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Decolonizing the Empire of Cotton

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Empire of Cotton: A Global History

Sven Beckert

Alfred A. Knopf, 2014

In his new book *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*, Sven Beckert reinterprets the history of global capitalism through the lens of cotton, the commodity at the center of the Industrial Revolution. The emergence of this empire depended heavily on the rise of a violent, early variant of capitalism—what Beckert calls “war capitalism”—which involved the transoceanic expropriation of territory and enslavement of people, primarily by European imperialists and entrepreneurs. By foregrounding the role of empire in the evolution of capitalism, Beckert demonstrates the fundamentally illiberal origins of Manchester industrialism and explains how cotton textile production, historically located in South Asia, Africa, and Meso-America, shifted to Great Britain, a country and climate poorly suited for cotton’s cultivation.

Beckert’s magisterial command of the literature, his globetrotting archival research across six continents, and his methodical approach will ensure that *Empire of Cotton* remains a landmark study in the history of both cotton and capitalism for many years to come. However, his lofty ambitions lead him repeatedly to overstretch the imperial metaphor, assigning outsized importance to both cotton’s role in the history of capitalism and the cotton capitalists’ role in creating the modern world, from the sixteenth century to the present.

Beckert's notion of empire provides a linkage to the wider debate around the "great divergence," in which Western Europe and the United States industrialized far more rapidly than other parts of the world.¹ For Beckert, the drivers of this divergence were the "enterprising entrepreneurs" and "powerful statesmen" who fully embraced the techniques of war capitalism and had supportive modern states to bolster their ambitions. These actors ultimately succeeded in opening the way for an even more innovative and productive industrialization of textile manufacturing in the North Atlantic world, with the American South's plantation economy supplying the raw material. Capitalism's rise deeply depended on colonial land grabs, genocidal conflict, plantation slavery, and state power.

Beckert invests world-historical importance in this cadre of planters, entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, and statesmen. "They animated cotton," he writes, "invested it with world-changing energy, and then used it as a lever to transform the world." However, by doing so, he repeatedly accepts at face value their self-important platitudes about cotton's centrality to capitalism's revolutionary remaking of the modern world and their own "genius" as innovators within this historical process. The role of social critics and social movements (abolitionists, organized labor, progressive reformers, socialist revolutionaries, among others), while acknowledged, is necessarily downplayed. Alternative ways to organize production are largely ignored or dismissed.

Entrepreneurial techniques for "mobilizing industrial labor" have far greater place in Beckert's analysis than organized efforts to hold employers accountable for the coercive innovations of social control they repeatedly attempted to impose on the places and people caught in cotton's imperial web. Beckert's history is more a tale of the *emperors* of cotton than of their far more numerous colonial subjects.

Just as Beckert leaves out many of the agents that shaped the global economy, so, too, does he leave out the significant forces that have remade the empire (if one can still use the term meaningfully today) over the past half century. The twentieth century, as Beckert explains, witnessed "the return of the global South" in textile production. Postcolonial Egypt and India, as well as "postcapitalist" China, all countries where cotton growing, spinning and weaving had a long-standing imprint, displaced Great Britain as the world's workshop. However, he then jumps rapidly from mid-twentieth-century decolonization to contemporary globalization and, in

doing so, largely ignores the radical transformations in cotton growing and manufacturing that have occurred since World War II—through the rise of large-scale, unsustainable, mechanized agriculture; the financialization of the economy since the 1970s; and the liberalization of trade since the mid-1990s. In each case, cotton, no longer a remaker of worlds, was more an object than an agent of broader systemic forces.

More broadly, over the last two centuries, the empire of *carbon* has eroded whatever primacy cotton may have had in capitalism's prior "reinventions." Whether in the form of the coal that fueled many of the most mechanized cotton mills in the nineteenth century or the chemicals that produced competing forms of fiber during the twentieth century, carbon has arguably had a far more central role in capitalism's rise over the long term. Through industrial agriculture, fossil fuels solved in less than a generation the labor question with which planters and cotton capitalists had struggled for centuries, though it did so at terrible social and environmental costs to farming communities and the landscapes that supported them.

