

Empire of Cotton; A New History of Global Capitalism

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For Immanuel Wallerstein, capitalism is not the mere existence of individuals or firms producing for sale on the market with the intention of obtaining a profit. Nor is the existence of persons working for wages sufficient as a definition. Rather Wallerstein has defined capitalism as a system that accords priority to the endless accumulation of capital (*World Systems Analysis*, 2004) Endless accumulation is a simple concept: it means that people and firms are accumulating capital in order to accumulate still more capital. And in the short history of global capital, no other sector has enabled unbridled accumulation of capital as the cotton textile industry. The author of *Empire of Cotton*, Sven Beckert, has described the cotton textile industry as the launching pad for the “broader industrial revolution”. Beckert is Laird Bell Professor of American History at Harvard University.

Unrestrained violence and savagery characterized the world of cotton plantations. The economic exploitation of the native populations that often

slipped into barbarism has often been “overshadowed in our collective memory by images of coal, railroads” and giant industries. “Too often,” the author argues, “we prefer to erase the realities of slavery, expropriation, and colonialism from the history of capitalism, craving a nobler, cleaner capitalism”. In the neo-liberal era, academics have sought to portray a benevolent image of capitalism. Selective amnesia is the hallmark of texts that have sought to erase the horrors of capitalist development.

1. War capitalism:

By the second half of the eighteenth century, European countries were successful in forging a military fiscal state; financial instruments that allowed for capital mobilization on a previously unimagined scale; disciplining the workers by financial and corporal punishment; legal systems that protected investments in the remotest corners of the globe; armed militias; and whenever the need arose, European capital forged alliances amongst themselves to break down barriers that stood in the way of accumulation of capital. British attempts to penetrate into China resulted in a series of conflicts, also known as the Opium Wars (1839-1860). The history of other colonial powers is too well known to merit mention.

Beckert’s conceptualization of war capitalism is apt: “Imperial expansion, slavery and land expropriations”. War capitalism also “nourished the emerging secondary sectors such as insurance, finance and shipping”. These developments were most visible in the evolution of the global cotton textile industry. European humanism and ideals forged in the “age of enlightenment” would not stand in the way of ever increasing profits. The Portuguese were probably the first to practice armed trade. The rest of Europe was to follow suit; and the English mastered it.

2. Capitalism and Slavery:

Beckert has detailed the dark underbelly of global capitalism: slavery. Urban centres such as Manchester and Liverpool owed its prosperity to slave

trade. Slavery solved the shortage of labour in the Americas and elsewhere. The United States had three “crucial ingredients that favoured cotton plantation: credit, land and labour. Land was forcefully seized from the local inhabitants by waves of European settlers backed by the federal government and local authorities. And the shortage of labour was met by the forcible recruitment of slaves from Africa. The local inhabitants were either terminated through wars or disease, or they proved too few and defiant to work in the plantations. This was true of plantation agriculture across the globe. For example tribals from Central India were forced to work in tea gardens in Assam.

The Germans were latecomers to cotton textile industry. The German efforts to muscle into the cotton industry are very well documented. Forced to compete with American and English manufacturers, Germans spoke of a *Baumwolkulturkampf* or “a cotton growing struggle”. German efforts to gain access to secure supplies of raw cotton would result in Tuskegee experts advising German colonialists on the German colony of Togo. Economic necessity, for once, triumphed over racism.

Nearer home, Beckert has drawn attention to the strong and intricate relations between the cotton textile magnates and the India’s freedom movement led by Gandhi. While this aspect of the freedom struggle has received attention of scholars and researchers, it rarely figures in public discourse. It is common knowledge that Gandhi popularized the manufacture and use of locally manufactured textiles. But what is little known that Indian textile magnates pulled the strings of the national movement to suit their own economic interests. And in the event of a face-off between mill owners and workers, Gandhi would ensure that the mill owners did not suffer losses. “Indian mill owners fought just as strenuously for recasting the Indian countryside as their British counterparts had done” Domestic capital proved to be equally exploitative as foreign.

The narrative follows a distinct pattern: the flourishing of cotton textile industry in various parts of the world before the advent of European

colonialism and massive expropriations. Europe led by a belligerent England was successful in bringing the cotton textile industry under its control. The profits earned and the experience accumulated enabled the colonial powers to expand into other sectors of industrialization. In the years following decolonization, Beckert traces the rise of China as a major player in the cotton textile industry. Another Asian giant, India, Beckert prophesizes, would follow suit. India has great power ambitions, and the textile industry may provide it with the means to materialize its ambitions. The only barrier to India's emergence as a global power is the negligence shown to the social and health sectors.

In conclusion, it may be argued if the book *Empire of Cotton* gives a new and a very comprehensive insight into the workings of global capitalism. The answer is an emphatic yes. It deserves a place in the bookshelves of students, academics and the general reader.