Black Workers and the South Carolina Government, 1871–75

HEATHER COX RICHARDSON

... In January 1872, newspapers reported that “At no time since the close of the rebellion has there been greater interest than now in the political and financial interest of South Carolina.” Indeed, the election year of 1872 injured even further the image of black workers, as reforming Republicans and Northern Democrats popularized their formulation of disaffected black workers subverting government to their own ends. By 1872, [Horace] Greeley had irreparably split with Grant and knew that the president was vulnerable to accusations that the men in control of his reconstruction governments planned to confiscate wealth rather than work for wages. Through January and February the New York Daily Tribune harped on the corruption of the South Carolina government.

Then, in March, Greeley printed a report from South Carolina by James S. Pike, a disillusioned former radical Republican politician. After interviewing men with financial interests in South Carolina—notably former Confederate general Wade Hampton—Pike published an article entitled “A State in Ruins.” His article tied together the Democratic formulation of the corruption of politics inherent in black voting with the Republican anxiety about disaffected workers. It highlighted both Hampton’s complaints about the state’s “oppressive taxation” at the hands of black legislators and their carpetbagger allies and his insistence that laborers did not want to work. The next month, an editorial in the New York Daily Tribune maintained that, while freedmen had not utterly failed under freedom, “they might and should have done much better.” They had to own land to have their freedom “secured and perfect,” the paper reiterated, but complained that they had not bought land because they had spent their money “in drink, tobacco, balls, gaming, and other dissipation.” Had they not wasted their capital, the editorial insisted, “they might have bought therewith at least Ten Million acres of the soil of their respective States which would have given each family an average of ten acres of mother earth; and the free and clear owner of ten acres need never stand idle or accept half wages.”

Greeley’s attacks on freedmen became central in the 1872 race for the White House. In early May, disgruntled Republicans and “New Departure” Democrats, who hoped to replace Grant, organized the Liberal Republican party and gave their presidential nomination to Greeley. While New Departure Democrats emphasized their belief that Republicans sought to create an empire through surveillance and corruption, powerful Republican newspaper editors who shifted away from regular Republicanism instead developed the changing image of black workers. Murat Halstead of the Cincinnati Commercial, Horace White of the Chicago Tribune, William Cullen Bryant of the New York Evening Post, and Edwin L. Godkin of the Nation all swung over to Greeley’s camp and adopted his rhetoric about unproductive black workers looting the Reconstruction governments, while they emphasized that white Southerners were helping the South to prosper.

Liberal Republicans’ attacks on African-Americans were not simply rhetorical attacks on Grant as the mentor of the freedmen; they also reflected the Republican dislike of powerful Northern labor interests. Labor organizations seemed particularly revetive in 1872, and Liberal Republicans seemed preoccupied with reporting strikes and attacking organized labor. At the Chicago Tribune, White continued to take his cue from Greeley, and, standing staunchly against politicized labor organizations, he complained in January 1872 that “those who style themselves the working classes” needed to be taught “a few sound truths of political economy.” “Now that their representatives are becoming more and more prominent in politics, their lack of such knowledge is painfully evident.” The New York Daily Tribune noted that a worker attending a Labor Reform Convention in Connecticut rose and “hint[ed] that, if the wrongs of the American laborers are not righted, he will resort to the revolutionary violence of the Paris Commune.” Two weeks later, White reiterated that South Carolina had been run deeply into debt by improvident men, and called for wealthy South Carolinians, who knew how to manage property, again to hold office.

In contrast to the Liberal Republicans following Greeley’s lead, stalwart administration Republicans dealt with disaffected workers by reaffirming the party’s commitment to a harmonious American political economy. They courted workers, nominating as vice president longtime friend of labor Henry Wilson, letting Wendell Phillips and labor leader S. P. Cummings draft a “labor plank” in the platform, welcoming [Benjamin F.] Butler back into the party, and staging a National Workingmen’s Convention in New York to nominate Grant and Wilson. Republicans also continued to defend freedmen as good workers starting their climb to prosperity in the fields. A correspondent to the Cincinnati Daily Gazette maintained that the South was producing more cotton than ever, and that “[a]ll the predictions about the idleness of negroes and evils of negro suffrage have proved grossly false. The negroes have done their part, and they have done it with no disposition to assume anything on account of their political privileges.”

