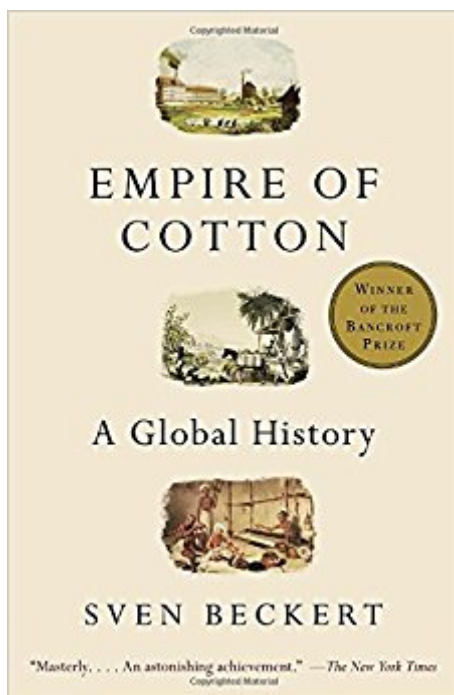


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# Empire Of Cotton: A Global History



## Synopsis

WINNER OF THE BANCROFT PRIZE PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST Winner of the Alfred and Fay Chandler Book Award 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. Sven 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. In a remarkably brief period, European entrepreneurs and powerful politicians recast the world's most significant manufacturing industry, combining imperial expansion and slave labor with new machines and wage workers to make and remake global capitalism. 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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



society. — Ruth Simmons, President Emeritus of Brown University — “Intellectually ambitious . . . a masterpiece of the historian’s craft.” — Timothy Shenk, *The Nation* — “A highly detailed, provocative work.” — Booklist — “Hefty, informative, and engaging . . . Beckert’s narrative skills keep the story of capitalism fresh and interesting for all readers.” — Publishers Weekly — “[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 — “Fascinating and profound. . . . Global history as it should be written.” — Eric Foner

This 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.

A great historical review of cotton and how its pursuit essentially created the industrial revolution as we know it. It makes important connections between plantation slavery in the New World, primarily in the Southern USA, and the cotton mills in England, where the finished cloth was in turn traded for more slaves to send to the Americas. War Capitalism and Industrial Capitalism are closely linked. The book outlines the movement of people from fields to factories in Manchester and other British cities, and the beginnings of wage labor. A lot of good research went into this book and it is worth reading.

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..

If the author could have been a little less preachy about the evils unleashed by the systems that grew up with the industrialization of cotton, this book would merit 5 stars. The story itself is compelling, and the documentation is clearly presented. It's inescapable that modern society owes its wealth and accomplishments to a wicked past, so it's understandable that the author - - who waded through the swamps of self-congratulation of the various perps to expose their crimes - - doesn't want anybody to miss the point. After all, who hasn't been overexposed to American Exceptionalism and the glorification of colonialism, capitalism, mercantalism, and any number of developments which (if viewed from the other side) would be seen as crimes? He could, however, have made his point by letting the facts speak for themselves - - which they do! He weaves a story that is a compelling tapestry of horrors. Horrors that make life very pleasant for many of us in the 21st century. The very least that we owe the victims is to know their stories and not pretend that it was goodness that made (fill in the blank) great.

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