

Lifestyle Gambling and the Normalised Harms of Deviant Leisure

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Let's face it: Something is not quite right with contemporary society. I am not just talking about Donald Trump; Brexit; or the Syrian refugee crisis. These are the most visible signs of our current political, economic and cultural malaise. But there is something deeper. There is something more insidious; a nagging-yet-ineffable shadow that looms over people's everyday lives that generates an exhausted and exasperated sense of impotence. Everywhere there seems to be a lingering sense of anxiety, inadequacy and lack; a lack that is actively cultivated by the very core of consumerism's logic. The perpetual sense of existential dissatisfaction and the promise of the good life—exacerbated in the vast 'hall of mirrors' (Ferrell, 1999) of mass-marketing and the competitive 'prosumer' platforms of social media—is put to work and constitutes the core psycho-social engine of consumer capitalism (McGowan, 2004; 2016). It is woven into our everyday lives and operates as a core motivational force underpinning some of the most normalised, celebrated and accepted forms of leisure. However, this carefully orchestrated lack and desire is not only deeply corrosive to the ontological security of the subject; but harmful in a number of other interpersonal, social, financial and environmental ways as it serves its purpose in creating new markets for commodified leisure or expanding existing ones.

This is the stuff of the deviant leisure perspective. Criminology is increasingly becoming (and will continue to become) a harm-based discipline. While perhaps a bold claim to make, it is one that I make with growing confidence. Quite simply, governments and legislatures can no longer contain the worst excesses of capitalism under our present mode of post-industrial consumerism. Unless there is a significant shift surrounding our real economy, the economic imperative to open up new markets and avenues for profit means that the dark underbelly of liberal capitalism

must be increasingly legalised, normalised and harnessed for the market irrespective of the human, social or environmental consequences. Therefore, the deviant leisure perspective is not concerned with an exploration of the alleged 'deviance' of the most visible, 'exotic', or abnormal forms of leisure. Rather, it is concerned with the harms that emerge from the most mundane, familiar and accepted aspects of our everyday lives and commodified leisure. This, I argue, is crucial to a proper thorough-going critique of consumer capitalism. The harms embedded within our political, economic and cultural systems are not exclusively manifesting in lands far away. Nor do they only affect the most 'socially excluded' populations who have seemed to serve as an exotic and pseudo-eroticised research population for the embourgeoisied social sciences. The harms of consumer capitalism and commodified leisure are commonly observable in each of our everyday lives. Properly understood, the deviant leisure perspective could be described as a criminology of consumer capitalism's harmful normality. It is a rejection of the current trend of enforced positivity in which, as Rojek (2010: 1) observes, 'one may hardly dare speak of leisure in anything other than triumphalist tones'.

It is in this spirit that I, along with Oliver Smith, have approached the issue of gambling in contemporary society (Raymen and Smith, 2017). Public and academic critique of the gambling industry appears limited to the most exotic outlier cases of criminality related to gambling; incidents of rule-breaking or bending of industry regulation, or the traditional 'problematic' gambling spaces of the local bookmaker's shop in which violence has risen 24% between 2014 and 2016 (BBC News, 2017). Thus, the harms of gambling appear limited to a group of 'deviant individuals' or socially excluded populations living precariously on the socio-economic margins. However, it cannot be denied that gambling is fast becoming one of the most significant public health problems in contemporary society that is far from limited to a minority of the population. Recent statistics from the gambling commission (2016) show that UK punters lost £13.7 billion between April 2016 and March 2017. For all the justified focus on bookmakers' shops and Fixed Odds Betting Terminals, it is remote gambling that is the largest and most profitable sector, constituting a 34% market share of the gambling industry overall. Bookmakers, casinos and bingo halls are all in decline; while the endless array of sports betting apps, online casinos, poker and bingo websites that are accessed through phones, laptops and tablets

generated a gross yield of £4.5billion pounds from UK gamblers in 2016 (Gambling Commission, 2017).

