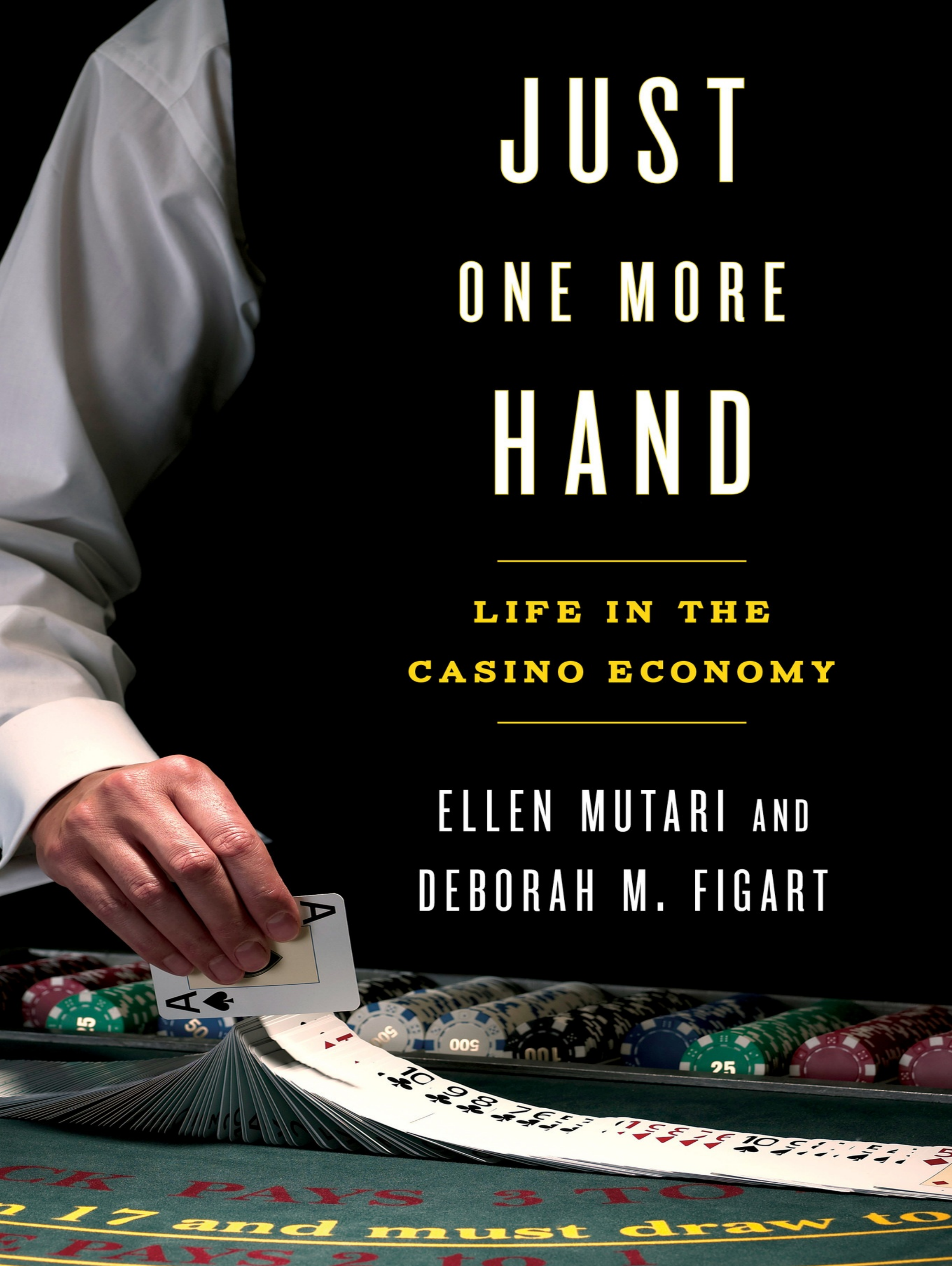

JUST ONE MORE HAND

LIFE IN THE CASINO ECONOMY

ELLEN MUTARI AND DEBORAH M. FIGART

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The Workers

Ally	dealer
Aparna	guest room attendant
Bernice	inspector
Caroline	dealer
Connie	surveillance officer
Dario	inventory clerk
Donna	dealer
Emil	craps dealer
Felicia	slot attendant
Graciela	floorperson
Heather	food server
Holly	dealer
Inez	steward
Isiah	dealer
Jesse	dealer
Keith	waiter
Ken	dual rate pit boss
Laurel	dealer
Lena	poker dealer
Lily	costumed beverage server
Manuela	guest room attendant
Marlene	dealer
Nana	seamstress
Nick	bar porter
Nora	loyalty card representative
Patrice	dual rate floorperson
Peter	waiter
Robin	manager
Ruth	beverage server
Sean	surveillance operator

SueBee	pit boss
Terrence	slot technician
Valerie	slot attendant
Walter	food server
Zoe	beverage server

Preface

On a cold winter Wednesday in February 2014, 1,300 people showed up for an "emergency job fair" at the Golden Nugget casino in Atlantic City. They had heard that fifty job openings were going to be filled immediately. With local casino employment levels at their lowest point in thirty years, the shutdown just one month earlier of another casino that put 1,600 employees out of work, and New Jersey's unemployment rate stubbornly above 7 percent, hopeful applicants lined up in droves for a chance to win one of the positions. The queue snaked around one floor and down the stairs to another floor. The odds of actually landing a job made slot machines look like relatively good investments. Yet, the job fair still seemed like a rare silver lining amid cloudy skies: Executive Vice President and General Manager Tom Pohlman had told the media that the Golden Nugget was seeing a spike in customers following the closing of local competitor Atlantic Club casino. It was looking to hire additional dealers, as well as front desk attendants, cocktail servers, valet attendants, and more.

