

# Freedom's Unfinished Revolution

## Teaching a people's history of Reconstruction

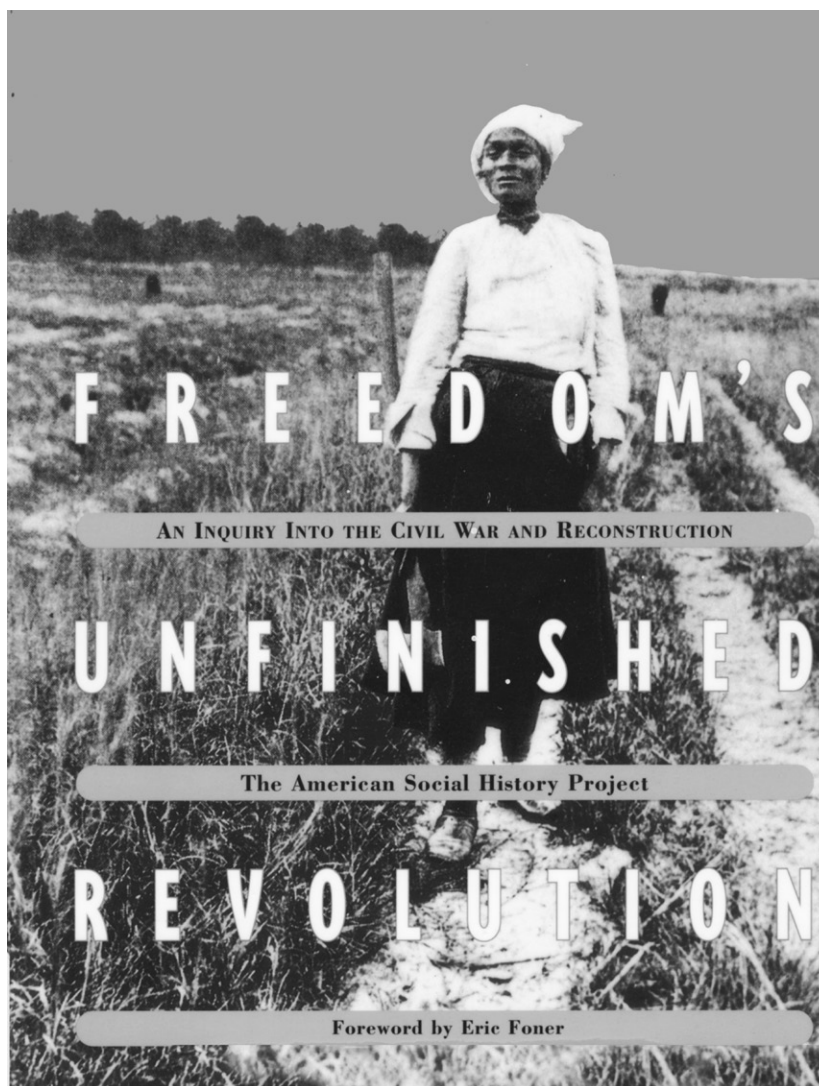
BY BILL BIGELOW

TOO OFTEN IN TEACHING THE CIVIL WAR and Reconstruction, my inclination has been to emphasize the enormous power that social elites and their allies have to subvert or suppress popular movements.

An important textbook/curriculum by the American Social History Project, *Freedom's Unfinished Revolution*, acknowledges this power—whether wielded by paternalistic white reformers, cynical presidents, or the KKK—but focuses on the efforts of African Americans themselves to gain their freedom. Its contribution is not so much in offering new scholarship, but rather in braiding together a collection of documents, photographs, and illustrations with a clear narrative that rivets our attention on the black struggle for justice.

Activism of all kinds courses through its pages. In contrast to typical textbook portrayals of a predominantly white abolition movement, credit here goes first to “the growing resistance of slaves themselves and the militancy of black and white abolitionists.” Later, in its descriptions of the Civil War, the book shows how enslaved African

Americans were a powerful force in shifting the aims of the war from union to freedom. Despite Lincoln's commitment to keep it a white man's war, blacks—North and South—demanded the



Freedom's Unfinished Revolution: An Inquiry into the Civil War and Reconstruction. *The American Social History Project*. The New Press. 302 pp.

right to fight and, after they won that right, successfully fought for equal pay with white soldiers. In the South, enslaved people sabotaged plantations and ran away to Northern lines. Documents from numerous sources—novels, letters, speeches, congressional testimony, newspaper editorials—breathe life into the text and are accompanied by generally provocative discussion questions.

