

# Interview

*Eric Foner*

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**Eric Foner** (nascido em 7 de fevereiro de 1943) pertence ao corpo docente do Departamento de História da Columbia University desde 1982. Foner é o mais destacado historiador contemporâneo do período da Reconstrução que sucedeu à Guerra Civil norte-americana. Escreveu *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, vencedor de muitos prêmios, e mais de dez outros livros sobre o tema. Seus cursos *on-line* gratuitos sobre “A Guerra Civil e a Reconstrução”, publicados em 2014, estão disponíveis no portal ColumbiaX. Em 2011, Foner ganhou os prêmios Pulitzer, Lincoln e Bancroft por *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*. Em 2000, foi eleito presidente da Associação Americana de História.

**Eric Foner** (born February 7, 1943) is a faculty member of the Department of History at Columbia University since 1982. Foner is the leading contemporary historian of the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, having written *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, winner of many prizes for history writing, and more than ten other books on the topic. His free online courses on “The Civil War and Reconstruction,” published in 2014, are available at the website ColumbiaX. In 2011, Foner's *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* won the Pulitzer Prize, Lincoln Prize, and the Bancroft Prize. In 2000, he was elected president of the American Historical Association.

*Reading your essay “My life as a Historian” (Foner, 2002, chap. 1), I got know about the importance of your father and uncle [Jack and Philip Foner] and the so called left wing radicalism of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in your first approach on history. In an other essay of the same book, “The Education of Richard*

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*Hofstadter*”, *I’ve known about your Ph.D. supervisor at Columbia University. May you talk a little about them and their influence on your formation for us?*

I grew up in the 1950s basically in what we call the old left, people who had been connected with the communist party, some of them had left, some of them were still sympathetic, but this was a little world, in the era of McCarthyism. It was an almost secret and very insular world. There was a lot of very anti-communist, anti-left sentiment in the country. But this was an insular world where growing up we just learned about things like race in America, the condition of black people in America, which was something nobody talked about, really, no white people were talking about it. Very few. This was before the civil rights movement really got going. But in a sense, I just learned from my father a different way of thinking about American history, where race was the fundamental problem of America, where radical movements were tremendously important in changing American society. At that time in school all you heard about was presidents and robber barons and diplomats and that kind of thing. My uncle Philip Foner was a very prolific historian. He created Frederick Douglas. In 1950 or so he put together four volumes – no one had ever heard of Frederick Douglas at that time. Literally, he didn’t exist. He was not in any U.S. history textbook. Today, every textbook talks about Frederick Douglas. But my uncle put him out there, collected his writings, collected his speeches, and helped to make people aware of what an important, brilliant figure he was. And of course they talked about labor history, African American history, and the history of women. Things, which today are totally normal and mainstream, but back then, were way off center. The scholarship was not dealing with that very much. So I grew up in that world, even though I wasn’t intending to be a historian. When I went to college I wanted to be a scientist, not a historian. But what history I knew was very different from what you would normally get in a regular classroom at that time. And then, when I was in college the civil rights movement really began. No, it didn’t really begin, it had been around. But the militant phase of the civil rights movement began in 1960 with the sit-ins of young black students. They became the cutting edge of change at that point. And many of us who were in school at that time and were interested in history really began focusing our attention on where did this come from in American life. The history of race, the history of slavery and abolitionism and, to try to find what we call a useable past, a past that could explain the present. Because the kind of history I’d learned in high school basically said, America was born perfect and has been getting better ever since. So this didn’t exactly explain why the country was falling apart, the

turmoil, the problems of the society. So you needed a different history that could actually lead up to the present. And in college here at Columbia I took courses with James Shenton, a great teacher who was very committed to these issues of slavery and race. And that's how I got interested in this area that I've studied most of my career in some way. So I think it's this combination of the world I grew up in and the world that was all around me when I was actually a student that shaped the way I look at history in many ways.

After I graduate here at Columbia I went to England for two years, to Oxford where I studied basically European history. And then I came back and did my Ph.D. here with Richard Hofstadter as my supervisor. So, now, of course that was also a very, very volatile time. Between 1965-69 I was here. That was the height of the anti-war movement, student uprisings, Columbia University's '68, where the students took over the university and occupied buildings. Well, you know about this.

