EMPIRE OF COTTON

A Global History

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irresistible and mysterious force was at work. Need I say it was the noise of your spindles and your looms, and of the machinery which drives them? . . . And I said to myself, what connection shall there be between Power in Manchester and Nature in America? What connection shall there be between the cotton fields of Texas, and the Factory, and loom, and spindle of Manchester?” The connection that he felt, but could not name, was the vital cord, still attached, between war capitalism and industrial capitalism.

Capturing Labor, Conquering Land

We are far remote from the period when men lived, and died, like plants, in the spot where destiny had produced them. . . . But of all the travels originating in curiosity, ambition, or the love of lucre, not one can be compared in the importance of its results, its extent, or the influence which it had exerted, to the mere transport of the produce of a weed shrub— to the travels which industry has imposed upon the wool of a cotton-tree, the metamorphoses of which are as innumerable as our wants and desires.1

—Asiatic Journal, 1826
In 1857, the British economist John T. Danson published his attempt to disentangle the history of the modern cotton textile industry. On the mystery of the “connection between American Slavery and the British Cotton Manufacture,” he noted that “there is not, and never has been, any considerable source of supply for cotton, excepting the East-Indies, which is not obviously and exclusively maintained by slave-labour.” Efforts to cultivate cotton with free labor had largely failed, he observed, lending support to his conclusion that “as far as yet appears, [cotton] must continue to be grown, chiefly by slave-labour.” So ironclad, argued Danson, was the connection between slave labor in the United States and a prospering European cotton industry that “I cannot but deem it superfluous to say one word” about “modifying the existing system.”

At first glance, Danson seemed correct. The year his essay was published, a full 68 percent of all cotton arriving in the United Kingdom came from the United States, and slaves grew most of it. Yet the reality that seemed so self-evident to Danson and others was only a recent invention. Indeed, in five thousand years of the history of the world’s cotton industry, slavery had never played an important role. And it was not just slavery that was new. The emerging cotton complex centered in Europe was also unique because it did not draw on the production of nearby peasants for its raw materials. As late as 1791, most of the cotton grown for manufacturing purposes around the world was produced by small farmers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and consumed locally. When cotton manufacturing exploded in Great Britain, it was unclear where enough cotton would come from to feed its hungry factories. Yet despite these challenges, never before had an industry grown so large so fast. Indeed, it grew as large as it did, as fast as it did, not despite but because of its peculiar spatial arrangements and its ability to draw on slave labor.

In the crucible of the late-eighteenth-century cotton revolution, cotton built its last, but most decisive, link to the newly global, dynamic, and violent form of capitalism, whose signal feature was the coercive expropriation of land and labor. Necessitated by the yawning gap between the imperatives of mechanized manufacturing and the capacities of premodern agriculture, at its core was slavery. Rapidly expanding factories consumed cotton so fast that only the exigencies of war capitalism could secure the necessary reallocation of land and labor. As a result, indigenous people and land-grabbing settlers, slaves and planters, local artisans and factory owners woke to a new century clouded by a constant, if one-sided, state of war. As Danson had understood so well, it was coercion that opened fresh lands and mobilized new labor, becoming the essential ingredient of the emerging empire of cotton—and thus an essential ingredient in forging industrial capitalism. Yet by projecting the world he lived in both backward and forward, Danson missed both the novelty of slavery’s essential role and the possibility that it could come to an end.

For millennia, as we have seen, cultivators had grown cotton in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. But while the cotton plant found a favorable environment in large stretches of the world’s arable lands, Lancashire, or anywhere else in the British Isles for that matter, was not among them. Outside of the greenhouses at the Royal Gardens at Kew (which to this day showcase the core commodities on which the British Empire rested), Britain and much of Europe was too cold and wet for cotton. Among European leaders, only French revolutionaries, with their fervent belief in inventing the world anew, seriously tried to outwit the local climate and grow cotton—and even they failed.

Indeed, British cotton manufacturing—and later, manufacturing across Europe—seemed a poor bet, for it was the first major industry in human history that lacked locally procured raw materials. In the United Kingdom, woolen and linen manufacturers had relied on Scottish sheep and English flax, the iron industry had used Sheffield iron ore, and the pottery manufacturers had worked up clay found in Staffordshire. Cotton spinning and weaving was different, with British manufacturers entirely dependent upon imports. To flourish, they required not just Asian technologies and African markets, but also raw material from yet another continent. Managing to acquire these materials meant building the first globally integrated manufacturing industry.

Yet in 1780, even as mechanical innovations occurred at a remarkable pace, a key piece of this global integration—the actual supply of cotton—remained undiscovered. The solution that emerged—slaves in the southern United States growing cotton on land expropriated from Native Americans—was far from obvious from the perspective of British cotton manufacturers and merchants. After all, in 1780 no cotton whatsoever arrived from North America. Instead, manufacturers drew on a far-flung network of small-scale suppliers to feed their mills. In the ports of London and Liverpool, bags of the “white gold” arrived from Izmir and Thessaloniki in the Ottoman Empire, from Port-au-Prince and Port
Royal in the Caribbean, from Bombay in India and the Gold Coast in Africa. Raw cotton had traveled comparable routes for many centuries, within Asia, Africa, and the Americas, as well as between Asia and Europe. Syrian cotton had been spun and woven in Egypt, Maharashtra cotton in Bengal, Hainan cotton in Jiangnan, Anatolian cotton in Lucerne, Yugoslav cotton in Trebizond, and Macedonian cotton in Venice.

By 1780, the surging production speeds of spinning machines in British factories increasingly strained this traditional nexus. British manufacturers spun about 5.1 million pounds of cotton in 1781, only about two and a half times as much as they had spun eighty-four years earlier. But a mere nine years later in 1790, that figure had multiplied six times. By 1780, the quantity had nearly doubled again to 36 million pounds. In France, growth was slower but nonetheless remarkable: In 1789, 4.3 times more cotton was consumed than in 1750, 11 million pounds. Rapidly falling yarn prices created ever larger groups of consumers, especially in Europe, where cotton, once a luxury product only accessible to the rich, could now be consumed by the many, and in Africa, where it would replace the products of Indian spinners. The increased consumption of raw cotton, as Leeds writer Edward Baines noted in 1835, “has been rapid and steady far beyond all precedents in any other manufacture.”

As demand for raw cotton rose, so too did prices. In 1781, prices for cotton in Britain were between two and three times higher than they had been a decade earlier. Manchester manufacturers were “quite convinced that unless some new source of supply could be found the progress of the rising industry would be checked, if not altogether arrested.” As a result, “from the 1780s they formed a powerful and influential group in their efforts to acquire the planters and the British government with their requirements.”

This sudden and unprecedented demand for cotton, and the lucrative prices paid for it, according to a contemporary expert, “occasioned a most extraordinary Increase of Culture in every Part, wherever the Climate and Soil could produce it; and, on this Account, every Sinew in the commercial World was strained to supply our Wants.” Ottoman growers, who for the past two hundred years had been a major source of raw cotton for Europe, could not satisfy this exploding demand. Indeed, throughout the 1780s, exports from Thessaloniki and Izmir remained nearly level. A severe labor shortage and the tenacity of feudal relations in the Ottoman countryside limited the supply from Anatolia and Mace-

donia. The labor shortage was such that beginning in the 1770s landowners in western Anatolia brought in thousands of Greek laborers to grow cotton—an expansion that still did not provide the scale necessary for the supply of European industry. The largely precapitalist dependencies that structured the world of rural cultivators, the efforts of peasants to secure their subsistence, the lack of transportation infrastructure, and the continued political independence of the Ottoman state contributed to Europeans’ inability to press for the monocultural production of cotton. A rapid reallocation of land and labor for cotton planting proved impossible. Local elites, moreover, remained a powerful counterweight against the increasingly influential presence of Western merchants in port cities such as Izmir and Thessaloniki, hampering the ability of Western capitalists to reform the social structure in the countryside to produce more cotton for world markets. Western merchants were also competing for what cotton there was with domestic spinners, a sizable and relatively prosperous artisan class. As a result, Ottoman cotton soon became marginal to European markets: while between 1786 and 1790 the Ottoman Empire supplied 20 percent of cotton imports to Great Britain, twenty years later it supplied only 1.28 percent and another ten years later a minuscule 0.29 percent. Unable or unwilling to revolutionize their countryside and trade networks, Ottoman cotton farmers and merchants exited the emerging European industrial system.

With this traditional source of cotton production insufficient to meet demand, manufacturers desperately looked elsewhere. Cotton merchant William Rathbone and cotton spinner Richard Arkwright, for example, embarked upon a failed effort to increase the cotton supply from Africa by creating the Sierra Leone Company. Manufacturers also cast an acquisitive eye toward India’s bountiful cotton harvests. Given that the East India Company enjoyed significant power on the subcontinent and that India was the ancient home of the world’s cotton industry, many expected it to become a major source of fiber. The company, however, reacted warily to Manchester’s appeals. The export of raw cotton, they argued, would undermine manufacturing in India and therefore its own profitable export business of cotton cloth. “If the Manufactures of Bengal were to suffer any material Check,” warned the East India Company in 1793, “and become considerable decreased, the Revenue of that Country would fall off, and its Population decline beyond the Power of Prevention; for it is not to be expected that even any considerable Encroache in the
Cultivation of raw Materials could become an equivalent for a material Reduction in the Extent and Encouragement of Manufactures. Moreover, such production for export would make peasants unduly dependent on purchasing food grains on the market, "which in an Indifferent Season might bring in a scarcity of Grain, nay even a famine, which would bring desolation on the Country, and an annihilation of Revenue." Whatever cotton there was available for export the East India Company shipped to China to finance its purchases of tea, replacing the need to export bullion there. The resistance of the East India Company compounded other difficulties: infrastructure that made moving cotton to the coast often prohibitively expensive, the quality of Indian cotton, especially its short fiber, and a lack of labor in the vast interior of the South Asian subcontinent. In short, Indian cotton exports to Britain proved insufficient to satisfy the growing demand.

More promising than in India, Africa, or Anatolia, it seemed, was the situation in the West Indies and South America. The exploding demand for cotton was no secret to the region's white planters, who had grown small quantities of the fiber since the 1630s. As demand for cotton increased, West Indian and South American merchants increasingly added cotton shipments to their regular trade in sugar and other tropical commodities. They also integrated it with their trade in slaves, as in the case of Liverpool's Tarleton Brothers, whose trade in cotton was at first just a sideline to their trade in human beings.

With fortunes to be made, European merchants in the Caribbean tried to secure more of the white gold. They drew on Caribbean planters who, unlike growers in India, Anatolia, and Africa, had nearly two centuries of experience growing crops for European consumers, most importantly sugar. The planters also controlled two key elements: land suitable for cotton growing and long-standing experience in mobilizing labor to produce for world markets. In the boom years of the 1770s through the 1810s, cotton was especially attractive to two up-and-coming groups of planters. The first consisted of small growers who lacked the capital necessary to start a sugar plantation and wanted a crop that would let them work more marginal lands, with fewer slaves and less investment, and still make fabulous profits. On Saint-Croix, for example, the average cotton plantation drew on the labor of less than a fifth as many slaves as the average sugar plantation. The second group consisted of planters in newly settled territories who planted cotton as a first crop for a few seasons to break the soil and would then use the cotton profits to move into sugar.

