Deep plays: A comparative ethnography of gambling contests in two post-colonies
Jeffrey J. Sallaz
Ethnography 2008; 9: 5
DOI: 10.1177/1466138108088947

The online version of this article can be found at: http://eth.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/9/1/5

Additional services and information for Ethnography can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://eth.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://eth.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations (this article cites 16 articles hosted on the SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):
http://eth.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/9/1/5
Deep plays
A comparative ethnography of gambling contests in two post-colonies

Jeffrey J. Sallaz
University of Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT
Clifford Geertz famously argued that careful ethnographic study of a society’s games of chance can generate insight into that society’s history, structure and culture. Adopting and extending the technique of the ‘ethnographic revisit’, the author compares his own ethnographic data on the organization of casino card games in contemporary South Africa to Geertz’s study of the Balinese cockfight. Three differences are delineated regarding the position of gambling as an institutionalized practice within the larger social matrix; the organization of the individual games; and the subjectivities produced through participation in the contests. These differences, it is argued, derive from divergent trajectories of post-colonial ‘governmentality’ in Indonesia and South Africa. The Indonesian state continued a colonial-era ban on gambling. As a result, cockfighting remained embedded in local village life as a vehicle for expressing both traditional status honor and resistance to central authority. In contrast, the South African state reversed colonial prohibition by sanctioning corporate casinos. Social and political dimensions of gambling are here subsumed within an economic framework of action and understanding.

KEY WORDS comparative ethnography, gambling, Geertz, Indonesia, South Africa, post-colonialism, risk, cockfight, casino
The anthropologists Clifford and Hildred Geertz arrived in 1958 at a remote Indonesian village to commence ethnographic fieldwork among the Balinese. For their first ten days they were resolutely ignored by the local villagers, an involuntary exclusion which ended only with their participation in a public cockfight and subsequent flight from the government police. The resulting essay, ‘Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight’ (1973), is an acclaimed classic in anthropology and sociology, a standard text in courses on culture and fieldwork (Fine, 1992; Schweder and Good, 2005). Via a ‘virtuosic interpretation’ of the structure and performance of the cockfight, Clifford Geertz sought to decipher deep structures of meaning within Balinese society and to illuminate the Balinese subjectivity (Ortner, 2005). Wagering, he claimed, was ‘the link connecting the fight to the wider world of Balinese culture’ (1973: 429).

Subsequent analyses of ‘Deep Play’, both laudatory and critical, have tended to conflate Geertz’s formal method of ethnocultural analysis with his substantive findings regarding the role of the wager in Balinese society. This latter, substantive point can be summarized thus: the cockfight was in essence a vehicle for displaying and affirming status honor (in the Weberian sense) among Balinese men (Alexander, 2004). The post-colonial government’s futile attempts to eradicate it, meanwhile, symbolized for Geertz the (as of yet) incomplete encroachment of modern forms of authority upon the island. Yet the methodological insight of ‘Deep Play’ is more general: we can gain insight into a society’s culture through careful ethnographic study of the concrete interpersonal situations in which its members wager, gamble and take risks. If we grant Geertz his assertion that Bali, in these initial years of independence from Dutch colonial rule, remained a social order structured around masculine status honor (and I will argue that the method of comparative ethnography outlined herein allows us to do so), may we not ask in turn of the role played by contests of chance in societies cleaved by other sorts of divisions, for example those of ethnicity, nationality or class?

Such is the aim of this article, a comparative ethnography of prototypical gambling ‘interaction rituals’ (Collins, 2005) in two post-colonies. I compare Clifford’s Geertz’s ethnographic study of the Balinese cockfight with my own ethnographic notes on casino card games in post-apartheid South Africa. Far from incomparable, Indonesia circa 1958 and South Africa circa 2004 constitute two instances of a larger case: that of newly independent nations struggling with the question of how to regulate economy and society. The regime of governance characteristic of a colonial order, thinkers from Fanon (1968) to Mamdani (1996) have argued, sets important constraints upon the post-colonial society. But it is also the case that new political elites will possess some amount of autonomy to steer the nation down paths not entirely determined by inherited constraints. I show
in this article that the interplay of colonial legacies and post-colonial opportunities may be observed in, of all places, interpersonal games of chance. The divergent trajectories traveled by South Africa and Indonesia have given rise to divergence in how wagering contests are institutionalized, organized and experienced. Before elaborating on these points, it is necessary to provide an overview of how I intend to establish comparability between Geertz’s field site in Bali and my own in South Africa, separated as they are by 50 years and 5000 miles.

**Comparative ethnography: issues, aims, sources**

Comparative ethnography, at its most basic, involves counter-posing fieldwork data collected at two sites in order to highlight and explain differences and/or similarities. One could of course argue that all ethnography is comparative insofar as the researcher is contrasting, if only implicitly, some ‘foreign’ social world with the home society of which he or she is a part. Systematic comparison of two or more sets of field data, however, requires a minimal amount of reflexivity concerning how one gathers these data and the categories used for description and analysis. The method of comparative ethnography is in this sense not only productive but prophylactic, insofar as it serves as a safeguard against importing into a research study one’s own common sense assumptions about the social world – a particularly acute danger when one’s purview is confined to but a single case (Wacquant, 2007). Comparative ethnography also provides a powerful ‘warrant’ for ethnographic research generally, by deflecting positivist claims that ethnographic data, no matter how thickly described, have minimal relevance beyond the local context from which they are extracted (Katz, 1997).

The specific approach to comparative ethnography put to use in this article draws upon the technique of the ‘ethnographic revisit’ as explicated by Michael Burawoy (2003). An ethnographic revisitor performs fieldwork at a site previously studied by another ethnographer. The task is then to comb through the many similarities that will exist between the sites, in order to discover some interesting (and, hopefully, puzzling) differences. He or she, then, guided by specific theoretical questions and reflexively attentive to his or her subject position, posits and evaluates a series of hypotheses as to why his or her findings differ from those of the original researcher.

Though revisits have been undertaken by numerous anthropologists and sociologists (among the most well-known include Burawoy’s own revisit [1979] to Donald Roy’s study of a Chicago engine factory [1952]), Burawoy’s formulation was the first to systematize the tenets of the method. It establishes a framework for explaining why field data produced by researcher A at time point A1 and location A2 would differ from field data
produced by researcher B at time point B_1 and location B_2. The revisit method specifies four reasons why variation may be found. It may be the case that the two sites were actually not that different at all, but that the two researchers performed fieldwork from divergent subject positions (a senior male professor studying the dynamics of an exotic dance club by visiting as a client will generate very different findings than would a female graduate student studying this same club by working as a performer). This is referred to as a *constructivist-internal* explanation, insofar as it locates divergent findings in ‘the relation of ethnographer to the people being studied’ (Burawoy, 2003: 667). Two ethnographers may also approach their research sites with disparate theoretical ‘lenses’ that shape what they see and the data they collect (a material-feminist will generate very different field notes on exotic dance clubs than would a scholar working from a rational-choice perspective). Because it draws attention to the participant observer’s embeddedness within a larger theoretical paradigm, this is labeled a *constructivist-external* hypothesis.

