

# 16

## **Games that people play: Capitalism as a game**

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In this chapter, I draw on Wierzbicka's explication of 'game' in order to show that it is an extremely useful tool in understanding aspects of contemporary capitalism. I begin with an overview of discussions of Wittgenstein's definition of 'game', including the difference between 'play' and 'game'. While it is tempting to think that both are inconsequential, they are not. As Huizinga writes, 'All play means something' (1949: 1). The same is true of games. I then rehearse Wierzbicka's elegant account of 'game' (1996). Building on Wierzbicka's analysis, I attempt to situate the concept of games in contemporary life, particularly in the domain of economics and finance. I draw on work that shows discussion of capitalism and its activities in terms of games and their attributes in order to show that while there is a comparison to be made between these activities and Wierzbicka's explication of 'game' there are nevertheless important differences. Specifically drawing on Zaloom's work on risk and Buchanan's work on austerity, I argue that the 'game of capitalism' does not follow the same kind of rules as those succinctly explained by Wierzbicka for 'game'. Specifically, the separation of the game world from the real world breaks down in the game of capitalism.

There is a feature of Wierzbicka's work that is both a great advantage and a 'problem'. This is the fact that there are very few places she has not turned her analytical lens. This is advantageous, especially to those of us without the analytical precision that Wierzbicka consistently brings to

bear on any topic. Indeed, because of her precision and her wide-ranging research, I have always found her work extremely useful in thinking through semantic issues in the specific domains in which I am interested. As Wierzbicka is concerned with clear semantic explications in service of better understanding both language and culture, her work has been particularly useful to me in thinking about topics we *think* we understand. This chapter uses her insights in order to provide a different way of understanding aspects of contemporary capitalism. My aim is modest. I simply want to raise some questions about the consequences of thinking about capitalism as a ‘game’ by considering some of the consequences of the game of capitalism itself. To do so, I begin with the semantics of ‘game’.

## 1. ‘Game’

In *Philosophical Investigations* (1958), Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that at least some concepts cannot be defined in terms of semantic features; instead, they may best be approached by thinking about ‘family resemblances’. As Wierzbicka notes, even though Wittgenstein did not explicitly refer to prototypes, his theory of family resemblances suggests the same kind of approach.<sup>1</sup> The particular passage in which Wittgenstein discusses games is a precursor to this and as Wierzbicka notes it does indeed have a ‘hypnotic force’ (1996: 158). Nevertheless, Wittgenstein’s discussion of games does not appear to have been the subject of a great deal of philosophical scrutiny (especially when compared to work on ‘family resemblances’), but there is some commentary in this field. I now provide a brief account of two works commenting on Wittgenstein’s discussion of ‘games’. As will become clear, they draw out the importance to games of skill, chance, reality and rules.

In the first of these, Rowe (1992) seeks to further refine Wittgenstein’s account of ‘games’. Rowe draws on Callois’s typology of games as set out in *Man, Play and Games* (2001). Rowe initially suggests the following typology of games:

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1 Also, see Manser (1967) for what is essentially a prototype analysis.

- (1) Games with internal point
  - (a) games of skill
  - (b) games of pure chance
- (2) Make-believe games
- (3) Sequential games (Rowe 1992: 469–70).

The ‘internal point’ (1) refers to the goal of the game. The internal point of chess, for example, is checkmate, while the internal point of roulette is to choose the right number on the wheel. The point is ‘internal’ in that the goal is meaningless outside of the game itself. There are, however, differences among games with internal points. For example, a distinction between chess and roulette can be made on the basis of whether skill or chance is determinative of reaching the goal. Rowe also argues that make-believe games (2) are games. Key here is that make-believe games are quite separate from real life and reality (1992: 469). Finally, ‘sequential games’ develops one of Callois’s categories: ‘Games of physical exhilaration (twirling round and round)’. While conceding that Callois’s is ‘not a helpful category’, Rowe nevertheless accepts that if such activity was *repeated*, he would be ‘happy to describe this as a game’ (1992: 468).

