

CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY AND THE STUDY OF MISSISSIPPI HISTORY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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As a social scientist, but not myself a geographer, I have come to realize that geography, especially social geography, is a key to the understanding of the history and social structure of Mississippi.

The impact of the land and other physical factors (rainfall, drainage, temperature, soil types and related features) upon agriculture can of course be traced immediately (Figure 1).¹ Thus the landform areas of the Loess Hills and Black Prairie, shown in Figure 1, can also be correlated to pasture land (Figure 2). But this is elementary; one would anticipate that landforms have some interrelationship with agricultural activities.

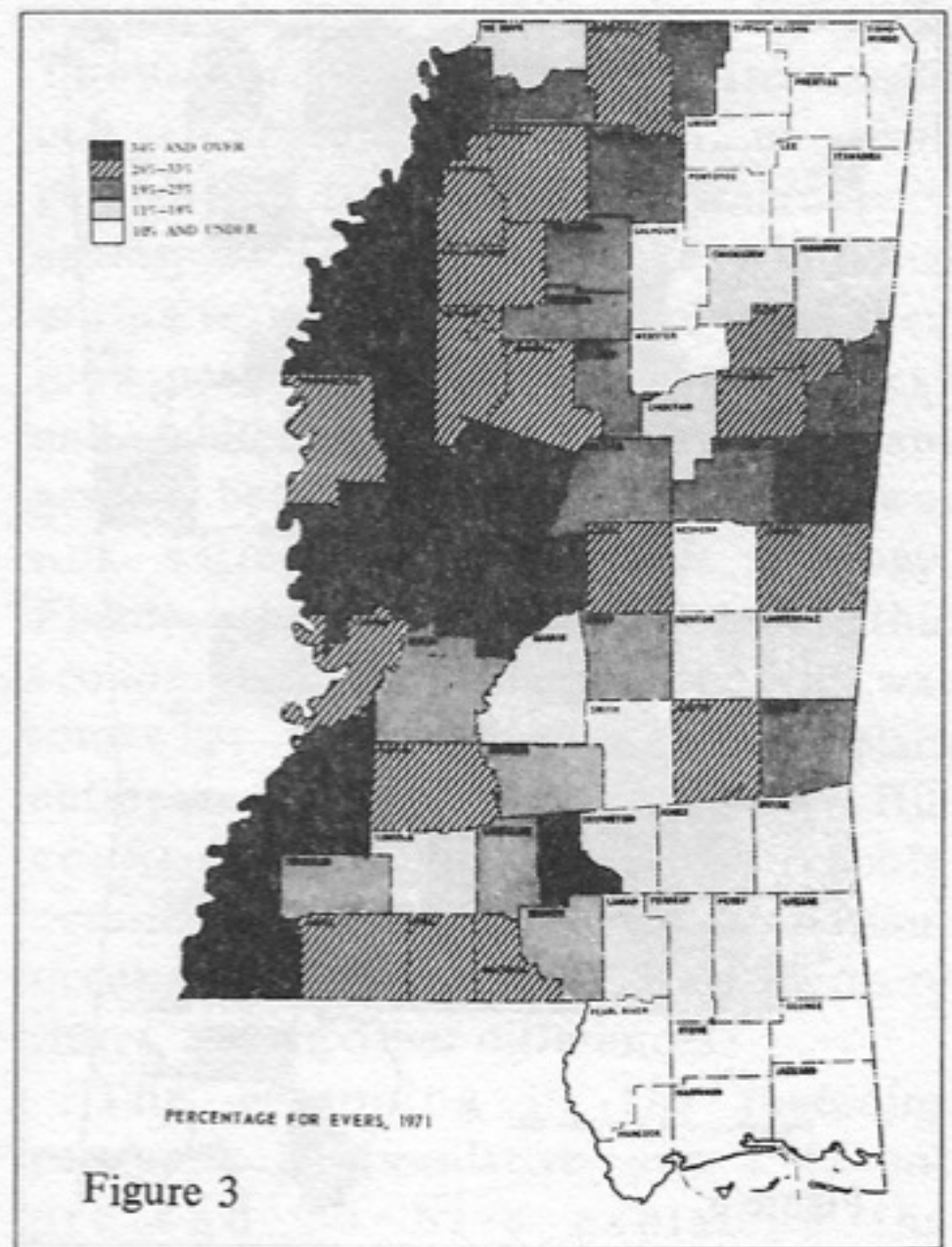
