

book review

Resorting to Casinos: The Mississippi Gambling Industry

Edited by Denise von Herrmann. (2006). University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, MS. 182 pp., ISBN: 1578067901. Price: \$45 USD (hardcover).

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This is a slender book of nine chapters sandwiched between an editorial introduction and afterword. With some additions, it is well described by the back cover summation, “Essays on how casinos became legal in Mississippi and how they affect the economy and the people.” Also, one might specify *political* economy and that most of the chapters focus on 1990–2000. Geographically, the State of Mississippi’s casino industry grew up largely in the lightly populated and heavily impoverished county of Tunica in the northwest corner of the state, along the Mississippi River below Memphis, Tennessee, and on the Gulf coast in the far south, especially the city of Biloxi in Harrison County, an area depressed economically for decades by the devastation wrought by Hurricane Camille in 1969.

The first chapter provides Mississippi’s historical claim to be the real home of 19th century riverboat gambling and early to mid-20th century seaside resort gambling in the United States. The second chapter offers a well rendered case study in political finesse: how a pair of state legislators from the Mississippi Delta and Gulfside navigated the quiet passage in 1990 of an act that enabled the revival of the repressed gaming enterprises (albeit on a scale well beyond what the solons had dreamed) at the same time that the Governor’s highly touted lottery legislation was being roundly shouted down.

The subsequent chapters cover the aftermath. One chapter reviews the racialized political economy of Tunica county, which was transformed from “America’s Ethiopia” (in Jesse Jackson’s turn of phrase) to the publicists’ “Mississippi miracle”—or perhaps, one might say, to an Atlantic City on the Mississippi, where local landowners accumulated new fortunes while the unemployed poor became the working poor, as this rural county of only 8,000 souls rapidly sprouted 13,000 jobs amidst a forest of moated casinos.

A chapter on whether casinos were “a solution for state economic growth” mainly focuses on the tidal wave of payroll in the two major gaming counties (Tunica and Harrison), rather than examining the state as a whole. This chapter is unusually cryptic (for example, to answer questions about measurement approach, “A copy of the survey instrument is included in the Appendix”—but there is no Appendix). This is followed by two very businesslike chapters that review, respectively, (1) the effect of casino tax receipts on statistical trends in municipal finance—particularly the matter of which categories of local expenditures (capital projects, debt retirement, public service operations) the increased revenues remitted locally were devoted to, and (2) educational

finance, with the desultory conclusion, “only four [out of all of Mississippi’s] school districts are really benefiting from casino revenue.”

A lone socio-anthropological chapter focuses on swing and night shift casino workers, concluding that this work pattern provides substantial job satisfaction (especially for those who are slender and attractive and get the most lucrative service assignments), while warning that “the ‘family’ created with coworkers may dominate all other relationships in the workers’ lives.” A chapter on gambling-related crime is inconclusive and marred by wholesale mismatches (found in several other chapters as well) between the data presented in tables/figures and the information asserted to be there by the text (not interpretive mismatches, but copy-editorial ones).

The final chapter on “The Future of the Casino Resort Industry” updates the casino story through 2004, reporting that after September 11, 2001, the industry was “stable” and had “reached equilibrium”—in other words, stopped growing. The Afterword, presumably composed shortly before the book went to press, trumps that finding with a final shock: the catastrophic impact of Hurricane Katrina. Katrina wiped out “the large stock of historic homes, museums, churches, and related structures” along the coast and severely damaged or destroyed all of the coastal casinos. The editor adds together the daily economic losses, the moves to permit rebuilding on land instead of dockside, and the speculation that smaller casino operators will not be able to rebuild while the dominant companies—Harrah’s and MGM—will reinvest in high-rise casino hotels. The picture ends “cloudy.”

This book is narrowly focused on sub-regional localities, leaves many of the key larger institutional actors in the offstage shadows, and has annoying flaws in production. But its human scale and earnest attempt to understand the remarkable events of Mississippi’s decade of the casino give it redeeming qualities. It is not the last word, but it is a decent, southern-accented beginning to what the editor invites: a professorial conversation on the lessons of Mississippi’s resort to casinos.