

MEDICALIZATION OF GAMBLING:

NOVA GORICA BETWEEN STATE SUPERVISION AND THE EMERGING MEDICAL POWER

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Introduction

The main purpose of this workshop is that – as your today’s program continues with the visit of the major tourist attraction of Nova Gorica – that is the casinos, we won’t let you just go there and have fun, without at least making you think about it. I think this request seems appropriate, since we are on a conference.) That’s why I am going to expose some problems or – better – changes related to the attitude towards casinos and gambling, in the context of some historical developments that took place – of course – in the town, where you are currently settled.

As you have surely noticed by now, Nova Gorica has a short but turbulent history, which is in grand part connected to its status of border town. The history of casinos in this area is not an exception: the bordering on Italy has had – as you will see later on – a crucial role from the beginning of the casinos in Nova Gorica till their nowadays existence. The visitors of Nova Gorica’s gambling facilities are in fact mainly Italians. In the 1997 approximately 90% of HITs visitors were Italians, with only less than 3% of all visitors being Slovene. This proportion is slowly but persistently changing. In 2006 perhaps the share of Slovenian guests rose up to 30%, the rest of them still being mainly Italian []. I do not enumerate all this statistic data just to bore you, but because these recent changes in the structure of gamblers in Nova Gorica reflect some underlying dramatic changes in the development of the gambling industry as well as in the local perception of gambling and related activities.

Gambling has – in this area as well as in other parts of the world – a long history. And as you probably know gambling wasn’t always – or better – it wasn’t till recently regarded as a normal part of countries economic activity. On the contrary, gambling was – as I know at least – from the Middle Ages onward mostly prohibited or at least strictly regulated and restricted by states or other sovereign powers. In this long history restriction on gambling took various forms: from total prohibition to restrictions that allowed gambling just in the daytime, allowed just specific types of games or just gambling for a certain amount of money. The grounds of restrictions also varied: from ethical constellation, in which gamblers were regarded as sinners and gambling an immoral vice, to more modern conception in which the prohibition of gambling was grounded on the sovereign care

for his people. Joseph II., the ruler of Habsburg lands, perhaps argued that gambling must be prohibited in order to prevent the degeneration and ruin of individuals and the families of those, who lose large amount of money on gambling []. Less than half century before, Maria Theresa, when ordering her decree, claimed that is not just a matter of losing property, but rather the proper life and soul of individuals that can be lost at gambling []. I named just two of the arguments accompanying the release of anti-gambling decrees, which followed one another in less than half century, but there were a lot more of them. Their frequency however can be taken as a proof that they weren't really successful in the eradication of gambling.

This was just a rapid historical perspective on gambling in the local area, before Nova Gorica was even established. The whole presentation will focus more on the last 60 years, that is on the history of Nova Gorica and especially on the last 20 years, when some really dramatic changes and shifts of perspectives regarding gambling took place.

From Yugoslavia till nowadays

The idea of building Nova Gorica arose in 1947 soon after the Paris Peace Treaty established the new border between Yugoslavia and Italy, leaving the now so called Old Gorica (Gorizia) outside the borders of Yugoslavia. It is said that the architect Edvar Ravnikar, when making the first plan of Nova Gorica, described it with the almost magic words, that we will build something marvellous, that will shine across the border. He didn't know it at that time, but he was actually talking about casinos! To continue with this a bit of a bitter joke: he could actually not have known that the casinos would shine across the border, since at that time casinos were prohibited in Yugoslavia.

A decree of the Yugoslavian Ministry of finance from 1946 restricted gambling to lotteries and similar games, which could be organized only for humanitarian or other cultural purposes. And more than this: money was strictly forbidden as a reward, thus only material goods could be given as a prize []. What was allowed at that time, wouldn't even be called gambling nowadays, because it is so far from the connotations that the concept of gambling has today. Gambling in that sense was more a social event, adding some more happening at local festivals; and on the other hand it was so rare that perhaps no one really got the opportunity to become greedy about it.

