The Controversial Concept of Emancipation in the Nation-Building Process: The American Civil War and Italian Unification

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Introduction: The Significance of Comparison for the History of Nation-Building Processes

By referring both to the American Civil War and Italian Unification, the title of my paper implies a comparative perspective and so I would like to start by explaining briefly the reasons why nowadays a historian should adopt a comparative approach in the study of a nation-building process.

According to recent essays on the comparative approach, the goal of comparative history is "[to discover] more profound historical connections" and understand change over time (Haupt and Kocka 24).

In other words, the significance of comparison lies chiefly in the fact that, by analyzing a similar issue in two different contexts, and considering all the points that they have in common and those which distinguish them, it is possible to reach a better understanding of the issue itself. To reiterate, a comparative analysis makes it possible to consider issues that have a worldwide significance and to single out the specific characteristics that make that issue a national or, in some cases, even a local one.

In the past few decades, the comparative approach has frequently come under attack as paying too much attention to the nation-state as a unit of analysis. Consequently, historians have tried to develop other types of approaches, such

as *entangled* and *transfer* history, which try to go beyond the national standpoint by looking also at the interrelationships between regions, towns or institutions. As opposed to the classic transnational researches, *transfer* historical studies pay particular attention to the role played by intermediaries (such as booksellers, publishers or universities) as well as the cultural media in creating connections and the initiation of mutual spheres of influence between different societies. On the other hand, *entangled* history looks at problems and questions relating to specific objects of study, such as works, disciplines, institutions and legal systems (Haupt and Kocka 31-33).[1]

Nonetheless, in spite of all the attempts to relativize the meaning of the nation-state in historical studies that concentrate on the nineteenth and twentieth century, the nation-state represents an inevitable point of reference. As is well-known, the concept of the nation-state in the European and North Western Atlantic World, which developed from a process dating back to the sixteenth century, reached its climax in the nineteenth century, at a time when nationalist ideologies were just emerging.

Thus, a comparative analysis at the national level can still be extremely significant within the context of the nation-building process. It should be mentioned, however, that serious comparative studies in the nation-building process in general, and with reference to the Italian and United States case studies in particular, are few and far between.

On the basis of the principal studies to date, this paper aims to discuss the issue of emancipation in connection with two contemporaneous examples of that process: the American Civil War and Italian unification. By looking specifically at these two case studies, it is possible to reflect upon the meanings adduced to the concept of emancipation in two very different nation-building processes. The importance of Emancipation in both contexts and the use that the respective social and political elites made of that issue give us a greater insight into a more general understanding of nation-building in Europe and in the North Western Atlantic World; thus, in this respect, the study of the emancipation issue can help also to understand the peculiar features that contributed to the nation-building process of the United States in the Civil War Era.

The Civil War as a National Movement

According to Michael Bernath, the idea of including the American Civil War among the nineteenth century national movements should be that of seeing what this "experience can teach us about the workings of nationalism itself" (Bernath 4). In fact, it is only very recently that the American Civil War has found

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1 Among the seminal studies of the transfer history we can mention Espagne and Werner; see also Espagne. Among the champions of the entangled history see Werner and Zimmermann; Zimmermann et al.

its legitimate place among the nineteenth century nation-building processes in Europe and the wider world.

The first scholar to look at the Civil War in this sense was David Potter. In two seminal essays, both published in 1968, he affirmed that the Civil War represented an event during which a convergence of nationalism and liberalism took place in America and he goes on to say that "the Civil War, more perhaps than any event in Europe, fused the two great forces of the Nineteenth century–liberalism and nationalism . . . so thoroughly that their potential separateness was lost from view" (Potter, "The Civil War in the History" 298; cf. also Potter, "Civil War" 135-45). It took more than twenty years for Potter's thesis to become accepted. Finally, beginning in the nineties, historians have developed a particular interest in the Civil War as a nation-building process and have placed it within a broader perspective. European and, in particular, Italian scholars such as Tiziano Bonazzi, have also acknowledged that the victory of the North in the Civil War was a turning point in the affirmation and spread of liberal nationalism in the Western World, and particularly in Europe (Bonazzi).

