

Beyond Twelve Years A Slave: What the United States Owes Black America

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Global Research, March 11, 2015

[Black Agenda Report](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Image: Scene from 12 Years a Slave.

"The uncompensated crime and tragedy of racial oppression in before and after slavery continues to accumulate its blood and financial cost to this very day."

I am never more than slightly encouraged about white America's capacity for breaking from the United States' deeply embedded racism when I hear one of my fellow US Caucasians report that they've viewed the Black British director Steve McQueen's powerful movie *Twelve Years a Slave* and were "moved" (sometimes to tears) by it. It's good that some US whites have retained enough inner humanity to recognize and recoil from the revolting racist cruelty and abominable torment that lay at the heart of the Southern US slave system depicted in *Twelve Years a Slave*. Sadly and sickeningly enough, untold millions of white Americans have been induced to think of the slave South as some kind of quaint, benign, and paternalistic time and place when benevolent white masters cared for the black chattel they viewed as inferior "family members."

Twelve Years a Slave burst that childish white historical bubble with a relentlessly true-to-life and death portrayal of 1840s and 1850s slave traders, slave-owners, and slave-drivers as ferocious and perverse sociopaths, exploiters, torturers, sadists, and rapists. Based on the published 1853 narrative of Solomon Northrup, a free Black Northerner who was kidnapped and sold into Georgia cotton slavery, the film rightly portrays the slave system as a living Hell for its Black victims.

Good for McQueen and good, I suppose, for whites and others who have left the movie with a new or newly intensified sense of repugnance at the massive crime that was North American Black slavery. Any other feeling taken from the movie would be a strong indication that one is less than human.

A Bigger White Block: What the United States Owes Black America

Still, we shouldn't exaggerate the anti-racist moral victory here. White America's major block when it comes to acknowledging what the United States did and owes to Black Americans through and because of chattel slavery is not a failure to acknowledge that system's immorality and cruelty. For every white American who idiotically believes that the "old time" South was a happy time and place for slavers and their masters alike, you can count two or three more with the elementary decency to recognize that slavery was a nightmare of misery and suffering for slaves. A much bigger and more important block in the white American mind comes around the question of what the United States is obliged to pay Black Americans because of the crime of slavery, committed over two and half centuries

stretching from the nation's colonial origins through the American Revolution (itself largely fought largely to guarantee North American slavery's survival and expansion) and the Civil War. The answer for most whites on this score is of course "absolutely nothing."

Here we are talking, or should be talking, about compensation - reparations (yes, the "R word") - for more than the astonishing loss, trauma, anguish and unpaid labor imposed on and extracted from Black Americans. A brilliant historical literature now shows that, in the words historian Edward Baptist, "the commodification and suffering and forced labor of African Americans is what made the United States powerful and rich" decades before the Civil War. By 1836, Baptist reasonably calculates, nearly half the nation's economy activity derived directly and indirectly from the roughly 1 million Black slaves (just 6 percent of the national population) who toiled on the nation's southern cotton frontier. Capitalist cotton slavery was how United States seized control of the lucrative world market for cotton, the critical raw material for the Industrial Revolution, emerging thereby as a rich and influential nation in the world capitalist system by the second third of the 19th century. As Baptist explains in his recent widely read book *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014):

"From 1783, at the end of the American Revolution to 1861, the number of slaves in the United States increased five times over, and all this expansion produced a powerful nation...white enslavers were able to force enslaved African American migrants to pick cotton faster and more efficiently than free people. Their practices transformed the southern states into the dominant force in the global cotton market, and cotton was the world's most widely traded commodity at the time, as it was the key material during the first century of the industrial revolution. The returns from cotton monopoly powered the modernization of the rest of the American economy, and by the time of the Civil War, the United States had become the second nation to undergo large-scale industrialization" (p. xxi).

"Slavery was an especially brutal form of capitalism, driven by ruthless yet economically "rational" torture along with a dehumanizing ideology of racism."

This is what Baptist calls "the half" that "has never been told": the dynamic and profitable contribution of cotton slavery to the development of the US capitalist system. Contrary to what many US abolitionists thought before the Civil War, Baptist shows that the systematic terror perpetrated against slaves in the South was about much more than sadism and psychopathy on the part of slave traders, owners, and drivers. Slavery, Baptist demonstrates was a highly cost-efficient method for extracting surplus value from human beings, far superior in that regard to "free" (wage) labor in the onerous work of planting and harvesting cotton. It was an especially brutal form of capitalism, driven by ruthless yet economically "rational" torture along with a dehumanizing ideology of racism - and one that proved the key driving force behind the rise of a powerful national capitalism and great mercantile, banking, and manufacturing fortunes in the "free labor" North and across the entire US before the Civil War.

