



Gambling

ANTHONY PICKLES, *University of Cambridge*

Gambling occurs when a person commits one or more valuable items (a 'stake') to an event or series of events packaged together, and where the result determines a loss or win at a rate agreed before the final stake is committed. The practice is or was not present everywhere and is often marginal in a given society, and some gambling variations escape the boundaries of this definition. Some include financial speculation within the phenomenon of gambling, but I do not cover that literature here. Anthropology has made valuable but often overlooked contributions to the study of gambling based on both comparative examples drawn from small-scale societies and marginalised peoples and by engaging critically with the gambling industry and concepts drawn from policy-oriented disciplines such as psychology, criminology, sociology, microeconomics, statistics, and the health sciences. In this entry four pioneering anthropological studies of gambling are summarised and compared. I then review current regional and thematic trends in the anthropology of gambling. Thereafter I review the anthropology of the gambling industry itself and the relationship of both to other disciplinary perspectives on gambling. I delineate some causes for the two-decade-long surge in the anthropology of gambling, and lastly suggest that the field has become rich enough to support new and original syntheses that would significantly enhance 'gambling studies'.

Introduction

Gambling is not a universal human activity. Betting is restricted to a subsection of any given population, and there are some areas of the world, most notably the Pacific Islands and Inuit communities, where gambling was once unknown. Many intentional communities, religious orders, and nation states ban gambling or discourage it, and most states impose variously effective regulations and prescriptions on the legitimate forms of gambling, the contexts where it is permitted, who may play, the odds that may be offered and the proportion of revenue to be appropriated by states, independent bodies, and [charities](#). The dominant discussions in the study of gambling are therefore who gambles and on what, why they gamble, and why some people ([ethnic](#) and/or cultural groups, genders, income brackets, etc.) gamble more frequently and/or with higher stakes. Ancillary debates centre on the relationship between [games](#) and gambling, the perceived causes of wins and losses, the correlation of gambling to other activities perceived as 'risky', and the role of gambling in redistributing valuables within and across societies. Anthropology has played a key role in moving beyond a problem-oriented approach to gambling by virtue of its attention to the context and symbolism of gambling *within* cultures. Oftentimes the [ethnography](#) itself challenges broadly held assumptions such as the idea that gambling [addiction](#) is to be understood as an individual failing, and the notion that humans calculate risk like (not very proficient) economists. As the anthropology of the Global North has matured, and the gambling industry has become more corporate than mob-run,

there is now a growing body of literature that tackles gambling 'at home' ethnographically. These have generated excellent ethnographic insight into the mutual construction of gamblers as 'addicted' or 'compulsive'.

Pioneering anthropological studies

Studies by three twentieth-century anthropologists loom large over contemporary anthropological studies of gambling. These are Clifford Geertz (1973), James Woodburn (1982), and Gregory Bateson (1973). The first two are primarily [ethnographic](#) accounts in which gambling plays an illustrative role in demonstrating and enacting broader social dynamics, while Bateson provides a theoretical framework for the study of play as a field that encompasses gambling. Another, almost completely forgotten antecedent which is of at least equal value, is Alexander Lesser's pioneering account of Pawnee (Native American) hand [games](#) (1969 [1933]).

Geertz analyses cockfighting in Bali and the two forms of gambling that surround it. Once two cocks have been matched as evenly as possible, in the centre a large even bet is assembled by two coalitions built around the two cocks. These people appear subdued. In contrast, small individual bets are then made around the periphery at odds that are shouted boisterously across the arena. Drawing on the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, Geertz argues that the stakes are so high among the central group that the benefit of winning (marginal utility) is less than the cost of losing (marginal disutility), which can be devastating, and that therefore gambling is a display of fixed status performed through a deliberately even playing field that instead of benefitting any one party simply excludes those who lack the wealth to participate. Peripheral, low-status gamblers are the itinerant class. The fixed status of people in Bali is therefore reinforced, and the game plays out their rigid hierarchy as 'a story they tell themselves about themselves' (Geertz 1973: 448). The fame of Geertz's account is such that most later literature cites it simply to refer to the fact that gambling practices can be a microcosm for cultures as a whole, whatever form the later argument takes.