Then came the heartbreaking announcement from the Golden Nugget's corporate office in Las Vegas: "While our gaming revenue has been reported as slightly up in Atlantic City, the comparative increase in business is off [of] a low base and not the reason for the job fair."[1] Instead, applicants were asked if they would relocate to a newer Golden Nugget casino in Lake Charles, Louisiana, that wasn't scheduled to open until the end of the year. They were also told that the Atlantic City property still might hire—but not until warmer weather increased seasonal summer business.

Hard-working people desperate for jobs and being told they had to transplant themselves away from family and community to get them. A recession compounding the long-term loss of business to newer competitors. Where had we seen this story before?

In 1995, we moved to southern New Jersey from southeast Michigan. Teaching economics in Michigan in the early 1990s had allowed us a front-row seat to watch how the economic restructuring of the U.S. economy away from a manufacturing base was transforming people's lives and livelihoods. Southeast Michigan is dominated—economically, culturally, and politically—by the dynamics of the U.S. automobile industry. In 1990, Deb had landed a tenure-track job in economics (and was subsequently tenured) at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Ypsilanti was the site of Ford Motor Company's Willow Run bomber factory built during World War II; the plant was shifted to auto production under several owners after the war, eventually becoming a General Motors (GM) facility. While working on her dissertation, Ellen spent several semesters as an economics instructor at Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan, the city made famous in the 1989 Michael Moore documentary Roger and Me. Many of the students taking community college classes in Flint were laid off GM workers whose tuition was subsidized under a union-negotiated agreement. Although our own research during this period focused on issues facing working women, particularly pay equity, flexible working time, and the feminization of work, we often taught and learned from students who were raised in the shadow of the local industry. Any time we needed to illustrate a concept in class, we relied upon examples from the auto industry, knowing that every one of our students would "get it."

Using the auto industry to teach economics was germane because it was such a crucial industry in shaping the concepts and language that we use to talk about economic life. Fordism, for example, is a term that describes the political economy of the mid-twentieth-century United States. The term honors Henry Ford, the automobile industry executive who pioneered the "Five Dollar Day." In simplified terms—far more simplified than the actual historical record of whether, how, and why Ford paid relatively high wages to his workers—auto workers who made good wages could afford to buy cars. The Fordist era of U.S. economic history was a period marked by mass production (assembly line manufacturing) and mass consumption (the rising living standards of middle-class Americans). Keynesian economic policy was the consensus approach, since the oligopolistic manufacturing industries of this era needed to maintain demand for their goods and services in the domestic market.[2]

Hard work became a badge of honor and a marker of masculinity.[3] Strong labor unions offered workers—particularly male workers—the kind of job security and good wages that supported escalating consumption standards, even as they also afforded employers a respite from strife on the shop floor. While many workin families outside of the dominant economic sector were left out of this "Golden Age of American capitalism and the unpaid work of homemakers that sustained the market economy was rendered invisible, it was nevertheless a period marked by income convergence and relative prosperity.[4] And since middle-class families were doing well, they tended not to begrudge the social safety net that was provided to catch those on the outside.

Starting in the 1970s, however, the institutional foundations of Fordism began to unravel. The Michigan we moved to in 1990 was going through hard times, eve as other parts of the United States were prospering in the so-called new economy. Globalization—that shorthand term for the process that resulted from technologica changes making it cheaper to communicate information and ship goods across borders—was, of course, one instrumental factor in this shift. Manufacturing, especially the less-skilled, routinized jobs on assembly lines, was increasingly outsourced overseas. As manufacturers produced and traded across borders, their workers did not need to be their customers. The virtuous circle of Fordism was broken. Manufacturing workers were losing their jobs or facing stagnant wages an decreases in benefits. Consequently, our students and their families were watchin good jobs slip through their fingers.

When we moved "back east," we landed in another area dominated by an industry. In 1995, Atlantic City's casinos were flourishing. Busloads of patrons arrived daily to play the slots or some cards. Couples would be dressed up in slick suits, ruffles, and sequins, excited to leave their normal life behind for a while. Small groups of women heading down after work would book a cheap motel room to take a nap and change clothes before a night of partying. Regulars just wore their street clothes, and restlessly fidgeted during the ride. In those days, the bus fare was free or minimal because the casinos would reimburse the cost of travel for gamblers whose round trip was initiated in places like the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York City. We sometimes rode the bus with them—but as paying customers because our trip was the reverse, originating in Atlantic City.

There was a charge of anticipation in the air as the bus full of gamblers pulled into the casino garage or parking lot. A casino greeter would get on the bus and give everyone their paper voucher, to be exchanged at a cashier’s window in the sponsoring casino. Each bus stopped at one or two casinos when it arrived, and patrons chose buses that went to their favorites. An escape from their dead-end jobs with minimal pensions or no pensions at all, and from fretting over the rising balances on their credit cards, the casinos beckoned gamblers with the possibility of a new kind of American Dream—a dream of quick riches for a lucky few. The atmosphere tended to be much more subdued on early morning return trips back to Manhattan. This was partly due to the time of day, but the quiet also seemed to occupy the gap between dreams and reality.

Our move from Michigan to New Jersey followed the same trajectory as the economy. Services—especially the selling of intangible experiences—were replacing the manufacturing workplaces that were so critical to the livelihoods of previous generations of workers, including our students back in Michigan. We had left the rustbelt behind, and, like Dorothy, found ourselves in a sparkling and colorful new land.[5] New and newly renovated casinos promised adventure and excitement. Advances in technology spurred progressive jackpots linked across casinos. Customers watched professional poker on television and demanded it in the casinos.

Not to say that we were wearing green glasses that made everything in this peculiar industry look like emeralds. Financialization was replacing the manufacturing giants of the Fordist era with the Wizards of Wall Street.[6] Making money with money was the order of the day. Middle-income and even lower-income households tried to jump in on the action during the stock market bubble and the housing bubble. Casino gambling is an even more accessible way to participate in this world where you could become wealthy as pieces of paper changed hands.

