



### Gambling and Social Theory Part 1

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Gambling has had a long history characterized by periods of condemnation and widespread participation, sometimes exuberant. When David Downes and his colleagues remarked (in 1976) on the social scientific value of Erving Goffman's (1967) analysis of gambling and action in '[Where the Action Is](#)', they said the essay 'lifts gambling out of the moral abyss into which successive generations of commentators and reformers have consigned it and renders possible a consideration of its meaning which is freed from a priori association of a negative kind' ([Downes et al., 1976](#)). The implications of these comments would be that gambling could be analyzed, without moral condemnation, as a phenomenon in its own right.

It is tempting to say that, now, in general terms given widespread legalization over the last several decades, gambling is beyond condemnation. Goffman's own approach was to analyze gambling as

action: 'gambling is the prototype of action' (Goffman, 1967, p. 186). He wanted to demonstrate the appeal of action sociologically, and preserve its place in everyday life – over and against certain sociological approaches (e.g. Parsonian functionalism) that left no room for the attraction of risks, thrills, and economic orientations not committed to 'prudential coping'. That was then (the 1960s); this is now.

One of the issues I have had to address in my own thinking about gambling is the tension between my participation in certain types of gambling (poker, blackjack, sports betting and pools, lottery tickets, past visits to the race track), and the contemporary social organization of gambling in its various forms. [Fiona Nicoll \(2019\)](#) thematizes the issue of gambling researchers who don't gamble, and how this colours their attitudes toward gambling, or at least certain types of gambling, such as EGMs. For myself,

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gambling, and my father's family history in horse racing, formed the experiential backdrop for entering into gambling studies. My experiences gambling have informed my work. In this, I hold up Goffman as an academic-sociological mentor, who not only gambled in Nevada casinos, but also worked as a dealer. Clearly, he was committed to participant observation, and being close personally, and sociologically, to the action. To return to the tensions, a fair portion of my own work – situated in the Canadian context - has been critical of state/government involvement in gambling enterprises (noting that this does not mean support for widespread corporate-run gambling instead). I am guessing that other gambling researchers wrestle with their own tensions over the gambling phenomenon.

Condemnation of gambling persists in interesting ways. While 'problem gambling' research does not condemn gambling, it nevertheless residually participates in a discourse of problems related to gambling, even though it also has the political consequence in some versions of legitimating certain gambling forms that are deemed by others to be problematic. In these versions, where the focus is on the individual, the problematic gambling forms (games/technologies), and/or the social organization of gambling is non-problematic. Although 'problem gambling' research is conducted under the auspices of psychological approaches, a discourse of social problems related to gambling persists. Nicoll (2019) provides an extended discussion of the implications of this research for the gambling studies field, and how by its extent it shapes the field. Without rehearsing the points made in that discussion, I would add that my own view is that problem gambling research is not gambling studies. It is rather an extension or application of addiction research to gambling. In her discussion, Nicoll also analyzes the discourses that shape perspectives on EGM gamblers, making explicit a politics of taste that shapes public perceptions as well as researcher

perceptions. This analysis of the EGM gambler and moral-cultural judgement demonstrates that the freeing of the gambling phenomenon pointed to by 'Where the Action Is' is still to be played out.

Focusing on the social organization of gambling allows for the extra-individual dimensions and social factors, as well as the political forces, that shape gambling offerings: the state and policy, the gambling industry, marketing and processes of gambling commodification, the public health agencies and discourses, media representations and advertising, etc. However, gambling can get lost here too. The risk being that insofar as power is an implicit if not explicit dimension of the analysis, the gambling actor gets lost, or can only be envisioned as an object of power. It is interesting that the gambler cannot appear as a commitment or as a social type. Here I am not referring to the 'problem gambler' as a particular figure, but rather the social actor committed to gambling as a course of social action. This is indeed strange when one considers the pecuniary interest of those who represent the 'house' (states, governments, and private industry) and benefit financially from widespread commercial gambling opportunities. But for the citizen who is encouraged to gamble by private industry or governments, gambling is, or should be oriented to as 'entertainment'. This disavowal of gambling is shored up in the responsible gambling literature (e.g. ['gambling is not a way to make money'](#)). Incidentally, why not governmentalities of entertainment or fun?

These discursive shapings of contemporary gambling make some sense, or at any rate are to be expected, given the large-scale expansion of gambling in the last three or four decades, as gambling is made into legitimate business in the consumer society. However, the disavowal of the gambler makes less sense in relation to the opportunities for action in the current financialized economy, where bets of all kinds take place. This is not to say that the average person is a gambler (although the ['risk society'](#)

interpellates them into various forms of risk and risk-taking); it is to say that that gambling is a mode of social action that needs to be grasped beyond its reductionistic framings (entertainment, pathology, responsibility). Or, we could say that these framings are forms of usage (cultural meanings), through which contemporary gambling appears and is collectively represented. The analysis of these usages, rather than their taken-for-granted status, is what is required.

