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## Monkey Houses or Revolutionary Legislatures? Moderating the Binary of Black Politicians in South Carolina

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### Writing Process

Writing this paper was an extensive process. It began early in the Spring semester—in ASI 120. From the beginning of the semester the ASI 120 students knew we would be writing a historiography in the realm of Reconstruction. To hone down a more specific topic, we were assigned Eric Foner’s *A Short History of Reconstruction*. By reading his account of Reconstruction, I was able to select a topic: black politicians in South Carolina. Next, a research librarian visited my seminar and introduced us to the research process. From there, I was able to gather sources and begin my annotated bibliography. To complete the annotated bibliography, I took elaborate and detailed notes on the historical interpretation of each author, and then proceeded to summarize each source. From the annotated bibliography, I worked at categorizing the sources and developing my argument for the paper—essentially, arguing for which source is the “best”, what is the criteria for being “the best”, and why. Once I settled on the criteria, I was able to form a draft of an argumentative historiography paper. I met with both Dr. Mackay and the Core Write Place Consultants to distill my drafts to more concise and effective versions. After some final grammar and structure tweaks, I submitted my final paper to my instructor, Dr. Mackay.

Course

ASI120

Semester

Spring

Instructor

Elizabeth Mackay

Year

2019

# Monkey Houses or Revolutionary Legislatures? Moderating the Binary of Black Politicians in South Carolina

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*Anna Biesecker-Mast*

*The Birth of a Nation* is an American film made in 1915, directed and co-produced by D.W. Griffith. Based on the novel by Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Clansman*, the film revives a Ku Klux Klan heroism. As Dixon put it when he was on a tour with the film: “My object is to teach the north... what it has never known—the awful suffering of the white man during the dreadful reconstruction period.”<sup>1</sup>

The silent film sets the scene with a title card: “The riot in the Master’s Hall. The negro party in control in the State House of Representatives, 101 blacks against 23 whites, session of 1871.<sup>2</sup> An historical facsimile of the State House of Representatives of South Carolina as it was in 1870.” Directly following are scenes of black politicians exhibiting “riot” behavior—wildly gesturing, pumping their fists, and boisterously laughing, not taking the legislative job seriously. In the balcony stands the “helpless white minority” who cover their mouths in shock and concern. The camera narrows in on individual black politicians, who are drinking alcohol they have stashed under their desk papers and who are kicking their bare feet up on desks. Some of the legislative actions include declaring that all members of the legislature must wear shoes and that “all whites must salute negro officers on the streets.” Additionally, the legislature passes a bill “providing for the intermarriage of blacks and whites.” Quite clearly, Griffith is narrating one

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<sup>1</sup> Erin Blakemore, “‘Birth of a Nation’: 100 Years Later,” *JSTOR Daily*, February 4, 2015, <http://www.daily.jstor.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer W. Taylor, “South Carolina’s Legislature in *The Birth of a Nation*” YouTube, October 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uuCMA-yE64>.

particular story of black politicians in South Carolina: that they were barbaric and undermined the decorum of the legislature. And throughout the short segment, Griffith portrays this interpretation as historically accurate, introducing scenes with title cards like “historic incidents from the first legislative session under Reconstruction.” Interestingly, this interpretation is echoed in other works, even in works by historians—some of whom are still revered today (although not by academic historians) and some of whose interpretations of Reconstruction are included in this historiography.

