

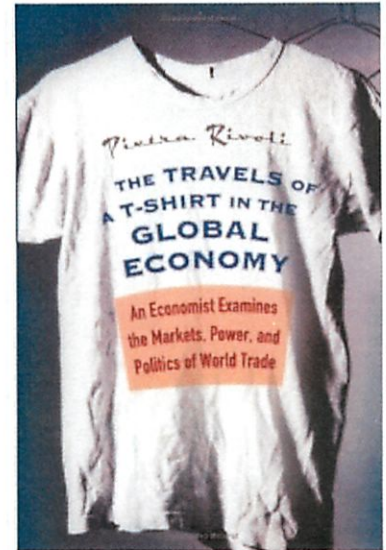
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Travels of a Global T-Shirt Book Report

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Macro Economics The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade by Pietra Rivoli (Amazon)



Book Cover

(<http://www.amazon.com/Travels-T-Shirt-Global-Economy-Economist/dp/0470039205/sr=8-1/qid=1169333121/ref=>) Book Report

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Summary

The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade explains the story (and politics) behind what it takes to produce a T-Shirt to be sold in America. The author, a collage professor at Georgetown University was inspired to take this journey after observing an anti-globalization protest in 1999. The first step in her journey was the cotton fields of Texas. Technology and subsidies means that a lot of cotton is grown right here in America. Then the cotton gets graded through a very scientific process and shipped to China. In China, the the state-run factories must cope with producing for a market not a quota. They get help from the workers, who despite having limited mobility feel very happy to work in a factory over a farm. This is similar to the long-gone British and American textile industries. Coming back to America, the shirt encounters a mess of tariffs and quotas. Despite promising free trade, the politicians have developed thousands and thousands of

laws regarding textile imports. However, when she is done with her shirt, it finally encounters a free market in the highly competitive fabric recycling industry.

My Review

This book was very interesting. All of the problems with T-shirts today stem from our long problem with protectionism. The problem is that all of the non-market activities drive up the cost and complexity of making a shirt. The story of how the US producers have always tried to avoid free markets is very, very interesting. In addition, the fact that Chinese workers rather work in a factory over a farm for independence surprises me. The activists should consider this when they talk about "sweatshops." I also learned how picky African buyers are with everything we donate. This book should be read by every person against the concept of globalization.

Connection

I was doing a report on globalization in World Cultures so I was very interested on the topic. In addition, we learned about the dangers of tariffs and quotas in The Choice as well as in class. This talks about the effects which these protectionist policies actually had and sort-of continue to do so because of the one powerful "alphabet army" of lobbyists.

Reviews

Article

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/21/business/yourmoney/21shelf.html?ei=5088&en=c67a9b6f553eec47&ex=>

The author of the review very much liked the book. He said that "has all the makings of an economic classic." I agree. We should give up the protests against global trade and focus on giving these people a free market to trade these goods. "She uses the T-shirt to tell the story of progress." Again I agree. The textile industry has always tried to avoid free markets. Especially with the cotton industry, it tells how the market adapts and changes. He said other books have made these points, but this one tries to work at a level anyone can understand because it tells the actual stories of people which the T-shirt industry touches.

Sources

- Rivoli, Pietra. The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade. Hoboken: Wiley, 2005.
- Lowenstein, Roger. "Travels With My Florida Parrot T-Shirt." The New York Times. 21 Aug 2005. 20 Jan 2007
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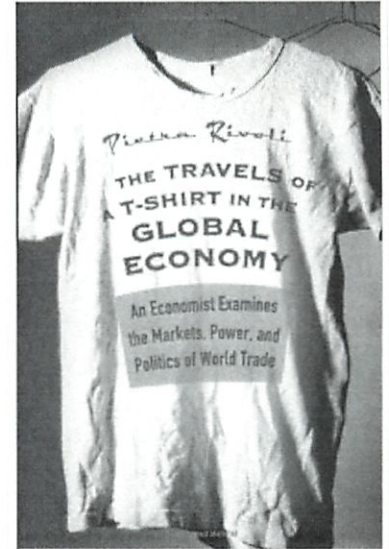
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August 21, 2005

Travels With My Florida Parrot T-Shirt

By **ROGER LOWENSTEIN**

THE really good writers do not write "about" their subjects so much as use them to tell a story. The topic of free trade would not seem to offer much in the way of storytelling material, but Pietra Rivoli has proved otherwise. In "The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy" (John Wiley & Sons, \$29.95), Ms. Rivoli, an economist at Georgetown University, has mined a subject known for dry polemics and created an engaging and illuminating saga of the international textile trade.

