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978-0-521-16670-6 — Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World
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1 INTRODUCTION: GLOBAL COTTON AND GLOBAL HISTORY

This book is a history of cotton textiles, but also a story narrated through cotton textiles. It is a story of how the world we live in has changed over the last thousand years. Cotton today is a very large industry, the most common material for our clothing and furnishings, a widely traded commodity, as well as the source of the means of living for millions of cultivators, workers and large and small traders. Cotton has also a cultural value: cotton textiles are consumed across the entire world and the cotton fibre has acquired specific social and cultural meanings. We think of it as a fabric softer and more casual than wool or silk, and more 'organic' than synthetics; we like our blue jeans, our T-shirts and cotton underwear.

One strand of this book is a narrative of how cotton came to be such a ubiquitous commodity, material and product. A thousand years ago the presence of cotton was limited. Raw cotton was cultivated and manufactured only in specific parts of the world. Slowly it entered into the consuming habits of millions of people, especially in the Indian subcontinent.[1] This book narrates the success of cotton in becoming global. But what does 'global' mean? Cotton came to be part of the production, exchange and consumption of many societies around the world. By 1300 India had developed a sophisticated series of regional industries specialised in the production of different types of cotton textiles that were traded across the Indian Ocean.[2] Cotton textile production was a flourishing industry also in China and had made inroads into Southeast Asia and in parts of Africa. Cotton and cotton textiles became 'global' not just by virtue of being contemporaneously present in different places, but also by their capacity to connect different corners of the world. Cotton textiles were probably the most traded commodity in the medieval and early modern world. However the 'globalisation' that cotton brought about was a tenuous linking of different places across Asia, some parts of Africa and Europe, rather than a thick web of connections.[3]

A world that produces and exchanges more over time is a world that becomes richer: people are busy at the loom or at cultivating raw cotton; others might

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buy cloth, allowing them to specialise in producing other commodities; traders earn from exchange; states impose taxes and duties. And this leads us to the second aspect of a story of cotton, one that is not about cotton itself but is narrated *through* cotton. Cotton was over a millennium one of the most important industries in the world. This is not an uncontentious claim, but the geographical extension and later history of industrialisation of cotton textiles makes it an acceptable generalisation. Hence cotton can be used as a lens through which to read other global phenomena that cotton came to exemplify and possibly explain. In this sense, a book on global cotton is also an example of how global economic history can be written.

The wealth that cotton brought about was not equally distributed. We live in a world with profound differences between industrialised, developing, and what used to be called third world countries. As the world 'progressed', some places became richer than others. The western world (Europe, North America and some outposts in East Asia, namely Japan and Australasia) is several times richer than many countries in Africa or Asia. Although more or less everyone has become richer over time, inequality has increased. Right now people living in the western world are approximately fifteen times richer than their ancestors three centuries ago. At the same time, however, there are parts of the world where famine is still a common occurrence and in which vast parts of the population live with less than 2 dollars a day.[4]

What has all of this to do with cotton? This material, commodity and industrial product contributed significantly to the phenomenal economic growth of the world in the last thousand years, but it is also partly to blame for the intensification of inequality. This book tells a story that has a happy ending, but basically for its leading economic character, namely the western world.

Argument

Cotton's primary position in the histories of economic development is hardly news. It has become a truism that cotton was the fuel of the industrial revolution. The story goes that cotton came to be the first mechanised sector of an island economy in the northwestern part of Europe called England. There and for the first time humanity used efficient machines to produce large quantities of textiles that were cheap. Large-scale factories emerged employing (and exploiting) millions of workers. Here was the beginning of what we call a modern industrial society.

I am purposely using the language of primary school texts, as this is the notion in the minds of millions of people. None of the facts are wrong, but

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the story might not be as transparent as we would like to imagine. It suggests a narrative of how one part of the world – mainly on the basis of its own initiative – became rich. It does not say much, however, about why other parts of the world did not do the same. This book tells a different story, of how cotton changed the way in which economies around the world worked. Europe, by using new technologies and imported raw materials from other continents, and by selling finished products to the entire world, became rich. The balance of economic development tipped away from Asia, especially from India, where cotton had been a very large industry. This marks the beginning not just of modern industrialisation but also of a 'divergence' between different parts of the world: the rich and the poor.