Despite stalwart Republican support, the actions of the freedmen themselves in the 1872 election seemed to many to prove that they indeed opposed the free labor ideal and threatened the American system. The Fifteenth Amendment went into effect in March 1870, making the 1872 presidential election the first in which the national government could enforce black suffrage. Northerners stood poised to judge freedmen’s participation in the government. The choice of candidate was a difficult one for many African-Americans, since their old champion Horace Greeley now led a party of Northern reformers, including men like former abolitionist Charles Sumner, who had joined with their traditional enemies, the Democrats. Both advocating the increased services of the Reconstruction governments and recognizing that Greeley’s policy would probably mean the restoration of Democrats to power in the South, most African-Americans voted for Grant and the Republican party, following Frederick Douglass’s famous dictum: “The Republican party is the ship and all else is the sea.”
While voting for Grant was the logical choice for freedmen, voting for the regular Republican ticket in the South meant supporting politicians who had been widely accused of corruption. Then, too, some freedpeople felt so strongly about the dangers of Greeley's policy that they attacked Greeley's few black supporters in the South, leading the Boston Evening Transcript to accuse them of "mob violence." Forced to choose between suicidal reform and the tarnished government that offered them political survival, freedmen chose survival and earned condemnation from a wide range of Liberal-Republicans, Democrats, and conservative and even some moderate Republicans.

Liberal Republicans lost the election, but their campaign popularized the idea that most freedmen were determined to rise without work, and legitimated in Republican thought the Democratic idea that black voting inherently threatened to corrupt the government.

The Liberal Republican debacle of 1872 and the almost immediate death of a devastated Horace Greeley were a bitter dose for those who opposed Grant, and their vitriol popularized the image of disaffected workers controlling government for their own ends. In January 1873, Whitlaw Reid, who had replaced Greeley as editor of the New York Daily Tribune, sent James S. Pike to South Carolina to write a series of articles about the state. While Pike recorded that he "was moved to visit S. Carolina from the extraordinary circumstances of its political condition," he and Reid probably intended his articles to add more fuel to an anti-Grant movement, and, to some degree, to punish the African-Americans who had deserted their old champion and voted overwhelmingly for Grant. Belying the idea that the South Carolina trip was to be a fact-finding tour, almost all of the themes of the new series had already appeared in Pike's 1872 article. While Northern black leaders recognized Pike's portrait of South Carolina as injurious to the African-American population, many Northern whites were predisposed to believe his story. The articles attracted so much attention that Pike expanded them and published them in December 1873 as The Prostrate State: South Carolina under Negro Government. The book was widely reviewed, it sold well, and it had a dramatic impact on the image of freedpeople in American society. The series, and later the book, fleshed out the idea that black Americans had rejected the laborer's traditional path to success and were instead attempting to rise by controlling politics to confiscate the wealth of their betters.

Pike's articles drew the attention of the entire nation, which by 1873 was not only preoccupied with South Carolina's troubles but also riveted to a political crisis in Louisiana in the wake of the 1872 election. There, staid Republicans had denied the election of a reform governor and appealed to the president for support. A Republican court installed the Republican candidate, William Kellogg, into office, but opponents insisted that their candidate, John McEnery, had been the popular choice and organized militia-type units known as "White Leagues" to defend his right to the governorship. As the rival factions fought for control of the state, Northern Democrats and Liberal Republicans believed that the Kellogg faction was a prime example of an undemocratic government forced on the people by a cabal bent on holding power by catering to a black mob. Then, in December 1872, the sitting Republican governor was impeached, leaving the office in the hands of the acting lieutenant governor, prominent black stalwart P. B. S. Pinchback. Seeing an African-American become the state governor confirmed the worst fears of anxious Northerners. The Liberal Republican Nation pilloried Pinchback as "a fine specimen of the rising colored politician" of the South. It accused him of usurping power, and argued that the "cock-fighter and gambler" has literally nothing under him but Federal bayonets and an injunction.

Carefully excising from his travel notes positive references to African-American legislators, Pike began his report with a description of society turned "bottom-side up." "The wealth, the intelligence, the culture, the wisdom of the State," "men of weight and standing in the communities they represent," had been displaced in the legislature by "the most ignorant democracy that mankind ever saw, invested with the functions of government." Pike's black "democracy" wore "coarse and dirty garments of the field; the stub-jacket and slouch hat of soil ing labor." African-American legislators, Pike argued, who were elected by their peers, had jumped far ahead of their earned position in Southern society.

