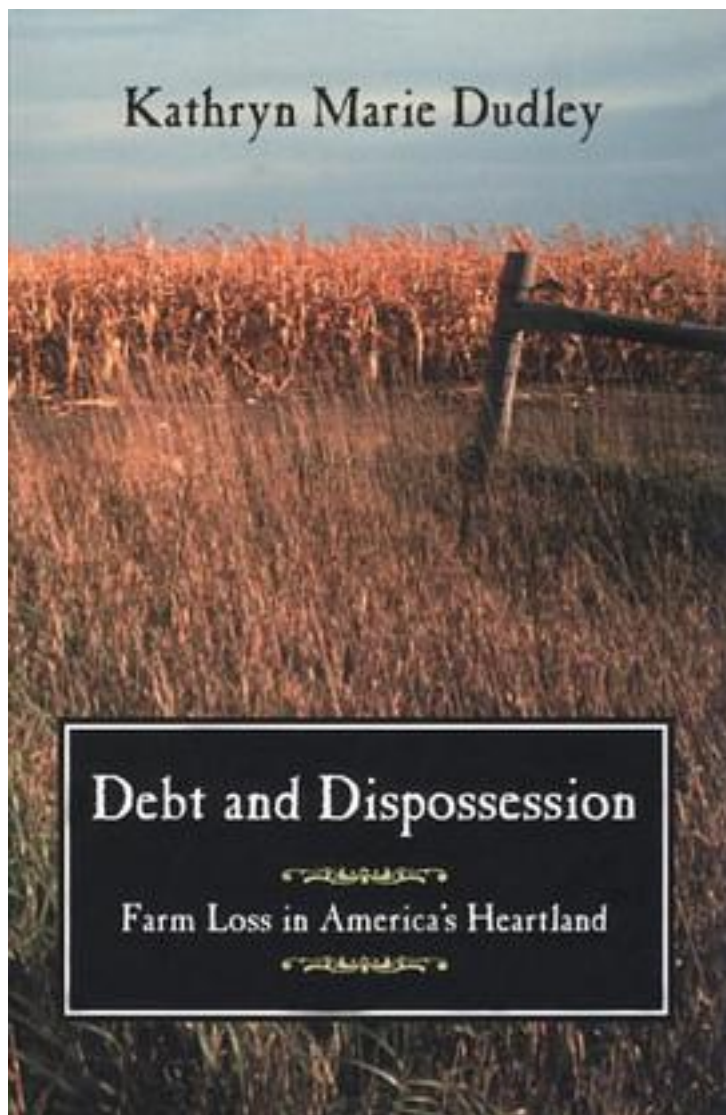


Debt and Dispossession



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"I never felt he left me or our marriage or the children. I felt he was leaving the farm problems". These words are from a woman reflecting on the farm crisis of the 1980s, the greatest economic disaster to hit rural America since the Depression. During this period, hundreds of thousands of farmers lost their farms and farm communities were irrevocably altered. As Kathryn Dudley demonstrates in this book, the crisis gave rise to a devastating social trauma that continues to affect farmers today. Through interviews with residents of an agricultural county in western Minnesota, Dudley chronicles the experience of financial failure in a culture that extols the virtues of independent business management, competitive production and middle-class self-sufficiency. Media images of the farm crisis fostered the impression that a majority of farmers banded together to protest the forced sales of neighbouring farms. Dudley counters this misleading view with her perceptive analysis of the local "culture of suspicion" that rejects political activism, discourages solidarity among neighbours and regards deeply indebted farmers as bad managers who deserve to lose their farms. Farming as a way of life turns out to be not a cultural refuge from the impersonal forces of capitalism, but emblematic of the very spirit of enterprise that animates a market-oriented society. With its focus on the moral dimension of economic loss and dislocation, this book raises far-reaching social questions: What does it take to be middle class in America? What kind of community is possible in a capitalist society?

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