‘The Psychodynamics of Casino Culture and Politics’

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Casino culture and its politics: A psycho-cultural approach

This article brings together object relations psychoanalysis, cultural and political studies to examine the psychodynamics of casino culture and its politics. Over the past twenty years, the term, ‘casino culture’, has been used as a metaphor to convey the widespread experience of uncertainty and risk that permeates different aspects of social and cultural life in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries. Some of this work draws on Beck’s (1992) well-known thesis on ‘risk society’ (Reiner, Livingstone and Allen, 2001) whilst others (Giroux, 2010) apply Susan Strange’s (1997) analysis of ‘casino capitalism’ to analyse the instabilities of late capitalism and its influence on US culture and society.

The negative aspects of casino culture have been discussed widely by cultural (Goodman, 2009) and scholars (Giroux, 2014; Reiner, 2012), who say that against a socio-political backdrop of uncertainty and risk, the values and practices of the casino as well as the emotional highs and lows associated with gambling, have become a way of life. As a so-called leisure activity, most gambling now takes place online, thereby reflecting a shift in the nature of our relationship to it, and also the ludic qualities associated with it. Whereas the practice of gambling once took place in gambling houses such as a casino, the risk of the casino has now broadened to occupy a *cultural* and *mental space* rather than a *place*, as the ethos of the casino is now widely embedded in different aspects of everyday life - from

betting on the lottery - to voting for a populist politician who may or may not deliver on his or promise to make your country 'great again'.[1]

This article links the notion of casino culture as a psychosocial and cultural formation to the emergence of what I call 'casino politics' where the dynamics of risk, illusion and speculation are widespread. The risky and emotive style of populist politics underpinning the UK Referendum decision to leave the European Union (Brexit) and the election of Donald Trump in the US provide good examples of casino politics in action. Whereas Brexit is viewed by some economic and cultural commentators as a 'reckless gamble' (Funk Kirkegaarde, 2016), the election victory of Donald Trump as the US President was widely described in terms of a risky and 'uneasy gamble' (The Listener, 2016). The rise of populist political figures such as Trump in the US and the pro-Brexit politician Nigel Farage arguably reflect a cultural identification with a character type broadly analogous to the figure of the gambler who is drawn to the highs and lows associated with the processes of casino culture as a manic psycho-cultural formation.

The increasingly emotive style and content of Western political culture is linked to a number of factors that include the mediatisation of politics, the culture of celebrity and the precarity of neoliberalism as a political, economic and socio-cultural formation (Richards, 2007; ******2015). In contrast to previous work on casino culture, which ignores the psychic drivers of it as a development, this article develops a new psycho-political approach that deploys object relations psychoanalysis, focusing in particular on the work of Winnicott (1971) and others (Ogden, 1992; Bollas,1997; Green, 2005) who foreground the concepts of play, illusion transformation in their work. Such an approach is useful because of its focus on the interweaving of meaning and experience across the different levels of self, culture, and society where the unconscious affective investments that shape the ideology of casino culture

[1]Which, of course, was the campaigning slogan of President Donald Trump.

and its politics are articulated. The article applies that conceptual framework to a discussion of the relationship between casino culture and political culture by focusing on fictional and non-fictional examples of casino politics where the emotions and fantasies associated with gambling also resonate.

The concept of 'political culture' denotes 'political experience, imagination, values and dispositions,' that shape the 'political system…political processes and political behaviour' (Corner and Pels, 2003, p. 3). Such processes take place within the mediatised field of political culture [2] and connect to what Winnicott (1971) calls the 'cultural field' of the psyche and imagination, where the experience of illusion and transitional phenomena take place. Winnicott provides a model of subjectivity in which social, cultural and psychological worlds intersect to produce *potential* or *transitional* space, where meanings are made and re-made and where identity and a sense of selfhood are also shaped in ways that signify the potential for health or pathology (Winnicott, 1971).

