by Du Bois and many others increasingly under attack, this problem remains, nearly a century later, as Du Bois called it, "the last great battle of the West."

### **Elizabeth Hinton**

This review was probably the hardest thing I've ever had to write, in a lot of ways, because of the book and how amazing it is, and also because I felt this enormous pressure to do justice to not only Du Bois himself—I wanted to honor Du Bois; I wanted to do something that I felt like I put my best foot forward, and that would make him proud—but it's also the ideas and the stakes of the ideas in this moment, you know, is the other kind of daunting part because, in many ways, we have been and we are still asking these questions. And it could be that we are on the precipice of a Third Reconstruction. The only thing that makes me wary about using the Reconstruction framework is that every time, there's a surge of oppression, and racism functions in new guises, new legal frameworks to instill hierarchy and class exploitation. I hope that we can finally achieve what Du Bois charges this nation with without the historic regression that we've seen, that we saw after the first Reconstruction and after the Second Reconstruction, of course, with mass incarceration and continued marginalization, isolation, and poverty. It feels like, in our moment, we really are coming to a crossroads. And the question is which direction this country will go. And I think that another question that Du Bois raises that I pose at the end too: Is the US a democracy? And I think that is perhaps the question that we're facing right now.

### **Daniel Story**

Our thanks to Elizabeth Hinton for being our tour guide through *Black Reconstruction*. You can find Elizabeth's full review in the December 2022 issue of the AHR. We're grateful also to Eric Foner, Chad Williams, Sue Mobley, and Kendra Field for adding their voices. And to paraphrase Sue, if you haven't read *Black Reconstruction* yet, you should probably go do that. *History in Focus* is a production of the *American Historical Review*, in partnership with the American Historical Association and the University Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Episode 9 was produced by Conor Howard, Matt Hermene, and me, Daniel Story, with editing advice from Nathan Dalton. Engineering and transcription support was by Myles Rider-Alexis. You can learn more about this and other episodes at [americanhistoricalreview.org](http://americanhistoricalreview.org). That's it for now. See you next time.

**Daniel Story**

Is there anything else you want to add about *Black Reconstruction*?

**Sue Mobley**

It's the best and everyone should read it. Seriously, the only thing that I have replaced more copies of than *Black Reconstruction* is *Achtung Baby*. In order to be in the reading group, I had to buy a new copy because I have lost six copies to people liberating them and keeping them. Three people in our reading group admitted that they had copies from me. So now I think I'm gonna start buying it in cases. And it will just be, like, little free libraries and a stack under my desk for when people take them away.

**Daniel Story**

I have an image of you on some busy street corner with a little stand display of *Black Reconstruction*.

**Sue Mobley**

I am kind of evangelical about it.

**Daniel Story**

Yeah, I get that.

**Sue Mobley**

It's the only thing where I'm kind of proselytizing. I don't knock on people's doors yet. We'll see how it goes. I'm getting older. At some point, I have to pick how I'm going to be eccentric and that might be it. Fair warning.

*Sue and Daniel laugh.*