My explanation will be complicated, geographically dislocated and, in an attempt to avoid familiar tropes (modernity; mechanisation, etc.), difficult to simplify. It will not claim any special virtue for Europe (or England); rather, it will attempt to explain what happened in one location by linking it to what happened elsewhere in the world. Global history exposes how events located in a precise space and time (the industrial revolution – England – *c.* 1780) are in reality the fruit of complex interactions between different parts of the world (for instance between factories in England and artisans in India; between cotton plantations in the Americas and consumers in Africa). A global approach attempts to be *systemic*, that is to say, to consider possible explanations not just by looking inside but also outside the 'black box'. Let me give you an example: in 1931 two fine scholars, Alfred P. Wadsworth and Julia de Lacy Mann, published what is still a highly cited book.[5] Their narrative of the rise of the cotton industry in England came to influence generations of historians and informed the general public. Their way of framing the problem was basically regional. It was about the rise of a region of England, not even England as a whole. Theirs is a story told by a narrating voice standing in Lancashire. This book has a different agenda. While Wadsworth and Mann studied Lancashire in the belief that they could understand how this region changed the world, my book looks at the world with the anticipation that it can explain what happened in Lancashire.

So far I have given particular importance to the role of cotton and cotton textiles in revolutionising the world at a specific time, namely the end of the eighteenth century. I have taken a well-established story – that of industrialisation – and claimed that I wish to explain it in a more global way. Would it not be easier to consider a short span of time, perhaps a couple of centuries, as Wadsworth and Mann did? As my explanation aims to be global, it also needs to go back in time and see the evolution of an industry, a material and a product. The risk taken in concentrating on a specific period is that of producing a truncated and partial account that misses many of the 'backward

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linkages' to a past that, although not destiny, created a path for future change and development. Plainly said, this book shows how cotton textiles, in the period before the seventeenth century, came to shape a world of exchange, economic welfare and socio-cultural relations that was very different from the one shaped by cotton from the eighteenth century onwards.

The book starts by considering the role of cotton as an industry and commodity to be found in different areas of the world, and especially in India. During the period between 1000 and 1500 CE, the subcontinent came to be regarded as the most efficient manufacturer of cotton textiles in Eurasia, and its products were sought after from the Mediterranean to Japan. Fast-forward in time to the nineteenth century, and the world that cotton helped to form is very different. By the early decades of the nineteenth century Europe had become the main location of production of cotton textiles in the world; cotton textiles were produced through a new system of manufacturing, and were sold by European traders across the entire world. One of the main aims of this book is to understand how and why that happened. The reply depends as much on understanding the end point in England, as understanding the point of departure in India.

There is a second reason why I consider such an enormous swathe of time. Change can either be sudden and quick or protracted and slow. The traditional story of the industrial revolution (and the very term betrays it) is more on the 'sudden and quick' side of the spectrum, though there is an entire body of literature discussing how quick and sudden a revolution must be to qualify as 'revolutionary'. The shift to a more global perspective has not changed this perspective, and Kenneth Pomeranz – to whom we owe the popularisation of the idea of Divergence – thinks that Europe escaped a common path of slow economic growth suddenly at the end of the eighteenth century.[6] This book instead tells a story of change that is rather slow. Factories might have materialised in England suddenly, but they are epiphenomena, the symptoms of something else. Economic historians accord too much importance to measurable outcomes. I am more interested in the process that brought us from a world in which India dominated the production and trade of cottons to a world in which Europe emerged as an industrial powerhouse. Processes take time, and this book argues that the transition built up over several centuries.[7]

The second part of the book shows how the relocation of cotton manufacturing, the changing modalities of production, and the relationships of power that it supported were part of a complex process formed from many different variables, not all of which led to the unidirectional shift of production to Europe. It was a process that was at times quite random, that had no *deus ex machina* type of rationale that gave it purposefulness and direction. In this sense, the story that

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I tell in this book is quite different to a more deterministic story still found in many economic histories.

It would be incorrect to say that historians are not interested in processes of change, or that I am the first to care about them. Economic historians are as much interested in measuring outcomes (levels of production) as they are in explaining them. But by and large they tend to explain 'it all' parsimoniously. They attribute all the merit (or blame) to one or a limited range of variables. Both the industrial revolution and divergence have been in turn explained by: culture, technology, resources, consumption, wages, institutions, and so on. The list could continue, but these variables seem to be nearly always exclusive. To see one or a small set of factors as the explananda of everything makes for a memorable narrative and a good argument with rivals who support other variables. Yet, when we are considering complex social, economic and cultural phenomena over the best part of several centuries, it appears to be a rather narrow way of accruing alternative explanations.

