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The Gambling Establishment: Challenging the Power of the Modern Gambling Industry and its Allies by Jim Orford, UK, 2020, 194 Pages, 9780367085704, 0367085704

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Abstract: Orford's book, The Gambling Establishment, published in 2020, continues to be relevant to understanding gambling practices and policies in this age of under-regulated gaming expansion. Gambling risks and harms are disproportionately placed on the player rather than on product design, gambling environments, and advertising. This review summarizes his analysis and offers some critical reflections on Orford's call for evidence-guided public policy.

Keywords: Book review, gambling industry, addiction, Orford.



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Introduction

Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1998) issued a simple challenge: *to think what we are doing*. This is one way of looking at what Jim Orford sets out to do in *The Gambling Establishment: Challenging the power of the gambling industry and its allies*, published by Routledge in 2020. Reviewing a book well after its publication requires a dash of audacity and admits to a measure of procrastination as well. It also enables us to recognize how remarkably disruptive in so many ways (including for this journal, which is fortunately now finding a new lease of life) the past five years have been. Indeed, five years on, the salience of Jim Orford's panoramic commentary on the gambling scene has, if anything, become more apparent. In North America, the current explosive growth of sports betting and the unrelenting barrage of advertising that accompanies it is one big example supportive of this observation. As age-old and trans-cultural as gambling is, it has only been in recent decades that legally permitted gambling has emerged in the fulsome and expanding ways we have it today. Available in increasingly diverse forms, always it seems aggressively promoted, legalized gambling, for the most part, is poorly regulated, Orford argues. Its rapid expansion is the result of the confident and presumptive ways that the gambling industry, often without even a blink from government and regulators, present gambling, in all its forms from bingo to online sports betting, as essentially harmless, playful entertainment that ought to be readily available for adults to enjoy.

Jim Orford has had his eye and his mind on this scene over his long career. Who better than he to guide us on a panoramic tour of gambling in contemporary society, to take a closer look and to 'think what we are doing.' To get started, let's take a quick walk-through, chapter by chapter, of what Orford has to say.

Chapter 1. The new backlash against the growth of commercial gambling.

Curiously, Orford starts his book by noting that recently, at least in the United Kingdom, there has been a backlash against commercial gambling. It makes him wonder if the age of unrestrained liberalization of gambling in Britain might be coming to an end. Citizen concern there and in other countries about the uncontrolled spread of gambling, particularly online, is putting pressure on governments to do something. Orford sees governments as implicit partners in what he calls the gambling establishment. As such they have generally been reluctant to take an objective look at how to address and identify gambling risks and harms. Yet, in many countries, the public is becoming noisy about being supersaturated by the gambling business (Big Gambling, some have called it). Locally, here in Canada, where I live, two lead agencies – the Canadian Center on Substance Use and Addiction (Young et al, 2024) and CAMH (Crepault et al, 2024) – have raised a call for action about advertising and

about the need for more effective gambling policy based on public health approaches.

Chapter 2. The Gambling Establishment: The industry and its allies inside and outside government

But if there is backlash against gambling expansion as it embeds itself as a normal part of social life and personal behaviour, Orford makes clear that the focus of attention needs to be not just on gamblers and gambling behaviours but on what he calls *the gambling establishment*. Not only the industry, which is in the business of selling gambling, but also the governments which support and draw revenue from the gambling industry. And not only them, but the broad range of organizations, non-governmental and otherwise, who wittingly or unwittingly promote and benefit from under-regulated liberalization of gambling – all of these constitute what he calls the gambling establishment. Here he includes advertising, financial, and service-providing and academic organizations. He sees these as the authors of what has become the official gambling discourse, advancing benign and benevolent notions about gambling. This displaces the traditional morally cautious or disapproving view of gambling with positive images of harmless play that promises to be rewarding, while resisting and even contesting evidence that points to the problem side of the gambling business.

Chapter 3. The establishment discourse: Five ways we were told how to think about gambling

Orford identifies five core elements, or discourses, that comprise the Establishment (Orford capitalizes this word) discourse on gambling:

1. Harmless entertainment: the gambling industry is just another business like all the others
2. Ordinary business: this industry has emerged in response to market demand from consumers, in ways that are legal, regulated, and creatively innovative
3. Social and cultural benefits: this industry creates employment and pays taxes, proving funding for social projects, all in pursuit of happiness and a healthy society. Gambling products are not only harmless when used properly but beneficial to gamblers and their communities
4. Fundamental right: let people choose the products they use, without regulators interfering in their right to make their own decisions
5. Personal responsibility: it's up to the person to use gambling products sensibly. People with gambling problems are different from ordinary gamblers; they need to practice self-control, self-exclude, and get treatment.

