

## RATIONALIZATION AND THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF PLAY: THE DIALECTICS OF LEGAL GAMBLING IN ISRAEL

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**Abstract:** Romantic notions and critical theories of play describe an assault by rationalization processes on the free and spontaneous nature of play. Other theories seek to describe the dialectical nature between rationalization and freedom, between routine, and magic, and between planning and spontaneity. This article seeks to focus on the rationalization processes of play and to examine whether and in what dimensions, these processes shape the characteristics of play and hamper its spontaneity and freedom. Examination of these processes, performed by socio-historical analysis of legal gambling in Israel, shows that rationalization processes were active on both the practical and technological levels, and on the discursive level of the games of chance. Nevertheless, the characteristics of freedom, joy and spontaneity appeared only on the discursive level of the game and were designed to deliberately serve the economic interests of the various agents in the Israeli gambling field.

**Key words:** gambling; rationalization; play; Israel; lottery.

The rising popularity of games in recent decades challenges the theoretical distinction between work and leisure. This distinction is blurred, as studies show that work is not necessarily a routine and enforced activity but can incorporate elements of play, while recreational activities, games included, share similar characteristics with work, such as routine and the production of capital goods and materials (Malaby, 2009). Despite these theoretical developments, romantic notions that see play as free, enchanted, unproductive and separate from everyday life are still prevalent in many studies dealing with play (see Grimes & Feenberg, 2009; Malby, 2007; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Such studies describe play today as an arena under attack by economic, technological, political, academic and rational processes (Brooke & Booth, 2006; Grimes & Feenberg, 2009; Taylor, 2006; Kuchener, 2012). These factors are described in these studies as threats to the free and cheerful nature of “pure play”. This article seeks to focus on the rationalization process of play and to examine whether, and in what dimensions, these processes shape or hamper the nature of free and spontaneous play. This examination will be performed via a socio-historic analysis of legal gambling games played in Israel.

## Play between *paidia* and *ludus*

One of the main scholars who was responsible for encouraging the view that play is a free sphere distinct from daily life was Johan Huizinga. In his monumental book “*Homo Ludens*” (1955, p. 13) Huizinga defined play as:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary life’ as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.

Thus, according to Huizinga, play is an unrestricted activity that is set apart from daily life in both space and time. This distinct activity is carried out by human beings for the fun of it and for the experience of playing, and does not involve any form of coercion, either by nature or society. When a person plays he or she expresses his or her freedom to develop and create, as well as his or her ability to break free of the constraints of reality.

Despite the obvious influence of Huizinga’s theory, his book was severely criticized, specifically regarding his perception that play is an activity that is not motivated by general interest and does not promise material gain to its participants (see Caillois, 1961; Guttmann, 1978; Turner, 1988).

One of the main theories seeking to offer a more complex view of play was formulated by French anthropologist Roger Caillois (1961). In his theory of play, Caillois did not exclude professional sports and games of chance as did Huizinga, but rather presented an axis with two types of play at either end. On one end there are *paidia* games, which are characterized by spontaneity and are comprised of fantasies, improvisation and carefree joy. On the other end of the spectrum are *ludus* games, which have more laws and regulations than those limiting the *paidia*. In addition to the aforementioned axis, Caillois also formulated a model that classifies games into four different categories: *Agon* – competitive games; *Alea* – games of chance; *Mimicry* – role playing; and *Ilinx* – vertigo games. According to this typology, every game can be classified under one of these game categories and can move along the axis between *paidia* and *ludus*. For example, the *Alea* category includes games like flipping a coin, which is also located on the *paidia* side of the axis, as well as online gambling, which requires the use of the advanced statistical technology located on the *ludus* side.

The comprehensive model Caillois suggested is not meant solely for categorizing games, but seeks to categorize the relationship between games and the structure of the societies in which they are played. His comparison of the relationship led Caillois to formulate a sociological evolutionary theory of games. According to this theory, the more “advanced” a society grows in terms of rationality and social structures, the more complex its social structure tends to be, and the games played by its members will lean toward the *ludus* end of the spectrum, and its members will prefer *agon* and *alea* games. Societies with a simple social structure, which Caillois called “primitive”, tend to play *mimicry* and *ilinx* games, which lean toward the more spontaneous and free side of the *paidia*.

