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Bingo Regulation and the Feminist Political Economy of Everyday Gambling: In Search of the Anti-Heroic.

Abstract

This paper uses bingo—a lottery-style game particularly popular with older working class women—to take forward feminist political economy debates about the everyday. It highlights consumption and regulation as key to research on everyday political economy, and aims to contribute to the productive ways in which gambling has been used as a marker of the everyday within critical political economy. Rather than seeing gambling primarily in terms of vernacular risk-taking, however, it argues that gambling is also a pathway into exploring other, more self-effacing political economies—of entertainment, fundraising, sharing, and ‘having a laugh.’ Focusing on three key areas of regulatory dispute (over how to win bingo; who can participate; and what defines the game), the research suggests that players and workers are (re)enabling the diverse, plural nature of bingo as a political economic formulation—involving winning; entertainment; fund-raising; care; flirting; and playful speculation—in the face of technological and legal processes aiming to standardize the game’s meaning as commercial gambling.

Keywords: gambling; consumption; play; regulation; gender; law

Bingo Regulation and the Feminist Political Economy of Everyday Gambling.

I used to go to the Isle of Sheppey with my parents, to a caravan park. We would play (bingo) in a small church hall. I remember I won a cauliflower once. I was so happy, I can't tell you. I know – it's ridiculous how happy I was! (laughs, at herself).

(Woman involved in running a weekly South London bingo game for a non-commercial members' club).

Introduction

In this paper I use bingo—a lottery-style game played in many countries and especially popular with older working class women—to take forward feminist political economy debates about the everyday. My wider research in this area asserts that bingo can teach us as much about political economy as casinos and stock markets (Bingo Project 2015). Here my aims in analyzing bingo are two-fold. Firstly I wish to highlight consumption, and the regulation thereof, as key to research on everyday political economy (section 1). Secondly, I wish to contribute to the productive ways in which gambling has been used as a marker of the everyday within critical political economy (section 2). Rather than seeing gambling primarily as vernacular risk-taking, however, I argue that it is also a pathway into exploring other, more self-effacing political economies - of entertainment, fundraising, sharing, and 'having a laugh.'

More specifically, I seek to take forward insights about consumption, regulation, and the plural political economies of the everyday by using a case study of boundary disputes and rule-making within land-based bingo play in England and Wales.

Research involved identification of relevant case law, legislation, political debate, and regulatory guidance on bingo, alongside six months of fieldwork encompassing 105 interviews with bingo stakeholders. I also played games to ascertain how rules and regulations were operationalized. Interviewees included employees; executives; volunteers who run games; local councilors; licensing officials; and central government regulators. This methodology reflects a dual interest in the social life of plural forms of rule-making (Merry 1990, 2010), and the ‘street level bureaucracy’ work of low-level officials (Lipsky 1980).

The approach identified three key areas of regulatory dispute, over how to win bingo; who can participate; and what defines the game. Section 3 explores these areas of dispute in-depth, arguing that they give insight into the different meanings attached to bingo as a political economic practice. While it is well-known that people gamble for many reasons, including to redistribute resources; bond with others through play; raise money for charity; secure family life; and escape daily worries (Cassidy 2013, 87; Casey, 2008), I suggest that the especially diverse nature of bingo as a political economic formulation means that it poses particular problems of boundary definition for regulators. Contestations over the game’s form and meaning are thus especially loaded with political economic significance, and offer much to our broader debates about the role of rule-making in everyday political economic life.

Section 4 explores the role of paid employees in mediating between different understandings of the game, particularly in (re)enabling the social nature of bingo in the face of technological processes that seek to standardize play in order to extract revenue from players more efficiently. Seeking to hereby hold together analysis of

consumption and labour, I argue that workers and players reanimate different gambling vernaculars to those imagined by regulators and commercial gambling operators, governed by distinct rules. I conclude by tentatively suggesting some new directions for research in IPE that stem from taking consumption and its regulatory entanglements more seriously in our accounts of the everyday.

Section 1: Consumption and Regulation in Everyday Political Economy: In search of an anti-heroic research agenda.

If scholarly accounts are to remain attentive to the constitutive role of the everyday in political economy they must do more than peer in a homogenizing or functionalist way into ‘ordinary people’s’ lives and explain how they are impacted by global political economic processes. Rather, they must critically interrogate the everyday as a political economic production. Some - using Lefebvre - have focused on the class dimensions of the everyday, involving the division between manual and mental labour in industrial capitalism (Davies 2010). Others – using feminist resources - have fruitfully explored the way in which gender also structures the mundane, routinized rhythms of the everyday (Oakley, 1976; Glucksmann (aka Cavendish) 1982). Either way it is incumbent upon scholars to explore what programmes the everyday, what value is placed on it, whose routines are seen as sites of creative resistance, and whose are dismissed as dull, conformist, or frivolous. For example, as Urs Staheli argues, although the popular, local, and vernacular are often portrayed as a critical response to the capitalist social order, the popular ‘outside’ is 'entangled' with capitalist markets in many ways, assuming a constitutive function in our political economic system (Staheli 2013, p. 9).¹

Similarly as Edensor et al. note in their collection on *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity* (2009) there is a need to intervene critically in conversations about the role that the cool and the mundane play in capitalist development. Cultural creativity is an explicit instrument of gentrification in many places, a process involving the parallel production of ‘cultural wastelands’ (Edensor et al, 2009, p. 1). There is an ongoing urgency, then, to exploring the imagined other to this creativity: the always-already uncool suburbs (Spigel, 2001); the ‘crap towns’ (Edensor et al., 2009, pp. 5–6); the soap opera watchers; gnome collectors (Potts, 2009), and bingo players. Such places and practices are not spectacular, extraordinary, or heroic, contrary to De Certeau’s framing of ‘the ordinary man’ as ‘a common hero’ in the dedication to his book on the everyday (de Certeau, 1988, n.p.). In fact if they are dominated by women they are often explicitly, pre-emptively self-effacing, as evident in the internalized sense of inferiority expressed by women who read romance novels (Radway, 1991); prefer comedies over documentaries; or watch reality TV (Wood & Skeggs, 2011).

