

A Fatal Contamination

Roger Caillois on Gambling—a “Theme” of (Late) Modern Culture

Jim Cosgrave 

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Article abstract

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A Fatal Contamination: Roger Caillois on Gambling—A “Theme” of (Late) Modern Culture

James Cosgrave^{a1}

^a Trent University Durham

Abstract: This article returns to Roger Caillois’s analysis of gambling in his classic text *Man, Play and Games* to provide a framework for understanding the place of widespread legal gambling in late-modern culture. The discussion begins with Caillois’s response to Johan Huizinga’s formulations of play and the exclusion of gambling from the world of play and games. It then proceeds with Caillois’s rehabilitation of games of chance as culturally significant phenomena. Drawing on some of the central themes of *Man, Play and Games*, contemporary gambling is then analyzed. Factors such as the cultural and economic shaping of the social distribution of *agôn* (competition) and *alea* (chance) provide the basis for an interpretation of the contemporary pervasiveness of games of chance as a socially and culturally situated historical phenomenon and “theme” of late-modern culture. In this culture, the spatial and temporal boundaries, which both Huizinga and Caillois claim separate play from everyday life, have been blurred in the case of gambling games. The article also posits that *alea* not only complements *agôn*, but competes with it, as *alea* has been legitimated as a social and economic ethic.

Keywords: *Gambling, Roger Caillois, alea, agôn, late modernity*

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“Gambling games are very curious subjects for cultural research, but for the development of culture as such we must call them unproductive. They are sterile, adding nothing to life or the mind.”

Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (1939/1955, p. 48.)

“The part of Huizinga’s definition which views play as action denuded of all material interest, simply excludes bets and games of chance ... which, for better or worse, occupy an important part in the economy and daily life of various cultures.”

Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (1958/1961, p. 5)

Introduction

Among his many and diverse intellectual interests, Roger Caillois was one of the few mid-20th-century thinkers to subject play and games to serious cultural analysis. He was also one of the very few sociologists at the time to study

gambling, particularly with a positive interpretation of its cultural significance. Caillois situated gambling in relation to his broader discussion of the cultural importance of play and games in his classic text *Man, Play and Games*, published in French in 1958 (and in English in

¹ Corresponding author. Email: jimcosgrave@trentu.ca



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1961). This text expanded on themes developed earlier in "Play and the Sacred," which appeared as an appendix to the second edition of *Man and the Sacred*, published in French in 1950 (English in 1959) (Barash, 1961; Caillois, 1950/1959).

Up to the publication of *Man, Play and Games* (MPG), there were very few in-depth analyses of gambling, reflecting perhaps its deviant cultural status. Exceptions included Walter Benjamin's discussions of gambling in "The Arcades of Paris" (1982/1999a; written between 1928 and 1929, but not published in English until 1999), his "Notes on a Theory of Gambling" (1999b), and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1955/1968); Edward Devereux's functionalist analysis of lotteries and horse racing in America (1949/1980); and Edmund Bergler's psychoanalytic work *The Psychology of Gambling* in 1957. Sociologist Erving Goffman used the example of betting games in his 1961 article "Fun in Games," but his extended discussion of gambling would not appear until 1967 in his long essay "Where the Action Is."

Bergler's (1957) work reflected the then-deviant conception of gambling, viewing it in psychoanalytic terms as a form of "psychic masochism," whereby gamblers had an unconscious desire to lose (p. 24). Ten years later, Goffman's "Where the Action Is" marked a shift in the social scientific attitude toward gambling (Downes et al., 1976) by treating it as an expression of *action*—the pursuit of risk-taking and thrills—which also challenged the dominant functionalist sociological framework of Talcott Parsons from the 1940s and 1950s, which had influenced Devereux's analysis. For Goffman, action had a positive social value that allowed for the expression and performance of *character*; that is, socially desirable traits such as courage and grace under pressure (Goffman, 1967). Caillois's MPG, published several years before and influential on Goffman's work on games and gambling (1961, 1967), also offered a positive interpretation: seeing gambling as a cultural species of play and games, thereby granting it a

cultural significance that had been denied by the earlier major theorist of play, Johan Huizinga.

Caillois's work on gambling takes us to the late 1950s. In the decades following the publication of MPG, and notwithstanding the different trajectories of the legalization of the various types of gambling in different countries (Chambers, 2011), gambling expansion would begin with the legalization of lotteries in the United States (1964) and Canada (1969), and casinos in the United Kingdom and Australia (in the 1970s). The need to fund welfare-state initiatives, accompanied by cultural liberalizations of the 1960s and the economic changes in the post-Bretton Woods economic world (early 1970s), laid the ground for gambling legalization, with a broader, more global expansion of gambling—casinos, electronic gaming machines, sports betting—occurring in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

This discussion revisits Caillois's analysis of gambling in MPG and demonstrates its importance for understanding gambling as a now ubiquitous cultural phenomenon. The discussion begins with Caillois's response to Johan Huizinga's formulations of play in *Homo Ludens* and Caillois's rehabilitation of games of chance and their cultural importance. The remainder of the discussion develops some central themes in MPG as a way of understanding and interpreting the widespread availability of gambling as a phenomenon and theme of late-modern culture. The spatial and temporal boundaries that both Huizinga and Caillois claim separate play from everyday life have been blurred in the case of gambling games. As a theme of late-modern culture, *alea* not only complements *agôn*, but competes with it, as *alea* has been legitimated as a social and economic ethic. The social structural and cultural significance of play and games, and the relationship of games of chance to economy as discussed here, will appeal to scholars of gambling studies and leisure studies. Further, the economic significance of gambling, which is flagged in MPG but not developed as a central theme, is discussed in terms of its relevance to the

culture and economy of late capitalism. This discussion of the economic significance of gambling challenges the position that play and games are separate from the economic dimensions of everyday life. The everyday gambling of women and its role and significance in the political economy of late capitalism, an important but neglected aspect of gambling studies (Bedford, 2019; Casey, 2008, 2024; Rak, 2022), will also be discussed.