According to Pike, the freedmen refused to follow a traditional path to success, preferring instead to plunder the true producers of the state. Pike reminded Northerners that South Carolina was "an elysium for an agriculturist." Plantation land "in good working order" could be had for two dollars an acre, and cotton was an extremely profitable crop which required only "easy and enticing" labor. "It would be difficult to know where an agriculturist could turn to find so good a prospect of reward for his labors," he wrote. Surely, in a land like this, anyone willing to work his way up in a traditional way could do so easily. But instead of working for their success, ineptuous laborers destroyed capital with confiscatory tax laws. The representatives of wealthy Charleston, for example, were chosen by "swamp negroes," he said. Pike reprinted a report of the South Carolina Tax-payers' Convention of 1871 lamenting that "they who lay the taxes do not pay them, and that that they who are to pay them have no voice in the laying of them." He quoted a speaker from the convention saying that African-Americans had been given "the privilege, by law, of plundering the property-holders of the State, now almost bankrupt, by reason of the burden of taxation under which they labor."

Pike's picture of labor confiscating capital elaborated on the connection between bad workers and a bad government, and was designed to strike terror into the hearts of Northerners who feared that disaffected workers could capture the American government. Echoing the 1867 New York World, Pike quoted a South Carolina judge's opinion that demagogues had convinced freedmen that "[Southern] lands properly belonged to them, and not to their former masters." Pike agreed with the Tax-payers' Convention that the tax burden "is calculated, even if it be not intended, to bring about a wide-spread confiscation of property." Twice he quoted a white man's report that African-American senator Beverly Nash had campaigned with a speech arguing: "The reformers complain of taxes being too high. I tell you that they are not high enough. I want them taxed until they put these lands back where they belong, into the hands of those who worked for them. You toiled for them, you labored for them, and were sold to pay for them, and you ought to have them."
Pike's prescription for South Carolina reiterated the traditional Republican plan for individual advancement. After eulogizing a group of freedpeople who had successfully developed their own plantation, he encouraged philanthropists to commence a true blueprint for Reconstruction. A model plantation worked by ex-slaves would demonstrate the attributes of adequately paid free black agricultural labor, lift from poverty "the best portions of the colored population," "pave the way for their social and moral elevation; and thus perhaps might be laid the foundation of a revolution in the character of the race, that would lead to the most benignant results," he concluded.

In 1873, Northerners were especially susceptible to Pike's portrait of dangerous workers in control of society. The Panic of 1873 threw many out of work, and they took their grievances to the streets in the form of strikes and protests. In April, for example, while the New York Daily Tribune ran Pike's articles, the Cincinnati Daily Gazette published "Anarchy and Bloodshed in the Indiana Coal Regions," which recalled the Paris Commune when it claimed that the women in Indiana "have thus far proved the most desperate element."

Another article, titled "A Frightful Riot in Louisiana," went further, explicitly talking of disaffected workers trying to control government. Historians have called the Colfax Massacre the bloodiest single instance of racial carnage in the Reconstruction Era, but newspapers at the time described the horrific white massacre of African-Americans as self-defense against pillaging ex-slaves who had cloaked themselves in authority. According to dispatches reprinted in the Cincinnati Daily Gazette, Captain William Ward, a white legislator in the disgraced Kellogg government, protested his removal at the hands of a judge and organized a force of freedmen and "a few white men of his own complexion," took possession of the Colfax courthouse, and took over the government. A Democratic newspaper from Missouri reported that the "mob" then "went on to use their powers violently until finally, intoxicated by an immunity of lawlessness, they began to hunt down those who were obnoxious to them, sack their residences and pillage their plantations. Several men were obliged to flee the parish." African-Americans who feared such disaffected men joined the clamor against them; O. J. Butler, "an intelligent colored man" and "a respectable merchant," told the New Orleans Picayune that "there are colored people ... who sadly deplore the occurrence; and, in fact, many of them, like myself, have been compelled by threats of violence to leave the place." Ultimately, the White Leaguers rallied for "self-defense" against the "reign of terror," set fire to the courthouse, and shot the men running from the flames. Eighty to one hundred of the Kellogg supporters died.

Even workers who did not take over towns expected to take over the government, the press reported. The Nation, for example, worried that "much of the manual labor required by cities, States, and the General Government" was procured on "thoroughly communistic principles." It quoted the report of a government official who complained that favored mechanics, "who, as a rule, exhibit little interest in the performance of their duties and have no responsibility whatever," received higher wages than "gentlemen of education who occupy positions of trust and great pecuniary responsibility in the different bureaus." The Nation concluded that: "all discrimination against hand-work in favor of head-work, in spite of the mystic bathenskite which is poured forth so freely on this subject, is a discrimination against civilization itself." As New York "workmen" rallied to protest the government report and adopted resolutions "denouncing members of Congress and the Legislature of the State for dereliction of duty to the cause of labor," even the radical Boston Evening Transcript bemoaned the "communism" creeping into America. Snarled the Chicago Tribune, "The spirit of Grangerism, Workmenism, Communism, Grievanceism, or by whatever name the present fever among those who assume to themselves the title of 'the industrial and producing classes' may be termed, appears to be growing apace throughout the United States."