Perhaps the most important feature of games as Rowe defines them is their separation from real life. For games with an internal point (1), the separation from ‘real life’ is implicit in the point itself. As the internal point has no meaning outside of the game, there is already a disconnection. Rowe is careful to distinguish games of type (2) and (3) in particular from ‘rituals, works of art, and several other activities which involve sequences of make-believe, and are all insulated from reality in ways which are difficult to define’ (1992: 470). His initial typology of three kinds of game (above) is refined to fuse (2) and (3). He thus suggests two kinds of game ‘those that are constituted by sequences and those that are constituted by goals’ (1992: 478). He provides the following definition of ‘game’:

An abstract object (either a sequence or a goal) which is designed to have no instrumental value; the realization or pursuit of which is intended to be of absorbing interest to participants and spectators. (Rowe 1992: 478)

The second account, Manser (1967), also dwells on the distinction between games and real life.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on Huizinga (1949), Manser argues that ‘the area of a game is “marked off” either literally or conceptually from the normal area of human life, that of genuine ‘action’ to which moral predicates apply’ (1967: 217). He continues ‘What is done in the course of the game is not meant to have effects in the “real world”’ (1967: 217). The most important feature across both accounts is the suspension of reality. As Rowe writes:

Games are designed to be purposeless, and this can be done, either by giving them no point at all, or a point which is valueless or unintelligible outside the context of the game. (1992: 477, emphasis in original)

## 2. Wierzbicka’s account

In Wierzbicka’s account of ‘game’, we find a distillation of the themes already encountered but with important additions. In contrast to Wittgenstein, Wierzbicka argues that we can in fact define games in terms of their semantic features. In contrast to Rowe and Manser, she provides a fuller account phrased in accessible terms. She suggests the following components as central to ‘games’:

- (1) human action (animals can play, but they don’t play games);
- (2) duration (a game can’t be momentary);
- (3) aim: pleasure;
- (4) ‘suspension of reality’ (the participants imagine that they are in a world apart from the real world);
- (5) well-defined goals (the participants know what they are trying to achieve);
- (6) well-defined rules (the participants know what they can do and what they cannot do);
- (7) the course of events is unpredictable (nobody can know what exactly is going to happen). (Wierzbicka 1996: 159)

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2 In his account of games, there is also a focus on pleasure (whether for the producer or spectator) and rules of some kind.

The inclusion of goals and rules means that we are clearly talking about games rather than play. As Wierzbicka notes, the components (and the explication) do ‘not apply to a situation when a child idly throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, but in English this activity would not be called a game’ (1996: 159). She notes that while this may be called ‘Spiel’ in German, this term ‘has a wider range of use’ than the English ‘game’ (1996: 159; see also Manser 1967: 217).

The explication for ‘game’ that Wierzbicka proposes is as follows:

### **games**

- a. many kinds of things that people do
- b. for some time
- c. ‘for pleasure’ (i.e. because they want to feel something good)
- d. when people do these things, one can say about these people:
  - e. they want some things to happen
  - f. if they were not doing these things, they wouldn’t want these things to happen
  - g. they don’t know what will happen
  - h. they know what they can do
  - i. they know what they cannot do. (Wierzbicka 1996: 159)

This account captures extremely well the aim of games (pleasure) and their structure and outcome as discussed by both Rowe and Manser. Games have rules (elements (h) and (i)) but there is a certain degree of chance involved (element (g)). The game is played voluntarily (elements (e) and (f)) and activity is not unlimited—it has a beginning and an end (element (b)). The duration of the game and the voluntary nature of participation (element (f)) also mean that the game is set apart from ordinary life. As with other explications in Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), this account has the advantage of being clear and accessible. It is translatable and, most importantly, it sets out the key elements of ‘games’.