*And did you participate?*

A little bit. I didn't really participate that much. I was too old by then. The real cutting edge were the undergraduates. The graduate students, we did things, but we were very moderate compared to the young undergraduates. But that was a very lively time to be studying history because again, the whole society was in this turmoil. That also influenced my long-term interest in social movements, radical movements. My second book, after my dissertation, was about Thomas Paine and the American Revolution (Foner, 1976). I got interested in that because of all the social upheaval in the society.

*Before, you mentioned that you went to England. In "My life as a historian" (Foner, 2002, chap. 1), you quote four well known historians you were in contact with or were influenced by, between the late 1960s and the early 1970s: Winthrop Jordan, E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Herbert Gutman. Did you meet Thompson or Hobsbawm during this time in Oxford?*

When I went to England, 1963-65, I read Thompson, but that still hadn't penetrated into the education at Oxford very much. And my dissertation book, the first one, was very much political history, ideological history, very little social history in it (Foner, 1995[1970]). It was very much a Columbia dissertation. Columbia, I mean Hofstadter himself, was very strong in this political, intellectual history, or political culture you might say. And I learned a tremendous amount from Hofstadter about how to study political ideas, which is

really what it's about. I think it was a good book, and that's what it was. But after that was finished, and after I taught for a couple of years, I was able to get a grant to go to England. This was the early '70s, and I wanted to write a book about American radicalism actually. And I was starting out with Thomas Paine. Now eventually Thomas Paine became the whole book. But that's when I was there from '72 to '73, that's when I really encountered Hobsbawm, Thompson, George Rudé, and their work – British social history, the British version of Marxist history. I attended Hobsbawm's seminar which he was running in London. And really I re-educated myself over there. Or, added to my education. In other words, social history was just rising at that time, history from the bottom up as they called it. And so my book on Tom Paine is about ideas, but also social history, in a way that my first book wasn't. I was very influenced by this British radical history way of doing history, so my book on Paine talks about his role among the artisans, the radical artisans, both in England and America, and tries to root him in this social conflict, a little bit more than my first book had done. So it was really there, in the '70s, that I became very influenced by, I guess you'd say, British Marxist history – Christopher Hill also. I hadn't really encountered them that much when I was a student at Oxford. It was seven or eight years later when I was back in England.

*And the work with Herbert Gutman was before...*

That's after that. After I came back. I was teaching at Columbia, but then Columbia told me to go away. They basically fired me. Or they said I was not going to get tenure. And Herbert Gutman had just been hired at City College [New York] to revamp their history department, and he offered me a job. Very, very lucky. And so that's really when I got to know Gutman. I taught for ten years at City College. From '73 to '82, something like that. And Gutman was really then the leading spirit of this new labor history in the U.S. and social history, bringing the British kind of perceptions to bear on American history. And I learned an enormous amount from Gutman, working with Gutman, about this in-depth social history that he was pioneering. He was working on his book on the black family at that time (Gutman, 1977). But I was also influenced very strongly, I hate to say it now, by Eugene Genovese, who later became crazy, politically. But at that time he was really the most important proponent of a kind of Americanized Marxist history. And Genovese strongly influenced my work at that time. In a certain sense, my first book was trying to do for the north what Genovese had done for the south – to look at the ideology of anti-slavery. He had studied the ideology of slavery. And I got to

know him very well. In the '70s, I worked on this short-lived journal that he was the editor of, called *Marxist Perspectives*. That was, I don't even know when, late '70s I guess. But it was an attempt to bring a form of Marxism into intellectual discourse in the United States. So I had these two. The problem was, Genovese and Gutman hated each other, would not speak to each other. And so trying to be friends with both of them or trying to be influenced by both of them was tricky, you know? But all of those influences were very strong on how I was writing history.

