

The Morality of Football Betting in its Intersections with Capitalism and Social Reproduction

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

Gambling involves a mixture of luck, knowledge, skill, and nerve. Through interview discussions with my informant Mateo, I seek to analyze the ideologies of economy, money, and exchange that interplay in the formation of the moralities and motivations for sports betting. Furthermore, sports betting via the online bookmaker Paddy Power involves multiple moralities that shape the practice around accumulation and leisure. These forces speak to larger capitalist and societal ethical standards and spheres of exchange, including the seeking of wealth in the interest of generating more. However, the goal of interviewing my informant is to outline the combination of pleasure and knowledge in what becomes a socially reproduced activity in today's society.

keywords: morality, exchange, gambling, money, capitalism, commodities, football

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'Money is the fuel of gambling; it drives it, as petrol powers a car, but the pleasure of driving a car is not about petroleum. It's about speed, style, movement. Fuel is merely what makes the car run'

(Spanier, 2001: 50 cited in Binde, 2006: 474)

As Spanier's quote suggests, gambling requires money, but the pleasure of the various styles of gambling are (to continue the analogy) what causes the driver to put their foot on the gas. The relationship between money and gambling, however, is more complex than a simple car analogy and requires an analysis of a system of reciprocal exchange that establishes distinct moral boundaries. Honing on a specific form of gambling, I will discuss the sports betting practices of my friend and interlocutor, who I have given the pseudonym Mateo. The morality of his practice is characterized by the consent of users on the betting platform Paddy Power and similarities can be drawn to the modern capitalist market of Wall Street (Ho, 2009). Ho's analogy shows how money begets money

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through the exploitation of the losses of other players within the market. Wall Street and sports betting are volatile money systems that then can further be compared to northeastern Madagascar export culture (Zhu, 2018). This economic structure conceptualizes earnings as 'hot money' - meant to be spent immediately - a characterization of money Mateo takes after due to its resemblance to the volatility of gambling (Zhu, 2018). In both instances, money is rendered for pleasure in order to distract from its power. However, Mateo oscillates between freedom from Paddy Power in spending his money on what he describes as entertainment activities, and being under 'Paddy's Power' so to speak. 'Paddy's Power' is diminished through Mateo's association with gambling as a leisure activity, where money provides the fuel, yet he needs 'Paddy' to beget money and leisure. Thus, Mateo's interaction with gambling is viewed as both leisure and the accumulation of money. Furthermore, money is a mechanism that enables Mateo to engage more fully and vividly with sport and its social relations by applying a combination of morals associated with capitalist accumulation and ideas of reciprocity.

Methods and the Money Man

I met my informant in the University Library Café in the middle of exam revision at the end of the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year. Mateo is a fellow undergraduate student at the University of Edinburgh, who I have known for most of my years there. He spends his downtime watching, playing, and betting on football; and playing poker with his flatmates.

For the methods of my ethnography, I conducted a long interview with

Mateo in which we discussed his current gambling practices - with emphasis on his successes in online sports betting - and played a game of poker in his flat. Mateo had recently started using Paddy Power and other online sports betting platforms that June when he and a friend were watching football at home. While both ended up losing a fiver on the match, Mateo had won a newfound enjoyment of football, with raised stakes and a feeling of virtual immersion. For the previous 16 years, Mateo has followed the daily on-goings of the Premier League and other leagues around the world. He had accumulated what he termed 'stupid football knowledge' that he sees as otherwise useless, except when it comes to football betting.

As a result of the pandemic and closing of social spaces where Mateo would normally spend his free time and disposable income, sports betting has filled a hole in entertainment. By providing Mateo with an enhancement of watching football from home, and an outlet for his 'stupid football knowledge', gambling on matches had become a favorite past time for Mateo and his flatmates. I had noticed that other gambling activities have proliferated in his all-male student flat. From making bets on ping-pong tournaments and weekly poker nights, to betting on the 2020 United States election.

Though this paper is concerned primarily with sports betting, due to Mateo's more extensive history with it, I will briefly discuss other gambling practices. With poker, ping-pong, and the US election, Mateo admitted his primary reason for placing bets was to participate in the social field of his flat. In addition, he confessed he was not very knowledgeable or skilled at any of these activities, and thus maintained a risk-averse attitude by

only making small bets. I happened to conduct participant observation in a poker game with Mateo, in which he often 'checked'; wanting to bet only when having a worthwhile hand. Similarly, Mateo maintains the same mentality in his football betting regardless of his increased confidence in success. From these bets, revenue is spent on personal activities and investing into future bets on Paddy Power.

