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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS ANAIS

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WORLD (OF) ENCOUNTERS:
the Past, Present and Future of Anthropological Knowledge

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ANTHROPOLOGY OF GAMBLING: ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC POLICIES

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Abstract

Just in few years Italy has become the major legal gambling market in Europe. The economic crisis which hit the country at the end of the first decade of the new millennium has often been used by policy makers as a public justification for the legalization of different types of games, motivated just by the necessity of collecting new tax revenues in an emergency situation. At the same time there has been an increase in the number of gambling addicts. Consequently, if on the one hand the Italian state earns money, on the other expenses have to be met for the rehabilitation treatment of pathological gamblers inside SERDs (*Social service agency for pathological addiction*).

The 450.000 slot machines installed inside bars, tobacconists and arcades have changed the aspect of some neighborhoods in Italian towns, where new actors have appeared: managers, arcade employees and gamblers. The latter ones, when gambling, detach themselves from the world and daily life by entering into the “*machine zone*” (Dow Shüll, 2012) behind the darkened windows of arcades because gambling, though enjoying a favorable legislation, is still socially partly stigmatized.

This work is the result of research based on interviews to gamblers, and ethnographic observation in legal gambling places; it aims to reflect on the conflictual interaction between different discourses related to the role of the state in regulating issues regarding the ethic and economic spheres but also public health, above all in a period of economic crisis.

Keywords: Anthropology of gambling, Ethnography, Addictive behavior.

In few years Italy has become the major legal gambling market in Europe. In 2016 Italians spent 97 billion euros on gambling, 10 of which went to tax revenues thanks to the legalization of several types of games with the objective to increase revenues in a period of economic crisis.

If related to GDP, the expense in our country corresponded to 0.85%, slightly exceeding the one in the in the UK (0.75) and exceeding the double in France (0.41) and more than the double in Germany (0.31).¹ At the same time there has been an increase in

¹ Source: Italian Parliamentary Budget Office.

the number of gamblers suffering from Pathological Gambling, recognized in the DSM (Diagnostic Statistical Manual) by the American Psychiatric Association as mental disorder with diagnostic criteria similar to those regarding substances although in this case the psychoactive substance is replaced by pathological behavior.²

The socio-economic and health issues related to pathological gambling are various and extremely serious: job loss, domestic violence, over-indebtedness, leading in some cases to usury, crimes and thefts by gamblers, fiscal fraud and evasion, uncovered checks, sanitary costs for gamblers' treatment, who in some cases attempt suicide after developing this form of addiction. On the one hand the state earns money in the form of tax revenues, on the other more and more expenses have to be met by public health services to treat and rehabilitate gambling addicts.

In order to study this growing phenomenon over the last few years an ethnographic research was carried out, which is still going on. During the fieldwork gamblers were interviewed and ethnographic observation was made in the places (or “non-places”) of legal gambling.³

In particular, field research in Florence and in the province of Siena was started in 2014 and implied different phases in time lasting 13 months up to now. The ethnographic observation was addressed to:

- gambling places, bars and tobacconists, the places where legal gambling is made possible, for a total of 60 places observed in the province of Siena and 63 in Florence⁴;

² In 2013, within the fifth edition of the DSM Diagnostic Statistic Manual, the Pathological Gambling was renamed as Gambling Disorder.

³ The well-known – but rather misused today – definition of ‘non-places’ coined by Marc Augé (1992), only partly can be applied to gambling places in Italy: that is the case of the new gambling dens. Those places lack a specific identity; besides, they have “no history” (non-identity and lack of historical character are just typical of non-places) while some bars (though a minority) have their own identity and a history of their own, which derives from the relations between clients and owner in time. I am referring here to the places observed during the research where, for example, card games have also been played for years and there is a community of regular clients. Surely the trend, a consequence of the expansion of slot games in those places, is to make them progressively “non-places” because of the scarcity of social interaction characterizing this game (the third fundamental feature of “non-places” is that they are not relational). Another interesting aspect concerns signs. For Augé signs such as “no smoking” are the standardized symbols characterizing “non-places” and establishing the only cold relationship between the manager of the place and visitors. In slot places and bars with slot machines there are notices with these characteristics (in this case provided by law, for instance prohibiting games to under age people) but some more can be found. We are referring to those inviting not to stand by the slot machines if you are not playing or even not to watch gamblers when they are playing. The latter ones are often hand-written to make the space more personalized in the relationship between manager and the community of gamblers as well as to create a sort of particular attention by the manager to the non-written rules shared by the gamblers. A definition which could be more appropriate to gambling places is the one of “extra-places” coined by Azzimondi, Cice and Croce who carried out some research inside gambling dens in Milan. The “extra-places” seem to be characterized by a sort of “complicity” between strangers who do not completely trust each other, though (Azzimondi, Cice, Croce, 2001, p.315).

