

## **Labor as Liberation: The Redefining of Worth & Work in the Era of Reconstruction**

The Reconstruction era in the United States was a period of profound transformation, particularly in the understanding of labor and its relationship to individual worth. As the nation grappled with the aftermath of slavery, Black activists and scholars reinterpreted deeply ingrained American labor ideologies, seeking to redefine the role of labor in a society that had long used it as a tool of oppression. By embracing the notion that labor was not just an economic necessity but a path to equality and dignity, they forged a powerful narrative that sought to elevate the status of newly emancipated African Americans. This paper will explore how labor, once a symbol of degradation under slavery, became a cornerstone of the fight for Black equality during Reconstruction, as well as the complexities and contradictions that arose in this ideological shift.

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Labor has a deeply rooted ideology in American history and culture, predating the nation's founding. This ideology contrasts sharply with much of the rest of the world's historical views on labor. While centuries of human history sought to minimize or eliminate labor, American society found their very identity and worth in it.

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville highlighted the contrast between American and European attitudes towards labor, reflected in their political structures: a democratic society versus an aristocratic one. In a democratic society, wealth is seen as directly tied to the amount of labor an individual and their family contribute, reinforcing the belief in meritocracy. Although both aristocratic and democratic societies value labor, only in a democracy is labor esteemed when it is performed to sustain life. In an aristocratic society,

work is considered noble only when driven by ambitions beyond mere survival. Tocqueville observed that even wealthy men in a democratic society feel compelled to devote their leisure time to work, given the honorable connotation labor holds. Their only escape from this pressure, Tocqueville noted, is when they retreat to European nations, where "idleness still holds honor." In an aristocratic society, labor driven by the need for survival signifies a lack of agency and freedom. Valor is only found in work chosen voluntarily, not in work done out of necessity. This contrasts with American society, as Tocqueville notes, where even the President of the United States receives a salary and, in a sense, works out of obligation. Because the democratic structure in America is such that every political and social class labors to some extent for their survival, labor in this format can no longer be viewed with disdain.<sup>1</sup>

Francis J. Grund, on the other hand, offers an interpretation of the American relationship with labor that even more closely ties labor to individual worth. In 1837, Grund declared that there is no other people on the earth that so closely ties labor with pleasure than Americans. To the degree that he says business constitutes the very foundation of an American's soul, the country not only resembles a nation but a massive workshop, and that labor is not just a means of survival to them but "the fountain of all human felicity."<sup>2</sup> By identifying labor as the basis of not only an American's nation but

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<sup>1</sup> de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. 1835. [gutenberg.org, https://contextus.org/Tocqueville,\\_Democracy\\_in\\_America\\_\(1835\)?tab=contents](https://contextus.org/Tocqueville,_Democracy_in_America_(1835)?tab=contents). Accessed 20 8 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Grund, Francis J. , 1804 Or. *The Americans in their moral, social, and political relations*. London, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1837. Pdf. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <[www.loc.gov/item/01026811/](http://www.loc.gov/item/01026811/)>.

their very soul, Grund argues that there is a foundational tie to an individual's self-worth and status in life to their relationship with labor.

The American relationship with labor was not merely political or economic but also spiritual. American Protestantism was steeped in rhetoric that glorified labor. William Penn, in his book of maxims, *Some Fruits of Solitude In Reflections And Maxims*, urged his readers to “love labor,” precisely for the reasons Tocqueville noted an aristocratic society lamented it: because labor enables survival and wards off idleness, which Penn warned leads to worse than doing nothing.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the American preacher Henry Ward Beecher, in “Laboring Together with God,” described God as a worker himself, declaring that “The greatest of all workers is God.”<sup>4</sup> This underscores that while a distinct American ideology glorifying labor does exist, its origins are multifaceted, rooted in political, economic, and spiritual influences, ultimately forming a core American cultural belief.

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The enslavement of Africans in the United States fundamentally altered cultural beliefs about labor. When a large portion of the population was forced into labor yet marked with the lowest social status, labor itself lost its inherent virtue; only “free labor” was deemed truly commendable.

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<sup>3</sup> Franklin, Benjamin, et al. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. The Journal of John Woolman. Fruits of Solitude / William Penn. P.F. Collier, 1909. The Harvard Classics, vol. 1.

