



## ‘Of luck and leverage’

Joyce Goggin

### review of

Bjerg, O. (2011) *Poker: The parody of capitalism*. University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor. (PB, pp. 274, US\$35.00, ISBN9780472071630)

Of all the uses to which the work of Slavoj Žižek has been put in recent years, Ole Bjerg’s new book on poker and its relationship to capitalism is, to my mind, one of the most interesting and productive. While Žižek is familiar fare in film and new media studies, literature and cultural studies, Bjerg brings Žižek’s (1991) re-reading of Lacan’s concepts of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary to the analysis of a simple game which, as players know, turns out to be exceedingly rich and complex. Indeed poker, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century American hybrid of card games like poch, bouillotte and brag that entered the New World from Germany, France and England (Parlett, 1992: 208) has also, in this age of postmodern finance and globalization, become an industry, an important economic driver and a ‘sport’ that people love to watch on TV.

Bjerg’s analysis of poker, how it is played, and its role in the greater scheme of things from the perspective of Žižek’s concepts is nothing short of brilliant, in part because it holds out a truly original explanation for the complexity and seemingly endless depths of poker, a game that has puzzled card and game historians for a long time. Where others have remained baffled by poker’s surface simplicity that masks tremendous complexity, along with the game’s relation to both causal logic and chance, Bjerg’s analysis is able to account for the mechanics of poker along with the fascinating dynamics of bluffing, which serve

to heighten and filter human nature and psychology. The initial step in Bjerg's approach to elucidating the game's more mysterious qualities contained in part one of *Poker: The parody of capitalism*, consists in asserting the notion that poker is neither simply a game of chance nor a game of skill, but rather it involves 'an intricate interplay between chance, mathematical-logical deduction, and psychology' (11).

What Bjerg is then able to explain is how these aspects of poker – both the game and its practice – jive with the Žižekian categories of the symbolic, the real and the imaginary. To begin, the element of logical deduction inherent in poker corresponds to Žižek's (1991) version of the symbolic order, and amounts to the poker-playing subject's compliance with the rules of the game and the notion of causality implied in counting cards, for example, as part of the game's governing system. It is this projected system of rules, including the calculation of odds and card counting, to which and through which the player responds in bidding. Again following Žižek, Bjerg explains the real in poker as the intrusion of chance, or the 'singular instance' that upsets the apple cart of logic, and particularly the 'law of great numbers', through which one is supposedly able to project the probability of an event's occurrence, such as the turn of a particular card. In other words, the real manifests itself as a disruption, as the element of chance that no amount of card counting can forestall, hence when it asserts itself, the real disrupts the laws of probability by not being reducible to any law.

But the greatness of poker resides in the fact that, while skilled players can sometimes get an edge by assiduously counting cards, they must also respond to the actions of other players. This, of course, is where the added layer of bluffing comes in. In order to read the behaviors, ticks and postures of one's opponents, one must constantly project fantasies in an attempt to explain opponents' tells, based on what they might be holding. Here, poker enters the imaginary, which 'consists of fantasmatic projections mediating the gap between the real and the symbolic' (12). In other words, in poker the imaginary consists of explanatory fantasies that make it possible for players to imagine and pre-empt other players' behaviors in the game. So, if one is competing with someone who plays fast and loose, for example, one might anticipate that this same player's raise is symptomatic of a naive interpretation of the strength of his or her hand, or simply a matter of reckless betting, perhaps due to inexperience or a propensity to embrace unjustifiable amounts of risk. On the other hand, the same behavior might be a bluff by a strong player who initially adopts a certain mode of play to create the impression of looseness, only later to switch to a different, 'tighter' strategy once other players have been duped.