⁴ The two contexts were chosen for having different characteristics in order to have a more complete vision: the “gambling places” observed in the province of Siena were located in small urban centers in Val D’Elsa, while the research in Florence concerned the central neighborhoods of a regional capital with 380.948 inhabitants (source Istat - National Institute of Statistics, 2017).

- inside residential rehabilitation communities, living together with pathological gamblers under treatment;
- attending self-help groups of “Anonymous Gamblers”;
- during events in which institutional representatives express positions about gambling and put forward policies to be adopted in order to contrast gambling;
- by means of ethnographic missions to trade fairs concerning the world of legal gambling.

So far in the research 46 pathological gamblers have been interviewed either in charge of SERDs (Social service agency for pathological addiction) or under treatment in residential communities.

While interviews concerned addiction to various types of games (lotto, sports betting, casino games, instant lotteries like “scratch and win” tickets, slot machines, etc.), ethnographic observation in field research mainly focused on slot machine games. That choice was due above all to the fact that over the last few years these machines have literally invaded the game market. The 450.000 slot machines installed inside bars, tobacconists and gambling places – about the half of those installed in the USA, which have a population five times bigger than Italy, though – have changed the aspect of some neighborhoods in Italian towns, where new actors have appeared: managers, club employees and gamblers.

The second reason which oriented the choice of focusing on slot machines derives from the data collected by means of interviews to pathological gamblers: as a matter of fact, most of the interviewed ones in the research (46%) had developed addiction to gambling just because of slot machines.

In relation to the many issues raised by the research on this occasion I am going to point out the conflictual interaction between different discourses concerning the role of the Italian state in regulating problems involving ethical and economic spheres in relation to public health especially in a period of economic crisis.

Such a choice aiming to limit the focus to this issue derives from the little space at my disposal which does not allow me to analyze the many aspects of a complex phenomenon such as gambling and the multiple interpretations which can be given to analyze it. Actually, it would not be excessively “risky” to consider gambling as a “total social fact” since it is at the center of dynamics involving the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres (Mauss, 1925). A partial confirmation of all that can be found in the fact that, from a disciplinary point of view, *the anthropology of gambling* is difficult to situate inside only one subfield or specific branch of ethno-anthropological disciplines. If we insert it inside urban, medical, economic, social or even religious anthropology, that risks of being limiting since each of those can offer contributions and interesting theoretical suggestions

to explain the complexity of such an articulated phenomenon for its characteristics and aspects. In analyzing the role of the state in the diffusion of gambling in Italy we could start from the ambitious sentence by Roger Caillois, a classical reference for those trying to analyze the world of gambling, who suggests to try to understand a civilization starting from its prevailing games (Caillois, 1958).

In order to find an answer to the question, “Why has Italy become in a few years the country with the highest number of gamblers in Europe?” it is inevitable, first of all, to investigate the political choices that may have influenced such quick and steady development. From 1997 to 2011 the alternating governments have continuously introduced in the market and legalized new forms of games: the lotto double game, bookies, SuperEnalotto (center-left government: 1999-2000), Bingo (center-left government: 1998-2000), new corners and betting points, the lotto third game, betting and big match (center-right governments: 2001-2006), “reaching the user” games, texts, digital terrestrial, tournament on-line games (center-left government: 2006-2008), new instant lotteries such as “scratch and win”, number games of national totalization –“Win for Life”, VideoLottery, distance Bingo, the opening of 1.000 gambling places for live poker, additional SuperEnalotto competition (fourth center-right government: 2008-2011). This continuous process of licensing new gambling games, which has developed regardless the political color of the governing parties over the years, has reached its peak especially at the end of the first decade of the new millennium.

