

Chapter One

THE PROBLEM

Now of all good things, truth holds first
place among gods and men alike.

—Plato, *Laws*, book V

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE MARVELED at the American spirit. His travels through the country in the early 1800s revealed a people with great ambitions, in constant motion, with remarkable ingenuity, and an appreciation for getting things done. In Europe, people seldom dared to dream. In the United States, where the established social and cultural orders of the old continent had been set aside and everyone had been given a fresh start, people could aspire to great things. A new society founded on equality unleashed fantastic energy, freedom, and movement. When Tocqueville asked an American sailor why the ships of his country were built to last such a short time, he was told that technological advances made any given ship obsolete in a few years. The “great nation” of the United States, Tocqueville reflected, “directs its every action” ultimately towards one goal: “indefinite perfectibility” (Tocqueville 2003: 523).

This may have been too simplistic an interpretation of the new country. But my recent yearlong stay in Denmark helped me see that Tocqueville captured something of life in the United States.

Chapter One

Anyone spending some time in Denmark will eventually run into Jante's Law. The law was formulated by Aksel Sandemose in his 1933 novel *A Refugee Crosses His Tracks*, where he portrays the culture and beliefs of the residents of the small Danish town of Nykøbing Mors. Virtually all Danes are familiar with the ten principles of the law. Many embrace them to a good extent. They permeate public and private life, the education system from kindergarten on, politics, business, sports, family life, and more. Here is what they say:

1. Don't think that you are special
2. Don't think that you are of the same standing as us
3. Don't think that you are smarter than us
4. Don't fancy yourself as being better than us
5. Don't think that you know more than us
6. Don't think that you are more important than us
7. Don't think that you are good at anything
8. Don't laugh at us
9. Don't think that anyone cares about you
10. Don't think that you can teach us anything.

Without a doubt, most of us in the United States are raised to believe exactly the opposite of Jante's Law. We are told to feel special and strive for new heights. Being smarter, better, and more knowledgeable than others are virtues, not faults. And most of us certainly believe, if not pray, that we matter and are good at something. While we do not necessarily want to laugh at others, we work extremely hard to make sure that others care about us and that we, in turn, have something that they can learn from us. Indeed, as recent comparative studies of American and Danish cultures show, Americans "hold unrealistically positive views of themselves and believe that they are much better than average on many attributes." Quite the opposite applies to the Danes (Thomsen et al. 2007: 446). Danes, in turn, "show aversion to conspicuously successful persons," while "Americans aspire to such distinction" (Nelson and Shavitt 2002: 440).

The Problem

We live in an intensely driven and dynamic society—a life, in the words of Tocqueville, of fervor. But while this is clear, it is also true that we seldom stop to think and analyze what exactly we are after and why. Instead, we subject ourselves with little awareness to the profound demands that our society imposes on us. As Liah Greenfeld recently put it, we are overwhelmed by “busyness” but lack understanding: convinced that the “sky is the limit” and conscious that it is our duty to “find” if not “make” ourselves, we are breathlessly running from task to task, place to place, and mission to mission (Greenfeld 2005a: 331). Max Weber wrote that our Puritan ancestors taught us that idleness is a sin (Weber 2002). One could say that we learned that lesson all too well. We have been running ever since even if—as Weber himself predicted—so much has changed around us.

Nothing represents our restless and confused mentality better, perhaps, than our great love of “winning” and deep fear of “losing.” Americans embrace competition. According to the World Values Survey,¹ as table 1.1 shows, our approval of competition is unmatched by any other major industrialized country on earth. Nearly half of our population firmly believes in the goodness of competition. This is much more than the numbers in Germany, Great Britain, and Italy. It is twice the number in France. In Japan, less than one fifth of the population values competition decisively. The figure for Denmark is 27 percent. Indeed, when we consider the whole world, the United States is more positively inclined toward competition than most countries—a fact that is well established among comparative psychologists and sociologists (Nelson and Shavitt 2002). As we shall see throughout this book, Americans also believe more strongly than others in the fairness of unequal outcomes, rewarding those who try and succeed, and leaving those who fall behind to their own devices.

At the same time, despite all this and the pressures it generates, *we have remarkably little understanding of what competition—and winning and losing in particular—are all about.* We use the terms with different and sometimes contradictory, but never explicit, connotations and meanings. We often think of winning as

Chapter One

TABLE 1.1
EMBRACING COMPETITION

	<i>United States</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Great Britain</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Canada</i>
No reservations	29%	16%	12%	18%	16%	11%	24%
Minimal reservations	17%	17%	17%	10%	7%	7%	15%
Total	46%	33%	28%	28%	23%	18%	39%

Source: World Values Survey, Question E039.

the opposite of losing, but we are unsure about how the two concepts relate to each other. We push ourselves, congratulate winners, and console losers—all without knowing why. Indeed, we are not even clear about what, exactly, we are after on any given occasion. Winning and losing have become “taken for granted” aspects of our “everyday reality” about which we know much too little (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 19–21).

