

An interview with historian James Oakes on the New York Times' 1619 Project

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The World Socialist Web Site recently spoke to James Oakes, Distinguished Professor of History and Graduate School Humanities Professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, on the New York Times' 1619 Project. Oakes is the author of two books which have won the prestigious Lincoln Prize: The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of anti-slavery Politics (2007); and Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865 (2012). His most recent book is The Scorpion's Sting: anti-slavery and the Coming of the Civil War (2014).

Q. Can you discuss some of the recent literature on slavery and capitalism, which argues that chattel slavery was, and is, the decisive feature of capitalism, especially American capitalism? I am thinking in particular of the recent books by Sven Beckert, Ed Baptist and Walter Johnson. This seems to inform the contribution to the 1619 Project by Matthew Desmond.

A. Collectively their work has prompted some very strong criticism from scholars in the field. My concern is that by avoiding some of the basic analytical questions, most of the scholars have backed into a neo-liberal economic interpretation of slavery, though I think I'd exempt Sven Beckert somewhat from that, because I think he's come to do something somewhat different theoretically.

What you really have with this literature is a marriage of neo-liberalism and liberal guilt. When you marry those two things, neo-liberal politics and liberal guilt, this is what you get. You get the *New York Times*, you get the literature on slavery and capitalism.

Q. And Matthew Desmond's argument that all of the horrors of contemporary American capitalism are rooted in slavery ...

A. There's been a kind of standard bourgeois-liberal way of arguing that goes all the way back to the 18th century, that whenever you are talking about some form of oppression, or whenever you yourself are oppressed, you instinctively go to the analogy of slavery. At least since the 18th century in our society, in western liberal societies, slavery has been the gold standard of oppression. The colonists, in the imperial crisis, complained that they were the "slaves" of Great Britain. It was the same thing all the way through the 19th century. The leaders of the first women's movement would sometimes liken the position of a woman in a northern household to that of a slave on a southern plantation. The first workers' movement, coming out of the culture of republican independence, attacked wage labor as wage slavery. Civil War soldiers would complain that they were treated like slaves.

Desmond, following the lead of the scholars he's citing, basically relies on the same analogy. They're saying, "look at the ways capitalism is just like slavery, and that's because capitalism came from slavery." But there's no actual critique of capitalism in any of it. They're saying, "Oh my God! Slavery looks just like capitalism. They had highly developed management techniques just like we do!" Slaveholders were greedy, just like capitalists. Slavery was violent, just like our society is. So there's a

critique of violence and a critique of greed. But greed and violence are everywhere in human history, not just in capitalist societies. So there's no actual critique of capitalism as such, at least as I read it.

There's this famous book on the crop lien system and debt peonage in the late 19th century South called *Slavery by Another Name*. [Douglas Blackmon, 2008] It wasn't slavery. But it was a horrible system and naturally you want to attack it so you liken it to slavery. So that's the basic conceptual thrust of what we're now reading.

One of the things that Desmond does in his piece, and he did in the podcast as well, is to leap from the inequality of wealth in slavery to enormous claims about capitalism. He will say that the value of all the slaves in the South was equal to the value of all the securities, factories, and railroads, and then he'll say, "So you see, slavery was the driving force of American capitalism." But there's no obvious connection between the two. Does he want to say that gross inequalities of wealth are conducive to robust economic development? If so, we should be in one of the greatest economic expansions of all time right now, now that the maldistribution of wealth has reached grotesque levels.

This ignores a large and impressive body of scholarship produced a generation ago by historians of the capitalist transformation of the North, all of it pointing to the northern countryside as the seedbed of the industrial revolution. Christopher Clark, Jeanne Boydston, John Faragher, Jonathan Prude and others—these were and are outstanding scholars, and anyone interested in the origins of American capitalism must come to terms with them. Some of them, like Amy Dru Stanley and Christopher Tomlins, launched sophisticated criticisms of capitalism. The "New Historians of Capitalism," reflected in the 1619 Project, ignore that scholarship and revert instead to standard neo-liberal economics. There's nothing remotely radical about it.

