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## THE SOCIOLOGY OF GAMBLING

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### ABSTRACT

Widespread resentment against gambling may be explained by the failure of gamblers to perform normally expected productive functions. The degree of antipathy differs according to class. The chance element in human life is particularly exploited in those societies where status is largely competitive and dependent upon pecuniary standards. The stabilizing and routinized mechanisms of social living are antithetical to gambling, which resists arbitrary social control.

### GAMBLING AND SOCIAL PATHOLOGY

Gambling has an extremely ancient history. As an institutionalized and informal pastime, it is not necessarily an evil and may, in fact, as it has in the past, serve as an important form of recreation. Artifacts and relics pertaining to various games of chance, such as paired cubes, throwing stones, drawing sticks, gaming boards, and similar contrivances, have been found in the archeological remains of the Sumerian, Egyptian, and Chinese cultures. The Greeks were particularly familiar with games of chance, and the casting of paired and multiple cubes was an especially favored pastime among the Romans. Primitive cultures, from the ancient Peruvian to the Bantu in Africa and the Eskimo in North America, have regaled themselves with such amusements as matching fingers or rolling pebbles or other objects, in which the elements of chance constituted one of the principal attractions. Early magic and religious rituals relied heavily upon chance, as in the study of the entrails of sacrificial animals among the Romans, although divine intervention was

employed as an explanatory device in order to impose some sense of order upon the unknown and the unpredictable. Card-playing has a lengthy history, many of the forms of our modern card games predating the medieval era in European history.

Gambling emerges as a form of social pathology only when there is widespread resentment against it because of the psychological and social problems which it creates. In the first place, in the inveterate gambler it frequently becomes an addiction, as in the celebrated character of Dostoevski's minor classic, *The Gambler*, who neglected personal, family, and social responsibilities. The gambler is condemned largely for his failure to perform the normal productive functions ordinarily expected of him rather than because of the nature of the gambling itself.

Leisure may be respectably enjoyed in most societies only when work is put first. Furthermore, the recreation must not be considered socially destructive or unproductive in itself. This latter consideration, while not a universal characteristic of "antisocial"

recreation, may nevertheless become so in a culture like our own, which places a high value upon economic activity. The emphasis is, however, a *class* function. In underprivileged economic groups such unproductive activity is strongly condemned, but in wealthier middle-class groups, however, gambling, though "wasteful," does not carry the same stigma.

Unlike excessive drinking, drug addiction, or sex demoralization, gambling produces no directly deteriorating effects upon the human organism or the social group. Its danger lies in the fact that it interferes with the normal assumption of responsibility which organized society compels. Second, gambling, as any other form of widely accepted and extensively practiced, although tabooed, form of social behavior, may become a social problem because of its intimate association with unscrupulous and lawless elements. Despite public strictures against it, particularly in the United States, gambling in its various institutionalized forms, ranging from card games for low or high stakes, horse-racing, bingo, betting on the outcome of various forms of athletic competition, and pinball and other mechanical gambling contrivances to the vast "numbers and policy" games which prey upon small-income groups in our large cities, has become a significant element in modern recreational life. Even before it became associated with underworld and vice elements, however, gambling had been viewed with profound suspicion because of the peculiar psychological, cultural, and familial disabilities it produces. In fact, certain religious bodies, such as the Methodists, have fought gambling almost as strenuously as the directly deteriorating vices.

Nevertheless, because of the ambivalence of the public, which condemns gambling as socially destructive while regarding with indifference or approval bingo games played in church parlors, gambling has become extremely difficult to control. Because of this, many modern European and Latin-American countries have capitalized upon what is

conceived as an ineradicable "human weakness" by diverting the profits from gambling to public revenues in the form of vast governmentally controlled national lotteries.

#### THE SOCIOLOGY OF GAMBLING

The essential basis for all gambling seems to inhere in the chance factor of success for its participants, irrespective of the type of device or game which is employed. The *aleatory* (or chance) element, however, always varies. Gambling may call for skill, as in certain card games and athletic competitions, or it may simply depend upon the chance throw of a pair of dice or the draw of a card, as in stud poker. In any event, the element of chance is always present. It is an indispensable aspect of its universal appeal.