Woodburn is concerned with the maintenance of [egalitarian](#) societies in Africa, and how gambling on a low-skill game can have redistributive effects that even out accumulations of wealth. The Hadza are nomadic [hunter-gatherers](#). Woodburn observed that Hadza men spend most of their time in camp gambling with valuables such as metal-headed arrows whose origins are geographically restricted. By tossing bark discs against a tree and reading which way up they fall, men circulate a range of items that are unevenly distributed. By a combination of keeping the items one wins and wants and staking what one doesn't, and by pressuring winners into playing again until they lose, desirable items slowly become distributed evenly. Woodburn's research has had a lasting influence on anthropological studies of small-scale societies that gamble; it has become emblematic of gambling as a mechanism for enforcing egalitarianism.

Bateson's theory is of a different order. From observing monkeys playing, he derives that play is bounded up by 'metacommunicative' signals. Each player communicates to other players that what is happening when they play does not have the same consequences that it would were they not playing. Threat is another example of 'metacommunicative' action: the person doing the threatening implies that their threat might become reality if the threatened does not comply. For Bateson, gambling is to be understood as a combination of threat and play (1973: 154). The point is unelaborated, but we may take it to mean that when stakes are introduced to forms of play in which there are winners and losers, the imperative to pay up after a loss is backed by an implicit threat of violence. Despite its un-anthropological origins and level of abstraction, Bateson's theory is often invoked in a manner similar to Geertz's, to suggest that gambling is a site of special 'meta-'significance. An advantage of Bateson's formulation over Woodburn's and Geertz's is that it preserves the thrill of the game, which, after all, is why people say they play, and why gambling appears preferable to more sober forms of ritual or redistribution. As a form of play/threat, gambling is set apart from everyday life, thereby introducing a theoretical space in which one can comprehend the excitement of gambling.

Alexander Lesser, a student of Franz Boas, made a truly remarkable (but very much overlooked) longitudinal study of an indigenous gambling game among the Pawnee of the Great Plains (1969 [1933]). Pawnee 'hand games' were complicated games of chance revolving around teams of players who hid counters in their hands and actively deceived opponents who tried to guess which hands contained the counters. What sets Lesser's account apart from the simple descriptions of games that often appear in early anthropology is his attention to the [historical](#) transformation, or 'temporal career', of this particular cultural trait over forty years (1969 [1933]: 334). Hand games before 1890 were used by Pawnee for recreational gambling, but through a tumultuous period of US domination, the games fell into disuse only to be resuscitated as an integral part of the Pawnee version of the revivalist Ghost Dance religion¹¹ that swept through Native American communities in the subsequent years. The hand games were, in the process, transformed from gambling game to ritual performance. Then, when the Ghost Dance religion gave way to Christianity, the hand games became mundane Pawnee equivalents of the domestic card games favoured by whites in the US. Lesser's book offers the first and still the most comprehensive account of how the games that support gambling shift roles and forms in order to adapt to contemporary concerns.¹²

Contemporary regional foci

A surge in anthropological accounts of gambling in the last two decades has forged new ground by highlighting the sheer variety of [games](#) in their myriad social contexts. Because the field was initially narrow, many anthropologists studying gambling address themselves more to regional cultural concerns than the topic of gambling *per se*. Inevitably, therefore, the problematics are to some extent a product of the regions where they conduct fieldwork. I have picked three regions as examples: the [Mediterranean](#),

East Asia, and Oceania, but what follows is by no means a comprehensive overview.