More importantly, the deregulation, digital democratisation and flexibilisation of gambling has created a new infantilised and identity-based culture of what we have termed 'lifestyle gambling' (Raymen and Smith, 2017), in which betting has become a normalised, socialised and firmly embedded feature of everyday life. As Deans et al (2017) have observed, sports-betting in particular has slipped its traditional moorings of the betting shop and embraced a new peer-oriented culture of 'lifestyle gambling' in symbiosis with other leisure activities such as casual sports fandom and the night-time economy. Walk into most pubs on a weeknight or weekend afternoon, and one is likely to see domestic and international football on the big screen TV, as groups of men are huddled round tables, pints in one hand and smart phones in the other placing bets on the day's football. Peruse the adverts which market sports betting apps and online bookmakers, and one observes that visual depictions of gambling are actually conspicuously absent. What we observe is gambling as a surreptitiously embedded undercurrent to a wider lifestyle of laddish infantilisation and more general youthful consumption. To use the 'Ladbrokes Life' advertising campaign as one example, we experience a relentless bombardment of weekend leisure activities in which men of indeterminate age between mid-twenties to early forties are seen smiling, socialising and laughing in pubs; doing silly dances in night clubs; flirting with beautiful women while drinking with their friends; inexplicably taking selfies with teacup pigs; enjoying go-karting with their friends, shopping for luxury consumer items such as fur coats, or getting impulsive tattoos while friends look on and laugh. To quote the adverts, 'the betting men' are 'the Wednesday-night warriors' and the 'have-a-go heroes of Saturday afternoons'. Gambling, therefore, becomes a vital attachment to these wider circuits of consumption that is part of the valorised and glamorised 'Ladbrokes Life' of youthful exuberance, silliness and adventure which characterises an infantilised masculine leisure identity that is peculiar to late-capitalism. Gambling is no longer 'separate' to everyday life, in which individuals enter separate 'magic circles' of play which offer temporary and illusory identities in which existential dramas are played out (Caillois, 1958; Goffman, 1967; Geertz, 1973). The spatial and temporal barriers to gambling are long gone as it has become a pseudo-socialised practice that is fully embedded within everyday life.

However, industry-sponsored research has suggested that forms of 'social gambling' are entirely unproblematic and even carry the potential to inhibit the likelihood of problematic gambling (Parke et al, 2012). Much like the laissez-faire attitude to gambling and indebtedness depicted within online bookmakers' adverts, this form of gambling is seen as simply a bit of harmless weekend fun, nothing that the individual will miss on Monday. Conveniently, the true locus of the problem is deemed to lie away from the gambling industry's most profitable sector. However, our ethnographic research among a group of male lifestyle gamblers and travelling football fans suggests that this sphere of infantilised, identity-based lifestyle gambling is seriously problematic. Far from the harmless youthful hijinks of the 'grown-up boys' who characterise alcohol and gambling advertisements, the men who informed our research were in their twenties and thirties and experiencing growing social and financial precarity; displaying many of the hallmarks of problematic or 'at-risk' gamblers. Deepening overdrafts, spiralling credit card bills, and the relentless pressure of high-interest pay-day loans have become all-too-familiar in their daily lives, part of a broader culture of indebtedness which is now a normalised feature of late-capitalism (Horsley, 2015). This has contributed to strained personal relationships, family breakdown, and tightening family budgets. Exiting the vortex requires a commitment to deferred gratification that is thoroughly incongruent with the hedonic realism of contemporary consumer society. All of this contributes to the intensification of an underlying objectless anxiety that is arguably characteristic of contemporary life (Hall, 2012a; Lloyd, 2012). In an accelerated timeframe, this has prompted growing mental health issues among these men, destructive behaviours of drinking and consumption, and wider existential crises. As sports betting and casino gambling have become entangled and embedded within numerous different masculine leisure cultures; access to friendships, socialisation and the ability to display the symbolic and cultural capital of sporting knowledge and fearless risk-taking has become contingent upon a willingness to indebted oneself. These men, like many others, are rigidly attached to consumerism's infantilised symbolism of youth as the threat of cultural irrelevance looms over them. As such, they feel that their incomprehensible anxiety—intensified by the looming threat of cultural irrelevance (see Smith, 2014)—can only be assuaged by returning to those consumer markets that are the very locus of their problems.

