

Excerpt from “Capitalism” by Matthew Desmond from *The 1619 Project*

Slavery was undeniably a font of phenomenal wealth. By the eve of the Civil War, the Mississippi Valley was home to more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the United States. Cotton grown and picked by enslaved workers was the nation’s most valuable export. The combined value of enslaved people exceeded that of all the railroads and factories in the nation. New Orleans boasted a denser concentration of banking capital than New York City. What made the cotton economy boom in the United States, and not in all the other far-flung parts of the world with climates and soil suitable to the crop, was our nation’s unflinching willingness to use violence on nonwhite people and to exert its will on seemingly endless supplies of land and labor. Given the choice between modernity and barbarism, prosperity and poverty, lawfulness and cruelty, democracy and totalitarianism, America chose all of the above.....

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.

Cotton was to the 19th century what oil was to the 20th: among the world’s most widely traded commodities. Cotton is everywhere, in our clothes, hospitals, soap. Before the industrialization of cotton, people wore expensive clothes made of wool or linen and dressed their beds in furs or straw. Whoever mastered cotton could make a killing. But cotton needed land. A field could only tolerate a few straight years of the crop before its soil became depleted. Planters watched as acres that had initially produced 1,000 pounds of cotton yielded only 400 a few seasons later. The thirst for new farmland grew even more intense after the invention of the cotton gin in the early 1790s. Before the gin, enslaved workers grew more cotton than they could clean. The gin broke the bottleneck, making it possible to clean as much cotton as you could grow.

As slave labor camps spread throughout the South, production surged. By 1831, the country was delivering nearly half the world’s raw cotton crop, with 350 million pounds

picked that year. Just four years later, it harvested 500 million pounds. Southern white elites grew rich, as did their counterparts in the North, who erected textile mills to form, in the words of the Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner, an “unhallowed alliance between the lords of the lash and the lords of the loom.” The large-scale cultivation of cotton hastened the invention of the factory, an institution that propelled the Industrial Revolution and changed the course of history. In 1810, there were 87,000 cotton spindles in America. Fifty years later, there were five million. Slavery, wrote one of its defenders in *De Bow's Review*, a widely read agricultural magazine, was the “nursing mother of the prosperity of the North.” Cotton planters, millers and consumers were fashioning a new economy, one that was global in scope and required the movement of capital, labor and products across long distances. In other words, they were fashioning a capitalist economy. “The beating heart of this new system,” Beckert writes, “was slavery.”

During the 60 years leading up to the Civil War, the daily amount of cotton picked per enslaved worker increased 2.3 percent a year. That means that in 1862, the average enslaved fieldworker picked not 25 percent or 50 percent as much but 400 percent as much cotton than his or her counterpart did in 1801...

The cotton plantation was America's first big business, and the nation's first corporate Big Brother was the overseer. And behind every cold calculation, every rational fine-tuning of the system, violence lurked. Plantation owners used a combination of incentives and punishments to squeeze as much as possible out of enslaved workers. Some beaten workers passed out from the pain and woke up vomiting. Some “danced” or “trembled” with every hit. An 1829 first-person account from Alabama recorded an overseer's shoving the faces of women he thought had picked too slow into their cotton baskets and opening up their backs. To the historian Edward Baptist, before the Civil War, Americans “lived in an economy whose bottom gear was torture.”

There is some comfort, I think, in attributing the sheer brutality of slavery to dumb racism. We imagine pain being inflicted somewhat at random, doled out by the stereotypical white overseer, free but poor. But a good many overseers weren't allowed to whip at will. Punishments were authorized by the higher-ups. It was not so much the rage of the poor white Southerner but the greed of the rich white planter that drove the lash. The violence was neither arbitrary nor gratuitous. It was rational, capitalistic, all part of the plantation's design. “Each individual having a stated number of pounds of cotton to pick,” a formerly enslaved worker, Henry Watson, wrote in 1848, “the deficit of which was made up by as many lashes being applied to the poor slave's back.” Because overseers closely monitored enslaved workers' picking abilities, they assigned each worker a unique quota. Falling short of that quota could get you beaten, but

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overshooting your target could bring misery the next day, because the master might respond by raising your picking rate.