

Cotton, Slavery, and the New History of Capitalism

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Abstract: The "New History of Capitalism" grounds the rise of industrial capitalism on the production of raw cotton by American slaves. Recent works include Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton*, Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams*, and Edward Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told*. All three authors mishandle historical evidence and mis-characterize important events in ways that affect their major interpretations on the nature of slavery, the workings of plantations, the importance of cotton and slavery in the broader economy, and the sources of the Industrial Revolution and world development.

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A surge of studies on the "New History of Capitalism" [NHC] grounds the rise of industrial capitalism on the production of raw cotton by America slaves. Recent works include Walter Johnson's (2013) *River of Dark Dreams*, Edward Baptist's (2014) *The Half Has Never Been Told*, and Sven Beckert's (2014) *Empire of Cotton*. The themes and topics covered are diverse: the first two focus on the United States whereas the last adopts a more global vision. Taken collectively these works offer a perspective on nineteenth century world development that redirects attention from the centers of cotton textile industrialization to the agricultural periphery and to the innovations that linked manufacturers with their sources of raw materials. In Beckert's words: "Slavery stood at the center of the most dynamic and far-reaching production complex in human history (2014, p. 244)." In this telling, cotton capitalists in Britain and elsewhere shaped, manipulated, and reshaped the agricultural periphery to meet the changing demands of industry.

The NHC relates a barbarous story. The key commodity in this account is raw cotton. It was produced by coerced labor on lands expropriated from indigenous peoples. Workers were kidnapped and transported to new lands, subjected to brutal punishments, and, in some accounts, often existed on the verge of starvation. Cultivation practices caused environmental damages, contributing to demands for ever more land. The story of the industrial revolution is often told as a wave of gadgets, as a product of world-changing mechanical innovations, but, by the NHC telling, its true origin was in the exploitation of stolen labor and land (Beckert 2014, pp. xv, 95). Moreover, slaves working on southern plantations were the real catalysts of world development.

There is much in this big picture with which to agree. However, much that is true in the NHC story has long been common place. There is no doubting evils of what Beckert calls "war capitalism" (as he rebrands mercantilism), whereby Europeans conquered much of the world, destroyed civilizations, and enslaved millions. There is no doubting that American slavery tore apart families, forcefully relocated people, imposed harsh work conditions, and brutalized and sexually abused many. Slave owners created a police state that benefited a small elite at the expense of blacks and poor whites.

However, to agree that slavery was important and evil does not mean that it was economically essential for the Industrial Revolution, for American prosperity, or even for the production of cotton in the United States. The new literature makes spectacular but unsupported claims, relies on faulty reasoning, and introduces many factual inaccuracies. These problems

significantly degrade the NHC's contributions. We relate the findings of the NHC literature to the slavery debates in the "new economic history" and point to more recent economic analysis. Our perspective casts doubt on many key claims made by the NHC, and leads to new understandings of the history of cotton and labor institutions, and of government policies to promote cotton production.

We start with an analysis of Beckert's book, giving special attention to his claims that cotton capitalists dominated world events and that coercion was necessary for the production of raw cotton. Next, we investigate Johnson's treatise on slavery and southern development. Finally we focus on the work and methods of Edward Baptist, who claims that more efficient systems of torture accounted for the rise of the South's cotton economy. We show that his claim (Baptist 2014, p. 130) that increases in torture were "the *ultimate cause* of the massive increase in the production of high-quality, cheap cotton: an *absolutely necessary* increase if the Western world was to burst out of the 10,000-year Malthusian cycle of agriculture" [emphases added] is unsupportable. We further demonstrate that many of the major shortcomings of all three books could have been avoided by a more thoughtful engagement with the large economic history literature on slavery.

The *Empire of Cotton*

In *Empire of Cotton*, Sven Beckert argues that raw cotton was the crucial input for the leading sector of the Industrial Revolution, and that increasing production of the fiber depended on expanding global supplies of coerced labor. *Empire* received the 2015 Bancroft Prize and was the runner up for the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for History. Beckert paints a top-down view of history that ascribes almost omnipotent powers to "cotton capitalists" to manipulate events around the world. But all too often he portrays interests that were at odds with one another as working in a united front; all too often he asserts historical actors behaved in ways fitting his story rather than as they actually did.

Beckert writes: "Europeans became important to the worlds of cotton not because of new inventions or superior technologies, but because of their ability to reshape and then dominate global cotton networks (2014, p. 30)." "The beating heart of this new system was slavery (2014, p. 37)." State intervention was crucial; "war capitalism" provided the "foundation" for industrial capitalism (2014, pp. xv-xvi, 79). By Beckert's telling, cotton manufactures and their financiers

dictated British policies (sometimes in ways antithetical to British political and military interests) to expand cotton slavery's territory and to impose coercive labor regimes globally. Inhumane and tyrannical labor policies were essential for cotton production. In addition, cotton capitalists successfully conspired to revolutionize the cotton-growing countryside following the end of slavery in the United States. The actual history of all of these episodes contradicts Beckert's interpretations. Moreover, British policies on the trans-Atlantic slave trade and numerous other important issues did not align with Beckert's grand themes.

As one example of "war capitalists" reshaping the world, Beckert offers a bold recounting of the Louisiana Purchase. He writes (2014, p. 106): "British banker *Thomas Baring*, one of the world's greatest cotton merchants,...was instrumental in the expansion of the empire of cotton when he financed the purchase of the Louisiana lands, negotiating and selling the bonds that sealed the deal with the French government. *Before doing so*, Baring asked for approval of the British government... [emphasis added]."

Beckert (2014, pp. 106-07) reports on what he asserts are Thomas Baring's notes of his meeting with British Prime Minister Henry Addington: Addington "thought it would have been wise for this country to pay a million sterling for the transfer of Louisiana from France to America, & that he saw nothing in our conduct but to approve. He appears to consider Louisiana in the hands of America as an additional means for the vent of our manufacturers & Co. in preference to France...."¹ Two important reviewers (Hochschild 2014; Blackburn 2015, p. 154) of *Empire* have singled out this fascinating story: here is choice evidence of the alliance of cotton merchants (Thomas Baring), high finance (the Baring Bank), and the British government to carve up the world to promote cotton production. Not so fast.

The Thomas Baring whose cotton trading activities are chronicled in *Empire* (pp. 106-07, 122, 219-20, 227) did not play any meaningful role in the Louisiana Purchase. How could he? That Thomas Baring had not yet celebrated his fourth birthday.² The members of the Baring family involved were Francis Baring, the firm's patriarch—he (not Thomas) was the actual

¹ Beckert (2014, p. 480, endnote 17) cites "Note by Thomas Baring, Sunday, June 19, in NP1.A.4.13, Northbrook Papers, Baring Brothers, ING Baring Archive, London." Beckert does not specify the year; the 19 June 1803 meeting occurred after the Peace of Amiens had lapsed and Britain was back at war with France.

² There is no evidence that Sir Thomas Baring (1772-1848), played a key role in the negotiations. It was his son, Thomas Baring (1799-1873) who became "one of the world's greatest cotton merchants."

author of the notes about the Addington meeting—and Francis’ second son, Alexander, who conducted the high-stakes negotiations in Paris (Ziegler 1998, pp. 50, 70-72, 390).³

Far more importantly, Beckert distorts the big picture: the 19 June 1803 meeting between Francis Baring and Prime Minister Addington did *not* occur on a “before doing so” basis. As Philip Ziegler (1988, p. 71) observes, Baring sought the approval of his government “[r]ather belatedly.” The Baring firm and its Dutch partner, Hope & Company, had been negotiating the Louisiana loan since at least January 1803. Alexander Baring had been conducting the negotiations in Paris since April. The Baring and Hope firms had signed the financing deal on 3 May 1803, six weeks *before* the meeting with Addington (Winston 1929). In the coming months, as the conflicts between Britain and France heated up, Addington changed his tune (Fedorak 2002, pp. 156-57). On 16 December 1803, he implored Francis Baring to withdraw from the transaction, given that it could help finance Napoleon’s planned invasion of Britain. But Baring continued to sell the bonds while Hope handled the remittances. The basic facts of this episode are well documented.⁴ Beckert does add one interesting detail: Addington reportedly saw advantages in the transaction from expanding the export market for British manufacturing, but he did not mention increasing supplies of raw cotton.⁵ The true course of events runs contrary Beckert’s picture of unity among cotton merchants, high finance, and the British state to advance cotton’s empire: the merchant was a three-year old, the financiers continued their dealings in in spite of Prime Minister Addington’s opposition, and there is no evidence that visions of new cotton lands played a serious role in the transactions.

In addition to misrepresenting the political machinations associated with the Louisiana Purchase, Beckert misstates its role in expansion of southern cotton production. To emphasize the importance of post-1800 American territorial expansion, Beckert (2014, pp. 105-06) claims that “by 1850, 67 percent of U.S. cotton grew on land that had not been part of the United States half a century earlier.” In fact, states and territories added after 1800, namely Louisiana,

³ Staff at the Baring Archive confirmed that Francis Baring was the source of the document, NP1.A4.13. In correspondence, Sven Beckert acknowledges the misattribution and agrees Thomas Baring (1799-1873) was not involved. The error is corrected in newer versions of the book. But the mistaken account has already entered the public discourse.

⁴ http://www.baringarchive.org.uk/features_exhibitions/louisiana_purchase/ Baring Archive Reference: NP1.A4.03 and NP1.A4.28. See also Ziegler (1998, p. 71-72). In October 1803, Addington approved the shipment of specie from Britain to France as part of the deal.

⁵ In 1803, the Mississippi Valley was an insignificant cotton producer. Perkins (1955, p. 161) observes that William Cobbett, an opponent of the Addington government, had argued that the region had the potential to be the best cotton producing area in the world. His view was not universally shared; others considered Louisiana without value.

Arkansas, Missouri, Texas, and Florida, grew less than 15 percent of American cotton in 1850. Adding Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee, which were largely within U.S. boundaries in 1800, pushes the 1850 share up to 65 percent. It is possible that Beckert intended to exclude from the United States in 1800 the lands held by Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Creeks. In that case, the county-level data show that the 1850 share of U.S. cotton grown on land conquered or acquired since 1800 should be 74 percent, not 67 percent.⁶ The basis of Beckert's share is unclear. In any case the emphasis on cotton is misplaced, because the Louisiana Purchase was more closely linked to the expansion of grain and livestock production (by free farmers) than of cotton production.