By placing the nineteenth-century American political experience, especially the Civil War, within the broader development of national movements in Europe, historical studies such as those by Liah Greenfeld (1994), Thomas Bender (2006) and Lloyd Kramer (2011) have prompted scholars to consider that the United States as a case study has been far less exceptional. In a recent article on nationalism published in the *Journal of the Civil War Era*, Micheal Bernath affirmed that "it is time for Civil War historians to fully engage in wider debates surrounding the rise of nationalism in the modern world" (Bernath 4).[2] Yet to compare the American Civil War with the European national movements is tantamount to admitting that the Federal Union founded at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention in 1787 was, in fact, a Federal-State devoid of a sense of nationality and that the idea of an American people bound by a sacred constitutional pact was a purely academic idea constructed on an "invented tradition" in the course of the nineteenth century.[3]

This, however, does not mean that we should deny the peculiar aspects of American nation-building. On the contrary, with particular reference to the years

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2 In this essay, Bernath has given an account of the current historical literature that looks at the Civil War in a transnational perspective. The essay is also retrievable on *The Journal of the Civil War Era*. Web. 20 Apr. 2015. A great contribution to the internationalization of the Civil War Era nationalism has been recently given by Doyle, *Nations Divided* 23 (see also Doyle and Pamplona; Doyle, *Secession* and *The Cause*).

3 The idea of nations as "imagined communities" has been introduced by the seminal work of Anderson. Though admitting the idea of nation is a cultural product, other authors, like Don Doyle, do not believe that it was just a creation made and propagated by the political as well as the cultural elites in order to sustain their political goals; rather the concept of nation would be shaped by all the public and private practices of ordinary men and women who were part of the general social, economic and political changes undergone by the nineteenth century Western Atlantic World. See Doyle, *Nations Divided*.

of the conflict between the Union and the Confederacy, the American nation-building process took a radically different path compared to that of the European liberal movements. Thus, by using a comparative perspective, it is possible to show the reasons that made American nation-building a distinctive and exceptional process, without falling into the trap of "United States exceptionalism."

The Civil War revolved around two parallel ideas of an American nation and, consequently, two ideas of a nation-building process.

The first idea dated back to the Convention of 1787, which created a federal system that was far from being the "Perfect Union" proclaimed by the Constitution. In point of fact, since the idea of a nation-state implies, first of all, a community of people organized on a definite territory, the American Republic, from the very start, did not match up to the strict definition of a nation-state. In practice, in Don Doyle's words "if a nation is a people who occupy a common territory and share some elements of national cohesion (common language, ethnicity, religion, customs, or history), then the British colonies in North America simply failed to qualify on almost every count" (Doyle, *Nations Divided* 18).

In this respect, the United States were a state without a well-defined western border until the end of the nineteenth century, and western expansion became, in fact, the basis of sectional division with regard to the question of slavery. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the American political establishment was shaken by a series of sectional conflicts among the states concerning the extension of the slave system in the territories—conflicts which eventually led Abraham Lincoln to call the American Nation "a house divided against itself."[4] Thus, within the federal context, we can see that the first half of the nineteenth century was characterized by extensive political negotiations that aimed at constructing a unified nation.

In the midst of the Congressional battle over what might seem like little more than a series of institutional and legal concerns, a new movement for nationhood and independence began to emerge within the American Federation: it was the movement for Southern Unity and Independence, arising from the Crisis of 1850—following the Mexican-American War—which eventually led to the foundation of the Confederate States of America in 1861. At the core of the movement for southern independence lay the defense of slavery. Therefore, whether we consider the American nation building at a federal level or whether we focus specifically on the southern movement for independence, the American nation-building process is undoubtedly linked to the problem of slavery and the question of emancipation, both of which were widely discussed at both federal and state levels, North and South of the Mason-Dixon Line.[5]

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4 From Lincoln's "House Divided" Speech, given at Springfield on June 16th, 1858. See Cuomo and Holzer 105-13.

