



## New Answers to Old Questions: Caste or Class?

JANE ADAMS  
D. GORTON

# Southern Trauma: Revisiting Caste and Class in the Mississippi Delta

**ABSTRACT** Two classic ethnographies, Hortense Powdermaker's *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* and John Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, contributed to a "master narrative" of the Mississippi Delta and the South that viewed class largely through the lens of race. Their work contributed to the community studies and culture and personality traditions and became part of the public discourse of race in the United States. This article examines the institutional and theoretical frameworks within which they worked. We focus on three aspects of their work: (1) their definition of class that left race as the only salient social divide; (2) their portrayal of middle- and upper-class statements as normative; and (3) their uncritical use of data from elsewhere in the South to interpret their Indianola data. We report the events at the Yale Institute of Human Relations that led Dollard to publish before Powdermaker.  
[Keywords: Mississippi Delta, race and class relations, poor whites, Hortense Powdermaker, John Dollard]

In 1932, WHITE ANTHROPOLOGIST Hortense Powdermaker undertook a study of African American life in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta in the Sunflower County seat of Indianola, Mississippi. Surrounded by vast cotton plantations, the county was over 75 percent African American. A U.S. student of Malinowski's at the London School of Economics, this was Powdermaker's second major field experience: Her previous research in Melanesia was published as *Life in Lesu* (Powdermaker 1933).

Indianola also was selected in 1934 for a major study by John Dollard, a white sociologist and a colleague of Powdermaker's at the Institute of Human Relations (IHR) at Yale. Dollard was a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, with a doctorate in sociology from the University of Chicago. He and Powdermaker were part of the multidisciplinary IHR team studying "the Negro community" in New Haven. The Mississippi fieldwork was intended to fill gaps in the researchers' knowledge of African American culture. In the summer of 1935, Dollard was joined briefly in Indianola by the recent Harvard graduate and fellow Freudian analysand, Leonard Doob. Doob was the publications director of the IHR, as well as a faculty member in psychology at Yale.

Powdermaker's *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (1993, originally released in 1939) and Dollard's (1957, originally released in 1937) *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, both received as landmark studies of the Mississippi Delta, have achieved a canonical status. Powdermaker and Dollard were part of a network of social scientists that,

beginning in the 1920s, shaped the major contours of U.S. anthropology, social psychology, and sociology. Their work contributed importantly to the then-nascent community studies, as well as the culture and personality traditions. Going beyond the academy, their studies became part of the public discourse of race in the United States. As the Harvard sociologist and U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed in the foreword to the 1988 edition of *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1988[1939]:viii), Dollard's schema became the dominant framework through which to understand race in the South. He conferred the imprimatur of science on widespread popular perceptions of white southerners and the effects of white supremacy on African Americans.

In this article, we probe the ways that Powdermaker's and Dollard's books, in different ways, contributed to the U.S. discourse on race and specifically became part of the "master narrative" of the South in general, and of the Delta in particular. We also examine the relations between these scholars that appear to have delayed publication of Powdermaker's findings until Dollard already had published his ground-breaking study. Powdermaker was eventually forced to leave the IHR and Yale repeatedly rejected her revised work for publication.

For the past four years, our work in the Mississippi Delta has focused on the "white" experience. During this time, we have found significant defects in the analysis presented by these two scholars, particularly in their representations of

the nature of the white population. Our critique focuses on three aspects of their work: (1) their definition of *class* that left race as the only salient social divide; (2) their portrayal of middle- and upper-class statements as normative; and (3) their uncritical use of data from elsewhere in the South to interpret their Indianola data and—particularly in Dollard's case—the portrayal of Indianola as characteristic of the entire South.

Our research demonstrates that class has crosscut race at crucial historical junctures, including the 1930s, and that religion has provided a key arena in which white supremacy and racial segregation have been debated. Although both scholars dealt with class, their treatment of it, and, less obviously, their omission of ethnicity and religion as significant social distinctions had lasting public policy and academic implications.

This, then, is our central claim: Powdermaker and Dollard brought back new and significant information about African American life under a system of white supremacy, as well as about the nature of race relations in general. However, they participated in the creation of a mythic history of the Delta and a paradigmatic view of the South, in which whites were prototypically planters and wealthy businessmen, and blacks were prototypically sharecroppers. Both scholars also described the deep class divides between rich and poor as deriving from differing normative codes and psychological orientations, rather than from economic relationships, and they viewed class largely through the lens of race.

How did their accounts come to have such power? What did they overlook? Why has their work been so widely accepted as accurate and complete? And what have been some of the social consequences of the models that they created?

### THE DELTA, DOLLARD, AND POWDERMAKER

Powdermaker was born into a middle-class Jewish family in Philadelphia and was educated in anthropology at the London School of Economics, from which she was awarded a Ph.D. in 1928. Between 1921 and 1925, she worked as a union organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (Silverman 1989). She began her study of Indianola in 1932 supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation-funded Social Science Research Center (SSRC), representing herself to the town of Indianola as an educator and a Methodist. She spent nine months during 1932–33 and three months in 1934 in the town (Williams and Woodson 1993:xvi). Dollard soon followed, spending five months between 1935 and 1936. He began with the aim of collecting Negro life histories but quickly realized that he needed also to understand the white community because “whites and whiteness form an inseparable part of the mental life of the Negro” (Dollard 1957:1).

Dollard, who identified his forbears as “Famine Irish” and was a native of Wisconsin (Ferris 1975), writes of “Southerntown”: “An authority [unnamed] states that this

region is as typical of the old agrarian South as any now existing” (Dollard 1957:15). He identifies a relatively small stratum of lower-class whites; a relatively large white middle class, primarily made up of people who have risen from the lower class; and a small upper class who are tied by kinship to elites in the area and throughout the South (1957:76–78). The population is overwhelmingly Protestant and native (U.S.) born.