My discussion of the psycho-cultural matrix of casino politics takes account of these different inter-connecting layers of meaning in the shaping of political culture where, for example, the cultural ethos of 'being a winner' also gets expressed through narcissistic modes of mirroring and identification and the unconscious processes of illusion and pathological play within the political field. Applying the ideas of Winnicott and those inspired by his work, allow us to see the complex unconscious investments that are made when identifying with the real and imaginary objects of a political culture that is underpinned by the values of the casino.

The article begins by mapping the different social, cultural, historical and political coordinates that shape casino culture and it then turns to psychoanalytic understandings of gambling. I provide two case studies of casino politics in which the television drama *House*

[2] The mediatised field of political culture includes for example, the Press, digital news media, social media, television and film.

of Cards (2013-18), and the US President, Donald Trump, are discussed before providing concluding remarks.

Casino capitalism and the culture of risk

The use of the 'Casino' metaphor is apt when linked to the political economy of neoliberalism and its pathologies. Economists and cultural studies scholars have used the concept of 'casino capitalism' and its imagery to discuss the financial mismanagement of banks and their investors, together with the addictive, short-term financial habits of late capitalism and the pernicious costs of that financial system for the structures of democracy and political accountability (Giroux, 2014; Reiner, 2012; Sin, 2012). The Economist, Susan Strange (1997) first coined the term 'Casino Capitalism' in the early 1980s when neoliberalism and late global capitalism were in ascendancy and becoming a way of life. Strange's analysis anticipated the banking crisis of 2008 and her heady description of financiers as 'croupiers' playing the market is suggestive when applied to the political economy of casino culture today (p.1). In his critique of late consumer capitalism and its corroding influence upon US society and its political institutions, Giroux (2014) reworks aspects of Strange's thesis of casino capitalism for the contemporary age, and he provides a pessimistic picture of neoliberalism and its market-driven values as an ideological force that now permeates all aspects of culture and society. Mark Fisher (2009) referred to this cultural moment of late capitalism as 'Capitalist Realism', where the taken for granted, common sense attitudes of commodity fetishism are internalized, so that 'the governed subject looks to find solutions in products not political processes' (p.61). Fisher argues that within this capitalist realist regime, neo-conservatism and neoliberalism become imbricated within a shared distrust of community dependence and also the rejection of government intervention

as a solution for vulnerability and loss. Here, one could say that the illusory promise of 'winning' becomes the contemporary *raison d'être* providing a key motivation to keep on going in a sea of uncertainty and risk.

In a globalized culture, where an experience of precarity often dominates (Standing, 2014), the ontology of risk and chance becomes embedded as a way of life. The contemporary preoccupation with risk has been well documented (Beck, 1992) and today one could say that we weigh up risks in much the same way as we might weigh up the odds in a casino or in a game of poker (Duncan, 2015, p. 3). The rediscovered World War 2 stoical caption of 'Keep Calm and Carry On' reflects both a postmodern, knowing and a 'post-ironic' response to the 'pain' and risks of contemporary austerity culture (Gilbert, 2011), whilst at the same time constitutes a disavowal of it, becoming emblematic of the kind of capitalist realist aesthetics discussed by Fisher. Sociologists of risk society have also noted the shift from a 'riskophobic' culture to a 'riskophiliac' one (Reiner, Livingstone and Allen, 2001, p.178). Reiner, Livingstone and Allen say that the idea of '"risk society" connotes not only a shift in the nature of risk', but also 'a change in the ways that we deal with risk' (p. 177). In a casino culture, risk is individualised and perceived as 'the product of chance or individual action' (Ibid.).