Furthermore, the physical distancing of the subject from money's symbolism in notes and coins has enabled a more casualised relationship to money and indebtedness that has always been a staple feature of gambling. The translation of cash into casino chips is the oldest and simplest example. However, in a technologically advanced society, this is intensified, with sports betting apps requiring only a few clicks of a button. Additionally, consistent with the broader notion of accelerated culture, we have seen simplicity and speed become the key selling feature of sports-betting apps, exemplified by BetFair's advertising slogan 'Tap Tap Boom'. One of the most extreme examples of this, however, is the emergence of the most recent sports-betting app 'Bookee', which models and advertises itself on the dating-app Tinder. Odds on a particular game are offered, and one simply swipes right to accept the odds and left to reject. If accepted, you are presented with a sliding scale to determine the stake you bet. Here, one whimsically moves their finger along to increase or decrease the stake. Bets are not carefully considered, but rapidly and casually accepted or dismissed with the swipe of a finger. Moreover, Bookee have also introduced a 'world first' feature of 'split your bet' in which punters are encouraged to 'go halves with your mates' on a bet: the culmination of betting's casualisation, socialisation and acceleration, all in one app. This technological acceleration of betting results in money that has very real value and utility becoming increasingly casualised and robbed of the symbolism involved in the transaction of notes and coins.

Therefore, perhaps it should be no surprise that we are witnessing an increase in problem gambling. Recent research conducted on behalf of the Gambling Commission shows that problem gambling in the UK has risen by a third in the last three years. Approximately 430,000 people suffer from a serious gambling problem, with a further 2 million people deemed at-risk, 35% of whom engage primarily through 'remote gambling' arenas such as online casinos, bingo, and sports betting (Conolly et al, 2017). Much has been made about the liberalisation of the gambling industry, the democratisation of gambling opportunities, and the heightened exposure to gambling through increased levels of advertising. All of these trends are undeniably important and need to be addressed by policy reforms which attempt to contain the worst excesses of the industry. But perhaps we also need to consider the

extent to which society has developed a general financial disposition which is fundamentally more susceptible to and familiar with the key unconscious mechanisms that underpin problem gambling.

In *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois (1958), a keen commentator on gambling, argued that, [i]t is not absurd to try diagnosing a civilization in terms of the games that are especially popular there. In fact, if games are cultural factors and images, it follows that to a certain degree a civilization and its content may be characterized by its games' (Caillois, 1958: 83). Caillois is onto something in his suggestion that the most popular games encapsulate the cultural milieu from which they emerge. The rise of popularity in gambling, particularly since its attachment to infantilised leisure cultures of hedonistic excess, reflects contemporary carpe diem injunctions to enjoy that have been instituted by consumer capitalism. The ubiquitous presence of gambling through its technological de-spatialisation reflects the dark side of a post-social cyberspace matrix in which we are almost permanently immersed; the affective and psychological consequences of which we are only just beginning to realise (Fisher, 2009). Therefore, it appears that what the deviant leisure perspective identities is the need for criminology to re-commit itself to new cultural, political-economic and psychoanalytical critiques of consumer capitalism which, through a commitment to harm-based perspectives, can properly problematise the harms that are continuously emerging at the intersection of commodified leisure, technology and consumer capitalism. This is not just a socially constructed 'moral panic', but a form of harmful leisure which carries genuine material, psychological, financial and domestically corrosive consequences. Quite simply, as Steve Redhead (2015:9) has asked, 'What are the gigabytes doing to us?'

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