This book tells a story of change that is not just about long processes; it sees change itself as the product of a variety of interconnected variables; it deals with consumption, trade, culture, technology, and so on, and argues that it was their interactions that produced momentous change. This way of conceptualising change has the weakness of appearing timid, resistant to admitting its 'real' causes and indifferent at shouldering other explanations. History is not about historians being right or wrong, but about trying to create a convincing explanation of a dynamic past.

Content

The three parts of this book each consider the interrelationship between resources (especially raw cotton), exchange (trade and consumption) and production (technologies, organisations, and the role of institutions and human agency).

Part one entitled 'The First Cotton Revolution: a Centrifugal System', considers the long period from *circa* 1000 to the sixteenth century. During this period cotton textiles were already a global industry and South Asia dominated their production and trade. I call this global system *centrifugal*, as it was based on processes of diffusion of resources, technologies, knowledge and the sharing of profits. India was the core of a global system that was only loosely coordinated by that subcontinent. Whilst enjoying the competitive advantage provided by the high quality of local production, most of the areas with which India interacted engaged in their own right in the cultivation of raw cotton, its processing and

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manufacturing into cloth. They together formed a system marked by competition and symbiosis. Trade was structured through a network of Asian intermediaries and consumers were keen to integrate local with exotic commodities, and the latter were customised to suit the taste and local meaning attributed to cloth. Cotton textiles were central to the articulation of a global system structuring itself mostly through 'nodes' of trade. India indeed emerged as a core area, but over time its position was weakened by processes of osmosis dominated by a centrifugal logic.

The second part of this book, entitled 'Learning and Connecting: Making Cottons Global', asks what was the contribution of Europeans operating outside the continent's borders to the subsequent rise of Europe as a new global core for cotton textile production. Historians have accorded particular significance to the coming of European traders (Portuguese, and later Dutch, English, French and other state-sponsored trading companies) to the Indian Ocean after 1500.[8] The importation of Indian cottons into Europe was clearly important, but it was not the only contribution deriving from the intensification of world trade. The European chartered companies provided the knowledge necessary to engage with a complex variety of fabrics. Consumers in Europe had to learn how to integrate cotton textiles into their dress and furnishings. European merchants also transformed cotton textiles into an Atlantic commodity for both American and African consumers. And finally Europe acquired techniques of printing and dyeing from Asia that came to transform the aesthetic vocabulary of textile production and consumption.

No one can deny the unprecedented (revolutionary) development of cotton manufacturing in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. Yet, I argue in the second part of this book that this was the end result of a process that took at least two centuries and in which Europe relied heavily on knowledge, ideas, expertise, materials and commodities from the rest of the world. I call this a process of 'learning' by Europe, in engaging with cotton textiles in terms of production, consumption, trade and in understanding the potential of an 'Asian' fibre. What Europe learned by looking and venturing outside its own borders was of fundamental importance for the subsequent shift (from India to Europe) and reconfiguration (from artisanal to industrial) of a world-important industry such as the cotton textile. Europeans exploited the openness of the Indian Ocean system, as 'late participants' to a continuing centrifugal process, to draw together a series of factors, conditions and structures necessary to make cotton textiles a new and integral part of European manufacturing, trade and consumption. But the continent also relied on endogenous factors such a strong human capital, a specific state-led social and economic structure, and long-standing expertise in the manipulation of other fibres.

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Europe could have matured into another area among the many in which cotton spinning and weaving were carried out along proto-industrial lines. This was not to be. The final part of this book, entitled 'The Second Cotton Revolution: a Centripetal System', explains how cotton was central to the story of 'why Europe grew rich', as Parthasarathi puts it.[9] 'Learning' evolved into the structuring of a new system in which Europe became not just the global centre for production and trade in cotton textiles, but also embraced a new system of manufacturing. In the 'second cotton revolution', manufacturing was as central as trade had previously been in the Asian 'first cotton revolution'.

Historians have argued for the centrality of manufacturing, but their explanations have closely focused on the role of technological innovation in spinning and weaving that characterised Europe alone.[10] My book restores an emphasis to the importance of finishing and raw materials and argues that manufacturing positioned itself within the structure of a new global system that differed from its Asian forerunner in several respects. This was a centripetal system, one based on the capacity of the centre to 'exploit' resources and profits towards its productive and commercial core, rather than a centrifugal system based on the diffusion of resources, technologies, knowledge and the sharing of profits. The new system was one of competition and exclusiveness rather than cooperation and symbiosis; it was based on direct connections – often coordinated by the rising European financial centres – rather than on loose areas connected by nodes of exchange. But most of all, it was a system the prosperity of which was based on forms of intensive global exploitation of natural resources and markets.