In contrast are two realist hypotheses, which locate divergent field data in the characteristics of the research sites themselves. A *realist-internal* hypothesis specifies that the two ethnographies differed because the field sites were at different stages of development (a factory studied during the year it opened will look different than it does 20 years later, even if nothing changes significantly in the external environment). A *realist-external* hypothesis in turn locates the reason for difference in the larger structural environment in which the field site is situated. The same ‘local’ phenomena (wage-labor, marriage rituals, etc.) can take multiple forms and be experienced in varied ways depending upon the external forces impinging upon them. Table 1 summarizes these four hypotheses.

The method of the ethnographic revisit, in sum, provides a coherent and parsimonious framework for making sense of differences observed at a given field site at different time points. But there is no reason why the principles of the ethnographic revisit must be restricted to staggered visits to the same field site. A variant of the revisit method known as the heuristic revisit in fact stipulates that insofar as two field sites bear at least a familial resemblance (by being, for instance, loci of the occurrence of the same phenomenon, such as gambling), the principles of the revisit method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constructivist</td>
<td>Positions of researchers</td>
<td>Researchers’ theoretical lenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realist</td>
<td>Internal organization of field sites</td>
<td>Surrounding environments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Explanations for divergent fieldwork findings
will hold. The ethnographic revisit, in short, via the principle of the heuristic comparison, lays the groundwork for a comparative ethnography generally.

Ethnographic revisits of course require two data sources. For this article, materials on gambling in Bali were drawn from Clifford Geertz’s field study of the Balinese cockfight as reported in ‘Deep Play’. For more general data on Bali, I turned to Geertz’s other writings on Indonesia as well as the secondary literature. Data on gambling in contemporary South Africa derive in turn from the author’s own ethnographic study of the country’s gambling industry, conducted over several stretches between 2002 and 2005.

I will discuss briefly the aims and parameters of this South African fieldwork. The ethnographic materials presented herein derive from a larger project on the globalization of the casino gambling industry during the final decades of the 20th century. At various points between 1999 and 2005, I conducted fieldwork inside casinos in Nevada, California and South Africa. I sought to document what this newly globalized industry looked like from the inside, especially from the perspective of the service workers who labor on the casino floor.

For the South African component of this project, I made preliminary visits to the country in 2000 and 2001. During these trips, I established contacts with officials in both the national government and the Gauteng provincial government (Gauteng, containing the cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria, is located in the center of the country and is the most economically active of the country’s nine provinces). In individual meetings, I explained that the general aim of my research was to study working conditions for service employees in the country’s new casinos. This narrative seemed to strike a chord with these officials. The ‘empowerment’ of workers had in fact been one of the main goals articulated in the 1996 legislation legalizing casinos in post-apartheid South Africa. The key ‘gatekeepers’ for my study – namely, the heads of the national and provincial regulatory boards – thus granted me permission to study the industry so long as I could find a casino firm willing to allow me to work behind the tables.

During these preliminary visits to South Africa, I thus also contacted and interviewed top executives in several of the entertainment firms which had been granted licenses to operate casinos in the ‘new South Africa’. To them I offered basically the same narrative that I had given to state regulators: I was an American PhD student here to study the working conditions of casino employees, hopefully by working as one myself (I emphasized to them as well that I had previously trained as a casino dealer in Las Vegas). This same story evoked from these corporate managers very different reactions. While state bureaucrats viewed my research as a means through
which to monitor the behavior of employers, these employers – mainly whites with decades of experience running leisure companies in apartheid South Africa – viewed me, a white American and a veteran Nevada dealer, as someone from whom they could learn the ‘Las Vegas’ way of running a casino. Though corporate executives’ reactions to me and motives for granting me access differed from those of state regulators, the result was the same: they agreed to allow me to work behind the tables as an unpaid corporate intern.4

I returned to South Africa in late 2001 to begin a full-fledged fieldwork stint in a Johannesburg casino. Over the next two years, I would spend a total of nine months in this gambling facility. The majority of this time was spent working full-time (40 hours per week) on the casino floor as a croupier dealing the games of blackjack and roulette. Because the primary aim of this fieldwork was to describe this newly globalized leisure industry from the point of view of the service proletariat which does the majority of its ‘dirty work’ (especially the extraction of money from losing gamblers), I also spent a considerable portion of my non-working hours in the casino and lived in a house with fellow casino employees. And since no study of gambling games would be complete without experiencing the action on both sides of the table, I participated as a gambler during thousands of casino games (the favorable exchange rate between the dollar and rand at this time – along with my own voracious reading of blackjack strategy guides – facilitated my participant observation research on the ‘consumer’ side of the table).

As it was for Geertz, my role as researcher was for the most part ‘open’ to my research subjects. And as was the case for Geertz, I was initially viewed by them with suspicion. I found out several months into my research that many of my co-workers had initially assumed I was a ‘spy’ there to investigate them on behalf of the company. Unlike the experience of Clifford and Hildred Geertz in Bali, however, there was no single moment, no dramatic raid by the police that allowed me to gain the trust of my co-workers. It was only by putting in my time behind the tables, by working alongside them night after night for weeks and months on end, that I came to be perceived not as a spy but as merely a left-leaning academic engaged in a rather esoteric study of the service labor process. Even the most dedicated of corporate moles, they seemed to sense, would not stagger bleary-eyed through this many ‘graveyard shifts’. (I should mention as well that it was not always feasible to inform casino clients as to my status. Taking the time to do so would have slowed down the games and caught the attention of the security personnel manning the video cameras above the tables, thereby endangering my standing in the eyes of casino management. Keeping my status as researcher covert in this way did not seem to pose any major risks to the gamblers on the tables.)
Overview of argument

My argument is elaborated in five steps. First, I summarize Geertz’s cultural approach to the study of gambling, the break with previous utilitarian theories it stimulated, as well as the debates which have subsequently arisen around ‘Deep Play’.

Second, I describe the divergent ‘governmentalities’ of gambling found in post-colonial Indonesia and South Africa. The Balinese cockfight and the South African card game, I argue, occupy disparate institutional positions within larger post-colonial political regimes for regulating economy and society. The newly independent Indonesian government banned all forms of gambling, such that illicit wagering came to symbolize local resistance to centralized political power in Indonesia. Contrast such governmentality with that of contemporary South Africa where gambling is a central piece of national economic policy; state authorities, by not futilely prohibiting but actively promoting the activity, constitute gamblers not as political agents but economic consumers.

Third, I explain precisely how these two state systems for regulating gambling structured interpersonal gambling situations, via the intermediary of concrete organizational templates. The argument here is that while the Balinese cockfight was structured through traditional rules and interpersonal trust, the South African card game is structured through bureaucratic policies and intensive internal surveillance.