Collectively, hundreds of these planters opened up a new "commodity frontier"—a new cotton-producing territory—and with it began a new chapter in the global history of cotton. As a result of their decisions and the efforts of their slaves, cotton exports from the Caribbean exploded. Between 1781 and 1791, cotton imports quadrupled from the British-controlled islands alone. French planters followed suit, doubling exports of what French manufacturers called "cotton des Îles" from Saint-Domingue, the Caribbean's most important cotton island, to France between 1781 and 1791. So rapid was the growth of Caribbean cotton that by 1800 Bahamian planter Nathan Hall reported in awe that the cotton "trade has increased amazingly."

Caribbean cotton came from various sites. Those islands that had been at the forefront of cotton production earlier in the century—Jamaica, Grenada, and Dominica, for example—continued to produce cotton, but their exports remained nearly constant at around two million pounds during the 1770s, and then approximately doubled during the course of the 1780s. The increase in production was (relatively) modest because cotton had found a stable place in the local economy and because sugar cultivation, which required a significant financial investment, was hardly ever given up for cotton.

But on islands with more uncultivated land and fewer sugar plantations, production boomed. On Barbados between 1768 and 1789, cotton exports increased by a factor of eleven, from 240,000 pounds to 2.6 million pounds. First, an ant invasion had decimated Barbados's traditional crop, sugar. Then in 1780 a massive hurricane destroyed much of the island's sugar infrastructure, which could not easily be rebuilt because of limited access to raw materials from revolution-torn North America. Transformed essentially into a huge cotton plantation, Barbados became the most productive cotton island within the British Empire. Similarly, Tobago planters had exported no cotton in 1770 but shipped a full 1.5 million pounds in 1780. And planters in the Bahamas, who had grown virtually no cotton before the 1770s, by 1787 sold nearly half a million pounds to British merchants.

Significant amounts of cotton also found their way to Britain from
the French Caribbean islands. There, British merchants profited both from the slower growth of the French cotton industry and the abundant imports of slaves to Saint-Domingue above all. In 1770, for example, the French islands produced an estimated 36 percent of the total Caribbean cotton crop, compared to 51 percent for the British. Saint-Domingue alone shipped 36 percent, or more than all the British islands taken together. Twenty years later the imbalance continued. Of the 14 million pounds of cotton that the French islands produced in 1789, only about 6 million pounds were consumed in France itself, while an estimated 7.7 million pounds were exported from French mainland ports to Great Britain.  

As the dependence on cotton produced on the French-controlled islands grew among Europe’s cotton manufacturers, Saint-Domingue in particular took on a central role. In 1791, the island, which counted nearly as many cotton as sugar plantations, exported 6.8 million pounds of cotton to France, 58 percent more than eight years earlier, and substantial amounts to Britain. This rapid expansion of cotton production was fueled by the importation of a quarter million African slaves between 1784 and 1791. At the height of the cotton boom, in the 1780s, as cotton prices in France increased by 133 percent over 1770 levels, nearly thirty thousand slaves were shipped to Saint-Domingue annually. That elasticity of the labor supply, a hallmark of war capitalism, was unmatched by any other region of the world. Indeed, as mechanized spinning spread on the European continent, ever more Africans were put in shackles, forced into the holds of ships, sold on the auction block in Port-au-Prince, transported to remote farms, and then forced to clear the land and hoe, sow, prune, and harvest the white gold.  

Slavery, in other words, was as essential to the new empire of cotton as proper climate and good soil. It was slavery that allowed these planters to respond rapidly to rising prices and expanding markets. Slavery allowed not only for the mobilization of very large numbers of workers on very short notice, but also for a regime of violent supervision and virtually ceaseless exploitation that matched the needs of a crop that was, in the cold language of economists, “effort intensive.” Tellingly, many of the slaves who were doing the backbreaking labor to grow cotton had been and were still being sold for cotton cloth that the European East India companies shipped from various parts of India to western Africa.

Encouraged by their home governments, rising prices, the availability of labor, and, within bounds, land, Caribbean planters became the cutting edge of the cotton revolution. From that moment on, 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. The world’s cotton industry relied upon “ruthless spatial expansion.”

Caribbean planters had lengthy experience growing cotton—but so had Ottoman and Indian farmers. The soil and climate of the Caribbean was well suited to cotton—but so was the soil of western Anatolia or central India. Caribbean merchants moved large quantities of cotton easily to European markets—but so did the merchants of Izmir and Surat. Yet Caribbean planters, unlike Ottoman and Indian farmers, faced few constraints on land and labor. With the native population decimated and slaves arriving on an almost daily basis from West Africa, Caribbean planters’ ability to respond rapidly to newly emerging markets set them decisively apart from all other cotton growers. While powerful Ottoman and Indian landlords also resorted to coercion to force peasants to work on their cotton estates, plantation slavery, as such, never took root. Moreover, the infusion of capital that enabled the rapid reallocation of resources in the Caribbean was hampered elsewhere by the lack of private ownership of land and the continued political strength of the Ottoman and Indian rulers. Fresh land and new labor, capitalized by virtually
unrestrained European merchants, bankers, and planters, precipitated an explosion of cotton growing.

These factors were supplemented by the support, albeit mild, that planters received from their government. Already in 1768 the British Royal Society of the Arts had offered a gold medal “for the best Specimen of West-India cotton,” which was claimed ten years later by Andrew Bennet of Tobago, who had spent years studying dozens if not hundreds of varieties of cotton. In 1780, the British government levied a tariff on cotton imported on foreign boats, the “proceeds to be devoted to the encouragement of the growth of cotton in his Majesty’s Leeward Islands, and for encouraging the import thereof into Great Britain.” Later, the British Board of Trade asked a Polish botanist, Anton Pantaleon Hove, to collect cotton seeds in India and forward them to the Caribbean. And in 1786, Lord Sydney, secretary of state for the colonies, pressured by manufacturers in Manchester, called upon the governor of the West Indian colonies to encourage planters to grow cotton. In response, the governor of Dominica, John Orde, went so far as to promise free land to individuals interested in planting cotton on the island. Such state support would have seemed inconsequential viewed from the vantage point of the late nineteenth century, yet it pointed to a future in which the state’s involvement in the global securing of essential raw materials for industrial production would become a widespread concern.  

But the true importance of the Caribbean planters was not the cotton that was shipped, though that remained essential but the institutional innovation that the Caribbean experiment produced: the re-creation of the countryside through bodily coercion, something only possible under war capitalism. Cotton grown by slaves motivated and financed the unprecedented incorporation of newly depopulated territories into the world economy. Slavery and land expropriation on a continental scale created the expansive, and elastic, global cotton supply network necessary for the Industrial Revolution, and with it the mechanisms through which the needs and rhythms of industrial life in Europe could be transferred to the global countryside. In the process, a new kind of slavery (what historians have called “second slavery”) emerged that was tightly linked to the intensity and profits of industrial capitalism—a dynamic that soon drew the African continent into its grasp as well, where West African economies increasingly found their focus in supplying sharply rising numbers of workers to the Americas.

As the Caribbean cotton explosion shows, war capitalism—exactly because violence was its fundamental characteristic—was portable. Its next stop was South America. With cotton exports from the West Indies rapidly rising but demand spiraling even faster, South American farmers discovered the newly profitable cotton market. In Guyana, between 1789 and 1802 cotton production skyrocketed by a staggering 862 percent, fueled by the concurrent import of about twenty thousand slaves into Surinam and Demerara.

Even more important was Brazil. The first Brazilian cotton arrived in England in 1781, supplementing Caribbean production but soon surpassing it. Cotton was indigenous to many parts of Brazil, and for centuries its planters had exported small quantities. As part of the process of economic modernization of its Brazilian colonies in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Portugal had encouraged the growing of cotton, especially in the northeastern regions of Pernambuco and Maranhão. When early efforts
paid off, a surge in the importation of slaves caused one observer to opine that "white cotton turned Maranhão black." Though cotton would eventually become a "poor man's crop," its first explosive expansion in Brazil was fueled by larger slave plantations. As in the West Indies, cotton in Brazil would never challenge sugar and later coffee, but its share of total exports in Brazil grew to a respectable 11 percent in 1800, and 20 percent in the years between 1821 and 1830.

Without any constraints on the availability of land, as in the West Indies, or on labor, as in Anatolia, the volume of Brazilian cotton expanded sharply. Between 1785 and 1792, Brazil overtook the Ottoman Empire in cotton shipments to England. By the end of that period, nearly 8 million pounds of Brazilian cotton had landed in Great Britain, compared to 4.5 million pounds from the Ottoman Empire and 12 million pounds from the West Indies. In Maranhão—then the most important cotton region of Brazil—exports doubled between 1770 and 1780, nearly doubled again by 1790, and nearly tripled once more by 1800. For a few years in the late 1790s, the period when neither West Indian nor Ottoman cotton production had expanded sufficiently and before North American cotton swamped markets, Brazil became a very important supplier to the booming British cotton textile industry. Not only did Brazilian farmers produce significant amounts of cotton, but they were also able to grow a particularly long-staple variety that was better suited to emerging factory technology.

By the 1780s, slaves in the West Indies and South America produced the vast majority of cotton sold on world markets, and this exploitive combination of slavery and conquest fueled the Industrial Revolution all the way to 1861. John Tarleton, a successful slave trader and Liverpool cotton merchant, understood that the slave trade, the export of commodities from plantation economies, and the well-being of the British shipping industry were all "mutually blended & connected together." And the combination was stupendously profitable: Cotton and slaves made many merchants rich, with Tarleton calculating, for example, that his "fortune" had tripled between 1770 and 1800.

The risks and costs entailed in the development of its globe-spanning system of supply might have seemed an insurmountable brake on the cotton industry's development. Yet the cotton manufacturers' total dependence on a distant tropical commodity turned out to be their signal breakthrough. Indeed, their factories would likely never have expanded as rapidly without the counterintuitive gamble of relying entirely on faraway land and labor. Already by 1800, Britain alone consumed such fabulous amounts of cotton that 416,081 acres of land were needed to cultivate it. If that cotton had been grown in Britain, it would have taken up 3.7 percent of its arable land, and approximately 90,360 agricultural laborers would have been needed to work these hypothetical cotton fields. In 1860, with the appetite for cotton even greater, more than 1 million workers (or half of all British agricultural workers) would have had to work these fields, which would have taken up 6.3 million acres or 37 percent of all arable land in Great Britain. Alternatively, if we assume that the woolen industry, instead of the cotton industry, had been at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution even more land would have been needed to raise the required number of sheep: 9 million acres in 1815, and 23 million acres in 1830—or more than Britain's entire arable land area. Under both the hypothetical domestic cotton and the wool scenario, land and labor constraints would have made all but impossible the sudden expansion of cloth production. Perhaps even more decisively, such a scenario would have created unimaginable upheaval in the British and European countryside, whose social structure, like that of the Ottoman Empire and India, was not suited for such a massive and quick reallocation of land and labor. The elasticity of supply so essential to the Industrial Revolution thereby rested on reliable access to distant land and foreign labor. The ability of Europe's states and their capitalists to rearrange global economic connections and to violently expropriate land and labor were as important, if not more important, to the ascendency of the West as the traditional explanations of technical inventiveness, cultural proclivities, and the geographical and climatic location of a small group of cotton manufacturers in a remote part of the British Isles.

