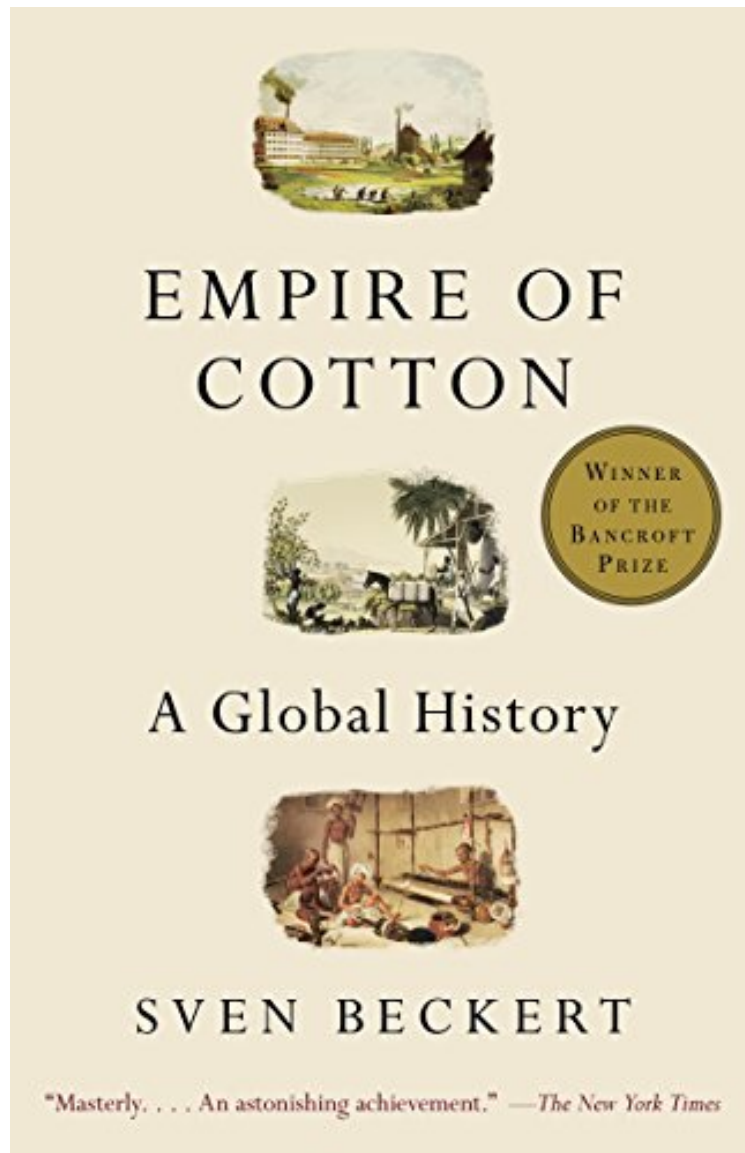


Empire of Cotton: A Global History

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. Spectacular and Original. Easy to read. Eye-opening. By Dee Dee This 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..1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Corrosive Capitalism By Jim Blake, Jr. A masterful history of capitalism told from the point of view of cotton. The overarching take-away here is that capitalism has been "global" since its beginning 250 years ago. Capitalism has always spanned the globe with a rhizomic network of trade routes from farm to factory to marketplace. The beauty of this book is the depth with which it explains the shapes of colonialism-capitalism in differing political environments around the globe and the remarkable advantage of pioneering states. Beckert makes very clear that cotton was at the heart of the 19th century Industrial revolution and nations that wanted to get on board all participated in slavery, oppression of farmers, factory workers. An enlightening fact illuminated in Beckert's masterpiece is that it was capitalism that invented the absolutist state, followed by the democratic state not the other way around. It was the forces of capitalism that generated wars for land acquisition, property laws that securely divided up this new land, contract laws and the courts to uphold them. Global Capitalism has always been the dog and big and small government the tail being wagged. The "people" get the leftovers after their souls are picked clean on coercive farms and factories. Beckert makes clear that the history of capitalism has been an evil swirling across the globe of a storm of oppression from the cotton fields of antebellum Mississippi to the corrosive sweatshops of 2016 Bangladesh. The corrosive nature of Capitalism to the human spirit has never been more cogently argued

The 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.