More prosperous Northerners reacted to these stories by attacking organized labor and rallying around the idea of traditional American workers. The Philadelphia Inquirer, for example, told its readers about the murder of a nonstriker, kicked to death because he refused to join a strike; it attacked carpenters' demands for a one-fourth reduction by arguing that this rejected the American labor system; and it reflected that a new Illinois law to prevent strikes "protects the rights and interests of the skilled and steady workmen, puts an end to the too long damaging dictation of the blatant demagogues that have for years profited from their self-chosen positions as guardians of the rights of laborers." The Cincinnati Daily Gazette published "The Fallacy of Strikes," reiterating in the article that "men have the right to claim certain wages for themselves, ... those of whom they demand these rates ... have an equal right to decline to grant them, and other workmen have an indisputable privilege to take the places of those who will not come to terms." The newspaper expected that society would bring to heel "malefactors" who tried to enforce their demands by "abuse, threats, or actual violence." By 1874, the Chicago Tribune was telling readers that the International was making the United States "the battle-ground in the war that Communism is waging upon society," and it warned: "We must no longer close our eyes to the dangers the International threatens."

Presenting Southern African-Americans as analogous to disaffected Northern laborers, Pike's picture of South Carolina became the dominant one in discussions of freedpeople in 1873. On the one hand, Republicans still lauded ex-slaves like those represented by a "convention of colored men" in Texas. The New York Times reported that black Texans owned "taxable property, mostly real estate, valued at $2,076,000" in only twenty-one counties. This proved, the paper claimed, that freedpeople, emancipated eight years before in absolute poverty, had "quickly acquired habits of forethought and thrift, and were mastered by a desire to become rooted as proprietors in the soil to which they had been attached as slaves."

On the other hand were increasing fears that disaffected black laborers sought to control the government. Growing numbers of Northern newspapers picked up their tone from the New York Daily Tribune, even if they lost the clear edges that that paper gave its argument. Some Republicans continued to insist that stories of Southern freedpeople's laziness and mismanagement of government were concocted by Democrats, but that insistence got much less press in the North than evidence that African-Americans in general demanded political
appointments in exchange for votes. When the Colored People of Ohio met on August 22, 1873, to declare the political independence of African-American voters from the Republican party and to protest what many of them saw as discrimination in appointments to government offices, many white men interpreted their protest as proof that freedmen wanted to hold government office simply to be able to live without working. The story of the meeting was widely reprinted, and widely condemned. Reporting that Grant had sent a "mulatto Colonel" to Ohio to manage "his colored brethren," the San Francisco Daily Alta California said that "[t]he colored-men of Ohio have discovered that numerically they are entitled to one-twentieth-fourth part of the offices," and demanded them in exchange for supporting the Republicans. The Philadelphia Inquirer used the meeting as an opportunity to condemn office-seeking in men of any color. The Boston Evening Transcript reported on both the Ohio convention and a similar one in Baltimore. Even the New York Times believed a story that "a number of colored politicians" had formed a secret society "for the avowed purpose of supporting only colored men for political offices," and joined other Republican papers in denouncing the movement.

Northern Republicans and Democrats found common ground in their depredation of black workers who sought to change the government. At the end of 1873, the Boston Evening Transcript said that "the divisional lines of the Republican and Democratic parties are now...indistinct." African-American congressman R. B. Elliott sounded like a Democrat when he explicitly told a black audience in South Carolina that "they were responsible for the thieves who had plundered the State into bankruptcy, since they had elected them to office." They must reform immediately, he admonished, warning that the national Republican party was ready to cut loose "upon the slightest provocation from the corruption now existing in the South, and unless you do something, and that speedily, they will be compelled to cut off the rotten branch." Things were grim indeed when, from her new home in Florida, Harriet Beecher Stowe herself, abolitionist author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, claimed that freedpeople did not work as hard as Northerners because the South's long growing season meant that "there really is not need of that intense, driving energy and vigilance in the use of time that are needed in the short summers of the North."