West Indian and South American cotton thus poured into the markets of Liverpool, London, Le Havre, and Barcelona, in effect allowing for the rapid expansion of mechanized spinning. But there were limits to this expansion. As already mentioned, the West Indian islands themselves had a rather low supply of suitable cotton lands, limiting cotton production and putting it at a long-term disadvantage with sugar. Sugar plantations there as well as in land-rich Brazil also competed with cotton plantations for labor. As a result, beginning in 1790, exports of West Indian cotton
declined absolutely. In 1803 only about half as much cotton left the West Indies as in 1790, and its market share in Britain was now reduced to 10 percent. Even preferential treatment at customs, which British-grown cotton was afforded after 1819, could not reverse the tide. By the early nineteenth century, the market share of West Indian cotton was in free fall, "accelerated by the emancipation of the negroes." In Brazil, the lack of a massive redeployment of slaves from sugar into cotton production acted as a brake on the expansion of cotton production. As cotton expert James A. Mann observed, "If Brazil could command the needful labour, there is no question but that she would become a large supplier of our wants."33

In 1791, revolution rocked the most important cotton island of all—Saint-Domingue—all but halting production of commodities for world markets, including cotton. In the largest slave revolt in history, Saint-Domingue’s enslaved population armed themselves and defeated the French colonial regime, leading to the creation of the state of Haiti and the abolition of slavery on the island. War capitalism had its first major reversal at the hands of its seemingly least powerful actors: Saint-Domingue’s hundreds of thousands of slaves. Saint-Domingue cotton production had equaled 24 percent of British cotton imports the year before the revolution, while four years after, in 1795, it was only 4.5 percent. As one British observer put it, "That Island, which has been the grand Source of Supply to us, of the Article of Cotton Wool, is, from these Causes, in a State of Anarchy, Distress, and almost Dissolution." Indeed, he predicted that it was unlikely that "the Soil of the Planters, fertilized by the Thirst and Blood of the Negroes, will always increase the Store of our Coffers, in order to add to the Excess of your Wealth, Extravagance and Voluptuousness." By 1795, cotton exports to France had fallen by 79 percent, and even ten years after the beginning of the revolution, exports had recovered to only one-third of their pre-revolutionary level. The French National Assembly compounded British supply anxieties by disallowing the export of raw cotton from French ports. The Pennsylvania Gazette in 1792 reported matter-of-factly, "The cotton and indigo . . . must have been deeply injured in 1791, as they were in season during the part of that year when the disturbances were greatest."34

The combination of rapidly rising demand for cotton and political upheaval in the Caribbean led to worrisome price spikes for manufacturers dependent on capturing new markets for cotton textiles by compet-

ing with Indian production. Throughout 1791 and 1792 John Tarleton reported to his brother that "Cotton is rising daily." By 1795 he found "Cotton up amazingly." In 1790, prices for West Indian cotton peaked at 21 pence per pound, in 1791 at 30 pence, and prices stayed consistently high throughout the 1790s. So traumatic was the experience of revolution for some cotton merchants that as late as 1913 the Rathbone family, one of Liverpool’s major cotton traders, remembered that the effect of the upheaval was a doubling of prices for cotton. Once war broke out between France and Britain in 1793, moreover, the import of French West Indian cottons into the British Caribbean ports came to an end.35

By the 1790s, therefore, it had become obvious to interested observers that the gap between the demand for and supply of raw cotton in Europe would grow rapidly and continuously for the foreseeable future. As the American writer Tench Coxe put it, "The peculiar fitness of the staple for the conversion into yarn, cloths, &c. by machinery . . . have hitherto made these demands, at home and abroad, very extensive, steady, and increasing."36 Traditional techniques of procuring cotton had clearly been insufficient. In the West Indies and Brazil, however, building on the experiences of their sugar economies, a new way of producing cotton had been invented that focused clearly on plantations and slavery. And while the production growth in these parts of the world soon reached their limits, or, as in Haiti’s case, was curtailed by revolution, there was a nearby region that seemed to meet all conditions for producing an abundant supply of cotton: the newly born United States of America. It was there that cotton production based on slavery would reach unprecedented heights.
As British cotton manufacturing exploded in the 1780s, the pressures on the global countryside to supply the crucial cotton increased at a rapid clip. It was in the middle of that decade, in the winter of 1785, that an American ship sailed into Liverpool harbor. There was nothing remarkable about such a voyage; thousands of ships had brought the bounties of North America to the shores of Britain before, filled to the brim with tobacco, indigo, rice, furs, timber, and other commodities. This ship, however, was different: In its hold, among other goods, were a number of bags of cotton. Such freight seemed suspicious, and Liverpool customs officials immediately impounded the cotton, arguing that it had to be contraband West Indian produce. When the Liverpool merchants Peel, Yates & Co., who had imported the cotton, petitioned the Board of Trade in London a few days later to permit entry, they were told that it “cannot be imported from thence it not being the Produce of the American States.”

Indeed, to Europeans in the 1780s, cotton was the product of the
The rapid expansion of cotton in the United States was partly possible because planters used the experience that their colonial ancestors had accumulated in the cultivation of the white gold. As early as 1605, settlers in Jamestown had grown cotton; by the end of the seventeenth century, travelers had introduced cottonseeds from Cyprus and Izmir to American soil. Throughout the eighteenth century, farmers continued to gather knowledge about cotton cultivation from the West Indies and the Mediterranean and planted cottonseeds from these regions, primarily for domestic consumption. During the upheavals of the American struggle for independence, planters grew larger quantities to substitute for the now absent imports of cloth from Britain, and to keep at work slaves whose usual crops—namely tobacco and rice—suddenly lacked a market. South Carolinian planter Ralph Izard, for example, eagerly gave orders in 1775 “for a considerable quantity of cotton to be planted for clothing my negroes.”

Quick expansion was made easier because substantial similarities existed between the growing of tobacco and cotton; knowledge accumulated in the cultivation of the former could be used to grow the latter. Moreover, some of the infrastructure that had facilitated the moving of tobacco to world markets could be redeployed to cotton. And during the revolutionary upheavals of the eighteenth century, planters and slaves moved back and forth between the West Indies and North America, bringing with them further knowledge about cotton planting. In 1788, for example, the owners of a slave from Saint Croix advertised him for sale in the United States as “well acquainted with the culture of cotton.” The slave-cotton paradigm invented in the West Indies now spread to the North American mainland.

In 1786, American planters also began to notice the rising prices for cotton engendered by the rapid expansion of mechanized cotton textile production in the United Kingdom. That year, planters grew the first long-staple Sea Island cotton, named after the location of their plantations on islands just off the coast of Georgia, with seeds they had brought from the Bahamas. Unlike the local cottons, this cotton had a long, silky fiber, which made it exceedingly well suited for finer yarns and cloths, much in demand by Manchester manufacturers. Though accounts vary, it is possible that a Frank Levett was the first to take this momentous step.
Levert, a native of the great cotton mart of Izmir, had left the rebelling American colonies for the Bahamas, but eventually returned to Georgia, retook possession of his land, and then began a major effort at cotton growing. Others followed his model and the planting of Sea Island cotton spread up and down the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. Exports from South Carolina, for example, ballooned from less than 10,000 pounds in 1790 to 6.4 million pounds in 1800.

Production received a decisive boost in 1791 when rebellion eliminated cotton rival Saint-Domingue, Europe's most important source of cotton, sending prices upward and scattering the entire class of French cotton planters: Some went to Cuba and other islands; many came to the United States. Jean Montalet, for example, one of many of Saint-Domingue's former cotton planters, sought refuge on the mainland, and upon his arrival in South Carolina converted a rice plantation to the growing of cotton. Revolution thus in one stroke both brought needed growing expertise to the United States and increased the financial incentive for American planters to grow cotton. But the slaves' uprising on the plantations of Saint-Domingue also ingrained a sense among manufacturers, planters, and statesmen of the inherent instability of the system of cotton slavery and land expropriations that they were about to expand in North America.

While Sea Island cotton production expanded rapidly, it soon reached its limit, as the variety failed at any substantial distance from the coast. Farther inland, a different strain of cotton thrived, so-called upland cotton, shorter in staple length, with the fiber tightly attached to its seed. It was difficult to remove the seeds with the help of existing gins, but with demand increasing and prices high, planters had their slaves work it up in a slow and tedious process by roller gins modeled after Indian charkhs.

Yet even with slave labor, the result was not adequate. Planters yearned for a device that would more quickly separate seed from fiber. In 1793, Eli Whitney, only a few months after arriving in Savannah from his college days at Yale, built the first working model of a new kind of cotton gin that was able to rapidly remove the seeds of upland cotton. Overnight, his machine increased ginning productivity by a factor of fifty. News of the innovation spread quickly; farmers everywhere built copies of the gin. Like the jenny and the water frame, Eli's gin overcame yet another bottleneck in the production of cotton textiles. As a result, in what can only be described as a "cotton rush," land on which cotton grew allegedly tripled in price after the invention of the gin, and "the annual income of those who plant it is double to what it was before the introduction of cotton."8

Armed with this new technology, cotton production spread rapidly after 1793 into the interior of South Carolina and Georgia. As a result, in 1795 significant amounts of U.S. cotton arrived in Liverpool for the first time; none, as best we know, was seized by customs. As settlers streamed into the region, many of them migrants from the upper South, the countryside was turned upside down—from a thinly inhabited region of native people and farmers who focused on subsistence crops and tobacco to one in the thrill of cotton.9

To enable such expanded production, planters brought with them thousands of slaves. In the 1790s, the slave population of the state of Georgia nearly doubled, to sixty thousand. In South Carolina, the number of slaves in the upcountry cotton growing districts grew from twenty-four thousand in 1790 to seventy thousand twenty years later, including fifteen thousand slaves newly brought from Africa. As cotton plantations spread, the proportion of slaves in four typical South Carolina upcountry counties increased from 18.4 percent in 1790 to 39.6 percent in 1820, and to 61.1 percent in 1860. All the way to the Civil War, cotton and slavery would expand in lockstep, as Great Britain and the United States had become the twin hubs of the emerging empire of cotton.10

The only substantial problem was the land, as the same patch could not be used for more than a few years without either planting legumes on it or applying expensive guano to it. As one Putnam County, Georgia, planter lamented, "We appear to have but one rule—that is, to make as much cotton as we can, and wear out as much land as we can...lands that once produced one thousand pounds of cotton to the acre, will not now bring more than four hundred pounds." Yet even soil exhaustion did not slow the cotton barons; they simply moved farther west and farther south. Newly emptied lands, portable slave labor, and the new ginning technology allowed cotton to be easily transferred to new territories. After 1815, cotton planters moved westward into the rich lands of upland South Carolina and Georgia. Their migration to Alabama and Louisiana, and eventually to Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas, was choreographed to the movement of cotton prices. While the price of cotton gradually declined over the first half of the nineteenth century, sharp price upswings—such as in the first half of the 1810s, between 1832 and 1837, and again after the mid-1840s—produced expansionist bursts.
of yarn and cloth, and the ability of new consumers to buy these cheap goods, would have founded on old realities of the traditional cotton market. The much-vaunted consumer revolution in textiles stemmed from a dramatic transformation in the structure of plantation slavery.16

The rise of the United States to dominance in world cotton markets was a radical reversal of fortunes. But why did it happen? As Tench Coxe pointed out in 1817, climate and soil alone did not explain the cotton-producing potential of the United States, because, as he put it, the white gold “can be cultivated in an immense district of the productive zones of the earth.” What distinguished the United States from virtually every other cotton-growing area in the world was planters’ command of nearly unlimited supplies of land, labor, and capital, and their unparalleled political power. In the Ottoman Empire and India, as we know, powerful indigenous rulers controlled the land, and deeply entrenched social groups struggled over its use. In the West Indies and Brazil, sugar planters competed for land, labor, and power. The United States, and its plentiful land, faced no such encumbrances.