<sup>4</sup> “LABORING TOGETHER WITH GOD.” *Christian Union* (1870-1893), vol. 12, no. 19, Nov 10, 1875, pp. 388. ProQuest, <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/laboring-together-with-god/docview/136702002/se-2>.

In his 1860 speech in Auburn, William M. Evarts echoed William H. Seward's characterization of slavery as an "irrepressible conflict," framing it as a battle between slave labor and free labor. Evarts argues that when a superior power strips an individual of their agency to labor, it reduces them to the status of oxen or horses. In contrast, free labor is infused with individual will, allowing a person to engage their work not only physically but as the master of their intellect. Free labor, therefore, demands the full expression of self in a way that slave labor cannot. Evarts asserts that under slavery, "man is degraded to the level of the brute, and his labor to the level of brute labor." Only through individual agency, he contends, can labor foster moral, intellectual, and social growth.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the system of slavery degraded the very labor that, just decades earlier, Americans like Tocqueville and Penn had glorified. Moreover, by asserting that degrading Black enslaved labor reduced enslaved Americans to the status of livestock, the connection between labor and individual worth was further entrenched. While earlier authors claimed that labor could glorify the individual, slave labor was now seen as capable of degrading them. For Black Americans to remain enslaved, this new ideology was necessary to justify degradation in the American consciousness—an ideology that Black authors of the Reconstruction era would boldly confront.

In his seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois explored the degradation of Black enslaved labor and the absence of character development in slave

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<sup>5</sup> Evarts, William M. "SPEECH OF WILLIAM M. EVARTS, ESQ.; WHAT THE REPUBLICANS INTEND DOING. THE QUESTION OF CONSTITUTIONALITY. THE GREAT ISSUES INVOLVED. THE TRUE ABOLITION PARTY. THE SOUTHERN DISUNION PARTY. THE DOUGLAS PARTY. THE BELL AND EVERETT PARTY. THE REPUBLICAN PARTY." *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 19 10 1860, <https://www.nytimes.com/1860/10/19/archives/speech-of-william-m-evarts-esq-what-the-republicans-intend-doing.html>. Accessed 20 8 2024.

labor compared to free labor. Du Bois described slavery as “The long system of repression and degradation of the Negro [that] tended to emphasize the elements in his character which made him a valuable chattel: courtesy became humility, moral strength degenerated into submission, and the exquisite native appreciation of the beautiful became an infinite capacity for dumb suffering.”<sup>6</sup> Like Evarts, Du Bois argued that slavery had profound ideological consequences for labor. It stripped labor of its potential to cultivate the virtuous character traits that American ideology once celebrated, instead enforcing a form of submission that dehumanized the Black people subjected to it—effectively “joining the black man and the ox together.”<sup>7</sup> Booker T. Washington also recognized how labor, once a source of empowerment, became degrading when exploited by the machinery of slavery. In his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, Washington argues that slavery was deliberately constructed to transform labor into “a badge of degradation, of inferiority.” Specifically, this redefinition of labor created a situation where both Black workers and white owners were trapped by its degrading implications and sought to escape its pervasive impact.<sup>8</sup> The dehumanization that Evarts hinted at, reiterated in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Up From Slavery*, was even more explicitly examined in Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*. Here, Du Bois deepened his critique, arguing that slavery was designed to weaponize labor as a tool to degrade Black Americans. However, to sustain the system of slavery, the ideology supporting it, once again, had to evolve. Du Bois contended that the rhetoric of Black inferiority was driven by “economic motives and the inter-connected political urge

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<sup>6</sup> Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Dover, 1994, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, 18

<sup>8</sup> Washington, Booker T. *Up from Slavery*. Dover Publications, 1995, 9.

necessary to support slave industry.” To justify slavery, the South had to present Black people as highly efficient in the agricultural labor they performed, while simultaneously asserting that their mental capacity—not their physical ability—was inferior to that of white Europeans or Americans.<sup>9</sup> Du Bois demonstrates how labor rhetoric in the United States evolved in tandem with slavery, linking an individual’s or a race’s worth increasingly to their perceived ability to labor. As the type of labor performed by a race became a justification of social class, it also came to be seen as indicative of their supposed biological capacities.

