REVIEW ESSAY


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Abstract. I was optimistic of a new beginning in an open society when I came to America in 1999. Since then, I have indeed benefited from many aspects of American life. I have learned a lot – especially through my experience with small farms and farmers. But now, it’s time to move on. And it was reading Debt and Dispossession, a book about American agriculture and human values, that crystallized in me why I wanted to leave. By telling the story of the 1980s farm crisis through the words of the residents of a Minnesota town, the book prizes open many of the contradictions of American society. The 1970s were boom times for mid-western farms; farmers took advantage of “easy” farm credit to finance expansion. By the 1980s, the boom burst and slump loomed. Lenders wanted their money back and thousands of farmers were dispossessed. Debt and Dispossession probes beneath the surface of a community apparently united in protest against the dispossessions. Underneath, it finds a tangled picture of a society at war with itself, pitting farmer against farmer in a fratricidal struggle. The book let me glimpse the paradox of American individualism, all-American contradictions centering on government and consumerism, frugality and morality. Just like my experience of American agriculture and farmers as a whole, Debt and Dispossession helped me see the best side of America, but also revealed the fragility of life in a one-on-one society.

Key words: American agriculture, Competition, Debt and Dispossession, Farmers, Farm credit, 1980s farm crisis, Individualism, Morality

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When I first came to America, I had an idea, somewhere in my mind, of what it was going to be like. My husband and I were going to move to the countryside, somewhere in Massachusetts. We would be away from the trappings of our old London life. Tired of a crowded nation, we sought space and security in a nice wooden house with a porch. America would be good to us, we thought. Opportunity. Openness. Generosity. It wasn’t all about class. Individual achievement was praised rather than scorned.

So we came with full of hope. Four years on, we’re leaving. Though the reasons are to some extent practical, they’re also political and cultural. America has been good to me in lots of ways. It’s the place where I came of age, where I completed my education, even though I never went to college here. It made me face myself, fight for myself, and discover what I care about. It’s also where I developed a passion for farm-fresh food and became fascinated with the food system as a whole. In America, I learned the importance of small farms and of a viable, healthy agriculture. It is thus ironic and painful that reading a book about farmers and American agriculture helped me crystallize the reasons why I now want to leave.

Don’t get me wrong. The book, Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America’s Heartland by Kathryn Marie Dudley (University of Chicago Press, 2000) isn’t in any way “anti-American.” Neither does it blast corporate agribusiness or corrupted politicians, easy as this is to do. No, Debt and Dispossession simply prizes open the many contradictions of modern American life. It allowed me to see them for what they were; allowed me to understand my own experience, as I know it will for others. Contradictions are a part of life and a part of me. So, I never had any illusions about finding a perfect life here, of finding a place free of contradiction. But my experience of America has been nonetheless of its contradictions, and it’s time to move on.
Debt and Dispossession is ostensibly a story of a farming community in a place I’ve never been. The town has a mythical name – Star Prairie – but we know it’s a real place somewhere in Minnesota. I imagine it resembles the book’s cover: corn growing in big flat fields, stretching for miles and miles. A few fences, roads. All spread out. Nothing like where I ended up living: a small cramped Manhattan apartment. And the story is set before I arrived stateside: the late 1970s and early 1980s, the time of the “American farm crisis,” when thousands of farmers were dispossessed of land they felt was theirs.

It’s this crisis that forms both the backdrop and core of Dudley’s moving, intelligent, and wonderfully readable book, as recounted through the eyes and words of Star Prairie’s people. Dudley, an anthropologist at Yale, exhibits a sympathy for her subjects while at the same time understands the bigger picture. It’s a book that gets to the core of agriculture, as well as human values. The values are revealed through interviews with farmers, bankers, loan agents, educators – those affected by the significant shifts in the American agricultural economy during the 1970s–1980s.

As Dudley explains, high commodity prices made farming seem easy in the 1970s. Nixon floated the dollar in 1971, creating a weak currency, making US-produced goods cheaper abroad. Crop yield in the rest of the world was low, further boosting demand for US farm products shrank. So did low cost credit. In 1979, the government introduced a restrictive monetary policy, purging inflation yet pushing up interest rates toward 20%. The effect on farm families was disastrous. Their earnings plummeted. At the same time, taxes went up, the weather was bad, and, to cap it all, President Carter imposed an embargo on the then-Soviet Union in retaliation for their invasion of Afghanistan. Bust. The lenders wanted their money back.

All of a sudden, the fruitful and successful farmers appeared to have overexpanded and overextended. Overnight, a “good farmer” became a “bad farmer.” Sometimes, these farmers were scorned, sometimes they fled their farms. Others ended it all. But here comes the crucial part of Dudley’s story: not all farmers were dispossessed. Some were OK. They were the ones buying up the land of the dispossessed. So, while the economic forces were the same across the community, across the state, across the nation, not all individuals met the same fate. This point raises the crucial question: who was to blame for the dispossessions? Why were some farmers winners and others losers?

In pursuit of answers, Dudley takes us into the world of Star Prairie. You don’t have to probe far to experience one of the major myths of modern American life: that the individual is responsible for their fate, for their lives, for their wealth, for their health. It’s a graft, but anyone can do it. And if you fail, if you become poor; if you become ill, well, hell: you made the decisions you made. You’re to blame when things go bad, praised when things go good. It’s up to you, right?

Issue number one: Was it the lenders who were to blame for lending the farmers too much money, or the farmers, for borrowing too much? Though there are plenty of stories in this book expressing anger at the lenders, Dudley leaves us with the overarching impression that the community placed the blame on individual farmers – “anyone who lost a farm had something to deserve it” (p. 5). Says an adult farm management instructor, “the lender was not putting a gun to the farmer’s head and saying, “Do it! Buy it, or we’re not going to support you anymore” (p. 38). Rather it was the individual who took the decision to borrow what they did. Dudley is illuminating in revealing the problems with this notion. She points out that speculators pulled out of farmland investment. Lenders overnight turned a “good” loan into “bad” not because the farmer failed to pay, but because the lender was anxious to rescure risky loans. And most importantly, the community in general were unwilling to grasp the importance of prevailing culture. Culture is a blurry force created by society. We get caught up in whether we like it or not. Though it isn’t identifiable like a gun, it shapes in part who we are and the decisions we take. And the prevailing culture of the time was to borrow money. As put by a University of Minnesota Agricultural Extension agent: “It was almost to the point where people would tell you you’re dumb if you’re not doing this. You know, everybody else is doing it” (p. 30, italics in original). It was irresponsible as an individual not to take the opportunity when it came along because it’s what people did. But the myth of individualism makes us think we are acting alone in making decisions, whereas we are really acting en masse.

The parallel here with the stockmarket is clear. When I first came to the US the Dow was soaring over 10,000. My husband and I had sold our London home, expecting to buy again. A financial advisor told us, put your capital on the stockmarket. When we suggested using all of it to buy a new property, he told us we’d be foolish, the stockmarket makes more money than property. Now, it’s true we had the choice to ignore the advi-