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## Book Review: Hard Living in America's Heartland: Rural Poverty in the 21st Century Midwest

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## Book Review

### **Hard Living in America's Heartland: Rural Poverty in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Midwest**

Paula W. Dáil

2015

Jefferson, NC: McFarland

266 pages

Softcover: \$45.00 US

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Dáil, a retired research professor emerita, spent her 25 year academic career researching poverty. Her crowning work, *Women and Poverty in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America* (Dáil, 2011), won the 2012 Independent Publishers and University Presses non-fiction Book of the Year Gold Medal. In *Hard Living* she brings her research experience, liberal politics, and love of the Midwest to address rural poverty. To her, rural poverty is anchored in agriculture, and she considers the social problem of rural poverty to be rooted in American capitalism. Midwestern family farmers are the primary focus of this book, but those looking for specific attention toward Native American, immigrants, and African American rural poverty need to look elsewhere. Dáil is uncovering the nearly invisible poor Midwestern farm family life and labors with a critical eye turned toward the structural injustices that contribute to their continued poverty.

The introduction defines Midwestern rurality in terms of values that include egalitarianism, neighborliness, and frugality. Aspirations are modest and complaints infrequent. Rich and poor tend to dress the same and live the same, making it hard to find anyone who really considers themselves poor. Although Dáil desires to look broadly at rural poverty in the 12 Midwestern states (North Dakota to Kansas, Missouri to Ohio, and Michigan to Minnesota), her approach is to focus in on Wisconsin as an exemplar. Her post-academe years as a journalist were in Wisconsin, and she uses those connections to locate key informants.

The first chapter explains how family farm poverty is different from urban poverty. The farm budget is likely to be several hundred thousands of dollars even if the annual profits are less than the federal poverty line. Farm communities are likely to be single employer, and the local economies heavily dependent on crop harvests, which builds a strong sense of community. Measuring family farm poverty by measuring income does not take into consideration that family consumption is augmented by farm production and bartering. Dáil explains the federal poverty line, the Alternative Poverty Measure, and the USDA's food insecurity measure. She provides the relevant data for each Midwestern state from 2010. She also provides a state-by-state analysis of income insecurity in the Midwestern states that indicates that income levels, quality of education, and public assistance are somewhat average; job quality weak; and assets relatively strong due to land ownership. Despite her analysis, she seems to prefer a more subjective understanding that poverty is hardship rooted in scarce resources that diminishes one's social position through dependency or marginalization. From this perspective it is easy to understand how it might be hard to find a self-professed poor farmer in a rural Midwestern community.

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The second chapter is a brief history of the settlement of the Midwest from the Louisiana Purchase until World War II. There is a lot of detail about the shifting legislation that permitted homesteading of Midwestern land, but the history is light on the genocidal policies toward Native Americans. Virtually anything that happened during this time period is mentioned briefly, but Dáil is at her best in describing the 1930s Dust Bowl where drought and unsophisticated farming techniques (no crop rotation, cover crops, terracing, or tree windbreaks) combined to create an agricultural disaster. Roosevelt's administration tried to respond, but largely ineffectively because farmers continued their errant farm practices until the 1950s. The Civilian Conservation Corps did plant 3 billion trees, built 3,470 fire towers and 97,000 miles of fire roads, and over 84 million acres of good farmland received manmade drainage systems. The chapter closes with the fortuitous return to better weather in the 1940s.

The third chapter begins as an ode to Midwestern values which, quite frankly, may or may not be true depending on the community under discussion, but Dáil also explains farm debt (\$35,000 to \$300,000 is common) and describes the average medium size farm as 350 acres earning \$35,000 a year after costs, which is less than 150% of the federal poverty line. As a result over 85% of family farms rely on off-farm income. Land values are a particular concern with high and/or escalating valuations barring new, young farmers from getting started, and low/falling land values putting farm debt in jeopardy. Retirement is also a serious issue as self-employed farmers are unlikely to pay into Social Security for their wives who are often destitute when widowed. Generational land transfers are complicated as few offspring have access to the resources to convert land values to cash to fund their siblings' inheritance. Native American problems and tribal governance is discussed in four pages. The chapter closes with USDA data charts for farm demographics, livestock inventories, and crop inventories.

Only the hardiest of readers is likely to make it all the way through the overload of facts and figures in chapter four. Dáil provides quantity and cost details on grain, livestock, meat processing, beef cattle, dairy cattle, hog operations, and poultry with the newest data being provided primarily for 2011. The markets for livestock, milk, and grain markets are provided with some detail on dairy price supports. As Dáil insists, the cows have to be milked daily whether there is a buyer or not. Other subjects addressed in this chapter include agribusiness, environmental protection, waste management, pesticides, organic farming, wind farming, farmer cooperatives, and rural small business enterprises. It is quite the collage of subjects. Perhaps this is the main point, "Nowhere else are people, their poverty, and their livelihoods so closely interwoven as occurs in rural America" (p. 133).

The focus is again on history in the fifth chapter, from Earl Butz, secretary of agriculture under Nixon and Ford, who began the push for commercialization of agriculture. The chapter ends with the current and ongoing depletion of the High Plain Aquifer. Dáil is quite critical of Butz and the politics that negatively affect the Midwestern farmer. Carter's embargo of grain sales to the Soviet Union created the 1980s farm crisis as commodity markets crashed, interest rates rose, and land values softened. Dáil is also critical of farm subsidies that favor commercial agriculture over family farms, encourage cultivation of marginal lands by commercial interests, and inflate land values restricting new farm development. She is a fan of organic and biological farming.

Self-reliance, individualism, and a spirit of community generosity are praised in chapter six, while the stigmatization of the poor and provincial attitudes that develop in rural isolation are

not. She unintentionally endorses the stigma of poverty by neglecting the social conditions that create it in her summary of Linda Tirado's (2014) blog about life as a poor person, and her interview with executive director of a Community Action Agency in rural Wisconsin.

The three chapters that follow, seven through nine, are a significant shift toward policy considerations. In turn, Dáil addressing the weak and weakening state of health care and mental health care in rural areas, the inadequacies of law enforcement in addressing the growth in rural drug trafficking and use, and the weaknesses of rural public education that stem from funding issues, low quality teachers, and the brain drain created when the best students leave for the big city. In her view, the result is a leadership gap unable to address rural problems effectively. The book concludes with a short chapter appealing to policy changes that will promote social and economic justice and a critique of the rural-eroding influence of the current structure of the American economy. Three appendices provide some details on her interview methodology, sketches of the agricultural traits of each Midwestern state, and details about Medicaid eligibility.

This is a somewhat difficult book to read and process. Dáil's career after leaving academia was journalistic, and she writes most of the book in that style. Each of the ten chapters is composed of short two-to-three page sections that are not always well-connected or obviously outlined despite the clear subheadings. Readers may find it difficult to synthesize the information. Scholars will lament her refusal to adequately cite her sources and describe thoroughly her methodology. The more casual reader may be overwhelmed by the abundance of facts, figures, and details. These criticisms became particularly acute when I noticed a factual error on page 139. Dáil asserts that 80% of the USDA budget goes into the Supplementary Nutritional Assistance Program. More accurately, SNAP is slightly over 50% of the USDA budget (Monke, 2015). I agree completely with Dáil that rural poverty is under-studied. Coming to terms with the complexity of agricultural policies, markets, and subsidies is a massive undertaking. I wish she had taken the time to cite her sources more carefully and more thoroughly so that her efforts could have made a greater contribution to the literature. Recommending a book primarily because there is little else available on the subject is not the highest form of flattery.

#### References

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