



Richard Follett, Sven Beckert, Peter Coclanis, Barbara Hahn. *Plantation Kingdom: The American South and Its Global Commodities.* The Marcus Cunliffe Lecture Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 176 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-1939-8.

Reviewed by Chris Evans

Published on H-Slavery (October, 2017)

Commissioned by David M. Prior (University of New Mexico)

This slim volume contains four chapters, each the text of a lecture delivered as one of the Marcus Cunliffe series at the University of Sussex, UK, in 2012-13. Each is devoted to a different commodity of the American South: rice, cotton, sugar, and tobacco. Each is the work of a distinguished author. The accent is on the “global.” The essays focus on southern agriculture but look outward to economic and political dynamics that were global in reach. They reflect what Richard Follett in his short introductory essay identifies as the current new scholarly consensus on the place of bonded labor in the United States. Whereas historians once squabbled over the extent to which the South was in or out of step with the main course of American development, it is now broadly accepted that slave-based plantation agriculture and US capitalism advanced in tandem. Indeed, “so explosive and dynamic was America’s plantation complex that some scholars now place slavery at the cornerstone of a new history of American capitalism” (p. 6).

Two organizing concepts feature in Follett’s introduction. One is the “second slavery”: the process whereby plantation agriculture invaded hitherto unexploited lands and deployed advanced industrial technologies to serve rapidly expanding mass markets over the course of the

nineteenth century. The second is the notion of “commodity hell,” a condition with which regions producing generic agricultural products for world markets are continually threatened. Each new low-cost entrant to a particular commodity sector unleashes a wave of cost-cutting and immiseration on existing suppliers.

The second slavery does not feature very explicitly in the chapters that follow. The concept of commodity hell does—prominently. It is used to particularly good effect by Peter C. Coclanis in his essay on rice. This is an unsung commodity but one that allowed lowcountry planters to amass wealth on a stupendous scale in the eighteenth century. It was not sustainable, though. Hydrological constraints meant that commercial rice cultivation was confined to a narrow and increasingly overworked coastal strip, leading South Carolina towards commodity hell.

Coclanis disposes of the notion—“Lost Cause” in inspiration—that the lowcountry’s prosperity was destroyed by Yankee invasion and slave emancipation. The rice industry was already in crisis in the antebellum period. Competition from producers in Southeast Asia proved devastating. Indeed, American planters were registering *negative* returns on investment by the 1840s and 1850s. The industry was only kept afloat by the

wealth accumulated during the super-profitable boom years. Coclanis also raises the question of whether the export of enslaved workers to the advancing cotton frontier played a critical role in cross-subsidising a decayed rice sector. It is a question that merits more systematic study.

Coclanis detects an inner logic of decay in the Lowcountry. Some historians, notably Walter Johnson, have seen the Cotton South wracked by internal contradictions, too.[1] Sven Beckert, in this volume, is more impressed by the surging growth of cotton. At the end of the eighteenth century the American South was “the one area in the world in which emptied lands, plentiful bonded labor, and a politically influential planter class existed” (p. 46), paving the way for massive expansion in the nineteenth century. This was arrested by the American Civil War. That conflict, global in its ramifications, brought new suppliers into play, breaking the stranglehold that southern producers had on the world market and nullifying their boast that “Cotton is king.”

Emancipation ushered in “a system of sharecropping and tenant farming ... in which cotton growers owned themselves and, sometimes, their tools and, drawing on metropolitan capital, grew cotton for world markets” (p. 57). Slowly, the South reestablished itself as a major supplier, albeit now just one of several. Where the South stood alone was in moving beyond cotton farming and into manufacturing, becoming a pioneer in the global process that saw the cotton industry shift to low-wage locations. The South could offer both a low-wage regime and state governments set on maintaining that regime through their hostility to labor unions.

War and a revolution against slavery transformed American cotton; a similar process, several decades earlier, brought American sugar to life. The Haitian Revolution, by destroying France’s Caribbean sugar industry, made space for new producers. Planters in Louisiana took full advantage. But like lowcountry rice, sugar was geo-

graphically restricted. Producers in Louisiana operated at the very edge of what was climatically permissible. Their costs were high as a consequence. They prospered only because tariff protection gave them command of a rapidly growing internal market. Commodity perdition arrived in Louisiana at the end of the nineteenth century when low-cost producers in the Caribbean (Cuba and Puerto Rico) and Pacific (Hawaii and the Philippines) were brought within the United States’ imperial fold. Formerly, Louisiana’s planters had been able to exert political leverage. Now they were exposed to the full force of international competition.

The stories of rice, cotton, and sugar are told across a global canvas. World events do not feature quite so prominently in Barbara Hahn’s lecture on American tobacco. Her focus is on regulatory institutions and the marketing of tobacco products. Different colonial regimes made for very different practices. Hahn notes that tobacco was processed in widely divergent ways in the English, Spanish, and French American colonies. Having made that observation, she focuses firmly on Anglo-America. Tobacco began as an export crop in the early colonial era but as an internal market developed, fed with tobacco that would not pass muster in overseas markets, it became a manufacturing industry, too. Indeed, tobacco became an industry that disrupted the easy distinction between an industrial North and a bucolic South.

Once again the Civil War era was decisive. New areas of cultivation came to the fore, most markedly in Kentucky, and from these new areas came new products. These were presented as the result of biological innovation, but they were in fact the outcome of new curing and marketing procedures driven by Gilded Age corporations. As Hahn remarks, this was “market regulation disguised as botanic taxonomy” (p. 117). Market regulation put power in the hands of oligopolistic buyers, much to the detriment of small growers in

western Kentucky. Farmers attempted to exert a countervailing power through producers' cooperatives; the outcome was sharpening social conflict, expressed most vividly in Kentucky's Black Patch Wars in the early twentieth century. Hahn does not invoke commodity hell to account for this--and rightly so. This is a story of corporate exploitation, interwoven with Jim Crow racial exclusion.

These are readable, wide-ranging essays by acknowledged authorities. There is nothing startlingly new for those who are familiar with the authors' earlier work, but anyone seeking a single-volume, up-to-date introduction to American plantation commodities in global context will be well served by this book.

Note

[1]. Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-slavery>

Citation: Chris Evans. Review of Follett, Richard; Beckert, Sven; Coclanis, Peter; Hahn, Barbara. *Plantation Kingdom: The American South and Its Global Commodities*. H-Slavery, H-Net Reviews. October, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48763>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.