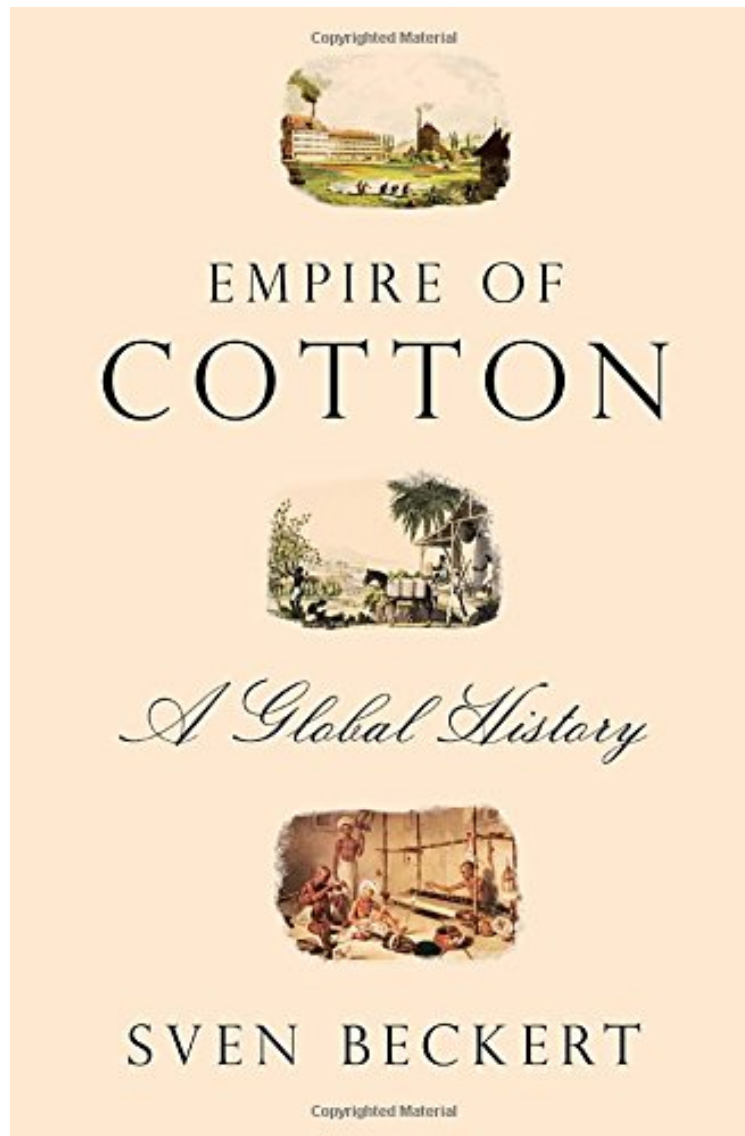


(Download) Empire of Cotton: A Global History

Empire of Cotton: A Global History

Sven Beckert

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Sven Beckert : Empire of Cotton: A Global History before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Empire of Cotton: A Global History:

58 of 59 people found the following review helpful. How slavery, colonialism, and strong state involvement laid the foundations of modern prosperityBy Robert J. CrawfordThis is an academic treatment of how the modern industrial economy was born: heavy in detail, clear in analysis, if somewhat dry at times. While much of the ground has been

