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Shackles and Dollars

Historians and economists clash over slavery

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PREMIUM

For Edward E. Baptist, the scandal was a gift. It had taken the Cornell University historian over a dozen years to produce a study tracing the creation of American capitalism to the expansion of slavery. It took less than one day for a short book review to turn his 400-page narrative into a cause célèbre.

The inciting review appeared in *The Economist* magazine. It faulted Baptist's study, *The Half Has Never Been Told* (Basic Books, 2014), for exaggerating the brutality of bondage based on the questionable testimony of "a few slaves." Baptist fired back in *Politico* and *The Guardian*. The magazine's critique, he wrote, "revealed just how many white people remain reluctant to believe black people about the experience of being black." *The Economist*, widely denounced online, published an apology.

The controversy stimulated both public discussion of slavery and sales of Baptist's book. Within academe, though, some think it had another effect: to squelch debate over *The Half Has Never Been Told*. Skeptical scholars may have been wary of criticizing its arguments for fear of being perceived as apologists for slavery.

That silence is breaking. In a series of recent papers and scholarly talks, economists, along with some historians, have begun to raise serious questions about Baptist's scholarship. Their critiques echo parts of the *Economist* review, only this time backed up by reams of economic research. The attack is notable because it has expanded beyond *The Half Has Never Been Told* to assail the wider movement to which that book belongs.

Over the past several years, a series of books has reshaped how historians view the connection between slavery and capitalism. These works show the role that coercion played in bringing about a modern market system that is more typically identified with freedom. At a moment of rising frustration with racial and economic inequality, they have won a level of attention and acclaim that academics dream about but almost never get. Some think the books' forensic accounting of how slave labor was stolen may buttress the case for reparations.

What the economists are now assembling amounts to a battering ram aimed at the empirical foundations of these studies, which include Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Harvard University Press) and Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (Knopf). The critics, whose own scholarship stakes out similar turf, say the new histories are riddled with errors, make overblown claims, or distort evidence to suit their story lines.

"The shocking thing is how far they have deviated from the traditional strengths of history, in terms of using evidence and evaluating arguments," says Paul W. Rhode, who chairs the economics department at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and until recently served as co-editor of *The Journal of Economic History*.

The clash is a reckoning for two disciplines that have long developed in isolation. Some researchers believe that economic history would gain strength if historians and economists worked together. By September, though, the sniping over slavery had gotten so nasty that one scholar trying to build bridges between the camps, Caitlin Rosenthal, described herself as "kind of terrified."

Rosenthal, a historian at the University of California at Berkeley, was about to visit Dartmouth College to speak at a public debate in which Baptist would confront the economists face to face. "I have no idea what's going to happen," she said, adding, "It's possible that it's going to just be a huge fight."

The best way to understand this fight is to take a closer look at the book that has caused the most friction, *The Half Has Never Been Told*. When you think about the slave trade, what probably comes to mind are the voyages that brought some 600,000 to 650,000 African captives across the Atlantic to the territories that would eventually become the United States. The heart of Baptist's study is a different slave migration, one that took place within those states.

Between about 1790 and 1860, traders and owners moved some one million enslaved people from older states like Virginia and Maryland to newer territories within the South's dynamically expanding cotton economy. The slaves were marched in chains or shipped on boats to lands the U.S. had acquired from other empires and cleared of native peoples. At first, they ended up in Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and South Carolina, but later migrations took them to Texas, Florida, Arkansas, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. A slave born in Virginia after about 1800 had something like a 30-percent chance of getting sold out of state.

The Half Has Never Been Told is about the effects of slavery's pre-Civil War expansion. Baptist argues that the forced migration and intensified exploitation of slaves turned the United States from the "barely surviving postcolonial disaster" that it had been in the 1780s to the "geopolitical and economic superpower" that it became. He uses slave testimony to make readers feel the brutality of this new slavery. The migrations to places brimming with disease. The families broken up in that process. The women marketed as "fancy girls" to excite white men's lust.

