

The Web of Gambling



The expression “hazard a bet” is a term used by gamblers that derives from the Arabic word al-zahr (“dice”). These instruments of fortune exemplify the desire to enrich oneself without making sacrifices. The first public places for organized gambling in the Middle Ages sprang up in secluded locations, far from squares and churches, managed by so-called “dealers.” [\[1\]](#) The locales of these particular games have always been thought of as webs woven by powerful “spiders” to trap their prey. In *The Gambler*, Dostoevsky describes Alexey’s human drama after playing: “The player is a victim regardless of his social class, a victim who becomes an executioner for others and for himself.”

In the history of gambling, the “what,” the “how” and the “where” reveal the relationship between politics and the gaming industry, between culture and the values of a society. For this reason Frederick II had forbidden the players and managers of games of chance to testify in a trial or hold administrative positions. Only with the beginning of the Renaissance was gambling recognized as a right, allowing the governors of Italian municipalities to apply the “gabelle,” a tax on gambling.

In Italy, for about a century, casinos – Sanremo (1905), Campione d’Italia (1917), Saint Vincent

(1947) and Venice (Europe's oldest casino, built in 1638) – have been an exception to the prohibition of gambling established by law. From 1897 to 1992, Italian governments considered gambling a social danger, a threat to law, order, savings and public accounts, even preventing residents of casino municipalities from gambling.

Literature and cinema have narrated the liturgy of those temples of the game, made up of rituals, ways of dressing, silent and poorly lit environments, perfumes and music that had as their goal to induce players to bet money. Choosing to play required preparation: organizing the trip, changing money for gambling chips, booking the hotel and so on. Casinos, in fact, were in faraway frontier places, built to avoid prohibitions of the law against letting out of the country the capital intended for gambling.

Italian gambling law was liberalized in 2003 and everything changed: Italy has become one of the largest open-air casinos in the world. The effect of this choice has led to an escalation of addiction: the community dimension that also characterized gambling has given way to the loneliness of the player who, in front of the machine directly inserts more and more money and lives a “hypnotic moment,” unable to perceive what is being spent. One player defined her addiction as “a dragon that grows inside you. The fire that he breathes is so powerful that there is no water that can extinguish it.”[\[2\]](#)

In a few years the web of the culture of gambling has spread even to the smallest and most remote towns where there are bars, betting venues and tobacconists. We are not referring here to the experience of gambling that takes place in homes or circles with solid rules involving modest amounts of money, the infringement of which will see the player expelled, but to the dynamics that lead the individual to becoming a lone player. The following statistics are enough to define the extent of the phenomenon: 366,399 slot machines are scattered around the nation, one for every 161 citizens, while 3,600 scratch cards are sold per minute.

We must therefore ask ourselves, our politicians and civil society: is it possible to neutralize and break this web, which is intended to be an indirect tax levy? And if so, how?

Social alarm: data and habits of Italians

Gambling and social crisis have become two sides of the same coin: they represent the symptom and consequence of a sick culture that relies on fate. The figures are dizzying, comparable to a government budget: in 2017 Italians gambled 101.8 billion euros, five billion more than in 2016, while in 2006 government expenditure did not exceed 35 billion. Behind these numbers remain hidden the debts, the existential dramas and the blackmail of the lenders to the 18 million Italian gamblers.

The unlikely province of Prato holds the record for average annual gaming spending: 2,948 euros per citizen, followed by Ravenna (1,846 euros), Rovigo (1,742 euros), Como (1,737 euros) and Teramo (1,721 euros). The accounts are soon done: of the total 101.8 billion, 82 billion were redistributed in 2017; 8 billion euros entered the coffers of the state, while profits of suppliers in the sector are approximately a dizzying 12 billion. Numerous investigations by the judiciary reveal that one in three slot machines is illegal, or that they are not connected to the government's monopoly circuit and the estimated black-market turnover is around 10 million euros per year.

At least 700,000 students between the ages of 14 and 17 have gambled, but it is the elderly and

unfortunately also the unemployed who are most likely to gamble; it is also estimated that there are about 12,000 gaming addicts in care and almost 700 players at risk.

