

America's Food Barons

Review essay

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Review of

Austin Frerick, *Barons: Money, Power, and the Corruption of Americas Food Industry*. Island Press, 2024, 257 pp.

The foreword to Austin Frerick's *Barons: Money, Power, and the Corruption of Americas Food Industry* is written by journalist Eric Schlosser, cited in the book condemning the rise of antiunion company town slaughterhouses in the 1980s (125, 7). He details some of the leading US monopolies and lauds Frerick as eminently suited to write this book in light of his personal experience in Iowa and his scrupulous research. Equally enlightening is his citation of "the great theorist and champion of capitalism" Adam Smith on the opening page, one assumes as a philosophical template for the book. However as much as Smith abhorred monopoly, his championing of competition, "free" markets and the entrepreneurial spirit has confined and compromised the essence of the liberty, equality and fraternity he so desired.

Austin Frerick's powerful indictment of the terrifying monopolization of the American food industry is a thoroughly researched exploration with chilling statistics and thoughtful interpretation. He writes with deep affection of his Iowan childhood, his father's work as a beer truck driver then in a corn processing plant, his mother's ambition to open a small bakery after working as a hairdresser. Here he describes the qualities of character and identity once nurtured in the small towns and cities of the United States, now hollowed out by the savage onslaught of industrial scale production. Yet the underlying belief that individual success is healthy and sits easily with community coherence and civic loyalty goes unquestioned.

Mutual aid, an organic essence in human social connection, is not discussed. The writings of Peter Kropotkin at the dawn of the 20th century point to the "three-cornered contest" among those seeking to maintain traditional forms of mutual support, those seeking transcendent commonwealth and those determined to usurp power for their own ends. Here "lies the real tragedy of history." In *Mutual Aid* Kropotkin recognized the importance of individualism and self-assertion, but the deeper compassion or solidarity he saw as a factor in evolution has been lost sight of in the muddled waters of contemporary perception.

Competition and hard work do not necessarily lead to fulfillment. My father's redundancy as a radio broadcaster and technician in his early fifties with two young children was followed by the failure of a family drapery shop and the "24/7" commitment of his radio and television repair business until seventy. The social cost was one of sacrifice and social isolation.

Our introduction to Frerick's work is an idyllic wander through the Iowa of his childhood, the family trip to meet relatives through the Driftless wonder of variegated crops, animals and thriving towns. He contrasts this with the contemporary horror of animal confinements and the disappearance of small business, replaced by impersonal chains. Iowa's identity as agricultural heartland is replaced by desecrated futures and the reactionary politics of desperation. He tells his story through seven exemplars of modern day "robber barons," ruthless in their destruction of community culture and as purveyors of homogenization and debasement of food.

A living metaphor for this sickness are the waterways in his home state now over 60 percent unfit for consumption, a havoc wreaked by the festering manure of thousands of caged pigs. Frerick narrates the "corporate takeover of my state" through the rise of the Hansen family, once simple hog breeders, who now represent one of the U.S.'s most powerful hog companies,

Iowa Select. Although business leaders advance the duplicitous narrative that corporate growth symbolizes success, Iowans paid a heavy price.

Political support saw the neutering of the counties' ability to regulate new confinements, with Republicans and Democrats alike at the corporate till. Former Democratic Governor Tom Vilsack oversaw the greatest expansion of pig industrialization between 2002 and 2006, later serving as agriculture secretary for both Obama and Biden.

Where the barons and their political lackeys saw monopolization of agriculture and industry as inevitable, Kropotkin argued for decentralization. Small farms and communities satisfied human production and distribution needs without the vast dislocation endemic in this dystopia. Frerick rightly deplores the destruction in modern America but his only solution is stronger unions, more robust legislation—a return to the United States of the New Deal era.

Instead, anti-trust legislation is subverted at all levels of government. One of the largest agri-firms, Cargill, was born in the 1860s as a grain hauler and owner of grain elevators, expanding during the Depression years in defiance of Roosevelt's Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, and prospering through its alliances with agricultural secretaries Benson and Butz under Eisenhower and Nixon to destroy the family farm-friendly New Deal Farm Bill.

Clinton's approval of the pro-big business Wall Street Farm Bill, as Frerick designates the seductively titled Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act, passed in 1996 with bipartisan support, illustrates the further abandonment of the keepers of the soil and food bowls of the country.