Throughout American Reconstruction (1863-1877), freedmen struggled to reach high levels of state government—especially in states like Texas, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia. By contrast, blacks were able to achieve significant political power in states like Mississippi and South Carolina. Starting during the South Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1868, the freedmen of South Carolina began to assert their representational power as delegates and, notably, they had strong representation at the convention. Many of these delegates moved on to being elected legislators of South Carolina’s state government by 1870.<sup>3</sup> How this level of representation developed in the first place and how well these black Republican politicians governed are widely disputed by historians. The following sources represent just a few of the many different interpretations of this historical moment. Specifically, these sources range from extreme to moderate stances on how qualified for office these politicians were, how successful they were in office, and how they treated their conservative white counterparts. These sources fall into three distinct categories, based on their core arguments. The first category, “Monkey Houses,” includes sources that portray these black politicians as too uncivilized and barbaric for office. Conversely, the second category, “Revolutionary Legislatures,” contains interpretations that argue for the truly revolutionary and progressive nature of black politicians in South Carolinian government. Finally, sources in the third category, “Moderate Interpretations,” consider both sides of the argument, acknowledging not just the valid qualifications and successes of the black politicians but also the damaging consequences of the political conflict and unrest on the functionality of the legislature. By further examining these sources, it is clear that Thomas Holt’s interpretation demonstrates the most credible argument

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, updated ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1984), 148-155.

because it mediates between two reputable interpretations thereby convincing the reader of the author's reasonability and accuracy.

### Monkey Houses

One prominent historical perspective on these Republican South Carolinian legislatures eviscerates the posture and behavior of the black politicians. Either by claiming a first-hand account or by undermining the qualifications of the black politicians, these historians argue that with the election of black legislators into office, the South Carolina legislature became a monkey house—overrun with animals that were incapable of governing. One such historian is James S. Pike. In *The Prostrate State*, Pike argues that although slave emancipation was crucial for progression in modernity, blacks in South Carolina had only recently come out of slavery and thus were still too primitive in nature to be adequate representatives in government. According to Pike, “It is not too much too [*sic*] say that, as the negro in slavery had absolutely no *morale*, he comes out of it entirely without *morale*.”<sup>4</sup> Even the educated black politicians are not enlightened enough to govern because they were not brought up with a “whole moral nature” (as their fellow white politicians were).<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, Pike says, the South Carolina government was overrun with black politicians—a domination that only succeeded due to physical force and large numbers, not democracy. As a result, the government in South Carolina, for Pike, is “the most ignorant democracy that mankind ever saw.” Pike paints a before-and-after picture of South Carolina: he indicates that the state used to be the perfect example of modern civilization, but now lies flat, prostrate, in the dust, overrun by barbarians in political office.<sup>6</sup> Not only is this government disorderly, it actively suppresses its white communities and white politicians, who Pike portrays as victims, martyrs, and the only remaining up-standing citizens. In comparison, Pike depicts these black politicians as improper, uncivilized, and filthy mockers of the prestigious position of state representative. Pike is very clear, though, that he is not denouncing the rights of blacks to citizenship—just their right to participate in government until they are adequately civilized. This book provides a bleak portrayal of the South Carolina government under majority black leadership, which contrasts with many of the other more optimistic

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<sup>4</sup> James Pike, *The Prostrate State: South Carolina Under Negro Government* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated, 1874), 48.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

interpretations included in this historiography. This source is also unique because it was written during the tail-end of Reconstruction, which provides an interesting perspective from an author who directly witnessed the rise of black politicians to power in South Carolina and, a point the author emphasizes for purposes of establishing its credibility.

About fifty years later, historian Claude Bowers draws from Pike's interpretation of Reconstruction in South Carolina and writes the Southern redemption narrative in *The Tragic Era*.<sup>7</sup> In this narrative, Southern Democrats were striving to survive under the oppression of an incapable Republican government. Specifically, regarding the black politicians, Bowers aligns with Pike as well, consistently citing him along the way. For Bowers, blacks brought chaos and shame to the legislative process. He dedicates most of his chapter, "Land and Year of Jubilee," to eloquently describing the barbarism of the black men in office, which seems to spread like a disease to the white Republicans of the legislature. Starting with the House, Bowers contrasts the "good-looking, substantial" white Democrats with the unsophistication of the black Republicans and comments on how the "guffaws, the noisy cracking of peanuts, and raucous voices disturb the parliamentary dignity of the scene."<sup>8</sup> Moving on to the Senate, Bowers likens the scene to a barroom wherein legislators are drinking champagne, wine, and whiskey excessively—at taxpayers' expense. No doubt the scene feels familiar to viewers of *Birth of a Nation*. Not only are they behaving in an undignified manner in the Senate, these Republicans are engaging in unorthodox money deals like bribery and bond-looting. Clearly joining ranks with Pike and Griffith, Bowers depicts these Republican black politicians as unprofessional, barbaric, and corrupt in office. That depiction contrasts sharply with the interpretations of many other historians who at least nod to some successes of these black politicians.