.com An Best Book of the Month, December 2014: How important is cotton? For starters, there's a good chance that you're wearing it right now. That's true no matter where you live in the world. Cotton is everywhere, has been for a long time, and was the dominant commodity during the early years of our country. It fostered war capitalism among European nations. It helped launch the industrial revolution in England. It drove slavery. The story of cotton is the story of modern capitalism, and in *Empire of Cotton*, author Sven Beckert shows how a worldwide crop that came in multiple forms and was cultivated and produced in many different ways came to be dominated by the late coming Europeans, and later Americans, often through violent means, reshaping both the world economy and the world itself--for better or worse--along the way. Chris Schlupe Celebration for Sven Beckert's *EMPIRE OF COTTON* "Sweeping, ambitious and disturbing . . ." - The Editors, *The New York Times Book*, "The Ten Best Books of 2015" "A book of fascinating dilemmas about human nature that can be read with equal enthusiasm by economists and non-economists, historians and non-historians." - Carlos A. Valderrama Becerra, *Expansion* "Brilliant and comprehensive . . . an epic history." - Simon Lewis, *Post and Courier* "Written with honesty, clarity and conviction, this transformative study is much more than another jeremiad against capitalism. The text glows from its underlying proposition for changing the world that will alter forever the way you view modern history, and your own class position in it." - Dana April Seidenberg, *East African*

nbsp; "Breathtakingly comprehensive, informative and provocative." -Glenn C. Altschuler, Tulsa World
nbsp; "Persuasive . . . brilliant . . . Beckert's detailed narrative never scants the rich complexity of the cotton traders' impact on many different societies." -Wendy Smith, Boston Globe
nbsp; "Sure, spacious, and skillful . . . Beckert has no issue with a tight focus, and he uses it deftly to describe the history." - Peter Lewis, Barnes and Noble
nbsp; "Empire of Cotton proves Sven Beckert one of the new elite of genuinely global historians.
nbsp; Too little present-day academic history is written for the general public. Empire of Cotton transcends this barrier and should be devoured eagerly, not only by scholars and students but also by the intelligent reading public. The book is rich and diverse in the treatment of its subject. The writing is elegant, and the use of both primary and secondary sources is impressive and varied. Overviews on international trends alternate with illuminating, memorable anecdotes . . . Beckert's book made me wish for a sequel." -Daniel Walker Howe, The Washington Post
nbsp; "Masterly . . . Deeply researched and eminently readable, Empire of Cotton" gives new insight into the relentless expansion of global capitalism. With graceful prose and a clear and compelling argument, Beckert not only charts the expansion of cotton capitalism. . . he addresses the conditions of enslaved workers in the fields and wage workers in the factories. An astonishing achievement. " - Thomas Bender, NY Times
nbsp; "Important . . . a major work of scholarship that will not be soon surpassed as the definitive account of the product that was, as Beckert puts it, the Industrial Revolution's 'launching pad.'" -Adam Hochschild, New York Times Book Review
nbsp; "Momentous and brilliant . . . Empire of Cotton" is among the best nonfiction books of this year." -Karen R. Long, Newsday
nbsp; "Compelling . . . Beckert demonstrates persuasively how the ravenous cotton textile trade in Europe was instrumental in the emergence of capitalism and draws a direct line from the practices that nourished this empire to similar elements in the production of goods for today's massive international retailers. Those who long to know more about how and why slavery took hold in Europe, Africa and the Americas will find this book to be immensely enlightening. Better still, those who live out the troubled legacy of the exploitation and enslavement of workers in the service of the cotton empire will find in it added inspiration for their continuing efforts to realize a just and more equitable society." -Ruth Simmons, President Emeritus of Brown University
nbsp; "Intellectually ambitious . . . a masterpiece of the historian's craft . . ." -Timothy Shenk, The Nation
nbsp; "A highly detailed, provocative work." -Booklist
nbsp; "Hefty, informative, and engaging . . . Beckert's narrative skills keep the story of capitalism fresh and interesting for all readers." -Publishers Weekly
nbsp; "[Beckert's] close-up study of the cotton economy is a valuable model for the study of capitalism generally, an economic system in which slavery and colonialism were not outliers but instead integral to the whole . . . a valuable contribution." -Kirkus
nbsp; "Fascinating and profound... Global history as it should be written." -Eric Foner

About the Author
Sven Beckert is the Laird Bell Professor of American History at Harvard University. Holding a PhD from Columbia University, he has written widely on the economic, social, and political history of capitalism. He has been the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including from Harvard Business School, the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, and the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History. He was also a fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.