*But in a certain way you kept the mixing of the social history with a kind of political and cultural approach...*

Well, in a sense, that's what I try to do. And then when I started working on *Reconstruction* (Foner, 1988), in the end that book is all of this put together, exactly. A lot of it is just political history, national political history. And I learned how to do that at Columbia. But a lot of it is the social history of former slaves, and I learned how to do that from Hobsbawm and Thompson and Gutman. But, also, it has a very strong, I don't know what you'd call it, "class analysis" of what's going on. And that I get from Genovese. So it's a combination of these various influences that had affected me for twenty years at that point of scholarship. So it aspired to be what we were calling at that time a synthesis of everything together, political history, social history, economic history, intellectual history. It's never possible, but it was trying to do all of it, rather than saying, just do this, just do that, just do this part, that part. Because one of the things I learned with Genovese was slavery was a total system. And the abolition of slavery meant that a whole new total system had to be created. And so you had to look at all these other dimensions. It wasn't just a political conflict, it wasn't just a labor conflict, it wasn't just a racial conflict – it was all of those. All of those things together. So you had to look at all of them. That's what I tried to do.

*That is great, before continuing on this point, just to finish the picture about your relationship with the social movements in the time of the civil rights, can you tell the story about your first class on African American history?*

Well, someone gave me this recently. [Shows a photo.] This is me, back then, at this class. This is a little historical artifact. Somebody just gave me this the other day. He said he found it somewhere. So I said, my God, look at that. When I finished my Ph.D., I was hired to teach at Columbia and this was '69,

the height of black power among black students, and there were now a significant number of black students. When I was an undergraduate, there were no black students. This place was just as segregated as the University of Mississippi. But because of the civil rights movement, black students were coming into the college now. And they wanted black history, which is fair enough. But there was nobody – there were only two black professors in the whole place, I think. And there was nobody who could teach black history. And so, they asked me to do it, which I said, yes, I'll do it. I had some knowledge of it. And then I studied, I worked very hard. And a lot of students took this course, this is the first course I ever taught. But after a while the black students, nationalists, decided they didn't want a white teacher. For them, it was insulting to have a white teacher teaching black history. So the course was in a kind of turmoil. Students would demonstrate in the classroom. And they walked out of the class one day. And they went to the Spectator, the student newspaper, and said that we want to change the course. And it was very complicated for me because this was the first time I'd ever taught in a lecture course and of course they were right that we need more black professors. But I also kept saying, no. If this is a subject, it has to be judged on its intellectual merits. There's no such thing as just one type of person who's going to teach. Who will teach ancient Greek history, then, if we don't have any ancient Greeks around? So that was my first course. We survived, it got to the end, and that was it. And I taught black history many times after that. And then they did start hiring more black professors. But it was a very challenging and chaotic situation. But the result of that is, ever since then, nothing that can happen in a classroom can faze me. You know what I mean? Nothing can happen that is as challenging and traumatic as *that*. So, I walk into a classroom with no fear whatsoever, because I've already gone through whatever could possibly happen. It was the late '60s. That was it. SNCC [Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee] and CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] were throwing whites out, and Black Power was everywhere. So it's not surprising it was on campus also. So, we survived. That's what I can say. And this book that I published then, a year later, *America's Black Past* (Foner, 1970), basically that was the syllabus for this course, it was just the readings for the course, because there were no such things. Today there's a vast literature of black history out there. But back then, there were no such books. So I just put together the readings and the publisher published it, and it actually got used very widely for a few years around the country because these courses were suddenly developing all over and nobody knew what to do, how to teach them.

The funny thing is, after this was all over, many black people praised me very much as someone who was a pioneer of African American history. And of teaching it. Some years ago I was at an event at Rutgers University, which was celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their black history program. And I was on a panel discussion about what's happened in black history. And I just happened to say – it was a mostly black audience in a big auditorium – and I said, you know I'm delighted to be here because forty years ago I taught the first course ever given at Columbia University, and everybody started applauding. So I said, boy, look at how things have changed. Forty years ago I was denounced as a racist. Today they're applauding the fact that I taught that course. Some things have changed.