The ontological pleasures of pushing the boundaries of risk have been described as 'edging', a term that refers to 'the desire to experience the uncertainties of the edge' (Lyng, 2005, p. 3). The emancipatory connotations of edgework chime in with the neoliberal myth of the bold business speculator and entrepreneur who is not afraid to gamble his or her house on a new idea. The practice and values of edging is traced back counter cultural hedonism of the 1960s and 70s that equated risk taking with freedom and a refusal to kowtow to society's norms and accepted modes of behavior. The image of the gambler and risk-taker was common in 1970's popular culture, as in the cult book, *The Dice Man* (Rhinehart, 1971),

which articulates that desire to live 'on the edge'. The book tells the story of a psychiatrist who is bored and unfulfilled and so decides to start making decisions about what to do next, based on a roll of the dice. The ethos of the book has links to the self-help movement, and Susan Jeffers' popular mantra of 'feel the fear and do it anyway!' provides a version of edgework as promoted in popular psychology (Jeffers, 1987). This idea is one that was made highly visual in the early twenty-first century as the fashion for 'extreme sports' took hold and social media permit the sharing of videos depicting very risky pursuits on mountain tops, roof tops, bungee ropes and so on. There is a trend largely amongst men (although not exclusively) for the literal risk of life in pursuit of a 'high' – a feeling that is linked to the notion of having conquered the impossible challenges that also resonates with the ethos both of cultural constructions of masculinity and those of casino culture.[3]

Today, the language of the casino and the arbitrariness of being either an economic 'winner' or 'loser' are recurrent themes in popular culture as in the use of the lottery or through the ubiquity of celebrity culture, where social mobility becomes linked to the luck of 'making it' on talent shows such as *The X Factor* (2004-), or the television franchise, *America's Got Talent* (2006-), where the promise of instant fame and wealth allows for the circulation of fantasies underpinned by illusion and omnipotent magical thinking about winning the jackpot. The duration of 'fame' attained by talent show winners is usually short lived and this taps into the addictive dimensions of the gambling culture that I have begun to describe, feeding into a cycle of depression that echoes the position outlined by Fisher in his account of 'capitalist realism'. Often, such talent shows foreground fantasies of entrepreneurship where, perhaps, you can become a millionaire overnight through patenting

[3] A popular website for such activity is *Stoked*: http://stoked.com/user/homepage/. There are numerous books on the subject of extreme sports that set out to appeal to boys and men and celebrate link the pleasures of risk with stereotypical notions of sporting masculinity (see MacAskill, 2016).

one-off inventions as celebrated on UK television show, *Dragons' Den* (2005-) or its US spin off series, *Shark Tank* (2009-).

As is well known, Donald Trump, made his name as a kind of celebrity entrepreneur on the US version of the reality show, *The Apprentice* (2008-15), where the values of risk-taking were celebrated and continued to be so when in 2017 the show was hosted by celebrity politician and businessman Arnie Schwarzenegger, thereby cementing further the links between celebrity politics and casino culture in the minds of the public. Trump has become an emblem of the kind of risky play and ambition that I have described, and the alignment of those values with the Republican Party enables a shift in terms of risk-taking becoming mainstream and finding its way into hegemonic forms of ideology. One could say that this development also aligns perceptions of risk with a very *un-risky* and tired mode of masculinity that shores up its risk value through its appeal to those groups who seek to empower themselves by challenging feminists and the so-called 'puritans' of the liberal establishment by breaking the rules of what they see as 'political correctness'.[4]

Despite Trump's claim to 'break the mould' of establishment politics (McKelvey, 2016), his macho persona nevertheless seems to celebrate almost in parodic form, a mode of retro patriarchal masculinity that is often present in high-octane dramas about banking and Wall Street. For instance, an ambivalent fascination with the power of bankers as bad but exciting symbols of masculine hedonism is a perennial theme of Hollywood cinema and this can be found in films such as *Wall Street*: *Money Never Sleeps* (2010), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2014) or *The Big Short* (2015), where in different ways the themes of masculinity, gambling, excess and addiction are foregrounded and often celebrated. By contrast, women in these films are rarely given lines to speak and are uncritically reproduced as sexualized

[4] There are numerous examples where a grievance about so-called 'political correctness' can be found – see Fueridi, 2006, or in popular discourse, there is the far-right, anti Semitic news website, *Breitbart News*.

signifiers of excess and the unprincipled greed that underpinned the sharp practices of the market and the illusions of phallic plenitude that underpinned it. The unreliability of luck as a gendered construction – often termed 'Lady luck' – is one that connotes a form of splitting associated with fantasies of fickle femininity; in the famous words of the song from the musical *Guys and Dolls*, luck 'was never a lady to begin with – Luck be a lady tonight!' (Loesser, 1950). As I discuss below, the psychoanalytic interpretation of luck as a gendered fantasy construction is linked to its narrative of the gambler who seeks endless supplies from an unreliable mother (Bollas, 1987).

