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Book Review

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At the risk of stating the obvious, two subjects take center stage in Bob Harris's *Gambling in Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century*: gambling as an empirical practice and the social milieu of eighteenth-century Britain. Using a medley of carefully selected and "illustrative rather than comprehensive" sources—such as bank and lottery ledgers, personal papers and correspondence, handbills, advertisements, judicial records, parliamentary papers, newspapers, travel narratives, and published biographies and autobiographies—Harris attempts to rethink the well-told history of eighteenth century Britain through an engagement with the elite and popular gambling practices that saturated British society during this period. My use of "saturated" here might appear ill-advised, considering Harris's critique of the more recent depictions of eighteenth-century British gambling as a "mania". A closer look, however, indicates that the author's objection to this phrasing has more to do with the complexities that it occludes and its lack of precision than with the sole issue of gambling's prevalence. As he writes, his approach is to "ask why opportunities to gamble increased in Britain in the long eighteenth century; how widely, both geographically and socially; how this might have changed who commonly participated in gambling; and what were the implications of these shifts for its character and meanings" (p. 259).

The monograph complicates the historiographical narrative that has typically presented gambling as a widespread, irrational, and distinctively British practice involving an "immoral and irresponsible" aristocracy and a lower class seeking a pleasurable "escapist" experience, with both groups "positioned on opposite sides of the moral and social high-plateau inhabited by an increasingly self-assured middling sort" (p. 3). Harris's analysis stresses that gambling in Britain between the 1690s and 1830 was not a uniform phenomenon, but rather manifested in distinct forms among and between various social groups, who participated for myriad rational reasons. Some were simply looking for a form of recreation and stimulation, while aspirational others were in search of a means of acquiring monetary gain, social status or identification with a particular group. Additionally, he notes that gambling as both speculation and consumption thrived during this period in Britain because of the advances made by the British press and print media industry, the "rise and spread of new ways of attempting to minimize and manage misadventure," and the societal preoccupation with the dynamics and possibilities of acquiring wealth, i.e., the exponential commercialization happening in eighteenth-century Britain.

The first chapter focuses on the elite class—or more precisely, the "landed elites"—and their gambling proclivities. Here, Harris situates readers within the world of horseracing and other forms of high-stakes gambling in exclusive gaming clubs in London. He unpacks why gambling appealed to the elites and how these practices sometimes deviated from, but mostly conformed to, contemporary gender norms and particular expectations of sociability common among British elites during the "age of extravagance." While men, reeling from the British defeat in the War of American Independence, self-consciously performed masculinity in exclusively male gaming clubs in London through competitive gambling; women with access to funds gambled with cards for significant sums at each other's houses, resorts in Bath, or the few and unusual heterosocial gaming clubs in London.

In the second chapter, Harris trains his focus on increased gambling among the lower classes, which he attributes to the rise in organized sports, especially horseracing, cricket, and pedestrianism. He argues that gambling among the "lower orders" was primarily a male pursuit that involved self-fashioning as a way to reinforce "British hyper-masculinity in a period when it was feared to be in full retreat" (p. 83). Readers are introduced to another kind of urban gambling space, which Harris describes as the "locus of an alternative society, one characterized by bravado and ostentation, and the flagrant rejection of the codes of moderation, self-restraint, and strict self-accounting which pervaded many areas of eighteenth-century society and which informed prevalent conceptions of patriarchy" (p. 124). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the response of British authorities to elite and popular gambling was vastly different. While the former (or "organized" gambling)

was permitted albeit seen as reprehensible, the latter (or "inferior" gambling) was consistently criminalized and conceived as an imminent "threat to social order and prosperity" (pp. 107-108). Harris contends that while popular gambling was defined by its inclusivity, elite gambling was demarcated by an air of exclusivity.

Chapters three and four are concerned with the involvement of the British state in gambling through an examination of official lotteries. The reintroduction of state lotteries at the tail end of the seventeenth century is presented as a product of a combination of factors including the "war, demands of public finance, and an upsurge of financial experimentation and entrepreneurial energy" (p. 126). British authorities initially saw lotteries as a way to raise government revenue and to ensure that British capital was not otherwise spent on foreign lotteries. Their efforts to popularize the state lottery were bolstered by the ingenuity of private enterprise to market the state lottery as socially inclusive, the expansion of an efficient postal service that increased accessibility, and the "financial revolution" which engendered public credibility. By 1823, however, state lotteries would be abolished as a result of diminishing profits and a more vociferous campaign against them. While admitting the inherent difficulty in doing so, in chapter four, Harris attempts to also delve deeper into the everyday life of the lottery, i.e., "who adventured in it, how regularly, and on what sorts of scale" (p. 175).

Finally, Harris examines the role played by the law in the development of eighteenth-century British gambling. Here, he makes two key interventions: The first is to propose that we see the specific targeting of lower-class gaming as part of a broader trend of professional magistrates in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England to "privilege the law and policing as the main instruments to enforce social and moral order on a populace in dire need of disciplinary regulation" (p. 234). The second is to assert that the attempts by the British authorities to quell popular gambling were largely unsuccessful because in addition to being met with "energetic resistance," they were also inherently "contradictory and socially selective" (p. 258).

Gambling in Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century is similar to a number of other studies about gambling—like those by Thomas Kavanagh (2005), Ann Fabian (1999), Gerda Reith (1999), LaShawn Harris (2016), and Amy Chazkel (2011)—in its attempts to explain how and why the phenomenon manifests in distinct local forms. As Harris writes, "gambling cannot be understood independently of the contexts and broader cultural, social, and economic currents in which it was enfolded and from which it gained its specific meanings" (p. 15). In this case, we are shown an eighteenth-century British public that gambles for a variety of reasons, ranging from recreational and social purposes to financial and material aspirations to performative and exhibitionist desires. Gambling across all social levels was concurrently about individual play and about the nurturing of one's networks.

What I find particularly laudable about this work is that Harris is adept at maintaining control over a narrative that could have been unwieldy in less proficient hands. He states the position he intends to take in the introduction and presents clear arguments through five well-written chapters, without convoluting either the multiple social histories of gambling or its linkages with larger socioeconomic and cultural developments in eighteenth-century Britain.

Harris foregrounds three suggestions regarding the historiography of gambling: that the history of gambling is irrevocably intertwined with the history of chance and fortune, that the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate speculation is subjective, and that a societal belief in the possibility of social mobility boosted the spread of gambling. None of these are particularly novel ideas about the phenomenon of gambling or gaming *per se*, but maybe that is not his primary aim. He seems to be more focused on reconsidering the socioeconomic milieu of the long eighteenth century in Britain. Gambling simply functions as a useful and illuminating means of parsing this dense world. Yet, I am unclear about what *specifically* about gambling makes it, in his words, "good to think with" in this context. Put differently, why approach the history of the long eighteenth-century in Britain through gambling? Is it primarily about countering the idea of British exceptionalism? Or about the effects of rapid commercialization and urbanization in eighteenth-century Britain? Or about the blurring of class distinctions in certain aspects of everyday life? Or about gender performativity? Or is it perhaps—like Harris's oft-repeated intimation in the monograph—about the nuances that permeated and arguably defined everyday life during this period? Depending on the answer, I wonder whether scholars of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain (as well as other neighboring parts of Europe) might have more pointed critiques.

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