Powdermaker's 1939 account (1993) corresponds closely with Dollard's observations concerning political and religious affiliation and the agrarian nature of the region. Her sketch of the social order varies only slightly from Dollard's. Like Dollard, she avers that most of the whites in “Cottonville” are middle class; however, she stresses the importance of both the aristocracy and the poor whites who bracket the middle class.

Of the poor whites, Powdermaker writes:

The purity of their [“American Stock”] lineage does not prevent them from being the most despised class in the South, shunned and scorned by both Whites and Negroes, and returning the dislike of each with bitter venom. . . . Many of the present Poor Whites are descended from middle-class farmers or artisans who were . . . ruined by slavery and depressed to a lower social level. [1993:20]

Unlike Powdermaker, Dollard describes the white middle class as made up of individuals rising from a preexisting and unexamined white lower class (1957:76–77). He divides the lower class into (1) those who are part of a permanent underclass and (2) those who have recently experienced economic decline but still hew to middle-class mores (1957:94–95). Also unlike Powdermaker, Dollard does not stress the presence of an aristocracy. Dollard's and Powdermaker's primary subjects are, however, largely middle-class whites and blacks and the complex relationships between these groups.

Powdermaker's views were in part shaped by her relationship with Greenville, Mississippi planter/aristocrat William Alexander (Will) Percy and the essayist David Cohn. Percy was her primary informant regarding Delta aristocracy (Powdermaker 1966:143, 190–194). Cohn, a native of Greenville, Mississippi and a member of its literary circle, helped craft the mythology of the Delta's benevolent, paternalistic aristocracy, taking Percy as its exemplar (Carter 1953:188; Cobb 1995; Cohn 1948:52). In contrast, Dollard was wary of the Percy-led aristocratic elite and preferred to remain distanced (Ferris 1975:6). Both, like Redfield in Tepotzlán (see Lewis 1951), accepted elite representations of whites as authoritative, not recognizing that the ideology and practices of white supremacy, while dominant, varied considerably by class, ethnicity, and religious background.<sup>1</sup>

Powdermaker and Dollard portray a largely “imagined” world of the Mississippi Delta. It is a world that remains intact as myth (Cobb 1992; Duncan 1999). In this account, the Delta consists of a small white aristocratic planter class; a relatively large white middle class; a small and virulently racist white lower class; and a majority black population. The black population is subdivided into a very

small professional and land-owning black middle class and a large, very poor, laboring lower class. Before World War II, this black laboring class was understood to be employed as sharecroppers on plantations; by the 1990s they are understood to be impoverished, lacking sustained employment (Duncan 1999).

In this schema, only the upper- and middle-class whites appear as historical agents who shape the future. However, in Cohn's account, which was not replicated in either Dollard or Powdermaker's works, demagogues from the "hills" sometimes stirred up the poor whites, who tried to wrest power from the Delta aristocrats (see Key 1949; Kirwan 1964). Dollard drew on psychology to view conflicts as the result of repressions and their consequences; Powdermaker based her work in Malinowski's institutional framework.

### **THE DELTA OF RECENT SCHOLARSHIP**

Dollard and Powdermaker captured the central and unavoidable aspect of the Delta and the South: the pervasive and oppressive nature of legal racial segregation and white supremacy. Powdermaker's study contributed important descriptions of the plantation system and of stratification within the African American community. Dollard, through the life histories he elicited from nine middle-class African Americans, exposed the not-so-hidden injuries of caste, particularly for middle-class and professional African Americans. It was through these life histories that he and Doob developed the theory of "frustration aggression," which became part of the "common sense" of popular culture (Moynihan 1988:vii). But their accounts distorted history and overlooked groups who were significant actors in the region.

The Delta varied significantly from the more eastern southern states. Indianola was not established until the 1880s, and most of what is now Sunflower County was cleared and settled toward the end of the 19th century (Hamilton 1992; Hemphill 1980). It had been a thinly populated frontier during the Civil War. Compared to the more eastern regions where slavery had deep roots, the Mississippi Delta of the 1930s was not representative of the South in general nor the cotton South in particular. First, although plantations predominated in the region's agriculture, planters shared the land with a large number of small farm owners, black and white, into the early 20th century. Its agriculture was industrial. Delta plantations were neither stagnant nor antimodern agrarian institutions. Second, the Delta's population was diverse, and immigrants played a significant role in the region's culture and economy. Third, unlike the myth of the South in general and the Delta in particular, race relations were continually being negotiated and white supremacy was achieved only with some difficulty. Fourth, the historiography of the more eastern regions does not easily apply to the lower Mississippi Delta. And, fifth, class and racial conflict coexisted.

### **Complex Structure of Agriculture**

In 1900, the historian Robert Brandfon noted, "Fully two-thirds [of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta] remained in virgin wilderness" (1967:142). The backcountry lands, cleared by a number of ambitious blacks and some whites, were often purchased by the people who cleared them (Willis 2000:58). In the early 1900s, although white planters owned a majority of the land, according to John Willis, "blacks comprised 66 percent of all Delta farm owners" (2000:188 n. 6).

The larger plantations were highly integrated enterprises: They had gins and compresses to process the cotton crop; sawmills to convert timber to lumber that was used on the plantation and exported; large herds of draft stock and acreage devoted to raising hay and other fodder for them; rail lines for both internal transport and as the primary means of communication with the national and international economy; and strong ties to global financial and marketing networks. A number of plantation owners were also financiers and merchants who had multiple local and extralocal business interests. Despite their aristocratic ancestry and style, Percy's father, LeRoy, and his business partners were exemplary of this class (Baker 1983; Barry 1997; Brandfon 1967; Cobb 1992: ch. 4; Percy 1941; Whayne 1993; Wyatt-Brown 1994).

### **Economically and Culturally Dynamic**

Powdermaker's and Dollard's historical accounts of the Delta portray a society that maintained a fundamental form and character as a biracial "cotton kingdom," in which black and white are fixed in enduring opposition of rich and poor. However, both the white and black sides of the color line were always in flux. The white population varied greatly in national, regional, and religious background and there was also a high degree of class mobility, particularly for those on the white side of the color line—a mobility as great as that found in the North. In their descriptions of Indianola, Dollard (1957:14) and Powdermaker (1993:7) note the presence of Italians, Jews, and Chinese, and they observe a Catholic Church. But they do not investigate the potential significance of these groups.