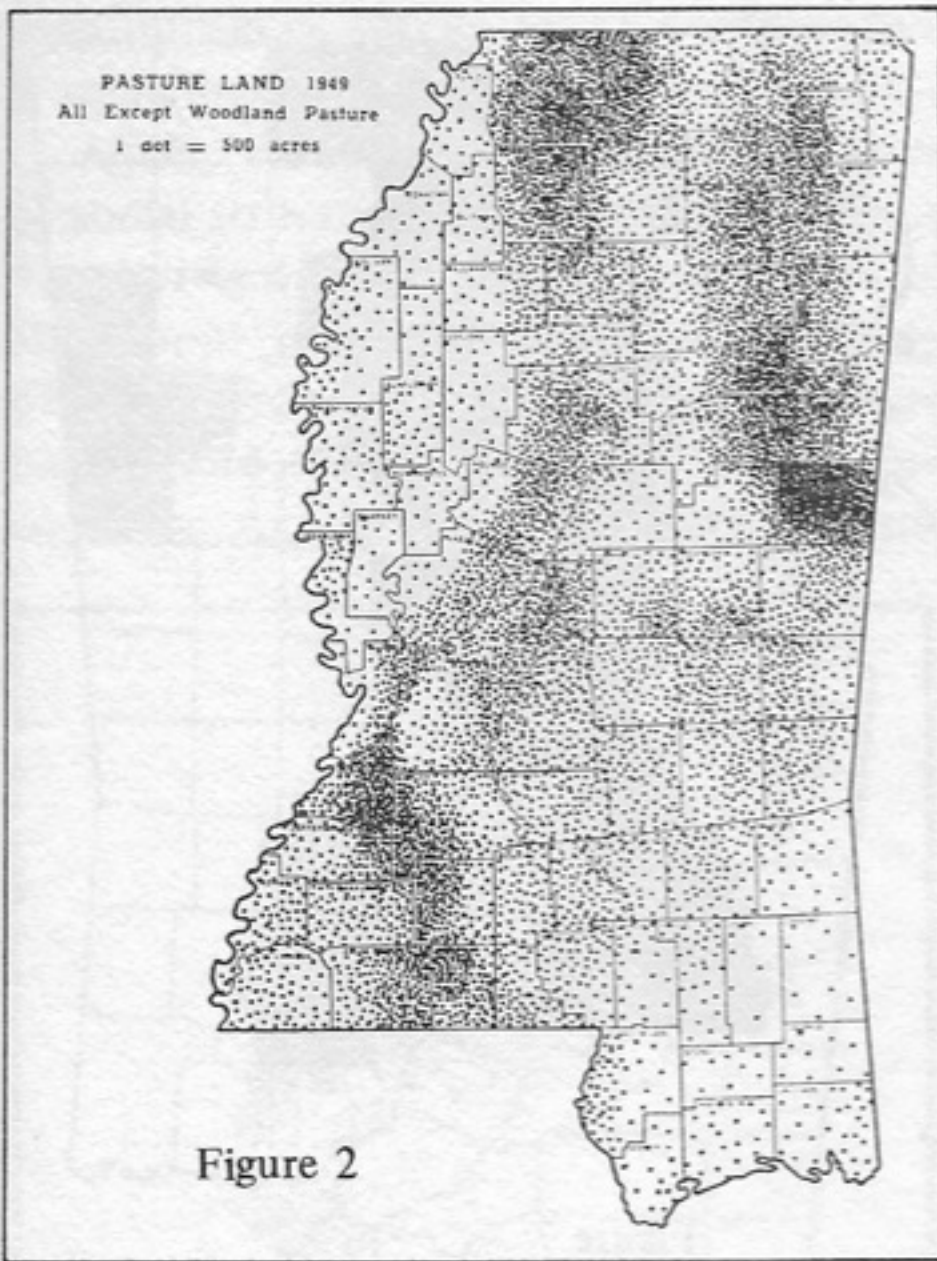
Recent voting patterns in Mississippi show a stable pattern, which also correlates strongly with the spatial distribution of landform areas. Figure 3, showing the voting strength of Evers for Governor in 1971, is virtually identical to Figure 4, voting pattern for Humphrey Democratic candidate for President in 1968. Indeed, the correlation between these two maps is .94, extremely high.² Such stability of voting behavior is common in America and can be termed "party behavior." It is new to Mississippi, however, in this century; before 1965, Mississippi politics had been marked by what V. O. Key called "factionalism."³ Alliances among local organizations were shifting and tenuous, and even when the same candidate made consecutive bids for statewide office, his patterns of support were not as similar as the Democratic Party behavior shown by Figures 3 and 4.⁴