Huizinga and Caillois: Play as Sacred, Play as Profane

Caillois was interested in the topic of play from early in his career. It was expressed in his dalliance with surrealism, in early essays such as "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" (Caillois, 1935/2003b), and in themes pursued through his founding of and participation in the Collège de Sociologie (along with Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris), which had as its mission a "sacred sociology" (Caillois, 2003a). This mission was a response to processes of societal rationalization, which for the Collège had attenuated forms of social effervescence and had generated a desacralized (i.e., individuated) self. The loss of self / deindividuation which the Collège celebrated was later expressed in Caillois's analysis of *ilinx* (vertigo) in MPG. The theme of mimicry (an anti-utilitarian "luxury") in "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" (Caillois, 1935/2003b, p. 97)—albeit pertaining to the insect world—presages the analysis of mimicry in MPG as a human play form. As Caillois scholar Claudine Frank notes, "Caillois explored civilized 'creative license' or playful transgression in his numerous writings on play, art, and literature" (2003, p. 46). Significantly, Caillois moved away from his (early) pro-deindividuating position, and his discussion of play and games in MPG is developed in terms of a pro-civilizational argument, whereby certain play forms diminish in their cultural significance while others come to dominate.

In part, MPG was a response to the formulations of play presented in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (i.e., "man the player"), originally published in 1939. *Man, Play and Games* was a continuation and fuller treatment of play and games that Caillois had previously explored in "Play and the Sacred," which appeared originally as an article in 1946 (Caillois, 1950/1959). In order to grasp Caillois's rehabilitation of gambling and its cultural significance, Huizinga's formulations of play will be laid out to provide a backdrop for Caillois's response.

The central theme of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* was the place of play in civilization and its development. *Homo Ludens* was, in turn, a fuller exploration of play that Huizinga had initiated in an earlier chapter titled "Puerilism" in *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (1936). This chapter lays out the characteristics of play: it occurs "within an artificial mental sphere governed by rules of its own and temporarily encompassing all conduct in a voluntarily accepted system of action" (Huizinga, 1936, p. 176), which Huizinga would later elaborate in *Homo Ludens*. *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* presents Huizinga's concerns about Western civilization at the time (the 1930s, impending war) and announces a theme he would discuss further in *Homo Ludens*: how, as a consequence of civilizational developments, play had been contaminated by "serious activity" (Huizinga, 1936, p. 177). Play had become degraded, prompting a negative interpretation of modernity.

On the basis of a fundamental, intimate relationship between play and the sacred in Huizinga's formulation (Huizinga, 1939/1955, p. 17), play is conceived as a phenomenon different from the usual activities of everyday life. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga provides his fleshed out, core definition of play:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside

"ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. (Huizinga, 1939/1955, p. 13)

One of the most important characteristics of play was its spatial separation from ordinary life. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. ...

Formally speaking, there is no distinction whatever between marking out a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for purposes of sheer play. The turf, the tennis-court, the chessboard and pavement-hopsotch cannot formally be distinguished from the temple or the magic circle. (Huizinga, 1939/1955, pp. 19–20)

Caillois accepted the main features of Huizinga's definition of play, and that play and the sacred share being "isolated from the rest of life" in terms of time and place (1958/1961, p. 6). However, he also stated that Huizinga's definition was both "too broad and too narrow" (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 4). Too narrow because it excludes games of chance and forms of play that are not rule-based. By contrast, Caillois (1958/1961, pp. 19–23) included "make-believe" games where people play roles, rather than follow game-based rules. Huizinga's definition was also too broad because it incorporated the "secret and mysterious" (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 4) into the formulation, thus sacralizing play. While both agree that "play is pure form, (an) activity that is an end in itself" (Caillois, 1950/1959, p. 157), Caillois disagrees with Huizinga that, in the sacred, content is secondary. The sacred "is pure

content—an indivisible, equivocal, fugitive, and efficacious force" (Caillois, 1950/1959, p. 157). For Caillois, the sacred evokes a different attitude from play:

In play ... [a]ll is human, invented by man the creator. For this reason, play rests, relaxes, distracts, and causes the dangers, cares, and travails of life to be forgotten. The sacred, on the contrary, is the domain of internal tension, from which it is precisely profane existence that relaxes, rests, and distracts. The situation is reversed.

In play, man is removed from reality. (Caillois, 1950/1959, p. 158).

Caillois thus differentiates the ludic from the sacred and proposes instead a "sacred-profane-play hierarchy" to add to Huizinga's analysis (Caillois, 1950/1959, p. 160).

In addition to this critique of the sacralization of play in "Play and the Sacred," Caillois also remarks on Huizinga's focus on "external structures" rather than on the subjective attitudes that give play activities their meanings. Further, Huizinga does not attend adequately to the "needs satisfied by the game itself" (Caillois, 1950/1959, p. 154). Thus, Caillois calls for more analysis of the various attitudes as they relate to the different kinds of games and, referencing Huizinga's exclusion of games of chance, he says:

One would have liked separate descriptions of each component of the gambling spirit, such as waiting for the die to be cast, the desire to prove one's superiority, the taste for competition or risk, the role of free improvisation, the way in which it is related to respect for rules, etc. (Caillois, 1950/1959, p. 153)

These criticisms anticipate the analysis of games of chance in MPG. As will be discussed, the analysis of subjective attitudes and the *lived*

experience of gambling has been taken up by scholars focused on the gendered dimensions of gambling participation (Bedford, 2019; Casey 2008, 2024; Rak, 2022).

Rehabilitating Gambling

The main point of Caillois's difference from Huizinga for this discussion is the latter's exclusion of games of chance from an analysis of play and games, thereby excluding their significance to culture(s) more generally. Huizinga saw gambling as devoid of interest for understanding culture because he viewed play and games in terms of their relationship to the sacred realm and their spiritual, rather than material, contributions—in other words, gambling lay too close to the material (economic) interests of everyday life. Play was akin to the sacred and thus incompatible with instrumental or material interests.

Caillois, by contrast, sees games of chance embedded in or reflective of these interests in various cultures and societies: "bets and games of chance ... occupy an important part in the economy and daily life of various cultures" (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 5). While play is, by definition, unproductive—"it creates no wealth or goods [It] is an occasion of pure waste"—the exchanging of property or wealth is not precluded (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 5).

As a critical response to Huizinga, Caillois (1958/1961) formulates his four-part analytical categorization of game types: *agôn* (competition, pp. 14–17), *alea* (chance, pp. 17–19), *mimicry* (pp. 19–23), and *ilinx* ("vertigo," pp. 23–26). In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga developed the bases for *agôn* (i.e., competition, referring to it as an "impulse" or "function"; 1939/1955, pp. 74, 75) and *mimicry*. For him, games have an ordering effect on social life, in part through the way they encourage and express characterological ideals—such as the positive expressions of *agôn*: honour, dignity, fairness, etc.—which are supportive of social order. Since chance signifies uncertainty, however, *alea* cannot appear as a play category or

game type. However, this exclusion from Huizinga's (sacralized) conception of play is challenged by Caillois's formulation of play as the "pure profane" (1950/1959, p. 160), allowing the latter to see in play other cultural objectives (diversion, distraction, relaxation) and to include games of chance and their "material" (economic) dimensions as culturally significant activities. Caillois's four-part classification also allows him to entertain the idea of game-type dominance and to explore how particular patterns or themes are expressed through games in various cultures.