5 We should, in fact, keep in mind that, as a consequence of the Nat Turner rebellion, between 1832 and 1833, even the possibility of a whole-scale emancipation of African American slaves was seriously discussed in the southern states and became a central issue in Virginia legisla-

Within the Atlantic context, the relation between nation-building and the slave system operating in the United States, is in itself an exceptional fact. As Paul Quigley has perceptively noted, the "Americans were right … that their specific circumstances were distinctive. The exceptionalism of American nationalism derived in large part from the tensions between lofty national ideals and actual practices" (Quigley 48). At the core of this tension was the issue of slavery, which drastically contravened the principle of "democratic citizenship" that the American Revolution had supposedly proclaimed.

As previously mentioned, the American nation-building experience can also be considered within the context of the wider process of the formation of the nineteenth-century liberal nation-states in Western Europe. It should be remembered, however, that the construction of the European liberal idea of a nation-state was based on a twofold objective: on the one hand, the political self-determination of nations—or groups of individuals who shared ethnic, linguistic and cultural roots—and, on the other hand, the affirmation of the civil and political liberties necessary for the full development of national sovereignty. It is precisely from this standpoint that, as a consequence of the wide variety of ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups within federal borders, the American model was unable to define its ideal of nationhood in ethnic terms; on the contrary, it proposed the idea of a civic nation bound to the values of legal equality and freedom for the white people (Doyle, *Nations Divided* xiv, 16).[6] As a result, although during the antebellum period political leaders in the Southern States attempted to construct a nationalist ideology for the South, the fact remains that even the sectional conflict over slavery was ultimately based on an idea of a "civic-nation" that was still to be defined. The issue of emancipation in America, consequently, became increasingly more complex and controversial than was the case in Europe. In fact, many of the most prominent European democratic nationalists including Giuseppe Mazzini, Daniel O'Connell, Lajos Kossuth and Adam Mickiewicz, up to the leading exponents of the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire,[7] regarded the problem of slavery and emancipation not only as a

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ture, where it continued to be a controversial problem until the outbreak of the Civil War, to the point of influencing the democratic development of the State of Virginia.

6 However, it should be noted that the development of civic nationalism was also extremely important in reinforcing so called Anglo-conformism, an ideology diffused in nineteenth-century United States according to which the main characteristics of American society were akin to those of Anglo-Saxon ethnicity. For this reason Anglo-Saxon social and political traditions became the norm for immigrants to the United States who, as a consequence, were deprived of their native cultural heritage. Many scholars, most importantly Robert Park and Milton Gordon, have attempted to outline a model of assimilation based on the Anglo-conformist ideology. See Gordon 82-85. For a general introduction to the Anglo-conformity perspective see Kaufman, in particular 19-36.

7 Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-72), was an Italian patriot and politician. He supported the creation of a united and independent Italian Republic. In general, he stood for the universal cause of freedom for all the people from every kind of oppression. Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847) was an

moral issue, but also as an effective metaphor for supporting nationalistic struggles in the defense of the oppressed. Considering slavery as an intolerable form of oppression that impeded mankind's march toward progress, they embraced the abolitionist struggle as a case in point for the independence of European national minorities. Thus, as studies by Robin Blackburn and others have made clear, "the struggle against slavery and the struggle for citizenship rights were related to one another, and both these struggles, in turn, were related to the definition of modern nationality in the Euro-American world"[8] (Dal Lago, "'We Cherished'" 295).

At this point, looking particularly at the United States system, it is interesting to note that the southern radicals based their demand for the independence of the peoples in the Southern States on the basis of their primordial origins and their opposition to the dictates of an oppressive federal government. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the defense of slavery remained at the very core of their proposals. This was, obviously, diametrically opposed to the aspirations of European nationalists.

If the defense of slavery from attacks from the federal government was the main reason to promote southern nationalism, this was certainly, in Paul Quigley's words "a weak basis for securing unity within the South or securing legitimacy as a genuine nation on the world stage." In his opinion, a free white society in the Southern States would, necessarily, have to rest on a "mud-sill" class, a class of people legally and economically dependent on a superior ruling class. From this standpoint, neither a legal nor an economic emancipation of the slaves could even be envisaged. Hence, again to quote Quigley, "slavery . . . complicated the parallels secessionists drew between themselves and European nationalists" (Quigley 74).