What happened in 1965, of course, was the readmission of black Mississippians, to politics, caused by the Voting Rights Act of that year. Figures 3 and 4 correlate at greater than the .9 level with Figure 5, Black Population, which is logically and temporally the prior or independent variable.

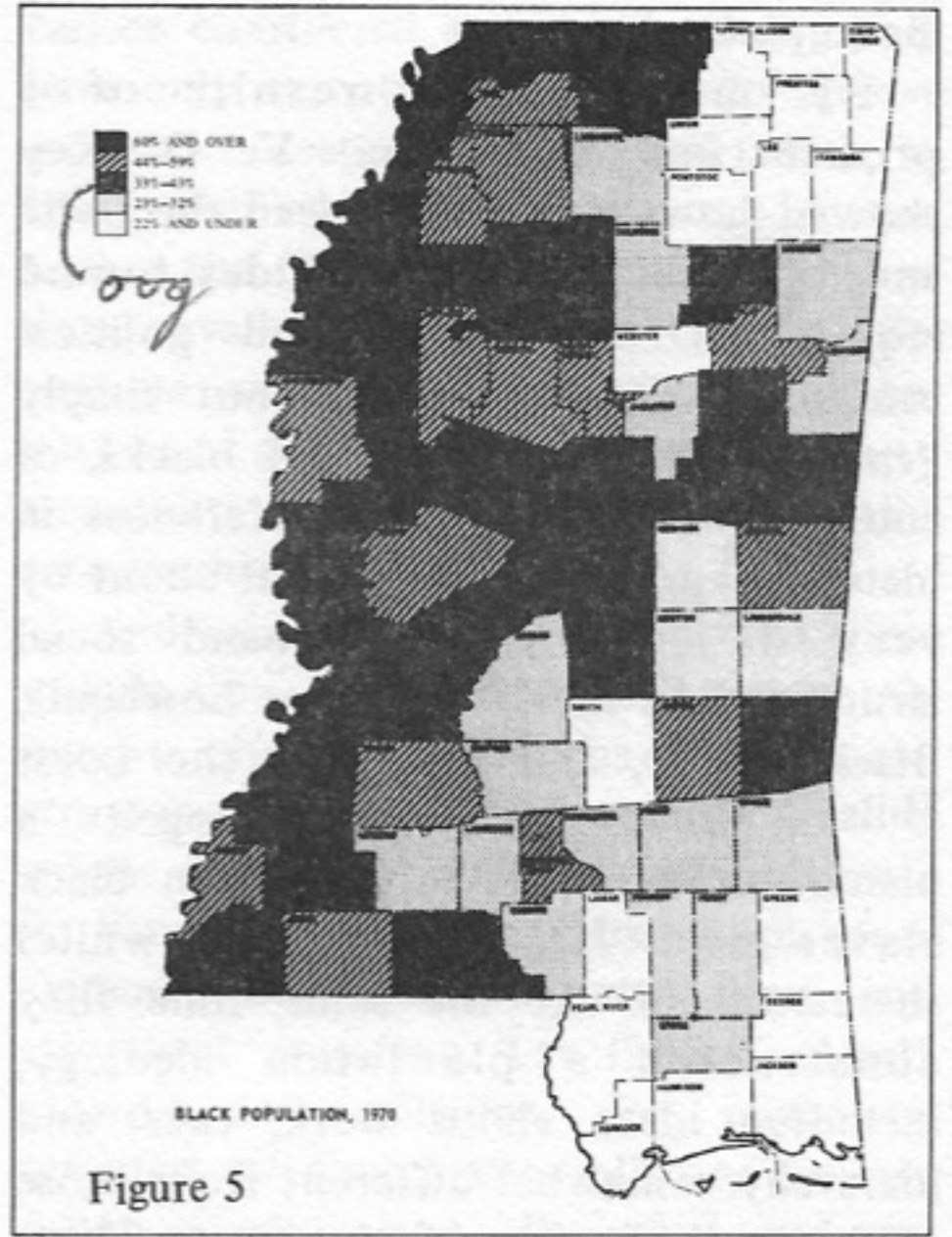
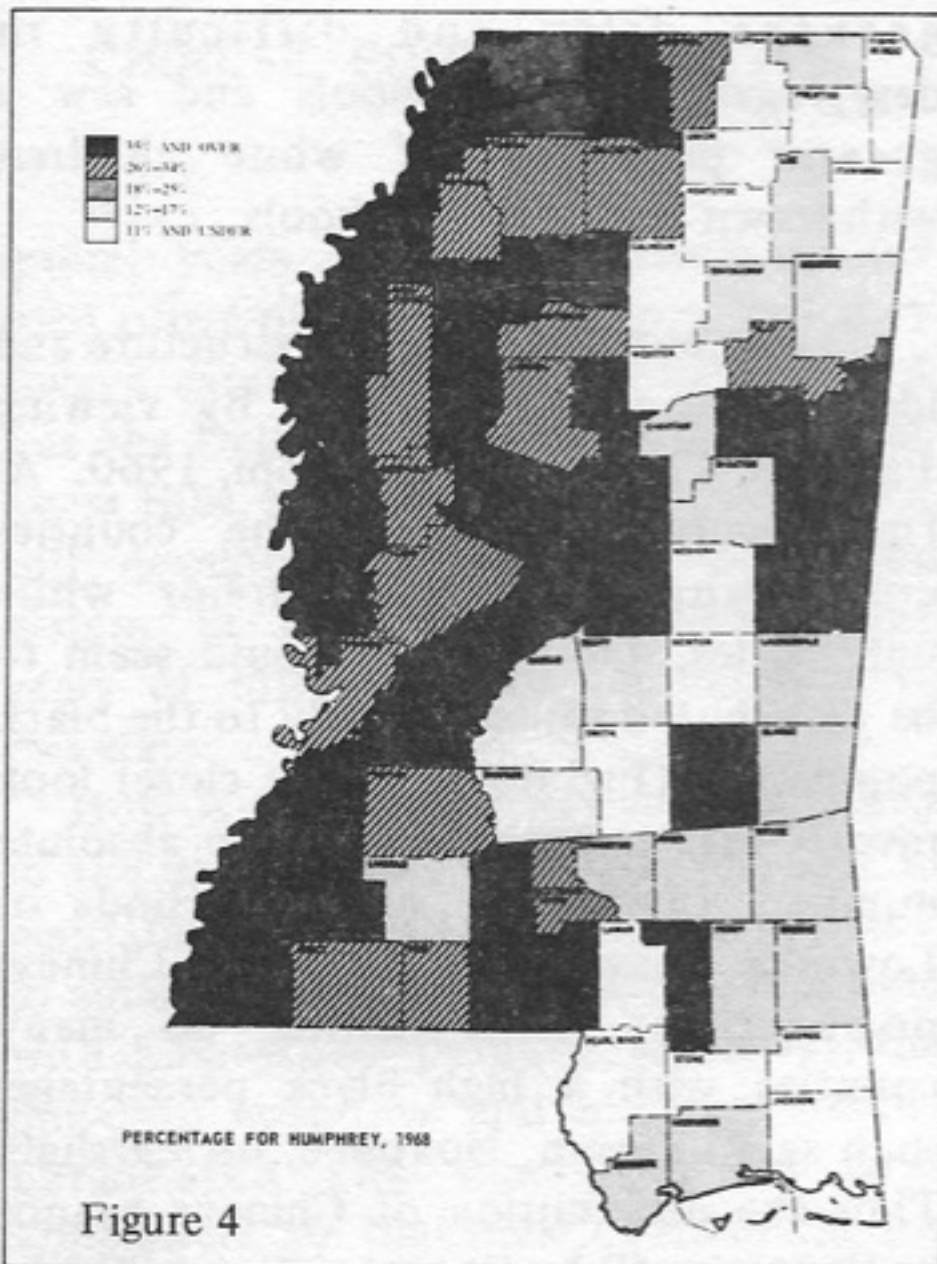
And in turn, Figure 5 is clearly related to the variations in landforms shown in Figure 1. Blacks live on (but do not own) the better farmland throughout the state. The Delta, rich cottonland, is predominantly black, as are the formerly prime cotton areas of the River Lowlands, the lower counties of the Black Prairie, and the Black Loess strip. Even apparent anomalies, such as the high black population of Jeff Davis County in the south central part of the state, can be explained by reference to the soil and topography.

