

EMPIRE OF COTTON

In “Empire of Cotton: A Global History” (2014) Sven Beckert writes “the biography of one product,” cotton, which he calls “white gold.”

Someone discovered how to process it 5,000 years ago, in India. From AD 1000 to 1900 it was the world’s largest industry, with trade networks connecting growers, spinners, weavers and consumers. Indian cotton was the “first global consumer economy,” some of it so exquisite it looked like “webs of woven wind.”

Originally a small-seeded perennial, the cotton plant was bred over time into a large-seeded annual with long white lint. As well as the clothes you’re wearing and the sheets you slept in, cotton occurs in banknotes, coffee filters, vegetable oil, soap, gunpowder and books. Cotton cloth has served as taxes, tribute and currency.

And worldwide, 350 million people still engage in its growing and processing, a number never before reached in any industry.

Beckert sees cotton as having created global industrial capitalism, by putting its essentials in place – finance and credit, communication and infrastructure, control of raw materials and consumers. “The factory itself was an invention of the cotton industry.”

Yet even up into the 20th century much cotton was grown by householders, planted among maize, beans, etc, and processed at home. But the rise of cotton's empire involved a relentless war against such subsistence living. Producers and consumers everywhere were to be transformed into servants of the factory, producing raw cotton to feed it, working within it, or buying its finished products.

In 1600 most Europeans were still wearing linen and wool; then nation states began entering the global cotton market, with ships and armed men. Beckert writes of capitalism's origins in "war capitalism" – involving slavery, imperial expansion, displacement of populations, expropriation of lands and goods, and states' encouragement of privatized violence.

Then war capitalism shifted gradually to industrial capitalism, as more and more efficient machines required more raw cotton and more cheap labor, and states and factory owners began organizing "workers into great orchestras of machine-based production." Most of these were children, young women and slaves, living and dying in desperate obscurity in William Blake's "dark satanic mills."

The complete control of workers, "a core characteristic of capitalism," was pioneered on U.S. slave plantations. "The lords of the lash" were tightly tied to the "lords of the loom."

Slave-grown cotton kept European factories humming for generations, and made many rich. So the Civil War horrified many Europeans – could their cotton empire survive the fall of slavery?

The answer was yes. Merchants now allied with nation states, with their business-friendly laws, and armies to enforce them. The market, the law, and the state replaced slavery's coercion, and among workers "the dread of starving" replaced "the dread of being flogged."

Berkert doesn't use the word "greed," nor does he reveal any political bias that I can detect. He's a Harvard historian following verifiable data as carefully as he can. Fully ¼ of his 600 page book is densely packed source notes.

Yet it seems to me that greed has driven the empire of cotton from the beginning, and drives it now. Relentlessly increasing abstraction, from workers physically handling bales to financiers manipulating "futures" in giant exchanges, has helped facilitate that greed, as more and more money and power has accumulated in fewer and fewer hands.

Now cotton manufacturing has shifted from Europe to the Global south, partly because northern nation states have increasingly supported labor and raised their wages. But because massive retailers like Walmart have broken free from state control, most of the world's folks, north and south, are

“inextricably tied to both commodity production and consumption.” And such retailers as Walmart are constantly seeking cheaper labor, in “a giant race to the bottom.”

So cotton’s story is a now familiar one, the enrichment of the few at the expense of the many.