

An “Apostle of Reaction” on the Hudson Shore: John W. Burgess, Reconstruction, and the Birth of the American University

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On a bleak night in West Tennessee, in January 1863, John William Burgess found his purpose. Writing of the event years later, Burgess described it eloquently: “The thunder rolled and reverberated like salvos of heavy artillery through the heavens.” The sound of thunder blended with the dying cries of fallen soldiers, and, through the driving rain, a terrified Burgess, eighteen years old, strained to see the approaching Confederate troops who sought his death. That night, Burgess promised that, if he were to survive, he would “devote [his] life to teaching men how to live by reason and compromise instead of by bloodshed and destruction.”^[1] Burgess survived and kept his promise. He spent the remainder of his life advancing the fields of political science, history, and law by conducting extensive scholarship and by founding, in 1880, the Columbia University School of Political Science, the forebear of the university’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. But Burgess’s contributions, though significant, cannot be neatly categorized. Drawing on his experiences at German universities and in the antebellum and postbellum South, Burgess promoted a vision of the university that was clouded by

white supremacy and espoused an antediluvian view of Reconstruction and race relations.

“The Medieval Period of American History”: Burgess’s Early Life and Career

John W. Burgess was born on August 26, 1844, in Giles County, near the village of Cornersville, in Middle Tennessee.[2] Burgess perceived the antebellum South to be a time of romance, later calling it “the medieval period of American history.” He described the halcyon days of his youth in sentimental terms, as he absorbed conceptions of race, class, and gender from his traditionalist upbringing:

My first memories are of planters’ mansions and negro cabins, of cotton fields and small country towns, of intelligent, proud, and courteous slave barons, and of ignorant, slovenly, poor white trash in the country [...] of dashing young country squires [...] and of beautiful maidens, the prizes of zealous and sometimes fierce competition between the coxcombs of the country and the beaux of the towns, and, at the bottom of it all, the vast mass of African slaves which served as the base of the political, economic, and social structure.[3]

Burgess’s father, Thomas T. Burgess, and his mother, Mary J. Burgess (née Edwards), were middle-class farmers, neither wealthy nor impoverished, and Burgess’s minimal inheritance left him with no obligation to become a planter.[4] Interested in mathematics, he planned a career in military engineering when he matriculated at Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee, eighty miles from his home. He arrived in September 1861 with his “negro boy and other paraphernalia.” Yet his time at Cumberland was short. After only five months, Burgess was forced to leave due to the outbreak of the conflict that would change his life, the Civil War.[5]

The Burgess family, though slaveholders, were opposed to secession. Thomas T. Burgess, originally of Baltimore, was a nationalist Whig in the mold of Henry Clay, and significantly influenced his son’s politics.[6] Tennessee was the last state to secede, and pockets of unionism, though most common in East Tennessee, existed across the

state.[7] While Tennessee sent at least 115,000 recruits to the Confederate army, it also sent 31,000 soldiers to the Union army. Moreover, the Volunteer State experienced much of the Civil War's combat, as Union invasion routes ran along the state's railroad and river systems.[8] No surprise, then, that John W. Burgess, escaping Confederate conscription, enlisted in the Union army, working to repair damaged railroads. It was in this capacity that Burgess experienced his "night of terror" in January 1863, while performing sentinel duty after a raid by the soldiers of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, and dedicated his life to the study of government and law.[9] That night was not his last experience with the evils of war. Stationed in Nashville at the end of his military service, Burgess saw the economic devastation the war wrought on his own family: "The fortunes of my own parents and relations, all of whom were loyal to the Union, were, nevertheless, wrecked beyond recovery." [10] He wrote of seeing his "ancestral home destroyed, [his] ancestral fortune dissipated, [and his] parents fugitives." [11] Burgess's terrible experiences in the Civil War had a profound effect on him, giving his life a specific goal and new meaning.

Though committed to advancing the study of politics, Burgess set out to accomplish this goal in a roundabout way. He first headed for Amherst College, graduating in 1867. Yet Burgess was unable to study the subjects he was now interested in, instead bogged down in mathematics, classics, and modern languages.[12] Burgess soon realized that academic study of "history, political science, and public law" did not exist anywhere in the United States at that time, and the closest he could come was reading "private law" with a practicing lawyer.[13] After passing the Massachusetts bar exam and briefly teaching at Knox College, in Illinois, Burgess endeavored to travel to the old universities of Europe, where he could undertake serious academic research. Before departing, however, Burgess visited his home in Giles County. Little had changed since he left for Amherst seven years before; if anything, his family's quality of life had worsened. Burgess saw his parents and friends living in abject poverty, and he had little doubt about whom to blame: "Respectable and intelligent white people [had been] disfranchised and ignored," he wrote, "and the negroes, led by Northern adventurers, ruled and plundered the land." [14] Burgess's perception of Reconstruction lent support

to his resolution to dedicate himself to political science—planting the seeds for his future work in Southern history—and he set off for Europe.

