

Bookshelf: “Empire of Cotton” by Sven Beckert

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Among the books that have recently widened and deepened my historical knowledge the most is Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton*. Drawing on a broad base of research in numerous archives and on a wealth of literature, the author follows the traces of cotton through the last millennia and across continents. He shows that by the first millennium AD, the cotton industry had already become important in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, while Europe still relied on flax and wool for textiles. But from the sixteenth century, European expansion into the rest of the world turned this situation on its head. Through brute force, European powers expropriated land and people in Asia, Africa, and the Americas to establish what Beckert calls “war capitalism.” Under this system, slavery and despotism in the overseas peripheries fueled the British-centered empire of cotton production, distribution, and consumption. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the “war capitalism” pioneered by European states went hand in hand with the emerging “industrial capitalism” organized by enterprises which—after the abolition of slavery—turned to wage labor. In the twentieth century, European states lost dominance in the global empire and the cotton industry shifted textile manufacturing from the Global North to the Global South in order to maximize profits.

Yet Beckert’s *magnum opus* is much more than just another history of cotton. Even for readers like me, whose main interests are not in the history of cotton itself, it offers a fascinating global history of capitalism, seen through the lens of cotton. This approach makes *Empire of Cotton* a paradigm of how one single scholar with limited resources, both material and immaterial, can manage to grasp issues of nearly unlimited—i.e. long-term and global—dimensions. Dealing with huge issues such as global capitalism requires a clear focus; otherwise, one runs the danger of getting lost in a tangle of persons, things, ideas, events, places, and other phenomena. Following one product provides an Ariadne’s

thread which leads us straightforwardly through time and space. Is there anything more characteristic of capitalism than the long- and wide-ranging web of cotton?

Beckert's cotton-centered global history of capitalism serves as a paradigm for my current book project at the RCC. I am working on a history of globalization in the twentieth century through the lens of the soybean. Up until the advent of what we nowadays call "globalization" in the mid-nineteenth century, soybeans were cultivated and used exclusively in East and Southeast Asia. Then they began to spread all over the world, through both large-scale trade and plant transfer. Following the multiple traces of soy from production via distribution to consumption sheds light on the formation and dissolution of global agro-food regimes from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries. This is not only a story of political power and economic performance, but also of the social and ecological burdens on the regions incorporated into this world system. For instance, eating a hamburger or another meat dish in a fast food restaurant in the Global North is connected—via large-scale livestock feeding and high-tech soy farming—to the displacement of small peasants and the destruction of natural habitats in the Global South. However, soy as a human food has also become a symbol of a more socially just and environmentally friendly alternative to this sort of globalization, as the basis of a "diet for a small planet" (Frances Moore Lappé).

The importance of soy for globalization is not as obvious as that of cotton for capitalism. However, my book aims to change this view by highlighting soy's role as a "guide fossil" of the age of globalization. Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* is a good companion on this journey.