

## THE NEW HISTORY OF RACE RELATIONS

Robert R. Dykstra. *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. xi + 270 pp. Tables, maps, appendices, notes, and index. \$47.50.

Political history, some historians say, is dead. Concerned only with the petty squabbles of rich white men, irrelevant to the real lives of the deprived or less favored, the territory of messy compromise, not lofty ideals, electoral and legislative politics, in this view, is unworthy of much attention. And the methods of the "new political historians" of the 1960s and 70s -- the formulation of clear hypotheses informed by explicit social scientific theories and their testing through using statistical methods -- are elitist, pseudo-scientific (when "truth" is relative and fleeting), inherently right-wing, and no fun to read about. In a "postmodern" age, better to write what you feel about "texts" (and anything and everything qualifies as a text), always being careful to include some and preferably several of the following words in your title: gendered, cultural, republican, class, race, and carnival.

Bob Dykstra's brilliant, readable, and profound new book not only reaffirms the importance of politics and of the techniques and theories of social science history, but it also demonstrates that race relations and changes in those relations in

America cannot be rightly understood without such methods. Far from a parochial study of an obscure, 99% white state that is best viewed, vaguely and briefly, from a transcontinental airplane, Dykstra's monograph is concerned with the broadest and deepest questions about our history -- how changes in social behavior and attitudes come about and how real they are. No one interested in nineteenth century U.S. history or ethnic interactions should ignore it, and readers who take the book seriously will learn and delight, and may change their opinions on what they believe to be true about racial relations and even how history ought to be done.

Not only does *Bright Radical Star* prove that political history is alive and very well, but it also serves as the most impressive monograph yet in what seems to me a new history of race relations, one that treats racially-oriented behavior as profoundly important, but changeable; as shaped by law, not fixed by culture; and as different from and more significant than expressed attitudes on racial matters. It is an optimistic book in two senses, one that should prove to a currently skeptical age that racial and political change can be progressive and that the study of political events can be central to history without depriving those less favored by past societies of the attention that they deserve.

Without taking a recorded vote, the 1839 legislature of the Iowa territory, dominated by white farmers born in southern and border states, passed a conventional black code banning African Americans from schools, the militia, the ballot box, and testifying against whites in court. The next year, the body corrected

an oversight by forbidding interracial marriages. Although initial efforts by abolitionists to repeal these laws failed, by 1857, a state constitutional convention authorized a referendum on black voting, in 1868, another referendum actually instituted impartial male suffrage, and in 1880, citizens repealed the remaining anachronistic black laws in a third popular vote. Why Iowans bothered to pass such laws in the first place and how and why the statutes were repealed are the central questions that Dykstra examines, and although he has scoured every conceivable relevant qualitative source, the three referenda and numerous legislative roll calls form the chief data that he analyzes systematically.

Although some historians have ignored or even denied it, Dykstra shows convincingly that abolitionists after the formation of the American Antislavery Society in 1833 repeatedly agitated against "black laws" in Iowa and other states. They had to. If colonization abroad was too costly and coercive to succeed, as it was, then abolition would mean that freedpeople would stay in the U.S. in *some* status. Antislavery could only become politically viable if abolitionists convinced whites that emancipated slaves who enjoyed at least some civil rights posed no threat to American society, and the best way to do this was to demonstrate that blacks would responsibly exercise equal rights. Thus, for abolitionists, ideals and tactical considerations both pointed toward fostering the civil rights of free persons of color.

Iowa's abolitionists began to act on this understanding as early as 1841, two

years after the passage of the Iowa territory's first discriminatory laws. Quaker, Congregationalist, and progressive Presbyterian villagers petitioned the legislature, a sympathetic Whig forced the House to vote on a repeal bill, and although the bill lost overwhelmingly, it served as the basis for future agitation by local antislavery societies, as well as the Liberty Party, which, Dykstra shows, attracted almost all the abolitionist activists in the state, and a slowly increasing number of sympathetic Whig politicians. Democrats almost uniformly opposed black civil rights, in Iowa as elsewhere.