It is important to focus on the rhetoric and narrations employed by policy makers to justify such political choices in order to understand in what measure such narrations have filtered and greatly impressed citizens. The main rhetoric by which such choices were motivated was essentially of two kinds: strategies to increase state revenues above all in a period of economic crisis (as the one which hit Italy in 2008) and the attempt to keep in a legal context widespread illegal and clandestine practices by regulating and controlling them.

The latter rhetoric is easy to disprove: since illegal gambling was a reality in Italy but limited to only a few games (videopoker, betting system, gambling dens), while games such as instant lotteries (more known as “scratch and win”) were introduced in the market ex novo thus increasing the volume of games in Italy with the consequent risk of developing forms of addiction. As a matter of fact the legal gambling market continuously launches new, more and more ‘seducing’ games. Then, what has been observed in these years in Italy is that there has not been a process of leading illegal gambling to a legal status; rather, there has been a progressive opening to the world of gambling, which has practically represented a big relaunching of it and at the same time the promotion of new forms of games.

As to the former justification by policy makers it is interesting to analyze the effect produced on citizens thanks to ethnographic data collected during field research; but before doing that it is opportune to remember that besides the revenue mission of gambling there is all the rhetoric related to the usefulness of revenues deriving from gambling to finance public issues of civil and cultural relevance (restoring state assets with important historical and artistic value, financing cultural events, etc.). From field research what has emerged is how much some of this rhetoric has impressed citizens, in particular the social actors and the economic subjects involved at various levels in the sector of legal gambling. We are not referring here to the big distributors or makers and charterers of slot machines, rather, at a lower and more extensive level in the gambling chain, to managers, and bar owners and tobacconists with slot machines in their stores. Some of them, for example, tended to “justify” the presence of the machines and the decision to keep them in the premises by claiming that if slot machines did not exist, citizens would pay more taxes. During an interview a bar owner with slot machines in his premises when addressing the researcher and trying to get his complicity referred to a series of taxes which “would have been much higher for us if there weren’t legal gambling”. Also, this rhetoric referred straight to the fact that games have always existed and that “people have always played” (citing the very words of the interlocutor) but at least today they are legalized and done “out in the open” also providing new state revenues. This type of rhetoric can make us reflect on the effect of a public narration in Italy related to legal gambling meant to justify the diffusion of it on a national level. A narration expressed by policy makers belonging to different parties and spread by media. A striking case concerns decree 39, 2009 by the then Minister for Economic Affairs Giulio Tremonti which introduced new types of gambling games in the market, in particular, it granted new licenses for Videolottery (VLT), a type of slot machine characterized by a much “riskier” game because you can bet not only coins but also notes up to 100 euro and get a biggest win of 5.000 per game with on- the-spot jackpots which can be up to 100.000 euro and a national one up to 500.000⁵. The justification for the legalization of those new types of games was that the revenues would have been destined to the reconstruction of L’Aquila, devastated by an earthquake in 2009, which killed more than 300 people. Today after nine years the reconstruction of the city lags behind if we consider, for instance, that of the 1.000 commercial businesses which were active before the earthquake only 60 have restated their activity.⁶ The analysis of how such “justifying” rhetoric is perceived by the social actors cannot but make us reflect on their importance and power. The political choices underlying the wide diffusion of gambling in Italy over the last few years need

⁵ Videolotteries (“comma 6b”) – unlike other slot machines – (defined as “new slot” or “comma 6a”) are not provided with an internal game card but are terminals connected to a central game system.

⁶ Data updated to 5 April 2018 (source: Confederation of Commerce, Abruzzo region).

'discourses' justifying them. The use of the term "discourse" is meant here in accordance with the rereading and sense which Michel Foucault (1969, 1971) gave to discursive formations when interpreting them as capable of exercising power over social reality.