The frontier nature of the Delta and changes in the U.S. and world economy made the region as a whole attractive to immigrants until the 1930s; Sunflower County's population, both white and black, peaked in 1930. African Americans came from the hills and the "Old South" seeking opportunity (Brandfon 1968:56) and, from the 1880s through the 1920s, were recruited by Delta boosters (Cobb 1994:82–83; Doob 1937:453). As Dollard and Powdermaker undertook their studies, old-stock whites, like their black counterparts, continued to come from the worn-out farms in the southern hills, and redundant sons and daughters of merchants and storekeepers came seeking commercial opportunities in the developing region.<sup>2</sup> In the late 19th century, some planters recruited Italian agricultural labor, leaving significant colonies of Italians around the region (Berardinelli 1909; Quackenbos 1907; Whayne 1993). Other

Europeans entered through networks of *landsmen*—Jews from Alsace, Germany, and Austria-Hungary, later from Eastern Europe and Russia (Solomon 1972; Turitz and Turitz 1995). Syrians, Greeks, Germans, and other European immigrants, as well as Chinese immigrants, arrived seeking the abundant opportunities for work in the region (Hoover Lee and Freeda Lee, interview with authors, June 6, 2000; Loewen 1988; Quan 1982). In 1920, between 11 and 18 percent of the white population in the counties bordering the Mississippi River were foreign born or had parents who were foreign born; the proportion in the towns was higher (University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center 1998).

Although relatively small in numbers, the foreign immigrants provided crucial linkages between black and white for the developing capitalist economy. Often tied into international merchant networks through ethnic and kin ties, members of these immigrant groups were also able to tap sources of capital and other resources that were useful to the old-stock white U.S. elites and that promoted the general economic development of the region (Loewen 1988; Solomon 2001; Turitz and Turitz 1995; Willis 2000:85–87). Maureen Weinburg Lipnick, a descendent of an Austro-Hungarian Jewish family who settled in Indianola around 1870, told us that, at the time of Powdermaker's and Dollard's studies, every store on the main street in downtown Indianola was owned by Jews, except for two stores on a side street (interview with authors, June 22, 2003).<sup>3</sup> Several Jewish families, including Lipnik's parents, played key roles as bankers, founders of the chamber of commerce, and elected officials. Jews owned many of the commercial and wholesale establishments; they were cotton factors, gin owners, and planters (Ben Lamensdorf, interview with authors, July 28, 2003; Sam Angel, interview with authors, July 29, 2003). Unaware of the acceptance of Jews among Indianola's elite, Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier—Powdermaker's African American advisors at the traditionally black Fisk University where she visited prior to her Indianola work—had counseled her to disguise her identity by claiming to be Methodist. According to Powdermaker, they "had strongly advised me not to reveal my Jewish background to Negroes or whites in a Bible belt community" (1966:145). "For both groups there, they explained, the Jews were still 'Christ killers,' and the few Jews these people knew were small shopkeepers of low status" (1966:145).

But of all the groups, the "poor whites" were most misrepresented, particularly regarding their attitudes toward African Americans. Dollard and Powdermaker accepted middle- and upper-class whites' characterizations of poor whites as virulent racists, based on almost no firsthand knowledge. Powdermaker (1988:20), in particular, viewed poor whites as seething with resentments against blacks, a view shared by most middle- and upper-class whites. Dollard (1957:332) attributes white caste aggression to lower- and middle-class whites, although he notes that the African Americans he interviewed "say that their real antagonists are not the whites of the highest or lowest status" but,

rather, what they called middle-class "strainers" (1957:77). A number of Dollard's African American informants "believed ... that the lower-class whites sympathized with the Negroes" (1957:77). Doob found that "poor white prejudice against the Negro ... is not strong" (1937:471), in contrast to their intense hostility toward the planters (1937:42). Memoirs, such as black civil rights activist Aaron Henry's (1995), our interviews, and the successful cross-race organizing by the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) indicate that poor whites were far less antagonistic toward their black neighbors than middle- and upper-class whites. In fact, alliances between poor whites and blacks often occurred and threatened white elite power.

### **White Supremacy as an Achieved Order**

Dollard and Powdermaker write with some sensitivity to variations within the black community, but their lack of historical knowledge largely misses the dynamic transformations of relations between white and black (Cobb 1992; Willis 2000; see also Allen 1994). Dollard notes that "Southerntown" is referred to as a "good town" (1957:8) by blacks and observed that "the Negroes in Southerntown were formerly much better off than they are now, owned more land, even ran business institutions in the town, and took especial pride in their bank" (1937:8). He does not, however, trace the reasons for Indianola's relatively benign conditions nor inquire into the social and political dimensions of these changes. His short five-month stay and his general unfamiliarity with the South may explain in part his superficial treatment of this important observation. But we now know that race relations were both in flux and contested. The populist "reforms" of the 1890 Mississippi Constitution attempted to strip African Americans of all civil rights, especially the right to vote (Cobb 1992; Key 1949; Kirwan 1964). Dollard and Powdermaker both note the importance of voting in terms of its practical consequences and in terms of the dignity it confers. However, neither explores the degree to which blacks carried memories of their political enfranchisement and subsequent disenfranchisement less than 40 years earlier. Nor does either note that African Americans in the Delta maintained limited and fragile access to the federal government into the 20th century through the Republican Party.

As noted by both Powdermaker and Dollard, property ownership also conferred a degree of autonomy from white domination recognized by both white and black. Powdermaker (1993:95–98) documents a community of black landowners formed after the Civil War; we also learned of a number of others (see also Hemphill 1980:413–415). In addition, both note black landowning farmers, whom they categorize as part of the middle class. Many of the early civil rights activists in Mississippi owned land, and a number of African American individuals who achieved economic and political success in the post–Civil Rights era came from these landed families (Dittmer 1994:253, 256; Duncan 1999:25, 33; Sewell and Dwight 1984).

