

The Slavery Debate: A Note from the Sidelines

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The groves of academe, as the inhabitants know, are a malarial jungle infested by snakes, snipers, and booby traps; only rarely does scientific argument ascend from guerrilla operations to global conflict in the classic style. Our own discipline is much blessed: the ongoing Great War between the Central Empires of Fogel and Engerman and the Allied Powers of near everybody else is a model of the kind, long-lasting, wide-ranging, and splendidly expensive in men and materiel.¹ But in the heat and din of battle, the problems of tactics are all-absorbing, and strategic considerations easily lost sight of. How easy it is to win the battle but lose the war, or win the war but lose the peace! Might not the notes of a neutral observer from another theater help even the combatants to reflect upon their war aims?

In a sense, the slavery issue is as old as the "new" economic history, which is just now coming of age.² The early questions of slavery's profitability and viability have been set aside: viability despite high slave prices was established by the observation that the latter were demand prices rather than supply prices;³ private profitability is taken for granted, since there is little evidence to the contrary (and equally little evidence for it, given that neither expected earnings nor *ex ante* discount rates can be observed);⁴ and social profitability is too complex a question to be usefully approached by cliometric modeling.⁵ The issues central to

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¹ See especially Fogel and Engerman (1974), David *et al.* (1976), Fogel and Engerman (1977), David and Temin (1979), Haskell (1979), Schaefer and Schmitz (1979), Wright (1979), and Fogel and Engerman (1980).

² Conrad and Meyer (1958).

³ Yasuba (1961).

⁴ The basic issue here is whether slave-owners were profit maximizers. The standard test has been to see whether slave prices were justified by slave earnings and interest rates; if not, that would be evidence that planters accepted a substandard rate of return, or

Time on the Cross, and to the subsequent debate, are relatively new ones: the "efficiency of slavery" on the one hand, and the nature of the slave-management system on the other. What is striking is the peculiar combination of positions adopted on these issues by the participants in the debate, which suggests that each group is busily undermining its own argument.

The first (but not the main) message of *Time on the Cross* is that slave agriculture was more efficient than free agriculture. Now "efficiency" is not a neutral word: efficiency is good, inefficiency is bad, and a more efficient system better than a less efficient one. What Fogel and Engerman actually did, of course, was to measure the ratio of output to a weighted sum of inputs in slave and free agriculture, and compare these ratios.⁶ The prudent interpretation of differences in such ratios is that they are due to poor measurement, and especially to incomplete measurement of the relevant inputs: the students of aggregate technical change, who pioneered such measures (in an intertemporal, rather than intersectoral, context), concluded that the difference in measured productivity was best called "the measure of our ignorance."⁷ A cautious scholar obtaining Fogel and Engerman's result might thus have concluded that the inputs into the slave sector's production function had been less completely specified than those into the non-slave sector's: in essence, that we know less about slave agriculture than about free agriculture. Not a dramatic conclusion, perhaps, but eye-catching enough to the *cognoscenti*.

It is plausible to assume that the critical mismeasurement is in the labor input, since it is relatively difficult to measure, and in any case more heavily weighted than the other inputs combined. If the measured productivity differential survives the refinement of the labor measure from a crude number-of-people figure to a less indirect number-of-man hours figure (as it appears to do), in turn, it is plausible to attribute the residual to the (still unmeasured) difference in the intensity of each labor hour.⁸ Simply put, the evidence suggests that slaves worked harder than

(equivalently) valued slaves as consumption goods as well as productive assets. The empirical block to such a test, as noted, is that the relevant earnings and interest rates are the expected future ones, and not the currently observed ones. There is yet a deeper problem: if planters did not maximize profits out of humanitarian feelings about how hard their slaves *should* be worked, the slaves' current earnings would not be maximized; but those earnings could still be normally capitalized into slave prices. The slaves' price-earnings ratio may thus be entirely beside the point.

⁵ The cliometricians who have paid sophisticated attention to this point—summarized, if one will, in the distinction between economic growth and economic development—do not appear to dispose of analytical tools superior to those of ordinary historians. See especially Wright (1978); also, for example, Genovese (1965).

⁶ Fogel and Engerman (1974), vol. 2, p. 131 ff.

⁷ Abramowitz (1956), p. 11; Domar (1962), p. 599. For a radically nihilistic view, see McClelland (1978), p. 375.

