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Book review: Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland by Kathryn Marie Dudley

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Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland. By Kathryn Marie Dudley. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 212 pp., \$22.50, hardback, ISBN 0-226-16911-1.

Debt and Dispossession provides a sobering overview of farm loss in a rural Minnesota county. Farmers, in their quest to earn a living, invested heavily in land and machinery during the 1970s when low interest rates and high commodity prices made it possible. When the markets turned sour in the 1980s and interest rates soared, more than 250,000 farmers nationwide defaulted on loans and hundreds of rural banks failed. Farmers hesitated to organize in protest because they did not share special interests as producers. Instead Kathryn Dudley finds that their involvement in grain, dairy, or stock production divided them into factions with unique needs and grievances. They competed more than they cooperated. As a result, farmers carefully hid their own strengths and weaknesses from neighbors who stood to profit in some way from their loss. This declension in the rural community remained below the surface, hidden behind an aura of sociability and mutuality. The crisis destroyed the aura and left the farmer, beholden to lenders and isolated from neighbors, struggling to save the farm.

Dudley orients the reader to the farm crisis with a discussion of politics and credit systems in the 1970s. Conversations with farm families, extension gents, and lenders attest to the shared conviction at the time that "bigger is better and debt is good" (31). The autonomous and individualistic farmer who watched land values soar made a reasonable and proactive business decision by expanding production. Lenders aided and abetted, but the federal government's monetary and foreign policies effectively stopped the growth. No one accepted responsibility for the overextended condition in which farmers found themselves, and the farmer ultimately shouldered the blame for making a bad decision. But Dudley hints that the blame did not lie with the farmer, the lender, or the government. The capitalist system itself offered no support structure to rescue individuals who, despite reason? able decisions, defaulted. Furthermore, the involvement of the public sector in private competition complicated matters and created inequities. Dudley explains that private lenders assessed individual character and family reputation while public lenders, such as the Farmers' Home Administration, assessed individual merit and personal achievement (51). The actions taken by private and public lenders seeking to collect on a loan also differed. Private lenders, intent on doing business "honorably" more frequently worked with farmers, while public lenders were not so constrained.

Dudley makes a significant contribution to understanding relationships of government, private enterprise, and the agrarian myth when she explains how the lenders, the community, and the farmers viewed farm loss. Farmers lost more than their businesses in the 1980s; they lost their way of life. Dudley's interviews with farm men and women, agribusiness representatives, and bankers in "Star Prairie," provide the multiple perspectives necessary to analyze the situation. Most of her

interviewees agreed that those who failed were not good business people. But Dudley identifies hidden relationships in the conversations that point to the competitive nature of farming and the isolation of individual families within an apparently supportive rural culture. She explains that few protested in the 1980s or discussed their troubles openly because they feared gossip. Preserving the farm for the next generation, thereby preserving the lifestyle and the business, stood as the ultimate accomplishment for the farm family. But the credit system, the competition between farmers, and the inability to communicate freely about troubles and ask for assistance made the quest nearly impossible. Dudley supports her anti-capitalist argument with solid research and informed analysis. She concludes that capitalism will continue to undermine the business and culture of family farms and rural communities. What alternative exists? This anthropological study provides information useful to historians, policy makers, sociologists, and farmers interested in understanding and finding alternatives to dispossession.

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