In the betting process, Paddy Power encourages its users to continue betting on earnings just won. For example, Mateo described that in a recent bet, he started by betting ten pounds on a football match between Sheffield United and Brighton. Specifically, a win would come if Brighton received a yellow card and both teams had a corner in each half. The bet won and Paddy Power immediately encouraged him to put ten pounds on a riskier four-fold bet, which would have won him one hundred and sixty pounds. Yet he lost by a slim margin as only three out of the four players in the bet got yellow cards needed. Luckily for him, Paddy Power's policy allows him to get the ten pounds back as a free bet the next day because he only lost one leg of the bet. Mateo assured me that for good measure he had made twenty pounds on easy bets the day before. His risk-averse tactics regularly pay off too, as he modestly disclosed that he has made upwards of six hundred pounds in the last six months.

Ideologies and Moralities of Exchange through Gambling

I will analyze Mateo's gambling as part of spheres of reciprocal exchange, first as a negative generalized reciprocity (Binde,

2005) which provides morality to Mateo's wins and his flatmates' losses as he views it as a positively balanced exchange.

Per Binde's (2005) article on the different exchange systems and subsequent ethical quandaries associated with each, demonstrates how gambling across cultures is capable of intersecting different types of reciprocal exchange because of gambling's normative and structural duality (Figure 1) (472). With respect to norms, gambling can be perceived as 'negative' where players win or 'steal' money from other players, and 'positive' in the consent provided that allows for the taking of one's money (Binde, 2005: 472). '... [structurally], there are games in which one player or group of players confronts another or a gambling entrepreneur [structurally balanced], as well as games where all play against all [structurally generalized]' (Binde, 2005: 472). Thereby, a negative generalized reciprocal exchange is an exchange where one profits off the losses of multiple others (Binde, 2005: 448). In the game of poker I played with Mateo, all players put in a modest bet of £ 2.50. Mateo walked away with ten pounds. This 'negative generalized reciprocity' is justified under the morality that: 'Once you've started, you must take the consequences' (Binde, 2005: 450).

While the morality and conception around sports betting varies from poker, the deviation is not such that it elicits a different category of reciprocal exchange. This is questioned by Binde, as he discusses how horse-race betters see poker as an aggressive form of money taking from the hands of other players, while in horse-race betting (similar to sport-betting), gamblers are betting against the bookmaker. In Mateo's case this is Paddy Power (2005: 451). This is a deviation from a negative generalized

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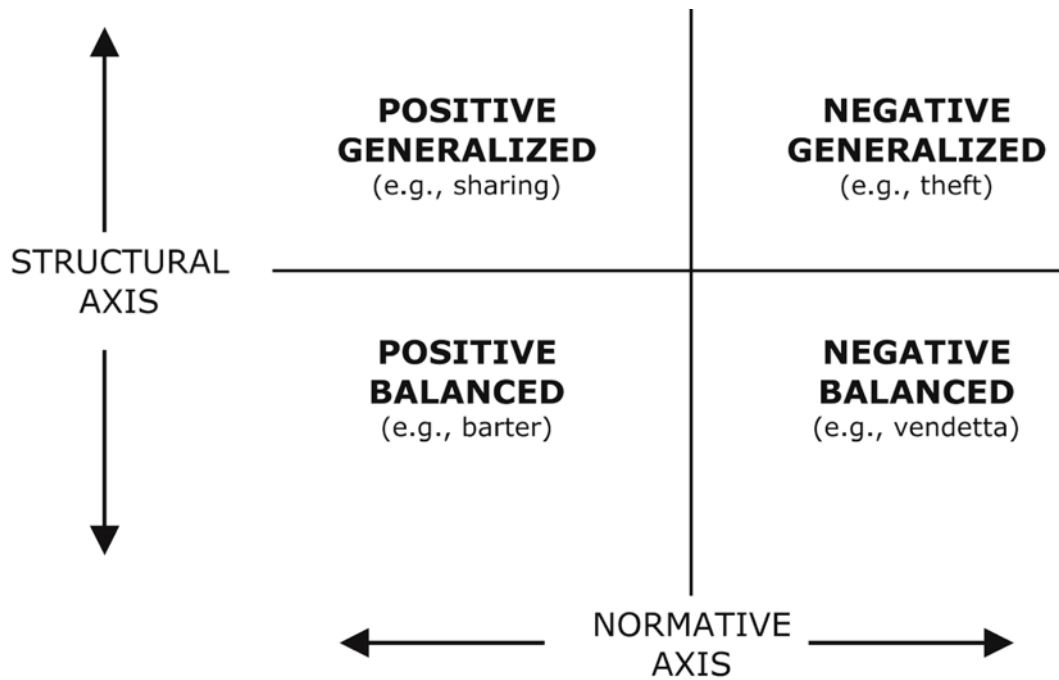