Certain social and cultural systems seem to foster and exploit the chance element in human life, particularly those societies where status largely depends upon competitive pecuniary standards. This is notably true in the United States, where rapid commercial expansion and industrial development conspire to spur the individual to economic success through sharp competitive practice, and where industrial expansion has depended to a considerable degree upon precarious and speculative enterprise. In the United States, for example, the distinction between certain forms of approved and legitimate stock-market speculation and the cultivation of the gambling interest is largely a matter of degree, yet one is approved and the other condemned. An illustration of this may be seen in the sharp rise of speculation among basic commodities, at perilous expense to the American economic structure and the national security, at the beginning of the Korean crisis early in the summer of 1950. Operating almost entirely on credit, speculators at the very start of the Korean war began to buy up "futures" of soybeans, lard, wheat, and other necessities. According to an analysis by the Commodity Exchange Authority of the United States Department of Agriculture, up to 85 or 90 per cent of the dealings in soybeans for July 21, 1950, was

pure speculation—betting that the market would go up as a result of the crisis. The report of the Commodity Exchange Authority states:

A speculator who purchased just before the Korean episode and deposited the minimum margin could have “cashed in” five weeks later, on July 28, with an approximate 450 percent profit on lard, 300 percent on cottonseed oil, 300 percent on soybeans, 150 percent on cotton or wool tops, and a comparatively modest 100 percent on the relatively sluggish wheat futures.<sup>1</sup>

Operating against chance, however, are the stabilizing and routinized mechanisms which are the basis of the social order. In order to achieve any type of security, every society strives to reduce ignorance and the unpredictable, as a means of insuring its own continuance.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, a certain degree of ignorance concerning the operation of both physical and human events must, of necessity, always exist. Ignorance of events, therefore, and of their outcome serves as a dynamic function in all societies.<sup>3</sup> Where knowledge of the outcome of a given series of human events is certain, there is no incentive toward competition and other forms of social striving. Von Neumann and Morgenstern have demonstrated this point of view in their analysis of economic behavior as compared to the “sporting” chance present in playing games.<sup>4</sup>

For a society such as our own—complex, impersonal, and yet highly competitive—a

<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Report of the Commodity Exchange Authority* (Washington, D.C., August, 1950).

<sup>2</sup> Cf., e.g., Wilbert E. Moore and Melvin M. Tumin, “Some Social Functions of Ignorance,” *American Sociological Review*, XIV, No. 6 (December, 1949), esp. 794 and 795.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert K. Merton, “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action,” *American Sociological Review*, I (December, 1936), 894–904.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (2d ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947). See also Oskar Morgenstern, “The Theory of Games,” *Scientific American*, CLXXX, No. 5 (May, 1949), 22–25.

great premium is placed upon conformity and the need for routine. At the same time there is great pressure to break the routine to initiate, to promote, and to experiment in order to bring about the dynamic growth of a continuously expanding social economy. For large masses of individuals, this is difficult, if not impossible. Hedged in by stereotyped employment which is ever increasingly regularized, the fear of insecurity, the pressures of family, and the opinions of others, the average individual fears to “take the chance” that may mean riches and prestige, despite the traditional assurance that the country’s growth and expansion have depended upon people who *did* exactly that. Moreover, as Allison Davis and the Lynds have shown in their studies of working-class families, they frequently realize that they are trapped and that there exists neither opportunity nor incentive for further advancement.<sup>5</sup> For many, however, the opportunity of making a “killing,” whether by betting on the Irish Sweepstakes or by winning the giant jackpot on some radio “giveaway” program or by answering the “\$64 question,” is a genuine possibility; they hardly ever take odds into consideration. Gambling serves the same function in the present day as the practice of magic and ritualistic formulas among primitives, who entertain the notion that the unpredictable contains for them among its infinite possibilities the chance of good fortune. It is probably no accident that inveterate gamblers are the most superstitious of men. This uncertainty is played upon by all peoples in all cultures and is the source of the perennial folk proverb, “While there’s life, there’s hope.”

Gambling is an escape from the routine and boredom characteristic of much of modern industrial life in which the sense of creation and the “instinct of workmanship” have been lost. “Taking a chance” destroys routine and hence is pleasurable, particularly in a culture where the unchanging and

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Allison Davis, “The Motivation of the Underprivileged Worker,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, III, No. 4 (summer, 1946), 243–53.

predictable routines of employment are sharply separated from "leisure"—the time when the individual *really* "lives." The desire for thrills through new experience makes the public readily open to exploitation by professional gambling interests, as Moore and Tumin point out:

Certainly the attractiveness of many games of chance, as well as those games and sports where chance may equalize or offset known differences in skill and performance, rests in large measure on their unpredictable outcome. In fact, there is some rough evidence that ignorance of the future in recreational activities assumes an especially significant role where routine (read: perfect predictability) and boredom are characteristic of work assignments and where there is a sharp break between working time and leisure time.<sup>6</sup>