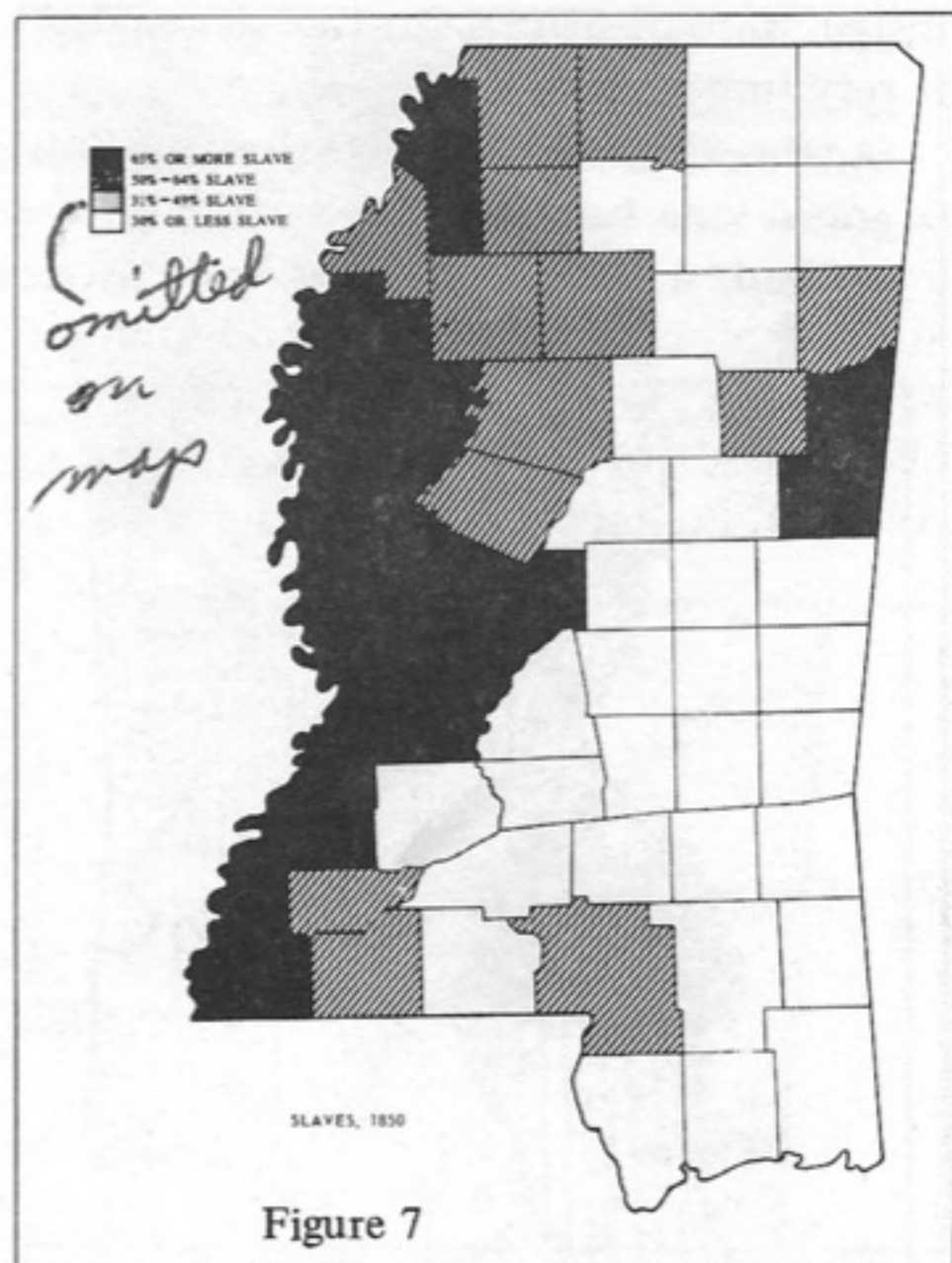
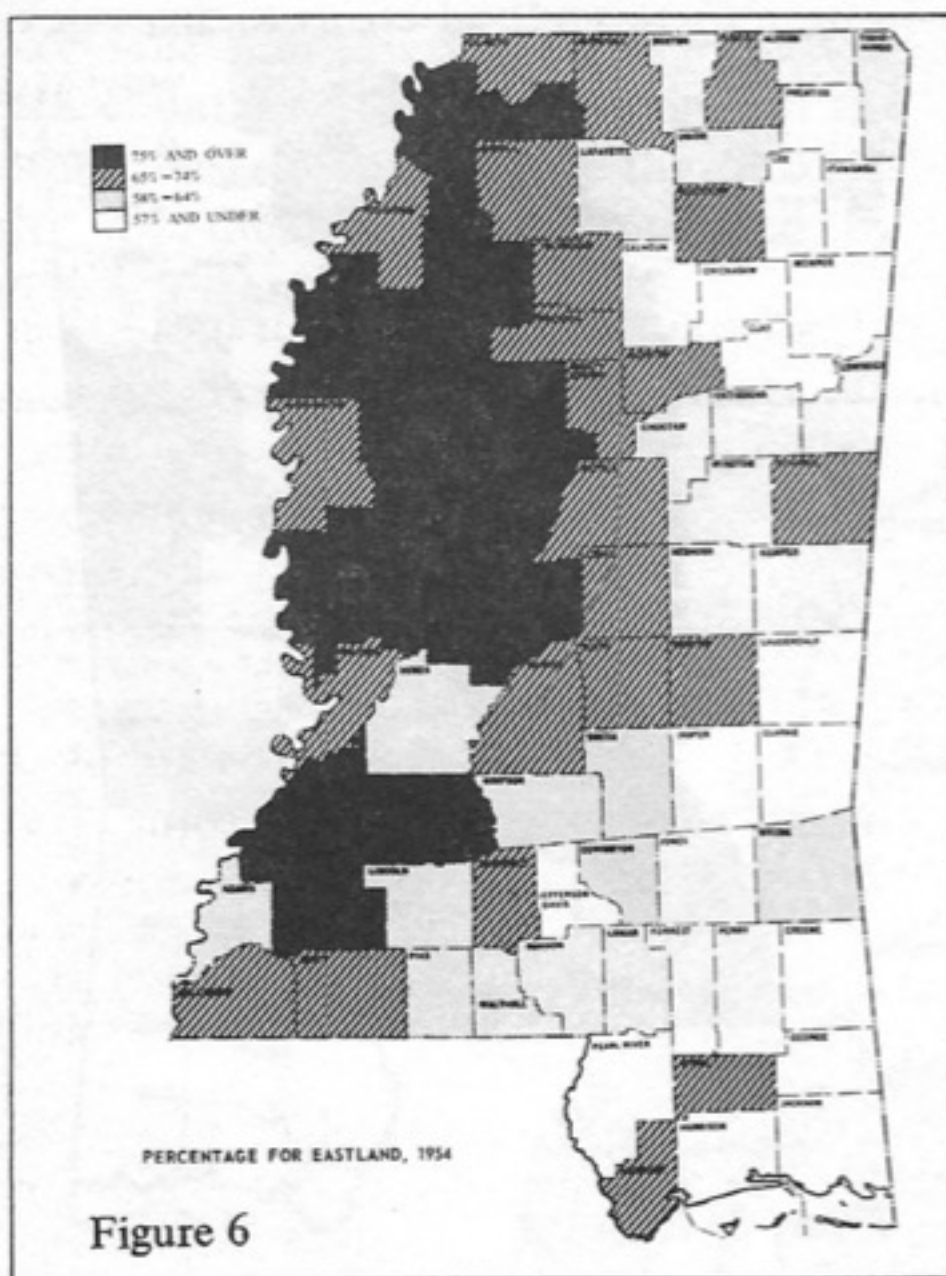
A full explanation of the growth and distribution of Mississippi's black population is beyond the scope of this paper. But it is important to understand that geography affected not only the distribution of blacks but also the distribution of attitudes among whites. Figures 6 and 7 illustrate this point by their striking similarity even though they represent different kinds of data collected a century apart in time. Figure 6 shows the vote received by Eastland in 1954 when he defeated Carroll Gartin for the United States Senate. With few exceptions, only whites were allowed to vote in that year, so Eastland's strength is in the Delta, River Lowlands, and other sections does not show support from

