

luck!

Once our policies have been motivated by good fortune or happiness for all people. Now it's up to risk-taking for the lucky ones. Is democracy becoming a lottery?

KURZFASSUNG

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The English language points to a distinction between happiness and luck. In English, you can be very lucky (fortunate) and still feel miserable. But our society puts increased emphasis taking risks in public and private thinking.

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Is democracy flourishing when only half of eligible citizens vote? During non-presidential years, voting in the United States often sinks to less than 40 percent attendance. What if a lottery ticket were attached to the voting ballot? When you vote, you automatically enter a national lottery for which the government offers prizes from 15 to 500 million dollar for each election. Along with news about who won public office, we would hear the lucky lottery numbers. Voter attendance would very likely soar to something like 99 percent. The lotto-ballot is, in fact, seriously promoted today by Matthew Miller, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, who got the notion from Didi Carr Reuben, wife of a Los Angeles rabbi.

The lotto-ballot may never happen, but the very idea might help us ponder the growing influence that Las Vegas has on Washington, D.C., and the increasing role played by gambling in public life. Every state in the Union runs several lotteries, and some states run ten or more. Public issues have become linked to the lotto. Propositions appear on the California ballot about the role of casinos on Native American lands (Should Indian casinos pay "voluntary" taxes or face more competition?). How does luck fit into "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," the goals mentioned by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence? Does admiration for luck undermine the Enlightenment hope that rationality will prevail once superstitions have vanished? Gottfried Lessing and Benjamin Franklin saw "the sun of Enlightenment" rising as the "shadows of superstition" fade, but they warned not "to blow out the candles" before the sun dispels the darkness. In Enlightenment terms, are public lotteries the fireworks at twilight? How is democracy affected by gambling?

Rational explanations – from Greek philosophy to religious theology – have sought to minimize the role of luck. Against luck and good fortune stand the classic laws of cause and effect, reward-and-punishment, "what goes around comes around." Ethical systems postulate Universal Justice that assigns a precise karma to human behavior, a logical promise that, in the final analysis, we get what we

deserve, not more and not less. Kantian systems expect reasonable people to postulate a logical moral order even if that order does not actually exist in human experience because moral judgments require a logical framework – if only for reasonable people. Aristotle insists on linking happiness with correct choices that guide behavior, while his *Ethics* does add that a person's happiness is qualified by factors beyond their control, such as the fate of their children or the circumstances into which they were born. But in general, Aristotle sees personal happiness and good fortune as the outcome of rationally tempered behavior (Greek *phronesis*).

There are complex ideas behind the words "happiness," "luck," "fortune," and "chance." Here the German language is less specific than English. The German "*Glück*" blurs the difference between luck (good fortune) and happiness (well-being), while the English language points to a distinction between happiness and luck. Sometimes "lucky" does mean happy, but good fortune is frequently independent of personal fulfillment. In English, you can be very lucky (fortunate) and still feel miserable. The German language can sharpen the meaning of *Glück* when it stands in contrast to *Pech*, as in the English-language version of Nobel-Prize winning novelist Elfriede Jelinek's *Bambiland* where the American mentality finds itself trapped in Iraq by an ironic perception that admires the "good fortune" of a depleted uranium missile:

"Depleted uranium ammunition can't and needn't eat to get energy, how lucky [*Glück*] ... The guns of combat tanks only have a small diameter, not more than 12 cm, so how can this make a decent impact force? Our problem is that we need to develop high impact in a little space, and uranium has high density, and that's its bad luck [*Pech*]. That's also our bad luck [*Pech*] because it might also make us sick. Yet it is rather our good luck [*Glück*] than our bad luck [*Pech*] when we look at it from the viewpoint of war. Ungainly ships attacking prow to prow, that doesn't do the trick any more. But the uranium really hits the spot."

Luck is good fortune incommensurate with responsible behavior. Acknowledging the responsibility of a serious work ethic, most states in the U.S. have endorsed public

poker games
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gambling only after long debate and after several rejections by the voters. The recreational games of Las Vegas and Atlantic City made their way into law only under the cloak of increased funding for public schools. The citizens' duty to educate their children became the argument for state-sponsored gambling. But what are the states teaching the public by their enshrinement of gambling?