Q. And a point we made in our response to the 1619 Project, is that it dovetails also with the major political thrust of the Democratic Party, identity politics. And the claim that is made, and I think it's almost become a commonplace, is that slavery is the uniquely American "original sin."

A. Yes. "Original sin," that's one of them. The other is that slavery or racism is built into the DNA of America. These are really dangerous tropes. They're not only ahistorical, they're actually anti-historical. The function of those tropes is to deny change over time. It goes back to those analogies. They say, "look at how terribly black people were treated under slavery. And look at the incarceration rate for black people today. It's the same thing." Nothing changes. There has been no industrialization. There has been no Great Migration. We're all in the same boat we were back then. And that's what original sin is. It's passed down. Every single generation is born with the same original sin. And the worst thing about it is that it leads to political paralysis. It's always been here. There's nothing we can do to get out of it. If it's the DNA, there's nothing you can do. What do you do? Alter your DNA?

Q. You have a very good analysis of the literature on slavery and

capitalism that Desmond is drawing on, in the journal *International Labor and Working Class History*. And one of the very important points you make is that this literature is just jumping over the Civil War, as if nothing really happened.

A. From our perspective, for someone who thinks about societies in terms of the basic underlying social relations of production or social property relations, the radical overthrow of the largest and wealthiest slave society in the world is a revolutionary transformation. An old colleague of mine at Princeton, Lawrence Stone, used to say, when he was arguing with the revisionists about the English Civil War, that “big events have big causes.”

The Civil War was a major conflict between the North and South over whether or not a society based on free labor, and ultimately wage labor, was morally, politically, economically, and socially superior to a society based on slave labor. That was the issue. And it seems to me that the attempt to focus on the financial linkages between these two systems, or the common aspects of their exchange relations, masks the fundamental conflict over the underlying relations of production between these two ultimately incompatible systems of social organization, these political economies.

By focusing on the similar *commercial* aspects of the slave economy of the South and the industrializing economy of the North, the “New Historians of Capitalism” effectively erase the fundamental differences between the two systems. This makes the Civil War incomprehensible. They practically boast about this.

Q. It seems that they’re kind of inviting in through the back door the old argument about the Civil War being the “war between brothers.” But now it’s the war between capitalist brothers. It begs the question, what was the dispute about then?

A. They don’t have an explanation. In the introduction to *Slavery’s Capitalism* [1] they write something like, “this raises some serious questions about the Civil War.” Well, for you it does, because of how you’ve framed it. But there’s plenty of evidence even in that book to indicate that they’re playing around with their own evidence.

For example, there’s a very fine book, *Accounting for Slavery* [2], published by an economic historian out of Berkeley named Caitlin Rosenthal, and Matt Desmond cites it. She also has a piece in *Slavery’s Capitalism*. It’s a history of those plantation management techniques that Desmond emphasizes. But Rosenthal comes to this subject as a historian of accounting practices. She’s looking for *best* practices, not *typical* practices, and she discovered that the most sophisticated version of plantation account books were more sophisticated than anything to be found in the North at the time. In the North you don’t get that level of sophistication—taking into account depreciation and the like—until the late 19th century.

But what Rosenthal also says in fact is that—this one planter’s account book, that everyone is citing, that Desmond is citing, this Thomas Affleck’s account book—that these account books were used by maybe a quarter of the planters, and many of them didn’t even bother filling them out. There’s a quotation in her article from James Henry Hammond, a huge South Carolina planter, who wrote to Affleck and said something like, “I can’t get my overseers to use these books.” So Rosenthal’s article in *Slavery’s Capitalism* shows that keeping minute records of the daily rates of cotton picking was not a uniform way of organizing labor in the slave South. And moreover she shows the kind of incentives the planters used to increase productivity—or at least the incentives they used to get slaves to pick more cotton during the picking season. Sometimes planters gave slaves gifts, sometimes they withheld Christmas gifts; they used as many devices as they could during the cotton-picking season.