Interestingly, the most recent source included in this historiography, published in 2011, falls into this category. Retired minister and amateur historian Jerry L. West's, *The Bloody South Carolina Election of 1876*, is about the redemption of South Carolina and outlines the process of Southern white democrats regaining

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<sup>7</sup> Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era* (New York City: Cornwall Press Inc. for Blue Ribbon Books, Inc., 1929).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

control of the state.<sup>9</sup> In his introduction, West romanticizes this campaign by portraying the Democrats as victims of the Republican rule of unrest, disenfranchisement, and military oppression. According to West, the Republican domination of the government not only disturbed the peaceful efforts after the Civil War to restore the Union, but was also an effort to punish the South in retribution for the compassion Johnson had shown for the South. For West, the Republicans were motivated by revenge and, starting in 1868, Democrats began their struggle for freedom. With this narrative in mind, it is then interesting to take a look at West's opinion on the black legislators of South Carolina during this time period. In his chapter titled "Satan's Rule," West narrates the Republican rise to power in South Carolina, specifically noting the sweeping election of 1868 when not enough conservative whites voted to have any real impact on the election, thus giving the Republicans the majority. In the wake of this Republican electoral sweep, West addresses individual black politicians and actually acknowledges their qualifications, noting prior minister positions, secondary education, and some college-level education. That said, he also warns that the freedmen were not as ingenious as the North expressed. Overall, West sides with the Democratic effort to regain South Carolina's government yet does convey a bit of respect for the legitimacy of black politicians and black voters. In this way, West pushes the boundaries of this category a bit. Broadly speaking, however, West's book resonates strongly with Pike's and Bowers' as he argues that the "white minority" was victimized and celebrates the ultimate triumph of the Southern white conservatives over the Republican black politicians.

### **Revolutionary Legislature**

On the opposite end of the spectrum of interpretations is the argument that black politicians were actually quite qualified for office and successfully moved the South Carolina legislature onto a more progressive trajectory. In his historical account of Reconstruction in South Carolina, *The Negro in South Carolina During the Reconstruction*, Alruthus A. Taylor highlights and critiques the exaggerations white historians have made about black people emerging out of slavery and assimilating into the political sphere.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Taylor dissects

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<sup>9</sup> Jerry L. West, *The Blood South Carolina Election of 1876* (Jefferson, North Carolina; McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Alruthus A. Taylor, *The Negro in South Carolina During the Reconstruction* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1924).

the complaint that blacks, in their ignorance, caused the state of South Carolina to regress economically and politically. Instead, Taylor argues that from an economic perspective, the new government of South Carolina was steadily progressive. For example, in response to the increased tax levies, Taylor argues that they do not provide conclusive evidence of corruption; rather, they were “a reflection of the changing needs of the time.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, instead of portraying black politicians as ignorant, Taylor asserts that they were actually very prepared for taking on the role in government, as many were thoroughly educated at school and in church. Taylor also indicates that there were numerous newspapers and white politicians who also saw the performance excellence in these black politicians. In fact, Taylor points out, there were a number of white voters who chose to vote for the black candidates over their white opponent. One example Taylor provides is the election of Robert C. DeLarge, who received more white votes than his white opponent because they saw him as more qualified for the position. Through his deliberate attention to detail and statistics, Taylor constructs a comprehensive critique of the common exaggerations made by white historians of black politicians in South Carolina. However, Taylor fails to include any counter argument or any alternative story, thus reducing the credibility of his argument despite his elaborate statistics.