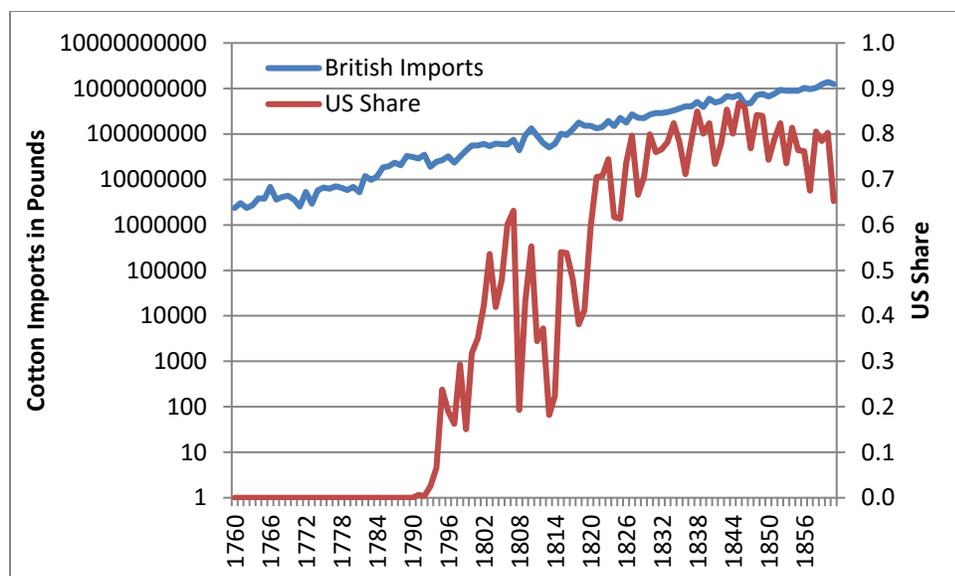
American Cotton Supplies and British Policies

The American South was a late-comer to world cotton markets, first entering in the mid-1790s (see Figure 1). Few anticipated the rise of cotton production in the United States as indicated by the 1795 ratification of the Jay Treaty, which signed away the nation's right to ship cotton abroad. The British were more interested in protecting their merchant marine's West Indian cotton trade than in encouraging the potential supply of cotton from the United States (Ellison 1886, p. 85). U.S. cotton and southern slavery had *zero* role in kick-starting the Industrial Revolution or in fueling its takeoff during its first decades (Donnell 1872, p. 43).

The South's role in the world cotton market changed rapidly. Beckert (2014, p. 104) reminds us that in 1802 the United States was the leading supplier of raw cotton to Britain. But *Empire* largely skips over the interruptions to trade (see Figure 1) associated with the U.S.-U.K. conflicts from Jefferson's Embargo (Dec. 1807) to the end of the War of 1812 (Feb. 1815). This omission is not surprising, given that these events are hard to reconcile with Beckert's theme of cotton capitalists molding their world—if they were dictating British foreign policy, it seems strange that they would have allowed relations to deteriorate so precipitously.

Figure 1: Total British Cotton Imports and the American Share, 1760-1861

⁶ The data can be found in Haines, Fishback, Rhode (2015). Also see Watkins (1969, 1908, *passim*), Bruchey (1967), and Woodbury (1836). The Indian Land Cessions are cataloged in Royce 1899.



Sources: The figures for 1760 to 1800 are from Ellison (1886, p. 29); those for 1801-14 are bales imported from the United States from Ellison (1858, Appendix Table B) times pounds per bales for American cotton from Holmes (1912, pp. 6-7); the figures for 1815-61 are from Mann (1860, Table 17 p. 116) and Ellison (1886, Appendix Table 2).

In fairness, Beckert’s theory that cotton capitalists dictated British foreign policies need not have to apply to every situation, but in addition to the cases he misinterprets there are many puzzling events, such as British policies toward Texas, that need explanation. An independent Texas would have created an alternative source of cotton outside U.S. control. In November 1840, Britain granted diplomatic recognition to the young republic, on the condition that the slave trade be suppressed.⁷ In 1843, British overtures to help settle relations between Mexico and Texas were linked to the abolition of slavery. The Texas planters refused and pushed for union with the United States (Smith 1911, p. 382; Adams 1918). These British policy imperatives ran counter to the NHC’s resolute focus on slavery as essential for cotton production. Other puzzles include why Britain closed the international slave trade, promoted West Indian emancipation, and did not intervene to maintain the cotton trade during the American Civil War. A core difficulty with the view that cotton capitalists could exert their will to expand supplies of cheap slave-grown cotton was Britain’s pioneering role in the world abolitionist movement (Florio 2016).

Cheap Labor?

⁷ Texas agreed to Britain’s right to inspect ships to suppress the slave trade. Roeckell (1999, p. 268).

Among the most inexplicable claims in *Empire* (p. 108) is the assertion that antebellum American cotton planters “enjoyed access to large supplies of cheap labor—what the *American Cotton Planter* would call ‘the cheapest and most available labor in the world.’”⁸ Beckert asserts that in India and Asia Minor, labor was scarcer than in the American South. The data suggest otherwise. Sources for northern India indicate that an Indian agricultural day laborer circa 1850 could be hired for the rough equivalent of \$15.80 a year (300 work days).⁹

This is about one-quarter to one-half of the annual cost of food, housing, medical care, and clothing for American slaves. Estimates of annual maintenance costs of slaves circa 1850 range from about \$30 (Vedder 1975, p. 455) to \$61 (Lebergott 1984, pp. 218-23).¹⁰ Although he did not make an explicit comparison with American slave’s subsistence, the abolitionist, James Cropper (1823, p. 29) noted as much when he inquired: “In a densely peopled district, like that of Bengal, where wages are reduced to the lowest rate of subsistence, where can be the profit or the motive for holding men in slavery?”¹¹

This comparison has yet to account for the *opportunity cost* of slave labor. The most direct measure is the rental rate of slaves. Fogel and Engerman (1974, Vol. II, p. 73) show an annual hire rate in the Lower South circa 1850 of \$168. In addition to the rental fee, the person

⁸ The quote is presented apart from its broader context, which is antithetical to the NHC’s theme of a prosperous South. It comes from an article in the *American Cotton Planter* 1 (May 1853), pp. 152-54 criticizing the Cotton South’s failure to develop in spite of its economic advantages. Another article published in the same volume, *American Cotton Planter* 1 (Aug. 1853), p. 229, touts the “superior cheapness of Hindoo labor.”

⁹ According to Robert Allen and Roman Studer (<http://gpih.ucdavis.edu>, file “India prices and wages 1595-1930 (Allen and Studer),” an unskilled laborer in North India in 1850 earned rupees worth 1.43 grams of silver per day. Assuming 300 workdays (which is high given the Monsoon would shut down most operations for an extended period), the annual earnings of 429 grams of equivalent silver. Per *Carter et al.* (2006), the U.S. dollar was defined as 371.25 fine grains of silver (Table Cj108-112 - U.S. monetary standards—official value of the dollar: 1792–1973). Our estimate is based on 1 grain silver=0.065 grams. So the annual 429 grams of silver would equal \$17.78 a year. An alternative 1850 estimate starts with the daily real wages calculated on the basis of prevailing prices of food-grains for North India, Mukerjee (1945, pp. 48-54) as reported by Peter Lindert, South Asia, <http://gpih.ucdavis.edu/Datafilelist.htm>. These were 2.84 kilograms of wheat per day, or 1.27 grams of silver per day, given the price of wheat in Northern India that year. This converts to roughly \$15.80 a year circa 1850, again assuming 300 workdays.

¹⁰ Conrad and Meyer’s (1958, p. 104) estimate of \$20-\$21 for out-of-pocket expenses excludes the value of home-grown food or housing and is thus too low. See also Genovese (1961, pp. 276-77). To the extent that the maintenance cost were averages for all slaves as opposed to just working age males (who were better cared for) the gap would be larger. One might object that since plantations grew most of their own food, the cost of food should not be included in the maintenance calculations. Such reasoning ignores the *opportunity costs* of food production. The resources and effort that went into producing corn could have been devoted to growing more cotton or some other commercial crop. Moreover, the foodstuffs produced could have been sold. The opportunity cost doctrine recognizes these potential forgone revenues as costs.

¹¹ Many contemporaries noted the cost differentials. See “British India and the United States,” *Savannah Daily Republican*, 18 Feb. 1842, p. 2; and “Cotton and Its Prospects,” *American Cotton Planter* 1, no. 8 (Aug. 1853), p. 229.

hiring the slave bore the cost of maintenance (and insurance). Adding the lower-bound estimate of maintenance costs (\$30) to the rental rate yields an annual cost of using a slave of \$198 in the Lower South: roughly ten times the cost of labor in India.¹² Recognizing the high cost of slave labor is important for many issues central to the NHC narrative. Most significantly it affects our understanding of the sources of America's comparative advantage in cotton production: it most certainly was not cheap labor.

Cotton Capitalists and East India

The themes that an increase in coercion was a prerequisite for increasing cotton production and that cotton capitalists drove British foreign policy also fails in India during the American Civil War cotton famine of 1861-65. Much as Beckert notes, British cotton manufacturers lobbied feverishly for major legal changes in India. Beckert (2014, pp. 251-53) argues that the "most important" demand was to revise Indian contract law to make breaches of agricultural labor and planting agreements penal, as opposed to just civil, offenses. He further claims: "Eventually this pressure succeeded; new contract laws were imposed," and that the coercive legislation led to an expansion of Indian cotton exports in the early 1860s (Beckert 2014, p. 252 and 2004, pp. 1411-13).¹³ Beckert recognizes the initial conflicts between the Manchester and Lancaster cotton interests and Secretary of State for India, Sir Charles Wood. Wood was the Cabinet Minister in charge of India, with authority over the Viceroy (the Governor-General) and other British officials in the subcontinent. Beckett (2014, p. 255) implies that Wood soon came around to the need for greater "state coercion" to increase cotton production in India. Wood supposedly pursued coercive policies because he believed "Indian cultivators...preferred leisure to accumulation, resulting in lower production when prices were high (Beckert 2014, p. 255)." This rendition fits nicely into Beckert's grand view, but as with his account of the Louisiana Purchase, it is mostly wrong.

¹² To say that labor in India was "cheap" relative to labor in the American South, does not mean that there were no labor shortages in India. During the boom caused by the American Civil War, officials complained of local shortages that delayed public works construction and the expansion of cotton production. A British report commented that "Everywhere in the vicinity of railway works the collectors remark on their great and immediate effect in raising wages," and that workers often travelled 200 miles to obtain work (Select Committee 1871, p. 616, 619-20 and No Author 1875, p. 183).

¹³ Indian contract law did change, for example, with the famous Contract Law of 1872. Beckert does not demonstrate the law changed as he indicated during the period under discussion. The relevant text paragraph and attached endnote 30 (p. 525) deal with 1861 to 1863.