Ever since the first European settlers stepped off their boats, they had pushed inland. The land’s native inhabitants had to reckon with what these boats brought—first germs, then later steel. In the late eighteenth century, Native Americans still controlled substantial territories only a few hundred miles inland from the coastal provinces, yet they were unable to stop the white settlers’ steady encroachment. The settlers eventually won a bloody and centuries-long war, succeeding in turning the land of Native Americans into land that was legally “empty.” This was a land whose social structures had been catastrophically weakened or eliminated, a land without most of its people and thus without the entanglements of history. In terms of unencumbered land, the South had no rival in the cotton-growing world.

With the support of southern politicians, the federal government aggressively secured new territories by acquiring land from foreign powers and from forced cessions by Native Americans. In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase nearly doubled the territory of the United States, in 1819 the United States acquired Florida from Spain, and in 1845 it annexed Texas. All of these acquisitions contained lands superbly suited to cotton agriculture. Indeed, by 1850, 67 percent of U.S. cotton grew on land that had

1811, one-sixteenth of all cotton grown in the United States came from states and territories west of South Carolina and Georgia, by 1820 that share had reached one-third, and in 1860 three-fourths. New cotton fields sprouted in the sediment-rich lands along the banks of the Mississippi, the upcountry of Alabama, and the black prairie of Arkansas. So rapid was this move westward that by the end of the 1830s, Mississippi already produced more cotton than any other southern state.13

The entry of the United States into the empire of cotton was so forceful that cotton cultivation in the American South quickly began to reshape the global cotton market. In 1790, three years before Whitney’s invention, the United States had produced 1.5 million pounds of cotton; in 1800 that number grew to 36.5 million pounds, and in 1820 to 167.5 million pounds. Exports to Great Britain increased by a factor of ninety-three between 1791 and 1800, only to multiply another seven times by 1820. By 1802 the United States was already the single most important supplier of cotton to the British market, and by 1857 it would produce about as much cotton as China. American upland cotton, which Whitney’s gin worked up so efficiently, was exceedingly well suited to the requirements of British manufacturers: While the gin damaged the fiber, the cotton remained suitable for the production of cheaper, coarser yarns and fabrics in high demand among the lower classes in Europe and elsewhere. But for American supplies, the miracle of the mass production

Moving westward: Production of cotton by U.S. states, 1790–1860
not been part of the United States half a century earlier. The fledgling U.S. government had inaugurated the military-cotton complex.

That territorial expansion, the "great land rush" as geographer John C. Weaver has called this moment more broadly, was tightly linked to the territorial ambitions of planting, manufacturing, and finance capitalists. Cotton planters constantly pushed the boundaries, seeking fresh lands to grow cotton, often moving ahead of the federal government. The frontier space they created was characterized by the near absence of government oversight: The state's monopoly on violence was still a distant dream. But these frontier planters at the rough edges of the empire of cotton had well-dressed and well-spoken company. British banker Thomas Baring, one of the world's greatest cotton merchants, for example, was instrumental in the expansion of the empire of cotton when he financed the purchase of the Louisiana lands, negotiating and selling the bonds that sealed the deal with the French government. Before doing so, Baring asked for approval from the British government for such a vast expansion of the United States, through Henry Addington, the British prime minister. So important was the meeting to Baring that he scribbled in small letters in his notepad:

Sunday, June 19: saw Mr. Addington at Richmond Park, communicated to him the particulars of the business, & answered every question. I asked distinctly if he approved the treaty & our conduct. He said that he thought it would have been wise for this country to pay a million sterling for the transfer of Louisiana from France to America, & that he saw nothing in our conduct but to approve. He appears to consider Louisiana in the hands of America as an additional means for the vent of our manufacturers & Co. in preference to France, besides other motives which we did not discuss, directly of a political nature.17

The thrust south and west was far more than just planters searching for fresh land. Expansion served many interests: of a rapidly consolidating state, of western farmers hoping for an outlet to the sea, of manufacturers' need for raw materials, and of British economic and political desires. As industrial capitalism expanded, the zone of war capitalism continued to push outward.

But internal treaties alone were not sufficient. To make the land useful to planters, this newly consolidated territory needed to be removed from the control of its native inhabitants. Already in the early 1800s, the Creeks, under duress, had given up claims to land in Georgia that was then converted into cotton farms. A decade later the Creeks suffered further defeats and were forced to sign the Treaty of Fort Jackson, ceding 23 million acres of land in what is today Alabama and Georgia. In the years after 1814, the federal government signed further treaties with the Creeks, Chickasaw, and Choctaw, gaining control over millions of acres of land in the South, including Andrew Jackson's 1818 treaty with the Chickasaw nation that opened western Tennessee to cotton cultivation and the 1839 treaty with the Choctaw nation that gave 5 million acres of land in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta to the United States in exchange for vastly inferior lands in Oklahoma and Arkansas. Alabama congressman David Hubbard invited the New York and Mississippi Land Company in 1835 to purchase lands from which the Chickasaw had been expelled, which were then turned into cotton lands: "If on my return I should meet with any thing from you in the shape of a distinct proposition to take hold of the public lands in the Chickasaw Nation, I shall then be ready to act immediately, according to the magnitude of your scheme & shall shape my course so as to meet fully the views of your capitalists in my future operation." The company bought approximately twenty-five thousand acres. In 1838, federal troops began removing the Cherokee nation from their ancestral homeland in Georgia, which was to be turned into cotton plantations. Farther south, in Florida, extraordinarily rich cotton lands
were expropriated from the Seminoles between 1835 and 1842, the longest war in U.S. history until the Vietnam War. It is no wonder that Mississippi planters, argues one historian, had “an obsessive concern with well-organized and trained militias, adequate weaponry, and a responsive federal army.”

Native Americans understood the underlying foundations of the expanding military-cotton complex: Upon removal in 1836, the chief of the Cherokees, John Ross, in a letter to Congress decried that “our property may be plundered before our eyes; violence may be committed on our persons; even our lives may be taken away; and there is none to regard our complaints. We are denationalized; we are disenfranchised. We are deprived of membership in the human family!” The coercion and violence required to mobilize slave labor was matched only by the demands of an expansionist war against indigenous people. Nothing of this kind had even been dreamed of in Anatolia or Gujarat.

If the project of continental consolidation provided access to new cotton lands, it also secured major rivers needed to carry the cotton, America’s remarkably cheap transportation costs were not preordained, but the direct result of the expansion of its national territory. Most significant here was the Mississippi, whose surge of cotton freight turned New Orleans, at the river’s mouth, into the key American cotton port. But other rivers—the Red River in Louisiana and the Tombigbee and Mobile in Alabama—mattered as well. The first steamboats appeared on the Mississippi in 1817, reducing transport costs, and by the 1830s, railroads connected the new hinterland to river and seaports. The most modern technologies thus made the most brutal exploitation of human labor possible.

The insatiable demand of cotton planters dominated the politics of the new nation, not just because of their reliance on the state to secure and empty new land, but also because of their need for coerced labor. Planters in the United States, unlike elsewhere, enjoyed access to large supplies of cheap labor—what the American Cotton Planter would call “the cheapest and most available labor in the world.” Cotton, until the advent of mechanized harvesting during the 1940s, was a labor-intensive crop. Even more than the hours required to spin and weave, the shortage of workers to harvest was the most constraining factor in its production. “The true limitation upon the production of cotton,” argued the southern journal De Bow’s Review, “is labor.” In the complex agricultural structures of Mughal India and the Ottoman Empire, rural cultivators had to first secure subsistence crops for their own use, thus limiting what they harvested for the market. Indeed, as we have seen, the shortage of labor had been one of the principal constraints on production in western Anatolia and had frustrated efforts to create cotton plantations in India. In Brazil, where slave labor was available, cotton competed poorly with the even greater labor requirements of sugar plantations. And with the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 it became difficult for West Indian planters to recruit labor.

In the United States, however, nearly any shortage could be fixed, with the right amount of money. The slave markets in New Orleans and elsewhere boomed as cotton did. And as significant, hundreds of thousands of slaves were available to grow cotton because tobacco production in the states of the upper South became less profitable after the American Revolution, encouraging slave owners there to sell their human property. As one British observer remarked perceptively in 1811, “The cultivation of tobacco in Virginia and Maryland, has been less of late an object of attention; and the gangs of negroes formerly engaged in it, have been sent into the southern states, where the American cotton planter, thus reinforced, is enabled to commence his operations with increasing vigour.” Indeed, by 1850 fully 1 million people (or one in thirteen Americans) grew cotton in the United States—most of them slaves.

The expansion of cotton production, as a result, reinvigorated slavery and led to an enormous shift of slave labor from the upper to the lower South. In the thirty years after the invention of the gin alone (between 1790 and 1820), a quarter million slaves were forcefully relocated, while between 1783 and the closing of the international slave trade in 1808, traders imported an estimated 170,000 slaves into the United States—or one-third of all slaves imported into North America since 1619. Altogether, the internal slave trade moved up to a million slaves forcefully to the Deep South, most to grow cotton.

