H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pete Daniel. *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 336 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-0201-1.

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Published on H-1960s (June, 2013)
Commissioned by Zachary Lechner

Saying One Thing and Doing Another: Agriculture and the Duality of Institutionalized Racism in the Modern United States

As we near the fiftieth anniversary of the milestone year of 1968, several monographs are emerging that reassess what we knew or, rather, thought we knew about that tumultuous decade and the years surrounding it. While many historians are familiar with "Freedom Summer" and the landmark equal rights legislative acts of 1964 and 1965, Pete Daniel in *Dispossession* strives to explain an important but relatively unknown aspect of the civil rights movement: the struggles against institutional discrimination that targeted black farmers in the U.S. South and their ability to serve as a window into the relationship between race and government in modern American history.

In the years following the Civil War, the number of black farmers in the South grew rapidly. There were almost one million black-owned farms by the 1920s. After the world wars and the Great Depression, the numbers of farms in general decreased, but not proportionately along the color line. What Daniel exposes is the emergence in the years between 1940 and 1964 of a drastically disparate ratio of white-owned to black-owned farms that came about as many Americans were led to believe that federal New Deal policies and bureaucratic agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) were working hard to secure equal access for all Americans. At a time when civil rights laws were being enacted to end discrimination, black-owned farms decreased by 93 percent as black farmers were denied access to federal programs, loans, and education needed for their survival.

Daniel's central argument is that the federal government, primarily the USDA, and its affiliate state and local committees rhetorically promoted equal rights to the public while actively and systematically suppressing southern black farmers' access to federal programs. This practice was accomplished via outward discrimination in the form of voter intimidation and denial of capital as well through limited access to education about new agricultural technologies that could keep them competitive with the larger white farms. In this meticulously researched and important monograph, Daniel shows that high-ranking officials at the USDA were not only aware of the various forms of discrimination, but they refused to act on them and, in most cases, even acknowledge them. He offers this hypothesis in a direct challenge to scholars who have explained the decline by citing either the structural shift between labor- and capital-intensive farming or by claiming that blacks simply left the South on their own, giving plantation owners no choice but to replace them with machinery. Daniel instead makes the case that the dispossession of black farmers in the U.S. South during these tumultuous decades was much more insidious and had more to do with institutional racism and discrimination than benign economic patterns and shifts in population.

Daniel comes to these conclusions by mining a large primary source base of organizational records and government documents. Central to his thesis are the findings of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, who began a campaign in the spring of 1964 that focused exclusively on USDA discrimination. In chapter 2, titled "Evidence," Daniel explains how the commission uncovered vast inequities between white and black farmers with regard to their access not only to government programs but also to agents and seats on government oversight committees. He shows how southerners at the local level blatantly denied access to blacks while high-level bureaucrats looked the other way. The USDA outwardly denied the commission's finding, but Daniel's research indicates they continued with business as usual.

Situating his argument in the larger historiography on the civil rights movement, Daniel explains that there was more activism occurring in the Deep South during

the mid-1960s than the voter registration drives often associated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) "Freedom Summer." In a chapter entitled "Freedom Autumn," Daniel illustrates that while the horrors of white actions during Freedom Summer may have held headlines, there was a lot of important, yet unpublicized activity occurring that aimed to help farmers threatened by dispossession. Primarily, this involved educating blacks about their eligibility for federal programs, as well as assistance with navigating the intentionally long and difficult forms that one had to complete in order to apply.

Daniel argues that the massive bureaucracy created in Washington under the banner of equal rights was actually a machine "used to mask continuing discrimination rather than end it" (p. 154). He highlights how the use of selective statistics, such as those used in reports to illustrate compliance, ignored areas of contention or occurrences where complaints of discrimination were filed. These documents along with false compliance reports were often used to publicly discredit accusations of discriminatory practices by the USDA and its agencies. In the same vein, blacks were also being excluded from influential public offices and seats on committees that held authority over access to USDA programs while it appeared to the public that the USDA was doing the opposite. Citing several individual instances, with a focus on the specific case study of Willie Strain, Daniel explains that blacks like Strain, who were gaining influence as activists or leaders among the farmers, were often "rewarded" with promotions or job offers which placed them in official positions that were meaningful in title only. These new positions were, in reality, designed as "damage control" to limit the activists' influence on the ground by placing them behind desks and granting them little political power.

The main criticism to be said of this book is that it is, at times, difficult to follow due to Daniel's capacious interrogation of New Deal programs, which could confuse the novice reader who is not familiar with the "alphabet soup" nature of the many different agencies. There is a key to the agencies following the preface at the start of the book, but it is frustrating that after the first time the agency is mentioned it is then referred to only by acronym throughout the rest of the monograph. It would have been easier if at least in a note the reader was reminded of which agency Daniel is discussing when he first mentions them again in each chapter.

In all, *Dispossession* is a worthwhile read for anyone who is interested in studies of the civil rights era and African American struggles for equality. The critical exposure of discrimination at all levels of government is both informative and provocative and is a welcome addition to the historiographical conversation that has sought to investigate and expose the hypocrisy behind institutionalized racism during the era of civil rights. While perhaps too dense for undergraduates, *Dispossession* could be a valuable contribution to a graduate seminar on the relationship between race and government in U.S. history.

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Citation: Dionna Richardson. Review of Daniel, Pete, *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights.* H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38616

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