Thus, Caillois reached the conclusion in his theory that games reflect social structures and major cultural values. This insight is consistent with Roberts and Sutton-Smith’s

approach, which shows that the rationalization and complexity of modern societies is reflected in the games they play, which tend to be regulated and controlled by the rules and regulations of the society (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1971).

More recent critical studies argue that some games played today not only reflect rational social structures and are “the latest sentiment to have been turned into the object of institutional desire” (Malaby, 2009, p. 216), but, similar to institutions like corporate bureaucracy and capitalist markets, they have become their own systems of social rationality with characteristics of order and social control (Grimes & Feenberg, 2009).

Caillois’s theory has been criticized both for its pretension in characterizing entire societies through their propensity to playing certain games, and due to the lack of references to the different meanings people give the same games in different times and places throughout history (Guttmann, 1978). However, much of the criticism focused on the positivist and evolutionist aspects of Caillois’s theory (e.g., Turner, 1988); Caillois, like Huizinga, it was argued, ignored the dialectical nature of games. This dialectic does not consider games as organized and based on laws and regulations, but as a supposed reversal of the evolution of free and spontaneous play undertaken for pleasure alone. According to this dialectical notion, the restrictions and rules that *ludus* consists of can exist simultaneously with *paidia*’s spontaneity, enchantment and gaiety, while the former formulates the channels in which the latter can exist (Turner, 1988), and it is precisely from these mutual relations that “meaningful play” can grow (Kirkpatrick, 2008).

The current article critically examines the dialectics between the processes of rationalization which impose order, logic and systematization on games, and the characteristics of laughter, enchantment, joy and spontaneity described by many as the real characteristics of “pure play”. This investigation will seek to establish the dimensions of play in which this dialectic appears; does it appear in the symmetry between the “free” properties of the game and its orderly and rational characteristics, and does it aim to produce a more significant playing experience, or does it serve other purposes? In examining these questions we will employ a socio-historical methodology of legal gambling in Israel.

## **Methodology**

The socio-historical methodology used in this study enables us to examine this field of research and the significant changes it has undergone with regards to the various relevant historical contexts. The collection and analysis of the historical data was conducted using a number of tools and methods (Yin, 1984), enabling us to obtain several perspectives of the field of study and helping enhance the article’s validity:

- Content analysis of documents produced by different players active in the Israeli gambling industry. These documents include minutes of meetings held by the Israeli government, and minutes of meetings held by the Knesset plenum and its various committees.
- Semiotic analysis of printed advertisements and posters of the main players in the Israeli gambling field. These publications include advertisements in the print media, banner ads, brochures, promotional articles in the press and books published by gambling organizations. The advertisements selected for analysis were published in two of Israel’s

largest newspapers: *Yediot Aharonot* and *Maariv*. The sampling of these advertisements was conducted in two stages. The first stage sampled newspapers from each annual quarter, from 1951 to 2011. Furthermore, advertisements that appeared at times of special events and festivals, such as Jewish holidays and important national events, were also selected. Of all the commercials sampled in the first phase, the final selection included advertisements that, through semiotic analysis of the signs that appeared in them, could shed light on the ethical and/or ideological implications they embodied. This semiotic method is an accepted method for analyzing visual data in general (Ball & Smith, 1992), and is a particularly good way to analyze advertisements (Barthes, 1972). In order to contribute to the validity of the semiotic interpretation, the advertisements were analyzed with special attention to the social and cultural contexts of the historical period in which they were published, pointing out similar signification patterns in several advertisements that appeared at the same time.

## **Gambling in Israel**

In 1964 the Israeli Knesset passed the Criminal Law Amendment, which prohibited lotteries and gambling. This law prohibited the holding of or participation in games of chance, lotteries or gambling. However, there was a loophole in Section 7 of the law which allowed the Finance Minister to permit gambling. This loophole enabled the state to allow some organizations to provide legal gambling, while other entrepreneurs were banned from doing so. The legislation gave two organizations which had been active before the amendment was passed an exclusive position regarding legal gambling in Israel. *Mifa'l HaPais* (Luck Factory, in Hebrew), established in 1951, gained an exclusive right to conduct lotteries, while *Sportoto Israel* was exclusively allowed to hold bets on sports scores (Levy, 2006; Levy & Galili, 2009).