Not interested in gambling ourselves, we were intrigued by casinos as workplaces. After all, we are labor economists. We are fascinated by how people earn a living. The germination of this book came from wondering how jobs in the casinos compared with the old manufacturing jobs. Could you build a life working in Atlantic City’s booming casinos?

The idea for this study sat in the back of our minds for years, as we gradually settled into life in South Jersey. We were diverted into other projects, but kept thinking that someday we really needed to take up the challenge of investigating the work lives of casino employees. When we finally initiated this project in 2006, we now had new students, new neighbors, and new friends. In Atlantic County, almost everyone’s life is touched by the casinos. Once we decided to do a study interviewing casino workers about their jobs, it was hard to separate fieldwork fror everyday life. If we mentioned what we were doing, everyone had a story to tell, a person who might be willing to participate in an interview, an opinion on the state of the industry.

Which was in flux. We quickly found that we were no longer focusing on an isolated case study. As we describe in subsequent chapters, the now-global casinc gaming industry has expanded rapidly. Many folks who used to ride the bus to Atlantic City have more accessible places to gamble up and down the East Coast. The success of two casinos on Native American reservations in Connecticut spurre a new wave of expansion in the mid-to-late 1990s focused on slot parlors and “racinos” (racetracks with slot machines). Gradually, one state after another has tried to upgrade to full-service commercial casinos. As we write, states such as Ne York, Massachusetts, and Florida are hotly debating whether or how to expand the number of large-scale casinos with table games and resort amenities. At the same time, gambling revenues are falling in many of the earlier gaming states, includin Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois, and Michigan.[7] Atlantic City’s casinos—and most of the locales offering casino gaming in the United States—now operate in a saturated market. Three more Atlantic City casinos are projected to close by the end of 2014, with a potential loss of over 6,000 more jobs in the industry and ripple effects on local businesses, real estate values, and the tax base.

Why do they keep building? Each time states decide to build more casinos to boost tax revenues, casino companies risk losing market share to a competitor if they don’t bid on the project. The philosophy seems to be to keep moving to avoic sinking. On the other hand, the local communities placing all their chips on casinc as an economic development strategy face increasingly long odds. The driving distance to the closest casino is getting shorter and shorter. Each locale has to fin new ways to draw in customers or else they have to rely on revenue from gambler in their own backyard. And even if the casino is profitable, the larger question for economic development is whether the casinos promote rising living standards. Th definition of economic development is not simply the proliferation of businesses. Good jobs are therefore critical to economic development because most peoples’ income derives from wages, not profits.

Our situated study of jobs in the new economy of casino gambling therefore has broad implications for citizens weighing whether the promises offered by casino development are likely to be realized. The answer to this question is not simple. We found an industry that traditionally offers higher wages than many other service-sector jobs, but the recent introduction of cost-cutting practices is making it harder to find full-time jobs with benefits. We met folks who loved their jobs, others who couldn’t wait to leave, and still others who were let go. We heard happy stories about a job where every day is different and horror stories about abusive customers and unhealthy working conditions. Yet even those who loved their jobs felt the best days were a thing of the past. While longtime employees ar fighting against concessions and wage stagnation, younger workers juggle multiple part-time and seasonal jobs at several casinos. Listening to their struggles, over and over we heard a dynamic story of change rather than static judgments about good jobs or bad jobs.

The individual experiences of the study participants who sat down for interviews about their work lives were shaped by trends in the political economy o the gaming industry and the U.S. economy as a whole. And the changes casino employees are facing are familiar ones for contemporary workers in many industries. The changes we witnessed in Michigan as the old Fordist regime unraveled are rippling through the rest of the economy. As the world economy slowly recovers from the Great Recession, the long-term trend toward increasingly precarious employment has accelerated. Secure jobs with benefits are scarce for everyone but the most privileged.[8] Deep-rooted unemployment and underemployment undermines the ability of families and communities to sustain themselves.

Casino gaming is an apt lens for viewing this new economic order. Today we are surrounded by risk—the risk of losing our jobs, losing our benefits, losing our homes, losing our credit ratings, and losing our economic footing. Our study participants are living in a casino economy. But, increasingly, so are the rest of us

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Papers based on our research were presented at conferences of the Labor and Employment Relations Association, the Allied Social Sciences Association, and the International Association for Feminist Economics. The other participants and attendees at these sessions gave us valuable feedback. This project would have been much more difficult without the resource of a strong local newspaper, the

Press of Atlantic City. Our editor, Suzanne Staszak-Silva at Rowman & Littlefield, supported our project with enthusiasm. Laura Reiter, our production editor, smoothly guided us to the finish line, assisted by the careful and thoughtful work of copyeditor Jo-Ann Parks.

Most importantly, of course, we are grateful to the anonymous study participants who took time from their busy schedules to answer our questions and tell their stories, stories that are much fuller than we portray here. We enjoyed every minute we spent getting to know them. Our research would not be possible without their trust, intelligence, and patience. This book is dedicated to them.

1. The description of this job fair and the text of this statement are from Jennifer Bogdan, "Golden Nugget Job Fair: Work-Seekers Pack Casino," Press of Atlantic City, February 27, 2014.

2. The school of macroeconomic theory based on the work of John Maynard Keyne views demand for goods and services as the primary driver of economic growth. Price adjustments will not self-regulate an economy out of a recession because oligopolistic industries tend to cut production and jobs rather than lowering price This creates a downward spiral as consumers with lower incomes continue to reduce their spending. Since it is rational for businesses and consumers to tighten their belts, government spending is needed to revive the economy. Government stimulus creates an upward spiral known as the multiplier effect. Greater income leads to increased consumer spending in the private sector. Thus, government spending is not viewed as competing with private investment, but as a way of boosting it.