Similarly, Joel Williamson writes about the qualifications of black politicians in South Carolina’s government in his book, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877*.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, he details their successful assimilation into the labor force and their ability to effectively adjust to the economic order out of slavery. Beyond that, Williamson addresses and complicates the Redeemer’s perspective of black politicians in South Carolina.<sup>13</sup> For example, he thoroughly dispels their exaggeration of the disqualification of the black politician. He does this by giving clear and concrete examples of their qualifications. For instance, Williamson articulates the Freedman’s Bureau program that worked to employ blacks in their educational division. This program funneled many blacks into Republican leadership. Additionally, Williamson points out, many blacks were ministers prior to becoming politicians. Rather than

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>12</sup> Joel Williamson. *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

<sup>13</sup> The Redeemers were a political coalition who largely controlled the history of the Reconstruction period and who notoriously dismembered any reputable characterization of black politicians and carpet-baggers.

focusing on the popular validation of black politicians in South Carolina like Taylor did, Williamson argues that leadership opportunities like those in the Freedman's Bureau and the church were what qualified these black politicians in South Carolina. Importantly, Williamson questions the more conservative historical interpretation; however, he does not put forward any compelling counter arguments thus falling into the trap of only telling one story.

In his article, "Black Politicians in Reconstruction Charleston, South Carolina: A Collective Study," about black politicians in Charleston during Reconstruction, William C. Hine combs through census data, registers, city directories, and tax records to piece together the origins of black politicians who were active in South Carolina.<sup>14</sup> Through this methodical investigation of their origins, Hine comes to very logical conclusions about the background and motivations of black politicians in Charleston. Firstly, Hine proves that most of the black politicians in Charleston during Reconstruction were native to South Carolina and free prior to the Civil War. In proving this, Hine argues that these blacks were well groomed in the cosmopolitan city life. Importantly, this point dispels Pike's claim that they were too barbaric for government since they were raised in slavery. Hine also points out the difficulty ex-slaves faced when running for office. Additionally, according to his records, more than half the black politicians of Reconstruction were literate or semiliterate (meaning they could read, but not write). Hine argues that a number of black leaders were well-educated; he lists the black politicians who were educated in high school and/or university. Not only were they educated, Hine says, many of them were also skilled or unskilled laborers. Typically, according to Hine, the ones who came into politics out of a skilled job were some of the most influential politicians. By illuminating the overwhelming evidence that black politicians in South Carolina were educated and well-versed in reputable work, Hine convinces the reader of their qualifications. However, like Taylor and Williamson, Hine does not include an alternative perspective to complicate the one story he is telling. Overall, through analysis of these detailed records, Hine paints a picture of a qualified and cosmopolitan black legislature in Charleston, South Carolina.

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<sup>14</sup> William C. Hine. "Black Politicians in Reconstruction Charleston, South Carolina: A Collective Study." *The Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 4 (1983): 555-584.

### Moderate Interpretations

Rather than siding with one or the other end of the spectrum of interpretations, there are some historians who attempt to glean truths from both sides and synthesize them into a more moderate interpretation. One such historian is Thomas Holt, who offers a unique critique of both Joel Williamson's optimism and W.E.B. DuBois' pessimism of Reconstruction's prosperity in South Carolina. In his book, *Black over White*, Holt does not side with either perspective that Reconstruction in South Carolina was a complete success or that Reconstruction was complete failure in the arena of black politics.<sup>15</sup> Rather, Holt argues that these black political leaders were bourgeois and as such failed their peasant counterparts. For Holt, these black leaders overwhelmed the South Carolina legislature and had a golden opportunity to enact change, which they did to some extent but not to the extent Holt imagines they could have. Throughout his book, Holt moderates between Williamson and DuBois, always landing somewhere in the middle. For example, Holt believes the South Carolina black-dominated legislature enjoyed some striking successes including the establishment of a public education system and ending the formation of an apartheid movement born from the Black Codes. However, Holt also notes some of the Republican legislature's major failures. One of these, Holt says, was the black bourgeois disregard of the peasant constituents' problems. In the wake of rapidly gaining political power, black politicians forgot to include the black proletariat of South Carolina. This interpretation is particularly distinctive because it takes into account the intersectionality of race and class in the story of black politicians in South Carolina instead of focusing on race alone. In doing so, Holt develops a new dimension of credibility and neutrality that the other sources lack. Holt does the best job avoiding the trap of only telling one story. By both narrating the story of lower-class Americans and mediating between two historians, Holt demonstrates a unique awareness of the presence of multiple stories.

