

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Ole Bjerg**, *Poker: The Parody of Capitalism*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011, 274 pp. \$35.00 (ISBN 978-0-472-05163-2, pbk.)

**P**oker begins with the issue of the contemporary popularity of poker and makes the case that the game should be treated much like other cultural phenomena, such as art and literature. While the discourse around poker manifested in law, morality, and politics — is it a game of chance or skill? — has contributed to cultural ambivalence, poker deserves to be treated as richly culturally expressive. Following on Roger Caillois' insights into the relationship between games, cultures, and social structures, Bjerg's analysis of poker contributes to the sociology of games. Further, and as the title makes clear, poker is the parody of capitalism. The book provides a sophisticated, philosophically informed, and enjoyable analysis of poker, its "cultural resonance," and parodic relationship to contemporary, postindustrial capitalism. It draws on a variety of philosophical positions to illuminate the game: from probability theory and game theory to early and late Wittgensteinian arguments about language. Most important, and central to Bjerg's approach, is the work of cultural analyst Slavoj Žižek and the deployment of the Lacanian-derived concepts of the real, symbolic, and imaginary. These concepts are laid out in the first chapter of the book, "The Ontology of Poker," where they are applied comparatively to chess, roulette, and rock-paper-scissors. Where chess, for example, is a game that grounds itself in the symbolic order — since there are always optimal moves that can be mapped out (think chess computer Deep Blue), poker is unique among games in that it invokes all three ontological orders, and where awareness of the imaginary dimension separates the good players from weaker ones.

The book is divided into four parts with two or three chapters in each: Part One explores "The Philosophy of Poker." Part Two focuses on "The Poker Economy." Part Three develops the typology, "Suckers, Grinders, and Players," and Part Four discusses "Poker and Capitalism." As the book includes some descriptive analysis of the movement of money in the online poker economy in Part Two, and for the sake of length, the review will focus on Parts One, Three, and Four. In Part One, "Anatomy of a Poker Hand," and "All you ever wanted to know about Texas Hold 'Em," Bjerg analyzes strategy *and* illuminates the game with the philo-

sophical sources mentioned. Poker players will appreciate the analysis of a hand by poker professional Gus Hansen in “Anatomy...”, while in the latter chapter, Bjerg provides a critique of the application of game theory to poker: it is too caught up in the symbolic to grasp the game’s imaginary dimension. In these chapters, Bjerg demonstrates a deep appreciation for, and theoretically sophisticated analysis of the game.

The parodic relationship with capitalism is developed in the later chapters. In Part Three (after analyzing playing styles in the final chapter of Part Two), Bjerg develops his tripartite typology of poker players/strategies. Each type corresponds with one of the ontological orders. “Suckers” are luck players who desire action and play loosely. Their orientation to chance and to action sees them as representatives of the real: they orient to the lucky chance of hitting their card — the unpredictable manifestation of the real, but this approach is a losing strategy. “Grinders” are the mathematically oriented calculators, “tight” players who do not veer from the optimal mathematical strategy and are guided by long run probabilities. Their probabilistic orientation places them in the realm of the symbolic. The final category, “Players,” are the adepts of the poker imaginary, knowing how to bluff and dissemble and thus superior to the other types. While they too know the mathematical odds and how to value their own and their opponents’ hands, they know the importance of reading the other players. This is required to become a strong player or a professional: the Player represents the awareness of all the ontological orders. Part Three (“Losing It”) finishes with a discussion of problem gambling, and the ways in which players’ involvement in poker challenges some of the dominant categorizations of “problem gambling.” For Bjerg, problematic poker participation occurs due to a skill deficit in “game skills,” “metagame skills,” or “ethical skills.” Bjerg’s discussion proposes moving beyond the conventional understandings of problematic gambling and addiction.

The theme of the cultural resonance of poker is taken up at the beginning of Part Four. How do games, like art, “capture fundamental features of the society of which they are a part?” Bjerg discusses the significance of play, drawing upon Huizinga (on “play” and “fun”), Baudrillard (on the distinction between necessary “law” and arbitrary “rule: “the rule functions as the parodic simulation of the law”) and Žižek on law and subjectivity.

