

AMERICA'S GAMBLING FEVER

It is only a little far-fetched to suppose that humans began to gamble almost as soon as they learned to walk. Archaeological evidence suggests that people began rolling astragali (dicelike objects made from the ankle bone of a sheep or dog) some 40,000 years ago.

From the Etruscans to the American Indians, virtually all of the world's peoples have played games of chance. As Lorenz J. Ludovici notes in *The Itch for Play* (Jarrolds, 1962), such games were rarely uncontroversial. Hindu holy books warn against playing with dice; Aristotle regarded dice players as thieves.

Some of the roots of the speculative urge lie in a desire to learn the mind of God. In the Old Testament, God commands Moses to divide the Promised Land by lot. Yet He also rebukes the children of Israel for "preparing a table for Luck." As late as the 17th century, Protestant ministers were agonizing over when it was permissible to cast lots.

Many people gamble just because it's fun. Yet even a game, it appears, is not always just a game. The deeper functions of play are explored in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938, repr. Harper, 1970) and Roger Caillois's *Man, Play, and Games* (1958, repr. Schocken, 1979).

Last but far from least on the list of goads to gambling are greed and compulsion. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Gambler* (1847) features literature's most famous wretched card-and-dice man. From the social sciences come a number of books, including *Compulsive Gambling* (Lexington, 1989), edited by Howard J. Schaffer. Dostoyevsky's own compulsive gambling is the subject of an essay by Sigmund Freud in *The Psychology of Gambling* (Harper, 1975), edited by Jon Halliday and Peter Fuller. Noting that Dostoyevsky was at his best as a writer when most nearly reduced to penury by gambling, Freud speculated that "when his sense of guilt was satisfied by the punishment he had inflicted upon himself, the inhibition upon his work became less severe and he allowed himself to take a few steps along the road to success."

The heavy moral baggage tends to tip the balance in many books. A good account of gam-

bling in ancient times, for example, is *Fools of Fortune* (Anti-Gambling Assoc., 1892), by reformed gambler John Philip Quinn. His well-stuffed narrative—including digressions on matters such as the "nail prick" and "shiner" methods used by card cheats in his own day—is wrapped in a violent antigambling tirade. A more lighthearted survey of the scene in 19th-century Europe is Ralph Nevill's *Light Come, Light Go* (Macmillan, 1909).

In *Gambling and Speculation* (Cambridge, 1990), a less ambitious survey, Reuven Brenner takes a decidedly more relaxed view than Quinn. Other histories include *The Business of Risk* (Univ. Press of Kansas, 1985), by Vicki Abt, James F. Smith, and Eugene Martin Christensen; *Sucker's Progress* (1938, repr. Patterson Smith, 1969), by Herbert Asbury; and *Play the Devil* (Potter, 1960), by Henry Chafetz. The best historical survey of the American scene is John Findlay's *People of Chance* (Oxford, 1986).

In *Card Sharps, Dream Books, and Bucket Shops* (Cornell, 1990), Ann Fabian argues that condemnation of gambling grew in tandem with capitalism in 19th-century America. Gambling, she says, became a "negative analogue," [which] made all other efforts to get rich appear normal, natural, and socially salubrious."

William R. Eadington and Judy A. Cornelius, both of the University of Nevada, Reno, have edited a number of volumes surveying recent research, including most recently *Gambling and Commercial Gaming* (Inst. for the Study of Gambling, 1992). On lotteries, see *Selling Hope* (Harvard, 1989), by Charles T. Clotfelter and Philip J. Cook.

One of the most thoughtful books in the field is *House of Cards* (Little, Brown, 1978), by Jerome H. Skolnick. Writing before the recent casino explosion, Skolnick worried that the spread of American-style legalized gambling would spur problem gambling, create an oversupply of casinos, and breed corruption of various kinds. Once left largely to the states, he wrote, the question of legalization might eventually become a major concern of the federal government.