Europeans learned to exploit raw cotton coming from other parts of the world (mostly the Americas) and the ecological advantages that this generated. Moving to a more comparative methodology, I show how, unlike other world areas of cotton textile production, in Europe the link between trade and manufacturing was consolidated, creating unique conditions for the restructuring of production to cater for global markets. What came to be broken was instead the link between manufacturing and the agrarian economy of Europe. I reflect specifically on the role of raw cotton and how and why within the new system Europe did not cultivate its own raw materials but created a fragmented productive process based on the intercontinental trade of raw materials. Slowly, but surely, a 'western system' centred on Europe and the Atlantic organised and determined by European producers and traders came into existence. The book concludes with a final chapter describing the articulation of this new centripetal system in terms of domination of world markets, leading to an eventual demise of cotton textile production in many areas of the globe.

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Debates

Today's world economy – an economy that restructured itself in the early nineteenth century – is very different from the world that preceded it. A key difference is the relative economic and social development of different areas of the globe and their changing relationships. This is in no way a new issue: the emergence of the West (and Europe in particular) to the front stage of world power and wealth has engaged historians in recent decades.[11] Triumphalist narratives of the 'rise of the West' and the relative backwardness of 'the Rest' have in recent times been revised presumably to accommodate the unstoppable development of China and India, back – one might say – to positions of wealth from which they had been dethroned more than two centuries ago. Recent scholarship has had to deal also with the parallel (and far too often separate) issue of the connectivity of the world that we live in. We might called it *globalisation*, a process of intensification of commercial, economic, social and cultural connections between different areas of the world. The trajectory of one world area is often linked to what happens elsewhere. It turns out that historically a world that has become more connected has also become more unequal.[12]

These two issues – divergence and globalisation – have in recent decades been at the centre of intense discussion. Two of the scholars who have most contributed to each of these concepts are Immanuel Wallerstein, with his multivolume work on world systems published between 1974 and 2011, and Kenneth Pomeranz, with his book *The Great Divergence* published in 2000.[13] I cite only these two authors because it would be unduly tedious to venture into the historiography of globalisation and divergence. I must state outright that my overall argument is not always in line with either Wallerstein's or Pomeranz's ideas, though their preoccupations, methodologies and findings have been fundamental for the research and writing of this book.

Let me start with divergence. Simply put, divergence is the differential between the GDP per capita of Western Europe and that of China, as in Figure 1.1, although the graph for India and other parts of the world would be similar. The graph can be divided into three periods: the widening of difference (divergence; up to the 1820s); a central period in which such difference was maintained (roughly the period from 1825 and 1975); and a final moment of shrinking difference ('convergence'; from 1975 and into the future). For the moment I am concerned with the period of divergence. There is disagreement over the chronology and intensity of such a process, in particular whether Europe was already developing faster than China or India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Unlike the graph proposed by Angus Maddison, Pomeranz's divergence is located in the late eighteenth century and was 'great' because it was intense over

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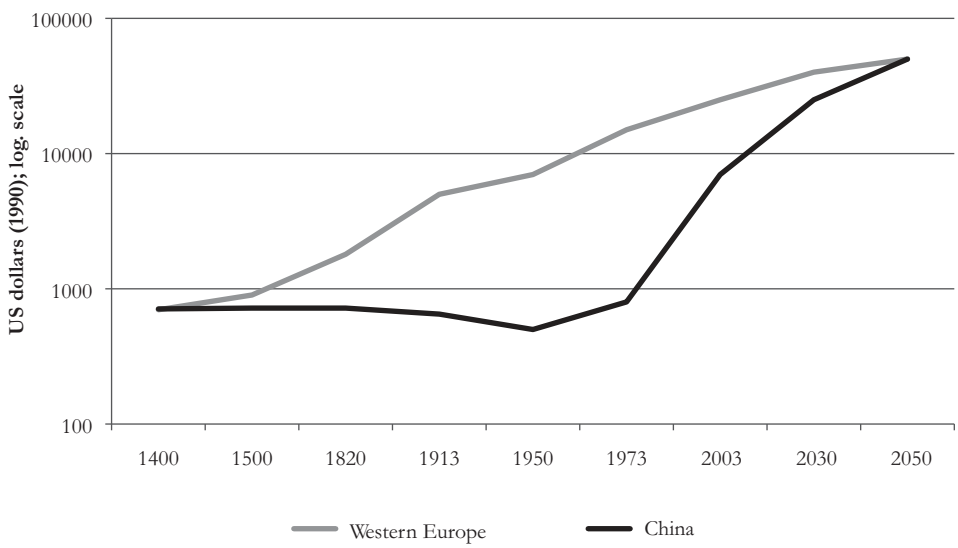

