

Challenges to the Grassroots: The Use of Strategic Planning by Southern Progressives for Economic Development and Power Relations in the Lower Mississippi Delta¹

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the causes for the shift toward the use of strategic planning by Southern Progressives and its implications for community-based groups through an examination of two major initiatives involving either a major federal or foundation program. Specifically, it examines the use of strategic planning in handling conflict with community-based groups as these groups attempt to gain more fiscal resources and decision-making authority in public policy. Simultaneously, the Southern Progressive tradition seeks to use strategic planning to coordinate, centralize, and dominate these smaller organizations while achieving their ends. The implications and, hence, challenges for community-based groups in this shifting strategy by Southern Progressives are critical to the future understanding of power and economic community development in the Lower Mississippi Delta.

The Problem

Since the 1900s historians have described the governance of the Lower Mississippi Delta region as Southern Progressivism (Brownell and Goldfield 1975). This tradition attempts to control power through the creation of agendas for economic growth by the leadership of a small, enlightened, and self-chosen few who, in turn, govern for the “good of all.” These elite typically include members of Chambers of Commerce, land developers, bankers, and lawyers (Grantham 1981, 1983). Drawing upon the conceptual framework of Carole Hill’s (1977) seminal article entitled *Anthropological Studies in the American South: Review and Directions*, this paper examines the movement toward the use of strategic planning as a revitalization tool for economic development by Southern Progressives in the Lower Mississippi Delta.

The Methods

The data collected for this paper come from three sources: historic literature on Southern political economic history; my participant observation over a twenty-year period of grassroots community building efforts in the Mid-South (two years of this time was spent working for a federal commission that developed a strategic plan for the economic development of the Lower Mississippi Delta); and a series of surveys of presidents and/or directors of neighborhood associations and community development corporations (Hyland et al. 1979, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1993, 1994).

Historical Background

Since the 1900s the governance of the Lower Mississippi Delta region has been described by

historians such as Brownell and Goldfield (1975, 1977), D. Grantham (1981, 1983), and D. Goldfield (1981, 1989) as a political tradition called Southern Progressivism. Initially affiliated with the national Progressive Movement of Theodore Roosevelt, the Southern version attempted to provide an agenda for economic and social reform (conflict among groups) through the leadership of a small, enlightened, and self-chosen elite who, in turn, would govern for the “good of all.”

The core constituency as detailed by Southern historians is the chamber of commerce (larger merchants, real estate agents, insurance brokers, bankers, contractors who are associated directly or indirectly with White businesses and the middle class) and the White religious leaders (Goldfield 1981; Tucker 1980). A new urban government philosophy arose that sought to handle the tremendous rural migrations from the hinterland at the turn of the century, attract more factories from the industrial north, set up efficient governments, and implement social reform that would avoid the pitfalls of urban riots in the ghettos of the northern cities. They uniquely defined progress as managed growth and minimum conflict.

To avoid direct conflict with “non-mainstream groups” the Southern Progressives set up what has been described by Southern historians as a secular religion called Southern boosterism. Henry Grady, newspaper editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, best reflected this boosterism in editorials about civic pride. This Southern boosterism took on ritualistic aspects in political and social events (Brownell and Goldfield 1975). Dissent was stifled through a litany of appeals such as: “Diversity with Unity;” “Change with Stability;” and “Growth with Order.”

The “good city” in their view was “corporate-expansive,” that is, stable and orderly, as well as growing and prosperous. There was accompanying this reform a well-defined social order (separate but equal) (Woodard 1955). The “non-mainstream groups,” poor Whites and Blacks, ethnics and outsiders, would be provided for but were not included in the decision-making processes. Translated at the governmental level this meant “trust me, I will take care of it for you.” At the grassroots level political subservience would insure social services. The ritual exchange was usually employed at political events such as political rallies, festivals, and elections.

In Memphis, Mayor E.H. Crump utilized and constantly reinforced this concept of Southern Progressivism to maintain firm control over local resources and policy. Biles (1986) notes that potential conflict with politically and economically marginalized groups was avoided through appeals to civic cooperation and a preferred Southern way of life. Hence, the relationship of Mayor Crump to citizens was largely through civic clubs and garden societies.

