

Excerpt

People, games and chance

A historical and systematic approach to the fascination of gambling

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Preface

A culture war is raging in our Western societies, and it is not about identity politics or climate change. The culture war we are talking about is a great deal older. It is the fight against games of chance, or more precisely against gambling as a symbol of individual freedom.

The core criticisms are firmly established: those who stake money in chance-based games like horse racing, blackjack or slot machines run the risk of pathological gambling addiction. Unlike games of skill such as boules or intellectual games like chess, such activities dangerously pervert the human need to play games. They must therefore be subjected to the strictest government restrictions and controls or, even better, be banned altogether. Such arguments are powerful. Although almost a third of the population indulges in gambling at least once a year and, in the words of the 2021 Gambling Survey by the University of Bremen, it has proven “a harmless leisure activity for most people,”¹ politicians and administrators have been increasing the regulatory hurdles for years. There is no end in sight.

In view of this debate, it seems worthwhile to pursue a fundamental analysis of games of chance and gambling as a social phenomenon and practice. Drawing on the methods of anthropology, history and game theory, we want to explore what makes games and gambling for money so fascinating – and why it is so fiercely contested. It becomes clear that gambling has always been a fundamental challenge to authority. The ideological lines of conflict can be traced back to the Middle Ages. The terms may have changed, but the underlying authoritarian thought patterns, chronically suspicious of the anarchic element of games of chance, have remained the same.

Then as now, trying your luck for stakes in a game of chance is universally human. This is where you can experience something beyond the everyday, break through the monotony of a regulated existence, surrender freely to external forces and yet remain completely in control of the situation thanks to a transparent set of rules. This real paradox has always challenged governments

¹ Sven Buth, Gerhard Meyer and Jens Kalke *Glücksspielteilnahme und glücksspielbezogene Probleme in der Bevölkerung. Ergebnisse des Glücksspiel-Survey 2021* (Hamburg: Institut für interdisziplinäre Sucht- und Drogenforschung (ISD), 2022): p. 8. https://www.isd-hamburg.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Gluecksspiel-Survey_2021.pdf (accessed 4 October 2023).

and led them to adopt an equally ambivalent stance: on the one hand as profiteers participating in the market through monopolization and profit skimming, and on the other hand as political authorities using power to enforce their preferred versions of a healthy and morally upright life. It is hardly surprising that with such an explosive mix of interests, power resources, moral concepts and deeply rooted ideologies, social conflicts have repeatedly erupted and taken on the form of culture wars. We aim to break down this complex of topics using three core hypotheses which form, as it were, a thematic guide through this book *People, Games and Chance*.

First, the human passion for games of chance is a universal and essential part of our existence.

At least by the time of early Antiquity, people were playing games of chance for stakes, using dice-shaped pieces of stone, bone or terracotta, and such games have been played ever since. In an era like that of the current day, when identitarian differences are more emphasized than commonalities, this circumstance is all the more remarkable. The fascination of gambling is explained by a number of characteristics that together make it a unique socio-cultural practice. People who play games of chance embrace a social time-out with its own, strictly egalitarian rules ("Everyone is equal under the rules"), where common hierarchies and antagonisms (rich versus poor, old versus young, urban versus rural) no longer apply, but which nevertheless remains hedged in by overall social structures. Players are free in their activities, because they play solely for the sake of playing. The significance of this can be seen by comparing games to other forms of leisure activity: people who go jogging, want to lose weight or stay fit; people who learn a foreign language, want to improve their education; and people who fill their social media profiles with content, want clicks, likes and shares. Only players of games are self-sufficient. In a game, players escape the paradigm of compulsive self-optimization and alienation that dominates the Late Modern Age like never before.

At the same time, players are not only equal under the rules, but are also equal in terms of another power, that of chance. Whether someone wins at roulette, blackjack or on the slot machines has nothing to do with talent, strategy or practice. The result is beyond their control and is therefore – depending on cosmological preferences – a question of luck, fate or favor. The mystery of games has lost none of its appeal simply because it is possible to stochastically predict entire series of events, such as card distributions or turns of the wheel. It remains impossible to predict individual events like the next hand or the next roll of the roulette ball. As, by definition, the outcome of games of chance is uncontrollable, it is possible to lose but not to fail. Players who cast the dice are under no pressure to perform, they have nothing to prove, either to themselves or to the world. The extraordinary emotional and cognitive relief provided by this logic is obvious and explains the enduring appeal of gambling. It is equally obvious that this very logic has rendered games of chance a thorn in the side of religious and political ideologies that are based on performance ethics. Those who, in the spirit of Calvinism, elevate diligence and the will to achieve from a character trait to a moral virtue and the quickest route to salvation, are unlikely to tolerate unearned profits or material

losses. The condemnation of gambling is an inevitable consequence of this doctrine, which – despite numerous secular upheavals – continues to exercise influence to this day. Clearly, neither government bans nor the threat of hellfire have been able to break the human passion for games of chance. It remains an anthropological constant, an ongoing challenge to social structures of power and order.