covered elsewhere, the synthesis, breadth, and grand themes that emerge are unavailable in a single volume, to my knowledge. For me, it was a seminal reading experience, a necessary perspective that brought things together in a way that will influence my view of modern society for the rest of my life. The principal idea of the book is that the cotton industry, which represented the first step in the development of the modern industrial economy, was created by slavery and brutal and ever-more-efficient state coercion in cooperation with private capital. Global in scale, this convergence of factors would re-fashion the everyday lives of a majority of people on the planet - subordinating their working days to the rhythms of machines that replaced human muscle labor, opening the way to unprecedented prosperity for many, and enabling decisionmakers far from their homes to control the lives of people they will never meet. Beckert sees several steps in these developments. In the beginning, there was the development of "war capitalism". In a nutshell, this was the forcible appropriation of land and labor, with the cooperation of a primitive form of the state. While cotton had been in use for millenia, it was limited to small, very local, networks at this time. As demand grew and new forms of mechanized manufacture began to appear, war capitalism vastly increased the scale of cotton cultivation, employing slaves to undertake the backbreaking work of clearing the land and then the thankless task of harvesting the cotton - their utility was cheap labor that could be forced to work by any means necessary. Meanwhile, the state aided in the acquisition of land - because it exhausted the soil quickly, cotton cultivation required continual land appropriation - and the displacement or elimination of whomever was unfortunate enough to occupy that land, in most cases Amer-Indians. For their part, capitalist traders emerged in Manchester, a mercantile capital that gained tremendous market influence and political power to bring the state into alignment with their interests. The next phase opened with the invention of new means of production, in particular in the harnessing of chemical power in mills of ever-expanding scale and with elaborate forms of administrative innovation. At the same time, the state got involved with the protection and establishment of markets for their goods, both in supply but also for selling, i.e the distribution of goods. Industry was national and nationalistic. The natural culmination of this was the colonial enterprise. This was the second great legacy of the cotton empire: the de-industrialization and control of vast new territories. For example, the skills required for the production of the fine muslin of India were completely and forever destroyed. The native populations were subjugated to this order, fitting integrally into a hierarchy that exploited them while enriching captains of industry and politicians in colonial capitals. Meanwhile, manufacturing facilities became the source of massive employment, drawing people from the countryside to urban agglomerations that grew to then-incredible proportions. Furthermore, the state remained intimately involved in the development of the economy in the major colonial states, not only in the development of supporting infrastructure, but in the legal subjugation of workers for the protection of the evolving industrial practices. This was the crucial step in the virtuous circle that arose of self-reinforcing economic development, resulting in a far more intricate and complex industrial economy that emerged in the product cycles of related manufactures. It can only be described as a revolution that changed our lives so fundamentally that it is on a par with the neolithic revolution. Of particular interest is the evolution of the political economy of slavery. It was seen as a necessity for cotton production in the American South - a phenomenally profitable enterprise that created capital for further industrial investment that benefited all free Americans regardless of location - and as a crucial basic resource for all the new manufacturing powers. When the American Civil War began, it severely disrupted the world economy, based as it was on cotton, and the industrialized nations desperately sought to increase the supply of raw cotton. After that war, it was proven that low-wage sharecroppers could be counted on to produce cotton in a profitable way, supported as it was by state and private repression of the newly freed slaves. The colonial powers took note of this. In the US South, this arrangement was to survive for almost a full century, when automated cotton picking was finally perfected in the 1940s. The most recent phase of the industry is its globalization, a shift of manufacturing to the former colonies. The real power gravitated to transnational corporations - predominantly retailers like Walmart or Gap - that were no longer subject to coherent national legal jurisdictions, hence largely disconnected from nationalistic considerations. While this caused the precipitous decline of once-prosperous cities like Liverpool, it is part of the ebb of flow of 21C capitalism. Organizational innovation extended to the development of massive logistical networks to handle getting cotton to manufacturers and then distributing their low-cost products in developed nations at a hefty profit. As this is so new, it is the least developed portion of the book. I suspect it decisively locks Third World producers and manufacturers into a lower-value added position, where design and brand generate greater profits for transnational corporations and their shareholders that no longer need to worry about employees in their home base of operation. The implications of the book are of great interest and relevancy. First, it proves that the free classes all benefited directly and lastingly from slavery as an enabler of the first phase of industrialization. Without slaves (and subsequently share croppers or colonial serfs), both investment capital and the self-reinforcing and expanding product base of consumer capitalism would have accumulated far more slowly, perhaps over centuries rather than decades. This is the best argument for reparations that I have yet seen - the line from slavery and colonialism to prosperity for most of us is direct, while the descendants of slaves and serfs remain exploited and oppressed. Second, the state functioned as a crucial support for the development of private enterprise, from protecting nascent industries to enforcing laws that favored the manufacturing class. This flies in the face of neo-liberal ideology, which argues for a "free trade" that locks the developing world into an inferior status. This book is a wonderful

