

Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London and New York: Verso, 1998).

Southern historians are often attracted topics like tragedy, irony, loss — things that are sad. But it is anger rather than sadness that characterizes this ambitious volume by Clyde Woods. The Mississippi Delta is not a sad place, left out of American potential, with the blues providing a sad, poignant soundtrack. Instead, in the interpretation Woods develops, the Mississippi Delta is a place where multiple stages of economic and political conspiracies have denied its impoverished people, most of them African American, access to anything but the worst jobs or the worst life without jobs. This book has some problems, but it deserves a place in discussions of the relationships between economics, politics, and culture in the American South.

Woods studies three traditions from the 1800s to the present. The plantation tradition demanded full control over land and labour and called for social order through repeated cries for white supremacy. This is the main continuity in the book, in which powerful landowners respond to new challenges through the same lens and with the same goals. Secondly, an especially southern development tradition wanted industrial growth without challenging plantation goals of low wages and an unorganized work force. Third is a largely African American tradition of challenging existing power relations. This point holds the most potential for originality. Too much scholarship on southern history studies how powerful people got and kept their power and only notes acts of resistance as signs of people fighting possible dehumanization.

The book fails in its treatment of the blues. Woods defines the blues perspective as an intense awareness of pain, a passion to resist dehumanization, and a recognition of the communal nature of that pain and passion. It is the blues perspective that holds together African American acts of resistance in the Delta. The weakness of Woods' discussion lies not merely in the author's lack of new primary research. Nor does it lie completely in his reliance on long quotes from scholars, musicians, essayists, and novelists to explain the meanings of the blues. These are significant problems, but even more troubling is the vagueness of his definition of the blues and what he consistently terms "blues epistemology." There is an obvious problem in interpreting a musical form as a social and political point of view. Scholars who study the blues narrowly tend to see great differences among performers and among generations. But scholars, such as Woods, who study the blues broadly not only miss the differences but make the concept of the blues so broad that it loses much of its meaning. I am ready to be convinced that the blues offer novel ways to understand the perspective of African Americans in the Mississippi Delta, but this book simply makes that assumption, quotes passages from various authors, and moves on to apply that point.

If the work is weakest in interpreting the blues, its strength lies in its interpretation of the consistency of plantation owners' perspectives since the 1800s. Major works by Pete Daniel, James Cobb, and Jack Temple Kirby portray agricultural changes since the 1930s as rendering African American labour as unnecessary. Woods takes a step beyond that, and sees planters' actions throughout the 1800s and 1900s as various battles in the same war — a war against African American advancement and, especially, a war against the various forms of activism that African Americans used.

One of the great strengths is a rethinking of the African American Freedom Struggle to make economic issues central all along. Instead of falling in line with a common opinion that civil rights figures started out with politics and segregation and finally got around to economic issues, Woods sees those issues as crucial all along, especially to African Americans in Mississippi. Woods' work is even more exciting in assessing the aftermath of the Freedom Struggle, in which the so-called Green Revolution turned most available land into commercial farm land operated by technology rather than human labour. Voting rights and especially desegregation turn out not to matter so much to people turned off the land.

A volume as promising and challenging as this one deserves a full consideration of its usefulness. The writing is not strong. Some phrases and sentences are likely to make readers pause, sometimes because of their originality but too often because of their sheer awkwardness. It would not be successful in an undergraduate class. Secondly, the general lack of primary research means the work lacks some of the forcefulness that it might otherwise have. Sections in which the author investigates primary sources such as the publications of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission are the most exciting parts of the book. Finally, the book lacks the national focus that gives special power to James Cobb's *The Most Southern Place on Earth*. In tracking three traditions in the Delta, Woods leaves out a broader American tradition that believes, often naively, that universal access to the vote and the market can eventually solve almost any problem. By ignoring this tradition rather than explaining its failures (or its potential), Woods simply leaves out the broader national context in which events in the Delta took place. Nonetheless, by stressing African American activism and the recurring power of the plantation, Woods has produced a work that is challenging and intriguing.

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