In each of the city’s 52 wards an appointed male civic club leader controlled daily neighborhood development activities and capital improvements. Tucker (1980, 33) notes that the message at political and social events was unmistakably clear, “that no young man can succeed in Memphis unless he is friendly to the Crump organization.” In effect, a widespread voluntary espionage system conveyed critical remarks directly to Mr. Crump, and the old man promoted fear of this system by exaggerating the effectiveness of the grapevine, suggesting that even a mildly critical remark (conflict) would be reported to him within five minutes.

The Need for New Strategies Consisting of More Local Involvement and Ownership

Post-World War II led to recognition of limitations of the paternalistic planning orientation in running state and local governments. During the period of the early 1960s a series of serious challenges was mounted by labor unions and civil rights organizations. Collins (1975, 1979), among others, documented the increasing rejection of the old traditions of appeals to civic pride and consensus.

Simultaneously, the Southern Progressives, as represented by Southern governors, mayors, and local chambers of commerce were beginning to confront a critical lack of resources, a growing poverty in both

rural and inner-city areas, and an inadequately skilled labor force.

Southern governors began a shift to the new language and the use of strategic planning in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1978 Lamar Alexander, Governor of Tennessee, launched a planning initiative entitled “The Memphis Jobs Conference.” This initiative sought to bring more local stakeholders to the discussion of public policy and resource allocation and, hence, avoid criticisms of favoritism; i.e., avoid political conflict with community-based groups and lose votes of a growing constituency. Governors Winters in Mississippi and Clinton in Arkansas led similar state efforts. Simultaneously Southern governors began using strategic planning in developing new approaches to reform in the areas of education and health care.

The issue of bridging economically and politically marginalized groups was probably best illustrated in the work of a federal commission on poverty and economic development in a seven-state area that bounded the Lower Mississippi Delta. The commission was authorized by Congress to function from 1988-1990. In addition Congress legislated that the commission was to be composed of the seven governors and two presidential appointees. Their mission was to develop a strategic plan for the economic development of this region by the year 2000.

Their work involved an eighteen-month effort that would include public hearings in each of the states, commissioned reports, and a series of conferences on special topics such as how churches could become more involved in economic development. The Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission, chaired by then Governor Clinton, developed 68 major goals in the areas of education, health, housing, community development, agriculture, natural resources, public infrastructure, private enterprise, business and industrial development, tourism, and the environment.

Each of the 68 goals was accompanied by a set of recommendations that identified actions and stakeholder groups, such as the U.S. Congress, state government, chambers of commerce, educational organizations, and community-based groups. The final goals and recommendations were jointly determined by the governors (and their representatives) and the presidential appointees. The commission presented its final report to the U.S. Congress and the citizens of the Lower Mississippi Delta in August of 1990.

Table 1 shows a breakdown of the final recommendations to Congress by issues and by stakeholders. Of relevance to the thesis of this paper is the inclusion of community-based organizations in the execution of each of the major areas of economic development. Specifically, community-based organizations and non-profits represent 11 percent of the total stakeholder initiatives. State governments were cited in 31 percent of the initiatives, followed by the

federal government (30 percent) (including both the executive and legislative branches), the private sector (12 percent), educational institutions (8 percent), and local agencies and governments (7 percent). The higher percentages of state governments' initiatives reflected the dominance of the principal authors of the report, yet the recognition of the diversity of stakeholders speaks to the growing awareness of the need for partnerships in economic development.

TABLE 1: THE DELTA INITIATIVES

Number of Recommendations Targeted to Categories of Stakeholders by Area of Activity

CATEGORIES OF STAKEHOLDERS

AREA OF ACTIVITY	FED GOV & AGENCIES	STATE GOV. & AGENCIES	LOCAL GOV & AGENCIES	PRIVATE SECTOR	EDUC. SYSTEMS	COMM. & NONPROF	TOTAL # INIT
HUMAN CAPITAL DEV.							
HEALTH	21	31	2	11	11	8	84
EDUCATION	31	34	3	12	22	8	110
HOUSING	31	12	3	3	1	1	51
COMMUNITY DEV.	13	21	9	5	9	15	7
NATURAL & PHY. ASSETS							
AGRICUL.	24	16	2	2	6	0	50
NATURAL RESOURCES	40	28	8	5	1	2	84
PUBLIC INFRA-STRUC.	18	13	6	5	0	4	46
PRIVATE ENTERPRISE							
ENTREPRE-NUERIAL DEV.	6	10	2	8	6	4	36
TECHN. DEV.	5	2	0	0	1	0	8
BUSINESS & INDUST. DEV	24	31	8	33	9	5	110
TOURISM	18	28	10	9	2	36	103
ENVIRONMENT	17	28	4	7	0	5	61
TOTAL # INIT	248	254	57	100	68	88	815

