



Book Review

Cassidy, Rebecca. (2020). *Vicious Games: Capitalism and Gambling*. Pluto Press. 240 pp. \$34.95CAD. ISBN-13: 978-0-7453-4039-5 (paperback)

Cassidy's book is a noteworthy addition to the gambling studies literature for several reasons:

- 1) It is one of few in-depth anthropological investigations of gambling scenes.
- 2) Her exhaustive qualitative data gathering (years of field work in UK gambling establishments, conducting wide-ranging interviews with gambling industry personnel, government policy makers and regulators, gambling researchers, and problem and non-problem gamblers) has produced a panoramic review of gambling expansion in the UK and Europe since 1980.
- 3) She shows how governments and the gambling industry have positioned commercial gambling as a legitimate, hugely profitable leisure pastime despite its past criminal associations, questionable public value, and there being no public clamour to expand gambling offerings.

Gambling formats discussed range from the relatively benign (raffles and lotteries) to the more pernicious (electronic gambling machines, in-play betting on sports events, and wagering via smart phones). The desire of governments and gambling purveyors to maximize profits has generated faster paced games, higher bet limits, longer hours of operation, and shifted the moral arc of the industry toward exploitation, duplicity, corruption, and greed. For example, light touch governmental gambling regulation; public denial of EGMs' addictive potency, despite uncontested research showing them to be the most hazardous legal gambling activity; bookmakers encouraging consistent losers to gamble more and at higher limits, while cutting off successful punters; and gambling deregulation being described in ethically grey terms such as 'modernization.'

Two gambling scenes described in fascinating detail are the inner workings of UK bookmaking shops and Gibraltar's online betting operations. For instance, we learn how bookmakers establish odds, manage risk, and constantly pursue new ways to line their pockets. Gibraltar's rise to gambling notoriety was the result of its low-tax regime; light touch European gambling regulation; the UK's 2005 *Gambling Act*, which permitted citizens to engage in remote gambling; and

the availability of satellite sports event television broadcasts. Interestingly, interviews with workers in these venues revealed a degree of cynicism toward their consumers. For example, questioning whether there is really a difference between a good, loyal customer and a problem gambler; or speaking derisively about players because there is no optimal playing strategy. Cassidy cites an interviewee describing virtual racing players as 'idiots by definition who'd rather bet on anything rather than nothing.'

Gambling, if done prudently, can be an innocuous leisure pursuit; the problem with the activity lies with its organization and regulation. American legal gambling scholar Jerome Skolnick offered these observations about gambling regulation that should be addressed if the activity is to be operated in the public interest:

- If the purpose of legalizing gambling is to raise revenue, a state will face the dilemma of regulating an industry while at the same time encouraging it to prosper. This idea is at the heart of the current money laundering scandal in British Columbia's lower mainland casinos. Millions of proceeds of crime dollars have been cleansed because of lax regulatory surveillance.
- The inherent contradiction of decriminalizing gambling; that is, the desire to generate funds originally developed by criminals while at the same time dissociating the state from their disrepute.
- The larger the economic interest of the state in gambling, the greater the outside pressure to erode the mechanisms of control.

(Skolnick, J. H. (1978). *House of Cards: Legalization and Control of Casino Gambling*. Little, Brown & Co.)

These verities seemingly are ignored or soft-peddled by the neo-liberal gambling regulatory regimes outlined in *Vicious Games*.

Responsible gambling is another issue discussed in the book. The general theme being that gambling purveyors give lip service to the idea of responsible gambling but resist tough regulations for fear of reducing revenues. There is also the fact that some conservative gambling researchers have developed responsible gambling standards (e.g., the Reno Model)

that are soft and thus industry friendly. This information is deployed by industry to justify the present modest responsible gambling efforts.

More implications stemming from Cassidy's comprehensive field work would be thought-provoking; for example, how to deter gambling-related crime—Macau has been described as a cesspool of financial crime, and money laundering is rampant in North American gambling venues. Also, her views on how best to deal with problem gambling would be of interest—should there be on-site interventions with problem gamblers? Should they be banned? Should there be legislated duty of care to protect against industry predation as exists with alcohol consumption?

Cassidy's book is insightful, carefully considered and thoroughly researched. I enthusiastically recommend it.

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Garry Smith is a University of Alberta Professor Emeritus who has conducted gambling studies research since the mid 1980s. One of the founders and research directors of the Alberta Gambling Research Centre, Dr. Smith's research focus has been on social justice issues related to legalized gambling.