To be sure, not all cotton in the United States was grown by slaves on large plantations. Small farmers in the southern upcountry produced cotton as well, and they did so because it provided ready cash and its cultivation, unlike the growing of sugar or rice, did not require significant capital investments. Yet despite their efforts, in aggregate they produced only a small share of the total crop. As we have seen the world over, small farmers focused on securing subsistence crops before grow-
ing marketable commodities. Indeed, 85 percent of all cotton picked in the South in 1860 was grown on units larger than a hundred acres; the planters who owned those farms owned 91.2 percent of all slaves. The larger the farm, the better the planter was able to take advantage of the economies of scale inherent in slave-based cotton production. Larger farms could afford the gin to remove seeds and press to compress loose cotton into tightly pressed bales to lower shipping costs, they could engage in agricultural experiments to wrest more nutrients from cleared soil, and they could buy more slaves to avoid any labor constraints. Cotton demanded quite literally a hunt for labor and a perpetual struggle for its control. Slave traders, slave pens, slave auctions, and the attendant physical and psychological violence of holding millions in bondage were of central importance to the expansion of cotton production in the United States and of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain.

Better than anyone else, slaves understood the violent foundation of cotton's success. If given an opportunity, they testified in vivid detail to its brutality. John Brown, a fugitive slave, remembered in 1854 how he was "flogged . . . with the cow-hide," and how overseers "hunt[ed] 'stray niggers.'" "When the price [of cotton] rises in the English market," he remembered, "the poor slaves immediately feel the effects, for they are harder driven, and the whip is kept more constantly going." Henry Bibb, another slave, remembered the fearful violence: "At the sound of the overseer's horn, all the slaves came forward and witnessed my punishment. My clothing was stripped off and I was compelled to lie down on the ground with my face to the earth. Four stakes were driven in the ground, to which my hands and feet were tied. Then the overseer stood over me with the lash." The expansion of cotton manufacturing in Great Britain depended on violence across the Atlantic. Cotton, emptied lands, and slavery indeed became so closely connected to one another that Liverpool cotton merchant William Rathbone VI, on a trip to the United States in 1849, reported to his father that "negroes & everything here fluctuates with Cotton." So crucial was slave labor that the Liverpool Chronicle and European Times warned that if slaves ever should be emancipated, cotton cloth prices might double or triple, with devastating consequences for Britain. While brutal coercion weighed like a nightmare upon millions of American slaves, the potential end of such violence was a nightmare to those who gathered the fabulous profits of the empire of cotton.

To make such a nightmare less likely, planters in the United States also drew on the third advantage that turned them into the world's leading cotton growers: political power. Southern slaveholders had enshrined the basis of their power into the Constitution with its three-fifths clause. A whole series of slaveholding presidents, Supreme Court judges, and strong representation in both houses of Congress guaranteed seemingly never-ending political support for the institution of slavery. Such power on the national level was enabled and also supplemented by the absence of competing elites in the slaveholding states themselves, and the enormous power slaveholders enjoyed over state governments. These state governments, in the end, also allowed North American cotton planters to amplify their good fortune of navigable rivers near their plantations by building railroads deeper and deeper into the hinterland. In contrast, Brazilian cotton farmers, competing with the interests of the country's powerful sugar growers, were unable to command infrastructure improvements to facilitate cotton exports. Transporting cotton over long distances on miles of horses remained expensive; transporting cotton from the São Francisco River region to the port of Salvador, for example,
almost doubled the price of cotton. In India, transportation infrastructure remained similarly poor (it was said that transporting cotton to the port added about 50 percent to its cost in India, but as little as 3 percent in the United States), as cotton merchants and growers in India lacked the capital and power to effect its rapid improvement. The political influence of slaveholders in the American Republic was also decisive because it allowed them to expand the institution of slavery into the newly acquired territories of the South and Southwest, while successfully committing the federal government to a policy of expropriating Native Americans.27

In a roundabout way, American independence had turned out to be a blessing for the European, especially the British, cotton industry. Bowing to a century of abolitionist persuasion, Britain in 1834 outlawed slavery within its empire. Some American revolutionaries envisioned a similar extinction of slavery as their own nation evolved, only to see the institution become the engine of the most important cotton-growing region of the world. And independence removed restraints from expropriating Native Americans as well, with the relationship between white settlers and North American Indians now removed from the complex negotiations of European politics. The disjunction of political from economic spaces in fact proved to be crucial for the world’s most dynamic industry—with cotton-growing slave owners dominating regional gov-

ements and exerting significant influence on the national government, their interests and the policies of the state could be aligned to a stunning degree, an impossibility for slaveholders within the British Empire.

How these factors came together can be seen, for example, in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Here, in an area of approximately seven thousand square miles, the mighty Mississippi had unloaded its rich sediments for millennia, becoming the seedbed of the world’s most productive cotton land. In 1839, as many as sixty thousand Delta slaves produced a staggering 66 million pounds of cotton, nearly ten times as much as was exported from Saint-Domingue to France during the height of its production in the early 1790s.28

For the Delta to become the chief grower of the industrial world’s most important commodity—a kind of Saudi Arabia of the early nineteenth century—its land had to be taken from its original inhabitants and labor, capital, knowledge, and state power had to be mobilized. Between 1820 and 1832 a series of treaties backed by skirmishes and armed confrontations transferred much of the land from the Choctaws—its native inhabitants—to white settlers. Using wagons, rafts, and flatboats, hopeful cotton planters brought slaves from elsewhere in the South to clear that land of its “jungle-like” vegetation, and later to hoe the soil, sow seeds, prune the young plants, and then harvest the cotton. The news that the Delta was “the most certain cotton planting area in the world” spread through the South; planters who were able to draw on sufficient capital (mostly in the form of labor) and expertise moved in. The plantations they built became substantial businesses: By 1840, Washington County, in the heart of the Delta, counted more than ten slaves for every white inhabitant. By 1850, each and every white family in the county held on average more than eighty slaves. The largest Delta planter, Stephen Duncan, owned 1,036 slaves and the value of his property by the late 1850s was estimated at $1.3 million. While not typical cotton farms, plantations in the Delta were highly capitalized businesses, indeed among the very largest in North America, and the investments necessary would have been beyond the reach of nearly every northern industrialist. Wealth, as viewed from the front porches of the lavish and elegantly furnished mansions in the Delta, appeared to flow out of the soil, the result of a strange alchemy that combined emptied lands, slave labor, and, as we will see, the never-ending flow of European capital.29

The growing domination of global cotton markets by planters in fact
fed upon itself. As cotton cultivation expanded in the southern United States and as British and eventually continental European consumers became more and more dependent on that supply, institutional links between the South and Europe deepened. European import merchants sent agents to Charleston, Memphis, and New Orleans. They corresponded with business partners across the Atlantic on a regular basis. These merchants built a dense network of shipping connections and integrated the trade in cotton with their other businesses. People engaged in the cotton trade crossed the North Atlantic frequently, forging close business connections, friendships, and even marriages. Such networks, in turn, made transatlantic trade more secure and more predictable, thus lowering costs and giving the United States another decisive advantage over its potential competitors, such as India or Brazil.

At the core of all of these networks was the flow of cotton from the United States to Europe and of capital in the opposite direction. This capital more often than not was secured by mortgages on slaves, giving the owners of these mortgages the right to a particular slave should the debtor default. As historian Bonnie Martin has shown, in Louisiana 88 percent of loans secured by mortgages used slaves as (partial) collateral; in South Carolina it was 82 percent. In total, she estimates that hundreds of millions of dollars of capital was secured by property in humans. Slavery thus allowed not just for the rapid allocation of labor, but also for a swift allocation of capital.  

With enormous riches gained from expropriated land and labor, planters invested in agricultural improvements, another illustration of how success begat further success. They experimented, for example, with various cotton hybrids drawing on Indian, Ottoman, Central American, West Indian, and other seeds, creating cotton strains adapted to particular local climates and soils, eventually crafting hundreds upon hundreds of different kinds of cotton. Most significantly, in 1806 a Natchez planter, Walter Burling, brought cottonseeds from Mexico, which had larger bolls that could be more easily picked and, according to experts, “possessed better fiber quality, especially fiber length, and was resistant to ‘rot.’” This type of cotton had been cultivated by Native Americans in the central Mexican highlands for centuries, and once brought into the United States it was appropriated by American planters, becoming the “basic germplasm for all subsequent upland cotton cultivars in the United States and around the world.” The new cotton could be picked three to four times as fast as the then common Georgia Green Seed cotton. The cruel irony was that Amerindians’ ability to develop a strain of cotton well suited for the American environment gave considerable impetus to the expropriation of their lands, and made slave labor on those lands much more productive.

Such innovations in labor control and agriculture were increasingly institutionalized by the construction of dense but distinctly regional networks for the dispersal of knowledge. Books, agricultural institutes, journals such as De Bou’s Review and the American Cotton Planter, along with regional agricultural conventions, all spread information about how to select seeds, how to organize a labor force, how to read the market, how to hoe and plant, and where to invest—in short, how to perfect a “Practical Plantation Economy.”

The Industrial Revolution in Europe also actively influenced the evolution of slavery in the American South. Gang labor, by no means new but never so prevalent as on cotton plantations, exemplified the new rhythm of industrial labor, or what one author has called “military agriculture.” The systematic mobilization of slave women and children on cotton farms further expanded their output. As a result, cotton production in the United States increased much faster than the number of slaves employed on farms. Some of that increase was related to the embrace of different cotton plants, but there was also a systematic intensification of exploitation. Plantation slavery in the nineteenth-century United States allowed for an organization of labor unlike what was possible in the world’s newly emerging industrial heartland. Because plantations were frequently larger than factories and required more substantial capital investments, and because aside from the spike in innovation around the invention of Eli Whitney’s gin in the 1790s technological progress in cotton agriculture was limited, productivity gains on plantations could only result from a reorganization of labor. Slave owners secured these productivity gains by taking almost total control of the work process—direct result of the violent domination of their workers. Nothing of that sort was possible in the world’s emerging textile mills, where workers succeeded in maintaining some of the rhythms of the farms, small workshops, and craft guilds from whence they came. The all-encompassing control of workers—a core characteristic of capitalism—experienced its first great success on the cotton plantations of the American South.

