



Introduction

Over the last decade, an almost explosive growth in the popularity of poker has taken place. Rough estimates say there are 140–80 million regular players worldwide, and the turnover of major poker sites on the Internet is counted in billions of dollars.¹ What used to be a typically American game has now become a genuinely globalized phenomenon. Obviously, the growing popularity of poker is closely connected with the development and the spread of the Internet. Yet technological innovations and clever marketing provide only part of the explanation for the “poker boom.”

This book is written on the assumption that the sudden popularity of poker signifies a rich cultural resonance in the game. When we look at a piece of art, read a piece of literature, watch a film, or listen to a piece of music, it is commonplace to think of them as cultural expressions of the society and historical context in which they are created. Art, literature, film, and music are readily recognized as mediums of the *Zeitgeist*. Poker and other gambling games are rarely thought of in the same fashion. At best, they are considered meaningless entertainment, at worst self-destructive vices.

The idea of this book is to treat poker as a cultural expression in line with art, literature, film, and so on. When so many people find poker interesting, it is because the game has an eminent capacity to capture a set of existential conditions of life in contemporary society and offer them to the players in a form that allows them to explore, challenge, and play with these conditions. Furthermore, not only is the cultural resonance of poker

manifested quantitatively in the great amount of people playing the game, but the quality of individual players' engagement is often very intense. It is not uncommon for players to devote significant amounts of time, money, and mental energy to the game. The significant cultural resonance of poker makes it a rich phenomenon in terms of meaning and therefore an intriguing object of cultural analysis.

In his seminal work *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois formulates a program for a sociology of games that could also serve as a program for the analysis of poker in this book:

It is not absurd to try diagnosing a civilization in terms of the games that are especially popular there. In fact, if games are cultural factors and images, it follows that to a certain degree a civilization and its content may be characterized by its games. They necessarily reflect its culture pattern and provide useful indications as to the preferences, weakness, and strength of a given society at a particular stage of its evolution.²

The reason that poker, as well as other gambling games, generally receives less attention than art, literature, films, and so on as culture-bearing is not simply a matter of forgetfulness. Jackson Lears, author of *Something for Nothing*, has noted: "Debate about gambling is never just about gambling; it is about different ways of being in the world."³ Historically, the attitudes in society toward gambling seem to have been ambivalent for as long as these games have existed.⁴ On the one hand, gambling has been condemned as a vice or later on as a pathology; on the other hand, gambling games have been tolerated and sometimes even appropriated as sources of public revenue. This ambivalent attitude is very much true today in relation to poker. Poker seems to have an eminent capacity for producing a certain kind of *Unbehagen* in the collective body of society.

As a cultural expression, poker is not exactly an embellishment of society. This is incisively captured in Walther Matthau's famous quip on poker: "The game exemplifies the worst aspects of capitalism that have made our country so great."⁵ As we are going to see throughout this book, poker simulates core features of contemporary capitalism and displays these in a very pure form. Poker functions as a parody of capitalism.

As we know from impersonations of famous and powerful people, the exaggeration of distinct features of a person has the effect of "desublimating" the image of this person. For someone who wishes to maintain a certain image as being endowed with certain sublime or otherwise impeccable

qualities, parody can be very disconcerting. There is an element of truth in any good parody, not in the shape of accurate representation but in the effects on the original image of the object of parody. As a parody of capitalism, poker produces certain truths about the economic organization of contemporary society. Maybe this is why the game provokes *Unbehagen* in society, and maybe this is why there seems to be a reluctance to grant poker the status of a culture-bearing phenomenon.

When we experience times of great fluctuation in the general economy, capitalism is sometimes compared to a gambling game. The metaphor of “casino capitalism” is frequently used as a denigrative designation of the state of the economy. For instance, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus comments on the recent financial crisis: “Today’s capitalism has degenerated into a casino. The financial markets are propelled by greed. Speculation has reached catastrophic proportions.”⁶ Although the intentions behind the statement are probably both fair and well-meaning in terms of the analysis of capitalism, the implied notion of what happens in a casino is at best inaccurate and at worst misleading.

This book proposes a corrective to the concept of casino capitalism. First, it makes a clear distinction between poker, on the one hand, and roulette, craps, and other gambling games of pure chance, on the other. Second, it demonstrates that contemporary financial capitalism does indeed resemble a poker game, whereas it has little to do with other casino games. Third, and perhaps more importantly, the book raises the question of whether the equation of capitalism and poker is really a denigration of the former or perhaps rather a denigration of the latter. As Yunus’s statement exemplifies, it is common to think of gambling in general and poker in particular as degenerate forms of economic transaction. The concept of casino capitalism is meant to designate a perverted form of capitalism.