Wood, who was noted for his free market views, repeatedly blocked the demands to revise Indian contract law during the cotton famine, and he steadfastly held to his belief that if peasants would not respond to higher prices, nothing else would be of much value. Robin Moore's (1966, pp. 77-85, 178-203, 252-53) book on Wood's Indian policy makes this abundantly clear: "Between 1860 and his departure from the India Office [in early 1866], Wood was confronted with proposals to change the law relating to breaches of contract.... He refused to accept the proposals... (Moore 1966, p. 77)." Wood considered the proposed codes as attempts to convey an unfair advantage to Europeans, as oppressive to Indian peasants, and as counter to his governing principles. Moore (1966, p. 85) continues that Wood's "last major act" before leaving office in February 1866 was "to prevent the revision of the [Contract] Code by the Government of India."¹⁴

Wood's correspondence reveals his disdain for the cotton manufacturers and their trade associations. On 18 October 1861, he wrote the Earl of Canning, then the Governor-General of India: "The Manchester people...are so singular ignorant & exert themselves so little beyond complaining that they do not carry people with them (letter book 9, p. 28)." On 10 January 1862, Wood further vented to Canning (letter book 9, p. 190) that "their ignorance and presumption exceed all belief." Did Wood mellow and come to accept the cotton capitalists' agenda as Beckert claims? Hardly. On 9 Oct. 1862, Wood wrote to Henry S. Maine, the Legal Member of the Council of the Governor-General, (letter book 11, p. 192) about the Contract Law: "Nothing reasonable has been proposed so far;" an 1861 law aiding indigo producers was "a monstrous Bill."¹⁵ In March 1863 Wood boasted to Earl of Elgin, the new Governor-General, that "We have resisted & successfully all the unreasonable demands of the Manchester People. I can throw them over horse and foot on duties, contracts, [and] wasteland... (Wood to Elgin, 16 March 1863, letter book 12, p. 130)." In August 1863, he noted that Parliament rejected with derision the Manchester position (Wood to Elgin, 17 Aug 1863, letter book 13, p. 234).¹⁶

¹⁴ Roy and Swamy (2016, 134-36) chronicle the "dithering" process leading to the passage of the 1872 Contract Act. Christopher Florio (2016) has extended the NHC view of the importance of coercion. He argues that the British sought to apply American slave management methods to India in the 1840s. For a counter view, see Olmstead (2016).

¹⁵ To add to the confusion, Beckert (2014, pp. 252-53) cited this short letter four times in note 28, listing the recipient as William (as opposed to Henry) Maine. For Maine's support for Wood's stance opposing a more coercive contract law, see Grant Duff (1892), p. 90.

¹⁶ See also Wood to Trevelyan, 18 May 1863, letter book 13, p. 66; Wood to Frere, 2 May 1863, letter book 13, p. 34. The history of Wood's administration written by his private secretary reinforces our interpretation of Wood's general opposition to making the breach of a crop lien a criminal offense (West 1867, pp. 51-7).

Wood's correspondence shows that he had "amicable" meetings with the Manchester men, but this was because they temporarily backed off from their more aggressive demands, not because Wood changed his position (for example, see Wood to Elgin, 2 May 1863, letter book 13, p. 6). In early 1863, Wood wrote to Charles Trevelyan, the Indian Finance Minister, that Lancaster was in dire straits and that something must be done to help. But he also noted that there was little he could do. He asked Trevelyan to work harder to improve roads to move cotton out of India, notwithstanding his view that past transportation investments had had little impact to date (Wood to Trevelyan, 17 Feb. 1863, letter book 12, p. 84).¹⁷ Even the secondary sources that Beckert cites refute his interpretation. Dwijendra Tripathi (1967, p. 262), Peter Harnetty (1966, pp. 85-86, 91), Arthur Silver (1966, pp. 158-224), W. O. Henderson (1969, p. 35-41), and Arthur Redford (1956, pp. 13-20) all chronicle Manchester's failures to obtain the wanted legislation. Beckert's assertion that the cotton capitalists "Eventually" persuaded sympathetic British officials to impose draconian labor contract policies during the cotton famine is wrong.

Manchester's impotency was evident by their failed attempts to have Wood impeached, and by their continuing stream of attacks on Wood even after he left office (*Manchester Guardian* 23 July 1864, p. 4; 21 June 1869, p. 3).¹⁸ Throughout the cotton famine, Wood maintained the support of many in Parliament and, most importantly, of Prime Minister Lord Palmerston. In addition, key voices in the print media supported Wood. As an example, in January 1863 the *Economist* opined that if Manchester wanted more cotton they ought to try paying the ryots (Indian cultivators) enough to make it in their interest; it was ridiculous for Manchester to ask the Indian Exchequer to supplement the "price and bring it up to what would be an adequate inducement ... (*Economist*, 24 Jan. 1863, p. 90)."

Consistent with his opposition to more coercive legislation, Wood repeatedly opined that higher prices would lead to more cotton production. In October 1862, Wood informed Elgin: "The impetus, however, given to the growth of cotton, is certainly great. Dr. Forbes reports that the price has reached the ryot, that he [the ryot] is buying his own gin to clean his own cotton,

¹⁷ There was a flurry of investigations into improving the infrastructure; but in June 1862, Wood ordered that education and public works expenditures be slashed because of a projected Indian government budget shortfall (that never materialized). Moreover, in April 1864 Trevelyan increased Indian cotton tariff valuations over the protest of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. Harnetty (1965, pp. 347-49).

¹⁸ Samuel Laing, who was under Wood, did try to advance some of the Manchester agenda. Laing repeatedly earned Wood's wrath by misstating Wood's views and making public statements supporting legislation, contrary to Wood's instructions. Wood dismissed Laing. See, for example, Wood to Elgin, 27 Feb 1863, letter book 12, p. 88.

and keep himself out of the hands of the dealer,- and that there is every prospect of increased cultivation.” Wood added that he had received a similar report from Madras and that a fair price “will do all that is needed... (Wood to Elgin, 25 Oct. 1862 (no. 2), letter book 11, p. 228). In a Parliamentary debate of 3 July 1863, Wood responded to his critics by noting: “My conviction is, that an adequate demand, evidenced by a rise in price, will produce an adequate supply [of Indian cotton]. I have held those principles throughout all my political life with the greatest confidence....”¹⁹

Perhaps most damaging to the claim that coercion was a prerequisite for increasing the supply of cotton from India are the data on Indian shipments. Cotton imports from India more than doubled between 1860 and 1863 (Henderson 1934, p. 34). The president of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce explained why India increased its exports: to the approval of those assembled, Henry Ashworth noted in January 1864 that the increase “was not the consequence of any change of policy, but of the magic effect of price (*Manchester Guardian*, 26 Jan. 1864, p. 6).”

Postbellum Developments

Throughout his treatment of the pre-Civil War era, Beckert maintains that slavery was essential for American cotton production. This creates a problem because the United States continued to produce cotton, lots of cotton, after the Civil War. Just five years after the War’s end, cotton production approached the peak antebellum levels, and in 1891 U.S. output was twice the highest level ever achieved in the pre-War period (Carter et al. 2006, Da756). Amid the chaos of the immediate post-Civil War era, freedmen and landowners experimented with new systems of labor organization—a groping process that would lead to the rise of sharecropping coupled with many state and local attempts to coerce laborers. Coercive policies included vagrancy laws, unfavorable crop lien laws, anti-tampering agreements, and the like. But any attempt to equate these policies with slavery does a disservice to the memories of those who suffered under slavery. As Gavin Wight (1986, pp. 84-107, esp. pp. 93-94) emphasized, the high mobility rates of both white and

¹⁹ 3 *Hansard* 172: 211-212 (3 July 1863). Over the next ten pages, Wood recounted the government’s many activities to support cotton production such as informing natives of the high prices, improving transportation systems, and distributing seeds. All of these were consistent with his free market views. He emphatically noted that Indian spinners and weavers were suffering due to the cotton famine, and he refused to allow policies that would worsen their plight.

black sharecroppers and cash tenants belies any notion that *as a rule* croppers and tenants were coercively bound to one landowner. The story of the rise of sharecropping has been told many times, but in an attempt to solve the contradiction of his own making Beckert (2014) imposes a world-wide top-down design to what was myriad local experiments: "...cotton capitalists searched for new ways to mobilize cotton-growing labor (p. 267)" and "emancipation forced cotton capitalists toward their own revolution—a frantic search for new ways to organize the cotton-growing labor of the world (p. 275)." "Throughout Europe and the United States, economic and political elites agreed that former slaves must continue to grow cotton (p. 281)," and "...by the 1870s, from the perspective of cotton capitalists, the crisis of the empire of cotton that had emerged from the emancipation of cotton growing workers had been resolved (p. 311)." This established a model that allowed capitalists "to transform the global cotton-growing countryside... (p. 311; also see p. 343)." Beckert gives the false impression that puppeteers operating in board rooms in London, Manchester, and Liverpool pulled strings in faraway lands to manage day-to-day events.

The demise of slavery vastly expanded the potential cotton labor supply because large number of whites toiled in the South's postwar cotton fields. Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch (1977, pp. 84, 104-105) report that in the five most important cotton-producing states, 40 percent of one-family tenant farms were operated by whites by 1880. The entry of whites was not a temporary phenomenon. In Georgia, the number of white sharecroppers and share tenants in 1910 exceeded the number of black croppers and tenants (Alston and Kauffman 2001, p. 183). White farmers were particularly important in driving the cotton expansion in the Piedmont during reconstruction (Weiman 1985, pp. 71-93; Harris 1994, pp. 526-42; Temin 1983, pp. 661-74). Black and white tenants and owners of small farms were efficient enough (when coupled with the South's financial, transportation, research, and marketing infrastructure) to allow the South to largely re-establish its dominance in world markets. The South could and did produce cotton without chattel slavery.

Overall, Beckert's account overstates the power of the cotton elite to determine British policies around the world. The accounts of Louisiana Purchase, of British East Indian policy during the crucial years of the cotton famine, and of the role of cotton in American expansion are misleading at best. He compounds these problems with his emphasize on the necessity of coercion and the impotency of market forces. He fails to understand a fundamental fact of American history—labor, be it free white labor or slave labor was typically relatively scarce and

expensive. And to justify his claims that slavery was essential to produce cotton he invents a new and misguided history of post-bellum labor relations.

