

## Book Review: Cotton by Adam Sneyd

*In Cotton, Adam Sneyd brings the reality of international trade into focus through tracing the local and global politics behind the circulation of one of the most everyday of materials: cotton. This is a vividly told, interrogative read that establishes its author as a leading expert on the politics of commodities and development, finds Dr Milaso Chérel-Robson.*

**Cotton. Adam Sneyd. Polity. 2016.**

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The cover of *Cotton* by Adam Sneyd is beautiful in its simplicity: the fluffy white stuff in a sea of blue. Yet, Sneyd's book successfully conveys how behind cotton's demure whiteness often lies the vulnerability of those who risk their health and food security to plant and pick this difficult crop in fields across the world. Sneyd also underlines that, more than any other raw agricultural material, the tale of cotton epitomises how international trade brings modern-day struggles for a decent life and geopolitics right into our very own beds.

*Cotton* takes us through the story of the politics of cotton, told through sweeping coverage of key players from the Americas to Asia and Africa, from minutiae description of local contexts to the global stage of big cars and high-level diplomacy. The book is academic in its research approach and journalistic in its style. It is framed with insights from various disciplines and yet is firmly grounded in the political economy of development. It makes clear that Sneyd's investigative approach to the global cotton (dis)order is ultimately about bringing forth the prospects for cotton to advance development in poorer and marginalised regions of the world.

The story of the cotton world features farmers and traders of colonial times, modern-day futures traders, industrial scale farmers, corporate players, smallholders in the developing world as well as new kids on the block from the alternative cotton and textile industry. Amidst saga-like accounts of cotton family traders and their modern-day counterparts, the book succeeds in keeping the thread of sustainability and development as the constant in its probing of the politics of cotton.

On multilateral issues, it accounts for the struggle of the 'Cotton 4': the valiant four African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali) fighting for international trade to bring development benefits to cotton-growing populations. It also features cameo appearances from a number of development partners, including the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), with references to the historical work of Hans Singer and Raul Prebisch and the more recent process that has led to the [Pan-African Cotton Road Map](#).

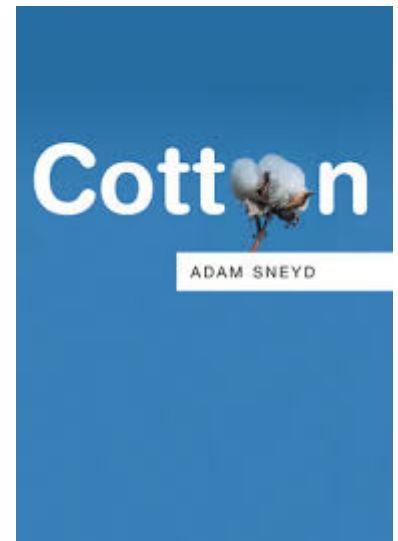




Image Credit: Cotton (Cara Harpole CC BY 2.0)

Thanks to the pace of the author's writing style, the book vividly describes how cotton gets interwoven with battles for voters/cotton farmers; the unpredictability of climate; the challenges of coalitions induced by changing geopolitics; and the disruptive power of high-tech farming and of stockpile releases. Sneyd demonstrates how the relentless exercise of power shapes the cotton world. In doing so, he uncovers the intimate links between the political and corporate worlds in the design or the unmaking of regulations; delves into pro-cotton subsidies in rich countries; shares tales of the glory and pitfalls of price management policies; and takes us through the fast pace of inter-state competition for political influence exercised in the cotton fields and the garment factories of Africa.

Cotton is topical and will remain so as this year its production plummeted by a factor of ten in some parts of the East African region. Farmers, ginnerers and representatives of textile associations all agree: cotton farmers should be provided with adequate support if the industry is to survive. The fact that actors further up the value chains now make this call strengthens the case for more resources to be devoted to capacity building for farmer organisations. This was one of the messages in UNCTAD's [Commodities and Development Report on Smallholder Farmers and Sustainable Commodity Development](#), released on the eve of the UN General Assembly's endorsement of the 2030 Development Agenda.

The book takes a firm stand on some hot issues. Sneyd predicts that it is only a matter of time before we are all asked to pay more for ethical, sustainable cotton. Sneyd is a political scientist who is *au fait* with the intricacies of how the world gets ruled by a select few, and in *Cotton* he offers a close-up analysis of how such power is exercised. And yet he believes that the countervailing power of change agents will win the day. These new actors come with investments from venture capitalists, crowdfunders and philanthropists and are the drivers behind the growing trend for cross-border sustainability-oriented collaborations. Sneyd asserts that they will shake up commodity politics.

However, altering the rules of the existing game is a momentous task. I write this review at the end of a long tour meeting with cotton stakeholders in East Africa. Some cotton and garments businesspeople I met during my trip remain skeptical about the possibility of change. Sneyd also alludes to the competition from other fibres and their role in changing the cotton industry. As I gaze around me, I wonder if the laypeople wearing cotton in the streets of Dar es Salaam can be induced into wearing more ethical and more expensive cotton. And how realistic is it to credit cotton with such transformative power for the sustainability movement?

Beyond the six chapters, there is more. In an afterword, the book continues its conversational tone as the author shares the story of how he came to write about cotton. Sneyd graces us with a candid reckoning of his positionality and legitimacy as a Western (white, he adds) cotton researcher mingling with struggling farmers and elites in urban Africa. Here, I cannot help but ask: how relevant is this? I am female, black and African. And yet I too am constantly struggling with the encounter with poverty, powerlessness and the complexity of never-ending tales of social and economic injustice that cotton weaves through the developing world.

We also learn that the younger Sneyd ran a dark marker over the logo of his jacket after reading Naomi Klein's *No Logo*. Adopting a style worthy of the 'What To Wear' sections of fashion magazines, the author goes on to give us the names of the alternative options that we should choose. Or rather: those that *he* is wearing. For readers who are looking for guidance, Sneyd is good as an agony uncle, providing expert opinions on where to look for information, what to acquire and what not. At this point though, like me some readers will be self-conscious, and yes, slightly defensive. I also read *No Logo*, but did not blacken the discreet logo on some of my shirts. The dark ink would have ruined them. Nor did I dispose of them. Rather, many proved to be sturdy and are still part of my work uniform almost two decades later. The reader might not care to know all of this, but somehow Sneyd's voice prompts conversation.

Like most good books, *Cotton* engages, probes and interrogates. It is Sneyd's second on this issue. Whether Sneyd graces us with another on the cotton saga, this book further establishes him among the world's experts on the politics of commodities and development.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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