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Gene Dattel. *Cotton and Race in the Making of America: The Human Costs of Economic Power.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009. xiv + 416 pp. $28.85 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-747-3.

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Facing Up to Slavery and the Balance Sheet

Gene Dattel's *Cotton and Race in the Making of America* tells the story of the rise of cotton production in the United States from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the mechanization of production in the 1930s. Dattel follows what he calls "the money trail" to the "heart and soul of America" (p. ix). His book attempts to show readers the underbelly of American economic growth in this period–where racial oppression, slavery, and exploitation generated enormous wealth and power for white Americans and persistent poverty for black Americans. But Dattel makes an even larger claim in this book. He wishes to expose "America's overwhelming attachment to material progress at whatever the human cost" (p. ix).

Dattel weaves several interlocking arguments throughout this book. He believes that cotton was so lucrative that it pulled every American into its web; that without "slave-produced cotton, there would have been no Civil War" (p. 27); that Northerners participated in and sustained racism; that Northern racism helped imprison blacks in the South after the Civil War; and that cotton corrupted the soul of Americans, creating a permanent "black underclass" by withholding opportunity from black Americans for generations.

Gene Dattel grew up in the Mississippi Delta and he is clearly concerned about the region's desperate poverty in the wake of the cotton economy. Much of the book can be understood as an explanation for why reparations to black Americans might be justified as compensation for the deep exploitation of slavery, sharecropping, and segregation. Dattel brings a sensitivity to the Delta's history that makes an especially powerful mark in his later chapters on Mound Bayou and the Delta Pine and Land Company, two failed efforts to break free of the cotton economy that Dattel chronicles with great effect.

Dattel left the Delta, however, and he spent much of his career as a managing director at Salomon Brothers and at Morgan Stanley. His expertise in international finance and capital markets is brought to bear in this story. He carefully documents the cotton trade and the ways that the price of cotton on the international market fluctuated but remained remarkably "resilient" (p. 64). Indeed, Dattel argues for a long run of consistency in cotton prices, despite violent short-term ups and downs. Throughout the 1850s, he reminds readers, cotton sold for eleven cents per pound, when it cost some planters five cents per pound to produce (p. 65). As a result, cotton helped sustain a "financial web" and a chain of dependent businessmen, politicians, and nations (p. 69). Dattel also briefly points out the ways Southern planters could leverage their slaves as collateral for further expansion of their cotton operations (pp. 50-51). This is one of the most important and least-understood aspects of the property rights in slaves that white Southerners held. All manner of other financial instruments might be created and sold based on these rights and secured by human bondage. Bonnie Maria Martin has recently uncovered important evidence of this financing.[1]

Despite its impressive narrative power, however, *Cotton and Race in the Making of America* presents some difficulties for this reviewer. The first is that Dattel's South is the cotton South. He dismisses other economic activities in the region and downplays their importance in order to draw a sharply visible line of connection between cotton and race exploitation. Rather than a diverse and interlaced region in which numerous competing identities took shape in the nineteenth century, the South presented here is one-dimensional, flattened onto the axes of cotton and slavery. Slavery, according to Dattel, was only profitable on cotton plantations and could never work in industrial or other settings (pp. 80-81). Yet nearly all of the recent economic studies of slavery suggest not only its consistent profitability across crops but also its diversity and reach.[2] In overdrawing the sig-

nal importance of cotton, Dattel renders tobacco, sugar, and rice, for example, as "simply not relevant" (p. 163). Even with cotton as the focus of this study, Dattel might have opened up the geography of this economic activity and the diversity of experiences within the cotton region. Here, the South equals cotton, an equation that historians have spend decades disproving. Understandably, Dattel seeks to draw attention to cotton and to link America, not just the South, to its history. In this effort he undoubtedly succeeds, but he does so at the expense of a more nuanced interpretation of the South.