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SOURCE: United States Department of Agriculture, *Base Book of Mississippi Agriculture, 1950* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1950). p. 121.





the growth of different ideologies and different social structures in different parts of the state. The mere fact that Figure 7 correlates so closely with his support indicates that any explanation of the 1954 results which does not begin before 1860 must be radically incomplete.

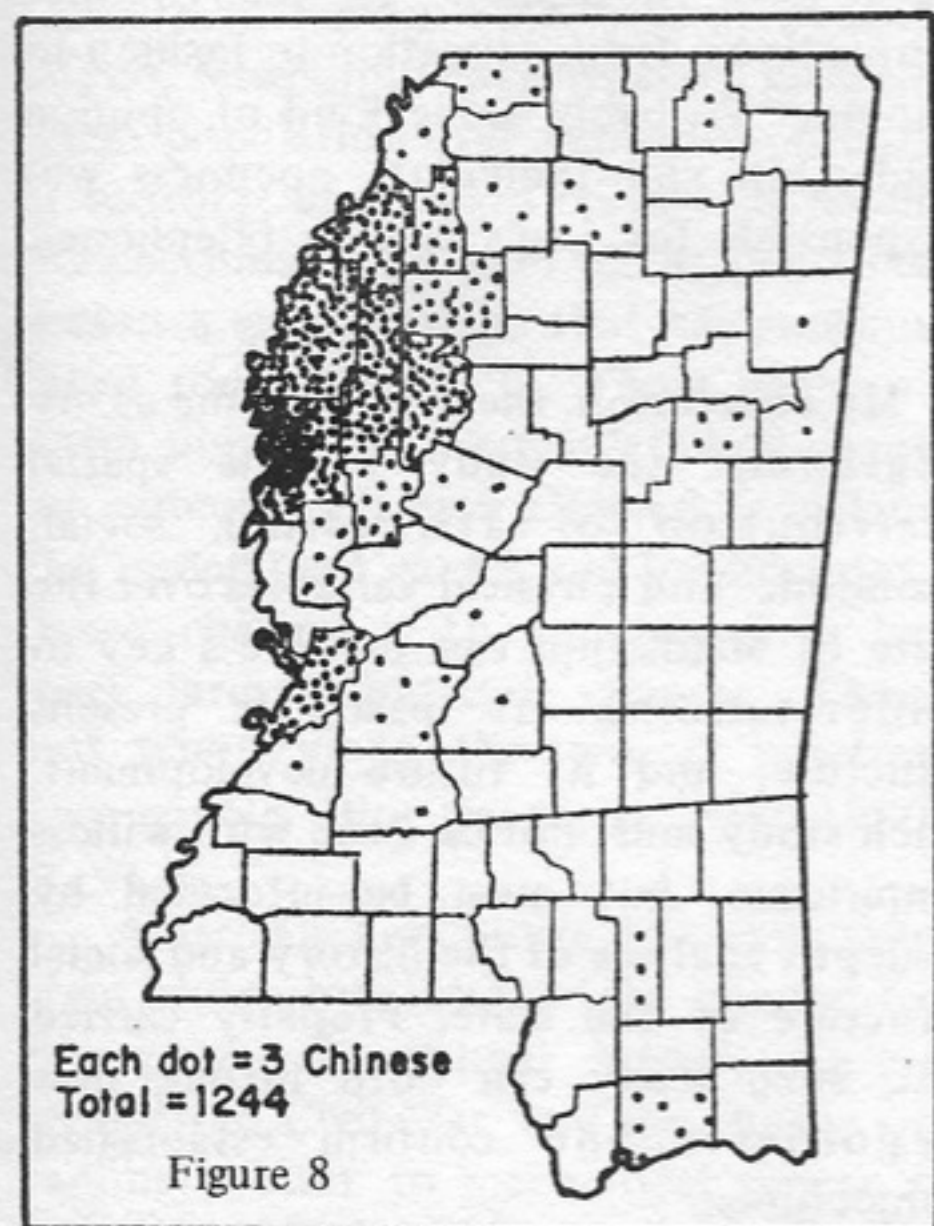
By mapping the results of a prohibition referendum, V. O. Key showed how the split between the Delta and the Hills affected attitudes toward liquor as well as toward political candidates. The division is not simply "caused" by the presence of blacks, of course, but again by the differences in ideology and attitudes brought about by very different economies and social structures. In the Delta, River Lowlands, Black Prairie, and briefly in the Loess Hills, white settlers developed a plantation structure relying upon black slaves and later black (and white) sharecroppers. At the same time they constructed a plantation ideology, including ideas about work, race, and hierarchy somewhat different from those held in other parts of the state. These

