

NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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THE LAND OF COMPETITION: OBSERVATIONS ON THE SOCIOLOGY OF GAMES IN FINLAND

Although I am by no means a specialist in this field, I was struck with the ideas presented in Roger Caillois's work, *Les Jeux et les hommes*.¹ In it he has attempted to classify games according to their basic character and the principles from which they stem. He has also tried to demonstrate that a certain kind of society corresponds to a certain category of games. In chapter viii of his book we encounter the transition from primitive societies, where games that Caillois classifies as *mimicry* and *ilinx* ("mimicry" and "vertigo") are the rule, to highly developed societies characterized by *agôn* ("regulated competition")

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1. Paris, 1958.

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and *alea* ("chance"). The ideal toward which all modern, democratic societies aspire is total achievement of the requisite conditions for the proper evolution of *agón*, not only in the realm of games, but in all of life, by guaranteeing equal opportunities to all citizens in their competition for wealth and power. However, as we can readily understand, this ideal can never be truly achieved, even in societies that are, theoretically, the most egalitarian. To this fact the author attributes the extraordinary passion for all forms of *alea*, which we witness today almost everywhere in the Western world. Chance offers compensation for the disappointments inherent in *agón*, for the inevitable inequalities among members of any human group. Caillois provides a penetrating analysis of all the forms that *alea* assumes in our times (games of "double or quits," betting, lotteries, beauty contests, infatuation with movie stars), and he cites examples to illustrate the passions they arouse. I was all the more impressed because they are practically non-existent in Finland. This is due, in my opinion, to the fact that in Finnish society opportunities for *agón* are equally distributed among its members; thus they do not feel the need to seek compensation in the whims of *alea*.

Finland is certainly not the only country where such civil equality has been achieved. Other analogous societies can be cited; for example, those composed of European elements in new continents (the United States, the British Dominions) where social differences were almost entirely leveled by the need to work for a livelihood with one's own hands. This need existed for every member of the group, and any ambitious individual could escape into a practically unlimited hinterland in order to seek his fortune. But these societies already belong to the past. In the United States, for example, the glaring inequalities of fortune, protected and guaranteed by powerful interest groups, have given rise to an inordinate passion for all forms of *alea*. In Finland, on the other hand, the predominance of *agón* and the absence of *alea* are still clearly discernible. I shall cite a few illustrations that help to demonstrate the interdependence of these two circumstances.

First of all, it should be noted that Finland has generally been forgotten or overlooked in discussions of Europe or of European civilization. This is not the place to inquire whether the neglect is justifiable; the paucity of the country's human and material resources might lead one to assume that it is. I would merely like to point out that Finland possesses certain distinctive features that might be interesting from the point of view of a general study of modern European society.

Before the advent of modern technology, the geographical position of Finland isolated it from the great centers of civilization. Its harsh climate and its sterile land, with poor subsoil, obstructed the development of its economy. Moreover, its social structure was very simple; the population was almost exclusively agricultural, consisting of independent peasants (serfdom had never been known in Finland or in any other part of Scandinavia), farmers, and country squires whose scale of living was relatively modest. Businessmen, industrialists, members of the liberal professions, bureaucrats, and clergymen were few; however, as early as the pre-industrial epoch, it was fairly easy to gain access to these social groups. The country was Protestant; a single university provided educational facilities for those interested in an ecclesiastical career. And, since the clergy did not have to be celibate, many a peasant's daughter, after passing her theological examinations and thus rising to the level of the educated classes, became the progenitor of a family which could subsequently attain the highest positions in the social hierarchy. The same was true of the bourgeoisie, which was too small to constitute a closed group and also underwent Russian as well as Swedish rule. The monarch conferred patents of nobility rather liberally as a reward for civic service, just as the crown does in present-day England. This replenished the ranks of the aristocracy regularly and thereby prevented it from becoming an isolated, inaccessible, and envied caste. Thus the country traditionally afforded good opportunities for social advancement, even for individuals of modest origin; but these opportunities increased infinitely with the advent of the industrial era, which was accompanied by important political changes. The country's forests, which previously had been poorly exploited, became the basis of an important industry. Agriculture profited by the adoption of modern technology and by the creation of a widespread co-operative movement. This movement included associations of buyers and sellers, savings banks, and consumers' co-operatives that multiplied throughout the country. Even the weakest economic groups could guarantee their share of production in this technological evolution.

On the political level, this economic evolution resulted in the right to vote as early as 1906. All citizens, men and women, were enfranchised regardless of wealth or social position. This naturally resulted in the creation of mass parties representing peasants and workers and led by men who themselves came from these classes. There were, in addition, the syndicalist movement and, following the acquisition of political in-

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dependence in 1918, the program of agrarian reform, which made every peasant an independent landowner and completely eliminated tenant farming.

