

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

Hunter's book, *Community Power Structure* (1953), was the first major empirical study to utilize elitist theory and the first attempt to analyze elite and nonelite relationships in a major city. In order to determine which leaders ran "Regional City"—a fictional city with several similarities to Atlanta, Georgia,—Hunter used the "reputational approach." He identified all of the city's business, civic, and political leaders and asked six other leaders who were familiar with them, to select the most influential persons from the list.²¹ Because Hunter described the city's power structure as a "stratified pyramid," his theory is also referred to as the stratificationist theory.

According to Hunter, business elites had more power than local governmental officials. Therefore, political leaders were in the second tier of the pyramid. The business elites manipulated government officials to give them what they wanted. Political leaders then carried out the instructions of those in the first tier of the pyramid. Thus, the key to gaining influence in Regional City and in others was to first gain influence in the business establishment and later in the political sphere.²² This elite power structure initiated most of the development that occurred in Regional City and that successfully kept most projects it disapproved of from coming to fruition.

Both normative elite theorists and the technocratic approach to elite theory pointed out some of the positive aspects of elite rule. Rule by a small minority reduced conflict among the masses, and elites were necessary for the management of society.²³ Since around the mid-1970s, a number of scholarly articles and books have examined the neo-elite perspective that found that elites have been constrained by such factors as the economy and public opinion.²⁴

In sum, classical, critical, normative, and technocratic elite theories examined the relationships between influential and powerless individuals in large cities. The manner in which elites acquired, maintained, and utilized their power differed in rural cities and counties; however, because elites in these areas are not always business or political figures, they find different avenues to attain power. In the rural South and especially in the Mississippi Delta, they are usually born into wealthy landowning families.

Regime Theory

Regime theory analyzed the relationships among local elected officials and business-people. Regimes have been defined as "the informal arrangements by which public bodies and private interests [functioned] together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions."²⁵ Clarence N. Stone in "Atlanta and the Limited

Reach of Electoral Control” (1997) discussed the need for cooperation among the public and private sectors:

Achieving electoral influence is significant, but popular control of elected office is only one element in the actual governance of a city. The need for private investment in business activity makes control of economic institutions a second element of great consequence. Governance comes out of the interplay between electoral and economic power. Neither stands alone. Governance . . . requires cooperation and accommodation among a network of institutions, especially political and economic ones.²⁶

These partnerships between politicians and business-people were difficult to establish and maintain especially in cities governed by African American politicians and predominantly white business communities. Major conflicts arose when black politicians attempted to deliver economic benefits to lower- and middle-income black communities. They usually encountered massive resistance from the white middle-class citizens and majority white business communities.²⁷

The regime theoretical framework has been more appropriate for analyses of public-private partnerships in urban cities rather than in rural counties. As previously mentioned, few business elites remained in the Mississippi Delta after the 1960s because of factory closures and overall declines in the farming industry. Whereas in cities, business-people and elected officials cooperated in order to pursue economic growth, political figures catered to the whim of wealthy landowners rather than to business-people in rural counties. Because of the polarized race relations in the Delta, landowning elites persuaded political elites to reject industries that would result in economic parity among African Americans and whites for most of the region’s history. Therefore, the regime analysis of the partnerships among political and business elites in cities has had little relevance for examining relationships among political elites and landowning elites in rural Mississippi.

Political Incorporation Theory

According to Rufus Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, and David Tabb in *Protest Is Not Enough* (1984), African Americans possessed political power in local areas when they achieved strong levels of political incorporation. Such incorporation occurred when African American citizens had “an ability to participate in a coalition that dominated city policymaking and . . . an ability to have issues of great

est concern to [them] furthered by this coalition."²⁸ Levels of political incorporation ranged from no minority group representation to "a dominant role in a governing coalition strongly committed to minority interests."²⁹

Incorporation required more than simply electing black representatives; it also required these political figures to pursue initiatives to raise the socioeconomic status of black citizens. After African American voters elected black representatives on local city councils, aldermanic boards, city commissions, and as city mayors, they expected tangible benefits from them, such as the establishment of civilian police review boards, minority citizen appointments to city boards and commissions, and increased opportunities to win city contracts.³⁰

As previously mentioned, pluralist and regime theories fail to adequately characterize political relationships in the Mississippi Delta. Studies that have utilized political incorporation theory to determine African American political behavior and empowerment have mostly assessed black political power in cities rather than in rural counties. Although political, social, and economic relationships differ in rural counties and cities, political incorporation theory is an adequate framework for examining the political and economic relationships among white elites and black nonelites in the Mississippi Delta.