Fourth, I compare the specific subjectivities associated with playing the gambling games. I argue that participation in the two contests, especially as revealed through the manner in which players manipulate the game equipment, produces mirror-opposite subjectivities. The Balinese cock-fighter, even though the outcome of a match was out of his hands once the struggle between his and his opponent’s fowl commenced, nonetheless experienced a sense of agency; within the South African casino, in contrast, we find an experience of play characterized by a denial of any sort of control over outcomes.

Having described in detail the differences between Geertz’s ethnography and my own, I conclude by attempting to explain them. In line with the principles of the revisit method, I argue that interpersonal gambling situations in Bali and South Africa differ due to realist-external factors. The set-up of the comparison between my research and Geertz’s essentially allows us to control for the impact of subject positions, theoretical lenses, and substantive differences between cockfights and card games. The ultimate cause for difference is to be found in the larger political environments in which the gambling situations were embedded. By banning gambling, the post-colonial Indonesian state preserved the cockfight’s meaning to the Balinese villagers as both a symbol of resistance to state
authority and a ritual for displaying a traditional, masculine ‘status ethic of honor’ (Geertz, 1980: 40). The South African state, in contrast, by legalizing mass gambling, displaced pre-existing forms of gambling, channeling this ‘action’ into rationalized table games in the pits of casinos. Here we find gambling situations structured not through pre-existing interpersonal ties but through institutionally defined roles (especially that of worker and customer). In the phraseology of the economic historian Karl Polanyi (1957), we may say that while the economic aspect of gambling remained subordinate to its social meanings in post-colonial Bali, the economic aspect of gambling displaces the social in post-colonial South Africa.

Gambling as Rosetta Stone: insights and controversies

Clifford Geertz’s ‘Deep Play’, in addition to its contribution towards theories of culture generally, is notable as an initial elaboration of an ethnographic approach to the study of gambling and risk-taking (Skolnick, 1978). Quite simply, it offered a rebuttal to long-standing, individual-focused theories (of both utilitarian and Freudian bents).

Wagering, which may be defined as risk-taking for an economic stake, had long presented a puzzle to utilitarian philosophers. Jeremy Bentham, in his *The Theory of Legislation* (1882), had used gambling to illustrate several fundamental points. First, pots and purses are always more than mere money. They possess a marginal utility which will differ across individuals and situations. Twenty dollars lost on a wager will mean nothing to the affluent, while to the indigent it will cause great psychological distress. Second, large wagers are irrational insofar as they entail a diminishing marginality utility. The individual who wagers her life savings on a roll of the dice or the flip of a coin and wins is at most twice as happy as before; should she lose, she is psychologically destroyed. Widespread wagering, especially when it involved large stakes, was thus for utilitarian theory both a pathology of the body social and sheer idiocy from the point of view of the individual bettor. So why does it occur as frequently as it does? This was a major puzzle to thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Prior to Geertz the standard answer to this puzzle was the Freudian (Reith, 1999). Heavy, seemingly irrational wagering is a form of masochism driven by guilt, as illustrated by Freud’s classic study of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky’s compulsive gambling habit (1997). But Geertz would propose an alternative to the Freudian solution. He appropriated from Bentham the term ‘deep play’ and retained its primary meaning: a wager which the bettor is not guaranteed to win and a loss on which could do him or her harm. Play is deep, in other words, to the extent that it is
problematic and consequential (Goffman, 1967). In Bali, a week’s or a month’s wages were routinely wagered on a cockfight; a good fight was one in which the cocks were evenly matched and the outcome was thus up in the air.

But Geertz would add a second meaning to the term, making risk not only deep but thick. Bentham and Freud had both erred in focusing attention upon the abstract motives of the individual gambler, rather than upon the concrete interpersonal situations in which wagering took place. So whereas Bentham’s felicific calculus had translated abstract monetary values into individual utility (a subjective value of psychological happiness), Geertz argued that this was an incorrect conversion. ‘Much more is at stake’, he argued, ‘than material gain: namely, esteem, honor, dignity, respect – in a word . . . status’ (1973: 433). This was a currency of moral import, equally fungible though profoundly social, not individual or economic, in nature.

Geertz portrayed the act of gambling not as a solitary individual confronting an impersonal statistical risk, but as an occasion of social intercourse in which participants create, reify and internalize a shared web of meaning. This approach to gambling was consistent with his larger approach to the study of culture, wherein specific acts and gestures were situated within the larger flow of history and the wider world of economic and political forces (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1987). The cockfight, in this view, became a ‘text’, a vocabulary of sentiment through which the Balinese, and by implication the ethnographer, could read the Balinese experience. The great themes of Balinese society, the essential characteristics of the Balinese collective consciousness, all could be deciphered through careful observation of (and, ideally, participation in) the cockfight. Geertz’s findings in this regard can be summarized thus: the fighting fowls functioned as surrogates for their owners’ social selves, such that the cockfight ritualistically displayed and affirmed social status (Roseberry, 1982). It allowed Balinese men to accumulate, in Bourdieu’s terms (1990), a symbolic capital of masculine honor.

I take Geertz’s basic methodological insight, that close ethnographic observation of deep forms of gambling can constitute a lens through which to see larger social processes at work, and apply it to the case of casino card games in contemporary South Africa. To focus the analysis, I restrict my purview to blackjack, the most popular casino game in South Africa (and, indeed, the world). A blackjack game, like the cockfight, is a contest both consequential and problematic. Players sit themselves at a semicircular table of green felt and set down their monetary stake; they in turn receive two playing cards. The result is not predetermined (and is thus problematic), as players must decide whether or not to draw more cards in an attempt to get as close as possible to 21 points without going over. Though the games are structured to insure for the casino a ‘house advantage’ over
the long run (typically an edge of 4% to 6% percent), the outcome of any individual hand is not set in advance. Nor is it impossible for a player to end a gambling session in the black; a small fortune can be lost but also won in a night (thus making the games consequential). On the other side of the table are the croupiers, who represent the casino in the contests. They are equally active participants in the gambling contests insofar as they also receive two cards and may draw further to reach 21. Though they do not wager their own money, they do have a material stake in the games: their very livelihoods. Any mishandling of the action—let alone an accusation that one has fleeced players or the house—can result in the loss of one’s job.

Before delving into the analysis, we should consider briefly common criticisms of ‘Deep Play’ along with their relevance to our comparative ethnography. Geertz’s notes on the Balinese cockfight, like his Indonesian writings more generally, have received much scholarly attention. As mentioned above, ‘Deep Play’ is considered a classic work (Mukerji and Schudson, 1986), but it has also been the object of a variety of critiques (for summaries, see Alexander, 1987; Sewell, 2005; Swidler, 1996). On one hand are what we may call realist critiques. Frederik Barth (1993), for instance, mobilizes his own ethnographic data to challenge Geertz’s substantive finding that Bali is best characterized as a homogenous, tradition-governed society. The argument here is that by treating the cockfight as a ritual of an ‘involved’ rural village, Geertz downplayed the conflict and strife that exists throughout Balinese society (see also King and Wilder, 2003). On the other hand are constructivist critiques focusing upon the manner in which Geertz, the western anthropologist, represented the viewpoint of the Balinese villager in his writings (Clifford, 1983; Crapanzano, 1986; Schechner, 1985). The argument here is that by treating the cockfight as an exotic text to be read by the outside observer, Geertz advances a subjective, perhaps even fallacious, interpretation of its meanings for and significance to the Balinese people.