The labor ideology intertwined with slavery became increasingly paradoxical. The prevailing justification was that labor is inherently virtuous when performed with individual agency. Conversely, slave labor—lacking this agency—was deemed degrading. Black people were said to perform slave labor because they were physically suited for it and supposedly lacked the mental capacity for free labor. This view likened Black individuals to livestock, laboring without the ability to assert their individuality in their work. The incongruity arises in maintaining the mental subordination of enslaved Black Americans. As Du Bois points out in *Black Reconstruction*, the white ruling class could not allow their Black workers to become intelligent, despite the fact that greater intelligence would enhance their productivity and ultimately benefit the white owners’ profits. Du Bois critiques this, stating, “He could not allow his labor to become intelligent, although intelligent labor would greatly increase the production of wealth.”<sup>10</sup> Converse to

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<sup>9</sup> Du Bois, *W.E.B. Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc, 38.

<sup>10</sup> Du Bois, *W.E.B. Black Reconstruction in America*, 38-39.

their economic goals, the agricultural industry's expansion into machinery and more complex devices to expedite production was limited by the desire to keep the Black labor force ignorant. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois further argues that the deliberate nature of slavery not only instilled character traits that reinforced white supremacist ideology but also handicapped the workers themselves.<sup>11</sup> Du Bois illustrates that, due to the close association between labor and self-worth, the system of slavery had to perpetually devalue Black labor to sustain its racial hierarchy—often to the detriment of the very profits it was supposed to maximize. Consequently, since labor is so closely tied to individual worth, Black labor was always relegated to a lesser status.

In examining the evolution of labor ideology alongside the institution of slavery, it becomes evident that the American view of labor was profoundly reshaped to justify and sustain the system of enslavement. Initially, labor was celebrated for its ability to develop individual virtue. However, as slavery entrenched itself in American society, the narrative shifted dramatically. Labor performed under the conditions of slavery was stripped of its inherent value and redefined as degrading. This redefinition was not merely an ideological shift but a deliberate strategy to uphold the racial hierarchy. As scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington have demonstrated, the system of slavery was engineered to devalue Black labor by limiting the intellectual and personal development of enslaved individuals. This not only dehumanized them but also reinforced a distorted racial ideology that justified their oppression. The paradox lies in the fact that while labor was heralded as a path to personal and societal growth, slave labor was denigrated to maintain the

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<sup>11</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, 102

social order and economic benefits of slavery. Thus, the labor ideology of the time, far from being a simple reflection of economic necessity, became a crucial instrument in perpetuating racial injustice.

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After emancipation, Black activists embraced and reinterpreted long-standing American beliefs about the relationship between individual worth and labor. This sentiment, now charged with a spirit of liberation, positioned labor as the path to racial equality. Thus, the very rhetoric once used to justify Black enslavement was transformed into a cornerstone of their fight for equality.

In his analysis of pre-Civil War Republican ideology, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, Eric Foner highlights the consistent assertion that labor is a source of value in political and economic spheres. He references the 1856 campaign speech of William Evarts, who declared, “Labor, gentlemen, we of the free States acknowledge to be the source of all our wealth, all our progress, of all our dignity and value.”<sup>12</sup> This sentiment directly parallels the words of prominent Black author Anna Julia Cooper in her 1892 chapter titled “What Are We Worth?” Cooper succinctly articulates how Black thinkers repurposed labor ideology as a tool for Black liberation. She asserts that individual worth is determined by one’s contributions through labor, stating, “It is by this standard that society estimates individuals; and by this standard finally and inevitably the world will

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<sup>12</sup> Eric Foner. *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men : The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*. Oxford University Press, 1995. EBSCOhost, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=e025xna&AN=367527&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=e025xna&AN=367527&site=ehost-live&scope=site), pg. 12.

measure and judge nations and races.”<sup>13</sup> Just as Evarts proclaimed labor as the source of all value, Cooper emphasized its importance, stating, “...it is labor that creates all value.”<sup>14</sup> Cooper’s writings underscore the adoption and transformation of American labor ideology into a foundational element of Black activist thought during Reconstruction, illustrating how labor was redefined as a liberating force.