According to the theory, African Americans and Latinos first mobilize their communities so that they can elect minority representatives, then gain varying degrees of political power and substantive benefits from their elected representatives.³¹ The discussion in chapter 5 will demonstrate the manner in which African American residents in Delta counties have mobilized themselves and elected representatives just like the African American residents of cities; however, rural citizens have had more obstacles to overcome when attempting to gain political power. First, rural counties have been more likely to have governmental systems in which most candidates are elected in at-large rather than in district elections. Second, it has been difficult to find viable black candidates to run for office because of their belief that they cannot win due to a lack of funding, racial bloc voting, and disappointing black voter turnout rates. Many predominantly black rural counties in the South still have majority white political establishments because of these obstacles.³² Third, the political incorporation framework discussed the importance of coalitions in cities as a way to gain political power. When African Americans joined coalitions with whites, Latinos, and Asians in cities, they were more likely to have their needs met and their interests served. In the rural counties of Mississippi, biracial coalition politics was never a

feasible option in the search for black political and economic empowerment because of the unwillingness of white voters to join coalitions with African Americans. In most Delta counties, blacks and whites have remained residentially segregated because wealthy whites have always lived in separately annexed towns. Also, poor whites and African Americans joined coalitions on the basis of race rather than class. Poor whites seldom supported black candidates even when these candidates promised to uplift the plight of the poor. Thus, it is impossible for African Americans in the Delta to follow the example of African Americans in Los Angeles, New York, New Haven, and in other cities where black candidates have developed multiracial coalitions. Moreover, it is more difficult for African American rural county residents to gain political incorporation because of the unique challenges their preferred candidates encounter when seeking offices and when attempting to govern.

The Limitations of Black Political Power and the Emphasis on Social Capital

Scholarly research has almost universally found that low-income minority citizens must gain political power and use it to address their social and economic dilemmas in American communities.³³ Political and economic transformations may not occur, however, even in cities and counties with a powerful African American political base. For example, African Americans became members of the political elite in many cities and counties during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, but inherited a “hollow prize.”³⁴ Their cities benefited in some ways from black political officeholding, but were also plagued by middle-class flight, population declines, and escalating unemployment, poverty, and crime rates. Added to these problems, majority white business establishments have oftentimes opposed political agendas designed to aid impoverished African Americans. Despite these limitations on black political mobilization, it is clear that minority communities that lack such empowerment will not experience any significant economic improvements.

Because of the difficulties that many black Deltans have faced when attempting to mobilize politically and the disappointments they have had with the inability of black elected officials to improve their quality of life, a larger number of African American Delta residents are addressing their community’s ills by working in community development organizations more so than in political organizations. In *Blacks and Social Change* (1989), a finding by James W. Button provided the rationale behind the current social capital efforts in the

Mississippi Delta, "Since powerless groups are generally precluded from achieving significant change through conventional political approaches, such groups tend to develop unconventional strategies in the attempt to influence change."³⁵

Because of a "paradox of political power," black Delta residents are now focusing on black social capital and intergroup social capital efforts. In this book, the paradox of political power is defined as follows: For African Americans in Tunica County, a lack of a political base has meant that few of gaming's substantive benefits have trickled down to the poor. Massive resistance from elites and from a governmental system in which most officials were elected at-large prevented them from gaining political power. Partly because they have held few municipal or countywide political offices until recently and have essentially been ignored by white politicians, the black residents of Tunica County failed to receive equitable benefits from the lucrative legalized gaming industry beginning in the 1990s. On the other hand, African American candidates in most of Tunica's neighboring Delta towns won most of the local political offices and were committed to the interests of the black citizenry, but failed to raise the socioeconomic status of their constituents because of a lack of financial capital. Currently, some Delta counties with predominantly black governing coalitions are listed among the poorest counties in the nation because of the lack of a middle-class tax base, jobs and other fiscal resources, as well as a large sector of "permanently low-income" (PLI) residents.