What are the implications of these critiques for a comparative ethnography of gambling in Indonesia and South Africa? Using another’s research to ground a revisit requires, of course, a minimal degree of trust in the methods and practices of the original ethnographer. The revisit method, furthermore, requires as a matter of course that we consider factors both realist and constructivist to explain why the original researcher generated the data he or she did. In this regard, and for the purpose of establishing a baseline of comparison with South Africa, it is necessary to accept three basic premises concerning ‘Deep Play’. The first is that Geertz adequately represents the institutional position of cockfighting in Bali within the larger political space of post-independence Indonesia (i.e. as a stigmatized practice and an object of attempted eradication). Insofar as I could find no
challenges to this position in either specific reviews of ‘Deep Play’ or in the secondary literature on 20th-century Indonesia, this premise seems warranted. Second, we must accept that Geertz’s description of the organization of the contest (the size of the cockfight ring, the sorts of equipment used, etc.) is accurate. Again, I found nothing in the secondary literature to contradict this assumption. The third premise is that Geertz adequately represents the subjectivity of the Balinese cockfighter. This one requires the greatest leap of faith, especially since Geertz himself did not participate first-hand in the contests by training or fighting cocks. The problem of peering into the Balinese psyche was of course not overlooked by Geertz, who admitted he did ‘not have the kind of unconscious material either to confirm or disconfirm’ conjectures concerning the inner state of the cockfighter (1973: 418). I thus restrict my own analysis (for both Bali and South Africa) to empirically observable behaviors of the game participants while the games were under way. In sum, for the purpose of comparing the Balinese cockfight to the South African casino game, I feel that trust in Geertz’s ethnographic findings – as long as it is coupled with reflexive due diligence concerning why and how he generated the field data he did – is warranted.

Divergent post-colonial governmentalities

Bali is an island within the archipelago constituting the modern nation-state of Indonesia. Because of its abundant natural resources and its strategic position along the spice trade route, the Indonesian archipelago was coveted by early European colonial powers. The government of the Netherlands, through the Dutch East India Company (VOC), claimed control of Indonesia in the 17th century after a series of victories over the British. Dutch control lasted more or less uninterrupted until the middle of the 20th century. Geertz’s research in Bali was performed in the aftermath of Indonesia’s violent struggle for independence from Dutch rule, which officially ended in 1949.

Dutch authorities had banned all forms of gambling throughout its Indonesian colonies, a prohibition that was maintained by Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno (Howe, 2005). This ban on gambling would be continued by Sukarno’s successor, Suharto (who ruled from 1967 to 1998). Prohibition persisted during Suharto’s neoliberal economic reforms to encourage foreign investment, and even following his ouster during the East Asian financial crisis in 1998 (Taylor, 2004; Vatikiotis, 1998). Why did Sukarno and Suharto (as well as subsequent Indonesian leaders) opt to promulgate the colonial ban on gambling? Geertz himself pointed to the ‘pretensions to Puritanism radical nationalism tends to bring with it’ (1973: 414). His argument was that post-colonial states, concerned above all else with
projecting on the world stage an image of modern civilization, will prohibit primitive practices such as that of wagering on the killing faculties of a fowl.7

However, not all ‘postcolonial forms of governance have mimicked their colonial predecessors’ (Pierce and Rao, 2006: 18). The fact that other post-colonial governments (South Africa would be an example, as would Macao) have felt secure enough in their international legitimacy to legalize gambling suggests that Geertz’s explanation was incomplete. As leaders of the world’s most populous Muslim nation, Sukarno and Suharto (though themselves not democratically elected) may have worried about a backlash from citizens or religious clerics (Ricklefs, 2001). Local officials in Bali (where Hindu, not Islam, is the dominant religion) have in turn rejected multiple proposals to build casinos on the island, which some explain as due to a concern that legal gambling would conflict with the traditional image the island has cultivated into a burgeoning cultural tourism industry (Hobart et al., 1996). Deciphering exactly why prohibition was continued by the post-colonial Indonesian state is beyond the scope of this article; what is important for our purposes is to establish a contrast with the larger trajectory and current logic of gambling regulation in another post-colony.

South Africa is also a former Dutch colony, and here too gambling was banned by early European settlers and administrators of the VOC during the 17th century. Colonial expansion into the region’s interior over the following centuries witnessed a series of struggles between Dutch and British settlers; both sides, however, continued to prohibit most forms of wagering among both indigenous and settler populations. This was the context – a patchwork of local prohibitory laws – into which the ultra-conservative National Party (NP) came to power in 1948. As part of their larger apartheid project of ensuring moral purity among both white South Africans and ‘traditional’ African tribal groups, NP leaders unambiguously banned gambling, by framing the activity as evil and injurious to all.

The end of apartheid represents the moment at which the regulatory trajectories of Indonesia and South Africa diverged. While Sukarno’s Indonesian Nationalist Party opted to continue the colonial proscription of wagering, the democratically elected African National Congress (ANC) would overturn prohibition. In a series of policy documents issued in the mid-1990s, ANC officials ‘re-framed’ gambling from an immoral consumer vice to a beneficent economic good. It is possible that ANC leaders were as concerned as was Sukarno with appearing legitimate on an international stage, but that the moral meaning of gambling had shifted since 1945 such that ‘modern’ nations now regulate rather than prohibit gambling. Nor did the ANC have to deal with any powerful domestic group vehemently opposed to gambling: Muslims constitute under 2 percent of the population, while Christian churches both black and white, though they did not lobby...
for or publicly support mass gambling, appeared willing to tolerate some forms of legal wagering in the new South Africa. In this context, entrepreneurial-minded party officials became fixated upon corporate casinos as a means to generate a ‘painless tax’ for state coffers (Sallaz, 2006).

These divergent regulatory trajectories in essence inserted gambling into distinct institutional spaces in the larger post-colonial societies. The island of Bali had historically constituted a focal point of resistance to centralized power within the Indonesian archipelago (Kingsbury, 2002; Schwarz, 2000). The continuation of colonial prohibition upon cockfighting only further crystallized the activity’s symbolic meaning as an act of local solidarity and resistance to the central government in Java. Though it was by necessity concealed physically, the cockfight ring, Geertz argued, continued to dominate the Balinese psyche and culture. It facilitated the enactment of a traditional world of status-honor made all the stronger by its position vis-à-vis the central state. Indeed, this is the reason ‘Deep Play’ is standard reading in qualitative methods courses: it was only by fleeing with the villagers from the machine-gun toting police that Geertz and his wife could achieve rapport with them. As he wrote, following the raid:

Everyone in the village knew we had fled like everyone else. They asked us about it again and again (I must have told the story, small detail by small detail, fifty times by the end of the day), gently, affectionately, but quite insistently teasing us: ‘Why didn’t you just stand there and tell the police who you were?’ . . . [A]bove all, everyone was extremely pleased and even more surprised that we had not simply ‘pulled out our papers’ (they knew about those too) and asserted our Distinguished Visitor status, but had instead demonstrated our solidarity with what were now our covillagers. (1973: 416)

To understand the cockfight, and by implication Bali, was to see how the fighting of cocks was situated simultaneously in the center and on the margins of post-colonial society.