For two years, Burgess studied at the universities of Göttingen, Leipzig, and Berlin. His time in the newly unified German Empire focused his life's purpose further: There he found a new model of the research university that did not yet exist in the United States. German education and social science were guided by a number of unique concepts that would prove enormously influential for Burgess and other American educators. Political science, known as *Staatswissenschaft*, was treated not as one of the humanities but rather as something akin to the physical sciences, encompassing the collection and analysis of data with the goal of discovering natural laws of political development. Additionally, two principles guided research and education in any field: *Lehrfreiheit* meant the professor's opportunity to pursue his own research with the assistance of libraries, archives, and assistants; *Lernfreiheit* was the ability of the student to enroll at courses in any university he chose.[15] The former principle in particular seems to have had a great impact on Burgess: He admiringly described one professor spending up to fifteen hours a day conducting research in the Prussian archives, something Burgess's Amherst professors—instructors rather than researchers—would never have dreamed of.[16] Burgess was swayed not only by administrative procedures, but also by continental political philosophy. Like many of his contemporaries, he was exposed to, and came to endorse, "Teutonic germ" theory, which held that English and American governmental institutions were directly descended from democratic traditions forged in the forests of long-ago Germany.[17] Burgess even took the recent German victory in the Franco-Prussian War as evidence of the effectiveness of German political thought.[18] Upon arrival in Göttingen, in mid-1871, Burgess traveled to Berlin to watch returning German soldiers march beneath the Brandenburg Gate. Never one to mince words, he described this sight as "the most magnificent manifestation of power which the world had ever furnished." [19] Burgess's time in Germany shaped him academically and politically, and converted him into a lifelong Germanophile; he even maintained his German sympathies during and after the First World War.

For all of his eventual success, and despite his enjoyable years at Amherst, Burgess lived a life of chronic sadness. A unionist Southerner and an American Germanophile, Burgess was deeply distressed by both the Civil War and the First World War. When the United States joined the latter, he said, “All my life’s work [is] brought down in irretrievable ruin all about me.”[20] The Civil War, in particular, had a dramatic effect not just on Burgess’s career, but also on his mental state. His experiences in the war and its aftermath, he wrote, “threw such a sadness over my young life, and produced in me such an early realization of the innate hypocrisy of the human soul, that I wonder I have not dwelt always under a deeper pessimism than has actually possessed me. As it was, I early lost faith in the wisdom and goodness of the mass of men.”[21] He “suffered great depression” at the death of a beloved commanding officer.[22] Writing of his time in Nashville, Burgess described himself as “broken in spirit, sad-hearted, and alone.”[23] Burgess’s retrograde views on Reconstruction, which this paper discusses in detail, make him deeply unsympathetic. However, watching his country crumble around him left a psychological toll from which he would never fully recover. Burgess’s ability to conduct research objectively—and to build an egalitarian university—was impeded by his emotional attachment to the hierarchical culture of the antebellum South.

“The University is Born”: The Founding of the Columbia School of Political Science

American tertiary education evolved little before the late nineteenth century. Colleges in the United States offered only superficial liberal arts instruction and were more interested in turning out a God-fearing citizenry than equipping curious scholars for future study. After the Civil War, German ideas of political science and academia began to make their mark on American higher education. Many Americans took graduate courses in Germany—about 1,300 studied at the University of Berlin in the 1880s—and were moved by their experiences.[24] Inspired students soon effected change in the United States: In 1876, Johns Hopkins University was founded in Baltimore as a German-style research institute.[25] One of these inspired students was John W. Burgess, who, like many of his German-educated contemporaries, believed that the

graduate faculty is what “makes out of a collection of colleges and vocational schools a real university.”[26] In an 1884 speech, Burgess explicitly endorsed the organization of the American university on German lines: “The German system will serve us as the example, in regard to the organization of the faculties, which we will do best to accept and imitate.”[27]

After he returned stateside, Burgess’s attempts to emulate the German university took him first to his alma mater, where he was hired as a professor. Returning to Amherst allowed Burgess to relive the joyful days of his undergraduate life. In Illinois and Germany he was “homesick for Amherst,” and in returning he described himself as “a thoroughly happy and contented man.”[28] Yet his goal in accepting a job was more particular: He actively sought “to establish a school of political thought.” Though Burgess succeeded in recruiting the college’s first graduate class, the faculty stymied his attempts to found a school of graduate study. Amherst, he realized, was not the ideal place for his life’s work.[29] In 1876, seeking to realize his vision, Burgess moved to the institution at which he would spend the rest of his career, Columbia College. As early as 1873, Columbia Law School founder Theodore William Dwight had been interested in hiring Burgess to replace the late Francis Lieber.[30] This was not Burgess’s first connection to that school; after his graduation from Amherst, he had planned to attend Columbia Law School before an attack of typhoid fever led him to read law privately.[31] The Columbia faculty was eager to hire him, inviting him to give a lecture at the school in January 1876. At the lecture, Columbia trustee Samuel Bulkley Ruggles made Burgess’s acquaintance. Burgess recalled Ruggles saying, “You are the man we have been looking for ever since Lieber’s death. You must come to Columbia.”[32]

Columbia was a logical place for Burgess to teach. Lieber, appointed to the Columbia faculty in 1857, was the first professor of political science in the United States—not coincidentally, Lieber was a German immigrant.[33] Additionally, Columbia had already taken early steps towards becoming a university, and awarded its first doctorates, via the School of Mines, in 1875.[34] Though initially leery of leaving the bucolic countryside of Western Massachusetts for “the din and crowds and murky atmosphere of the city,”

Burgess overcame his wariness when the trustees unanimously appointed him a professor of history, political science, and international law, and both Ruggles and Columbia's president, Frederick Augustus Porter Barnard, sent him letters urging him to accept.[35]

