



[:en]Cotton: The Fabric of Death[:]

This review of Sven Beckert, Empire of Cotton: A Global History was originally published by [Monthly Review](#).

I could not wait to read *Empire of Cotton*. For four years following the 2008 mortgage crisis, I worked as a cotton merchant for one of the “big four” trading firms—ADM, Bunge, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus. These shadowy giants, two of them privately held, maintain oligopoly control of agricultural commodity markets. From desks in Memphis, my colleagues and I purchased mountains of cotton in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, warehoused it, speculated on it, and sold it back to mills on those same continents. Our wood-paneled office was hung with quaint paintings of cotton fields and sepia photographs of the Old South. We sat at the pinnacle of a web of political and economic forces that funneled cotton into facilities we owned and cash into our accounts, but nowhere in the office was there a visible sign of the violence that made it all possible.

Too often liberal histories focus on a single period, territory, or class perspective, and end up obscuring the truth, severing the threads that tie a moment to its historical roots. Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton* is different. Although a liberal historian, Beckert refuses to limit his scope in the traditional way. Instead, he follows the movement of cotton across time, space, and class, bringing forward the threads that bind the objects of an otherwise distorted past. *Empire of Cotton* is a history of the evolving relationships between city and countryside, toiler and owner, colonizer and colonized—all through the prism of cotton.

With this approach, Beckert joins the ranks of prominent scholars, such as Giovanni Arrighi, writing “global history.” He brings to a broad audience the iconoclastic lessons that have usually been the purview of marginalized academics, typically Marxist and oppressed nationality scholars. *Empire of Cotton* is a *New York Times* bestseller, book of the month on Amazon, and winner of the Bancroft prize. For a text that argues “Slavery, colonialism, and forced labor, among other forms of violence, were not aberrations in the history of capitalism, but were at its very core,” this is nothing to scoff at (441). It is a book that reaches beyond the audience of scholars and history buffs, and will no doubt make its way even into the hands of some of my former cotton-trading colleagues.

Beckert compiles a mountain of diligent research, alternating between macrolevel data and microcosmic anecdotes. Disappointingly, though, he follows some of his “global history” peers into Eurocentrism, neglecting reference to M.N. Roy, W.E.B. Du Bois, Eric Williams, and the other critical scholars who paved his way. Beyond these concerning omissions, the book’s citations make an impressive list, especially of primary sources, which include southern planters and textile workers, Tuskegee agronomists, colonial bureaucrats, merchants, peasants, industrialists, and enslaved people. It is an excellent resource for anyone who wants to analyze and understand the rise of capitalism, and draw conclusions beyond the modest claims articulated by the author.

After the plunder of gold and silver from the Americas slowed, cotton became to early capitalism



what oil has been to contemporary imperialism, only on a grander scale. It was the single most important commodity for the engine of global capitalism and the key focus of global geopolitical strategy of capitalist states. Breaks and changes in the global nexus of trade and manufacturing that led the world from tributary—or feudal—modes of production before 1500 to an integrated capitalist one in 1900 were essentially transformations in the global cotton industry. A laser focus on cotton illuminates the relationships that make up the inner truth of early capitalism. Beckert helpfully coins the system of these relations with the term “war capitalism.” It may not replace earlier formulations of the violent foundational epoch of modernity, but it is a very helpful notion.

War capitalism is not mercantilism, nor primitive accumulation, in the sense Marx meant it, which is the period of capitalism’s gestation. Neither is it primitive accumulation, in the sense that Rosa Luxemburg and Samir Amin have meant it, a process that is continuous throughout capitalism. War capitalism is both the first period of capitalism itself and the first method by which it dominates and dispossesses the periphery. It is the general principal that brings together the essence of an otherwise heterogeneous list of particulars: enclosure, genocide, colonialism, armed trade, slavery, protectionism, colonialism, and uneven industrialization.