One of the peculiar characteristics of the American Civil War Era was thus represented by the way the problem of emancipation was addressed by the political forces in relation to the nation-building process. For this reason, a reflection on the emancipation issue in comparative terms can be particularly enlightening in defining the similarities and differences between the American Civil War and the European struggles for national causes.

Irish political leader who fought for the political equality of Irish Catholics within the United Kingdom. Lajos Kossuth (1802-94) was the most prominent leader of the movement for the extension of civil and political rights in Hungary, as well as for the emancipation of Hungary from the Habsburg Empire. Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) was a polish national poet. He was exiled after the anti-Russian upheavals of 1830-31 and embraced Mazzini's concept of martyrdom.

8 During the nineteenth century the connections between anti-slavery movements and radical democratic movements literally crossed the Atlantic Ocean, creating a transnational and transatlantic movement for freedom. Cf. Blackburn. It may be noticed, though, that some abolitionists denied the concept of national self-determination. See McDaniel 113-36.

In the past few years, a type of dialectic between legal and economic emancipation within the boundaries of a nation-building process comparable to the one related to the American Civil War has been studied by some scholars within the Italian context, with specific reference to the Italian *Mezzogiorno* and to the role played by its agrarian elites in the struggle for Italian unification.

In this respect, one of the most significant contributions is that of Enrico Dal Lago (and especially his book *Agrarian Elites*, 2005), who has paid specific attention to the comparison between the American South and the Italian *Mezzogiorno* in the period comprised between 1815 and 1861.[9] Dal Lago's works form part of a broader literature focused upon the idea of the "South" in a comparative global perspective and have opened the way to perceptive insights.

The Southern question, as a problem concerning the American as well as the Italian nation-building process, is at the basis of Don Doyle's *Nations Divided*, according to which in both countries the issue of " 'southerness' became the counterweight by which national values were measured," up to the point that "for northerners in both countries, southerners served as foils for models of civic virtue, rebels who refused to conform to national ideals."[10] Likewise, in her comparison between the American Civil War and the Italian Risorgimento, Susanna Delfino has highlighted the fact that the idea of "southern backwardness" became a common feature of both the Kingdom of Italy and the nineteenth Century United States (see Delfino 105-06).

These studies represent excellent examples of the historical comparative approach to the analysis of the United States and the Italian nation-building process and pay specific attention to the issues arising from the political relationship between the American federal and Italian monarchical governments and their respective southern ruling classes—American slaveholders and Southern Italian landowners.

By going more deeply into the two case studies—the American South and the Italian *Mezzogiorno*—we can see that, in economic terms, both regions were essentially agricultural regions at the periphery of a capitalist world economy,

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9 Some suggestions about United States and Italian case studies are included in modern studies on nationalist movements, as well as transnational studies that are useful for a comparative analysis. Apart from the works of David Potter, Raimondo Luraghi, Luigi Salvadori, important suggestions can be derived from the works of Paul Quigley (2012), Timothy Roberts (2009), Ian Tyrrell (2007), Thomas Bender (2006), and Carl Guarneri (1997). And yet, in 2012, Bernath, in his aforementioned article on nationalism in the *Journal of the Civil War Era* argued that there are not many studies that compare the American Civil War with other national movements. In the past few years, however, there have been some important exceptions. Comparative studies between the American and Italian nation-building processes have been published by scholars such as Susanna Delfino, Don Doyle and Enrico Dal Lago, whose works are cited in the course of this essay.

10 See the preface by Anastatia Sims in Doyle, *Nations Divided*, in particular x.

which at that time was dominated by Britain and the Northern United States (cf. Wallerstein 25-29; cf. also Salvemini 5-10). Like all the semi-peripheral and peripheral regions in the European world-economy, both the American South and the Italian *Mezzogiorno* developed a system of staple crop production, centralized in large agricultural units and with the need of a large agricultural labor force.[11]

The specific nature of the two economic systems led to the adoption of particular models of labor relations. While the antebellum American South embraced the legal enslavement of African Americans, the Italian *Mezzogiorno* witnessed the rise of forms of economic and psychological subjection of the peasants who were, in theory, free citizens but, in practice, were almost exclusively denied access to active civil and political life.[12]

