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Hancock, J.F. Plantation Crops, Plunder and Power: Evolution and Exploitation. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

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Hancock, J.F. *Plantation Crops, Plunder and Power: Evolution and Exploitation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

James Hancock has written a sweeping overview of the bio-social history of plantation crops: sugarcane, bananas, cotton, tea, tobacco, coffee, and rubber. These crops were all domesticated in what is today the poor global south and became wildly popular and important in the affluent global north. Each crop has a deep, evolutionary history of between 2,500-10,000 years, moving from humble domesticated origins to massive profit-making super-players in the global capitalist economy.

For each crop, Hancock weaves the story of its domesticated emergence, evolutionary history, and transcendence onto the global scene; the precipitation of political conflicts and other warfare surrounding crop production, processing, and markets; the environmental consequences and destruction left in the wake of crop production; and the human cost of exploited labor in the form of slavery, indentured servitude, or highly exploitable poor, free labor. So while these diverse crops have their own unique and historically-situated trajectories, Hancock's important contribution is to underscore the striking similarities among those histories. Because of the complexity of the analysis of these crops, Hancock invokes anthropology, archaeology, evolutionary biology, botany, genetics, history, political economy, and globalization into his portrayals, though he is by trade a geneticist and plant biologist. Thus, his work is truly a cross-disciplinary and impressive effort.

Plantations are pre-industrial versions of modern factory farms. They are land extensive economic juggernauts. Unlike their contemporary counterparts, however, they are labor intensive rather than technology intensive—though when it comes to the transporting and processing of plantation crops, those dimensions are often both labor- and technology intensive (a good example being the processing of cotton, which included milling and weaving with steam-powered technology under sweatshop conditions). Landed aristocracies – efficient or otherwise – control the means of crop production and the local/regional political scene relating to plantation crops. The ecological cost of plantation crops is remarkable, as vast tracts of land are cleared, and biological diversity is reduced through a reliance on monocropping. The ecological destruction owed to plantation crops is rivaled only by the human cost of producing them. Hence, the keywords in the book's title – plunder, power, and exploitation – are apt.

The book's chapters are organized by crop type and follow a general narrative structure. Each chapter begins with the evolutionary origins and domestication of the crop being described; the early history of the crop and its regional expansion; its eventual discovery by Europeans; a description of how the crop was drawn into and affected by the Industrial Revolution; the role of the crop and its products in an emerging global capitalism; the conditions and experiences of the people who work producing or processing the crop (and resistance by those workers to their conditions, treatment, and wages); and finally, the current state of the crop and the industries that revolve around its production.

Exploration of cotton production forms the longest and most complex chapter in the book. Cotton was domesticated around 5,500-6,000 years ago in the New World (Mesoamerica and Peru) and the Old World (Indus Valley and Egypt). It was an important trade item in various regional "world systems." Europe discovered it in the 17th century, and Britain subsequently became a center for textile manufacturing with an insatiable appetite for the raw stuff. Fast forward to the U.S. south and Andrew Jackson's early 19th century campaigns to remove Native Americans from the landscape, making way for cotton plantations, among other things. African slaves were imported to meet the intensive labor demands of King Cotton. Hancock details

slaves' horrific treatment at the hands of their owners. A homegrown New England textile industry (including mills, merchants, and financiers) emerges to compete with the British for raw cotton processed by equally ill-treated northern mill workers. Hancock provocatively notes that prior to the Civil War, the Mississippi Valley had more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the U.S., a stark reminder of the gross inequalities between white plantation owners and the slaves and other workers indentured to the system. The American Civil War (1861-1865) devastated the British and American textile industries and left the American South in economic and social shambles.

After the war, vast plantations were opened up to tenancy and share cropping by owners who had no slave labor or means for paying wage labor. Share cropping was a brutal system for tenant farmers, who could never get out of debt. But enough cotton was produced to drive a new Southern mill boom. Indeed, cotton production under share cropping rivaled pre-war levels but at prices that were devastatingly low. Not surprisingly, mills could hire poor white farmers who simply traded one bad situation for another.

While the book offers useful and powerful analysis, I do have a few quibbles here and there. For example, Hancock takes seemingly at face value a claim that the indigenous Tupi of central and coastal Brazil were "cannibals." As anthropologists and others know, this characterization is fraught with problems. Indeed, William Arens (1979) argues convincingly that such claims commonly come from single, dubious sources. In this case, the claim is based upon testimony from a single European source rather than systematic, empirical documentation.

Plantation Crops, Plunder, and Power is an important reminder about how plantation systems upend existing social organization, ecology, and political order, often resulting in internal power struggles and violence or broader forms of national and international warfare. This book is a very welcome primer to plantation systems and their pernicious effects that will be of service to anyone with an interest in agrarian systems and their evolution.

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Reference

Arens, William (1979). *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.