*Yes, fortunately, some things change. Let's then talk about Nothing But Freedom (Foner, 1983). This is your most well-known book in Brazil. It was published there in a time of change 1988, in the centenary of slavery abolition, and helped to create the field of post-abolition studies in the country. It came before your Reconstruction and has a comparative approach that you not follow in subsequent works, may you talk to us about the production context of this specific book?*

I am delighted to hear that of course. Unfortunately it's the only book of mine that was translated into Portuguese. I would love to see my book on Lincoln or some other book translated and used and available in Brazil. But that requires a publisher to do it somewhere. That book came out of when I was invited to give these lectures, called the Fleming Lectures, at Louisiana State University. Every year they have someone come down and give three lectures on Southern history and then they publish them as a little book. I was then working on *Reconstruction*, which took me about 10 years. So I was in the middle of that. But it shows you how life is full of serendipity. A few years before I had given a lecture at Duke University on some of my research about reconstruction and the labor problem particularly – land, labor, the struggle over land after the end of slavery, and theories of labor and all this. I was trying to say, you know it's not just a question of race. In the United States, everything related to blacks becomes race. The opposite of what it used to be in Brazil. But a lot of things are not race. Even though a black person is involved, that doesn't mean race is the big issue. I was talking about labor and these other questions. And a graduate student in African history came up to me after and said you know there's a big literature on these questions in Africa, the whole question of how to mobilize black labor and ideologies of labor, and some of it is

relevant to you. And I said, really? She said, yeah, I'll send you a bibliography. And in her bibliography she also included stuff on the West Indies, and I began reading this and it was amazing because we are very insular. American historians are very insular, maybe a little less so now than we used to be. But because we all believe, or most of us, in American exceptionalism, right? That is the bane of our existence, the belief in American exceptionalism – Because, if you believe America is exceptional, you don't need to know anything about the rest of the world. It becomes irrelevant. We have nothing to learn from any other history if we are so exceptional. We are exempt from the laws of history. So I didn't know anything about that. There had been some work, as you know, of comparative slavery going back to [Frank] Tannenbaum and [Carl] Degler and others, Herbert Klein and Genovese. But nothing that I knew of comparing the aftermath of slavery. And every country that had slavery had an aftermath of slavery, right? So, I really was very fortunate that this woman had given me all this and I started reading. And then, again in '80-'81, I was over in England for a year. I was teaching at Cambridge that year. And I got to know people who were really experts on the West Indies. And giving me books. And I realized that these issues of access to land, control of labor, and other things were universal. They couldn't just be understood within the context of American history. And so I devoted my first lecture in that series of lectures, and in the book, to this question of comparative emancipation. Now, that really did ring a bell here. Nobody knew anything about it. It got a lot of attention in the United States. I'm very glad that in Brazil it also had an impact. It opened up this question which now other people have gone into. But, having said that, I will also say that it's not so easy to do. And what I did was really very pioneering, or even primitive in a way. Because, for example, there's very little about Brazil in my book, because, I don't read Portuguese. So I am a prisoner of the literature that is in English. I mean good works by scholars in Brazil have been translated into English. But a lot of work has not been translated into English. So if you are going to really do this seriously you've got to know languages, and even more important, you've got to know the historiography, you've got to know where this book is coming from. I can pick up a book on Brazil after slavery, but I don't understand how that fits into a whole intellectual discourse in Brazil. And eventually I could figure that out with the British Caribbean, because I know British history, and it's all in English, so I can read all the stuff and compare how this scholar and that scholar are doing it. And a lot of the work in Africa. But basically it's Anglophone. It's a comparative history, but it's very much the English speaking world. I've learned a lot since then about



Brazil, and the very good work that's been done there of course on this. And then of course Spanish America, the Spanish Caribbean, there's a whole other literature. Not to mention Haiti, which has another literature. So I'm well aware of the lack of depth in some ways, but at least I was able to put these questions out there. How do we think about the aftermath of slavery? And what are the issues that recur everywhere? I use that as a way of counteracting this exceptionalism. The issue of master and slave in US is not all that different from the issue of master and slave in Cuba or in Jamaica or, maybe in Brazil. The way it's worked out is different in each national context. But the questions are the same. And even in Africa, the whole question of slavery and forced labor in Africa. Very few people have done that in the U.S. since. There's, one or two. Rebecca Scott of course has done this, for Cuba and the United States. I found it very fascinating. It's just a little essay but it's still a pretty wide open area here in America, 30-odd years after I published that.