The consequences of gambling are the cause of many silent suicides or extreme choices, such as selling a kidney to pay off debts. News media are full of desperate cries for help.[\[3\]](#)

Forty percent of gamblers are women with an average age between 50 and 60 years. They play to overcome loneliness, to escape from the emptiness left by their children leaving home, to compensate for the frustration and monotony of everyday life. Gambling is like sinking into quicksand: you only understand the danger when you are swallowed up. “The more I played, the more I lied. To my daughter, my parents, my brother and everyone I knew. My monthly salary ended within a few days and, with the lack of money, I began to take money away from my family. In secret, I would get the bank card for my parents’ account and withdraw as much as I needed.” [\[4\]](#) This is a dynamic common to many players.

Yet, in 2009, about 70,000 young people had tried to raise their voices against the advertising by the state’s monopoly. They had been given an aptitude test to do, but in reality it was a psychological trap: the weakest and most vulnerable to the game were given flattering responses, the most mature and responsible who rejected it were ridiculed. “The spirit of the wand hovers over your head. Solid or stiff like an icicle just taken out of the freezer softener is required.” [\[5\]](#) The remedy was to play to achieve and win. This was a sophisticated design, part of the plot of a larger web, gradually woven and constructed by multiple minds, that of the entrepreneurs of gambling and a part of the political class, traders and economists.

The same rule applies to the net, where roulette, baccarat and online poker appeared, where virtual money was involved. Only afterwards were bets in actual currency made on videopoker, skill games, arcade games and online slot machines. You only need to log in to experience the global casino.

On July 6, 2016, the Parliamentary Anti-Mafia Commission distinguished legal from illegal gambling, providing for entry barriers, the revision of criminal and administrative sanctions, the strengthening of anti-money laundering measures to trace winnings, the strengthening of anti-Mafia policies, the role of local authorities and a new governance of the sector.[\[6\]](#)

It is legal gambling that makes illegality, loan sharking, money laundering and extortion grow, not the other way around. The machines have become the focus for those who extort protection money or engage in counterfeit operations. There are about 60 underworld clans that, from Calabria to Veneto, invest in loan sharking: from 2014 to 2016, about two million euros were withdrawn from entrepreneurs and traders in difficulty, with a liquidity for clans of at least 4.5 million, according to Libera. The money circulating is much bigger, if you consider that in just two years 450 million euros were seized.

A silent pathology

The costs to the nation are huge: it includes an estimated 6 billion euros for psychological outpatient interventions, hospitalizations, medicines, loss of income, the social cost of divorces, bankruptcies, the consequences of family and social violence that gambling causes.

Gambling addiction has been included in the essential areas of care and is considered a disease thanks to Decree No 158/2012 of the then Minister of Health, Renato Balduzzi. On January 12, 2017, another decree allowed for the treatment of addicted players through the Pathological Addiction Services. In 2014, gambling was defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in Psychiatry (DSM-5) as an addiction and a problem “unrelated to substance use.”

Gamblers, while playing, are stimulated and excited; they forget reality and do not govern their strongest impulses; their behavior becomes compulsive, their relationship with food changes, expenses increase, even sexual activity is enhanced. It only takes three years of play to enter the phase of addiction, and then the phase of despair; so, when players become aware of addiction, they should immediately ask for help.

Pathology has a social cost. The state expends between 56 and 63 million euros per year. But it is not easy to treat a “substance-free addiction”; gambling addiction is different from alcohol and drug addiction. Professor Maria Grazia Marciani, a neurologist, has pointed out that “on a neuropsychological level, the behavior of pathological players is similar to that of subjects with neurological damage to the frontal lobe and with drug use disorders. Both individual and socio-environmental factors contribute to vulnerability, as a consequence of a lack of self-regulation capacity, which is based on morpho-functional alterations of the cortico-subcortical circuits involved in the self-regulation process (prefrontal cortex – control of executive functions). The main brain structures and neurotransmitters involved are: the frontal cortex, the striatum, the insula, the dopaminergic system and the serotonergic system.”^[7] That is why medicine considers pathological gambling a real disease, not a game involving money.

But unfortunately there is more: scientific studies also reveal a correlation between the despair of recovering the money lost in the game and some crimes against savings and property.

Practical ways to reverse the situation

Politicians are called upon to repair and heal this scourge. Almost all parties have benefited from funding from gambling: between the 11th and the 17th legislatures of Italy (1992-2018), 47 types of gambling were approved and placed on the market. One merit of the Conte Government is that it had banned advertising; however, there is no legal framework. The declarations of principle by M5S, on the other hand, are not consistent with the concrete choices. Why do concessions continue to be extended for slot machines, SuperEnalotto and bingo?

