

A Lesson from Mississippi

James W. Loewen

3/2006

I started my teaching career at Tougaloo, a predominantly black institution, in the fall of 1968, after finishing my doctorate in sociology at Harvard University. That first year at Tougaloo, in addition to teaching sociology courses, I was assigned to teach a section of the Freshman Social Science Seminar. The history department had designed this seminar to replace the old "Western Civ." course — History of Western Civilization, that most colleges in America, including most black colleges, required in the 1960s. The FSSS introduced students to sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and so on, in the context of African American history — appropriate enough, 99% of our students being African Americans.

African American history involves the same chronology as American history, of course, so second semester began right after the Civil War, with Reconstruction. I had a new group of students that first day of the spring semester in January, 1969, and I didn't want to do all the talking on the first day of class, so I asked my group, "What was Reconstruction? "What images come to your mind about that era?"

The result was one of those life-changing "Aha!" experiences — or, more accurately, an "Oh, no!" experience. Sixteen of my seventeen students told me, "Reconstruction was that time, right after the Civil War, when African Americans took over the governing of the Southern states, including Mississippi, but they were too soon out of slavery, so they messed up, and reigned corruptly, and whites had to take back control of the state governments themselves."

I sat stunned. So many major misconceptions of fact glared from that statement that it was hard to know where to begin a rebuttal. African Americans never took over the Southern states. All of the Southern states had white governors and all but one had white legislative majorities throughout Reconstruction. Moreover, these Reconstruction governments did not "mess up." Across the South, governments during Reconstruction passed the best state constitutions the Southern states have ever had, including their current constitutions. They started public school systems for both races; Mississippi had never had a statewide school system for whites before the Civil War, only scattered schools in the larger towns, and of course it had been a felony to teach blacks, even free blacks, to read and write during slavery times. The Reconstruction governments tried out various other ideas, some of which proved quite popular. Indeed, Mississippi enjoyed less corrupt government during Reconstruction than in the decades immediately afterwards. Therefore "whites" did not take back control of the state governments; rather, some whites — Democrats, the party of overt white supremacy throughout the nineteenth century and well into the 1920s — used force and fraud to wrest control from biracial Republican coalitions.

How could my students believe such false history? I set out to find out. I visited high schools, sat in on history classes, and read the textbooks students were assigned.

Tougaloo was a good college — perhaps the best in the state. My students had learned what they had been taught. Bear in mind that they had been taught in all-black high schools with all-black teaching staffs — massive school desegregation would finally take place in Mississippi in January, 1970. In school after school, I saw black teachers teaching black students white-biased pseudo-history from textbooks written from a white supremacist viewpoint.

The year-long course, "Mississippi History," was the worst offender. It was required of all ninth-graders, public and private, owing to a state law passed after the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregating the public schools. This Mississippi statute was part of a package of obstructionist measures designed to thwart the Court and maintain "our Southern way of life," which every Mississippian knew meant segregation and white supremacy. The one textbook approved for the course, *Your Mississippi* by John K. Bettersworth, said exactly what my students had learned. Among its 55 illustrations containing images of people, just three included African Americans.

I knew John Bettersworth. I had attended Mississippi State University, where he taught history, for part of my junior year in college. He knew better. Indeed, when he reviewed several books on Reconstruction in the *New York Times Book Review*, he made clear that he knew that the interracial Republican coalition that governed Mississippi during Reconstruction had done a good job under difficult circumstances. But in his ninth-grade textbook, Bettersworth wrote what he imagined the Mississippi State Textbook Board wanted to read. He knew full well that historians did not (and still do not) review high school textbooks, so his professional reputation would not be sullied by his unprofessional conduct.

Dr. Bettersworth could not have believed that his textbook was an innocent way to make a few thousand dollars without hurting anyone. At Mississippi State, he encountered the graduates of Mississippi high schools by the hundreds, and he knew how racist some of them could be — partly because they believed the BS (bad sociology) about African Americans in his textbook.