Nightmares on the River of Dark Dreams

In *River of Dark Dreams*, Beckert's Harvard colleague Walter Johnson portrays the antebellum cotton-producing South as part of a modernizing, capitalist economy. According to Beckert (2014a), "Johnson sees slavery not just as an integral part of American capitalism, but as its very essence." Johnson paints a picture of a reckless, speculative, and expanding slave economy that wasted land and lives. His notion of wasting land stems in part from a failure to understand the concept of *comparative advantage* that underpins the basis for trade.

Johnson (2013, p. 13) asserts "the production of cotton [was]... determined by the size of the slave population in rough arithmetical proportion: bales per hand per acre." He (p. 53) further claims that "bales per hand per acre" was the South's "ruling trinomial." As Gavin Wright (2014, pp. 27-29) has pointed out, the trinomial makes no mathematical, economic, or historical sense.²⁰ Adding to the confusion, Johnson sometimes cites his trinomial as "bales per hand per acre" (pp. 153, 177, 197) and sometimes as "bales per acre per hand" (pp. 217, 246-47, 254); both ratios are meaningless. Johnson provides no evidence that cotton planters ever used either of his ratios. Planters instead wrote about bales per hand, acres per hand, bales per acre, and took careful note of bale weights, which varied greatly over time and space. Writing about "bales per hand" or "bales per acre" is senseless without defining the number of pounds of lint per bale. A number of scholars, including Robin Einhorn (2014), have gone into print, treating Johnson's fictitious trinomial as if it ruled the Cotton South.²¹

Johnson (2013, p. 177) tells us that due to the focus on bale-dominated measures of performance, the "cotton-crazed planters" overspecialized in the cash crop and failed to produce sufficient food crops. This notion of overspecialization in cotton and a heavy dependency on the importation of Midwestern foodstuffs is a persistent theme: "Throughout the antebellum period, the Lower Mississippi Valley...imported most of the wheat, corn, beef and pork its residents required to live from the Midwest and the Ohio Valley. The entire economy was devoted to

²⁰ The trinomial make no mathematical sense because the order of division matters; $A/B/C$ is mathematically ambiguous because $(A/B)/C$ need not equal $A/(B/C)$. For example: $(1/2)/3=1/6$, but $1/(2/3)=3/2$.

²¹ Also see Dierksheide (2014, p. 218); and *The Junto*.

agriculture, yet it could not feed itself (p. 176; also see pp. 8, 12, 156, 177-78, 285-86).” The supposed irrationality of “cotton-crazed” slave owners is called into question by the fact that the postbellum South was even more specialized in cotton. The post-war shift stemmed in part from the increased efficiency of Midwestern farmers in growing corn and on the improved transportation network (Olmstead and Rhode 2008, pp. 64-97).²²

But the slave system itself also caused the plantation south to under-specialize in cotton. As Ralph Anderson and Robert Gallman demonstrated forty years ago, planters treated their chattel as a fixed, rather than variable, costs of production (the interest cost on the investment in slaves and most of the cost maintaining slaves existed whether or not the slaves worked). This meant planters had an incentive to create a year around work schedule to use slave labor in low peak-load seasons. This led to the “over production” of foodstuffs (Anderson and Johnson 1977, pp. 24-46).

The broader issue is that trade and specialization are not necessarily bad as Johnson implies; to the contrary, they are generally major contributors to economic growth. Moreover, Johnsons’ argument about antebellum South’s dependency on northern foodstuffs has long been refuted by the economic history literature showing the southern plantations were largely self-sufficient in food production (Atack and Passell 1994, pp. 160-64).

For Johnson, steamboats plying the western rivers were an important link tying the slave economy with the free North. They also represented a symbol of both irresponsible behavior and of technological progress in the Cotton South.²³ The key message is that in an environment of unbridled capitalism, greedy boat-owners consciously cut corners and created unprecedented carnage. In this regard steamboat owners was much like slave owners, whom Johnson thinks wantonly risked the lives of their chattel.

As Johnson (2013, pp. 5-8, 87) correctly observes—western steamboats often had horrific accidents with great losses of life and property. Johnson further asserts that by “the mid-1840s, the steamboat economy discovered its outer limit” for service territory and operators “increasingly...tried to wring profits from the river trade by running their boats in a way that put

²² It also may have reflected problems with the new southern credit structures (Wright and Kunreuther 1975, pp. 526-51). A key distinction in the economic history literature is between individual and collective interests (Wright 1976, pp. 88-97).

²³ Johnson ignores important economic history studies on inland water transportation including Haites, Mak, and Walton (1975); Berry (1943); and Taylor (1951). Gudmestad (2011), by contrast, engages with this scholarship.

both their passengers and cargo in mortal danger (pp. 7-8).” Increased congestion, night running, high speed, shoddy construction and engines, and employment of “wholly incompetent persons” in key positions all increased the hazards (pp. 98-99, 120-24). Johnson (2013, p. 13) approvingly quotes an 1851 critic: “The history of steam navigation on the Western rivers is a history of wholesale murder and unintentional suicide....”

Johnson is right that steamboat accidents increased over time, but, as the economic history literature reveals, steamboat traffic increased even more rapidly. As a result, the risk per passenger mile travelled declined sharply. For example, the number of deaths due to explosions fell from an average of 0.196 per million person-miles traveled in 1825-29 to 0.071 in 1840-44 and then to 0.026 in 1855-59 (Denault 1993, pp. 91, 183). The latter rate was on par with the U.S. motor vehicle death rate per passenger mile for highway travel in 1970. The most significant change in the western steamboat economy was not the rising numbers of accidents that Johnson (2013, pp. 107-25) details, but that the shipping rate for cargo fell by a factor of 25 times between 1815 and 1860 while the accident rate plummeted (Mak and Walton 1972, p. 627).²⁴

Johnson also garbles the story of the development and diffusion of improved cotton varieties.²⁵ (This is a topic that we covered at length in Olmstead and Rhode (2008, 2008a)). Johnson focuses on a variety called Petit Gulf, which was developed and introduced in the early 1830s, to the exclusion of Mexican cottons that spread over a decade earlier and to numerous later advances. He (pp. 8, 9, 151) incorrectly labels Petit Gulf as *G. barbadense*, a type of Sea Island cotton, when Petit Gulf was, in fact, a type of *G. hirsutum*, or Upland cotton. This is a significant error because Sea Island and Upland cottons were different crops, sold in different markets, grown in different areas, and produced using different techniques and labor regimes. Relatively little Sea Island cotton was grown anywhere near the Mississippi Valley, which lies at the heart of Johnson’s steamboat story. He (pp. 8, 152) claims falsely that Petit Gulf was

²⁴ The U.S Department of Transportation data show 52,627 highway fatalities and 2,042 billion passenger miles traveled in 1970, yielding a death rate of 0.026 per million passenger miles. See Tables T2-1 and T1-40 in http://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov/bts/files/publications/national_transportation_statistics/html/table_01_4_0.html. The steamboat-highway comparison is incomplete. Including deaths due to collisions, fires, encounters with snags, etc. would increase the steamboat rate. But given that boiler explosions were not generally insurable (Denault 1993, pp. 6, 11, 192-201), the decline in insurance rates indicates that there were also significant declines in the relative frequency of these types of accidents.

²⁵ Johnson provides little new on myriad other changes in agricultural practices that increased southern productivity: improved cotton gins and presses, the replacement of oxen and horses with mules, and more.

“patented in 1820.” Under U.S. intellectual property law, it did not become possible to “patent” cotton varieties until Plant Variety Protection Act of 1970 (7 U.S.C. §§ 2321-2582). Given the apparent lack of awareness of the economic history literature, it would be valuable to highlight how some of its main findings bear on the NHC.

The Economic History Slavery Debates

The NHC has touted its findings that slavery was profitable, that slave owners were capitalists, that the slave system was integrated into the broader national and world economies by trading and financial networks, and that overall the South was prospering. Slavery was a dynamic system, and its continuing existence did not depend on planters sacrificing profits to preserve a way of life. But these NHC findings add little to what was already known. Other findings of the NHC, such as the assertion that the Cotton South was the primary force driving national expansion in the antebellum period, are neither original nor correct.²⁶

For economic historians most thoughts of an unprofitable plantation economy were put to rest by Alfred Conrad and John Meyer’s 1958 path-breaking analysis. They calculated the internal rates of return on slaves in the 1850s and concluded that these returns compared favorably to what could be earned on alternative investments. Studies such as Conrad and Meyer’s offer major insights not just because of what they did, but also because of what they could not do. They could not use plantation accounts to calculate profits.²⁷ Instead, Conrad and Meyer had to make a stream of estimates on such items as a slave’s longevity and work life, on maintenance cost, on the capital cost of slaves, on the value of the output they produced, interest rates, and much more.

Yasukichi Yasuba (1961) added a key insight, distinguishing between the “viability” and the “profitability” of slavery. If slave-based cotton production was unprofitable at any point in time (as it was following the Panic of 1837), it could still be viable because the price of slaves

²⁶ In his 1973 review of the new economic history literature on slavery, Gavin Wright noted: “One of the ways in which we overstate our progress is by exaggerating the foolishness of our forebears” (Wright 1973, p. 452). The NHC scholars, have repeated the errors of many economists in besmirching earlier generations of historians. Kenneth Stampp (1956), for example, clearly refuted the notion that slavery was unprofitable or unproductive.

²⁷ These plantation books have received attention as symbols of modern capitalism (Beckert 2014, pp. 61, 116; Rosenthal 2013, pp. 732-48). The books typically do *not* contain the information needed for a basic profit-loss or rate of return assessment. As Naomi Lamoreaux (2003, pp. 442-44) pointed out, most northern merchants’ and manufacturers’ accounts in the early nineteenth century suffered from this defect.

(and other assets) would fall to restore profitability.²⁸ Owners of assets would suffer a capital loss, but production would continue so long as the prices of slaves remained above the cumulated costs of raising slaves. Yasuba emphasized that in the 1850s there was a large and *growing* gap between slave prices and rearing costs, suggesting slavery was economically robust. This work, together with studies by Robert Evens (1960) and Richard Sutch (1965), countered any notion that slavery was about to die out for economic reasons.²⁹ This is another insight claimed by the NHC, but once again it has been taught for decades.

The NHC's pronouncements that the South was prospering before 1860 rest entirely on the work of economic historians. The per capita income levels in 1840 and 1860 were roughly the same in the North and South, and the average income of the white population was higher in the South than in the North (Easterlin 1961). The rate of growth of per capita income over the 1840 to 1860 period was higher in the South than in the North. By the conventional measures of economic performance—the level and rate of growth of per capita income, the South was economically dynamic in the late antebellum period. The people making the decisions, the southern white elite, were on average doing very well. This too has been taught in economic history classes for decades.