*Why did you not follow with this comparative dialogue in the writing of Reconstruction?*

The *Reconstruction* book is part of a series in American history, the so-called New American Nations Series. In others words, it is domestic history and it's already 600 or 700 pages. I did not really continue that in that book because I had already said what I have to say in this other book. And here I'm really focused on the internal, because that book has many purposes and one was to finally put into the grave the old view of Reconstruction, which was so dominant. And to do that, I had to really, I don't know how to put it, I had to really kill it, effectively. And that required a lot of research, a lot of work, a lot of domestic American history, and the comparative didn't really fit so to speak. But another little, sort of comparative thing I did was this essay called "Why is there no Socialism in America?" (Foner, 2002, chap. 6) which is an old, old debate. It was a paper I gave in England around 1980 or something on theories of socialism or lack there of. But that is implicitly comparative because it's comparing labor consciousness, socialist consciousness in the U.S. with Europe, and other places. Really in a sense it's challenging the whole concept that there is a single path of historical development with capitalism, socialism, going in a certain direction. And a lot of that was influenced by work I'd done in England, even though it's not cited so much. But you're right, basically my work is internal American history. I think today of course in U.S. history everyone talks about globalizing or internationalizing American history, and that's all fine. I think it's great. Anything that cuts against our parochialism is

good. On the other hand, as I said, it's easier said than done. Most American historians do not know any other foreign language. How are you going to do global history if you only know English?

*"If Reconstruction was born in the archives, it was written from the heart" you wrote. I believe that most of Brazilian historians usually do not think about how rooted in the US society was the interpretation that you were fighting in your book. May you contextualize this?*

It's still out there in the popular memory. What we call the old Dunning School, which originated here at Columbia over 100 years ago, around 1900-1910, became the dominant view for at least half a century or more, which was that Reconstruction was a total failure because it was a period of corruption, misgovernment. The reason, according to them, was that black people were incapable of taking part in political democracy. It was racist thinking – the great error was to give the right to vote after the civil war to African American men, former slaves. Women of course didn't get to vote. They think former slaves were inherently incapable of political participation. They just were going to be manipulated by white people, unscrupulous white people. Therefore it was a terrible error to give them the right to vote, and therefore you have this travesty of democracy and eventually the white southerners banded together and overthrew this, and brought back good government in the South. Now this was very bad history. It was founded in racism, the lack of ability of black people was the underlying premise. But what I think is important, and one of the reasons it had to be killed, totally dead, is that it had very strong political implications, down to the present day. You still hear echoes of it today. That giving rights to black people is a punishment to whites. The South was punished after the civil war because blacks were given the right to vote. It's taking something away from white people when blacks get better rights. Or second of all that it was a mistake to give them the right to vote anyway, and therefore the South was then correct to take the vote away, which they did, so for 50, 60 years, black people could not vote in the South. It was based on the idea that white southerners understand race relations better than northerners. So any time in the 1920s, '30s, '40s, '50s people would demand change in the South, they'd say, no no no, look at the horrors of Reconstruction. If you give more rights to blacks you're going to have another Reconstruction. Reconstruction became the example of why nothing should change in the South. And it also became the intellectual foundation for the system of Jim Crow segregation. Oh, and also, it glorified the Ku Klux Klan. The Ku Klux Klan were a group of

