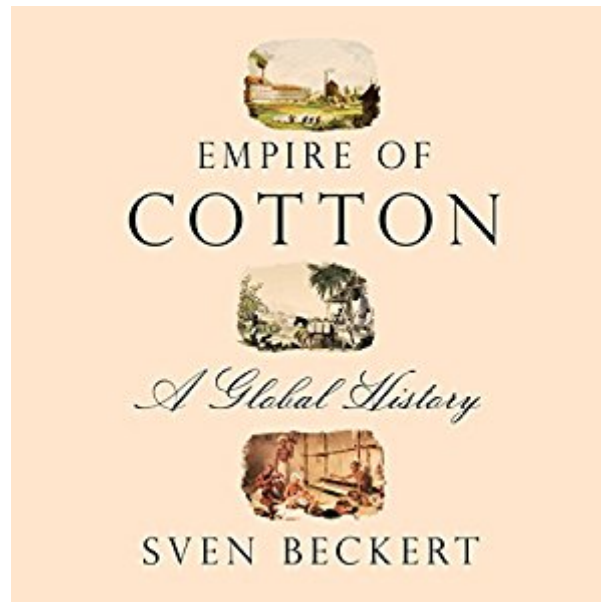


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Empire Of Cotton: A Global History



Synopsis

Sven Beckert's rich, fascinating audiobook 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, combined them with the expropriation of lands in the Americas and the enslavement of African workers to crucially recast the disparate realms of cotton that had existed for millennia. We see how industrial capitalism then reshaped these worlds of cotton into an empire, and how this empire transformed the world. The empire of cotton was, from the beginning, a fulcrum of constant global struggle between slaves and planters, merchants and statesmen, farmers and merchants, workers and factory owners. In this as in so many other ways, 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* continues on a global scale his project in his first book, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896*, in demonstrating that the US is not an exceptional Arcadia emancipated from the repressive political, economic, & ideological forces of global capitalism. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the evolution of our global system of political economy, indeed for anyone seriously interested in the development of the 19th and twentieth century world. Beckert, a professor of history at Harvard University, creates a history of capitalism for the 21st century, decisively demonstrating that older Marxist scholars notably Eugene Genovese, were wrong to argue that slavery was a pre-capitalist mode of production, with the implication that Southern US slaveowners were somehow more benevolent "paternalist" employers than Northern industrialists. He also definitively challenges classical liberal lines of scholarship that argue that superior western institutions (other than the military) and free markets led to the economic expansion of the West. Unfreedom had far more to do with the rise of capitalism than freedom, liberty, or democracy. Even after the post-emancipation shift to industrial capitalism, capitalist enterprise remained tied closely to, and probably could not continue to expand without strong exercises of state, particularly military power.

"...starting in the sixteenth century, armed European capitalists and capital-rich European states

reorganized the world's cotton industry. It was this early embrace of war capitalism that was the precondition for the Industrial Revolution that eventually created an enormous further push toward global economic integration and continues to shape and reshape our world today..."An excellent account on the importance of cotton in the development of capitalism with the emphasis given to slave labor. My only question is while discussing capitalism the author makes no reference to "Das Kapital" even Karl Marx have many attributions to cotton industry in England in his work . Let us not forget F. Engels who provided the information and data to Marx due to his connection to the textile industry in England, his family owned factories in Manchester. In his work " The Condition of the Working Class" Engels too gives examples of workers in the cotton mills of victorian Manchester: As an early advocate of workers cooperatives, George Jacob Holyoake writes in the secularist paper "Reasoner": "As you enter Manchester from Rusholme, the town at the lower end of Oxford road has the appearance of one dense volume of smoke, more forbidden than the entrance to Dante's inferno". In writing the ills of capitalism Engels admits that he was shocked: "I have never seen so systematic a shutting out of the working class from the thoroughfares, so tender a concealment of everything which might affront the eye and the nerves of the bourgeois as in Manchester" "..

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