In South Africa today, we find a converse positioning of gambling in the spatial and symbolic orders. Here contests of chance take not a traditional, if stigmatized, form, but rather are integrated into the post-colony as a central piece of social policy (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000). During apartheid, various forms of indigenous gambling had persisted despite official prohibition. Though there is no extensive secondary literature on these games, we do have evidence that African domestic workers in white households surreptitiously played a neighborhood-level lottery game known as fah-fee and that township men organized dice games on the streets (Bozzoli, 1991). The new central government in South Africa, however, has waged a two-front war on such games. On one hand, we find a vigorous police effort to crack down on unsanctioned forms of ‘traditional’
gambling. However, and as was the case for the Indonesian police, the eradication by force of so universally desired an activity as gambling remains a pipe-dream. To complement eradication, the state thus engages in displacement, by flooding the national market with legitimate games of chance. Corporate, Vegas-style casinos are strategically placed throughout the country to maximize industry revenues, while national lottery tickets can be purchased in any supermarket or corner store. And as was the case for cockfighting in Bali, the present meaning and future fate of these wagering contests occupy a central place in the South African collective consciousness, at least as it is expressed in public debates, media accounts and everyday conversations (see, for example, Keeton, 2001).

Structuring the situations

We now turn to our second point of comparison: the organizational contexts in which the interpersonal activity of gambling takes place. The fundamental character of the activity – that is, the wagering of money on an event of uncertain outcome – was identical across the two cases. We find divergence, however, in terms of the spatial organization of the games, the locus of authority regarding their rules, and the roles of game participants.

Bali was, for Geertz, a society both involuted and dynamic. The island had been relatively buffered from external forces (especially Islamicization and colonization), but this in no way implied that it was static and unchanging. Bali was not, and on this point Geertz (1980) was adamant, a living museum in which one could see an unadulterated, pre-colonial Indonesia. What was it, though, that drove transformation in Balinese society? The answer, Geertz argued (1959), was an ongoing series of series of status wars among the island’s various factions organized around caste, village and lineage. Change and conflict, in other words, were ongoing processes, orthogenic in nature.

Such is the framework within which we must understand how Geertz linked the organization of the cockfight to its larger function as status drama of central significance to the Balinese. The cockfight ring was laid out so as to centralize the status drama and to make it visible to the community. The ring was (ideally) located in the center of the village, with the two fighters positioned in the middle of a crowd of spectators along the periphery. Custom dictated the main participants, that is, the men whose cocks fought: they were to be of roughly similar social stature. The higher this stature, the deeper the play. The cockfight, then, was at root a contest of two men’s status honor, waged through the proxy of their cocks. The large sums wagered were not what was driving these contests, establishing
their importance, and ensuring their suspense. The wagers were epiphe-
omena of deeper social processes.

How does the setup of the cockfight compare to the organization of a
South African casino? First and foremost, the latter is laid out not to central-
ize and amplify status, but to sequester and enshroud class. The South
African casino is, in the words of its staff, actually ‘two casinos in one’.
Upon walking into the property for the first time, the visitor finds himself
in a large, dimly lit arena saturated with hundreds of slot machines and
card tables. The décor is gaudy and the clamor of voices nearly deafening.
This is the main casino floor, and it is the only casino that most visitors will
ever see. But there is a second casino, known as the ‘privé’. It is a small,
elegant gaming area consisting of approximately ten tables, isolated from
the hustle and bustle of the main casino floor. To find it, one must walk to
the rear of the casino complex and down an unmarked hallway, where one
meets a security guard and a casino ‘hostess’. It is their job to recognize all
of the 200 or so players who are granted access to the PRIVÉ. Not that many
of these players regularly enter through this hallway. They have their own
private entrance to the PRIVÉ, connecting directly via a walkway to the valet
parking area outside.

As its name implies, the PRIVÉ is designed to keep the identities of its
guests hidden from public view. I was in fact surprised to learn that casino
managers, although they dedicate a disproportionate amount of their time

Figure 1  The Balinese cockfight was a public status drama, according to Geertz.
Source: Northern Illinois University Center for Southeast Asian Studies Picture DataBase.
and energy to monitoring the action in the privé, do not know the surnames or occupations of many privé gamblers. Gamblers here are classified only according to their ‘EP’ (their estimated play, the amount of money they lose on a typical visit to the casino). Male or female, doctor or drug dealer, black or Chinese: none of the common ways for classifying others matter here. The senior casino host, when I ask her whence these privé gamblers get their money, merely laughed. ‘I sure don’t know what business they’re in. But they’re shady, I tell ya. Anyway, it doesn’t matter to me. I’m worried about their EP, what they’re worth to me, that’s all.’ In contrast with the Balinese cockfight, wherein the depth of play correlates with the social status of the participants and for which the spatial layout serves to attract and retain the gaze of community members, the South African casino obeys a spatial logic economic in nature. The latter serves not to exhibit but to obscure from sight those able and willing to gamble large sums deep inside it.

We may also compare how the rules regulating the two contests are transmitted and enforced. The cockfight was ordered by complex though uncodified rules passed down intergenerationally, through legal and cultural traditions. These rules regulated all aspects of the ritual, from the length of the fight to the standards for determining a victorious cock. Ultimate responsibility for knowing and enforcing these rules resided with the umpires, ‘well trusted, solid, and, given the complexity of the code, knowledgeable citizens’ (Geertz, 1973: 424). Their judgments were considered by all to be beyond reproach.

The rules of the casino games, unlike those of the cockfight, derive not from custom or tradition. They are entirely exogenous to the group and the situation, formulated and imposed from the outside, from the headquarters of the casino firm. In turn, the ultimate arbiters of the gambling contests – the pit bosses and other managers – are typically not known personally by game participants. A regular player may obtain first-name familiarity with a pit boss, and dealers may converse with them during their breaks (though typically not), but such relationships end at the door of the casino. The South African pit boss’s power over gamblers and dealers is best characterized as a form of bureaucratic authority, insofar as it derives from his or her occupational role rather than from personal reputations built up and cemented over time.

