WRITING AGAINST CULTURE WITH ONLINE POKER

• JUKKA JOUHKI •

> [Anthropology demands] the open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder at that which one would not have been able to guess. (Mead 1950: xxvi)

As with many new cultural formations, the recent online poker boom is, in a way, an accident. When the NHL strike (2004–2005) in North America created an acute need for television re-scheduling, poker tournaments filled the empty programming slots. A stale game of middle-aged men turned into an exciting, familiar hobby with a global reach. Progress in internet infrastructures enabled a boost of poker online. Nowadays, online poker is depicted as a game for young men whose lives are devoted to the pursuit of intense experiences. The game is also characterized by its contradictory embodiment and rejection of the virtues of the Protestant work ethic. It emphasizes diligence, yet places a high value on quick success and money. It suggests a highly competitive recreational venture, a postmodern Darwinist challenge.

However, there is still a lot of sin in poker: it violates the Lévi-Straussian binary relation of play and work (see e.g., Erickson and Murphy 2008: 113–114). Poker therefore attracts moral attention which manifests itself in both abhorrence and rebellious excitement, and this reverberates within academia as well. Online poker carries the inherent qualities, the mythology and the moral ambiguity of traditional poker, but is stigmatized as a highly addictive way to lose money. It also has to defend itself against worries about Internet addiction. Yet the everyday life of a professional poker player might differ little from that of a civil servant, and a recreational poker player might relate to the game as one relates to a movie: as an investment in entertainment (see e.g., Jouhki 2011a).

That online poker has been researched so much as a problem has influenced the way media and the public view the game. However, a majority of those 200,000 Finnish men (97 per cent) and women (99 per cent) who play online poker report that they have no gambling problem at all (Järvinen-Tassopoulos 2009: 19). Moreover, it hardly implies a pandemic addiction problem that *Peluuri*, the Finnish problem gambling helpline, received only 86 calls concerning online poker in 2008 (ibid.: 53). In this light, it seems addiction is perceived to be a significant problem in online poker because the hegemonic discourse demands it. The Finnish state, for example, wants to protect its gambling monopoly in the EU and to do this it needs to emphasize gambling-related problems (Tammi 2008). But there is an increasing body of literature and articles in the media that valorize the more mainstream practice of poker.

There is a need to 'unsettle' the stigmatizing meta-narrative of (online) poker. As Gubrium, following Abu-Lughod's (1991) idea of writing against culture, suggests, 'it is important to document the complexity of culture from below (…), rather than in relation to a uniform cover story' which obscures complexities and may steer communication toward naturalizing the 'obvious character of those portrayed'. These ubiquitous cover stories have such momentum that they seem to be the reality (Gubrium 2008: 512). Because online poker is such a culturally loaded subject, traditional anthropological

themes could easily and fruitfully be transferred to its context. From what I have observed so far, the four interrelated Ms—morality, marginality, masculinity and money—invite (if not beg) anthropological questions. These include:

- What cultural configurations interact with the morality of poker?
- What are the socio-cultural elements that marginalize poker as a hobby or a profession?
- What makes online poker seem a hyper-masculine venture?
- What is the social and symbolic value of money in poker?

An anthropological view and its thick description, including a wide socio-cultural formation, would generate sorely needed insights into the phenomenon. One should not study poker morality without studying the dynamics of the law of the state, religion, individualism, ideas of leisure, or the work ethic and family values. One should remember the complexities of discourse and rhetoric. Anthropological holism drawing on the classics would be more than suitable for examining poker, but in the case of online poker the scholar would be forced to embrace the new context, digital culture. Here, a cynic might think that if anthropologists overlook television or other media (no matter how significant they are in culture), there is little chance that they will study cyberspace and its new phenomena such as online poker—no matter how universal, timeless or ethnographically inviting these themes may be.

However, approaching poker anthropologically could be a Malinowskian venture into trade, myths and value. Or poker could be studied in order to write against culture, to question hegemonic truths, *if* the scholar refused to view the object of anthropological study as being limited to whole ethnic groups, societies, states, tribes or other cultural entities with clear but imagined boundaries. As contemporary anthropology accepts, we belong to multiple different cultures, of which the traditional foci of anthropology are but few. We work and enjoy leisure. We belong to cultures that are smaller and bigger than our native 'tribe'. We are cultural—and increasingly digital—nomads. Better yet, we are cyberforagers.

