

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**The Sun Never Set Upon The Blues: Reading and Honouring Clyde Woods, November  
2012**

## **Remembering Clyde Woods—Geographer-Planner**

Edward W. Soja  
Urban Planning  
UCLA  
esoja@ucla.edu

I dedicated one of my books to the students who have taught me so much. Clyde Woods was at the top of the list. A most memorable starting point, a kind of birth-of-the blues moment, came when Clyde first told me what he was thinking about for his dissertation. Clyde had come to UCLA and the Urban Planning department with some professional planning experience in Baltimore, but he wanted to get involved with more theoretical and critical issues. One afternoon he arrived for an appointment with me and appeared uncharacteristically nervous. We talked about possible dissertation topics, mainly involving the impact of urban restructuring on the African American community in Los Angeles. We also had a side conversation about the recently elected Bill Clinton, whose early presidency was wrapped in allegedly scandalous behavior. We had talked earlier about Clinton and his claim to have a special relationship with the African American community, to the point that some were claiming he was the first Black president. With his knowing smile, Clyde had earlier shared with me some informed gossip about just how close that relationship was, provoking an image of little Black Clintons frolicking in Arkansas and elsewhere in the South.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

One piece of inside information, however, connected with our shared interest in regional development theory and planning. As Clyde knew was being planned, President Clinton had announced the creation of the Lower Mississippi River Delta Regional Commission. In this bold move, Clinton had revived the regional planning commissions that had started with Appalachia in the JFK presidency but had died away almost entirely by 1980. Kennedy promoted Appalachian development as a political strategy to get West Virginia to vote for him in the primary election. For Clinton, it was a much more meaningful decision. As Clyde was quick to point out, regional planning in America up to that time was fundamentally racially biased. From the Tennessee Valley Authority to the Appalachian and other regional commissions, poor whites, rather than even poorer blacks, received the greatest attention. If regional planning was aimed at improving economic development and helping areas of extreme poverty, then it failed to address what has been the country's poorest region for at least the past hundred years, the Lower Mississippi River Delta. It was precisely this Delta region that Clinton promised would be a centerpiece of his national economic policy - and the region Clyde Woods dedicated himself to in his dissertation research.

Clyde had already visited the Delta region and seemed torn between doing his dissertation on African American development in the South or focusing on Los Angeles. Typical of him, he was determined to do both topics, but for the moment he decided he would start in the Delta. Supporting his choice, I suggested that a thorough analysis of the origins and development of the Delta Commission would make for a good dissertation on its own. Clyde, however, was way ahead of me. He was going to back up a study of the Delta Commission with a much more wide-ranging look at African American development planning initiatives throughout the South. At one level, he would apply a strong regional political economy perspective, satisfying what he

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

thought I would want. But toward the end of our meeting, he asked me a question that he thought I might reject: “I want to do something with more of a critical cultural perspective”, he said. He then asked, with his characteristic assertive shyness, “Will you let me look at African American development in the South from a Blues perspective?”. As I looked into his eyes, I thought of Oliver Twist daring to put his bowl forward, saying, “Please, can I have some more?”. I agreed, not really knowing what to expect.

Clyde actually at first used the term 'Blues ontology' and tried to explain what he meant by this. I had wrestled with ontological debates before, in *Postmodern Geographies* (Soja 1989), and thought that seeing the Blues ontologically would be too abstract and too easily divorced from concrete empirical interpretations. Being as supportive as I could, I urged him to use the term 'Blues epistemology', a Blues-based way of knowing, rather than ontology. Clyde would agree, although later in his career I gather he would turn back to the notion of a Blues ontology as well.

Thus was born the extraordinary accomplishments of *Development Arrested*, variably subtitled *The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* or *Race, Power, and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta* (Woods 1998). His plural accomplishments begin with his 1000-page+ dissertation, a work of such demanding self-dedication that he almost stopped eating to finish it. He was able to dig up around 15 examples of creative development ideas, going back more than two centuries to Native American initiatives. He would explain how innovative the ideas were and how they often came into conflict with the plantation mentality and authority, and how, in each and every case - including the Delta Regional Commission - they were crushed by 'plantation power' and King Cotton's violent reach. Encouraging survival and hope, stimulating still more innovative efforts was the blues, always not just in the background but in the foreground as well. I remember being rather breathless after reading the completed dissertation.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

I called Margaret FitzSimmons, another member of his dissertation committee, to ask if she had read it. She had and was reacting much the same as I, that no other dissertation in our memory had had such an impact, had changed our way of thinking so much. I remember at the time wanting to throw a brick at my television whenever the Cotton Council's advertisement came on, warmly cooing "The look, the feel of cotton, the fabric of our lives", knowing full well the racist roots and far-reaching political influence of the plantation based cotton economy and, even worse, mentality. Suddenly, the Southern drawl of the US Senate made terrifying sense.

Another extraordinary accomplishment was the distillation of the lengthy dissertation into an equally powerful book. *Development Arrested* succeeds at so many different levels. It offers an outstanding political economy of Black music, showing how an understanding and feel for the blues opens one's ears and eyes to so much that is otherwise hidden or inaccessible. In later meetings, for example my retirement party several years ago, Clyde would give me his highest compliment, welcoming me, perhaps undeservedly, into the blues-jazz-hip-hop culture. As usual, he paid me the compliment with a sly smile, but at least he knew that I knew that his reversed title, *Development Arrested*, derived not from a TV show but from a punk band rooted in Southern California.

Furthering its accomplishment, *Development Arrested* was also a brilliant regional political economy and would signal one of the many different intellectual pathways Clyde would take in his career, one that has been particularly dear to me. Clyde became a geographer after graduating and was widely and warmly recognized as such. Almost all of our personal encounters up to his death were at the annual meetings of the Association of American Geographers, where Clyde was in high demand. I was very proud to add Clyde to the list of graduates from UCLA Urban Planning who, often without any background training in

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

geography, became geographers by choice and professional identity: Costis Hadjimihalis, Susan Ruddick, Olivier Kramsch, Barbara Hooper, Mustafa Dikec, and Clyde's close friend Laura Pulido. Clyde would become so much more as well, building on his core identity as a geographer-planner.

Others, I am sure, will do better in appreciating these wider accomplishments. I just want to make sure that Clyde continues to be recognized and appreciated as an exceptionally creative and critical spatial thinker.

## References

Soja E W (1989) *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*.

New York: Verso

Woods C (1998) *Development Arrested: Race, Power, and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta*.

New York: Verso [Revised and updated - (2007) *Development Arrested: From the Plantation Era to the Katrina Crisis in the Mississippi*. New York: Verso]