Chapter 4. How gambling is forcibly advertised and sold in the modern era

The logic the industry promotes is that there is a pre-existing need in society for gambling, and the gambling industry is there to provide a needed service. (One might then wonder why gambling is advertised so aggressively to get people on board if gambling products exist to meet a deeply felt human need.) Orford critiques these five discourses by documenting how the Establishment narrative about gambling is not just deficient but actively deceptive. Gambling, he shows, is designed and promoted in ways that deceive gamblers about their chances of winning, giving the false impression that gambling is a fun pastime with good chances of winning in a context where the player has high levels of control and low levels of risk. Gambling advertising keys on the perception that there are many winners while avoiding giving information about the chances of winning. Studies that explore the seductive nature of gambling advertising reveal messaging that normalizes gambling, glamorizes risk-taking, and distorts the chances of winning, while exaggerating skill (Hing et al, 2014; Thomas et al, 2017). This creates a distorted perception to incite participation in gaming for fun and profit. The recent expansion of sports betting is another problematic development, especially with e-gambling and the introduction of live-action sports betting. What has been a long tradition of sports betting in Britain and Europe has recently been unleashed in North America, dominating advertising space and embedding gambling as a normal, inherent aspect of the experience. Orford observes that the expansion of gambling markets has left people feeling ‘bombarded’ by advertising that seems ubiquitous and inescapable. Using celebrities and appealing to masculinity, a diverse range of marketing strategies puts the emphasis on winning as the key motive for gambling, overemphasising player skill and minimizing player risk. For Orford and others (e.g., Griffiths, 2005; Rossi & Nairn, 2022), a particularly worrisome consequence is the exposure of children and youth to the distorted images that come with gambling advertising.

Chapter 5. Is modern gambling fraudulent? How players are deceived about the chances of winning

As if Orford’s critique of the gambling establishment and its self-justifying ideology isn’t enough, Orford here shows how gambling promotion and advertising deceive gamblers about the chances of winning. On Electronic Gaming Machines (EGMs), for example, people stay engaged in gambling because of a process that researchers call ‘losses disguised as wins’ (LDW). The gambler experiences apparent small wins while what is happening is that overall, they are losing money. As always, he draws on published research, for example by Harrigan & Dixon (2009), Turner (2011) and Schull (2012), which reveals how EGMs maximize short term wins while minimizing the number of wins in the long term. Of the various forms of gambling, the jury of experts have found EGMs to be

particularly addictive. Deception is also a feature Orford sees in online sports betting where players are misled about the real odds of winning. He notes that the normal principles of consumer protection are missing or marginalized in these gambling products. Players are not given an honest understanding of the real odds of winning, even as they are drawn into games with design features to capture their engagement in the activity. More than the industry itself, which is driven by economic self-interest, Orford sees the bigger failure with governments, in their duty to protect the public, for not adequately regulating gambling providers and their products.

Chapter 6. Understanding gambling addiction: Bringing personal experience and theory together

Having offered an analysis of how gambling operates in its varied and increasingly innovative ways, Orford turns to explore how and why people become addicted to gambling. He looks at the personal experience of gamblers as well as what we can learn from research into addiction in general and gambling in particular.