The intrusion of cheap corn syrup to sweeten a vast range of food products is a vivid depiction of Cargill's unscrupulous debasement of its health responsibility. Frerick's observation of the base treatment of Black farmers throughout all manifestations of farm-related legislation shows something much more profound endured over the past century—the exploitation of Black farmers who gained nothing from government subsidies and now make up just one percent of US farmers.

The first two chapters are insightful and deeply informative, offering numerous reasons for outrage, but there is a pervading sense of hopelessness. Yet none of this is inevitable. In contrast, Kropotkin as a theoretical practitioner, urged the expropriation of the powerful landlords of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the tilling of the unused land he saw during his walks around rural England. He was inspired by farms still nestling in small villages and offered practical hope as much as passionate condemnation. Kropotkin illustrated his critiques with detailed examples of how soil improvement and grain growth had been and could be realized to sustain an egalitarian and self-sufficient society (Possibilities of Agriculture in Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow*, 2012).

Frerick's third chapter broadens the conversation, introducing the dark history of the transnational German Reimann company, JAB, with its links to Nazi Germany and its debt to the US for its post war existence. Frerick depicts the role of monopolies within the fascist state in steel, rubber and coal and the Reimann family's collusion. As he explores JAB's move from perfume and luxury goods to coffee, he ponders the delusion of choice offered by so many conglomerates, then returns to the impact multi-national chains had on his mother's life—her bakery closed, and she took a job at a competing coffee shop.

A long history of anti-trust and anti-monopoly crusades was turned back in the post-war years as a neoliberal state turned an increasingly blind eye to corporate abuses. Robert Bork's (who remained on the appeals court even after his nomination to the Supreme Court was stymied) insidious "consumer welfare standard" was a theoretical gift to monopolists of all persuasions,

justifying a wave of mergers and buy-outs, predatory pricing and government subsidies. JAB prospered in this capitalist free-for-all, but the rest of us paid a heavy price.

Throughout these early chapters the role of workers and the labor movement is studiously avoided. The author's sympathy is clear as he describes the human catastrophe caused by monopoly ethos and the dreaded "efficiencies," but the suffering does not leap from the pages—nor do solutions, historical or otherwise.

Once again, Kropotkin offers a useful counterpoint. His essay on food in *The Conquest of Bread* portrays an anarcho-communist revolution. His template is a living, breathing one; cattle, copse and woodland are distributed according to need, justice and equity. At the time he estimated that 200 million of the 300 million living in Europe lived in this manner. Frerick's world is one where capitalism's dominance is unchallenged. Kropotkin devotes another chapter in *The Conquest of Bread* to luxuries, defined as the freedom from duress where each person could cultivate knowledge of literature, science and art, where a manual worker could contribute knowledge of his skills to profoundly enhance the theoretical impracticality of privileged minds.

Will the final chapters change Frerick's approach? He visits Fair Oak Farm, centerpiece of the Disney-like Indiana dairy empire of the McCloskeys, ambitious veterinarian Mike and former art student Sue. They gave birth to the ultra-filtered milk Fairlife in 2014. Coca-Cola's distribution and ultimate purchase enriched both companies. Here Sue McCloskey's "happy girls" produce four million school cartons worth of milk a day. The writer describes the "unsettling" atmosphere of this artificial paradise, the "hollowed out" sense in neighboring Fair Oak town.

We witness the most graphic description thus far, the unreported tragedy when one of the largely undocumented workforce, a 47-year-old Honduran father of three children, asphyxiates as his clothing catches in machinery connected to manure treatment during his 12-hour shift. Not only is the average wage a pittance of \$9 an hour, but the workers are often further industrialized in overcrowded dormitories.

Frerick mourns the loss of the idyllic red barns of yesteryear in Wisconsin and Vermont as thousands of dairy farmers are displaced by these soulless monstrosities. He criticizes the devious methods employed by the McCloskeys to rot the system through inventing digesters to supposedly convert methane to biogas and their challenge to the checkoff system where dairy farmers pay subsidies to promote the industry, which ended with this baron mysteriously receiving millions after the case was "lost."

The following three chapters follow the similar pattern of exploring the history of the "Barons," then showing how they increased their power and influence through political connections and the power of neoliberal theory and practice. There is a deeper focus on the conditions of the workers in these chapters.

