



'The Holy Game of Poker': Gambling, Religion and Neoliberalism

*You hate to see another tired man
Lay down his hand like he was giving up
the holy game of Poker
-Leonard Cohen*

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The title for this blog post is taken from Leonard Cohen's song "[The Stranger](#)", about a gambler who places his faith in Poker and follows a chance-led trajectory through train stations and women's lives. With his attention focused on the game, the stranger watches 'for the card that is so high and wild, he'll never need to deal another'. The seeming profundity contained in these lines—the idea of finding *the* wild card that transcends the need for any other—raises a number of questions - at least to my mind. Therefore, in what follows, I will discuss the nature of believing in the divinity of a high card, what it means to invest Poker with holiness, and why would one look to gambling for spiritual redemption.

If one may begin to think about the questions raised in one popular song by referencing yet another, I am reminded here as well of the lyrics to Sting's "[Shape of My Heart](#)", which similarly suggests a belief in the occult power of cards. The actor in this song is not a gambler, but a mystic who 'deals the cards as a meditation [...] to find the answer, the sacred geometry of chance, the hidden law of a probable

outcome', and thus to answer deep, metaphysical questions. These lines, like those from Cohen's "Stranger", express an abiding impression, disseminated through various forms of culture, that cards are somehow sacred or at least connected to the universe in such a way as to be capable of unlocking deep truths. This common thread in our culture carries a rich and colourful history with which I will begin, as a means of exploring a number of beliefs or superstitions that circulate with cards, and that perhaps partially explain Cohen's lyrics about the 'holy game of Poker'. My account of cards' possible origins will also connect with the history of Poker—a distinctly American game—in an endeavour here again to understand why a popular song about gambling and cards might also contain a meditation on eternity and the sacred.

A Brief (Hi)story of Cards

In the 18th century, Egyptologist [Court de Gébelin](#) penned *Du Jeu des Tarots*, a colourful, imaginative and almost entirely intuitive history of playing cards, in which he traces their origins back to ancient Egypt.

Although some card researchers now refer to this vivid origin story as the greatest hoax in history while advancing their own theories and conjectures, de Gébelin's fictional account inspired many card historians who came after him and who, accepting his account, also saw an immediate kinship between playing and tarot cards, as well as ritual, mysticism, and divinity.¹

One such writer was [Mrs. John King van Rensselaer](#), a New York historian who wrote both *The Devil's Picture Books* (1908), and *Prophetical, Educational, and Playing Cards* (1912) based on Court de Gébelin's theories. She argued that cards were originally the leaves of a book dedicated to the worship of Thoth, the Egyptian god of death, who devised a method for transcribing language as a system of signs. By placing signs representing the Egyptian gods, along with virtues and vices on the walls of temples dedicated to Thoth's worship, his priests could cast rods on altars at the centre of his temples, and then interpret the random combination of the signs indicated by the rods.

With the invention of parchment, Thoth's priests supposedly copied down the temple hieroglyphs, and bound them as pages into books that first entered Italy and Spain late in the 13th century. Thoth's books spread rapidly across Europe, disseminated by Romani, crusaders and traders, who separated the pages and played games with them. By the 15th century, symbols on the cards had been adapted to local custom and playing with the descendants of the leaves of that ancient book had become a familiar activity, as well as a frequent subject of painting and

printing. Moreover, while this exotic amusement adapted readily to local custom, cards' supposed mystic origins may be traced back to the deck of 52, an innovation of European printers that facilitated play by reducing the number of cards from 74 or 78, to the number of weeks in a year. In the now standard deck, the four suits are also thought to represent the four seasons, the thirteen cards in each suit the lunar cycles, and the numeric value of the deck added together is 364, the Joker makes it 365, the number of days in a year. Indeed, in keeping with the lore and air of great significance that surrounds playing cards, they have been known by various colourful names over the centuries such as 'The Bible of the Gypsies,' 'The Tablets of Fate,' 'The Register of Souls' and 'The Great Book of Thoth Hermes' (Morley, 1989, pp. 18, 19). Hoax or no hoax then, de Gébelin's story of cards' origins in the book of Thoth, taken apart and used as cards in games by Europeans in the 13th century, has imparted an aura of mysticism and that continues to surround these familiar randomizers today.²

In the New World

In [Facts and Speculations on the Origin and History of Playing Cards](#) (1848), Andrew Chatto claimed that cards, which by 1492 had already spread throughout Europe, had reached the American continent with Columbus and his men, who played with them on their long sea voyages. Like many things that migrated to the American continent, cards and card games developed into a hybrid of Indigenous practices and imported European ones. In this case, the first European settlers encountered Indigenous peoples who were also avid gamblers and played many games involving 52 randomizers of various

¹ See [Dummett](#) (1981) and Sosteric (2014, esp. pp. 364-5), both of whom have argued that de Gébelin's history of cards is entirely fictional. The factuality or fictionality of de Gébelin's account is not important here. Rather, the cultural impact of *De Jeu des Tarots* is at issue. See also Penco (2013, pp. 146-7).