Faced with the gambling world’s communications machinery, which confuses words and conceals consequences, citizens should instead reward bars and businesses that choose not to promote gambling. A common “No Slot machines” sign would offer an ethical guarantee. We must also support those dedicated mayors and the many civil society groups that battle to raise awareness of the dangers of gambling culture. The administrations of Naples, Rome, Genoa and Ravenna have distinguished themselves for their gambling regulations. The municipality of Bergamo, for example, managed to reduce gambling turnover by 3.7 percent, while in the Lombardy Region gambling had grown by 3.4 percent. The Piedmont region, administered by Sergio Chiamparino from June 2014 – June 2019, proved to be the most successful, curbing the proliferation of gambling in about 1,000 municipalities, decreasing gambling by 10 percent, while in the rest of the country it grew by 5.3 percent. On the

contrary, in the first six months of 2018 in Sicily 4 billion euros were spent on bingo, sports betting, scratch cards and slot machines.

The hold of gambling can be broken by re-educating children in schools and in youth clubs, regulating gambling advertising especially during sports broadcasts, strengthening controls, exposing the connection of politicians with powerful lobbies.

The first step to free oneself from the strings of the web of gambling is awareness, calling dependence by its name, confessing addiction to people you trust and getting help. Too many players are trapped in the chains of addiction, in debt and in family crises. It is a struggle against the god Plutus, the lord of wealth and money, who in mythology is depicted as blind, obese and slow. In order not to imitate him, it is necessary not to fight him but to ignore him, to accept one's own limits and to begin a therapeutic and detox process.

Some paths and effective tools have sprung up, such as those specialized centers that afford a path of rehabilitation from addiction through treatment. Another is the campaign *Mettiamoci in gioco* (Let's put ourselves in play!) formed by 34 associations, including Acli, Alea, Anci, Arci, Cisl, Libera and other well-known associations. Their spokesman, Fr. Armando Zappolini, has reiterated the importance of prohibiting all forms of gambling advertising and overcoming instrumental communication: "In this work of raising awareness, the contrast and support that has been given by the Italian Church is important. Its media, both daily and periodical, are the only ones that keep attention and stimulate reflection and commitment. Most of the media, on the other hand, are hostages to the substantial advertising payments they receive from the large gambling companies." [\[8\]](#)

The government is called upon to make some courageous choices that are already shared by many in civil society, but which are difficult to regulate by law. We must limit liberalization and introduce a moratorium on new games destined for the market; give more power to municipalities and allow mayors to deal with licenses, which are now granted by the state; prevent advertising with bans similar to those used for tobacco; provide for pathological gamblers to enter into the levels of care provided by health services, allow the right to care, to free and direct access to services [\[9\]](#); register the tax code or health number of the players to track the flows of money they spend; entrust the Ministry of Health with the management of the problem; set up a discussion table with representatives of the sector to enhance education about gaming and the communication of risks and consequences. [\[10\]](#)

The legal culture of the 20th century had curbed gambling, because reliance on luck implied the passivity of the person, the rejection of daily sacrifice and was a vice that threatened savings and generated family and social conflicts. What is left of this anthropological vision in Italian culture? After the historical phase of containment and prohibition, tax receipts from gambling have aided governments in times of economic crisis: gambling has now become an industry in a political-financial operation. What other evolution will it undergo? And, above all, what price will the weakest have to pay?

The most authoritative studies on the subject – such as, for example, those of Maurizio Fiasco, sociologist and consultant to the National Anti-Usury Council – consider gambling a crack in social cohesion, because it undermines the fundamental goods provided for by the Constitution, such as the integrity of the person and the social utility on which the activity of economic enterprise is based, free

entrepreneurial initiative, and the savings which the Republic protects and encourages (Art. 47 of the Constitution).[\[11\]](#)

Gambling – which has been defined as the “theft of social happiness” – expresses the image of a country that, instead of hoping and building, has decided to bet on luck and not on sacrifice. However, the bank of this great roulette wheel that is piloted by great economic potentates must not continue to win with rigged rules. It is necessary not to trivialize the phenomenon, to study it in its many aspects, and to remember the wisdom of the popular proverb: “Whoever earns the first loses the last.”

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