It is worth noting the parallels in Caillois's conception of cultural or civilizational development to two of his influences:

1. The Durkheimian conception of the transition of societies "from mechanical to organic solidarity," where the power of the group is based on resemblance—that is, members of the group share the same beliefs, feelings, values, and ideals—gives way to social differentiation and individuation (Durkheim, 1895/2014, pp. 57–87). *Agôn* and *alea*, then, come to the fore in "organic solidarity" (modern society).
2. The idea that civilization moves away from *ilinx* (vertigo) and *mimicry* also parallels Nietzsche's distinction between Dionysian / Apollonian culture and the supersession of the latter over the former (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 87; Nietzsche, 1967). Caillois says:

The reign of *mimicry* and *ilinx* as recognized, honored, and dominant cultural trends is indeed condemned as soon as the mind arrives at the concept of cosmos, i.e. a stable and orderly universe without miracles or transformations. Such a universe seems the domain of regularity, necessity, and proportion—in a

word, a world of number.
(1958/1961, p. 107)

Caillois's analysis of play and games thus links with macro-sociological and historical themes such as civilizing processes, rationalization, and the development of individuation. It is important to note here a feature of the rationalization of knowledge and of games: the application of probability theory to games of chance in the 18th century (Bellhouse, 1993).

If Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* emphasized the centrality of play in civilization, *Man, Play and Games* is no less interested in civilizational themes. A common theme in Huizinga and Caillois—indeed a theme the latter borrows from the former—is the distinctive and proper place of play and games in culture. This theme supports, but also goes beyond the idea of the separation of play spaces from more serious or quotidian realms:

The most fundamental characteristic of true play, whether it be a cult, a performance, a contest, or a festivity, is that at a certain moment it is *over*. ... And here the evil of our time shows itself. For nowadays play in many cases never ends and hence is not true play. A far-reaching contamination of play and serious activity has taken place. The two spheres are getting mixed. (Huizinga, 1936, p. 177)

Caillois follows Huizinga, positing in his own work the idea of the perversion of the play forms:

If play consists in providing formal, ideal, limited, and escapist satisfaction for these powerful drives [i.e., *agôn*, *alea*, mimicry, and vertigo], what happens when every convention is rejected? When the universe of play is no longer tightly closed? When it is contaminated by the real world in which every act has inescapable consequences? Corresponding to each of the basic

categories there is a specific perversion which results from the absence of both restraint and protection. The rule of instinct again becoming absolute, the tendency to interfere with the isolated, sheltered, and neutralized kind of play spreads to daily life and tends to subordinate it to its own needs, as much as possible. What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and source of anxiety. (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 44)

Notice in this passage that the game types are formal expressions of "powerful drives." Particular cultural constellations or social formations would reveal, express, or encourage particular drive trajectories, which would result in the manifestation of particular game forms. However, if these powerful drives are not restrained, the "rule of instinct" takes over, resulting in a "contamination" of the game forms (Caillois, 1958/1961, pp. 44, 49).

The ubiquity of contemporary gambling and its embeddedness in everyday life indicates that the asserted separation of gambling and play from the "real world" or everyday life is problematic. Indeed, as feminist gambling scholars have pointed out, there are the ordinary, everyday forms of gambling participation by women, such as bingo and lottery play, that blur distinctions between play and economy, and express the "lived experience" of inequality, particularly by working-class women, in late capitalism (Bedford, 2019; Casey, 2008, 2024). Perhaps, as Huizinga suggested, games of chance are too close to material interests to be considered separate from everyday life. This points out a contradiction in Caillois's conception of play: it is both (ideally) separate from everyday life and embedded in it (profane). In any case, the idea of "contaminated" play will serve the discussion of gambling in contemporary society in a later section. Relatedly,

Caillois's notions of obsession and compulsion serve as anticipatory conceptions of the problems related to gambling excess, which indicate the seepage of everyday life into play and games.

Social Function of Games, Themes of Culture, and Intellectual Habits

While "the incidence of play is not associated with any particular stage of civilization" (Huizinga, 1939/1955, p. 3), Huizinga saw a degradation of play occurring in modernity, precipitated by the technological and industrializing forces shaping modern societies. "Civilization ... has grown more serious; it assigns only a secondary place to playing" (Huizinga, 1939/1955, p. 75): the agonistic dimensions of civilization recede as it becomes more complex. By contrast, Caillois's civilizational trajectory of game forms saw the favouring of chance (*alea*) and competition (*agôn*) in modernity, and he viewed this as a positive historical development. His sociological approach to play and games allowed him to move past Huizinga's largely negative appraisal of gambling's cultural status.

As with other types of games, games of chance could demonstrate patterns or themes of culture, the latter being a central topic of Caillois's analysis. For Caillois, "The question is to determine the role played by competition, chance, mimicry, or hysteria in various societies (1958/1961, p. 86). He also boldly asserts that the "destinies of cultures can be read in their games" (p. 35).

The relationship between particular cultural formations and the types of games that are generated is also significant for Caillois, as it raises the question for him of the "habits of thought" that various cultures' games produce and express. In *Man, Play and Games*, Caillois includes a chapter on "The Social Function of Games." The idea that games have social functions follows thematically from Huizinga's (1939/1955) chapter "Play and Contest as Civilizing Functions" in *Homo Ludens*.

The "powerful drives" that are named through Caillois's four-fold categorization are "positively and creatively gratified" through their institutionalized form as games (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 55). Following Huizinga's view that games have an ordering effect, Caillois sees games as disciplining the drives and institutionalizing them. With respect to *agôn*, for example, competition socializes skill and rivalry for spectators (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 108). This socialization reinforces characterologically desirable traits (Caillois, 1950/1959, p. 159)—a formulation previously expressed by Huizinga, which was a precursor to (and a likely influence on) Erving Goffman's notion of "character," which he took up in "Where the Action Is" (1967). For Caillois, emphasizing the ludic dimension of civilization:

There is no civilization without play and rules of fair play, without conventions consciously established and freely respected. There is no culture in which knowing how to win or lose loyally, without reservations, with self-control in victory, and without rancor in defeat, is not desired. One wants to be *en beau joueur* [a good sport]. (Caillois, 1950/1959, p. 162)

The idea that game forms indicate the "enrichment and establishment of various patterns of culture" (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 55) has not generally been taken up with respect to gambling—likely due to the persistence of deviant and stigmatizing attributions and concerns around gambling excess, even though gambling has been legalized and legitimized. Nevertheless, the contemporary spread of gambling would seem quite conducive to analysis in Caillois's terms. The issue is the way gambling expresses the "moral and intellectual values of a culture" (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 27): for Caillois, there are habits of thought related to both

agonistic and aleatory games that are not solely negative. These themes are taken up below.

