

The Chronicle Review

October 12, 2007

What We Don't Know About Gambling, but Should

By ALAN WOLFE

"It should not be all that difficult," I told the prominent sociologist with whom I was speaking. "All I want from you is an analysis of available literature."

My request, or so I thought, seemed reasonable enough. I was asking about research on the effects of gambling on the American family. One would be hard pressed to overestimate the role of gambling in America today. In 2005 the American Gaming Association estimated total revenue from gambling at \$84.65-billion for the year. One sector of the industry, American Indian casinos, accounted for \$22.62-billion, and state lotteries in Massachusetts, California, and Connecticut have brought \$4.4-billion, \$3.6-billion, and \$970-million a year, respectively. While some people who travel to places like the Foxwoods Resort Casino in Connecticut (advertised as the world's largest casino) or spend their time filling in the NCAA tournament brackets are single, most of them, like most Americans, have family ties. Finding out the effects of a family member's spending money that might otherwise go to children or a spouse seemed a perfect fit for a conference I was organizing on "Gambling and the American Moral Landscape."

"No immediate data come to mind," my sociologist friend responded. "Let me check and get back to you." A week later, he wrote to say that, as intrigued as he was, he could find no hard figures on the subject and had to decline my offer to speak at the conference. I then contacted another well-known family sociologist, who told me the same thing. Finally I located a third well-regarded expert in the field who felt confident he could address the issue based upon data in widely disparate sources.

And so began my introduction to a project I consider as important as any in which I have engaged. Few subjects are more pressing than the role of gambling in American life, yet academic attention paid to it is uneven at best.

Not that long ago, legal gambling was confined to one state, Nevada, which, along the way, had developed a reputation as the place to get divorced or buy sex; things forbidden everywhere else were permitted there. We usually think of taboos as deeply entrenched, separating the dirty from the clean, yet not only are Las Vegas and other Nevada cities now among the fastest growing in the United States, but the industry associated with their once unseemly nightlife is featured on more cable-television stations than one can count.

Gambling, moreover, has taken root in a country with a Puritan background that is to this day marked by public religiosity. Once upon a time, religious figures were second to none in their condemnation of gambling: Billy Sunday, the prototypical right-wing revivalist, denounced it in his sermons in the early 20th century, while Walter Rauschenbusch, the left-wing founder of the Social Gospel, called it "the vice of the savage." Yet in contemporary America, not only are religious figures generally quiet on the issue, but some of them, like the *The Book of Virtues* author William J. Bennett, have themselves been gamblers, while others — one thinks of Ralph Reed, the former executive director of the Christian Coalition — have been implicated in efforts to charge Indian tribes exorbitant fees for lobbying on behalf of the American Indian gaming industry.

It would be relatively easy to conclude that gambling has become so prominent in American life because we have become a hedonistic country in which anything goes. But as the Rev. Richard McGowan, a Jesuit priest and gambling expert at Boston College, reminded me, 30 years ago gambling was considered a sin while smoking was fashionable, whereas today the reverse is true. We continue to be deeply puritanical in some aspects of our culture while decidedly libertarian in others; at a time when we see debates about hate speech, witness campaigns by feminists against pornography, and hear politicians speak about zero tolerance for under-age drinking or sexual misconduct, gambling is on the rise. It resonates with the permissive rather than the prohibitive side of our culture.

For that reason, at least in part, gambling has not generated substantial political opposition. Whenever people on one side of a political issue mobilize, people on the other side generally countermobilize; that has happened in recent years on issues ranging from abortion to gay rights. But the growth in gaming has not produced an anti-gambling movement. Republican conservatives who believe that we can regulate morality tend to be sympathetic toward business, and gambling is big business indeed. Democrats who distrust business not only tend to be laissez-faire with respect to moral issues, but also have ambitious plans to spend any revenues that gambling might bring in, usually for education. Observing gambling in America is like listening to one hand clapping; there is no right and left.