How we understand both the evolution of the Empire of Cotton and the agents of historical change is particularly important to how we approach the future. At the end of his volume, Beckert calls for "an empire of cotton that is not only productive, but also just." Not only is the concept of a "just empire" oxymoronic, but it also rings hollow given Beckert's articulation of the sources of earlier historical transformations. If the emperors of cotton and their ilk—entrepreneurs and their political enablers—hold the cards in capitalism's reinvention, then conscious capitalists and policy reformers become the world's only possible redeemers amid capitalism's "endless revolution." However, if the goal is to decolonize the empire of cotton rather than simply temper its worst excesses, then we will need to look to a much broader mix of actors and institutions across global civil society to effect that needed change.

Fortunately for humanity, a broader reading of history suggests that such agents do, in fact, exist. After all, it was not simply enlightened entrepreneurialism that led working conditions on the land and at the loom to improve over time. Paternalistic welfare capitalism—whether in mill towns or in social policy—was far more often the response to vocal demands from laborers and their allies for safer workplaces and larger pieces of the economic pie than it was an independent

epiphany of entrepreneurs. Historical transformation is more often the product of social and political struggle. Identifying today's agents of change thus requires turning to campaigns to promote fair trade and corporate accountability across overseas supply chains; movements embracing more ecologically sustainable growing practices and increasing consumer awareness and demand for ethical apparel; and the emerging, smaller-scale, flexible textile manufacturing renaissance based on worker cooperatives and "triple-bottom-line" business.

In the aftermath of the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh that killed over 1,000 workers, for example, apparel brands have committed to safer working conditions in the global garment industry in large part because of the transnational action of trade unions and non-governmental organizations. Socially-minded investors and consumers are increasingly demanding more sustainable practices and transparent supply chains "from dirt to shirt," and companies ranging from small printing and dyeing businesses in North Carolina to brands like Patagonia and H&M are responding to these calls.² Cotton farmers in South Asian villages, the Middle East, and northwest Texas are increasingly growing organic cotton to meet this demand. In the western highlands of Guatemala, women's weaving cooperatives have maintained indigenous textile traditions amid the social dislocations of civil war, while in the US South, Guatemalan immigrant families have helped create worker-owned cooperatives, leading a nascent revitalization of textile manufacturing in the United States.³

These diverse initiatives are rooted in a cosmopolitan sense of sustainability and shared values, stretching across borders. Taken together, they provide an alternative model to the dynamics of earlier moments in the empire of cotton's history—one that places well-being, solidarity, and ecological balance above the imperial imperatives of a single commodity crop. Although Beckert provides little sense of the alternative pathways these efforts open, his massive historical account of the rise of the global system nevertheless gives concerned citizens much to consider as they seek to understand what gave us the world we now seek to transform.

Endnotes

1. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
2. On the concept of transparent, “dirt to shirt” cotton supply chains, see Misha Clive, “Dirt to Shirt in North Carolina: T.S. Designs,” *Green America*, September 5, 2012, <http://www.greenbusinessnetwork.org/dirt-to-shirt-in-north-carolina-ts-designs/>. On the case of H&M, see Leon Kaye, “H&M, The World’s Largest Organic Cotton User: Better Enough?” *Triple Pundit*, August 4, 2014, <http://www.triplepundit.com/2014/08/hm-organic-cotton/>.
3. TRAMA Textiles and Opportunity Threads are two examples of these parallel phenomena. See www.tramatextiles.org/about/ and “John Duda, How a Worker Cooperative Factory Is Helping Bring Textile Manufacturing Back to North Carolina,” *Community Wealth*, October 16, 2014, <http://community-wealth.org/content/how-worker-cooperative-factory-helping-bring-textile-manufacturing-back-north-carolina>.

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