In 1862, British merchant John Benjamin Smith boasted that the manufacture of cotton yarn and cloth had become “the greatest industry that ever had or could by possibility have ever existed in any age or country.” Forty years later, about 1.5 percent of the men, women and children alive in the world either planted, picked, manufactured, shipped or sold the fluffy white fiber.

In “Empire of Cotton,” Sven Beckert, a professor of history at Harvard, draws on archival material on every continent to provide a breathtakingly comprehensive, informative and provocative account of this ubiquitous commodity and “the marvelously productive and violent system” created for it. Putting cotton, the world’s first modern industry, in a global framework, he demonstrates and helps us understand industrialization, imperialism, decolonization, continuous economic growth, staggering inequality, and the origins of “the great divergence” — between colonizers and colonized, between the global North and the global South.

Beckert’s biography of cotton allows us to see how capitalism “perpetually re-creates our world.” Slavery, he indicated, was essential to the empire of cotton in the 18th and 19th centuries. It made it possible for plantation owners in the American South to mobilize and exploit millions of black workers to attend to a crop “that was, in the cold language of economists, ‘effort intensive.’” Only after slaves were emancipated in the United States, Beckert points out, could European capital and state power “prepare the countryside” and peasant producers in India, Egypt and, eventually, Africa and Central Asia, for cotton.

The state, Beckert emphasizes, paved the way for the market-driven empire of cotton (and industrial capitalism in general). Government policies protected global markets, facilitated the recruitment of wage laborers (in part by pressuring individuals who spun cotton by hand for their own use or for local markets to work instead in factories), and created and enforced private property rights in land.

The domination of all things cotton by England and the United States ended long ago. While a few American cotton growers soldier on (abetted by government subsidies), cotton mills in places like Lowell, Massachusetts, and Manchester, England, have been re-purposed as shopping malls, museums,
art studios and condominiums. Shirts these days start their existence as cotton grown in China, India, Uzbekistan or Senegal, are spun in China, Turkey or Pakistan, and take final shape in Bangladesh or Vietnam. World-wide cotton production is expected to triple or quadruple by 2050.

Although overt physical coercion is now relatively rare in the kingdom of cotton, many workers remain at the mercy of corporations who can shift production to lots of places. With the active cooperation of the government, some 2 million children under age 15 are sent into the cotton fields of Uzbekistan each year. In China, government suppression of labor unions keeps the wages of cotton workers very low.

The reshuffling of key elements in the industry, Beckert reminds us, serves as testimony to the ability of capitalism to adapt, and, for better and worse, to turn the lives of people and places upside down.

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