Consistent with Baptist's findings, *Twelve Years* shows slaves being whipped and otherwise abused in accord with their precisely measured productivity in cotton fields. On the whole, however, the greater impression left by the movie is one of highly sexualized and mentally disturbed psychopathy on the part of the masters, something that tends to distract from slavery's underlying "rational" centrality to US capitalist development. I am afraid that many

of the movie's viewers have been encouraged to continue the abolitionist mistake of separating the sociopathic brutalization of the slaves from the profit imperatives of capital within and beyond the South.

The "Freed" in 1863/65 Narrative: Another Half Left All Too Untold

Another and related great block to white Americans' proper understanding of what the US owes to Black America goes beyond what people could ever get from *Twelve Years a Slave*, which ends with Northrop's return to free life in upstate New York in 1853 (thanks to the intervention of a benevolent white anti-slavery carpenter played by Brad Pitt). I am referring to the widespread narrative that the US set its Black slaves "free" during and after the Civil War.

Okay, Go Compete

This "freed during and after the Civil War" story line is highly problematic on at least three levels. First, there is the absurdity of expecting four million people (the US slave population on the eve of the Civil War) who had been horrifically and systematically disfigured, tortured, traumatized, pulverized, stripped of wealth and income and otherwise savagely abused over centuries by the multiple and unfathomable torments of slavery to be in any kind of condition to suddenly and magically compete on a free and equal basis for jobs, land, education, and businesses with a free white population spared the incredible ordeal of racist total commodification - this in a nation that remained viciously racist in North and West as well as South after the Civil War. Success in the capitalist so-called free market depends largely on what one brings to the market and slavery took everything, or close to it, from those who survived it.

A Poker Chip Analogy

Second, there is the related absurdity - repeated again and again in US history from 1865 through the present day of thinking - that Blacks could ever be granted "equal opportunity" to succeed in the white capitalist US without a massive prior redistribution to Black America of wealth and other advantages stolen from it over centuries since the onset of North American Black slavery in the 17th century. Racial (and class and other) inequalities are cumulative and because they accumulate over time, the distinction that defenders of the current racial status quo make between "past and present racism" is inadequate and deceptive. The ongoing need for historical acknowledgement and correction, commonly called reparations, was expressed with a useful metaphor by the Black political scientist Roy L. Brooks nearly two decades ago:

"Two persons - one white and the other black - are playing a game of poker. The game has been in progress for some 300 years. One player - the white one - has been cheating during much of this time, but now announces: 'from this day forward, there will be a new game with new players and no more cheating.' Hopeful but suspicious, the black player responds, 'that's great. I've been waiting to hear you say that for 300 years. Let me ask you, what are you going to do with all those poker chips that you have stacked up on your side of the table all these years?' 'Well,' said the white player, somewhat bewildered by the question, 'they are going to stay right here, of course.' 'That's unfair,' snaps the black player. 'The new white player will benefit from your past cheating. Where's the equality in that?' 'But you can't realistically expect me to redistribute the poker chips along racial lines when we are trying to move away from considerations of race and when the future offers no guarantees

to anyone,' insists the white player. 'And surely,' he continues, 'redistributing the poker chips would punish individuals for something they did not do. Punish me, not the innocents!' Emotionally exhausted, the black player answers, 'but the innocents will reap a racial windfall.'"

Roy Brooks' surplus "chips" are not quaint but irrelevant hangovers from "days gone by." Besides having been accumulated largely through blood-soaked expropriation from Black Americans, they are weapons of racial oppression in the present and future. Given what is well known about the relationship between historically accumulated resources and current and future success, the very distinction between past and present racism ought perhaps to be considered part of the ideological superstructure of contemporary white supremacy functioning as an ongoing barrier to black advancement and equality.

