



Book Review

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

Rebecca Cassidy is Professor of Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is known for her major contributions to the field of the critical gambling studies through her contributions to: *Fair Game: Producing Gambling Research* (Cassidy, R., Loussouarn, C., & Pisac, A., 2013, Goldsmiths, University of London), a research report about the politics and complexity surrounding gambling research; and *Qualitative Research in Gambling: Exploring the Production and Consumption of Risk* (Cassidy, R., Pisac, A., & Loussouarn, C., 2015, Routledge), a book that highlights the need to revisit gambling research using new research methods and paradigms. Cassidy's latest book, *Vicious Games: Capitalism and Gambling*, is grounded in many years of impressive and rigorous fieldwork with 'people who produce, shape and consume gambling' in a variety of spaces, contexts, and jurisdictions. The book explores the expansion of commercial gambling and argues that 'commercial gambling and late capitalism are not merely compatible, they are mutually beneficial and rely on the same narratives' (p. 175). Rooted in a critical perspective, this book furthers the discussion about responsibility in the gambling field, showing how academics, policy makers, operators, and regulators contribute to the constructed discourse around 'responsible gambling.' Cassidy also addresses a fundamental issue in the field: the need to rethink the concept of responsibility, moving from an individual perspective to a collective one that integrates stakeholders and broader society.

I have no choice but to start this review by underlying the challenge of doing justice to the richness of this book, especially as an early career researcher in the gambling field. Indeed, it is a great privilege to write a review about the inspiring work of a remarkable researcher in the field.

The first chapter, 'Gambling's New Deal,' discusses the legalisation and liberalisation of commercial gambling in the UK and explores how a once criminal and tolerated activity became a massive and lucrative enterprise integrated in a broader political and economic landscape. Based on field notes and interviews with bookmakers, policy makers, politicians, and gambling executives, the chapter documents 'how

the industry and successive governments attempted to reframe gambling, from a tolerated working-class habit to a rational expression of individual economic choice' (p. 22).

In the second chapter, Cassidy invites readers to become immersed in the world of raffles as an opportunity 'to think about the meanings of risky, profitable exchange and how these change over time' (p. 42). Her anthropological fieldwork with groups of people who buy raffle tickets illustrates how raffles are culturally rooted in some communities, particularly in the UK. Analyses reveal that, for most of the respondents, raffles are more about sharing resources within the community, creating and nurturing relationships, binding people together, and altruism than about gambling or winning something. Thus, the chapter brings to light a fundamental question: What is gambling? Indeed, although some respondents consider raffles to be gambling, most of them do not. Cassidy illustrates how raffles are proof that 'there is nothing intrinsically anti-social about gambling' (p. 56). According to her, the problem arises when 'gambling acts to solidify and nurture particular distributions of resources, including those that are highly unequal. In these cases, the role of gambling is not to redistribute scarce resources ... but to exacerbate and reinforce inequality, contrary to its nature, and despite its liberating potential' (p. 56).

Chapters three to six offer a deep dive into the world of betting shops in the UK. Together, these chapters present an insightful illustration of the main argument of the book: that commercial gambling and capitalism have evolved together, in an intertwined way, and became mutually beneficial. Cassidy demonstrates how economic and political changes (such as the legalisation of betting shops in 1961, the Deregulation of Betting and Gaming Order in 1996, and changes in taxation in 2001) and environmental changes (for instance the advent of electronic points of sale, virtual races and fixed-odds betting terminals in betting shops, and the online gambling revolution) have profoundly transformed the culture and atmosphere of betting shops, as well as the nature of the activities and relations that take place in them. Where once they were

a social space for people to share common interests and nurture relationships, betting shops have become part of an industry focused on profit.

Chapter four, 'The Rise of the Machines,' is a particularly striking example of the magnitude of the transformation of betting shops and bookmaking. In this chapter, Cassidy 'go[es] behind the scene' and shows how the advent of fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBTs) in betting shops is part of a larger enterprise which 'occup[ies] specific niches in wider gambling ecologies, for historical, social and political reasons' (p. 73). From the perspective of people working in the bookmaking industry, this chapter underlines two main discourses about the advent of FOBTs in betting shops. First, a more common discourse, compatible with the responsible gambling narrative, in which FOBTs are seen as a 'gift of god' for their capacity to generate profit. Within this narrative, people who use these machines are framed as 'life's losers,' 'greedy,' or 'incapable of thinking.' On the other hand, the author has met people who are really worried and uncomfortable with this way of doing business, expressing serious moral concerns about the rise of problem gambling since the advent of FOBTs. The friction between these two narratives raises serious ethical concerns about responsibility that the gambling field must resolve: the absolution of the gambling industry of any responsibility regarding the harms associated with FOBTs. Furthermore, this chapter illustrates how, within this rationale, the responsibility of other actors and institutions involved in the 'gambling ecologies'—for instance regulators, governments (who make profits from gambling), and academics—remain silent. Finally, the chapter underlines important concerns about the relationship between stakeholders and gambling corporations.

