



Teaching Slavery

By EDWARD E. BAPTIST

One thing is certain as I prepare to teach another course on U.S. history. Invariably, at least one student evaluation will complain that "Professor Baptist only talks about slavery." It's an annual reminder that while I've been trying to teach the history of slavery for two decades in American classrooms, America has tried to evade thinking about that history for far longer. Twenty-four decades have passed since the Continental Congress deleted Thomas Jefferson's criticisms of slavery from his first draft of the Declaration of Independence, and college students today arrive knowing little about the way America's history of slavery has shaped their lives. Avoidance of the topic is deeply ingrained.

When I was at the University of Pennsylvania in the '90s, the campus environment felt as if a bubbling bowl of white resentment were spilling over mostly black West Philadelphia. This was the era in which public intellectuals seriously discussed "The Bell Curve," which argued that I.Q. tests proved African-Americans were intellectually inferior. This kind of questioning — directly inherited from the history of white defenses of slavery — found its way into the Civil War history discussion I was leading. Two

—
*Two young
white students
complained
that criticizing
enslavers
was modern-day
moralizing.*
—

young white students complained that criticizing enslavers was modern-day moralizing. Slaves, they said, might have actually been happy. They kept glancing at T., the class's lone black student. I naïvely thought that if I invited T. to speak up, he would find a way to shut the white students down. "T., do you want to respond?" I asked. As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized my mistake. T.'s face stiffened. "It's not right to always look at one group of people to explain slavery," he said firmly. T. didn't speak again for the rest of the semester. Powerful forces were giving certain students the message that to protect their inherited privileges, they needed to dig in and resist confronting the facts of American history that had led to, for instance, a class in which there was only one black student.

When I began teaching at the University of Miami in 1998, however, I found that the student population had already reached the demographic tipping point that the Census Bureau says the entire country won't reach until 2050. White "Anglos" were a minority. But I didn't fully experience the effects of a minority-white classroom until the day a class pushed its white members to take on the burden of explaining slavery. The course was pre-1865 American history — before emancipation, in other words. Several white students were complaining that I expected too much from their weekly essays. Though members of the school's honors program, they insisted that the class was too challenging and grumbled that too many assignments focused on slavery.

Finally, one young woman had heard enough. Born in Jamaica, S. lived in a working-class neighborhood in Broward County. She was unquestionably the best writer in the class. S. turned around in her seat and pinned the complainers with a glare. "Stop whining and do the work — that's why you're here." The power dynamics of the class instantly shifted. Then something interesting happened: The white students responded. Over the weeks to come, not only did they work harder, but their comments became less defensive, more insightful. S. had challenged the white students to cast aside their expectation that the class would focus on *their* felt needs — including their reluctance to wrestle with present legacies of past wrongs. I learned that if you want to have conversations that transcend intractable arguments about race, you can't reproduce the historical structures of power that created those problems in the first place.

When I moved to Cornell a few years later, the classroom became much whiter. Resentment of the topic of slavery hums at a relatively low volume in Ithaca's chilly upstate classrooms. Eyes roll with less adolescent abandon than at Penn in the 1990s. Still, students occasionally try to derail the issue in ways that show their discomfort; one white woman's sole contribution to the discussion last year was to ask with a smirk whether Africans sold other Africans to European dealers.

So as I walk into the first class of the semester, I know that I will find challenge, discomfort and even anxiety. Whenever we dredge up the past, we find that the rusty old chains we rake from the bottom are connected to some people's present-day pains and others' contemporary privilege. But to do that kind of work, as S. insisted, is why we are here. ♦