Because planters dominated labor in ways radically different from
English merchants' connection to agricultural cultivators in India, or
Ottoman landowners in Anatolia, they could drive their slaves ever harder,
as they came up with increasingly brutal methods of disciplining their
workforce. Indeed, torture, according to historian Edward Baptist, was
at the root of the ability of American planters to produce ever more cot-
ton. Innovative ways of labor accounting further helped planters squeeze
more labor out of their workers. As management scholar Rob Cooke has
argued, "There is no real question nowadays... that it [the plantation]
was a site of early development of industrial discipline." And with rising
productivity on cotton plantations, prices fell, allowing British manu-
facturers to become even more competitive in the markets of the world,
a move that, among many other things, would eventually undermine
manufacturing in India and elsewhere and make the later integration of
that countryside into the global cotton empire much easier.34

The rhythm of industrial production also entered the plantation in
other ways. Since the expansion of cotton agriculture depended on the
advance of credit, sometimes secured by mortgages on slaves, most of

which derived from the London money market, its patterns now fol-
lowed the competitive logic of markets rather than the whimsey of per-
sonal aspiration and regional circumstance—capital moved to wherever
cotton could be produced in the greatest quantities and at the chea-
est cost. To the great lament of southern planters, the factor—a man-
chant who would sell a planter's cotton, supply him with goods, and
provide credit—and with him the London money market, was a decisive
source of their wealth and power. But the London money market and
the Lancashire manufacturers depended just as much on the local experts
in the violent expropriation of land and labor. The old paternalism of
East Coast planters, shielded partially by the mercantilist logic of mutu-
ally beneficial and protected exchange between motherland and colony
of the greater British imperial economy, had given way to a freer, more
competitive, and fluid social order mediated by merchant capital. The
voracious appetite for accumulation spelt the "social metabolism" of cot-
ton production. The logic of war capitalism in fact now emanated from
its industrial (wage labor) center in Lancashire. While in the eighteenth
century, slavery had enabled industrial takeoff, it now became integral to
its continued expansion.35

The peculiar combination of expropriated lands, slave labor, and the
domination of a state that gave enormous latitude to slave owners over
their labor was fabulously profitable for those positioned to embrace it:
As early as 1807 a Mississippi cotton plantation was said to return 22.5
percent annually on its investment. Many thousands of planters moved
along with the cotton frontier to capture some of these profits. Cotton's
profitability is also revealed by the dramatic increase in the price of slaves: A young adult male slave in New Orleans cost about $500 in 1800, but as much as $1,800 before the Civil War. Consider the story of a young Georgia planter, Joseph Clay. He had bought Royal Vale, a rice plantation in Chatham County, Georgia, in 1782. He grew rice until 1795. That year, hearing of Whitney's gin, he obtained a loan of $2,000, used that money to buy additional slaves, had them convert some of the land to cotton fields, and installed a number of gins. So profitable was the undertaking that a mere seven years later he was able to repay his debt, lavishly redecorate his mansion, and buy additional slaves and gins. When Clay died in 1804, his estate was valued at $776,000. 

In similar ways, South Carolina indigo planter Peter Gaillard saw his fortunes revive thanks to the cotton boom. By 1790 Gaillard's indigo business had all but collapsed owing to the disappearance of British markets, and he had resorted to growing food for his family on his plantation. As a friend of his reported, "The disastrous ten years which preceded the introduction of cotton as a market crop involved him, as it did others, in debt and distress." In 1796, however, he began growing cotton — "a brilliant prospect now opened to the eyes of the desponding planters" — a crop so profitable that four years later he had paid back all his debts and in 1803 constructed a new mansion on his property. Coerced labor meant rapid profits; by 1824 he owned five hundred slaves. South Carolinian Wade Hampton I followed suit. His first cotton crop in 1799 allegedly netted a profit of $75,000, and by 1810 he drew $500,000 annually from his cotton plantations. His son would eventually use some of the profits to relocate to the Mississippi Delta in the mid-1840s. Prospective cotton planter Daniel W. Jordan, surveying the opportunities for cotton growing in Mississippi, "saw a field to operate in and here I can make money . . . I can in this State make as much money in 5 years as a man should want.

Fortified by their wealth, confident of their slave-sold ability to squeeze ever more cotton from the land, American cotton planters came to dominate British markets by 1802. By the 1830s they had also captured newly emerging continental European and North American markets. As a result, earlier producers, especially those in the West Indies, suffered: "The Competition, if left perfectly free and unrestricted, cannot be long maintained by the Colonialists [in the West Indies]; as the same price that yields a liberal profit to the American Cultivator, is not adequate to defray the charges of cultivation to the colonist," observed an anony-
mous letter writer in 1812. Other potential competitors, such as farmers in India, planted cotton on just as much land as North Americans as late as 1850, but their presence on world markets remained marginal.

As this cotton boom violently transformed huge swathes of the North American countryside, it catapulted the United States to a pivotal role in the empire of cotton. In 1791, capital invested in cotton production in Brazil, as estimated by the U.S. Treasury, was still more than ten times greater than in the United States. By 1801, only ten years later, 60 percent more capital was invested in the cotton industry of the United States than that of Brazil. Cotton, even more so than in the Caribbean and Brazil, infused land and slaves alike with unprecedented value, and promised slaveholders spectacular opportunities for profits and power. Already by 1820, cotton constituted 32 percent of all U.S. exports, compared to a minuscule 2.2 percent in 1796. Indeed, more than half of all American exports between 1815 and 1860 consisted of cotton. Cotton so dominated the U.S. economy that cotton production statistics "became an increasingly vital unit in assessing the American economy." It was on the back of cotton, and thus on the backs of slaves, that the U.S. economy ascended in the world.

So important had American cotton become to the Western world that a German economist remarked that "a disappearance of the American North or West would be of less significance to the world, than the elimination of the South." Southern planters, convinced of their central role in the global economy, gleefully announced that they held "THE LEVER THAT WIELD THE DESTINY OF MODERN CIVILIZATION." As the American Cotton Planter put it in 1853, "The slave-labor of the United States, has hitherto conferred and is still conferring inap-
preciable blessings on mankind. If these blessings continue, slave-labor must also continue, for it is idle to talk of producing Cotton for the world's supply with free labor. It has never yet been successfully grown by voluntary labor.

American cotton farmers had succeeded in turning themselves into the world's most important growers of the industrial age's most important commodity. Their "gigantic plantations," observed a British mer-
chant in Tellicherry, India, "now supply the materials for clothing half the civilized world." And with slave-grown cotton pouring in from the United States, the cost of finished cotton declined, making clothes and sheets affordable for a rapidly expanding market. As the Manchester
Chamber of Commerce put it in 1825, "We are firmly persuaded that it is in great measure owing to the very low price of the raw material that this manufacture has been of late years so rapidly increased." In 1845, South Carolina's cotton planters agreed: "Nearly one half of the population of Europe...have not now the comfort of a cotton shirt," constituting an "untried market...opening more and more to our enterprise." The world of cotton, which before 1780 had consisted mostly of scattered regional and local networks, now increasingly became one global matrix with a single nexus. And slavery in the United States was its foundation.\[1\]

Despite its undeniable success, the dependence of Europe's cotton manufacturers on one country and on one peculiar system of labor disquieted some consumers of raw cotton. As early as the 1810s, British manufacturers in particular began to worry that they had become too dependent on a single supplier for their valuable raw materials. In 1838, the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce and Manufactures shrilly warned of the "alarming fact that Britain is almost entirely dependant on foreign supply for this article, which is now scarcely less necessary than bread." Six years later, "A Cotton Spinner" looked with "great apprehension" at the dependence of the United Kingdom on cotton supplies from the United States. This relationship had become important just as the North American colonies embarked upon their slow and painful move away from the empire, showing that connections across the Atlantic could be severed by political and military action. Cotton manufacturers understood that their prosperity was entirely dependent on the labor of slaves and they "dreaded the severity of the revulsion which must sooner, or later arrive." By 1850, one British observer estimated that 3.5 million people in the United Kingdom were employed by the country's cotton industry—all subject to the whims of American planters and their tenous hold on their nation's politics.\[2\]

Cotton manufacturers' concerns about dependence on U.S. cotton focused on three issues. First, they feared that the United States would siphon off ever-increasing amounts of its own cotton in its own factories, which had begun to emerge in significant numbers in the 1810s, making less cotton available to European consumers. Second, British manufacturers in particular were concerned that continental producers would acquire a rising percentage of the world's cotton, competing for American supplies. Third, and most important was "the increasing uncertainty of the continuance of the system of slavery." Drawing on "the blood-stained produce" constituted a "suicidal dependence" on the "crime of American slavery."\[3\]
In 1815, Thomas Baring carefully observed the United States, expecting that "the further agitation of the Slave question might materially alter the result, acting of course, favourably on prices." How secure, after all, would slave property be in an industrializing America with increasing abolitionist sympathies? Would the political economy of southern planters collide with that of northern economic elites? And could the increasingly expansionist designs of wealthy and powerful slaveholders in the American South and their proto-nationalist project be contained within an industrializing United States? Southern planters, the "lords of the lash," emboldened by their wealth, began to lament their subordinate role within the global economy; their fledgling designs to revolutionize their own position within it were yet another threat to the system as a whole. To the "lords of the loom," raw material producers had to be politically subordinate to the will and direction of industrial capital.  

On the plantation itself, another terror was lurking. A visit to the industrial cotton fields of the "black belt" impressed on many observers that slavery was unstable because the war between slaves and their masters could turn at any point. "A Cotton Spinner" warned in 1844 that "the safety of this country depends upon our obtaining an improved supply of Cotton from British India," since in America "on the first opportunity . . . these slave-gangs will naturally disperse, the improvident negroes will cease to grow cotton, and there being no white men to supply their places; Cotton cultivation in America will terminate." He feared an "exterminating war of races—a prospect too horrible to dwell upon." Emancipation, he worried, might shake "our country . . . to its very foundations." Talk of runaways, refusals to work, and even outright rebellion kept planters and European cotton manufacturers on their toes. Merchant Francis Carnac Brown warned in 1848 of "a race of discontented slaves, ruled by tyranny, and threatening daily some ruinous outbreak, which it is known must one day come." Americans tried to explain to their European customers that slavery in the United States, unlike in Saint-Domingue, was safe—not least, as Tench Coxe put it, because of the presence of a powerful white militia and because slaves have "no artillery nor arms. Tho they are numerous they are much separated by rivers, Bayos and tracts thickly peopled with whites." But concerns remained.  

During these moments of anxiety, European cotton manufacturers looked to other regions of the world for an increased supply of cotton, to places such as Africa and India. French officials eyed Senegal in the 1810s and 1820s as a potential alternative source of cotton, but despite their concerted efforts, little cotton came. In Britain, hopes for non-American cotton focused squarely on India, whose long history of cotton exports seemed to make it superbly suited to supply British factories, not least because manufacturers believed the country had "overflowing supplies of various descriptions of cotton." And India might point toward ways to build a cotton industry not dependent on the inherent instabilities and exigencies of slavery and expropriations. The possibilities of Indian cotton were enumerated and analyzed in literally dozens of books, many with fantastically ambitious titles like Scinde & the Punjab: The Gens of India in Respect to Their Past and Unparalleled Capabilities of Supplanting the Slave States of America in the Cotton Markets of the World. Some of these books were not mere pamphlets; John Chapman, a former manufacturer of supplies for the textile industry and railroad promoter in Western India, for example, published in 1851 The Cotton and Commerce of India, Considered in Relation to the Interests of Great Britain, with over four hundred pages of detailed accounts of the soil, agricultural practices, land ownership patterns, transportation infrastructure, and trade relations of various parts of India, supported by a vast array of statistical information. Like him, most writers concluded that "the soil and climate" of India was "favourable to the growth of" cotton.  

By the 1830s, these individual voices found collective expression. In 1836, the Manchester Chamber of Commerce mentioned Indian cotton for the first time in its Annual Report. Four years later, they held a special meeting to pressure the East India Company to do something about cotton production in India, and in 1847 they sent a petition to the House of Commons to similar effect. In 1845 the Manchester Commercial Association, a rival body of local entrepreneurs, even sent a deputation to the directors of the East India Company to urge them to promote cotton growing in India, a subject "of paramount importance to the interests of this district."  

