

FORUM: THE VALUE OF GAMBLING AND ITS RESEARCH

THE VALUE OF GAMBLING AND ITS RESEARCH AN INTRODUCTION

• PAULIINA RAENTO •

Gambling today is a multi-billion-dollar industry with global influence. It is a prominent part of culture and a major financial contributor to society in Finland and many other countries where governments own, license and regulate gambling enterprises. Most people in Western societies have some experience of gambling, and many buy a lottery ticket, play slot machines, or bet on sports as a regular part of their leisure. Over the past decades the gambling industry has grown massively, due to its entry into new territories, the increased popularity of gambling, and new globally influential innovations, such as televised poker tournaments and online gambling. The political, economic and cultural implications of this change have been notable. Gambling scholarship is on the rise and its foci are broadening especially in the social sciences and cultural studies.

The time is ripe for anthropologists to take a fresh look at gambling. This would have multiple benefits. For one, a look at new, popular forms of gambling would flush out some disciplinary stubbornness regarding topics and approaches. From the past, distant and primitive the emphasis should continue to shift even more strongly toward what is new and happening here and now. The study of online poker, says Jukka Jouhki in this Forum, offers one opportunity to bring anthropologists up to speed with understanding recent technological developments, and cultural forms that have sprung up with them. After all, more people now log on to online gambling sites than to Facebook (*Gambling Online Magazine* October 26th, 2010). Ethnography, one powerful tool of anthropology, should be expanded to online environments. More new, stimulating methodological ponderings and innovation will inevitably follow.

'Land-based' ethnography, on the other hand, is gaining popularity in interdisciplinary gambling studies together with other qualitative approaches. Gambling scholars would benefit from anthropological insight in developing their approaches. More sound examples of how to use ethnography are needed so that the study of gambling can step forward from its emphasis on individual behavior and problems, toward understanding groups and their cultures. And considering the social and cultural sensitivity of gambling—and related perceptions of questionable moralities, vice and weak character—ethical issues are evident, and culturally bound in a fashion that should be deconstructed analytically. Anthropologists are well equipped to provide examples and analytical support to gambling studies—and gain positive visibility for their field by doing so. And anthropology's scope of research will expand en route, for ethnography can shed light on groups ignored

in both gambling studies and anthropology. In her ethnography of African and Asian immigrant gambling in Finland, Perpetual Crentsil shows how cultural difference can be found at home. Understanding of the 'exotic' does not require traveling to distant lands (cf. Parish 2005).

Furthermore, the classics of anthropology still hold tremendous power and are applicable to contemporary phenomena related to gambling. Goffman's work has been discovered in gambling studies and is being applied comparatively (Sallaz 2010). In this forum Jani Kinnunen returns to Geertz's (1972) Balinese cockfighting in the light of online gambling, showing why anthropologists should revisit their classics. Gambling is less about money than social rewards, he says, and these rewards in online environments are creating new cultural forms. Instead of the need to develop entirely new theories and methodologies, a fresh, innovative look at what already is out there might suffice.

A closer look at gambling can also expand anthropology's interdisciplinary horizons. Many outsiders perceive anthropology as an insular discipline which fails to use its full potential. Anthropologists seem more comfortable talking to one another rather than reaching out into new venues and convincing others about the power of their specialty. But if anthropologists ventured out from their usual circles and across disciplinary boundaries, all participants would benefit. Riitta Matilainen concludes this Forum by showing one contact point with socio-economic history and political geography in her assessment of the symbolic significance of the game of roulette in Finland in the 1970s. The key to understanding this significance lies in the context, in the geopolitics of that era and the Finns' identity-political cravings toward the West. Contexts—time- and place-specific cultures—matter (Raento and Schwartz [eds] 2011), and anthropologists would have plenty to contribute to interdisciplinary dialogues about culture and gambling.

Anthropologists who presently specialize in gambling are few, but typically do excellent work as research scholars, policy advisors and capacity builders (Binde 2005a&b, 2007a&b, 2010, 2011; Spilde 2006). Individuals working on obviously related fields such as horse racing have begun to take a look at gambling (Cassidy 2010). A number of studies by anthropologists focus on particular groups of gamblers or their places, sometimes in interdisciplinary collaboration (McMillen [ed.] 1996; Douglass and Raento 2004; Holbraad 2007). Ethnographic approaches have for some time attracted interdisciplinary attention among fellow students of gambling interested in culture and society (Rosecrance 1985; Howland 2001; Neal 2005; Lalander 2006; Raento and Flusty 2006; Marksbury 2010). And upcoming scholars are addressing new topics and revisiting the classics (Sallaz 2010).

This is a good start, but there is space for others.

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