"The Berry Barons" is the first chapter to offer detail on the exploitation of workers, here the strawberry laborers of California and the insidious control exerted by the Driscoll's corporation. The courageous battles of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta are described as is the increasing repudiation of their human rights achievements in recent decades since the North American FreeTrade Agreement. Union membership has plummeted from almost 100,000 to virtually zero.

Frerick discusses the revolt at Rancho Laguna Farms against pitiful wages and oppressive hours of work and conditions, ultimately to little avail. His study of the Reiter brothers, whose berry empire has spread to Mexico with plans to extend to the Sub-Sahara and China, is one of genetic research, extensive branding, and detachment. The industrial farms are contracted out

so ethical qualms are less visible. Offshoring and outsourcing see Driscoll's spread through all continents, Antarctica aside.

Barons is published by Island Press, an independent (apart from the foundations!), environmentally oriented organization. Frerick's case studies illustrate excessive use of underground water in Southern California and the worker and community fears of illness from Driscoll's rampant use of fumigants. In an earlier chapter Frerick described the drastic impacts of pig confinements on the health of children as well as adults.

However, no radical or even progressive resolution is advanced. There is a sad inevitability about the debasement of US food and the irrationality of the nation as a net importer of fruit and vegetables, but the broader canvas is left untouched.

Within the world of berries, Kropotkin enthused about the methods of cultivation already in use, pointing to the market gardeners of Paris and Jersey as skillful and varied. In Jersey, he spoke glowingly of the small vineries that best exemplified the glasshouse culture of one Mr. Bashford, yet compared the yield of the tomatoes and strawberries grown in the open as equal in quality. While deploring the physical toll needed to maintain a livelihood, he explored the techniques of soil enrichment and water in admiring the culture *maraichere* of Paris. Here was the "utopia" that the U.S. is losing or, more likely, never really possessed at all. (*Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow*, 1985)

While all of the *Barons* discussed bent the law in a variety of nefarious ways, the Batista brothers, the owners of the world's largest meat and chicken slaughterhouse chain, JBS Foods, are presented as the most blatantly criminal. Their modest origins in Brazil exploded in the 1990s to the extent that they could be used in a scam to discredit President Temer in 2017 to escape prosecution for bribery! Their incursion into the US coincided with their rise to become one of the four largest slaughterhouse companies dominating 85% of the market and the beginning of a series of scandals involving bribes, price-fixing, under payment and near expulsion from the country. These giant corporations now control the majority of beef cattle, 90 percent of dairy cows and 80 percent of pigs.

Frerick details the infamous history of this most harrowing of jobs, regularly referencing Upton Sinclair's 1906 book *The Jungle*, a withering dissection of working conditions in the slaughterhouses that served as inspiration for federal reforms (less to protect workers than to protect consumers from tainted meat). Again we see the pattern of inhumanity where reforms realized are swept away by the inexorable growth of capitalism. Genoways' *The Chain: Farm, Factory and the Fate of our Food* (2014), portraying the weakness, pain and numbness in workers' feet and legs after inhaling aerosolized pig brains diffusing in greater quantity as corporations sought greater speed in the killing line is a contemporary illustration.

Safety has always been compromised, the most tragic consequence being the death of twenty-five workers in Hamlet, North Carolina, in September 1991. That half of the victims were Black women said as much about the exploitation of the industry as did the revelations that the company had never applied for a building permit, and never filed safety forms. The locked doors on the outside preventing escape again speaks to literal horror and symbol entrapment.

Trump's hypocrisy has long been evident in his supposed ambition to "drain the swamp" and pretense of protecting vulnerable workers. His ignorance in declaring slaughterhouses "critical infrastructure" in 2020, doubtless under pressure from the North American Meat Institute, contributed to the death of 269 workers from COVID-19 between March 2020 and January 2021.

Meanwhile, exports reached record levels and the four major meatpacking monoliths paid \$3 billion in dividends to their shareholders.

Frerick states that his final chapter was a necessary depiction of the integration of food suppliers and retail outlets, but he had not intended to focus on Walmart as to do so might appear to be an assault on the lower socio-economic consumer clientele of the retail, now grocery, giant. He reluctantly realized that this was unavoidable, with the US's largest company employing 1.6 million people and embodying so many of the invidious practices of all barons. It becomes the book's longest chapter.

