

Slavery and American Colleges: Historical Entanglements that Matter for Understanding Inequality Today

by Ansley T. Erickson — May 30, 2014

Powerful new historical scholarship documents the many connections between American higher education and the institution of slavery. This commentary argues that this new historical knowledge should be brought to bear on discussions of contemporary inequality and should prompt a reexamination of how schooling and labor and wage structures interact today.

The American college and American slavery grew up together and in mutually reinforcing ways. Slave-trading families and their profits helped get the first colleges off the ground, funding new buildings and academic chairs at elite institutions like Harvard and Columbia and Dartmouth in their first decades. Enslaved people cooked the meals, laundered the clothes, stoked the fires, and tended the classrooms so that the work of learning could proceed. As these colleges matured into 19th century bastions of learning, as they themselves depended on and profited from slave labor, the colleges also produced a false biology of scientific racism, offering an intellectual façade to cover a system of base exploitation. Students on campus were surrounded with the physical, economic, and intellectual manifestations of slavery, and some carried this familiarity from their northern campuses on the road south to become plantation owners themselves. This is the powerful history M.I.T. historian Craig Steven Wilder assembled in intricate detail in his new book, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and The Troubled History of America's Universities*.

Given its focus on events of centuries ago, and on the nation's oldest and most elite colleges, this might seem a story that operates at some distance from today's concerns in education. But *Ebony and Ivy* does what the best historical interpretations do. In telling a distant story, it prompts a fresh look and new questions about patterns and practices close at hand.

Ebony and Ivy examines the multiple points of connection between slavery and the early American college. What happens if we expand from racialized slavery, to think about American labor systems over time, and stretch from the university, to American education overall? The question, then, is how our education system and our labor system have been, and remain, intertwined. The intertwining reaches well beyond the end of chattel slavery, with a wage-labor system that today produces extraordinary (and still racially marked) income inequality (Gordon, 2013).

As Wilder shows, in the era of slavery, universities helped match people to their places in a slave labor system. They helped inculcate elite white men in the work of mastery, and helped nurture the structures and ideas that kept people of African descent enslaved (2013).

Surely, education did not function only in this way, even within a slave labor system. An 1830 North Carolina statute made the teaching of reading to an enslaved person a crime. The law itself testified to the reality that even as the state tried to ensure a lack of education to enforce servitude, enslaved people pursued education. They made learning a mode of resistance, a place for the making of freedom (Williams, 2007). Even as early American colleges reinforced slavery, enslaved people and free black Americans used education differently, to make space to assert their humanity, to stand from that basis and critique the falseness of the labor system that constrained them.

This is a core and enduring tension—between uses of education that fit people for the labor system they face, and views of education that suit them to perceive, to critique, to seek to transform—that labor system. It is a tension well illustrated in the first decades of the 20th century, within a wage labor system ruled by Jim Crow. The Northern philanthropic Julius Rosenwald fund sought to expand high-school education for Southern black students. They offered to fund buildings and pay teachers in Little Rock, Arkansas, among other places. Rosenwald officials carefully studied and then designed their school to respect the boundaries of Jim Crow labor. They promised classes only in those areas of work white people had rejected, assuring local white school administrators that “this school would interest itself only in trades obviously negro.” The school might be new, but what it would produce would be old. Seeing this as an attempt to fit their children for injustice rather than ready them for justice, black community members pushed hard against the plans. In other settings, they resisted more quietly. Some communities took the classrooms labeled “chauffeuring,” or “gardening,” and taught within them the “literary subjects” or classical academics they wanted (Anderson, 1988). Without naïveté about the shape of the local labor system they faced, they pushed not only for education to suit their children's work, but for education that gave their children a foundation from which to perceive and fight against injustice.

This critical and democratic education tradition continued into the 1960s. Freedom schools and citizenship schools carried it

forward, as the richly educational organizing practices of the black freedom struggle (Payne & Strickland, 2008).

