

# Journal of Economics Bibliography

www.kspjournals.org

Volume 2

December 2015

Issue 4

**Howard Bodenhorn, *The Color Factor: The Economics of African-American Well-Being in the Nineteenth-Century South*. Oxford University Press, 2015, 336 pp. \$39 Hardcover.**

By Scott Alan CARSON <sup>†</sup>

## Book Review

No single institution dominates the long expanse of American economic and social history like ante-bellum slavery, the US Civil War, and subsequent legislation to rectify the injustices associated with 19<sup>th</sup> century slavery. Given its importance, each generation of scholars, therefore, returns to this period and re-interprets the economic and social consequences of the institution against the backdrop of that generation's academic theory. Kenneth Stamp (1956) recast slavery's economic, demographic, and social consequences and maintained the controversial position that Southern slave owners were benevolent to their slaves. Conrad and Meyer (1964) relied on economic theory and evidence to show that slavery was "efficient." Fogel and Engerman (1974) push the argument forward and combine the demographic and social aspects raised by Stamp with the economic issues addressed by Conrad and Meyer to recast slavery as a benign and efficient institution. David et al. (1976) and Ransom and Sutch (1977) counter Fogel and Engerman's interpretation and propose their own interpretations for sharecropping and the post-bellum South. It is against this backdrop that Howard Bodenhorn enters the slavery debate with *The Color Factor: The Economics of African-American Well-Being in the Nineteenth Century South* and promotes a new dimension to the economics of American slavery, that skin complexion was related to economic outcomes under slavery.

Bodenhorn is an accomplished and well-respected economic historian, so context and institutions matter in his evaluation of economics and history. Different states had different definitions for what legally defined a person of color. The definition of complexion came down to physical characteristics: hair, nose, lips, foreheads, and especially complexion. As one may expect, clarification of the race question turned to 19<sup>th</sup> century science. On the one hand, mixed race individuals were distinct persons between blacks and whites. On the other, mixed race persons were not fundamentally different from blacks, therefore, had no claims on any form of whiteness. If the former is true, it justified commonly held beliefs among many whites that mulattos deserved additional rights, were valued more in slave sales, and had greater intelligence than their darker complexioned counterparts. If the latter is true, mixed race individuals were the same as darker complexioned blacks, and harsh treatment was justified.

<sup>†</sup> University of Texas, Permian Basin, 4901 East University, Odessa, TX, 79762, USA.

☎. 432-552-2195 ✉. carson\_s@utpb.edu

## Journal of Economics Bibliography

Sexual relations necessary for mixed-race off-spring between African and European descendants in North America began early in the colonial period, and rather than colonial white masters forcing themselves on slave women, the earliest mixed race relationships were between white indentured servant women and slave men. This does not imply that such liaisons between slave owners and their slaves—either forced or consensual—did not occur and with some frequency on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century plantations. When such encounters occurred, it was the women who bore the cost of the liaison, and men were at lower risk of future stigmatization.

*The Color Factor* presents solid evidence that mixed-race slaves received greater training on plantations. Light-complexioned Africans were over represented among the semi-skilled, skilled, and domestic services. Among domestic services, fair complexioned females were over represented. Moreover, among a large collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century US prisons, mixed-race men were less likely than darker complexioned men to be unskilled workers (Carson, 2012a). No attempt at identification is made to show why workers with fairer complexions were able to gain access to occupational opportunities, but it is reasonable to infer that fairer complexioned men gained access to opportunity because of social preference. However, claims that mixed race slaves received light workloads, were treated less harshly, and had greater relative bargaining power than darker complexioned blacks are not well supported.

A novel contribution of *The Color Factor* is the economics of colorization and freedom under slavery. Both from the slave and master's perspective, the unique microeconomic approach to any subject are the relative costs and benefits. Manumission is the process by which a slave is voluntarily set free by their owner or is able to purchase their freedom from an accommodative master. The act itself appears to be against the best interest of the owner; however, manumission served to motivate slaves as an incentive and to increase their productivity, sending a signal to slaves who remained on plantations that a master was willing to negotiate with their ambitious slaves who sought freedom. Manumission also served an economic purpose if a planter's output price declined without the prospect of recovery, the costs of caring for slaves increased, or irreversible soil depletion set in. Not surprisingly, complexion was related to manumission and possibly running away.