However, once we move past the immediate moral depreciation of poker and venture into a thorough analysis of the game, arguably we find a more democratic, honest, just, and pure system for the distribution of value than in actually existing capitalist society. In a 1974 *Playboy* article, G. Barry Golson says about poker:

The game is as perfect a microcosm as we have of the way a free-enterprise system is supposed to work, except that the rich don’t necessarily get richer. Brass balls will do. [In a game of poker] a grocery clerk can humiliate an oil tycoon through sheer bravado—the object being, without exception, to bankrupt the bastard across the table.⁷

A symptom of the reluctance to give poker the status of a culture-bearing expression is that the vast majority of research-based texts on gambling are analyses of different aspects of problem gambling. Although problem gambling is certainly a serious issue with tragic consequences for those individuals suffering from the disorder, the focus on the detrimental aspects of gambling often stands in the way of exploring and understanding its wider cultural meaning. Fortunately, in recent years there has been a growing interest in the cultural significance of gambling, and a number of brilliant books on the subject have been published.⁸ As none of these works deals with poker specifically, many of the analyses of this book venture into virgin territory. Actually, David Hayano's seminal study of Gardena poker players in *Poker Faces: The Life and Work of Professional Card Players* from 1982 stands out as the only serious academic work on poker within the field of anthropology, sociology, and philosophy.⁹ As a result, the analyses of this book have found great inspiration and support in the rich body of nonacademic literature on poker that has been growing steadily with the increased popularity of the game.¹⁰

As poker is a fairly virginal phenomenon in terms of academic analysis, it still has not found its proper place in a specific field of research. Within the framework of the book, this indeterminacy constitutes both a difficulty and a liberty. Instead of fixing poker within a particular field of theories and methods, the analyses of the book move into various disciplinary fields: philosophy, sociology, psychology, economy, and history. The purpose of the study is to intervene in several fields of knowledge at the same time and, by doing so, force these fields to open up toward each other. These fields of knowledge are cultural studies of gambling, popular literature on poker and poker strategy, gambling studies of compulsive gambling, and social theory on contemporary capitalism. The ambition of this multidisciplinary approach is also to invite a wide range of readers with different interests to explore different topics in the book.

The book is divided into four parts, each subdivided into two or three chapters. Part 1 is a philosophical analysis of poker. In chapter 1, poker is positioned in relation to other games with regards to the ontological structure of the game. Slavoj Žižek's distinction between three different ontological orders, the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary, is presented. This triad provides the basic analytical framework for much of the thinking about poker in the book. Chapter 2 continues along the same lines. Using a single hand played by poker professional, Gus Hansen, as an example, it demonstrates how a particular variant of poker, Texas Hold 'Em, is actually

played, and the basics of strategic reasoning in poker are introduced. Chapter 3 concludes the philosophical analysis of Texas Hold 'Em by using Žižek to unfold the challenges of poker strategy.

Part 2 analyzes poker empirically as an economic system for the circulation and distribution of money. In this part, the analytical focus is gradually shifted from the game of poker to the poker players. Using data from an online game provider, chapter 4 maps the relative proportions of different categories of winning and losing players. In chapter 5, data on different styles of playing are included, and five classes of players are identified in a statistical latent class analysis.

In part 3, the analytical focus is also on the players, and different forms of subjectivity in poker are investigated. Based on qualitative interviews, chapter 6 investigates the particular skills required to succeed as a professional poker player. In chapter 7, three ideal typical approaches to poker are developed, using again Slavoj Žižek's distinction between the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. The three orders correspond to the three types: Sucker, Grinder, and Player. Chapter 8 looks into problem gambling in poker. Using qualitative interview data, the chapter develops a map of four different types of problem gamblers in poker.

Part 4 investigates the cultural meaning of poker and the relation between poker and capitalism. Chapter 9 takes the analysis to a very general level by inquiring into the relationship between game and society; it proceeds by presenting Jean Baudrillard's definition of game as "parodic simulacrum" as a way of conceptualizing this relationship. In chapter 10, this concept is applied to a historical analysis, demonstrating the parallel development of poker and capitalism. I argue that the evolution and succession of different forms of poker, Flat poker, Draw poker, Stud poker, and Texas Hold 'Em, correspond to the evolution and succession of different paradigms of capitalism. Chapter 11 demonstrates how the circulation and distribution of value in No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em simulate the circulation of value in postindustrial capitalism. Furthermore, it shows how the ideal types of poker players correspond to class positions in postindustrial capitalism.

Even though the book is written with the intention of being read from beginning to end, it is also possible for readers with particular interests to approach the different parts of the book in an order other than the one immediately suggested by the disposition. A scholar of contemporary social theory might want to begin with part 4 and then turn back to part 1. A poker player with an interest in the game in its own right will probably want to start at the beginning. Chapters 1 and 3 are, however, the most de-

manding chapters to read because of the extensive use of philosophical terminology. An alternative option is to skip forward to parts 2 and 3 before reading part 1. A reader with a particular interest in problem gambling might want to start with part 3 and perhaps even approach the chapters 6 through 8 in reverse order. Scholars of the culture of gambling will want to read the book from beginning to end.

In other words: shuffle up and read!