### 3. Games and capitalism

I want to suggest that Wierzbicka's definition of game provides an important analytical viewpoint when thinking about capitalism. This requires, of course, that a connection be made between 'game' and capitalism. I come to this presently. First, it is necessary to define what I mean by capitalism, for as Chun notes 'capitalism means many different things to different people' (2017: 141).<sup>3</sup> I define capitalism here as late neoliberal capitalism, which has political and economic features and consequences. At its heart, capitalism is a system that values economic growth and in which people (rather than states) hold capital, trade in a market and seek profit. Neoliberal capitalism makes further political claims, that is, it makes claims about how the relationship between the state, the market and people should be configured. As the International Monetary Fund explains, neoliberalism involves two things: increased competition 'through deregulation and the opening up of domestic markets' and 'a smaller role for the state' (Ostry et al. 2016, cited in Pettifor 2017: 125).

The connection of games to capitalism (or indeed any ordered human behaviour) can be made, at least in part, by noticing that economic activity requires rules. For markets to work, for trade to take place and for people to hold capital and property, rules are needed. Some take the form of laws, others are found in regulation, and still others operate as more or less stable conventions and norms. It is not my purpose to enter into an analysis of the myriad laws and practices that regulate the modern economy and the various activities within it. Rather, I turn to research on people engaged in activity that is clearly connected to the capitalist system in order to see whether considering capitalism as a game is either warranted or useful.

I first outline the argument that capitalism is a discourse before turning to work on the metaphors found in both news media reports on the financial crisis and in the language of foreign exchange traders. This kind of trade is sometimes construed as gambling. I then turn to a discussion of risk, relying on Zaloom's ethnographic account of the Chicago Board of Trade. I want to suggest that while capitalism is sometimes construed as a game, there is a key difference in relation to Wierzbicka's explication. The capitalist game is neither completely voluntary nor of limited duration. It is also not separate from real life. The 'game' of capitalism is, in many ways, the game of life.

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3 For an excellent account and analysis of the different views people hold, see Chun (2017).

## 4. The discourse of capitalism: Human action and rules

Dahlberg (2014) argues that capitalism is a practice that combines specific elements (concepts, objects and subject identities). He therefore suggests that it may be productive to think of capitalism as a discourse and argues that this helps us understand the norms and rules of capitalism. Discourses, like games, are connected to human thought and action. Discourses have a structure as well as a relation to both language and practice. Perhaps they tend not to be thought of in terms of ‘rules’ as they are—in the final analysis—arbitrary. Rules of all kinds, however, are also often arbitrary and insufficient to the task they are supposed to perform. This is clear at times of crisis (Dahlberg 2014: 260). At such times, either rules are not available or they do not solve the current challenge. This can be seen in the most recent financial crisis. As Cox notes, ‘Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, a hero for free-marketeers, famously acknowledged that the market’s capacity for self-regulation had failed’ (Cox 2018: 198). In this crisis, the discourse had too few rules. Economic crises may be a result of rules or gaps in the system itself: the existing rules and practices fail to deliver what they promise.

In order to fully analyse capitalism as a discourse, Dahlberg makes use of the concept of ‘social logics’ (from Glynos and Howarth 2007), explaining that social logics can be either general or specific. These logics can be considered on a continuum from rules (or law) to norms as they ‘consist of rule following’ (Laclau 2005: 117 cited in Dahlberg 2014: 264). As they may be more or less explicit, social logics may not take the form of ‘concrete social codes, such as explicit work place rules ... they operate at a more abstract level, characterizing practices’ (2014: 263).

The connection of social logics to games is clear when Dahlberg considers whether social logics can have predictive effects. He compares their operation to chess. Once a game of chess starts:

the rules, together with the player’s knowledge of past games and their aim of winning, progress the game in particular directions that can be prognosticated before each move, as more or less likely. (2014: 265)

Along these lines, Dahlberg considers what would happen if interest rates were to rise:

there will be a range of likely responses from a range of actors—with a variety of roles (from parent to banker), goals (from paying bills to maximizing profit) and knowledge of the system—and an associated range of consequences for actors. (2014: 265)

It seems to me that we need not even consider the predictive power of social logics in order to see the similarity with games. The responses from actors will be oriented towards certain rules: the rules and norms by which the economic system functions. These rules certainly differ from those of, for example, board games. Economic ‘rules’ are not always set out in a clear summary of instructions to ‘players’. In a similar vein, Bjerg in his book *Poker: The Parody of Capitalism* argues that the card game poker is ‘an *idealized* version of democratic capitalism where everybody has equal access to the spheres of value circulation’ (2011: 242, emphasis added). Nevertheless, the point is that there are more or less predictable actions and consequences in these economic domains. In Wierzbicka’s terms, ‘the participants know what they can do and what they cannot do’ and ‘the participants know what they are trying to achieve’ (1996: 159).