## Exhilarating Defiance

Sections on Reconstruction are especially effective. Where most high school texts organize chapters around the policy zigs and zags of Lincoln, then Andrew Johnson, then the Radical Republicans, et al., *Freedom's Unfinished Revolution* focuses on the creativity and determination of people at the bottom. Ex-slaves destroyed cotton gins, refused to work in gangs under white overseers, demanded their own land, and in 1867 in South Carolina refused to pay taxes to the white planter-dominated government. In straightforward prose, students learn how ex-slaves sought in daily life to create a new, more equal society in the South:

*Discarding the symbols of their enslavement, many rejected names forced upon them by slavemasters and took new ones. Casting aside drab garments of slavery, they wore new badges of freedom—brightly colored outerwear, fancy hats, ornate parasols, elegant veils.*

*They held meetings without white permission, supervision, or presence—that is, without the probing eyes of a master or overseer. In everyday encounters, they challenged former masters, mistresses, and overseers. Such defiance was expressed in a variety of encounters—looking an ex-master straight in the eye, talking back to a plantation mistress, refusing to tip a hat or give way to whites on a sidewalk.*

*In a world turned upside down, slaves found their defiance exhilarating.*

Chapter 11, on land reform in the South, is by itself worth the price of the book. I use this with my students in its entirety. The chapter opens with an 1866 quote from Bayley Wyat, a man who had been enslaved:

*We has a right to the land where we are located. For why? I tell you. Our wives, our children, our husbands, have been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locate upon; for that reason we have a divine right to the land. ... And then didn't we clear the land and raise the crops of corn, of cotton, of tobacco, of rice, of sugar, of everything? And then didn't ... large cities in the North grow up on the cotton and the sugars and the rice that we made! ... I say they have grown rich, and my people are poor.* [ellipses in original]

My students read this immediately following a role play in which they debated issues of land reform, voting, education, and protection from the standpoint of ex-slaves, plantation owners, poor whites, Northern manufacturers, and members of the Andrew Johnson administration. Some students who portrayed ex-slaves, and even poor whites who had decided to ally with blacks, had made similar remarks in the role play debates. For many, reading Bayley Wyat's words married role play and the real world. My student, Tim, who

---

*The book shows how enslaved African Americans were a powerful force in shifting the aims of the war from union to freedom.*

---

in our debates scoffed at plantation owners' claims to "property rights" and insisted that prominent Confederates' land be confiscated and turned over to ex-slaves and poor whites, lit up in vindication upon reading Wyat's words.

The land reform chapter also includes substantial excerpts from speeches of the Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens urging confiscation and redistribution of leading Confederates' land: "No people will ever be republican in spirit and practice where a few own immense manors

and the masses are landless.” Also included is an excerpt from a *New York Times* editorial that worries about the precedent set by land redistribution: “if begun at the South, it will find its way into the cities of the North. ... [Confiscation] strikes at the root of property rights in both sections. It concerns Massachusetts as much as Mississippi.” The chapter concludes with Frederick Douglass’ stirring condemnation of the toothless Reconstruction offered freed slaves by the U.S. government:

*You say that you have emancipated us. You have and I thank you for it. But what is your emancipation? ... [W]hen you turned us loose, you gave us no acres. You turned us loose to the sky, to the storm, to the whirlwind, and worst of all, you turned us loose to the wrath of our infuriated masters.*

But as fine and useful a book as is *Freedom’s Unfinished Revolution*, it is not without its limitations. The authors accurately, albeit politely, describe Lincoln’s commitment to union rather than to abolition in the weeks following his election in November of 1860: “Lincoln was ready to make concessions to the slaveholding South.” But the text fails to specify these “concessions.” In Lincoln’s first Inaugural Address in March 1861, he promised never to interfere with slavery in the South and that he would support a constitutional amendment to make the federal government’s commitment to maintaining slavery in the South “express and irrevocable.” This was the original 13th Amendment. Lincoln would not support the extension of slavery into the western territories, but where slavery existed, it could remain forever.

The book does not ask students to reflect on why the Civil War was initiated. The authors’ description of events leading up to the war begins from the unexamined assumption that the secession of Southern states would lead

automatically to war. But why? Why did Lincoln and the Republican party want so desperately to keep the states together that they were willing to take the nation into war? Why not say to the seceding states, “Good riddance”? The authors never raise these questions.

