Chances are that, unless you’re from North Louisiana, you know little about it. Its two largest cities—Shreveport and Monroe—are afterthoughts even in the mostly rural Deep South, mere highway rest stops between the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolis and Atlanta; in state, they’re eclipsed by New Orleans’s singular personality and Baton Rouge’s petrochemical power and corruption. And yet middling Monroe, 47,000 people tucked on the banks of the Ouachita River, a hundred miles from any larger city, played a role a century ago in the origin stories of two American corporate behemoths better identified today with Atlanta: Delta Airlines first got off the ground in Monroe, while the first entrepreneur to bottle and sell Coca-Cola, Joseph A. Biedenharn, built his business from the city.

Bart Elmore’s *Country Capitalism* is the first book to try to make sense of how the rural South, mostly neglected places like Monroe, Louisiana, gave rise to some of the most innovative and globe-spanning US corporations. It is a provocative and compelling reinterpretation of southern capitalism. Elmore argues that five companies—Coke, Delta, Walmart, FedEx, and Bank of America—grew to conquer capitalism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries not in spite of their origins in the benighted South but rather as a result of the region’s unique geographic challenges and ecological opportunities. For better or worse, the contemporary Amazon economy was born out of capitalism’s efforts to connect the South’s distant backroads and underserved communities.

There is a two-part argument to this tightly written, cogent book. First, rurality was, for these firms, “an asset rather than a liability,” the reason why they became not extractors of resources, as so many other southern companies did, but movers of goods, people, and capital—“commercial blood thinners” (p. xi), “the lungs of our global economy” (p. 172), and “conduits of capitalism” (p. 115), as Elmore, with a talent for metaphor, variously describes them. Serving as a conduit for all these things in the rural South made these companies...
really good at what they did, emerging out of a kind of corporate survival of the fittest.

Second, the South’s size and distinctly rural landscape also meant that these companies came to have an outsized ecological impact. If Coca-Cola really were to put a Coke “within arm’s reach of desire,” as legendary CEO Robert Woodruff envisioned, it could only do so by trucking Coke or its syrupy concentrate many miles down desolate dirt roads and—importantly—to refrigerated vending machines that themselves accounted for a significant percentage of the company’s carbon footprint by the end of the twentieth century. As conduits of global capitalism rather than simple extractors of natural resources, like the oil and gas or logging companies often associated with southern capitalism, these companies helped the South become “an exporter, rather than just an importer, of ecological problems” (p. 4).

Elmore smartly flips the historiographic script for understanding the South and capitalism. Essential works like James C. Cobb’s *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development* (1993) and Cobb and William Stueck’s edited collection, *Globalization and the American South* (2005), demonstrated for historians how national and global forces transformed the local throughout the South, whether it was German chemical companies in the South Carolina Piedmont or Japanese auto manufacturers in Kentucky and Tennessee.[1] But for Elmore, what observers would come to identify as global by the twenty-first century—the rapid compression of time and space in the flow of capital, goods, people, and ideas—grew out of the trials and tribulations of a handful of southern companies. Rather than the global coming into and transforming the South, the South went global.

Elmore’s analysis begins with Coke, which is appropriate, given his excellent first book, *Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism* (2014), which similarly, and fluidly, synthesizes business and environmental histories. (In just one prodigious decade Elmore has produced a career’s worth of innovative work on the histories of capitalism and the environment—see also 2021’s *Seed Money: Monsanto’s Past and Our Future.*) Here Elmore sharpens one of *Citizen Coke’s* main arguments: Coke is best understood not as a producer of sugary carbonated treats but as an exporter of a business model that succeeds only because it relies on and exploits local resources. In *Citizen Coke* Elmore mainly focused on the exploitation of local water resources; in *Country Capitalism*, the Coke model is contingent on the burning of fossil fuels not only to move products around the world but also to keep them cold, all in the interest of meeting Woodruff’s imperative to put a Coke “within arm’s reach of desire.” Remarkably, by the twenty-first century, Coke’s largest contribution to greenhouse gas emissions was through refrigeration rather than trucking. Elmore recounts a corporate history of trial and error with new kinds of refrigerants. Pressured by environmental activists, Coke decided to act to reduce emissions, but always and only in the name of “efficiency” rather than in the broader interest of human and environmental sustainability. Elmore’s question—“What would our world look like if the convenience of immediate consumption was sacrificed for emissions reductions critical to cooling a warming planet?” (p. 44)—was not the one Coke wanted to answer, and because government regulatory muscle rarely backed up grassroots environmental activist pressure, it never had to.

For Elmore, this corporate concept of “efficiency” is essential to understanding how his subjects reacted to the realization that their innovative and profitable business models as commercial blood thinners generated outsized ecological effects. Because they were not direct extractors of resources, like southern logging or oil companies, they avoided confrontation with activists in the environmental movement’s first decades. But by the 1990s activists had traced the connections between the extractors and the connectors like Delta, FedEx, and Bank of America. Companies ad-
opted “efficiency” strategies but, Elmore argues, efficiency was a red herring: it was so often measured in ratios rather than in absolute statistical contributions to climate change. The energy crises of the 1970s forced Delta to find ways to use jet fuel more efficiently, for example, which in turn merely enabled the company to fly more routes to more places. Delta burned fossil fuels more efficiently by the twenty-first century, but it burned exponentially more of them. “Efficiency” was good for capitalism and greenwashing, but ultimately did little to address the impending climate catastrophe.

Elmore’s prescriptions are reformist rather than revolutionary; he offers suggestions for how each of his corporate subjects might use their tremendous power as conduits of capitalism to implement truly meaningful changes. What if Walmart, for instance, used its unparalleled logistics tools to track not just the cheap trinkets it buys in China but also how moving that stuff around the globe affects the environment? The company already has the ability to do this, and in fact developed in 2008 a “sustainability index” for its logistics chain, but the system is voluntary and few than 2 percent of its thousands of suppliers use it. So, too, do companies like FedEx and Bank of America already have the tools necessary to make capitalism work more ethically.

But Elmore’s time line of rapid growth, roughly the last third of the twentieth century, also coincides with an era of radical corporate deregulation. Thus, when Elmore concludes with a critique not just of these conduits of capitalism but also of popular consumerism more broadly, he does so while acknowledging that only the state has the ability to counter the power of capital and implement reforms democratically. His companies have produced the “Amazon way,” the apotheosis of Woodruff’s “within arm’s reach of desire” dictum, wherein cheap stuff from just about anywhere in the world can reach our doorstep within days, or increasingly, within hours. They’ve generated demand for precisely these kinds of services, and if they withdrew, someone else would surely fill the lacuna, absent serious government intervention. But do we need things so quickly? Are our lives enriched by the “instantaneous gratification of consumer wants” (p. 174) in ways that are worth the ecological tradeoffs? Clearly the answer is, in most cases, no, but how to reverse the inertia of the global economy of quick and cheap, born on the South’s backroads, is much less clear.

Note
[1]. See the contributions by Marko Maunula and Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu, respectively, in Cobb and Stueck, eds., *Globalization and the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).