Whites had to overcome deep factional and class differences among themselves to achieve unity sufficient to reinstall their race-based power (Key 1949; Kirwan 1964; Percy 1941; Willis 2000). By the early 20th century, this had been largely accomplished, particularly when Democrats held the executive branch of the federal government, precluding the threat that Republican patronage would disrupt white Democratic unity. Dollard and Powdernaker undertook their 1930s studies at what, looking back, can be seen to have been the nadir of African American political power and the full consolidation of white power under a relatively united, if economically embattled, elite.

### ***Misreading the Local as the Universal South***

Both Dollard and Powdernaker uncritically apply historical reconstructions and contemporary observations made about other, more eastern regions to their studies of Indianola. The agricultural depression following World War I ruined small farmers throughout the nation and the effects were even more severe in the South, compounded by the boll weevil and, in the Delta, the 1927 Mississippi River flood. Many small farmers, both black and white, migrated to industrial jobs in urban centers in what has been termed "The Great Migration." Those who stayed were transformed into renters, sharecroppers, and laborers, often on land they had previously owned. In the Delta, however, plantations expanded dramatically, both through acquiring the land of ruined farmers and through clearing and draining new land. Unlike the situation of the more eastern regions of the South, the Delta attracted large numbers of agricultural workers, both black and white. In Sunflower County, between 1900 and 1930, the population more than quadrupled, with the white population increasing fivefold—from 4,006 in 1900 to 19,555 in 1930. The black population increased from 16,076 to 66,201 during the same period (University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center 1998).<sup>4</sup> Attesting to the massive in-migration of poor whites, Dollard's colleague Doob, who undertook a brief, one-month study of poor whites in 1934, observed, "Of the seventy-five odd poor whites who furnished fragments of vital statistics, only one was actually born in Southern-town" (1937:456). However, neither Dollard nor Powdernaker made a systematic inquiry of African American origins. Powdernaker (1993:56–60) provides brief biographies of a number of African Americans that attest to their birth in other regions, but she did not make analytic significance of their relatively recent migration to Sunflower County.

The Great Depression shattered the remaining agricultural markets. The new Roosevelt Administration passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) in 1933. One of the AAA's provisions paid planters to reduce their crop acreage in return for cash payments from the federal government. The results were immediate and calamitous for the sharecroppers. Most planters kept the payments to themselves, retired some farmland, and evicted the redundant croppers. Because the planters viewed poor whites as more difficult

to manage than African Americans, they were reluctant to hire them as sharecroppers and laborers (A. J. Cowart, interview with authors, July 21, 2003; Dollard 1957:76; Robert "Tut" Patterson, interviews with authors, July 1 and July 18, 2003; Powdernaker 1993:81). As Doob observed, they "preferred to retain the Negroes and let the poor whites go" (1937:453). With sharecroppers, payment was not directly an issue; management was. White sharecroppers would not take direction nor accept planter financial accounts as readily as did blacks. It was therefore easier to cheat African Americans. As day laborers, blacks and whites were paid the same. Planters viewed blacks as more docile and susceptible to paternalistic control. They rarely established the same paternalistic relationships with whites. By August 1934, Sunflower County planters had received benefit payments of \$275,875. At the same time, between May 1933 and May 1934, county relief expenditures rose dramatically from \$5,668 to \$32,325 (Embree 1936:149), largely to help poor whites (Doob 1937:455).

The destitution sharecroppers faced was widespread throughout the South, though it arrived later in the rich Delta region. Many of the evicted families faced starvation. The problem of widespread and increasing tenancy loomed large in New Deal thinking (Baldwin 1968; Embree 1936; Raper 1943, 1968). In our interviews of white families, we were told of infant siblings who had died from malnutrition (Maggie Monteith, interview with authors, July 12, 2003). Others recalled, as children, of working while being so hungry that they nearly fainted (William French, interview with authors, July 14, 2003). Doob saw actual starvation among the poor whites who importuned him to get them extra rations of yeast to prevent malnutrition and pellagra, but Dollard is virtually silent concerning widespread misery of whites or blacks. Powdernaker noted the presence of large numbers of people on relief and some of the political questions involved (Powdernaker 1993:136–137) but does not indicate that whites received more relief than blacks because their situation was more precarious.

### ***Class Conflict***

Class alliances between poor whites and blacks suddenly appeared as the primary threat to white supremacy. In Arkansas, Mississippi, and Missouri in 1935, when the planters cut their sharecroppers out of the AAA payments, white sharecroppers were affected disproportionately. They reacted angrily against the planters, feeling the sting of caste rejection as well as real economic desperation. They responded by seeking alliances with black sharecroppers, organizing in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) (Grubbs 1971; Kirby 1987; Mitchell 1979). At this time, Dollard was in Indianola and Powdernaker was writing up her research at Yale. The threat of labor agitation was so pervasive that Dollard was suspected of being a union organizer (Dollard 1957:10; Ferris 1975). A crisis unfolded that threatened the planter class with the possibility of unionization in the fields as well as defeat at the ballot box, in

which poor whites were becoming passionate voters and supporters of the New Deal.

As demonstrated by their response to the AAA, the white governing class also welcomed the New Deal. Newly elected Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo was one of Roosevelt's strongest supporters. Bilbo was a virulent racist who crafted a political program that appealed to poor whites with aid and progressive legislation, wrapped inside a message of white supremacy that created caste solidarity (Morgan 1985). When Franklin Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act on August 14, 1935, towering over him was the Senior Senator from Mississippi, the white-suited, cigar-smoking Pat Harrison (Social Security Administration n.d.). Doob (1937:473) recalled being asked by poor whites in Indianola about the provisions of the bill immediately after it was signed.