This dualistic position allowed *Mifa'l HaPais* and the *Sportoto Israel* to establish their position in the gambling industry in Israel and gain a significant share of its activity, yet it did not prevent competitors from offering Israeli gamblers other alternatives. This led to a situation in which Israelis are now offered an unprecedented range of options for participating in various games of chance, including, among others, illegal gambling on sports scores, illegal gambling in casinos in Israel, and online gambling.

## **Rationalization of gambling in Israel**

The first signs of the penetration of systematization and rationalization into the Israeli gambling field can be found in the late 1960s. The two major organizations in the field, *Mifa'l HaPais* and *Sportoto Israel*, were the major agents of this rationalization process (Levy, 2010). This process was apparent on the practical level of organizing and participating in gambling, as well as on the discursive level of the Israeli gambling field.

Since the late sixties, gambling has undergone extensive and accelerated automation and computerization. This was the result of several factors: First, the technological developments in automation, computing and communications which enabled the gambling organizations to optimize their work in all of its stages, starting from the distribution of

gambling forms through collecting, sorting and distributing prize money. The various technological developments enable the legal gambling organizations to demonstrate before the regulator that they intended to use minimal public funding. Moreover, the use of automated methods and computerized and online terminals gave legal gambling organizations an edge in the competition against illegal organizations and the more conspicuous sides of the gambling industry. While the latter were suspected and frequently accused of illegitimately managing their bets in order to harm gamblers, Mifa'l HaPais and Sportoto Israel boasted computerized systems that allegedly operated impartially and without error (Levy, 2010).

Another expression of the rationalization process of legal gambling in Israel is derived from the computerized and automated processes described above. Through the computerized gambling stations throughout Israel, gambling organizations began offering their customers the use of statistical software programs and automatic betting forms. These programs offered gamblers the opportunity to plan and calculate their bets. For example, a gambler who guessed the results of football matches was offered calculators, tables of statistics about the previous results of the teams involved in the betting game, and other tools that are supposed to make the bet less capricious and enable a more informed decision. Furthermore, the gambling stations offered their customers the option of filling out weekly forms so that they could regularly and systematically participate in the bet. These forms spared the gamblers the trouble of having to travel frequently to the station and the social and playful experience involved in the act. After the year 2000 the two gambling organizations gradually developed websites, which provided the general public with the chance to place as many bets as they wished and to participate in all the optional games, provided that they used the statistical tools and conducted all the necessary calculations so as not to place an irresponsible and spontaneous bet based purely on luck.

However, the introduction of rationality, order and systematic legal gambling in Israel did not only have an effect on the practical levels of organizations and the participation in gambling, but also on the discourse of the various players involved in the field. Like other fields that were rationalized, the public and political debates on gambling in Israel became less ideological and more instrumental. That is, there was less discussion about the ethical and moral aspects of gambling, and more discussion on how to effectively manage gambling and how to monitor and control the system.

First, it was the legislators and regulators who, from the end of the 1960s, were systematically responsible for stifling the moral debate regarding various initiatives in the gambling industry in Israel, and turning the debate to economic questions that were purely instrumental (Levy, 2005, 2010). This process, or rather the beginning and the end of the process, can be illustrated by the following two quotations. The first is from 1952 in which MK Isaac Harari (the Progressive Party) refers to lotteries:

All over town and the countryside, you meet people who sell them. It adds color to our lives ... Why call a matter regarding the loss of public funds a "factory", a factory that seemingly adds to the country's productivity? ... And thus we are witnessing an educational and cultural dispersion of earning and losing money without working for it. I do not know where this is taken from. I did not find such ideas in the writings of A. B. Gordon [a philosopher who praised work values – M.L.]. We are becoming used to a primitive way of life.

This quote is largely characteristic of the way people referred to gambling in the 1950s and 60s. During those years references to and judgments about gambling were usually derived, at least on the discursive level, from clear moral priorities or from a discretion regarding the adoption of appropriate values.

The following quote is from MK Avshalom Vilan (the Meretz party) from 1999, in which he refers to a proposal to establish a legal casino in Israel:

There is a million-dollar gambling industry in Gush Dan [center of Israel – M.L.]. Israeli citizens leave almost one million dollars a day in the casinos in the Palestinian Authority, in Jericho. It is not taxed, and the state doesn't make a penny from it ... the questions surrounding gambling are no longer about legitimacy and morality. We need to make the most out of the existing gambling industry, and therefore, they should go to the heart of the Negev, while maintaining the law and ensuring the proper administration ... I think we should deal with this issue rationally, without burdening it with our extra weight and intentions ...