Some forward-looking manufacturers began to understand that there might be a deeper, and enduringly profitable, relationship between India as a market for their goods and India as a provider of raw materials. They imagined a world in which Indian peasants would export their cotton and in turn purchase Manchester piece goods: "Nothing can be more natural than that the inhabitants, deprived of a market for their cloths, should be encouraged to cultivate the raw material."
The agitation for Indian cotton reached its height during the 1830s, when prices for U.S. cotton rose once more. To be sure, Manchester cotton interests were still divided on the merits of state intervention to secure Indian cotton, with some believing that things should be left to the market.  

But by 1837 the “adequate supply of cotton being obtained to sustain the industry of this district” had become a major topic of discussion at the Chamber’s annual meetings. Cotton manufacturer, Chamber of Commerce president, and member of Parliament Thomas Bazley believed that “the supply of ... cotton is altogether inadequate” and demanded that more needed to be done to secure cotton from India, Africa, Australia, and other places, “precisely because the British government does possess that soil.” Calling upon spinners to organize to expand cotton production in colonial territories, he was the prime mover behind the creation of the Manchester Cotton Supply Association in 1837 “with a view to having a more abundant and universal supply.” Concerned about the increasing volatility of American politics in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott decision, the association literally went to the ends of the earth delivering cotton gins, giving advice, and distributing seeds and implements to farmers, while collecting information on various kinds of cotton and various ways of growing it. The association’s work was a microcosm of the grand project of cotton capitalists: to transform the global countryside into a cotton-growing complex.  

For cotton manufacturers, India beclouded the obvious reason that it remained one of the world’s greatest growers of the white gold. They believed that India produced more cotton than the United States; notoriously imprecise estimates spoke of up to 750 million pounds of cotton consumed annually within India, in addition to its annual exports of 150 million pounds and more. This compared favorably with total U.S. production, in 1839, of 756 million pounds. Traditionally, much of this cotton was used for domestic production, and even cotton that went into long-distance trade usually remained within India. Central Indian cotton had been traded to Madras in the south and Bengal in the east, but with the decline of the Indian cotton cloth export industry, it was increasingly brought to Bombay and from there exported to China and, in limited quantities, to Britain.  

The British East India Company had halfheartedly supported efforts to increase such exports since 1788, but the quantities involved were small, not least because of high transport costs. Indeed, until the 1830s, much more cotton was exported to China than to Europe (it paid for the company’s purchases of tea), and increases in exports to Europe usually went hand in hand with decreasing exports to China. Thus Indian cotton agriculture did not significantly become more export-oriented.  

Yet Manchester manufacturers wanted more. They pressured the British East India Company, the British government, and, later, the British colonial administration to develop a multitude of activities to encourage the growth and export of Indian cotton. Private initiative was insufficient to change India’s cotton-growing countryside, as “private companies do not answer” and thus government needed to step in. Infrastructure improvements were first and foremost on their mind, “a bridge [needed to be] built, or a railway made, or canals dug, or cotton cultivated, or machines introduced.” In 1810, the company sent out American cottonseed to be used in India. In 1816, the Board of Directors shipped Whitney gins to Bombay. In 1818, four experimental cotton farms were started. In 1829, further experimental farms were established and land was given to Europeans “to grow the approved kind of cotton.”  

In 1831, the Bombay government created an agency to purchase raw cotton in Southern Mahratta Country. In 1839, discussions emerged within the East India Company on more investments in infrastructure, experimental farms, and the shifting of capital out of opium production into cotton. Their cause was aided by legal changes: Starting in 1829, the Bombay government punished with up to seven years in prison people who fraudulently packaged and sold cotton. In 1831, another “Act for the Better Suppression of Frauds” came into effect, with similar goals. Numerous initiatives sought to increase and improve Indian cotton exports. And in 1853, as the British acquired Berar, a territory about 300 miles northeast of Bombay, Lord Dalhousie, governor-general of India, bragged that this “secured the finest cotton tracts which are known to exist in all the continent of India; and thus ... opened up a great additional channel of supply, through which to make good a felt deficiency in the staple of one great branch of its manufacturing industry.”  

As important were schemes to collect, appropriate, and disperse knowledge. Efforts to survey the state of Indian cotton agriculture proliferated. In 1810, the administration commissioned detailed reports on cotton cultivation in India. In 1848 the government of India surveyed virtually the entire subcontinent, investigating the potential of each and every region for the increased production of cotton for export. Indeed,
as elsewhere, the statistical and informational penetration of territory usually came before the incorporation into the global economy, and at midcentury, Europeans' knowledge about the climate, soil, agricultural diseases, labor supplies, and social structures in many parts of India was still tentative. Simultaneously, exotic seeds, especially of U.S. origin, were introduced into India, new gins delivered, and experimental farms established in Gujarat, Coimbatore, and elsewhere.34

The most significant of these efforts occurred in the 1840s, when the East India Company supported the creation of experimental farms run by U.S.-born cotton planters as a step toward supplanting U.S.-grown cotton with that from India. Several Americans had offered their services "to go to Hindustan." One W. W. Wood, who was "born and bred on Cotton plantations," wrote from New Orleans in June 1842 that he had been "entertaining the idea for some time of going to India to cultivate the Cotton plant on my own account but would much prefer patronage and support" of the East India Company. He received that support and went, along with nine other planters, to Bombay with seed, gins, and implements brought from the United States. The planters traveled to various parts of India, where they were given land, a house, and a cotton press to grow exotic cotton varieties, mostly from American seed. They hired workers and contracted for the growing of cotton with peasants working on their own account. At first things looked good and the Asiatic Journal reported on the "zeal and diligence" of the American planters.35

However, despite their best efforts, the farms failed rapidly. Rainfall patterns frustrated plans to use American farming practices. Limitations of infrastructure made transport difficult. There was a growing realization that American practices were too capital-intensive for the conditions in which Indian cotton cultivators found themselves. Indians also opposed the use of so-called waste lands for experimental farms because traditionally they had been able to feed their cattle without expense upon the wastelands. Moreover, farms failed because peasants paid less attention to the fields on which they worked for hire than their own fields. And then there was outright resistance. One of the American farmers, "Mr. Mercer, a few weeks ago, had his bungalow burnt down, and the estate and works, together with his whole property, destroyed, except the suit of clothes he had on him." At such moments, it certainly did not help that the Americans were "perfect strangers to the habits and Language of the country." As a result, Mercer reported in 1845 that the "the experimental farms were only a useless expense to Government; that the American system of cultivation was not adapted to India, that the Natives of India were, from their knowledge of the climate and capabilities of the soil, able to cultivate better and much more economically than any European, and requested that the farms be abolished..." 36

Indian cultivators, in effect, resisted giving up so-called waste lands, and they did not easily come to be persuaded to work for wages on farms, making a "plantation revolution" along the lines of one occurring in the Americas unlikely. Indeed, they actively opposed the impositions of colonial officials. The American cotton farmers in India complained that they were "obliged to give way to [their workers'] prejudices." They complained of the "laziness" of Indian cotton pickers, of cotton stolen from small farms, that workers went on strike, forcing them to give in to demands for higher wages, and that capital was lacking, soils were poor, and they "did not succeed in obtaining labor." Eventually they decided that wage labor did not work, with one of the planters stating categorically that "cultivation by paid labor could, under no circumstances, be profitably applied to Cotton in that part of the country."37

The experiences in India indeed seemed to confirm cotton's dependence on coercion. Yet slavery, manufacturers began to understand, could not be completely trusted. And since manufacturers' own capital and their own institutions were insufficient to create alternative systems, they turned to the state: They demanded new laws regarding land tenure to secure investments in cotton. They demanded even more investment in experimental farms and the accumulation of agricultural knowledge, more state investment in infrastructure, and a tax on the cultivators that would not discourage cotton growers from investing and improving the quantity and quality of their crops. Cotton capitalists in Britain and India understood that capital had to be infused in the countryside, but they found the conditions there too risky. As the Bombay Chamber of Commerce argued, "An Extension of production, so great as to reach many million of pounds annually, and an improvement in processes so radical as to involve a change in the customs and habits of a whole people, cannot be produced by measures of petty detail, but can only be looked for from the operation of causes and principles of commensurate extent and force."38

The British East India Company defended itself vigorously against charges by cotton manufacturers and merchants that it did not suffi-
ciently encourage cotton cultivation in India. By 1836, the East India Company had already published a book in its defense, *Reports and Documents Connected with the Proceedings of the East India Company in Regard to the Culture and Manufacture of Cotton-Wool, Raw Silk, and Indigo in India*, in which it listed in great detail the myriad of activities it had undertaken. The company accused the merchants instead, demanding from them more vigilance when acquiring cotton in India and a willingness to purchase only clean, well-ginned cotton. As it happened, European cotton merchants and colonial officials would spend the next fifteen years accusing one another of being responsible for the inferior state and insufficient quantities of Indian export cotton.59

Yet despite all the bickering and all of these efforts, Indian cotton continued to play only a very minor role on world markets and posed no threat whatsoever to the supremacy of American-grown cotton. To be sure, more Indian cotton came to the United Kingdom, not least because former exports to China were redirected toward Europe. But despite that redirecting of Indian cotton, its market share in the U.K. remained low—ranging from 7.2 percent during the 1830s to 9.9 percent during the 1850s. “The success which has attended the cultivation of this article has not been so great as could be wished,” admitted the Revenue Department in 1839. More categorically, for the Bombay Chamber of Commerce, the efforts to improve and expand cotton exports “resulted in signal failure.”60

As the failed experimental farms had suggested, one important reason was the problematic transportation infrastructure. Cotton was usually brought to market on bullocks and carts, an extremely slow and expensive way to transport the raw material. As late as 1854, there were only thirty-four miles of railroad in India. One expert indeed argued that American cotton was so much more competitive than Indian cotton because of the vastly better system of railroads, and, one should add, a vastly superior system of rivers. There was a disjuncture between the industrial rhythm of Lancashire and the rhythms of economic life in India’s cotton-growing countryside. War capitalism had succeeded in bridging this gap by resorting to bodily coercion elsewhere, but not in India.61

Perhaps more important than the lack of adequate infrastructure was that the pattern of production of Indian cultivators did not articulate well with the needs of production for export. Indian peasants were still deeply embedded in a cotton economy separate from the cotton upstarts in Europe. They produced cotton for domestic consumption, and more often than not produced their own clothing. What Britain saw as a “failure” is more usefully viewed as evidence for the vast differences in the possibilities and the priorities of cotton production. The monocultural production of cotton, so prevalent in the American South, was unknown. Indian cultivators gave preference to subsistence crops, because they feared they would starve if their market crop did not succeed—one observer described “the cultivators growing Cotton & Grains in their respective fields together, and indiscriminately as their inclinations or interests dictate.” Local peasants grew cotton only “as a secondary crop,” lamented a British collector.62