## 5. Metaphor: Rules and reality

The presence of rules and games in capitalism is also attested in the language that describes particular kinds of economic activity. A good example of this is Pühringer and Hirte’s (2015) work documenting metaphors (in the tradition of Lakoff and Johnson (1980)) in texts written by economists in magazines and newspapers. In addition to finding that the 2007–08 economic crisis is described as a natural disaster, military attack and infection or disease, they also find evidence for the idea that the crisis is misfortune in an economic game. That is, the financial crisis is represented as a result of ‘bad luck’. This is consistent with games in which outcomes are not determined, ‘nobody can know what exactly is going to happen’ (Wierzbicka 1996: 159). The presence of luck in these metaphors is also consistent with other economic and financial metaphors. Stock market trading, for example, also uses the language of gambling (for example, ‘betting’ on a stock or the market more generally). As Pühringer and Hirte argue, ‘The game metaphor suggests that the economy follows specific

rules ... which have been designed by a superior authority' (2015: 618). This metaphor has a bearing not only on how we conceptualise economic events, but also how society responds to them.

An 'extraordinary event' as the financial crisis according to an understanding of the economy as a game is then consequently interpreted either as a consequence of someone breaking the rules or simply as misfortune. (2015: 618)

In terms of Rowe's game with internal point, the crisis is thus explained in terms of bad luck (like roulette) or breaking the rules (as one might attempt to in chess, for example, moving the king more than one space). Note that attributing the crisis to a lack of skill is not prominent.

It is worth stating that the presence of the game metaphor in relation to economic activity is not simply a consequence of media representations. Oberlechner, Sluneco and Kronberger's research (2004) focuses on 'participants' subjective experience of the [foreign exchange] market and on the role of metaphors in this experience' (2004: 134) and finds ample evidence of game metaphors.<sup>4</sup> The markets in which traders trade are conceptualised as bazaars, machines, oceans, wars, living beings, sports and gambling spaces. Clearly sports and gambling are connected to games: both have rules and depend on skill and chance. I turn first to sport and then consider gambling.

A sports competition ... is always conducted within a defined framework. It has an agreed-upon beginning and end; it takes place on a particular playground ... and it follows a set of constitutive rules. (Oberlechner et al. 2004: 141)

In examples of this metaphor in Oberlechner et al.'s research, informants refer to 'competition', 'teams' and 'goals' (2004: 143). Sometimes the comparison is directly made in the form of a surface simile, for example: 'to me trading is like sports. It's about winning. It's a competitive game that starts every morning at 7 o'clock' (informant B14, 2004: 143).<sup>5</sup> As it is a competition, players have the same goal (Wierzbicka 1996: 159).

4 Foreign exchange markets are clearly tied to contemporary economic activity, as they would not exist but for particular features of the economic world: different nations have different currencies, these can be traded, their values fluctuate in relation to each other.

5 B14 is a reference to an informant in Oberlechner et al.'s research.

While success in sports usually presupposes physical ability and skill, the other metaphor identified, gambling, relies on chance. Here, traders refer explicitly to ‘casinos’, ‘roulette’ and having ‘little chips on your table’. The casino, like the sports arena, is set off from everyday life (Wierzbicka, 1996: 159). The reference to the casino substitutes for money (‘little chips’) may be designed to suggest such a separation. And while chance is a feature of gambling, this activity is represented as requiring skill, technique and discipline. Oberlechner et al. write:

Besides pure gambling, the metaphorical field of gambling includes strategic games, such as professional poker or a game like chess perhaps [B17], in which the combination of chance and strategic thinking becomes manifest. These games highlight elements of discipline, skilfulness and expertise, and may thus be seen as a bridge between the metaphorical fields of gambling and of sports. (2004: 141)

The case of gambling presents an interesting example in relation to games. Gambling is connected with the real world but in mediated ways. This is clear in the convention of using ‘chips’ instead of everyday currency notes when gambling in a casino. Despite not being conventional money, there is a direct correlation between these chips and ‘real’ money. The chips can be purchased and redeemed for money. But as Wierzbicka notes, in games ‘the participants imagine that they are in a world apart from the real world’ (1996: 159). If one is playing with real money (albeit represented by a token), this separation from the real world is much less clear.

