

The Transformation of Plantation Politics

**Black Politics, Concentrated Poverty, and
Social Capital in the Mississippi Delta**

Sharon D. Wright Austin



The Transformation of Plantation Politics

SUNY series in African American Studies

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*To Mama, Mother Austin, Al Jr., Al Sr., my family,
and to my dear friend and mentor, the late Jim Button*

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	ix
Foreword	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
Abbreviations	xvii

Part One The Theoretical Framework

Chapter One	The Influence of Local Elites in the Mississippi Delta	3
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Part Two The Plantation Political and Economic Culture

Chapter Two	The “Cotton-Obsessed, Negro-Obsessed” Delta Plantation Economy	25
Chapter Three	Black Mobilization and Elite Resistance during the Height of Traditionalistic Plantation Political Rule	41

Part Three The Transformation and Legacies of the Plantation Culture

Chapter Four	The Transformation of the Delta’s Economy?: Legalized Gaming, Economic Change, and the Persistence of Black Concentrated Poverty	61
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Chapter Five	The Transformation of Delta Plantation Politics	95
Chapter Six	Building Black and Intergroup Social Capital Ties in the Delta	133
Part Four Lessons Learned		
Chapter Seven	Concentrated Poverty, Political Power, and Social Capital in the Mississippi Delta	169
Notes		177
Appendixes		207
Bibliography		217
Index		235

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

2.1	Map of the Mississippi Delta	27
3.1	The Status of Mississippi's Traditionalistic, Transitional, and Modern Political Periods	43
4.1	Casinos in Mississippi's Towns and Counties	76
4.2	Allocations of Gaming Revenues in Tunica County, Mississippi	77
6.1	Delta Counties in Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee	142

Tables

2.1	Population Changes in the United States, Mississippi, and Mississippi Delta Counties, 1940–2000	38
3.1	Mississippi Voting-Age Population (VAP) and Voter Registration, by Race, 1868–1964	47
4.1	Poverty Rates in the Counties of the Mississippi Delta, 1970–1990	63
4.2	Socioeconomic Index for Residents of Tunica County, Mississippi, 1960–2000	65
4.3	Educational Levels of Delta Residents, 1970–2000	67
4.4	Households Receiving Public Assistance in Tunica County, Mississippi, 1992–1999	79
4.5	Per Capita-Incomes of Mississippi Delta Residents by Race, 1970–1990	80

4.6	Per Capita-Incomes of Mississippi Delta Residents by Race, 1999	81
4.7	Poverty among Individuals in the Counties of the Mississippi Delta, 1990–1999	82
4.8	Annual Unemployment Rates in the Counties of the Mississippi Delta, 1991–2004	83
4.9	Employed, African American, Poor Persons in States, 1989 and 1999	84
4.10	Percentages of Employed, Poor Families in Delta Counties by Race, 1999	86
4.11	Black Per-Capita Incomes and Black Unemployment Rates in Mississippi Counties, 1999	88
4.12	The Impact of Selected Variables on Black Poverty in Mississippi's Counties, 2000	90
4.13	The Most Powerful Landowners in the Delta	93
5.1	African American Political Power in the Mississippi Delta's Towns and Cities, 1991	107
5.2	African American Political Power in the Mississippi Delta's Towns and Cities, 2004	119
5.3	Delta Counties with Strongest and Weakest Amounts of Black Political Incorporation: Numbers of African American Elected Officials in National, State, Countywide, and Municipal Offices	127
5.4	Black Poverty Rates in Delta Counties with Strong, Moderate, and Weak Black Political Incorporation	129
6.1	Percentage of Whites and Blacks Ages 25 or More Completing High School in the United States, the State of Mississippi, and in Mississippi Delta Counties, 1980	150
6.2	Racial Population, Poverty, and Educational Levels of Delta Counties with Prisons, 1999	162

FOREWORD

Sharon D. Wright Austin has produced a comprehensive study of rural Mississippi, focusing on its traditional Delta “Black Belt.” That long sliver of fertile crescent located along the Mississippi River seems, in this graphic and copious descriptive analysis, to roll along almost out of sync with real time. The plantations remain the driving force in the region, with even family names appearing immutable. And there also are the dependent African Americans bound to the former plantations like so many post feudal clients. So thick is this fog of racialized tradition that even the contrary new myth of gaming is but a vehicle to sustain the old arrangements. In short, the Mississippi Delta remains the Delta, barely interrupted by the displacement of cotton as “king.” The new kings all fit into a well-wrought scheme where whites dominate in virtually all spheres of life, while African Americans remain powerless and often subservient in virtually all spheres of life.

