

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**EDWARD E. BAPTIST** is a professor in the department of history at Cornell University and House Dean of the Carl Becker House. In 2014, he published *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. He spoke with Boisi Center interim director **Erik Owens** before his presentation on the connection between slavery and America's economic success throughout the nation's history.

**OWENS:** One of the reasons your book is so powerful is because you structured it around not only the stories we tell about American slavery, but also those stories we refuse to hear about slavery. Do you believe that historians of slavery and capitalism have neglected to share certain stories?

**BAPTIST:** I think there are a number of stories that have been either not told, not told loudly enough, or disconnected from each other. One of the most obvious is the fact that in some ways, we have a lot of survivors' testimonies in the U.S. compared to slavery in other parts of the New World—such as Brazil, Cuba, and other countries. They don't have, or have not found, as many of them as we have found. Yet for a very long time, up until the late '60s, in fact, most historians who wrote about slavery in the U.S. didn't use those testimonies or were openly skeptical of them—depicting the survivors' testimonies as subjective and white testimonies as objective.

I would like to think we're not in that place anymore. Yet there continues to be a sense that there's something more subjective or something more emotional about the testimonies of survivors of slavery. I would actually say that they're probably more reliable in many cases, if not most cases, than the testimony of the people who were doing the enslaving.

Of course, even historians who use those sources do not agree on how we should use or interpret them. We're always disagreeing about their use. That's something that I see to be likely to continue. One of our greatest historians, C. Vann



Woodward, who was by no means a black radical historian, said these are important sources to consider. He said, "What do we do with sources? We interpret them." I don't think there's anything world-shattering about using them, and I don't think there's anything wrong with using and interpreting those sources.

White historians and the white public often have a lot of trouble seeing enslaved

African Americans as the *subject* of the story. That is, seeing them as the subject either in terms of how we narrate the story, how we think about the implications of the story, or seeing them as the real Americans of the story. Too often, a story about African Americans, about enslaved people, is an asterisk—it's something happening to the side, rather than the fundamental thing that's happening.

Even where we might say slavery is a national shame, it's a national trauma, etc., whites in the U.S. have a tendency to think of slavery as a tragedy that happened to white people. "Here we were trying to have this great country, and there was a problem, and it was slavery. What a terrible thing to happen to us, right?" I'm not talking about any particular person. I'm talking about a tendency that is present in our culture and our sense of our nation's history.

Those are a couple of ways in which, as a larger society and as a historical profession, we have not always done the best job that we possibly could of telling the story of slavery, understanding its implications, and understanding its significance.

Those failures fundamentally blind us to the interconnections—the lines of causality that lie between what's happening in the cotton field and what's happening in the counting house, and what's happen-

ing in the state house or the capitol. We, too, tend to separate those into discrete areas and don't see that sometimes the connections are clear and pretty immediate. If a huge amount of cotton is picked in a particular year and the price goes down, there may be problems in the counting house. There may be problems in the state house. There may be problems in the capitol.

**OWENS:** In your introduction, you frame the over 100-year movement from the explicitly white supremacist historians of Woodrow Wilson's era to our present era where historians take the enslaved Black American experience more seriously, but also embed a sort of heroic narrative of resistance in it. You picked that up as one of the "problematics" that you'd like to break apart. Can you talk about why that's important to you? The general reader, as opposed to a professional historian, might not make that next step between what's problematic about that and how we can reframe that in the contemporary context.

**BAPTIST:** I agree. Problematic is a good way to put it. Not that it is problematic, but that it is a problematic—that it is something that we wrestle over, that there's a kind of conundrum at the heart of talking about enslaved people's moments of resistance and about moments where resistance is impossible. It is very difficult for us to talk about those things in a way that is respectful of the people who went through those experiences and also useful to us in terms of understanding and learning from that experience.

If we don't talk about resistance, then we run the risk of suggesting that there wasn't resistance, that enslaved people accepted slavery. And if we talk about resistance a lot, we might lead readers into the possible belief that resistance happened so much that exploitation was more limited than it actually was, that suffering was more limited than it actually was, that enslavers' success was more limited than it actually was, depending

on how you define success. They certainly were very successful at economically exploiting enslaved people.

That's problematic. It's a difficult conundrum to sort of write our way through. I can't pretend to have solved it. The more enslaved people themselves are at the center of the stories and the more that we try to show the ambivalence and the suffering, but also the joy and the resistance, but also the loss—the better able we are

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to come to a richer understanding of that history.