Her book's subtitle is "An Economist Examines the Markets, Power and Politics of World Trade," and the author acknowledges that, at the outset, she shared her profession's bias in favor of free trade and, in particular, its "somewhat off-putting tendency to believe that if everyone understood what we understood" then "they wouldn't argue so much." But then, as she says in one of her many beguilingly titled subchapters, "Student Protests Sent a Business Professor Around the World."

The protests occurred on "a cold day in February 1999." Ms. Rivoli was watching as students gathered at the gothic centerpiece of Georgetown to demonstrate against the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and other putative villains of international trade. The crowd, Ms. Rivoli noticed with characteristic acuity, had "a moral certainty, a unity of purpose" that permitted it to distinguish black from white and good from evil "with perfect clarity." One woman seized the microphone and asked: "Who made your T-shirt? Was it a child in Vietnam? Or a young girl from India earning 18 cents per hour? ... Did you know that she lives 12 to a room? That she shares her bed and has only gruel to eat?"

Ms. Rivoli did not know these things, and she wondered how the woman at the microphone knew. But she decided to find out. In the rest of her narrative, the author tells the story of "her" T-shirt, which she purchased for \$5.99 by the exit of a Walgreen's in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "It was white and printed with a flamboyantly colored parrot, with the word 'Florida' scripted beneath." A company in Miami had engraved the front, after buying the shirt from a factory in China. The Chinese manufacturer had purchased the cotton used to make the shirt from Texas. Eventually it will end up as part of a large but little-known market for used clothing destined for resale in East African ports.

Ms. Rivoli follows her T-shirt along its route, but this is like saying that Melville followed his whale. In Texas, she plumbs the reasons for America's pre-eminence in the cotton trade. This leads to a fascinating inquiry into the pre-Civil War South and its use of African slaves, whose cheap labor was an early example of "the ability to suppress and avoid competition" that she finds at every stage - not least in today's Asian sweatshops - of her T-shirt's journey. Even today, Texas owes much of its success to factors outside the "free market," like universities and other institutions that have helped to integrate ginning, packaging and shipping, and programs to familiarize farmers with technology.

Most of all, American farmers benefit from government subsidies, whose effect is to disenfranchise lower-cost cotton from poor nations of West Africa. When Ms. Rivoli informs us that these subsidies amount to more than the United States' entire development aid budget for the continent of Africa, we are ready to cut the Chinese a little slack, recognizing that they are hardly alone in departing from the virtuous fantasy of free and unrestricted competition. Given the absurdly arcane (and infuriating) knot of import restrictions that will confront her shirt when it attempts to reenter the United States, it isn't clear,

she observes dryly, "whether the best negotiators, or the best T-shirts, would win."

By looking across history to the shifting center of textile manufacturing from Manchester, England, to Lowell, Mass., to South Carolina to Japan and, finally, the developing nations of Asia, Ms. Rivoli discovers a universal truth. Without making light of the horrors experienced by workers, she asserts that their jobs were a little better than other available options (usually farm work) and, what's more, that textile factories led to advances in industrialization and, just as dependably, in living standards. It is not too much to say that she uses the T-shirt to tell the story of progress.

Similar points have been made before, but in the abstract dialect of economists. Ms. Rivoli does her best work at ground level, introducing us to a family farmer outside Lubbock, Tex.; a young woman on the assembly line in Shanghai; a reseller of shirts in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; a K Street lobbyist in Washington; not to mention figures from history. We learn of an earlier generation's exploitation from an Alabama sharecropper; of the mangled limbs suffered by factory workers in 19th-century Manchester from Friedrich Engels; and of the hazards of sweatshops from a survivor of the infamous fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in lower Manhattan in 1911 that killed 146 employees.

THE book sparkles with short, happy sentences like "Unlike French wine or Florida oranges, Texas cotton doesn't brag about where it was born and raised." Stationed outside a shopping center in Bethesda, Md., where a Salvation Army truck is accepting donations of used clothing, the author tartly observes, "It is a Saturday morning, and soccer moms are in a race to throw things away."

Ultimately, she concludes that the argument for free trade is as strong as ever, and it is a moral case as well as an economic one. She advises the activists not to disperse, but to refocus their efforts on including people, like repressed factory workers in China, in the political process "rather than shielding them from markets." Her nuanced and fair-minded approach is all the more powerful for eschewing the pretense of ideological absolutism, and her telescopic look through a single industry has all the makings of an economics classic.