The choices leading to the granting of new licenses for gambling, motivated for example by the need to find funds for the reconstruction of a city hit by an earthquake or, more generally, to collect fiscal revenues in an "emergency" period could be interpreted by borrowing some reflections which Mariella Pandolfi (2005, p. 156) works out in relation to interventions of humanitarian emergency.

Although the theme fields are not the same, in both cases such rhetoric has the effect of leading to an uncritical legitimization of each action. If Pandolfi refers to the need to act or to "have to do something" because of a humanitarian catastrophe, here instead we refer to find resources by the state resorting to solutions of "creative finance" which are adopted because of the paradoxical condition of "perennial" emergency dictated by the economic crisis.

In this way these "discourses" and rhetoric become indisputable until they legitimate themselves.

The rhetoric of "perennial emergency" caused by the economic crisis seems to determine a state of exception, not specifically in the sense of suspension of law (Agamben, 2003), but basically as an "alibi" to accomplish given actions. The latter ones, just because of this rhetoric, are always perceived as inevitable and politically neutral, inside a process tending to hide the fact that they are still the result of precise political choices.

Such justifying rhetoric is consequently useful for the state to defend those markedly neo-liberal choices which have allowed the diffusion of gambling; however, reporting only this aspect does not suffice to shed light on the reasons why Italy has hit the European record about the largest sums of money spent on gambling. In order to trace back such causes it is necessary to focus just on the type of game under consideration by employing the famous distribution of games in 4 categories as worked out by the above mentioned Caillois (1958): *Agon* (of competition), *Mimicry* (of simulation, not necessarily realistic), *Ilinx* (based on perception and vertigo) and *Alea* (of luck, chance or gamble).

Why has such a high number of Italians decided to choose game typologies belonging to the fourth category⁷?

⁷ In this work we are not going to go deeply into the analysis of the causes originating "gambling disorder" provided by psy-sciences. We are going to deal with socio-cultural, political and economic points of view related to the growth of this phenomenon in Italy. However, from the psychological point of view it is important to remember that the scientific literature has extensively dealt with the link between gambling and the personality profiles of gamblers: some research has pointed out that pathological gamblers would suffer from an obsessive-compulsive disorder (Hodgins, Stea, Grant, 2011). Some more studies have related the pathological behavior of gambling to a disorder of a borderline personality, histrionic and narcissistic with high levels of impulsiveness involving the search for new exciting experiences (a psychological trait defined as "novelty seeker") together

The “seducing” dynamics which gambling has unchained thanks to the attraction power of probable winnings of goods or money has been a common feature in different historical ages and societies; but what specific and unique factors have then influenced the boom of the phenomenon in Italy? The political choices that have allowed a growing liberalization of gambling, already mentioned before, have surely played an important role in the growth of the phenomenon, but, if we wish to interpret them more deeply and reread them in a clearer light, it is advisable to put them in relation to socio-economic data characterizing the years when they were collected.

Gambling total collection from 2007 to 2014 has fundamentally grown yearly with a slight slowing down in the years 2013-2014 (table 1).

Table 1.

Year	Money collection from gambling (in billions of euro) [▪]	Italian GDP (variations related to the previous year) [▪]	Unemployment (%)
2008	47,3	- 1.1%	6,7
2009	54	- 5,5%	7,7
2010	61,1	+ 1,7 %	8,4
2011	79,6	+ 0,6 %	8,4
2012	87,5	- 2,8 %	10,7
2013	84,6	- 1,7%	12,1
2014	84,3	+ 0,1%	12,7

Economic data show that the volume of money being spent on gambling increases with the tightening of the economic crisis in Italy. If we analyze Italians’ per capita GDP, that has lost 12.8 percentage points from 2008 to 2014 (data collected by the Italian Confederation of Commerce).

