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*Empire of Cotton: A Global History* by Sven Beckert (review)

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Sven Beckert. *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. xxii + 615 pp. ISBN 978-0-375-41414-5, \$35 (cloth).

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Sven Beckert's long-awaited second book examines the central role of cotton in the making of capitalism. As Beckert and others have argued, writing the "history of capitalism" demands an interdisciplinary and transnational approach, and *Empire of Cotton* does not disappoint. Economic, political, social, and cultural themes are interwoven throughout the book as Beckert follows cotton—"one of the very few human-made goods that is available virtually anywhere"—across continents and oceans (p. xiii). The first chapter surveys the ancient history of cotton, but the real substance of the book is Beckert's analysis of cotton as an engine of European expansion, capital accumulation, and industrialization after the sixteenth century.

Beckert rejects the label of "merchant capitalism" to describe the political economy of European empire building in favor of a neologism, "war capitalism" (p. xv). This is an empirical description more than it is a theoretical concept. As Beckert amply demonstrates, state-backed violence was at the heart of capital accumulation between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, smashing open new markets and commandeering goods, land, and labor for the benefit of firms and individuals. Several chapters evoke Eric Williams' famous thesis on slavery and industrialization, but Beckert identifies the flexibility of slave labor in the Americas, rather than plantation profits, as the key factor behind the emergence of industrial capitalism in Europe. The early British spinning mills would easily have exhausted any capacity for expansion in the world's other cotton-producing regions had the American South not arrived as a major exporter in the early nineteenth century, and the South met rising demand for raw cotton by exploiting land and labor on an unparalleled scale. African captives bought with cotton cloth—first with Indian fabric, then with European substitutes—were put to work growing cotton on land seized from native Americans. This was possible only in the Atlantic basin: Waging war to steal labor and land on the scale necessary to feed Europe's new mechanized spinning mills could not have "even been dreamed of in Anatolia or Gujarat" (p. 108). The dynamism of the Atlantic system produced fortunes in Europe and the Americas, but it drove once-dominant agricultural and manufacturing regions in Asia into decline.

The second half of the book focuses on the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath. Beckert insists that state power and violence remained important even as capitalists came to the fore in the nineteenth century. Governments used bounties and tariffs to

foster infant industries, forced colonies to accept manufactured textiles, and helped manufacturers recruit and discipline a new class of proletarian workers for cotton mills. The American Civil War strained this expanding “empire,” but Beckert argues that the war ultimately “emancipated” cotton agriculture from slavery. In America, the line of argument is clear enough: Private and public violence created new labor regimes based on sharecropping and wage labor. In other parts of the world, the processes of change are less clear. From Berar to Brazil, cotton-growing peasants became utterly dependent on the world market for their survival, but it is not clear why this had to wait until the late nineteenth century, especially as Beckert argues that these communities had successfully resisted earlier efforts to intensify commodity production. The argument becomes clearer in Chapter 12, in which Beckert returns to the themes of state power and market making, this time looking at the “new imperialism” and the remarkable expansion of cotton agriculture in Africa and Asia in the twentieth century. Overt violence still played a role, but the bureaucratic violence of taxes, regulations, and coerced labor became more important in transforming peasants into specialized commodity producers.

The last two chapters address the sudden collapse of the European core of the “empire of cotton.” In Beckert’s narrative, cotton manufacturing shifted from Europe to Asia because of a combination of entrepreneurship on the periphery, anticolonial mobilization, and rebellion among workers in the industrial core. The book moves quickly from the 1930s to the present, but Beckert makes a convincing argument that the decline of manufacturing in the West allowed capitalists to unmoor themselves from the state structures that had fostered their growth. The result is a “permanent revolution” moving from country to country, discarding old production sites in pursuit of cheaper, more malleable workforces for fields and factories. The book is a salutary reminder that coercion from states and private actors is still a prominent feature of the worldwide cotton industry. As Beckert concludes, “Slavery, colonialism, and forced labor, among other forms of violence, were not aberrations in the history of capitalism, but were at its very core” (p. 441).

The book is well documented, although an effort to minimize in-text citations results in some confusion. To take one example, Beckert writes that the “yawning gap” between the productivity of premodern agriculture and industrialized manufacturing demanded slavery as a solution (p. 84). The endnote directs readers to works on “second slavery” (a term addressed on p. 92) and commodity frontiers (discussed on p. 89). In several places, readers will need to examine notes for entire sections to identify relevant sources.

Beckert's conclusions about the "illiberal origins" of capitalism (p. 37) should not surprise most historians, but readers will find much to like in Beckert's archival research and in his expert synthesis of the vast literature on cotton, slavery, capitalism, industrialization, and imperialism. The book is a truly global history of cotton, giving due attention to the outsized importance of Lancashire and the American South, but also focusing on overlooked regions such as Central Asia and Latin America. Although its size and broad scope are daunting, *Empire of Cotton* is easy to read, is well illustrated, and will appeal to general readers as well as students of history.

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