



**Disclaimer: The following "Letters to the Editor" were sent to the respective publications on the dates indicated. Some were printed, but many were not. The original articles that are being commented on may or may not be available on the internet, and if they are, they may require registration or subscription to access. Some of the articles being commented on are syndicated, therefore, they may also have appeared in other publications.**

---

11 December 2014

Editor, *Slate*

Dear Editor:

Reviewing Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton*, Eric Herschthal argues, apparently in line with Beckert, that "slavery was not a hidebound institution that capitalism destroyed, but an integral one that made capitalism possible" ("The Fabric of Our Lives," Dec. 2). Herschthal's evidence for this argument is that much of the cotton used in 18th- and 19th-century British and American textile mills was grown on plantations manned by slaves.

Although it's true that before the U.S. civil war textile mills on both shores of the Atlantic got most of their cotton from slave plantations in the American south, Herschthal's argument is built on triply dubious reasoning.

First, as Herschthal himself notes about the mid-19th-century, the percent of its raw cotton that Russia got from America's slave plantations was higher than was the percent of its cotton that Great Britain got from these plantations. If slave-grown cotton were a key spur to capitalism, it's difficult to understand why a booming capitalist revolution never occurred in Russia.

Second, after slavery ended in the U.S. capitalist industrialization in the U.S. accelerated, and in Britain it continued nearly apace, for the rest of the 19th century. And in the 20th century, both countries - especially the U.S. - continued to witness magnificent capitalist innovations and rates of growth of industrial outputs.

Third and most fundamentally, by the time of the industrial revolution slavery had been around for many millennia without coming close to creating capitalism. So clearly something else had to occur to spark the emergence of capitalism; slavery wasn't sufficient. But was slavery, as Mr. Herschthal asserts, necessary? Doubtful. Slavery did, again, produce some inputs used in early capitalist factories. Yet this fact no more shows that capitalism *required* slavery than does the fact that Christianity was then the dominant religion of factory owners (and of slaves) show that capitalism *required* Christianity.

A far more compelling account of the origins of modern capitalism is offered by the economic historian Deirdre McCloskey, who - in addition to debunking the "slavery-made-capitalism possible" assertion - argues that the key change that created capitalism was the growing social admiration of bourgeois pursuits and an increasing toleration of the changes wrought by open, competitive, entrepreneurial markets.\*

Sincerely,  
Donald J. Boudreaux  
Professor of Economics  
and  
Martha and Nelson Getchell Chair for the Study of Free Market Capitalism at the Mercatus  
Center  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA 22030

\* Deirdre N. McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

19 December 2014

Editor, *Washington Post*  
1150 15th St., NW  
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Editor:

So Dr. Mehmet Oz isn't really a wizard: he and other media medics often peddle, not sound information, but entertaining quackery ("Half of Dr. Oz's medical advice is baseless or wrong, study says," Dec. 19). No surprise. People are gullible, especially when credentialed 'experts' promise easy 'solutions' to problems that skeptical minds understand to be inherently complex and either unsolvable or solvable only at significant costs.

My own field of economics is crowded with such 'experts.' Pandering politicians and pundits are forever recommending snake-oil policy concoctions that appeal to people's primitive superstitions and childish hopes about the way economies work. The result is an endless stream of endorsements of quack economic remedies such as minimum wages, export subsidies, stimulus spending, income redistribution, and command-and-control regulation.

Just as the popularity of advice issued by the likes of Dr. Oz does not testify to the medical soundness of that advice, the popularity of the advice issued by the likes of Dr. Obama does not testify to the economic soundness of that advice.

Sincerely,  
Donald J. Boudreaux  
Professor of Economics  
and  
Martha and Nelson Getchell Chair for the Study of Free Market Capitalism at the Mercatus  
Center  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA 22030

20 December 2014

Editor, *Chronicle of Higher Education*

Dear Editor:

Sven Beckert struggles to portray slavery as essential to the origins of capitalism ("Slavery and Capitalism," Dec. 12). His core argument boils down to this: slavery existed at the time of the industrial revolution; textile production was the leading activity of that revolution; textile mills used lots of "cheap, slave-grown cotton" from the U.S.; therefore, slavery was necessary for the creation of capitalism.

Problems aplenty infect Prof. Beckert's narrative, but none more fatally than his presumption that using slaves to grow cotton made that commodity especially "cheap" (and, thus, an unusually inexpensive input without which there would have been no industrial revolution). Data from the 1880 U.S. Census show that by the mid-1870s the price of cotton at New York was about the same as this price had been, on average, during the quarter-century before it spiked because of the Civil War.\* And as reported by economic historian Stanley Lebergott, "by the period 1870-79 Southern production [of cotton] was running 42 percent above its pre-war level."\*\*

If slavery made cotton especially "cheap" (meaning especially abundant) - so cheap and abundant to have supplied the necessary spark for the greatest economic transformation in human history - we can only wonder why this millennia-old institution failed to supply such a spark at any earlier time. Yet even greater wonder is caused by the data's failure to show that the price of cotton was lower, and the supplies of cotton higher, with slavery than without it.

Sincerely,  
Donald J. Boudreaux  
Professor of Economics  
and  
Martha and Nelson Getchell Chair for the Study of Free Market Capitalism at the Mercatus Center  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA 22030

\* <http://www.handsomeatlas.com/us-census-statistical-atlas-1880/manufactures-specific-cotton-goods>

\*\* Stanley Lebergott, *The Americans: An Economic Record* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), p. 249.

22 December 2014

Mr. Travis Herring

Dear Mr. Herring:

Many thanks for your e-mail. You are correct: I do oppose legislation that forces businesses to serve customers that businesses prefer not to serve. My opposition to such legislation doesn't mean that I look kindly upon such refusals to serve; quite the contrary. Yet I value freedom - including freedom of association - so highly that I find it abhorrent that government forces Jones to associate with Smith when Jones prefers not to associate with Smith. Freedom should be equally available to all peaceful people, including to those who act in ways that we find disagreeable.

Fortunately, the economics of the matter ensures that I confront no moral dilemma in opposing forced association.

First, it's mysterious to me why anyone wants to patronize merchants who don't want him or her as a customer. Do you really think that, say, a homophobic baker forced to bake a cake for the wedding of a same-sex couple will do as good a job as would a willing, non-homophobic baker?

Second, bigoted merchants who refuse to serve blacks or gays or women sacrifice whatever profits they would earn by serving blacks or gays or women. In other words, these bigots generally pay a price for their bigotry, and it is a price that, history shows, reduces at least the manifestations of bigotry over time.\* Legislation forcing businesses to serve people they wish not to serve forces these businesses to earn profits that they would otherwise lose, thus making these bigoted business owners better off monetarily!

Third, bigotry-directed business decisions not only generally harm bigoted businesses, they also *help* non-bigoted businesses. Bigoted businesses increase the number of customers for non-bigoted businesses. Therefore, non-bigoted businesses grow in number and thrive even better as a result of the actions of their benighted competitors (which is one reason why, over time, the free market diminishes the manifestations of bigotry). Why not allow more-enlightened businesses to enjoy the extra profits that would come their way as a result of their rivals' stupid behaviors? Legislation of the sort that you endorse ironically penalizes the tolerant, inclusive, and enlightened attitudes that both you and I applaud and wish to see rewarded.

Sincerely,  
Donald J. Boudreaux  
Professor of Economics  
and  
Martha and Nelson Getchell Chair for the Study of Free Market Capitalism at the Mercatus  
Center  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA 22030

\* See, for example, Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

