

# Reviews

## Casinos y poder

### El caso del Kickapoo Lucky Eagle Casino

(Casinos and Power

The Case of the Kickapoo Lucky Eagle Casino)

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The study of the indigenous peoples of our hemisphere is a current issue because theirs are problems the national states have not been capable of resolving, and this remits us to a necessary starting point: history. Without a doubt, a temporal perspective is absolutely necessary for knowing the roots of a cultural identity. However, the problem becomes more complex when we look at contemporary groups, immersed in capitalist, globalized societies.

This is where the specificity of Elisabeth Mager's research about a very particular, little-studied tribe, the Kickapoo, lies. It is a group that comes from the Great Lakes region and which, from the nineteenth century on, has maintained a presence in Kansas and Oklahoma. It settled in Texas and, after the 1847 war, requested permission from the Mexican government to colonize part of Coahuila. It is a small tribe scattered over a large area that became bi-national. This made it possible for it to experience and cross the northern border constantly, participating in different kinds of labor markets, societies, and cultural references. These characteristics became more marked with globalization, when the tribe became more involved in relations of greater linkages, simultaneity, and consumption.

In this new book about the Kickapoo, Mager concentrates on the group located on the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas (KTTT) reservation, in Maverick County, immersed in the fight for economic control over the Lucky Eagle Casino, established in 1996. This struggle has spawned political factions and rifts in the group.



Power disputes in native communities are more evident since the United States authorized the establishment of casinos on Indian reservations. Together with the aim of effectively implementing a cultural assimilation policy, this has strengthened the finances of tribes settled on their own land, in addition to giving them visibility and social and political power by positioning them in the public sphere. We should remember that Indian reservations are territories with limited sovereignty, and native tribes can, among other things, open casinos and gambling halls, prohibited elsewhere.

Using historical and ethnographic data and theoretical reflections, the research project clarifies the group's current situation, created by the tension between two different processes: assimilation and social integration into broader U.S. society. The former involves the acceptance and appropriation of a new culture, achieving social recognition by negating the original culture; the latter includes the incorporation of some cultural traits of mainstream society, but preserving the tribe's own identity.

Setting up casinos on U.S. tribal lands is seen as a way of giving them privileges. However, two things should be taken into account. The first is that the economic improvements experienced by reservation inhabitants do not nullify

the reservations, which the United States used to try to solve “the Indian problem” by confining these people to a specific reserved territory; in addition, the economic benefits are not distributed equitably. The second is that the profound social differentiation and economic asymmetries have created internal conflicts, favoring the emergence of different social classes.

Mager’s description of how Kickapoo tribal power has been constituted is so complete that it breaks with classical ethnographies that present indigenous people as static and homogeneous. Undoubtedly, these are groups with a common identity and past, a shared history, language, and cultural and natural heritages that are very important to document. However, inside these communities there are also rivalry, conflicts of interests, and competition. In this struggle, the dominant groups are constantly at risk of losing power to other factions that become empowered in accordance with economic, political, or ideological interests. These risks of division weaken

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the tribe, its identity, consciousness, and ethnic resistance, and expose it to dangers from mainstream society. Political adversity is expressed in social disarticulation, exposing its members to individualism and consumerist selfishness typical of capitalist societies, which divides peoples and conglomerates.

This people has gone through worse moments. They had to face a policy of physical extermination and ideological persecution, and then a policy of cultural assimilation in the form of a government “civilizing” policy. This went on until they were able to find a way to forge a self-determination strategy that has not only kept the Kickapoo united as a nation and given them the strength to overcome internal divisions, but has also integrated them into the dominant society despite its defects. Down through its history, it is possible to see this dual character in the Kickapoo identity: atavism and the cultural heritage of U.S. society and resistance to alien

cultural schema. An obvious concern in Mager’s study is that the group’s socio-economic conditions weaken that ethnic resistance, that strong response to cultural influences that undermine the group, community fiber.

Other fundamental indicators exist for observing contemporary ethnic identities. At the end of the day, a tribal nation like this one has gone through certain changes: they lost their religious cohesion and traditional power structures; their current government and authorities manage both federal funds channeled into the reservation and casino earnings. In this sense, the book concludes, the casinos are more like corporations with directors who presumably have the mission of defending tribal interests, when their interests are actually business interests. For this reason, both ceremonies and expressions of religion and kinship become mere representations of culture. Therefore, what is suggested is that with this “win-win” policy, the state is the main beneficiary: U.S. first peoples become businesspeople of the system and have put to one side ethnic resistance; and at the same time, the self-determination policy frees up the government from its financial obligations to the tribes.

This situation is becoming more and more chaotic and hostile for the youth of the tribe, who must be educated in English-speaking schools to be able to work in the casinos. There, they receive an education according to mainstream U.S. culture, centered on consumerism and exacerbated individualism. Thus, these young people are losing their cultural heritage, moving into syncretic labyrinths where different and sometimes contradictory beliefs are reconciled, pushing them into the complicated world of drug addiction, alcoholism, and crime as a result of their cultural confusion and economic inequality.

According to Mager, power structures, the driving force behind the disarticulation of indigenous organizations, can be characterized not only as the use of economic mechanisms based on political and military power, but also as instruments of ideological orientation. This conclusion leads us to rethink the nature of the ethnic question, cultural resistance, and the self-determination of contemporary indigenous peoples, all questions influenced by the contexts in which they are immersed, that is the national states that, nevertheless, define themselves as multicultural. ■■

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