

The Real Wages of Whiteness: Southern Wage Laborers and Slavery

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Introduction

Historians and social scientists generally assume that the wages of so-called “poor whites” in the antebellum South were undermined by competition with slaves. In this chapter I show that the opposite was in fact the case. Wages in plantation areas were not only higher than in other regions of the South, they were typically higher than in the North. Contrary to the standard view, this finding suggests that many non-elite whites in the Black Belt received significant material benefits from their interaction with the slave economy.¹

In my account of this finding I suggest that wage and slave labor were complements rather than substitutes in part because slave plantations generated demand for free labor in tasks that it was either too costly or too risky to assign to slaves. The wage premium in plantation counties appears to have been driven by unobserved variation in skill and possibly effort, both of which were plausibly endogenous to the slave plantation complex. I furthermore present evidence that the abolition of slavery may have led to a significant loss of wages for whites in areas of the South in which slavery had been concentrated. I conclude by suggesting that these facts may help explain the compensatory function of what Du Bois calls the “public and psychological wages” of whiteness under Jim Crow.

0.1 The Complementarity of Wage and Slave Labor

The view that the “poor white of the South” was a victim of slavery was first popularized by Northern abolitionists in the 1850s. A key slogan of the abolitionists at that time was that “slavery degrades labor,” which was frequently interpreted to mean that competition with slaves lowered

1. The term “Black Belt” refers to the color of the soil rather than the population of these counties. It is traditionally identified with the cotton-growing areas of Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. In this chapter I will focus on a slightly broader range of counties in which slaves formed the majority of the population. In addition to the traditional Black Belt this also includes lowland South Carolina and Louisiana and several cotton-growing counties in Tennessee, Texas and Arkansas. In the following I will at times also refer to these as “plantation counties.”