These two agrarian economic systems were controlled by comparable agrarian elites. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, largely as a result of the impact of the market revolution in the American South and of the commercial revolution in the Mezzogiorno,[13] American planters had increased their economic leverage in the South, while, in the same period, a new class of southern Italian landowners emerged from the abolition of feudalism and made its fortunes with the production and sale of commercial crops. In both cases, the ambitions of these new economic elites were largely at odds with the policies of their respective central governments: on the one hand, the United States southern elites became involved in a political conflict over the extension of slavery to the newly defined territories, one that would have had a direct impact on the ensuing balance of power between free and slave states in the federal government. On the other hand, southern Italian landowners, who mostly grew commercial crops in the peripheral region of the Bourbon Kingdom, agitated for greater political autonomy within the highly centralized Bourbon administrative government. As

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11 However, it must be noticed that "on Southern Italian latifondi, produciton of cash crops for sale was less common than on American plantations." See Dal Lago, *Agrarian Elites* 37.

12 It could be contended that while the slaves were denied any civic status whatsoever, Italian southern peasants—albeit subject to a process of strong subordination—had freedom of movement as evidenced by the phenomenon of their migrations. Nevertheless, as far as the issue of labor relations is concerned, the Italian *Mezzogiorno* is certainly comparable to the American South. In the period under consideration, both the two case studies can be considered as part of the broader context of the agrarian peripheries of the Atlantic economic system. By looking at these peripheries it is possible to trace a continuum of economic systems characterized by varying degrees of freedom and the lack thereof in labor relations according to the specific place and time. See Dal Lago, *American Slavery* 119-21. For an overview upon the many issues and approaches adopted by contemporary studies which aim at comparing the American South and the "other Souths" see Kolchin 74-115. Among the various themes tackled by comparative historians of the "other Souths," the issue of slavery is certainly one of the most important. In contemporary studies, Kolchin argues that "despite significant interpretative disagreements, many scholars have recognized that southern slavery is best understood in the context of slavery and other forms of unfree labor elsewhere in the modern world" (78-79).

13 For a discussion of the commercial revolution, as to say the participation of the southern Italian goods in the trades generated by the industrial revolution, and the consequent diversification of the Italian Mezzogiorno in three types of agricultural areas, see Salvemini 10-20.

in the case of the United States, therefore, the Italian *Mezzogiorno* faced problems in the core-periphery relationship, which were grounded in the emergence of provincial elites "whose rise to power was linked to the commercial revolution and to the abolition of the feudal system, [*and*] agitated for stronger political participation" (Dal Lago, *Agrarian Elites* 206).

The requests of the southern Italian landed bourgeoisie for more political autonomy and representation can be placed within the broader context of the concomitant nineteenth-century struggles in Italy for liberal forms of government. However, notwithstanding their avowed aim to achieve democratization, these struggles were still based on the need to preserve an economic system based on the exploitation of a labor class made up of peasants who, although in the eyes of the law were equal citizens, were not entitled to economic emancipation.

In the American South too there was a movement toward the democratization of institutions and of systems of political representation. Nonetheless, as Dal Lago points out, this idea of democracy was an idea of white male democracy, a paternalistic type of democracy that justified "the exploitation of racially discriminated" people (cf. Del Lago, *Agrarian Elites* 216-18) who did not benefit from either legal or economic emancipation; this was the only form of democracy compatible with slavery. It is within this context therefore, that the two case studies are comparable.

Within the broader context of the American and Italian nation-building process from the early eighteen-fifties to the early eighteen-sixties, the comparison between the respective movements for independence also yields some interesting elements for reflection on the issue of emancipation in line with what I have adduced earlier: on the one hand, emancipation in relation to freedom for the workforce—freedom from disenfranchisement in the case of American slaves, and freedom from economic exploitation in the case of southern Italy's peasants; on the other, emancipation as independence from political oppression from a central government—the federal government in the United States, and the Bourbon Kingdom in the Italian south.