Arriving at Columbia College, then located on Forty-Ninth Street and Madison Avenue, Burgess was horrified to find academic standards far lower than those he had encountered at Amherst. The library, to his dismay, contained only 25,000 volumes and was maintained by a single surly librarian in one room that was open only an hour and a half every day. The undergraduate School of Arts, it seemed to him, was little more than "a day school for the sons of the residents of New York, who came rather irregularly to the exercises of the school." [36] These students so failed to impress him that he told his fellow instructors that he did not think a single undergraduate was worthy of receiving a bachelor's degree.[37] Thankfully, unlike at Amherst, many of Columbia's trustees, Ruggles chief among them, were interested in fundamentally changing the character of the college, and these trustees could claim President Barnard's support.[38] Impressed by the quality of the Law School—at least relative to the quality of Columbia's undergraduate school—Burgess suggested expanding Columbia Law School to include graduate programs in political science. Opposition from the faculty, however, led Burgess to take up Ruggles' suggestion to instead inaugurate a stand-alone graduate school. Ruggles' idea, Burgess writes, "promised the fulfillment of the hope which had been my life's guide for more than fifteen years." [39] Accomplishing this goal was difficult, both professionally and personally. In the process, Burgess lost his working relationship with Dwight and earned the enmity of much of the faculty of the Law School and the college proper.[40] Yet Burgess persevered. He outlined a plan for the Columbia School of Political Science, made up of scholars of history, economics, law, and political philosophy. These professors would teach a course of three years, and the school would award bachelor's degrees to students who completed one year, and doctorates to students who completed three years and write a thesis. Students could easily transfer between the School of Arts, the Law School, and the nascent School of Political Science in order to receive a truly interdisciplinary social-science education. As Ruggles submitted this plan to Columbia's trustees, Burgess headed for Paris, to

investigate the recently formed *École libre des sciences politiques*, now Sciences Po.[41] On June 1, 1880, Burgess received an eight-word telegram from Ruggles regarding the trustees' vote to create the new school: "Thank God," it read, "the University is born. Go Ahead." [42]

The Columbia School of Political Science was the first graduate school of that discipline in the United States.[43] According to the *Columbia Spectator*, its goals were to "train men for public life," with courses ranging from literature to science.[44] Its evolution into the broader Graduate School of Arts and Sciences began almost immediately.[45] President Barnard's illness and death were setbacks for supporters of college expansion, but his successor, Seth Low, turned out to be an even closer ally of Burgess. In 1892, with Low's support, pure sciences were added to the fledgling graduate school and, according to Burgess, "filled out the entire circuit of philosophical and scientific research" along with political science and philosophy. The expansion of the School of Political Science coincided with the growth of Columbia as a whole. President Low, like Burgess, was intellectually excited by the idea of founding a modern university nearly *ex nihilo*, and had the management skills to bring the idea to fruition. Moreover, Low had both a large fortune of his own and enormous influence over men with even larger fortunes. Low oversaw the creation of a renamed and unified Columbia University, and the school soon moved from midtown Manhattan to what Burgess called "the magnificent site on Morningside Heights, the Acropolis of the city." [46]

Burgess was appointed dean of the School of Political Science in 1890, and by the time of his retirement his title was Dean of the Faculties of Political Science, Philosophy, Pure Science, and Fine Arts.[47] Burgess was one of the most influential figures on Columbia's campus, serving as acting president at least once, in 1908.[48] However, the expansion of Columbia, masterminded by Burgess and Low, was predicated on restrictions on who could attend. Burgess was fiercely protective of Columbia's status as a bastion of New York's white, male, Protestant elite, and vocally opposed opening the school to African Americans, women, and immigrants. Before Burgess's arrival, Columbia had been relatively progressive. President Barnard—though a former slaveholder himself—openly sought to admit students "of whatever age, sex, race, or

previous condition,” and a black student entered the School of Mines in 1873. In Burgess’s conception of a university, by contrast, the inclusion of disciplines was premised on the exclusion of people.[49] Under the presidencies of Low and his successor, Nicholas Murray Butler, Burgess’s expansionist ideas remained popular while his conservatism maintained a stranglehold on the Columbia community’s perceptions of race.

Burgess was not unaware of his own life’s significance. He plainly considered himself to be nothing less than a world-historical figure: “I was a prophet ahead of my time,” he wrote.[50] Though this sentiment is vain, it was shared by many of his colleagues at Columbia. Writing in 1905, Low expressed this view clearly: “There is no one who appreciates more highly than I what [Burgess] has done for Columbia, and, through Columbia, for the scholarship of the country.”[51] When he retired, Burgess was the longest-serving member of the faculty or staff. The Board of Trustees wrote, “Professor Burgess was largely instrumental not only in the development of graduate instruction at Columbia but in the transformation of the institution from an aggregate of unrelated parts into a coordinated and unified whole.”[52] President Butler wrote the forward to Burgess’s memoir and reflected on his teaching ability: “Professor Burgess was not only an outstanding scholar, but he was a great teacher. Literally thousands of students of Law and Political Science have looked back upon the hours spent under his instruction and inspiration as the most fortunate of their lives.”

In contrast to how he remembered his undergraduate years at Amherst, Burgess never expressed much delight about his time at Columbia. Butler wrote, “he preferred to live a quiet, almost shy, intellectual life.” Burgess never grew fond of the many obligations expected of him in New York.[53] After his retirement in 1912 he embraced the life of a resolute New Englander, withdrawing, with his second wife Ruth Payne Burgess (née Jewett), to homes in Newport, Rhode Island; Brookline, Massachusetts; and the woody Green Mountains of Vermont.[54] One of the most beautiful passages of his memoir is his description of his arrival at Amherst: “Over all,” he wrote, “was spread such an air of peace, contentment, and goodwill as made the earth to me a different place to live in from what I had elsewhere found in it.”[55] Burgess sacrificed the opportunity for a

peaceful existence in pursuit of a goal born of the trauma of the Civil War. Yet his enormous accomplishments in his thirty-six years at Columbia cannot be scrubbed of the odor of white supremacy.