² For more on the inhering aura of ritual and spirituality that surrounds many kinds of toys and games as well as cards, see Giorgio Agamben's *Infancy and History: The*

Destruction of Experience (1978/93), and Huizinga (1955), in particular chapter one on "The Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon", pp. 1-28. Cf. Stewart Culin on Indigenous games of North America, when he writes that he discovered 'manifest relations' between 'dice game(s) and most of the other games' played by the people he studied 'which exists between the gaming implements and many ceremonial appliances' (1992, p. 32).

description. As one 17th-century observer remarked, 'the Indians [sic] use a game upon rushes *much like primero*' and in 1895 the *San Francisco Examiner* reported a gambling game played by the Puyallup Indians with 52 wood chips in which 'the shuffler handles the chips rapidly, *like an experienced faro dealer*,' or manipulates them like 'a *three card monte dealer*' (Chavetz 1960, p. 10; Culin 1992, p. 251, my emphasis).³

More importantly, according to popular chronicler of gambling in the US, Henry Chafetz '[g]ambling has run through our history since the first settlers staked their claims in the New World and took the land away from the Indians [sic] who were avid gamblers themselves' (1960, p. 3). Hence, the two (implicit or explicit) belief systems merged in playing cards and gambling games that were later, as Stewart Culin claims, 'borrowed by the Indians [sic] from the whites' (1992, p. 32). As one historian has remarked, '(t)here is a certain justice in the fact that today, all the way from the rural towns of New York to the urban centers of New Mexico, whites find themselves spending large sums of money in reservation bingo parlours' and casinos (Tedlock quoted in Culin 1992, p. 24).

By the 1820s, Poker, a quintessentially American hybrid, had emerged from a blend of frontier mentality, old world gambling, and perhaps unacknowledged Indigenous games. It was in the saloons of New Orleans that 'Primero, Brag, Bouillotte, Poch and Poque' came together in Poker, which was destined to become 'America's national card game' (Parlett 1992, pp. 208, 209). This is significant because national card games are, as David

Parlett has noted, 'essentially products of folk art,' and bear deep connections with the people who created them, such as the folk who contributed to Poker's heritage as *the American game* (Parlett 1991, p. 7). By extension, if Poker is somehow the distilled essence of the people who created both the game and the country in which it is played, it is equally noteworthy that American culture celebrates gambling in centres like Las Vegas, while historically handling investment and speculation in bucket shops in the early days, and the contemporary financial market which now seems to take precedence over the economy in the US. According to John Findlay, gambling and entrepreneurship are closely connected in the culture and mentality of the USA because, 'laws designed to check [professional gamblers] were difficult to enforce, and the entrepreneurial ethos [...] encouraged all forms of speculation' (1986, p. 43).

To put it somewhat differently, '[t]he first British colonization of America was [...] a business venture undertaken by a group of stockholders [...namely] the Puritans who bought all the stock of the Plymouth Company in 1660, and moved the charter to America, thereby turning a commercial company into a self-governing colony' (Ludén and Srigley 1992, pp. 87-88). This is to say that the colony was managed as a joint stock company by Puritans, a group of settlers who were also exercising their newfound freedom to practice a religion for which they had been expelled from England. It is this combination of religiosity and entrepreneurial spirit that has lent the American political economy its distinctive stamp and this, combined with the incessant threat of various forms of natural disaster,

³ Anthropologists and ethnographers were and are not neutral observers. They are also part of the colonial processes that brought them to study those constituted as otherness, often with the goal of distinguishing indigenous peoples as 'primitive' against a notion of 'modernity' that associated Europeans with 'civilization' and historical progress.

That said, however, Stewart Culin's 1907 *Games of the North American Indians*, appears to have no other purpose beyond recording and cataloguing the games that Culin began working on in 1891 for the Columbian Exposition of Chicago. His work was later expanded following a trip made in 1900 through "Indian reservations", and further trips and visits made annually from 1901-05.

have made Americans as Kevin Rozario (2007) has argued, a 'people of calamity'. Americans are a fervently religious folk whose legacy is replete with fires, floods, earthquakes, epidemics, and attacks which, according to Rozario, they have learned to embrace as divine providence. Under the guiding lights of 17th-century men of God like [Increase Mather](#), Puritan settlers were enjoined to understand disaster as a contribution 'to urban and economic expansion,' which gave rise to 'the concept of creative destruction that would come to govern capitalist views of development over the following centuries' (Rozario 2007, p. 33).

