

GAMBLING AND CONSUMPTION

THE HIDDEN VALUE OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

• RIITTA MATILAINEN •

Gambling is a consumption decision (e.g., Garvía 2007: 644; Casey 2008). Sociologist Emma Casey (2008: 3), who has studied British working-class women's experiences of the National lottery, points out that buying a lottery ticket is a very popular routine purchase with unique mass appeal. Nonetheless, gambling can still have a rather dubious image. Sociologist Colin Campbell (1998: 235, 238) describes the tendency of intellectual discussions of consumption to use a dichotomy of need and want. The former is viewed as 'a legitimate activity', because it satisfies what is necessary, whereas catering to 'non-essential' or 'superficial' desires is seen to be driven by 'ethically dubious motives'. The rhetoric of need has therefore dominated the study of consumption as well as the views of ordinary people. As gambling falls into the 'want' category it has had the unfortunate fate of having been regarded as something unnecessary and objectionable.

Furthermore, gambling has received surprisingly little attention both in anthropological and historical research worldwide considering its economic, social and cultural impact on societies, though sociologists and psychologists have been interested in compulsive gambling and moral objections to gambling. Most analyses of gambling behavior have focused on its psychological and economic interpretations and tend to regard it as a deviant and dangerous activity (Casey 2003: 245, 2008: 6–7). This all means that the experiential aspects of gambling as something other than a negative trait of human nature have been underrated in research.

However, a new school of culturally oriented gambling studies is expanding the field and the image of gambling and gamblers. Its views are the following: gambling is an important part of almost every contemporary society's social, cultural and economic life; gambling *per se* is not pathological or criminal, but a part of everyday life; gambling takes place in time and in space; gamblers make consumer decisions, and these choices must be treated as rational rather than irrational decisions; gender, class, age, and dwelling place must be taken into consideration with the help of, for example, ethnographic studies. The concept of experience is given a central place in many of these studies (see, e.g., Reith 1999; Casey 2003, 2008; Husz 2003, 2004; Garvía 2007; Marksbury 2009), and co-operation between anthropology and gambling studies is necessary to enhance these insights.

The introduction of the game of roulette in Finland in the 1960s and in the 1970s exemplifies how the concept of consumption can bring new dimensions to the fore in gambling studies. The case study demonstrates that a micro-historical study of a new legalized form of gambling, and of related discourses and practices in a particular context of change, offers a chance to analyze the Finns' changing consumer and leisure cultures (Matilainen 2010). Before the introduction of legal roulettes in the 1960s very few Finns had played the game. Due to images of luxurious casinos in Monte Carlo and continental Europe, and of roulette being an upper-class game played by Russian aristocrats, the

game had to be democratized without losing the exciting elements of luxury and exclusiveness. Roulette fitted poorly the 'tamed' image of Finnish gambling under the state's patronage.

Finland's Slot Machine Association, RAY, licensed to operate roulette, tested the game on board passenger ships traveling to West Germany in 1967, following the example elsewhere. As living standards in Finland rose, passenger ships increased in popularity and added to the Finns' liminal experiences with food, alcohol, shopping and sex. Onboard the passenger ships a new consumer culture was taking root. The low monetary risks involved in Finnish roulette assured that it had a purely entertaining character and guaranteed that RAY could not be accused of promoting and organizing a type of gambling where fortunes could be lost overnight. RAY continued the roulette trial period by placing the tables in upscale restaurants and nightclubs on the mainland in 1969. Ever since roulette has formed part of the Finnish bar and nightclub scene.

The introduction of roulette in a new town was an important media event. It was thought that roulette could increase the international attractiveness of Finnish cities and towns and that the country would finally open up and adopt a more Western European attitude toward leisure, entertainment and gambling. Roulette was marketed as a form of gambling especially suitable for middle and upper classes. Unlike in many other countries, women were allowed around the tables, both as croupiers and as customers. This was thought to soften prejudices against the game which some still considered to be a particularly vicious form of gambling. It is quite obvious that women served to increase to allure of the game and to attract men to the tables.

In a situation where the influence of the Soviet sphere was thoroughly felt, participation in roulette was one way to ensure that Finland and Finns were part of the Western world and could enjoy the pleasures offered by increasing consumption. Roulette became a significant symbol of an imagined Western European way of life and its imitation, strengthening the gambling Finns' identity-political orientation to the West. Geographers Pauliina Raento (2006) and Sami Moisio (2008) have both in their recent works made the same argument with other popular-cultural data (Finnish postage stamps and materials about the Finnish European Union membership debate, respectively). By introducing the concept of consumption to the study of roulette in Finland, a deeper and more theoretical understanding of this affiliation ensued, facilitating comparison between this particular case and other case studies.

Roulette in Finland illustrates anthropologist Per Binde's observation (2005a) that history and ethnography have shown that gambling varies greatly in different societies and different contexts, depending on the organization, social meanings and moralities of gambling. Binde's goal is to explain the ever-changing relationship between society and gambling by forming a reciprocity model of the variety in the form and morality of gambling. An understanding of the relationship between stability and change in history is needed to support such models. Furthermore, particularly interesting for anthropologists are questions concerning the transformative power of money in gambling, and rituals, beliefs and dreaming related to gambling. Adding these perspectives to contemporary anthropology is necessary because consumption is becoming a strong driving cultural force almost everywhere in the world. At the same time, organized, legalized and commercial gambling is spreading throughout the whole world at an unprecedented

pace—even though Binde (2005b: 22) has shown that gambling has not been a universal phenomenon known in, and practiced by, every culture. The collision and integration of local gambling and consumer cultures with the often global gambling operators and their aims is especially worth studying. This task requires knowledge of both traditional local gambling and consumer cultures and of global trends. As gambling marks status, difference and sometimes also disregard for social and cultural norms, it offers excellent possibilities for analyzing the social and cultural structures of different communities (e.g. Geertz 1972). A good way to study these phenomena is extensive ethnography and observation, which keeps in mind the value of various historical sources where they are available. Questions concerning time and contextualization need to be part of any good (anthropological) research. Without them our understanding of the question under study lacks scholarly credibility.

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