
Sven BECKERT, *Empire of Cotton. A New History of Global Capitalism*
(Allen Lane – Penguin Books, 2014)

Professor Sven Beckert of Harvard University has devoted a great amount of work to writing a global history of cotton, a simple and common commodity, from the 15th century to the middle of the 20th century. The reader is invited to travel from India to England, from the South of the United States and Brazil to Egypt, Turkey and Japan. After a lengthy stay in Liverpool, she will visit busy manufacturing centers in Spain, France, Belgium and Germany, but also in Brazil, India, Uzbekistan, China and Russia. As it is an impossible task to render justice to the scope of the book as a whole, this review will focus on the three big theses that constitute the backbone of this global history.

The focal point of this global history of cotton is the capital-state relationship. Beckert demonstrates that the development of capitalism cannot be achieved without the help of the state. Why? Because capitalists are unable to obtain, through their own efforts, the amount of land and cheap labor necessary to produce cotton, yarn, and ultimately cloth. To assemble the required factors of production, capitalists relied on violence: violence to grab land from their initial owner or user (in the United States, in South America, in Egypt, in India), and to coerce peasants and workers into working in field and manufactory for meager salaries. This is particularly true of the cotton plantations, first in the West Indies, and then in the South of the United States. This is what Beckert calls “war capitalism.”. This is the first big thesis, explaining the birth of the first cotton empire during the 17th and 18th centuries, when the production of cotton migrated from India and the Mediterranean to the New World: first to the West Indies, and then to the Southern American colonies.

The second big thesis of the book concerns the connection between war capitalism and its industrial cousin during the 19th century. Beckert demonstrates convincingly that the development of what we may call the British phase in the empire of cotton was not hampered by the full development of slavery—the global history of the slave trade climaxed by the end of the 18th century according to Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau (*Les traites négrières. Essai d'histoire globale*, Paris,

Gallimard, 2005)—but found in this institution the conditions necessary for its full development. Slavery in the cotton plantations was efficient from the point of view of cotton's imperialists (certainly less so from the point of view of the slaves), producing the very large quantity of cotton bales necessary to feed the newly created manufactures in the Manchester area, with their fast growing population of spindles and wage-workers. However, wages did not mean the end of violence. Beckert reminds the reader that, most of the time, these manufactures relied on some form of coerced work, provided notably by women and children, because the earnings of the male breadwinners were not large enough to secure the basic material needs of their family.

In these circumstances, the weakening of the slave trade, and the subsequent unraveling of slavery as a legitimate institution, raised many issues. The American civil war came as a tremendous blow to the cotton capitalists who were finding new sources of cheap cotton: India, but also Egypt and Turkey. This brings us to Beckert's third big thesis: his global history argues that the search for new supplies of raw cotton turned the capital-state nexus towards colonies, notably Africa and more generally the "Global South", in order to produce, again through coerced labor, cotton for their manufactures. In some instances they used the expertise of former slaves (or descendants of slaves) to explain to Africans how to produce cotton in their mother countries — see chapter 12, p. 363ff on the German experiments in its colony of Togo. The story of this phase in the empire of cotton does not stop here, since Beckert extends his capital-state nexus to the following phase, when new nations used the power of the state and the increasing nationalism of cotton workers, whether in fields or manufactory, to secure their independence. This independence was deemed unrealisable without the creation of a national cotton industry: thus, be it in post-colonial, socialist or post-socialist countries, the capital-state nexus was still at work in the post WWI world economy, when the empire of cotton came back to the Global South where it had originated.

The book ends with a glimpse of the latest phase. Now the main characters in the empire of cotton are global firms—Walmart, Metro, Carrefour—selling cotton under their brand names while obliging states to run a race to the bottom with regard to the working conditions and wages of the local workforce, not to mention the very favorable rates of taxation on profits that these firms enjoy. Thus, according to Beckert, capital now seems to benefit from state power without being trapped by the weakness of any given state when it comes to the control of the workforce and of wage increases.

In the conclusion, Beckert explains how his global history challenges a European view—more precisely that of Eric Hobsbawm—that focuses on the dismantling of the European cotton industry, without noticing that this century has seen the rise of a cotton industry in the “Global South” during the period of decolonization. Nevertheless, many readers might find this argument somewhat partial, since there are no clear statements within the book on the theory behind Beckert’s global history. His emphasis on the violence inherent in war capitalism is sound, but is this anything more than a global version of the violence implicit in what Marx called the process of “primitive accumulation” in 16th and 19th Europe? Are there any intellectual connections between Beckert’s war capitalism and Max Weber’s “politically-oriented capitalism”? Is the connection between war capitalism and industrial capitalism a new approach to the subject, or does it merely retrace the Marxist view of the articulation of different modes of production, something central to the Braudel-Wallerstein core-periphery model? His emphasis on the economic and, to a more limited extent, the political dimensions of the empire of cotton is irrefragable, but there is a tendency to neglect the “social” dimension beyond its consequences for the cost of labor and bales of cotton. One example is enough to understand how social forces may be important: when the empire of cotton was British-centered, when Manchester was benefiting from the articulation between industrial and war capitalisms, between wage labor and slavery, a British political, moral and religious movement led to the abolition of slavery in the 1830s (see Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002). Subsequently the British government pressured its European counterparts to also abolish this institution, using the Royal Navy along the African coast to make the slave trade more and more difficult. How does this social counter-movement fit into the history of cotton as global capitalism? How can we explain this social movement against the highly-profitable British grip upon slaves and wage-workers, or war capitalism and industrial capitalism?

Traveling on the good ship *Empire of Cotton* is a convincing experience. Beckert has a profound knowledge of the world cotton industry, and his lucid narrative is of the greatest value. If Beckert could add a general theoretical statement to his history of global capitalism, then their conjunction would amount to a landmark study of the economic and sociological history of global capitalism.

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