

Grasping Reality with Both Hands

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Brief Procrastinatory Thoughts on American Slavery, Power & Economists' Rhetoric— Highlighted

When the very sharp Eric Hilt writes of "Fogel and Engerman's analysis of slavery as...brutal but efficient", I wince. "Efficiency" is an engineering term, meaning: achieving maximum productivity with minimum wasted effort or expense. A steam boiler powering the lifting of ore out of a mine that converts only 55% of the stored chemical energy in the coal burned into the extra gravitational potential energy of the ore is 55% efficient. The other 45% of the energy is waste heat. An efficient process is one that produced little waste. In striking contrast with an efficient engine that produces little in the way of waste products, slavery produced enormous amounts of waste: death, family separation, pain, overwork, imprisonment, unfreedom. You can call slavery "brutal, but effective in producing profits for the slavelords", and I will not quarrel: that is very true. But please don't call slavery "efficient". To do so makes a normal person think that you are an empathyless moron, or neo-Confederate-adjacent.

OK. So why does Eric Hilt, who is neither an empathyless moron nor Neo-Confederate-adjacent approvingly cite Fogel and Engerman for their "analysis of slavery as... brutal but efficient"? Because economists redefined "efficient" in a particular way. Economists called a situation "efficient" in which there were no uncompleted win-win market exchanges of commodities for money. And, indeed in slavery, there were no uncompleted win-win market exchanges of commodities for money. American slaves (in contrast to at least some Roman slaves) had no chance or opportunity to buy their freedom. So it was efficient. American slavery would only have been inefficient if masters could have (a) freed their slaves, (b) charged them a market rent for their farms, and (c) collected more in rent than they had previously extracted at the point of the lash.

Now Adam Smith thought that that was in fact the case:

The pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors. Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen.... The profits of a sugar plantation... are generally much greater than those of any other... and the profits of a tobacco plantation, though inferior to those of sugar, are superior to those of corn.... Both can afford the expense of slave cultivation but sugar can afford it still better than tobacco...

I always thought that Fogel and Engerman, in arguing that American slavery was "efficient", were in fact arguing against neo-Confederate-adjacent who lamented the "tragedy" of the Civil War. Their adversaries had thought that what the South needed was not Sherman commanding Thomas and his Army of the Cumberland, Schofield and his Army of the Ohio, and McPherson and his Army of the Tennessee, but rather forbearance and persuasion. That would, in the minds of these adversaries, lead to the diffusion of commercial values into the south, and then the slavelords would realize that they could make more money by going full-throttle toward the market economy, freeing their slaves, and becoming normal landlords than by the continuation of their neo-feudal fantasies.

Adam Smith (and those who followed him in seeing slavery as an expensive luxury chosen only by a ruling class in love with its image of itself as made up of dominating masters) were, I think, wrong—and the work done in *Time on the Cross* is a good part of what, I think, demonstrates that they were wrong.

But there is still this problem with the word "efficiency". It would be innocuous if you were talking only to economists. It would be innocuous if you wrote, instead "efficiency-in-economes". But writing that slavery is "efficient" when your audience includes any people who are in any way not full-fledged economists expecting you to speak in economeses conveys the false message that American slavery was not very *wasteful*. And yet what is the destruction of humans' autonomous lives that is the core of slavery as an institution and practice but immense waste?

Eric Hilt: *Slavery, Power and Cliometrics: A Brief Comment on Rosenthal* <https://economic-historian.com/2020/08/slavery-power-and-cliometrics/>: 'Rather than attempt to comment on all of Rosenthal's paper, here I would like discuss some insights from the literature on *Time on the Cross* that relate to some parts of it.... Fogel and Engerman's analysis of slavery as a brutal but efficient labor system clearly has echoes in some of the new books by historians on slavery...

...particularly Ed Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told*.... Critics [of Fogel and Engerman] ... disputed the importance of the gang system and the... [focus on] slavery... as a system of labor organization.... They argued that slavery is better understood as a system of property rights... [that] enabled slave owners to solve important problems inherent in agriculture... compel... labor to move... at times of peak demand... to work in the fields.... There were many different forms of coercion in slavery, and considering the implications of slavery as a system of property rights rather than simply a labor organization system may produce additional insights....

Fogel and Engerman's attempt make inferences about the consequences of living under the threat of whippings from a simple count of whippings actually meted out is an error economic historians are very unlikely to repeat. Nonetheless I believe Rosenthal is correct in her argument that historians working on slavery are in an excellent position to produce unique insights... through close readings of archival sources... understand[ing] the consequences of slave owners' power over the enslaved in ways that cannot be observed in the quantitative sources.... I welcome the return of historians to economic topics... and I hope it leads to more interactions...

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