Gendered perceptions of luck and chance are also bound up with a particular founding mythology of the US and its past. The history of North America and the perceptions of it as a land of opportunity and democracy are closely bound up with fantasies of masculinity and the manliness of the frontiersman (Fabian, 1999). Connected to that myth are also the values, emotions and practice of gambling as a game of 'chance'. As Alexis de Tocqueville (1863/2003) argued in his *Democracy in America*:

> Those living in the instability of a democracy have the constant image of chance before them and in the end, they came to like all those projects in which chance plays a part… not only because of the promise of profit but because they like the emotions evoked (p. 643)

For de Tocqueville, gambling went hand in hand with a belief in luck and the 'secularisation of chance' (Reith, 1999, p.14) that separated the US from the old, more closed, rigidly stratified society of its European cousins. Whereas chance had once been associated with religious notions of 'the sacred', it took on epistemological connotations as being linked to notions of probability and knowledge. And yet, there remained some of the

mystical unknowable associations that contributed to superstitious and highly charged emotions associated with notions of luck and chance, particularly when applied to the sphere of gambling. The emotionality of gambling and its history in the US also reflects the duality inherent within the capitalist desire for speculation between a mode of self-control associated with the puritan protestant work ethic versus the excitement, danger and optimism associated say, with the recklessness at the gaming tables, or in the behaviour of stock market financiers described by Susan Strange. As historians of gambling point out, there was always a tension in the US gambling sensibility between so-called 'virtuous' socially sanctioned business speculation on the one hand, and the reprobate 'vicious' gamblers on the other (Fabian, 1999, p. 5). From an historical perspective, the distinction between the 'vice' of gambling and the 'virtue' of capitalism was always blurred as the key traits and behaviour of the gambler (for example, competitiveness, skill and cunning) were also present in the successful 'edgework' of the businessman and capitalist entrepreneur. As Fabian (1999, p. 5) argues:

> Southern planters who bet with money made for them by their slaves could hardly condemn a gambler's search for easy gain, and northern capitalists who celebrated the gain that came of great risks could hardly condemn a gambler's search for easy gain.

Today, the business of gambling and the practice of speculation on the financial markets share much in common, thereby blurring the boundaries even further between what is considered legitimate and non-legitimate business. This ambiguity also mirrors the loss of faith in the grand narrative of the US as a land of chance and opportunity and Trump's promise to 'make America great again' needs to be seen in this context. One aspect of Trump's public persona that overtly taps into the wider cultural values of the casino and its practices is most notably his identity as a successful risk-taking entrepreneur. Here, the

traditional boundaries between virtuous and non-virtuous speculation collapse, as the discourses of gambling, business and politics converge, and his popularity amongst certain sections of the population indicate the purchase of this formation upon the public imagination.

Much has been written about the ways in which poker is the national game of the US and that the history of the game mirrors that of the American Dream (Fabian, 1999; McManus, 2010). One could say that today, the practice and values of gambling that underpin casino culture, permeate a great deal of the world. Gambling is now a huge global business and in the UK for example, the growth of Internet gambling combined with the hugely popular national lottery has meant that gambling has become normalized as a way of life (Donoughue, 2011). The normalization of gambling across continents provides an example of US soft power in that the cultural proliferation of casino capitalism and its ethos that underpins the American Dream, reaches beyond the country itself (Duncan, 2015).