Figure 1: Four modes of reciprocal exchange. (Adapted from W. Mitchell, 1988)

reciprocity to a positively balanced system, yet the economic reality is that Mateo profits off his flatmates' losses regardless, even if indirectly (Binde, 2005: 451). Mateo's attitude towards earnings are centered on his online engagement with Paddy Power rather than the taking of money from his flatmates. This transforms Mateo's perception of hits bets into a positive balanced system, wherein by betting against a gambling organization, he is profiting off the miscalculations of the website and receiving revenue indirectly from actors in a system of consent. While he usually places bets on Premier league matches, he has profited from bets on Brazilian Serie B football, a league he admits he doesn't know much about but he claims he knows more than Paddy Power. Thus, Mateo takes advantage of his 'stupid football knowledge' to place

bets he perceives Paddy Power to have miscalculated by looking at the odds and researching for himself. Rather than see sports betting as a competition between himself and his flatmates, Mateo sees himself in competition with Paddy Power.

'It's not really about the competition [amongst friends] part of it. Because when you both win the same bet, you're happy that you both won. [...] If I see something, which I think isn't correct, in the odds or something. When I think there's like a miscalculation, you also get satisfaction from thinking you know more than what they're doing. That's the main thing.'

Mateo's gambling can be seen as a positively balanced exchange, where the consent of gamblers is assumed, and the mindset is against Paddy Power. On the other hand, Binde notes in horse-race betting: 'the economic reality however is that

bookmakers do not altruistically give away money to gamblers, all wins come from the losses of other gamblers' (Binde, 2005: 451). As a result, the upwards of six hundred pounds Mateo has made comes from the contributions of gamblers like his flatmates, some of whom are down one hundred pounds on Paddy Power. The opaque social field on Paddy Power allows Mateo to moralize winning money from potentially his friends in a system of exchange that is requiring knowledge and luck as opposed to theft. This conceptualization of gambling allows Mateo to see it as a socially reproduced activity which bonds his flatmates together through their communally shared winnings.

The Morality of Gambling and the Intersection of Capitalism

Knowledge of gambling's purported voluntary nature along with the exploitative nature within a capitalist economy, gives moral justification to betting practices. In Karen Ho's (2009) ethnography on the downsizing of Corporate America and the beneficiaries on Wall Street, she discusses how investment bankers earn money through the loss of jobs for employees in corporations to expand shareholder value. In 1995 telecommunications giant AT&T announced its split into three different companies, and in doing so, offered 77,800 employees buy-outs whilst downsizing another 40,000 (Ho, 2009: 180). On the day of the announcement, the AT&T stock rose 6.125 points growing \$9.7 billion, meanwhile investment banks received a rise in corporate reorganization deals (Ho, 2009: 180). Furthermore, the investment bank that carried out the execution of AT&T's reorganization, Morgan Stanley, earned

tens of millions of dollars (Ho, 2009: 181). Ho exhibits how investment bankers profit off downsizing deals with corporations that involve unemployment for over one-hundred thousand people.

'Wall Street investment banks are central to corporate downsizing, they are key agitators for the restructuring of companies to 'create' stock price wealth from "undervalued" assets' (Ho, 2009: 181).

More money for the shareholders is more money for the agitators downsizing companies. On Paddy Power, similar to Wall Street, placing a successful bet returns a profit, and the loss of the other is moralized through the understanding of the nature of the market, where entering brings the potential of losing.

This brings us to question how natural the market is. When investing in a company, money becomes an avenue for its own reproduction, and effectively comes to life. As Karl Polanyi notes, money under systems of capitalist banking and finance is a fictitious commodity as it transforms from a means of exchange mediating the trade of commodities to a commodity itself that is invested, pushed, traded, bought, and sold (Polanyi, 2001: 75-76). Furthermore, there is nothing natural about the idea that money begets money, in fact, Taussig (2010) notes the concept is rather supernatural. His informants on a sugarcane plantation in the Cauca valley of Colombia conceive that those who increase their production and wages in order to accumulate capital are seen as making pacts with the Devil (Taussig, 2010: 13). Taussig's ethnographic research demonstrates the antagonism of a people in between precapitalist and capitalist societies. The consequences of these pacts are prema-

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ture death and the destruction of one's capital, along with an inability to conduct future exchanges (Taussig, 2010: 118). This is the result of placing oneself as the goal of exchange rather than embracing reciprocity which allows for social reproduction (Taussig, 2010: 120). Taussig and Ho's informants represent different worlds of economics, with one group living off the concept of money's self-regenerative powers, and the other equating the concept with the devil. For Mateo, his sports betting is more closely aligned with the system Ho noted.