The roles of blackjack game participants also diverge from those of the Balinese cockfighter. Most fundamentally, participants confront one another not as status co-equals with a personal history, but as dealers and players – workers and consumers – who most of the time know nothing of the other. Dealers are for the most part black South Africans from local townships; players, an ethnic potpourri of working-class South Africans. For this latter category of gamblers, the making of money was the primary
frame through which the games were experienced. Players would often come to the casino and even gamble in dyads or triads, but the game itself was, at root, an individual affair between player and dealer. Compare this to Geertz’s account of the place of the cockfight in the Balinese collective memory:

The talk (which goes on all the time) is about fights against such-and-such a cock of So-and-So which your cock demolished, not on how much you won, a fact people, even for large bets, rarely remember for any length of time, though they will remember the day they did in Pan Loh’s finest cock for years. (1973: 428)

Talk among South African blackjack players, in contrast, inevitably references the size of a particular pot – for instance, the night you got on a hot streak and won 5000 rand – without regard to the specific dealer from whom the money was won.

Dealers too experience the blackjack game as an economic matter first and foremost. Although they have no personal stake in the outcome of individual hands (croupiers are paid a flat hourly wage, collecting neither commissions on wins from management nor tips from winning gamblers), they are understandably concerned with keeping their jobs, and so

![South African casino advertisements prioritize the pecuniary pleasures of play.](http://eth.sagepub.com)

Source: author’s collection.
manage the contests so as to stay in the good graces of management. To oversee the gambling games this way is to treat your activities less as a socially or morally meaningful form of ‘action’ than as a quotidian form of labor.

My argument thus far is that the Balinese cockfight and the South African card game diverge in terms of their basic organizational structure. The former centralizes and renders visible the status of its main participants; the latter follows an economic logic whereby those considered most ‘worthy’ are ensconced in the privé. It would be incorrect, however, to envision gambling in either Bali or South Africa as a homogenous institution. In both countries we find both a status and an economic dimension to the wagering contests; differences were not a matter of absolutes but of weighting, of which of these dimensions took primacy over the other.

Recall that the Balinese cockfight was segmented into an inner core and an outer periphery. The former was the site par excellence of status displays, for here only even money could be wagered on the cocks, even if it was obvious that the two fowls were mismatched. In the periphery, however, economic calculation was perfectly acceptable, and here Geertz found side bettors who would establish odds on the outcomes of particular match-ups. Yet there was never any doubt that the spatially center betting was also the social ‘center of gravity’ (and because the logic of the cockfight entailed matching two men of similar statuses, bets on the periphery tended to be pulled towards even money as well).

The South African casino, structured as it is around an economic logic, tends to suppress pre-existing status relationships among game participants. On the tables, structural role trumps personal biography, and the economic subordinates the social. This can be seen clearly in the enactment on the casino floor of ethnicity – especially the pernicious division between white and black that had formed the basis for the apartheid order. In the South African casino, a white gambler may scowl at a black dealer, but a white dealer, even an American one (as the author’s experience attests), would be insulted or even threatened by a player of color should he or she be in a particularly foul mood following a large loss:

It is three in the morning during a graveyard shift in late October, as a group of three men sit down at my table. As I usually do, I offer them a polite grin along with the standard South African greeting, ‘Howzit?’

The two men sitting on the outside of the table reply with grunts, but the man sitting in the center merely glares in my direction. I can smell alcohol on their breath and can sense their anger. (Toward me? Toward the casino? Toward the world? It’s impossible to know.) By now though I know how to read such cues, and slide into that mode of self-presentation known among casino workers as ‘dummying up and dealing’.
I say nothing as I pull cards out of the shuffling machine and lay them on the table, and I deliberately avoid eye contact. But the middle player refuses to grant me my implicit request for disengagement. After losing a bet, he announces to his comrades, ‘This dealer wants to take our money. I can tell because he makes this sound.’ (Apparently I had been emitting unawares some sort of whistling or breathing noise as I dealt.) He is betting hard and heavy, and I am rather ‘hot’ in that I repeatedly draw for myself winning hands of 20s and 21s.

‘Do you get anything but pictures [i.e. 10-valued face cards]?’ he asks me directly. My only defense at this point is to speed up my game, to rely on the statistical certainty of the house edge coupled with the finiteness of the human pocketbook to shorten this guy’s tenure on the table. The tactic works, as he soon loses several large bets and appears to be out of cash with which to wager.

‘That’s it! My paycheck gone, down the drain. Because of you, you fucker.’ He departs, but not before informing me that he would ‘be waiting for [me]’ in the parking lot after my shift. Though his threat turned out to be idle, I nevertheless arranged a ride home that night with two former rugby players now employed as security officers at the casino.

**Divergent subjectivities**

As a third and final point of comparison, I consider the divergent subjectivities of game participants in Bali versus South Africa. Because of the inherent difficulties involved in capturing and inscribing others’ inner states (a phenomenological dilemma exacerbated when drawing upon comparative ethnographic material), I draw inferences based mainly upon observable relationships between game participants and the equipment used to determine outcomes.

In the Balinese case this equipment consisted of the cocks themselves, but also the razor sharp blades affixed to their feet. The bond between player and equipment Geertz captured through a crude but entirely accurate double entendre: the men were their cocks. Through obsessive preening and preening, hours of labor dedicated to feeding and training his animal, the Balinese man came to view his cock as an extension of his social self. Bird as man both magnified and miniaturized, so to speak. When the cock was inevitably torn to shreds in the ring, the pain the man experienced derived not merely from the mourning of a dead bird, but from a successful attack upon the self and the social group (organized typically around kin or clan) of which he was a part. ‘The cocks may be surrogates for their owners’ personalities, animal mirrors of psychic form, but the cockfight is ... a simulation of the social matrix’ (Geertz, 1973: 436).
It is thus not surprising that the Balinese cockfighter, while the clash of fowls was in progress, experienced an acute sense of agency, of being able to control the outcome. Geertz, for example, described the exaggerated gyrations of the two cock-owners during the fight, as if they sought to control their birds through some invisible remote control. And if there was a break in the action, a man would grab his injured bird and put its head in his mouth, in a futile attempt to literally breathe life back into it. Such a sense of control was of course illusory, for once the cocks were placed on the ground and began flailing away, their fates were out of the hands of men. The point is that there was a gulf between, on the one hand, agency as it was publicly expressed (and, one may assume, privately experienced) and, on the other, real control over the match once it had commenced. The Balinese cockfighter, in the midst of this status bloodbath, actively carved out agency.

How does this compare to the relationship between game participants and game equipment in the South African casino? Here we find not status coequals squaring off through their cocks, but consumers and workers facing each other via the intermediary of playing cards, plastic casino chips, and shuffling machines. The irony is that in blackjack, game participants on both sides of the table do in fact have the ability to affect outcomes once the game has commenced, but here agency is actively avoided by all parties. This is a contest not of agency but of effacement.

