Book Reviews

Sven Beckert. *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*. United States: Vintage Books, 2014. Pp. 441. Paperback. $17.95.

Sven Beckert, the Laird Bell Professor at Harvard University, explains cotton's function in building a capitalist economic system. Capitalism emerged through cotton because of where it was grown and its commercialism. The production of cotton dates to pre-Columbian times in Mesoamerica and Asia. During European exploration this cash crop became the foundation of capitalism and created the economic system's financial structure. Once Europe became part of this trade, it created both a network system and production system for vast farm areas, not allowing the individual to sell, trade, or conduct business outside of the designated area.

Large-scale production of cotton changed societies. Growing the crop and producing cloth was time and labor intensive. Therefore, it was mainly a secondary source of income. Most individuals produced cotton in their households on their own time. The social history of cotton is evident once ancient empires seized on the idea that using cotton could serve as a payment for taxes, tribute, and trade. This encouraged individuals to continue producing cotton to pay their dues. As the product increased in value, there was also an increase in the search to improve production.

Beckert organizes the history of cotton chronologically, initially explaining how it came to be produced from a raw material into cloth and how it subsequently emerged as the base of capitalism. The first half of the book explains the production of cotton and its transport from Africa and Asia to Europe. As the demand for cotton grew, the industry was transformed from a local economy to a global market. The creation of factories and paying wages to workers had a deep impact on the emerging capitalist economy. The book continues to discuss the cost of cotton production focusing on capitalism and how low-cost labor benefited its growth. We learn women earned less than men, and

child labor was allowed during the expansion of cotton capitalism.

The second part discusses the importance of cotton globally and its production shifted in the mid-nineteenth century from Asia as the biggest producer to the United States. Labor continued to play an important role. After the Civil War in 1865, formerly enslaved people were still the primary producers of cotton. However, labor conditions were difficult because of low wages, and lack of black landownership. U.S. production of cotton was marked by crop sharing, where white landowners took all of the profit and systemic violence against African Americans including lynchings.

Beckert tells the fascinating story of how cotton was used to build capitalism; his book deserves a recommendation for students and professors interested in global capitalist history. While experts might be disappointed at the lack of details about the quality and quantity of cotton from Mesoamerica and South America, Beckert does provide this information from Asia and India. Beyond numeric data, Beckert considers the influences of slavery, wages, trade, and trade wars. He helps us to understand the cultivation of cotton and its journey from farms to industrial manufacturing as a capitalist network.

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