3. Wayne A. Lewchuk, "Men and Monotony: Fraternalism as a Managerial Strategy at the Ford Motor Company," Journal of Economic History 53, no. 4 (1993): 824–5

4. Arthur MacEwan and John Miller, Economic Collapse, Economic Change: Getting to the Roots of the Crisis (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2011); and Timothy Noah, The Great Divergence: America's Growing Inequality Crisis and What We Can Do Abou It (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

5. This is, of course, an allusion to the 1939 film version of The Wizard of Oz.

6. Robin Greenwood and David Scharfstein, "The Growth of Finance," Journal of Economic Perspectives 27, no. 2 (2013): 3–28.

7. Christopher Palmeri, "Casinos Know When to Fold 'Em," Bloomberg Businessweek, April 7–14, 2014, 25–26.

8. Guy Standing, The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

Chapter 1

Stories from a Casino Economy

> It's a unique industry because you're basically, it's a factory job because you're producing, but you're not producing a product. It's open 24/7, which most business aren't. You're dealing with the public constantly. You're being watched constantly. You come into contact with the very rich to the very poor; every nationality walks through the doors. You never, it's like live theater because you never know what's going to happen. You think it's going to be a normal day, and somebody comes walking through and does something just so bizarre that, it's like you can't even make it up. It's just like . . . it's like . . . it's so . . . it's never the same.
>
> —Ken, Dual-Rate Pit Manager

The excitement of participating in a perennial party and the adventure of meeting people from every walk of life—from NBA basketball pros and Hollywood producers to gypsies in town for a funeral. A winning player tosses a $1,000 chip onto the serving tray of a cocktail waitress. Regular customers become like family sharing major life events. The challenge of spotting cheaters. The pride of learning how to handle people when they are at their worst. Walking away at the end of the shift, knowing you made good money for yourself and your family.

And yet. . . . High rollers whose every whim must be gratified and whose abuse must be deflected. Slot machine players who refuse to leave a machine they expect to pay off any minute, so they urinate right where they sit. Exhaled smoke directly aimed at your face because you dealt a losing hand. Or being hit with a drink, or even worse, spit. Being called every possible vile name or swear word. Con artists who advise players and then ask for a piece of their winnings. Prostitutes hanging on the arm of a "whale," with sexual acts performed as if they were hidden from view under the gaming tables. Job auditions requiring a bikini or a short, revealing uniform, and "Please bend down and pick something up off the floor." Constant noise, noise, noise. More drinking. More smoke. More abuse. More unhappy losers.

Sound like a typical day at your job? It is life on the job in a casino.

People construct lives and identities in a particular context that is profoundly shaped by the economic structures in which they work. Workers in Atlantic City's casinos do this in an unusual environment. Gamblers come to hit the jackpot that will transform their lives, or at least to escape their daily routine for a short time. The physical environment of the casinos is designed around escapist fantasies of other places and times—from generic visions of opulence to specific daydreams of a nineteenth-century frontier saloon (Bally's Wild West Casino), ancient Roman bacchanals (Caesars Atlantic City), or a Maharajah's palace (Trump Taj Mahal). Time is supposed to be suspended. Casinos are open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and fifty-two weeks a year. The gaming floors typically have no windows and no clocks. But within these self-contained environments devoted to risk and reward, the diverse employees who make up the casino workforce are als seeking to create their lives. They punch time clocks, serve cocktails and meals, deal cards, spin wheels, deflect complaints, make beds, wash dishes and laundry, observe customers, monitor employees, fix plumbing and slot machines, and perform a myriad of other challenging, mundane, and sometimes curious tasks.

The fact of near-chronic losing influences the interaction between the service provider and the consumer, making gambling distinctive as compared with other experiences for sale in the leisure and entertainment sector of the economy. Gamblers generally lose, and the games played against the house are structured t ensure this is the case. The carrot of “comps” (rewards based on the amount a player bets) and free drinks offered to customers while gambling further complicate the transaction. Graciela, a former pit manager with over thirty years o experience who shifted to a part-time supervisor in order to go to college, compared the casinos with another popular entertainment option: “What makes a difference is because people expect something back. When you go to Disney Worl —I’ll just use Disney World, I love Disney World—you go there, you’re thinking, ‘I’r gonna have a great time.’ You’re not expecting Disney to give you something at the end of your stay.” She eloquently observed a few minutes later that “The truth of the exchange is less clear, it seems like, because you know you’re just going to get a movie or you know you’re gonna get a dance floor to dance on and other things. And in gambling, you don’t know what you’re getting back as the custome and customers may have unrealistic expectations about what they are gonna get back.” The free alcohol that lowers inhibitions doesn’t necessarily mix well with losing money. A relatively new dealer, Ally, noted when asked what makes casinos different as workplaces, “I guess probably the biggest comparison is that most people in the workplace don’t have to tolerate smoke and drunks. If a drunk came into an office he’d be tossed out. . . . That’s probably the biggest thing—the drinking. Alcohol changes personalities—let’s face it.”

In important ways, working in casinos is not much different than working in other industries in a market economy. There are bosses, good and bad, who affect your daily experience on the job. There are rules and regulations for job performance—especially strict ones in the gaming pits. There are uniforms to wea and roles to play. There are unionization campaigns and management memos about teamwork. There are conflicting demands from work and family life, and creative ways to solve the conflicts. There are people and policies that make the job better, and others that strip away one’s dignity. But central to our study is a story that workers all over can relate to: a workplace in an industry that seemed to promise a solid and stable livelihood is being transformed by competitive pressures, causing employees to lose their economic footing. What seemed like a good job one day becomes a bad job the next. So the experiences of Atlantic City’ casino employees are in many ways illustrative of what workers are facing and ho they are coping throughout the contemporary political economy.

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In a postindustrial United States, casinos have become both a metaphor for a roller-coaster economy and a key service industry selling experiences and dreams

As various economic bubbles have burst, the U.S. economy since the start of the new millennium has seemed to be more of a casino than a factory: a place where you put down your money and cross your fingers. Buying a home, saving for retirement, getting a student loan, starting a business, or even accepting a job seem like risky ventures rather than sure bets. In such turbulent times, we all seem to be gamblers, even when we do not intend to be.