We should pause and analyze. According to the World Values Survey, the Danes, with their apparently odd approach to life, rank among the most satisfied and happiest people on earth—well ahead of the United States on both counts.² According to a recent comparative study of forty-two nations across the world, happiness decreases as the level of competition increases in a given society (Van de Vliert and Janssen 2002). The United States cannot and should not turn into a Denmark, of course. We are too diverse a society and our approach generates valuable benefits. But those reports suggest that something may be amiss in our mind-set.

The purpose of this book is to explore in detail our ideas of winning and losing. The task is certainly challenging. Tangible things in life, like bicycles or telephones, are relatively easy to take apart and study. With some effort, we come to understand their makeup: their components, how they are put together, and so on. But the values, ideas, and concepts that frame or underpin our societies are more difficult to deconstruct. They are invisible and cannot be held. They are nowhere in a sense, yet also everywhere. We can say that they exist in the minds of people. We can also say, however,

The Problem

that they have an independence of their own and exist separately from each individual consciousness (Durkheim 1965: 269). How, then, should we carry out our investigation of winning and losing?

For guidance, we can turn to the foundational works in sociology of Georg Simmel and Max Weber. They offered two different but complementary methodologies for examining life in society. According to Simmel, social life takes on particular forms (Levine 1971). We come to know any given social phenomenon when we understand how it is ordered or set up: What elements are at play? How do they relate to each other? Who gives what to whom? Parents, for instance, are authoritative figures who provide love and protection to their children. Those children reciprocate by giving their parents joy and affection. Prostitution, in turn, entails an exchange of money and sex between two individuals with asymmetrical power. Simmel urged us to look at the structure of things.

Weber, by contrast, thought that we should pay far more attention to what goes on inside people's minds. People interpret themselves and the world around them. They endow things with significance. Understanding something in society is best done by grasping the meaning it holds for its members (Runciman 1978). If, for instance, we see a mother buying an ice cream for her daughter on the first day of summer, we can understand what is happening when we discover that the mother is motivated in part by memories of her own mother doing the same thing for her years ago. For Weber, our attention should go to what people make of things—to the attributions and thought processes they bring to the world around them.

Both approaches inspired my investigation of winning and losing in America. In line with Simmel, I examine two fundamental aspects of winning and losing. Both have to do with what is at stake or what we *pursue* when we seek victory and try to avoid loss: What prizes do we get or give up? Second, what powers does victory give us over those prizes? How does loss limit us? These are structural questions—they are about the way winning and losing are set up in our society. The answers will reveal a great deal about the hidden qualities of victory and losing as well as what

Chapter One

moves us to pursue victory and dread loss so passionately. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 explore the prizes. Chapter 5 focuses on power.

In line with Weber, I explore how we conceive of winners and losers—how we think of them and therefore make them into what they are. Who, in our minds, is a winner? Who is a loser? What do we believe a person must do to earn those titles? Moreover, how do we think about competitive events and the world in general that allows for the existence of winners and losers as well as for their central position in our culture? We are interested in our *beliefs* about the constitutions of winners, losers, and the world around us. This will be the topic of chapters 6 through 9. We will cover much ground. Figure 1.1 summarizes the road ahead. Above all, the analysis will make clear one fundamental fact about winning and losing: they are not endpoints or final destinations but gateways to something of immense importance to us. This is *the affirmation of our place in the world*. We desperately wish to know that we belong to this earth and society—that our presence is legitimate. This doubt is characteristic of modern societies but especially the United States (Greenfeld 2005a, 2005b). Americans, according to the World Values Survey, are among the most preoccupied people in the world about the meaning and purpose of their lives.³ We are an unsettled people. Behind the drive toward “perfectibility” that Tocqueville saw in America one finds *profound doubt*. In victory we hope to find a positive answer to our questions. In loss, we fear rejection and, with that, the abyss.

Our investigation will also make clear that, unfortunately, we are bound to be disappointed over and over again—regardless of whether we win or lose. This is because, as we compete, we are not aware of what we are really after. It is also because we rely on arbitrary and faulty or inconsistent logic to assess the world around us, to draw conclusions about others and ourselves, to motivate us and interpret events and outcomes. All this creates problems. The intensity of our drives, coupled with our ignorance about what we are doing, ensures that we have a very *obsessive* or compulsive (Fellman 1998) relationship to competition: one that is marked by