Although Puritans certainly did not promote gambling, the pursuit of fortune was entirely instinctive and 'the risk taking inherent to the lotteries and gaming so common in Jamestown, paralleled the chance undertaken in the larger enterprise of [crossing] the Atlantic into a new continent' (Findlay 1986, p. 15). Much of this colonial enterprise was sponsored by lotteries at the behest of the crown, sometimes financed with playing card money, and these collective gambles and speculations combined underwrote the settlers' propensity to take risks.⁴ Amplified perhaps by the Puritan belief that violent random events and natural disasters are demonstrations of divine providence, the result is a uniquely American religion built on individuality and risk taking, and reinforced by blind faith. For centuries now, Americans have zealously taken [Pascal's wager](#), celebrating the power of chance to reveal sudden truths as manifestations of God's will. It is this animistic and fundamental faith in chance that led John Findlay to poetically characterize Americans as 'people of chance'.

⁴ On playing card money, see: <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/playing-card-money>

⁵ The relationship between American capitalism as led by the current market-believer president and Evangelicals in

Moreover, like Poker, which developed out of the rules of European games influenced by Indigenous games, the United States proved fertile ground for fanatical one-off religions, such as various Evangelical sects, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists. Fueled by rugged individualism, the settler mentality had turned the United States into a 'religion-mad country' of some two hundred and fifty sects by the time Harold Bloom published *The American Religion* in 1992 (p. 37). These are oddly secular faiths that sprung up though American-style capitalism with its reliance on speculation, and its fondness for gambling.⁵ Indeed, Americans are reminded daily of their abiding faith in speculation and commerce, and the role their country has played in the migration of spirituality from the protestant ethic into capitalism, by their dollar bill which bears the motto 'In God We Trust'.

In the 19th century, American sociologist Thorstein Veblen identified a number of predilections and pastimes which he believed the leisure classes had inherited from barbarian and feudal societies devoted to warfare. 'The gambling propensity', observed Veblen, 'is another subsidiary trait of the barbarian temperament [...] characterized by the animistic apprehension of things' (2009, pp. 276-277). For animists, 'an agency which partakes of the attributes of personality [...] somewhat arbitrarily influence[s] the outcome of any enterprise', and behaves as 'an inscrutable preternatural agency' (p.280). This kind of 'anthropomorphic personification' may be observed anywhere in Vegas, where a fellow casino patron once graciously offered me her one-armed bandit because she thought that, after extended play, the machine was 'on to' her.

the USA, is particularly evident in these Christians' bizarrely transactional relationship with Donald Trump, whereby all manner of shenanigans with porn stars, friendships with pederasts and abuse of children are tolerable if abortion is illegal and the Dow-Jones rises.

In his chapter on “The Belief in Luck”, Veblen explained that his argument was primarily concerned with the economy, and that, when he was writing, this belief was considered ‘incompatible with the requirements of the modern industrial process’ because like gambling, this belief was also ‘a hindrance to the fullest efficiency of the collective economic life’ (2009, p.277). He feared ‘the economic drawbacks of animism’ in a ‘population with an animistic turn [...] as a whole’ which may have ‘consequences more far-reaching under the modern system of large industry’ (p. 283). But things, of course, have changed since Veblen was writing: we live in a (post)postmodern, post-industrial economy, which has tended to progressive dematerialization for several decades now, and wherein gambling—gaming as it is now called—has become a respectable, key industry with magical thinking and the belief in luck greasing the wheels of fortune.

The link I am now proposing between magical thinking and finance has been researched and discussed by Knorr Cetina and Brugger (2000) in “The Market as an Object of Attachment”, in their effort to understand how traders engage with finance. In the current era of what they call ‘postsocial relations’, Knorr Cetina and Brugger identify a tendency to engage in “‘object relations’ with non-human things’ among the group of Wall Street traders they studied (2000, p. 143). Of those they interviewed, many described the financial market as a ‘greater being’, and their professional role as finding out what is ‘on its mind’. One trader described the market as a kind of ‘third thing’, a ‘being [that] is the foreign exchange market’. ‘We are the sum of its parts, or it is a sum of its parts’, he explains, a sort of cosmic meta-being on whose behaviour one continually gambles (pp. 149, 151).