But actual gambling is big business. Thirty-nine U.S. states have commercial casinos, tribal casinos, racetrack casinos, card rooms, and/or electronic gaming devices.[1] (We are not including states that only operate lotteries.) For a decade, gambling has been a form of entertainment with greater consumer expenditures than movie tickets, video games, theme parks, recorded music, and spectator sports combined. Commercial casinos alone earned over $37 billion just from their gaming operations in 2012. Casinos are major entertainment venues. The American Gaming Association reports that 34 percent of Americans visited a casin in 2012. Young adults (aged twenty-one to thirty-five) are even more likely to go t casinos; the same survey found 39 percent had visited a casino. Moreover, the casino industry is emblematic of a relatively recent wave of service industries that sell a form of experience as their product.

Casino billboards advertise: “Easy Street. It’s Only a Play Away.” Or “How Far Will You Go to Win Big?” And “Are You Ready to Play?” If you can get the customers in the door and into the gaming pits, these businesses guarantee revenue for “the house.” The casinos’ “edge” is improved by “payment of less tha true odds to winners (out of the losers’ pool).”[2] Gambling, for casino operators, was a sure bet.

It is no longer a sure bet. The enormous growth of recent decades has reached the point of market saturation. That is, when new markets and new casinos open, they try to “cannibalize” the customer base of their predecessors. Even prior to th economic and financial crisis that began in 2008, the growth pace of gaming across the United States was slowing. During the Great Recession and its aftershocks, revenue plummeted while casino operators found new profit centers overseas. Macau, a city in southern China located on a peninsula, surpassed Las Vegas as the world’s largest gaming market in 2006. Less than one-fourth of the gaming industry is now centered in the United States. The global casinos and gaming sector grew at the same time the industry was shrinking in the United States. The average annual decline in U.S. gross gaming revenue (or “win”), a key indicator used to gauge profitability, was 0.6 percent from 2006 through 2010.[3]

Atlantic City’s casinos faced even worse conditions. For example, Atlantic City experienced the country’s largest percentage decrease in gross gaming revenue i 2010, over 9 percent.[4] Despite the opening of a new casino in town, gross gamin revenue declined 8 percent in 2012.[5] Once the shiny new attraction that lured gamblers from all over the East Coast, if not the world, Atlantic City today is scrambling to find a formula that can restore its edge, providing lessons for policy makers and others committed to economic development and sustainable livelihoods.

Atlantic City’s efforts to restore its position as a destination resort demonstrat the difficulties for local communities that are building new casinos in the hopes of luring tourists. Las Vegas has successfully supplemented gambling with a broader appeal, but copying their model in today’s market is challenging. As casinos proliferate and gambling is more and more convenient, it ceases to be special. Wh plan a vacation to gamble when you can just drive a few miles to indulge? The voices of Atlantic City’s casino workers also show that a casino economy is increasingly a tough way to build a life. Though the jobs can seem fun and glamorous, gambling culture can grind you down. And, as the employers in the industry feel competitors and creditors breathing down their necks, a short-term focus on the bottom line is eroding those aspects of the jobs that were once value by employees. But this undermining of job quality is not unique to casinos. The U.S. economy has lost its edge in many industries and regions. Businesses are trying to survive by trimming, then cutting, then slashing costs. As they do, good jobs are harder to come by.

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The initial puzzle that prompted us to undertake this project was a concern with whether the casino economy was providing employees good jobs. We decide that it would be important to listen to what casinos workers said about what constituted a good job and what they viewed as the positive and negative qualitie of their own working lives.

Of course, we brought our own standpoint to this process. We view paid work as more than simply a means to material ends like buying a house, paying your bills, or saving to retire. Work, both paid and unpaid, is part of a complex economi process that can be referred to as social provisioning.[6] An economy, from this perspective, is how society organizes these provisioning activities, mediated by culture, ideology, and institutions. The processes involved in social provisioning, according to economist William Dugger, “produce goods and services, but they also produce people.”[7] People, as we see it, are the whole reason to have an economy. Their well-being is the most important end product of all. Sometimes policy makers, business analysts, and economists lose sight of this, and talk about people, especially workers, in terms of what they must sacrifice for the good of the economy, treating individuals as means rather than as ends in themselves.

Our lens on paid work differs from the standard economics model. In labor economics textbooks, paid employment generates what economists call disutility, meaning dissatisfaction. It is not something that we do voluntarily. This dissatisfaction has to be compensated by paying us to do something that has no intrinsic value for us. Our pay is then used to purchase goods and services that do bring us satisfaction. Work does not provide meaning in this view; “meaning” in economic life comes from the satisfaction of wants through consumption.[8] So when economists and others started doing research that categorized some jobs as “good jobs” and other jobs as “bad jobs,” they initially focused on how much the jobs paid, along with other monetary benefits. Bad jobs were jobs that did not allow someone to achieve the material standard of living that a particular society considers normal.

The literature on good jobs and bad jobs took off in the 1970s, as the U.S. service sector was rapidly expanding but the manufacturing sector was still seen as the nation’s economic heart.[9] Political economists such as Peter Doeringer anc Michael Piore introduced an approach that they called dual labor market theory.[1 The idea behind dual labor markets was that the job market was divided between jobs in what they called the primary sector and the secondary sector. In the primary sector, good jobs were well paid and had career ladders. Secondary secto jobs were low paid and had lots of turnover and few opportunities for advancement. Economic restructuring, specifically the declining share of employment in the manufacturing sector and the increase in service-sector employment, was depicted as a declining primary sector and expanding secondar sector. This research was intended to correct an overemphasis on individual worke characteristics (supply) by analyzing the employer (demand) side of labor market In other words, how much you earn is not solely determined by how hard you work or the education and skills you acquire. Structural factors like the profitability of the industry, the degree of competition your employer faces, and whether the industry is unionized are equally important.