“As Far as Civilized Man Can Inhabit”: Burgess and Political Science

The late nineteenth century was an exhilarating time for the field of political science. The economic ruination and mass casualties wrought by the Civil War put questions of public policy at the forefront of American consciousness, and many universities appointed professors to teach that discipline. John W. Burgess was central to the postbellum rise of American political science, and today he is considered a founding figure of the field. Burgess and professors at his School of Political Science were responsible for founding the American Academy of Political Science, which served as an alumni association for Columbia’s new graduate school. The first political science journal in the United States, *Political Science Quarterly*, was launched at Columbia in 1886. Over the next quarter century, the *Quarterly*, which Burgess edited and wrote for, professionalized the fledgling discipline and gave scholars a place to publish original research. Meanwhile, fresh-faced professors at Columbia issued the first collegiate political science textbooks.[56]

Though his achievements as an administrator won him the acclaim of the Columbia community, Burgess was an academic at heart. Burgess’s contributions to scholarship are legion. First among them—both in terms of chronology and prominence—is Burgess’s two-volume tome, *Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law (PSCCL)*, first published in 1890. Most significantly, *PSCCL* reveals Burgess’s embrace of, and fierce advocacy for, scientific racism and social Darwinism, theories that also influenced his actions as a university administrator. From chapter one, Burgess made it evident that the real purpose of the book is classifying the world’s races and determining their various aptitudes for democracy and governance. Unsurprisingly, the peoples of Europe reside at the top of his hierarchy: “The highest talent for political organization has been exhibited by the Aryan nations,” he wrote. Burgess further

divides the “Aryan” race. While Celts and Greeks, for example, are not ideally suited for democracy—despite the Greeks’ role in inventing the concept—Burgess is most interested in another subtype: “The Teuton,” the book notes, “really dominates the world by his superior political genius.”[57] Here, Burgess exposed his great debt to “Teutonic germ” theory, which he almost certainly picked up during his studies in the German Empire. Years later, he made this conviction plain: “Teutonic hordes and tribes,” he wrote, “began the foundation of that system of modern European states, which developed into the modern nationalistic, capitalistic civilization of the nineteenth century.”[58] Burgess’s definition of “Teutons” is extremely limited: They appear to consist only of “Anglo-Americans, Germans, and Scandinavians”—essentially, offspring of the Protestant nations of Northern Europe.[59]

Burgess, a political scientist rather than an anthropologist, fashioned this racial hierarchy not as an end in itself, but with a specific purpose in mind. He sought to determine the ideal provision of political authority. Burgess’s answer to this difficult query is simple: In Burgess’s mind, only the “Teutons” can properly accrue political power. This conclusion has a number of implications for both foreign and domestic policy. First, it gives Western states the right to exercise diplomatic control over the entire world: “Teutonic nations are particularly endowed with the capacity for establishing national states,” he wrote, and, therefore, “they are intrusted [*sic*], in the general economy of history, with the mission of conducting the political civilization of the modern world.” Second, Burgess granted “Teutonic” peoples living in multiethnic states rights and responsibilities over other ethnicities: “In a state with a variety of nationalities the Teutonic element should not surrender power to any other element; under certain circumstances it should not even permit participation of the other elements in political power.”[60] These passages in *PSCCL* are overtly racist—as is much of the book—and they lend academic legitimacy to condemnable American foreign and domestic policy.

Burgess’s perspective on race had another major implication as well: Burgess soon became a vocal supporter of white supremacy at home and abroad. These positions are rooted in his political theories espoused in *PSCCL*. “Teutonic” peoples, he believed, have a responsibility to interfere in the world affairs, and ought to have a “colonial

policy” to carry civilization to the parts of the world that “live in a state of barbarism or semi-barbarism.” “The civilized states,” he wrote, “have a claim upon the uncivilized population, as well as a duty towards them, and that claim is that they shall become civilized.”[61] In 1904, only a few years after the publication of *PSCCL*, he was able to apply his theory to the United States. Writing in *Political Science Quarterly* in response to the U.S. occupations of Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, and Hawaii, Burgess praised American civilization, and argued that the U.S. has an obligation to “share its civilization with other peoples, sometimes even as a forced gift.” Burgess was not content with U.S. intervention in backwater territories of the Spanish Empire. Instead, he envisioned a variant of Manifest Destiny that includes not just the territory between the coasts, but rather all of continental North America, and beyond:

It might be a bold, but it would not be a reckless, prophecy to say that the child is now born who will see the States of this Union stretching from the Isthmus of Panama to the North as far as civilized man can inhabit, peopled by two hundred and fifty millions of freemen, exercising a free protectorate over South America, most of the islands of the Pacific and a large part of Asia.[62]

Herein lies the importance of Burgess’s political theory and opinions on imperialism. Most white Americans living at the turn of the century held views on race we today consider repugnant. Yet Burgess took these views to their very extreme and argued for them with a passion unmatched by most of his peers. That he did so while serving as dean of a school of Columbia College, and while developing the budding field of political science, casts a shadow that must be acknowledged by both Columbians and political scientists alike.

Burgess’s political and racial theories were influential, receiving both praise and condemnation from his contemporaries. *PSCCL* was widely read by attorneys and academics. Many of them wrote to Burgess to express their appreciation. Judith Ellen Foster, a political science teacher and one of the first female lawyers in the U.S., saw in Burgess’s work “a delightful embodiment of certain ideas which I had never before seen expressed.”[63] Edmund James, founder of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, remarked that the book “took possession of me and held me to the

exclusion of everything else” and praised Burgess for producing “a valuable addition to our literature.”[64]*PSCCL*’s influence extended beyond the ivory tower, and some of its readers managed to put his principles into practice. Sanford Ballard Dole, participant in the coup d’état that overthrew the indigenous Hawaiian monarchy, wrote to Burgess in March 1894. Having read *PSCCL*, he quoted it extensively, and asked for advice on how to structure a republic led by Hawaii’s white residents. Dole was clearly skeptical of native administration of the archipelago. Burgess, as was his wont, interpreted Dole’s letters as asking how to write a constitution that “will place the government in the hands of the Teutons.”[65]