And, especially, the work of cotton picking itself. As Baptist dug into his sources, he realized that antebellum cotton production had not just expanded. It had transformed. The amount that each slave picked per day more than tripled between 1805 and 1860. The reason, he argues, comes down largely to one word: torture. Baptist describes how planters assigned picking quotas to slaves, whipped them if they failed to meet the targets, and steadily increased picking expectations for workers. Slaves avoided the lash by learning to pick faster. To this metaphorical "whipping machine," Baptist attributes world-historical consequences. "Systematized torture" in "slave labor camps," he writes, was "crucial" to creating the cotton-fueled wealth of the Industrial Revolution.

Baptist's language is extreme, and he has been criticized for stretching sources to the point of putting words in slaves' mouths. But his principal concerns are of a piece with the growing literature on "Slavery's Capitalism," to borrow the title of a new essay collection. Recent scholarship has stressed slavery's modernity, its profitability, and its centrality to national development, as Harvard's Sven Beckert wrote in a 2014 *Chronicle Review* survey of this research. Cotton accounted for more than half of U.S. exports. Planters drew on global markets to finance slave agriculture. Northern mills spun slave-grown cotton. "The slave economy of the Southern states had ripple effects throughout the economy," Beckert wrote, "not just shaping but dominating it."

If this doesn't seem novel, in some ways it isn't. Earlier scholars, from black Marxists like C.L.R. James and Eric Williams to neoclassical economists like Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, dealt with related themes. But what is important to understand is how much the new work departs from the paradigm that shaped historians' views for decades. Slavery, as Eugene D. Genovese presented it in his 1974 book *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (Pantheon), was a unique constellation of labor relations that was *in* the capitalist world, but not *of* it. Genovese saw the institution as a self-contained system marked by frequent bargaining between master and slave over the limits of slaveowners' authority.

For the newer crop of historians, the important relationship is not the psychological one between master and slave. It's the economic one between slaves and the markets that moved and trapped them. What's exciting about that approach is the way it renders the slave South as a dynamic, changing society, in contrast to Genovese's static, anti-capitalist vision, says Edward L. Ayers, a historian and former president of the University of Richmond. "To have that overturned so quickly," he says, "it looks more like the sciences than it does the humanities."

On a Thursday night in October, two economists who have pummeled Baptist's work in print, Alan L. Olmstead and Trevon D. Logan, engage historians in a public debate over slavery's role in the coming of American capitalism. The setting is a dimly lit basement auditorium at Dartmouth College, where 100 or so students and professors have gathered to hear them go at it. This is the event Berkeley's Rosenthal worried would devolve into a fight.

It mostly doesn't — until, about an hour into the discussion, Olmstead steps up to the lectern. "I came here to hammer Baptist," he says. Olmstead, a tall, white-haired economic historian from the University of California at Davis, fills the screen behind him with a slide about Baptist's torture thesis. He clutches a stack of rolled-up papers in his left fist. "It's hard to find anything in history that's more ludicrous than this, in recent years at least."

To appreciate Olmstead's exasperation, it helps to know a bit about the quest that has consumed much of his career. His research on the slave economy is animated by some of the same questions that concern Baptist. How did slaves in the antebellum South come to pick so much more cotton? What resulted from that growth? Olmstead and his longtime collaborator, Michigan's Rhode, sought answers by scouring the South for plantation records. They accumulated a data set with more than 600,000 entries showing the daily amount of cotton that individual slaves picked between 1800 and 1861.

Baptist drew on that data to claim that calibrated torture was behind the productivity spike. Only, to hear Olmstead and Rhode tell it, he left out the section of it that clashed with his story. In *The Half Has Never Been Told*, he reproduced one of their charts, showing a fourfold increase in picking rates for one type of cotton, called Upland, grown away from coastal areas. He failed to include a separate chart that had run below it in their original paper. That one showed almost no increase in picking rates for another cotton crop, called Sea Island, cultivated mostly along the coasts and on the offshore islands of Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina.

To economists, that comparison makes all the difference, because it enables a kind of natural experiment. As Olmstead writes in a review of *The Half Has Never Been Told*, "If Baptist's 'whipping machine' drove the huge increase in Upland cotton picking output, he needs to explain why the nabobs producing other crops did not apply more (or new forms of) torture to increase their output." The increase in one kind of cotton but not the other suggested a different explanation. Olmstead and Rhode concluded that biological innovation — improved varieties of seeds that yielded more pickable cotton — propelled the Upland jump.