intellectual adventure, its ideas are far more subtle than I could ever express here. It is a bit too academic for my taste, covering developments in exhaustive detail, but on the whole it is a page turner. Recommended with the greatest enthusiasm. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. CottonBy Michael H. HausslerThe two best things about this wonderful and exhaustive documentary are first, the statistical verification of what we all knew: the empires of the West were built upon the exploitation of the resources of the so-called third world, and it turns out the incestuous exploitation of one another; second, the inclusion of third world nations as also being sources of the cotton empire, which makes infinitely more nuanced the story of the industrialization of cotton. Yet, the mind reels after hundreds of pages of redundant documentation of the utilization of cotton as a source of economic growth. The prose is interesting; requiring close scrutiny and attention to detail, and the point is made early and repeated incessantly. I believe the book could be more useful if there were more charts, tables, graphs. That is also my prejudice; I love data. This book is a hard read, and I am a historian and I love to read history. There is so much redundant patterning of the story of cotton that by page 400 I have lost track of the specifics but am comforted by understanding the pattern and that the pattern repeats. Iterations. A new kind of chaos theory for cotton and the industrialized West. Perhaps a slant including chaotic patterns and an interdisciplinary connection to simple physics would serve to make the narrative more interesting. The writing cries out to become more interesting, to read, yet at the same time the story is indeed fascinating. I also consider the tight focus on cotton. Sugar is another story; kin to cotton. Slavery another story. Slavery is touched upon in this book, but cotton cotton cotton is the relentless focus. But as historian I must look at all these stories taken together. 5 stars for the story. 3 stars for the writing. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Spectacular and Original. Easy to read. Eye-opening. By Dee DeeThis was a very good book! It presented American history, as well as world history, in a way that was eye-opening and interesting. I found it easy to read because it was so interesting, and Mr Beckert's analysis seemed so original, and so convincing. As someone whose ancestors toiled in the cotton mills of New England, and who now lives on a farm in the southwest United States that was long ago appropriated from Native Americans so cotton could be grown, I felt a personal connection to the story of King Cotton. The book showed me the crucial, central role that cotton production and cloth production had in truly changing the world and affecting millions, many in brutal ways (such as working as a slave on a plantation). It brings together every aspect of historic cotton growing and manufacture, which truly was at the center of industrial development and capitalism, and even brings it up to what is happening today. It's the kind of book many might be wary of because it might sound boring-- I mean, what is there to say about cotton? Well, it's not at all boring, and it appears there is quite a bit to say about cotton. For the history buff, it would be a fascinating book..

ONE OF THE NEW YORK TIMES 10 BEST BOOKS OF THE YEARWINNER OF THE BANCROFT PRIZEPULITZER PRIZE FINALISTThe epic story of the rise and fall of the empire of cotton, its centrality to the world economy, and its making and remaking of global capitalism. Cotton is so ubiquitous as to be almost invisible, yet understanding its history is key to understanding the origins of modern capitalism. Sven Beckert's rich, fascinating book tells the story of how, in a remarkably brief period, European entrepreneurs and powerful statesmen recast the world's most significant manufacturing industry, combining imperial expansion and slave labor with new machines and wage workers to change the world. Here is the story of how, beginning well before the advent of machine production in the 1780s, these men captured ancient trades and skills in Asia, and combined them with the expropriation of lands in the Americas and the enslavement of African workers to crucially reshape the disparate realms of cotton that had existed for millennia, and how industrial capitalism gave birth to an empire, and how this force transformed the world. The empire of cotton was, from the beginning, a fulcrum of constant global struggle between slaves and planters, merchants and statesmen, workers and factory owners. Beckert makes clear how these forces ushered in the world of modern capitalism, including the vast wealth and disturbing inequalities that are with us today. The result is a book as unsettling as it is enlightening: a book that brilliantly weaves together the story of cotton with how the present global world came to exist.