differences in ideas and social structure now possess an independent life and exert causal effects upon many apparently unrelated issues. To take a recent example, it is probably true that those counties, where elements of plantation ideology were stronger, experienced greater delay and difficulty in desegregating their schools and saw a greater percentage of white children withdrawn from public schools.

The importance of social structure and ideology can be examined by viewing Figure 8, Chinese in Mississippi, 1960. At first glance, except for the counties containing the three major white universities, the Chinese would seem to be distributed quite similarly to the black population (Figure 5). But a closer look reveals that counties with large absolute numbers of blacks, such as Hinds or Lowndes, have no significant Chinese populations, and neither do many counties with a high black percentage, such as Wilkinson, Noxubee, or Marshall. Thus the distribution of Chinese cannot be "explained" by its association with the

distribution of blacks, for that association is very imperfect.

Again, through the historical analysis of social structure, the distribution can be explained. The Chinese entered Mississippi in about 1870 and quickly became grocers, selling to plantation blacks and town blacks in plantation counties. As one Chinese grocer told me



CHINESE POPULATION, 1960

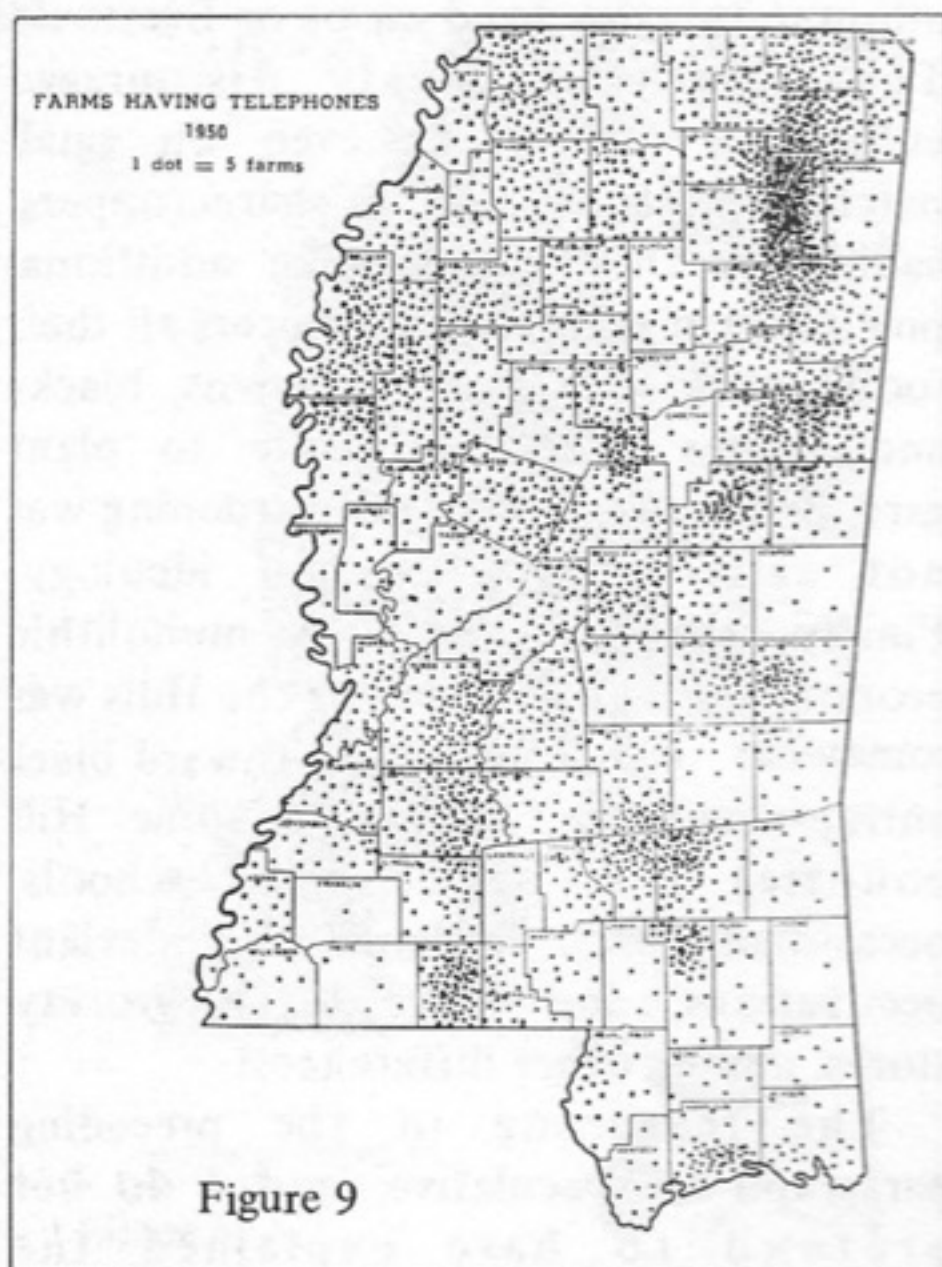
several years ago, "The Chinese people tried other places in Mississippi, but they always came back to the Delta." For it was the Delta, and not the Black Prairie, Loess Hills, or River Lowlands, which was still developing as a viable plantation system in the period 1870-1910, the years of initial Chinese immigration to this state.