The absence of money rewards – on the other hand – shows some really strong ideological features. In the communistic doctrine money is not and cannot be regarded as a good for itself. (At least money is a means of exchange and even in this function must be regulated – as princes were at that time). In the communistic ideology – if I use a shallow parallel – money gets the very sinful connotations that it had in the Middle Ages: in a way it is the work of the devil, that can seduce

human into fetishism: the senseless accumulation, greed, or as Marx has put it: money for the purpose of producing more money. These are all crucial elements of gambling, which are in contradictions with the Marxist doctrine, as wealth is and can be produced only through labour.

Anyway, it seems that also in Yugoslavia economic motives became more powerful than ideological ones. Two decades after the above mentioned restrictions on gambling, in the year 1965, a new legislation on gambling was passed []. This legislation defined the so called “specific gambling activities”, which gave the impetus to the rise of the gambling industry in Yugoslavia. Casinos could be opened, although on very specific restrictions, which show the very economic ground of this legislation. In fact casinos could be opened in Yugoslavia, but not for Yugoslavs. Restrictions were the follows [] :

- the casino complex had to be architecturally organized as an independent unit with all the accompanying facilities
- the casino had to have the capacity to accommodate at least 1000 tourists
- three years before the opening of the casino, the complex had to guest at least 200.000 guests from foreign countries
- gambling was allowed only in foreign currency
- Yugoslav citizens were forbidden to gamble

To sum up: casinos in Yugoslavia were meant only for foreign visitors and not for Yugoslav citizens.

The economic motives for this legislation were at least two:

- 1.) An Italian legislation from the 20's forbade the opening of new casinos (By the way, this legislation is still valid today: in fact the whole territory of Italy has only four casinos or at least only four legal casinos, which are all concentrated in the northern part of Italy. Recently there has been a lot of controversy about a new legislation on gambling in Italy.) Anyway: since the 20's the opening of casinos is generally forbidden in Italy, although before, in the 19th and even in the 18th century especially Gorizia was an important touristic centre, which had public casinos even at that time. They were meant, of course, for rich male population. For some reasons these casinos were closed and as the legislation forbade the opening of new ones, we can say that this now bordering territory of north Italy remained without the means to satisfy an already existing demand for gambling [].
- 2.) The second reason was that Yugoslavia suffered – in an economic sense – from a shortage of foreign currency. In this sense the opening of casinos on the ground of the legislation from 1965 would provide an income of foreign currency, which would improve the macroeconomic stability of

the country.

In 1965 in Slovenia only two places had the appropriate qualifications demanded by law to open a casino: these were Portorož and Bled. At that time Nova Gorica hadn't fulfilled the demanded conditions. In spite of this in 1966 Nova Gorica requested the permission for opening a casino, arguing that although it doesn't have the accommodation facilities demanded by law, it is near enough to commercial centres of north Italy and as gamblers are mostly businessmen, who are used to travel, casinos in Nova Gorica could also flourish as did that in Portorož, because of its vicinity to the Italian border. [] The request wasn't approved and Nova Gorica did not get its first casino till 1986. [] History has shown Nova Gorica's request for opening a casino to be appropriate as HIT (the enterprise managing the casinos) became one of the most powerful enterprises in Slovenia.

HIT also adopted what at that time in Slovenia was a new type of gambling activities, aiming at middle-class guests, which is one of the reasons for its story of success. However, at the time of the opening the entry was still prohibited for the citizens of Yugoslavia or strictly limited to one entry per year until the collapse of Yugoslavia.

In the first years of the independent Republic of Slovenia, i.e. in the 90's, the perception of casinos among the citizens of Nova Gorica – as I estimate – was still mainly influenced by the old pattern of casinos being meant for rich Italian citizens, coming to Gorica to gamble their money – that is to lose it or better transfer it to our community. Statistic data show that this pattern began to change only in the new millennium. From my experience I can say that I was totally surprised when I worked in a casino approximately two years ago: I was expecting a clientele of rich Italians, instead of whom I found a casino full of persons from middle if not lower socio-economic classes, a big part of which were – against my expectation – Slovenes or citizens from former ex-Yugoslavian countries, who actually mostly came to Slovenia to gain bigger wages working here and end up spending them in the casinos.