What makes this 'ontology of poker' so appealing is its potential for broader application. As Bjerg argues, Žižek's (1991) re-reading of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory makes it applicable not only to an analysis of the game that psychologizes poker strategy, but also to a sociological analysis of the relationship between poker and poker playing subjects, as well as to poker and the market both inside and outside the game. Hence, while Bjerg analyzes poker itself in terms of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, this tripartite logic is then extended to player types, namely, Suckers, Grinders, and Players. As Bjerg writes, 'while the Sucker is playing his luck, the Grinder is playing the cards, the Player is playing the opponent' (156). This section of the book likewise makes inroads into exploring the notion of 'entrepreneurial selves' and the hybrid potentials and skills that Grinders, Suckers or Players may possess, and which they may strategically develop and deploy. That said, however, Bjerg largely limits his discussion to the in-game economy, making this specific area one that has potential for much broader application in the future.

The Sucker, the first in Bjerg's typology, is the kind of player who counts on luck, plays wildly or loosely and clings to the romance of chance, and therefore, to the 'dimension of the real' (146). The Grinder, on the other hand, knows that chance is randomly distributed and therefore, operates squarely in the order of the symbolic. Moreover, as a player who attempts to make fairly steady and predictable returns in the game, the Grinder will carefully estimate every hand in relation to some form of deductive logic or theory of probability. And finally, the Player relies on his or her ability to read hesitation and weakness in the opponent. The Player will attempt to read opponents' tells as a means of projecting what is going on their minds, in the hopes of predicting their fantasies of how the game will pan out. In other words, the Player works largely in the area of the imaginary both by reading other players' bluffs and, with the Grinder, the Player makes long-term imaginary predictions as to how the law of great numbers might work in his or her favour.

Part Two of Bjerg's magnum opus contains a fascinating investigation of the poker economy, the first section of which deals with on-line poker and the general shift that has occurred as players have become increasingly skilled since the game was first virtualized. Here again the author explains a range of player types, from sharks (strong players, often professional) to donkeys, or those players who win in games with lesser or equally skilled players, and then make the move to a more professional crowd only to lose, thereby transferring the wealth from one level of the on-line community to the upper echelons of more skilled players. In 'A tough way to make an easy living', Bjerg explores how the 'enormous amounts of money circulating in the poker economy have made poker playing a viable way to make a living for a substantial number of players

worldwide' (111). Here Bjerg also begins to explain the conditions necessary for poker to become professionalized and how this relates to contemporary postmodern capitalism, wherein televised poker tournaments become big entertainment business.

In subsequent chapters of *Poker: The parody of capitalism*, Bjerg focuses more specifically on the game in the greater economy, comparing, for example, the previously established types – Suckers, Grinders, and Players – to how we interact with capitalism. Hence the Sucker, according to Bjerg, is like a worker in the system who 'acts in the most immediate relation to the real' and, like the worker who produces surplus value to be exploited, by counting blindly on chance the Sucker feeds the game with money which is then 'redistributed in the order of the symbolic and the imaginary in favour of the Grinder and the Player' (237). Likewise, Draw poker, Stud poker and No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em, are all analyzed in the chapter entitled 'The history of poker', in their relation to developing economic modes from industrial to postindustrial capitalism. And this permits Bjerg to conclude, and quite rightly I believe, that No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em is a perfect expression of what he calls 'No-Limit Capitalism' (234) in that 'there is no secure medium for trading and pricing commodities' since the collapse of the Bretton Woods, which he relates to the 'smaller number of exposed cards in Texas Hold 'Em' (238). That few cards are exposed in this game effectively makes skill in playing it more contingent on reading one's opponents imaginary projections, hence there is 'no way of neutralizing the fluctuations in the imaginary order by mathematical calculations', just as in the current financial market even the veneer of any conformity to a theory of market efficiency is out the window (239).

More importantly, Bjerg argues that poker, and particularly Texas Hold 'Em, has a great deal of explicative potential to help us to understand how capitalism works as an economic system that has particular impacts on the subjects that function within it. For example, in 'A tough way to make an easy living' Bjerg explores the cruel irony of the plight of the professional poker player who embarked upon this career in the pursuit of freedom – only to discover that, given the 'strong element of repetition and routine even in advanced poker playing' (135), the very opposite of freedom 'seems to be built into the profession and the game of poker' (*ibid.*). In other words, the subject who takes on poker as a profession in an attempt to subvert or sidestep the contemporary social and political economies ends up finding that poker is very much a part of those same economies, and demands slavish attention and sustained labour.