'It's made me like, realise there are opportunities out there to make money just from sitting at home, on my phone and having stupid knowledge from football.'

Mateo renders money as a commodity that can multiply as a necessity. Money is the stakes Mateo places on his knowledge because he values its ability to multiply 'from just sitting at home.' The acceptance of money as a commodity creates the ideological framework Mateo exists in. In some ways, Mateo resembles Ho's informants in profiting of the loss of others, reminiscent of a negative generalized exchange. It is the ideology and societal acceptance that money is a commodity that can be waged and used to beget more of itself that proliferates the conception of gambling, and the practices of businesses like Paddy Power. As previously mentioned, Paddy Power encourages further betting in order to increase one's accumulation. Evidently this ideology of money as a commodity seems natural and is accepted as the result of growing up under capitalism (Taussig, 2010: 4).

Lukewarm Money and the Pleasure of Challenging Paddy's Power

Mateo is of course not to blame for using money as a tool to accumulate capital, and in fact he uses his earnings in a socially reproductive manner, which I will conceptualize as 'lukewarm' to be spent immediately. Zhu (2018) describes the earning of money through erratic means as 'hot money' as her interlocutors immediately spend their earnings as if the money was hot. The volatility of the stock market and earning profit from sports betting is reminiscent of a systemic volatility in the export culture Zhu describes that conceptualizes income as restricted to the sphere of pleasure. The erratic nature of income from Paddy Power encourages Mateo to keep his earnings in the sphere of pleasure as they may not last forever. In order to analyze Mateo's earnings and his interactions with them, I will draw from Annah Zhu's (2018) ethnography on the export economy in northeastern Madagascar. During the past 20 years, Madagascar has experienced economic booms and busts due to the volatility in the exports of vanilla and rosewood (Zhu, 2018: 253). Cyclones destroy much of the region's crops which causes a rapid increase in the price of vanilla and leads to rural villagers receiving wealth previously unimaginable to them (Zhu, 2018: 253). With this newfound prosperity, farmers spend their earnings in indulgent sprees, consisting of cold beer and nights out in neighboring towns (Zhu, 2018: 253). When the region and crops recover from the cyclone, the price of vanilla decreases, along with the money of the farmers, causing them to sell their mattresses and return to straw beds (Zhu, 2018: 254). The spending habits of these

northeastern Malagasy are characterized by Zhu's description of the concept *vola mafana* or 'hot money', which one of her interlocutors describes as '[when] you have got such a lot of money, but you don't even want to think about saving it! All you want to do is just to find a way to spend it all!' (Zhu, 2018: 259).

Mateo's money is initially conceptualized as disposable. From the start, he notes his ability to gamble stems from an open space in his social life: 'I've just not been spending money on going-out.' In this sense, 'going-out' refers to the weekly visiting of pubs, nightclubs and parties in Edinburgh, all of which are currently nonexistent as a result of restrictions to stop the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. His disposable income is thereby funneled into Paddy Power, and spending it on shared activities such as takeaways with his girlfriend and beer for his flatmates replicates the types of leisure he would be participating in had Covid-19 not caused the closing of all night-life. Furthermore, football betting leads to socially reproductive activities.

'You watch football, with your friends. And you can talk about it. But I guess it's probably more social than poker, poker is like more competition, like you're playing against your friends, you're winning their money, or you're losing your money to them. Whereas when it's betting it's small, it's not competition like that.'

The emphasis on socially reproductive and shared activities deviates a little from Zhu's example, focusing more on the relationships rather than the extravagance of the spending. In addition, the notable absence of competition in football betting allows it to prevent antagonism between flatmates. In this instance, the shared

activities are what Mateo earns his money for.

'Like, what's the point in winning if you don't actually spend them otherwise? Otherwise, it's just silly. I'm not doing it to make money to earn a living. I'm doing it for the little things.'