But in their quest to find modernity and capitalist vigor in the South, NHC scholars generally have omitted a major caveat dampening southern economic prospects: much of antebellum southern growth came from territorial expansion onto more productive lands and from riding the cotton boom. It could not be sustained over the long run. The slave South did not build the institutions—educational, civic, and financial—to promote innovation and to diversify away from the cotton staple (Wright 1978, pp. 107-27; Wright 2006, pp. 48-82). The South therefore lacked the dynamic potential for modern economic growth that existed in the North.

Beckert, Johnson, and Baptists all vigorously advance the idea that the antebellum Cotton South drove national expansion. They seem unaware that this hypothesis has been proposed, rigorously tested, and *rejected* several times. In the economic history literature, this is known as

²⁸ As long as the slave rental prices did not fall below zero, the use of slavery labor would be a viable. Capital asset prices do not determine the profitability of an activity; the causality runs in the other direction, with the profitability of an activity determining the price of capital.

²⁹ It also calls into question the logic of statements claiming that because of the decline in the price of cotton in the late 1830s, some slaveholders considered letting their slaves starve to death. See Johnson (2013, p. 13).

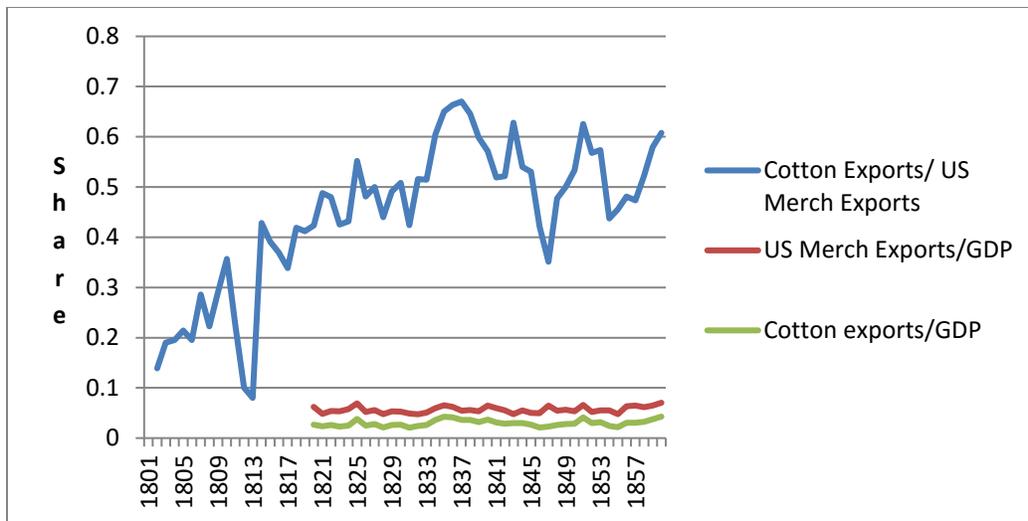
the Cotton Staple Growth Theory. It dates to the work of Guy Callender (1902) and Louis Schmidt (1939). Douglass North (1961, pp. 67, 189) forcefully argued that cotton was the "prime mover" explaining U.S. growth over the 1815-43 period. He claimed "the demands for western foodstuffs and northeastern services and manufactures were basically dependent upon the income received from the cotton trade." Preceding Johnson's argument of southern food dependency by a half century, North (1961, p. 67) writes: "It was the West which provided food for the South," and it was the South that provided "the West's major market." Because cotton "was the commodity for which foreign demand was significantly increasing" and "accounted for over half the value of exports," North concluded (p. 68) "cotton was the most important proximate cause of expansion" between 1815 and 1843, and it remained an important driver of national growth up to 1860.

North's fellow new economic historians promptly assaulted his thesis. It was widely recognized that cotton was leading U.S. export in the antebellum period. But exports represented less than one-tenth of total income (Kravis 1972). Figure 2 graphs the values of cotton exports as a share the value of U.S. merchandise exports, and then both U.S. cotton and merchandise export values as shares of GDP.³⁰ As the bottom line makes clear, cotton exports were a very small share of national product—less than 5 percent over much of the of the antebellum period (Engerman and Gallman 1983, p. 28).

More than this, cotton was not even the nation's most important agricultural commodity in terms of value—that distinction always went to corn. The national value of the small grains (taken together) and of hay also were typically higher than that of cotton. Perhaps more surprising, given the NHC narrative, is that in 1839 and 1849 corn, not cotton, was even the South's leading crop in terms of value! Some familiarity with historical data might have moderated the sensational claims of the NHC literature.

Figure 2: Cotton Export Values as Shares of U.S. Merchandise Exports and GDP

³⁰ The data are based on Series Ee571 (Value of Cotton Exports). Series Ee366 (Value of U.S. Merchandise Exports), Ca10 (Nominal GDP, as interpolated with Ca9 and Ca13 for 1821-29 and 1831-39) from *Millennial Historical Statistics* (Carter, et al. 2006).



Sources: Value of Cotton Exports (Series Ee571), Value of U.S. Merchandise Exports (Ee366), and nominal GDP (Ca10, Ca9 and Ca13) from *Historical Statistics* (Carter et al., 2006).

The importance of the trade linking the South with the Northeast and with the Northwest also failed to give much traction to the Cotton-Staples Thesis.³¹ Using data from the 1839, Richard Easterlin (1961) showed that production per capita of corn, swine, and cattle in the South exceeded the national average. Only for wheat was the region below the national average, and this was largely because of plant diseases in the South. Corn was used in its place in the southern diet. The East, not the South, was the food-deficit region. Albert Fishlow (1964) determined that most of the food shipped down the Mississippi river actually went to the Northeast, to foreign markets, and to the urban population of New Orleans. Less than one-fifth of western exports were consumed on southern plantations.³² William Parker and Robert Gallman developed their celebrated matched sample of southern farms and plantations in cotton-producing countries in large part to evaluate the North thesis. Gallman (1970) concluded that in 1859 southern farms and plantations were, as a rule, self-sufficient in food.

Figure 2 should counter the NHC's exaggerated notions about the economic importance of cotton. Baptist, for example, asserts that cotton production circa 1836 was valued at about \$77 million and made up about "5 percent of the entire gross domestic product" (in line with Figure 2). But then by double counting and bad national product accounting, he boosts cotton's "role" to more than \$600 million "almost half of the economic activity of the United States in

³¹ For an analysis of the South-Northeast link see Lindstrom (1970), Herbst (1976) and Uselding (1976) show.

³² Diane Lindstrom (1970) showed that much of the foodstuffs arriving in New Orleans had been grown elsewhere within the South.

1836.” Here is his method: he adds the value of inputs used to produce cotton, though this double counts costs already subsumed in the cotton’s price. He adds the estimated value of land and slave sales, though asset sales are not counted as a part of GDP. Further, he inexplicably adds the “money spent by millworkers and Illinois hog farmers,” and so on (Baptist 2014, pp. 321-22). If one extended this faulty methodology by summing the “roles” of cotton with a few other primary products, the amount would easily exceed 100 percent of GDP, which of course makes no sense.

The treatment of slavery in the new economic history made significant contributions, but there have been serious shortcomings. The presentation has often been overly sanitized, with insufficient attention paid to the injustices and brutality. Furthermore, as Paul David and Peter Temin (1974) emphasized many economists and historians have inappropriately adopted a language emphasizing concepts such as “efficiency” and a methodology which are built on neoclassical assumptions of free-will, the ability adjust at the margin, and the like. The NHC, rather than offering a much needed corrective on these issues, has taken a step backward by ignoring or misinterpreting the work of the new economic history.

The Torture-Led Growth Thesis

Baptist is perhaps best known for his thesis that innovations in calibrated torture propelled southern and world development. As we noted earlier, by his reckoning it was torture that finally allowed human-kind to escape the jaws of the Malthusian trap. Baptist relied on our estimates showing that the quantity of cotton picked per slave per day quadruped between 1800 and 1860 (Olmstead and Rhode 2008, 2008a, and 2011).³³ He then argued that masters became ever more efficient torturers, incessantly extracting more labor from their chattel. Baptist reached this conclusion by stringing together statements by a few ex-slaves that supposedly asserted that as soon as they reached or exceeded a quota the target was raised. (The most famous of these ex-slaves is Solomon Northup who was immortalized in the 1853 book and 2013 motion picture *Twelve Years a Slave*.) If a slave fell short of his or her *individual* target, punishment was immediate and severe. It was this ever-evolving metaphorical “whipping-

³³ Our results rely on a sample of over 600,000 individual slave-day picking observations drawn from the records of plantations across the South. Following the lead of scores of contemporaries, plant scientists, and some historians, we emphasized the role of improved cotton varieties.

machine” that accounted for the growth in picking output per slave, as, by Baptist’s telling, individuals repeatedly learned new “secret” methods to pick cotton faster (Baptist 2014, pp. 111-44, esp. pp. 126-28, 134). The enslavers also had a “secret” (albeit a widely shared one): new methods of torture. This secret and the slaves’ secret picking innovations accumulated for 60 years: they represented the true source of southern cotton productivity growth and world development. In Baptist’s account (2014, pp. 271, 395), quotas continuously rose; they never went down.

We will have much to say below about scholarly accuracy, so it behooves us to quote directly from *The Half* and related material. Baptist (2014, p. 112) notes: “The first slavery had not yielded continuous improvements in labor productivity. On the nineteenth-century cotton frontier, however, enslavers extracted more production from each enslaved person every year. [New paragraph] The source of this ever-rising productivity... was a whip.” He says (p. 117): “Innovation in violence, in fact, was the foundation of the widely shared pushing system.” The “new pushing system... extracted more work by using oppressively direct supervision combined with torture ratcheted up to far higher levels...(p. 121).” Calibrated torture was “the secret that, over time, drove cotton-picking to continually higher levels of efficiency (p. 131).”

Baptist (2014, p. 133) further writes “on the cotton frontier, each person was given a *unique, individual quota* rather than a limit of work fixed by general custom” [emphasis added].³⁴ After weighing the cotton picked at the end of the day and recording the individual’s total in chalk on a slate, the enslaver (p. 134) “transferred chalk totals into the more lasting ink and paper of a ledger. Then he erased the slate. And then he wrote down new and higher minimums.” The “minimums increased for all over time (p. 136).”

In a recent essay appearing at the website *The Junto* (2015), Baptist succinctly summarizes his argument: “As my book demonstrates, in the new, non-lowcountry areas, enslavers often demanded a specific number of pounds of cotton as a minimum, but pickers had to keep going until dark. Poundage in deficit led to whippings. Poundage in excess of one’s quota led to increases in the quota.”