Alea and the Pursuit of Money as Themes of Culture

While the idea of characterology is not explicitly taken up by Caillois, it nevertheless relates to the idea of themes or patterns of culture and to the intellectual habits of a culture.

Historically, the pursuit of chance is of ill repute, particularly within Christian religious traditions, and this value persisted well into the 20th century. As Max Weber argued (1930/1992), the emergence of Western modernity produced an ascetic work ethic and characterology suited for the emerging capitalist world of production. In a cultural milieu oriented to the work ethic, Caillois portrays the orientation to chance as anti-social:

Work is obviously incompatible with the passive anticipation of chance, just as is the unfair favor of fortune with the legitimate rewards of effort and merit. ...

...

In addition, chance is not only a striking form of injustice, of gratuitous and undeserved favor, but is also a mockery of work, of patient and persevering labor, of saving, of willingly sacrificing for the future—in sum, a mockery of all the virtues needed in a world dedicated to the accumulation of wealth. As a result, legislative efforts tend naturally to restrain the scope and influence of chance. ...

... To draw one's entire subsistence through chance or gambling is regarded by nearly everybody as suspect and immoral, if not dishonorable, and in any case, asocial. (1958/1961, pp. 157–158)

The spread of legal gambling beginning in the 1960s, and the broader expansion and legitimization occurring in the 1980s and 1990s and ongoing to the present, relates to shifts in capitalist societies, including secularization, trajectories of cultural liberalization, economic transformations, and the emphasis on money in financialized late-capitalist societies. The state has played a central role in the expansion of gambling by legalizing it and contributing to its legitimization in culture. The state has legitimized alea and has been a major economic beneficiary of this legitimization (e.g., lottery revenues; Cosgrave, 2022; Young, 2010). The promotion of chance, initially through lotteries, that we find with widespread legal gambling signifies—as Huizinga said about alea—an orientation to dealing with uncertainty (Neary & Taylor, 2006). It has been posited that the state itself has become an “aleatory subject” under the conditions of the “risk society” (Young, 2010, p. 264). This means that the state itself is subject to global conditions of uncertainty (alea).

The shifts in capitalist societies over the past sixty years (e.g., from the welfare state to the neo-liberal state) have had systemic effects on the lifeworld (Habermas, 1981/1987), generating newer cultural patterns, intellectual habits, motives, and “emotional economies” (Pearce, 2001, p. 146), thus effecting new forms of social reproduction (Datta, 2018; Panitch & Gindin, 2013; Pearce, 1976) and producing new characterological requirements. Late capitalism not only promotes economic agonism with respect to the pursuit of money (and in limitless amounts), but it has also generated and legitimized aleatory social action orientations. Legalized gambling, and its widespread availability, has made alea socially acceptable.

Gambling signifies the pursuit of money without earning it (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 145), which parallels the role of speculation in financial markets: gambling liberalization has followed pecuniary liberalization, as the pursuit of money, and speculation, have been freed from the

restraining religious, social, and economic ethics (de Goede, 2005; Stäheli, 2007/2013). The role of speculation in capital accumulation has contributed to the increasingly aleatory dimensions of stock and financial markets, and to economies more generally. The 2008 financial crisis—precipitated by speculative risk-taking (e.g., the development and deployment of derivatives), and indeed the many other economic and market crises in the post-Bretton Woods era (Marazzi, 2011; Fourcade et al., 2013)—raises the issue of the economically disorganized or unstable character of late capitalism and of the generalized economic—and social—uncertainty this generates. Indeed, gambling legalization and the state's pursuit of gambling revenues signifies "innovation" (Merton, 1938) in both the economic and cultural realms, as the state deals with the pressures put on it by the flows of global capital (Neary & Taylor, 2006; Panitch & Gindin, 2013).

The World of Number and Societal Rationalization

In terms of Caillouis's broader civilizational themes, the overshadowing of *ilinx* and *mimicry* by *agôn* and *alea* is related to the emergence of the "world of number" (1958/1961, p. 107), a phenomenon that also relates to the cultural development of individuation and rules, supplanting the worlds of magic and mystery. These themes (number, individuation, rules) can be understood relatedly as features of societal rationalization that, in Max Weber's well-known formulation, signify the "disenchantment" of the world (1946, p. 139). This rationalization is tantamount to the decline of mysterious and magical formulations of social reality that are, in turn, the consequence of the emergence of rational orientations to reality based on calculative, pragmatic, and scientific modes of orientation. Indeed, in a passage paralleling Weber, Caillouis discusses the transformation of the sacred:

It can be noted that [the sacred] seems to become abstract, internalized, and subjective, attached less to beings than to concepts, less to acts than to intentions, and less to external manifestations than to spiritual tendencies. This evolution is manifestly tied to the most important phenomena in the history of humanity—such as the emancipation of the individual, the development of his [sic] intellectual and moral autonomy, and the triumph of the scientific ideal. The latter is an attitude hostile to mystery, demanding systematic skepticism, a deliberate lack of respect. In considering everything as an object of knowledge or matter of experience, it leads to everything being regarded as profane, and consequently viewed as knowable, with the possible exception of the passion for knowledge itself. (Caillouis, 1950/1959, p. 134.)

The human desire to know manifested through rationalization processes reveals itself as an agonistic orientation to social reality. If the desire to know social reality has shifted from a search for causal laws to a probabilistic understanding of this reality and a "taming of chance" (Hacking, 1990), these attempts to know nevertheless manifest themselves as agonistic expressions of the will to power (Nietzsche, 1968). Echoing Caillouis's notion of knowledge as profanation, Baudrillard presents the modern understanding of chance as a form of disenchantment:

Chance in its modern, rational sense, chance as an aleatory mechanism, pure probability subjected to the *laws* of probability (and not to the rules of a game) ..., the epitome of a fluctuating universe dominated by statistical abstractions, a secularized, disenchanted and unbound divinity. (1979/1990, p. 143)

For this discussion, rationalization processes and the desire to know relate to the way games of chance are rationalized and colonized for their profit-making possibilities.