All of this said, however, I also have a few minor points of criticism that readers of Bjerg's book might want to take into account. The first concerns what might

be called a certain 'weakness' in Bjerg's book, which may ultimately turn out to be a considerable strength. *Poker: The parody of capitalism* is an enormous undertaking and this is reflected in the book's structure. This is to say that the book is divided into four parts, which are then subdivided into chapters, but each of the parts could readily become stand-alone books on their own. Indeed, with updating and elaborating this book could well lead to a good deal more work on the topic of poker – from an historical perspective, an economic perspective, or a cultural perspective – and again, this might just be the book's potential strength. Ultimately it is Žižek's re-reading of the Lacanian notion of the symbolic, real and imaginary that will ultimately guide any future applications that the book may have, thereby potentially imparting the same methodological rigor to subsequent studies.

My second criticism of the book is connected with the title which would lead readers to expect a more sustained analysis of the game and its relationship with contemporary capitalism. Unfortunately, this aspect of the book, although highly interesting, remains buried in the final section, and comes only after a long investigation of players, behaviours, in-game economies and so on. And while the book relates Texas Hold 'Em to the current market situation, I believe there is much more to be said on the topic in terms of the game's cultural framing in tandem with the cultural framing of the market. Again, it is perhaps what is left to say on the topic that makes Bjerg's contribution so stimulating, and one can only hope that his book will spawn more research on this under-theorized topic.

And finally, one might also take issue with Bjerg's reading of the Grinder and the 'reality', as it were, of imaginary projections of outcomes through the law of great numbers. What I am getting at is this: on the one hand Bjerg writes that 'any symbolization of the real [read: chance] in the form of mathematical calculation or logical deduction is structured around a central lack and then recognizing the way people compensate for this lack through their imaginary fantasies'(156). Good enough. But elsewhere in the book, Bjerg seems to suggest that the success of the Grinder type relies on the 'long run' view, that is, his or her ability to look forward to an 'imaginary point where the symbolic order is complete', or a moment at which 'the effects of the unruly real have been neutralized, chance is fully "tamed", and the universe is subordinated to the symbolic regularity and calculability of probability theory' (147). But this, to my mind, constitutes a fairly major contradiction in terms, given that the singular event – the chance occurrence – can never be entirely ruled out by counting cards or any other strategy, so that the real will always assert itself and disrupt the best laid plans of any player. Indeed herein lies the 'juice' that most gamblers crave almost regardless of their style of play but, more importantly, this is also why the market is so unpredictable and susceptible to crashing. In other words, it seems at turns

that Bjerg argues for the impossibility of taming chance, and elsewhere to believe that, in the past, one could rely on the law of great numbers and probability. This suggests therefore, that before our current post-Bretton Woods, post-modern, post-industrial, dematerializing economic paradigm, there was some form of economic realism whereby people could accurately predict outcomes and reliably make money. One need only cast the most cursory of glances in the direction of the mercurial economy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the vicissitudes of the European market in that century, to see that this was far from being the case.

That said, however, Bjerg's insight that poker is about the three ontological orders – the real, the symbolic and the imaginary – and that, for example, Texas Hold 'Em's fascination and popularity resides in the game's 'structure that balances the three ontological orders very well against each other' provide the kind of 'aha' moments that make the book well worth reading, cover to cover (38). And more than simply worthy of a good read, *Poker: The parody of capitalism* is sure to inspire new research on this overlooked yet urgently important topic. Indeed, scholars should take the game of poker, and its most recent incarnation in Texas Hold 'Em, more seriously for a variety of reasons, among which are the game's potential to mirror the financial structures of the economy in which it operates, and its importance as an industry, as a profession and as a leisure activity. Hopefully, Ole Bjerg's important work on the topic will provide a springboard to more studies on the cultures of poker, and the liquid, changeable and highly adaptable structures of poker, which will doubtless continue to morph in step with the economy well into the future.

## references

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