Gambling is also intimately tied up with our complicated history of race. After a relatively obscure U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1987, *California v. Cabazon Band of Mission Indians*, Indian tribes were allowed to operate casinos, fueling the spread of gambling on the one hand while enriching leaders of one of the poorest minority groups in America on the other. Meanwhile, as scholars at the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia have shown, state lotteries, which are increasingly relied upon to provide funds for public education that might benefit inner-city African-Americans, amount to a regressive tax on the poor. Gambling crosses all racial and ethnic lines in America; everyone gambles. But it can also be viewed as a way that income is redistributed by race and class.

And then there is Internet gambling, an almost \$6-billion industry in 2005 and surely a far larger one now. If the Internet had not existed, poker players would have found a way to invent it. Gambling has always involved a certain amount of role-playing and theater; you could be Willy Loman at home but anything you imagined yourself in Las Vegas. Now you do not need to travel to Nevada to assume a new identity. Nor do you even need to come face to face with other people. The Internet provides a 24/7 way, generally immune from any effective regulation, to try your luck. P.T. Barnum is reputed to have said that there is a sucker born every minute. In the age of the Internet, there is a gambler born every millisecond.

The questions posed by the rise of gambling roll on and on. Why have Roman Catholics historically been more reluctant to view gambling as a sin than Protestants — but then again, why have even Protestants opted to raise money through bingo? Are people who gamble responsible for the consequences of their own behavior, or is gambling evidence of an addiction? Why are poker tournaments and lotteries considered gambling, but investing in the stock market or real estate is not? Are we really witnessing something new here, or have Americans always been gamblers? Is gambling more harmful to women than men, and therefore a feminist issue? Is gambling rational? Is it glamorous? What does the popularity of gambling say about American attitudes toward thrift, and if American views of thrift are changing, what implications follow for the study of American values? Are younger people more or less attracted to gambling than their elders? *Cui bono?*

The sociology of family life is not the only academic field that has paid insufficient attention to gambling. Despite the prevalence of lotteries and other forms of gambling in the inner city, I could find no ethnographic research exploring why poor people are attracted to situations where the odds are against them to such a degree. Nor is there much comparative work dealing with gambling; some countries in

Europe have more gaming than others, and it would be fascinating to learn whether any of their experiences are similar to those in the United States. Yet despite such gaps, a surprising number of academic fields are beginning to develop a strong interest in gambling.

Because it has become such a huge industry, gambling is an obvious subject for economic studies. At least two researchers — Robert Goodman, in *The Luck Business: The Devastating Consequences and Broken Promises of America's Gambling Explosion* (Free Press, 1995), and Earl L. Grinols, in *Gambling in America: Costs and Benefits* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) — have concluded that once all the costs and benefits are added up, gambling may not be as profitable to state treasuries as those who support it insist. But more than costs and benefits are involved. The huge public popularity of books like *Freakonomics*, which demonstrates the important insights offered by behavioral economics, has led some economists and other scholars to use those empirical data we call "bets" to analyze more carefully why people take risks and whether they are rational when they do so.

Now that so many states rely on revenues generated from gaming as an alternative to higher taxation, political scientists have an obvious concern with gambling as well. People may not like to pay taxes, but taxation represents an investment by the entire community in programs undertaken in the name of all. But if public treasuries grow only when citizens can be induced to part with private funds, everyone no longer has an equal stake in what government does; because they do not, some of the most basic ideas we have about citizenship and accountability may have to be changed. The politics of gambling raises fundamental questions, not only about power, but about the nature of democracy itself. The subject of gambling is not as prominent in political science as I believe it should be, but books have begun to appear on the subject, including *How the South Joined the Gambling Nation: The Politics of State Policy Innovation*, just out from Louisiana State University Press, by the political scientists Michael Nelson and John Lyman Mason.