Even if the black residents of Tunica County had political power, it may not have made much of a difference for the poorest residents of the county because black elected officials usually pursue the same type of agendas as white elected officials in cities and counties. The emphasis of these officeholders is usually on economic development strategies that benefit the middle class and the business community, often at the expense of the poor.³⁶ For these reasons, the impoverished black residents of neglected communities engage in nontraditional political activities. Robert D. Putnam defines the concept of social capital as "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions."³⁷ By strengthening their social capital ties, African Americans can develop strong networks within their communities and accomplish more by working together in community empowerment groups while continuing to elect black officeholders.

In one of the few studies that analyzed social capital efforts in a predominantly African American community, Marion E. Orr distinguished between black social capital—the trusts, norms, and networks

within black communities-and intergroup social capital-the trusts, norms, and networks of cooperation among black citizens and white elites.³⁸ In *Black Social Capital* (1999), Orr pointed out that black communities usually have strong levels of social capital, but have had difficulty working with white elites.³⁹ *The Transformation of Plantation Politics* will demonstrate that it is even more difficult for African Americans to establish successful collaborative relationships with white elites in rural counties with histories of polarized race relations and massive elite resistance to black political and economic gains.

Overview

Each of the chapters in this book reveals the transformation of the Delta's plantation political culture from one of complete African American political exclusion to one of majority black representation in many small towns. The plantation political structure of the Delta has undergone five phases. During the first phase from the 1800s to the early 1960s, African Americans were denied the right to participate in any kind of local or state political activity. The second phase took place during the height of the modern civil rights movement when activists sought to improve the economic, educational, and political conditions for black Mississippians.

During the third phase, the years immediately following the Voting Rights Act of 1965, an initial transition from majority white to majority black political governance took place in many Delta towns after the black voter registration rates increased and black candidates sought elective offices. After the ratification of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African American citizens had high expectations that black political figures would more sufficiently address their needs, but were soon disappointed because of the lack of economic resources in towns governed by African American politicians and the insurmountable problems experienced by most Delta residents.

During the fourth phase from the 1970s to the present, African Americans held most of the political offices in many Delta towns, but few countywide positions. Members of the plantation elite class continued to control these positions which were the most powerful in the region. During the fifth and final phase from the 1980s to the present, Delta community residents have focused on "politicizing [their] black social capital and transforming it into a force of policy change."⁴⁰ In other words, they have attempted to strengthen their levels of black social capital while still engaging in political activities as a way to improve their economic status in the Delta.

Chapter 2 discusses the establishment of a “cotton-obsessed, Negro-obsessed” society that was maintained through an exploitative sharecropping system and blatant institutional racism. The plantation bloc of white landowning elites profited from the cheap labor of black sharecroppers. During this time, the Delta had a prosperous economy that was sustained by the profitable cotton industry as well as by the oats, soybean, and wheat-farming industries. Conditions for black sharecroppers, however, were never ideal in the Mississippi Delta. Studies have found that African Americans in rural counties in Mississippi and in other Southern states have remained impoverished primarily because of the legacy of slavery, the sharecropping system, and institutional racism.⁴¹ In the current Delta society, the legacy of the sharecropping system remains apparent because of the continuing economic disparities among the white wealthy and the black poor.

Chapter 3 discusses the disfranchisement of African Americans by white elites during the first and second phases of the plantation political structure. Many black Deltans chose the option of “exit” over “voice” during this time period.⁴² For several decades, thousands of local residents moved out of the area because of the lack of employment, educational, and political opportunities rather than remaining to transform a seemingly unchangeable system.

