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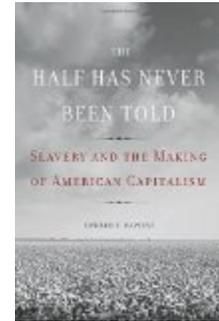
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward E. Baptist. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 2014. 498 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-00296-2.

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The Half Has Now Been Told

Talking about the financial benefits of slavery is like that awkward Thanksgiving dinner conversation that everyone at the table is trying to avoid. For decades, historians have portrayed slavery as an economically inefficient institution, viewing profit as a secondary incentive and not the driving force of capitalism in antebellum America. Oddly enough for a country that is considered the world's preeminent capitalist nation, and despite the subject's intrinsic interest and its remarkable academic value, never until now has the economics of slavery received the comprehensive historical treatment that it deserves. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* offers an ambitious and thorough account of how American capitalism was not an innate gift, but rather a system of gradual development, aiming to penetrate all aspects of the American public life. In particular, this fine book anatomizes the relationship between slavery and the creation of American capitalism.

With *The Half Has Never Been Told*, Edward E. Baptist, who teaches at Cornell University and is the author of the award-winning *Creating an Old South*, continues his valuable series of elegantly crafted studies of slavery's impact on the United States and its economic development and prosperity. The book covers a timeline from 1783 to 1861, with an introduction and afterword extending its reach until 1937. Due to the richness of the materials and Baptist's meticulous research, the book under review is large, entertaining, and rigorously argued.

Chapter 1, titled "Feet"—each subsequent chapter is named after a body part, a choice that, while adding to the book's artistic value, does not necessarily foreshadow the content under discussion—describes the "unfree movement on paths to enslaved frontiers that were laid down between the end of the American Revolution in 1783 and the early 1800s" (p. xxiv). Following this account is chapter 2—"Heads"—which covers America's acquisition of key points of the Mississippi valley by violence. Chapters 3 and 4—titled respectively "Right Hand" and "Left Hand"—reveal the inner secrets of enslavers' power and their spread in networks, whereas chapters 5 and 6—"Tongues" and "Breath"—describe "how enslavers had not only found ways to silence the tongues of their critics but had built a system of slave trading that served as expansion's lungs" (p. xxiv). Chapter 7—"Seed"—tells of the horrific near-decade from 1829 to 1837; chapter 8—"Blood"—focuses on the massive economic crash of 1837 and accounts for the problems that it brought to American families, especially to white slave-owning families. Following this economic theme, chapter 9—"Backs"—explains that by the 1840s the North had "built a complex, industrialized economy on the backs of enslaved people and their highly profitable cotton labor. Yet, many northern whites were now willing to use politics to oppose further expansions of slavery" (p. xxvi). The last chapter, chapter 10—"Arms"—details how slavery continued to expand in the decade after the Compromise of 1850.

In an analytical narrative that spans over four hundred pages, this book not only covers the topic of eco-

conomic enterprise, but also intertwines it with religion, ideas about masculinity and gender, and, most important, local and national politics. Thanks to its comprehensive, chronological approach and its lucid prose, the book is a rich addition to the literature on the economics of slavery and American development.

Baptist sheds new light in four important areas: the soundness of his economic thought when it comes to production output; the interstate commerce and transportation of slaves and its impact on the local and national economies; the interaction of the northern and southern economies, that is, of wage slavery and chattel slavery, to spur American economic development as a whole; and, lastly, the thorough description of the extreme violence implicit in the workings of the slave system. Drawing on his narrative structure and his articulate prose, Baptist demonstrates his ability to break down complex financial matters and deep theoretical concepts into understandable terms for the general readership.

One contribution that this book makes to our understanding of the relationship between capitalism and slavery deserves special mention. The conventional wisdom about that relationship has long taught that the North and West were dominated by a forward-looking, entrepreneurial capitalism emphasizing profit and growth, whereas the South's commitment to slavery gave it a feudal, backward-looking economy that had little room for calculations of profit and economic development. This sectional divergence led, among other things, to the Union victory in the Civil War; in this telling, the slave economy turned away from the main course of American economic development and its doom was foreordained. To the contrary, Baptist demonstrates convincingly that both entrepreneurial or wage capitalism in the North and West and slave capitalism in the South interacted synergistically, each driving the other forward and both showing a strong interest in and commitment to profit and development. Rather than slavery being a doomed digression from the main story of American economic development, Baptist declares, slavery was integral to the rise of American capitalism.

Baptist's analysis not only presents thoughtful and challenging history analyzing the relationship between slavery and capitalism; it also succeeds as an economic analysis. As any student who has taken a "Principles of Economics" course has learned, the Cobb Douglas production function is useful in studying production outcomes in an economy. If we were to apply this production function to Baptist's work, we would soon dis-

cover that his arguments fit well within the framework of economic thought. For example, the Cobb Douglas production function—depicted as $Y = AL^{[\alpha]}K^{[1-\alpha]}$ —represents the technological relationship between inputs and the amount of output that can be produced by those inputs. Here, Y represents total production, whereas L and K are the inputs of labor and capital respectively and A is considered to be innovation.