Sometime at the beginning of the millennium a process of normalization of gambling activities took place. Again from my experience I was totally shocked when a few years ago in Ljubljana someone, knowing I was from Nova Gorica, seriously asked me: “Mm, you are from Nova Gorica, so tell me, do you have a technique how to win in casinos?” Through his words it sounded that gambling is a common activity, and since I'm from Nova Gorica I should know something about it, as perhaps someone leaving near the sea probably knows how to swim. I myself even at that time didn't perceive gambling without negative connotations and I had actually never thought about gambling as a common way to spend your time. But nevertheless, in public discourse gambling quickly became a normal activity. A rapid process of normalization of gambling took place. We can say gambling today is treated as a common activity, casinos are considered to be a normal part of

touristic offers and gambling is viewed as a proper form of consumption, in spite of its paradoxical status in relation to the ethics of capitalistic production.

A long history obviously knew and recognized some moral and social problems related to gambling and thus this way of today's proper consumption was mostly banished or strictly limited. Nowadays the liberal tendencies of policy don't recognize gambling as a problem or, more precisely, don't recognize it as a problem that should be regulated by states policy. In fact the gambling industry has a very symbiotic relationship with the state and/or local municipality. As you can imagine gambling is a very profitable industry and as legalized represents high incomes also for the state. In fact HIT was – before the current economic crisis – the biggest taxpayer in Slovenia []. At the same time the municipality of Nova Gorica, which is a partial owner of the HIT, gets a considerable part of its incomes from the gambling industry. In fact we should be grateful to the gambling industry of Nova Gorica as it is – through the wealth distributing hand of the municipality – providing the funds also for this conference.

To sum up: With the legalization of gambling the forces of state control are ceasing. With the normalization of gambling the forces of social control are ceasing. But the problems related to gambling do not cease to exist. They are just transferred to individuals, who can be helped by the new rising powers of medicine.

Medicalization

Gambling or pathological gambling entered the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Health in the 1980 and thus – we can say – officially becoming a medical problem.

As a note: DSM – Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Health is an important medical document published by the American Psychiatric Association which is also in accordance with the International Classification of Disease. With this I want to emphasize that although being published by an American association DSM is shaping the guidelines of psychiatric approach in many other countries, including Slovenia.

Gambling was first included in the DSM in its 3rd edition in 1980 as a “disorder of impulse control not elsewhere classified” emphasizing the inability of a subject to resist some irrational drives. Seven years later in the revision of DSM-III pathological gambling was reclassified and redefined in terms of a “substance abuse disorder” having – to make a joke – this special status among others substance-abuse disorders that the substance itself is in fact missing. But – if you would ask a psychiatrist, he or she would tell you that someone's dopamine system (that is a bio-chemical system that among other thing regulates also someone's capacity of feeling pleasure) is altered

under the conditions of repetitive gambling, which enables gambling to be defined in terms of dependency. To go on I will list the diagnostic criteria of pathological gambling as they are exposed in the 4th edition of DSM, which is the last one and as such the currently valid.

A pathological gambler is someone who has 5 or more of the following 10 diagnostic features.

Description of the Pathological Gambling Criteria of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fourth Edition)*

1. Is preoccupied with gambling (e.g., preoccupied with reliving past gambling experiences, handicapping or planning the the next venture, or thinking of ways to get money with which to gamble)
2. Needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve the desired excitement
3. Has repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling
4. Is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling
5. Gambles as a way of escaping from problems or relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)
6. After losing money gambling, often returns another day to get even (“chasing” one’s losses)
7. Lies to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of one’s involvement with gambling
8. Has committed illegal acts, such as forgery, fraud, theft, and embezzlement, to finance gambling
9. Has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of gambling
10. Relies on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation caused by gambling

SOURCE: American Psychiatric Association (1994)

This criteria aim to distinguish a normal gambler – social gamblers or professional gamblers as psychologists would call them – from a pathological gambler; i.e. someone marked by a disease, “a progressive condition that almost always worsens over time”.