Mediterranean-based anthropological studies of gambling are few but influential. The main examples stem from Greece (Herzfeld 1991; Malaby 2003; Papataxiarchis 1999), and all situate gambling as a form of valorised [resistance](#). For Herzfeld, aggressive [masculinity](#) is demonstrated through nonchalantly submitting one's wealth to mocking chance at illegal coffeehouse gambling. Players boast of their losses rather than their wins. They walk a knife edge between a devil-may-care attitude towards [money](#) and perceived irresponsibility to one's wife and family. If they lose too badly or too often, men experience a collapse in male status as they are forced to surrender [financial](#) power to the woman of the house. Papataxiarchis similarly foregrounds bravado in his description of gambling on the island of Lesbos, but locates it instead in the antagonism between local society and encompassing orders that are embodied in people's [dependence](#) on state-issued currency. Gambling allows for disinterested [sharing](#) and the public renunciation of money as a symbol of external state domination. Malaby's book-length [ethnographic](#) monograph on Cretan gambling continues this masculine tenor. He describes the local repertoire of gambling games (backgammon, dice, poker, and lotteries) and the way these games situate gamblers, non-gamblers, and the state in relation to each other, and how gambling allows people to construct the self around a stance to the various manifestations of contingency. A recent contribution by Scott (2013) complicates the issue of valorising resistance through her research on Cyprus, a contested island divided between Greece and Turkey. Scott evaluates the role of casino gambling in Turkish-controlled territory as a space where Greek and Turkish Cypriots construct stereotypes of each other. The stereotypes are literally played out through the kinds of choices each group is thought to make during hands of blackjack in what appears a relational elaboration on the idea of gambling as resistance.

Gambling in Asia is a vast, temporally deep, and socially salient topic. [History](#) reveals attempts to ban gambling in China as early as the fourth century B.C., and gambling is mentioned in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. There is some evidence that cards were brought to Europe from China. What comes across from contemporary literature on East Asia is a diverse and thriving gambling scene which I cannot do justice to here, and which requires much more research. East Asia boasts a lively and localised repertoire of card games used for both high and low stakes gambling, together with a range of legal and illegal lotteries and casino and horse race gambling meccas in Hong Kong, Singapore and especially Macau, which has taken over from Las Vegas the designation as the global centre of gambling. Bosco, Liu, and West review the rural and peri-urban phenomenon of an illegal lottery that became wildly popular in China during the late 1990s, and has links to neighbouring Taiwan (2009). Employing accepted social-scientific reasoning, they cast lottery gambling as a form of symbolic resistance to economic paternalism. Again based in rural China, Steinmüller writes against this narrative, claiming that (among other games) *zha Jinhua*, a game similar to poker, connects to the widespread equation of social exuberance with 'heat', foregrounding a mid-level, regional preoccupation with hotness and coolness (2011). By situating his

analysis at this scale, Steinmüller gains greater explanatory purchase than an appeal to abstract terms like 'resistance' in China, where it seems not to hold anything like the same cultural cachet as in the Mediterranean.

Overseas Chinese communities figure prominently in anthropological accounts of the way gambling contributes to minority communities' collective self-definition. This is perhaps unsurprising given their fame as gamblers, their role as migrant labourers and traders in various [colonial](#) regimes, and the prevalence of Chinatowns in metropolitan centres (Basu 1991; Loussouarn 2010; Papineau 2005). Loussouarn is emblematic of the wider literature in challenging the consensus that because (in her case, Chinese) minorities gamble more they are irrational, instead providing a cultural analysis of peoples who value confrontations with contingency in a context of risky migration choices and minority status.

For all these specifics, Mahjong remains the most famous and probably the most played of East Asian gambling games, both at home and abroad, though it has not received proportional attention (Festa 2006). Four players use a set of 144 tiles and each player attempts to gain a winning set of four melds and a pair. The discourse emerging from China centres on the transition from socialism to capitalism and the transmutation of traditional attitudes to hospitality and efficacy through gambling practice. The explosion in popularity of the mechanical game pachinko in Japan after the Second World War also cries out for anthropological treatment (Schwartz 2006); superficially the game resembles pinball but with potentially hundreds of balls in play at any one time. The aim is to get as many small metal balls as possible, which may be exchanged for prizes.