Making War Capitalism

Until the sixteenth century, Europe was forced to import fine cotton textiles, while West Africa, China, and India produced them. Motivated by its economic dependence on other tributary societies, developing European nations stumbled upon a strategy to gain the upper hand: murder. Distinguished mostly by their desperation and will, European gunboat merchants muscled into Asian trade routes, colonized the Americas, and established slave-fueled plantations. By the seventeenth century, a trade network had been stitched together in which Indian textiles bought African slaves who worked on New World plantations growing agricultural products for Europeans. This first truly global matrix of exchange is for Becker the birth of capitalism, and its development “didn’t rest primarily on offering superior goods at competitive prices, but on the military subjugation of competitors and a coercive European mercantile presence in many regions of the world” (37).

I was struck by three aspects of this new process, which are repeated as themes throughout the book: (1) States united with private interests (plantation owners and armed merchants) to a degree historically new and characteristic of capitalism thereafter; (2) Far-reaching corners of the globe were united at gunpoint into a single matrix of trade for the first time, with Western Europe at its center, soon joined by the United States and, much later, Japan; (3) A new level of systematic violence was initiated, aimed at destroying traditional subsistence and forcing commodity production.

Slavery at the Center

Even after establishing its armed trade empire, Europe was unable to subjugate, or even compete with, traditional textile manufacturing in India. Hungry for the last, and most lucrative, link in the cotton chain, Europe and the United States did through slavery and mechanization



what could not be done with gunboats. With available labor and waterpower, stolen technology, and pillaged troves of capital, industrial commodity manufacturing was born, with slavery as its midwife. By 1850, Europe and New England dominated global textile trade, and between 75 and 95 percent of cotton in British, French, Russian, and New England textile mills came from the slave plantations of the U.S. South (243).

Slavery played a double leading role. First, unlike peasant agriculture, plantations could rapidly respond to movements in Liverpool cotton prices and Atlantic credit markets. With access to cheap land and labor, the plantation economy was uniquely able to supply the exponential growth in industrial cotton demand. Second, slavery provided the model for labor discipline, which became a cornerstone for industrialization. By the end of the eighteenth century, the main way to increase plantation productivity was to torture slaves into working harder and faster. Systematic whipping and beating became the cornerstone of this first modern “speed up,” a dynamic closely analyzed by Edward Baptist. Perhaps more important, the first labor accounting methods were also developed for the plantation. Standardizing the output per slave “hand,” calculating slave depreciation, and setting picking requirements based on previous years’ harvest are some examples, set out by historian Caitlin Rosenthal. As Beckert says, “The all encompassing control of workers—a core characteristic of capitalism—experienced its first great successes on the cotton plantation of the American south” (115).

After War, the Unfolding of State-driven Industrial Capitalism

Up until 1861 the relationship between mill and cotton, between industry and countryside, was one of slavery. With the onset and outcome of the Civil War, this relationship ended. Strong industrial states, strengthened by the dividends of manufacturing, stepped in to fill the gap.

In the post-war South the struggle between freed people and plantation owners resulted in a planter-dominated system of sharecropping, land renting, and, increasingly over time, agricultural wage labor. Growers worked autonomously but usually fell into a debt spiral that forced them to produce commodities rather than practice subsistence farming. Many former slaves returned to the fields of their previous owners under debt peonage. At its core, this new economy was built on state-promulgated property and contract laws catering to the planter class and textile capitalists. A strong relationship between state and citizen was characteristic of new industrial states.

Yet again the U.S. South blazed the trail for global capitalism. Cotton capitalists the world over pushed their governments to intervene in colonies and rural peripheries they influenced, to “revolutionize the countryside by spreading capitalist social relations, including credit, private ownership in land, and contract law” (279). Soon, the vast peasant hinterlands that had previously eluded European cotton mills and merchants were brought into the global market.