Psychiatry is thus telling us that some individuals gamble and gambling is for them a normal behaviour, but that – on the other hand – some other individuals gamble, because they are pathological gamblers, dependants from gambling. At the same time, psychiatry as a form of positive scientific knowledge is basing this distinctions on medical ground, that is as something natural; not regarding the social environment, in which a gambler becomes a pathological gambler.

If you look carefully at the diagnostic criteria, you will notice that the described conditions don’t actually refer to gambling in itself, but to the various consequences of gambling; and actually to the consequences that can be embraced in a very specific social situation: that of losing money – or better – of not having enough money to gamble.

The emergence of gambling as a medical problem must be seen in the context of the above mentioned – let's say – “new qualities” of the gambling industry; that is, that it is progressively extending its offer to different social classes. Once – perhaps 50 years ago – gambling in casinos as a part of a touristic offer was associated with prestige and richness, which could be afforded only by high socio-economic classes. Nowadays – in Nova Gorica – you can gamble at slot machines for 1 cent.

A research [] based on a large survey made in the U.S. showed that people from high socio-economic classes gamble for excitement in contrast with people from lower socio-economic classes that gamble mostly for money – that is, to improve their economic standard. The funny thing is, that in spite of gambling being medicalized (at first) on the basis of irrational impulsiveness, people from lower socio-economic classes, who gamble for money, will more probably be identified as pathological gamblers.

Conclusion

Medicalization is a term used to denote the rising role of medicine as an institution of social control. The expanding medical knowledge is replacing other institutions, such as law or religion, in defining the line between normal and abnormal. Conditions and phenomena that previously pertained to other social domains are being transferred under medical jurisdiction.

In this context it is appropriate to talk about the medicalization of gambling. Gambling was previously restricted by state supervision and even before from religious institutions as it was denoted as immoral and represented a sin that may render difficult the salvation of one's soul. With the legalization and normalization of gambling, the persisting problems related to it became to be regarded as individual ones – and more precisely – as medical ones.

It's not a state problem, if you gamble – it's your own. We live in a liberal state and we cannot prohibit gambling because we promote freedom; you have your choice and it is on you to decide to gamble or not.

In this way the state ceases to control gambling and gambling becomes a normal practice. On the other hand problems related to gambling don't cease to exist, especially if someone does not have the money to gamble. But this is not a social problem anymore, rather an individual one.

At this point, there comes medicine that will tell you: “You know, there's nothing wrong with gambling in general, it is just you – you know – you have this condition, you are a bit pathological! You know, you gamble, you lose your money, and then you get a bit anxious about it. Then you go home, you lie to your family. You become depressed, since you don't know how you will pay your

bills any more. Searching for a solution, you borrow some money and you go back to the casino to win your losses back. But you lose again! You begin to steal, you become a thief ... but you are not a criminal, you are a pathological gambler. Because gambling is not a social problem, it's a medical one.”

In addition: by naming something a disease, also some moral connotations fall off. Disease is usually (in our culture) regarded as something quite independent from the patient, who is just its contingent carrier. As said before: nothing is wrong with gambling; a gambler is not a morally bad, degenerated person, he or she is just sick and needs to be cured. To be precise, just some gamblers are sick; probably those, who don't have the money to gamble.

At the end I want to underline that talking about medicalization and naming some activities, perhaps gambling, medicalized, has in no way the intent to insinuate, that the so called pathological gamblers do not suffer or do not have problems with their gambling. Instead this workshop wants to pose some questions about the very nature of this problem, because by answering the question of what is the nature of a problem, we can find the proper way to treat it.

Literature

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