The identification of labor as the equalizing agent for Black Americans was a wide-spread belief by Black scholars. Booker T. Washington infamously demanded historically Black colleges and universities teaching their students to labor effectively was integral to their education to the degree that he maintained he had no patience for Black educational centers that refused to teach the dignity of labor.<sup>15</sup> In building the very universities they were educating themselves in, Washington believed that labor imparted virtues such as self-help and self-reliance that would become integral in African-Americans achieving equality in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

In his essay "Labor Omnia Vincit," W.E.B. Du Bois exemplifies the liberatory spirit Black activists infused into labor ideology. Du Bois praises labor as a force that "conquers all things"—albeit slowly, and he identifies it as the greatest challenge of the twentieth century, even more significant than the debates over labor versus capital or democracy and gender equality. Du Bois elevates labor to the central issue of "the problem of Equality of Humanity in the world as against white domination of black and brown and yellow

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<sup>13</sup> Cooper, Anna Julia. *A Voice from the South*. Dover Publications, 2016, pg. 111.

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 72.

serfs."<sup>17</sup> In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois declares that labor is the key to Black liberation, asserting, "The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor, and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown, and black."<sup>18</sup> The belief in labor as essential to Black emancipation is unequivocal.

Moreover, the accessibility of labor made it particularly appealing to Black activists in the wake of slavery. By grounding value in labor, Black scholars aligned themselves with widely respected figures like Abraham Lincoln in the debate over the relative importance of labor and capital. Lincoln argued, "Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital and deserves much the higher consideration."<sup>19</sup> By endorsing this view, writers like Du Bois not only aligned with a key political figure in the fight for Black equality but also embraced a path more attainable for newly emancipated African Americans. Lacking capital and facing severe restrictions under Jim Crow laws, including discriminatory real-estate covenants, Black Americans had limited opportunities to accumulate wealth.<sup>20</sup> However, if labor could be established as the true source of individual worth, activists would have promoted an ideology that enabled Black people to achieve equality through hard work and diligence alone.

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<sup>17</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. "Labor Omnia Vincit." *The Crisis*, vol. 18, no. 5, 1919, pp. 231-232. HathiTrust, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.30000052846791&seq=9>. Accessed 26 8 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction in America*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> "Annual Message to Congress," December 3, 1861, Roy P. Basler, et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press for the Abraham Lincoln Association, 1953–55), 5:52.

<sup>20</sup> "Jim Crow Laws - Separate Is Not Equal." National Museum of American History, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/detail/real-estate-covenant.html>. Accessed 27 August 2024.

However, by adopting American labor ideology, Black scholars risked reinforcing the same arguments used against Black labor during slavery. For example, *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* published testimonies from two white personnel managers on the integration of Black workers into their labor force. While the journal likely intended to highlight these managers' positive assessments, a closer reading reveals their continued perpetuation of harmful stereotypes about Black laborers. J.O. Houze, one of the managers, repeatedly praises Black workers for traits like their "sunny disposition" and eagerness to please but couples these compliments with assertions that they cannot work independently without supervision. In what is meant to be a commendatory statement, Houze writes, "There is no work in our shop that they [Black workers] cannot do and do well, if properly supervised."<sup>21</sup> By claiming that Black workers excel only under strict direction, Houze perpetuates the same ideological divide between slave and free labor that William Evarts once emphasized. This perspective relegates Black workers to the same "brute labor" that Evarts claimed lacked virtue during slavery. The persistence of such labor ideology suggests that as the labor roles available to Black Americans expanded, the work they performed was often deemed low-skill to justify their continued subjugation. Consequently, Black activists recognized that advocating for Black labor alone was insufficient; they needed to push for the integration of Black and white workers. Their argument evolved: if Black people could perform the same work as white workers, then their individual worth was equal to that of white workers and deserving of the same rights.

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<sup>21</sup> Houze, J.O. "Negro Labor and the Industries." *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1923, pp. 20-22. HathiTrust, [http://www.hathitrust.org/access\\_use#pd-google](http://www.hathitrust.org/access_use#pd-google). Accessed 8 26 2024.

In the aftermath of slavery, the reinterpretation of labor by Black activists marked a pivotal moment in the struggle for equality. By aligning with the American ideology that esteemed labor as a source of individual worth, these activists transformed a once-oppressive narrative into a powerful tool for liberation. However, this redefinition was fraught with challenges, as the very arguments used to elevate Black labor risked reinforcing the same stereotypes that had justified their oppression. Despite these contradictions, the emphasis on labor as a path to dignity and equality laid the groundwork for future civil rights movements, underscoring the enduring power of labor as both a means of survival and a vehicle for social change.