



research reveals...

an update on gambling research in ALBERTA

About The Alberta Gaming Research Institute

The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province. The Institute's identified research domains include bio-psychological and health care, socio-cultural, economic, and government and industry policy and practice. The Institute aims to achieve international recognition in gaming-related research. It is coordinated by a Board of Directors working in collaboration with the Alberta Gaming Research Council. The Institute is funded by the Alberta government through the Alberta Lottery Fund.

OUR MISSION:

To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society

Your comments and queries are welcome either by e-mail abgaming@ualberta.ca or phone 780.492.2856.

Civic morality and gambling: An intersection of past and present

by Rhys Stevens

IMMORAL, DISREPUTABLE, AND dangerous are terms that many people living in early twentieth-century Canada would have used to generalize how their society viewed gambling. Indeed, many of the "moral reformers" of bygone days were vehemently opposed to gambling and justified their opposition on moral grounds. Such characterizations might appear hopelessly out-of-touch or even irrelevant to individuals who have grown up in our modern era of the ever-increasing availability of legalized gambling. Yet, today, there are still many people who contend that support of or opposition toward legalized gambling must be based on something other than simply a cost-benefit analysis.

University of Lethbridge principal investigator Dr. William Ramp and co-investigator Dr. Kerry Badgley of Library and Archives Canada have been seeking to shed new light on the development of the moralizing attitudes toward gambling that prevailed in the 1920's. Findings from their research indicate that elements of the moralization argument still appear to have cultural relevance and should not be dismissed. In particular, their results show that charitable agencies can be philosophically conflicted about whether their use of gambling proceeds meshes with the purported values of their organizations. Their work represents a component of Institute-funded research project *Gambling, Identity & Community* which also involves Jim Cosgrave (Trent University), Thomas Klassen (York University) and Robert Williams (U. of Lethbridge).



University of Lethbridge principal investigator Dr. William Ramp

Canada's agrarian movement

Dr. Ramp describes his overall research interests as involving, "how groups of people come to see *themselves* as agents in history and politics, and how they map out a sort of moral geography in which to act." As such, the issue of gambling became particularly fascinating to him as, historically, it was represented as a "problem" in Canada. Ramp, however, points out that, "gambling and risk don't



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just exist in a vacuum, but take their place in relation to ideas about the economy, citizenship, personal and social responsibility, moral character, and fairness.” Each of these ideas has a specific history of its own and Ramp suggests it is important to understand them individually and in combination in order to understand how people thought about and made sense of gambling specifically.

A major component in their investigation was an attempt to outline a ‘moral discourse’ that was prominent in Canada during the early twentieth century. Making use of primary source accounts from the Glenbow Archives [Calgary], Provincial Archives of Alberta, and National Archives, Ramp and Badgley found this prominent discourse articulated in the ideas of agrarian movements like the United Farmers and the United Farm Women. According to Ramp, “these two organizations existed in virtually every province in Canada during the early 1920’s and they formed or heavily influenced governments in several of those provinces. They expressed a set of ideas shared by farm people across Canada, in the United States, and around the world. Their ideas are often dismissed as ‘populist’, which today means ‘right wing’ but agrarian activists saw themselves as progressive, involved with experiments in radical education, producer and consumer cooperatives, internationalism and civic reform. They wanted to come up with a whole new idea of what citizenship, politics, and economics would be about. We agree with historian Keith Walden’s claim that the rural-urban distinction was a fundamental element of the national consciousness a century ago, and that a lively rural civic culture was still influential in Canadian public life.”

The producer ideology

In parallel with the rise of agrarianism in Canada, Ramp points out that a set of ideas known as the ‘producer ideology’¹ were also becoming particularly attractive to farmers, segments of the industrial working class, and small industrialists alike. Ramp explains that these ideas espoused a belief that, “the person who produces useful goods with his hands is the bedrock of economic life, and should likewise be at the centre of political life.”

Ideas that were part of this ethic led to condemnation of gambling as well as ‘unproductive’ financial speculation. Ramp explains that, “[these ideas] were accompanied by the growth of a set of morally-tinged symbols organized around the problems of drink, vice, gambling, economic inequality, monopoly, patronage, and even militarism. Dr. Badgely and I argue that they fed into a broad ‘moral reform’ consensus which came to dominate the ways in which Canadians thought about alcohol and gambling—and which also dominated public policy relating to these activities right through to the 1960’s.”