Nevertheless, the response to *PSCCL* was not entirely positive. A scorching review in a liberal New York newspaper, the *Independent*, panned *PSCCL* as a retrograde work built on the failed ideology of the Old South. “Professor Burgess,” the review reads, “maintains the spirit, and almost the language of those who not very long ago declared that no Negro had any rights that a white man was bound to respect, that no other races have any rights that the Teutonic States need respect.” The article lambasted Burgess’s “combination of arrogance of tone with feebleness and confusion of thought,” and concluded that his support for imperial aggression is “repugnant to the progress of true civilization.”[66] Condemnation eventually came from inside academia itself: In 1913, Charles Austin Beard, one of Burgess’s former Columbia students, denounced Burgess’s notions of “Teutonic” superiority as racist.[67] But whether readers agreed or disagreed with Burgess’s theories, they considered, reacted to, and discussed them. Though later scholars have roundly debunked his ideas, there is no doubt that Burgess was a titan of his era’s political thought.

Burgess’s German ties contributed not only to his political theory, but to his political activity as well. Publicly, Burgess’s infatuation with Germany was mostly harmless, leading only to ugly interactions with hawkish Americans during the First World War, into which Burgess staunchly opposed American entry. Privately, however, his support for a revived interwar Germany led him to align himself with some of the darker elements of the German far right. In June 1924, Burgess received a letter from George Sylvester Viereck, a political provocateur who, since 1914, had published a number of

pro-German magazines, beginning with the *Fatherland*. Viereck, familiar with Burgess's work and his perspective on Germany, asked him to send a message to be published in the tenth anniversary issue of the *Fatherland*, by then renamed the *American Monthly*. Burgess's response was glowing: "I have been a constant reader of your publication since the appearance of its first number in 1914," he wrote, "for the reason that I have found in it most important facts and most important points of view not contained, or not so fully contained, elsewhere, and because I am in full sympathy with your proclaimed purpose." [68] On its face, this exchange is rather pedestrian. Yet the previous October, *American Monthly* published Viereck's interview with a young Adolf Hitler, only weeks before his arrest in the aftermath of the Beer Hall Putsch. In the interview, Hitler's antisemitism was on full display. He referred to Jews as an "alien people in our midst," and argued, "The fact that a man is decent is no reason why we should not eliminate him." [69] There is no evidence that Burgess read this interview, though he called himself a "constant reader" of the publication. Still, in context, Burgess's exchange with Viereck is troubling. Furthermore, in a letter to Alfred Hugenberg, leader of the right-wing German National People's Party, Burgess wrote that the concept of German responsibility for the First World War is "a clearly proven falsehood." [70]

Burgess passed away in 1931, and the details of his opinions on the Weimar-era German right and the Nazi Party may never be known. But it is clear that he was a man blinded by dogma, unable to see the danger lurking in the hearts of his ideological allies. This was Burgess's curse. Molded by his time in the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Germany during the first thirty years of his life, Burgess stopped evolving. He proved unable to adopt more nuanced perspectives in the face of changing facts.

"One-Sided, Colored, Incomplete": Burgess and Reconstruction

The first years of modern American social science were chaotic. Disciplines were neither well defined nor distinct from one another. History, in particular, was inextricably linked to political science during the formation of the twin subject areas. The wall of the room that housed the first political science seminar at Johns Hopkins was adorned with the following phrase: "History is past Politics and Politics present History." [71] John W.

Burgess himself echoed this sentiment less succinctly: “Political science must be studied historically, and history must be studied politically, in order to [form] a correct comprehension of either,” he wrote.[72] Consequently, Burgess, though trained as a political scientist, was also a serious and well-regarded historian. After the release of *PSCCL*, he wrote three books on American history covering the period of 1817 to 1876. While all of these books garnered a positive reception, the last of them, *Reconstruction and the Constitution: 1866-1876*, published in 1902, earned its author great praise and helped guide the careers of generations of historians.

The Civil War and Reconstruction together make up a critical and controversial period of American history. The political scene was contested by a multitude of archetypes: Scalawags, doughfaces, carpetbaggers, Radical Republicans, abolitionists, secessionists, freedmen, copperheads, Klansmen, War Democrats, unionists, Liberal Republicans, and others took stands on a dizzying array of disputed issues. Little surprise, then, that the era’s historiography has been similarly contested. Yet Burgess’s idea of Reconstruction, as with many of his ideas, was fully formed from the start. Some of Burgess’s opinions on the period do not differentiate him from today’s progressive academe. Burgess, a nationalist, looked askance at the most common justification for secession, states’ rights.[73] Burgess admired Abraham Lincoln, whom he called “the great and good President” and whose actions during the beginning of Reconstruction Burgess claimed to agree with.[74] Though he criticized Radical Republicans, and hailed from the future “Solid South,” Burgess was himself a member of the Republican Party, at least in the 1910s.[75] Finally—and most surprisingly, given his casual discussion of his slaveholding past—Burgess opposed slavery. He admitted to “a lifelong prejudice against slavery of any of its forms.” However, his musings on slavery undermined this claim. Burgess made a distinction between unnatural and natural “involuntary servitude,” and did not condemn the historical belief that “barbarians” should be servants to Christians:

We cannot dismiss this opinion as due of the errors of the ‘dark ages.’ It lies today as a principle of modern political science and practical politics, under the form of statement

that civilized peoples have the right and duty to impose civilization upon uncivilized populations by whatever means they may judge to be just and proper.[76]

Though he criticized the practice of slavery, Burgess's perspective on its historical adoption was tainted by his empathy for slaveholders of the past.

