

Gambling in an Age of Chance – The Problems of Gambling and the Contradictions of Capitalism

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Abstract

This paper traces the development of ideas about gambling and the emergence of the ‘problem gambler’ as a distinct social phenomenon during the 20th and 21st centuries. It argues that modern discourses of problem gambling articulate some of the inherent tensions within consumer societies. Although historically, gambling was criticised for undermining the ethic of production, today the notion of problem gambling is expressed in terms of a ‘consumption ethic’ based on the values of self-actualization, responsibility and reason. This is related to wider socio-economic trends in which external regulation is replaced with an emphasis on internal self-control that is carried out through appropriate types of consumption. In the case of gambling, the recent deregulation and liberalization of Western markets, together with an emphasis on individual player responsibility, expresses the tensions inherent in consumer capitalism, and creates the conditions for the emergence of the problem gambler as a unique historical figure.

Author Bio

Dr Gerda Reith is Senior Lecturer and Director of the Gambling Research Group at the University of Glasgow, U.K. Her research focuses on the social and cultural determinants of gambling and problem gambling, as well as other forms of consumption sometimes considered risky, addictive or problematic, such as drug and alcohol use, and has written extensively on these areas. She is author of *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture* (Routledge 1999 & 2002), winner of the Philip Abrams Prize 2000, and editor of *Gambling: Who Wins? Who Loses* (Prometheus Books 2003). She has recently been appointed as Research Chair of the Responsible Gambling Strategy Board, the organisation which advises the British government on priorities for research, education and treatment. In addition, she sits on the editorial boards of *International Gambling Studies*, *Journal of Gambling Issues*, and *Journal of Youth Studies*, and has also provided specialist advice to the Department of Health, the Gambling Commission and the Scottish Government on gambling-related issues.