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Commodity Frontiers and the Global History of Capitalism: A Discussion about Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton*

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INTRODUCTION

The public reception of Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* has been remarkable, to say the least. Published in 2014 in one German and two English editions,¹ it has been translated into ten languages so far. The book won the Bancroft Award and the Philip Taft Award, received the Cundill Recognition for Excellence, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The *New York Times* named it one of the ten most important books of 2015. Numerous reviews have been published in the popular press,² and the author has been lecturing about the book around the world. Nonetheless, "*Empire of Cotton* is not casual airplane reading. Heavy going at times, it is crowded with many more details and statistics (a few of them repeated) than the non-specialist needs" (*New York Times*). Despite its 450 pages of text and 138 pages of footnotes, many reviewers recommend reading it; not just to learn about a fascinating past, but also to learn about the world we know now. "*Empire of Cotton* ... should be devoured eagerly, not only by scholars and students but also

¹ Sven Beckert, *King Cotton. Eine Globalgeschichte des Kapitalismus* (München: CH Beck, 2014); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (London: Alan Lane/Penguin, 2014).

² Some can be found here: <http://svenbeckert.com>.

by the intelligent reading public" (*Washington Post*). "Mr Beckert's story is both inspirational and utterly depressing, a reflection of the white-knuckle ride that has been the characteristic of globalization through the centuries" (*Economist*). "No other means of producing and consuming goods has ever rivaled capitalism for creating wealth, and this is as true in the 21st century as it was in the 19th. The *Empire of Cotton* reminds us that the difficulty has been and remains distributing that wealth more equitably" (*Boston Globe*). Many academic reviewers such as Thierry Drapeau in *Labour/Travail* second this opinion: "It vividly reminds us that forced labor in general, and slavery in particular was, and to some extent still is, pivotal to the development of global capitalism." Simon Szreter in *Population and Development Review* commends the book as a prime example of world historical scholarship that "offers a different, intrinsically conflict-ridden and violent account of economic change." Tirthankar Roy in *American Historical Review* also praises the book: "These multiple aims—to write a global history and to write a connected history—are met with energy, erudition, skill, and plain good writing."

The book is grafted upon a grand ambition: It is as much a study of cotton as a study of the emergence of global capitalism. Three points stand out: It develops a profound world-systemic perspective, it stresses the coercive role of the new European states, and it reveals the centrality of the global countryside in capitalist expansion. Sven Beckert uses a specific commodity, cotton, as a lens on the development of the modern world itself. By focusing on cotton as a commodity, "We are able to see connections between peoples and places that would remain on the margins if we embarked upon a more traditional study bounded by national borders" (p. xxi). This modern world is energized by capitalism and understood as a globalizing world-system in a Braudelean-Wallersteinean way.

Although explicit theoretical framing is largely absent, references that underline this global-systemic approach are scattered throughout the text. The book "understands capitalism in the only way it can be properly understood—in a global frame" (p. xv). "It shows that capitalism has been globe-spanning since its inception and that fluid spatial configurations of the world economy have been a common feature of the last three hundred years" (p. xxi). This has created increasing regional inequalities, so that by the late nineteenth century, "a new global periphery had emerged in which millions of farmers, sharecroppers, peasants, and agricultural laborers toiled to keep up industrial capitalism's awe-inspiring advances, while themselves not sharing in them" (p. 377).

Essential for this global capitalist expansion was the rise of a European state-system, promoting state-sponsored coercion and violence

on a world scale to secure access to and control over land, labor, and nature, thereby “according violence a rightful place in the range of working hypotheses on inequality” (Tirthankar Roy in *American Historical Review*). “The emergence of modern industrial capitalism, from this perspective, was rooted as much in violent conquest as in constitutional, institutional and technical innovation” (Simon Szreter in *Population and Development Review*). Much in line with recent work by Peer Vries, Beckert writes: “This book . . . embraces a global perspective to show how Europeans united the power of capital and the power of the state to forge, often violently, a global production complex, and then used the capital, skills, networks, and institutions of cotton to embark upon the upswing in technology and wealth that defines the modern world” (p. xv).³ “It was this nexus of social and political power that together animated industrial capitalism” (p. 63), instigating “new ways of raising capital, new ways of inserting capital into production, new forms of labor mobilization, new forms of market making, and, last but not least, new forms of the incorporation of land and people in the global capitalist economy” (p. 173).⁴

Empire of Cotton is especially good at emphasizing the central role of the global countryside in the expansion of global capitalism. “Too often, we ignore the countryside to focus on the city and the miracles of modern industry in Europe and North America while ignoring the very industry’s connection to raw material producers and markets in all corners of the world” (p. xviii). Expanding the production of cotton for the world market implied a “restless spatial expansion” (p. 91, quoting Jason Moore), via the massive expropriation of land and labor and the recreation of rural labor forces. “From that moment on [the late eighteenth century] ever newer cotton frontiers replaced one another, motivated by the unrelenting search for land and labor, as well as soils that had yet to escape the ecological exhaustion that so often came with cotton growing” (p. 91). This increasing interconnection created increasing divergences: “The constant shifting recombination of various systems of labor, and various compositions of capital and polities is the very essence of capitalism” (p. 440). Sven Beckert’s story of cotton is the story of a shifting commodity frontier. Frontier expansion has been an essential condition for any successful long wave of capitalist

