
In The Half Has Never Been Told the historian Edward E. Baptist vividly describes the ways enslaved people shaped the development of modern capitalism. He asserts that their exploitation in the cotton fields, through violent force, enabled the United States to prosper, expand, and become a world leader in cotton production. Baptist anchors his study in the eighty-year period between the end of the American Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War, tracing the experience of enslaved people through trade, travel, separation, labor, and violence.

The vast body of scholarship on slavery has noticeably shifted in the last two decades, and the institution of slavery now has a prominent place in national conversations about U.S. history. Baptist’s The Half Has Never Been Told arrives within this watershed moment in the historiography, as a plethora of slavery studies have prompted new understandings of an old institution. Baptist’s work also appears at a time when films, television shows, and documentaries are introducing an increasingly wider audience to this history.

Written for a popular audience, this book employs a provocative style that is jarring for some readers and welcomed by others. It is jarring through the very descriptive way he recounts the violence enslaved people experienced, and through the language he uses. He tells the story of capital development in the United States, arguing that the country prospered because of enslaved labor in the cotton industry. Relying heavily on the testimony of enslaved people, the book follows the physical structure of a giant. He begins with the “heart” and introduces readers to the thoughts and feelings of the enslaved, shared through their testimonies from narratives and interviews. They complete the story of American slavery, because their half had never been told. From the heart, he moves to “feet” and describes the ways “black feet went tramping west and south in chains,” through the domestic slave trade (p. 11). Next he describes the “heads” that were decapitated in the Haitian Revolution to show how enslaved people resisted and fought back. Violence is again at the center of his analysis. Baptist continues by exploring the “right hand,” “left hand,” “tongues,” “breath,” “seed,” “blood,” “backs,” and “arms.” Each chapter covers a particular moment in time, as well as the metaphorical body of an enslaved person forced to labor against his or her will.

Scholars writing on this topic have sometimes danced around the idea of violence, and, if covered, it was not made central. Baptist argues that “enslaved African Americans built the modern United States, and indeed the entire modern world” (p. xxiii). Until now, he argues, only part of this history has been told and rarely from the vantage point of the enslaved. Utilizing narratives or combinations of narratives, at times Baptist employs a methodology similar to that of Marcus Rediker in the introduction to The Slave Ship: A Human History (2007). Explaining this method, Baptist writes that he wishes “to provide a richer depiction of the landscape, work practices, and cultural practices of the time” by using the testimonies of “formerly enslaved people” who lived and survived enslavement (p. 428). To my liking, Baptist uses narratives indiscriminately and cites from the many published narratives of the nineteenth century as well as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews collected.
in the 1930s. Of the latter he says, “the WPA narratives contain rich personal observation remembered by the interviewees themselves” and if “read carefully,” can reflect the world view of the enslaved (p. 427). I appreciate this perspective and have always been troubled by complete dismissal of these sources.

In the chapter on “seed,” some scholars will be taken aback by his creative use of profane words to describe the tripartite exploitation of enslaved women, cotton crops, and productivity. Yet this language drives home his point. Putting his word choice aside, enslaved women in this chapter are often relegated as voiceless bodies being demoralized by the system and their enslavers. Given the wide body of scholarship where women speak back to this exploitation, I wonder why Baptist chose to write this chapter from the perspective of the employee/enslaver rather than enslaved women.

_The Half Has Never Been Told_ has drawn attention to slavery in a way that few recent works have. Part of this attention came when _The Economist_ published an anonymous review that criticized Baptist for making all of the white people in the book “villains” and the black people “victims.” After receiving numerous complaints and subscription withdrawals, the magazine recanted their statement. But individual economists also hurled criticism at Baptist for different reasons. Some, such as Alan Olmstead, Trevon Logan, Jonathan Pritchett, and Peter Rousseau, felt that his examination of cotton production was flawed, his use of narratives unoriginal, his utilization of data unsubstantiated, and his analysis simplified. Such criticisms arise from the particulars of the two fields. Economists share data and typically make their datasets publicly available to other researchers. Baptist has shared his data with individual scholars but has not made it available online, thus opening himself up to sharp criticism. Is this about etiquette or is it about facing a difficult history told through the voices of the enslaved? How does one grapple with off-putting language and the dense descriptions of the hundreds of miles enslaved people walked to markets? How can we account for technological change over time in the face of unrelenting violence? Is there room for both arguments, and, if so, what does that narrative look like?

Perhaps we are in the middle of figuring this out, and Baptist’s book, like controversial studies before it, has stepped out and offered one perspective—one that has not been shared so clearly before. As a scholar of the enslaved, I found the use of narratives a welcome contribution to a difficult history. I also would love to see his data and a discussion of technological change in the cotton plants, production, and processing described by so many economists. Even more of the story needs to be told. As Charles Ball reminds us, “it is a mistake to suppose that the southern planters could ever retain their property, or live amongst their slaves, if those slaves were not kept in terror of the punishment that would follow acts of violence and disorder” (Ball, _Slavery in the United States_, 1937, p. 379).

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This important book is poised to become the definitive general history of U.S. abolitionism for decades to come. Exhaustive research, dramatic writing, and ambitiously full coverage make _The Slave’s Cause_ unlikely to be surpassed in scholarship. At the same time, the interpretations offered explicitly early and late in the book and implicitly in the vivid storytelling throughout reflect the particular concerns of our scholarly generation. The book is a triumph, but the times, in historiography and in politics, that produced it lend themselves to sharply defining some interpretive issues and to eliding others.

Two striking interpretive lines deserve particular foregrounding. The first, drawing on rich Marxist and leftist black nationalist scholarship so well-represented at the University of Massachusetts, where Manisha Sinha teaches, places black people at the center of the plot of abolition. Excellent coverage of humanitarianism, Christianity, and reform frame matters, but the insistence on African American self-activity...