The New Historians pick out the most highly rationalized systems of plantations management because, once again, they *look* like highly-regimented capitalist bureaucracies. But a capitalist bureaucracy is

regimented 365 days a year, and it doesn’t speed up for the weather. You could just as easily focus on the vast *differences* between the yearly cycle of work on a slave plantation and the repetitive daily conditions in an auto factory. Moreover, the auto workers go home after the shift with their wages and live in an entirely different world of consumption patterns, voluntary contracts, etc. You can’t cherry-pick one aspect of plantation agriculture, one part of it, and make it the whole thing in order to make it look like industrial capitalism.

Q. You mentioned the ahistorical character of some of this work, and it seems to me that they also have to overlook a lot of what people back then said and thought about these divergent systems. Planters imagined that they were defending a feudal-patriarchal world. But if you consider a figure like Frederick Douglass, who worked as a slave and as a wage laborer in the North, he and others like him were convinced that the northern economy was more dynamic.

A. Certainly, the anti-slavery position is that the free labor economy of the North is more dynamic than the slave labor economy of the South. In the 1850s this was not an unreasonable position to take. But the sectional crisis didn’t happen because all of a sudden northerners became anti-slavery. The problem was that the anti-slavery North gradually became a lot more powerful. It became a lot more powerful because the capitalist economy was proving to be far more dynamic and wealthy than the slave economy. The slave economies of the New World were basically extractive economies whose function was to provide commodities and raw materials to the more developed economies of the metropole. Specifically, the southern cotton economy was the creature of British industrial development, and industrial development in the North. It came into existence to feed that increasingly dynamic system.

British and northern textile manufacturers wanted cotton, but they didn’t much care where it came from. Merchant capitalism has always been amoral that way. It didn’t care what system it engaged for trade. The merchant capitalist of the Atlantic world engaged with all sorts of systems—a revived feudalism in eastern Europe; a completely different set of social relationships in Africa, free labor systems in the US North; slave labor systems and plantation economies elsewhere. Merchant capitalists don’t care what form of social organization they are engaging in trade with. To the extent the trade relationship is successful and profitable, it will make profitable all of those systems. But the dynamic force behind this is really the capitalist world that is developing in the North Atlantic, particularly Great Britain and the United States.

Q. Let me ask you about Lincoln. He’s not discussed much in Ms. Hannah-Jones’ article—

A. Yes, she does the famous 1862 meeting Lincoln had in the White House on colonization—

Q. Lincoln is presented as a garden-variety racist...

A. Yes, and she also says somewhere else that he issued the Emancipation Proclamation simply as a military tactic...

Q. Could you comment on that?

A. It’s ridiculous. Most of what Abraham Lincoln had to say about African Americans was anti-racist, from the first major speech he gives on slavery in 1854, when he says, “If the negro is a man, why then my ancient faith teaches me that ‘all men are created equal’; and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man’s making a slave of another.” Lincoln says, can’t we stop talking about this race and that race being equal or inferior and go back to the principle that all men are created equal. And he says this so many times and in so many ways. By the late 1850s he was vehemently denouncing Stephen Douglas and his northern Democrats for their racist demagoguery, which Lincoln complained was designed to accustom the American people to the idea that slavery was the permanent, natural condition of black people. His speeches were becoming, quite literally, anti-racist.

Now, he grew up in Indiana and he lived as an adult in Illinois, and

Illinois had some of the harshest discriminatory laws in the North. That is to say, he inhabited a world in which it's almost unimaginable to him that white people will ever allow black people to live as equals. So on the one hand he denounces racism and is committed to emancipation, to the overthrow of slavery, gradually or however it would take place. But on the other hand he believes white people will never allow blacks equality. So he advocates voluntary colonization. Find a place somewhere where blacks can enjoy the full fruits of liberty that all human beings are entitled to. It's a very pessimistic view about the possibilities of racial equality. Ironically, it's not all that far from Lincoln's critics today who say that racism is built into the American DNA. At least Lincoln got over it and came to the conclusion that we're going to have to live as equals here.