At this time, civil rights activists attempted to challenge black political exclusion in the entire state of Mississippi, but found it more difficult to persuade the African American residents of many rural towns of the Mississippi Delta to participate in civil rights and political empowerment protests than the black residents of cities. The elites had instilled such a great amount of fear in black Delta residents that most refused to participate in the earliest empowerment efforts. Civil rights activism did occur in many Delta towns and counties despite threats of reprisal from local elites because of the involvement of historically black colleges and universities in the state, independently-owned churches, and charismatic leaders. However in Tunica County, no visible efforts occurred because churches were owned by local elites and were located on their property. No student activism occurred and no leaders emerged to the forefront. The discussions of black political and civil rights efforts in chapter 3 indicate the existence of strong levels of social capital within the Delta’s black communities during the 1960s. Through their work in groups such as the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), Delta residents of color developed networks to survive the harshness of plantation life in Mississippi and took the initial steps toward gaining political and civil rights.

Chapter 4 discusses the abject poverty in the Delta during the 1980s, the decline of the agricultural industry, industrial redlining, and the unsuccessful governmental efforts to revitalize the region's economy. Because of these problems, local and state officials were desperate for a new industry to revitalize the Delta. At the time, the Delta had an abundance of cheap land and a need to enhance cultural tourist sites, but no means to attract new industries.

Beginning in the 1990s, several major changes occurred because of legalized gaming. The proponents of casino gaming promoted it as an "industry" that would revitalize the economies of counties throughout the Delta, the Gulf Coast, and the entire state of Mississippi. Gaming became a godsend, but also a double-edged sword for the Delta. After the legalization of gaming, an abundance of jobs and financial capital existed in Tunica County, but the poverty rate in the entire Delta region continued to double and even triple the national average. While gaming revenues alleviated unemployment and welfare dependency, it exacerbated the problems of crime, alcohol addiction, drug addiction, gaming addiction, and traffic fatalities. The main research questions in this chapter are as follows: Has one of the poorest areas in the nation been transformed into an entrepreneurial state? Is there any evidence that the elites were threatened by "outsiders"-casino executives and owners-whose industry resulted in a myriad of changes in a society that had traditionally resisted change? To what extent has gaming resulted in an economic transformation in the Delta? Third and most importantly, has gaming brought about a transformation of economic power relationships among white elites and African American nonelites-that is, a greater amount of economic power for African Americans as a group?

Chapter 5 analyzes the question of whether a lack of black political power contributes to the remaining high poverty levels in some Delta communities. Despite the alleged benefits of gaming, the region's poverty rates remain among the highest in the nation. The improvement in the economic and political standing of black Deltans by the end of the 1990s should have resulted in significantly lower black poverty rates, especially in counties with strong amounts of political power and with casinos. This chapter essentially questions why this has not happened as expected in the Mississippi Delta.

Chapter 6 discusses the efforts of black Deltans to enhance their social capital after the legalization of gaming during the fifth and current phase of the plantation political system. Unlike the social capital efforts of the 1960s, the most recent activities are concerned with economic empowerment more so than political and civil rights gains. In Tunica County, black residents solicited the assistance of regional

and national organizations and formed new local community empowerment groups in order to reap more of gaming's benefits. In neighboring Delta counties, black political power and gaming revenues failed to improve the overall quality of life. The social capital activities of these community residents mostly involved winning the local and statewide support to build new prisons—the only industry that would provide reliable jobs, higher wages, decent working conditions, and revenues to sustain the local economy. This chapter examines the significance of this study. What can we learn from this analysis of plantation politics in the Mississippi Delta and how does it contribute to our understanding of elite-nonelite relationships, rural African American political development, and the concept of social capital?