But although these efforts never entirely dissipated, their relative place in our education discourse weakened over the last half of the 20th century. Beginning in the 1960s, federal policy and public rhetoric embraced a view of education that seemed to be more ambitious—education itself was said to fix poverty, close gaps of inequality (Kantor, 1991). But this view of education was also *less* ambitious, because it satisfied itself increasingly with making mobility by producing future workers for the extant (and still unjust) labor system. Somehow the very way that education had earlier stymied change was now imagined to be the route to make change. Gradually, the idea that education needed to produce discerning and critical citizens drew less attention.

Although we can find a history of education for citizenship and critical democracy that runs far back, it is the image of education as fitting students to our present labor system that dominates current conversation. There are many possible examples, from curricular trends to renewed federal interest in vocational education. This conversation does not look the same as it did in early 20th century Little Rock, when the Rosenwald Fund tried to reinforce a racial wage labor system through its schools. It appears, in fact, in a quite different and seemingly positive idiom. It appears in the now familiar images of neatly uniformed, usually Black and Latino, children working seriously away in their classrooms, while college pennant-flags line the walls or adorn the ceiling. It embraces a language of college-going and increasing expectations that carries widely appealing ideas about mobility, about opening opportunities rather than closing them.

We should notice the limits of this rationale. It is, still, education designed to fit students to an extant labor market. It is to fit them some notches higher than they might otherwise have been. But it is, nonetheless, driven chiefly by an idea of school as preparation for work. Yes, skills, individually acquired, individually carried, can help move students to a better place in this labor system. But that movement is not only highly individual, but of course, highly contingent and, from the perspective of the collective challenges facing our democracy, highly incomplete. Preparation for individual mobility isn't the only educational problem. It is also an educational problem when the lower tier of our labor system includes work so ill paid and so tenuous that even full-time employees can scarcely support themselves and their families.

We are in a moment of heightened public attention to wage inequality—and the inequality produced by our present labor system is jaw-dropping. The basic gaps in income are larger than they have been in nearly a century, with the wages of the lowest-paid 30 percent of workers falling in real terms since the 1970s, the median stagnating, and the top ten percent skyrocketing. Meanwhile, in terms of the median wage, black workers have lost ground against white workers since 1979 (Gordon, 2013).

The promised links between education and mobility in this labor system are beginning to look unstable as well. A generation ago, some college or a college degree was a much better predictor of moving beyond low-wage work than it is today. College degrees still yield a significant wage premium, but high-skill, high-wage jobs are growing much more slowly than low-skill, low-wage jobs (Gordon, 2013).

The idea that education can be *the* engine of American mobility has had tremendous appeal. On closer examination, however, that notion is troubled by deep inequalities by race visible in both education and labor. In the same mid-to-late 20th century decades in which black high school attainment rose significantly and made some progress in closing the gap with white educational attainment, white men remained more than twice as likely as black men to make their way into the more dynamic and well-paid white-collar sector (Katz, Stern, & Fader, 2005; Rury & Hill, 2011). Acknowledging the imperfect links between education and employment should make it even less possible to think that fitting students to a deeply unequal labor system will somehow transform that system and produce equality.

Schools can work hard to help jump as many of their students as possible from the low-wage pool into the higher-wage pool. But as doing so becomes harder, we have to ask at what point the education conversation needs to shift from trying to somehow make everyone a winner in a game of steep odds, to consider how democratic, political engagement might be needed to change the terms of the game. The real decreases in American inequality have come in the times when Americans have made equality-favoring political choices, ones that acted directly on our labor system (in recognizing and encouraging unions, in supporting strong minimum wage standards, in expanding social benefits through work or government provision) (Gordon, 2013). Worker preparation alone, whether college-bound or vocational, is not enough.

It seems that it is easiest to talk about our current labor system as having one kind of educational problem: the need for workers. But in fact our current labor system provokes a different question: what role can education play in addressing a labor system that is producing incredible inequality and a political system that is, to date, tolerating it?

Craig Steven Wilder's *Ebony and Ivy* gives historic examples of how education has worked to slot people into, and produce the ideas that reinforced, a slave labor structure. It comes at a moment of useful popular attention to economic inequality. Together these should provoke us to reconsider what ties between education and labor we see today, and what better links between education, democracy, and today's labor structure we might need.

Notes

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