In one of the appendices to MPG, Caillois (1958/1961, pp. 170–175) discusses the mathematical approaches to gambling, contrasting the “irreducible element in play” (p. 173) with the mathematically oriented approaches that seek to eliminate uncertainty. “The interest of the player disappears together with the uncertainty of the outcome [if] all variables are known” (p. 173). Mathematical theories destroy reasons for playing. Those individuals who employ mathematics against the casino (e.g., card counters in blackjack) would be for Caillois analogous to workers or “professionals” who are not involved in the spirit of play.

This theme of mathematics versus play indicates a broader tension in late modernity between agonism and alea, the forces of rationalization against the uncertainties of social life, and the aleatory orientations of gamblers. The rationalization of gambling extends beyond the mathematical constitution of gambling games themselves (probabilities, odds, payouts, etc.) to include the way gambling knowledges are used to shape gamblers’ behaviours. *Agôn* is evidenced in the attempts to render these behaviours as a source of profits, for example, through behavioural shaping of electronic gaming machines (Schüll, 2012). This *psychological agôn* becomes a feature of the house edge—beyond the mathematical. If aleatory orientations are passive or fatalistic, the agonistic orientation of the casino (“the house always wins”) is active precisely through its interest in rationalizing its gambling offerings, including the shaping of its customers’ behaviours.

The rationalization and accessibility of (commercial) gambling means the activity has been socially routinized. One might speak of the withering of the stake in commercial gambling,

where one’s participation should be entertainment or a form of “fun” without consequentiality. What is really at stake when the “casino” exists in your cellphone? If the gambling stake signifies an agonism, a challenge (Baudrillard, 1979/1990, pp. 142–144)—putting something of value on the line—the routinization of gambling suggests the sublimation of *agôn* as a force or drive in Caillois’s sense, and commercial gambling offers simulated agonism or “safe risk” (Gephart, 2001). Winning or losing, and the real life, material consequentiality that follows from both (Caillois, 1950/1959, p. 187, note 37; Goffman, 1967) is blurred as the gambler is enjoined to view their gambling in commercial venues as “entertainment.” This simulated agonism turns the winning or losing of a stake into a routinized, minor spectacle (Johnson, 2010).

However, if we consider the cognitive dimensions of gambling (“habits of mind”), and leave to one side aleatory gambling, for which no cognitive effort can alter the outcome, gambling forms such as poker, sports, and race-track betting—agonistic gambling forms—require a consideration of a variety of types of information prior to betting, thus exhibiting and promoting a rational consideration of odds, probabilities, possibilities, and information akin to a speculative mindset. In this respect, such agonistic gambling forms exemplify the habits of mind that Caillois speaks of, and in terms of their popularity, demonstrate the patterns of culture he says games represent. Without specifying particular games, Caillois suggests that games of chance foster “foresight, vision, and speculation, for which objective and calculating reflection is needed” (1958/1961, p. 19). Such habits of mind constitute “homo aleator” (Reith, 1996), a form of subjectivity indicating a cultural characterology that develops under particular socio-historical and cultural conditions.

Where Huizinga was broadly concerned with the play-denigrating features of modern industrialization, Caillois was concerned with the

rationalizing and corrupting effects on play by daily life and the professionalization of competitive games (1958/1961, pp. 5–7, 43–47). Beyond the professionalization of sports, a significant feature of gambling in the early 21st century has been the legalization and spread of sports betting. Sports betting, in effect, appends layers of both *alea* (uncertainty) and *agôn* (the betting stake) to the individual's experience of popular agonistic events.

While competitive games can become the object of betting (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 18), for many, sports have become a means to betting, indicated by the numerous sports betting ads on television and by the popularity of fantasy sports leagues and sports pools. While sports are enjoyed for their exciting aleatory moments, the habits of mind that betting participation indicates cannot go unremarked. The “foresight, vision, and speculation” that attend serious sports betting says something about the intellectual habits of an agonistic culture where agonistic gambling forms flourish (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 19). Aspects of these habits are problematic; for example, the agonistic desire to profit from match-fixing. For the bettor, this adds another aleatory factor. Sports betting also appears to reduce the distance between athlete and fan / bettor. Fantasy sports allow individuals to “play with” their favourite athletes or teams (mixing fandom with odds calculation and knowledge of the sport) and also play with others. The individual gambler is integrated into a community; at least, a commercial, virtual community. At the same time, the popularity of non-commercial sports pools (among friends or colleagues) provides individuals with opportunities to socialize, demonstrate knowledge, and win money and recognition, constituting a form of social attachment (Zola, 1963) and allowing individuals to demonstrate that they are good winners or losers.

Gambling and Late Modernity: The Social Distribution of *Agôn* and *Alea*

In “Competition and Chance,” Caillois indicates a central cultural pattern and intellectual value of modernity:

Both as a matter of principle and institutionally, modern society tends to enlarge the domain of regulated competition, or merit, at the expense of birth and inheritance, or chance, an evolution which is reasonable, just, and favorable to the most capable. (1958/1961, p. 114)

Presumably, Caillois is referring to capitalist societies rather than socialist or communist societies. He makes no mention of capitalism in MPG, but this must be noted since capitalism as an economic system is agonistic in terms of its central characteristics: profit motive, competition, class agonism (conflicts), extractivism of labour and nature, etc. This is particularly significant with the shift to late capitalism and the “freeing” of the pursuit of money and speculation, and the place of financialization in the economy.

Caillois argues that the role of *alea* continues to be significant in competitive societies (1958/1961, pp. 114–115) as both a compensation for and complement to the primarily agonistic economic structure. In Table II in MPG, under the category of “*Alea*,” “Lotteries, Casinos, Hippodromes, and *Pari-Mutuels*” are identified as “Cultural Forms Found at the Margins of the Social Order”; whereas “Speculation on Stock Market” is identified as “Institutional Forms Integrated into Social Life” (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 54). The difference now is that, with legalized and widespread gambling, gambling as a “cultural form” is no longer marginal to the social order. Perhaps late capitalism has intensified the compensatory aspects of gambling, but it can be proffered that *alea* now competes with *agôn*. This is meant in terms of the legitimation of *alea* through the

legalization of gambling and its widespread availability, and more importantly as legitimized ethic for social and economic action. While Caillois indicates “speculation” as integrated into the social order, it is nevertheless and significantly categorized as a form of “Alea.” However, speculation in the 21st century might well be regarded as a legitimate form of “economic competition,” which Caillois categorizes as “Agôn” and associated with “Institutional Forms Integrated into Social Life” (1958/1961, p. 54).