Conceptualizations of Black Political Power and Black Social Capital

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies publication, *Black Elected Officials*, listed the names and offices of all African American political figures in the United States. As mentioned earlier, political incorporation theory equates African American political power with an ability to elect black mayors, City Council members, aldermen, and other political representatives over a period of several years and the power to demand that these representatives implement the preferred policies of African Americans.⁴³ However, African American citizens with the strongest measures of political incorporation still may not have had the kind of unchallengeable political power possessed by wealthy white elites in some cities and counties. This latter form of political power involved more than electing officeholders and promoting group interests, but also a capacity to “determine whether certain questions ever reach the competition stage” and to guarantee “the quiescence of the powerless.”⁴⁴ Thus, these individuals possessed what EE Schattschneider and later John Gaventa referred to as “power’s second face”—the ability of the elite class to exclude certain issues from the decision making process and to suppress opposition from nonelites.⁴⁵

In a study of elite-nonelite relationships in Appalachia, Gaventa found that most powerful elites not only implemented a political, economic, and institutional structure beneficial to them at the expense of others, but also kept the issues, grievances, and interests of nonelites off of the decision making agenda.⁴⁶ Appalachia’s elites maintained a “quiescence” of its nonelite class through its

“mobilization of bias”—that is, its ability to promote issues and decisions favored by elites and to suppress nonelite challenges to the elite-dominated power structure.⁴⁷ These power relationships could only be altered when either the elites lost power or the nonelites gained power.⁴⁸

In the analysis of the possible impact of black political power on black poverty in the Mississippi Delta in chapter 5, African American political power is defined as the ability to elect sympathetic black political representatives over a period of several years, but also by the number of African American landowners because of the importance of land ownership in the Delta. To assess the amount of black political power according to this definition, the author first analyzed the Joint Center’s roster of the number of black elected officials in each Delta county and the years in which they were elected. Second, chancery court clerk records that included the names, but not the racial backgrounds, of elected officials were examined to determine the names and titles of politicians elected after publication of the Joint Center study. Local residents who were knowledgeable about local politics looked at these lists and were able to identify the officeholders’s races.

To determine the third component of political power in the Mississippi Delta, land ownership, 1998-2003 annual reports of the Delta Council and of the most recent Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management (FARM) organization report were reviewed in order to determine the names of the owners of the most acreages of land. The membership of the Delta Council, established in 1935 to promote agricultural interests, has traditionally consisted of the most prominent landowners, business people, and professionals in the area.⁴⁹ Delta FARM originated in 1997 to protect the region’s natural resources; its members are owners of the Delta’s largest farms. Throughout most of their histories as organizations, both the Delta Council and Delta FARM have had all-white memberships.

In the analyses of the social capital efforts of African American Delta activists during the modern civil rights movement and the post gaming eras in chapters 3 and 6, an attempt will be made to estimate the levels of social capital relationships. Scholars have encountered several obstacles when “measuring” social capital ties among community residents. One body of research found that “a single ‘true’ measure [of social capital] is probably not possible or even desirable” mostly because of the difficulties of defining and measuring concepts such as “community,” “trust,” “relationships,” and “networks.”⁵⁰ Some research has estimated the extent of social capital relationships from surveys assessing the levels of trust individuals have in their neighbors; their voter registration and turnout rates; and the numbers of

individuals belonging to civic, political, religious, and social institutions in local communities.

In this book, social capital will be defined as the concern of individuals for the welfare of their communities and by their willingness to work cooperatively to solve their problems. This definition, like others of social capital, includes the numbers of active participants in churches, social, and in political, community empowerment, and civic organizations.⁵¹ Interviews conducted by the author found clear indications of strong social capital ties because of the participation of most African American Delta residents in churches and a sizable number in other groups. Before African Americans were allowed to form community development groups or to participate in political organizations, their strong social capital ties were shown in their concern for their neighbors and in their active participation in churches.⁵²

Robert D. Putnam's research pointed out the impossibility of strong social relationships among community residents, but the possibility of weak political participation rates. In his view, weak social capital ties resulted in "civic disengagement" or in a declining interest in political participation.⁵³ The experience of Mexican American activists in San Antonio, Texas's poorest neighborhoods, however, demonstrated that a minority group with strong social capital ties could also possess low political participation rates. Vibrant social capital relationships exist among the thousands of mostly poor, Latino, and Catholic members of COPS (Communities Organized for Public Service). This organization has become one of the most powerful community groups in the nation because of its ability to win federal block grants and to persuade local elites to empower their neighborhoods. The participants in COPS have enhanced their social capital by holding neighborhood meetings, writing proposals for community development projects, securing federal block grants, using these grants to enhance their neighborhoods, and pressuring the city's political leaders to fulfill their needs.⁵⁴ However, the members of COPS have had some of the lowest voter registration and turnout rates in San Antonio's local elections. This low involvement in the political process has been attributed to the unique socioeconomic profile of its members—that is, their low incomes and status as recent immigrants.⁵⁵

Chapters 5 and 6 will echo the finding that communities with strong social capital relationships can also have low political participation rates. After the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Mississippi Delta had record high black voter registration rates. Although these levels declined in subsequent years, the social capital efforts of local citizens continued.

