

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Western Pillar of African American Labor

Faith Noelle Auon · Wednesday, August 5th, 2020

From the booming industrial revolution of the early 1800s, to modern day political progression, western society has been presented as the paragon of progression and innovation ever since the 15th century. Most western countries have moved past industrialization and have entered post-industrial societies, out sourcing labor to industrialized countries, or countries entering industrialization, further posturing western society as the most advanced, progressive, and efficient. But how has all this exponential growth been made possible? A closer look at the pillars that uphold the identity of western power and progression will show the common foundation throughout all of them is the reliance upon African American labor. Although hidden and erased, African American labor is responsible for the construction of the western world since the beginning of slavery in 1619, to modern day political activism that has labelled the western world as “progressive”.

Allow me to define “labor.” The term “labor” is not just tethered to a task or job that one carries out, like being a soldier or a slave. Labor, specifically when it comes to African Americans, refers to the use of one’s body or intellectualism to yield results and productivity, whether it was on the African American’s own volition or if it was forced upon them. Labor is not just a job or a task, it is an actualizing of results and product. These products can benefit the one undergoing the labor, but often (especially in the history of African Americans) it is specifically for the benefit and progression of the white population, and the detriment of the African American. An array of forms of African American labor have built western society, ranging from the physical to the intellectual.

Physical Labor is the most predominant type of labor in African American history. Slavery takes the mainstage in this context of “physical labor”, considering it was responsible for the creation of “racism”, and subsequently “race”, in western culture in the first place. In Baptist’s book, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, Baptist’s main thesis is that capitalism and slavery are interwoven concepts, with slavery being the first form of American capitalism, which would go on to provide the foundation for the massive “brutal capitalist” complex that exists in America today. The rise of industrial capitalism is traced back to the industrial revolution, spearheaded by the cotton gin in the 1790s. With cotton prices high, and cotton processing made quicker and cheaper through the cotton gin, enslavers in Georgia and Carolina began to invest in cotton production, with other states following in their footsteps, such as Alabama and Mississippi. Through using enslaved labor to meet and surpass quotas to maximize profit, these slave labor camps would strengthen America’s hold on the cotton industry, which would eventually propel America into an economic powerhouse, and eventually would acquire a near monopoly on cotton, the world’s most widely traded commodity. This exponential growth would not have been possible without the expansion of slavery and the brutal extraction of labor from the enslaved.

This is made evident through the exponential production of cotton in the United States. In 1791, there were 2 million pounds of cotton produced. In 1821, there was 150 million pounds of cotton produced. In 1860, there were 1.5 billion pounds of cotton produced. That is a 76,700% increase in product over 70 years. That was only made possible through the maximization of African American labor through torturous means of extraction. Enslaved people were pushed to a 400% increase in productivity to reach this growth, made achievable through torture and the manipulation of their “left hand”. The “left hand” refers to the enslaved people’s passive resistance to their enslaver’s oppression, such as developing personal skills that aided them in their labor and leverage when dealing with their enslavers. Enslavers “...redirected left-handed power by measuring work, implementing continuous surveillance of labor, and calibrating time and torture,” (pg. 112, Baptist) leading to enslaved people’s innovation being used to reinvent their own labor to become more efficient and profitable, and in effect, turning them against themselves. This labor within the actual labor of picking cotton is what exponentially grew America’s hold on the cotton industry, creating the western industrial complex that we live in today.

When it came time for the Civil War, over 200,000 African American men took up arms and joined the North in fighting for the preservation of the Union. Without these African American men’s enlistments, their labor, the Union would not have won the war. The North’s opposition to slavery had less to do with the morality of slavery and more to do with the politics of slave versus non-slave states, due to the Missouri Compromise. Though there were many moral objections to slavery in the North and a desire to limit Southern enslavers’ power, if the South had expanded slavery elsewhere that was not the United States, such as Mexico, the conflict between the North and the South would most likely not have been large enough to spark a Civil War. With that context in mind, the North’s resolve began to weaken quickly as the Civil War raged on, leading many northern officials ready and willing to negotiate peace. It was the commitment of the African American soldiers that persisted the Union to hold out until the end of the war.

African Americans’ labor in the military has not stopped at the Civil War. Today, African Americans are the most likely out of all the racial groups to join the military. 125,000 served in WWII, and 350,000 African Americans served in WWI. African American enlistment in WWII was even opposed because of the fear that it would bring African American men, “...to the conclusion that his political rights must be respected,” and “inevitably lead to disaster,” (pg. 22, Hannah-Jones) according to Senator James K. Vardaman. This quote points out the acknowledgement, albeit subconscious acknowledgment, of the significance and power of African American labor, one that is dichotomously devalued, feared, and relied upon.

As I mentioned previously, slavery takes the mainstage when talking about physical African American labor. Preoccupying more than 61% of African Americans’ time in America, not to mention the additional 24% of time spent in segregation, African Americans have only seen “equality” in the last 56 years. However, a new form of slavery has arisen in the last 50 years: Prison labor.

To understand the correlation between African American slavery and the use of prison labor, and why prison labor is in fact a racial problem, an understanding of the mass incarceration complex is required. Currently, the United States holds the highest incarceration rate in the world, currently incarcerating almost 2.3 million people, 38% being African American. This percentage is almost 3 times the percentage of African Americans in the United States, according to the United States Census Bureau. Why such a disproportionate percentage? That’s because there is a history of the Justice System targeting African Americans for arrests, specifically drug arrests. This all started

during the War on Drugs, which is when Mass Incarceration in America began to grow exponentially. In Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander illustrates the history of mass incarceration of African Americans in the United States, beginning with the War on Drugs.