Similar to functionalist interpretations of gambling (Devereux, 1949/1980; Zola, 1963), Caillois (1958/1961) sees the embrace of aleatory gambling in modern (agonistic) societies as a response to thwarted mobility aspirations. People resort to alea when competition is perceived to be too difficult or when societies are “racked with inequalities that [offer] little in the way of meaningful social mobility” (Casey, 2024, p. 87). Chance makes a mockery of merit as merit is questioned as a social value. Articulating a Durkheimian perspective on the relationship of social solidarity and merit, Pearce (2001) says:

Society as a whole will only be solidaristic if any hierarchically stratified positions are, in both principle and practice, filled by meritocratic recruitment. This is the only way that the energy of individuals is likely to be used constructively, since only then will they fulfil their occupational role enthusiastically. (p. 76)

The issue is not only the difficulty people have in the face of economic competition, but the perception of unmeritocratic social rewards: a contemporary expression of this perception is the sentiment that “the system is rigged.” This perception is particularly relevant as it pertains to the wealth that has been generated in financial markets through forms of financialization and speculation: that this wealth is not (perceived to be) productive wealth, and also that it contributes to financial crises. Increasing wealth inequality as

a consequence of economic policy (e.g., neoliberalism, financialization) prompts a questioning of the idea of merit (Panitch & Gindin, 2013; Piketty, 2013/2014). The popularity of lotteries thus signifies economic fatalism in the face of the ideologies of work, reward, and merit. This fatalism stands as a marker of the failure of these ideologies to live up to their promise of integrating and rewarding individuals in the late-capitalist division of labour (Pearce, 2001, pp. 126–130, 205). The role of the gambling industry in “feed[ing] off and exploit[ing] the inequalities and vulnerabilities of players” is also notable in the late-capitalist context (Casey, 2024, p. 86). Within gambling studies, a focus on “the structural inequalities of gender, race, and class within which gambling is always situated” have, by and large, been ignored due to the persistence of frameworks that foreground the individual and pathologize their gambling participation (Casey, 2024, p. 86).

While late capitalism breeds the socio-economic conditions for the spread of lotteries, which states have used under agonistic economic circumstances in order to generate revenues, the aleatory basis of lotteries challenges (and serves as a critique of) agonistic economic discourses and ethics that have characterized and supported liberalism and capitalism.

Lotteries have been institutionalized as organized ritualizations and celebrations of contingency (Cosgrave, 2021; Stäheli, 2007/2013). Nevertheless, the rationalization and commodification of alea (Baudrillard, 1979/1990, pp. 144–146; Baudrillard, 1999/2001; Cosgrave, 2022; Schüll, 2012) has permitted the agonistic, profit-generating instrumentalization of chance. The promotion of (state) lotteries and lottery revenue taxation supplementation show the state’s promulgation of aleatory economic orientations—in marked contrast to the earlier cultural-economic valuing of the work ethic. The “meritocratic fantasies of accessible egalitarianism that ... are entirely ubiquitous” in neoliberal, social media-driven culture (Casey,

2024, p. 88) might well be described as cultural expressions of the promulgation and commodification of alea: a meritocracy not of work and reward, but of chance.

In its rationalized, commercialized forms, individual gamblers might experience vertiginous effects, but gambling is not a destabilizing, "heterogeneous" force in late-capitalist society (Bataille, 1970/1985), as it has been integrated into the social order. Lotteries, in particular, can be viewed as solutions to "strain" in the economic system (Merton, 1938). Indeed, it is worth considering how lotteries, and legal gambling apparatuses generally, especially those that directly benefit the state through revenues, work as forms of social reproduction, demonstrating the state's implication in the shaping of lives and social relations in late-capitalist, financialized economies (Datta, 2018; Neary & Taylor, 2006; Pearce, 1976).

As a form of "unproductive expenditure" (Bataille, 1967/1991), the surplus generated by legal commercial gambling is channeled back into production: either lining the profit columns of private gambling corporations, or adding to the general revenues of states to be used for various social programs. While gamblers generally destroy their own wealth, their losses are rationalized; that is, the losses are subject to the probabilistic calculations that support the "house edge," as well as being put back to work in a "restricted economy" (Bataille, 1967/1991). Thus, gambling does not pose a serious threat to late-capitalist ethics, nor is it "a challenge to the natural economy of value, a crazed activity on the fringes of exchange" (Baudrillard, 1986/1989, p. 128). If gambling losses constitute a surplus that is destroyed or wasted (Bataille, 1967/1991), this occurs rather as a consequence of speculation in financial markets (e.g., the 2008 financial crisis); however, in the event of serious financial crises and / or massive market sell-offs, central banks typically step in to mitigate too much "unproductive expenditure" (Bataille, 1967/1991). Significantly, the bailouts of banks

and financial firms in crisis situations, and the subsequent calls for austerity, are agonistic ideological expressions that claim to be for the good of everybody but are punitive against those who would suffer from cuts to social programs and other forms of government spending (Datta, 2018).

For Caillois, agonistic and aleatory games provide for players a realm of "pure equality denied them in real life" (1958/1961, p. 19). As such, games of chance stand over and against the "real world," where inequality reigns and justice is a hard-fought achievement. Games of chance thus function as placation, and indeed Caillois saw gambling, and lotteries in particular, in this way: promoting the illusion of wealth, ultimately supporting the (unequal) agonistic economic system with its ideology of achievement.

But beyond the functionalist position Caillois holds, the ubiquity of gambling also suggests a changed society compared to when *Man, Play and Games* was published. As discussed, the pursuit of money has been sacralized in a financialized society, where speculation is a legitimate social ethic. Late capitalism encourages a calculative, speculative mindset (Mellor & Shilling, 2016). It has also allowed "homo aleator" to flourish.

Thus, gambling manifests in both game form(s) and as social-action orientation, expressing a social-structural and cultural milieu where gambling and speculation have been "legitimately" integrated. Indeed, to grasp the place of gambling in late capitalism means that gambling is more than an analogy for capitalist activities; rather, "as a practice ... [it] has a distinctive, central, role" (Bedford, 2019, p. 34). To be sure, the ability to "play one's cards" in this milieu will depend on the cards one has been dealt; that is, the particular socio-economic situations that individuals find themselves in and the greater or lesser forms of economic and cultural capital they possess and can deploy (Bourdieu, 1986). However, the reference to play here also points to the forms of pleasure people

derive through their gambling participation within particular socio-economic situations (Bedford, 2019; Casey, 2008, 2024; Rak, 2024).

If certain habits of mind are encouraged in the late-capitalist milieu, Caillois's concerns about the "fatal contamination" that can occur when the powerful drives (e.g., *agôn* and *alea*) are unleashed provide insight into the relation of gambling games to significant cultural and economic features of late modernity.