Perhaps as a passive form of resistance against their racist textbooks, many Mississippi teachers — white as well as black — spent hours of class time making students memorize the names of the state's 82 counties, their county seats, and the date each was organized as a county. Or, perhaps more likely, they did this because it had been done to them. Regardless, these 250 twigs of information were useless and soon forgotten. And students learned nothing about the past that would help them deal with the wrenching changes Mississippi was going through in the 1960s and '70s.

Black students were particularly disadvantaged. What must it do to them, I wondered, to believe that the one time your group stood center-stage in the American past, they screwed up? Couldn't be good for their psyches — their *souls*. If it had happened, of course, that would be another matter. In that case, it would have to be faced: why did this take place? What must we learn from it? But nothing of the sort had taken place. It

was, again, Bad Sociology.

For more than a year, I tried to interest historians in central Mississippi to write a more accurate textbook of Mississippi history. Finally, despairing of getting anyone else to do so, I put together a group of students and faculty from Tougaloo and also from Millsaps College, the nearby white school, got a grant, and we wrote it ourselves. The result, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*, won the Lillian Smith Award for best Southern nonfiction the year it came out, but the Mississippi State Textbook Board rejected it as unsuitable, nonetheless. In most subjects, the board selected three to five textbooks. In Mississippi history, they only had two, which might be characterized "ours" and "theirs." By a two to five vote, the board rejected ours, accepting only theirs. Two blacks and five whites sat on the board.

Our book was not biased toward African Americans. Six of its eight authors were white, as were 80% of the historical characters who made it into our index. In contrast to the white supremacist fabrications offered in "their book," however, ours portrayed Mississippi's past more accurately. So, after exhausting our administrative remedies, we— co-editor Charles Sallis and I, accompanied by three school systems that wanted to use our book — eventually sued the textbook board in federal court. The case, *Loewen et al. v. Turnipseed, et al.*, came to trial in 1980, Judge Orma Smith presiding. Smith was an 83-year-old white Mississippian who believed in the first amendment — students right to controversial information — and was bringing himself to believe in the fourteenth amendment — blacks' right to equal treatment.

For a week we presented experts from around the state and around the nation who testified that by any reasonable criteria, including those put forth by the state itself, our book excelled their book. Specifically, *Conflict and Change* was more accurate in its treatment of prehistory and archaeology, Native Americans, slavery, Reconstruction, Mississippi literature, the Civil Rights era, the recent past, and so forth.

Then came the state's turn. The trial's "Perry Mason moment" came when John Turnipseed, one of the board members who had rejected our book, was asked by the Deputy Attorney General of Mississippi why he had done so. He asked the court to turn to page 178, which included a photograph of about two dozen white people posing for the camera behind the body of an African American man, silhouetted in a fire that was burning him. "Now you know, some ninth-graders are pretty big," he noted, "especially black male ninth-graders, and we worried, or at least I worried, that teachers — especially white lady teachers — would be unable to control their classes with material like this in the book."

As lynching photos go, ours was actually mild, if such an adjective can be applied to these horrific scenes. The victim's features could not be discerned, and no grisly details — such as whites hacking off body parts as souvenirs — were shown or described. Nevertheless, our book was going to cause a race riot in the classroom.

We had pretested our book — along with Betterworth's — in an overwhelmingly

white classroom and an overwhelmingly black classroom, and both had preferred ours by overwhelming margins, so we had material to counter this argument when our turn came for rebuttal. We never had to use it, however, because at that point Judge Smith took over the questioning.

"But that happened, didn't it?" he asked. "Didn't Mississippi have more lynchings than any other state?"

"Well, yes," Turnipseed admitted. "But that all happened so long ago. Why dwell on it now?"

"Well, it is a history book!" the judge retorted. And we nudged each other, realizing we were going to win this case. Eventually, in perhaps the most positive first amendment decision to date, the judge ordered Mississippi to adopt our book for the standard six-year period and supply it to any school system, public or private, that requested it, just like any other adopted book.

That episode proved to me that history can be a weapon, and it had been used against my students.