The establishment view that gambling is fundamentally safe does admit that there exists a set of people (in their view, a very small set) who are unable or unwilling to gamble safely. Successfully argued, it places the fault for the problems gamblers may have not on gambling products but with these weak and vulnerable individuals who can't control their gambling behaviour. Orford tackles this reductive view head on, providing a more rounded and adequate understanding of how gambling and gambling products are problematic. Looking at the person stuck in the gambling habit, he critiques what he calls '*the strange case of self-exclusion*'. For Orford gambling is 'no ordinary commodity' – a term public health advocates make good use of when talking about alcohol and cannabis, by the way (Barbor et al, 2022; Crepault et al, 2024). Self-exclusion as a practice is unique to gambling. It requires that the person who experiencing gambling harms formally request that they be banned from a particular gambling venue. While there may be benefits in this for the person wanting to stop gambling, Orford points out that to self-exclude the person must engage with the provider of the product which is endangering them to stop them from accessing their products. It is a tacit recognition that gambling is a behaviour that people can lose control over. But Orford asks, is that only because of the vulnerabilities of the person? Why is the emphasis put on self-exclusion, a strange ritual, and not on the ways gambling products and gambling promotion contribute to gambling harms? Clearly, gambling problems happen to particular people in a variety of ways. But Orford hold firm to his key point: gambling is addictive in its very nature. While the risk of addiction varies across different forms of gambling, all forms of gambling carry addictive potential to one degree or another. It is only recently – 2014 – when the World Health Organization and the American Psychiatric Association recognized gambling disorder as an addictive disorder. And yet it is gambling – this only recently recognized form of

addiction – that Orford, having spent a lifetime studying and researching addictive behaviours, points to as the clearest example of addiction. Here addiction is not contingent on the consumption of a psychoactive drug that crosses the blood-brain barrier but occurs without the need for an extrinsic chemical agent.

How can that happen? Looking at first-person accounts of people who became addicted to gambling, Orford identified five characteristics, features that are common to all addictive behaviours: preoccupation, distorting thinking, secrecy, personality change, and feelings of a divided self. Building on these, he makes his core observation about the essence of addiction – that it is a conditioned habit. Habit is what he sees as the thing that mediates and reconciles free will and determinism, the two antipodes that confound our thinking when we try to understand and address addictive behaviour. To have an addiction, Orford concludes, is to have a divided self, a self that engages in behaviour that is out of control while at the same time appearing to be voluntary and intentional. That is the behavioural paradox at the heart of addiction as a disordered habit. The brilliance of many gambling products is in how they build and shape habit in the player in subtle yet powerful ways that go beyond the simple logic of intermittent reinforcement.

This view of addiction as habit finds support in neuroscience. (It is interesting to note that in the world of substance use disorders, it is common talk among users to refer to their ‘habit’. Now that word returns with a deeper resonance that allows a more useful and integrative understanding of addiction.) The insights Orford gains from listening to people with gambling problems complements the emerging neuroscience on habit to offer a therapeutically valuable view of the person with gambling problems: that they are in conflict, preoccupied, confused, at a loss to plan and behave consistently over time. This conflicted, divided self is in moral distress while being primed to respond urgently to the call of habit. This vulnerability tends to be greater in people who are experiencing other problems, including substance use disorders, mood and anxiety disorders, physical health problems, and social and economic distress.

Chapter 7. Gambling’s harm to individuals, families, communities, and society

The establishment narrative is that gambling addiction affects only a very small set of people, but gambling harms is more prevalent and extensive than most people realize. Orford explores how the gambling harms go beyond the gambler, harming others as well. This is most clearly apparent in the crises and acute events that are related to gambling losses, but there are also long-term, ‘legacy’ effects. Gamblers are at risk not just to addiction, but a wide range of other consequences, including finances, work and education, physical and mental health, housing, and crime. Family members and others are also affected by financial troubles, loss of trust and reliability, domestic conflict and abuse, separation, health and wellbeing,

all of which have developmental impact on children. Communities are affected by the impact of gambling on other businesses and other recreational options. At the societal level, the normalising of gambling can undermine traditional values and – as studies show – contribute to inequality. Gambling advertising, in the tone and messages it promotes, has rather insidious impacts, shaping what gets called normal not only for the adults who are being encouraged to become players, but for youth and adolescents who see this all too clearly as normal adult behaviour. In manufacturing the image of gambling as leisure activity, as harmless amusement, as just another positive business without much of a downside, Orford sees governments are equally culpable. When gambling harms are factored in, he concludes that gambling in its present forms is more a threat to society's well-being than a blessing.

Chapter 8. How the Gambling Establishment has used evidence to support its position

In discussing how the gambling establishment uses evidence to justify its business, Orford makes the point that the relationship between research and policy is more complex than people admit or understand. The simple view is that to make good policy you just look at the facts and the data to guide you to the right policy, which you then implement diligently. In addition to reliable evidence, Orford argues that what is needed just as much is a values-based conversation about what kind of society we want to live in. He sees current policy as muddled and piecemeal, without guiding values and principles beyond economic logic. Looking ahead, he calls for an interactive model of political decision-making where a fuller range of participants are included in the conversation.