To sum up, gambling increases because it is situated in a negative spiral feeding itself thanks to the economic crisis which plays a crucial role in this process. Actually, if on the one hand in the name of the crisis political choices of liberalizing new, more seducing, more exciting, riskier games are legitimated, on the other it is just the tightening of the crisis that pushes a growing number of gamblers to “roll the dice”. The gambling sector is one of the few ones which seems not to be affected by the economic crisis; rather, it thrives just in the most difficult moments for Italian economy. Some researchers even claim that “gambling can be considered as a thermometer of the economic crisis” (Sabatino, 2016, p. 45).

with the desire to experiment continuously new risks (Blaszczynski, Steel, 1998). Some more approaches focus on cognitive distortions about gambling and erroneous beliefs about the chance of winning (Delfabbro, Lambos, King, Puglies, 2009; Donati, Ancona, Chiesi, Primi, 2015).

▪ Such figures refer to the total amount of money played by Italians and also include on line gambling. Let us consider that part of these figures has been “returned” to gamblers in wins (source: AAMS official data – Italian Agency of Customs and Monopolies).

▪ Eurostat Data.

More worrying data come from the parallel growth of the yearly total collection of games and the percentage of the unemployed from 2007 to 2014: the unemployed are more prone to gambling and in the cases of more serious addiction (as emerged from the interviewed gamblers) you risk losing your job or you lose it because of compulsive gambling. From what emerged from the interviews, pathological gamblers risk being fired because they are found out stealing money in the workplace to be played once more or they are late or absent themselves from work to go gambling, or again seem careless or not very efficient because of the worries and the sleepless nights devoted to finding strategies to recover losses.

We have to take into account the fact that Italy holds another negative record in Europe: the major percentage of young “*neet*” (not engaged in education, employment or training). We are referring here to young people who do not study, or work or again are not involved in training courses, but, above all, do not even look for a job. A generation that seems to have lost the hope to find a job.

Also on a level of OECD countries the percentage of *neet* young people, in Italy, has increased between the years 2005 and 2015 more in relation to other countries: +10 points according to the 2016 OECD report representing 26.9% of young people aged 15 – 34 in 2015 according to data collected by Caritas (Nanni, Quarta, 2016). In order to analyze the phenomenon of gambling it is always important to focus on young people (Gupta, Deverensky, 2000) mainly because the earlier you start gambling the higher the risk is of developing a problem of pathological gambling in adulthood (Capitanucci, Smaniotto, Biganzoli, 2010).

In order to read these data we can resort to Caillois’s reflections quoted and reanalyzed by De Sanctis Ricciardone which would tend to interpret gambling as “more democratic” than *agon* games because it rewards and punishes everybody absolutely in the same way, blindly. Gambling “does not embody any form of knowledge” about players’ because it does not take into account whether they are able or competent, strong, intelligent or strategic (Caillois, 1967; De Sanctis Ricciardone, 1994, p.148).

These interpretations about gambling are of great interest if related to the reported data and to the relationship between neoliberal policies adopted by states in connection to gambling and to the growth of the phenomenon.¹⁰

¹⁰ It is not possible here – and it not my aim either – to go deeply into the debate about how much and to what extent the Italian State – with respect to the political-economic mechanisms of the European Union and through the alternating governments over the last few years – may be generally characterized as markedly neoliberal, that is, not intervening in market regulation and economic dynamics. In this text, apart from this analysis, the significance of the term “neoliberal” we mean to use is inspired by Aiwha Ong’s approach, who interprets neoliberalism as a set of governmental practices, of flexible dispositifs which can be adopted also in the presence of strong state powers without necessarily imposing itself as dominant ideology. I am referring in particular to the reflections in her volume “Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty” (Ong, 2006), well aware that they are the result of research carried out in post-colonial contexts and in economically emergent countries, not in Europe.

Actually a particularly misused form of rhetoric inside the neoliberal discourse, at least over the last few years, gives much emphasis to the theme of meritocracy. In Italy such rhetoric acquires an additional shade and a meaning tending to create a contrast between merit and “connections” interpreted, the latter ones, as a very negative and widespread practice in Italy which allows you to get a job exclusively thanks to a network of family, social, economic or patronage relations. In contrast to the rhetoric giving value to meritocracy the young “*neet*” would seem instead to be not only disillusioned but also absolutely reluctant to rely on merit and the acquisition of competences to improve their living conditions. In other words, they have no hope to find a job or to get back the employment they lost. Such an interpretative key can be borrowed from this context to be employed to interpret the behavior, if not of everyone, at least of a part of Italians resorting to gambling. Such a hypothesis, if confirmed on a level of general trend, would risk of having disastrous results for Italy, emphasizing a loss of hope in the chances of improving one’s own living conditions by means of formative courses based on competence acquisition.