In the fall of 1873, even the staunchly pro-Grant and pro-freedmen Boston Evening Transcript ran a letter from Tennessee originally printed in the Democratic New York World arguing that "the blacks, as people, are unfit for the proper exercise of political duties.... The rising generation of...blacks needed a period of probation and of instruction; a period...long enough for the black to have forgotten something of his condition as a slave and learned much of the true method of gaining honorable subsistence and of performing the duties of any position to which he might aspire." A man writing about Louisiana summed up the increasingly prevalent attitude about freedmen at the end of 1873. "It takes four negroes to do the work of one, on an average, and that which they do is done in a slovenly manner," he wrote. "Those negroes at work are between thirty and sixty years of age, and the younger decline to work almost entirely, but aspire to office, and have too much blue blood in their veins to stoop to any manual labor...they are made to believe that they will, with the aid of the white scallawags [sic], soon be masters of Congress."

Prominent Northern minister Henry Ward Beecher read Pike's book and, perhaps unconsciously, took the argument a step further. Linking together all black and white laborers who rejected the free labor system, Beecher wrote in his Christian Union that the only solution to the situation in South Carolina was "the speedy achievement of rule by the classes who ought always to rule."

South Carolinians opposed to their state government found the changing Northern sentiment about freedpeople encouraging, and recommended in January 1874 to attack their legislature. Complaining that the new taxes were "much heavier than in any preceding year," property holders met in Columbia and called for the reassembly of the Tax-payers' Convention. The angry assembly recommended that the convention "ask [Congress] that [South Carolina] be recommended to a territorial condition or be placed again under military rule." At the meeting, the Northern press reported, "a number of speeches were made—one of them by a colored man—all declaring that the assessments have been outrageously high and that the people will not stand the abuse any longer." After the meeting, its executive committee unanimously resolved to recall the Tax-payers' Convention on February 17, in Columbia. Over the next two months, discussions of the South Carolina Tax-payers' Association became so widespread that by the end of March, a Pennsylvania congressman told the House of Representatives that the desires of the South Carolina protesters were "a matter of public notoriety."

What did the reconvened Tax-payers' Convention actually do? In March 1874, it sent to Washington a delegation with a memorial citing the plunder of the state as a basis for the remedying of South Carolina to military rule. The members of the delegation included quite prominent Southern Democrats, including four former governors and one former Senator. The delegation members visited the vice president, cabinet officers, and prominent congressmen. Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts presented their petition to the House of Representatives on March 31, stating that it was "signed by gentlemen of such character as precludes the idea that it is frivolous or without any such foundation as would justify such an investigation."

Reminding Congress that "the history of the country teaches that taxation without representation is tyranny," the petition claimed that a similar system of "monstrous oppression" existed in South Carolina. The petition maintained that in South Carolina, "those owning the property have no voice in the government, and those imposing taxes have no share in the burden thereof." Declaring that, in many cases, extravagant taxation consumed "more than one-half the income from the property taxed," the petitioners argued that the South Carolina government is arrayed against property." Echoing Pike, the petition maintained: "It has been openly avowed by prominent members of the legislature that taxes should be increased to a point which will compel the sale of the great body of the land, and take it away from the former owners," going on to argue that this policy was designed—misguidedly—to "promote the elevation of the black population, and the acquisition by them of the lands thus virtually confiscated." The
Philadelphia Inquirer reported that the petition "bore the signatures of a large number of prominent and influential citizens."

It took only a day for opponents of the Tax-payers' Association to take up the gauntlet. As the first order of business on April 1, 1874, African-American congressman Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina presented to the House the response of the Republican Central Committee of South Carolina to the Tax-payers' petition. Rainey noted that the men signing the memorial were "prominent politicians of the old regime." The reply maintained that the taxes were not burdensome, and were imposed for the good of the state. It also declared that the Republicans, not the Tax-payers' Association, "represent the substantial interests in the State, as they represented the great majority of the people." [President] Grant sided with the Republican Central Committee, of course, as did the House Judiciary Committee when it declared that Congress had no authority to address issues within states. The petition was dropped.

Although Grant recognized the petition as a political attack and blamed the extremism of the men comprising the Tax-payers' Association for the freedpeople's consolidation against them, the 1874 Tax-payers' protest had struck a chord in the North and received attention way out of proportion to its apparent import. The Tax-payers' Association had framed its complaints in such a way that the North would hear them, had enlisted a Massachusetts man to present them, and had asked the unthinkable. South Carolinians, citizens of the state that had begun the Civil War in defense of state's rights, had asked the federal government to assume control of their state. The demand was shocking—the North snapped to attention—and the fight over black participation in the government was to be fought in a national forum over the issue of taxation.

