

Pete Daniel. *Toxic Drift: Pesticides and Health in the Post-World War II South.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. xii + 224pp. \$26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-3098-8.



Reviewed by Robert Rakoff

Published on H-Environment (December, 2005)

The misguided overuse of chemical pesticides in the decades after World War II has been a familiar story at least since the publication of *Silent Spring* (1962). In *Toxic Drift*, Pete Daniel has scoured the records of federal agencies and trial transcripts to add a wealth of new detail to the history of that period when the use of pesticides expanded even as the evidence of environmental and health risks grew.

Daniel looks in depth, first, at what may have been the first court trial claiming damages from aerial spraying of toxic chemicals, a case in Mississippi in the late 1950s. While the facts of the case seemed to show clearly that the injured man was doused with pesticide from a passing plane, experts from the USDA, farm associations, and chemical manufacturers were able to minimize their shared liability with testimony based on dubious science and with legal tactics that delayed a final judgment until the dying plaintiff settled out of court for a pittance. Daniel moves on to look closely at the activities (and inactivities) of the USDA's Agricultural Research Service and its Pesticide Regulation Division as they dealt with their

contradictory statutory responsibilities: to regulate the labeling, safety, and marketing of pesticides, and to advocate for the expanded uses of these same substances as part of the USDA's program of encouraging industrial agriculture. Relying on new research in USDA archives, Daniel documents the appalling record of mismanagement, shoddy research, politicized science, lack of enforcement, turf wars, and collusion with the companies being regulated that allowed these agencies to approve the widespread use of toxic chemicals in agriculture as well as domestic settings with very little evaluation of risks and benefits.

How could this state of affairs have persisted for so long, even into the new century, and even as the evidence of harm became clear and public? Here Daniel does not do justice to his detailed research. Daniel argues that this result was shaped by a corrupt, inept, and perfidious government bureaucracy that was insensitive to its own scientific findings and to the public good because it had been captured by the very industry it regulated, and because it lived in fear of the power of Con-

gressional appropriators, especially the notorious Jamie Whitten of Mississippi. There is certainly much truth in this explanation, which is echoed in a good deal of political science literature. But this approach only hints at the agencies' underlying commitment to a belief in industrial agriculture as the best way to achieve both food security and a profitable farm economy, what Christopher Bosso, in his *Pesticides and Politics* (1987) called the "pesticide paradigm." What Daniel calls "a careless love for chemical control programs" (p. 159), may have deeper roots in modernity's quest to transform and control nature. This may help us understand why USDA and company scientists were not simply guilty of malfeasance and dereliction of duty, but were blinded by their own ideological commitment to an unquestioned notion of progress.

As the book's subtitle notes, this is also a story about the South, Daniel's specialty as a historian. Many of the episodes he recounts here, especially the infamous fire ant eradication programs, were set in the South and were aimed at the alleged threats insects posed to cotton and other commodity crops. Moreover, many of the central actors in congress and the agencies hailed from the South and owed allegiance to powerful constituencies there. Curiously, though, Daniel does not dwell on the significance of this regional stamp in his analysis, even though this was a period of great upheaval in the rural, agrarian South, which was reshaping the agricultural and political structure of the region. Where does the pesticide story fit in the history of racial, technological, economic, and political change in the South? How was the relationship between federal and state authorities in this case affected by the contests over federalism and federal authority during this period?

This book had its origins in Daniel's work as a curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. The text was based on a notable series of lectures Daniel delivered in 2004 at

Louisiana State University. Daniel has provided a rich new source of material on the politics of agricultural pesticides that will be of great use to a new generation of scholars.

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Robert Rakoff. Review of Daniel, Pete. *Toxic Drift: Pesticides and Health in the Post-World War II South*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10979>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.