We generally think — indeed I just implied — that gambling represents a voluntary choice. But does it? If gambling can be an addiction, as many psychologists claim, then those interested in how the mind works will be interested in it. Gambling touches on a number of issues raised by cognitive psychologists and philosophers of the mind. How do gamblers make decisions? Do they possess autonomy? Are they responsible for their actions? The social scientist Mikal J. Aasved has embarked on a multivolume overview of research on those questions, and a somewhat dated review of the literature can be found in Michael B. Walter's *The Psychology of Gambling* (Butterworth Heinemann, 1995). As those works make clear, gambling also overlaps with the work of mental-health researchers, especially when one considers whether or not gamblers are prone to depression and violent behavior. Many Americans gamble responsibly, but few commentators doubt that there are also "problem gamblers."

There may have been a time when gambling was studied primarily in courses dealing with "deviant" behavior, but it is difficult to view something as abnormal when a large part of the country appears to be doing it. Perhaps psychologists should study not why so many people gamble but why so many do not. The *Journal of Gambling Studies* has taken the lead in providing an interdisciplinary forum to explore the range of gambling behavior.

Nor does academic interest in gambling stop with the social sciences. Theology and religious studies have an interest in the subject, but not for the obvious reason. It is true that many religions once considered gambling sinful, but it is also true that one of the most famous justifications for the existence of God, the one offered by the French philosopher Blaise Pascal, is based upon a wager: If we bet that God exists and are proven correct, we gain eternity, but if we bet that he exists and lose, we gain nothing. Religion's relationship with gambling is a complex one since, not knowing what will happen to us after we die, we are in roughly the same position as a poker player who does not know what cards his opponent holds. Do

religion and gambling both flourish wherever uncertainty exists? That, it seems to me, is a worthwhile question for scholars to ponder.

Gambling features in the works of Dickens, Trollope, Thackeray, Melville, and Twain, let alone Ian Fleming and Frederick and Steven Barthelme, who talked about gambling and their legal troubles in their book *Double Down*. It is the subject of numerous films and plays. It is indispensable to Tchaikovsky's opera *The Queen of Spades* (based on Pushkin) and Prokofiev's *The Gambler* (based on Dostoyevsky), as well as to Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* and Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte*. Humanists interested in the world's greatest writers and artists may find themselves also interested in gambling.

And then there are the historians. As a social scientist, I long ago learned that any statement I make about how things have changed will be immediately challenged by a historian pointing out that nothing much has changed at all. So while the legalization of gambling may represent something new, the notion of risking all on games of chance is as old as the republic. Historians such as Jackson Lears have written extensively on the subject — *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (Viking, 2003), teaches us that the culture of chance is not simply an irrational, morally reprehensible arena but an alternative to the culture of control that dominates Americans' lives. Others have analyzed the role that confidence men play in both reality and the American imagination. From their work, we learn that the line between the respectable (stock markets) and the unrespectable (dogfights) is not always as clear as we imagine it, and that greed and politics are sometimes synonyms.

That increased attention is being paid to gambling does not detract from the fact that the subject remains unevenly treated. There are, a search of Web sites reveals, few courses on the sociology of gambling outside of Nevada. Law professors, philosophers, and theologians do not debate the morality of gambling the way they do the morality of abortion or euthanasia. Gambling is one industry upon which not many schools of business administration focus. It will be interesting to see whether the increased respectability of gambling in American life is met with increased academic respectability.

In the end, I was able to put together a group of scholars from nearly all the major academic disciplines to attend our conference later this month. Interestingly enough, it will take place just as my state, Massachusetts, finds itself deciding whether to invest heavily in gambling so that the money spent by its residents in nearby Foxwoods is kept closer to home. In mid-September, our governor, Deval Patrick, a liberal Democrat, recommended the creation of three casinos in the commonwealth. It would be a good thing if the conference could inform him, as well as other political leaders interested in the issue whether, based on the insights from scholars across the academic world, he is right to do so. As for me, I have a personal view on the question, but, like the subject itself, it is somewhat tentative, and I would rather wait until I hear from the scholars I invited before I go public with it.

Alan Wolfe is director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life and a professor of political science at Boston College.

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: The Chronicle Review

Volume 54, Issue 7, Page B8