Chapter five, 'The Responsible Gambling Myth,' discusses the over-emphasis that the responsible gambling approach puts on individual responsibility, its use as a self-regulation strategy by operators, and the threat that it could represent to corporate profits, which are largely generated by individuals labeled as 'problem gamblers.' What makes this chapter particularly interesting is the description of everyday life in betting shops derived from Cassidy's own experiences behind the counter. In this chapter, she shows how the atmosphere in betting shops has drastically changed since the introduction of FOBTs, as expressed by one manager: 'we have gone from people who are helping someone have a bet on a horse they fancy to prison guards, stuck behind a reinforced counter, being abused by people who know we are exploiting them, robbing them blind' (p. 105). Chapter five highlights the paradox in which betting-shop workers find themselves: on one hand, they are expected to promote the use of gambling machines; and, on the other hand, they are asked to adopt a responsible gambling narrative, placing responsibility on individuals for their losses and problems. Placing workers in this impossible

position exemplifies the inappropriateness of the responsible gambling approach in this particular context.

Chapter six, 'The Bookmakers' Lament,' is based on observations and interviews from 'the trading floor of a UK bookmaker.' It discusses the online revolution of gambling in general, and online betting in particular, where 'an embodied practice based on specialised knowledge and exclusive relationships was being replaced by abstract systems which used algorithms and data to create profitable uncertainty' (p. 111), and in which the bookmaker no longer exists. With the story of this transformation through the words and lived experience of people from the old guard of bookmaking in betting shops, Cassidy exposes a very interesting analysis of the 'last stand of bookmaking,' both in terms of culture and as a business model.

Chapter seven, 'Online in Gibraltar,' is a fascinating glimpse into the world of offshore online gambling operators in Gibraltar. It describes how the 'new gambling industries understand products and customers' (p. 127) and how the responsible gambling narrative is integrated in this new way of doing business. The chapter begins with a presentation of the birth and history of online gambling in the UK: 'the only open market for online gambling in the world' (p. 127). After this introduction, Cassidy brings us with her to Gibraltar, behind the scenes of this particular industry. She explores the way of life of those working in the online gambling industry in Gibraltar, an environment Cassidy describes as a 'work hard, play hard atmosphere' (p. 135). If some workers seem very happy with this culture, others seem more uncomfortable, comparing the industry to 'the seventh circle of hell' (p. 135). The chapter also specifically addresses the 'bet in-play' games, a new form of online gambling game that is proving to be extremely lucrative. Cassidy exposes the very aggressive marketing strategies and mechanics behind this new business, including the use of personal data for targeted marketing. In 'Online in Gibraltar,' Cassidy also raises important concerns about the advent of mobile online gambling games: 'Technology has domesticated gambling, moving it from casinos and betting shops into homes and, most recently pockets' (p. 151). Finally, the chapter delves into a customer service department at Lucky Day, an online gambling operator in Gibraltar. It exposes how people working in that kind of department interact with and create bonds, to some extent, with gamblers. The chapter concludes by exploring how some employees of the online gambling industry consider themselves to be part of the entertainment industry, rather than a business that exploits vulnerable persons for profit. Again, the common narrative shared by people in the gambling industry is about individual responsible gambling, which absolves the industry of any responsibility for gambling harms.

Chapter eight, 'The Regulation Game,' addresses the creation of regulation in the gambling field through

fieldwork undertaken at conferences. More specifically, in this chapter, Cassidy discusses the construction and dissemination of discourses on gambling and how those discourses, and the actors involved (policy makers, gambling industries, academia), contribute to, shape, and transform regulation. This chapter examines the links between politics, gambling industries, regulators, and academics in the creation of regulation politics and their associated issues: 'The co-production of regulation means that different interests are variously promoted and suppressed' (p. 166). This is probably the *game*... Moreover, Cassidy underlines the high risk of conflicts of interest in these circumstances. 'Gambling regulation is a political journey' (p. 171), she writes, 'the way in which it is formally managed and legitimated can help us to understand how those in power think about luck, reward, thrift, class and progress' (p. 173).

This book is a must-read for people interested in critical gambling studies or in an anthropological, sociological, cultural, political, or historical approach to the field. Certainly, it would be of great interest for those interested in the culture of betting shops. One of this book's major contributions is its highlighting of ethics and responsibility in the gambling field. It 'focused on the production of gambling, the ways in which policy makers and corporations work together to align policies, regulation, products and desires in profitable combinations' (p. 174). Moreover, the analysis presented in this book demonstrates how the responsible gambling narrative is the perfect instrument of a capitalist system in which gambling is used to generate profits in an intertwined way. The analysis also reveals the necessity to undergo a major shift in the field by rethinking responsibility in a collective way and by taking into account the role of academia, which is too often overlooked. In conclusion, Cassidy hopes 'to have contributed to an international movement which shifts responsibility for the harm caused by gambling from individuals to the whole of society, including the gambling companies and governments which create the environments and narratives which enable them to flourish' (p. 187). I argue that this book is an extraordinary contribution to that end. As an early career researcher in the gambling field, I would like to thank Professor Cassidy for this great and inspiring work!

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