Drawing on the work of Peter Adams (2016), he questions the essential framework that governs current gambling policy. He is expressly concerned about the pressures researchers are under. The focus of government and industry funded research on problem gamblers. There is a lack of studied attention to the nature of gambling products and the risks and harms that come with them, often by implicit design. The gambling establishment has skewed the research agenda away from the games and towards the player. Let this be a spoiler alert because in this chapter, Orford mentions three prominent researchers, one Australian, one American, and one British, who have in his view have risked their independence and moral integrity by accepting industry funding. The quality of their research is not what he challenges, but its focus and its use. Orford's concern is that research gets 'hijacked' by selective use of data to support the industry's self-interest. He stresses the need for independent funding of gambling research to investigate not just characteristics of gamblers but of gambling products, gambling environments, business practices, and social impact.

Chapter 9. Resisting the power of the Gambling Establishment: A manifesto for change

Orford ends his panoramic scan of the wide world of gambling with a manifesto for change and a call to resist the agenda of a powerful gambling establishment. Orford's goal is not just to alarm the reader about how bad things are, but to find a way forward. While he has the British context primarily in mind, he reminds us that these issues needing to be confronted in many countries. At the policy level, the fundamental thinking about gambling needs to be rethought, moving from the current responsible gambling ideology to a public health perspective with a comprehensive view of safer gaming. Such a switch accepts gambling as economic activity but insists on a co-equal public health dimension. It requires investments in gambling harm reduction, treatment, and research. Regulating gambling advertising, particularly with the goal of protecting children and young people, needs to be a lead priority. Current approaches focused on educating and tracking problem gamblers would be expanded dimensionally to include measures that identify and reduce level of dangerousness of gambling products themselves. A more responsive treatment system would include services not just for gamblers but for families. It would include not just primary care and mental health services, but children's services, as well as debt, law enforcement, and social services.

Having addictive risk and harm built into it by design means gambling is no ordinary commodity. Shifting the governing paradigm from the ordinary business/responsible gambling ideology to a dangerous consumption/public health perspective is key in Orford's future vision. Approaches that have been successful at the global level in addressing the risks and harms of alcohol and tobacco use offer points of reference in how to do this. Key to this transition is the recognition of the principles of consumer protection and the duty of governments to effectively regulate gambling products. Letting industry self-regulate creates and sustains the current problematic situation in too many countries. In moving to a health promotion/public health approach, funding of treatment and research needs to be transparently independent of the gambling industry. The amounts of money governments have invested in prevention, treatment, and research have been inadequate. The amount the industry earns – or even what it spends on gambling advertising alone – is many magnitudes higher than what is spent on prevention, treatment, and research combined.

As Orford shows, gambling has slowly encroached on our lives, for better or worse. His commentary demonstrates how this has happened. The fact is, gambling is being allowed to be more and more embedded in personal space and in society at large, without much public awareness, consent, or debate. Orford's wager is that public backlash driven by alarm about gambling expansion and increasing distress at gambling's risks and harms can lead to evidence-informed and value-guided change in gambling policies and practices.

Orford's argument is that gambling expansion has occurred in unthinking ways, enchanted by the revenue it produces for governments and the gambling business and allied industries. That, guided by the mystique of gambling as harmless, fun-filled entertainment, creates the foundation on which the conventional view of gambling rests. It is worth remembering how a similar establishment narrative – about tobacco, also no ordinary commodity – after being contested scientifically and medically for years, has been gradually transformed by evidence-based public health policies and practices. By getting us to 'think what we are doing', Orford sets the stage for dialogue about where to go from here and wagers on how to get there.

Some Comments

A couple of features of Orford's book stand out for me. First, he accomplishes this comprehensive analysis in a mere 166 or so pages, followed by an extensive list of references. In nine very readable chapters he explores the rise of what he calls the gambling establishment, the focus on gamblers as the source of their own problems if they become addicted, gambling products that are developed and designed to produce addictive involvement, the nature of addiction as habit, the ways research and knowledge dissemination are controlled and constrained, and the path forward through effective regulation, and investment in gambling prevention, treatment, and research. To cap it all, he argues gambling disorder is the clearest illustration of what addiction is as a bio-psycho-social process.