Then there's the question of how important cotton really was to the American economy in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Baptist's book walks readers through a series of calculations to arrive at the striking conclusion that more than $600 million, or almost half of economic activity in 1836, derived directly or indirectly from slave-produced cotton. But the notion that cotton was the prime driver of antebellum economic growth has been repeatedly tested and rejected by economic historians, as Olmstead and Rhode detail in a 34-page draft paper attacking Baptist, Beckert, and Johnson.

Even worse, economists accuse Baptist of manipulating statistics to pump up cotton's importance. They say he tramples widely accepted methods for calculating a country's gross domestic product. For example, his $600 million includes pork, corn, and axes bought by slave plantations. But those are production inputs, says Eric Hilt, an economic historian at Wellesley College who has his own forthcoming critique of Baptist et al. Including them and the cotton output is one of numerous examples of Baptist's double-counting. You could similarly claim almost any commodity was crucial. Hay, say.

It's "hocus-pocus," Olmstead says at Dartmouth, a number pulled from thin air. He drives home the point by spinning around while waving a pretend magic wand above his head.

These themes — innumeracy, overstatement, and ignorance of economics research — pop up again and again in economists' critiques of the new histories of slavery and capitalism. But here's the broader point. Most economic historians have argued that "cotton textiles were not essential to the Industrial Revolution," and that cotton production did not necessarily depend on slavery, according to Douglas A. Irwin, an economist who held and moderated the Dartmouth debate. Summarizing economists' thinking for the debate audience, Irwin points out that cotton was grown elsewhere in the world without slaves. Cotton production continued to rise in the United States even after slavery was abolished. "In this view, the economic rise of the West was not dependent on slavery," Irwin says, "but came about as a result of an economic process described by Adam Smith in his book *The Wealth of Nations* — a process that depended on free enterprise, exchange, and the division of labor."

Much criticism of Baptist and others originates within the subfield of economic history. These are scholars, trained mostly in economics, who bring a social-science perspective to studying historical economic behavior. That means testing hypotheses against data. It means quantitative analysis. And it means counterfactual thinking. When historians claim slavery was essential to the Industrial Revolution, as Beckert and Baptist both do, to economists that implies it would not have happened in slavery's absence. If scholars feel uncomfortable making that statement, "than they should think harder about the initial claim," Hilt says. Economic historians have thought very hard about the slave economy for decades. They believe slavery was profitable. But they also believe the institutions created to sustain it harmed the South's long-term development.

As they see it, the problem with the new slavery books stems in part from how the discipline of history has developed. In the '60s and '70s, historians and economists battled over economic history. But as historians turned toward culture, and economists became more quantitative, economic history increasingly became just a subfield of economics. For a variety of reasons, including the 2008 crisis, historians are turning their attention back to financial matters. But they "did not build up their tools in order to understand the material world," says Rhode. "And they carry along certain ideological positions which they hold fervently and are not willing to test." Historians, he says, "can't be making stuff up."

Not surprisingly, Rhode's targets see things differently. Start with Baptist. He ended up pulling out of the Dartmouth debate, blaming scheduling problems, so he was not on stage to rebut Olmstead's wand-waving. Reached by phone, however, he does so aggressively. Baptist sees a basic flaw in Olmstead and Rhode's research — a problem that points to the methodological gulf dividing historians and economists.

It comes down to seeds. Olmstead and Rhode say that cotton picking got more efficient because of improved varieties of Upland cotton. They reach that conclusion in part by comparing the growth in Upland cotton to the lack of growth in Sea Island cotton. The problem, Baptist says, is that comparison assumes there was no real difference in the labor systems used to produce those crops. But there was. As Baptist writes in a blog post responding to Olmstead and Rhode, historians have shown that Sea Island planters assigned slaves a "task," or a specific amount of work they had to get done each day. Task accomplished, they could go home. The quantity of work demanded under the task system did not change much prior to emancipation, he says, partly because those slave communities resisted increased labor demands.