It is perhaps enticing for modern-day citizens to look back and judge this moral reform consensus as being narrow-minded, intolerant,

¹ The ‘producer ideology’ has been articulated by Canadian labour historian Bryan Palmer, among others.

or class-biased. But, says Ramp, “It is important to understand that there was a consensus that alcohol and gambling constituted a set of moral questions, and that these were connected to larger issues of the public good, democracy and the organization of economic life.” Within this broad consensus, however, Ramp indicates that there was also a diversity of opinions, proposals and strategies.

The government as a moral agent

A key idea in the moral-reform literature that Ramp and Badgley identify is the idea that government could and should act as a moral agent in social life; not just as a guarantor of individual rights. Moral reformers of the day called upon the government to exercise more public moral agency. In doing so, Ramp says that, “they laid the groundwork for a developing consensus about an expanded social role for [Canadian] government.” As a complement for government’s role as a moral agent, the reformers also believed that citizens were individually and mutually responsible for their choices and actions. Ramp explains that, “Ninety years ago, this idea was moderated by being placed in relation to ideas of civic education, community and the public good. Today, ideas about self-responsibility seem to be tied more closely to those of individual rights, but they continue to be at the core of much debate about the social place of gambling, albeit in new and perhaps surprising ways.”

When asked to comment on the apparent absence of the moral reform discourse in the present day, Ramp says that, “The moral reform discourse is still very much with us... but in what I’d call ‘fragmentary’ form. What really burst the dam was the liberalization of Canadian law governing not only gambling but also alcohol and sex starting in the 1960’s.” Ramp theorizes that this occurred as part of a gradual dismantling of the moral reform agenda over a forty-year period. The five primary factors he identifies in this dismantling were: 1) an increase in the social acceptability of leisure consumerism; 2) the rise of a stronger sense of individual rights that included rights to a free sphere of private leisure activity; 3) a move toward a more liberal and libertarian philosophy in relation to both moral and economic issues; 4) a re-evaluation of what constitutes ‘harms’ relating to activities like drinking and gambling and how such harms should be addressed, and; 5) a shift in basic ideas about civic life to a more “consumerized” and rights-oriented concept of citizenship.

The moral dilemma faced by today’s charitable agencies

Even as the concept of government functioning as moral or social agent has faded away, some of the underlying philosophical questions about the acceptability of gambling appear to have remained to the present. This fact has become especially evident as community service organizations grapple with the realities of replacing regular, ongoing funding from general tax revenue with ‘occasional’ funding from government-sanctioned gaming revenue. As part of his investigation, Ramp interviewed a number of Southern Albertans involved in community work to ascertain how they made moral sense of the practical decisions they faced in funding their organizations.

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According to Ramp, the goal of the interviews were, “to get a sense of the practical and moral reasoning [individuals] employed, and how it compared across organizations and also to the historical discourses we’d studied.”

Based on his analysis of these conversations, Ramp says that those whose work brings them into contact with families that have suffered from the activities of a problem gambler are far less comfortable with such

funding. The one thing that he says really stood out from the interviews was that many members of community non-profits found themselves, practically speaking, making the same sorts of connections that the old moral reformers had made, albeit more philosophically. Moral reform discourse linked questions of ‘vice’ to broader questions of what defined economic fairness and the public good. Says Ramp, “Today, in their day-to-day fights to keep their organizations going, many members of community non-profits find themselves asking questions about the nature of public responsibility and economic organization in relation to the economic troubles of their clients, government policy concerning the provision of social services, and the question of who should pay for community benefits... and by what means.”

The place of gambling in the future

Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a profoundly different country than today and its citizens thought rather differently about their world. Not surprisingly, the discourse on gambling’s place in society at that time was inextricably linked to the dominant social issues of the day. In a similar vein, Ramp predicts that, “Gambling—including new forms of gambling—can’t and won’t be thought of entirely in isolation from these larger issues in the future... though there may be attempts to isolate it!”

Ramp predicts that, in the future, “we’ll likely see questions about the place of gambling become part of a “big picture” debate; one in which gambling is connected once again to questions about the role of government, public and personal responsibility, equity and justice. Such questions about gambling will open up subsequent new debates about individual rights, property, taxation, economic fairness, the public good, and what counts as democracy. In other words, they could lead to legalized gambling re-emerging in a public discussion of civic morality.

A book chapter entitled “Blood Money”: Gambling and the formation of civic morality by Dr. William Ramp and Dr. Kerry Badgley is included in *Gambling in 21st Century Canada*, presently under review by McGill-Queen’s University Press.

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