

Fabian, Ann. *Card Sharps, Dream Books & Bucket Shops: Gambling in 19th-Century America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990. Notes, index, photographs. \$24.95.

In his ill-fated run for the presidency in 1972, George McGovern proposed a 100 percent tax on inheritances greater than a half million dollars. To McGovern's surprise, opposition to the tax emerged not just among millionaires but also among blue-collar workers. "They must think they're going to win a lottery," was the only explanation that he could offer. The incident reveals the complex ways in which ideas about gambling and gain are embedded in our national history and culture. Casino capitalism (as well as casinos themselves) may have brought vast riches to a few in the 1980s but the possibility of the "big score" has also helped to keep larger numbers of ordinary Americans from seeking broader changes in the same inegalitarian economic order.

One of the many virtues of Ann Fabian's study of *Card Sharps, Dream Books, and Bucket Shops* is her close attention to the ironies and ambiguities of gambling in American life. Despite the title, Fabian's book provides a cultural history of gambling that moves beyond the colorful tales of wily card sharps on Mississippi Riverboats. To be sure, there is plenty of color in Fabian's account. But she also asks more fundamental questions about the meaning of gambling, about the relationship of gambling to more basic changes in American society, economy, and culture. Fabian's answers to those questions are subtle and nuanced. She shows us that gambling did not have a single *meaning* but rather that its meanings (and functions) varied over time and space. The slave-holding

Virginia gentlemen who wagered large sums on horse races and cockfights were, quite literally, a world apart from the poor African-Americans who placed small bets in policy games.

Fabian's careful explication of the diverse meanings of both gambling and efforts to control it can be seen in her discussion of attacks on gambling that emerged in the ante-bellum North and South. In the North, the focus of reformers was on the ways that gambling challenged the emerging market economy rooted in industry, frugality, and rationality. Opponents of gambling worried about how the gambling of young Wall Street clerks threatened the financial integrity of the emerging "economy of strangers" and how the gambling of artisans and laborers undermined the slow and steady accumulation of wealth that seemed to be a cornerstone of the new market economy.

In the South, by contrast, the concern was more with the disorder and vice that seemed to accompany gambling rather than with gambling itself. Thus, the hanging of five gamblers in Vicksburg, Mississippi in July 1835 can be understood as a response to a perceived threat to the social order of a slave society. "The grubby professional gamblers," she argues, "made a mockery of the cultural symbols of a planter aristocracy and they made it just at a moment when the slaveholders of the South felt themselves most threatened both by the intensified abolitionist campaigns and by the increasing commercial economy of the lower Mississippi Valley" (p. 36).

Among African Americans in the post-Civil War north, gambling took on yet another guise. Poor black residents of northern cities who put down their pennies on the numbers implicitly rejected middle-class injunctions to save and accumulate. Fabian perceptively finds the "remnants of an alternative culture of irrational economics . . . hidden in the early numbers betting and in the dream books designed to guide the minuscule speculations of numbers bettors and policy players." In playing the numbers, poor African Americans offered their own critical commentary on an ostensibly rational economic order that did not operate with true rationality from their perspective—a lesson clearly taught by the collapse of the Freedman's Savings Bank.

Although Fabian's book is especially valuable for its nuanced "readings" of gambling's multiple meanings, it does not simply conclude that the story is one of endless particularity. She also shows how gambling can be seen, in more general terms, as a shifting commentary upon the emerging capitalist economy of the nineteenth century. In effect, by looking at this "underside" of the market economy we can better see the ways that Americans came to understand and accept the capitalist order that was enveloping them. As she writes (in one of the most important insights in the book): "Gambling thus became a 'negative analogue,' the one form of gain that made all other efforts to get rich appear normal, natural, and socially salubrious. To condemn gambling was to condone the speculative profits generated by the transfer of land and stock and by the sale of contracts for agricultural commodities" (pp. 4-5). Sending the police after the corner card sharp became a way of keeping the police from arresting commodity speculators who tried to get a corner on wheat. Closing the

gamblers' bucket shops turned out to be the only way to keep open the speculators' Board of Trade. Thus, by the end of Fabian's book, we see that the history of gambling can also be the history of economic thought.

Fabian's account is rooted in extensive research in a wide range of sources from the autobiographies of gamblers to the sermons of Protestant ministers to the dream books of poor urban residents. She adeptly analyzes these diverse sources and offers close and perceptive readings of both fictional and non-fictional texts. Equally important, Fabian demonstrates an impressive command of the relevant literature in economic, social, intellectual, political, and literary history.

Naturally, there are gaps in any such pioneering effort to explore a vast subject. Fabian's book, in the end, is less a social history of gamblers and gambling and more an intellectual history of ideas about gambling and the economy. Moreover, although Fabian offers some suggestive remarks about the transformation of gambling in the twentieth century, her account is fundamentally confined to the nineteenth century. To understand how gambling shifted from being a critical counter-commentary on the economic status quo to both a big business and a way of accommodating people to an unequal economic order, we need an explication of the next century of the history of gambling written with the same flair and insight as Fabian has demonstrated here.

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