Responding to the STFU, the federal government, through the Farm Security Administration (FSA), stepped in, creating a massive series of farm and housing projects for dispossessed farm workers. In Mississippi, the FSA established resettlement and tenant purchase projects on failed plantations. All these projects were segregated, and whites were given disproportionate access (Baldwin 1968:195–199). White unity across the class divide was fragile; ironically, given progressive assessments that the government activism of the New Deal extended opportunity to the dispossessed, New Deal programs actually helped to strengthen white caste solidarity that held until the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

### **Why the Discrepancies?**

The omissions in these two studies result from a specific set of causes: Some are specific to their site of research but other deeper causes derived from a research agenda that was linked to discernable interests. At least five factors limited Dollard's and Powdermaker's ability to collect and analyze data in a way that would have been truer to the dynamics of the local situation: (1) their racial identity, (2) their lack of systematic study of the white population, (3) their definition of class, (4) their naïve use of history, and (5) their neglect of economics for psychology.

Dollard and Powdermaker faced certain restrictions because of the codes that maintained racial segregation. They had to live in the white community, in which they informally gained knowledge through interaction with their peers—members of the middle and upper classes. Powdermaker (1993:xlv) argues that interviewing poor whites would have cost her access to both African Americans and middle-class whites; Dollard actively chose not to engage them (Dollard 1957:xv).

Their theoretical frameworks and research problems constrained their analyses. Because they focused on the African American community, they did not undertake systematic examination of the white side of the color line. However, they created accounts that appeared to be comprehensive, even as they obscured the existence of eth-

nic whites (and Chinese) and misrepresented poor and working-class whites.

Despite their theoretical differences, they both worked within a functionalist paradigm that, particularly when conjoined with psychology, was harnessed to an agenda that stressed acculturation and accommodation. Powdermaker used Donald Young's definition of *class* (1993:14), spelled out in a memorandum to the Social Science Research Council; meanwhile Dollard based his definitions on W. Lloyd Warner's work (Dollard 1957:61, 74). Both defined *class* as differing normative orders ranked on a status hierarchy, rather than as sets of economic relationships. They saw racial/caste relations as inherently conflict ridden; *class*, in contrast, referred to relatively insular normative orders.

They used history schematically and naively, translating the experience of slavery directly to the 1930s. They do not make analytic reference to the specifics of the Delta, which, as we sketched earlier, was largely unique in the cotton South.

Finally, Doob, the only researcher who dealt with class conflict, transformed it into a psychological problem based in the frustration experienced by "rednecks." This frustration, he averred, rises from their feeling of dependence on the planters, with an attendant resentment and hostility, and leads to potential aggression against blacks (Doob 1937:471, 474–477). Dollard along with Doob and others developed the "frustration-aggression" theory based in part on their studies in the Delta.

Their theoretical frameworks created analyses quite at odds with the active black and white union organizing of the STFU. Dollard's and Powdermaker's focus on the white middle and upper classes as the only salient contrast to class-divided blacks is therefore quite remarkable.

### **THE SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT**

Dollard and Powdermaker did not work within an institutional vacuum. Their research agenda was established by a network of scholars, foundations, and academic institutions, creating a program to which they, as junior scholars, had to conform.

The theoretical frameworks that informed both Powdermaker and Dollard—Malinowski's functionalism in the case of Powdermaker, and Freudian psychology in the case of Dollard—developed through a dense network of intellectual, financial, and institutional relationships. When Powdermaker returned from her first field experience, a web of personal relationships—including her professor Malinowski, Robert Lowie, Alfred Kroeber, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and Clark Wissler—moved her from Lesu, a village in New Ireland, Melanesia, to the Yale IHR. They further helped her obtain a National Research Council fellowship to write up her Lesu research (Powdermaker 1966:123–125). Edward Sapir, chair of the Yale Department of Anthropology, then backed her proposal to the SSRC for a study of Negro life in Mississippi (Powdermaker 1966:131–135). Powdermaker was part the intellectual community that linked

Malinowski's and Radcliffe-Brown's functionalisms with U.S. anthropological interest in culture and personality—a linkage most firmly conjoined in Edward Sapir's seminars at the Yale Institute of Social Psychology: "The Impact of Culture on Personality."

Dollard had undergone psychoanalysis in 1931 while on a Rockefeller Foundation postdoctoral fellowship at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute (Rose n.d.). His academic home was the Yale Institute of Human Relations, where Powdernaker introduced him to Indianola and he indicated he ran the seminar on "The Impact of Culture on Personality" with Sapir (Dollard 1957:vii). As Dollard was writing up his research, the Rockefeller-funded team of Warner and the Natchez group developed a theoretical paradigm describing racial differences as caste differences in their book *Deep South*. Dollard (Ferris 1975:2) later acknowledged his debt to the Warner team (Davis et al. 1941; Patterson 2001:89). The Rockefeller and associated Foundations promoted both basic and applied sciences, seeking to develop an effective human science that united all the social sciences with human-oriented biological sciences, and they exerted pressure on the institutions they funded to achieve results (May 1970; Patterson 2001; Stanfield 1982, 1985). The SSRC, established by the Rockefeller philanthropies in 1923 (Patterson 2001:72), had a major programmatic focus both on theoretical issues of personality and culture and also on pragmatic aspects of "acculturation" (Powdernaker 1966:131–133; Patterson 2001:86–87). Topically, the SSRC had early taken "the Negro problem" as a central focus, with the associated issues of internal migration and race relations (Sibley 2001:165, 175; see also Worcester 2001). The foundations' concern with "acculturation" was rooted in the "problem" of assimilating largely non-Protestant immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as African Americans from the South. For the first time, the South's "Negro problem" was a national problem (Baker 1998; Patterson 2001:74, 86–88; Stanfield 1985). They were also concerned with rural poverty and were important in formulating New Deal policies (Baldwin 1968; Stanfield 1985:72, 196–197). The focus on "acculturation" elided issues of power and associated political conflict, emphasizing the psychological and educational aspects of social mobility.