I will focus my discussion in this section on the casino dealers. They exhibit no identification with the game equipment nor do they attempt to portray themselves as agentic – all in contrast to the cockfighter. Dealers’ estrangement from the tools of their trade is revealed by their occupational lingo and routine work practices. Casino dealing entails the practical mastery of a series of physical movements – referred to in industry parlance as dealing ‘procedure’ – considered by South African croupiers to be unnatural and uncomfortable. For instance, procedure dictates that a croupier stand erect with his or her body slightly turned to one side and pressed hard against the table. Veteran dealers inform tyros to the trade that they will eventually form permanent ‘scars’ on their hips from being pressed against the table so. The task of handling chips and cards in turn entails learning a series of highly detailed, tightly regulated moves. These involve contorting one’s hands and fingers into extreme positions for extended periods of time. Dealing neophytes are informed that they are correctly performing procedure only if they can ‘feel the pain’ in their hands, arms and shoulders. Many trades of course require mastering unnatural physical movements, a mastery which may serve as a source of solidarity with one’s peers and distinction vis-à-vis the lay public (see, for example, the case of boxers presented in Wacquant, 2004). But the skills required to deal, though they require months to learn, years to perfect, and a considerable degree of
dexterity, do not serve as a source of pride. In fact, the South African casino, despite its plush carpets, air conditioning and elegant dress code for employees, is regularly referred to by dealers simply as ‘the factory’. Dealing in the South African casino, in short, is experienced less as a skilled craft or service profession than as estranged manual labor.

Once they make it onto the tables, new dealers discover they have no interest in affecting the outcome of the games. Should management observe them assisting players in some way, they could be accused of cheating and fired. Should players perceive them as influencing game outcomes in the house’s favor, dealers could find themselves on the receiving end of a vituperative verbal tirade. A croupier thus at all times seeks to deflect interactional attributions of agency. We see this clearly when we consider the croupier’s relationship to the main tool of her trade: the shuffling machine, that breadbox-sized contraption that sits on the blackjack table and from which croupiers retrieve and pass out the playing cards. While labor process scholars typically argue that workers will resist technologies that deskill their labor (Braverman, 1974), South African casino workers found the shufflers useful insofar as they permitted the symbolic erasure of the dealer’s agency.

Gareth, a 25-year-old Afrikaans dealer, explains why and how this occurs:

Figure 3  A South African croupier at work.
Source: Author’s collection.
You see, when [the players] lose it is your fault. Give me a [queen or king] they say. You give them a 6 and they get pissed. Look, I say. Here's the [shuffling] machine. Here's the card. Here's my hand. I simply bring the card out of the machine and to you. What can I do man?

This blaming of the shuffling machines for players’ losses was an excellent tactic, especially when players colluded in attributing responsibility to them. I will share here an example from my fieldnotes. In late October 2002 I was working as one of several inspectors in pit number 2, the only non-smoking pit in the casino (and referred to by workers as the ‘maternity ward’, as it is the pit to which the handful of pregnant dealers on staff at any given time are assigned). An inspector is an intermediary position between dealer and pit boss to which experienced dealers will be appointed to work about once a week. As an inspector, it is your job to walk the interior of the pit when the pit boss is otherwise occupied, to keep an eye on the tables to insure that nothing untoward is underway, and to provide dealers with assistance should they need it. The main occupational hazard faced by a dealer on a typical night like this would be that of an angry player who responds to a large loss by threatening (or, on a rare occasion, physically assaulting) a dealer. Dealers and inspectors understand that at these moments, irate gamblers are looking around for someone or something in their immediate field of vision to which they can attribute responsibility, and thus blame, for their losses. Tonight tensions in the casino are high, as a story has spread that earlier in the evening a losing gambler had slapped in the face a well-liked dealer. At this moment, I hear raised voices on table 11, and quickly walk over to it. Mr Fan, an elderly Chinese gentleman and casino regular, is playing blackjack. He is known among the staff as a good-natured fellow, but you never know. Mr Fan has lost several hands of blackjack in a row, the inspector on this side of the pit tells me, and now stands at the table, shaking his index finger at the shuffler. ‘Come on you, give a blackjack!’ he yells. The dealer, Byron, senses the opportunity before him and plays along. ‘Yeah yeah, you tell it!’ Mr Fan now grabs a small placard on the table and places it in between him and the shuffler. Scrunching down in his chair, he exclaims, ‘Maybe now it can’t see me!’

The Balinese cockfighter experiences a connection to the past; he is an agentic gambler in control of his game equipment – his cock. Through winning he achieves a sense of distinction, an affirmation of his position as a man of honor atop the status hierarchy of Balinese society. The South African card dealer denies his or her own agency. The subjective experience of participating in the gambling contest is that of a wage worker whose ascriptive identity is irrelevant to the proceedings. Agency in the South African casino was not carved out but avoided like the plague. Rather than a status bloodbath, here is subjugation to the economic grind.
Discussion and implications

Clifford Geertz’s ‘Deep Play’ sits uneasily in the ethnographic canon. Though it remains a benchmark for the doing of thickly described, structurally situated fieldwork, scholars have raised concerns regarding both the formal method of cultural analysis deployed by Geertz and his substantive findings regarding the role of the cockfight in Balinese society. Though these critiques have merit, I have argued that we needn’t throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water. By adapting the precepts of the ethnographic revisit method to a comparative ethnography generally, we can account for both constructivist and realist dimensions of Geertz’s initial account.

In this vein, this article has described three ways in which the Balinese cockfight (circa 1958) as described by Clifford Geertz in ‘Deep Play’ differs from the casino card game in contemporary South Africa. The essence of the two contests is the same: the act of wagering on events of uncertain outcome. Yet the cockfight was governed by traditional forms of authority (especially the umpire, a trusted community figure) and spatially configured so as to publicly amplify the status of the main participants (the men whose cocks fought). The casino, in contrast, is a bureaucratic organization wherein one’s authority is determined by one’s occupationally defined role. Its spatial layout, furthermore, exemplifies a formal logic the substantive goal of which is to mask the personal identities of South Africa’s new economic elite. The contrast between the subjectivity of the cockfighter and that of the card dealer, in turn (and as conveyed through their observable manipulation of the game equipment), could not be more stark. The former identifies personally with his fowl, and seeks to convey a sense of control over it to the audience. The latter seeks above all else to avoid running afoul of other game participants, and so avoids displays of agentic control over the cards and chips.

Having elaborated upon these divergent ethnographic findings as an explanandum, I conclude by attempting to establish a convincing explanans. I do so by revisiting Burawoy’s revisit method, applying to our cases its four hypotheses for making sense of divergent field data. A constructivist internal explanation would focus upon the different positions occupied by Geertz and me during our stints in the field. Because I, in this view, actively took part in the games as a dealer and player (and occasionally with my status as researcher unknown), I may have achieved a more thorough rapport with my subjects than did Geertz, who always observed the fights from afar, never directly handling the birds or putting his status on the line. On the other hand, perhaps I had overgeneralized my own experiences on the tables. No matter how well I’d ingratiated myself with my co-workers, how could I, an outsider to South African society, have experienced the gambling contests in a manner analogous to native South
Africans? To deal with such issues, this article has grounded its interpretation of the cockfight and the card game, to the greatest degree possible, in the behaviors and actions of the game participants themselves. For instance, although I found blaming the shuffling machines for players’ losses to be an effective tactic for deferring attributions of agency on the tables, I refrained from labeling this a general feature of the experience of card dealing until I witnessed other croupiers use the machines in this way as well (as in the Mr Fan example described above).