patriotic, well-meaning southerners who just wanted to restore good government in the South. It justified violent terrorism and murder, which is what they really were. The Ku Klux Klan and groups like that killed more Americans than Osama Bin Laden did. And yet they were glorified. There were statues in the South to Ku Klux Klan leaders. So all of that was a good example of what we call the politics of history. The way history affects current thinking about things. So long after Reconstruction was over, this view of Reconstruction was part of the edifice of racism in the United States. And it had to be destroyed. Now I'm not the only person. There had been a generation of historians, starting in the 1960s. Once the civil rights movement came along, the underpinning of this outlook fell apart. You could no longer say, oh well, black people are so inferior that they shouldn't have any rights. And of course W. B. Dubois had done this in the 1930s with his great book *Black Reconstruction in America*. But that was ignored by the mainstream academic world. By the 1960s you had people like Kenneth Stampp, John Hope Franklin, Eric McKittrick. Mainstream, very excellent historians, chipping away at one or another part of this story. You had Leon Litwack in the 1970s. And many local studies, Reconstruction in this county in Alabama, slave labor and free labor in this other place they were the building blocks being created by many many scholars and many more documents becoming available. But what I had to do was put it all together in a coherent, new account. It's not enough to say, well the old guys are wrong. What actually did happen in Reconstruction? Once we say they're wrong, that doesn't tell you what the history was. So that's what I was trying to do. To create a new narrative of Reconstruction, a coherent narrative to take the place of the old narrative. But it's a political thing as well as a historical thing. And unfortunately, even though they don't teach the old view in schools anymore, certainly among an older generation of people who were educated in the '50s and before, that's the view of Reconstruction, still the old Dunning School is alive and well out there.

*In this sense, how about your subsequent experience as public historian of the period?*

Well, I wanted to bring good, new history to a broader public than is going to read academic books. I got involved in this public history world, again, almost by accident because the Chicago Historical Society, a very fine institution, asked me to become a curator of a big exhibit on the civil war era, about Lincoln and the civil war era. Because they were pioneering something that is very common now, which is bringing together an outside historian with the

people at the museum to figure out how to show history. Because generally speaking before that everything was done internally in these museums and very often the history was very out of date, because they're not scholarly historians, most of them. So when they asked me to do that, I said, you must have the wrong person. I don't know anything about how to make a museum exhibition. And they said, no no no, we know how to make museum exhibitions. We don't know the history though. What are we going to show in our museum exhibition? You determine that. And I said, all right, great, that sounds like a great opportunity. And I learned an enormous amount about what a historical museum is, what they have. Of course only a tiny fraction is shown; they have these vast holdings in storage. And with another excellent curator there, a woman, Olivia Mahoney, we worked together, going through all this tremendous array of materials they had, of deciding what was going to be shown, and where and how, and what is the story we're telling here. And it turned out to be a very successful exhibition. And then after that the Virginia Historical Society asked us to do another one on Reconstruction, which we did. This was the '90s and it traveled around for several years as a visiting exhibit to 7 or 8 different venues, North and South. You know, I've been involved with the National Park Service about how they present history, at like Gettysburg and other, not just other historical sites. I've been involved with TV history, although I don't really approve of it very much. It usually tends to oversimplify everything. And I speak a lot at public venues.

*And you are also interested in history teaching, right? How about the curriculum of history in the schools here in the US?*

Well it's very decentralized. There is no national curriculum. It's state by state, and often city by city. I've been involved quite a few times in running in the summers a seminar for high school teachers on Reconstruction. Just one week: how do you teach Reconstruction? I get about 30 of them from all over the country who come. We spend a week talking about Reconstruction. I lecture to them. Then we talk about how to use it in a classroom. I'm not a high school teacher. I can't tell them what they should do, but they need the history. So I am trying to get these ideas out there as best I can. But it's an uphill battle because the strength of the old mythology is very powerful.

*Yes, I remembered Gone with The Wind, I believe even there Ku Klux Klan is still glorified...*

*Gone with the Wind* absolutely is the most popular movie ever made in the United States. Well it's mostly a romance, but it's set in slavery, and the view of slavery is very out of date. It's mostly about the civil war, but it has some parts on Reconstruction too. And it still shows the old myth, evil carpet-baggers coming down from the North, blacks being ignorant and manipulated by everybody else. That's what people get when they go to see *Gone with the Wind*, absolutely.

