The Global T-Shirt

After letting it sit on my shelf for about a year, I finally got around to reading Pietra Rivoli's book, The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy. The subtitle is "An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade." That's accurate but makes the book sounds pretty dry and academic. The book actually manages to be both substantive and entertaining, a very tricky combination to pull off.

Pietra was at a student anti-globalism rally where one speaker asked the audience, "do you even know where your T-shift is from?" Pietra realized that she didn't and set about finding out. As it happens, the T-shirt was manufactured in Shanghai, but it was a little more surprising to learn that the cotton was actually grown in west Texas and then shipped to China for manufacture, before being shipped back to the U.S. for sale. The odds are that, when it's finally disposed of, the shirt will end up in Africa. Pietra does an in-depth exploration of each stage of the process, asking how the world of cotton garments has evolved since the days when cotton grown in the slaveholding South went to England for manufacturing.

The most interesting aspect of the book is Pietra's demonstration of inseparability between markets and government — at almost every stage from the planting of the cotton to the shirt's return to Florida for sale. Pietra places today's patterns of agriculture, industry, and trade in historical context, and unlike many economists gives a fair hearing to social and environmental concerns about globalization. It's well worth reading, whatever your views about globalism and free trade.