Culturally oriented online poker research suggests (e.g., Farnsworth and Austrin 2010) that everyday experience, values and practice, things that are part-and-parcel of anthropology, should be more the focus of the study of online poker. This would counterbalance the common picture of poker, which is made up of extremes. The huge mass of people between the rare cases of multi-million-dollar champions and wrecked addicts should be brought under scrutiny. Moreover, the morality of poker, which is a complex web of significant factors connected to concepts of rights, culture, ethics and economics should be examined in all its diversity.

Many disciplines have adopted ethnography and other elements of anthropology to study contemporary socio-cultural phenomena. In multidisciplinary gambling studies an ethnographic method is a staple for its ability to map people's values, practices and meanings (e.g., Howland 2001; Li 2008). Anthropological questions such as those about the four Ms are being asked and addressed in international gambling scholarship, but mostly by other scholars than anthropologists. The risk for anthropology is that if disciplinary constraints cannot be shed soon, the fine—small, but always present—

anthropological current in gambling studies will lose its foothold to gambling scholars from other fields who use online ethnography and who increasingly understand culture as anthropologists do.

The toughest challenge to objective, unbiased inquiry into online poker is the academic community itself. In the traditional *discipline* of anthropology, the cultural formation of poker is of little interest because the subject is not the typical non-Western ethnic group; it does not portray formerly colonized people. Moreover, the culture of online poker manifests itself mostly in cyberspace, which is 'another revolution anthropology has missed' (Forte 2002; cf. Hine 2000), or, less dramatically, a paradigmatic frontier too 'modern' to be crossed by mainstream anthropology, at least in Finland.

Openness is needed in the academic community for scholars to embrace new cultures and new methods. An anthropologist engaging *webnography* as a method in an investigation into online poker would not be a heretic if a certain anthropological core, whether it be the Geertzian thick description or Kluckhohnian controlled holistic impressionism, was sustained in the approach. No doubt there is a lot to study. In the folklore of online poker men battle for glory. While 'big players' move big money for the luxuries of life, 'small players' smuggle a little excitement into their everyday routines (e.g., Casey 2008). Advertisements for online poker draw on the former and reproduce the discourse of heroics, emphasizing the winners' sex appeal to induce the latter. A passer-by in the culture might draw hasty conclusions and find it difficult to distinguish the moral code of online poker from the laws of the jungle. But as far as the game itself is concerned, the poker code for players is absolutely straightforward: win or lose. Poker can be viewed as a game, a form of gambling, a straightforward bid for cash, micro or macro capitalism, postmodern work or a global cultural phenomenon (e.g., Kinnunen 2007; Svartsjö et al. 2008: 13; Binde 2009: 44; Jouhki 2010, 2011b). Why are anthropologists and their notebooks not flooding to study this rich cultural formation?

If humans are animals that are suspended in 'webs of significance' they themselves have spun (Geertz 1973: 5), and if poker is one of those webs, it deserves the interpretative attention of anthropology. The question is: is the discipline as flexible as the societies it studies?

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IMMIGRANT GAMBLING IN FINLAND

• PERPETUAL CRENTSIL •

An anthropological study of gambling among immigrant groups in Finland can reveal much about how the society organizes its way of life in categories relevant for the economist, sociologist, political scientist and the historian. Anthropological studies of other aspects of immigrants' lives—remittance giving, socio-economic status, and development issues in origin countries—usually present immigrants as ethnographic subjects. These lives are situated in specific historical and social conditions that represent particular images based on certain cultural values in their native homelands and in the place of settlement. Immigrant gambling has every potential to add to this corpus of knowledge.

Scholars who have studied gambling in European societies and elsewhere have tended to focus on problem gambling, which they see as an individual rather than a social issue (Lalander 2006: 73); they also concentrate on indigenous populations (e.g., Orford and