On one level, I think of the entire book as a very old story, which is a story of death and resurrection, resurrection and death. That's an ambivalent story, right? It's a story that's hard to understand, hard to figure out, hard to make peace with—which is as it should be.

**OWENS:** One of the other major problematics of historians is the nature of storytelling and narrative itself. You take a slave narrative—you've already suggested that at times they have been criticized for

being partial or constructed or imperfect in some way. Yet by taking many, many narratives, you start to put together a more complete picture in some sense.

How did you reflect on this book as a project with so many stories, yet trying to collect them into a single narrative? How did you manage this with being a professional historian who is prone to include data in his work?

**BAPTIST:** In the largest sense, what I tried to create was a narrative that brought together enslaved people's experience during a time period where many of them were migrating, where they were being forced to migrate successively further and further south and west, or even across the Atlantic. I tried to bring that together with other phenomena that were happening in time, such as the politics of expansion, domestic and international conflicts, the development of new kinds of financial networks and systems, and the transformation of cotton from something that was a side crop to something that was 50% of all American exports.

I tried to weave those things together, and I couldn't figure out for a long time how I was going to do that. Was this going to be a strict chronology? Was it going to be strictly thematic? Like other authors, I ended up trying to combine the two of them. I did that with the device of the body, which explicitly comes from Ralph Ellison. For me, the body fits a historical phenomenon that is driven by enslavers' ability to exert control over the bodies of the enslaved. It's always contested, but it was very real, and it has immense cost to enslaved people. That was also part of the project that I had for myself of trying to write this story of this period in American history with enslaved people literally at the center of the story.

**OWENS:** What was your central goal in writing this book? Can you describe, in greater detail, the relationship you highlight between American slavery and its role in the development of American capitalism?

**BAPTIST:** That's something we've been in denial about. We've had two main white-dominated traditions of understanding the rise of capitalism, one being from classical or neoclassical economics, and the other from Marxism. Both of them in different ways have, at times, argued that slavery, maybe especially American slavery in the 19th century, was a sort of an impediment to the emergence of capitalism. There's something that's profoundly improbable about these claims.

The key raw material of the Industrial Revolution for its first 60 years was cotton. By the time we get to the 1830s, most of it came from the American South, which had not been a key producer before. Almost all of that exported cotton was made by enslaved laborers. They're making much more of it per unit, per individual, per hour—however we want to measure it—than ever before. Yet, again and again, we hear the claim that capitalism really had nothing to do with slavery. The cotton wasn't that important to the Industrial Revolution. I would like to hear the argument about why oil is not important to our economy in 2016, because an argument about cotton would be even more improbable than that. Or an argument that enslaved people didn't make it as efficiently. This is a favorite of the neoclassical economic response to arguments for the centrality of cotton slavery in the rise of industrial capitalism.

It may be that there was a possible world in which that could have happened. Maybe that's how it went down on Earth-Two. But that's not how it went down on Earth-One. On Earth-One, there were competitors to the South, but the South beat them all out. Most of those competitors were not using enslaved labor. On one hand, we have arguments that "it was the seeds." The industrious slave-owners were these super-smart dudes who found awesome seeds, and the seeds just made cotton picking easy. But of course, at the end of the day, if you hadn't picked



enough cotton, you were whipped. How much cotton you picked day to day was kept track of on ledgers and spreadsheets. Everybody who's ever worked in a situation where their labor is measured and there are consequences if they don't meet the standard—even as academics, we know that that's a tool of coercion.

So it may be that there was another system that was more efficient, although somehow none of the competitors to the American South discovered that system. Again, maybe this happened on Earth-Two, or in some other universe. But in this universe, nobody else did. Coercion made all of the cotton made by slaves. It made every single pound.

We see the tables. We hear the descriptions that formerly enslaved people give. We can argue about how much weight to put on this description or that description, and we can argue about the methods for raising the quotas, but we know the quotas went up. We know the cotton-picking totals went up. We know that people got whipped if they didn't pick enough cotton, and the amount they had to pick went up all the time. We know that the result was Southern dominance in the supply of this essential raw material.

I think there is an element of absurdity in the argument that slavery and coercion

are not central to the rise of industrial capitalism. The cotton that was made in this way was everywhere in industrial capitalism. The cotton mills are the start of it.

**OWENS:** One of the issues that I see in your book is an attempt to suggest that this whole period in American history was wholly different, and the whole economic expansion was somehow wholly separate. You want to make this link that slavery is actually the foundation of all of our American economic life today.

