

## Judging the Sins of Our Fathers

by Carl R. Trueman

Winston Churchill famously quipped that history would be kind to him, for he intended to write it. That line came to mind last week when I saw a tweet about America's slave-owning past. It pointed out the rather obvious fact that Jonathan Edwards was only able to study as long and hard each day as he did because he had slaves to do the drudge work necessary for the material maintenance of his household. Whether this comment was intended to prove that Edwards's theology was fundamentally unsound, or to demonstrate that Edwards (like me and, presumably, the author of the tweet) was morally flawed, or merely to point out that Edwards lived in the eighteenth century rather than the twenty-first was unclear.

The transatlantic slave trade was an evil. And it did enable men like Edwards to enjoy the leisure from physical work that then allowed them to study. But it was—and is—not the only evil that enables one class of people to enjoy life at the expense of another. Early critical theorist Walter Benjamin, using the idea of the spoils of war to reflect upon history, memorably commented:

[Cultural treasures] owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

Benjamin's point is simple: The things we admire in culture are often built on the back of exploitation. And one does not need to be a Marxist to see that there is much truth in this claim.

Take, for example, companies currently involved with China—companies whose products we all use and that make our hi-tech lives, including those of the tweeting class, possible. In 2020 the Australian Strategic Policy Institute produced a report on the forced labor of Uighurs under the Chinese government and identified 82 companies that potentially benefit, directly or indirectly, from this. That list included Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, and Samsung. Apple was among the companies that did not respond to the report. Last year, the *New York Times* reported on the efforts of American companies, including Apple and Nike, to weaken the Uighur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which would ban imported goods made with forced labor from the Xinjiang region of China. In May of this year, *Business Insider* reported that seven Apple suppliers had links to forced labor programs in China, including those that abused Uighur Muslims. In short, if you walk to work in Nike trainers or use a smartphone or computer, you can probably only do so because somebody in China has been enslaved and exploited. And that is before any consideration of how buying Chinese products in general supports a nation engaged in genocide and racially profiled forced sterilization, all enabled via a system of government concentration camps.

Given this, today's online pundits would do well to meditate upon Benjamin's comment about barbarism. Indeed, we might even recast it for the internet age:

Tweets owe their existence not only to the efforts of those who post them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries who produce the computer hardware. There is no tweet of civilization which is not at the same time a tweet of barbarism.

In short, if we use computers or smartphones to conduct business—or to maintain Twitter accounts that preach social justice, to research books on reparations, or to compose screeds on white privilege—then we can do so only on the back of modern-day slave labor, racially based and part of what looks very much like a genocidal campaign against the Uighurs.

Is that somehow more excusable because those of us who benefit from it do not actually own the slaves, or see the slaves, or directly brutalize the slaves? Are those slaves less important because they belong to a distant ethnic minority and share neither language nor religion with us? And are we less culpable than the Jeffersons and Washingtons of yesteryear because today there are a few more steps in the economic chain between the exploitation and the technological luxuries upon which we depend? Perhaps we should ask the Uighurs.

None of this is to say that the slaveholding of Edwards or Jefferson or Washington is not important when we consider their lives and their legacies. Nor is it to neutralize the issue by moral equivalence. There are some very hard questions to ask about our forefathers. But they cannot be asked in isolation from consideration of our own complicity in the exploitation and evils of today's globalized economy. There is, of course, no easy and quick way to extricate ourselves, but that should motivate us to think harder about the situation, not make us fatalistically indifferent to it, as we are wont to accuse Edwards and Jefferson of being to slavery. It should also make us less sanctimonious and more cautious when we judge the sins of our fathers and the systems in which they were participants. Our hands are not so clean.

The slavery of colonial and antebellum America was tragic but there is nothing we can do to change that history. The present is a different matter. That is our responsibility. No amount of indignant finger-pointing at the world of three hundred years ago will cleanse us of our present-day complicity. And we, unlike Churchill, will likely not write our own history. That task will fall to a future generation and, in light of that, we might reflect with profit upon the words of Jesus himself: "With the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you."

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