Moreover, Indians were reluctant to embrace new methods of cultivation and new ways of preparing cotton for market. They resisted the use of exotic seeds. They continued to gin their cotton by footroller or charka. This resistance to different ways of growing and processing cotton, so maddening to the British colonials, was entirely rational from the standpoint of Indian cultivators. After all, the technologies they employed were well adapted to local social and environmental conditions, and so were the indigenous seeds. Moreover, the peasants’ biggest customers were indigenous spinners, so they grew cotton that they knew would appeal to the local markets. Under conditions of extreme capital scarcity, it made sense to focus on subsistence crops, proven technology, and established markets. And since capital was not forthcoming, neither from European merchants nor from Indian traders, the revolutionizing of production was difficult if not impossible. Creating a rural proletariat, potentially another strategy to gain control over production, proved just as impossible without clear-cut private property in land, which could be fashioned only with massive expropriations and a powerful presence of the state.63

Just as peasants retained control over land, their labor, and the way they produced cotton, indigenous merchants remained powerful in the circuits of exchange, effectively limiting Western encroachment and, with it, the revolutionizing of the countryside. Trade in cotton was until the 1860s still largely dominated by Indian agents, brokers, middlemen, merchants, and even exporters. Despite “strenuous efforts . . . made by British interests to adapt the marketing of cotton to the needs of the export economy,” they largely failed. In 1842 the Bombay Chamber of
Commerce took up a perpetual question: "Why is British capital, so powerful everywhere else, and from which so much was expected to be done for India, here so wholly inoperative?" They listed numerous disadvantages to European capitalists: They were few in number, with only forty European merchants in Bombay dealing in cotton. They had to adapt "to a pre-existing state of commerce." They lamented "the opposition and imposition that must inevitably be encountered." And they had to compete with local spinners.

Even when Western merchants operated in the cotton-growing districts, they met opposition at every point: "The cultivators were taught to distrust them, in consequence of their being Europeans, to demand for their Cotton a price far beyond what they accepted from Native dealers. A similar imposition was attempted in every thing—the price of labour, the hire of carts, the rent of warehouses, and the rates of charka men." As a result, the idea of "the maintenance of Establishments in the interior" for European merchants was quite unthinkable and English merchants limited themselves "to the purchase of Cotton when brought here [Bombay] to market." Even though they knew of the need for "Mercantile Agency in the interior of the country" as a precondition for the recasting of cotton production, they were not likely "to risk in a place so remote from their control the large amount of capital requisite to erect the buildings, and furnish the advances to the cultivators, which would be necessary to keep up permanent establishments in Guzerat." In Berar as late as 1846, "the Cotton is usually purchased in small quantities by itinerant Dealers at the Villages where it is produced," with much of the cotton spun by the farmers themselves, and "with no Capitalist in the Country who could make advances to any great extent worth mentioning." Unlike in the British parliamentary committee in 1847-48 deemed might be necessary: "for European capitalists to place themselves in direct communication with the cultivators of the soil."  

In short, Europeans had only very superficially penetrated India's cotton growing. Western merchants had no impact whatsoever on how cotton was produced in the Indian countryside. They had just as little impact on the ways cotton moved from its producers to the traders on the coast. British efforts to grow cotton on large farms with wage labor failed spectacularly, not least because labor could not be mobilized. One superintendent of such a cotton farm wrote that "these people all refuse to come to the Farm when the villagers require their services, and some who have been paid by Government by the month went away saying they were sick and unable to work in the Morning, and in the evening I found them working for the villagers." 66

Given such troubles, coerced labor seemed an attractive option. Indeed, the example of the great slave-based American system of cotton growing led one commercial resident to ask in 1831 if it might not be better if the company would engage in "a little gentle coercion." Another writer similarly suggested that Europeans should employ "apprentices from the Orphan Schools," while others favored the use of prison and convict labor. All these came to naught—and with them European-run cotton plantations. Instead, the East India Company had to engage constantly with local rulers, local power structures, local property ownership patterns, and local ways of producing things. British difficulties in India clarify the decisive difference from the United States. Though settler conflicts with Native Americans were costly, both in lives and treasure, the result left settlers in full control of the land and its resources. Indigenous ways of doing things were no longer. The local was simply obliterated. 67

Indian peasants, like their counterparts in Anatolia, western Africa, and elsewhere, had shaped a world in which they could resist the onslaught of European merchant capital. Since Europeans were unable to transfer bodily coercion and all-encompassing expropriation of land to these regions of the world, and since they lacked the power to force some other alternative system of raw material production, much to their lament, their dependence on the United States deepened. As Mr. Dunbar, commissioner of Dhaka, concluded in 1848, "In this ancient and populous Country where land is valuable and rents high, where agricultural Service is almost unknown and the want of skill, energy and enterprise of the agricultural population is proverbial, where the produce is so inferior and the Cost of transportation necessarily so high, competition with America seems a hopeless task." 68

In contrast to India, Egypt contained the possibility for coercion, expropriation, and even slavery. Cotton as a major export staple came late to Egypt, during the reign of Muhammad Ali Pasha in the 1820s. As part of Ali's effort to create a vibrant domestic cotton industry, in the late 1820s he brought Louis Alexis Jumel, a French textile engineer long
since removed to New York City, Jumel chanced across a cotton bush in a Cairo garden with unusually long and strong fiber. With the support of Ali, he developed the strain further, and by 1821 was already harvesting substantial amounts of what came to be called Jumel cotton, finding ready markets in Europe.

Ali understood the potential of this new export crop and ordered it grown throughout the country. Coercion was integral to this project from the beginning. Peasants were forced to cultivate cotton on state-owned lands for their yearly corvée duty, a forced-labor tax. On their own lands they were also forced to plant cotton in specific ways, to sell their crop to the state, and to work without pay. The government set prices for the cotton and controlled all aspects of its transport and sale to foreign merchants in Alexandria, who were explicitly disallowed to directly purchase cotton from Egyptian growers. Workers were also forced to dig canals to water the crop and to build roads that crisscrossed Lower Egypt to move it to market. As Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review observed in New York in 1843, "Cotton is not willingly cultivated by thefellahs, and would probably be scarcely produced at all but through the despotic interference of the pasha." In Egypt, unlike the United States where force was exerted by private individuals, violent coercion descended upon rural cultivators from a premodern state.

The Egyptian state also dominated the cotton trade itself. Until the 1850s, in contrast to indebted American planters, Egyptian rulers succeeded in limiting the influence of foreign merchants on the domestic trade in cotton, despite their centrality in organizing the export trade from the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria. The government purchased the cotton at fixed prices, collected it at central warehouses, and then shipped it to Alexandria, where Ali was the only seller of the raw material to foreign merchants. In the 1820s and 1830s, between 10 and 35 percent of the revenues of the Egyptian state derived from this sale of cotton.

Egyptian cotton came to play a significant role in supplying European manufacturers. British factory owners noted in 1835 that such exports had "materially checked the advances which lately occurred in the prices of all other Cottons." But the prime value of Egyptian cotton, they argued, was that it could substitute for American long-staple Sea Island cotton, which they considered important "in the event of any political event depriving us altogether of the Cotton of the United States."

The cataclysmic event did not materialize. Not yet. Instead, cotton flowed ever more cheaply out of the American South. Slavery and the expropriation of native lands, fueled by European capital, combined to feed raw materials relentlessly into Europe's core industry. The massive infusion of European capital transformed the American countryside; land became wealth, and linked across great distances slaves and wage workers, planters and manufacturers, plantations and factories. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, slavery had become central to the Western world's new political economy. But this capitalism, based on territorial expansion and violent domination of labor, was also inherently unstable: As the Bremer Handelsblatt put it in 1853, "the material prosperity of Europe hangs on a thread of cotton. Would slavery suddenly be abolished, cotton production would fall at one stroke by 6th, and all cotton industries would be ruined."

Relief for cotton-hungry manufacturers, ironically, came from unexpected quarters, for unexpected reasons: from the slow but steady collapse of competing circuits of cotton manufacturing in Asia. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, local cotton craft networks remained a powerful presence in the world. In Africa, Latin America, and throughout Asia, the growing of cotton for household use or local markets remained important; indeed, it is entirely possible that as late as midcentury more cotton entered such limited circulation than entered industrial production. In large parts of Africa, observed Thomas Eliot as late as 1886, "indigenous Cotton has from time immemorial been both
grown and manufactured, and the natives are for the most part clothed in fabrics of their own production.”

In China as well, using traditional methods of production, spinners and weavers, working mostly in their houses and drawing on the labor of their dependents, continued to serve their very large domestic market. Most of the cotton they consumed came from their own or their neighbors’ fields, while others bought cotton from the large cotton merchants of Shanghai and elsewhere. “Early in the fine autumnal mornings,” observed a British traveler in 1845, “the roads leading into Shanghae are crowded with bands of coolies from the cotton farms,” testifying to a world of cotton distant from the circuits of growing, production, and consumption dominated by Europeans. Japan too had a flourishing domestic trade in locally grown cotton, and produced large amounts of cotton goods in homes and workshops. And Bengal, despite the beginning decline of its export manufacturing industry, still imported huge quantities of raw cotton in the first years of the nineteenth century. In 1802, it was said that Bengal grew a little more than 7 million pounds of cotton, but imported more than 43 million pounds, principally from western India, competing with China and Lancashire for the raw material of its core industry. Despite British designs to the contrary, India continued to be the most prominent example for such alternative circuits of cotton.

Yet while local and regional networks persisted, they would never again flourish. These smaller networks, defined by custom, convenience, and profit, were undermined by the ever-widening veins of European capital and state power. Indeed, the cheapness of cottons enabled by slavery in the United States would help undermine local manufacturing everywhere. Many times over, indeed, the empire of cotton would advance what historian Karen Wigen has called the “making of a periphery.” Tench Coxe understood that process already in 1818: The export of British piece goods to India, he perceptively observed, would force Indians “to turn to raising cotton instead of making piece goods they cannot sell.” Across the nineteenth century, Europeans gambled on the efficacy of war capitalism again and again; each time they succeeded in planting new fields, in coercing more slaves, in finding additional capital, they enabled the production of more cotton fabrics at cheaper prices, and they pushed their cotton rivals to the periphery. The destruction of each of these alternative circuits of cotton, in turn, would further tip the balance of power in many parts of the world’s countryside, making more territory and more labor vulnerable to the encroachment of the global economy. The great irony of this rapacious cycle of war capitalism, as we will see, is that its success laid the foundation for its own demise.

But any hint of demize was distant. In the first half of the nineteenth century, war capitalism seemed a vast and impenetrable machine, a painfully efficient mechanism for profit and power. As Britain’s power grew, capitalists in other regions of the world saw the possibilities inherent in the marriage of new technologies and bodily coercion. Certainly, many observers were anxious about the warlike expropriation of native peoples, the violence on the plantation, and the social turmoil in England’s industrial cities. Yet wealth and power beckoned to those able to embrace that new world. Throughout France, the German lands, Switzerland, the United States, Lombardy, and elsewhere, capitalists tried to follow the path laid down by Manchester.