A realist internal explanation would in turn consist of a substantive reading of the two games – that is, that there is something inherent to card games that brings to the fore their economic dimension, and to cockfights such that they are predetermined to serve as sorters of status rank. But we must guard against a substantive explanation, as tempting as it may be. Cockfighting and card games such as blackjack are of course very different sorts of contests, one involving live animals, the other mechanical shuffling machines. But there exist numerous counter-examples to this realist internal hypothesis. In the United States, for instance, card games such as poker are often played among friends not for serious stakes but for pennies or matchsticks, thereby serving as a ritual for establishing and affirming solidarity (Rosecrance, 1986; Tutt, 1989; Zurcher, 2006). Cockfighting, meanwhile, can itself become a mini-industry, operated and mediated not by respected men in a village but by organized crime cartels and street gangs (McKinley Jr, 2005). The South African card game differs from the Balinese cockfight, in short, not because of the predominant role played by birds versus shufflers.

A constructivist external explanation for divergent ethnographic findings would in turn ask not whether Geertz and I had different kinds or degrees of ethnographic access, but whether we adopted different theoretical ‘lenses’. It is true that Geertz and I entered the field at different points in our careers, and with different scholastic habitus. Geertz had trained as a social anthropologist, and would come over the course of his career to advocate an interpretive approach to ethnography that treated a field site as a ‘text’ to be read. I in contrast had trained in the tradition of the extended case method, a realist approach to ethnography that seeks to establish causal relationships among individuals, groups and institutions. Because of his interpretive approach, Geertz may have been prone to overestimate the influence of status displays, while I may have been preprogrammed to document the role played by class. To state this another way, had Geertz done research in the post-apartheid South African casino, would he have interpreted the action and interactions on the tables as a status performance? And had I performed fieldwork in Bali, would I have analyzed the cockfight as at root a struggle to win economic stakes? Close readings of the two sets of fieldwork data would lead us, however, to reject...
this constructivist-external hypothesis. Geertz did not reject out of hand economic factors; he in fact dedicates a considerable chunk of his essay to explicating the economic odds-making which occurred along the periphery of the cockfight ring, before concluding that the status battles at the center of the ring were what was ‘driving’ the action. Similarly, I considered the role played by status and ethnicity in the casino, before concluding that wagering here was embedded within an economic frame – the size of the pots and purses, and not the relative status of the participants, drove the action on the tables.

I endorse, in other words, a realist external explanation that locates ethnographic divergence in the different positions of embeddedness within the larger social matrix. The starting point for such an analysis is the situating of gambling as an institution within the larger post-colonial orders. Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno, carried forward the colonial regime’s proscription upon gambling, though with largely ineffectual enforcement. As a result, the cockfight remained central to village life as a means of expressing both traditional forms of masculine status honor and local resistance to centralized state authority. Rather than futilely suppressing demand for traditional forms of gambling, the post-colonial government in South Africa established an entirely new supply of gambling goods, most notably casinos which now saturate the country. This has for the most part eliminated indigenous forms of gambling, while casinos exist not in the shadows, but in the center of the South African economic and social order.

The organization of the casino games and the subjectivities associated with participating in them diverge accordingly. In post-apartheid South Africa, pre-existing social roles are subordinated to the economic element of game play – the pursuit of wins and of wages. We can see this as an expression of a larger transition from a society organized around ascriptive identities – the racial caste system that was apartheid – to a class society in which race is correlated with but no longer determinative of social position. To subsist as a low-wage service worker in contemporary South Africa, so important given the extreme dearth of employment options, is to suppress one’s own agency. The web of meanings constitutive of localized gambling contests in South Africa, in sum, reveal much about larger post-colonial trajectories of social and economic regulation, as they did in the newly independent Indonesia.

Acknowledgements

For their feedback on and assistance with this article through its various iterations, the author wishes to thank Ari Adut, Michael Burawoy, David Grazian, Andrew Perrin, Brian Streensland, and Loïc Wacquant.
Notes

1 Ironically, though ‘Deep Play’ commences with an account of how Clifford and Hildred Geertz transitioned abruptly from invisible outsiders to accepted visitors in a Balinese village, Hildred, herself an accomplished anthropologist, gradually disappears from the text over the course of the essay.

2 For other ethnographic approaches to gambling, see Drake and Cayton (1945), Light (1977) and Polsky (1967).

3 Indeed, this is the reason why Pierre Bourdieu undertook an ethnography of his home village of Béarn, France, concurrently with his fieldwork in Algeria: to make explicit and thus control his implicit understanding of ‘peasant life’ (see the special December 2002 issue of Ethnography).

4 Despite this formal permission, the actual process of obtaining a temporary work permit would take many months and would entail navigating a quagmire of bureaucratic personnel and procedures.

5 Treating the practical actions of one’s research subjects as signs to be read like a text is a paradigmatic example of what Bourdieu labels the ‘scholastic fallacy’ (1990).

6 In my other published work on the casino industry, I adopt a symbolic interactionist approach to the creation and experience of meaning on the tables. For the sake of establishing a baseline of comparison with Geertz’s writings, however, my approach is more behaviorist. Laying emphasis upon observable actions and gestures has a long pedigree in sociological ethnography, dating back to William Foote Whyte’s classic Street Corner Society (1955).

7 Nor is controversy surrounding the organized fighting of animals peculiar to post-colonial societies. In the United States, for instance, the fighting of cocks remains a contentious social and political issue. New Mexico banned the activity in 2007, leaving Louisiana as the only state in which it is legal. The fighting of dogs of course generates even greater controversy, as attests the recent arrest of Michael Vick on charges of animal cruelty and unlawful gambling.

8 I am grateful to Ari Adut for pressing me on this point.

9 I did not witness first-hand this physical attack on a dealer. Several other dealers and a pit boss did testify to me as to the veracity of the rumor that spread on this particular night about a dealer being slapped. Physical threats were more common than assaults. I heard approximately 20 of them during my stint at SA Casino, including three directed towards me.
References


Schechner, R. (1985) *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia:
University of Pennsylvania Press.

**JEFFREY J. SALLAZ** is an Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department at the University of Arizona. He received his PhD in sociology from the University of California-Berkeley in 2005. In addition to his South African research, he has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Las Vegas casinos, on tribal reservations in California, inside a Midwestern auto factory, and among undocumented day laborers along the US–Mexico border. His research on the global gambling industry has appeared in a variety of scholarly journals, and he is the author of a forthcoming book from the University of California Press. **Address**: Department of Sociology, University of Arizona, PO Box 210027, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA. [email: jsallaz@email.arizona.edu]