The Problem

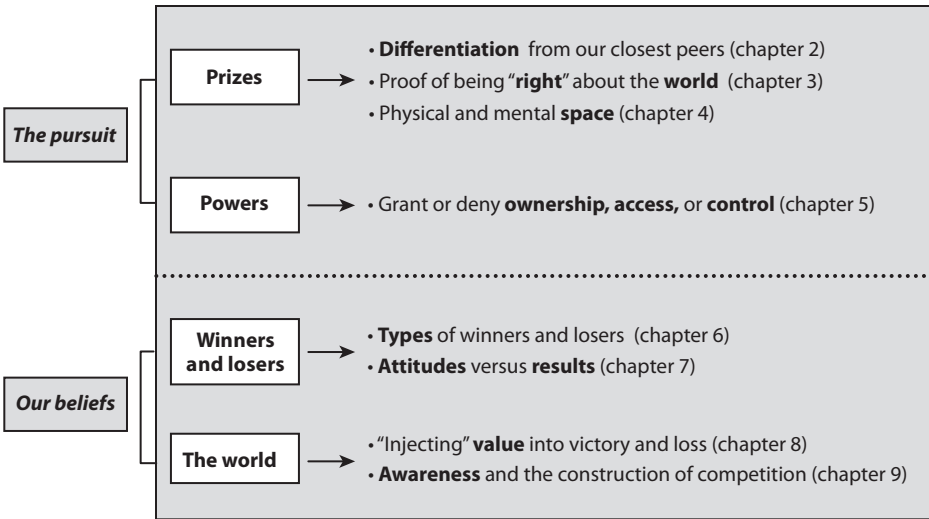


Figure 1.1. Exploring winning and losing in America.

strong urges, repetitive but never satisfied behaviors, and a continuous need to produce evidence about ourselves.

The bulk of this book is descriptive. But in the last chapter I pursue a very normative question: Should we continue to embrace the language of winning and losing in our everyday life? If winning and losing have become “inflationary” and are, at the same time, very messy concepts, is this not an indication that the time has come to reassess our use of those concepts? Are we depriving ourselves of more appropriate language, of sounder and therefore healthier attitudes toward so many different situations and events in life? Is our approach ultimately *inefficient*? I will propose that there are advantages but also serious problems associated with our current approach to winning and losing. Thus I will close by proposing an alternative mind-set for how we pursue our aspirations and dreams.

I shall end this chapter with three caveats. First, our investigation will not be exhaustive. While the task before us is of the most serious nature, I do not intend to offer a conclusive description of winning and losing backed by a comprehensive set of data. We

Chapter One

know too little about those terms for that to be possible. My objective is to offer an initial *portrait* of winning and losing as they exist in our society—to identify some of their most important qualities. This book is not a treatise but an “intervention,” an exploration. As I proceed, I draw from an eclectic range of data sources and various modes of argumentation to make my point.⁴ The reader looking for provoking and powerful insights will encounter good material for further reflection.

Second, I do not intend to describe how all of us—individually or as members of particular socioeconomic, racial, gender, or other groups—think about winning and losing. There are, of course, important differences across individuals and groups. Some readers will not identify with what the discussion will unveil. Other readers, such as myself, will recognize (perhaps hesitantly) parts of themselves in it. What lies ahead is a particular type of sociological effort. My mission is to shed light on a set of powerful concepts *that occupy a dominant place* in our society and which, by virtue of their privileged position, are incessantly before us as we go about our everyday life. To use the language of Berger and Luckmann, this is a book about two socially constructed ideas that have firmly taken roots in our society and which many, though not all of us, accept without question (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 19–21). We are after what Emil Durkheim called “social facts” that mold in a multitude of ways our reality (Durkheim 1982: 70).

Third, we shall focus on the characteristics of winning and losing, not how those concepts originate from, are maintained by, or stand in relation to broader societal factors. What roles do our political system, professional and nonprofessional sports leagues, education system, and economy—to name a few of those factors—play in the making of our competitive mind-sets? Do they benefit from our preoccupation with winning and fear of losing? Are there significant differences across contexts? I do not systematically answer these important questions. Still, given that I speak to them at various points in the book and that some readers may be looking for answers, I outline here my position.

The Problem

When it comes to broader factors, we should pay special attention to institutions. Institutions are the formal and informal programs, rules, and practices found in our political, economic, athletic, educational, and other systems. We find them at our workplaces, leagues, the state, associations of various kinds, our schools, and beyond (Campbell 2004: i; Fligstein 1996: 658). Institutions are especially responsible for fostering, supporting, and making possible our approach to winning and losing. Research should turn to institutions when investigating the broader context of our competitive mind-sets. By and large, the organizations, associations, and systems that house those institutions benefit from what they produce: individuals are encouraged to give far more of themselves to any given cause than is reasonable or healthy. More of everything is therefore generated—goods, services, professional and athletic achievements, money, entertainment, to name a few. Matters are unlikely to change fast: institutions are sticky (Mahoney 2000) and cannot be easily dismissed, although each context is likely to have unique dynamics at work. In all of this, individuals clearly find themselves in difficult circumstances. The most promising path for them to follow is a change in their own personal perspectives, as I argue in the closing chapter of the book.