*And what did you think about this year new movies on the subject of slavery and civil rights, like The Butler and Twelve Years a Slave?*

I never saw *The Butler*. Maybe I will one day. Well, *Twelve Years a Slave* is a big step for movies in the direction of reality. But nobody is making such a movie like that about Reconstruction. It's too complicated; it's too bittersweet. *Twelve Years a Slave* ends on a happy note, in a way, right? This guy gets out of slavery. Of course all the rest of the slaves are left behind, but nonetheless he gets out of slavery back to his family. Reconstruction ends on a very unhappy note. The Klan triumphs, the rights of black people are taken away. That's not what Hollywood's trying to show. I don't think we're going to get a good movie on Reconstruction any time soon. As somebody said, Hollywood likes a tragedy with a happy ending. Tragedy with a happy ending. Reconstruction doesn't have a happy ending.

*Let's finally talk about your last book, The Fiery Trial (Foner, 2010). I hope someone in Brazil decides to translate it. Why did you decide to write a Lincoln biography?*

I have taught American history, well 19<sup>th</sup> century American history, for a long, long time. If you do that, you're always thinking about Lincoln in some way or another. And Lincoln pops up. He's in my first book about the Republican Party, he's in my book on Reconstruction. But I'd never focused on Lincoln. I think I got interested in writing about Lincoln because I became more and more annoyed at how literature on Lincoln was developing like 10 years ago or so. Because there was a whole literature coming out which saw Lincoln as the great pragmatist, the great realist, the politician. As opposed to the abolitionists who are just fanatics, irresponsible, and causing all sorts of disruption. It's Lincoln who accomplished everything. And I thought this was

a complete misreading of the dynamics of social change. Lincoln was not an abolitionist. But the relation between Lincoln and the abolitionists was much more symbiotic than antagonistic. It's a different concept of politics. The abolitionists are working out in the society, trying to change public opinion. That's politics. It's just not electoral politics. Lincoln is a man in the political system. But without them, there's no Lincoln. Without a public opinion hostile to slavery, a guy like Lincoln cannot flourish. So I wanted to counteract this view that Lincoln is the essence of pragmatism, and therefore anyone else who demanded something different was just some crazy person. They were impractical. How do we know they were impractical? Because Lincoln didn't do it. And Lincoln is practical. It's a circular argument. So I really wanted [to fight this], but then I got more and more interested in Lincoln's own views. I became very impressed by the way his views changed over time. Because so often [in historical narratives] Lincoln is just born ready to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. And many aspects of Lincoln's views are ignored or neglected in the literature. Like some of his racial views, which are not very forward looking. Much of the literature just ignores that, or they'll just say – oh yeah, he said these racist things, but he didn't really mean that, that's just to get elected. He believed that black people should be encouraged to go to some other country, after the end of slavery. Well nobody talks about that but I was very impressed by the fact that Lincoln spent 10 years pushing that point of view. So, on the one hand, I wanted to try to explain Lincoln. But I was also trying to change how people thought about social movements. I was also influenced by the early Obama campaign in 2008. I was writing in that time. A political leader and a social movement, what is the relationship between them? And Obama did not turn out to be Lincoln in my humble opinion, but very few people do. But he came into office as an example of what I'm talking about with Lincoln and the abolitionists.

*At the end of the book, when Lincoln is dead, you really think that he was really assuming full citizenship for blacks as a conviction?*

Well, he was moving. He thought blacks were citizens. What rights they would have was not yet clear. Lincoln is killed at a certain moment. The big mistake that people make when they write about that is they just say okay that is Lincoln's view right there. What he believed when he was shot, that's Lincoln's point of view. But in fact one thing my book shows is Lincoln evolves all the time. It's completely unrealistic to think Lincoln would have stuck with this view as of April 1865 if he hadn't been killed. No, Lincoln was always in

relationship to Congress, abolitionists, black people themselves. There's no question he would have evolved. Exactly where? We don't know. That's not history. It would be like fixing him, if he was killed in 1861, it would be easy to say he would never have emancipated the slaves. Absolutely not. He said, I'm not going to emancipate the slaves. He said that very clearly so obviously he would not. But he lived and he did emancipate the slaves. So, particularly in a time of such crisis, people don't just stick with one view. So I admire Lincoln a lot, but Lincoln is not a god. Lincoln had flaws like any other human being. But I think this capacity for change, this open-mindedness, this willingness to listen to critics, was what really made him a great leader. He didn't get stuck as history is moving very fast.