Critical Gambling Studies (CGS) will be welcomed by gambling studies researchers insofar as it offers a venue to move beyond the heretofore dominant and conventional approaches to the subject matter found in the established journals. I am in agreement with [Egerer et al. in their article](#) in the inaugural issue of CGS that sociological theory has remained marginal in gambling research at large. [This is not a new point](#), but deserves reiteration.

With this in mind, I outline some theoretical traditions that are still largely untapped resources for gambling studies. Most of these theorists are from sociology, although in some cases they cross over into anthropology and philosophy. The inaugural issue of CGS features articles utilizing the sociological perspectives of Erving Goffman and Niklas Luhmann. It is refreshing to see a piece on the way in which Luhmann's systems theory can inform gambling studies. The authors mention two other Luhmann-related sources in their paper, and I would add that for researchers interested in Luhmann, Urs Stäheli's book [Spectacular Speculation](#) (2013) also uses systems theory to analyze the popular dimensions of contemporary markets, and the place of gambling in market societies.

Goffman, of course, is well-known to gambling researchers for 'Where the Action Is'. Along with what can be drawn from in this piece, his various sociological approaches – dramaturgical, strategic/game theoretic, frame analytic – can be

called upon to analyze the interactive dimensions of gambling activity, and the opportunity is there for those who want to take up Goffmanian approaches to online/virtual gambling. Goffman was strongly influenced in his work by classical sociological theorist Emile Durkheim. With the exception of Georg Simmel's in-passing comments on gambling, and Thorstein Veblen's more extended discussion, classical theory (including Marx, Weber, and Mead as well) has next to nothing to say about gambling. However, classical theory offers rich theoretical resources for the analysis of gambling, and certainly in the case of Durkheim, and to some extent Marx, has informed more contemporary theoretical approaches that take up the topic. In the case of Marx, in critical cultural theory there is Walter Benjamin, who is one of the first to take up the particular expression and place of gambling in modernity (e.g. in [The Arcades Project](#)).

Durkheim has bequeathed an impressive heritage, in no small part through the work of his nephew Marcel Mauss (e.g. *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*), whose work has gone on to influence Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and Jean Baudrillard. Caillois is known for his influential work [Man, Play, and Games](#). While Bataille and Baudrillard have both discussed gambling in their work, their rich analyses leave a veritable feast of ideas and concepts for gambling analysis. Note the increased use of game simulations in the (post-) modern casino. The analysis of online gambling could also draw from Baudrillard's work. As gambling games (as well as venues) are, and further become standardized products, Baudrillard's idea of the 'code' could find new objects of application.

My own forays into the voluminous work of Max Weber for signs of 'gambling' have revealed scant references. However, his work, I believe, remains one of the great untapped treasure troves for gambling analysis. I have provided a brief discussion of the importance of his conception of social action in

[‘Where Isn’t the Action?’](#) in the inaugural edition of CGS. But his applicability is potentially wide-ranging: from his methodological emphasis on “cultural significance” and his powerful theorization of “rationalization,” to his important analyses of social stratification and inequality, to his theorization of the relationship of (religious) ethics to social action, and the changing contours of characterology (such as we find in *The Protestant Ethic* and *The Spirit of Capitalism*).

Strongly influenced by Max Weber, and by a variety of sociological, anthropological, and philosophical traditions is the work of [Pierre Bourdieu](#). Like Weber, Bourdieu’s corpus provides great opportunity for gambling studies: fields (field theory), forms of capital, habitus, symbolic violence - these concepts are ripe for gambling research, particularly as legal, commercial gambling is and continues to become a field, intersecting with other fields (e.g. the state, policy, economy, etc.) both nationally and internationally.

There is also the potential for particular philosophical traditions to inform gambling studies. I will note one that has had an influence on interpretive sociology: phenomenology. Phenomenology (i.e. in the work of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, and others) provides the opportunity to explore the meaning and lived experience of gambling, with the sociological formulation of lived experience taken up in the work

of Alfred Schutz and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Phenomenologies of gambling are virtually non-existent: while Goffman’s analysis of action is sociological, it nevertheless offers something close to a phenomenology in its attention to the meaning and significance of action. Phenomenological approaches can also help clarify topics related to gambling by addressing the taken-for-granted understandings of these topics: for example, since all gambling involves some form of staking, the meaning of stakes and staking could be formulated. What is a stake? What am I doing when staking?

There are no doubt many contemporary social theories that could be indicated here - a topic for a later blog - but my intent has been to show that even when considering classical theoretical traditions and their contemporary offspring, there is much that gambling studies can draw from.

## References

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