Are you hearing or feeling that sort of discomfort with the implications of your arguments among lay people and among historians who may want to salvage, for some reason, the history of neoclassical economics or market capitalism as somehow pure?

**BAPTIST:** Or the idea that the North and the South were fundamentally distinct, and the abolitionist movement and emancipation and the Civil War thus somehow represent the victory of good over evil. Which in one way they do, right? Emancipation was a tremendously significant event, and like all acts along those lines, it was political. It was morally ambiguous in all kinds of ways. Yet emancipation is fundamentally better than what came before, and there were a lot of sacrifices that went into it, and not just by African



Americans, although we have traditionally understated the African American contribution to emancipation—certainly among white historians.

But you're right. If our current economic system cannot have come into being without the intensification of slavery in the 19th century, then we have a fundamental moral problem. For me, that's a key point.

So yes, there's discomfort with the reality of our history. There will continue to be discomfort with its implications. White Americans are not running into the streets saying, yes, let's have reparations.

**OWENS:** How has this conversation come about for you, since writing this book, with others around this question of reparations? Last year, there was a brief uptick in the conversation with Ta-Nehisi Coates writing on the issue. What have you seen around this conversation, or what have you learned from your professional work, about the concept of reparations?

**BAPTIST:** This is one of these issues where we have a huge fundamental difference, in general, between white Americans and black Americans. That may

change over time. There's a huge gap between what white Americans and black Americans understand to be the responsibility of the whole country for things like the wealth gap today and the extent to which that traces back to slavery.

I've had this experience often: I've had black, lay readers who come up to me, and they're very positive about the book, which I'm really grateful for. I really appreciate that. What they say is "We already knew all of this, but I'm glad you're getting it out there to what may be a broader audience." This knowledge was passed down year after year, which is what Lorenzo Ivy says at the start of the book. If you say the half has never been told, that doesn't mean that nobody was ever telling any of it. It means that half of the people were not hearing or not listening or not ready to listen and so on.

There's a big gap in the understandings of what slavery meant and what it means today in terms of its implications for America today.

I do not think that we can redeem what happened, obviously. That is beyond our power to do so. That's the thing about the past. But I do think that we have the

moral obligation to redeem the consequences in the present. That is a challenging proposition and clearly would be an expensive proposition, among other things.

**OWENS:** Has religion figured into any of the conversations you have had with people while researching and writing this book? What about in your own personal experience in thinking about the implications of this book? How does this relate to the sense of sinfulness that many Americans use as a lens to understand slavery and American history?

**BAPTIST:** In regards to my last point, when we describe it as America's national sin, to me it sounds like a cop-out. It sounds like we're looking for a cheap grace that is *not* the kind of cheap grace described by Robert Farrar Capon. He was an Episcopal priest who wrote a series of books about the parables, in a way that sometimes seemed breezy, but I think was often complex. He emphasized that cheap grace is actually very costly. Grace is universal, and it does mean that you will lose everything to gain everything. Grace is for everybody. Whether everybody accepts it or not is a different story.

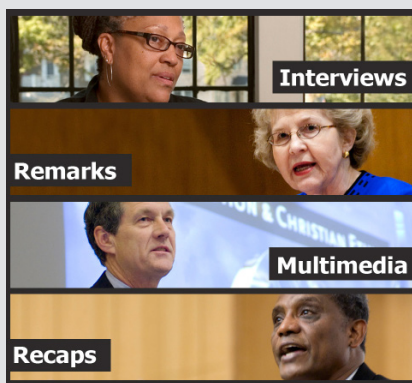
But I don't think that's the kind of grace that we are implicitly looking for when we say, "slavery was America's national sin." Maybe I'm not being fair. Certainly I'm not being fair to every single person who says that. But sometimes we treat the weight of slavery as if it's the sort of thing that we can pray away in an afternoon — it's the sort of sin that we can make an apology for, and then it's done.

**OWENS:** A religious person would have a hard time reading this without feeling morally indicted and also aggrieved and pained in ways—Calvin talks about the convicting nature of the law. You read something like this, and it's a convicting book. It's a convicting experience. That's a powerful gift to people in the midst of such a radically polarized experience in our country, where we have people who refuse to accept narratives from people who are different than them.



**BAPTIST:** That's a challenge. I can't claim to have really done anything substantial about American polarization. But for me, it was profound to get to the end of writing the book and realize that I was witnessing not just death, but also resurrection. Of course, resurrection is never the end of the story, right? But yes, if the world around us does not indict us, maybe knowing that world's history can convince us that in fact we are indicted, and we are called to act differently.

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