And yet, at the same time, the liberalization of gambling has gone hand in hand with wider cultural shifts in late modernity. With its 'randomised' elements of chance, gambling exemplifies the illusory and seemingly random, transitory nature of late modern experience (Duncan, 2015, p. 53). This description also holds true when applied to the psychodynamics of late modern, promotional politics, where the fantasies of casino culture also play themselves out. The notion of gambling as a metaphor for the illusory nature of contemporary political culture as a psychosocial field of play is suggestive when viewed through a psychoanalytic lens. To explore this idea further, I now turn to psychoanalytic theories of gambling and play.

Psychoanalytical understandings of gambling

In classical psychoanalysis, the literature on gambling has tended to focus on men and also on its addictive and destructive aspects. Freud (1928) linked gambling to Oedipal guilt and said that gambling provides the means of alleviating parricidal impulses. Freud said that gambling is a form of self-punishment, which the subject inflicts upon himself in order to deal with his guilt about wanting to kill his father. Others have stressed its pre-oedipal, infantile roots and Bergler (1943) argued that the gambler was 'a misunderstood neurotic', emphasising the regression to an infantile 'fiction of omnipotence' and a masochistic wish to be punished. Greenson (1947) explored the oral nature of gambling, with its culture of drinking, eating and smoking. He said that the gambler uses his habit as way to ward off depression and feelings of loss and he says that ultimately, it is a 'narcissistic hunger' and a need to fend off feelings of emptiness that motivates the gambler (pp. 61-67).

From an object relations perspective, the experience of gambling can be approached through the concept of play and its relationship to the processes of illusion and disillusion. Whilst Winnicott (1942) argued that play can be used as a means of dealing with anxiety, he focused mainly on healthy forms of play as being key to healthy development (Abrams, 2007, loc. 5353). However, Andre Green's (2005) reading of play includes a greater emphasis on its pathological aspects. Like Greenson, he argues that the experience of play can be underpinned by a desire for omnipotence, mastery and the denial of reality: 'I think the activity of play can sometimes become distorted, corrupted and perverted in society as well as in individuals' (Green, 2005, p. 11). Green challenges the idea that play is always a benign activity when he cites the game of 'Russian Roulette' as an example of this. He says that play can be cruel and repetitive and like the compulsive gambler discussed by Greenson, it may be used as a way to ward off anxiety and loss. Green's reading of the pathology of

play returns us to Freud's 1920 discussion of little Ernst and the *Fort-da* game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where he examines the pleasures of mastery and possession in relation to play. In that paper, Freud describes how his grandson, Ernst, used a cotton reel, which he repeatedly threw out of his cot as a means of managing his mother's absence. This description of play is suggestive when applied to the image of the gambler at the blackjack table, or the city trader who attempts to master the odds by being the *player*, rather than the one who is *played with* by the forces of the global capitalist market. Instead of using objects in a creative and transformative way, they are used defensively to ward off feelings of shame and wounded narcissism.

The repetitive nature of gambling and its motivations are also discussed by Christopher Bollas (1987) through his theory of transformational objects. Bollas says that the search for transformation is the most primary of impulses, and one can relate this wish for transformation to the cultural desire for newness and the turn from riskophobia to riskophilia that I discussed earlier. As Bollas says: 'We have failed to take notice of the phenomenon in adult life of the wide-ranging collective search for an object that is identified with the metamorphosis of the self' (1987, pp. 15-16). In Bollas's (1987) theory of the 'unthought known' that refers to archaic and unconscious memory, the transformational object is an early 'primitive' experience of the mother's ability to provide the infant with all that he or she needs and this experience is associated with a metamorphosis of the self. In adult life, the search for relief and satisfaction also represents a desire to connect with that same experience of transformation. Bollas also describes how a person may seek a negative version of this experience and repeat traumatic situations, which have their origin in early failures of the transformational object. As he says, 'it should not be surprising that varied psychopathologies emerge from the failure, as Winnicott put it, to be disillusioned from this relationship' (p.17). Bollas therefore argues that there is a holding on to the expectations of those changes that are

derived from the experience of the transformational object. This process of 'holding on' is not tempered by the kind of disillusionment with the mother that Winnicott said was necessary for development. Instead, Bollas argues that, 'The gambler's game is that transformational object, which is to metamorphose his entire internal and external world' (p. 17-18), thereby implying a pathological fixation to the experience of the transformational object. As Bollas (1987, p.18) says:

> It may also be true that people who become gamblers reflect a conviction that the mother (that *they* had as *their* mother) will not arrive with supplies. The experience of gambling can be seen as an aesthetic moment in which the nature of this person's relation to the mother is represented.

Casino politics, gambling and the fear of breakdown

What emerges from these psychoanalytic theories are the links between gambling, Oedipal aggression and guilt as discussed by Freud, but also the relationship between gambling, play, illusion and disillusion, and the ways in which the repetitive play of the gambler alongside the potential pleasures of mastery and transformation are used to manage loss and anxiety. In addition, a recurring image is of the disappointing mother that links to fantasies of the tantalizing *femme fatale* that I alluded to earlier, in relation to 'Lady Luck'. Such ideas can be applied to the political scene in the US and in the UK and elsewhere in Europe where fantasies of casino politics are present.

In the US, the mythology of poker and its symbolic value as the US national game can be found in oft-repeated accounts about the ways in which past US Presidents such as Truman or Nixon played poker in and outside the Whitehouse (MacManus, 2010). Indeed, popular – albeit clichéd – notions of good political leadership become aligned with ideas about the courage and skill of the poker player. For example, there is a widely held popular

perception that a test of a good leader is that he or she has the courage to take appropriate risks – as in the contexts of a 'tough' foreign policy decision or on the economy (Parsons, 2015). The cultural asymmetry of gender and its hierarchies are often present when applied to casino politics, as in the US election campaign of 2015, when Hillary Clinton was represented as *a risk* rather than as being an effective *risk taker*. At the level of fantasy, fears about the unreliable and disappointing mother were present in the minds of voters as the gendered dynamics of casino politics were played out, with concerns about her health, her age and also last-minute revelations about her email account (**** 2019).

By contrast, Trump claimed to challenge the political establishment through a seemingly unpredictable and exciting celebrity style of political campaigning, drawing on his identity as a television game-show host, to get his audiences to chant in a ritualised manner: 'Lock her up!' Yet, for many, alongside the attraction of his campaign that seemed to operate as an exciting and unpredictable game, was the appeal of his reactionary message of returning to a fantasy of a non-risky vision of America where the helpless experience of losing and of being played *with* (thereby evoking Green's description of the relationship between play and the desire for mastery) would cease and somehow be reversed. In that scenario, the fickle economic forces of global capitalism became symbolically linked to his opponent Hillary Clinton as the disappointing mother and persecutory neoliberal candidate of the establishment.

Alongside the lived realities of contemporary casino politics are its popular fictions. For example, the dilemmas of risk and leadership can be found in the highly successful, award -winning political television drama, *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-18), where, like *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-2019), the show's title infers that politics is a game to be played. A show such as *House of Cards* contributes to the shaping of political culture and both reflects and affects the attitudes, emotions, wishes and fears that constitute it at

conscious and unconscious levels of experience – or what I call the *matrix* of political culture. For the first five seasons, the drama of *House of Cards* revolves around the central character of Frank Underwood played by Kevin Spacey, a Machiavellian politician whose lust for power drives him to murder his rivals, blackmail a President, and then to take his place. In the final season, after a real-life scandal regarding Spacey's arrest for alleged sexual assault, his fictional character was killed off and instead his on-screen wife 'Claire' (played by Robin Wright) took centre stage as the new scheming, President. The themes of murder, addiction, deception and what Ogden (1999, p.102) refers to as the 'deathly' experience of 'flirting with danger', are foregrounded in that drama, and viewers are invited to identify with the scheming and competitive machinations of both Frank and Clare Underwood. As Spacey's character Frank reminds us: 'the stakes are high' but 'worth the risk' (*House of Cards*, 2015, Season, 3, Episode 6, Chapter, 32).