To the indigenous peoples of Oceania (including New Zealand and the best part of Australia), gambling was a novel practice; in Australia it arrived 300 years ago, but in parts of Papua New Guinea people learnt of gambling as late as the 1960s. As such, gambling had to be placed within a repertoire of imports such as Christianity, money, wage [labour](#), and a swathe of new technologies and commodities. Initial guiding concerns for anthropologists were the role of gambling in integrating new practices, especially as modes of redistribution, and the association of gambling with young men who were rebelling against patriarchal control (Zimmer 1987). Given the novelty of gambling, the Pacific literature also contains a trove of freshly invented and constantly transforming games and a fresh exploration of gambling's possibilities (see Laycock 1966; Pickles 2014a). Elsewhere I have described how in Highland Papua New Guinea, the games that were initially introduced bifurcated into two streams of card games, one fast and one slow, and have since been supplemented by slot machines and betting on Australian horse racing at a bookies (Pickles 2013; 2014a). These latter forms of gambling have introduced a 'house edge', meaning the house always wins in the long run, a feature that was otherwise absent in games that didn't have a 'house'. Given that a proportion of house revenues are given to the state through [taxation](#), it is worth noting that it is only these games that are legal. Recent studies concentrate on the capacity of unseen forces and the gambling games in which they operate as ways in which Pacific people explore a wide range of ideas about efficacy (Mosko

2014; Pickles 2014b). In a context where [gifting](#) and demand sharing play a pivotal role in social life, gambling has also served as a means to explore the potential of state-issued currency, another introduction (Pickles forthcoming).



Gamblers playing a card game called *bom* in Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea

The gambling industry and the wider field

Anthropological studies of the gambling industry represent an area of proven analytic potency and considerable growth. They are not restricted to one region, but they are conceptually united because they deal with: (1) technologies and mathematics that are often very similar or the same; (2) international consortia; (3) shared legal frameworks; and (4) parallel interest from other academic disciplines that can be glossed under ‘gambling studies’.¹⁴

As a commercial industry that relies heavily on permissive state regulation, the gambling industry funds a significant amount of social science research, exercising soft power over the theoretical paradigms within which academics operate. Tied as they are to evidence-based policy, the gambling field is consequently dominated by psychology, criminology, sociology, microeconomics, and the health sciences. With some commendable exceptions (Cassidy 2014a; Schüll 2012), anthropological writings and the works they reference sometimes choose to circumvent this literature, pointing out the [historically](#) and geographically contingent development of the concepts involved (Hacking 1990; Reith 1999). One of the most valuable attributes of anthropological studies of the gambling industry is the [ethnographic](#) necessity for critical

engagement with the same concepts that are used by the industry, by related academic fields, and in the lives of gamblers themselves (e.g. 'leisure', '[addiction](#)', 'responsible gambling', 'problem gambling', 'compulsive gambling', and 'pathological gambling').^[4] Critical appraisals of social science approaches to gambling stemming from anthropology and sociology represent a potent counter narrative, but these accounts are rarely taken seriously in the more instrumental, policy-oriented 'gambling studies' literature (McGowan 2004).

