

Book Reviews

Brij Mohan

Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2019, 224 pp., ISBN-13: 978-03-965257-4 (cloth)

Thomas Piketty, *A Brief History of Equality*. A brief history of equality. Trans. Steven Rendall. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022, 274 pp., ISBN-13: 970-67-427355-9 (cloth)

Professor Eric Foner is the most well-known historian of the Civil War era and America's *Reconstruction*. He is DeWitt Clinton Professor Emeritus of History at Columbia University. He is a winner of the Pulitzer Prize, and has authored 25 books, excluding the one under review. This book is a timely publication of constitutional reforms that embedded equality into the nation's foundation. It also is a critique of guarantees that have been forgotten in the wake of ideologies of far-right republicanism. While the waves of Trumpism have overshadowed the democratic ideals enshrined in constitutional amendments, especially 13th, 14th, and 15th, the future of democracy has been eclipsed by the reactionary forces that have been unleashed by the 45th POTUS.

Civil War ended slavery. "Along with a nostalgic image of the Confederacy, the idea of the Lost Cause rested on a view of slavery as a benign, paternalist institution and of Reconstruction as a time of 'Negro rule' from which the South was rescued by the heroic actions of the self-styled Redeemers who restored white supremacy" (p. xxii).

Foner's "publications have concentrated on the intersections of intellectual, political, and social history of American race relations" (p. 223). The ugly head of white supremacy nearly brought a political coupe; it continues to beat the drums of lies and falsification to bring the Trumpian fascism back in the saddle. Decades

Brij Mohan, Dean Emeritus, LSU School of Social Work, Los Angeles, CA, USA. He can be contacted at brijmohan128@gmail.com and SWMOHA@lsu.edu.

ago, I taught the graduate students an offering called History and Philosophy of Social Work/Welfare. I knew nothing about Reconstruction. Ta-Nehisi might have been in Middle School somewhere. Today we are privileged to read Foner and Coates. However, I am uncertain if the anatomy of “whiteness” or “caste” in America is honestly taught in most MSW programs. CSWE’s “anti-racism” emphasis is akin to the shining tusks of a proverbial elephant.

Structurally, the book contains four chapters preceded by *Introduction* with an articulate list of *Illustrations*, *The Reconstruction Amendments*, and *Preface*, followed by a scholarly *Epilogue*, *Acknowledgements*, and *Notes with Index*. The chapters detail historical and analytical narratives of (1) *What is Freedom? The Thirteenth Amendment*; (2) *Toward Equality: The Fourteenth Amendment*; (3) *The Right to Vote: The Fifteenth Amendment*; and (4) *Justice and Jurisprudence*.

It seems fair to conclude: There is nothing absolute and permanent in the struggle for freedom involving rights of citizenship, equality, and justice. The contemporary social regression underlines the paramountcy of constitutional amendments that signify the essence of democracy. Foner concludes:

So long as the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow continue to plague our society, we can expect Americans to return to the nation’s second founding and find there new meanings for our fractious and troubled times. (p. 176)

Thomas Piketty’s new book on history of equality is about the origin and causes of inequality. Progress has been made, doubtless. Yet, the rise of global inequality is a matter of grave concern. It keeps Piketty restless. I share his concern, philosophically and pragmatically, even though I am not an economist like the distinguished French author.

The two immediate predecessors of the book under review include *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) and *Capital and Ideology* (2020). No one—not even Marx—has discussed, elaborated, traveled, lectured, and published so much and in such a short span—2014 to 2022—as Piketty has lately. To understand him and his mind, one ought to comprehend these two books before reading this one on “history of equality.” *The history of equality is the politics of inequality if I may*.

Understanding “equality” without thwarting “cultural separatism” and “intellectual compartmentalization”—Piketty believes—is a fruitless enterprise. Elsewhere, I have emphasized the significance of “unification of knowledge.” Education as a political process shapes the generational outlook about the reality. It’s evidently the dynamics of equality that is at the root of perpetual inequality. Teachers, students, and other readers whom this book is aptly dedicated to are the vehicles of this transformation, “the new economic and social history” (Piketty, 2022, p. 9). Piketty alerts to avoid two dangers: a) “neglecting the role and struggles and power relationships”; and “the importance political and institutional outcomes along with the role of ideas and ideologies” (p. 13).

History of all societies is the “history of class struggle.” Karl Marx prophetically changed the world which—Piketty reaffirms as violent and disastrous.

As eighteenth-century thinkers began to “enlighten” this dark side of humanity, they began to move “fitfully toward a more just distribution of income and assets. A reduction of racial and gender inequalities and greater access to health care, education, and rights of citizenship.” The author explores a vast field of knowledge demonstrating the need for continued systemic changes in the institutional infrastructure of legal, social, fiscal, and educational systems. The imperialist spectacle of The Queen’s passing as lately televised does not represent the other side of human tragedy: Starvation in Somalia, mayhem in Sudan, chaos in Ethiopia, war in Ukraine, and apocalyptic floods in Pakistan. Yet, if examined scientifically—as Marx did and Piketty is showing—there is an historical connection between glamor and gloom, beauty and beast, and hubris and despair.

This compelling “short text” covers a vast conspectus of intertwined themes which unravel the whole “metaverse” of equality: The movement toward equality; deconstruction of power and property; reparations; revolution; redistribution, democracy, socialism, and progressive taxation; discrimination; existing neocolonialism; and democratic, ecological, and multicultural socialism. Piketty alerts against the rise of statist hyper capitalism best represented by “Chinese socialism.” Elaborating his notion of a *Universalist Sovereignism*, Piketty concludes:

The march toward equality is a battle whose outcome is uncertain, and not a road laid out in advance. Since the end of the eighteenth century, equality has made its way by overturning the rules of established by the regimes of power. The same will be true in the future [N]early everything remains to be invented. (2022: 243)

Pluralist, decentralized, inclusive, and universal elements of Piketty’s new *sovereignism* has many a precondition and challenges. I have assayed such constructs, values, and factors elsewhere (Mohan, 1992, 2018). However, Piketty’s power of words and analysis is unmatched in the current culture of neoliberal orthodoxy¹. I strongly recommend this book for every course and program which seeks real social transformation.

References

- Gerstle, G. (2022). *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mohan, B. (1992). *Global Development: Post-Material Values and Social Praxis*. New York: Praeger.
- Mohan, B. (2018). *The Future of Social Work: Seven Pillar of Practice*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Piketty, T. (2022). *A Brief History of Equality* (under review).

¹See Gerstle, Gary (2022).