How is this possible Austin asks, in light of the prevalence of an opposing and quite widely dispersed vision of a “new Mississippi? In fact this new story line emphasizes racial integration, buttressed by the evidence that African Americans in this state lead other states in political empowerment. In this previously “unredeemed” state, an outlier on all things racial, African Americans now are regularly elected to a wide range of political offices, and with such success that the scope of this electoral achievement outpaces all other states. So could Austin be incorrect about the Mississippi Delta? After all this region of the state had been one of the great centers of leadership and activism during the civil rights movement that swept the state in the 1960s. Aaron Henry founded a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch in the town of Clarksdale in the heart of the region and went on to lead a confederation of movement affiliates that broke the cycle of segregated partisan organization in the state. Moreover, all the major towns in the region had strong NAACP, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and/or Congress

of Racial Equality (CORE) centers of activism that effectively registered most voting age African American citizens by the end of the 1960s. Clarksdale, Greenwood, Greenville, Cleveland, Ruleville, and so forth. Despite all this contrary data, which Austin surveys, she still finds something amiss in the empowerment of African Americans in the region.

But how can both of these portrayals be true? What is the meaning of such a contradictory situation for social, economic, and political change in Mississippi? In some senses what it means is that this state, like some others, have found an uneasy and often deficient accommodation of African American claims for inclusion. They have struck the ultimate bargain—the more things change, the more they remain the same. While it is true that Mississippi outdistances other states in the number of African American political officeholders, that in itself hardly signifies political empowerment or even that any fundamental alteration of the racial caste system has occurred. Political officeholding is not the same thing as delivering political benefits to one's constituency. It simply means that as access to those formal offices has been conceded, real power has moved to other places; or, that real power was never vested in such positions in the first place. Austin shows that power remains illusive for African Americans because it is, and always has been, significantly determined by economic power or wealth; and that while political offices may have been vacated, hardly any of the wealth has been reallocated. So it is not so complicated after all—whites remain the power base in the Mississippi Delta. And for African Americans, even when there is some favorable change other factors and circumstances conspire in such a way that their real conditions only get worse. And here is the real anomaly of the situation—that in places where apparently there is greater access to formal political offices, overall empowerment (defined in the terms Austin has adopted) is significantly worsened. So in thinking about the question of African American betterment, still something else is required and she provides some useful ways of thinking this through.

The analysis is significant in a number of important ways. It brings to bear a number of theories (some old and some new) to amplify the power arrangements in the Delta and applies them in novel ways. Her deft combination of political and economic factors shows how these twains are rarely separated in the local power equation. The historical sweep of this project is vast and is absolutely vital in revealing how the past and present resonate with each other. And there is a mix of methods that get the benefit of both worlds of political inquiry, although clearly the weight of the project is on the development of the region/industry as a case or cases. All told this provides

us with an illuminating contemporary study of the Mississippi Delta, with definite implications for an analysis of African Americans located in rural areas. The latter remains a very important, but vastly understudied area, because of the still sizable number of African Americans and their officeholders.

In the early theoretical part of the analysis, Austin offers a comprehensive and targeted analysis of some of the most prominent theories in the discipline and shows that they do not work satisfactorily to illuminate her data or the study of racial politics in general. Among those she considers are pluralism, regime, and incorporation theories. She then borrows from aspects of two conceptualizations that seem promising for explaining the Mississippi Delta. She reaches back to the well-wrought concept of elitism and the relatively recent iteration of social capital as her tools. She uses elitism to reveal the continuing racial hegemony of Southern planters and the new partnership they developed to accommodate geopolitical conditions; and, uses social capital to interrogate the terrain of relative African American electoral success and internal social and economic community organization. She then applies these theories to the circumstances she uncovers in the northern Mississippi Delta. Clearly a Delta elite remains the prime mover in public affairs, economic control, and public benefits distribution. Austin uses personal interviews to uncover who these figures are, and time and time again they remain the same families, even to the point of bearing many of the same surnames. And while African Americans command considerable social capital, which they deploy to organize their racialized communities, this capital does not seem to be transferable across racial lines. There is therefore little alteration of the historical status arrangements between the two racial groups.

The methodologies employed in this analysis seem to be especially appropriate. Austin adopts a mix of personal interviews, historical, and quantitative techniques for the study. This mix makes it possible for her to delve deeply into several cases in the northern tier of the state; and, to make modest use of aggregate cross-region data that strengthens the broader claims for her findings and for the conceptualizations she employs. As such we get to know the case of Tunica County and its new industry (gaming) thoroughly. She used Floyd Hunter's reputational technique to produce a list of local elites, and then used structured interviews to collect information from, or on, these leaders. The historical material was developed from secondary sources, archives, and interviews. Meanwhile, she collected and coded a considerable amount of aggregate data on socioeconomic/political factors for the state and for the Delta region. The

combination of methods produced a richly detailed analysis of the subject that will open it up for greater attention by scholars—a much-deserved examination.