The Yale IHR was largely underwritten by the Rockefeller Foundation, as was the traditionally black Fisk University sociology department, where Powdernaker consulted with sociologists Johnson and Frazier before going to Indianola. Powdernaker entered Mississippi through the Rockefeller Foundation Representative for Negro education and the African American Jeanes Fund supervisor in Sunflower County (Powdernaker 1966:136–137).

## CONSEQUENCES

Dollard's and Powdernaker's analyses were congruent with many who helped shape New Deal programs. Dollard's account, in particular, provided a putatively scientific psy-

chology that focused on racial attitudes rather than the arrangements of power. White liberals and moderates, and New Deal agencies and associated foundation- and church-sponsored programs, accommodated white supremacy. While they attempted to ameliorate its worst consequences (Raper 1943; Stanfield 1982, 1985), the New Deal rural programs had the effect of reconsolidating the class-fractured white racial solidarity.

With the threat of black-white unionization looming, the Roosevelt Administration—having enlisted the cooperation of local white elites—began buying up failed plantations and resettling the impoverished croppers. The Farm Security Administration's (FSA) Tenant Purchase Program and other programs subdivided failed plantations and sold them on easy terms to sharecroppers and renters (Baldwin 1968:195–199). These FSA programs were racially segregated, separating black and white people who had lived intermingled as sharecroppers. That residential segregation was durable, creating housing patterns that remain inscribed in the 21st-century landscape of the Delta. There were many such projects in the Delta. While some plantations were subdivided and sold to African Americans, poor whites were settled on both more and larger projects.<sup>5</sup> The program bailed out banks, insurance companies, and others who held the mortgages on the failed plantations. It also co-opted the most ambitious and capable black and white sharecroppers by giving them land and a house, defusing the threat of a class-based, cross-race alliance opposed to the planters.

Despite Dollard's and Powdernaker's implicit critiques of white supremacy, their analysis of Southern society converged with that of moderate and "progressive" Southern elites—in part because they relied so heavily on elite testimony. The *class* nature of both poor white and black sharecroppers' lives is overwritten by the singular focus on *caste*. White upward mobility becomes unremarkable, a function of the natural workings of the system (or of *acculturation*, to use the newly coined anthropological term); meanwhile, the failure of blacks to rise must be explained. Dollard and Powdernaker do so by reference to the legacy of slavery and white prejudice and to the lack of middle-class behaviors—*acculturation* in Powdernaker's terminology, *repressions* in Dollard's. This reading of race and class allowed white elites, when their position was secure, to favor African Americans for their own advantage and to marginalize poor whites as laborers. It simultaneously provided the means with which to reinstitute racial solidarity if poor blacks and whites again joined forces, as they had when the New Deal agricultural programs broke the bonds between sharecroppers and planters.

Neither Dollard nor Powdernaker intended their work to be read as supporting white supremacy: Both treated their African American subjects with respect and skill, both captured the enforced nature of black inequality, and both noted the importance of voting, which was denied to African Americans. However, by reproducing white elite interpretations of poor whites and portraying the dominant

white racial orthodoxy as universally accepted by Southern middle- and upper-class whites, they inadvertently contributed to a view that the Southern white population was utterly united in its intransigence to African American demands for civil rights. Dollard's work, in particular, was widely read by participants in the civil rights movement. Had civil rights activists viewed the white community as differentiated in their racial views by class, ethnicity, and religion, they might have developed significantly different strategies.

The accounts created by Powdernaker and Dollard continue to be quoted as foundational studies. However, in ways that no scholar can control, their work moved into intellectual arenas in which caste and class are conflated. This conflation continues. For example, Cynthia Duncan's (1999) recent work exemplifies this intellectual transformation. Following Putnam's (1993) thesis concerning the importance of a democratic civic culture in economic development, Duncan argues that the Delta's acute poverty results from its rigidly hierarchical, class-divided social structure. Invoking Dollard and Powdernaker, as well as interviews with local whites and blacks, she paints a picture of "Dahlia" as a world in which virtually all whites are rich—a "very wealthy planter elite and the comfortable, upper-middle-class whites"—and almost all blacks—"the have-nots"—are poor (Duncan 1999:74). The actual figures on income distribution reveal a quite different story. African Americans are disproportionately poor, but in 1990, when she undertook her study, nearly 21 percent of white households in Sunflower County earned less than \$10,000 a year and nearly one-third were below \$15,000 (Center for Population Studies 1990). Fully 50 percent of white households fell below \$25,000, an income that cannot generally be considered "comfortable upper middle class." Duncan leaves fully half the white population outside of her analysis.

### THE RETURN TO NEW HAVEN

Powdernaker returned to the Institute of Human Relations<sup>6</sup> in the winter of 1934 and began writing up her material from the Delta. On February 5, 1934, she submitted a "Report of Negro Study" to the IHR that briefly reviewed the work in Mississippi and contained a "plan for continuation of the Negro research for the next academic year." What followed was a case of academic infighting that delayed the publication of Powdernaker's study until 1939, while Dollard's *Caste and Class* appeared in 1937, published by the IHR and the Yale University Press.

In January of 1936, Powdernaker submitted the manuscript of her Indianola project to IHR Director Mark A. May "at Dr. Sapir's suggestion" (1936a). By this time, Doob had become the acting director of publications at the Institute. May gave Doob the manuscript and Doob (1936) made his "confidential report" to May on January 16, writing: "I shall refrain from emphasizing my own psychological point of view and the theoretical position of John [Dollard] with which I am acquainted; and I shall not employ too

frequently my experience in Indianola as a basis for criticism." What followed was a criticism so harsh and relentless that it amounted to an utter dismissal of Powdernaker's work stylistically, substantively, methodologically, and theoretically.

Doob called the work "a rather amateurish first-draft...her style...is atrocious....How does she know that her colored ladies were revealing their 'private' attitudes and not their 'public' ones?...It is nothing more than a badly told story of a small town in the South...a collection of old wives tales." He finished his critique by suggesting that the manuscript be cut to a monograph: "Then it will still remain trite and unoriginal, but it will fill the mores of the anthropological world and perhaps be published therein."