One of the interesting aspects of poker as a game is the way it transgresses the boundaries between game or the play world and society. Bjerg suggests that because it does not fully conform to Huizinga’s theory of play and “eludes unambiguous analytical distinction,” it is “an eminently post-modern game” (p. 201). Because it simulates structuring

principles of capitalism, poker is difficult to distinguish from “the real world of capitalist economy.” Money is the central reason for this transgression: while good poker players must learn to devalue money in order to play in a disciplined way (suspending money as “sublime object”), the material interest is “the heart and soul of the game.” And, as articulated in the discussion of problem gambling, wins and losses have real life consequences for the players.

Chapter 10, “The History of Poker” traces the co-evolutionary development of poker and capitalism. Drawing on Marx’s use/exchange value distinction, the development of capitalism from expansionist to industrial to postindustrial forms is expressed in the evolution of poker, where exchange values come to dominate and skill becomes more important. Bjerg traces the development of poker in its various forms — Flat, Draw, Five and Seven Card Stud, until we reach the now globally popular No Limit Texas Hold ’Em. The “use value” of a hand (its objective game ranking) becomes subordinated to the (poker) market mechanisms for the determination of value through betting action, and where the value of hands can be simulated. Bjerg situates the early rise in popularity of No Limit Texas Hold ’Em in the early 1970s, when “crisis” capitalism emerges and when Bretton Woods breaks down. In postindustrial capitalism, the virtualization of money (produced by the increasing size and influence of financial markets) and the immaterialization of labour became central structuring factors. It is interesting to hear the comments of formerly “limit” poker players on the monotonous drudgery of the game, which Bjerg likens to industrial labour. By contrast, no limit requires creativity and guts, and signifies the latest phase of capitalist value generation.

In the final chapter, “The Poetry of Money,” post-Bretton Woods financial capitalism is discussed with reference to the massive market for derivatives in a system where money is unbounded to a standard (e.g., gold), and where markets themselves determine the value of money and all other commodities. Markets have their own “endogenous” dynamics that influence (market) actors’ actions. Derivatives generate interconnections between actors in various markets, and provide great amounts of leverage. Paradoxically in providing insurance for market risks, they also generate risks through their speculative suitability. Because there is no single imaginary to which money now corresponds, money no longer functions as a universal equivalent, but instead operates in a variety of particular imaginaries that make up interconnected financial markets. In this context, the way value is created is analogous to the three types of poker player: the capitalist worker is the sucker (producer of surplus value); the capitalist owner is the grinder (squeezing surplus value from

the worker) but whose profits are threatened by the postindustrial speculator; the latter is the player, looking for opportunities in financial markets. No Limit is the parodic form of value generation in postindustrial capitalism. It also parodies the American Dream: on the one hand class position does not count, but skill, ability, and guts do; on the other, poker displays the cynicism and greed of capitalism itself. As Bjerg puts it in the Conclusion, poker does not offer a “critique or condemnation of capitalism,” but rather parodies it without itself depending upon normative contents or ideological justifications.

A wide range of theoretical and philosophical sources are utilized here, but *Poker* might have drawn on Caillois further, since he is mentioned early in the discussion. Bjerg does offer in the Conclusion that the study of the rules of games might give insight into the collective unconscious. However, Caillois’ distinction between agon (contest) and alea (chance) could have been brought in, not just to illuminate the structure of poker, but also to consider the distribution of agon and alea in postindustrial society. In this context, state-run lotteries and other forms of aleatory gambling are popular. Poker’s popularity and its American development appear to reveal Geertzian “deep play” characteristics. Bjerg’s analysis can also be compared in some respects with Jean-Joseph Goux’s work on symbolic economies. But this is more commentary than criticism as the range of sources and thoughtful analysis is impressive.

*Poker* will appeal to a wide variety of readers as it analyzes a game and a cultural form that parodies features and values of the larger economic structure within which it has become a global popular cultural activity. Sociologists, gambling studies and cultural studies researchers, Zizekians, students of financial capitalism, poker aficionados and anyone else interested in the culture of late, postindustrial capitalism will find *Poker* to be illuminating and a very good bet indeed.

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