³⁴ Baptist (2014, p. 149) elaborates “the pushing system pitted migrants against each other. When picking season came, one person’s skill could push up another’s quota.”

Baptist's book has received wide recognition, and he has gained laudatory reviews in both the popular press and in professional journals.³⁵ Many reviews have singled out the causal relationship between torture and productivity growth. As one example, George Yancy and Noam Chomsky (2015) note that U.S. slave plantations "were highly efficient. Productivity increased even faster than in industry, thanks to the technology of the bullwhip and pistol, and the efficient practice of brutal torture, as Edward E. Baptist demonstrates...." Beckert (2014, p. 116) approvingly cites Baptist's assertion that "torture ... was at the root of the ability of American planters to produce ever more cotton."

The next three sections document serious problems with Baptist's account. Many of his examples come from slaves who were new to cotton picking and thus might well have seen planter expectations rise as they acclimated to the job.³⁶ Such cases would not be representative of the larger slave population. More importantly, Baptist ignored the well-documented argument that picking rates had increased in large part due to a *succession* of improved cotton varieties. As we show in the following section, the "pushing system" is Baptist's invention; there is no evidence that contemporary actors used this term. We also will call into question his use of ex-slave testimony; an accurate reading of these accounts bodes poorly for his argument. An examination of plantation records further undermines his story.

The Origins of the "Pushing System"

In *Publishers Weekly*, Baptist (2014a) relates slavery to modern work practices: "If you work in an office you probably recognize the management technique that a supervisor named Mr. Belfer [the correct spelling is Bellfer] once used on a young man named Israel Campbell. Belfer established a productivity quota tailored to Campbell's level of training. If Campbell's 'metrics' didn't reveal enough work output, Belfer would evaluate him negatively. If Campbell could meet the target, Belfer would raise Campbell's quota even higher, and they'd go through the whole process again.... Belfer invented this system back in 1825, at a Mississippi slave labor camp.... When sundown came and Campbell's 'pick sack' didn't contain at least 100 pounds of cotton picked since daybreak... he was whipped: one blood-drawing, back-muscle-cutting lash

³⁵ The book's honors include the 2015 Avery O. Craven Award given by the Organization of American Historians for the best book dealing with the coming of the Civil War, the Civil War years, and the Era of Reconstruction.

³⁶ Examples include Solomon Northup (1853) and Charles Ball (1859).

with the bullhide whip for each pound Campbell came up short.” Baptist adds that “Belfer set targets that would be unreachable unless Campbell created new, faster ways to move up and down the cotton rows.”

Israel Campbell’s owner had recently transported him from Kentucky to Mississippi and hired him out to pick on the Belfer plantation. Baptist (2014, p. 134) asserts: “After Israel Campbell figured out how to meet his quota, Belfer raised Campbell’s requirement to 175 pounds per day.” But Campbell’s narrative (1861, pp. 33-39) includes no direct mention of Belfer or his overseer raising Campbell’s or anyone else’s quota. Campbell was withdrawn from the Belfer plantation at the end of season. It was a different planter, Mr. Garner, in a different season, at a different location, with different crop conditions, who set Campbell’s 175-pound task. Garner also paid a bonus for extra picking (Campbell 1861, pp. 39, 56). Campbell regularly exceeded his quota to earn spending money; he makes no mention of the quota being raised immediately after he exceeded it. (See the appendix for detail.) There is nothing in Campbell’s account about Belfer inventing the pushing system in 1825. Based on the narrative (1861, pp. 16-24) and other biographical information, Campbell was still in his home-state of Kentucky (not Mississippi) in that year.³⁷

Baptist’s claim in *Publisher’s Weekly* that “Mr. Belfer” invented the pushing system in Mississippi in 1825 is directly contradicted by Baptist himself. In a 2015 piece in *Slate* recounting the experiences of Charles Ball, who worked in the South Carolina cotton fields in the early 1800s, Baptist wrote: “We do not know who invented the widely shared ‘pushing system’: a system that extracted more work by using oppressively direct supervision combined with torture ratcheted up to far higher levels than Ball had experienced before. But it was already present when Ball got to Congaree in 1805. Innovation in violence was the foundation of the pushing system. Enslaved migrants in the field quickly learned what happened if they lagged or resisted.” “Belfer” appears in the *Slate* account too, but he is not credited with inventing the pushing system. Here Baptist asserts the labor control method existed “as early as 1800.”³⁸

In a review of Baptist’s book, the Columbia University historian Eric Foner (2014) maintained that planters called these practices the “pushing system.” One will search in vain in

³⁷ Smith, McDaniel, Hardin (2015, p. 88). Campbell dated his birth to 1815.

³⁸ www.slate.com/articles/life/the_history_of_american_slavery/2015/08/slavery_under_the_pushing_system_why_systematic_violence_became_a_necessity.2.html which is a *revised* excerpt of Baptist (2014) fourth chapter.

the antebellum agricultural press and in the records of cotton plantations for this usage. Baptist (2014, p. 116) says slaves called the work regime the “pushing system.” Again, one will look in vain in the ex-slave narratives for any direct mention of the “pushing system.” A few contemporaries did write critically about the operation of a “pushing system” in sugar production in the West Indies. This system killed workers and destroyed the land—it was evidently abandoned when the price of replacing slaves increased. There is no mention of a ratcheting system in the Indies (Stewart 1823, p. 186; Riland 1827, p. 138).

Baptist (2009, p. 49, note 35) provides clues to its possible origin of the phrase “pushing system.” It appears to have been inspired by the letters to the *Ohio Atlas* from Philemon Bliss, a northern visitor to Tallahassee in 1834-35.³⁹ The key passage, reproduced in an 1836 American Anti-Slavery Society pamphlet (Bliss 1836, pp. 37-38) reads:⁴⁰ “Some planters, I am told, give tasks which can be finished before night, but I know of none such. One planter I *do know* of, who sometimes gives tasks, and if by extraordinary exertion they finish before dark, it is increased the next day, and the slave is whipped if he does not finish it. [New paragraph] I asked an old man I saw the other night, making fence by torch-light, if he was tired when he came from the field. ‘One can't help being tired,’ said he, ‘beginning before we can well tell the cotton from the grass, and working without stopping till dark.’ ‘Don't you stop at all?’ ‘Just long enough to eat our bread at noon, sir: men grow mighty *pushing* when they are trying to get rich,’ We didn't have to work nights in Virginia, but folks are mighty pushing about here.”

Baptist appears to have made up the term, “pushing system,” based on the use of the word “pushing” by one Florida slave in a purported chance conversation with a northern abolitionist (as reported by that abolitionist). The anonymous slave was complaining of his pushy master in the specific context of increasing the task requirement for non-harvest work. The northerner wrote of one planter who sometimes ratcheted up tasks if they were completed early. Avery Craven (1942, p. 114) observed: “Slaves found life and labor in new districts far more severe than in the older ones because the master trying to get rich was more pushing.”

³⁹ According to the *Ohio Statesman* (25 Feb. 1840), p. 3, Philemon Bliss, was “better known as ‘Philemon the fugitive,’ a lawyer and an abolitionist, who had to flee from Florida some five or six years ago to escape a summary trial before Judge Lynch, for lecturing amongst the slaves in that ‘benighted region.’”

⁴⁰ This was one of two letters from the same unnamed author to the *Elyria, Ohio Atlas*, edited by Albert Bliss. Weld (1839), pp. 102-05 attributed the second letter to Philemon Bliss, Albert’s younger brother. It also named Philemon Bliss as the author of three letters on “Slavery in Florida” in the *New York Evangelist*, 23 and 30 April, and 7 May 1836. In the last of the *Evangelist* letters, Bliss emphasizes the “pushing” theme. See also Philemon Bliss, “Letters on Slavery,” Oberlin College, Special Collections Library.

Craven made no reference to a “system” and, contrary to Baptist, argued conditions were harder in the settlement period than in the late antebellum years.⁴¹ Craven thus implies that the application of torture might have declined over time.

To make our position clear, it is extremely likely that the use of violence or the threat of violence increased slave output relative to what it otherwise would have been, but a reading of the primary sources (including those Baptist cites) yields no evidence that violence against slaves increased between 1800 and 1860 and provides no evidence of any significant innovations in violence. There is no evidence that increases in violence accounted for the persistent increase in per capita output over a sixty-year period. Baptist’s fabrication that slaves called the labor management policies the “pushing system” is all the more egregious because the actual policies he describes (whatever they are called) were not a common feature of slave management. This too is made up.

Baptist’s Use of Narrative Evidence

Baptist’s mishandling of Israel Campbell’s narrative is indicative of a larger problem. Consider his manipulation of literary evidence on page 133 in his book. Baptist (2014, p. 133) writes “Southern whites themselves sometimes admitted that enslavers used the vocabulary of credit and debit accounting to frame weighing and whipping—like this Natchez doctor, who in 1835 described the end of a picking day: ‘The overseer meets all hands at the scales, with the lamp, scales, and whip. Each basket is carefully weighed, and the nett weight of cotton set down upon the slate, opposite the name of the picker.... [O]ccasionally the countenance of an idler may be seen to fall’: *‘So many pounds short, cries the overseer, and takes up his whip, exclaiming, “Step this way, you damn lazy scoundrel,” or “Short pounds, you bitch”*.³⁹” The “39” refers to Baptist’s endnote number; we added the underlined and italicized print to help the reader follow our argument.

One might expect to find the italicized portion of the quoted material in the same account of the Natchez doctor as the underlined segment. The underlined passage is from the well-known account of Dr. J. W. Monett of Mississippi, appended to Joseph Holt Ingraham’s *The South-West, by a Yankee*. But the italicized passage is not there (see the appendix). Nor is it in

⁴¹ Craven (1939, p. 309) notes that in the Southwest: “Slavery was less diffused and the masters, as one slave complained, ‘more pushing’.” He based this conclusion on his survey of the region’s newspapers.

any of the cited materials in endnote 39.⁴² The italicized passage appears to be a *modified* version of Rev. Francis Hawley’s account in Theodore Dwight Weld’s *American Slavery, As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1839. On p. 96, Hawley writes: “*So many pounds short, cries the overseer, and takes up his whip, exclaiming, ‘Step this way, you d—n lazy scoundrel,’ or ‘bitch’* [italics added].” Baptist includes *American Slavery As It Is* in his list of “abbreviations” but fails to reference Hawley in his endnote relevant to the “Natchez doctor.”

