

## What the 1619 Project Gets Wrong about Slavery and Economics

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This year marks the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved people from West Africa in what is now the United States. *The New York Times* is marking the event with its [1619 Project](#). The *Times* describes this as a “major initiative (...) observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery.”

## Capitalism on the Plantation

The 1619 Project lists a range of current social evils in America and traces them all back to slavery. One article, for example, is titled “[American Capitalism Is Brutal. You Can Trace That to the Plantation.](#)” The author, Princeton sociology professor [Matthew Desmond](#), paints a picture of the evil institution at work.

They picked in long rows, bent bodies shuffling through cotton fields white in bloom. Men, women and children picked, using both hands to hurry the work. Some picked in Negro cloth, their raw product returning to them by way of New England mills. Some picked completely naked. Young children ran water across the humped rows, while overseers peered down from horses.

Enslaved workers placed each cotton boll into a sack slung around their necks. Their haul would be weighed after the sunlight stalked away from the fields and, as the freedman Charles Ball recalled, you couldn’t “distinguish the weeds from the cotton plants.” If the haul came up light, enslaved workers were often whipped. “A short day’s work was always punished,” Ball wrote.

In his autobiography—one of the indispensable documents of American history—[Frederick Douglass](#) laid bare the horror that lies behind that word “whipped.”

I have often been awakened by the shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom [Douglass's "master"] used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose.

The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it.

But, incredibly, Desmond goes on to link the plight of the modern-day office worker with that of the chattel slave.

Today modern technology has facilitated unremitting workplace supervision, particularly in the service sector. Companies have developed software that records workers' keystrokes and mouse clicks, along with randomly capturing screenshots multiple times a day. Modern-day workers are subjected to a wide variety of surveillance strategies, from drug tests and closed-circuit video monitoring to tracking apps and even devices that sense heat and motion.

A 2006 survey found that more than a third of companies with work forces of 1,000 or more had staff members who read through employees' outbound emails. The technology that accompanies this workplace supervision can make it feel futuristic. But it's only the technology that's new. The core impulse behind that technology pervaded plantations, which sought innermost control over the bodies of their enslaved work force.

So, when your boss tells you off for doing your Fantasy Football picks on company time, according to Matthew Desmond you are suffering something akin to what slaves like Frederick Douglass's aunt suffered.

## Slavery and Economics

This nonsense is grotesquely offensive to the victims of slavery. It belittles their suffering, using it as fodder for a contemporary political campaign. Desmond is writing with an agenda. His aim is to link modern free(ish) market capitalism with the evil institution of slavery. In that way, modern free(ish) market capitalism will become evil by association.

Desmond writes that it was slavery that “helped turn a poor, fledgling nation into a financial colossus.” This argument derives from estimates of the contributions of slavery and cotton more generally to US GDP. In [congressional testimony recently](#), journalist and political commentator Ta-Nehisi Coates claimed that

By 1836 more than \$600 million, almost half of the economic activity in the United States, derived directly or indirectly from the cotton produced by the million-odd slaves.

This, it is argued, fueled America's economic growth.

But this number is completely bogus. It comes from Cornell historian Ed Baptist's 2014 book *The Half Has Never Been Told*, in which he claims to estimate the total value of economic activity derived from cotton production at \$77 million, or about five percent of US GDP in 1836. But as historian [Phil Magness explains](#):

Baptist then committed a fundamental accounting error. He proceeded to double and even triple count intermediate transactions involved in cotton production — things like land purchases for plantations, tools used for cotton production, transportation, insurance, and credit instruments used in each. Eventually that \$77 million became \$600 million in Baptist's accounting, or almost half of the entire antebellum economy of the United States.

There's a crucial problem with Baptist's approach. The calculation of GDP, the main formulation of national accounts and a representation of the dollar amount of economic activity in a country in a given year, only incorporates the value of final goods and services produced. The rationale for doing so comes from accounting, as the price of the final good already incorporates intermediate transactions that go into its production and distribution. Baptist's numbers are not only wrong — they reflect a basic unfamiliarity with the meaning and definition of GDP.

Indeed, if slavery and cotton were the engines of prosperity that people like Desmond and Baptist—[echoing the institution's 19th-century supporters](#)—suggest, why did the Confederacy lose the Civil War? Grant was not a more skillful general than Lee. Rather, the Union ground the Confederacy to dust between the cogs of its vastly superior industrial machine.

## A Disgrace to History

The Confederacy was reduced to shaking down frontier towns for cash, as when, in 1864, Chambersburg in Pennsylvania was burned after refusing to pay up on an extortion demand. Indeed, Harvard economist [Nathan Nunn](#) has found a strong negative relationship between the historical existence of slavery in a county or state and its level of income, lasting into the present day.

Debates between academics seldom go mainstream, but this one matters. On the back of a number produced by Baptist's ignorance and peddled by Desmond in his *New York Times* article, Congress is being lobbied to take billions of dollars from one group of Americans and give them to another group.

This, like the burning of Chambersburg, is a political shakedown, pure and simple, and the likes of Desmond, Baptist, and others are simply cooking up dodgy numbers to try to justify it. It is a disgrace to the history profession.



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