Even though drug arrests were on the decline, and there were rising attitudes from sociologists for the dismantling of prisons in the United States altogether, the Reagan administration took the War on Drugs as one of the spearheads for their campaign and used it to essentially wage war on the black community. The campaign fueled a panic around crack cocaine, the form of cocaine that was predominantly used by the black community, which raised punishments for the use and distribution of crack. A strong racial connotation surrounds the persecution of crack cocaine because even though the same drug was favored by their white counterparts, powdered cocaine, the physical form of crack cocaine is what received more extreme punishments and a higher social stigma. Minimum sentencing rose as the percentage of charged and incarcerated African Americans also rose. Minimum sentencing of five years in prison for even first-time offences became commonplace, filling prisons with more than just prisoners; a workforce.

Prisoners are forced to work while in prison. Whether it's sewing Victoria Secret undergarments, or packaging Microsoft software, prisoners are required to work or else they'll be punished. This includes either being put in "...solitary confinement, loss of earned good time, or losing family visitation" (Whitney Benns, *The Atlantic*). Prisoners, though "paid", make as little as 23 cents an hour before deductions, even though prison labor is a billion-dollar industry, according to the *Economist*. These corporations that make up the capitalist structure that upholds the western world as a whole, not only rely on cheap labor fueled by predominantly African American inmates, they helped create it. "The Prison Industries Act" that expanded inmate labor was passed by the American Legislative Exchange Council, which was funded by corporations looking to maximize cheap, subliminally African American, labor.

The use of predominantly African American prison labor has been described as modern-day slavery. It has prompted many discussions of why we are allowing slavery to be not only operational, but to be supported by our own government and justice system. What many don't know is that slavery is still, technically, allowed in our constitution. According to the 13th amendment, the amendment that supposedly ended slavery, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." With this caveat, the United States finds, once again, a way literally enslave African Americans and mine them for their labor. African Americans, through specific racial targeting, are funneled into the prison industrial complex that puts a colorblind lens on their essential enslavement, since the dominant percentage of African American inmates has been ignored until recently, and has devalued and hidden their labor from society behind prison bars.

The discussion of physical labor would not be complete without dissecting the roles African American bodies in the progression of the western medical field. Black bodies have been subjected to the experimentation and extraction of white medicine for centuries. This dates back to as early as the 1820's when John Brown, an enslaved man from Baldwin County, was torturously experimented on to determine how deep black skin went. Hamilton, the physician that experimented on Brown, performed these experiments to determine the extent to which black bodies were "different" from white bodies (pg. 57, Villarosa). The surgical technique used to repair vesico-vaginal fistula, a complication of childbirth, was created through torturous experimentation on African American women in the mid 1800s. This torture, this labor of the black female body,

brought about the founding of modern gynecology as we know it. Throughout medical history, the torture, the labor, of the black body has been used for the benefit of the white populous and the rest of western society. You don't have to look far in modern day medicine to find the labor of African Americans in medicine. The HeLa cells, the world's first line of immortal cells, were cervical cancer cells stolen from Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman in the 1950's, without her knowledge or consent. These cells went on to create monumental strides in medicine, such as aiding in creation of the Polio vaccine and supporting the study of Virology, and have gone on to sell up to \$10,000 a vial. However, not only was Henrietta Lacks neglected by her doctors, not just by stealing her cells but also by not giving her proper medical attention due to her race, her family never saw a single penny from the money made off of the HeLa cells. To this day, Henrietta Lacks' family lives below the poverty line.

African American labor is not just limited to physical labor. Some of the most important reforms in legislation and political activism have been the product of African American labor, which we can call "intellectual labor". This intellectual labor begins as early as the Civil War era. After the Civil War, from 1865 to 1877, America went into a period of Reconstruction. Although this period did not last for very long, what was created would be proven to be monumental. After the establishment of laws that allowed African American men to vote, the African American vote brought in black politicians to fill political seats, ranging from local to federal government. Under these politicians came egalitarian state constitutions, equitable tax legislation, discrimination prohibition, and more. The two most notable products of the Reconstruction were the 14th amendment and the creation of public schools. The 14th amendment was prompted by previous discussions of African American citizenship, and the notion that African American people were not only property, but African instead of American, even if they were born in America. The rejection of this idea not only led to the formation of the 14th amendment, stating that any person born in the United States is automatically a citizen, thus solidifying not only African American citizenship, but the rights of many future immigrants who would come from all over the world.

Public education is another product that all Americans benefit from today. African Americans were prohibited from reading and writing during the era of slavery, so in order to finally access education, black legislators pushed for and established a universal, state funded school system accessible to anyone regardless of race. Not only did black legislators create public education, they created *mandatory* public education. With compulsory education laws implemented in the South, Southern children were now required to attend school, all thanks to the labor of black legislators and the voters who put them there.

This "intellectual labor" has been influential domestically and internationally. One of the most influential movements in history is the Civil Rights movement in the United States. This nationwide movement that stemmed from the oppression of African American people and black resistance served as a blueprint for other civil rights movements, such as women's rights movements and LGBT rights movements thereon after. To quote Nikole Hannah-Jones, "...the laws born out of black resistance guarantee the franchise for all and ban discrimination based not just on race but on gender, nationality, religion and ability." The labor of black resistance is one that has progressed society universally, building the political and social foundation we exist in today.

African American labor, volunteered or forced, has served as the bedrock of western civilizations for centuries. With the reliance upon slavery heavily understated and the legislative work of

African Americans gone uncredited, it is clear that African American labor may be a pillar of western society, but it is a pillar made invisible and devalued. In order for it to even function as a pillar, it must be rendered invisible. African American labor did not stop at slavery, it has lived, breathed, and evolved into an essential of modern day western society.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, August 5th, 2020 at 6:20 pm and is filed under [Discourse](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.