The "Fatal Contamination" of Play

Like Huizinga, Caillois regarded games as free activities, separate from the quotidian goings-on of everyday life, constituted by uncertainty (of outcome), and materially unproductive. For both thinkers, there was a proper place for play, which would mark the activity off spatially from the other activities of everyday life. While Caillois questioned Huizinga's sacralizing of play, he nevertheless felt there were particular symbolic boundaries that supported play as an activity in itself. For Huizinga, a defining characteristic of games is that they cease at some point. However, in industrial modernity, he felt that games often never end. Modern society had destroyed the boundaries between games and "the serious," producing "a far-reaching contamination" (Huizinga, 1936, p. 177). Caillois viewed modern society more positively than Huizinga, seeing the emergence and dominance of *agôn* and *alea* in positive civilizational terms. However, like Huizinga, Caillois held strongly to a conception of the corruption, or "contamination" of the play spirit. If each of the play types (*agôn*, *alea*, *ilinx*, mimicry) represent a powerful cultural drive, the inability of society to contain the drives can turn the play / game orientations into "perversions": "pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and source of anxiety" (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 44).

Much of what has been discussed thus far would prompt a serious questioning of Caillois's proprietary conception of play / games in that

late modernity has embedded gambling into the fabric of everyday life. Casinos no longer require a special trip, such as to Las Vegas: brick-and-mortar casinos are part of the entertainment landscape in many jurisdictions, and online casinos are accessible 24/7 through electronic devices. Sports betting opportunities are easily accessible and abundant. Lotteries exemplify "make-believe" through the appeal to imagination (e.g., Canada's Lotto 6/49 slogan "imagine the freedom," and Lotto Max advertisements depicting "dream coaches"), but straddle the play / daily-life boundary. They promise freedom from work, and escape from the demands of modern everyday life, while being advertised as a form of economic salvation. As Casey (2024) writes, the National Lottery's "altruistic discourses: of contributing towards 'good causes' ... [are] the perfect neoliberal strategy; one that offers a highly lucrative commercial solution to complex social problems, while at the same time offering the daydream of hope for a better future" (p. 89). Poker has become professionalized, thus corrupting the spirit of play. As with professional athletes: "it is clear that they are not players but workers" (Caillois, 1958/1961, p. 6). Professionals are a "contagion of reality" (p. 45).

With ubiquitous gambling opportunities, gambling spaces are not separate from everyday life. Gambling advertising for these opportunities (online casinos, sports betting, lotteries) have proliferated in public spaces and on television and social media. In broad terms, the legitimizing of *alea* in society has spatially decontained it, thus bringing about the conditions both Huizinga and Caillois feared: the contamination of play by everyday life. At the same time, not only does *agôn* (competition) continue to provide the ideological underpinning of capitalism, it has been exacerbated by the financialization of society, with the more or less direct objective of creating profit through financialized means. In this sense, the pursuit of money has become evermore bald through the invention of

financialized products that sidestep the production of goods as the vehicle for profit generation. Significantly, the spread of gambling beginning in the early 1990s and into the 21st century has, by and large, corresponded in capitalist countries with market financialization and the ideology of neoliberalism.

For Caillois, gambling is a pattern of culture, and indeed, while he did not live to see the late 20th-century legalization and expansion of gambling, his analysis in *Man, Play and Games* would prompt him to see gambling as a play form that expresses themes, as well as the intellectual habits, of late-capitalist / modern culture. In this context, gambling is a “popular” institutionalized expression of a speculative, financialized economy (Stäheli, 2007/2013). Caillois (1958/1961) argued that games could parody aspects of culture, including sacred ones, but that this parody should not go too far in impugning the sacred value. Bjerg (2011), in an argument reminiscent of Caillois’s, argues that poker is a parody of capitalism. Gambling, however, even if in certain forms it parodies capitalism, no longer poses any threat to social or economic ethics: it has been completely integrated into the culture in its rationalized commercial forms. Furthermore, and like the speculative activities accompanying financialization, it has become an economic ethic (Cosgrave, 2020; Mellor & Shilling, 2016).

Caillois’s rebuttal of Huizinga’s exclusion of games of chance from an analysis of play was based on acknowledging the place of games of chance in the economy and daily life of various cultures (1958/1961, p. 5). This is undoubtedly the case for late-modern culture. At the same time, the embeddedness of gambling—its presence and accessibility beyond separate play spaces—challenges certain assumptions that Caillois’s account shares with Huizinga’s. If Caillois sought to include games of chance in the category of play, we must note the leakage of gambling from the boundaries of play; that is to say that, in late modernity, the boundaries separating gambling (as play) from everyday life have been blurred.

Neither Huizinga nor Caillois provide an analysis of games incorporating a conceptualization of gender. In his analysis of “action,” Goffman (1967) did not distinguish between types of gambling games in terms of the qualities of action they offered (lumping together the aleatory and agonistic), and his discussion in “Where the Action Is” (1967) draws predominantly upon male examples. Gambling scholar Kate Bedford (2019) puts it directly: “Conversations about gambling and political economy tell a very male story” (p. 36). Goffman did, however, formulate the notion of the “cult of masculinity” when discussing the concept of character. Thus, particularly in the realms of agonistic action, we find the performance of “masculine” character, and what Goffman (1967) refers to as “character contests” (pp. 239–258). (Note that Goffman’s “Where the Action Is” (1967) preceded his important contributions to the sociology of gender in his *Gender Advertisements* (1979).

Thus, Goffman hints at an analysis of gendered responses to games and forms of action, a line of inquiry taken up by Julie Rak (2022) in her discussion of female poker players. Rak analyzes the masculine, and often sexist, world of poker, with an eye to the strategies female players use to negotiate this world and succeed as players. Rak formulates the notion of a “perifeminist” approach that female players adopt: while understanding and experiencing the masculinist world of poker, these players use the traditional stereotypes that male players hold of women players (e.g., “easily fooled,” “scared of aggression,” etc.; in effect, lacking qualities of (male) “character”) against them to succeed (2022, p. 2). While the structure of the masculinist world of poker is not directly confronted, the stereotypical assumptions of this world are deployed agonistically against it. Rak (2022) thus provides a conception of the differential gendered responses to games and action, and invokes a methodology that incorporates life writing to understand the gendered experiences

of gambling games. The methodologies used by feminist gambling scholars (Bedford, 2019; Casey, 2008; Rak, 2022) also provide a response to Caillois's call for attention to the "attitudes" towards games that make game participation meaningful.