Sapir, Yale's Sterling Professor of Anthropology, wrote his dramatically different assessment on February 6, 1936: "This seems to me to be first rate book. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that it should be published. I cannot honestly say that I know of anything that has been published by the Institute of Human Relations that seems to exceed it in value" (1936a). He went on, "the work seems notable for its clarity and admirable adherence to factual material." He rated the book "higher than I do Middletown." On February 13, 1936, Sapir (1936b) wrote that the manuscript would "require a good bit of polishing" but continued his enthusiastic support for its publication.

Despite Sapir's praise, May (1936a) declined Powdernaker's manuscript. On April 27, 1936, May (1936b) refused to renew Powdernaker's research position at Yale beyond the 1936–37 academic year. For the next two years, Powdernaker struggled to get the book published at the IHR. After a second rejection, she accepted May's (1937) offer to hire an editor, Mrs. George Herzog (Powdernaker 1937), submitting it for the third time on March 9, 1938 (Powdernaker 1938a). By this time, Powdernaker was teaching at Queens College by day and working at the New School in Manhattan by night (Powdernaker 1938b). However, despite the assistance of Herzog, Yale again rejected the book.

Finally, Powdernaker (1938c) wrote to May on September 26, 1938: "I am glad to report that my Mississippi Book, 'After Freedom—A Cultural Study In the Deep South,' has been accepted for publication by Viking Press." May (1938a) responded by asking for the acknowledgment section of the book before it was published. He then wrote:

I have requested one change in the last line of the first paragraph instead of saying 'when I was a research associate on the staff' I suggest that you say 'when I was a member of the staff' for the reason that your title was not that of 'Research Associate' byt [sic] 'Associate in Anthropology' for the year 1935–36 and 'Associate in Sociology' for the year 1937–37. Under the rules of the University an 'Associate' in a department is not the same thing as a 'Research Associate'. This may sound like hair splitting, but in scientific publications strict accuracy is required. [May 1938b]

Dollard's (1937) book on *Caste and Class* was released to both enthusiastic praise and criticism in academic journals. Peter Odegard wrote that it "is a magnificent study"

that is "a portrait not alone of a Southern town but of the South" (1938:982). T. Lynn Smith, however, was skeptical of Dollard's extrapolations from his nine life histories:

A single observation calls forth a torrent of highly speculative premises, hypotheses, and conclusions, together with not a few corollaries, explanations and applications. If representative of the discipline as a whole, Dollard's work would definitely prove Poincaire's thesis that sociology is the science which has the fewest facts and the most theories. [1937:797]

Smith twinned his review with Arthur Raper's *Preface to Peasantry*, a study that he admired deeply for its "slow, laborious and painstaking method" (1937:797). Raper had spent nine years on his study in contrast with Dollard's five months. W. E. B. Du Bois, in a review entitled "Southern Trauma" in Lillian Smith's *North Georgia Review*, found that Dollard's psychoanalytic study "is one of the most interesting and penetrating that has been made concerning the South and is marked by courage and real insight" (Du Bois 1972:271). He noted, however, the lack of sociological foundation—a function, he said, of Dollard's material being rushed to publication before Powdermaker, who took him to Indianola as a coworker, published her findings. Knowledgeable of the study's site and circumstances, he critiques the book's generalizations "built on a few interviews with local Negroes" that tend "to become statements concerning the Negro race in Mississippi, the South, the United States, the world" (1972:271). Du Bois mentioned the name of the town that was studied, distressing Dollard. The book provoked a firestorm of criticism among the whites in Indianola. In a letter to Anne May Bennett, Dollard (1937) was deeply wounded and worried that his informants might be made to suffer on his behalf.

Powdermaker's 1939 book *After Freedom* (1993) received more uniformly positive reviews by, among others, Du Bois (1939) and Robert Park (1940).

Doob went on to a splendid career in psychology, becoming an "expert in using psychological principals to help people to promote peace in conflict-laden areas" (Yale Bulletin and Calendar 2000). He retired as Sterling Professor of Psychology at Yale.

## CONCLUSION

The Mississippi Delta today is a vast farming region, shorn of the sharecroppers' shacks that were once a ubiquitous presence upon the land, its population shrunk nearly one-third from its 1940s apex. By 2004, the people of Indianola and Sunflower County already had been represented in the United States Congress by an African American for more than a decade; their city and county government and other local elected offices are dominated by African Americans; and those whites who remain in office generally do so with substantial black support. In their respective studies, both Dollard and Powdermaker had stressed the importance of voting and the deep injustice of the enforced caste division. However, their analysis—particularly Dollard's—failed

to reveal the strains within the white caste that would force it to surrender its exclusive prerogatives. Instead, Dollard builds a case for a seamless white intransigence. But this is not what occurred. Unlike the Redeemers of the post-Reconstruction era and the white lynch mobs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, white elites in the 1950s and 1960s did not organize and lead paramilitary groups to subdue African Americans, nor did they incite pogroms. Instead, those members of the elite who were committed to white supremacy sought to use the levers of the legal system and economic terror on black and white supporters of desegregation (McMillen 1994; Robert "Tut" Patterson, interviews with authors, July 1 and July 18, 2003). Perhaps significantly, the most successful organization promoting "massive resistance" to desegregation, the (white) Citizens Councils, was formed in Indianola, a relatively "good" town for blacks in the 1930s. When white resistance failed, a founder and Executive Secretary of the Citizens Councils, Robert "Tut" Patterson, told us, they grudgingly accepted the new order, attempting instead to carve out private arenas of white exclusivity—particularly white private schools (interviews with authors, July 1 and July 18, 2003).

