THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU AND THE PROBLEM OF RECONSTRUCTION HISTORY

by

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INTRODUCTION

On May 4, 1865 four million former slaves became the wards of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau. Created within the War Department by an act of Congress in March, 1865, the Bureau was authorized to supervise and manage all abandoned lands in the South, and direct the operations pertaining to the freedmen and refugees. General Oliver Otis Howard was appointed the first commissioner by President Johnson. Assistant commissioners were assigned to the individual states. Howard organized four departments within the Bureau; Lands and Claims, Records, Finance, and the Medical Department. Specifically, the Bureau was concerned with relief, providing medical care and hospitals, food, clothing and shelter for freedmen and refugees; the administration of justice, supervising the beginnings of free labor, and protecting freedmen from fraud and violence; and education, cooperating with Northern philanthropic societies and local officials in establishing schools. Initially the law limited the Bureau's existence to one year after the rebellion; however, an amendment continued the Bureau's authority for two more years. Congressional legislation in 1868 abolished all Bureau departments except Education and Bounty Claims from reconstructed states as of January 1, 1869. The Bureau was terminated on June 30, 1872.[1]

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[1]For the background of Congressional legislation that authorized the creation and continuance of the Freedmen's Bureau see the two standard historical monographs of the Bureau, Paul S. Peirce, The Freedmen's Bureau, a Chapter in the History of Reconstruction, State University of Iowa Studies in Sociology, Economics, Politics, and History, Vol. III, No. 1. (Iowa City: 1904; St. Claire Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press, republished 1970), pp. 23-45, 55-74, and George R. Bentley, A History of the Freedmen's Bureau (New York: Octogon Books, copyright 1955 by the American Historical Association; reprinted 1970), pp. 30-49, 121-34, 209-12.

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Interpretation of the Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction has been challenged many times in the last century. The historian in his time was convinced of his own objectivity. The historiographer, however, argues confirmation of interpretation was often envisioned by contemporary event or value. Past experience apprehended by current values determines a moral interpretation of history. Is integrity of scholarship based upon evidence or ideological conviction?

Each era, intellectual history makes clear, perceives the world in terms of thought patterns or block structures, which give coherence to reality. Paradigms, changing almost imperceptibly in response to complex forces within reality, control the judgment of historians no less than his contemporaries. He depends on his perception of verity and moral certainty which gives meaning to his life. The inability for honestly objective historians to shake biases and prejudices is easily diagnosed by the historiographer. Historians possess their own value systems; therefore, moral judgment upon the past is unavoidable. His struggle is an objective comprehension of the past. It is an obligation, therefore, to deliberate the judgments upon the past which are most compatible with convictions. The same duty devolves upon the historiographer when he critiques the bias of historians.

Historians of the Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction were either repelled or enamored by various elements under study which emerged in the historian's milieu. While moral critique is vital to historical judgment, the values perceived by the era itself are foremost. Rather than parading the failures of the past, it would seem contemporary historians should attempt to recreate the climate of opinion current in the Reconstruction era. A tolerant sympathy with past persuasions will help understanding why the Bureau lacked public support and failed to deter white racism and black poverty. Moral broadsides hurled at the past in terms of the present are inadequate and frustrating for an understanding of the past.

Belief in racial, social, and economic equality is expressed by historians of the Bureau and Reconstruction today.[1] Such commitment must not distort the historian's sensitivity to conflicts in value and the dilemma of moral choice innate to the Reconstruction era. Using the past is alarming in a special way; without a humane appraisal of another era's value-nexus, historical analysis can be grossly unfair. The writing of Freedmen's Bureau history should strike a delicate balance between humanism and historical methods.[2]

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[1]A shift may be occurring in the scientific view of the relationship of heredity and environment and its influence upon race, class, and intelligence. See Arthur R. Jensen, "How Can We Boost I.Q. and Scholastic Achievement?" Harvard Educational Review, XXXIX (Winter, 1969), 1-123. He concisely summarized his article in "Arthur Jensen Replies," Psychology Today, III (October, 1969), 4-6. A reprint of the summary appeared as "Race, Class and Intelligence" in Issues, Debates and Controversies: An Introduction to Sociology, ed. by George Ritzer (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1972), pp. 253-57. Jensen found, Ritzer noted, "that compensatory education had not significantly improved the measured intelligence or academic performance of its target population--'disadvantaged children.' Recognizing that IQ is largely inherited, is inversely related to social class and that blacks typically have lower IQs than whites. He contends that it is reasonable to hypothesize that the causes of the racial differences are genetic as well as environmental." Ibid., p. 251. Jensen's view, a modern heresy, precipitated controversy. He was accused of granting tacit support to the notion Negroes were genetically inferior. See Ibid., pp. 251-73. It may be speculated that should the scientific paradigm shift in concepts of race, class, and intelligence interpretations of the Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction may change in response. Will scientific views on race meld with the seeming present conservative retrenchment as aftermath to the volitile sixties?

[2]See John Higham, "American Historiography in the 1960's" in Writing American History: Essays in Modern Scholarship, Midland Books (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1972), pp. 157-74, for a critique of the New Left. Higham observed his prediction of the late fifties that historical writing would soon show a balanced moral judgment proved wrong, instead the New Left directed a passionately shrill assault upon the American past. The New Left was criticised for lack of ideological cohesiveness. United in attack upon American culture past and present, Higham concluded, the New Left was unable to shart a meaningful coarse for the future.