## 6. Risk

Where there is gambling there is risk. And while contemporary society has been called the ‘risk society’ (e.g. Beck 1992) examining individual behaviour in relation to risk provides a clearer picture of what it means and the consequences it may have. The kind of risk I discuss here is directly connected to economic activity. I draw on Zaloom’s work, which focuses on risk in the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT), ‘a major global financial futures exchange’ and shows the centrality of competitive game playing in this arena (2004: 365). While risk might be thought of as the absence of rules, Zaloom demonstrates that risk *requires* rules. Zaloom explains:

‘The tightly regulated markets of the CBOT make speculation possible. Aggressive risk taking is established and sustained by routinization and bureaucracy; it is not an escape from it’ (2004: 365).

What is striking about Zaloom’s fieldwork is how it shows the connection between capitalism’s games and real life. In her study, she shows how the games that are played on the trading floor have consequences outside of this domain.

Financial calculations are always present. However, with each trade, these dealers wager much more than money. Their market engagements are significant social games, a form of ‘deep play’ in the heart of capitalism. Each trader displays a risk-taking self that his competitors, the market, and he himself will judge ... These games gain their significance from voluntarily placing the self under threat of annihilation. The reward is creating a newly defined self. (Zaloom 2004: 367)

There are many games present here. The trading pit itself has rules (about who buys and sells, where people can stand and so on). The market they are trading in has rules (of supply and demand, regulation, laws and so on). There are also rules about how the trader behaves in the market itself (what the trader can and cannot do while trading). These behavioural norms are collectively described as a particular kind of ‘discipline’. ‘Traders use discipline as a tool to shape themselves into actors who can produce appropriate and successful interactions with the risks of the market’ (Zaloom 2004: 378). This requires traders not to behave as emotional individuals, but rather as finely tuned instruments.

According to their professional norms, discipline enables traders to coast with the uncertainties of the market and judge effectively when to enter and exit the game. Speculators train themselves to become embodied instruments for reading the market and reacting to its every twitch. (Zaloom 2004: 379)

While part of the trading identity and practice is to enter into the trading game for its own sake (2004: 378), to really be successful as a trader (financially and in identity terms) one has to win more often than one loses. But as Zaloom observes, ‘Traders play the game, but winning is not necessarily the first objective’ (2004: 383) in that their personal identities are also at stake. This is not just a profession, it is a constant expression of self. This expression and performance of self also brings pleasure, a key aspect of games (Wierzbicka 1996: 159). But the game does not always

end well. Zaloom documents the effects of ‘playing’ this ‘game’ on the real world in a particularly acute way, as this game (which already has serious identity stakes) has effects on traders’ bodies even to the point of death, with instances of suicide among ‘failed’ traders well known among her informants (2004: 380–81).

## 7. Policy and individuals

Zaloom’s work shows the leakage of the game of capitalism into the real lives of real people. Similar evidence can be found, however, by looking at the way particular terms are used. Here, I briefly consider ‘austerity’, a term and set of practices (a discourse) that became popular in the wake of the 2007–08 financial crisis.

Austerity is a set of economic and political policies aimed at reducing public spending. It can be seen as a tactic of neoliberal capitalism in this sense, as a reduction in public spending will usually mean a smaller role for the state in society. With national debt incurred because of the bailouts of the financial crisis, many nations sought to rationalise their domestic budgets through introducing austerity measures. In the face of high national debt, austerity appears to be a logical solution (see Borriello 2017). This is only the case, however, if certain economic positions and views of national economies are taken. That is, there are abundant arguments against austerity on purely economic grounds (see, for example, Krugman and Layard 2012). There are also arguments that can be made against austerity by focusing on language use.