Another important aspect of analyses of women's participation in gambling is the way in which this participation challenges the symbolic boundaries that define and shape gambling and its regulation (Bedford, 2019). As discussed, the embeddedness of gambling activities (bingo, lottery play) in everyday life indicates the blurring of the lines separating the economic dimensions of everyday life from the world of play. Further, as Bedford suggests, the "male story" around gambling has excluded particular participants and games. For her, not only does studying bingo disrupt "entrenched patterns of studying men's games" (Bedford, 2019, p. 37), but bingo itself fits "awkwardly" into established gambling discourses and categories, mixing together discourses around play, profit, leisure, community, and mutual aid (p. 41). Bedford also points out the way constructions of skill do gendering work: masculinist "skill" is held separate from "feminine" hunches, thus supporting masculinist conceptions of "character." She points out the "considerable boundary-making work [that] has gone into the distinctions ... between chance and skill" (Bedford, 2019, p. 45).

With respect to the "contamination" of play, a problematic feature for Caillois is that the conditions arise for the "perversion" of the game forms. Caillois uses the terms "obsession," "compulsion," and "anxiety" to characterize the perverse relationships to play (1958/1961, p. 44). Contemporary terminology with respect to a perverse orientation to games of chance is "problem," "pathological," or "disordered" gambling. To be noted is the emergence of the "problem" gambler alongside the spread of legalized, commercial gambling. The problem gambler could be described as a casualty of

chance, or rather of *rationalized* chance; that is, a casualty of the agonistic forces (rationalization) used by the casino against the gambler. The problem gambler may or may not have an "unconscious desire to lose," but gambler losses are in any case the structured outcome of the casino's economic objectives. In agonistic terms, and despite the medicalized conceptualizations of problem and pathological gambling, such gamblers are pecuniary losers.

The problem gambler can also be understood in relation to a consideration of the spatial characteristics of play and games, as put forth by Huizinga and Caillois. "Problem" gambling can occur in relation to games housed in brick-and-mortar casinos or in relation to gambling on electronic devices. With the latter, there is no separation of the gambling play-space from the rest of everyday life, and gambling games are available 24/7. The game(s) never end.

The problem gambler as a figure has emerged as opportunities to gamble have become widespread and easy to access. In this environment, the individual is enjoined by state gambling agencies and the gambling industry to risk-manage their gambling proclivities (e.g., to gamble "responsibly"). For Young, the "misrecognitions" opened up by aleatory consumption, combined "with the ideology of chance, conceal the agonistic realm of production by enabling consumers to adopt individualized orientations towards consumption" (2010, p. 269).

"Responsible gambling," then, is not just as an individualizing form of risk management, it is a misrecognized expression of agonistic culture; a form of self-discipline that an individual is encouraged to enact, not to win against the unfavourable odds, but as a deflected acknowledgement of the agonism of the casino (rationalized monetary extraction) and the embedded knowledges—spatial, technological, behavioural—the casino employs to ensure that it "always wins." "Responsible gambling" is, in effect, an accommodative strategy, a training in

treating losing as entertainment (e.g., “know your limit, play within it”; “gambling is not a way to make money”; etc.) that supports the agonistic economic interests of the casino against the gambler.

The agonistic features of the casino, and of commercial gambling more generally, are thus revealed, and the struggle of the self must be noted here as the individual attempts to resist excessive gambling in the face of the unfavourable odds and behavioural shaping the casino employs, to ensure that neither loss of self-control (vertigo) nor significant financial loss occurs with fateful consequences. As the “casino” is now accessible through one’s cellphone, the “perversions” of play can appear anywhere. Indeed, in the environment of easily accessible gambling, the figure of the “problem gambler” plays an alibi role, distracting from the agonistic structure of commercialized gambling “play.”

Conclusion

In contrast to Huizinga, Caillois acknowledged the material interests attached to games of chance, while also simultaneously holding to a conception of play and games as activities “separate” from everyday life. Gambling was “profane” but also culturally significant. To the category of “play” that Caillois proposed adding to the sacred–profane dichotomy, the presence of widespread gambling in late modernity also demonstrates the economic and material significance of games of chance in this culture. Having moved beyond the bounded space of the racetrack or the casino, gambling occupies an important part of the late-capitalist economy because it has been *made economic*.

It can be said however, that Caillois’s rehabilitation of gambling as culturally significant does not go far enough. Gambling is also “profane” because it is embedded in the activities and practices of everyday life. Thus, the quotidian nature of certain forms of gambling challenges the interpretive assumptions positing the

separateness of gambling (as play) from everyday life.

The notion of “fatal contamination” is both fruitful and limiting. It is fruitful in allowing for a thoughtful consideration of the spread of gambling in late capitalism that expresses the dynamic interplay between economy and cultural forms, as well as the attendant (gambling) problems that accompany this. On the other hand, the notion of “contamination” risks devaluing the expressions of gambling in everyday life and obscuring types of participants for whom gambling is part of their ordinary lives (Casey, 2008, 2024).

In this paper, Caillois’s categories of *agôn* and *alea* have been used to understand some of the political economic aspects of late capitalism and grasp the “fatal contamination” of gambling within it. As a pattern or theme of late-modern culture, *alea* not only “complements” *agôn*, but competes with it, as *alea* has been legitimated as a social and economic ethic, and as legitimating ideologies (work, reward, merit) that have supported capitalism are attenuated. Further, the organization of commercial gambling as a product of rationalizing processes and efforts, not only rationalizes and colonizes chance for its profit-generating possibilities, it also uses these efforts agonistically against the gambler. *Alea* competes with *agôn*, but also serves agonistic forces. Indeed, not only are the uncertainties of late modernity capitalized by the commercialization of *alea*, but the agonistic uses of *alea* in commercial gambling suggest a dialectic between them.

While any particular game of chance comes to an end, gambling’s widespread presence—its proximity, accessibility, and convenience—lays bare Huizinga’s worry: as a game, it never ends.

Somewhere between a game and an economic feature of late-modern everyday life, we are left to confront the ambiguity of gambling as a culturally significant phenomenon and theme of late modernity. The “fatal contamination” calls us to consider Caillois’s bold statement: “the

destinies of cultures can be read in their games” (1958/1961, p. 35).

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Author Details

James Cosgrave teaches in the Sociology Department at Trent University Durham in Oshawa, Ontario. His research interests include the sociology of gambling and the state's role in the legitimation, expansion, and regulation of gambling markets. Recent publications include:

Cosgrave, J., & Cormack, P. (2023). Making markets out of vice: Gambling, cannabis, and processes of state legitimation and formation in Canada. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 57(2), 280–298. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs-2022-0033>

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ORCID

James Cosgrave  [0000-0003-2539-140X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2539-140X)