

AFD Ep 358 - The Cotton Gin and Southern Capitalism [Bill/Nate] - Recording 3/14/21

- Episode Premise: Too many northern analysts were (and remain to present day) incapable of understanding the transformation (via the cotton gin) of antebellum Southern agriculture from a more traditional feudal farming mode into a proto-industrial agricultural plantation and forced labor camp.
- "Empire of Cotton" by Sven Beckert (2014) - a history book on Southern plantations that argued they should be viewed as forced labor industrial camps for farm production.
 - War Capitalism - p38, 63
 - Cotton mill owner MPs
 - Free labor fails to cultivate cotton?
 - Cotton Gin - suited for American upland cotton as opposed to finer sea island cotton - productivity up by factor of 50 overnight
 - 1790 - 1.5 mil
 - 1800 - 36.5 mil
 - 1820 - 167.5 mil
 - Exports increased by a factor of 93 (1791-1800) and grew by factor of 7 by 1820
 - Gin damages the fiber but this is suited for British lower-class clothing market
 - American expansion, Indian wars - war for cotton growing Seminole land 1835-42
 - Creeks, Choctaw, Chickasaw lands bought for cotton production after removal p107
 - P108 Cherokee chief John Ross:
 - Territorial movement of slaves to upland cotton growing counties (SC counties 18% slave in 1790 but 61% slave by 1860) - a million slaves moved to the deep south
 - Soil exhaustion fuels westward expansion
 - Did Francis Cabot Lowell do industrial espionage to get the Arwright water frame loom
 - Mortgages using slaves as collateral, economies of scale with violent control p114 (LA-88% loans used slaves as collateral -hundreds of millions of dollars in capital)
 - Joseph Clay p118
 - Grew rice until gin was invented
 - Galliard indigo
 - Manufacturing
 - Abuses - Ellen Hooton p 176
 - Productivity can only be improved with violent control

EPISODE OUTLINE:

This week on the show we're talking about the cotton gin and southern capitalism before and shortly after the American Civil War. While the southern plantation owners and slavers might have been live-action role-playing as a feudal aristocracy, in reality, they were also in the process of mechanizing their agricultural production and integrating into the northern capitalist economy, and we need to understand that process to better understand US history and the history of global capital. Before we get into the book we'll be talking about today, let's go over some basics about cotton, the cotton gin, and what it did.

- Introduce the cotton gin and its usage
- Overview of the book: Changes in production & economy (export stats), some key quotes
- Creation of the cotton gin and other related inventions at the time (water loom)
- How these inventions and cotton became inextricably linked to slavery

- How production changed (economies of scale in plantations) and the southern economy as a whole shifted into cotton

Plantations as forced labor camps (compare to our episode last year on northern prison factory slavery and convict-leasing farm labor:

<http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2020/07/21/july-19-2020-prison-labor-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-317/>)

- Financialization of slaves: Debt to buy slaves, debt backed by slaves as collateral

- Which lands were used for cotton? (River lands, early Indian wars) Why was it faster to be adopted in the US than India, Brazil, Egypt, etc.?

- Slaves vs free labor in cotton production

- Western expansion was going to have to happen and that implication caused the Civil War

Depleting land/soil quality: <https://modernfarmer.com/2016/10/kudzu/>

- Changes during and after the war: British imperial production increased, but then sharecropping & convict-leasing system rebounded southern production stronger than ever

- You can't separate the slave cotton economy from the free labor textile mill economy

- Mid-20th century and modern conditions (Central Asia, India, etc.)

Concluding sum-up: Cotton was only profitable for massive production after the mechanization of the cotton gin and forced reorganization of labor on a large scale and forced expropriation of native land to support this new production.

- Some quick [wiki notes](#) that summarize the situation concisely:

- *Prior to the introduction of the mechanical cotton gin, cotton had required considerable labor to clean and separate the fibers from the seeds.[30] With Eli Whitney's gin, **cotton became a tremendously profitable business, creating many fortunes in the Antebellum South.** Cities such as New Orleans, Louisiana; Mobile, Alabama; Charleston, South Carolina; and Galveston, Texas became major shipping ports, deriving substantial economic benefit from cotton raised throughout the South. **Additionally, the greatly expanded supply of cotton created strong demand for textile machinery and improved machine designs that replaced wooden parts with metal. This led to the invention of many machine tools in the early 19th century.[1]** The invention of the cotton gin caused massive growth in the production of cotton in the United States, concentrated mostly in the South. Cotton production expanded from 750,000 bales in 1830 to 2.85 million bales in 1850. **As a result, the region became even more dependent on plantations that used enslaved American labor, with plantation agriculture becoming the largest sector of its economy.[31]** While it took a single slave about ten hours to separate a single pound of fiber from the seeds, a team of two or three slaves using a cotton gin could produce around fifty pounds of cotton in just one day.[32] The number of slaves rose in concert with the increase in cotton production, increasing from around 700,000 in 1790 to around 3.2 million in 1850.[33] The invention of the cotton gin led to an increased demands for slaves in the American South, reversing the economic decline that had occurred in the region during the late 18th-century.[34] The cotton gin thus "transformed cotton as a crop and the American South into the globe's first agricultural powerhouse".[35] Because of its inadvertent effect on American slavery, and on its ensuring that the South's economy developed in the direction of plantation-based agriculture (while encouraging the growth of the textile industry elsewhere, such as in the North), the invention of the cotton gin is frequently cited as one of the indirect causes of the American Civil War.*