

Resisting the Power of the Gambling Establishment

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We are in danger of being successfully conditioned to accept the expansion of gambling

Gambling is being allowed to encroach more and more on our lives. I hope I have shown how alert we need to be about how this is happening. My thesis has been that we are steadily being conditioned to accept an enlarged role for gambling in society and that this conditioning – brainwashing if you will – is largely taking place surreptitiously and without our awareness or much public debate. Gambling is now mostly provided commercially, much of it by very large companies operating internationally. First and foremost it is their interests which are served by our tacit acceptance of gambling expansion. There is a great deal of money to be made by those who provide the means for other people to gamble. Big Gambling is powerful. Power is most effectively wielded by using a variety of strategies and tactics, naked and aggressive ones sparingly, those that can claim legitimacy more often, and those that hide their real intentions the most often of all.

But it is the alliance of the gambling-providing industry and our governments which is ultimately so powerful. Some would say that governments are in it for the colossal revenues to be earned by taxing gambling. Others may be more prepared to acknowledge that governments have a genuine concern to regulate commercial gambling in the interests of public health and safety. Whatever their mix of motives, governments around the world have in a short period of just a few decades changed their position on gambling and now lend their weight behind the effort to get us all to think differently

about the subject. By the expression The Gambling Establishment, which I have repeatedly used as a collective term, I mean the alliance of those who profit by providing gambling, governments which provide a newly liberalised environment within which commercial gambling can flourish, and any organisations linked to industry or government, such as advisory bodies, industry-led social responsibility groups, third sector organisations funded by industry, and some academic researchers, which are an integral part of the industry-government concord or dependent on it. This is a powerful alliance.

The most effective way to exert power is to get everyone else to think in the same way. What I have argued is that the Gambling Establishment has a particular way of thinking about gambling which they have been endeavouring to implant in the public's minds. It is very easy to accept that way of thinking without reflection or resistance unless it is recognised for what it is – a set of assumptions which is very different from the one that prevailed only a short while ago. I have tried to spell out what those assumptions are, and to question them. The central assumption is that the business of providing gambling is an ordinary one, just like any other entertainment business. The consequences of accepting that assumption uncritically are immense. It implies an open competitive market, advertising, welcoming technological innovation. Along with this goes marginalisation of any opposition which appears to contradict the assumption. For example, any suggestion that a new gambling venue should not be licensed because demand is already satisfied, or any suggestion that advertising should be limited, or that the government of one country should not permit the operation of a company based in another country, can readily be criticised as contravening the basic rules to which we have all supposedly signed up.

I presented arguments which I believe should at the very least make us stop and think about that central ordinary-business assumption. I tried to show, first, that when people gamble they are mostly not buying an entertainment product in the same way they would buy time at a cinema or a football

match. They are, rather, hoping to win money, and if they do so it is at the expense of others who lose money. Although the Gambling Establishment emphasises gambling-as-entertainment, it is gambling-to-win-money which is emphasised in gambling advertisements and it is the winning money motive which is predominant in what people say about their reasons for gambling. Furthermore, there is the evidence I summarised, particularly from studies carried out in Canada where good independent research is much better supported than in Britain and elsewhere, that offering gambling on modern, technologically sophisticated electronic gambling machines (EGMs) relies on deception, giving the impression that players are winning when in fact they are losing. Studies of the way in which gambling is advertised have also shown how the prospect of winning is unrealistically inflated.

Another central Gambling Establishment assumption, which we are in the process of blindly accepting, is that gambling is inherently safe. The corollary of this is that any problems that do arise are confined to a very small minority who are not using the product responsibly. I hope I have presented enough evidence to question that assumption. For one thing, gambling, by its very nature, has always had the potential to be dangerously addictive. This has always been known. It is also tacitly acknowledged by gambling providers and the rest of the Gambling Establishment when they agree that, in order to be socially responsible, the offer of gambling should be accompanied by provision for harm reduction procedures such as self-exclusion and pre-commitment to spend or time limits. Modern forms of gambling are so dangerous, it seems, that it is now judged to be irresponsible to provide them without at the same time having in place surveillance systems to detect harmful patterns of behaviour and schemes that help customers control their consumption. This is clearly no ordinary commodity we are talking about.

There are consequences for the health and well-being of individuals and families. The extent of the harm to health should not be under-estimated although that is exactly what the Gambling Establishment tries to do. Whenever the prevalence of gambling-related problems in the general

population has been assessed it turns out that the rate is sufficient to constitute a public health problem equivalent in size to others that are taken much more seriously, such as illicit drug problems. The rate is substantial amongst those who gamble at all regularly and among certain demographic sections of the population, particularly young men. There is further evidence that adolescents are amongst vulnerable groups particularly at risk. Nor is gambling harm – the negative externalities of gambling to use the economic term – confined to those with clearly evident gambling problems. The greatest volume of harm to gamblers themselves is borne by the larger number of those whose gambling is putting them at risk. Furthermore, the largest group in any population which is harmed by gambling consists of close family members of those whose gambling is excessive – the wives, husbands and partners, mothers and fathers, and most importantly children. Affected family members have been largely ignored in Gambling Establishment thinking. Much more attention needs to be given to the harm to family members and others who are affected by someone else's gambling problem.

We should not be led unthinkingly to accept what we are being told about gambling and its proper place in society. Innovation has given us new forms of gambling, which build on those features of gambling which render it dangerous, to produce modern forms which are yet more addictive. Such novelties have been welcomed by governments as part of what would be expected of an ordinary business. Most concerning have been the increasingly sophisticated, high powered, fast, multi-game, multi-line and/or high stake EGMs and the various ways of gambling remotely online. The idea that some forms of gambling are more dangerous than others is resisted by the Gambling Establishment because it does not fit comfortably with its assumption that problems associated with gambling are attributable to a small number of individual players and how they gamble. Amongst the more addictive forms of gambling are those that are the most profitable for the operators. It serves their interests not to acknowledge that some products are more harmful than others.