Reacting against the continual abolitionist/Liberty agitation for the repeal of the black laws, the 1844 statehood constitutional convention, 71% of whose members were Democrats, came very close to banning blacks from the state entirely. This was not a measure that attracted support from delegates who were even very mildly against slavery, but one sponsored by proslavery forces. Thus, its chief proponent captured his constituents' attitudes in the slogan "Slave or no negro." (59) Despite the fact that there were only about 300 African-Americans in the territory at the time, an abolitionist petition against any black laws evinced from a constitutional convention committee a vision of a racial future that was as apocalyptic as any farther South:

There are strong reasons to induce the belief that the two races could not exist in the same government upon an equality without discord and violence, that might eventuate

in insurrection, bloodshed and final extermination of one of the two races. No one can doubt that a degraded prostitution of moral feeling would ensue; a tendency to amalgamate the two races would be superinduced; a degraded and reckless population would follow; idleness, crime and misery would come in their train, and government itself fall into anarchy and despotism. (57)

After first endorsing exclusion, the convention rejected it by a vote of 35-33, largely for fear that it might cost Iowa votes for statehood in Congress. Missouri's request in 1819 had been held up for two years on this ground, and an important 1837 judicial opinion by Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story implied that the Fourth Amendment privileges and immunities clause prohibited such deprivations of rights by the states. In fact, Florida's statehood request, considered by Congress at the same time as Iowa's, was delayed by New England members on exactly these grounds.

The convention's rhetoric and actions were not the only signs of how much abolitionists had to overcome in what Dykstra calls "perhaps the most racially conservative free state in the Union." (239) In 1849, Quakers from the village of Salem were tried, convicted, and fined \$2900 for helping some Missouri slaves to escape. Iowa was the

only northern state whose two senators voted for the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and the state's most prominent Whig newspaper editor lost his job for criticizing that law. In 1851, the legislature actually passed a black exclusion law, but its effectiveness was limited by a clever legislative trick that Dykstra charmingly elucidates. (How could anyone have ever thought that abolitionists were indifferent to institutions or unwilling to try to manipulate them?)

Nonetheless, in 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act suddenly ignited the state, finally driving the Free Soilers into a coalition with the Whigs and thrusting the coalition into control of the governorship and General Assembly. What accounted for this upsurge, after so many years of frustration and despair for Iowa abolitionists, Dykstra does not really explain. The temperance issue and a small Know-Nothing movement arrived at approximately the same time as the anti-Nebraska crusade, almost no Liberty or Free Soil activists in Iowa became Know-Nothings, and since slavery and black civil rights issues split the state's small Know-Nothing movement, Republicanism could not have been a product of nativism in the state.

Rather than one issue driving the others, Dykstra thinks midcentury men, "informed by evangelical religious belief," were moved "to fuse varied programs of uplift into one grand strategy of universal

emancipation" in the Republican party. (125) He supports this assertion through a detailed analysis of the positions of legislators in 1851 and 1855 on black law issues, showing that the patterns of their support correlated almost perfectly with party and votes on liquor issues, and, to a lesser extent, with age, religious tendency, and occupation. Democrats and wets were anti-black, and Republicans and dries, much less so. Younger men and members of pietist denominations tended to oppose black laws somewhat more than older men and religious liturgicals did. Merchants usually joined the Democratic party, while artisans tended to become Republicans. The social correlates of vote choices among the masses of citizens, Dykstra shows through a detailed comparison of election returns with demographic statistics, were similar to those of legislators. By 1856, the proximity of the brutal slavery struggle in Kansas turned out 85% of Iowa's voters, who backed the openly antislavery Republicans by 56%-44%.

As early as 1855, Iowa's tiny black population, led by Alexander Clark of Muscatine, petitioned the legislature to repeal the law that supposedly banned them from the state, and by 1857, they were agitating for suffrage and entry into public schools. In response, the state's Republican-dominated 1857 Constitutional Convention rejected

a motion requiring school segregation, leaving it to the courts to decide whether no mention of race at all meant that African Americans could or could not be denied entry into any particular school, timidly submitted the question of racially impartial suffrage to a vote of the people separate from ratification of the rest of the Constitution, and rejected a clause prohibiting black emigration, an issue which for the first time split the Democrats.

The convention's extensive discussion of racial discrimination and prejudice and Dykstra's extensive analysis of roll call voting in the body undercut any notion that there was a white consensus on such matters. Although admitting some personal prejudice, the convention's most liberal delegate, R.L.B. Clarke, favored a constitution "free from all invidious personal distinctions, and based upon universal suffrage," even if it damaged the fortunes of the Republican party. The slightly more moderate William Penn Clarke balked only at mandating equal suffrage, and that not from any matter of principle, but from fear that the public might punish the Republicans and even defeat the Constitution because of it. No Republican asserted a belief in the innate inferiority of African Americans, but only that slavery had degraded them and taught whites prejudice. Even John Edwards, son of a Louisiana slaveholder who had grown up

in that state, but was now an antislavery Republican, voted for several of the black rights provisions. In contrast, all of the convention's Democrats resisted any state-provided schooling for blacks, and they solidly opposed the rights of African Americans to testify or vote and even a general statement in the preamble that all men were "equal."