The statement he makes on colonization was framed as an unflinching attack on the colonizationists who were motivated by their hatred of blacks, who wanted free blacks expelled from the country simply because they were black. It's a vehement attack on the racist justification of colonization. So Lincoln favors colonization, but he abandons it with the Emancipation Proclamation once it no longer serves the political function of promoting state abolition, and once he comes to accept that America was going to have to be a multi-racial nation.

Still, that meeting with African Americans in the summer of 1862 was terrible. As I said in a previous book, it was a low point in his presidency. But although Lincoln at that point was still sincerely committed to colonization, he was also a politician and it was also a strategic meeting. He was sitting on the Emancipation Proclamation. He knew that northern racists were going to be annoyed because they'd been saying from the start that they didn't want the Civil War to be about freeing the slaves, they wanted it to be about nothing more than restoring the union. So Lincoln is throwing them a sop by behaving in a disgraceful, condescending manner toward a group of African American leaders in the most conspicuous, public way.

Q. Yes, context is important, and it reminds me of his letter to the *New York Tribune* ...

A. To Greeley. Exactly. It's the same month. It's the same summer. And it's doing exactly the same thing. It's strategic.

Q. It reads differently if you know that he has the Emancipation Proclamation in pocket...

A. In the Greeley letter Lincoln says that if he could restore the Union without freeing a single slave he would. But he's already signed the Washington D.C. emancipation bill. He's already signed the bill banning slavery from the western territories. And he's already ordered the Union soldiers to emancipate all the slaves coming to their lines in the war. So option one is already off the table. He can't in fact restore the Union without freeing any slaves. Then he says in the same letter to Horace Greeley that if he could restore the Union by freeing all the slaves, he would. But he can't do that either, because as he said many times that the only emancipating power he had under the Constitution derived from the war powers to suppress a rebellion. He can't do that in Maryland, because it's not in rebellion, or in Delaware, Kentucky and Missouri, because those states were not formally in rebellion. So option two is out: He can't restore the Union by freeing all the slaves. That leaves option three: If he could restore the Union while freeing some slaves, he would. So when Lincoln says to Greeley he has these three options, he doesn't really have three options. He is simply saying he is going to restore the union. That's what I'm supposed to do. That's the only thing I can do. The Constitution doesn't let me fight a war for the purpose of abolishing slavery. But if I need to free some—actually most—of the slaves to restore the Union, I will. Lots of northerners denied that Lincoln needed to free any slaves to restore the Union. And this is the critical point: The only people who viewed emancipation as a military necessity were the people who hated slavery. And Lincoln was one of them.

Q. I assume that you are familiar with Marx's writings on the Civil

War, and it seems to me that he had a very good handle on it.

A. He did. He had a very good handle on it. He did. Did you ever read the letter from the Workingmen's Association to Lincoln?

Q. Yes. In another instance he criticized the unremarkable prose of the Emancipation Proclamation, writing that it was like a summons from a country lawyer.

A. Right. But plenty of Lincoln's rhetoric about slavery is emotive. There are many examples. "If slavery isn't wrong, nothing is wrong," he says. Again, though, he needs to maintain a coalition of northerners—some of whom are not anti-slavery—and to keep them in that coalition against the slaveholders rebellion, he has to find ways of justifying emancipation, basically not to lose the support of the racist members of that coalition, mainly the northern Democrats. They can accept an argument for the restoration of the union, and maybe they can accept an argument for military necessity, but they can't accept an argument such as, "I'm doing this because I hate slavery." Constitutionally, he could not have justified such a claim.

Q. As an aside, I'm always struck when I hear people saying that the United States today is just as racist as it has always been. It's as if they know nothing about the level of racism that prevailed in a state like Illinois before the Civil War.