How is the plantation system the key to the distribution of Chinese grocers? In plantation areas small farmers were rare, so small grocers did not have to compete with homegrown produce. Moreover, the one-crop economy and ideology deeply permeated the minds of the large landowners so that most of them did not

attempt to raise food crops or livestock. They further actively discouraged cultivation of gardens even on small patches of land around sharecroppers' cabins, so they could make additional profits from selling their laborers all their food needs. And even in towns, blacks and whites were less likely to plant gardens because the idea of gardening was not salient in plantation ideology. Finally, the somewhat less monolithic economy and atmosphere of the Hills was somewhat less oppressive toward black entrepreneurship; as results some Hill counties had better black schools, occasional black leadership in deviant occupations, and more black grocery stores, among other differences.

The reasoning in the preceding paragraph is speculative, and I do not pretend to have explained the distribution of the Chinese adequately nor to be able to bolster all my speculations with evidence.⁵ Indeed, so far as I can tell, the geographic study of economic, social, and attitudinal variables in Mississippi is still in its infancy. For example, no reliable statewide poll has ever been taken in the state on any subject! Elections, which in some cases can be considered a form of opinion poll, have only recently again come to involve serious contests of parties and issues, as they did during Reconstruction and before the Civil War. But in the masses of data available from the Census, the various state departments, and other public sources, there are many possibilities for uncovering interesting relationships.

And again, the investigations of these distributions and relations must surely involve the study of change in social structure and ideology over time. Even as simple a variable as that shown by Figure 9. Rural Telephones in Mississippi, gives evidence of significant attitudinal and structural causation. Lee County clearly stands out. Chance, one might be tempted to argue; after all, one county must always lead. Probably not so,



SOURCE: United States Department of Agriculture, *Base Book of Mississippi Agriculture, 1950* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1950). p. 117.

however. For we know that Tupelo, county seat of Lee, was the first city in America to get TVA power. Lee County

leaders heard of concrete as a substance for highway construction and proceeded to build the first concrete highway in the South. Even more recently, Tupelo was the first town in Mississippi to show "A Clockwork Orange," Stanley Kubrick's X-rated film, without much outcry, and the first to have a chapter of a mental health support group. The county and town have been hospitable to many other innovations, from education to fashion to banking. Probably some kind of opinion leadership and individual openness was responsible for Lee's lead in telephones.

My conclusion, then, is the same as my beginning: the study of the spatial distribution of attitudinal, social, economic, and physical variables over the state of Mississippi can provide a key to understanding its past, its present structure, and its future development. Such study must not be done with witless empiricism, but must be informed by in-depth analysis of the history and social structure of the state. Properly carried out, such study can both inspire new hypotheses and confirm established conjectures.

FOOTNOTES

¹The author would like to thank Mackie Odom, a graduate student in geography at the University of Southern Mississippi, for his cartographic assistance in reproducing the author's sketch maps of Figures 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

² r , or product-moment correlation, can vary from -1.0 (perfect negative or inverse correlation) through 0.0 (no relationship) to +1.0 (perfect positive or direct relation). A correlation of +.94 indicates that differences among counties in percentage strength for Evers in 1971 are almost wholly associated with differences in Humphrey strength three years earlier.

³V. O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, (New York: Random House Vintage, 1949), Chapter 11.

⁴McGovern strength in 1972, incidentally, was quite similar to that of Evers and Humphrey. Eastland support followed a quite different pattern.

⁵A more complete analysis of the relation between plantation structure and ideology and the success of Chinese groceries may be found in James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), Chapter 2.