This book falls into an important category of studies that focus on racial politics in the United States, and specifically the manner in which Mississippi fits into this scheme. The state has always had a large African American population and has had a reputation for being particularly recalcitrant in finding cross-racial accommodation. Moreover it has a particular place in the study and analysis of Southern regional politics. This provides a body of work on which Austin relies and offers her the opportunity for updating and reassessment. She does this comprehensively, demonstrating a remarkable command of the extant literature and builds on it usefully. In chapter 2, she brings together a huge amount of material on the plantation system, reorganizing it in a way that makes it understandable. Chapter 3 explores the transition period when racial change finally came to Mississippi—revealing its principals, accomplishments, and the distinct limits on the redistribution of power and wealth. The new “industry” of gaming is considered in chapter 4, with special reference to Tunica County and Tunica City. Chapters 5 and 6 are substantive discussions of what has happened to plantation relations; and, how African Americans develop and deploy social capital for public ends. This prodigious effort is thought provoking and challenging, inviting us to think anew about the place of Mississippi in racial, national and regional politics. It reveals in great detail what has changed and what has remained the same, and to what end for the political empowerment of local African Americans.

Minion K. C. Morrison

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As a proud Memphis native and the daughter of two Tunica County, Mississippi-born parents, I became acquainted with the Mississippi Delta history and political development at an early age. I first of all need to thank my Lord and Savior for blessing me in so many ways. Also, I would like to thank my mother Annie Ruth Wright and my late father Willie James Wright for making countless sacrifices on my behalf.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAA	Agricultural Adjustment Act
CCA	Corrections Corporation of America
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CMT	Community Management Team
CPMT	Community Policing Management Team
COFO	Council of Federated Organizations
COPS	Communities Organized for Public Service
CQE	Citizens for Quality Education
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
DCVL	Drew Community Voter's League
EZ/ECs	Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Communities
FARM	Farmers Advocating Resource Management
IAF	Industrial Areas Foundation
LMDDC	Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission
MACE	Mississippi Action for Community Education
MDEZA	Mid-Delta Mississippi Empowerment Zone
MEWG	Mississippi Education Working Group
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
MRC	Mississippi Redistricting Coalition
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
PLI	Persistently Low-income
SDE	State Department of Education
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
STFU	Southern Tenant Farmers' Union
TANF	Temporary Aid for Needy Families
TCRC	Tallahatchie County Redistricting Committee
TERC	Tallahatchie Education and Redistricting Committee
THI	Tallahatchie Housing Incorporated
TIL	Tunica Institute for Learning
VAP	Voting-Age

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PART ONE

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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CHAPTER 1

THE INFLUENCE OF LOCAL ELITES IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

Introduction

Most of the research examining relationships between white elites and black nonelites in the Mississippi Delta has been of a historical nature. In recent years, three superior books have examined these relationships. The historian James C. Cobb's comprehensive history of the Delta from the 1820s to the early 1990s allowed for an understanding of the region's reputation as the "most Southern place on earth"¹. *The Most Southern Place on Earth* (1992) explained the manner in which black Deltans endured poverty and racism, but failed to significantly improve their economic situation despite the aid of federal laws, U.S. Supreme Court decisions, and federal programs.

Clyde Woods's book, *Development Arrested* (1998), also analyzed the historical conflicts among impoverished African American residents and wealthy white elites. Woods's research indicated that African Americans in the Delta continued to pursue social and economic justice during an era of vehement and massive resistance from the plantation bloc. In addition, *Development Arrested* is one of the few books that discussed the establishment of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission (LMDDC) in October 1988 and its mixed results in alleviating poverty in 214 of the poorest counties in Arkansas, Illinois, Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee. Like *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, *Development Arrested* explained the way in which African Americans coped with unbearable conditions during slavery, the end of federal Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the peonage system by developing the blues musical tradition.

Frederick M. Wirt examined the Delta's sordid history of racism, political exclusion, and labor exploitation, but also the emergence of a New South. *We Ain't What We Was* examined the changes that occurred after the publication of Wirt's 1970 study

of Panola County, Mississippi, *The Politics of Southern Equality*.² Although evidence of a closed society remained apparent in the Delta by the 1990s, significant changes had taken place beginning in the 1960s because of the civil rights revolution and black political empowerment in several Delta counties. Nevertheless, the problems associated with poverty and segregated schools have always been insurmountable in the Mississippi Delta.

