

Cooling the Mark Out

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You run into a man at a party. You strike up a conversation. He seems very friendly. You like him. And then he tells you about some friends he has. This man is called the roper.

The friends tell you about a deal. They know about a gamble, but it's rigged so you can't lose. Just give them some money and they'll show you. This is called the con.

The first time you give them money it works; it comes back ten-fold. But now you're getting greedy. You want to do it again, bigger this time. Only this time their money doesn't come back. This is called the loss.

You feel like a chump. Your greediness got the best of you. You want to get back at those con-men. You are called the mark.

But the roper talks you down. You can't go to the police without admitting that you were trying to commit a crime. And everybody has to lose sometime, right? It could be worse. This is called cooling out the mark.

Erving Goffman, the great sociologist, [noticed this decades ago](#). Only he didn't just notice it in con men. Students had to be persuaded to accept a world far less idealistic than they learned in school. Kids who failed the bar exam had to persuade themselves they didn't really want to be lawyers. People at restaurants had to be persuaded to accept the screwup by the kitchen. Everyone occasionally needs "schooling in the philosophy of taking a loss."

It was this last example that particularly struck me. The other day, I was watching [a video clip of a motivational speaker](#). And what did he talk about? A screwup by a restaurant he went to. And how the host worked hard, overhard even, to pacify him about it.

It was a decent story. It was very well told. But why was a motivational speaker telling it? But now I realize: it was about cooling out the mark.

Cooling out marks is how institutions persuade people to accept things they think are wrong. The con-man convinces you getting stolen from is OK. Your job convinces you it's OK that they're corrupt. The restaurant persuades you it's OK that they're incompetent.

Motivational speakers do the same thing. Did the economy cheat you, fire you, stick you in some crappy job with a crabby boss? Listen, the motivational speaker explains, it's not the economy's fault. And just as the roper is always separate from the con men, the motivational speaker doesn't directly work for the economy. He sits on the sidelines, waiting to cool the mark out.

- Further reading: Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bait and Switch*