

Title: “The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade”

Author: Pietra Rivoli

Publisher: John Wiley & Sons

Length: 272 pages

Price: \$29.95

Reading time: 3 hours

Reading rating: 5 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 4 (1= average; 4 = outstanding)

In “The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy” Pietra Rivoli accomplishes what few have even attempted — she presents a balanced view of the impact of globalization. Where most have authored books of dogma vehemently opposed, or rabidly in favor of what has become business reality, Rivoli presents a journey that is at once both real and figurative as she describes the transformation of raw cotton into a t-shirt, and beyond, as she also presents her changing perception of the workings of global economy. In the final analysis, Rivoli admits to her initial position, in keeping, she tells us, with traditional thinking among economists, that globalization was positive, and proclaims her realization as she researched the subject in writing the book that unfettered free trade represents a mixed bag. Despite the fact that free trade can be seen as the source of much economic good, Rivoli concludes that without strident efforts by protesters and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such benefits would generally result at the expense of exploitation of disadvantaged workers in third-world sweatshops.

This book should be of particular interest to people living in North Carolina. In selecting a way to examine the impact of free trade, Rivoli provides considerable background on the textile industry, long an important part of the economy in North Carolina, and the source of much economic hardship in recent times. As Ravoli relates the details of textile jobs following low-cost labor, first from England to New England, then from New England to the Southeast, it becomes clear that the dislocation that now impacts North Carolina is just a repetition of what was previously the fate of other areas. This alone should serve as a powerful lesson to those that would seek today to promote economic development by recruiting industry from other regions. As Rivoli aptly shows, if you can recruit businesses to the region, so can others recruit them away from the region.

Rivoli also does a good job of illustrating the protectionism that tarnishes the free trade sermon that our representatives seem intent on delivering to other nations. In particular, she describes how the cotton that went into her t-shirt was grown in Texas under a staggering array of government subsidies and policies that have served to allow U.S. farmers to mitigate the risks associated with growing cotton. The astute reader will immediately recognize that it is for such public support that the U.S. government imposed a tariff on wood products from Canada. Is it any wonder that some doubt the extent to which we are willing to play by the rules? As one of the attendees at a conference in London, Ontario recently asked me, “Do you really think that we can entrust our future to trading with the United States?” I did not have a good answer.

Rivoli's t-shirt started as cotton grown in Texas, was rendered as fabric and eventually sewed into a t-shirt in China, returned to the U. S. in Florida where it was screen-printed, was sold on a street corner in Washington, D.C., and as an old t-shirt it will finally encounter a free market as a cast off. Such cast offs may clothe someone in Tanzania, but it may well pass through China again to be sorted, on the way to Africa. Along the way there is plenty of room for disagreement about how business should be conducted. This book praises both the business people engaged in global trade and their adversaries who help to ensure that trade does not dehumanize those that it might serve to help. Do yourself a favor and read about the importance of both groups.

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