The issue of tourism was the largest issue identified by the commission for community-based initiatives, representing 35 percent of the total tourism initiatives. Housing and community development were other major issues where the participation of community-based organizations was highlighted in the execution of the strategic plan (21 percent). The potential of community-

based groups to mobilize residents and resources around local issues related to identity, such as tourism, housing, and community development, was obviously at the core of the governor's recommendations. Equally true is the position that the governors were aware of decreasing state resources to provide solutions to these development issues.

Of equal interest to this paper is the observation that one of the 68 goals directly addresses the importance of integrating local action with state and private-sector plans. Specifically the goal states that, “[B]y the year 2001, all 219 Delta counties and parishes will be operating in accordance with local strategic plans, integrated with the plans of state, regional, and federal entities; these plans will reflect volunteer initiatives representing local population diversity” (*The Final Report*, The Delta Initiatives 1990, 56).

The Issue of Strategic Planning at the Grassroots in the Mississippi Delta

The adoption of strategic planning by Southern governors as illustrated by the Delta Commission Final Report further affirms its place in resolving conflict among various stakeholders concerning future economic development efforts. Simultaneously, it opens a major question, “Are all stakeholders capable of engaging in and executing strategic planning efforts?” More specific to the concerns of this paper is the question of whether or not community-based groups in the Lower Mississippi Delta have the capacity to engage in strategic planning. Concerning this question the Delta Commission notes that “many localities lack the necessary funds, training, and technical assistance to develop programs (strategic plans). A 1989-1990 study sponsored by the Delta Commission indicated that a majority of low-income residents in the Delta “have no access to fundamental civic skills training to enable them to participate in the economic social and political life of their communities” (*Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission’s Final Report* 1990, 56).

The realization of the barriers to strategic planning at the grassroots level raises the question of whether there are any models of successful strategic planning by community-based groups in the Lower Mississippi Delta region as well as whether these models could feasibly be replicated. If not, one is left to infer that the Southern Progressives have created a new language of inclusion; i.e., strategic planning for community-based groups with no intention to include them.

In light of these questions, Hyland et al. (1994) attempted a more systematic inventory of strategic planning efforts by community-based groups in Memphis. Specifically, we surveyed the strategic planning efforts of neighborhood associations and community development corporations for the period from 1990 to 1994. Our survey of neighborhood associations and community development corporations

in Memphis revealed an interesting pattern. Of some 300 neighborhood associations and 34 community development corporations, only eight have engaged in a strategic planning process (Weidman 1995). A faith-based organization called Shelby County Interfaith, consisting of a coalition of 50 Black and White congregations, also engaged in a strategic planning effort during this time period.

Of the eight neighborhood-based groups, six have been linked with funding from philanthropic foundations (either at the national or local level). Three strategic planning efforts have been linked to funding from the Mott Foundation, one from the Ford Foundation, one from the Pew Foundation, and one from the Venture Fund of the United Way of Greater Memphis. All of the linkages to national foundations have been mediated through the efforts of the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis. Of the remaining two neighborhood-based organizations, one was supported by businesses in the area and the other by the state government. The efforts of Shelby County Interfaith are funded through local church congregations and are linked to its national parent organization, the Industrial Areas Foundation.

An examination of Memphis neighborhood-based groups that have done strategic planning revealed three patterns. First, neighborhood-based groups engaged in strategic planning because of conditions imposed by foundations, businesses, and or government – all part of the Southern Progressive tradition. Second, funded neighborhood-based groups competed against other community-based groups for funding and won because of a combination of their prior track record of accomplishment and their links to supporting institutions such as colleges or universities. Third, all of the neighborhood-based efforts engaged in strategic planning involved joint efforts between neighborhood associations and community development corporations.

The overall impact of strategic planning in terms of economic outcomes in Memphis is yet to be systematically evaluated, although Bolding and Hyland (1995) have analyzed housing production of community development corporations. What is apparent from the survey and observational data to date is that the more informal, the less connected, and the more financially limited a community-based group is, the less likely it is that it will engage in strategic planning. This dilemma raises some critical questions for the advocates of strategic planning for community-based groups, as well as for applied anthropologists engaged in community development.

