

Beyond Pathology:
The Cultural Meanings of Gambling

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Gambling can be a pathological addiction, but it can also be many other things. In associating it with alcoholism, drug abuse and similar disorders, we would not want to lose site of the myriad cultural meanings specific to gambling itself. This paper departs from the discourse of pathology to sketch out the complex economic, emotional, philosophical, and even religious significance of gambling in American history.

From time to time, novelists, theologians and psychoanalysts have observed the connection between gambling and ancient rituals such as the casting of runes or lots, practices meant to divine the will of the deity or the direction of the cosmos. While Freud reduced gambling to a substitute-gratification, a stand-in for masturbation, his disciple Theodor Reik called it “a question posed to destiny.” The longing to be at one, however fleetingly, with the will of the cosmos links the gambler’s faith in luck with the Christian notion of grace as a free gift from God. Grace, from this view, could become a kind of spiritual luck, and attempts to conjure it could be a form of serious play, a means of posing ultimate questions about the universe.

In the American context, the gambler’s cosmology suggested an alternative to the dominant (largely Protestant) ethos, which denied the very existence of luck and insisted that success (in this world) and salvation (in the next) could only be achieved through a partnership of human will and divine Providence. At the level of individual psychology, gambling embodied a protest (with a mostly masculine edge) against the Protestant ethos of self-control, a search for the *frisson* of risk too seldom available in the workplace or the domestic sphere. This quest for intense experience parallels the frenzy of the stock speculator, who at one time was also a cautionary character in American moral tales, but has in recent years been sanitized and celebrated as a risk-taking entrepreneur. It leads to obsession and addiction but also resonates with the romantic aesthetic of the sublime, the association of pleasure with danger.

The gambler’s personal preoccupations sometimes acquire a social significance, even occasionally rising to the level of social critique. Most gamblers insist that “it’s not [or not merely] about the money.” If the gambler can somehow avoid compulsive behavior, can cultivate insouciance toward money and accept its loss gracefully, then gambling can point to an alternative moral economy—one based on circulation rather than accumulation, on reckless generosity rather than calculation of gain. Certainly some gambling communities in the American past have approximated this situation—the numbers players in Harlem and New Orleans before the coming of the legal lottery, the horseplayers who served as the models for Damon Runyon’s fictional characters.

Whether the same sort of community is possible in today’s environment remains to be seen. The rise of legalized casino gambling has coincided with the globalization of capital, the spread of job insecurity and the spread of a “contingent labor market.” In this

economic climate, it is harder than ever to accept the familiar insistence that hard work is the key to success. But it is equally hard to see gambling in contemporary American society as anything more than a quietly desperate response to anomie. The question persists: are there certain historical and cultural circumstances that promote the isolated, obsessed kinds of gambling that lead to addiction, and other circumstances that encourage more benign—even communal--versions of this ancient, multivalent ritual practice?

Suggested Readings

Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (Boston, 1967), pp. 39-58.

Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play Element in Culture* [1944] (Boston, 1990), chapter 4, "Play and Law," pp. 76-88.

Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York, 2004), "Introduction," pp. 1-24.