*Freedom’s Unfinished Revolution* doesn’t peel back Lincoln’s “save the union” rhetoric to examine the economic motives underlying the Republican Party’s prosecution of the war. Surely no responsible analysis would suggest that the Civil War was fought solely to keep access to cheap, slave-grown cotton or to maintain the South as a market for Northern goods (protected from British competition by tariffs). But no responsible analysis should fail to highlight these as motives for war. In later chapters, the authors do an excellent job describing the economic reasons for the Republican Party’s failure to pursue a genuine redistribution of power in the post-war South. Such explanations would be clearer to students if Northern financial interests had been more prominently featured earlier in the book.

Each chapter in *Freedom’s Unfinished Revolution* is followed by suggested teaching activities: role plays, trials, debates, writing assignments. Most of these are good ideas, but they left me wishing that the authors had put more effort into the curricular dimension of the book. Their suggestions often felt thin, and I lacked a sense that real teachers somewhere had done these activities

and were sharing classroom-tested lessons.

For example, at the end of one chapter the authors suggest a role play activity for an 1865 Congressional Hearing on land confiscation and redistribution. They list 11 individuals from the book for students to portray. But for a number of these—e.g., “the widow of a Union soldier,” and “a disabled Union veteran”—there is almost nothing for students to go on to prepare a presentation, other than guess or

---

*In straightforward prose, students learn how ex-slaves sought in daily life to create a new, more equal society in the South.*

---

stereotype. Here, I wanted fuller descriptions of the roles, and perhaps discussion questions. But more important, I wanted a teacher “voice” to indicate something of his or her classroom experience with the lesson. In none of the descriptions of student activities was there a note to the teacher-reader saying, “Sometimes students respond to this lesson by ...”

### Antidote to Despair

So the book is not perfect. But, on balance, the authors offer an antidote to despair as they encourage students to draw hope from Reconstruction’s defeat. They portray “freedom” not as some fixed historical goal post, but as the process of people struggling for better lives—as an “unfinished revolution”:

*Harriet Tubman defined [freedom] on June 3, 1863, when she marched with Colonel James Montgomery at the head of an army of black deliverance to liberate 727 slave men, women, and children from their South Carolina masters. Field hands on Edward*

*Philbrick’s Coffin Point plantation defined it when they rebelled against “King Cotton” and refused to work as gang labor for twenty-five cents an hour. ... Squatters on the Delta Plantation defined it in 1867 when they drove off Union soldiers and defended their right to the land. Union Leagues defined it by building multiracial coalitions and facing down KKK violence.*

And, one might add, students themselves define freedom when they work to determine the meaning in their own lives of the ongoing struggle against racism. ■

**Bill Bigelow** ([bill@rethinkingschools.org](mailto:bill@rethinkingschools.org)) is the curriculum editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine.



This article was previously published in *Rethinking Schools* magazine. To order back issues of the magazine or to subscribe, visit [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org) or call 800-669-4192.

This article is offered for use in educational settings as part of the **Zinn Education Project**, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. Contact Rethinking Schools ([office@rethinkingschools.org](mailto:office@rethinkingschools.org)) directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

For more information:

**Rethinking Schools**  
[www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)

**Teaching for Change**  
[www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)



# rethinking schools

This article was previously published in [Rethinking Schools magazine](#).

*Rethinking Schools* is an award-winning quarterly magazine, featuring articles portraying some of this country's finest social justice teaching. *Rethinking Schools* is a must-read for everyone involved in education — first-year teachers, veteran teachers, parents, community activists, and teacher educators.

*Rethinking Schools* magazine, books, and other resources promote equity and racial justice in the classroom.



To order back issues or to subscribe, visit [rethinkingschools.org](http://rethinkingschools.org).

Zinn Education Project registrants get 15% off a [Rethinking Schools](#) subscription by using the code **RSMAGZEP** at checkout.

**As a teacher and researcher, I rely on *Rethinking Schools* for information, insight, and inspiration. — Sonia Nieto, Professor Emerita, University of Massachusetts Amherst**

## More from Rethinking Schools

Rethinking Schools also publishes books with articles and lessons about teaching climate justice, ethnic studies, teaching for Black lives, immigration, gender and sexuality, people's history, and more. Visit [RethinkingSchools.org](http://RethinkingSchools.org) to browse and order online.

