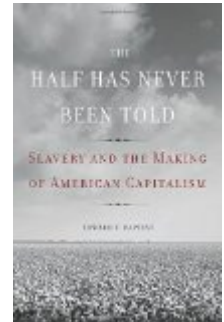


Edward E. Baptist. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism.* New York: Basic Books, 2014. 498 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-00296-2.



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Between the end of the American Revolution and the eve of the Civil War, roughly one million black slaves were transported from the southeastern United States to the expanding southwestern cotton frontier. More than half of them ended up in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi (pp. 2–3). Between 1790 and 1860, cotton production skyrocketed from a paltry two million pounds to 1.536 billion pounds per year, accounting for more than 60 percent of the world's total cotton production and also for 60 percent of all US export revenues (p. 114). During the same time period, the productivity of cotton pickers, measured by the amount of cotton harvested per day, rose by 400 percent, nearly equal to the productivity gains in English cotton mills (pp. 126–129). However, in contrast to the textile industries in Europe and New England, technological innovation played no role in increasing the productivity of cotton plantations in the American South. Production kept growing because planters continuously expanded the cotton acreage and because forced migration supplied the necessary enslaved labor force. The availability of cheap land and the shortage of labor led to a ruthless system of ex-

ploitation “that enslaved people called the ‘pushing system’” and that Edward Baptist aptly describes as “innovation in violence” (pp. 116–117). “Cotton-picking increased,” the author writes, “because quotas rose” (p. 134). Enslaved workers who failed to meet their daily assignments could expect to be whipped or suffer other forms of punishment. After emancipation, the productivity of cotton planting fell considerably (p. 410) – a clear indicator that the “efficiency” of slave labor rested on brutal force.

In “The Half Has Never Been Told” Cornell University historian Edward Baptist argues that the process of expanding slavery into the southwestern states is the key to understanding not only the dynamics and character of antebellum slavery but of the 19th century United States at large: “The returns from the cotton monopoly powered the modernization of the rest of the American economy,” he states in his introduction, “...slavery’s expansion shaped every crucial aspect of the economy and politics of the new nation” (p. XXI). While this is hardly a new argument, the author tells the story of how cotton and

slavery spread from Maryland to Texas in novel and arresting ways. Unwilling to confine himself to the perspective of powerful actors, Baptist tries to recreate the views and experiences of enslaved people, who suffered the cruelties of forced migration and the “pushing system”, by making use of an enormous number of slave narratives from the 19th and 20th centuries. The book’s title stems from a 1937 interview with a former slave who noted that “the half has never been told” (p. XXI), while the subtitle indicates the author’s interest in linking his story to the larger political and economic forces and developments that shaped American history between Independence and the Civil War.

Indeed, Baptist succeeds impressively at all levels. By focusing on the fates of individual slaves, he confronts readers with the horrors of separating families by sale and the particular cruelty of slavery on the frontier, which its victims found “fundamentally different” from their earlier lives in the Chesapeake region (p. 115). If anything, the sexual exploitation of enslaved girls and women was worse under the reign of often young and reckless white men who dominated among the slave traders and planters on the frontier. It is no coincidence that the term “paternalism” only appears in passing (pp. 184–185) and is missing from the index. The author portrays the various classes of “enslavers” as unscrupulous and greedy profit-seekers who bear no resemblance to the paternalistic self-image of antebellum slaveholders. They were capitalist entrepreneurs in relentless pursuit of making money from a system that was part and parcel of a larger capitalist economy.

The author also does a great job linking the expansion of cotton slavery to key events of American history, such as the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and the Missouri Compromise of 1819/21. Another instructive example is the notorious Bank War of the 1830s, which President Andrew Jackson waged in the name of democracy for and

equality of white men (pp. 249–270). Baptist demonstrates that the Bank War and its disastrous consequences were driven by an insatiable demand of slave traders, planters and land speculators for credit. International investors underwrote credit arrangements uncannily similar to the securitization schemes that led to the 2008 financial crisis (pp. 256–257). Most importantly, of course, the Civil War was the result of the unyielding quest for the expansion of slavery. Slaveholders acknowledged no “natural limits” to the economic usefulness of slave labor and seceded when they concluded that expanding slavery was no longer possible within the federal Union. However, that was a “tremendous mistake”, according to the author, because slaveholders failed to see that “war was the only way slavery would have ended in the United States” (p. 414).

“The Half Has Never Been Told” is a major scholarly accomplishment and one of the best books on American slavery published in recent years. It is thoroughly researched and elegantly written although traditionalist historians may scold the author for occasionally blurring the line between historiography and fiction writing in recreating the emotions and thoughts of his enslaved protagonists (pp. 23–26). The book offers a sweeping synthesis based on the largely persuasive proposition that “slavery’s expansion was the driving force in US history between the framing of the Constitution and the beginning of the Civil War” (p. 413). Yet for all its merits, Baptist does not give a “radical new interpretation of American history,” as the blurb claims. Readers who are familiar with the vast and rich scholarship on American slavery will be surprised by an introduction that alleges historians are still wedded to the notion of antebellum slavery as a premodern institution fundamentally at odds with a liberal republic and a capitalist economy (pp. XVII–XIX). Edward Baptist is surely not the first historian to emphasize the profitability and capitalist character of American slavery nor is he the first to emphasize the centrality of slavery to American his-

tory. See Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*, Cambridge, Mass. 2003, p. 13: “For most of its history the American colonies and then the United States was a society of slaves and slaveholders. From the first, slavery shaped the American economy, its politics, its culture, and its most deeply held beliefs.” For an introduction on the debates of economic historians, see Mark M. Smith: *Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum American South*, New York 2004. Moreover, while antebellum slavery unquestionably was a cornerstone of the capitalist world economy, Baptist’s assertion that “enslaved African Americans built the modern United States, and indeed the entire modern world” (p. XXIII) betrays a curious conflation of American history and world history. As a contribution to American history “The Half Has Never Been Told” will stand as a towering achievement.

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