Over time, scholars came to recognize that many industries, especially in the service sector, include both high-wage and low-wage occupations. Attention turned to good jobs versus bad jobs within industries. Research on job quality also gradually moved beyond a narrow focus on financial compensation to explore other job characteristics. As more studies asked workers to rate what they valued in a job, investigators found that people themselves place tremendous value on jo aspects such as autonomy, fulfillment, and ability to balance work and family—in addition to pay. Yet it seemed that the good characteristics clustered together in some jobs and the bad characteristics clustered in others. And it appeared that jol quality was declining in the United States and other postindustrial economies.[11]

The focus on clustering of job characteristics led to the argument that jobs are segmented by race and gender. That is, good jobs and bad jobs are often allocatec to individuals on the basis of the gender, race, and ethnicity of the worker.[12] Good jobs were still defined as breadwinner jobs with full-time pay and benefits that enabled the employee to support a family. These jobs were disproportionately allocated to white males. White women were channeled into jobs that supported mothering while racial and ethnic minorities found employment in jobs that required co-breadwinning because they did not pay family-sustaining wages. Eventually, feminist scholars challenged the idea that this was a two-step process first a job is created and then there is a hierarchy in job allocation. Instead, feminists argued that job characteristics are shaped by employers’ expectations about the potential job-holders—that some jobs are created as male breadwinner jobs while others are designed for workers with family responsibilities, for example

Dramatic changes in the U.S. labor force at the end of the twentieth century helped contribute to more rethinking about job quality. The workforce became increasingly diverse. Women, especially mothers with young children, were far more likely to be on the job due to a range of factors that pushed them and pullec them into paid employment. Discriminatory barriers to entry into nontraditional occupations were reduced—though of course not eliminated—for many groups of workers. New immigrants came in search of employment as well. The assumption that certain job characteristics are good regardless of who holds them was increasingly problematic. Instead, there was more attention to the differences among workers and their needs, dreams, and desires. Workers may hold different values, and social values may themselves change over time. Our interview informants confirm that job quality is a multi-dimensional concept and diverse employees define a good job in terms of their own life perspective.

Most importantly for our study, these diverse transformations have led scholar to conclude that job quality is not static. There are no intrinsically good jobs or ba jobs.[13] Jobs are continually in the process of being developed, defined, merged, and at times eliminated. Every time there is a change in job responsibilities, working conditions, the number or types of employees collaborating to accomplish a set of tasks, and, of course, the pay and benefits, a job is reconstructed. Even static wages, in a world of rising prices, change job quality. Jobs are shaped and reshaped by individuals, collective behavior, and institutions.

Business owners and their managers play a pivotal role in this process through all the decisions they make about hiring, promotions, and working conditions. The have to be attentive to the economic environment in which they operate, includin competitors, financial markets, conditions in related industries, and their custome base. But they also make decisions on the basis of prevailing social norms, and sometimes even their own ethical standards and beliefs.[14] Employees themselve are not passive in this process—either as individuals or as members of unions. Politics and public policy also shape job quality. Employers and employees both jockey for influence in a political world where employers have more funding but employees have greater numbers. Citizens and broader communities view themselves as stakeholders in the kinds of jobs available, so they also seek a voic through political channels. All of these dynamics have played out in Atlantic City's casino economy.

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We met Laurel, a young grandmother in her fifties, through mutual friends. Laurel, a white high school graduate, has spent most of her career as a dealer at Caesars, after beginning at another casino. Her employer, Caesars Entertainment, is the second largest global casino operator, and currently the owner of four Atlantic City casinos (Caesars, Harrah's, Bally's, and Showboat). Like others in the industry, she was drawn in through family connections; her cousin was a dealer. Her first employer told her to attend dealer school and then tested her for assignment to the gaming floor. She remembers her first day: "They tell you to come in with black pants and a white blouse . . . then you go to the benefits office where you apply for the job and they take you to the casino floor and whatever games you have they'll tell you, 'Okay, jump into that game' and they'll watch you Then you'll do whatever other game you deal and they watch you and that's how you get hired." In casino parlance, it's called an audition. They watch how you dea the game and how you deal with customers. Laurel wanted to deal craps because of the exciting, high-stakes action. Management told her she was too short for the craps pit and sent her to roulette at first. At that time in the early 1980s, it was ~~more likely that they didn’t think a woman dealer belonged in craps. Think of the~~ names of the dealers in any craps pit: a boxman, a stickman, and one or two base dealers, often called “croupiers” in European casinos.

When she moved to Caesars in the early 1990s, it was because Caesars had the best toke (tip) rate in town. To keep herself from being bored, Laurel learned new games and rotated among them, what are referred to as “carnival games” such as three-card poker, four-card poker, Let It Ride, Texas Hold’ Em, and Caribbean stud poker. These tend to have a higher edge for the house than regula games like blackjack or baccarat. She did not get paid a higher base wage for knowing more games, yet they made her a real asset to the casino. When we interviewed her she said, “so tonight, I’m going to Asia Poker in pit twelve.” Caesars promoted Laurel to a floorperson who watches or supervises games, but the job didn’t earn tips. She suffered a loss in income without tips, so she gave it up to return to full-time dealing “because I’m making more money dealing.”