Moreover, whereas some Americans cleave to television evangelists, and traders listen to the greater being of the foreign exchange market, still others turn to the self-help industries, or place their

faith in a body of ponderous preternatural agencies and conspiracy theories. This is why, according to Toby Miller in his article “Creepy Christianity and September 11”, the USA is a nation:

[...] where the vast majority attests to the existence of a devil and individuated angels; 45% of people think aliens have visited Earth; three times more people think there are ghosts than [...] a quarter century ago; and 84% say there is a posthumous survival of the soul. (2008, p. 118)

From the above, I would conclude that in a country where gambling was once prophylactically isolated on riverboats and in towns like Vegas, but is now available virtually anywhere, many may also put their faith in the ‘sacred geometry of chance’ that drives the ‘holy game of Poker’ or some similar god game. Las Vegas is not only a place to gamble and get married, it has also become a sort of a sacred place out in the desert where one goes for life changing experiences and a new breed of spirituality. According to Fuat Firat, people go to Vegas ‘seek[ing] varied and alternative/alternating experiences in trying to extract meanings of life in the present [...] because they have lost their faith’ (2001, p. 113).

In the Movies

One compelling example of what I am endeavouring to explain is [Leaving Las Vegas](#) (1995), a film made in the turbulent market years of the 1990s, in which Ben (Nicolas Cage) goes to Vegas to drink himself to death. In the process Ben has a spiritual epiphany in the arms of a prostitute named Sera (Elisabeth Shue) who, in the confessional mode of the film, also attests to a life-changing experience in the presence of his death. Notably, Ben and Sera hope for, and believe in, redemption through the discovery of the logic that drives the system; a sort of invisible hand which would balance their habits—how much to gamble, how much to drink—and reduce the

instability of their lives in America's postmodern gambling capital.

Both the novel and the film adaptation are a cry for redemption in the form of authentic experience which one finds, paradoxically enough in Las Vegas, the epicentre of the fake and the simulacrum. In other words, at the heart of the late-capitalist experience economy, Ben and Sera seek some kind of post-religious salvation, repeatedly hinted at in the film through the religious aura that director Mike Figgis carefully created around Elisabeth Shue. For example, in the confessional scenes in which Ben's 'angel' as he calls her, relates her moment of epiphany, Shue is framed by lilies, while the cross she wears is constantly in view – likewise when she is filmed hooking on the Vegas Strip framed by extras dressed as nuns. In sum, the film consistently equates religion with gambling and seems to suggest that one should look to the neon nightmare of Las Vegas in order to retrieve one's faith through the various authentic, 'holy' engagements with chance on offer deep in the desert.

The real, late-capitalist world in which *Leaving Las Vegas* was written and later adapted for film also contains New York and, presumably, the traders or their like whom Knorr-Cetina and Bruggé interviewed. As noted above, they gave voice to an animistic view of the market as a 'greater being', and this is commonly reiterated by TV market reporters who talk about the market in [anthropomorphic terms](#) as being 'angry', 'not responding', and so on. In other words, many of the American tendencies to which I have been referring since the outset of this essay have penetrated deep into American, and now arguably global, culture, and are disseminated on numerous media platforms, such as film, TV, video games, as well as various branches of the casino industries.

Texas Hold 'em, which appears regularly in Hollywood film has also become an integral part of both American and global culture, as well as an eloquent expression of postmodernity and numerous aspects of my argument thus far. Where the [Bond](#) franchise is concerned, the staging of Texas Hold 'em as the centerpiece of *Casino Royale's* pivotal Poker scene – rather than Baccarat as in the novel - is particularly interesting, given the brand's characteristic imperative to project 'nowness', and reflect the contemporary political and economic contexts in which the films are made.⁶ In the 2006 film, 007 takes on international terrorists in a lush casino in Montenegro, in a game named for the 28th State, thus highlighting the global impact of American culture and ideology in the age of neoliberalism. The filmmakers reportedly chose the game largely for its aesthetic appeal, and of course, in the decade preceding the film's production, Poker events were regularly broadcast and bolstered by the multi-billion on-line gambling industries that helped to make Texas Hold 'em a worldwide phenomenon as well as a familiar aesthetic.