Let us look carefully at all the agents involved in Baptist's picture. Slave labor accounts for L , plantations (or as Baptist would prefer "slave labor camps") account for K . To increase total output, there is a continuous demand for L (slave labor) or K (slave labor camps). As the legal importation of slaves terminated in 1808 when Congress outlawed the international slave trade (at the earliest point allowed by the US Constitution), slave owners needed to come up with innovative ways to fuel the L and the K to ensure that total output remained at the same level or better. This explanation can account for the massive spread of slavery into the states bordering the Gulf of Mexico through uprooting people from Maryland and Virginia. Baptist depicts one individual enmeshed in slavery, whom he calls "Rachel" (pp. 75-77, 83-89), but many "Rachels" were involved in this skillfully coordinated, highly efficient, and economic thought process: "From the 1790s to the 1860s, enslavers moved 1 million people from the old slave states to the new," writes Baptist (p. xxiii). Territories that later would become Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana were added to the United States to satisfy the growing demand for land, or K in the Cobb Douglas Model.

Yet, like everything else, the Cobb Douglas Model is not perfect, at least not for the purposes that slave owners would have liked. As Nobel laureate Robert Solow showed in his growth model, economic growth in the long run within the framework of the Cobb Douglas function experiences diminishing returns as one keeps increasing K or L .^[1] Therefore, ultimately, the only rational thing to do is to "play" with A (innovation). Enter the cotton gin. This technological advance changed the rules of the game, as it allowed the producers to increase drastically their total output, as the need for labor and capital remained stable.

Innovation had deep impact on the domestic slave trade; technological additions such as the steamboat, the railroad, and the telegraph stressed the need for labor and capital for production to remain stable or improve. Although such critics as Alan L. Olmstead argue that "the increase in picking productivity was primarily due to the

spread of improved cotton varieties” to diminish Baptist’s claim that the use of violence led to an increased work performance, the hard truth remains that both claims—whether the addition of new crops or enhanced violence led to increased production—were forms of innovative approaches with tremendous impact.[2]

Innovation also had a tremendously negative impact—a negative spillover effect—on enslaved African Americans and their families. Besides suffering caused by slaves being uprooting from one region to another, African Americans families did not remain together; buyers of slaves preferred workers with “no attachments,” creating a market in which children were separated from their siblings and, similarly, members of couples were destined never to see each other again. The detailed descriptions that Baptist provides are harrowing, devastating, and disappointing when we consider what human beings are capable of doing to each other. It is indeed depressing to think that humanity fell this low in performing such actions in pursuit of economic benefits. The work of Baptist and of other historians exploring the reality of slavery dispels once and for all the fictitious image of the genteel, benevolent southern slave owner, a creation of the twentieth century; replacing that fiction is the image of a cold, calculating entrepreneur who is willing to be ruthlessly efficient as long as there are benefits that he can reap.[3] Slave owners drew on everything that could be used to maximize profits on a sale; they put emphasis on slaves’ abilities, their expertise in certain skills, and their physical attractiveness. As the notorious saying of the New York City Tammany ward boss George Washington Plunkett goes, “they seen their opportunities and they took ’em.”

After the sale of slaves was carried out in good faith (at times the buyers would even use their current slaves as collateral, emphasizing the conception of slaves as property), newly purchased slaves, chained in “coffles,” would be transported to their new destination, the slave labor camps. Run as infamous prisons where such punishments as sexual humiliation, bodily mutilation, and even waterboarding were common practices, the slave labor camps were places of severe torture for slaves by their owners or overseers if they did not meet the economic outcomes that slave owners sought to achieve. Drawing on testimonies by slaves themselves, Baptist paints a picture of slaves having to endure calibrated pain if they were unable to exceed the previous day’s gains in production. And this scary incentive worked: between 1820 and 1860, for example, the productivity of cotton-pickers doubled.

As the cotton economy was becoming prosperous, Baptist asserts, “The returns from cotton monopoly powered the modernization of the rest of the American economy.... In fact, slavery’s expansion shaped every crucial aspect of the economy and politics of the new nation” (p. xxi). The need for the expansion of slavery ultimately divided the nation, due to intense opposition in the North, leading to the 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency, the southern states’ attempts at secession, and a bloody civil war.

Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told* connects all the dots for the history of this period—including slavery, Abraham Lincoln, economic incentives, and the war. It connects perfectly with the rich historical literature on Lincoln, the Civil War, and slavery, and it sets historical events of antebellum America within a context that is accessible and understandable. For example, *The Half Has Never Been Told* connects effectively with Eric Foner’s *This Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (2010) and John C. Rodrigue’s *Lincoln and Reconstruction* (2013). Furthermore, the book treats many themes addressed by the leading study of Lincoln’s economic thought, Gabor S. Boritt’s *Abraham Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* (1978; reprint, 1994). All these books complement one another as they create an intellectual symphony in which all sides of the story matter and need to be told.

The Half Has Never Been Told is required reading. It is challenging, illuminating, refreshing, and creative. Despite its perhaps improper use (for an academic work) of colloquial language to address important topics and to increase its shock value (as if the content would not suffice and a more traditional terminology somehow would not do better), Baptist adds many new, essential elements to the story of capitalism in America. Arguably, his most important contribution is to show how the “dismal science” of economics can be an engine of development and yet a reminder of great and terrible costs that it imposes in the overall story. Now the long unspoken half of the story has been told—and we can only hope that it is heard.

Notes

[1]. Robert M. Solow, “A Contribution to the Theory of Economic Growth,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 70, no. 1 (February 1956): 65–94.

[2]. John E. Murray, Alan L. Olmstead, Trevon D. Logan, Jonathan B. Pritchett, and Peter L. Rousseau, “Roundtable of Reviews for *The Half Has Never Been Told*,” *Journal of Economic History* 75, no. 3 (September 2015):

919-931.

[3]. For such perspectives, see Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965).

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