While it makes sense to discuss the most pervasive of all giants and the penultimate destination of the food chain, the author's description of the destruction of retail malls and grocery business throughout the country is at odds with the strange remark "The empire that Sam Walton was able to build is admirable" (146)! Seemingly, success is ingrained in the American psyche and philosophical conversation is the poorer for it. The family wealth of \$225 billion makes them the richest people on Earth.

Frerick is a sensitive writer and his perception of the Walmart "show town" of Bentonville as akin to the Truman Show in artifice—a town the more eerie each time he visits—is reflected in the hard facts of the region's inequality, 15th out of 916 metropolitan areas in the US (Economic Policy Institute, 2018). The scale of shattered towns devoid of local stores is mirrored in the megalith's invasion of rural and regional America. Iowa alone lost "298 hardware stores, 293 building supply stores, 161 variety stores, 158 women's apparel stores, 153 shoe stores, 116 drugstores" in what Frerick describes as its first wave of destruction (Stone, 1995). Local grocery stores throughout the nation were to follow.

Walmart's treatment of its employees matches those of other robber barons—poverty wages, de-unionization, consumer exploitation, environmental destruction—the very epitome of intra-national, indeed multinational, commerce. Another dimension of the power distortions is the fact that most Walmart workers receive SNAP payments, in effect subsidizing the richest family on the planet. Observations such as that emanating from Obama's chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, Jason Furman, are little solace for the workers whose medical slips are routinely rejected: "Wal-Mart: A Progressive Success Story" (Furman, 2005). Walmart's battle with Amazon is between two titans, the former seeking online presence to complement the physical, the latter endeavoring to do the reverse.

As the Farm Bill became emasculated over time, so the 1936 Robinson-Patman Act was eroded by political and legal pressure from

Bork's early opposition to antitrust laws, now reinforced by Supreme Court pronouncements. The impact within the United States was even more devastatingly apparent in the outsourced consequences of the corporation's greed. Months before the 2012 loss of 112 workers to fire in a garment factory in Bangladesh, Walmart officials rejected fire and electrical safety improvement requests from workers. In 2013, 1,134 workers died in a garment-making building supplying the behemoth in the same impoverished country.

In the 1960s Kropotkin's ideas were echoed by thinkers such as Murray Bookchin, who embraced the decentralization and utopian elements of Kropotkin's ideals but offered a 20th century understanding of the destructive impact of herbicides and pesticides in his groundbreaking *Our Synthetic Environment*—published six months before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* but to less publicity hence acclaim and vitriol.

“Bookchin’s *Post-scarcity Anarchism* hit the New Left and the counterculture like a thunder-clap” (*Ecology or Catastrophe*, Biehl, 2015, 138) but the broader society ventured towards more modest environmental change. A sad irony that as the transformative social change urged by such thinkers was ignored, the frailties of reformist laws and comfortable middle-class convention were soon ruthlessly exposed by the monopolization of the economic world, the desecration of community and environment, the emasculation of the political sphere.

Frerick’s conclusion is honorable. He urges returning animals to the land while phasing out industrial confinement, abolition of the Wall Street Farm Bill and restoration of the Robinson-Patman Act, stronger legal guidelines and recourse, popular education, “a robust middle class,” better conditions for workers. He seeks restoration of robust supply chains, and a diversity of domestic production beyond corn and soy. In the same breath as condemning the broken laissez-faire approach of the past four decades he suggests the implementation of “pro-competition measures” (171–83).

We may ask, where is the insight to see that this recipe will likely repeat the errors of the past? Before the era of industrialized agriculture, Kropotkin argued for the very opposite of the vast monopolization of agriculture and industry that the barons and their political lackeys see as common sense. He noted the possibilities for increased yields and less waste that decentralized, communal farms or gardens could offer in a rational society. Contemporary critics of our agro-industrial complex might do well to look to Kropotkin, Bookchin and others who offer food for different thoughts.

Sidebar: Bad for Workers, Bad for Consumers

New research reported in *The Atlantic* shows that incomes decline significantly in US counties where a Walmart store opens. One study found that the average net loss from a Walmart’s opening is at least \$2,000 per year per person, leading to a 16% increase in poverty locally. This results both from lower wages and fewer retail and manufacturing jobs. Local public services also decline as a result of economic decline and reduced tax revenue.

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