A. Yes, they're not familiar with Stephen Douglas...

Q. For example, I believe that Illinois forbade blacks from settling in its borders.

A. They passed these laws that anti-slavery people viewed to be unconstitutional, that said no black person can enter Illinois who is not also a citizen of the United States. They often had to keep the citizenship provision in, because at the time of the Missouri Compromise—there were in fact two debates about Missouri. Missouri, having been allowed to enter as a slave state, submitted a constitution banning blacks from settling. The anti-slavery people said you can't do that. In the Constitution the privileges and immunities granted to citizenship are very real, and the least of them is the privilege to move from one state to another. And black people are citizens. So the racial restriction laws tended to say a black person can't come in who is not a citizen. By and large, by saying that a black person cannot come in who is not a citizen of another state, they are trying to keep fugitive slaves out, because slaves are not citizens. It's a fugitive slave enforcement statute essentially.

Not all the exclusion statutes were so careful, however, and all of them were intensely racist. The northern states passed all sorts of racially discriminatory legislation. They segregate blacks in schools. They segregate street cars. But they are also starting, in the 1840s, as anti-slavery builds up, to repeal those laws. There is a famous repeal in Ohio in 1849, there is a repeal in Rhode Island as a consequence of the Dorr Rebellion. Massachusetts repeals its school segregation law, repeals its streetcar segregation laws. There's a major book coming out on this by Kate Masur on this subject.

Q. You have this provocative quote in *Scorpion's Sting*, in which you write, "Scratch beneath the surface of any debate about race in American history and there you will find a struggle for power, ultimately political power." Can you elaborate on that?

A. Barbara Fields once said that plantation owners didn't enslave Africans because they didn't like black people. They enslaved Africans because they wanted to produce cotton. I'm making a similar point about using racial appeal to achieve political power.

Before the Civil War the Democratic Party in the North is tied, inextricably, to a southern Democratic Party that is increasingly and aggressively pro-slavery. The northern Democrats cannot go before their own voters and say, "The pro-slavery argument is correct. Slaves are constitutionally protected property." They can't because that position is unacceptable in virtually all of the North. So when they can't go where the pro-slavery wing of their party wants them to go, the only way they

can cling to power—without losing the southern base—is through increasingly extreme, demagogic racism. It's what they need to maintain their dominant position in northern politics. It's not that they don't believe what they're saying. I'm sure they believe what they're saying. And it's atrocious. But they're saying it for a reason. And it's becoming increasingly extreme in the 1850s because they're actually losing their grip on power because of the emergence of this anti-slavery party. So their racism is closely related to their desire to cling to political power.

Historians have made very similar arguments about the rise of Jim Crow in the late 19th century. The threat that emerges in the late 1880s, with one million or more black farmers joining the Colored Farmers Alliance, along with another one million or more white farmers in the farmers alliance, that turns into a very real Populist threat. It is met with this incredible upsurge of racist demagoguery, Jim Crow laws proliferate, blacks are disenfranchised. So the racist backlash of the 1890s is very closely related to the need to push down this threat emerging, the possibility of a white-black alliance. Of course they're racist, and I'm sure they believe everything in their own racism. But there's a reason they're saying it and a reason they're doing what they're doing. And it has to do with maintaining the political power of the landlord-merchant class.

Q. The formulation that behind debates over race are struggles over power struck me in relationship to the present as well, and in particular the promotion by the 1619 Project of racialist politics, which is certainly once again a cornerstone of the Democratic Party.

A. Here I agree with my friend Adolph Reed. Identity is very much the ideology of the professional-managerial class. They prefer to talk about identity over capitalism and the inequities of capitalism. We have an atrocious wealth gap in this country. It's not a black-white wealth gap. It's a wealth gap. But if you keep rephrasing it as black-white, and shift it off to a racial argument, you undermine the possibility of building a working-class coalition, which by definition would be disproportionately black, disproportionately female, disproportionately Latino, and still probably majority white. That's the kind of working-class coalition that identity politics tends to erase.

Q. Another point that you make in *Scorpion's Sting* is that Lincoln and the Republicans didn't really want to talk about race. They wanted to talk about slavery.