There remain, finally, the conditions of "differential association," opportunity, and the large blocks of unplanned leisure, which modern society permits. Games of chance are traditionally found, and even encouraged, in the play of children in modern society, ranging from traditional children's guessing and matching games to the early imitation of adult gambling and card games. In many families, on all class levels, card-playing and other forms of gambling, even when the stakes are low, have become deeply entrenched. There are ethnic, class, and even sex differentials in these common forms of recreation. Bridge-playing is largely a middle-class diversion, while poker is traditionally considered a "man's game," and the casting of dice, aside from professional gambling interest, is common among Negroes. For many young men of the lower and middle class, learning to play cards is part of growing up and becoming identified with adults and their standards. For the individual with few inner resources, whose employment offers little opportunity for progressive challenge and advancement and is tedious and boring, and in whose early experience gambling in some form has played a part, to be a gambler is as commonplace and natural as to become an ardent baseball fan or a moving-picture addict.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 794.

In summary, gambling provides a function in well-organized societies where the stress of competition (with its lack of predictability) is great, and where, in contrast, the regimen of economic and social life is rigorous. Such a society, placing a premium upon "risk" and "taking a chance," provides through gambling an outlet for many individuals who, hedged in by social restrictions and limited or no opportunity, would otherwise find little satisfaction for the need for new experience and pecuniary success. This penchant for taking a chance is expressed in the popular cliché: "Why not? What have you got to lose?" The implications are twofold.

In the first place, the probability of being the winner or the loser in a gaming enterprise provides suspense, insecurity, new experience, and hope, serving important emotional needs in individuals whose lives are increasingly regularized.<sup>7</sup> Although certain cultural factors and conditions must also be taken into consideration, this may account in part for the heavy gambling in cards in certain classes, such as the landed English gentry of the eighteenth century. Although highly stable and securely ensconced in the social structure through special favor and privilege, "life in the country," as judged by descriptive accounts, diaries, and letters of the period, was extremely boring.<sup>8</sup> Gambling provided a precarious diversion, as did the risks of fox-hunting: a man would risk his entire estate upon the turn of a card. This aristocratic tradition had its counterpart in this country in the ante bellum South among wealthy plantation owners.

In the second place, the belief that chance works equally in favor of each one of the contestants in a gambling venture sustains the hope for status or rewards, which the individual feels may *not* be achieved through conventional and acceptable channels. (Who hasn't dreamed of what he would do if he

<sup>7</sup> The family lives of a small selected group of gamblers who were examined by the author were characterized by an extreme of regimentation.

<sup>8</sup> Cf., e.g., David Matthew, *The Social Structure of Caroline England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948).

had a million dollars?) Further, in American life, the "get-something-for-nothing" philosophy is expressed in a wide range of activities from saving box tops for premiums to the enormous prizes of the radio "give-away" programs. This incentive, ironically, operates even when what is given away—as, for example, a thousand cans of dog food—may have very little or no value to the contestant. The antics of a fictional "Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford" or his realistic counterpart, "Bet-a-Million" Gates, the financial tycoon, excited the admiration, envy, and emulation of an earlier generation of Americans at the beginning of the century, just as the giant radio and television "jackpot" contests entice their present-day children and grandchildren.

#### THE GAMBLER AS A PERSONALITY TYPE

Since gambling is so extensive, gamblers, unlike alcoholics, do not fall into any specific typological classification. Nevertheless, certain common characteristics may be found in their personalities. Gambling, as a form of addiction, occurs when the individual consistently and continuously neglects his important primary duties and obligations to his family, employer, and community for the sake of gambling. The life-histories of inveterate gamblers indicate a transitional period in their careers when their regular routines are seriously jeopardized and it becomes increasingly common for them to stay away from home and job for lengthy periods. The inveterate gambler becomes as unpredictable and undependable as the alcoholic, as far as his home and his work are concerned. Aside from horse-racing and other spectacles which encourage gambling, most forms of professional gambling may be indulged in at any time of the day or night, and night-long sessions, disrupting the routine of normal life, are quite common. For the gambler who consistently pursues his gambling interests, therefore, the discipline and orderliness which to some degree characterize the lives of most individuals are gone.

It is not uncommon to find occasional evidences of neglect of diet and sleep. Neglect

of personal appearance, a matter of great importance in a highly competitive society, is another characteristic; although not very common, this is a revelation of class. In fact, some gamblers sedulously cultivate a dapper appearance as a means of indicating affluence and respectability and betokening, among other things, solvency as a gambling partner or adversary. The interesting psychological feature of gambling is the enormous hold it finally comes to exert upon the personality, comparable in a sense to the grip of alcohol, without its adverse physical effects. Once addicted, even though the gambler may recognize the harm his practice is causing his family, business associates, and others, he will nevertheless continue to follow his bent, living in the hope of making up in one final sweep of winnings an amount sufficient to compensate for his previous losses and, consequently, to make restitution to his family and friends. The motive to gamble, when once it has achieved a "functional autonomy" of its own, may dominate other primary considerations of the personality.<sup>9</sup> This impetus is so strong that the individual may transgress against law in order to accomplish his purpose. Embezzlement is a common offense of gamblers.