⁸ Fogel and Engerman (1980), pp. 686, 688.

free men. This result may have been novel to those—if there ever were any—who genuinely believed the racist hokum about shiftless niggers and all that; at least to an Italian, who would say “*lavorare come un negro*” where English-speakers say “work like a dog,” it is almost spectacularly platitudinous. Moreover, the picture that emerges from the attribution of the measurement error to the labor input is one that substantially confirms the traditional view that Southern agriculture used human effort where Northern agriculture used capital and improvements; and it is precisely this “backwardness,” this failure to substitute capital for labor, that the nontechnical observer seems to identify with inefficiency. In short, it would appear, efficiency in its narrow textbook sense is neither here nor there; what Fogel and Engerman call the relative efficiency of Southern agriculture is simply what was previously called its relative *inefficiency*, and the apparent novelty of *Time on the Cross* on this particular issue reduces essentially to a play on words.⁹

The truly novel argument made by *Time on the Cross* is that the superior “efficiency” of slavery—the superior intensity of slave labor, if, at the limit, it is only that—was attributable not to the threat (and use) of the lash but to humane treatment, moral suasion, and promises of rewards. The most important message of the work, certainly the basis for its public notoriety, is that slavery was relatively benign: slave-breeding, harsh material conditions, interference with family life, whippings, exploitation, debauchings are either insignificant or outright “myths.” Whatever the ultimate reasons for this interpretation—perhaps the desire to bring even slavery into that Elysian neoclassical world in which people interact only to their mutual benefit, perhaps the dangerous presumption that it is the destiny of cliometrics to correct the blunders of traditional historians, perhaps even the siren-song of the spectacular—two things seem clear. The first is that it is not warranted by the evidence: it convinced no one beyond a few early, impressionable reviewers, and the close criticism of David, Gutman, Sutch, and Temin has effectively disposed of it.¹⁰ The second is that it is, from Fogel and Engerman’s own point of view, a remarkably unpromising, not to say self-defeating, basis on which to explain the superior “efficiency” of slave agriculture. The slave-owner has no advantage over the employer of free men in his ability to offer, and elicit effort by means of, ordinary rewards; but only

⁹ As I have argued elsewhere (Fenoaltea, 1973), the controversy surrounding Fogel’s earlier assessment of the importance of American railways turns on a similar sleight of hand (in this case, the substitution of “necessity” for “sufficiency”). What is most curious, in all this, is the prevailing willingness supinely to accept the argument on the misleading terms that underlie the proposed (counterintuitive, and false) reinterpretation of history.

¹⁰ David *et al.* (1976). While noncliometricians also contributed to the debate, the fundamental criticism of *Time on the Cross* came, as it perhaps had to come, from within the guild.

slaves can be driven with the whip.¹¹ If slaves were more productive than free labor, is it not presumably because they were threatened rather than cajoled, because slavery was terrible rather than benign?

Here, then, is the central *curiosum* of the slavery debate. The best evidence that slavery was harsh and terror-driven is the superior "efficiency" of slavery; the best evidence that slavery was mild and benevolent would be that slaves worked no harder than free men. *Time on the Cross* argues that slavery was benign, and advances the productivity argument that undermines that view; *Reckoning with Slavery* argues that slavery was harsh, and attacks the productivity argument that supports that view. Might it not behoove both groups to pause and reconsider their scientific objectives?¹² My own suggestion (as the reader has inferred from my use of indicatives and conditionals) is that David *et al.* should make their stand on the nature of the slave-system, where their case that it was indeed inhuman and inhumane seems unassailable, and embrace the Fogel-Engerman argument that slaves were "more efficient" (worked harder) than free labor. The latter result seems relatively robust, for all their arguments to the contrary;¹³ and, to repeat, it is a powerful weapon in their own hands if only they choose to adopt it. With equal consistency, Fogel and Engerman could embrace the criticisms of their relative efficiency findings, and make their stand on the benign nature of slavery—or, with I think far greater empirical justification, vice versa. If they were to maintain their findings on relative productivity, where their cliometric contribution seems greatest (and, please, abandon the biased and misleading term "efficiency"), and recant the interpretation of slavery advanced in *Time on the Cross* (or at least consent not to repeat it, without admission of guilt),¹⁴ all could agree

¹¹ The inability of the plantations to survive Emancipation on a wage-labor basis indicates that their productivity depended on the merciless driving of the slave gangs, rather than on conventional economies of scale; see also Fogel and Engerman (1980), pp. 677–679, 682, 686. By the same token, the "rewards" for which slaves labored were typically relief from lash-driven field work and the like; for a broader discussion of such incentive systems, and the limits to their profitability, see Fenoaltea (1980).

¹² Scientific objectives are not the only ones, of course, and others may be at the root of the animus that mars *Reckoning with Slavery*. The eagerness to find fault with everything in *Time on the Cross* not only reproduces, as in a mirror, the inconsistencies of that work; it also leads to a basically negative critique, insensitive to the need to offer a coherent picture to replace the one under attack. Wright's contribution to the volume is here the laudable exception; and other authors may have made their positive contribution elsewhere, e.g., Ransom and Sutch (1977).

¹³ Fogel and Engerman (1980).

¹⁴ There is some evidence that they may be leaning in this direction: note the focus of Fogel and Engerman (1977, 1980), and the growing stress on the gang and hard work as the source of the slaves' superior productivity (also Haskell, 1979). On the other hand, Fogel and Engerman still seem determined to convince us that their measures establish the superior *efficiency* of slavery, and actually claim a consensus on this point (1980, p. 672).

that slaves were harshly driven, and (therefore) worked *come negri*. A classic conflict would come to an equally classic end: a return to the *status quo ante bellum*. A good time was had by all, and a Thucydides, or an Aristophanes, could write it up for posterity.

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