There were some very good years for Laurel and other dealers in the industry. For example, she worked part-time for several years because she had young children, and her employer at the time offered benefits to part-timers. The flexibility helped her balance work and family. “It’s different now,” she said, referring to the aftermath of an acquisition of her longtime workplace, as well as Bally’s Atlantic City, by Harrah’s Entertainment in 2005. (The name of the parent corporation was changed to Caesars Entertainment soon thereafter because it hac better brand appeal.) These days, it is difficult to secure a full-time dealer positior at all if you are a new employee, because part-timers no longer get benefits. And casinos have been cutting benefits for full-timers, too. Venting her frustration witt the new management dictates when we interviewed her in 2007, Laurel said: “They made our benefits horrible. I never had such bad benefits, like if you have t go in the hospital now it’s like you have a $1,500 deductible.” She added that the company also charged a lot more for benefits through paycheck deductions: “They went up sky high.” “And plus another thing they were doing is [the parent company] tried to weed away people that are making the most money,” meaning the senior, full-time dealers. Like Laurel. She was at the top rate of $8.50 base pay per hour and the rate for new hires was $4.00 per hour. Corporate, she felt, wante to replace her with a lower-paid part-time employee. But when we spoke with her again in 2013, she was holding onto her job despite the pressure. In fact, she had become active in the new dealer’s union, and felt the grievance procedure was helping protect jobs. And get her more money, as she is now up to almost $10.00 an hour plus tips.

Zoe laughed as she repeated a line that she has uttered many times before: “I am fifty-two years old. I am not what corporate would think is the ideal cocktail waitress.” “Corporate,” in this case, also refers to Caesars Entertainment. A white woman who was born and raised in Atlantic City, Zoe is a “Day-Oner,” meaning that she helped open Resorts Casino Hotel in 1978, directly after graduating from high school. Her jobs, at various casinos and family-owned restaurants throughout the city until she settled at Showboat over twenty-five years ago, have helped her along with her husband, raise three children. It has been, in her words, a “great job,” particularly for a working mother. While she joked about the fact that “To ge the job you had to show up in a bikini,” she recognized that any job working with the public requires a lot of hidden skills: “You have to be able to talk to all sorts of people. You have to kind of head off conflict if you can, and not make conflict.”

Her job security, she said, has come from being a union member (Local 54 of UNITE HERE). Being a union member, however, has not prevented major changes in the way she does her work. Nor could it prevent Caesars Entertainment from announcing its intention to close Showboat one year after our interview, abruptly forcing her to look for a new line of work. As she took one of her rare days off in 2013 to talk with us, she observed that “One of the reasons why I’ve always done the job and liked the job and been involved in the job is because I liked interactin with the customers. I like, that’s part of, and I could always get a bigger tip out of somebody because I could schmooze them or whatever. And now that’s not . . . because I’m timed. I only have six minutes from the time the drink is ordered from the iPad to the time I deliver it—only six minutes.”

About three years ago, she indicated, management introduced a new system for ordering and serving free drinks for gamblers—the “iApp” system. The casino hired new employees, mostly younger, to walk up and down the casino floor with iPhones (now iPad minis) and take drink orders. Zoe described the process: “They go up to you and say ‘Would you like a drink?’ And they would punch in the drink and I’m to wait in the bar, and the drink [order] is shot into the bar. The bartender makes the drink and it’s put in a row. And if it’s my turn, because I no longer have a station—it’s called the next tray where everybody just waits for their turn. . . . I take the next seven drinks out to the casino floor and serve them whether they ar anywhere on the casino floor.” Because the customers for these seven drinks are spread out, “you are kind of like ping-ponging around a little bit instead of the traditional, the older way, where you would just go up and down your aisle or up around your one pit. Now you’re kind of like, darting around, kind of like The Hunger Games.” The new system saves the casino money: “What it’s done is shrunk the staff down. They don’t need as many people any longer. They don’t need as many cocktail servers.” Conversations with customers are eliminated. Not surprisingly, tips—which cocktail servers keep rather than pool with the others—have declined. And the cocktail waitresses, who used to be trained to monitor customers’ alcohol intake and cut them off when they had imbibed too much, can no longer keep track of how many drinks someone has had.

Terrence, a middle-aged African American man, also helped raise a family with his casino job. He is a huge fan of late senator and vice president Hubert Humphrey, especially because of the Minnesota senator’s work in developing the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program. After dropping out of college in the 1970s, Terrence found himself, in his own words, “poor and destitute.” He did not have meaningful skills or experience, so he found himself in a “Catch 22 situation. Employees didn’t have the training to get the job, and the employers didn’t want to hire you because you needed experience.” CETA paid fo job training while he worked in a public service job, but to qualify he had to go on public assistance which was a blow to his pride. Once in the program, he was face ~~with a choice between learning to deal blackjack or to service slot machines.~~ Terrence chose to become a slot machine technician because he had read Alvin Toffler’s books, Future Shock and The Third Wave, and believed it was important t become comfortable with technology and technological change: “Primarily the thing I did the most, I think, for myself is I helped myself to feel comfortable around high technology.”

As Toffler would have predicted, the technology that Terrence was initially trained to fix has become obsolete. Slot machines no longer accept coins. Terrenc described the changes on the job: “Well, day-to-day, right now, a typical day for me in a casino now, is almost kind of boring, as a matter of fact. Because the fact that [pause] due to the nature of the slot machines, right now, as they exist today I theorized years ago, about fifteen or so years ago—I talked to one of the chief technicians—I told him that the slot machines of the future, or the casinos of the future, will require fewer and fewer technicians to service more and more slot machines.” He continued, “Why is that? Because of automation.”

Terrence graphically described the old system:

> Okay, imagine if you will, a customer, here’s a typical customer walking through the casino. They’re walking through the casino; they pull money out of their wallets. They look for a change person who then sells them coins, from a cart, or from a booth. And then they put the coin, they got the coins, they start playing. They put the coins in the slot, they pull the handle. One, two, three, four. If [the coins] get stuck, you have to call somebody to unstick them. When they get a pay up, it pays out in coins. If that gets jammed, you get that. Most of the work that was done was done because it was a coin—basically, it’s a metal wafer that has to go inside the machine. It’s a bucket inside the machine, a hopper, that pays out a little hole in the bottom of the slot machine where excess coins go. . . . But it used up a tremendous amount of manpower, because somebody had to sell the coins, someone had to collect the coins. Someone had to pay the jackpot. Someone also had to fill the machine with money when it ran out. And it employed a tremendous amount of people.

