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West Point and the Problem of Equality

Kate Masur, Northwestern University

This paper takes up the question of how Americans envisioned equality after slavery's abolition. Equality is, like freedom, a crucial concept in United States history. Yet it has received far less attention from historians, particularly historians of Reconstruction. Indeed, the struggle to redefine equality in the wake of emancipation has rarely been the subject of serious scholarly inquiry.

After slavery, white Americans, both North and South, often reframed arguments for new forms of racial equality as demands for "social equality" whose fulfillment would contradict agreed-upon ideals of liberty and personal taste. In this paper, I use a decade in the history of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point to explore the relationship between what nineteenth-century Americans understood as the "social" realm, on one hand, and the "civil" and "political" realms, on the other. I first establish that before the Civil War, northerners generally believed that the social was a preserve of inequality and hierarchy. Next, I use controversies surrounding

the appointment of African American men as cadets at West Point, beginning in 1870, to examine how white northerners invoked the social – as a category – to resist measures designed to eliminate racial inequality. I also explore how early African American cadets viewed the social realm and, in particular, how they understood their social relationships with white cadets. In the paper's conclusion, I suggest why excavating and analyzing postemancipation arguments against social equality might be important and useful in our own time.