Nor should we forget that education has always been widespread among the people. The Protestant church, at least in theory, required that all its faithful should know how to read and write; it encouraged them specifically to read the Bible. Moreover, all the typical agencies of free instruction in Scandinavia—night classes, institutes for popular education, youth groups, etc.—spread throughout the country. They supplemented obligatory schooling by enabling those who were obliged to terminate their studies at the primary level to complete their education subsequently. The university, which trains people for positions in education, the civil service, law, and the other liberal professions, has always been accessible to the members of every social level. One can truly say that in Finland personal merit has had every chance to assert itself. The ruling classes of the preceding era were too few in number to resist the rise of the “new wave”² on either a *de facto* or a *de jure* basis, by means of an intangible material or moral obstruction.

To all the areas open to ambition and talent another must be added—that of sports, which is typical of the country. This is an entirely different thing from the state of affairs one is exposed to in western European countries, where all the celebrated champions are professionals and where the promoters of athletic contests calculate their profits on the basis of the size of the attendance. In Finland a quasi-sacred atmosphere permeates sports. This is perhaps best illustrated by an analogy with the great contests in ancient Greece, whereas present-day professional sports irresistibly bring to mind the Roman arenas.³ This is due, in part, to certain special factors—first among them the fact that the country discovered sports before it acquired its independence. National pride as well as the need to affirm its own individuality, long repressed on the political level, could achieve expression in important international contests. Sports had great fascination for the people. In contrast to Anglo-

2. In 1918 a partial setback occurred when a Communist revolutionary movement was stamped out with bloodshed after a fierce civil war. But, because the triumphant party sought the support of imperial Germany, the fall of the latter first brought to power the liberals, then the moderate socialists, backed by the Peasant party.

3. I say this merely to stress the difference in points of view, not wishing in any way to extol Greece or Finland or to depreciate Rome or countries where professional athletics are the rule today.

Saxon countries, for example, where athletic games were especially and primarily played by young people from the aristocratic universities, Finland recruited its athletes almost entirely from the peasants and workers. Because the other countries of the world did not have such a passion for sports, the Finnish people lived for a quarter of a century in a transport of extraordinary triumph as their champions won Olympic medals and established dozens of world records. Since then other countries have tried harder, and the Finns have had to yield a good deal, although sports continue to occupy an important place in the life of the country. This has insured, above all, that men from the lower classes, to whom other avenues were closed, were able as before to rise in the social hierarchy, not only during the short period of their athletic ascendancy, but subsequently as well. To be sure, although the champions were strictly amateurs and could not grow rich as a consequence of their skill, their contacts with sports enthusiasts made it possible for them to open athletic-goods stores, for example, or to hold offices in athletic organizations. Thus they might get to preside over local clubs or regional or national federations, which would rank them among the important personalities of the country.

We see, then, a country where every opportunity is truly available to men of talent and ambition, where *agôn* is achieved in the purest sense of the word, where the effects of inequalities in fortune and birth are neutralized, not by legal devices but by the very nature of the society. All members of the nation benefit fully by this equality.⁴ Needless to say, self-made men abound in both business and industry; for example, an ordinary sailor has become one of our greatest shipping magnates, and a former cobbler heads the largest shoe-manufacturing company in the country. Among scholars, educators, members of the liberal profes-

4. I quote the following remark from *Les Jeux et les hommes*, p. 178: "Even the talented son of a farmer in a poor and remote province cannot readily compete with the son of an important official in the capital, though the latter might be of mediocre intelligence." In Finland we feel that he could compete. It just happens that the president of the Republic is a good case in point and can serve to illustrate the many opportunities available to a Finnish citizen of humble origin. He is the son of a modest agriculturalist from one of the poorest and most remote provinces in our country. He studied at the university and received his doctorate in law. He then embarked upon an athletic career and became the high-jump champion of Finland and subsequently the president of the National Federation of Sports. Thereupon he decided to go into politics; he was first elected deputy, then a member of the cabinet, then president of the parliament, and finally president of the Republic. Yet, in biographies, his humble origin is given no special emphasis because, in actuality, hundreds and even thousands of Finns of similar circumstances have also attained the highest positions during the course of their careers.

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sions, civil servants, and army officers⁵ one also encounters people of the humblest birth. With no false pride, although they have attained the highest rungs of society, the leaders of proletarian and peasant parties give their original occupation in the country's *Who's Who*—mechanics, train engineers, typists, or hairdressers. And just as freely academicians, famous doctors, the heads of central administrative agencies, and army generals will indicate that their fathers were workingmen, chimney sweeps, or shop salesmen. This concern for making equality of opportunity available to all exists in a certain measure in athletics as well. As we have already pointed out, it is athleticism which is especially in favor, from leapfrog to the high jump to weight-lifting or hammer-throwing. And even in this domain, therefore, the most fortuitous personal inequalities—those that are due to the kind of physique one is born with—are equalized to a certain extent: a man who is sinewy and agile but not very powerful can, like the strong but slow Herculean type, enjoy his moment of glory.