Buchanan writes:

Let us consider the grammar of the following: ‘necessary austerity measures in health’; ‘due to necessary austerity measures this service will close’; to, ‘due to necessary austerity measures your surgery has been cancelled’. While using essentially the same clause ‘necessary austerity measures’ this one clause plays three different games. (2013: 39)

Perhaps because ‘austerity’ has become so familiar as a term, it is difficult to immediately see these three different games. But if we substitute another noun phrase in each instance, we might arrive at:

‘funding cuts in health’;  
 ‘due to lack of money this service will close’;  
 ‘due to low staff numbers your surgery has been cancelled’.

Examining the use of ‘austerity’, Buchanan argues that ‘austerity’ functions like a metaphor that obscures the real people affected by the real harm austerity policies cause (2013: 39). That is, ‘austerity’ is given more representational weight than the people involved; they are simply ‘the collateral damage of necessary austerity measures’ (2013: 39). Paying particular attention to health care and health outcomes, he argues that:

A sleight of hand has indeed occurred as the reality of a person’s suffering due to actual cutbacks is repackaged as collateral damage (a metaphor) and the metaphor of the *game of capital* has become the more literal. (2013: 39; emphasis added)

The reason this can happen is because national economies are closely connected to the game of capital. Buchanan argues that ‘The game of capital does not take place due to conceptual confusion—rather this game thrives because of conceptual confusion and the game itself actively promotes such confusion’ (2013:40). He continues, observing that ‘the game of capital thrives because of the threats held within its game’, threats which ‘force governments to the bargaining table’ (Buchanan 2013: 40).

The difference between Buchanan’s account of the game of capital and Wierzbicka’s explication of ‘game’ above is clear. First, the game of capital does not have clear rules that everyone knows (even though everyone knows, or pretends to know, that it functions according to certain rules). Second, the game of capital is not set apart from real life, it is real life. To take one example, the most recent recession coincided with a rise in male suicide across Europe and appears to be caused by unemployment (Reeves et al. 2015).<sup>6</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

Games involve human action, directed by rules and goals, played for a fixed period of time, with an uncertain outcome but nevertheless involving some enjoyment in the activity. The central feature of games for Rowe and Manser is the separation of games from real life. This is also a key element in Wierzbicka’s account. But this separation between the game and real life does not apply to ‘capitalist games’. As research on

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Each percentage point rise in the male unemployment rate is associated with a 0.94% rise’ in male suicide (Reeves et al. 2015: 405).

foreign exchange traders, traders working in the CBOT and indeed in relation to austerity itself shows, the consequences of these 'games' are not confined to the world of the game. The world of the game is the real world. The game of capitalism has effects on real people. Does it make sense, then, to describe capitalism and its attendant practices as games?

Wierzbicka provides a clear account of the semantic features of games. They begin and end, they are voluntarily entered into, they have clear rules and they are distinct from real life. While specific games in capitalism may only last for a period of time, for capitalism itself there is no final end point. There is no final winner; only periodic winners and losers. The game continues. Further, while it is possible to opt out of some of capitalism's domains and activities, given how enmeshed nation states are with global economic practices, it is difficult to escape altogether. While theoretically our participation may be voluntary, it is a kind of coerced consent. While there may be 'rules' and norms, these are not always transparent. Considering the effects of the games of capitalism on real life, and the inability to avoid the consequences of some of these games, it seems that while contemporary capitalism is often discussed and described in terms of rules and games, as it is so connected to real life, it is clearly not a 'game'.

Metaphor, as Aristotle (1991) observed, brings something before the eyes. It allows us to see something new or to appreciate the world in a new way. However, metaphors are always selective. They provide new perspectives, but they erase others. What they 'show', therefore, needs to be carefully examined. Wierzbicka's analysis of 'games' clearly shows that usually games are separate from real life. But the games of capitalism are the rules we increasingly live by. It would perhaps be more appropriate to think of these activities not in terms of games but in terms of war. Perhaps then, the very real suffering that people endure would not be forgotten.

The language choices we make are never innocent.

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