I have also tried to show how this attempt to control the way we think extends to control of the gambling research agenda. If the fault for any harms that arise from gambling lies with individual gamblers, then it follows that the kinds of research which should be prioritised are those which ask questions about individuals, their backgrounds, their personalities, their mental health, and the way they gamble. Asking questions about gambling products and those who provide them – features which might make some forms of gambling more dangerous than others, the way gambling is advertised, the way decisions are made about the siting of new gambling venues, or the tactics used to influence government – should therefore be a lower priority. The prevailing ideology is a powerful determinant of thought and action in any field and gambling is no exception. Its influence runs to the very questions that we ask ourselves when the issue comes up, and thence to the kinds of research that are called for, funded and carried out. I gave the example of the British gambling machines research programme as a prime example of this bias; but as I indicated there are other examples of the way in which Establishment thinking on the subject of gambling affects what research questions are asked and what theoretical positions are adopted to interpret the results.

It is not only research that is affected by the officially approved ideology. When it comes to prevention, those methods that are most accommodating of the status quo and which provide the least challenge to Establishment thinking are naturally the ones that are favoured. Hence projects with the aim of identifying a minority of people with the most obvious gambling problems take precedence over those which examine the characteristics of gambling products. Gamblers' motives for gambling are of greater interest than the motives of those who provide and promote the means for gambling. The emphasis is on 'harm minimisation' rather than the range of prevention methods which would be expected from a public health perspective. The form of primary prevention most favoured is the one which public health experts believe to be the weakest one of all – educating young people and others about how to gamble responsibly.

Meanwhile those who partake of modern gambling opportunities are being increasingly controlled and manipulated whilst at the same time being beguiled into believing that they retain control. As Natasha Schüll exposed so clearly in her book¹, players of modern gambling machines are at the mercy of a digital process over which they have quite literally no control whatever. Yet in various ways the machine designers have tried to preserve the illusion that players retain some control over the outcome. The development of player tracking, first used at Harrah's casino in Atlantic City in 1985, and the software to analyse the data means that the industry now knows more and more about the players whilst the products becoming increasingly complicated and unfathomable. As a senior vice president at Harrah's commented, 'I am watching everything. I see it all'. To enable gambling providers to make sense of this otherwise overwhelming mass of surveillance data, behavioural analytic software was developed of the kind that we saw in the previous chapter was put cleverly to use in the British gambling machines research. Such systems are developments of the loyalty card idea, not only allowing a wealth of customer data to be collected but also providing a means of incentivising them. The industry puts a lot of effort into ensuring maximum enrolment: 'Loyalty programs are about giving your customers a reason to give you data, so that data can be used to earn you money' said one industry representative in 2008. These are modern, sophisticated ways of determining how 'loyal' a customer is, who are the 'big spenders', and calculating a customer's profitability – their 'customer value'. Whilst the industry is becoming more 'scientific' and data-based, 'gamblers remain in the intuitive domain of "emotion and guesswork"'. Between the industry and the players there now exists a 'profound imbalance' between their respective abilities to know what the other party is doing. Schüll was in no doubt that it is the industry that has 'the upper hand'.

As if all this is not troubling enough, the most alarming prospect is that of the gambling industry moving into formerly gambling-resistant nations, including countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. As one executive for a supplier to Mexico told Natasha Schüll, 'what you're doing is *establishing player habits*. We get our machines down there, and the players start

becoming familiar with them and they like them, and you keep those players'. It has been suggested that Central America and South America in particular are also potentially huge online gambling markets. We know that it is vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals, families and communities who are paying the largest price for gambling expansion in relatively high income countries. It is horrifying to think that steps may be afoot to impose a similar price on those in low to middle income countries.

There may of course be yet bigger issues to face here, issues to do with the very kind of societies we are becoming and would like to become. Perhaps the competitive values of contemporary societies support gambling. Maybe it is the consumer society, plus the increasing customer surveillance which goes with it, which is to blame. George Ritzer, famous for his *The McDonaldization of Society*, referred to the megacasino as one of the modern 'cathedrals of consumption'². Perhaps the growth of 'financial products commercialising risk' which has made it harder to distinguish between financial trading and gambling has played a part as well³. Perhaps we have to accept that we now live in a Risk Society⁴, that we have witnessed, '... a societal shift from a riskophobic to a riskophillic "casino culture", which glorifies society's winners and shuns its losers'⁵. National Lotteries may have played their role. Social scientist Gerda Reith has suggested that the 'state-sponsored fantasy of the big win has ushered in a new consumption ethic which celebrates and promotes an "age of chance"'⁶. Whatever the truth of those various assertions, surely no one would deny that values are important.

Yet the Gambling Establishment tries to deny that there is any moral component to the modern debate about gambling policy. If that means that a thoroughly moralistic stance toward gambling generally, and a totally prohibitionist view of how gambling should be dealt with, are anachronistic, I would agree, as do most people in Britain and a number of other countries. But if on the other hand it implies that we need no discussion of whether gambling, or particular forms of gambling, are in keeping with local, national or international values, then I must disagree. Gambling is now becoming such an intrusive presence in local high streets and communities, on television and in social media, and in the

personal and family lives of an increasing proportion of the population, that questions about its normalisation in society and whether or not its rise is consonant with our collective values are beginning to be asked. We need to consider carefully whether modern gambling serves the common good.