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The Sociology of Risk and Gambling Reader

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Abstract

Edited by James F. Cosgrave. (2006). New York: Routledge, 440 pp. (hardcover), 435 pp. (paperback), ISBN: 0415952212 (hardcover), 0415952220 (paperback). Price: \$90.00 USD (hardcover), \$39.95 USD (paperback).

Sociology is concerned with the organization of human societies and the behavior of individuals in social interaction. While there has been some attention paid by sociologists to gambling, these efforts have been sporadic and limited both theoretically and methodologically. Given the dominance of the psychological perspective in the field of gambling studies, the most important contribution that sociology can make is to move us beyond the focus on the individual that has long dominated the field to a better understanding of the social and institutional aspects of gambling.

The intent of this reader/book, as Cosgrave notes in his introduction, is to place contemporary gambling within

the context of recent developments in sociological theory. He argues that gambling in late capitalist societies is best understood as the institutionalization of contemporary orientations to chance and risk. Based on this view, Cosgrave contends that the sociology of risk—a branch of sociology that extends theories of probability to situations of everyday life—can contribute to an improved understanding of gambling. Another important area where Cosgrave believes that sociology can contribute is through a constructionist perspective that sheds light on the social settings within which gambling takes place and the interactions that occur in these settings. A third contribution that sociology can make to our understanding of gambling relates to the role of the state in shaping gambling enterprises and the gambling experience.

The first section of the reader includes selections from Giddens and Beck, two leading exponents of the “risk perspective” in sociology. These selections explore the significance of risk in relation to identity and institutions in late capitalist society and examine voluntary risk-taking as well as the “downloading” of societal risks onto individuals. A selection by Lupton draws from Foucault and the social constructivist tradition to consider the “governmentality” approach to risk whereby individuals are encouraged to govern themselves. In contrast to the risk perspective, which focuses on the social conditions that produce individual behavior, the governmentality perspective focuses on risk as a means for managing individual conduct. The fourth reading in this section is an early effort by several British sociologists to examine gambling as a specifically sociological phenomenon and includes considerations of gambling as play, gambling as “action,” and gambling as a means for resolving strains in the social structure.

The second section of the reader looks at gambling from a historical and cultural perspective. The selections here include the classic functionalist account of “lower class” horse bettors by Zola, a recent Bourdieu-influenced ethnographic consideration of horse race betting by Allen, an ethnographic study of female bingo players

from a Canadian research team, and a historical overview of the commercialization of gambling in the 19th century by Reith. The final selection is an essay by Benjamin that draws connections between slot machine gambling and the mechanistic conditions of labor in industrial capitalism.

The third section of the reader considers gambling from an interactionist or constructivist perspective. A selection by Benjamin in this section provides a framework for understanding the subjective experience of the gambler. A classic selection by Simmel examines “adventure”—a temporal break from the everyday that depends on a transformation of the meaning of the experience—and is intended to provide insight into the experience of risk-taking, and only tangentially into gambling. This is followed by another classic sociological account of gambling, this one by Goffman, dealing at the interactional level with the “consequentiality” of gambling as a means for individual social actors to experience and manage “fateful character tests.” Another selection by Reith is included in this section, this one dealing with the gambling experience as a form of play. The final selection is taken from a book by Frederick and Steven Barthelme about their personal experiences losing a fortune at the riverboat casinos in Mississippi.

The final section of the reader moves back to the macro-level to consider the politics and regulation of gambling in late capitalist societies. A selection by Nibert uses a Marxist perspective to argue that lottery gambling diverts the attention of the poor from the systemic conditions that constrain their lives and serves as a safety valve to siphon off stress and frustration that might otherwise threaten the stability of the state. Another Marxist selection by Neary and Taylor examines the reproduction of capitalist social relations through the British National Lottery and the transformation of the state into a “lottery-like form” prompted by the globalizing forces of late capitalism. A selection by Collins focuses on ways in which categories such as “pathological gambler” are discursively constructed within particular historical and social conditions and points to the key role played by the

“psy” sciences in the governing of populations. The final selection is a journalistic account of the rise and fall of slot machine gambling in South Carolina in the 1990s. While not specifically sociological, this piece highlights the role of political institutions in the legitimization of gambling activities as these become important sources of revenue for governments.

The reader brings together an eclectic array of materials ranging from classic analyses to more contemporary considerations of risk and gambling in relation to modern sociological theory. A variety of sociological perspectives are represented, including functionalist, Marxist, interpretive, and interactionist approaches. While the volume will undoubtedly be of interest to a variety of audiences, the first section—with readings selected from higher-level sociological theorizing about “risk societies” and “governmentality”—will be difficult for readers who lack a disciplinary context to follow. Another frustrating aspect of the reader is the lack of integration between the macro- and micro-level readings that have been selected. However, this reflects a larger issue in the discipline of sociology, which has long struggled with the challenge of interweaving considerations of historical, economic, and political trends with considerations of the symbolic power of information and ideas. Given the paucity of sociological attention to gambling over the years, this reader deserves a place on any gambling researcher's shelf.

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