A. Right. They want to defend the northern system of labor, a capitalist system, free labor, over and against what they viewed as a backwards system, slavery, a system that gave rise to a powerful slaveholding class that was becoming more and more aggressive in its demand. And the northern Democrats the Republicans are facing keep on focusing on the race issue. It's quite clear that the Democrats are using the race issue to avoid talking about slavery. Republicans don't want to talk about race, but they are confronting this racism and they have to face it.

A lot of historians have pointed out that Lincoln is cagey in the way he talks about racial equality. The most famous example is the Charleston debate of 1858—everybody quotes it—where he says that he has never declared himself to be in favor of blacks voting, blacks serving on juries. He says I have never advocated those things. But notice he does not say whether or not he himself supports them. He is just saying he has never publicly advocated for them. He is being cagey because he is being pushed. It doesn't make his deference to racism acceptable, but the context surely matters.

And it changes. The more northerners become committed to anti-slavery politics, the more their racist tendencies subside. When anti-slavery was peaking in the late 18th century, when the northern states one after another were abolishing slavery, there was also an anti-racist aspect to that. The anti-slavery people then assumed that once the slaves were emancipated, they would be on the path to full citizenship. But once that movement fades, because no more states are going to abolish slavery, and then the

second party system comes along and suppresses anti-slavery, you get a bulge in American racism. And when anti-slavery comes back, starting with the abolitionists in the 1830s, culminating in a mass party, the Republicans—the first really successful mass anti-slavery party—then those people tend to moderate their racism.

And Lincoln is part of that. He never much thought about race. In the 1830s in the Illinois legislature, he advocated discrimination in voting. But by the 1850s, he's increasingly required, by the political situation he's in, to emphasize the fundamental premises of anti-slavery, which are the principles in the Declaration of Independence—all men are created equal—that in the right to earn her bread from the sweat of her brow the black woman is my equal and the equal of every living man. There's a way in which that capitalist logic, in the context of 19th century liberalism, pushes racism to the side. So as anti-slavery peaks, so does that push back against racism. As Eric Foner says, Lincoln always hated slavery, but he grows on questions of race. There's real growth there. So that by the end, the last speech he gives, he's publicly advocating the right to vote for some of the freedmen, the first president ever to advocate such a thing. His thinking on race changes as his commitment to anti-slavery and then abolition deepens.

Q. Right. He's pulled in the direction of the Radical Republicans.

A. Yes. They're the standard bearers. They set the tone.

Q. Central to the argument of the 1619 Project is not just that there is white racism, but a permanent state of white privilege. That can be answered in the present with data, but I'm curious how, as a historical question, you approach that claim, for example when you look at the antebellum South, where you have a lot of white households who own no slaves.

A. The slaveholders dominated the legislatures in polities that were formally democratic, where property qualifications for voting were disappearing, and where the overriding need of that planter class is to protect slavery. They can't go to the electorate and say, "I'm superior to you. You're inferior to me. Vote for me." It's not going to work. They have to conform to the requirements of a formally democratic polity. And they claim that "any man who wants to can rise up and become a slaveholder." But that's increasingly tenuous. The steeply rising price of slaves makes that harder and harder. And so the slaveholders resort to white supremacy. They try to use white supremacy to maintain the loyalty of the non-slaveholders.

But how well it's going to work in any situation is not so clear. A substantial number of non-slaveholders were not interested in seceding. Ultimately one of the major factors in the collapse of the Confederacy is the collapse in support from the non-slaveholders. The slave states that have the largest share of non-slaveholders—Maryland, Kentucky, Delaware and Missouri—don't secede. The slaveholders in those states are themselves divided and may want to join the Confederacy, but they can't get majorities to support secession.

Did you know that more Missisippians fought against the Confederacy than for it, when you add the blacks and the whites? So there's this collapse of internal support. And then there's this fear all through Reconstruction, that the goal of Republicans is to get poor whites and blacks together based on shared interests. That's the frightening thing to the landed class. So it's something that they try to impress on the poor whites. But it doesn't always work.