One may object that sports, which are played with such enthusiasm in Finland, arouse excessive enthusiasm for the star performer. Roger Caillois uses the term "proxy" in alluding to this worship of the star. He considers it, quite correctly in my opinion, one of the atavisms of *alea*. It is quite true that there is some adulation for athletic champions in our country,⁶ but its manifestations are relatively limited. Actually, the great variety of sports and the large number of young people who appear in the stadium each year make it difficult for the public to single out any individual. And, given the very keen competition that prevails in every branch of athletics, the champions must be constantly on the alert to maintain the standing they have attained through merit and persistent effort exclusively. Moreover, the rules for amateurs are rigidly enforced in our country. The public regards professional athletics almost as a disgraceful vice. Consequently, its athletic idols derive nothing save glory from their prowess; in their private lives they cannot display any suddenly acquired and dazzling luxuries. However, interest in their private lives is rather slight. To be sure, photographs of champions at home with their families are published, along with articles explaining

5. I do not mention artists because in every country and at all times they have been thought of as living on the margin of normal society.

6. The champion Finnish sprinter even had a statue erected in his honor, but, and this is typical, the pedestal of the statue does not bear his name. It is known officially as "The Runner"—the work of a certain sculptor.

how they live. But the object is merely to emphasize that they are like everyone else; that they, like modest workers and peasants, live in houses or apartments with unassuming wives and children; that they go to work every day exactly like all the people of their milieu.

The same modesty is apparent in other areas. Beauty queens, even a “Miss Europe” or a “Miss Universe,” are quickly forgotten after their single day of triumph. If they are photographed subsequently, it is only to show that they have become fine mothers of a family, although one proved an exception by committing the relative folly of marrying a well-to-do Filipino. There are also successful authors and movie stars in Finland, but again it is not their professional accomplishments that are admired; their private lives are in no way affected by their achievements. Jewelry, furs, luxurious wardrobes, large sport cars, or trips to de luxe hotels in fashionable vacation resorts are no part of the picture. They might well indulge themselves in this fashion, admittedly on a more modest scale than in France, Great Britain, or the United States but sufficiently, nevertheless, to make a sharp contrast with the lives of their fellow-citizens. This refusal to enjoy luxuries may be attributed to an innate modesty, to fear of censure by people of their own kind, or to the existing social structure; but the existence of this simplicity cannot be denied. The author of a war novel that sold more than 400,000 copies within the space of two years⁷ has claimed that he wished to keep his job as a factory worker and has actually done so. Another writer, whose historical novels have been translated into all the major European languages and have been made into movies in the United States, has not moved from his small apartment in a middle-class neighborhood; this is likewise true of a leading man in the movies, the idol of the young girls and a charming singer. He does not own a car and either walks to work or takes the streetcar, and his presence causes no stir among the other commuters, who may not even recognize him.

If we proceed from the question of “proxy” to domains in which *alea* is more plainly manifest, the same lack of interest on the part of the public is apparent. There are lotteries,⁸ and one can win a large sum of

7. In a country with a population of four million; the equivalent sale in France would be four million copies.

8. Furthermore, the lottery was combined with an economic activity planned after a fashion reminiscent of the network of savings banks in the U.S.S.R. and described on page 251 of Caillois's book: certain state debentures which are payable with interest and are valid as lottery tickets as well; thus it is possible to win relatively large sums in the lottery.

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money. The drawing is not publicized,⁹ however, so that nobody actually knows where or how it takes place. The lucky winners are practically ignored by the press. Again, this does not involve a deliberately formulated or tacitly accepted principle, because occasionally the fact that the big prize went to someone of modest means is mentioned. Rather, the explanation is simply that the public lacks curiosity. This same lack of curiosity prevails in regard to horse racing and betting on the results of football matches (the Italians' "totocalcio"), both of which are legal.

Finally, the Finns's indifference to the dazzling and unpredictable results of matches or games of "Double or Quits" is perhaps more patent than anything else; this contrasts markedly with the excitement about such games in other countries.¹⁰ It is characteristic of Finland that these games were initially played, and still are, in a form that is much more akin to *agôn* than to *alea*—as a contest between two people rather than as an attempt to answer a series of increasingly difficult questions. Another and perhaps even more typical trait of the country is that the names of the two champions are always withheld and no prize is awarded the winner, the sole satisfaction derived resting in participation and perhaps winning. One of the regular contestants represents the radio. He is called "Mr. X"—a kind of walking dictionary who supposedly knows by heart the answers to ever imaginable question. The other contestant is an amateur challenger who, for the occasion, assumes some fanciful title like "Good in Composition" or "The Scholarly Woman." In the presence of the judges they answer the same questions and are prevented by technical devices from hearing each other's replies. For the correct answers they receive points which are totaled at the close of the game, when the winner is announced. But, we repeat, his name remains unknown. Moreover, the press shows little interest in these activities, despite the fact that the radio does all it can to play up its "Double or Quits" program by distributing expensive prizes, by publicizing the game, and even, in one instance, by revealing the identity of the contestants.

