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Book Review

Titans of Industrial Agriculture: How a Few Giant Corporations Came to Dominate the Farm Sector and Why it Matters

by Jennifer Clapp

(MIT Press, 2025; 474 pages)

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In *Titans of Industrial Agriculture*, Jennifer Clapp offers food and agriculture studies a comprehensive account of the history and ongoing transformation of consolidation across four agriculture sectors: machinery, fertilizer, seeds, and pesticides. Clapp traces the initial rise of corporate bigness, mid-twentieth century mergers of distress and opportunity, and twenty-first century megamergers that formed the oligopolies we have today. This sweeping and detailed account offers new insights into the deep roots of industrial agriculture as well as the widespread power that entrenches corporate interests in the dominant agriculture system.

Clapp writes that she was inspired to undertake this research after reading US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis' (1914) *Other People's Money and How the Bankers Use It*, in which he wrote, "Size, we are told, is not a crime. But size may, at least, become noxious by reason of means through which it was attained or the uses to which it is put." Brandeis further warned that concentrated corporate wealth undermines democratic institutions. In *Titans*, Clapp examines how monopoly capitalism shaped Big Ag, and how it threatens—not only agricultural production—but also the functioning of our democracy. Clapp advances three primary arguments.

The first argument has to do with how certain firms gained dominance in the first place. Clapp finds that mergers and acquisitions were not only arranged in the pursuit of efficiency, but occurred through a mix of market, technology, and policy influences. This included not only privileged access to finance, but also state-sponsored research that supported new technologies, first-mover advantages for investor-powered companies, and extended protections on intellectual property. These dynamics reinforced each other, and large firms grew to be giants among few competitors by the mid-twenty-first century. This first argument is where Clapps's archival research really shines, offering new insights into the already-robust literature on agricultural transformation. Take the Green Revolution,

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for example. Critical scholarship tends to focus on the social and ecological impacts of the Green Revolution. Notably, Clapp shifts the discussion from impacts to one of strategic corporate dependency through technological lock-ins that entrenched agribusiness power. Clapp also shows how consolidation and power preexisted the Green Revolution, but solidified and grew because of the imperial-capital-production-technology machine.

The second argument Clapp advances is that bigness begat power, and power begat more bigness. Dominant firms used their power to close out or acquire smaller firms. Big firms shaped new innovation to maximize their own profits and used technological lock-ins, like seed-chemical "packages" to entrench the industrial model of agriculture and their own power. They pursued strategies—aggressively lobbying in national and global governance spaces, co-opting environmental policies, and raising supra-competitive pricing beyond what inflation or material costs require—to influence the market, technology, and policy dynamics that facilitated their dominance in the first place.

The third argument, though a less direct focus of the book, is that corporate consolidation has resulted in wide-ranging social and ecological impacts for both producers and consumers. Social costs include the loss of small farms and farm livelihoods, as well as stymied innovation leading to lesser choice and higher prices for both agricultural inputs and products. Ecological consequences include biodiversity loss, soil degradation, pollution, and major contributions to greenhouse gas emissions. These costs were known as early as the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century but have been repeatedly ignored by firms who argue that bigness is needed to feed the world through innovation and efficiency.

As a food and agriculture scholar who teaches on, but does not personally research, state and corporate power, I am tempted to suggest that Clapp's 456 pages of examined archives and grey literature is perhaps *too* much detail. However, reducing the text for brevity would be a missed opportunity to present evidence of corporate pressure and power in industrial agriculture—funding associations left off of journal articles, backdoor discussions of price-collusion, commentary on lawsuits fought. *Titans* is a courageous, extraordinary documentation of power. The playbook is laid bare.

To say that Clapp could have edited further is also to miss the excellent teaching opportunity that this book affords. Clapp's writing is thoughtful and formulaic, neither flourishing, nor dry. The chapters are extractable from the book and useful in undergraduate courses.

Nevertheless, *Titans* is not without limitation. While Clapp signals toward structural forces, as a work that relies heavily on the New Brandeis movement framework, Clapp's primary focus is market dynamics, rather than capitalism itself. By framing the issue as a problem of concentrated power, her book risks implying that by simply breaking up firms into smaller entities or regulating them better, the food and agriculture system will become sustainable and just. However, as scholars like Philip McMichael (2013) show, there is a more systemic critique to be made, that industrial agriculture is integral to the functioning of global capitalism, which demands cheap food, cheap labour, and endless market expansion. As a complement to *Titans*, readers might turn to Judith Carney's (2001) *Black Rice*, for a reminder that the global agriculture system was founded on racial capitalism and the violent appropriation of Indigenous land—the system was never innocent, even before the titans arrived.

Relatedly, in prioritizing the stories of "bigness" of agricultural titans over the critique of global capitalism, *Titans* occasionally glosses over the violent realities of how this system takes in land and bodies. In centering the names and logics of megamergers, Clapp risks eliding the intimate details about how and why marginalized bodies and land are required to animate industrial agriculture. Readers looking for these details may supplement *Titans* with Tania Li and Pujo Semedi's (2021) *Plantation Life* as an example of a grounded account of how corporate plantations transform life and space in Indonesia's oil palm zone.

In the book's conclusion, Clapp quotes competition expert Matt Stoller in saying, "Nothing about monopolization is inevitable." However, the task of dismantling corporate power is exigent. The business-as-usual path will likely lead to more megamergers. But this is not the only path. Though not the stated goal of the book, Clapp's conclusion offers some guidance for how to begin to fight corporate power, including strengthening competition policies, renewing accountability, and expanding public support for alternative agricultural models. *Titans*'s thorough and detailed account of corporate concentration across two centuries offers a playbook for collecting evidence against oligopolies. How we use it remains to be seen.

Mindy Jewell Price is a political ecologist and human geographer whose research examines the intersections of critical food and agrarian studies, Indigenous environmental studies, and polar geography. Her current project examines how the Northwest Territories, Canada, has emerged as both an imaginative and material frontier for agriculture, and how rural and Indigenous communities negotiate their relationships with land and the state amid shifting climatic and agrarian conditions. Her research and teaching advance food justice through a focus on land sovereignty, gender equity, and ecologically sustainable practices, and she collaborates closely with communities and practitioners in community-engaged ethnographic and archival research.

Conflicts of Interest: None to declare.

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