During the ethnographic interviews the unemployed pathological gamblers emphasized that just being unemployed and spending as a consequence empty, long days with no work – together with the loss of any hope to get a job – gave them much free time which was often passed in front of a slot machine or in a gambling place.¹¹ In other words, those gamblers trusted *alea* more than ways to look for a job.

Besides, as emerged from the interviews, slot games mainly allow players to detach themselves from the world and daily worries. Among those, unemployment is surely one of the most and frequent in a period of economic crisis. Slot machines, both for the way they are designed (graphics, lights and sounds related to the game, as well as for the game mechanism alternating wins and losses) and how the space where they are installed is designed and set up (dark rooms or scarcely lit neither by artificial lights or windows overlooking the street, no wall clocks) allow gamblers to immerse themselves completely in the game getting distracted or totally alienated from the daily problems concerning both the work sphere and the relational and family ones. The interviewed gamblers, when remembering the sensations they felt in front of a slot machine often referred of sensations such as entering into “*un mondo ovattato*” (a “cocooned world”), “not having to think about anything else”, “getting away from the world”. Sensations being very similar to those described by Natasha Dow Shüll (2012) and summarized in the concept of “machine zone” a formula by which the gamblers she interviewed in her ethnographic research in the Las Vegas casinos described that “zone” they entered into when playing as representing a kind of trance state that kept them away from the world and worries.

¹¹ In the research context about this theme, as well as in this paper, when we refer to pathological gamblers, we mean those under treatment at SERDs or in residential rehabilitation communities.

Let us consider the fact that if we enlarge our analysis to the wider social context, these social actors live, like all of us, in a world that on a macroeconomic level is deeply affected by the fluctuation of financial markets, which are influenced, they too, by dynamics which are so unpredictable to seem aleatory. Those are mechanisms that are physically distant from the interviewed gamblers during the research but that find an echo even in their homes thanks to mass media spreading that concept of “playing” on the stock market which is interpreted also in a common sense more and more often as a series of interlinked bets. Going back to the micro-context, in our research we meant to underline the perceptions shared by those who actually gamble and the general economic context, in particular, to the state’s responsibilities in relation to the diffusion of gambling in Italy.

Since the very beginning of the interviews with the gamblers something they said particularly struck me when they talked about their reaction to the more or less efficacy of the “warning” strategies adopted on a state level. We are referring here to slogans such as “play responsibly” or “play without exaggerating” or “playing can cause pathological addiction”, recited by law at the end of commercials advertising legal gambling or printed on notices by the slot machines in bars.

The researcher’s attention was captured not only by the answers but also by the changes which on an emotional level frequently characterized that part of the interview: the gamblers’ tone of voice rose while facial expressions communicated feelings of rage. Rage for a state continuously offering you new, more and more seductive forms of game but also making you believe that you are being protected. The words of those being interviewed actually referred to highly contradictory behavior by the state, basically marked by hypocrisy.

A sentence from an interview to a gambler clearly expresses such concepts:

“I think that the state should behave to citizens like a good father or a good mother... what it has done, instead, is to offer me what harmed me. And then it pretends to worry about me...”

Those gamblers had gone through all the phases: from social gambling to problem gambling to pathological gambling living in first person the perverse mechanism leading to addiction; developing at the same time a feeling of rage and an attitude of strong criticism to the state. A state playing the role of the (gambling) “bank” which earns money from games by millions of Italians and giving at the same time the task of collecting tax revenues to private firms which have the license of the game market (and have the task to control it) and consequently they too get a profit from the diffusion of the phenomenon. Some disquieting data concern the fact that the 500 companies operating in Italy in the world of legal gambling (Marinello, 2016, p.24), thanks to the growing number of available games, have increased their income more proportionally superior to state revenues (table

2). In conclusion, not only the state but – to a greater extent – a particular private sector with the assent of the state earns a profit by exploiting the citizens’ weakness because seduced by gambling.