That the makers consciously chose to substitute Texas Hold 'em for Baccarat in adapting of Fleming's *Casino Royale* (1953), is not an insignificant detail for a number of other reasons as well. First, Baccarat is an older, explicitly financial game led by a banker and in the novel, the crowd playing Baccarat is in fact composed of 'bankers and businessmen' – the sort of people Fleming expected to find in a casino in at the time of writing in the 1950s (p. 012). His inclusion of a 'Jamaican plantocrat whose father had made his pile in tobacco and sugar and whose son chose to play it away on the stock market and in casinos' further implies that when Fleming was writing, the words 'stock market' and 'casino' could be comfortably uttered in the same breath, if not equated with each other (p. 021).

⁶ On the importance of "now-ness" for the Bond franchise, see also Goggin (2020).

However, while in Fleming's text *Baccarat* is a signifier of the post-war, western economy as it was developing an increased propensity to behave like a casino, the movie represents Texas Hold 'em as *itself* integral to the global casino economy, the stakes of the game being literally the global market. That Texas Hold 'em is a no-limit game, heightens its appropriateness as a signifier of global markets given that both are ostensibly limitless. At the same time, this Poker variant is often referred to as a 'thinking man's game', contributing to the illusion that it is more manageable and predictable than other forms of gambling in the same way that derivatives were conceived as a means of managing money and hedging against risk.⁷ The presence of Texas Hold 'em in the film suggests that we are living in a casino economy that makes Susan Strange's predictions in *Casino Capitalism* (1986) look tame; that this economy is both global and culturally American; and that it is based on chance and dissimulation even though we like to believe that both the game and the market are about skill and information. Indeed, *Casino Royale* (2006) stresses the relationship between speculation, the market, and gambling, by portraying global markets as flowing directly into the proceeds on the green felt, where it is wagered against global terrorism, supposedly in order to securitize the global economy.

More importantly Texas Hold 'em, when played in an opulent 19th-century European casino as in this film, presents a striking hybrid of cultures and styles, while there is also a political pay-off to injecting an American game into a European, old-world setting. Whereas Fleming wrote that there were 'good Americans' in the casino, who 'were fine people and [...] most of them seemed to come from Texas' (p.

047), the film's plot devolves from a game that hails from Texas, and was created at a time when a Texan was in the White House. While the connection might seem somewhat gratuitous, I mean to imply that the substitution of Texas Hold 'em for *Baccarat* from novel to film is an indication Americans are now dictating house culture even in Europe, and indeed around the globe. Hence, in the casinos of Montenegro everyone plays American Poker with Texas rules, and in Mbale, Uganda, where the plot picks up after the opening credits, a child soldier plays an American pinball machine - evidence that US culture has insinuated itself there as well.

In Ian Fleming's 1950s world moreover, gambling and politics go hand in hand, as he explains when he writes that the events in Bond's world are predicated on the 'impartiality of the roulette ball and of the playing cards', and futures are decided on the 'grass-green baize battlefield' of the card table (pp. 042, 070). For Fleming, one of the consequences of a world run on gambler's luck is that 'the villains and heroes get all mixed up' (p. 135) until Bond saves the day and the good and the bad become distinguishable from one another once again. On the other hand, as a central fictional device in the film, Texas Hold 'em ratchets up the stakes, reflecting the logic of full-blown, very late capitalism, in a world where no one claims that anything remotely like a Smithian 'invisible hand' morally regulates the market, and where everyone - good or bad - is in bed with everyone else. In a world where the Poker logic derives from a Texan variant that deceptively claims to be rational while its ultimate driver is still chance, the confused and twisted logic of this late postmodern film, as well as that of our world, should come as no surprise.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of varieties of Poker and how the evolution of Poker parallels 'the development market-immanent mechanisms for the determination of exchange value in capitalist society', see Bjerg (2011), especially "The History of Poker" (pp. 203-224, here p. 208). See also LiPuma (2017) who argues that Texas Hold 'em is the

defining Poker genre of our time, because both Texas Hold 'em and the market rely on a speculative reading of the present moment that becomes enfolded 'within a social habitus', foregrounding speculation 'th[r]ough a new social imaginary' that is constitutive of what he calls 'Poker nation' (pp. 256-7).

Conclusion

In this post, I have discussed Poker as the expression of a distinctly American variety of magical thinking, and faith, as well as a kind of God game that bears the imprint of American ideology and a population that Veblen thought to be invested with a propensity to animistic behaviours. I have also suggested that, given the religious overtones that still cling to cards and gambling as some kind of subtle clue to our collective destinies, the enormous popularity of games like Texas Hold 'em should be taken seriously. Indeed, if I am correct in reading this strain of Poker as an expression of American-style neoliberal spirituality in a post-Christian, secularized era, we would do well to pay attention to the next Poker variant that takes Vegas, and the world, by storm.

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