Using a candid yet conversational tone, Orford invites the reader into the dialogue. Many times, he speaks from a first-person context himself; often he brings in first-person narrative accounts of people's lived experience to complement research-based findings; and always he respects the reader, taking time to explain himself, often addressing the reader as a 'you', or by using phrases such as 'you and I.' These are welcome features in a synoptic work that deserves the attention of a wide audience, including professionals involved in prevention, treatment and research of gambling problems and other addictive behaviours, as well as those affected by addiction, policy leaders, and the public at large.

I would be remiss if I concluded without noting Jim Orford's active presence in the addiction field going back to the 1960s and 1970s. In 1977 he and Griffith Edwards published a seminal study that showed that men (with their wives participating in the program) who received a single session advice did as well as those receiving comprehensive treatment measured over two years of follow-up. The research included a comprehensive assessment and regular follow-up. This work contributed to developing modes of treatment that went beyond the medical disease approach, busting open questions that are at issue today about the essence of addiction therapy and the nature of recovery.

In 1980s, he published *Excessive Appetites*, with a second edition appearing in 2001. He is one of the first to go beyond a narrow view of addiction as being about substance use to include gambling, eating, and sex as appetitive behaviours that carry addictive risk. The appetitive requirement for addiction and the range of behaviours that have that dimension are now more widely accepted. But forty years ago, Orford was contesting an old paradigm and offering new, useful insights that opened approaches to treatment and change that are now foundational. I have a much-used copy that has helped shape how I think about and work with people struggling with addiction for many years now. From the beginning of his career, he has been active in collaborative research (with family members, clinicians and social scientists) on the effects of addiction on families. In 2012 he co-founded the Addiction and the Family International Network (AFINet). He has also written about addiction as essentially a process of disempowerment and the role of social equality in its profusion, fed by our social ideologies of autonomy, responsibility, and merit. As far back as the 1990s, Orford has been involved in gambling, gambling policy, and gambling research. On his website, he points to his characterization of addiction as a habit disorder in this book as the most accurate summary of his understanding of the issue. He also notes that he prefers the phrases ‘drug addiction’ and ‘non-drug addiction’ to the term ‘behavioural addiction’, because all addictions are behaviours. But here I would disagree and argue for the importance of the term ‘behavioural addiction’, for the very reasons that he develops so insightfully. Indeed, the antipode of ‘addiction’ is much better understood just not as ‘mental health’ but as ‘behavioural health.’

One quibble, if I may, has to do with Orford’s view that funding for the public health side of gambling risks and harms should come from general tax revenues. In a more benign and enlightened political and civic environment, I would expect this would have been built in from the beginning. But in truth it is hard to think of a jurisdiction where the tax dollars needing to be invested to effectively address gambling and other addictive behaviours will be found any time soon. I have argued in the past for a different strategy which involves taking money off the top from revenues made by the industries that provide gambling and other addictive products and the governments that gather revenues from them (Skinner, 2007). It starts with accepting the notion that these are risky behaviours. Most other risky behaviours require that people have insurance as a condition of engaging in the behaviour, be it driving a car, or travelling, or owning home, or even being alive. Instead of a tax, the principle would be that from the monies being made by those selling gambling products, a percentage would be dedicated to providing ‘behavioural risk insurance’ for gamblers. Rather than having to ask for a tax to cover the costs of gambling harms, build it into the money earned by those providing gambling products. Rather than having to compete with other social priorities for general tax revenue, the money to develop and deliver a robust public health

approach to addictive behaviour is already there in the revenues made by the industry selling the products and the governments that allow them to operate. Applying even one percent of the money made selling gambling products towards addressing gambling risks and harms would dramatically exceed what most governments spend on gambling harms. Providing public health responses that are proportional to the risks and harms that come with any behaviour needs to be recognized as part of the cost of doing business. In that way, the gap between the need to address gambling risks and harms and the lack of resources need to address them can start to be closed.

And a final note. As much as Orford notes and expresses concern about the overwhelming forces that make addiction an endemic characteristic of contemporary society, he also points to solutions, to ways of mitigating addictive harms and promoting behavioural health. It is no small accomplishment in this – no ordinary book – that Orford puts all his cards on the table and calling on the reader to join him in a conversation about the need for change, guided by facts and evidence and by our values and aspirations, individual and societal. So finally he challenges us, betting that when we realize what the stakes are, we will work together to make that happen.

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