Most of the extralegal violence during the civil rights era was carried out in secret, by individuals or very small groups, and violence sponsored by governments was sporadic and often contested within the elite white community (Lee 1999:48–54). Institutionally, most of the mainline white Christian churches advocated conforming to Supreme Court rulings and federal laws. Many went much further in supporting universal civil rights—as did Jews and Catholics, especially after the 1962–65 Second Vatican Council of Bishops (Vatican II). For both African Americans and whites, religion became a key arena for challenging white supremacy. White resistance was strong, but it was tempered not only by federal power but also by disensus within the white elites and a far more heterogeneous white population than is generally discerned (Chappell 1994, 2004; Marsh 1997; Newman 2001). White ethnic minorities such as Italian Americans, who were not part of the town elite, appear to have negotiated the post-World War II transformation of the region's political economy in a considerably different way from the elites upon whom Dollard, Powdermaker, and even Duncan relied upon as primary informants.<sup>7</sup>

The two works, and the schools of thought that they represented, had significantly different impacts. Dollard continued his psychological career with all the prestige of Yale supporting him; his book was reissued in 1949 and again in 1957 when the nation was focused on race as the primary division in U.S. society, and psychology was gaining widespread, popular acceptance. Powdermaker found an academic home in the newly created Queens College, where she built the combined departments of anthropology and sociology. In many ways, Powdermaker was ahead of her time—such as in her attempt to incorporate history into functionalist frameworks, as well as her concern with complex societies and interest in media. Because of this,

Powdermaker's work fell out of the social scientific and anthropological mainstreams. Powdermaker's *After Freedom*—published two years after Dollard's *Caste and Class*—was not reissued until 1968, and then as part of the Atheneum Series, "Studies on American Negro Life." Dollard's psychologically based work helped define the nature of race relations in the South for generations of college students and policy makers. It contributed to a stereotyping of poor whites as vicious and unredeemable racists that has been reenacted in countless films and television shows. Daniel Moynihan, in his foreword to the 1988 edition, writes: "It was a work of epic consequences.... It was John Dollard's singular fate to have had his principal ideas so widely accepted in his own lifetime that by the time of his death they were part of our general understanding of the world and had ceased altogether to be associated with the man who first presented them to us."<sup>8</sup> He and Powdermaker captured something crucial, both in the black experience of the white United States and of the white experience of racial superiority.

But they missed something crucial as well. They misconstrued the salience of class, which at the time was shaping public policy as an economic rather than normative ordering. And they obscured the variability of attitudes among white people and the achieved nature of white supremacy. It is always risky to speculate on counterfactual histories, but a half century after the abolition of legal segregation a new racial separation has developed, particularly in the public schools and in housing, as well as in state- and foundation-funded programs that aim to remedy the legacy of white supremacy. An analysis of the South that included poor whites, and attended to variability among the governing class of whites, might have yielded significantly different programs.

Our research indicates that the people overlooked and unproblematised in the dominant accounts of the Delta have, in fact, been among the most dynamic elements in that society in the post–World War II era. Dollard and Powdermaker, and the institutions that funded and supported them, were primarily concerned with the "Negro question." They failed to see the people who do not fit into the dominant narrative: whites and blacks who made their living outside of the moral universe of the plantation economy or who reached across the caste divide to create relationships based on class and faith. Their accounts do not undermine David Cohn's romance of the aristocratic regime or Duncan's dystopian vision of the racially bifurcated social order that carves the world into eternal, irreconcilable opposites enshrined in myth. The Delta's real history is particular, situated, created by actors whose narratives are more often told through the acts of daily life and intimate remembrance. Necessarily contingent and contested, this history remains to be written.

**JANE ADAMS** Department of Anthropology, Department of History, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4502

**D. GORTON** Documentary filmmaker, independent scholar

## NOTES

*Acknowledgments.* Research for this article was supported by grants from the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the Southern Illinois University Graduate School. We thank the numerous individuals and families who have allowed us to interview them, generally on film, and who have introduced us to family members and associates. Danelle Moon at the Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives provided invaluable assistance. We gratefully acknowledge the original and insightful research by Dr. Anne C. Rose, whose work pointed out the significance of and drew our attention to the correspondence concerning Powdermaker's and Dollard's roles at the Yale Institute of Human Relations in the Yale University archives. We also greatly appreciate information and insights provided by Constance R. Sutton, and Sydel Silverman, and the helpful readings by anonymous AA reviewers and the AA editors. The title, "Southern Trauma," is taken from a review of *Caste and Class* by W. E. B. Du Bois (1972).

1. Leonard Doob's (1937) one-month study of "Poor Whites" has some careful and accurate portrayals of the working-class whites whom he observed but is deeply tinged with condescension and a heavy-handed application of psychoanalytic categories.
2. Native-born whites from outside the Delta generally came from two sources: ruined farmers who commonly came into the Delta as sharecroppers and laborers ("poor whites") and the noninheriting children of shopkeepers and professionals who established businesses, became managers of plantations, or entered professions, forming the middle class.
3. Powdermaker (1993:9) notes some Jewish and Italian businesses.
4. Raper writes about an emigrant agent in Georgia, who sent thousands of "surplus" Negroes" (1943:132–135) to the Delta in winter 1899–1900. Georgia planters stopped him.
5. We conducted a preliminary survey of Farm Security Administration (FSA) projects in six Mississippi Delta counties, finding 105 properties platted into 1,087 units (chancery clerk's offices, map books). In 1945, only 35 percent of Tenant Purchase borrowers in Mississippi were African American, although they were 75 percent of the tenant population (Baldwin 1968).
6. We first became aware of the Institute of Human Relations and Dollard files in the Yale University Archives through the original research by Anne C. Rose (n.d.); following her research, we were able to locate the files in the IHR Archives used in this section. Our focus and interpretation differ from hers in significant respects.
7. Regarding the transformation of the region, see Daniel 1980, 2000; Fite 1984; Holly 2000; Kirby 1987.
8. Dollard influenced Margaret Mead's work. In a sketch of her intellectual genealogy, she diagrammed Dollard in the same generational line as herself, her then-husband Gregory Bateson, and Geoffrey Gorer (LOC 2002).

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