A few books have analyzed political relationships in the Mississippi Delta and in other rural areas especially in African American communities. Minion KC Morrison's *Black Political Mobilization* (1986) and Lawrence Hanks's *The Struggle for Black Political Empowerment in Three Georgia Counties* (1987) are two notable books on African American politics in rural areas.³ Despite these studies of politics in rural, predominantly black, Southern communities, more research is needed. One scholar discussed the absence of political science scholarship on rural predominantly African American counties as well as the need for more such studies:

By the late 1960s, social scientists had abandoned the critical investigation of rural relations in the predominantly African American plantation counties of the South. When they are examined, there is a tendency to superimpose categories created for the study of Northern manufacturing-based cities onto the social and institutional histories of these rural regions. What is lost in the process is not only an appreciation of the continuity of plantation-based economic systems and power relations, but also the critique of these relations.⁴

The Transformation of Plantation Politics will provide more than simply a description of race relations in the Mississippi Delta. It will also comprehensively examine the impact of black political exclusion, institutional racism, and white elite resistance on the Delta's economic, political, and social relations. A significant portion of the book will examine political and socioeconomic conditions in Tunica County where the most dramatic economic changes have occurred since the early 1990s and where white elite-black nonelite divisions remain apparent.

The elitist theory of community power depicts decision making in most Delta counties because the local political scene has always been dominated by a small group of white elites. One of the seminal studies of this theory is C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956), which found that local elites rather than local elected officials controlled the major economic institutions and manipulated political officials to give them what they wanted. Mills's study characterized local affairs in the Mississippi Delta. Most of the white Delta residents were "planta-

tion bloc millionaires” who inherited their wealth and privilege from their families, benefited from the cheap labor provided by black sharecroppers, selected local politicians, and determined the manner in which local revenues would be spent.⁵ The terms plantation elites, landowning elites, and the plantation bloc will be used interchangeably throughout this book in reference to these families.

As plantation owners, these individuals guaranteed the exclusion of African Americans from any influence in local affairs. For several decades, generations of black sharecroppers were trapped in a cycle of poverty where they earned low wages and lacked alternative employment opportunities. The sharecropping system also resulted in illiteracy, substantial school dropout rates, and other indicators of low educational achievement because most black children had to leave school and work in the fields for most of the year. Thus, black Delta families never had a reason to place a high value on education. Also under this oppressive system, African Americans found it almost impossible to own land, businesses, or even their homes. The sharecropping system mostly meant that they lived in substandard housing or “nigger town slums,” did fieldwork from morning until night, were kept indebted, and had no opportunities to improve their standard of living.⁶ Thus, chapter 1 analyzes pluralist, elitist, regime, and political incorporation theories and explains why the elitist and political incorporation theories paradigms best characterize the relationships among whites and African Americans in the Mississippi Delta. The pluralist and regime frameworks have weaknesses that render them inappropriate for examining relationships among white elites and black nonelites in rural Mississippi.

Theories on the Role of Race in Local Decision making

Pluralist Theory

Over the years, political scientists have developed many theories in order to study the relationships among dominant and subordinate groups in local communities. The complex question of who governs cities and counties, has been debated repeatedly in the political science literature because the individuals who govern cities determine who will hold the major elective offices and which group(s) receive the most economic resources. In his study of power relations in New Haven, Connecticut, *Who Governs?* (1961), Robert A. Dahl examined whether the city of New Haven was governed by a small number of elites. He analyzed twenty-four important decisions in the areas of urban renewal, education, and the selection of party nominees for

mayor during the 1940s and 1950s in order to determine whether the same individuals made the most important local decisions most of the time. He found that power and decision making in New Haven was noncumulative in the sense that no one individual made all of the decisions, but that a plurality of groups—such as the members of labor unions, political parties, banks, manufacturing plants, churches, school systems, and government agencies—competed for power.