Table 2 – Data in millions of euro. Source: Agency of Customs and Monopolies – Monopoly Area.

Year	Tax revenues	Gambling companies turnover
2006	6.742	5.208
2007	7.384	6.373
2008	7.888	7.018
2009	8.409	8.502
2010	8.892	8.151
2011	8.626	9.504
2012	8.285	9.067
2013	8.474	8.809
2014	8.271	8.774

Concerning the complexity and the extent of the phenomenon it is advisable to reflect on the different state strategies about the laws to be enforced regarding substances and behaviors which can create pathological addiction. In Italy, selling alcohol and cigarettes is liberalized for people aged more than 18 as well as a wider and wider range of gambling games while the selling of soft drugs is not allowed.¹²

It is interesting to analyze how the gambling world by means of more and more intrusive commercials inside the programming of Italian television or on internet sites or again through an invasion of slot machines in bars or tobacconists in Italian towns has been able to progressively “tame” the perception about gambling, making “familiar” to the Italians what was historically stigmatized. A process which has not occurred for soft drugs.

It is also interesting to underline how the economic prescriptions of neoliberal style which, in the name of citizens’ freedom, should favor freedom of enterprise, for what concerns the context of substances or behaviors leading to pathological addiction are actually applied by states in some areas by excluding other ones. It will be of great interest to analyze this phenomenon in the future years since compulsive gambling, on a level of social perception, is today in a transitional phase in the common sense leaving the exclusive context of “vice” to be interpreted as pathological addiction and consequently as a disease.

Another fundamental aspect to take into account if we want to understand how and if state policies will change regarding this phenomenon is the fact that in Italy the figures of pathological gamblers are increasing alongside with the awareness by gamblers and

¹² In Italy only from January 2017 there has been a little normative opening to soft drugs because it is now possible to commercialize in specialized shops a variety of cannabis, – cannabis sativa L., – which by law must have a THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) content, the main psychotropic principle, inferior to 0.6% (law 242, 2016).

their families that this addiction can be treated with no charge in SERDs (*Social service agency for pathological addiction*) because expenses are met by the Italian National Health Service. Those expenses for rehabilitation treatment soon could level off state revenues from gambling. Moreover, on a level of common sense, something is changing: the above mentioned rhetoric meant to justify the usefulness of gambling for the community (at least from the fiscal point of view) which had impressed citizens as emerged from the research is now being replaced by a growing concern and a more critical attitude about gambling. Media have contributed to creating this “climate” by paying more and more attention to the phenomenon over the last few years by means of news items and in-depth investigation.

Regarding the policies of neoliberal style of states included in a globalized world and economies, “gambling” plays a role which on a symbolical level can be interpreted as emblematic and at the same time paradoxical because it is in the center and at the crossroads of different dynamics and discourses feeding it.

As we have seen, the gambling market is liberalized with the motivation of finding new revenues for the state in a period of economic crisis – that crisis which was originated inside the financial world marked by dynamics essentially based on a series of “bets” – and it is just in a period of economic crisis that gambling grows and thrives. In conclusion, we will have to analyze in the future the socio-political and cultural development fundamentally asking ourselves the following questions which must be left necessarily open today: about this spiral causing the boom of gambling in Italy over the last few years will state policies about it in the future be characterized by a liberal style as it has happened in Italy in the last years or will they adopt an interventionist approach with the aim of protecting citizens? Starting from ethnographic data, which mainly drove me to start this analysis and in particular the gamblers voices who more than anyone else know gambling deeply and its seducing and at the same time destroying mechanism, the question is in a few words, will the state behave like “a good father or a good mother” or like a gambling den owner? And how will citizens respond? Will they react and do something about these policies, for instance putting pressure on governing political parties?

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[VOLTA AO SUMÁRIO]