Second, the lives and experiences of black Americans remain distinctly secondary in this book, so much so that Dattel's persistent criticism of white exploitation begins to ring hollow. In the North, blacks found an "anti-black" racism so pervasive, he writes, that their situation was "far more hopeless" in some respects than slavery (p. 109). We learn little of free blacks in the cotton regions of the South and in the urban places that serviced the cotton economy. Race remains an unexplored concept in this book, invoked to mean essentially the economic exploitation of blacks by whites. But scholars have shown how racial definitions and identities were malleable, and slavery and racism have a complex history. However, here race is particularly economic, a construction defined solely by the market demand for cotton. "Race Moves West," the title for chapter 9, suggests how loosely the term is used. While the chapter details the exclusion and expulsion laws of the northwestern states before the Civil War, we learn little about the ways black Americans dealt with these laws or how people lived within and around the law.

After the Civil War, Dattel emphasizes even more strongly the ways black Americans were limited by forces beyond their control. "The story is terribly simple," he explains. "Although they [black Americans] were no longer bound to a plantation, they were stuck between a white North that didn't want them and a white South that desperately needed them" (p. 222). Following the arguments of Gavin Wright in *Old South New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (1986), Dattel asserts that blacks were unable to move out of the South because the white North would not offer them jobs. They were trapped in the South "by a web of forces" (p. 222). Once snared in the cotton economy, black Americans, no matter what they did, experienced a "tragic" "devastating inheritance." Dattel suggests that for black Americans "high rates of illegitimacy," "a disproportionate incidence of crime," and "destructive behavioral traits" followed in the wake of slavery, segregation, and cotton (p. 364). The linkages between these social effects and the cotton economy (their causation) are never fully documented in this account. All of these assertions imply that Dattel's main concern is to make white Americans realize the level of exploitation involved in the history of slavery and cotton agriculture as well as the legacies of these forces today. But he does so at the expense of a deeper understanding of the humanity of those involved. Indeed, the "human costs" for African Americans remain largely unexplained.

In what is both a strength and a weakness of his approach, Dattel privileges economic explanations above all others. For Dattel, "reality" means economic considerations, and this reality trumps politics, family, or faith. In the North before the Civil War, the explanation for the "shared racial animosity" whites held against blacks was "simple: money triumphed" (p. 108). Later, William Henry Seward, for example, had "no trouble sacrificing freedmen" for larger economic goals of transcontinental supremacy after the war (p. 120). And even later in the twentieth century, "economic laws, not moral precepts, finally broke the chains that bound blacks to the cotton fields" (p. 283). Other realities, of course, characterized the lives of black and white Southerners, even those tied to cotton production, but they are not acknowledged.

With the emphasis so heavily placed on economic explanation, the region's environmental actors, such as the boll weevil, fertilizer, crop science, and weather, receive little analysis. The landscape history of the Cotton South, the nexus of human and environment, has been usefully examined in Mart A. Stewart's *'What Nature Suffers to Groe': Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (1996), but Dattel keeps the focus squarely on the economic balance sheet.

Despite these reservations, the strength of Dattel's storytelling and narrative skills make this book both enjoyable reading and highly useful. His arguments are clear, insightful, boldly proclaimed, and strongly defended. He weaves together revealing data about the business of cotton both before and after the Civil War. And he succeeds in showing readers the connections in the world economy that developed around cotton and why they were so important to America in the nineteenth century.

Notes

[1]. Bonnie Maria Martin, "'To Have and To Hold' Human Collateral: Mortgaging Slaves to Build Virginia and South Carolina" (PhD diss., Southern Methodist University, 2006).

[2]. See John Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation*

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Gavin Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Jenny Bourne Wahl, "Stay East, Young Man? Market Repercussions of the Dred Scott Decision," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 82 (2007): 361-391; Michael John Gagnon, "Transition to an Industrial South, Athens, Georgia, 1830-1870" (PhD diss., Emory University, 1999); and Viken Tchakerian, "Productivity, Extent of Markets, and Manufacturing in the Late Antebellum South and Midwest," *Journal of Economic History* 54 (September 1994): 407-525.

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