The racial theories Burgess explicated in *PSCCL* served as a starting point for his analysis of Reconstruction. On an emotional level, Burgess was also influenced by his experiences during the hardest days of Reconstruction in Giles County. Burgess began *Reconstruction and the Constitution* by denouncing both secession and Reconstruction as terrible errors. Reconstruction, he believed, had noble ends, in particular the establishment of civil rights for freedmen and the reformation of Southern state governments. The issue, he claimed, is that the U.S. government used erroneous means to accomplish those ends.[77]

Today, scholars agree that many Southern states, during Andrew Johnson's presidential Reconstruction, enacted Black Codes that quickly reversed much of the progress made by the Thirteenth Amendment. The Black Codes, while on their face regulating vagrancy, apprenticeship, and labor relations, often had the effect of limiting African Americans' employment opportunities and forcing them back to plantations, free in name only.[78] Burgess did not agree with this analysis. The Black Codes, he wrote, were legitimate, intended only to prevent the "whole negro race from becoming paupers and criminals." [79] Meanwhile, his description of the Freedman's Bureau is overtly hostile. Describing most of their agents as "canting hypocrites and outright thieves," he claimed that they intentionally "kept the negroes in a state of idleness, beggary and unrest" and were a "veritable tyranny over the white population." [80] Burgess was certainly correct that the Freedman's Bureau was imperfect. But his purely negative history of the Bureau is incomplete. Bureau agents were truly committed to legal equality and fought tirelessly for freed slaves. As historian Eric Foner wrote, the Bureau was African Americans' "best hope for impartial justice in the postwar South." [81] When the Bureau failed, it was not due to corruption on the part of its employees, but rather its optimistic agents' inability to grasp the deep-seated racial animus that divided the South.[82]

If he perceived the Freedman's Bureau with hostility, Burgess's opinion of congressional Reconstruction—after Radical Republicans in Congress took control of Reconstruction in 1867—was downright damning. The defining characteristic of Radical Reconstruction was African-American suffrage, enforced by the United States military.[83] Thus Burgess's criticisms of Radical Reconstruction and his criticisms of African-American voting and governance are one and the same. Burgess described the expansion of suffrage in near-apocalyptic terms:

But there is no question, now, that Congress did a monstrous thing, and committed a great political error, if not a sin, in the creation of this new electorate. It was a great wrong to civilization to put the white race of the South under the domination of the negro race [...] A black skin means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason, has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind. To put such a race of men in possession of a 'State' government [...] in communities with a large white population is simply to establish barbarism in power over civilization.[84]

Again, Burgess grounded his historical analysis in the language of political theory: "From the point of view of sound political science the imposition of universal negro suffrage upon the Southern communities, in some of which the negroes were in large majority, was one of the 'blunder-crimes' of the century," he wrote.[85] Likely inspired by the white poverty he witnessed while visiting his family in Middle Tennessee circa 1871, Burgess's account of the South under Ulysses S. Grant is melancholy and emotional:

A period of darkness now settled down upon these unhappy communities blacker and more hopeless than the worst experiences of the war. The conduct of the men who now appeared upon the scene as the creators of the new South was so tyrannic, corrupt, mean and vulgar as to repel the historian from attempting any detailed account of their doings.[86]

Perhaps ironically, Burgess was not repelled. In fact, he was drawn to what he perceived to be an American tragedy. Though writing from New York, Burgess remained enchanted with the South and its way of life.

Burgess's study of Reconstruction, combined with his racist analysis of international politics, helped to solidify Southern commitment and Northern indifference to Jim Crow. After the withdrawal of federal troops from the South, it was not immediately clear what would happen to the region's freedmen. Jim Crow did not come about immediately. More than a decade separated the end of Reconstruction and the first Jim Crow law; as late as 1897, a Charleston editor called segregation "a needless affront to our respectable and well behaved colored people."^[87] African Americans continued to vote and hold public office in the South in large numbers for two decades after the end of Reconstruction.^[88] Instead, Jim Crow was a result of the gradual unification of white Southerners at the expense of African Americans, to which Northerners were largely indifferent.^[89] During the 1880s and 1890s, Northerners began to prioritize national reconciliation over the extension of civil and voting rights. Liberal publications like the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Weekly* portrayed African Americans as lazy and unfit for political participation, while the Supreme Court chipped away at constitutional prohibitions on segregation and disfranchisement.^[90] It is no coincidence that the embrace of Jim Crow by both North and South reached its zenith in the 1890s, at the same time as Burgess and his peers espoused academic racism and harsh critiques of Reconstruction. Burgess's work—and the work of the historians he influenced—was used to justify tacit Northern support for Jim Crow.^[91] As historian C. Vann Woodward wrote decades later, "The doctrines of Anglo-Saxon superiority by which Professor John W. Burgess of Columbia University [and others] justified and rationalized American imperialism in the Philippines, Hawaii, and Cuba differed in no essentials from the race theories by which [Southern politicians] justified white supremacy in the South."^[92] As the U.S. began to enforce white rule abroad, Americans became more comfortable with white rule at home; Burgess played an important role in creating a patina of academic legitimacy for two interrelated manifestations of racism.

