Before the implementation of the Gambling Act in 2007 in the UK, the betting industry was relatively low-key and mostly hidden from the public eye. The National Lottery had been established only in the mid-1990s, quite late when compared to many other countries. In the early 2000s, betting shops still had blacked-out windows and before 2002–2003 no football clubs in the English Premier League had a gambling company as a sponsor.

Everything changed in 2005 when the Gambling Act was introduced. Between 2006 and 2012, TV gambling advertisements increased by 600 per cent in the UK (Sweney, 2013). In the 2020–2021 season, only three Premier League clubs were without any gambling sponsors. Betting shops are much more visible in the high street, with window displays and promotions. All this has led to a normalisation of gambling in British society. Stock prices of the UK betting industry have increased in value and the highest-paid CEOs are often those of gambling companies (Denise Coates, the founder of Bet365, paid herself 323 million GBP in 2019 in Davies (2021)).

The gambling industry is a difficult sector to research due to trade secrets and unclear reporting. Therefore, it is important that researchers who are examining the gambling industry understand how to interpret the information available and are critically able to evaluate what are the trustworthy data sources. In addition, one has to understand the rhetoric and tactics of the gambling industry and recognise the influence the industry is able to exercise even over democratically elected officials and governments (see Adams, 2008, 2016; Orford, 2011, 2013, 2020).

Rebecca Cassidy, Professor of Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London, is one of the few researchers who can accomplish this difficult task. Over a period of almost two decades, she has conducted fieldwork at racetracks, casinos, and betting shops across the globe. In Vicious games, she has set herself the formidable task of exploring the transformation of the British betting industry, highlighting at the same time the complex and multi-faceted relationship between governments, gambling and capitalism. Given that she started her fieldwork in gambling in the 1990s, she has personally witnessed how the centre of gravity in the UK gambling industry has shifted from land-based operations to online gambling. During this time, she has led a ground-breaking ERC research project “Gambling in Europe” (GAM-SOC), which was an anthropological study of the gambling research community. A result of
that project, the *Fair game* report, showed that gambling research does not function as an external commentary on global gambling expansion, but as an active participant in advancing industry-friendly discourse, including notions and paradigms such as “problem gambler” and “responsible gambling”, whilst trying to suppress the alternatives (Cassidy et al., 2014).

To me as a gambling researcher, the most problematic issue faced by researchers looking into the gambling industry is (as Cassidy et al. also noted in 2014 in their *Fair game* report) that the industry often shares its most useful data only with those researchers who produce either uncritical or commercially valuable research. These researchers often have positions as gambling journal editors, and are able to control what kind of research is published. Since the editors are also often co-authors of research papers, this leads to mass production of publications that in many cases do not add anything to already existing research literature, or which have an aim of upholding the status quo, in which money flows to research projects and commissioned research that present an uncritical view of the government–industry relationship.

This leads to a situation in which the gambling industry is able to play “a numbers game” in which gambling companies demand that any policy action should be based on research using high-quality data, whilst at the same time they control access to it. By so doing, the industry is able to discredit those research results that are unfavourable to its interests. As shown earlier in relation to tobacco, uncertainty, an inherent part of any scientific process, can be misused to advance business goals (Gilbert, 2008). Like tobacco companies, gambling industry representatives demand that every bit of uncertainty be removed before any policy action.

In *Vicious Games*, Cassidy expresses the matter in the following way (Cassidy, 2020, p. 89):

> The gambling industry has managed to set the terms on which evidence can be assessed, setting impossibly high standards for effective measures while rolling out low-cost, low impact measures such as responsible gambling education, often without requiring (or providing) proof of their efficacy.

At the same time, governments also produce uncertainty by funding (expensive) prevalence studies that systematically recruit too few problem gamblers and are subject to widely different interpretations, aimed to show that nothing has changed (Cassidy et al., 2014; Livingstone, 2018; Markham & Young, 2016).

In her book, Cassidy skilfully uses quotations she has collected from gambling industry representatives during interviews at conferences and industry meetings, to show how the industry constantly pushes the boundaries of regulation further, knowing that regulators and policymakers do not understand the constantly changing nature of gambling products. By upholding the “responsible” gambling discourse, gambling companies have been able to frame the issue to a few (problem) individuals who create a disturbance while the majority are supposedly having fun (Boyce, 2019; Livingstone & Rintoul, 2020).

In the chapter “The responsible gambling myth” Cassidy uses her work experience in a betting shop to illustrate the vast difference between gambling advertising and the reality of daily operations at a shop level, where gambling harms are extended to the occupational hazard of workplace violence against the staff (cf. Lamont, 2016). For me, the special merit of the book is that Cassidy highlights this often-ignored role of frontline employees. They are not the ones who reap the benefits of gambling. Instead, they are low-paid or part-time workers who answer the phone with a friendly tone and keep the customers content. The chapter about Gibraltar clearly shows how many employees of gambling companies are uncomfortable with the role they are assigned and this is in line with other reporting about the subject (Busby, 2017; Davies, 2017).

Alongside the seminal book *Addiction by design* by another anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll (2012), *Vicious games* is a must buy for
anyone interested in gambling as a social issue. The only drawback might be that the publisher (Pluto Press) is not a traditional academic publisher, but “a radical political publishing house” (https://www.plutobooks.com/). This may make it easier for those in favour of gambling expansion to dismiss the book as propaganda.

In the last chapter (aptly-named as “The Regulation Game”), Cassidy tells a story in which a regulator in a conference in Greece made a mistake of saying that, due to concerns over gambling harm, an outright gambling ban might be an option. This was met with shouts of “Communist!” and “Get lost” by the industry representatives. Given the recent gambling advertising bans in Italy and Spain, those in favour of unrestricted gambling are understandably nervous. But this should not hinder even those working in the gambling business from reading the book Vicious games, since it points out why stricter regulation is on the way and what went wrong.

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