There are many playful aspects to the show, not least, Frank and Claire Underwood's direct, intimate address to us as the audience. In the manner of Shakespeare's Richard III, they break the 'fourth wall' by speaking to us directly and then, as in a game of 'peekaboo' with a tantalising parent ('now you see me, now you don't'), they disappear once more back into character. Against a socio-political backdrop of crisis and uncertainty, what seems to be at stake within the *House of Cards* narrative and its flirtatious mode of address, is a wish to control the object as a defence against the losses and risks of contemporary culture. The popularity of the show suggests that this dynamic seems to resonate powerfully for audiences, who may relate to the drama and its characters as a game of risk and chance.[5] Within *House of Cards*, there is a ruthless denial of vulnerability and the addictive quality of

[5] The show has been rated in the IMDB as most popular shows of all time and it has won critical acclaim through numerous awards, including two Golden Globes.See: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1856010/awards?ref_=tt_awd

binge watching it on Netflix also echoes, perhaps, the underlying themes of the programme itself.

Winnicott's theory of the manic defence seem apt when applied to the character of Frank Underwood who denies his vulnerability and who is compelled to win at all costs. In seeking to master the 'objects' around him, what we see in him is the gambler who in a manic fashion is looking for the active, triumphant state of mind that will serve to deny an otherwise internal deadness. Perhaps, for Spacey – it is a case of real-life mirroring art, where the charismatic flirt uses his seductive charm in order to master and control the object. Against a backdrop of heightened misogyny associated with the Trump Presidency, Wright's performance as Claire takes on an additional *frisson* as 'Madam President' whose ruthless ice-queen image as the cold, political *femme fatale*, evokes fantasies of the withholding, tantalizing mother described by Bollas who cannot be relied upon for 'supplies'. [6] Thus, Frank and Clare Underwood's deathly games of flirtation illustrate the perverse dynamics of 'play' as mastery which also echo more widely the precarious psycho-dynamics of casino politics.

The dystopian elements of the show are often commented on and it is seen as a drama for a 'post-hope' era. For example, the *New York Times* said that whereas Martin Sheen's performance as Josiah Bartlet in the 1990s political drama, *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006) seemed to represent the good father and what 'we wished our government could be', Frank Underwood represents 'a nightmare of what our government has become' (Sternbergh, 2014). Such sentiments are often articulated in relation to the 'real-life' political scene, and the cynicism surrounding Trump's tenure in the White House provides a good example of this. On the one hand, the extremeness of his outlandish image and ideas appear to push the impulse for risk to new levels. However, his message to 'make America great again' also

[6] A key aspect of the show's narrative regarding Claire's ruthless and unnatural desire for power, is her status as a childless woman.

contains within it, a promise of mastery over the very uncertainty that he in part has helped to construct in the first place. As dramatized in popular television dramas such as *Game of Thrones,* or *House of Cards*, casino politics means constantly being exposed to an existential threat and yet at the same time, knowing that governments cannot help you – unless that is, one believes in the authoritarian certainties of politicians such as Trump.

The repetitions of casino culture

At the wider cultural and political level, what is being denied and defended against within casino culture and its politics? In his discussion of the crises of capitalism, the rise of neoliberalism and debt, Couze Venn (2012) argued that the consent for the programme of austerity in Europe and the US was achieved partly by targeting those so-called 'losers' who could be scapegoated as wasteful and dysfunctional and who could carry the 'shame' for 'the regime of debt' built up over many years. Instead of 'us' 'all being in it together', the political message has been one of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. This ethos of individualism also underpins casino culture and much of its politics, and is symptomatic of a defensive structure of feeling in which vulnerability is repudiated and the common ground is denied.