The prospect of manumission required a willing master, and not all slaves had the patience or circumstance to wait for a master to become benevolent. Only about one percent of the slave population risked escape in any given year. Using a Roy-type model regarding the decision to migrate and a Beckerian rational crime model, Bodenhorn frames the decision to escape as a reasoned decision. The decision to run away was made when the likelihood of successful escape and a life of freedom were greater the probability of being caught and how it affected their life on the plantation after being returned. Slave masters, on the other hand, had to make the reasoned decision to pursue an escaped slave against the costs incurred on their slave labor force when slave owners had to divert their attention and resources to look for an escaped slave. Complexion played into a slave-owners calculation because owners also may have been more likely to manumit their own off-spring or former concubines who were themselves mixed race.

The fundamental contributions of the book are chapters on occupations, access to occupations, and wealth acquired by mixed race individuals. While blacks and mixed race individuals never came close to the occupational attainment of whites, blacks did experience some occupational opportunity. Before emancipation, there was limited access into skilled occupations and merchants for individuals of mixed race, but less for their darker complexioned counter-parts. For the most part,

## Journal of Economics Bibliography

African-Americans were over represented as operatives, service trades, and common laborers; nonetheless, some carved out positions in skilled trades, and fairer complexioned blacks found easier access into skilled trades than darker complexioned blacks. This pattern is not unique to professor Bodenhorn's results. In a supporting skin complexion study using nearly 130,000 prisoners in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century US prisons, dark complexioned blacks were nearly 80 percent less likely to be white-collar workers compared to whites. Mixed race workers were nearly twice as likely as blacks to be white collar workers; however, mixed race workers were about 60 percent less likely to be white collar workers compared to whites. There was some increased likelihood that mixed race persons acquired skilled occupations, and even more for farmers, but in neither case were blacks and mixed race individuals half as likely as whites to be in either skilled jobs or farming. Similar patterns are observed for women. Part of black underrepresentation in skilled positions was due to less human capital acquisition, and education and apprenticeship positions were the most sensitive to skin-complexion, therefore, these areas where social preference limited access to economic opportunity.

Although it is strange to study wealth holding patterns for African-Americans before the end of slavery, blacks nonetheless owned property, and some African-Americans became sufficiently prosperous to, themselves, own slaves (Bodenhorn, 2015, p. 144). Nevertheless, property ownership was along color lines, and mixed-race individuals were more likely to own property than darker complexioned blacks. Of course, the most important form of property ownership was over one's own time and the rewards from their labor. For the majority of persons of African descent, this was delayed until after the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment's passage and 100 years later with passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

When traditional measures for economic welfare are scarce or unreliable, stature, body mass, and weight are now widely used measures to analyze economic well-being during development. A homogenous population's average stature represents its cumulative net nutritional difference between calories consumed and calories used for physical activity. *The Color Factor* includes stature as a measure for cumulative net nutrition and reports that mixed race individuals were about half an inch taller than darker complexioned blacks. This is not a new finding, and various explanations are offered, such as efficiency wages, human capital, and biological differences (Carson, 2008; Carson, 2009; Carson, 2012a). There are two patterns for black stature over time that has emerged. First, average white statures declined during the 19<sup>th</sup> century's 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> quarters, a pattern known as the 'antebellum paradox.' Second, over the same time interval, black statures increased just prior to emancipation and decreased thereafter, indicating that black cumulative net nutrition improved with the pre-Civil War cotton boom but temporarily decreased when the slave economy was disrupted (Rees et al. 2003; Carson, 2008).