The continual suspense in which the gambler lives engenders an emotional tension. He is frequently taut, the hypertension being sustained for lengthy periods of time. He cannot afford to relax, since he is invariably either raising funds for his gambling forays or planning for or making his bets. He devotes considerable time and energy to his enterprises. The amount of time spent in working over his "dope sheets" in horse-racing, for example, and the degree of concentration required are impressive.

Subjected to the tension involved in continuous risk-taking, the gambler learns to affect characteristic expressive behavior. His inner turmoil and anxiety are frequently repressed through an assumption of stoical calm, evidenced in the well-known "poker

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gordon W. Allport, *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1937), chap. vii.

face" of the inveterate card-player. Moreover, just as the alcoholic secretes liquor and funds for a potential drinking bout, the gambler will retain a reservoir of funds—his "betting money"—which he will not use even for pressing personal needs or the needs of his family. Finally, there is interesting evidence of the mechanisms of compensation and other characteristic forms of psychological tension-reducing devices: for example, he frequently boasts about his winnings, real or fictitious, to nongamblers, while he bemoans the exaggerated extent of his losses to his fellow-gamblers.

The specialized humor of gambling and the jokes which gamblers exchange among themselves reflect their tensions and their underlying cynicism, the latter an evidence that they are aware of the futility of gambling. Striking is the paradox between the gambler's perennial hope that he can "beat the game" and his realistic knowledge that it is virtually impossible to do so.

#### THE GAMBLER'S CODE OF ETHICS

Gambling over many centuries has produced a traditional code of ethics. Primary is the "gentleman's code"—that gambling debts must be paid and given priority over other forms of obligation. This may be in part a survival of the eighteenth-century aristocrat's code of the "debt of honor." The individual may indulge in chicanery and dishonesty in order to satisfy his gambling creditors, so deeply is the obligation felt.

There is, however, another significant sociological element in this practice. The basic thrill in gambling rests in the expectation that the individual may make a "killing." This, of course, depends upon chance or the inability to predict what the outcome may be. This, however, is premised upon a certainty—the certainty that the loser will pay his debts. Otherwise, the gaming venture itself has no validity. "To win" without "winning" makes no sense. Hence, to make the gambling worth while and profitable, there must be the continued assurance that the

loser will pay his debts. Chance itself becomes *institutionalized* in the certainty, viz., the certainty that *if* he wins, he will be paid.<sup>10</sup>

#### GAMBLING: A DILEMMA OF MODERN SOCIETY

The practice and organization of gambling seems to follow a cycle. So well entrenched is it as a form of recreation, and so propitious are the various cultural elements in modern society which promote it, that, like the prohibition of alcohol, legislation and other forms of arbitrary social control are frequently considered an infringement upon personal prerogative and privilege. Consequently, it is a widespread practice which, in its disorganizing effects upon groups and personalities and the possibilities for exploitation it offers to lawless elements, goes uncontrolled. And when control *is* attempted, it is virtually impossible to maintain because of the secure place which gambling enjoys in the folkways. As a result, legislation and other controls are only partial. Such measures provide an incentive toward the opening-up of forms of gambling still proscribed, paving the way toward irresponsible control by lawless and corrupt elements. This invites further legal control, again impossible to enforce and leading to further corruption, with the result that eventually considerable popular pressure is exerted to legalize all forms of gambling. When this occurs, the dangers of widespread legalized gambling invite hazards for the entire society, reintroducing the need for partial control; and the cycle begins again. This is apparently the phase of the cycle which we have presently reached.

From the standpoint of social control, gambling thus presents two major problems:

<sup>10</sup> In the hierarchy of gamblers' values, failure to "pay off" when a debt is due is the cardinal sin, since the continuance of the entire involved structure of professional gambling interests depends upon the honoring of the debt. So clearly is this recognized by professional gamblers that gambling syndicates, ordinarily reluctant to advance each other's interests, will nevertheless extend credit to each other so that the confidence of the gambling public may remain unjeopardized.

that of the disorganized individual gambler and that of widespread effective control.

The extreme gambler, a sociopathic deviation, requires concerted therapeutic and psychiatric care.

The social control of gambling presents two alternatives: (1) Gambling may be diminished or removed only to the degree that

other recreational choices are cultivated—a problem involving widespread social reappraisal. (2) As a more feasible course, gambling may be regularized in accordance with conventional social practice through adequate permissive and controlling legislation.

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