

Cotton and Race in the Making of America: The Human Costs of Economic Power

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Recommended Citation

Engerman, Stanley L. (2010) "Cotton and Race in the Making of America: The Human Costs of Economic Power," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss1/6>

Review

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Winter 2010

Dattel, Gene *Cotton and Race in the Making of America: The Human Costs of Economic Power*. Ivan R. Dee, \$28.95 ISBN 9781566637473

A New Look at Race and Economics

Gene Dattel grew up in the cotton area of the Mississippi Delta, studied history at Yale and law at Vanderbilt before a twenty-year career in financial capital markets. He has long been interested in the role of the cotton economy in influencing racial attitudes in the United States, North and South, from the American Revolution until the current time. Dattel has read extremely widely in the literature on slavery and American, particularly southern, history. He presents a strong case for the influence of the demand for cotton production upon attitudes to black slaves and then black free persons of color after the Civil War, until the successful diffusion of the mechanical cotton picker by the 1940s.

The book is divided into six parts. It starts not with the beginnings of American slavery in the early seventeenth century, but with the Constitutional Convention and the compromise on slavery, even before the expansion of cotton and before any expectation of cotton's future role in the American economy. The section on American economic growth 1787-1861, details the westward expansion of cotton and tells the familiar story of the rise of the cotton kingdom and the emerging sectional conflict. The next section deals with the anti-black attitudes in the North and Northwest, with much interesting detail in several state studies. The impact of the Civil War on the ill-fated Confederate financial and economic policy as well as the role of British action in the war is discussed. The two postbellum chapters, covering 1865 to 1930, deal with the economic and labor adjustments to the end of slavery with the increase in cotton production, with most blacks remaining in cotton production, and the late development of the mechanical cotton picker. It concludes with a listing of the contemporary problems of black life today, arguing that they can be traced to the "legacy of cotton for African Americans" although without dealing with arguments such as

those of William Julius Wilson that pay attention to the importance of contemporary circumstances.

While much of the author's basic argument about "money and the uses and abuses of power", and "America's overwhelming attachment to material progress at whatever the human cost" in terms of the development and persistence of racism will not be surprising to most scholars, the presentation of the material and the basic arguments are well-made and the writing is quite clear. This book will have a broad appeal and will serve to educate a wider audience.

Stanley L. Engerman is the John H. Munro Professor of Economics and Professor of History at the University of Rochester. He is co-author with Robert W. Fogel of Time on the Cross (1974) and author of Slavery, Emancipation, and Freedom: Comparative Perspectives (2007).