*The Color Factor* concludes "Mixed race people benefitted from advantageous treatment relative to that received by blacks (Bodenhorn, 2015, p. 182)." However, it is not clear what Bodenhorn means by advantageous selection, nor does he address that other biological markers do not support this advantageous treatment position. For example, if mixed race individuals received advantageous treatment relative to darker complexioned blacks, we would expect that fairer complexioned whites and mixed race individuals to have greater BMIs and heavier weights than blacks. However, the opposite is true (Carson, 2009; Carson, 2012a; Carson, 2012b; Carson, 2015a; Carson, 2015b). Consequently, it is not clear that mixed race individuals were taller than darker complexioned blacks because of advantageous treatment if this is only social preference. This leads to the important

## Journal of Economics Bibliography

extension to *The Color Factor*'s thesis. If fairer complexioned mixed race individuals had better jobs, greater access to wealth, and better biological conditions, what is the limit to the fairer complexion hypothesis? When were differences in outcome variables—such as occupations, wealth, and height—related to social conditions, and when were differences in outcome variables due to non-controllable factors, such as genetics or biology?

The hallmark of any important academic study is how long it influences the direction of future research. Like its predecessors, *The Color Factor* fills an important void in the study of slavery and the antebellum period. On all counts, *The Color Factor* will influence future work and the direction on studies of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century slave conditions. Nonetheless, there are a few areas that will receive closer scrutiny in future research. Foremost may be the source of the mixed race stature and health advantage, and leaving the explanation with the blunt interpretation that mixed race statures were taller because of advantageous treatment does not suffice. Is the source social or biological, and under what conditions can we say there was an economic or biologic color effect? A color effect was more plausible with economic outcomes that had a distinct social component, such as labor market outcomes and wealth. However, it is less clear there was a color effect related to biological outcomes. Because complexion is related to beauty, an important but untestable subject that is not considered in the book is beauty economics (Hammermesh, 2011). Other studies may develop for mixed-race and black income, wealth, migration, and occupation mobility. In any event, *The Color Effect* is a scholarly work that will influence the research agenda for the coming generations in antebellum economic history.

## Journal of Economics Bibliography

### References

- Bodenhorn, H. (2015). *The Color Factor: The Economics of African-American Well-Being in the Nineteenth Century South*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carson, S.A. (2008) The effect of geography and Vitamin D on African-American stature in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Evidence from prison records, *Journal of Economic History*, 68(3), 812-830. doi. [10.1017/S0022050708000648](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050708000648)
- Carson, S.A. (2009) Racial differences in body-mass indices of men imprisoned in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Texas, *Economics and Human Biology*, 7(1), 121-127. doi. [10.1016/j.ehb.2009.01.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ehb.2009.01.005)
- Carson, S.A. (2012a), The body mass index of Blacks and Whites in the United States during the nineteenth century, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 42(3), 371-391. doi. 10.1162/JINH\_a\_00255
- Carson, S.A. (2012b). A quantile approach to the demographic, residential, and socioeconomic effects on 19<sup>th</sup> Century African-American body mass index values, *Cliometrica*. 6(2), 193-209. doi. 10.1007/s11698-011-0069-0
- Carson, S.A. (2015a). Biology, complexion, and socioeconomic status: Accounting for 19<sup>th</sup> Century US BMIs by Race. *Australian Economic History Review*, 55(3), 238-255. doi. 10.1111/aehr.12075
- Carson, S.A. (2015b). A weighty issue: Diminished 19<sup>th</sup> Century net nutrition among the US working class, *Demography*, 52, 945-966. doi. 10.1007/s13524-015-0384-3
- Conrad, A., & Meyer, J. (1964). *The Economics of Slavery and Other Studies in Econometric History*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.
- David, P., Gutman, H., Sutch, R., Temin, P., & Wright, G. (1976). *Reckoning with Slavery*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fogel, R., & Engerman, S. (1974). *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Hamermesh, D. (2011). *Beauty Pays: Why Attractive People are More Successful*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ransom, R., & Ransom, R. (1977). *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rees, R., Komlos, J., Long, N., & Woitek, U. (2003). Optimal food allocation in a slave economy. *Journal of Population Economics*, 16, 2003: 21-36. doi. 10.1007/s001480100109
- Stamp, K.M. (1956). *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*. New York: Vintage Books.



Copyrights

## Journal of Economics Bibliography

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>).