*And the movie about Lincoln, did you see? What did you think?*

The movie? It's Hollywood. What do you want? It's not history. It's a good Hollywood movie. It's not history. It's based on history. But it has no more to do with history than Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* has to do with the history of ancient Rome. It's a statement about the present, about politicians, about Congress, in the guise of history. In all Hollywood history with maybe a few exceptions, even *Twelve years a Slave* – it seems inevitable it's going to elevate one person. That's just the essence of the genre. I don't care if it's Malcolm X, Gandhi, you name it. There's a whole series of those movies. *Twelve Years a Slave* is all about Northrup. Well, all right, it's based on his book. But the other slaves are really pretty much in the background, most of the time. You know, you don't get much of a sense of a lot of other slaves, and their views, their attitudes. So the *Lincoln* movie was about Lincoln. The problem is that in that world, Lincoln was not the only actor, historical actor. So it gives a very misleading view of the dynamics of politics at that time. But you know, the actor was good, and the costumes, pretty good. That's all right.

[Prof. Martha Abreu asks] *Well, how about your current research?*

Well, I am finishing right now a book, it's a little different, because it's about New York City, actually. It's about what we call the Underground Railroad, fugitive slaves who came to New York, who helped them, where they came from, where they were sent, how it operated. Because there's a lot of literature on the Underground Railroad, but very little on New York City, because New York was very closely tied into the South. The New York merchants were in charge of shipping cotton all over the place. New York business

men were very tied into the South. New York bankers financed southern slavery. So this was a pro-southern city before the civil war. And so, it was tricky dealing with fugitive slaves. Boston was much more anti-slavery so a lot of the work went on secretly here. So it's difficult to dig up, although I have dug up a lot. And then there were court cases all the time, and those are all public and useful about fugitives captured, and then a case about sending them back. So it's really about, from about 1830 to 1860, how the issue of fugitive slaves plays out. And also, go back to *Twelve Years a Slave*, the issue of kidnapping. Because you had slaves escaping to New York and you had New York free people being kidnapped and sent to the South. Solomon Northup was not the only one that happened to. And so, in fact, I juxtapose, you have advertisements in the southern newspapers for fugitive slaves, slave escaped, here's what he looks like, here's what he was wearing. Five hundred dollar reward if you capture him. And then in the northern newspapers you have ads for people kidnapped: A child was taken off the streets by someone the other day. Here's what he looked like. Here's what he was wearing. Sent to the South, reward if you can get this kid back. So you have this strange two-way transportation of black people in that period. So it's an interesting story. New York had a very small abolitionist movement, very small, but they were very active in trying to help fugitive slaves and it's just an interesting detective story, really. And I'm almost finished. It'll probably be published next spring. I'm going to turn it into the publisher in a month or so. So, it's basically done. I've been digging around in that for a few years. It took a long time to just find out where things are. But there's more information than I thought there might be.<sup>2</sup>

*We've talked about exceptionalism. At this very moment, Brazilian historiographical agenda is also focusing on slavery borders, kidnappings, and illegal enslavement along the 19th Century. The same questions apply.*

New York State abolishes slavery in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but fugitive slaves carry the law of slavery into New York. There is no slavery in New York. And yet, these people have to be treated as slaves and sent back to slavery. New York has to enforce the laws of Virginia, or South Carolina. So it's also relevant about the national debate about slavery, and what is the power of slavery, and how far does it reach. After 1850, with a new fugitive slave law in the United States, slaves had to go to Canada. And that's also interesting because, go back to exceptionalism, we think of ourselves in the United States, as Thomas Paine said, an asylum, anyone who seeks liberty from other countries can come to America, right? People from dictatorships and all. Here are people who had to



flee America in order to become free. They had to go to Canada. They could not be free in the United States. So this turns the whole image of America over on its head, right? Thousands of people fleeing to Canada to become free. So it's a very interesting juxtaposition.

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## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Martha Abreu, Associated Professor in History of America at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), filmed part of the interview (available at: <http://conversadehistoriadoras.com/2014/04/06/conversando-com-eric-foner/>).

<sup>2</sup> The book has just been launched in the U.S. (FONER, 2015).

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