The little things don't seem to draw a similarity to the extravagant hot money spending as discussed by Zhu. Mateo is not exactly rolling around in money that he does not want to think about saving either. Both volatile systems of earning money create a desire for immediate spending. The immediate spending on shared activities being a reward and benefit of his gambling, with the capability of enabling socially reproductive activities such as bears with his flatmates. His earnings are thereby lukewarm, for they are not as hot as the revenue gained from the Malagasy farmers, but are still warm enough to encourage immediate spending on 'little things'.

Though Mateo spends a portion of his earnings on immediate pleasure goods, he still saves his money in Paddy Power as a platform, which encourages users to continue betting through accumulation. The accumulating bets often reap larger rewards and offer protection that cancel a loss, as discussed earlier with Mateo's Brighton bet. Yet, Mateo is essentially under the control of Paddy Power, they dictate what the odds are, and the element of luck is a trap for many, such as Mateo's flatmates. Thereby Mateo's immediate spending could be seen as resisting the 'Paddy's Power'. Returning to Zhu's analysis of hot money spending, money is conceptualized and spent immediately as attempts to take away its power (Zhu, 2018: 256). In Zhu's example, she notes that the immediate

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spending of 'hot money' is a way for the farmers to rid themselves of the power that the global economy exudes through imports, by spending it freely rather than adhering to its hegemony (Zhu, 2018: 264). 'Hot money' spending is a response to the volatility of the vanilla and rosewood markets (Zhu, 2018: 264), similarly to how Mateo's immediate spending of his earnings is an effort to remove his money from Paddy Power and prevent him from losing it on accumulation bets. The response to volatile systems of revenue is spending earnings in the pleasure sphere to reduce the power money has over the actor. The act of betting and checking the odds of football matches is a pleasurable activity for Mateo. The association of leisure implies he could stop at anytime, but the game of using his skills that he has spent his life acquiring gives him pleasure. Mateo could theoretically stop at anytime, but since he doesn't rely on his earnings and is able to manage the capricious system through small bets to enhance his entertainment, then why stop? Though Paddy Power gives him autonomy with revenue, he does not entirely subvert the economic order by spending all his earnings immediately to reflect the volatility of gambling like the Malagasy with 'hot money' (Zhu, 2018).

Therefore, Mateo's situation is more of a mix of subverting the economic order through gaining capital in an unconventional manner. Yet by keeping his items in the sphere of leisure and most of his winnings in his balance on Paddy Power, Mateo exists in constant purgatory between reaping benefits from success in gambling and losing his earnings through the convincing bets orchestrated by Paddy Power. This is also best described as existing between generalized and balanced exchanges. The balanced

sphere represents the 'Power of Paddy', and is in this sense negative, as Mateo is in constant battle with the business to achieve earnings and winning bets, while using money as a commodity to accumulate capital. On the other hand, the generalized exchange in sharing his earnings with his flatmates is normatively positive as he distributes his earnings in a spirit of social reproduction. All the while his success, in general, is testament to his knowledge and ability to find 'miscalculations' on Paddy Power. At the end of the day, football betting is one of Mateo's leisure activities. In keeping money in Paddy Power, he is conscious of how his money is a reproductive capital that can bring him pleasure, which ultimately arises from the social interactions that football betting accompanies.

I have analysed the morality and societal framework that sports betting exists under, as well as the types of exchange systems Mateo is involved in. Looking at gambling as allegorical to and a part of modern capitalism in constructing money as a living commodity. Gambling is a volatile system, and thus encourages earnings to be spent immediately. Money conceptualized for pleasure is a way to mask power, as Mateo oscillates between spending and keeping his money in Paddy Power. However, because gambling is a leisure activity for Mateo and not a career, his interactions with sports betting are for entertainment purposes which prevents him from ceasing to operate under Paddy Power. His knowledge and successes continuously replicate feelings of value and pleasure in placing bets, despite the company attempting to use his failings for revenue. The joy derived from betting also coincides with the socially reproductive aspects of gambling that enable him to form deeper bonds with his flatmates in a

non-competitive and reciprocal manner.

Disclaimer

The informant involved in this ethnographic study is not addicted to gambling and no longer gambles. Addiction is a serious topic and while I am not addressing it in this essay, it is extremely important that I bring attention to it. My concern is to analyze the ideologies of economy, money, and exchange that interplay in the formation of the moralities and motivations for sports betting.

For further information on gambling addiction please visit <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/gambling-addiction/> or call the National Gambling Helpline at (0808 8020 133) if living in the UK.

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