Poor William J. Bennett! He served as Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration and became a member of the President's Cabinet as the "drug czar" (Director of National Drug Control Policy). Bennett was a controversial Secretary of Education who gave speeches and wrote books about the lack of virtue in American society, particularly among young people. As a leading voice for conservative morals, Bill Bennett was particularly humiliated when in 2003 his addiction to gambling became public knowledge, and after he admitted having lost as much as 8,000,000 dollar within a one-year period. Bennett claimed he was never addicted to gambling and compared his habit to responsible drinking. Bennett did, however, say that his habit does not set a good example and he now claims to have quit gambling forever. Luck has a strong allure even for moral crusaders who scold the world on behalf of virtue.

Even the strictest ethics has to admit that we can only play our cards in life if we use the hand we are dealt – accepting the physical, mental, and emotional facts of our life situation. This means in turn that chance, luck, or grace shuffles the deck before we receive our cards. We may cut the deck after the shuffle, but the fingers of Fortune have first riffled the cards. The initial circumstances of our lives are not fair at the beginning. We don't get what we deserve – we get what we get. Playing our cards right is a lesson not lost on college campuses today where poker games are pushing aside video games as the preferred recreation. Poker parties have increasingly become the centerpiece of dorm nights, birthday parties, and even weddings. Cable television shows poker tournaments on at least three channels at any given time, and there is "Celebrity Poker" played by Hollywood stars. This year, UCLA offered poker at college orientation and it was a big success.

Teen poker is not surprising when we contemplate the larger context of a risk-taking society. The "dot-com" era of the 1990s put its spotlight on the entrepreneurs and ventures capitalist whose "blue sky" thinking represents the stock market as a vast get-rich-quick slot machine. Join the game now or become a loser, was the motto. A society that encourages investment and that makes credit widely available sows the seeds for a risk-taking, gambling mentality. Jacob Hacker, professor of political science at Yale University,

is preparing a book called "The Great Risk Shift" in which he describes increased emphasis on taking risks in public and private thinking. Where security may have been the motive behind many social policies of the past, current thinking highlights the need to take risks and invest in the future. The dynamics of economic and social change require nimble flexibility rather than secure certitudes. The appeal of fundamentalism in religion and social philosophy depends on the larger context of chaotic change happening in all areas of life.

Gödel's Theorem, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, and Chaos Theory have set the path of contemporary thinking. These de-constructive ways of thinking undermine closed systems of certitudes. But this is not to say that skepticism has permanently paralyzed all action. What provides clarity of action is neither certitude nor the recklessness of sheer chance. Between certainty and chance lies probability. The clarity of probability comes not from certainty but from immersion in the details of what actually exists at any moment in time. Probability is not the lucky guess of the gambler but the intuitive reasoning of the well-informed observer. Probability is not the intolerance of morals but the wisdom based on experience – where wisdom does not preen itself on being absolutely correct. Probability is inseparable from risk-taking without abandoning the sober respect for facts and for what specifically needs to be done.

All extremes are inherently unstable since every situation is constantly shifting and evolving. Reality may at bottom consist of fluid situations – as asserted by process philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Alfred North Whitehead. Process philosophy appears also in the oldest known texts of civilization in ancient China, which are the oracle texts of the *I Ching* and the *Ling Chi Ching*. These oracles teach that the most basic reality exists in given situations that we encounter in the Now Moment. And the way to apprehend each situation is to acknowledge the changing patterns evolving in the uniqueness of the Now Moment. In the enigmatic pieces of the puzzles before us, our intuitive brain sees patterns emerge that are conducive to action. The patterns that emerge are never perceived without risk, but neither are they grasped blindly or arbitrarily. The patterns point to a probable path. The 20th Hexagram of the *I Ching* is "Observing" (Wind over the Earth), and its advice conveys the Taoist wisdom of probabilistic thinking: "Observing means being alert, careful. Above is the wind, penetrating. Below is the earth, soft. So make progress gradually, with proper timing. Advance without impetuosity, with alert observation. Be swift without being hasty, move strongly but with firm foundation. Advance with flexibility. A pearl hangs in the black void, illumining the whole world as though it were in the palm of your hand. Be attentive. Observe." ■

DER AUTOR

Michael Heim, einer der wichtigsten Medienphilosophen der Internetepoche, lehrt am Art Center College of Design in Pasadena und ist Mitarbeiter bei .copy.