For Northerners, the real issue at the heart of the Tax-payers' protest was whether adherents of a traditional vision of a harmony of economic interests or proponents of a new belief in class struggle should control American government. Significantly, the national battle over the South Carolina legislature was not fought over the issue of race; the opponents of the South Carolina government were careful to include prominent African-American voices in their protests. The San Francisco Daily Alta California revealed that, to Northerners, their imagined African-Americans in the South Carolina government had come to represent a whole stratum of American society. In a peculiarly Western image, it lamented that "[t]he old line of honest men have [sic] disappeared; gone like particles of gold in a bushel of sand, sunk out of sight, hidden by the common earth above them. Now the carpet-bagger, the scalawag [sic], the mean white trash and the ignorant freedman, constitute the top material, and the decency is out of sight."

The image of South Carolina as a world of workers running amuck was one around which both moderate Democrats and Republicans could unite. While Democrats avoided complaining directly about workers controlling government and tried to emphasize the color dimension of the property issue, the New York World nonetheless editorialized against the removal from power of Southerners who were "trained to deal with great questions of public economy, sound financiers and rational statesmen." The New York Times asserted more strongly that poor workers were ruining South Carolina. Following every move of the reorganized Tax-payers' Association, it asserted that, in South Carolina, "[t]he preponderance of the political power is in the hands of non-tax-payers, who refuse the tax-payers a fair representation for their protection." The Philadelphia Inquirer reflected that "[t]he present legislation may be in the interest of a class ... which has been elevated from the depths without experience how to act." While race was always a part of debates involving African-Americans, at the heart of the 1874 fight was political economy.

The 1874 fight over which version of political economy would dominate America. For many years—especially the past three—Americans had been learning to distinguish between workers who accepted the concept of a harmony of interests in society and those who believed in class struggle. In February 1874, a writer for the Boston Evening Transcript distinguished between the two types of workers in a description of German immigrants. Some, he recorded, were "solid, honest, thrifty, taking an adieu of their country, in company with their wives and children, and industrious as themselves." The others were caricatures of the displaced worker that revealed just how profoundly this sort of individual threatened American life. They were "of less inviting appearance," "wiseless and childless" socialists who discussed "strange theories of government" and who denied the very basis of civilization by "arguing that the relation of husband and wife is but an 'historic product,' ... 'that the woman who freely gives her love to any man is not a prostitute but the woman of the future.'"

In 1874, the fight over African-Americans permitted this division to be illustrated with real force. A typical letter to the New York Times from a Virginia correspondent made clear the distinction between good and bad workers by concentrating on African-Americans. On the one hand were "too many negroes, as well as whites," who were "lazy, self-indulgent and improvident." They worked at farms or tobacco factories in the summer, but wasted their money (and "valuable time") in "weekly railroad excursions." With winter came unemployment as factories closed and farms lay fallow, and the workers were "almost reduced to starvation or beggary." These freedpeople took their rightful place in American political economy: "This improvidence, which leaves them victims to hunger and cold for several months in the year, largely accounts for the great mortality among them." It was workers like these that the Boston Evening Transcript reported were policing the Louisiana bayous in January 1874, stopping all work until they received higher wages. "Citizens," the Boston paper reported, had petitioned the governor for help, stating: "Our section is in a state of terror and alarm. All work is suspended. Armed bodies of mounted men enter our premises in spite of our remonstrances, and threaten the lives of all at work."

On the other hand were African-Americans who were "sober, well-behaved, and tolerably industrious ... quiet, orderly, and polite ... the best servants in the world when well paid and well treated," reported the Virginia correspondent to the New York Times. With the self-respect that supports "all personal elevation and advancement," these freedpeople were washing, dressing well, improving their homes, saving for the future, and educating their children. They were "fast
becoming owners of the soil all over" Virginia, and were "now farmers in their own way on their own account." In Richmond many had "houses and ... bank accounts, while some are already wealthy." "My washerwoman, good old soul," the writer continued: "is mistress of the comfortable house in which she lives, besides owning several tenements which she rents out. She also owns hacks, wagons, carts, and horses—and yet her industry is such that she still plies her trade of laundress." Similarly, an old "plasterer and white washer" of his acquaintance owned "twenty or thirty houses, big and little, in the city," but continued to live in "his modest suburban cottage."