Sometimes people act on their interests. If their kids are dying in the opioid epidemic, their towns are ravaged by deindustrialization, they're closing one factory after another, and there's poison coming out of the water faucets, telling them to feel good about being white isn't going to mean much.

Q. It seems to me that there are two aspects to the argument. One is that poor whites in the South allegedly derive some sort of psychological wage from being white. But as you've discussed, that is actually a political

argument, and its authors are the planters. But then there's also an allegation that poor whites derive an economic benefit from slavery, whether or not they own slaves. Have you looked in your research at any of the data on wages in the antebellum South?

A. There's dispute about that, and it's not so clear as it used to be that wages are depressed by slavery. But what's clear, to me at least, is that the slave economy inhibits the kind of development that northern farmers are engaged in. So that the average wealth of a non-slaveholding farmer in the South is half the wealth of a northern farmer.

This is one of the things I find so disturbing about the argument that slavery is the basis of capitalism. Slavery made the slaveholders rich. But it made the South poor. And it didn't make the North rich. The wealth of the North was based on the emerging, capitalist internal market that allowed the North to win the Civil War. It's true that cotton dominated the export market. But it's only something like 5 percent of GDP. It's really the wealth of the internal northern market that's decisive. That depends on a fairly widespread distribution of wealth, and that doesn't exist in the South. There's a lot of evidence from western Virginia, for example, that non-slaveholders were angry at the slaveholders for blocking the railroads and things like that that would allow them to take advantage of the internal market. So the legacy of slavery is poverty, not wealth. The slave societies of the New World were comparatively impoverished. To say things like, the entire wealth of "the white world" is based on slavery seems to me to ignore the enormous levels of poverty among whites as well as blacks.

Q. One of the points you make in one of your earlier books, and raise again in *Scorpion's Sting*, is the relationship between the concept of self-ownership and private property, which you trace back to the English Civil War. Could you elaborate on this?

A. Well, earlier you mentioned Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan, Roll*, and I actually disagree with his concept of paternalism. In the United States these people are operating inside liberal constitutional structures, no monarchy, no titled aristocracy, no entail or primogeniture, and they are also operating in a global market that forces them to be competitive, to be aware of the productivity of their plantations. Forced to defend their way of life against a rising tide of anti-slavery politics, they move away from paternalism, if by paternalism you mean the defense of organically unified hierarchy on the model of the patriarchal family, a defense that transcends racism. Nope.

The primary defense of slavery was always, always, the defense of private property: slaves are our property and you can't take our property away from us. You can say, and slaveholders do say, that our material interest in the value of slave property leads us to take good care of these valuable human beings. You can say that as a result we treat our slaves kindly. But Genovese was clear that by paternalism he did not mean benevolence. I actually think paternalism was a much more powerful element in anti-slavery ideology, which emphasized slavery selling apart wives and children from fathers. When the Republicans in 1856 compare slavery and polygamy as the twin relics of barbarism it's part of an attack on the Slave South—that it doesn't recognize the legitimacy of slave families, their familial bonds.

So my argument is that the centrality of property rights is something the slaveholders are always going back to, basing themselves on liberal theorists, that the function of a state is to protect private property. And in that sense, it's coming out of the same liberal tradition that produces an anti-slavery ideology based on the premise that property rights themselves initiate in self-ownership. What C. B. Macpherson called the "political theory of possessive individualism," produces ultimately a defense of slavery—based on the possessive individualism of the slaveholders—but also an anti-slavery argument based on the premise that my rights of property begin with my ownership of myself, and that is incompatible with being owned by someone else. Liberalism is the lingua franca of the

debate over slavery.

Q. Can you address the role of identity politics on the campus? How is it to try to do so serious work under these conditions?

A. Well, my sense is that among graduate students the identitarians stay away from me, and they badger the students who are interested in political and economic history. They have a sense of their own superiority. The political historians tend to feel besieged.