The most prominent case of socio-cultural anthropology actively [resisting](#) industry-promoted concepts and trends is Natasha Dow Schüll's outstanding *Addiction by design* (2012), an ethnography of the machine gambling (slot machine) industry in Las Vegas. Schüll uncovers the thin margin between gambling machine and person, riffing on the interstitial space that constitutes them both as models for each other within a machine-formatted head-space that is known as 'the zone'. Schüll follows the affective link from players to machines and through to the architects of escape, those who make the machines, process the data, and engineer the casino floors. And it is escape that is offered; not something for nothing, but nothing as something. Schüll's informant-players are beyond the desire for a win; they wish to kindle a space where 'you're with the machine and that's all you're with' (2012: 2). There is no escape, for addiction and its treatments are shown to be couched in the same language of actuarial self-management as gambling. Schüll refuses to shy away from exposing industry-affiliated research; she reveals the means by which the gambling industry manipulates opportunities for funding so that research is forced to concentrate on individuals' propensities to addiction and to steer clear of the interplay of machine and person. She argues that the lack of an obvious intra-bodily aspect in this 'behavioural' kind of addiction has either led or enabled researchers to put their focus on the biological make-up of individuals, and drawn attention away from the substantive manipulation of people by gambling machines. What results from the analysis is a nuanced theorization of a society-wide cognitive dissonance between self-regulation and addiction.

A flourishing subdiscipline

From sluggish beginnings, the anthropological literature on gambling is surging. Part of this phenomenon must be put down to the expansion and maturation of anthropology as a discipline, but a more important factor is the increasing visibility and public acceptance of gambling within the Global North, where the vast majority of anthropologists receive their training. Set against this background, anthropology's response to a global gambling phenomenon appears belated, and the centre ground of gambling analysis has been effectively co-opted by problem-oriented disciplines that generate quickly digestible instrumental outcomes. The flourish of anthropological publications in the last two decades has its roots in [ethnographic](#) particularism and regional concerns, but the result has been a wealth of cases that, if harnessed, speak to a single identifiable phenomenon. Of this they are on the cusp. It remains to be seen whether anthropologists will be able to make good on their unrivalled breadth of experience and produce the paradigm-changing

analyses that are required in order to account for the diversity in gambling practices and perceptions seen across the world.

As things stand, anthropologists tend to produce qualitative analyses centred on the gambling experience and the relationship of gambling to the broader socio-cultural context, emphasising that what we know about gambling is irreducibly tied to how we come to know about it (see Cassidy, Pisac & Loussouarn 2013). These contributions are important but undervalued. Ethnographic particulars have yielded excellent data that has been used to plot the presence of gambling against other social phenomena, the best cross-cultural correlation for gambling being presence of state-issued currency and high levels of inequality (see Binde 2005; Pryor 1977). This data is intriguing, but insufficient. Above all, anthropological studies of gambling have shown that the local meanings, uses, strategies, efficacies, symbolism, and effects of gambling can be so manipulated and transformed as to destabilise consensus on what gambling represents as a sociological phenomenon. What emerges instead is gambling as a space of socio-cultural introspection, an underdetermined ritual which privileges form in order to interrogate possibility. It is above all this insight which must figure in broader syntheses. By beginning from an anthropological perspective, broad statistical correlations offer just the merest (but nevertheless profoundly enticing) glimpse into the real boundaries of cultural difference.

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Note on contributor

Anthony J. Pickles is a social anthropologist and Research Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge. His forthcoming monograph is entitled *The other face of money: gambling in Papua New Guinea*. Other publications include a special issue of *Oceania* on gambling in Melanesia (2014).

Dr Anthony J. Pickles, Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, Division of Social Anthropology, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RF, United Kingdom. ajp225@cam.ac.uk

[1] In dire times, the Ghost Dance movement synthesised new religious strictures with existing beliefs and above all emphasised the power of formal dances (long considered socially efficacious) to bring about a utopic transformation of Native American circumstances, generating prosperity and unity across Native American communities and release from colonial oppression.

[2] Other important influences include the following: anthropologists were late on the scene when it came to gambling, and often therefore trace their intellectual heritage from the philosophers Walter Benjamin (2006), Johan Huizinga (1970 [1949]) and Georg Simmel (2006 [1911]), the works of sociologists and cultural theorists such as Thorstein Veblen (2007) and Roger Caillois (1961), as well as Fyodor Dostoyevski's *The gambler* (1996 [1866]). With the exception of Roger Caillois, these thinkers were concerned with the development of European and American gambling under the capitalist system or the proclivities towards gambling of a universal human subject modelled on European cosmologies. They therefore figure more prominently in anthropological studies of gambling in the context of capitalism and in the Global North.