Newspapers lectured freedpeople on their duties as free laborers, encouraging them to struggle for "education and intelligence, and character and property," to lead "lives of sobriety, honesty, industry, frugality and courtesy." Even the rhetoric of the press distinguished powerfully between unacceptable and praiseworthy African-Americans. Newspaper articles discussed disaffected African-Americans as a mass. They were usually Southern freedmen, faceless, nameless, and never quoted directly. In contrast, newspaper reporters accorded acceptable African-Americans individuality and respect, using their full name and often a specific physical description or even a picture. This type of African-American, who was almost always upwardly mobile, was frequently allowed to speak at length in direct quotations. Even the Chicago Tribune, for example, lauded a prominent African-American who claimed that ex-slaves were succeeding as free workers in America and pointedly rejected an alternative vision for the nation's workers. "All that we ask," John Jones insisted in a speech excerpted at length in the Tribune, "is to be paid the regular market price for our work. I thank God that there are no Communists among us, demanding other people's labor and blood. We work for all we get, and do not propose to quarrel with our neighbors because they may have more than we have."

In South Carolina some called for "a chosen noble band" to sit in the legislature to enforce its honesty, but despite this suggestion of a Ku Klux Klan-like organization, even in South Carolina many believed that the fight against taxes was not about race. When the taxpayers of Rich County met on January 12, 1874, the Charleston News and Courier reported:

There were several colored men present, and one of these, William Winthrop, an industrious carpenter, addressed the meeting. He said that the question of taxation was separate and distinct from politics; that he was a Republican, and did not wish to be thought otherwise, but that the colored man and the white man were ground down alike by the oppressive taxation imposed upon them, and he was willing to join with the whites in an honest non-political effort to obtain mutual relief. He was repeatedly cheered by the convention....

In April 1874, the editor of the Nation used the association of African-American voters and disaffected workers to attack what he believed was the growing power of workers in America. Excluding his remarks African-Americans who were industrious, intelligent, and well behaved, editor E. L. Godkin explained in his article, "Socialism in South Carolina," that "the average of intelligence among the rest is very low—so low that they are but slightly above the level of animals." He insisted that freedpeople were plundering the property holders as farms were sold to pay taxes and plantations were broken up to provide jobs and homes for indigent freedpeople. "The sum and substance of it all is confiscation," Godkin relied on racism to make this reorganization of society even more chilling, describing "the rich Congo thief on top and the degraded Anglo-Saxon at the bottom" of society. Finally, Godkin spelled out for his readers the lesson of the Palmetto State. "This," he trumpeted, "is what socialism has done for South Carolina." Raising the image of House leader and spoilsmen Benjamin Butler as a leader of both workers and African-Americans through his extensive patronage system, Godkin reported:

The taxpayers ... are now actually engaged in begging General Butler, the greatest socialist demagogue of our day, to have a little mercy on them. It is not a mistaken instinct which leads them to him, for they know very well that the South Carolinian imitators derive their power from the steady-moving and merciless machinery which fills the custom-houses and post-offices with his tools; and it is this machinery which makes socialism in America the dangerous, deadly poison it is.

Edward King's famous 1873–1874 series for Scribner's Monthly, "The Great South," encapsulated the now mainstream image of dangerous black labor attempting to manipulate government to gain property. A journalist who had come to prominence when he covered the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune for the Boston Morning Journal, King published "The South Carolina Problem: The Epoch of Transition" in June 1874, right after the Tax-payers' protest. In it King told the public that, after the war, freedpeople had believed that they should use their ballots to get property, and so had elected officials who confiscated land through taxation. In vengeance for slavery, King wrote, "Swart Demos" meant to wrest the lands from white people. He defended opponents of black suffrage: "It is not taxation nor even an increase of taxation, that the people of South Carolina object to; but it is taxation without representation, and unjust, tyrannical, arbitrary, overwhelming taxation, producing revenues which never get any further than the already burning pockets of knaves and dupes." Freedpeople, charged King, were "numberers of the soil; their ignorance impeded, their obstinacy throttled; their idleness will in time annihilate all chances of [South Carolina's] resuscitation.... They ... revel in .... idleness ... yield easily to corruption ... are immoral and irresponsible; ... not at all unfriendly in spirit towards the whites, their old masters, yet by their attitude in reality they do them deadly harm."....

Afraid of what they believed had happened in South Carolina, a critical group of Northerners hailing from both parties was coalescing around the previously Republican idea that a harmonious society of people following a traditional path to prosperity through hard work was the true American way. The Liberal Republican movement had failed, but its ideas flowed back into both the Republican and Democratic parties, creating a shared body of ideas: At the
same time, the Liberal Republican years had created an enduring independent political voice that continued to grow for the rest of the century as more and more newspapers and their readers, who saw themselves as members of what they called the “better classes,” tried to throw off political obligations and hold true to the ideas of limited government beholden to no special interests, equality of rights, individualism, and hard work. In 1875, the San Francisco Daily Alta California reiterated that “real substantial, enduring prosperity will be reached on the basis of solid hard work,” and that advice was repeated by independents and members of both parties throughout the nation. These mainstream Northerners held tight to the American system of success, which seemed to be threatened by workers who, believing in a class conflict, were attempting to control the nation and confiscate wealth through legislation.