The reflection of identity politics in the curriculum is the primacy of cultural history. There was a time, a long, long time ago, when a "diverse history faculty" meant that you had an economic historian, a political historian, a social historian, a historian of the American Revolution, of the Civil War, and so on. And now a diverse history faculty means a women's historian, a gay historian, a Chinese-American historian, a Latino historian. So it's a completely different kind of diversity.

On a global scale the benefit of this has been tremendous. We have more—and we should have more—African history, Latin American history, Asian history, than we ever have. Within US history it has produced narrow faculties in which everybody is basically writing the same thing. And so you don't bump into the economic historian at the mailbox and say "Is it true that all the wealth came from slavery," and have them say, "that's ridiculous," and explain why it can't be true.

Q. Another aspect of the way the 1619 Project presents history is to imply that it is a uniquely American phenomenon, leaving out the long history of chattel slavery, the history of slavery in the Caribbean.

A. And they erase Africa from the African slave trade. They claim that Africans were stolen and kidnapped from Africa. Well, they were purchased by these kidnappers in Africa. Everybody's hands were dirty. And this is another aspect of the tendency to reify race because you're attempting to isolate a racial group that was also complicit. This is conspicuous only because the obsession with complicity is so overwhelming in the political culture right now, but also as reflected in the 1619 Project. Hypocrisy and complicity are basically the two great attacks. Again, not a critique of capitalism. It's a critique of hypocrisy and complicity. Here I agree with Genovese, who once said that "hypocrites are a dime a dozen." Hypocrisy doesn't interest me as a critique, nor does complicity.

Q. And their treatment of the American Revolution?

A. I don't like great man history. Not many professional historians do. So I'm sympathetic with my colleagues who complain about "Founders Chic." (I have the same problem in my field: Lincoln is great, but he didn't free the slave with the stroke of his pen.) But that's different from erasing the American Revolution, which amounts to erasing the conflict. What you're doing by erasing abolitionism, anti-slavery politics, anti-racism, is you're erasing the conflict. And if you erase the conflict you have no way of explaining anything that happens, and then you wind up with these terrible genetic metaphors—everything is built into the DNA and nothing changes. It's not just ahistorical. It's anti-historical.

Q. What are you working on now?

A. I am finishing a book on Abraham Lincoln and the anti-slavery Constitution, which I never expected to write. That's almost finished. But the big project I'm working on is the history of the Civil War. I published a review recently in *The Nation* on a new book on the Civil War, and that's my first outing on how I'm going to approach this. The project is, how do you build an anti-slavery politics and sustain it over four years of a very brutal war, to come to the conclusion that it comes to. And, by contrast, how does the Confederacy fail to build and sustain such a coalition.

Notwithstanding the claim that we don't have class in this country, anti-slavery politics is a politics whose dominant framework, as far as the Republicans were concerned, was that this was a war between slaveholder and non-slaveholders. They framed it as a class war. And if you don't understand that going in, then the increasing tendency of the war to

become a more and more radical assault on slavery, to the point that they rewrite the Constitution—if you don't understand where they're coming from before the war—then you're just going to say the radicalism is an accidental byproduct of it.

Q. I'm looking forward to it. Are there other scholars we should be looking out for?

A. There's a lot of good work. There's a historian named Van Gosse coming out with a book on African-American voting between the American Revolution and the Civil War that will show there's a lot more voting than Leon Litwack's book would have let you believe. It's very important. Kate Masur has a book coming out, that I mentioned before. There's a bright young historian at Penn named Sarah Gronningsater on the children of emancipation. There are several good books recently on the fugitive slave issue and its role in the origins of the Civil War. There's a book by one of my former students, just about to come out, Paul Polgar at the University of Mississippi, on emancipation in the mid-Atlantic states showing that the first emancipations were driven by people who were also anti-racist.

Footnotes

[1] *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Early American Studies) by Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, 2018

[2] *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*, by Caitlin Rosenthal, Harvard University Press, 2018.



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