And yet, one could argue that aided by social media and the new interactive methods of political communication, the contemporary psychodynamics of 'play' within the field of casino politics have the potential to open up new transitional spaces for political engagement. For example, it may be that the popular UK vote to leave Europe and even the anger of Donald Trump's supporters in the lead up to his election in 2016 (alongside the more progressive forces of oppositional politics - often associated with Bernie Saunders supporters for example) signalled a desire for change and a refusal of the old establishment, together with a protest against the forces of casino capitalism and the burden of the neoliberal

settlement described by Venn (2012). The global protests that have occurred since Trump's inauguration can be read in a similar light - albeit in a different context, as in the protests of women and ethnic minority groups who represent an alternative voice to that of a backward looking, and increasingly authoritarian political establishment as they use their anger to create an alternative vision of political transformation. As Winnicott (1971) said, the process of destruction and creativity are interlinked and the aggressive use that is made of politicians, as objects of contempt could, perhaps, be seen in this light. Winnicott (1970) also described how within a democratic system, there is a perennial destruction and casting out of the current government to be replaced by something new and which brings new hope and possibility. Although Winnicott (1962) described the necessity for the infant's fantasy of destruction of the object as a process of placing him or herself in the outside world, he also described the way that this process ushers in a new 'capacity for concern' (which was his own preferred way of describing Melanie Klein's (1935) concept of the depressive position).

Nonetheless, what we see in US politics, and also in relation to Brexit in the UK, is arguably a *lack* of concern for the destructive consequences of the action.[7] In this context, it is interesting that both Trump and Farage shared a political platform together at a campaigning Trump Presidential Rally[8] as they both make a virtue of pushing their political rhetoric to the limits and sometimes beyond what is generally perceived as socially and morally acceptable. For their supporters, it seems that there is considerable excitement at the extreme consequence of the policies that also mirror the action of the gambler and the thrill of the 'all or nothing' impulse that goes with the throwing of the dice, the turning of the card or competing with the algorithms of an internet game of chance against all the odds. The gambler's unconscious wish is for triumph over loss and an avoidance of ambivalence

[7] For example, in the UK, there was reportedly a 41% rise in 'race and religious hate crimes' following the referendum vote to leave the EU (BBC News, 2016).
[8] The ex-UKIP Leader Nigel Farage was also the first visitor at Trump's residence following on from his successful election as President.

together with a reckless lack of concern about the future. In the case of Brexit, a form of 'buyer's remorse' soon set in, as it was reported that the day after the referendum, the Google search engine received the majority of its enquiries about the nature and constitution of the European Union (EU), implying therefore, that the vote to leave was for some, based more on an emotional impulse than on an informed decision (Selyukh, 2016). In the US, a similar phenomenon occurred with the 'Trump regrets' hashtag on Twitter for example.

These events are symptomatic of the casino culture that I have identified and discussed, where politics is shaped defensively by the processes of mastery and repetition, and where the culture of illusion and risk is now widespread. In the current political climate since the election of Trump in the US and the rise of populism in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, the stakes seem especially high, as certain groups are made to carry the unwanted feelings of those citizens who turn to a reactionary form of nationalism for comfort and reassurance in an uncertain world. The repudiation of vulnerability through a widespread culture of misogyny and the scapegoating of migrants and refugees as objects for the projection of hostility and contempt is analogous to the gambler who attempts to ward of loss and depression through winning against the odds and triumphing over fate.

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Television Programmes and Films

America’s Got Talent (2006-, NBC, US)

Dragon’s Den (2005-, BBC, UK)

Game of Thrones (2011-2019 HBO, US)

House of Cards (2013-18 Netflix, US)

Shark Tank (2009- ABC, US)

The Apprentice (2004-15, NBC, US)

The Big Short (2015, A. McKay, US)

The West Wing (1999-2006, NBC, US)

The X Factor (ITV, 2004, UK)

Wall Street; Money Never Sleeps (2010, O. Stone, US)

The Wolf of Wall Street (2014, M. Scorsese, US)