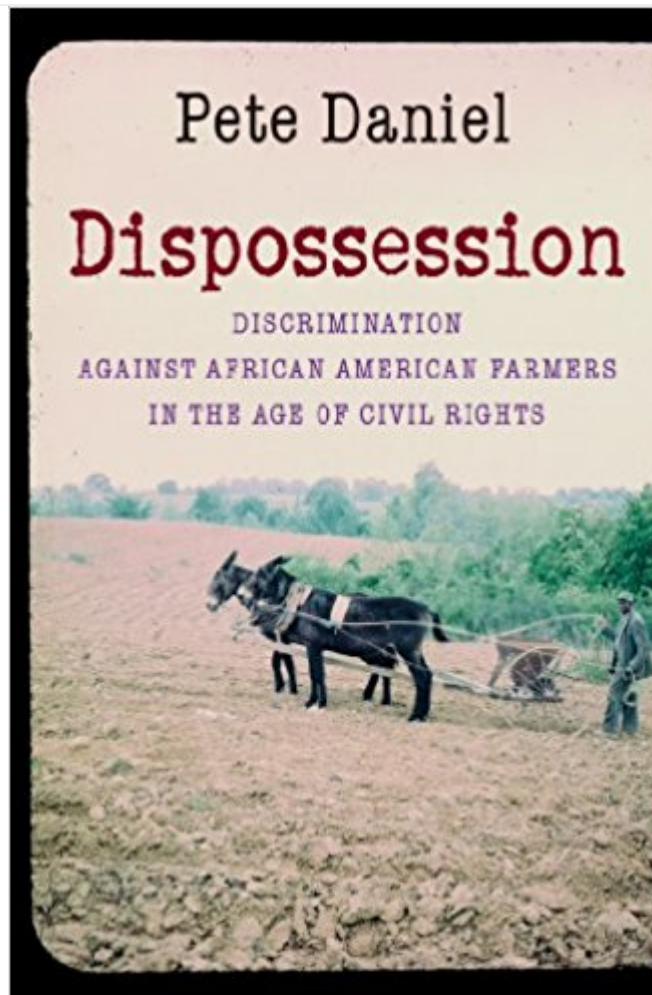


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## Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights*. By Pete Daniel (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). Pp. 332. Cloth, \$34.95.

In *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights*, Pete Daniel argues that racism pervaded U.S. farm policy and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) during the civil rights era. In a detailed, well-documented, and convincing analysis of various department divisions, such as the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation

Service, the Federal Extension Service, and the Farmers Home Administration, Daniel demonstrates how certain practices and policies barred black farmers from enjoying equal access to the largess and benefits provided by the USDA. His argument serves several purposes: not only does Daniel provide evidence of racist government actions, but he also shifts the focus of the civil rights movement from town to countryside and continues his decades-long interest in the decline of small farms and the rise of agribusiness in America.

The story of rural discrimination, according to Daniel, has largely gone unnoticed. Too many other, more visible stories competed for the attention of the media and public in the 1960s and 1970s. “The static of the Vietnam War, civil rights demonstrations, and cultural changes,” maintains Daniel, “obscured not only black farmers’ tenuous survival but also the USDA’s callous violation of their civil rights” (13). Thus Daniel’s book charts new territory as it delves into the multifarious connections between “agribusiness and agrigovernment” that “crushed many farmers” during the civil rights era (16).

Discrimination, in Daniel’s analysis, occurred primarily at local levels under the direction of state and county offices of USDA programs, while the federal leadership feigned compliance with civil rights legislation and passively accepted prejudice in the rank and file. Faced with a need to reform the employment practices of the outreach and educational arm

of the USDA, the Extension Service, Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman stalled “for nearly two years,” and “allowed extension personnel to tie the issue into knots.” Freeman, suggests Daniel, “had no stomach for confronting southern politicians or even his own deceitful staff” (185, 190). This is but one example of a theme that pervades the book: those in position to bring about change in the policies and organization of the USDA lacked the conviction to act, while local-level managers were left free to perpetuate discriminatory practices.

The practices pursued by USDA personnel contributed to the loss of 618,000 black farmers in America between 1940 and 1969. But, as Daniel is quick to point out, “black and white farmers throughout the country wrestled with mechanization, chemicals, and government programs” during this period, factors that drove some 3.4 million farmers from the land by 1970 (4). As farming in the hinterland transformed into a capital-intensive rural industry, many farmers needed government assistance for investments in irrigation, tractors, fertilizers, and insecticides. Access to USDA programs could make the difference between a farm falling into debt or remaining viable, and black farmers, on the whole, failed to secure such help more often than whites.

The inability to acquire loans had far-reaching consequences for farmers, and Daniel finds evidence of discrimination throughout the Farmers Home Administration’s dispensation of loans. Rural blacks active in civil rights movements, he argues, “faced huge risks,” as the withholding of loans became “a punitive tool” (225). But even African-American farmers with no connection to activism received fewer loans relative to their white counterparts. Worse still, according to Daniel, “[t]he FHA sometimes lured black farmers into debt, failed to supervise them, and then foreclosed” on their accounts (229). The white elite who controlled the USDA used their power to force African Americans from their land.

Daniel’s book adds depth and complexity to the growing scholarship on twentieth-century rural change typified by the work of Neil Foley, Rebecca Sharpless, and Claire Strom, among others. Strom’s work on the USDA’s role in eliminating cattle ticks in the South, for instance, focuses on the importance of class in rural transformation. As she demonstrates in *Making Catfish Bait out of Government Boys: The Fight Against Cattle Ticks and the Transformation of the Yeoman South* (Athens, Ga., 2009),

the USDA supported wealthy cattle ranchers to the detriment of upcountry yeoman farmers, with the result that small farmers lost their livelihoods while elite farmers expanded their control over agriculture with the government's help. Thus it seems that sometimes class interests drove the USDA's efforts to modernize American agriculture, while at other times, as Daniel demonstrates, race motivated the decisions of USDA personnel.

Daniel's work in *Dispossession* therefore advances the study of the USDA's role in dispossessing farmers who did not fit the department's concept of progress, but it also shows the need for additional work to synthesize the myriad ways that class, race, and gender worked together to transform rural America. Nevertheless, in *Dispossession*, Daniel provides a well-written and strongly argued work that does much to forward our understanding of rural transformation in twentieth-century America.

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