
Raymond I. Orr. *Reservation Politics: Historical Trauma, Economic Development, and Intratribal Conflict*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. 239pp. ISBN: 978-0-80-61-53-9

<http://www.oupress.com/ECommerce/Book/Detail/2213/reservation%20politics>

In the 1980 Supreme Court Case *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians*, the judiciary ordered the payment of “just compensation to the Sioux Nation” in the form of hundreds of millions of dollars as restitution for the illegal annexation of the Black Hills in the late 1870s (Blackmun 424). The Lakota people turned down the government’s offer and have continued to do so to this day, even as the fund set aside for their payment has ballooned with interest to well over \$1billion. The motivating question behind Raymond I. Orr’s *Reservation Politics: Historical Trauma, Economic Development, and Intratribal Conflict* is: why has the Lakota leadership declined this wealth in the face of the massive economic and social challenges facing their people?

It is a fair question and one that is well worth asking. Orr, a political scientist at the University of Oklahoma, argues that this question, as well as several other contemporary political questions spread across multiple reservations, can be answered by examining what he calls a given society’s “worldview.” This is a spacious term, and Orr goes to some length pinning it down to a concrete meaning for the purposes of his argument: “A *worldview* ... is the interpretation about the world and our role in it ... constituted from the intersection of our motivations and how we frame or perceive our surroundings” (5). In short, Orr’s central claim is that to understand why a given tribal government makes particular political choices, one must first understand the long-term historical processes at play within a given society, especially the instances (or absences) of major community trauma.

Reservation Politics uses a comparative analysis of three reservation governments – the Citizen Potawatomi in Oklahoma, the Isleta Pueblos in New Mexico, and the Rosebud Sioux in South Dakota – to examine the way an Indigenous group’s worldview shapes their reaction to political questions and crises. Orr dives deep into the often complicated and fraught world of intratribal politics and adeptly explains the factions, motivations, and fractures at play in a diverse array of political contexts. Of notable strength is Orr’s examination of the Isleta Pueblo and the importance of witches and other “common secrets” (informal community knowledge often ignored in scholarly literature) within their community. In describing complicated, sometimes puzzling, political and social systems, Orr’s analysis and writing is strong and deft.

Equally impressive is the care Orr shows in describing important, though delicate, social systems and relationships. He utilizes informant interviews with the respect and care indicative of long-term, carefully cultivated relationships based upon mutual trust. On the topic of witchcraft within the Isleta Pueblo community, Orr readily admits that “there are sensitivities around the subject of witchcraft” which he understandably respects and which informed his research and writing (150). But when he “asked those willing to discuss witchcraft whether it should be written about

... Most told me that writing about Isleta society and politics would be incomplete” without doing so (150). Here and throughout the text, *Reservation Politics* takes seriously the fraught nature of social science research in non-Euro-American cultures and lets the research subjects and informants guide the argument and evidence.

However, despite Orr’s well-placed care, the book’s analysis is nonetheless flawed in critical ways. The historical processes which serve as explanatory factors in crafting an individual group’s worldview are often ahistorical and overly simplistic. Orr draws on Freud and Nietzsche (two individuals who, he recognizes, are themselves fraught with historical baggage) among more contemporary social science research to describe the role of trauma in Indigenous societies. “Collectively traumatizing events could be wars, starvation, genocide, and forced relocation,” Orr writes, citing events which North American Indian societies have experienced in spades, and “it should not be unexpected that years of prolonged and direct experience with traumatic events ... would incline individuals toward a melancholic worldview” (70-71). Orr groups his worldview concepts into two broad forms: melancholic, which is shaped by historical trauma, and self-interested, which is created by processes of economic development (9). It is in these broad categories, such as trauma, melancholy, and economic development, that the analysis in *Reservation Politics* falls short. Trauma, for instance, seems to be only inflicted by white colonizers, which ignores the complex social and political webs into which European empires embedded themselves beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Do slave raids by the Yamasee and Westos upon their rivals in the American southeast in the early eighteenth century count as traumatic experiences with similar multi-generational effects as forced relocation? Did attacks and horse raids by nomadic Lakotas and Arapaho upon the more sedentary Mandan at the beginning of the nineteenth century also create historical trauma with twenty-first century implications?