This quote characterizes the public discourse on gambling from the late 1960s to the present day. Throughout which it has been characterized by the logic of instrumental rationality. This logic avoids dealing with the moral aspects of gambling and is reduced to the technical aspects of efficiency, governance and supervision of the gambling industry.

Parallel to the changes in political discourse, gambling organizations sought to present their wares to the regulators and the gambling public as a “rational”, supervised and organized practice, as opposed to illegal gambling operated by various agents. In order to achieve this public status, Mifa’l HaPais and Sportoto Israel have, since the late 1960s, introduced a discourse of “rationality”. This discourse includes the frequent use of visual imagery of vending machines, computers and technological information demonstrating an appearance of progress, systematization and order to decision makers (in publications intended for ministers, parliamentarians and mayors) and to the public (in advertising campaigns). Beyond the use of visual imagery, they use keywords that carry a similar message. For example, they used the word “method” and “system” in various slogans that accompanied campaigns, such as: “Toto's new method” (1969), “Lottery is a system” (1973), and “Fill in the lottery using the lottery method” (1987-1988). According to these advertisements, gamblers could learn that they were no longer operating in the realm of arbitrary chance or other uncontrollable forces. The proposed method allowed them to plan their bet in a rational manner, thereby increasing their chances to win the coveted award.

The transformation gambling practices underwent—from a practice subject to luck to a practice subject to the laws of probability—was accompanied by the consistent insertion of the statistical term “probability.” Therefore, various options for legal gambling were introduced as options that give great / good / special odds for winning. The advertisements that used the code name “probability” did not generally specify the true and almost minute statistical probability the gamblers had of winning. This demonstrates that not only was this a case in which the gambling organizations were trying to demonstrate their superiority over their competitors in the gambling market but also that the instrumental rational discourse had penetrated into the gambling field. It is also reflective of the ability of this discourse to establish its terminology, even though it was substantially empty.

The penetration of the rational discourse into the gambling field and the inculcation of gambling methods both accelerated, and were encouraged through various means. Gambling agencies offered tools in their advertisements that would teach the gambling public to use complex gambling methods. For example, Sportoto Israel published, on a weekly basis, the award amounts they offered, and these advertisements made sure to mention that one could learn how to fill in the weekly systematic forms distributed in a weekly magazine for that purpose. For the gamblers who did not stop at that, they even offered expert guidance at the gambling stations. Mifa'l HaPais acted similarly when they recruited an engineer to write a manual providing assistance when filling out the systematic lottery tickets. Harnessing “experts” to implement new methods was evidence of the discourse that sought to present gambling as a serious and reasonable practice, subject to laws of rationality that could be studied and learned. These games could have experts, proving that they were not merely games of chance based on fun and spontaneity.

### **The re-enchantment with legal gambling in Israel**

The “system’s” entrenchment in the Israeli gambling industry gave it order and a routine expressed in the gambling practices and in the discourse about them. However, this process of rationalization harbored several problematic elements for the gambling organizations. Slogans such as “fill in the form lottomaticly” (1987), alongside advertisements that preached “make it a habit, fill in the lottery every week!” (1974), castrated the experience of spontaneity, freedom and excitement and turned it into a planned and methodological routine. Characteristics such as planning, order and routine are associated with aspects of life such as work, rather than with play. Their penetration into the play sphere could dull the gambler’s pleasure and thus diminish the gambling organization’s income. In order to preserve the gambling experience despite the laws and the order and logic that infiltrated the gambling industry, the various organizations adopted a marketing strategy that sought to create a discourse around the unique dialectic between rules, rationality and order, and the fun and playfulness of gambling.

As a means of preserving the playfulness in gambling, the advertisements displayed a dialogue, and even a synthesis, between rationality and madness. The colorful advertising posters that were hung up at the multiple betting stations began using descriptions such as “Toto-mania”, “Lotto-mania”, “madness”, “crazy”, etc., to describe the stakes offered to the public. The various media outlets collaborated with the gambling organizations on this point—a cooperation especially apparent when the public was offered especially large prizes and the media coverage described the action in the stations as “hysteria” and “madness”. The culmination of this dialogue between rationality and madness could be seen in the slogan that accompanied all Sportoto Israel advertisements in the 1980s, which claimed that “there is method to the Toto madness” (1983). Thus, at the bottom of the advertisements for guidance in filling out the complicated Toto forms, as published in the advertisement pages in the press, this slogan appeared as a reminder that in addition to the routine methodology, there is an element of madness that guarantees the fun of play.