To Baptist, the root problem with Olmstead and Rhode's work is reductionism. The economists are bent on stripping causality down to one variable (seeds), assuming away things they have no business discarding (different systems of labor). They also falsely suppose that economic actors will always look at a situation and identify the most efficient way of achieving their goals. So, by this logic, planters in 1800 understood everything about extracting labor that they understood in 1860. But that's antithetical to how many historians think, Baptist says. Historians believe causality is complex and cultural frameworks are in constant flux. By 1860, planters may have formed different ideas about what they should be trying to get out of laborers.

Baptist calls Olmstead and Rhode "profoundly naïve" about the plantation records that anchor their research. "These are not documents that were generated to test seeds," he says. "They are documents that were generated to measure labor. And to measure labor that was being extracted by force. And to measure labor that we know, from dozens and dozens of different testimonies by people who survived it, was generated by the threat of being whipped for not picking enough cotton."

When economists gripe about historians retreating from economics, historians offer a counternarrative: "The problem is the economists left history for statistical model building," says Eric Foner, a historian of 19th-century America at Columbia University. "History for them is just a source of numbers, a source of data to throw into their equations." Foner considers counterfactuals absurd. A historian's job is not to speculate about alternative universes, he says. It's to figure out what happened and why. And, in the history that actually took place, cotton was extremely important in the Industrial Revolution.

Some economists who attack the new slavery studies are "champion nitpickers," adds Foner, who has praised Baptist's book in *The New York Times* and who taught Beckert at Columbia. "They're barking up the wrong tree. They're so obsessed with detail that they don't really confront the broader dynamics of the interpretations. Yes, I'm sure there are good, legitimate criticisms of the handling of economic data. But in some ways I think it's almost irrelevant to the fundamental thrust of these works."

Part of what those works are trying to do, he says, is to counter the idea that capitalism is a natural system. They want to put that system back into history by showing the contingencies that shaped its rise.

Historians also want to come up with a new way of writing about economic change, Berkeley's Rosenthal says, one that brings politics and power back into the mix. Beckert, for example, coined the phrase "war capitalism" to describe the violent phase of development that laid the foundation for the more familiar industrial capitalism that began in Britain in the late 18th century. War capitalism was based on "slavery, the expropriation of indigenous peoples, imperial expansion, armed trade, and the assertion of sovereignty over people and land by entrepreneurs," he writes in *Empire of Cotton*.

For all the mudslinging, the slavery fight does not break cleanly along disciplinary lines. Historians under attack find support for their ideas in the writing of some economists, like Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O'Rourke. Some historians think Olmstead and Rhode have the better side of the facts in their battle with Baptist. Historians *and* economists criticize the new slavery scholarship on grounds that go beyond economics.

One economist, Trevon Logan of Ohio State University, sounds much like a historian in what may be the most personal of all challenges to the new scholarship. Logan, who is African-American, cuts down Baptist for misusing slave testimony in a misguided effort at racial amelioration. Baptist has suggested that his book could help liberate African-Americans from the shame of being the descendants of slaves. This feels oddly familiar to Logan. In the '70s, he writes, the same impulse led Fogel and Engerman to highlight "black achievement under adversity" and argue that slave laborers were far more productive than their Northern counterparts. "I was not freed from shame from having read Baptist's book," he writes. " … American slavery will never be a source of pride for anyone. It is time to accept that fact."

The greatest breakthroughs in historical scholarship on slavery, Logan writes, concerned the slaves themselves. Think of Genovese's work on Southern culture, or Herbert Gutman's on family structure, or John W. Blassingame's on psychological development. But in Baptist's analysis, slaves are not the real subject, Logan says. The meat of Baptist's book, as Logan reads it, concerns "the people who bought and sold other individuals for profit, the way that they organized the people they bought and sold, and how they fostered relationships with those that did not own people to further their cause." Like many others, Baptist "continues to see the enslaved as a vehicle for his own need to tell us something new, even when it is not," Logan writes. "That, I believe, is the true shame about the historiography of slavery."

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