³ Peer Vries, *State, Economy and the Great Divergence: Great Britain and China, 1680s–1850s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁴ This resonates with Fernand Braudel’s, Charles Tilly’s, and Giovanni Arrighi’s analyses of the dialectical relationship between state formation and capitalist market formation; see, for example, Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994).

accumulation, through the intertwined processes of constantly shifting incorporation and appropriation of natural resources and labor by old and new commodity frontiers, and securing sufficient surpluses by opening up new frontier zones. Quoting Beckert once more: “These frontiers of capitalism are often to be found in the world’s countryside, and the journey through the empire of cotton reveals that the global countryside should be at the center of our thinking about the origins of the modern world” (p. 441). As Ulbe Bosma stresses in his contribution to the special forum, the proliferation of extractive economies in geologically and climatically distinct ecosystems has been a highly unstable process, inciting multiple paths of transformation.⁵ The drive toward permanent cost-reduction and increased labor productivity was facilitated by an indiscriminate appropriation of the world’s ecological surpluses. We call this process of appropriation, and often dispossession, “commodity frontiers.” The concept was coined by Jason Moore, and it entails the long history of incorporation and enclosures of nature, land and labor.⁶ Commodity frontiers produce “cheap food, cheap energy, cheap raw materials, and cheap labor.” This cheapness is relative to the wealth of the industrialized countries because social costs are at best only partially included in the price of the commodity.

In a more encompassing sense, frontiers refer to constantly shifting processes of contact between different spaces and social systems. They materialize in contact zones, or frontier zones, and disappear when the interaction ends or when one system is fully incorporated into another system. Frontier expansion nourishes social systems; it provides new sources of nature, land, and labor, creating new supplies, reducing production costs, and increasing profitability.⁷ Frontier encounters produce spatial reorganizations and, as a rule, asymmetrical power relations. They generate shifting sets of “localized” activities to secure access to labor and land for “globalized” commodity production, primarily agricultural, forest, and mining goods.⁸ Frontiers are never fixed but are inherently unstable. They challenge the limits of

⁵ See also Alf Hornborg, J. R. McNeill, and Joan Martinez-Alier, eds., *Rethinking Environmental History: World-System History and Global Environmental Change* (Lanham, Md.: Altamira Press, 2007).

⁶ See, for example, Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), 84–85, 144–45, 298–305.

⁷ Hanne Cottyn, “A World-Systems Frontier Perspective to Land: Unravelling the Uneven Trajectory of Land Rights Standardization in the Andes,” *Journal of World-Systems Research*, forthcoming.

⁸ Thomas Hall, “Incorporation into and Merger of World-Systems,” in *Routledge Handbook of World-Systems Analysis*, ed. Salvatore J. Babones and Christopher Chase-Dunn (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

social, economic, and ecological sustainability, resulting in the apparent need to be continually shifting in time and space.

Commodity frontiers are a central concept for studying and understanding historical capitalism as a globalizing system. That globalizing system integrates peasantries and rural worlds in the story of the origins of the modern world. It creates a bottom-up framework, linking the local and the global by departing from the commodity frontiers themselves. This particular “inductive” approach poses an immense challenge in terms of regional comparisons and collective and systematic data gathering.⁹ At the 2016 World History Conference in Ghent, Belgium (sponsored by the World History Association and Ghent University), Sven Beckert presented a keynote on “Cotton and the Global Origins of Capitalism,” which propagated a commodity-focused history, exploring its chains and its frontiers. As he argued, this allows world historians to understand the history of capitalism as a history of connections forged between different places, different regimes of labor, and different kinds of states. It makes changing forms of global connections integral to understanding local, regional and national histories. This includes the way capitalism and the modern world related to social conflict, which was often global in nature.

In a subsequent roundtable talk, Peer Vries (University of Vienna), Ulbe Bosma (International Institute of Social History Amsterdam), and Eric Vanhaute (Ghent University) debated Beckert’s book, along with Sven Beckert himself (Harvard University). This *Journal of World History Special Forum* brings together Sven Beckert’s adapted keynote speech and the interventions of other participants.

⁹ Commodity Frontiers Initiative is a network consisting of scholars working inside and outside academia, who are meeting and collaborating in different settings and are connected both by personal and institutional linkages. These scholars and their teams have been working extensively on global commodity production, rural societies, labor history, and the history of capitalism. Together, they harbor expertise on a wide range of global commodities, covering all the principle producing regions of the world from the early modern period to the present day and employing a range of approaches, including social and economic history, anthropology, sociology, political science, ecology, and development studies. The network was initiated and is coordinated by Sven Beckert (Harvard University), Ulbe Bosma (International Institute of Social History Amsterdam), and Eric Vanhaute (Ghent University).