Data and Methods

The rich data source of this qualitative book consists of interviews, U.S. census data, dissertations, scholarly articles and books, theses, and unpublished papers. Numerous scholarly analyses of concentrated poverty, elite, and social capital theories are referred to in the analysis of the research questions in this book. These sources provide historical, political, and theoretical information that are relevant for this examination of politics, poverty, and social capital in the Mississippi Delta.

Over the past four years, approximately one hundred face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted by the author with community activists, current and former residents, journalists familiar with Delta politics, and political officeholders. Appendixes A, B, C, and D provide a list of questions that were asked during the interviews. Each ranged from approximately 30 to 60 minutes and some individuals were interviewed more than once.

The “reputational approach” developed by Hunter in one of the earliest studies of nonelite-elite relationships in the South was useful for identifying the Mississippi Delta’s elite class and for determining prospective interviewees. Hunter’s approach stipulated that the names of local elites can be ascertained by first compiling a list of prominent individuals in civic, business, and political affairs; then allowing knowledgeable community residents to rank in hierarchical order the most influential persons or the “top power structure” and the “understructure personnel” of less powerful individuals in local communities.⁵⁶

After reading several newspaper articles and conducting the first round of interviews in December 1999 with current and former Delta residents, the author compiled a list of political and landowning elites in the top power structure, community activists and others in the understructure personnel, and the least influential residents of Delta communities or nonelites. During the second round of interviews in the summer of 2000, many of these persons were interviewed. The author conducted subsequent sessions with these local elites and with nonelites between 2000 and 2004. During each round of interviews, many of the those interviewed provided additional names of influential landowning politicians, community residents, activists, and journalists.

The information gathered in these meetings is referred to in this book, but especially in chapters 2 and 3 that discuss the plantation economic and political history of the region. In addition, taped interviews that were part of oral history projects at Delta State Univer-

sity, the University of Mississippi at Oxford, and the Mississippi Valley Collection of the University of Memphis Ned R. McWherter Library provided insight about the attitudes of the Delta's elites and nonelites. In these interviews, local activists, citizens, and politicians explained the manner in which the plantation bloc continues to dominate the economic and political arenas of Delta counties. Although they have not exhibited the overt resistance to black political and economic gains as in previous years, this book argues that the legacy of their past resistance to these gains continues to negatively impact the socioeconomic status of African American residents.

Like any study of this nature, this research has limitations. Many of those contacted agreed to participate only after receiving assurances of anonymity. Their desire to have their names withheld and/or to not be quoted directly was understandable considering the peculiar race relations in the Mississippi Delta's small counties and the fear on the part of nonelites of retribution from elites. In addition, few plantation elites consented to interviews. Therefore, the author questioned others about the governance and wishes of the plantation bloc. In addition, many of the journalists cited ethical reasons for their refusal to be interviewed; they instead referred the author to their published newspaper and magazine articles.

Chapters 4 and 5 include an analysis of data from the U.S. census and from the Mississippi State Tax Commission to determine the changes in the Delta's median household incomes, per-capita incomes, poverty, and unemployment rates of Delta residents. The census data provides a socioeconomic profile of the Mississippi Delta's residents—that is, its white upper and middle classes and its black impoverished population. Second, this data indicate the declines in the region's unemployment and poverty rates after the legalization of casino gaming, but the persistence of double-digit black poverty in all of the Delta's counties. Third, the census data, and the Joint Center for Political Economic Studies information, provide evidence in chapter 5 that poverty rates were higher in some areas with greater percentages of black elected officials.