As Southern Progressives, particularly Southern governors, have shifted their emphasis to economic development based upon strategic planning, there have been few government resources directed to building capacity at the community level. In fact, only one neighborhood-based organization in Memphis was given resources by the government for strategic planning.

When foundations have offered their resources to community-based organizations, only a few have responded, and even fewer have received support. In effect most neighborhood-based groups in Memphis are left out of the picture. The obvious conclusion is that strategic planning requires a major commitment of time, energy, and resources, and the process of strategic planning would overwhelm if not crush most of these neighborhood-based organizations. Milosky (1987) notes that this reality is not specific to Memphis but typical of neighborhood organizations elsewhere in the United States. It seems reasonable to infer that the trends in urban neighborhoods, with their proximity to resources, would be even worse for community-based organizations in isolated rural poverty areas in the Mississippi Delta.

The Implications and Dangers

The inference drawn from the above pattern is that the connected groups will get richer and the unconnected will become more politically and economically marginalized. If the above scenario continues, it appears that explanations from Southern Progressives will be advanced to explain the growing conflicts among community-based groups over the discrepancies in resource allocations.

Based upon past poverty program literature (Critchlow et al. 1989; Piven and Cloward 1979; Schiller 1984), a probable explanation of the non-use of strategic planning will involve a blaming of the victim; i.e., the community-based organization. This blaming will result in a new set of programs aimed at changing their behavior; i.e., training courses will be set up. Short of a massive infusion of resources this approach will then yield more frustrations and, hence, more blaming.

An alternate explanation is to blame the Southern Progressive institutions and organizations, such as banks, foundations, colleges, and universities, that provide little or no support system to the less organized community-based groups. This blaming has yielded a literature on the need for grassroots advocacy and confrontational politics (Piven and Cloward 1979).

Based upon a growing literature on community-based organizations (Milosky 1987; Oropesa 1992; Austin 1991; Fisher 1981) and my participant observation of numerous neighborhood-based groups in the Mid-South, I suggest an approach developed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) based upon their work with community-based groups in Chicago. This approach emphasizes strategic planning as a process (path) that identifies and mobilizes assets of all stakeholders within a neighborhood and restructures relationships with community institutions based upon these assets.

Control of action is clearly centered in the assets of the neighborhood-based organization. In turn, opportunities are identified with a localized context and on a scale appropriate to a group's capacity. Opportunities could be internal or external, financial or relational. Kretzmann and McKnight's approach applied to strategic planning efforts encourages a nurturing of diverse interests, relationships, assets, and opportunities to build upon a web of fragile social networks and limited financial resources. Simultaneously, their approach calls for the active restructuring of local institutions and agencies as collaborators rather than as initiators and determiners of action.

Agenda for Engaged Anthropologists

In terms of setting an agenda of strategic planning for community-based organizations and engaged anthropologists, certain paths seem obvious. First, qualitative documentation of the diversity of planning efforts is crucial to inform the Southern Progressives and hopefully broaden their understanding of planning at the grassroots level. Sponsorship of forums to exchange stories of strategic planning by community-based organizations can provide a rich source of information. In light of the documentation, the design of a community-driven curriculum is needed so that lessons learned in this venture can be reproduced and future efforts can lead to more opportunities.

Second, the understanding of current community-based efforts must lead to a restructuring of existing networks of technical-assistance providers from major institutions and organizations (financially controlled by Southern Progressives). This restructuring can lend support to localized social networks in their effort to expand the way in which strategic planning can be utilized to maintain their vision and identity. For example, technical assistance can generate statistical information through spatial representation such as

Geographical Information Systems; i.e., neighborhood-scale maps. In turn, these knowledge bases can be transferred to the community-based organizations for purposes of developing action strategies. Finally, part of the restructuring of technical assistance should involve the establishment of a comprehensive internship network of applied social scientists and humanists that can support the above activities.

Notes

1. This research is part of the larger sphere of related research Stanley E. Hyland has conducted as Director of Research (1988-1990) for the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission. He is currently directing a major Department of Housing and Urban Development grant which is working on inner-city revitalization. In addition, he has worked extensively in the area of public housing.

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