The sociologist Erving Goffman is that discipline's first point of reference on gambling, and his influence has been important to

anthropology as well (2006 [1969]). Based on research in the US, he generalises about gamblers everywhere. Goffman begins by distinguishing between the objective mathematical risk of a given bet and the subjective risk experienced by players, and as a sociologist he is primarily concerned with the latter. Unlike anthropological accounts of gambling, which would by and large dismiss the relevance of statistical risk at this point, Goffman retains this mathematical framing for the problem of subjectively understood risk. His primary insight stems from this combination of statistical probability and perception. For Goffman, the 'expected utility' of a pot (i.e. the usefulness accorded to the money one might win by a player weighted by the probability of their winning it) is shot through with other subjective factors. These include the excitement of gambling and the ability of a pot to make a consequential difference to the player's life after the game is concluded. Goffman defines the thrill of risk as 'action', and describes sociological reasons why people are attracted to 'action' in whatever form it can be found. The approach is a natural ally to Bateson's in that the thrill of gambling is seen as a necessary, nigh fundamental part of the analysis of gambling.

Roger Caillois was an anthropologically informed French intellectual and critic, and a colleague of Marcel Mauss. Unlike Goffman, who begins with the assumption of conceptual hegemony during cognitive processes that are on the surface perceived differently by different actors, Caillois takes human diversity and divergent cultural history as the starting point for the development of approaches to games. His open-ended approach in making a global typology of games in *Man, play, and games* (1961) is in some respects still innovative today. For Caillois, all human play begins with *paidia*, which he defined as 'spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct' (1961: 28), from the Greek, but this is the extent of human similitude. *Paidia* is disciplined to various extents by a concept from Latin, *ludus*, the 'pleasure experienced in solving a problem arbitrarily designed' (Caillois 1961: 29). The resultant game takes a form that lies within a matrix of four tropes: directed contest, chance, mimesis, and disorientation. Caillois was also at pains to point out that *ludus* is not the only conceivable metamorphosis of *paidia* into social forms of prescription, and he takes the closest Chinese-language equivalent to *paidia*, *wan*, as his example. *Wan* is 'oriented not toward process, calculation, or triumph over difficulties [as *ludus* is] but toward calm, patience, and idle speculation' (1961: 33). For Caillois this was evidence of how China wisely worked out a contrasting philosophical destiny for itself, and that cultures' destinies could be read from their games. Though dated, *Man, play, and games* remains the most ambitious attempt yet to model games across all cultures.

[3] Quantitative and instrumental accounts of gambling have a functional policy role backed by state and industry funding in wealthy nations of the Global North. It has been left largely to anthropologists to study small-scale societies' gambling practices within their own social contexts, as well as gambling in nations which do not have the financial resources to support their own research. There are three notable points of intersection between these poles, the first being the wholesale adoption of gambling policy designed in the Global North by nations in the Global South (Cassidy 2014b). These are often driven by commercial interests and good-governance drives, and are a field ripe for anthropological study. The second is the development of gambling enclaves that attempt to entice gamblers from wealthy states to spend money offshore (Pina-Cabral 2002). Thirdly, the study of minority communities in settler states (particularly in the United States and Australia) are often tackled using quantitative and instrumental techniques, but have also been the subject of anthropological analyses (Altman 1985; Goodale 1987), and the results often represent stark and problematic contrasts (e.g. Brady 2004).

[4] Exemplars of such studies include horse racing in the UK (Cassidy 2002), croupiers in a Slovenian casino (Pisac 2013), casino gambling in the United States and South Africa (Rizzo 2004; Sallaz 2009), and participation in the South African lottery (Van Wyk 2012). The emerging field of online gambling is as yet somewhat of a blind spot (but see Gariban, Kingma & Zhorowska 2013).