9. The description of a public drawing of the National Lottery of France which I once gave in Finland elicited the kind of astonishment that a tale about the oddities of an exotic tribe might arouse.

10. We must add that television has not been very widespread in our country, mainly for economic reasons. It will be interesting to see whether "Double or Quits" will be followed with greater enthusiasm when there are more television sets.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the public's moral sense, which tends to be strict and puritanical in regard to some things, disapproves of this kind of competition. On the contrary, success in such contests is regarded as proof of intelligence and of the nation's high educational level. Far from being associated in the public's mind with the dissipation of time in frivolous diversions, the prizes are looked upon as just rewards for merit, for work and study undertaken to improve the mind and acquire knowledge. If "Double or Quits" has no real following in our country, the explanation lies in its failure to arouse interest. A characteristic incident which illustrates this indifference occurred several years ago. The radio station had organized an important contest in which specialists in various fields competed. The questions became progressively more difficult. There were large prizes and a maximum of publicity. The show took place out of doors in an amusement park, and the participants were identified by name. The contest was staged in the traditional manner, and one of the participants won a large sum. But a little later a jovial and joking workingman offered to try his luck. He deliberately gave idiotic answers, then laughingly confessed that his good wife had advised him not to compete, that he had wanted to take a chance anyway, and that there was no denying that he was completely ignorant. The absence of such incidents in other countries is probably due to a prior and more rigid screening of candidates. If they did occur, they would doubtless create a good deal of embarrassment. The spoilsport would probably be turned away promptly and firmly out of deference to a disapproving public, whose quasi-religious fervor was being trifled with. But, in Finland, this ignorant workingman had amused many sympathizers, the public acclaimed him, and the master of ceremonies had to go along by awarding him a nominal "prize for effort." Thereupon the contest continued without further incident but in the face of general indifference. This type of elaborate spectacle was dropped, and thereafter the radio staged such contests on a much more modest scale. The participants remained anonymous and the press displayed a total lack of interest. Today the newspapers of Finland give one the impression that "Double or Quits" is unknown there.

It is interesting to compare these observations with the data assembled in *Les Jeux et les hommes* and with what we know in general about the enthusiasm with which "Double or Quits" is followed in other countries.

In this connection Caillois's book alludes, for example, to Sweden. It

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cites an example of the feverish excitement which "Double or Quits" aroused there (p. 189). Yet Sweden has many features in common with Finland: identical public institutions, the consequence of a protracted union during the course of their respective histories; the long established *de facto* and *de jure* liberty and equality of all citizens; workers' trade-union and political organizations, notably the highly developed co-operative movement; obligatory and free public instruction, and consequently relatively ready access to the highest positions in society for individuals from all classes. But, in spite of these common traits, the two countries do differ palpably. Sweden, which has more natural resources and a better geographical position than Finland, has always been an independent state. Its kingdom has been very respectful of monarchist traditions; it has an old judicial and military aristocracy as well as a rich and powerful middle class, both of which are permeated with time-honored traditions. Accordingly, Swedes of modest circumstances have far less opportunity than their Finnish counterparts to improve their economic status. There is therefore much more enthusiasm in Sweden for all the forms of *alea*. Occasionally we witness frantic outbursts of admiration for individuals whom chance has raised to stardom. For instance, a few years ago an obscure ice-hockey player was briefly acclaimed all over the country because he had composed and launched a song. Paradoxically enough, the song was all the more admired because the lyrics were awkward, the melody very ordinary, and the promotion deficient. Obviously, however, that paradox was more apparent than real. The public was naturally and unconsciously exacting revenge for all the existing inequalities; it was attempting to prove to itself that even the most mediocre man could achieve fame. There is hardly need to add that the idol's second song was a dismal failure and that he is totally forgotten today.

In his book Caillois attempted to demonstrate the interdependence of *agón* and *alea*. To support his thesis, he used arguments drawn from his own observations of contemporary European society. These tended to show that the impossibility of insuring an impartial distribution of *agón* inclined the masses to seek consolation in *alea*, which today assumes the most varied forms. It seemed to me rather interesting to apply this thesis to a society that is markedly different from those he describes—a society whose interest in *alea* has kept itself at a minimum because all the prerequisites for a fair distribution of *agón* have been achieved with a maximum of equity.