The referendum confirmed Penn Clarke's judgment, as only 15% of those who cast a ballot on Proposition 2, the black suffrage provision, favored it, and the Democrats' racist campaign nearly brought down the whole constitution. Unlike in other states, and unlike in Iowa after the war, Republican leaders feared to endorse black suffrage, and there was no organized campaign for it. Every man who voted Democratic in the 1856 election, Dykstra estimates, opposed impartial suffrage a year later, while Republicans split, with two-thirds of those who expressed an opinion favoring black voting, but nearly twice as many abstaining as casting a ballot on the measure. New Englanders, drys, Quakers, and Presbyterians were the only groups to favor black suffrage in 1857 in Iowa. Although a Democratic campaign stressing the party's opposition to school integration failed to dislodge Republicans from the statehouse later in the year, fear of getting too far out in front of a racially conservative public did lead Republicans in the subsequent legislature to abandon their opposition to requiring

unanimous consent from white parents before allowing black children to enter common schools.

The Civil War, in which 49% of Iowa's 1860 military-age men served, completed the emancipation of the Republican party. In 1865, the state GOP convention endorsed racially impartial suffrage by better than two to one, while Democrats, who had been devastated by the desertion of unionists from their ranks during the war, sought to revive their fortunes by organizing the "Union Anti-Negro Suffrage party." This time, the racial appeal failed, as more and more Republican leaders publicly approved what state Supreme Court Judge Chester C. Cole called "God's law of equality," and the voters ratified the new party line. By 1866, black suffrage had become so widely accepted by Iowa party activists that deviation on the issue cost Congressman John Kasson renomination, only eight of the eighty-three Republicans in the legislature opposed it, the state convention virtually unanimously endorsed it, and the landslide for the Republican ticket was even larger than in 1864 and 1865. By 1868, the state platform was referring to impartial suffrage as "a cardinal principle of our political faith," 85% of the Republicans in the legislature endorsed not only suffrage, but every other measure aiming at racial equality, Judge Cole, acting in a case brought by Alex Clark,

had declared school segregation illegal in Iowa, and black suffrage ran only five percent behind Grant in the general election, winning 57% of the vote - about 90% of those who backed Grant, but almost none of the supporters of Horatio Seymour. By 1880, when the state absentmindedly removed the last vestiges of the black laws from the statute books by referendum, those Democrats who bothered to vote still cast negative ballots, but two-thirds of the minority party did not even vote, while Republicans recorded their franchises overwhelmingly for equal rights. Finally, Iowa whites had reached something approaching a racial consensus: black laws were either undesirable or irrelevant.

Voters reached that consensus partly by conversion and partly by turnover. While two-thirds of the 1856 Fremont supporters who voted on Proposition 2 in 1857 supported it, these "yes" voters represented only a quarter of the Fremont total, for the majority, apparently caught between their own racism and a desire to support the position of their most progressive party leaders, abstained. In 1868, the former Fremont voters who remained in the electorate had been largely converted, voting as a unit for black suffrage, with less than a third abstaining. Democratic voters until 1880 were always virtually unanimously adverse. But those who had joined the electorate since

1856, who comprised nearly half of the potential voters by 1868, overwhelmingly supported black rights, suggesting that the events surrounding the Civil War and the courageous endorsements of equal rights by Republican leaders had imprinted themselves on that generation.

Dykstra ends with an explicit and fascinating discussion of the connection of the nineteenth century Iowa experience with social scientific theories of racial behavior change associated with Gunnar Myrdal, Robert K. Merton, Gordon Allport, and Thomas Pettigrew.<sup>1</sup> Like the historian C. Vann Woodward, these social scientists emphasize the importance of politics and authoritative laws in shaping racial behavior, the superficiality of much white racism, and the crucial impact of leadership in fostering change.<sup>2</sup> A pessimistic view that white Americans have always been incorrigibly racist, Dykstra concludes, "implicitly demeans the courageous idealism of many individuals, both black and white, who fought for racial justice. . . . The circumstances, processes, and strategies that won frontier Iowans to

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<sup>1</sup>Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (1944); Merton, "Discrimination and the American Creed," in Robert M. MacIver, ed., *Discrimination and National Welfare* (1949), 99-126; Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954); Pettigrew, "Racial Change and Social Policy," *Annals* (1979), 441.

<sup>2</sup>Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955).

the civil equality of blacks remind us that there are egalitarian precedents as well as a racist tradition in America's past." (270)

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