Burgess presented his study of Reconstruction to general acclaim, most of all at Columbia. Burgess and one of his students, William Archibald Dunning, were the founders of the Dunning School of Reconstruction, a collection of Columbia-educated history professors who provided academic support to the already common view that Reconstruction and African-American suffrage were failures.^[93] Dunning personally

taught dozens of students, many of whom would later staff universities in their home states and write similarly biased state-level studies of Reconstruction.[94] While Dunning was more of a teacher, and Burgess more of a researcher and administrator, Burgess's impact on Dunning is clear: Dunning received his doctorate from Columbia School of Political Science in 1885, and Burgess served as his professor and mentor.[95] The Dunning School would influence historians for decades. As late as 1969, historian Avery Craven mildly referred to *Reconstruction and the Constitution* as "an older 'traditional' interpretation useful for comparison" to current scholarship.[96] Today, Burgess's work and the Dunning School have been discredited. In 1915, Oswald Garrison Villard, cofounder of the NAACP, wrote that he planned to read Burgess's *Reconstruction and the Constitution* "with reservations as to his accuracy. For I long ago came to distrust both his opinions and facts." [97] The final blow to the Dunning School came as mores changed in the 1950s during the Civil Rights Movement.[98] Eric Foner best summarized the consensus view of contemporary historians: "Scholars now view Reconstruction as a praiseworthy attempt to create an interracial democracy from the ashes of slavery and emphasize its accomplishments as much as its failings." [99]

Still, the Dunning School might not have been debunked without the work of one man: William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. In 1935, Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction*, in which he challenged Burgess and Dunning's claims. Du Bois argued that white historians ignored the role African-American suffrage played in building functional governments, creating a multiracial democracy, and founding the South's first public schools. Du Bois condemned Burgess's vision of the antebellum South as dangerously ignorant of the plight of slaves: "No serious and unbiased student can be deceived by the fairy tale of a beautiful Southern slave civilization," he wrote. Du Bois specifically called out Columbia and Burgess as responsible for advancing racist thought, and had much to say on Burgess's life and political leanings:

Burgess was an ex-Confederate soldier who started to a little Southern college with a box of books, a box of tallow candles and a Negro boy; and his attitude towards the Negro race in after years was subtly colored by this early conception of Negroes as essentially property like books and candles [...] Burgess was frank and determined by

his anti-Negro thought. He expounded his theory of Nordic supremacy which colored all his political theories [...] Burgess is a Tory and open apostle of reaction.[100]

Du Bois was clearly familiar with Burgess's life and his work. Though his description of Burgess as an "ex-Confederate soldier" is inaccurate—Burgess fought for the Union—Du Bois evidently read Burgess's memoirs, and quoted his recollection of leaving for Cumberland University with "a Negro boy" at length. In the last line of the above quotation, Du Bois made Burgess's outlook plain. Impressed by the experiences of his early life—in Tennessee and Germany—Burgess felt a kneejerk opposition to change and was exceptionally vocal about his feelings. Burgess, indeed, was an "apostle of reaction."

Burgess and Dunning—with their racist stands and biased research—were instrumental in assembling the modern field of history, and exercised a degree of influence over academic history that Du Bois did not approach in his lifetime. Burgess had lofty expectations for the historian: "The university professor must be a worker among original material," he wrote. "He must *construct* history out of the chaos of original historical atoms [Emphasis his]." Burgess gave students guidance that could well be relevant today. His students were to compare secondary sources to primary ones, to not accept a statement without proof, and to set facts "in their order as cause and effect." [101] Burgess and Dunning improved the rigor of historical scholarship. They examined more sources than their contemporaries, cited those sources consistently, and underwent peer review.[102] Though Burgess had high expectations for historians, however, his expectations for the resulting history were surprisingly modest, as if presaging later criticism of his work: "Truth," he wrote, "is a human interpretation, and subject therefore to the fallibility of human insight and reasoning,—one-sided, colored, incomplete." [103]

“A Hebrew Female Seminary”: Burgess, Immigration, and Coeducation

John W. Burgess also weighed in on coeducation, another topic of debate at nineteenth-century Columbia College. President Barnard advocated fervently for coeducation, while Burgess was staunchly opposed; Burgess wrote that their differing opinions on the issue estranged the two men for years.[104] Burgess gave many reasons for opposing coeducation at the college proper, most of them trite sexist banalities. He believed female students would distract male students from their coursework, and that women have “physical infirmities” which would render them unable to keep up with men. However, one of Burgess’s rationales is more relevant to the discussion of his racism. He argued that coeducation would turn the undergraduate school into “a female seminary, and a Hebrew female seminary, in the character of the student body, at that.”[105] Burgess, though clearly enchanted by the Protestants of Northern European stock, did not express a prejudice against Jews anywhere near as consistently and firmly as his prejudice against African Americans. He wrote to President Butler, “You know that personally I have no prejudices, at least no pronounced prejudices, against the Jews.”[106] However, many American Jews at the turn of the century did fall into two categories of which Burgess was deeply suspicious: immigrants and socialists.

Given Burgess’s belief in Northern European supremacy, it is not surprising that he was also a nativist. As with his opinion on race, Burgess’s position on immigration was a reactionary result of his times. The turn of the century saw an influx of Jewish and Italian “new immigrants,” not least in New York. In the 1890s alone, 1.9 million Southern and Eastern Europeans immigrated to the United States, the overwhelming majority of whom were Catholics or Jews. The shift in immigration trends inspired a nativist backlash by the United States’ white population, who became politically active with the goal of reducing immigration from “undesirable” places.[107] Burgess embodied this backlash. He revealed his suspicion of immigration in *PSCCL* in blatant terms: The state, he wrote, ought to defend “its nationality against the deleterious influences of foreign immigration.” When immigration threatens “the national language, customs, and

institutions,” he argued, the state should “close the gateways partly or wholly.”[108] Burgess’s fear of immigration extended to Columbia. Remarking ruefully on Columbia Law School, he wrote, “Frequently the son of a Hebrew old clothes vendor of the East Side would be found sitting next to an aristocratic A.B. of Harvard or Yale.”[109] His worry that Columbia College could become “a Hebrew female seminary” by attracting a large number of female Jewish students is bigoted, but it was grounded in differing perspectives on education. Often, Jewish immigrants, unlike many conservative Anglo-Saxon families, prioritized education for their daughters as well as their sons. Jewish women were associated with institutions that promoted education across gender lines, like Hull House, and some working Jewish women went to night school after their manufacturing jobs.[110] Burgess’s opposition to coeducation at Columbia College was motivated, in part, by fears that Jewish immigrant women would be especially interested in attending, and that their presence would weaken the hegemony of Columbia’s traditional Protestant constituency.