An additional measure designed to give the various gambling organizations a charming and cheerful appearance was the emphasis placed on laughter in the advertising campaigns.

Advertisements published by both Sportoto Israel and Mifa'l HaPais showed photographs of well-known celebrities or illustrations of people smiling and laughing. These images, placed under slogans such as "Lotto laugh all the way to the bank" (1995), promised gamblers a way out of their routine with a laugh: "If you too aren't satisfied with a small smile, but want to laugh loudly all the way to the bank—fill in a Lotto ticket!". In order to introduce laughter and merriment as a balance to the lack of spontaneity and routine, these advertising campaigns featured Israel's leading comedians.

The various advertisements mentioned that despite its complex methods, gambling is still a game, while the "game" was highlighted in many advertisements from the 1980s. Furthermore, besides encouraging the public to make routine and weekly bets, Sportoto Israel also incorporated sports images, especially of soccer, into its advertisements. Mifa'l HaPais, on its part, called the lottery "The Game of the Week", which was also the name of the weekly soccer television broadcast.

Apart from mentioning that gambling is a game, the advertisements also made sure to note that despite the complexity of gambling methods, gambling is still fun and simple. For example, one of the games was presented by the Mifa'l HaPais as: "It is much easier to play and much more attractive. It's Square Bingo—bingo's new game. Four games on one card that are pure delight" (1996). The simplicity, fun and enjoyment of the game, as displayed in the advertisement, attempt to convey that the method, planning and routine do not have an exclusive hold on gambling. Slogans such as "Easy Peesy" (1990) and "You only need to guess six" (1990) had a similar purpose. These slogans wished to state that gambling is not exclusively for experts or professional gamblers, but that participation can be spontaneous and need not involve consideration of the rules and regulations.

## Discussion

Since the end of the 1960s, legal gambling in Israel has undergone comprehensive rationalization processes. These processes are reflected on both the practical and technological levels of gambling organizations, as well as on the level of the public and political discourse about gambling. These processes have turned games of chance into a routine, planned, organized and regulated activity. The disenchantment and the instrumentalization of elements characteristic of work rather than a fun leisurely activity, shifted the legal gambling in Israel from the *paidia* side of Caillois's model toward its *ludus* side.

At face value, it seems that in order to set roots in the Israeli legal gambling field, rationalization processes needed to take the playful characteristics of this field into consideration. That is to say, that the rational, orderly and organized outposts were established in a dialectical process together with the playful characteristics of gambling. However, unlike the model proposed by Turner (1988), this dialectic did not enable the methodology, order and routine to determine the channels in which playfulness, joy and spontaneity could flow. While the gambling organizations aimed at balancing the rationalization processes through the introduction of joy, spontaneity and playfulness into the industry, the above analysis shows that these factors were based only in the discursive level of the field. Thus, contrary to Campbell's findings (1987) that traced the processes of re-injecting enchantment on the individual-level of the patterns that underwent rationalization, this study's findings show that

the Israeli gambling experience lacks the significant dimensions of excitement, spontaneity and freedom.

These findings show that the processes of rationalization were active at both the technological and discursive levels of legal gambling in Israel. Yet the characteristics of laughter, joy and spontaneity appeared only in the discursive dimension, in order to serve marketing goals. This indicates that there are dialectic processes between rules and freedom, planning and spontaneity and order and joy in these recreational activities. However, similar to the conclusions drawn by Ritzer and Stillman (2001) after their examination of the casinos in Las Vegas hotels, we can say that the dialectic between *Dionysian* components and *Apollonian* components in games and recreational activities is not symmetrical or "natural", but occurs in accordance with economic and other interests. That is, even when the two aspects are not mutually exclusive, the processes of rationalization are more dominant and tend to push aside and limit the authentic experiences of pleasure. As compensation, a strategy whose function is to hide the routine, order and regulation is triggered, and it presents the illusion of magic, laughter, freedom and so on. Thus, researchers of games and other recreational activities have to identify these strategies, whose role is to increase the profits of the stakeholders and expose the onslaught of rationalization processes and other processes on games and recreational activities today.

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