In the next paragraph, Baptist (2014, p. 133) writes: “Charles Ball’s first-day total on his slate became the new minimum on his personal account. He understood that if he failed on the next day to pick at least his minimum, thirty-eight pounds, ‘it would go hard with me.... I knew the lash of the overseer would become familiar with my back.’” But the actual quote does not end here; Baptist clips Ball’s statement in way to fit his argument. Ball (1837, pp. 215-16) says: “for I knew that the lash of the overseer would soon become familiar with my back, if I did not perform as much work as any of the other young men.” Ball is referring to two younger men who picked 58 and 59 pounds of cotton on the day that Ball picked 38 pounds. The words “slate” and “minimum” appear nowhere in Charles Ball’s narrative. In the passage quoted, Ball explicitly says he would be judged compared to the other similar workers, whereas Baptist asserted Ball will be judged compared to his own past performance. The direct reading of Ball’s passage is that the overseer, with whip in hand, was testing the workers to set the “standard of the season” and determine the ratings of individuals. Ball (1837, p. 217) related that the next week the overseer “fixed the days [sic] work at fifty pounds; and that all those who picked more than that, would be paid a cent a pound, for the overplus.” Thus the task set was *lower* than what the two younger slaves had already achieved. The overseer set lower daily tasks for the old, the young, and women with children.⁴³ Ball made no mention of his quota being ratcheted upward if he picked more than fifty pounds. Ball (1837, p. 212) generalized his condition: “On all estates,

⁴² Baptist’s note 39 reads: “Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 128–132; Anderson, *Life and Narrative*, 19–20; Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson: A Fugitive Slave* (Boston, 1848), 19–20; ST; Works Progress Administration interviews from the 1930s, e.g., GSMD, 199; Gus Askew, AS, 6.1 (AL), 15; Rufus Dirt, AS, 6.1 (AL), 117; Sarah Wells, AS, 11.1 (AR), 89; Sarah Ashley, S2 2.1 (TX), 87; Jesse Barnes, S2, 2.1 (TX), 175. Also J. Monett, Appendix C, in J. W. Ingraham, *The South-West, by a Yankee* (New York, 1836), 2:285–286.”

⁴³ Ball (1837, p. 212) observed: “On all estates, the standard of a day’s work is fixed by the overseer, according to the quality of the cotton; and if a hand gathers more than this standard, he is paid for it; but if... the standard quantity has not been picked, the delinquent picker is sure to receive a whipping.” The quotas Ball discusses refer to his experience in South Carolina circa 1805, well before the introduction of Mexican varieties.

the standard of a day's work is fixed by the overseer, according to the quality of the cotton; and if a hand gathers more than this standard, he is paid for it; but if... the standard quantity has not been picked, the delinquent picker is sure to receive a whipping.” The quotas Ball discusses are exceptionally low compared to later standards because he refers to his experience in South Carolina circa 1805, well before the introduction of easier picking Mexican varieties. Note also that Ball was saying that quotas changed depending on the conditions in the field. This directly contradicts Baptist’s story of ever increasing quotas.

Baptist writes: “on the cotton frontier, each person was given *a unique, individual quota* rather than a limit of work fixed by general custom [emphasis added].” In the next paragraph, Baptist (2014, p. 133) invokes the testimony of Sarah Wells. In the WPA Slave Narratives, Sarah Wells, of Little Rock, Arkansas, says (p. 2): “Some of the slaves would pick five hundred pounds of cotton in a day; some of them would pick three hundred pounds; and some of them only picked a hundred. IF YOU DIDN’T PICK TWO HUNDRED FIFTY POUNDS, THEY’D PUNISH YOU, put you in the stocks.”⁴⁴ Here is how Baptist (2014, p. 133) retells her story: “Sarah Wells remembered that near Warren County, Mississippi, where she grew up, some slaves picked 100 pounds a day, some 300, and some 500. But if your quota was 250 pounds, and one day you didn’t reach it, ‘they’d punish you, put you in the stocks’ and beat you.” She makes no mention individually-varying quotas, as Baptist’s argument implies. Wells describes a single 250 pound quota. Baptist also adds the phrase “and beat you” to her account⁴⁵

These are not cases of reading between the lines, filling in the gaps based on other accounts, or cleaning up the language to avoid offense. These are cases of misattribution and obfuscation, of dropping the narrators’ own words, or of changing their meaning in ways that advance Baptist’s argument. The problem of quotations differing in a material way from the source and of inaccurate, incomplete, and misleading citations are not limited to these examples, all drawn from *one* page. A direct and accurate reading of the narratives does not support Baptist’s argument.

⁴⁴ Capitalization is in the original; the sentence ends at “stocks.” Library of Congress, 2001, *Born in Slavery* Arkansas Narratives, Vol. II, Pt 7, p. 90. memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=027/mesn027.db&recNum=94&itemLink=D?mesnbib:1:/temp/~ammem_jVEe::

⁴⁵ Baptist adds telling details, absent in the original, in his treatment of William Anderson (p. 133) and Adeline Hodges (p. 139).

The Ratcheting Hypothesis Meets the Evidence

The ratcheting hypothesis—the claim that a slave’s individual quota was ratcheted up every time he or she exceeded a past quota—is at odds with large bodies of qualitative and quantitative evidence. There are hundreds of ex-slave narratives dealing with cotton production. From this sample, Table 1 summarizes those mentioning cotton picking, quotas, and the like. (The top of the table lists accounts written in the antebellum years; the middle part lists those penned in the postbellum era; and the lower section lists narratives found in the WPA interviews of the mid-1930s.) A fuller treatment is provided in the appendix. Most narratives that mention cotton picking also attest to the prevalence of brutal punishment on their or another plantation. (But a few explicitly deny whipping happened on the plantation where they lived and worked.) Many refer to picking quotas; some (Henry Bibb, Henry Bland, John Brown, Jackson John, Marshall Butler, Benjamin Henderson, Louis Hughes, Sarah Wells, and George Womble) to general quotas, some (Charles Ball, Cyrus Bellus, James Bertrand, William Brown, and Abbie Lindsay) to quotas determined by gender or work status; and some (Solomon Northup, Eliza Suggs, Charles Thompson, and Henry Watson) to individual quotas.

Several early narratives note that women can pick as much or more than men. A few (John Brown, Lewis Brown, Israel Campbell, Louis Hughes, Peter Still, and Jesses Williams) mention prizes and contests; two (Charles Ball and Israel Campbell) discuss cash payments for picking above the quotas. Almost all that mention quotas refer to set amounts without any indication of changes over time. Some (Charles Ball and Solomon Northup) refer to being tested when first arriving at the plantation before being assigned a quota. Some assert that picking more in the initial testing period led to a larger assignment. The only unambiguous statement of a ratcheting quota over time appears in Solomon Northup’s account.⁴⁶ Northup (1853) wrote about his own experiences. He did not make claims about how slavery operated before his kidnapping, after his release, or in places other than where he was held captive. Baptist generalizes from Northup and extends the ratcheting system found in this one account to the whole cotton South over the entire antebellum period.

⁴⁶ John Brown (1854) complicates the picture. He writes of dynamic work expectations, stating on p. 128, “as I picked so well at first, more was exacted of me, and if I flagged a minute, the whip was liberally applied....” But his narrative (p. 197) also specifically lists *fixed* daily picking tasks prevailing in different regions.

There was much variation in practices across plantations and even on a given plantation under different managers. There was great scope of arbitrary behavior and ambiguity about work expectations. In Solomon Northup's narrative (1853, pp. 253-61), Epps flogged Patsey even though she was a phenomenal picker. In Israel Campbell's account (1861, p. 39), Bellfer's overseer whipped Mary, "an extraordinary hand" and top picker. Bennet H. Barrow whipped the most productive pickers more frequently than the least productive.⁴⁷

A large body of data on cotton picking also is incompatible with Baptist's ratcheting story. Many masters kept logs detailing the daily work activity of *individual* slaves, including the amount of cotton picked. The data allowed for comparisons with past years, and helped set expectations for picker performance. Over time record keeping became more formalized with the advent of bound books with well-arranged templates. The most popular cotton account books were marketed by Thomas Affleck, beginning in 1847. These books were efficiently laid out for recording individual daily picking performances along with much other useful information. However, there is no place to enter quotas: this omission in and of itself is damning to the torture-ratcheting hypothesis because if Baptist was correct a clear statement of an individual's quota would be essential for tracking that person's performance.

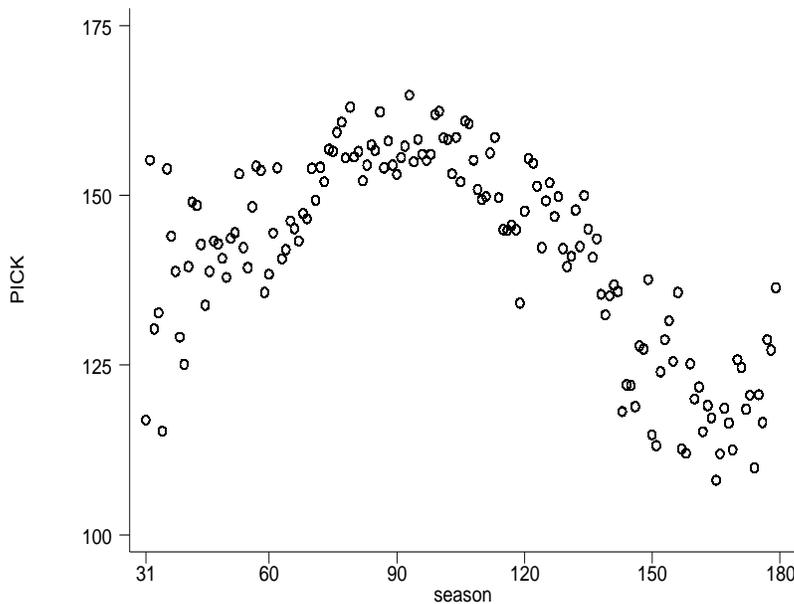
Our sample of picking records for the period 1801-1862 includes data from 114 separate plantations and a total of 397 plantation-years, covering 602,219 individual observations of daily cotton picking performed by 5,598 enslaved African-Americans. As we will demonstrate below, the patterns that emerge from the individual numbers on cotton picking do not support Baptist's claims. In addition the literary evidence is nearly silent on the ratcheting hypothesis. Day-to-day conditions in the fields were too variable for prescribed quotas, let alone ever increasing quotas, to make sense.

