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Why Exclusion Leads to Oppression
By Kareha Agesa

Early intellectuals such as Thomas Jefferson and Catherine Beecher placed an importance on education because they believed it would strengthen the new nation and engender happiness throughout its people. Though these intellectuals argued for education, they oftentimes argued solely for the education of middle class white men and rarely, if ever, middle class white women. The choice to leave out women and people of color was a detrimental flaw in the plans of the early intellectuals. The ideas of Jefferson and Beecher matter as we consider the history of US education because flaws in the ideas of these thinkers have developed into stereotypes and hardships prevalent today. Their ideas for education have been molded into our current education system, and modern day problems such as lower graduation rates and income levels among people of color and a gender wage gap favoring men originate from the education plans of the early intellectuals privileging solely white men.

The philosophies of Founding Father Thomas Jefferson centered on happiness. Jefferson believed that education was an imperative means for the pursuit of happiness and placed high value on the pursuit of knowledge. One of Jefferson’s goals was to remove the “artificial aristocracy” made up of those placed in power solely because of their wealth and birth status and allow for a natural aristocracy, consisting of those with the virtue and talent to lead the new nation. Jefferson created a plan for education that widened the pool from which the nation’s leaders could be chosen. In his plan, Jefferson divided the schooling system into four distinct tiers that would ultimately give rise to men with the merit and skill level to lead the nation.

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2 Ibid., 40.
Jefferson’s plan called for a republic based on meritocracy, in which only those who demonstrated the appropriate amount of merit could occupy influential positions in the nation.\(^3\)

Though Jefferson’s plan for education and building the new nation was ideal for middle class white men of his time, it proved disadvantageous for women and people of color. In his plan, Jefferson accounted for a woman’s education only up until elementary school (the first tier in his four tier plan) and viewed a woman solely as a “homemaker, bearer of children, and delight to her husband.”\(^4\) Jefferson saw no purpose for a woman’s education past elementary school and reduced her potential for success to that of the household economy. Along with his disregard for the educational advancement of women, Jefferson failed to include slaves in his plan for education. Though Jefferson’s views on the humanity of slaves are ambiguous, refusing to include them in his legislative proposals on education shows his dehumanizing sentiments toward them.\(^5\)

Remnants of Jefferson’s misguided exclusion of women and slaves in the entirety of his education plan can be traced throughout US education history. Traditionally, people of color have been subjected to mediocre education compared to that of white people, which has resulted in both lower graduation rates and lower income levels among people of color. Further, though women currently have the potential to reach levels of economic success equal to those of men, there exists a gender wage gap favoring men and a societal expectation that a woman’s long-term goal should be to get married and start a family. Oppressive issues such as these show modern day society’s internalization of Jefferson’s ideas. Though there are current examples of affluent people of color and women who have acquired influential positions in society, most women and people of color must work considerably harder than white men to achieve these roles. Jefferson’s

\(^3\) Ibid., 40.  
\(^4\) Ibid., 43.  
\(^5\) Ibid., 42-44.
exclusion of women and people of color from his plan for education has created a barrier that favors white men to reach academic and socioeconomic success.

Similar to Thomas Jefferson, Catherine Beecher valued happiness and recognized that education prepares men to assume the important duties of society. Additionally, Beecher believed that collegiate and professional institutions must be established in order to give a proper education to these influential men. From this education, men will have “well-disciplined and well-informed minds,” better allowing them to successfully hold their positions and strengthen the nation.\(^6\) According to Beecher, the absence of education would result in “desultory, deficient” men unfit for success in their chosen professions.\(^7\)

Unlike Jefferson, Beecher realized the important role that women played in society. Though Beecher believed that equating the sexes resulted in “weak men and disorderly women,” she also believed that women were imperative to the prosperity of a nation.\(^8\) Beecher claimed that “the moral and intellectual character of the young” is molded by the female mind, so women must have a vital role in the education system.\(^9\) According to Beecher, women deserved an education because their teachings formed the character and morals of their sons, and their sons grew into the nation’s prominent figures. Beecher’s belief that if “the women of a country be made virtuous and intelligent…the men will certainly be the same” shows the importance she placed on a woman’s education.\(^10\)

Though Beecher recognized the vital role a woman’s education played in the prosperity of the nation, she also limited a woman’s capabilities to that of a household laborer. According to Beecher, “the stimulation of the intellect [of a woman] should be very much reduced,” and a

\(^7\) Ibid., 51.
\(^8\) Ibid., 28.
\(^9\) Ibid., 37.
\(^10\) Ibid., 37.
woman’s schooling should focus on bettering her “physical development” and not her intellectual development, so as to preserve her “beauty and youthfulness.”

Further, women are to be sent to school only after the age of six, and the main goal of a woman’s education should be to gain “a thorough practical knowledge of all kinds of domestic employments.”

Though women are to receive enough schooling to enable them to guide their sons, most of a woman’s time should be spent in the “Domestic Economy.” Beecher also believed that a woman should be honored by her role as a household labor worker. Beecher’s goal was to lessen the stigma that labor is degrading and have women realize that their lack of a proper education is a gift. The subservient and oppressive mentality Beecher expected of women in her ideas for education contributed to the inequality women have faced throughout US education history. Her belief that women should be confined to domestic work has perpetuated the notion that women cannot exceed outside of household labor and fed into a stereotype that women have struggled to overcome for years.

Many early intellectuals excluded both women and people of color in their ideal education systems, and this exclusion has lead to the many socioeconomic and academic hardships for both groups of people. Examining US education history shows that traditionally, people of color have been denied the same rights to education as white people. This has limited the potential for educational and material success for people of color, particularly women of color, throughout history and even today. Moreover, current scholarships like the Posse Scholarship and other programs aimed at assisting underrepresented populations in achieving academic success show modern day society’s compensation for the early intellectuals neglecting

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11 Ibid., 48; Ibid., 41.
12 Ibid., 49.
13 Ibid., 50.
14 Ibid., 61.
to include people of color in their education plans. Furthermore, the idea that women belong solely in the domestic sphere has lead to stereotypes and expectations of women that limit them to submissive roles. Women that do overcome these degrading and limiting stereotypes are often inappropriately labeled and have to work to prove their womanhood, a ridiculous phenomenon. Had the early intellectuals included all people in their plans for education, people of color and women may have had the chance to earn successful positions in life with an ease parallel to that of white men.
Works Cited