Savage Racial Oppression Since the Civil War

Third and last but not least, there is the harsh historical reality that the racist US South was basically permitted to undertake the "reconstruction of Black servitude" (in the words of the anti-racist scholar Stephen Steinberg) to keep Black Americans essentially chained to cotton production in the wake of the Civil War and the aborted effort at anti-racist Reconstruction in the South. Millions of Black Americans journeyed into a type of freedom after the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) only to fall back under the shadow of involuntary servitude - slavery by another name - shortly thereafter. Reparations are due Black America not only for two plus centuries of chattel slavery but also for the hyper-exploitative system of cotton sharecropping and debt peonage that followed pure slavery's demise, the Black Pass Codes and ubiquitous racial terror and violence that enforced the restored servitude, and for the political re-disenfranchisement and the Jim Crow segregation that were imposed across the South by extra-judicial terror and law in the final decades of the 19th century (and which lasted through the seventh decade of the 20th century), Reparations are due also for the brutal, commonly violence-enforced system of de facto racial segregation and inequality maintained in the North through the last century and into the present; for the forced, often murderous expulsion of "free" Blacks from thousands of Midwestern and border state "sundown towns" during the late 19th and early 20th centuries; for the present so-called New Jim of "racially disparate" (racist) mass incarceration and felony-marking, not to mention the ongoing shoot-down of hundreds of Black Americans (young Black males especially) by white US police each year.

The savage oppression of Black Americans after the Civil War and slavery's formal demise should also be considered part of "the half" that "has never been told" - or is at least badly under-told and widely ignored in white majority America - about the US Black historical experience.

The Savage Irony of the Civil War

I'm not sure the post-1865 history isn't even worse in a way than the long nightmare of slavery. Between 1861 and 1865, more than 700,000 Americans, including 40,000 Black Union soldiers, died in the US Civil War. That epic conflict led to the formal abolition of slavery and was fought essentially over the issue of slavery's death or survival after January of 1863. "If God wills that [the war] continue," US President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed in his Second Inaugural Address (March 4, 1865), "until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three

thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'"

To what end did the 40,000 Black Union anti-slavery warriors meet their early demise? For less than a decade, between 1866 and the early 1870s. Baptist notes, "Reconstruction in the South seemed like it might produce a radically transformed society. White resistance was brutal and widespread but the national commitment to emancipation kept federal troops stationed in the South." But the commitment was not that strong and did not last very long in the new Age of Capital:

"...after 1873, when the industrial economy fell into a deep depression, white America's conscience wavered. Consumed by labor disputes in the North, Republican leaders were increasingly unlikely to see the free [Black] laborers of the South as people with whom they shared interests....Across the South, night riders went out - hooded in white, burning, raping, beating, and killing. They stole one state's elections after another. They torched the homes of black folks bold enough to buy land...They rode to Washington to make deals. To resolve the disputed presidential election of 1876, northern Republicans made a corrupt bargain with the South's Democratic rulers to let the later have 'home rule.' The 'Redeemers'...changed the laws to roll back as much of Reconstruction as they could. By 1900, they had taken away the vote from most Black men, and many of the less reliable white men as well. They also lowered the book of segregation - 'Jim Crow,' as people would come to call it - an array of petty and brutal rules [that]....forbade Americans...from enjoying the civil rights to move in public space as equals or have access to the same education and economic opportunities as white."

Then the Jim Crow South added supreme historical insult to injury. Dixie "built monuments to the defeated generals of their war for slavery, memorialized the old days of the plantation, and wrote histories that insisted that the purpose of the war had been to defend their political rights against an oppressive state," Baptist notes. "They were so successful at the last goal that they eventually convinced a majority of white Americans, including most historians, that slavery had been benign and that 'states' rights' had been the cause of the Civil War."

Solomon Northrup at least got to return to a type of freedom (a highly qualified Antebellum Northern version of it) in 1853. For millions of Southern Black ex-slaves, neither the Civil War nor Reconstruction did the trick. The uncompensated crime and tragedy of racial oppression in before and after slavery continues to accumulate its blood and financial cost to this very day, when median white household wealth is 22 times higher than median Black household wealth in the US, when fully 39% of Black American children, compared to just 14% of white US children, live below the federal government's notoriously inadequate poverty level, and when Black Americans comprise more than 40% of the nation's giant (2.4 million) prison population. "Long ago" history lives on in ugly racist shame while untold masses of US Caucasians preposterously believe that Black Americans have been given every opportunity to advance and succeed ("the president is Black, isn't he?") in a nation that "set them free" in 1863.

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