By the middle-late nineteenth century, states saw industry as their primary asset and moved trade, domestic government, and colonial policy in ways to facilitate industrial growth, beginning with cotton. Under the boot heel of colonialism, new corners of the world—Central Asia, Anatolia, East and West Africa, and parts of South America—were finally forced into the matrix of cotton



trade, with the violence of rationalized state policy and the “free market.” In India, for instance, British-appointed tax collectors used torture to extract payment. After a wave of switching from grain to cotton, which was uniquely convertible to cash for taxes and debts, famine in India killed 6 to 10 million people in the late 1870s, and another 19 million people in the 1890s.

Additional Conclusions

I can aver that Beckert’s three themes can as aptly apply to the modern cotton market as to pre-industrial mercantile trade and the ascendance of industrial capitalism: (1) When the U.S. Department of Agriculture redeveloped its cotton subsidy program in the early 2000s, it sought guidance from commodity giants, including the one for which I worked, to write its program; (2) Today, the only cotton futures exchange that is sufficiently deep to handle the bulk of global trade is located in the United States and denominated in U.S. dollars, which essentially means that international cotton traders must do business with U.S. firms; (3) Peasants and traditional growers in the global south are being pushed off their land or forced by IMF-backed restructuring to grow cash crops like cotton, at an accelerating rate.

Beckert’s history of early capitalism gives strong support to the theories of Amin that invert the traditional Marxist narrative of social development. While traditional economic theory, both Marxist and liberal, attribute the onset of industrial development to Europe because of its dynamism, as Beckert shows, India, West Africa, and China were all more advanced. The first model of a modern textile mill appeared in China in 1313. Industrialization took off in Europe precisely because it was the most backward and the least functional of its contemporaries. Beckert’s history shows how European merchants could grab labor and state backing—two must-haves for industrialization—precisely because Europe was weak. In Asia and Africa these were harder to come by because peasants, artisans, and elites had more resilient relationships to the land, their institutions, and one another.

Showing how capitalism rose precisely from a forced integration of global trade around Europe gives the lie to those theories that insist nations must progress through sequential stages of capitalist development, in either their liberal or Marxist costume. Western Europe never was a colony. Despite strenuous efforts, Britain never successfully structured New England’s economy for the colonizers’ industrial needs. The North Atlantic countries leapt directly into global market dominance by military means, and only thereafter, with the myriad wages of war capitalism, gave birth to industry. This is significant because the politics of “development” continue to be imposed on the global South, as with today’s battleground trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which would further pry open Asian markets to western capital.

The importance of slavery for the formation of capitalism is difficult to overstate. The mindboggling amount of uncompensated labor contained in plantation cotton was the first great source of value for the rising capitalist class. Gathered in industrial upstarts like Manchester and Lowell, it became the foundation for all industrial capital accumulation thereafter. The descendants of slaves, and dispossessed First Nation Americans, have perhaps more claim than anyone else to the wealth born from industrial capitalism. This moves the question of reparations to center stage, not just as a domestic concern in the United States, but also as a



transitional demand in an international struggle for socialism. Here in Memphis, a democratic peoples' government would certainly begin on the right foot by expropriating the real estate and capital goods, which were bought and built with money from "cotton row," the string of cotton trading houses along Front Street.

By the time I joined the cotton industry, the old cotton houses had moved from Front Street out to the white-flight suburbs. Although now consolidated into the "big four," the shadowy world of cotton oligopoly still exists. The cotton trade is still directed from atop a 500-year-old web of social forces. In the midst of broad economic ruin, in February 2009, management flew us on a luxury trip to the Cayman Islands to celebrate a flush year. Drinking rum next to a roasting pig, our conversation moved seamlessly from the perfect weather at the resort to state agricultural policy in China. It never occurred to us that we glutted our cotton-trade funded treats on the very ground where first the global cotton trade itself had been violently born. Perhaps if I had had *Empire of Cotton* with me for beach reading, it would have looked different. Beckert's readable prose makes a rich historical tapestry that organically, though without naming the concepts themselves, details the political economy and relations of production, of cotton, and with it, all of early capitalism. It is a powerful invocation against forgetting, for Marxists, liberals, and cotton merchants alike.

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