In contrast, he described the current, coinless slot machines as akin to an automated teller machine at a bank:

> Okay, now we’re gonna skip, go from that to what it is now. So, the customer puts a bill inside the machine, the machine gives them credits, they play, they get done, it spits out a ticket, you go to a window, you either get your cash or go to a machine and then use that. It eliminates the need to have a hard count team who collects the coins at the end of the night, a cashier who sells the coins, an attendant who has to attend the problems with the machines, and technicians, who fix the machines. Now there are fewer and fewer technicians. Hardly any slot attendants—where you used to have 130 slot attendants, now we have thirty. We used to have, at our place, about, at least 200 slot cashiers.

> Now we have maybe twenty. We used to have thirty-seven technicians; now we have maybe nineteen. But we still have 2,700 slot machines.

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In order to appreciate the individual stories that casino workers tell, we need t better understand the industry and the city in which they work. The changing fortunes of casino gaming in the local and national economies are profoundly shaping the opportunities and experiences for the 30,000-plus workers in Atlantic City's casinos and their compatriots across the United States. Changes in job security and job quality, such as the changes described by Laurel, Zoe, and Terrence, are often wrought by macroeconomic fluctuations of the nation's economy that impact specific industries or groups of workers. Tight labor markets (meaning low unemployment rates) boost employees' bargaining power while recessions and unemployment give employers the upper hand. Product demand is also affected by the macro economy. Gambling was long touted as a recession-proof industry, offering relatively cheap entertainment akin to movies during the Great Depression. The economic crisis of 2008, however, disproved this contentior Weighed down by debt and losing their nest eggs (house values and retirement accounts), middle-class consumers cut back. In an industry where line workers depend on tips for a good livelihood, shrinking demand has a direct and profound impact on living standards.

There are also microeconomic dynamics within particular industries, as businesses strive to increase their market power and operate as oligopolies or monopolies. Textbook economics extols models of "perfect competition," that is, markets for products where many sellers compete to produce identical low-cost goods or services as efficiently as possible and sell them to buyers with perfect information about prices and quality. A rational business owner, however, abhors perfect competition. Political economists since Karl Marx have observed the constant striving for market power that leads businesses to consolidate and merge differentiate their products, and externalize costs. In the mid-twentieth century, Joseph Schumpeter, who was both a champion of free-market capitalism and an admirer of Marx, embraced this dynamism, coining the term "creative destruction to describe the process of innovation that can threaten the position of mature industries.[15] As entrepreneurs continuously seek to be the first out of the gate with the next new thing, they render existing product lines and production processes—or older casinos—obsolete. In contrast, Paul Sweezy and Paul A. Baran radical critics of market economies, suggested that maturing industries will tend t concentrate in order to preserve their market power.[16] The consolidated market leaders use strategies such as cost cutting, product diversification, and lobbying for government favors to retain their position. Baran and Sweezy spurred a line of research starting in the 1960s on the economic and social impact of this drive toward monopolization, focusing on capitalism's tendency toward stagnation and an incessant downward pressure on wages.[17]

These dynamics are clear in the contemporary casino gaming industry. But we need to review how we got to this point in the history of the industry. Nevada pioneered the modern era of casino gaming starting in the 1930s. Las Vegas, its casino mecca, was isolated in the desert, built relatively from scratch, and did not spark an immediate wave of imitators. Then Atlantic City ventured into the industry in the 1970s as the U.S. economy shifted from the Golden Age of postwar prosperity to the recent era of sluggish economic growth, deindustrialization, and income polarization. Atlantic City's gamble with gaming was viewed as a success story that inspired other economically depressed areas. Casinos, it was thought, would bring jobs and tax revenues and enhance the economic development of surrounding communities.

Expansion of the industry nationwide started around 1989, about a decade after Atlantic City opened its first casino doors. Initially, gaming operations outsid of New Jersey and Nevada were mostly situated on Native American reservations and riverboats. For example, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, passed in 1988, created the structural framework for the operation and regulation of Indian gamin through the National Indian Gaming Commission and the U.S. Department of the Interior. Though Native American casinos are owned by the tribes, the day-to-day operations are often under contract with a commercial casino company.[18] Iowa's riverboats started cruising in 1991, followed quickly by Illinois, Mississippi, Louisiana, and other states on the Mississippi River. Many of these casinos were positioned to draw revenue (for state governments as well as casinos) from population centers in neighboring states. This pattern drove the escalation in riverboat casinos, as states tried to recapture lost revenue.[19]

Sensing a new revenue stream, more and more states beckoned the industry onto dry land. A 1999 report by the National Gambling Impact Study Commission (created by the U.S. Congress) helped legitimate the industry, even as it pointed t the need for regulation and possible ensuing social problems. In its recommendations, the Commission noted that "especially in economically depressed communities, casino gambling has demonstrated the ability to generat economic development through the creation of quality jobs." The Commission contrasted the job creation impact of casinos with the lack of economic development fostered by lotteries, Internet gambling, and non-casino electronic gaming devices.[20] Low- and middle-income communities latched onto the Atlantic City model. Casinos, racinos, and slot parlors gradually expanded into urban areas such as Detroit, Michigan (in 1999); Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (in 2010); and Cleveland, Ohio (in 2012).

Equally important for our study, ownership within the industry changed. Discovering a viable profit stream, non-gaming corporations absorbed casinos and casino companies starting in the 1990s, streamlining processes and changing the culture of these workplaces. The industry "moved out from the gray shadows of illegitimacy and [became] a major and visible presence on Wall Street and Main Street," according to William Eadington, director of the Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming at the University of Nevada, Reno.[21] First firms from other hospitality sectors, including hotel chains like Hilton, moved into the casino gaming industry. Eventually, as with other sectors of the U.S. economy private equity firms and other financial speculators sought a stake in this booming