This increasing consensus between moderate Democrats, independents, and Republicans reflected a political realignment in the country. At the end of 1874, the Democrats captured Congress for the first time since the war. Even in South Carolina, the Republicans had split over the issue of taxation and corruption, although stalwart Republicans had managed to hold on to the state for another two years. After the election, the staunchly Republican Cincinnati Daily Gazette could not entirely deplore the result; it congratulated the party because “corruptionists who made their way into power in the Republican party have been almost entirely swept out by the people.” The Boston Evening Transcript agreed, triumphing on January 1, 1875, that “[t]he year just closed has witnessed a practical union of the best men for the purpose of elevating the tone of official life, and driving those into retirement who would debauch the people and degrade the Government service to their own level.” It looked forward to “enlightened, economical, and just civil administration.” Southerners and Northerners were reconciling over the issue of [good] government. “The chords of true patriotic feeling are in process of being touched by angel fingers,” the Boston Evening Transcript cooed.

Two years later the South was “redeemed” by many of the same men who had led the Tax-payers’ Association, and not all Republicans objected. When Wade Hampton’s Red Shirts swept to power as reformers in South Carolina in 1876, African-Americans were visible enough in the organization for Hampton’s men to request federal troops to help protect the “Black Red Shirts” from black opponents. While Hampton’s African-American supporters apparently were poor men who joined him for emotional reasons or out of economic need, many Northerners accepted the conservative portrayal of them as “respectable colored men.” These Northerners believed that the South had indeed been redeemed as reformers swept from office corrupt Republicans who had mustered a lazy black constituency by calling for class legislation. Symbolically as well as practically, in 1877 President Rutherford B. Hayes stopped using U.S. troops to protect Southern freedmen, who no longer seemed to Northerners to be free laborers in need of government support. Instead, Hayes turned the military against workers engaged in America’s first national strike. Many feared that this uprising, the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, was “the beginning of a great civil war in this country, between labor and capital.”

Illegitimacy and Insurgency in the Reconstructed South

MICHAEL PERMAN

... The Republican Party that was catapulted into power in the election of 1868 had no prior history in the southern states, except in western Virginia. It was brought into existence by the four Reconstruction Acts of 1867–68, and its formation was supervised by U.S. military officers, who were responsible for registering the new voters. The party’s membership was drawn from three sources, but each of these elicited scorn from the former Confederates and from the South’s political class in general.

First, there were northern whites, often Union soldiers who remained in the South to work with the Freedmen’s Bureau or to embark on a new livelihood there. This group also included civilians who came south during and after the war to participate in the rebuilding of the war-torn region as teachers, farmers, and entrepreneurs or as public officials and political activists. A second group consisted of southern white men who had opposed, or been lukewarm in their support of, the Confederacy. Many of them saw in the new party an opportunity to modernize and democratize the South, in effect transforming it into a new South. Other white southerners who joined the Republicans were politicians who, for various reasons, calculated that they themselves and the region would benefit if the Republican Party succeeded. And, finally, African Americans, both the freedmen and those previously free, were confirmed Republicans, knowing that their future and that of their race was tied closely to the party that had emancipated most of them and that alone could protect them and advance their prospects.

Unfortunately, all three groups were, in a very real sense, outsiders and therefore anathema to most white southerners, who wasted no time before launching vitriolic attacks against them. They dismissed the northerners as rejects from their own society, “carpetbaggers” who came south with no assets and belongings, save what could be carried in a suitcase, or carpetbag. Northerners in North Carolina’s constitutional convention of 1868 were dismissed by the state’s leading newspaper as “men without character or talent, unknown to the people, unaccustomed to public life and knowing[ ] little of Constitution-making than so many wild Arabs... They came as adventurers to make gains.” The native whites who affiliated with a party that was alien to the South and had been imposed from outside were denounced as “scalawags,” renegades of no account or worth who were traitors to their race and region. Even though many of these “scalawags” were politicians who had figured prominently in southern politics previously, such as Joseph E. Brown, the former governor of Georgia, or James L. Alcorn, a Mississippi congressman before the war, they were still treated with suspicion and contempt. And, of course, blacks were vilified just as they had always been, except that their role and influence in the party were now wildly...