Burgess’s perspective on coeducation was also haunted by the specter that would soon come to dominate American political discourse: Socialism. Burgess perceived socialism as alien to the individualistic Teutonic democracy he held dear. “Asian” civilizations, he wrote, are organized “into communistic bodies locally under despotic unity of these bodies,” in stark contrast to the free capitalist societies of Europe.[111] Writing to labor union leader—and Jewish immigrant—Samuel Gompers, Burgess endorsed the laissez-faire capitalism of the Gilded Age: “I look with considerable disfavor on the expansion of governmental power in the domain of contractual relations between capital and labor, especially in a Republic,” he wrote.”[112] Burgess’s first personal experience with socialists took place during his time at Leipzig University, when he took classes alongside Russian women. Though coy when recalling their “advanced political opinions,” he later described these women as Russian Jews with socialist persuasions.[113] Burgess, horrified, warned that socialism, popular in Eastern Europe, might travel to the United States via the “new immigrants.” In *Political Science Quarterly*, Burgess wrote that immigrants to the United States at the turn of the century were of “that very element of Europe’s population” to which socialism appealed.[114] Here, Burgess was correct. Jews played a disproportionately large role in the

development of socialism in the United States, and at the turn of the century every American Jewish community contained a significant socialist contingent.[115] Aside from his commitment to maintaining Columbia's Christian character, Burgess's aversion to socialism led him to object to coeducation that could result in the socialist element of New York's Jewish population gaining access to Columbia.

Burgess's resistance to coeducation proved enormously consequential in the development of Columbia University. Though two consecutive Columbia presidents, Barnard and Low, strongly backed coeducation, Burgess and other conservative members of the faculty successfully resisted this change, at least at Columbia College. Burgess, like many of his contemporaries, was not opposed to the higher education of women, so long as it were kept separate from that of men. Burgess warned of those who would "confuse the question of coeducation with the question of the higher education for women." With Barnard and Low unable to muster the support necessary to admit women to the undergraduate college, they struck a compromise and, under the leadership of Annie Nathan Meyer, established Barnard College, in 1889, five blocks south of Columbia's Madison Avenue campus.[116] While the idea of a women's college is progressive, Barnard College was formed, in part, to buttress a conservative status quo. Burgess wrote that Barnard College, far from a symbol of gender equality, "stands for the education of women separately from men." [117] Burgess remained deeply concerned about the status of women at his graduate school. Yet the admission of women to the School of Political Science is one of the most comic moments in Columbia's history. Burgess, then dean, adamantly refused Low's request for the school to teach women. He changed his mind, however, when anonymous donors offered to endow three new professorial chairs at the graduate school, to begin in 1895 at a cost of \$12,000 a year, on the condition that the school offer classes to students and graduates of Barnard College. It was only after Burgess grudgingly accepted the proposal that he learned the anonymous donors were Seth and Annie Low themselves.[118] Despite this setback, Burgess was not entirely defeated. The college proper would not admit women until 1983.

Conclusion

On January 12, 1944, at 1:00 pm, officials and employees of the Permanente Metals Corporation in Richmond, California, launched the S.S. *John W. Burgess*, one of the 2,710 Liberty ships produced during the Second World War.[119] Built to replace vessels of the American merchant fleet sunk by German submarines, Liberty ships could be constructed in days, and were used to ferry cargo and troops to both theaters of the war.[120] It is difficult to overstate the irony that the S.S. *John W. Burgess* was utilized in a conflict fought partly against Germany, and was assembled at the Richmond Shipyards, which hired women and racial minorities to work alongside white men.[121] War shaped and tormented John William Burgess, yet a warship memorialized him.

The ship also meant that Burgess lived on in the public's memory, nearly thirteen years after his death. The Library of Congress suggested his name to the U.S. Maritime Commission, and Frank Diehl Fackenthal, provost of Columbia University, wrote to that agency to inquire about the ship.[122] During celebrations of Columbia's 250th anniversary, in 2004, Burgess was listed as one of the 250 "Columbians ahead of their time," and was given partial credit "for the strength of women's studies at Barnard and Teachers Colleges." [123]

Through the dogged pursuit of graduate education in political science that went on to consume his life, Burgess left a lasting legacy. Without Burgess's work, the social sciences would not exist as they do today. Burgess played a major role in the expansion of Columbia University and, leading by example, helped spur the birth of the modern American university, but he also played a role in limiting the university's reach. Burgess's arrested intellectual development prevented him from coming to terms with a changing world. His influential writing, published while he worked at Columbia, nudged American academia towards his racist and sexist worldview and his dangerous perspective on Reconstruction. In some ways, he furnished an expectation of robust scholarship that improved the fields of study to which he devoted his life. In other ways,

however, he was a poor scientist, conducting research in order to confirm his biases, rather than to discover a truth that might be unsettling.

None of this is to say that John William Burgess was uniquely villainous—he was merely an American conservative, of his time. Much of this paper consists of a litany of criticisms, but Burgess simply reacted to the great psychological pain he felt as the American South tore itself apart. He promoted a status quo that he honestly believed was best for white and black Americans alike. What is unique is the forcefulness and duration of Burgess's advocacy for racist principles, which became synonymous with his scholarship, and the black mark that advocacy leaves on his enormous contributions to academia, the American university, and Columbia.

Endnotes

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