In Italy, beginning with the Revolts of 1848 and then the 1859 War against Austria, the movement led by the elites of the *Mezzogiorno* for the achievement of provincial self-government became part of a larger nation-building project. The agrarian elites saw in the prospect of Italian national unification, dependent on the abolition of the Bourbon Kingdom, a means whereby they could achieve their objectives. In this respect, the movement led by the *Mezzogiorno* bourgeoisie closely resembles the struggle of the southern States of the United States for unity, which aimed at preserving the southern economic system through a sectional conflict that ultimately ended with the official secession of the southern states from the Union and the creation of the Confederate States of America. Thus, particularly after the 1846-48 Mexican War, the southern question became part of a broader American national issue that focused on uniting the free North and the slave South.

Both the Italian and the American nation-building processes were led by elites that supported a world-wide type of liberalism, one which connected economic progress with a type of political freedom based on individual liberties and representative systems. These last two elements were the two tenets of an ideology of "progressive nationalism" that, represented as it was by the Republican Party in the United States, was obviously at odds with the presence of slavery in the South. In this regard, the representatives of the United States southern interests could not be accommodated within a liberal project geared toward the progress of mankind. Indeed, in Dal Lago's words: "In the politics of progressive nationalism, antislavery represented the struggle for civil liberties that liberal nationalists in Europe waged against absolute monarchy" (Dal Lago, "Lincoln" 85-86).

Thus, although in the first half of the nineteenth century the republican governments of the American South were certainly far more advanced in terms of democratic institutions compared with the monarchical regime of the Italian *Mezzogiorno*, the existence of slavery and the concomitant need to preserve the inequality inherent in the racial status-quo prevented the United States southern elites from taking full advantage of the ideology of liberalism to advance their struggle for independence from the Union.

On the other hand, although "southern Italian political radicalism could contemplate, at its best, the creation of a truly democratic society," at the same time "the southern . . . Italian elites that subscribed to either the democratic or the moderate liberal programs of reform were more forthright than politicians in the American South in advancing ideas that advocated maintaining a certain degree of social status quo" (Dal Lago, *Agrarian Elites* 236).

The Civil War Breakpoint

Before the outbreak of the Civil War, the status quo in the American South was accepted by the majority of northern politicians. At the start of the war, even the Republican Party could be considered a moderate political organization with minimal radical elements, an organization that was mainly oriented toward the achievement of national progress through the development of a system based on an economy of free labor. It was precisely this idea of economic progress, however, that rendered the continuation of slavery as an economic tool absolutely unacceptable for the Republicans, even though most of them were not even abolitionists. They certainly expressed a hope for the eventual extinction of slavery, but their principal concern was to gain control of the federal government by provisionally confining slavery to the southern states.

This viewpoint, mainly oriented toward national progress in general to be achieved through economic development and the establishing of political liberties, is clearly comparable to a similar one shared by Italian nationalists who, for

the most part, were moderate liberals who aspired to constructing a unified Italy under a monarchical and constitutional government.

Even if we take into account the many differences between the Italian and the American contexts—especially in relation to their respective institutional structures—we can still see the American Civil War and Italian unification as nationalistic movements inspired by moderate liberal principles. Nonetheless, the similarities between the two "wars" end here for the simple reason that the two conflicts later diverged. And it is precisely the issue of emancipation that lies at the heart of this divergence.

In other words, while the American Civil War started as a nation-building process based on republican principles akin to those of the moderate liberals in Italy, it became radicalized after slave emancipation became a foreseeable reality following Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and the subsequent 1865 Thirteenth Amendment, which freed slaves throughout the United States and held out to them hope for future economic emancipation. Conversely, in Italy, even the most radical and democratic movements made compromises over an essentially moderate project of unification under a monarchical and constitutional form of government. Yet, even though significant and radical, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the ensuing Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments must be considered in the light of the eventual overthrow of African American rights that characterized the end of Reconstruction in the United States. The fact remains, that even though, soon after the War, Radical Republicans endeavored to create the preconditions for a model of black male American citizenship that ensured the same rights as white male American citizenship as regarded property, dignity, and equality before the law, these radical proposals ended abruptly with the compromise of 1877, which returned political power to the southern elites that were comprised, almost exclusively, of former slave-owners.

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