Recall that Baptist has embraced our data showing a roughly four fold increase in average cotton picking rates over the antebellum years. These data only reported plantation yearly averages. If we turn up the power of our microscope and look at the *daily* data for *individual* slaves that we used to construct the plantation averages, a whole new world appears that allows us to investigate empirically the effect of current picking on future picking. There is *no* evidence

⁴⁷ Davis (1967, pp. 419-22, 431-40); Gutman (1975, pp. 80-81). Baptist (2014, p. 140) notes that the best pickers were whipped. He (p. 446) also notes the use of contests to determine picking possibilities. He does not detail how one's quota depended on others' performances.

of ratcheting. Over the course of a year picking rates formed an inverted “U” going up to a peak period and then falling significantly. Figure 3 shows the average number of pounds of cotton picked by male slaves over a given season, where the x-axis shows the days from early to late in the picking season (90 on the x-axis corresponds to September 28th and is near the peak of the season).⁴⁸ Similar inverted “U” patterns also hold for female slaves over a given season and for individual slaves over their lifetime.

Figure 3: Male Picking Rates over the Season (Sept. 28=90)



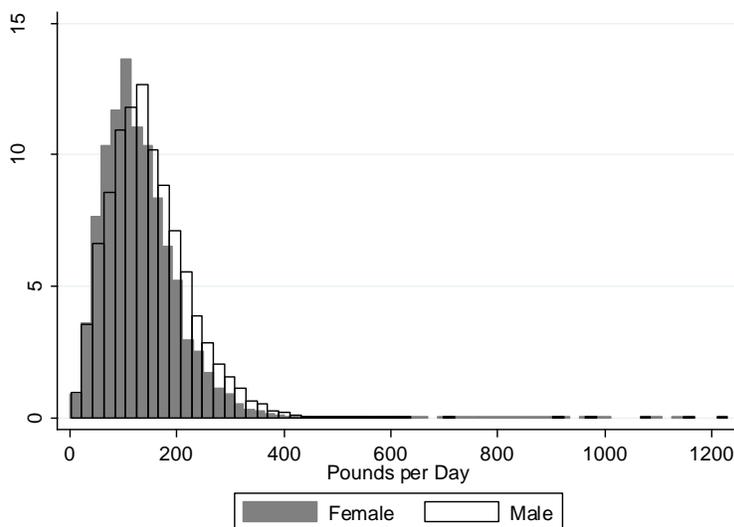
The actual performance of picking rates is even more nuanced. Picking rates tended to be lower than Baptist’s commentary commonly suggests. Focusing on adults between 1840 and 1861, the mean daily picking rate was 129 pounds for females and 146 pounds from males. Figure 4 provides a histogram. Picking more than 200 pounds per day was uncommon. This occurred in 13.1 percent of the picking observations for females and 20.4 percent for males. Picking more than 300 pounds was rare. This occurred in 1.8 percent of the observations for females and 3.3 percent for males. Picking more than 500 pounds was exceptionally rare. This occurred in 0.05 percent of the observations for females and 0.002 percent for males.

⁴⁸ The average at day 160 is about 40 pounds (or 25 percent) less than the average at the season’s peak period. A literal reading of Baptist would mean that across the South almost all male slaves would have received about 40 lashes a day for weeks!

Rates regularly rose and fell from day to day depending on many factors beyond human control: the weather and the condition of the crop (such as how many bolls were open and whether the cotton was damp from morning dew). A sample of approximately 494,000 individual observations that tracks the same person from one day to the next shows that in only about 5 percent of the observations did individuals pick the same amount on consecutive days. In 49.1 percent of the observations individuals picked more on the second day, and in 30.8 percent of the observations they picked at least 10 percent more. But it was not always up-and-up or even always the same (which is what ratcheting incentives encourage). The pickers harvested a smaller amount in 45.6 percent of the observations, and in 29.3 percent picked at least 10 percent less. Thus individual picking rates went down almost as frequently as they went up.

Unless owners intended to whip virtually every slave most of the time, planters and overseers who assigned quotas would have had to change them regularly, sometimes daily, over the course of the season to reflect the abundance of the crop, the weather, and the condition of the fields.⁴⁹ Over the longer run, picking rates and presumably output expectations rose as the characteristics of cotton improved, but this does not necessarily mean that slaves worked harder in 1860 than in 1810 or 1825.

Figure 4: Distribution of Adult Daily Picking Rates, 1840-61



⁴⁹ Bennet H. Barrow provided more thoroughly documented record of whippings (Davis 1967, pp. 431-40). As cruel as Barrow was, he did not whip every cotton picker nearly every picking day (Gutman 1975, pp. 77-81).

Other quantitative evidence runs counter to Baptist's hypothesis. Baptist (2014, p. 134) explicitly states the enslavers measured daily picking rates and updated the quotas or minimums in their record books in ink, and (p. 136) these quotas continually increased. In fact records detailing cotton picking quotas are rare. Out of the thousands of plantation books we have examined, we have seen only two plantations where explicitly-defined picking tasks were recorded. In the case of the Hillyer plantation (in Virginia), the slaves only equaled or exceeded their assigned task in six percent of the picking observations. Baptist would have us believe that almost every slave was whipped every day. The case of the James A. Tait's Alabama plantation also is unfavorable for Baptist. Tait explicitly set quotas for Green Seed cotton and for the newly-introduced Mexican cotton in 1823. Individual slaves were expected, on average, to pick 25 percent more Mexican cotton than Green Seed cotton per day. Tait set tasks considerably lower in 1824 than in 1823 "on account of the badness of the cotton...." In other cases there is clear evidence of tasks being revised downward. The tasks varied by gender and age, but they were not fine-tuned to individuals.⁵⁰

Conclusion

There are good reasons why slavery remains a topic of keen interest. Slavery's pervasive impact on American society, the misery it caused, and its toxic effects on American's troubled history of race relations are all legacies of the nation's original sin. Slavery and the war that ended it led to an impoverished South. It was in this backward, largely rural and agricultural setting, that freedmen and women, lacking education and capital, and often surrounded by hostile whites, had to start new lives. For too long there was a general acquiescence to a southern revisionist version of slavery, the causes of the Civil War, and the subsequent southern white supremacy governments and policies. The NHC has rightly highlighted past injustices and their ramifications.

However, to recognize the pure evils of the slave system, does not mean that slavery was "absolutely essential" for U.S. economic growth, for the Industrial Revolution, or for world development. Neither the NHC's evidence nor its methodology supports such deterministic

⁵⁰ Hillyer family papers, (ca.) 1797-1860, University of Virginia; and Tait, James A. 1823, 1824, 1826 and 1850. Plantation records. Auburn University Special Collections.

conclusions. If slavery had been abolished nationally in 1790, we still would have had the Cotton South, and we still would have had an American Industrial Revolution. The British Industrial Revolution was already underway, and it would have continued. The slave system did increase the scale of farm size in the South, made many slave owners rich, and oppressed blacks. It also impoverished many whites who existed on the margins of the more stratified, less urbanized, and less educated society that slave system created. The riches of slave owners were not essential for national development, and the policies that this elite imposed on local, state, and national governments were on balance detrimental to development. The slave system was an effective way to produce cotton, but hardly the only way. Slavery was a national tragedy that inhibited economic growth over the long run.

The three foundational books in the NHC literature examined here all make serious errors of scholarship. Perhaps most significantly, all mistakenly assert an essential role for cotton and slavery in the emergence of modern economic growth. There is little understanding of the fundamental technological and production realities of the plantation cotton economy. On this latter issue, all three books fail to recognize and come to grips with the significance of biological innovations in reshaping the American cotton slave economy and the worldwide implications of these innovations. As the NHC matures, it might embrace the enduring strengths of traditional historical scholarship, including citing sources correctly, conducting close (and accurate) readings, drawing inferences that are actually supported by the evidence, and integrating its findings into the broader historiography. It should also stop making stuff up.

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Table 1: Summary of Narratives of Ex-Slaves on Cotton Picking⁵¹

First Name	Last Name	State	Whipping	Nature of Quota, if any	Change Ratchet	Contests or Prizes	Payments for Excess	Learning	Other
ANTE-	BELLUM								
William	Anderson	MS	Yes	Yes, but unspecified					
Charles	Ball	SC	Yes	By category	Static		Yes	Yes	
J. H.	Banks	AL	Yes						
Henry	Bibb	LA	Yes	Uniform					Generalizes
John	Brown	GA/MS	Yes	Uniform	Dynamic	Yes			
William	Brown	MO							Severe
Israel	Campbell	MS	Yes	Tasks		Yes	Yes		Uses trickery
Jackson	John	SC	Yes	Uninform					
Solomon	Northup	LA	Yes	Individual	Dynamic			Yes	Patsey whipped
Peter	Still	AL		Targets in Contests		Yes		Yes	
Henry	Watson	MS	Yes	Individual					
James	Williams	AL	Yes						
POST-	BELLUM								
Octavia	Albert	GA	Yes	Own Quota					
Levi	Branham	GA							
William	Brown	MO		Men: 150 lb; Women: 140 lb.					Purchaser
Henry	Bruce	MS	Yes						
Louis	Hughes	MS	Yes	Able-bodied: 250 lb		Yes			
James	Smith	VA	Yes	Fixed					
Eliza	Suggs	MS	Yes	Individual					
Charles	Thompson	MS	Yes	Individual					
William	Walker	MS	Yes						
William	Webb	MS	~	Acres					

⁵¹ This list summarizes the statements on cotton picking, quotas, and related issues. Clearly the vast majority of ex-slaves did not refer to these issues.

WPA

Rachel	Adams	GA				
Sarah	Ashley	MS	Yes	Own 300 lb quota		
Cyrus	Bellus	MS	Yes	Men have 400 lb quota, women 300 lb		
James	Bertrand	AR	No	Men have 300 lb quota, women 200 lb		
Henry	Bland	GA	No	Uniform 200 lb		
Fannie	Borum	SC	Yes	100 lb quota		
Monroe	Brackins	MS	Yes	900 lb quota		
Lewis	Brown	MS	Yes	Tasks	Yes	
Jesse	Butler	SC	Yes	Tasks		
Marshall	Butler	GA	Yes	Uniform 200lb		
Thomas	Cole	AL	Yes			
Charles	Dortch	AR		Didn't know		
Jake	Green	AL				Great pickers
Benjamin	Henderson	GA	Yes	Uniform 150 lb		
Adeline	Hodges	MS	Yes	~Individual		
Mary	Island	LA				Own picking
Abbie	Lindsay	AR	Yes	Men have 200-300lb quota, women 150		
Sam	Polite	MS	Yes	Tasks		
Mary	Raines	SC				Own picking
Berry	Smith	AL/MS			Yes	Own picking
Addie	Vinson	GA	Yes	Task of 1000lb per week		Day off
Sarah	Wells	AR	Yes	Uniform 250 lb		
Jesse	Williams	SC			Yes	Trickery
Robert	Wilson	AR				Own picking
George	Womble	GA	Yes	Uniform 300 lb		Trickery
Henry	Wright	GA	Yes	200 lb		Trickery