Contrastingly, historian Richard Zuczek, in his *State of Rebellion: Reconstruction in South Carolina*, focuses on a different narrative of black politicians' ascent to power in South Carolina's legislatures.<sup>16</sup> What makes his

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Holt, *Black over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction*. (Urbana Chicago London: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

<sup>16</sup> Richard Zuczek, *State of Rebellion: Reconstruction in South Carolina*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996.

perspective unique is how he describes the tensions between the black Republican politicians and the white southern Democrats as a military struggle. Specifically, Zuczek highlights the military violence of this white resistance against the black Republican government and how this resistance successfully overthrew the black Republican government. Throughout his portrayal, Zuczek illustrates the white conservative ranks as deceptive and violent schemers against the Republican opposition. For instance, Zuczek describes the conservative effort to manipulate black citizens into joining the Union Reform which criticized the corruption of the Republican government prior to 1870. He asserts that many Republicans including black Republicans like Robert Brown Elliott were too smart to support the Union Reform campaign. However, Zuczek also portrays the entire Republican government, dominated by blacks, as wrought with division, corruption, and instability. For Zuczek, they could have done more to secure stability in the government in the face of conservative white opposition. Throughout his book, Zuczek offers a detailed account of the violent white aggression against the Republicans and ultimately argues that Reconstruction was defeated by relentless white conservative efforts to take back control of South Carolina. Unlike Holt, Zuczek fails to demonstrate an openness to outside perspectives as he does not devote substantial time to acknowledging the work of other historians. Additionally, Zuczek focuses entirely on race to the exclusion of any other factors thus ignoring the kind of intersectionality that Holt underscores. In sum, Zuczek addresses the direct conflict between the conservative whites and Republican legislators in South Carolina and characterizes both sides fairly objectively.

Out of these three categories, the last one, “Moderate Interpretations,” best demonstrates objectivity by considering both sides of the argument—and in doing so, the reader is more convinced of its reasonability and accuracy. However, out of the two sources in this category, Holt’s interpretation is more compelling than Zuczek’s because Holt constantly mediates between well-established historians, Williamson and DuBois. Holt’s repeated referral to their arguments shows he is willing to bring in outside perspectives, which builds an extra dimension of credibility that Zuczek lacks. Additionally, Holt brings intersectionality into his interpretation—discussing the class differences among blacks in South Carolina and how black politicians failed to address the black proletariat population. For all of these reasons, Holt does the best job of establishing credibility with the reader—by illustrating a unique awareness of the multiple stories. He

demonstrates this broader perspective by presenting various sides of the debate and by building his argument from two recognized historians on the topic.

History is contingent, and so often we as everyday historians fall into the trap of only telling one story which becomes “fact” and then it becomes impenetrable. In doing so, we forget about all of the other stories containing truths we have either dismissed or never heard. As everyday historians, we need to be constantly aware that we can never know everything, so we need to question single stories that force others into the margins or nonexistence. For instance, Griffith’s dramatic characterization of South Carolinian black politicians as incompetent and barbaric grossly ignores the numerous qualifications many of them had before coming into office, not to mention the deeper story of elite black politicians not doing enough for the lower-class African Americans. Though a number of sources considered here are not as marginalizing as Griffith’s film, many of them do fall into the trap of telling only one story. These interpretations are important to consider, but the ones that accommodate more perspectives and create their own compilation from those various perspectives achieve a better comprehension of the past. This is why Holt’s numerous dimensions of neutrality and collaboration with other historians makes his account of black politicians in South Carolina the best out of all the sources considered here. And in reading syntheses like Holt’s, we as everyday historians can learn how to construct our own blended stories and learn how to be open to their contingencies.

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