During the Nineteenth century, New Haven had been dominated by an “oligarchy” or a system of “cumulative” inequalities in which a few privileged individuals possessed most of the wealth and power; yet, this system was later replaced by one of “noncumulative” power and “dispersed” inequalities during the twentieth century.⁷ A system of dispersed inequalities existed in New Haven because, despite the existence of some inequalities, every group in the city possessed some resources and thus had some measure of influence. On this point, Dahl found that:

No minority group is permanently excluded from politics or suffers cumulative inequalities. Our system is not only democratic, but is perhaps the most perfect expression of democracy that exists anywhere. . . . No minority group is permanently excluded from the political arena or suffers cumulative inequalities. . . . Different citizens have many different kinds of resources for influencing officials.⁸

Who Governs? also discussed the ability of Irish “ex-plebes”—working class Irish politicians—to mobilize the Irish vote and to control city patronage jobs during the heyday of machine rule. Irish mobilization allowed them to take control of the local political machine. Dahl pointed out that Irish machine bosses used the political mobilization of the Irish and the patronage system in the city of New Haven to advance the social and economic position of the Irish. Using machine patronage, the Irish gained middle-class status rapidly considering their meager job skills and the discrimination they encountered. The implication was that other ethnic and racial groups could also mobilize themselves politically in order to improve their disadvantaged plight in local communities.⁹

Pluralist theory was found to be an invalid theoretical model for understanding the impact of race on local decision making in the years following the publication of *Who Governs?*¹⁰ First, the finding that local decision making is noncumulative because several groups rather than a few elites make most of the major decisions is not the case in rural Southern communities. Power in these areas is more likely to be concentrated in the hands of a few elite individuals who

make most of the major decisions with little or no input from most local residents. This is especially the case in areas with histories of polarized racial relationships and with substantial populations of poor African American residents. For most of the Mississippi Delta's history, wealthy white elites excluded black nonelites from even the slightest role in local policy making.

Second, Dahl's finding of dispersed inequalities—that all groups have some measure of influence in local politics because of the resources they possess—is an even more inadequate characterization of power relationships in the Mississippi Delta. Until recently, the members of elite families were the only individuals who possessed any power in the region. The most influential members of these families effectively prevented African Americans from gaining political and economic power by using legal, physical, and economic forms of intimidation.

Third, the belief that African Americans can emulate Irish Americans in translating their political power into economic power is problematic. The political and economic discrimination endured by the Irish was much less severe than that endured by African Americans in the rural South who experienced insurmountable *de facto* and *de jure* obstacles when attempting to mobilize politically. Even after African American citizens overcame these impediments and held most of the major elective offices in cities and counties, the communities they governed were plagued by extreme poverty, crime, unemployment, and other socioeconomic ills. For example, African Americans held the major political offices in most of the Mississippi Delta's counties beginning in the 1970s, but failed to gain economic power because of factors such as a lack of financial capital, industrial redlining, and a permanently low-income workforce.

Elitist Theories

Dahl's findings contrasted with those of Mills, Floyd Hunter, and others who found that individuals known as elites controlled the major economic institutions and manipulated political officials to give them what they wanted. Elitist theories explained the way in which individuals became elites, the amount of influence they possessed, and the method by which they exercised their power. Most of this research defined elites as "unitary" actors who worked together and who conspired to promote their interests to the detriment of the masses.¹¹ Whether they were social elites,¹² specialized elites,¹³ or governing elites,¹⁴ they were at the top of any "socially significant

hierarchy and always determined the amount of resources that groups received in local areas.¹⁵ The following discussion outlines the elite theories that originated in sociological research and that were later used in political science research. This overview will provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of relationships among white elites and black nonelites.

Classical elite theory originated in the works of the sociologists V. Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Roberto Michels. Their research was among the earliest to find that a small group of individuals determined the way in which their society would be governed.¹⁶ The classical elite studies identified who the elites were and questioned whether they established and maintained their power base through consent of the masses, right of birth, or force. Subsequent research examined the manner in which elites reacted when nonelites threatened their power base and the reasons why some individuals lost their elite status.

G. William Domhoff, in *Who Rules America?* (1983), discussed the activities of the ruling elite and the governing class. The ruling elite were the “minority of individuals whose preferences regularly prevail in cases of differences in preference on key political issues.”¹⁷ Domhoff found that the same persons from upper class families determined the outcome of a wide variety of issues. Together these “ruling elites” made up a governing class, “a social upper class which receives a disproportionate amount of a country’s income, owns a disproportionate amount of a country’s income, owns a disproportionate amount of a country’s wealth, and contributes a disproportionate number of its members to the controlling institutions and key decision making groups in that country.”¹⁸

In *The Power Elite*, Mills discussed critical elite theory. He found that most American communities whether small or large were dominated by a small group of individuals and families whom he defined as, “. . . Men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women. They are in positions to make decisions having major consequences. . . . They are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society.”¹⁹ Mills found that the earliest elites were white men who controlled the local and/or national economic and political scene by using a variety of leadership and governing styles. Some of the elites were born into privileged families. Others were born into families that were outside the strata of elites, but that gained influence by accumulating wealth in the business establishment, acquiring an education at a prestigious institute, marrying someone from an elite family, or ascending to the highest military rankings.²⁰