Figure 1.1 Comparative GDP per capita in China and Western Europe, 1400–2050.

a short period of time (a century at best) that coincided with the industrialisation of the British Isles and Europe. This book sees instead a divergence lasting several centuries, a long process that eventually allowed Europe to reap the benefits.

The reason why I am suggesting that divergence was a long process is linked to a second, and perhaps more important debate: what are the reasons for diverging economic results at a global level? I simplify again by saying that over the last century explanations moved between two poles; from the idea of the 'exceptionalism of the West' to the idea that it all happened because of 'contingencies' (Figure 1.2). There is a gradient of 'agency' in the process of divergence on the part of the West. Exceptionalism tends to emphasise that Europe had something special that no one else had (a special culture or religion – Weber and later Landes; a special political ability to conquer – Jones; etc.). Contingencies are lucky coincidences such as the fact that Europe had good and cheap reserves of coal and access to land ('ghost acreages') and markets in the Americas. This is the interpretation of Pomeranz, much loved as it sidelines cultural traits in favour of

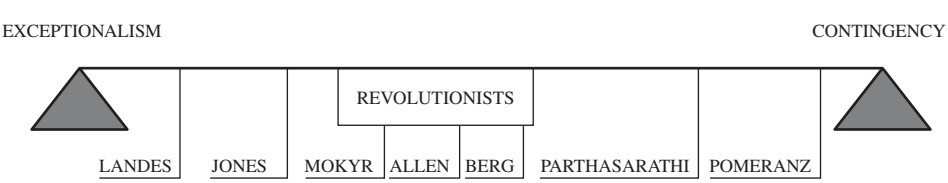

Figure 1.2 Explaining divergence: between 'exceptionalism' and 'contingency'.

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hard differences and complies with our ecological awareness. In between exceptionalism and contingency, there is a range of scholars interested specifically in explaining the industrial transition of Europe (I call them 'industrialists' and I underline that they are not a homogenous category). Let me also say that this list is far from complete.

The story told through cotton in this book does not fall in the 'contingency camp': I try to explain how improbable, and in many ways unthinkable, it was for a continent like Europe, with little knowledge of cultivation, processing and consumption of cotton, to specialise in this product. Yet this does not make Europe exceptional: cotton was taken up elsewhere in the world, though it did not become the key sector and product for enormous economic and social transformation. Europe, in many ways, was more *extreme* than *exceptional* on a world scale. I argue in this book that such extreme outcomes were not the result of one specific factor that gave Europe a comparative advantage over other areas of the world (be it religion, culture, force, machines, coal of colonies, just to cite a few). The path that Europe undertook was the result of a 'layering' of different factors and circumstances, some of which were peculiar to the continent, some of which she borrowed from elsewhere, and others of which were quite absent altogether. These factors and circumstances produced synergies and catalysed change. The result was an economic transition that was momentous, but that should not be interpreted as the best possible outcome: the European 'transition' on which global divergence so much depended was also the result of failed attempts and partial successes. I argue, especially in the second part of this book, that many of these opportunities presented themselves from the interaction of Europe with other continents after 1500: the learning of technologies, of products and of raw materials, and the cultural and social changes at home that allowed for products, technologies and resources to be integrated into the socio-economic system of the West.

This leads me to 'globalisation', or better to say the relationship between different areas of the world. The subject matter of this book cannot either support or disprove the coming into place of a 'world economy', as suggested by Wallerstein. The world of cotton was not geographically homogenous. Before the eighteenth century, India had dominated production and trade in the Indian Ocean; after that date northwestern Europe dominated on a truly world scale. These two worlds were very different in their working, size and outcomes. For sure, the development of the European cotton industry looks like a leading sector for the Wallersteinian world-system, though my understanding of it includes not just power and money but also products, fashion and technologies, and Europe's capacity to profit from the physical disintegration of traditional chains of production with its industrial activities connected to raw materials, skills and final markets that were local and regional.

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