Second: Tackling gambling is a catalyst for the development and expansion of state structures.

The question of how to deal with the egalitarian, anarchic and subversive phenomenon of gambling has preoccupied state authorities for thousands of years. Even Antiquity saw a wide variety of political and regulatory approaches, whether Roman *panem et circenses* or Abrahamic gambling prohibitions in Judea. However, it was not until the Middle Ages, more precisely in thirteenth-century Spain, that gambling was intensively and systematically tackled through the successive establishment of a system of classifications and sanctions. The ruling elites controlled access to games of chance by using class privileges, and discovered opportunities to siphon off profits; at the same time, the church directed its moral censure against “sinful” games that distracted people from the true faith. In this way, the levies raised on gambling enjoyed a dual moral and fiscal quality that they continue to possess today.

In the course of confronting gambling, discovering the criminal risks inherent to the illegal gambling sector and testing counterstrategies, the European state gradually developed unprecedented expertise. By the Modern Era at the latest, government administrators were the greatest experts on games of chance. Consequently, state monopolies for lotteries were established, prestigious casinos were built and lotteries were launched for all social classes. A highly professional infrastructure was implemented, covering everything from ticket sales and the registering of bets to prize draws and payouts.

With the emergence of stochastics, the final piece of the mosaic was added to the picture. Equipped with the statistical methods and probability theory that form the basis of applied stochastics, government agencies became able to precisely control the chances of winning and payouts. The extensive lists of specifications for the gambling industry, commonplace today, are a testament to the depth of regulation with which the state intervenes in this sector of the economy. The Janus-faced attitude towards gambling remains evident: fiscal justifications for state-supported games of chance and the profit skimming of the gambling sector must be reconciled with the moral censure derived from the Middle Ages and its implications for restricting and prohibiting gambling. This internal tension characterizes the entire relationship between the state and gambling and the search for a legitimate foundation for political intervention.

Third: Modernity witnesses the triumphant pathologization of the enjoyment of gambling.

Modernity, when psychology and psychiatry were recognized as independent branches of science for the first time, also saw the birth of a new principle of gambling control: the pathologization of the joy of gambling. Based on the premise that human emotions, inclinations and habits were no longer subject only to normative assessments but also to medical diagnosis, and could therefore be classified as symptoms to produce a clinical assessment, a completely new set of questions arose: Where are the boundaries between a politically acceptable enjoyment of gambling and a medically defined threat to human health? The necessity of identifying the point where frenzy and addiction begin is systematically inherent to the dichotomy of “normal” and “abnormal” or “healthy” and “sick.” But the precise definition of the criteria and threshold values that determine that point was in the power of the executive authorities. Clearly, pathologizing an enjoyment of gambling transformed the traditional principle of moral censure but did not replace it, providing an added legitimation for state intervention, one which could be integrated into a scientific world view and thus claim objectivity.

Of course, this legitimization strategy contradicts the inherent logic of gambling. By definition, gambling creates an exceptional situation that involves the crossing of emotional boundaries, the questioning of social conventions and emotional catharsis. If players do not eagerly anticipate the roll of the roulette ball, hold their breath as the next card is turned, or tear up the betting slip out of disappointment as their tipped favorite fails to come in first, then they are not enjoying the game. Behavior that is classified as bizarre or inappropriate in everyday social life is taken for granted while gambling; in such settings it has a socially accepted place. This is what games of chance have in common with liturgical festivals, carnivals, sporting events and other cultural surplus products, which are not intended to further the standardization of individuals or reproduce acceptable patterns of behavior, but rather involve the staging of outbreaks and subversion. In short, because the psychological-psychiatric pathologization of human behavior is based on categorical standardizations – this is the norm, that is the deviation – it fits in very poorly with the exceptional situation of gambling.

The question of why pathologization of the enjoyment of gambling continues to be a successful model, despite its obvious methodological and conceptual weaknesses, can be answered by a combination of zeitgeist and path dependency. Firstly, it is simply fashionable to classify people in psychological terms and to give a pathological label to phenomena that the authorities find unsettling. This saves annoying social debates about rival concepts of happiness and the definition of a successful life. Secondly, a huge apparatus of experts, interest groups and committees has long since been established around the triumphant advance of this strategy of legitimization, all of whom owe their wages and livelihoods to the perpetuation of the narrative.

Where do these insights lead us? First and foremost, we must redefine the social position and function of gambling in our society, recognizing its role as a social time-out providing critical

relief, its potential for positive subversion and its central but underestimated position as a catalyst of political-administrative innovation in the development of the modern state. The psychological-psychiatric reinterpretation of this millennia-old cultural practice has led to the stigmatization of entire population groups, but has done nothing to explain the enjoyment provided by gambling. One thing is certain: the cultural battle against gambling is also a battle against individual freedoms and individual notions of a successful life, which explains the necessity for the robust hurdles attempting to restrict these freedoms. This book was written for anyone with a passion to explore these theses and to rethink the multifaceted subject of gambling.

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