To be sure, neither of these events were destructive on the scale of outright imperial warfare or forced marches and relocations, but such distinctions are not made in *Reservation Politics*, and trauma remains an ill-defined concept throughout the book. Moreover, Orr’s deployment of the concept of trauma and its influence in Lakota politics verges at times on victim-blaming. “Conflict seems internalized among the Lakotas,” he writes toward the end of the book, “neither the white world, as construed by them, nor that of outsiders engages in reservation pillaging or conducts raids on this community ... [C]onflict and violence, I claim, are often internalized” (178-79). Although it is never explicitly stated, Orr’s implicit answer to the question of why Lakota leadership has refused to accept the Black Hills restitution is that they have made the choice out of a deep-seated, community-wide tendency toward self-sabotage and that his recommendation would be that they simply take the money. This line of argument is misguided at best, pernicious at worst and is laced throughout the back third of the text. “Why we are inclined to seek out our disappointments and frustrations is an interesting question,” Orr muses in the final chapter, before commenting that “[a] community, such as that of Rosebud, seems to instigate painful events,” and while “the Black Hills matter might concern honor ... the Lakotas, I believe, refuse to find closure and therefore continue at least some of the trauma of

colonization” (185). Despite his expertise in the politics within Indigenous societies, Orr’s prescriptive message is less than unhelpful here.

Not all the discussion of multi-generational trauma in *Reservation Politics* is quite so tainted. Orr’s use of still-emerging epigenetic science to describe the effects of multi-generational trauma is tantalizing and worthy of greater inclusion in work by social scientists and humanists. However, his narrow definition of what constitutes trauma as well as his apparent diagnosis of flawed Native decision making are difficult to reconcile with the more well-realized portions of the book. Other important and broad concepts such as “melancholia” and “economic development” also fail to find specific historical grounding and are presented as static, vague, and ideal categories, despite Orr’s occasional caveats.

Similarly lacking is Orr’s historiographical intervention. The author is quite right to suggest that scholars need to produce more historical and social science writing on the conflicts and politics within reservations in the twentieth century. However, Orr’s argument that historians are loath to do so because they believe “perhaps it is better to stay quiet on contemporary intratribal and intra-ethnic politics” because of “sensitivities about what should be said” or because “it might be more difficult to remain neutral” are unfounded (29). Indeed, several works exist in the historiography which capably and fearlessly examine the role intra-tribal conflict has played in Indigenous politics, including Akim Reinhardt’s excellent *Ruling Pine Ridge* (2009) and Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior’s classic *Like a Hurricane* (1997), neither of which Orr cites. More research should indeed be done in this field, but the historiographical hole is not so dire as Orr contends, nor is there much evidence that historians and social scientists have avoided the topic out of fear.

Reservation Politics is a provocative and often frustrating book. Scholars interested in the issues facing contemporary Native American societies will find it useful for its clarity in describing the complex dilemmas facing the three case study reservations Orr describes. The book is also a good model for how to write comparative analysis. However, the intellectual framework upon which Orr’s argument rests, while certainly compelling in its unique perspective, is shaky and significantly less well-conceived.

Stephen Robert Hausmann, Temple University

Works Cited

Blackmun, Harry A. and Supreme Court of the United States. *U.S. Reports: United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians*, 448 U.S. 371. 1979. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/usrep448371/.

Reinhardt, Akim D. *Ruling Pine Ridge: Oglala Lakota Politics from the IRA to Wounded Knee*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2009.

Smith, Paul Chaat, and Robert Allen Warrior. *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*. New York City: New Press, 1997.