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Austin Frerick, *Barons: Money, Power, and the Corruption of America's Food Industry* (Island Press, 2024).

In *Barons: Money, Power, and the Corruption of America's Food Industry*, Austin Frerick presents a powerful exposé of the transformation of the American food system from farm to table. At a time when food travels long and complex paths before reaching our plates, Frerick uncovers how the rise of corporate agribusiness has reshaped the food industry and the broader sociopolitical landscape of the United States.

While much attention has been paid to the economic and environmental aspects of the food industry, Frerick's extensive empirical work adds a fresh perspective, examining how legal and political institutions have enabled and sustained the concentration of power among the seven corporations he refers to as the "Barons."

The book's central thesis aligns with a core tenet of Law and Political Economy (LPE): Politics creates and shapes the economy, and law structures the relationship between the two. Throughout the book, the author reveals how legal arrangements serve as tools of corporate governance, reinforcing monopolistic and monopsonistic power. This is not merely a story of market dynamics, but of deliberate legal and political design.

A key component of this design, Frerick argues, is the influence of Robert Bork and the Chicago school. Their redefinition of antitrust policy to focus narrowly on prices willfully disregards the broader consequences on labor, local producers, and democracy itself. Frerick demonstrates how seemingly technical legal standards are, in reality, political decisions that determine who accumulates power and who remains vulnerable. For example, Tyson's power concentration has had an impact on its contracted chicken producers, who are forced to take on enormous debts to meet the company's standards. Yet they have no control over prices, inputs, or sales conditions. This makes them economically dependent on the corporation and extremely vulnerable to its unilateral decisions.

Frerick's book provides a detailed account of how the unchecked growth and practices of the seven Barons validate and operationalize core LPE themes. One theme is the increasing concentration of control over economic and labor markets in the hands of a few corporations over the years. Each of the seven Barons exemplifies this trend in their own sector. Frerick argues that market concentration in the food sector is the result of deliberate legal and political arrangements. One example discussed is the New Deal's Farm Bill, which initially provided stability and distributed power to some extent. However, after being dismantled through legal reforms that redirected subsidies to large economic actors, the law was shown to be a tool to redistribute wealth upward, thereby exacerbating racial and class-based inequalities.

Frerick also unveils the contractual structure adopted by the Barons across the supply chain. There is a clear pattern of outsourcing that exploits farmers and workers, seeking to obscure the true negative impacts and inequality generated by such models on labor and society more broadly. The Barons are portrayed not only as economic players, but also as individuals who use the law—through production contracts, patents, international treaties, check-off programs, and other legal mechanisms—to control markets and labor relations.

One example is Driscoll's, a company that does not grow berries itself, but instead controls patents and production contracts, enabling it to generate profit while evading labor and environmental accountability. This represents the privatization of public knowledge and the contractual subordination of farmers, a phenomenon that the book consistently highlights.

Frerick also details how the activities of the seven Barons have led to severe social and environmental consequences. Workers are exploited, rural communities are dismantled, and the surrounding social and ecological environments are degraded. Environmental disasters, such as polluted rivers, toxic lakes, and soil degradation, are not inevitable side effects, but rather the result of lax regulatory structures, often influenced by the Barons themselves. The narrative makes it clear that the law determines who bears the costs—communities, workers, and public health—and who reaps the gains—the Barons.

The book is a powerful account of how free-market rhetoric has been used since the Reagan administration to dismantle antitrust regulation and erode historical protections. Thus, according to Frerick, the problem is both economic and democratic, involving regulatory capture and social exclusion.

Nonetheless, Frerick doesn't conclude on a note of despair but issues a call to action. The author proposes ideas for rebuilding the system based on policies that promote the common good. The solution, in his view, lies in reimagining legal and economic institutions to ensure a fairer distribution of power. Meaningful intervention is necessary, as markets are legal and political institutions that are not natural phenomena and do not become healthy on their own. Rather, they must be cultivated and shaped through conscious political and social choices. Frerick's proposed path for restoring justice to markets is through stronger regulation and antitrust laws, with the aim of revitalizing family farming.

Austin Frerick's *Barons* offers a compelling and empirically grounded contribution to debates on food systems, corporate power, and legal governance. Adopting a Law and Political Economy perspective, the book transcends conventional economic analysis, shedding light on the legal and political infrastructures that perpetuate inequality and environmental degradation. It is essential reading for anyone interested in food justice, as well as for scholars and policymakers concerned with the intersection of democracy, law, and the future of markets.

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