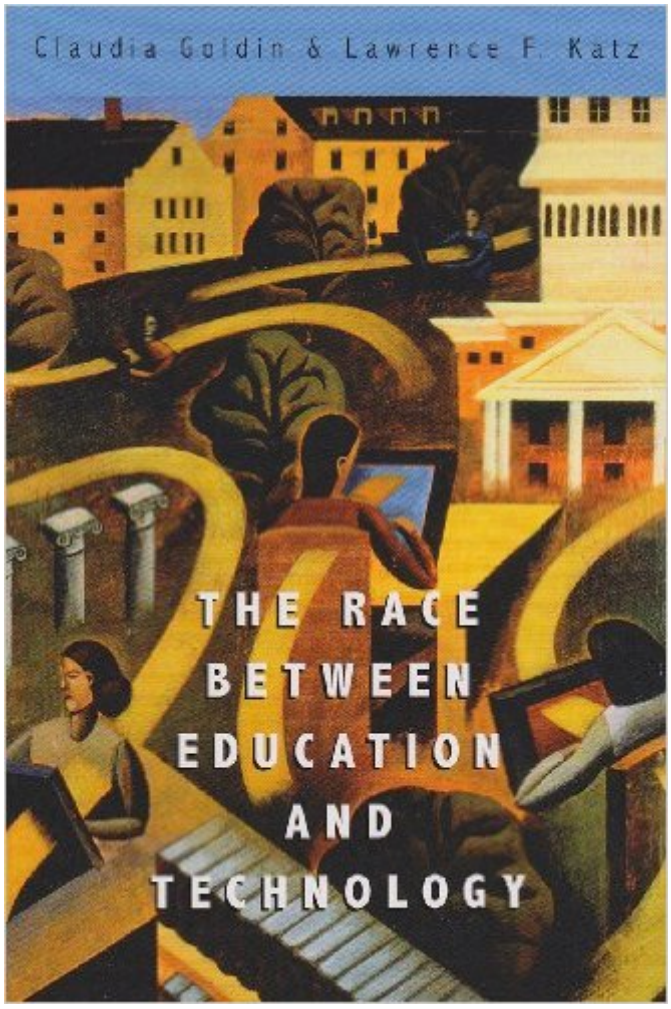
The Race Between Education And Technology



Synopsis

This book provides a careful historical analysis of the co-evolution of educational attainment and the wage structure in the United States through the twentieth century. The authors propose that the twentieth century was not only the American Century but also the Human Capital Century. That is, the American educational system is what made America the richest nation in the world. Its educational system had always been less elite than that of most European nations. By 1900 the U.S. had begun to educate its masses at the secondary level, not just in the primary schools that had remarkable success in the nineteenth century.The book argues that technological change, education, and inequality have been involved in a kind of race. During the first eight decades of the twentieth century, the increase of educated workers was higher than the demand for them. This had the effect of boosting income for most people and lowering inequality. However, the reverse has been true since about 1980. This educational slow-down was accompanied by rising inequality. The authors discuss the complex reasons for this, and what might be done to ameliorate it.

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Customer Reviews

I found this book fascinating and would recommend it although I found it frustratingly flawed, and therefore, without the authors' further comments, will eventually have to reduce my 4 star rating. The book's core thesis is that the rate of technological change in the 20th century has been constant, while the supply of skilled workers has been uneven, leading to expanding and contracting wage differentials between skilled and unskilled workers over the course of the century. The variation in supply and correlation to changes in relative wages seems large enough to be

convincing. But while I find the case persuasive, I couldn’t help but feel it was, in part, reserve engineered to reach its conclusion. It seemed to me that three critical issues remained either unwittingly or intentionally overlooked.In part, large part perhaps, I would guess, the "skill" of a worker transcends their education. So a high school drop out today, when most everyone graduates from high school, represents a much less skilled worker than a drop out at the turn of the century, when very few graduated. To suggest the ratio of wages between high school graduates and drop outs today can be compared to the past without some adjustment, or even mention of an adjustment, that take this into consideration, seems lacking. The same is true of college graduates, where the meaning of the term has been averaged down. The analysis seems to suggest that a college or high school graduate is equivalent no matter what (changing) percentile of the population it encompasses or, more complicated mathematically, that the relative curve across percentiles is such that any point is logarithmically proportional to any other.

This well written book is based on a careful analysis of the effects of educational policy on economic growth and economic inequality in the USA over the last century. The authors have undertaken the very demanding task of reconstructing a large amount of data related to eduational performance and economic performance. In some respects this is a fairly dense book with a lot of data presented, usually in the form of tables and simple charts, though the authors use some multivariate regression methods and some modeling as well. The authors necessarily use some simplifying assumptions and methods, for example, using the benefits of higher education - the college wage premium - as an index of inequality. Given the limitations of the data and the complexity of the topic, these approaches seem reasonable and the end result is a convincing analysis.Goldin and Katz make a series of important points. One is that a well educated work force is an important driver of economic improvement. In this context, the show that the USA, from the mid-19th century to around 1970, was a world leader in mass education. They show 3 major waves of mass educational advancement; near universal primary education in the 19th century, a huge increase secondary education ("the high school movement") in the first half of the 20th century, and the enormous expansion of higher education in the post-WWII era. The authors argue very well that this distinctively American series of educational expansions were a major contributor to robust American economic growth. Simultaneously, the success of serial mass education and production of increasing numbers of well educated workers resulted in a relative reduction in inequality with social benefits beyond merely economic benefits.

This book epitomizes everything that is wrong with social science. The modus operandi is to pull together a series of charts showing correlations, assume that the correlation is due to causation, and ignore any discussion of alternative explanations of the trends.Goldin-Katz spend the bulk of the book hammering away on two points that everyone already knows: years of schooling on a national level correlates with industrialization, and years of schooling on a personal level correlates with income. Goldin-Katz spend precious few pages actually dealing with the causation issue, and never address any of the best arguments against their thesis. Nor is there any attempt to actually talk to people working in technology in order to understand more deeply why the correlation exists.Let's examine in detail some of the flaws.a) Goldin-Katz's base hypothesis is that years of schooling should continuously rise over time, as technology increases. But the very definition of technology is that you get more output for a given amount of input. Thus we should not expect a proportional increase in education to take advantage of new technology. Indeed, this is what we see on the ground. As a programmer in 2009, I no longer need to learn a huge amount of information that my father needed to know. For my job, I do not need to assembly language, register hacks, memory allocation, pointer arithmetic, etc.b) Goldin-Katz's hypothesis is at odds with the experience of all the recent college graduates I know. No one believes that education teaches job skills. A quick check of the top 10 most popular college majors shows that these majors have little to do with technology.

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