At least two analytic priorities stem from understanding the everyday as entangled with, but imagined as other to, elite forms of political economy: 1. a focus on consumption, and 2. a focus on regulation. Although key theories of the everyday rest on consumers, their role as producers of meaning, as ‘poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality’ (de Certeau 1988, p. xviii) has been somewhat eclipsed in the political science turn to the everyday.² Moreover, some Left analyses still make a thoroughly gendered distinction between production, where resistant potential is ever present, and the variously frivolous, wasteful, crass, conformist sphere of consumption. As feminists have long noted many such critiques of consumption are frankly misogynistic (Spigel, 2001, p.

7), and it is often working class women's tastes at stake in condemnations of mass culture specifically (Skeggs, 1997).

Feminist political economists have attempted to address this neglect of consumption, including through gendered analysis of commodity chains (Stewart, 2011); and work on household level debt (Le Baron 2010). However feminist analyses of everyday consumption remain unusual in politics. Hence work by feminists in other disciplines is crucial: historians (Peiss, 1985; Spigel, 2001); sociologists (Casey & Martens, 2006; Zelizer, 2010); geographers (JK Gibson Graham 2006), and anthropologists (Miller, 1998; Wilson, 2004). Without exception these thinkers avoid the functionalist tendency to fold consumption into social reproduction as only ever a form of provisioning. For example, Olga Shevchenko's (2009) research on people's experiences of post-socialist life in Moscow highlights the role of consumption in everyday crisis contexts. In so doing, it critiques the dominant social science emphasis on the outstanding and heroic at the expense of the trivial and self-effacing. The narratives she relays involve people buying multiple extra fridges to cram into small apartments, because value holds in appliances not currencies; and doing word puzzles as an individual and collective affirmation of intellect in the face of disintegrating public education. Such work contributes to feminist political economy not just in its attentiveness to sites of daily shopping and leisure often dominated by women, but also in refusing gendered notions of what is worthy of serious academic attention as a political economic site or practice.

A second analytic priority for a feminist political economy of the everyday concerns attentiveness to the pluralist regulatory environment through which the everyday is

partly constituted. In Edensor et al's framing, as in de Certeau's, vernacular creativity allows a focus on the value of practices that do not produce commodifiable economic products, but that might instead produce community cohesion, neighbourhood identity, conviviality, and economies of generosity (Edensor et al., 2009, p. 11). Yet the home, neighbourhood, and community are often sites of unequal power. To posit them as opposed to the formal economy is to potentially miss how they are co-constituted by it, and to underplay their dynamics of inequality. Relatedly, a conceptualisation of the vernacular as opposed to state or market orderings may prove insufficient for exploring the diverse, multi-levelled institutional orders that co-constitute everyday practices of shopping, collecting, TV watching, and so on. Such orders may include hard consumer protection laws; soft quality standards guidelines; state health campaigns to discipline consumers; gendered conventions that reserve family resources for men's recreation; local council licensing procedures; broadcasting rules that structure TV viewing and radio listening; and so on. The point is that one can not know in advance which rules and regulations matter most. Hence attentiveness to the regulatory dimension of the everyday does not entail a formalist 'law-first' focus. Rather, effective research requires a more socio-legal approach, interrogating what Sally Engle Merry (1990; 2010) terms the social life of plural forms of rule-making. Such an approach is foreshadowed in Lefebvre's identification of 'the everyday as an object of a programming' (quoted in Davies 2010, 54) – but it requires more explicit attention to plural regulatory orders than has characterized much work on the cultural economy of vernacular practices.

Section 2: Gambling and Everyday Political Economy.

Gambling is an excellent place to start such a non-heroic quest, since it has long been a key site for interrogating everyday political economy. As historian of risk Arwen Mohun (borrowing from Levi–Strauss) argues about roller coasters and lawn mowers, gambling is ‘good to think with’ (Mohun, 2012, p. 6), because it draws our attention to processes of vernacular risk culture and regulation and their interaction with more mainstream realms of political economic analysis.³ As a popular, playful form of engaging with economic contingency, gambling has continuously to be distinguished from its serious others: insurance (Clark, 1999); stocks (Stäheli, 2013); derivatives (Randalls, 2013) and so on. Gambling also plays a broader, heuristic role in discussions about the politics of distribution more generally (Cassidy, Pisac, & Loussouarn, 2013, p. 1; Reith 2013), with scholars exploring how it is understood to relate to concepts of deserved rewards, worthwhile leisure, equality, democracy, and responsibility (Cosgrave, 2006; Reith, 2002; Miers, 2004). The racialized and class stratified nature of gambling regulation has also received attention from scholars in several jurisdictions.⁴

Moreover, gambling is a route in to discussing the entertaining nature of speculation. As Urs Stäheli argues, the ‘vehement struggles’ around the distinction between gambling and speculation in the nineteenth century US in part related to how the latter handled its own entertaining nature (Stäheli, 2013, p 15). Attempts to economise speculation involved efforts to purge it of the perceived thrill of popular participation purely for the sake of entertainment, including by distinguishing it from gambling. On this reading, gambling can no more be analytically reduced to a vernacular way of managing risk than stock markets can be reduced to theatres. Rather it is the ‘entanglement’ (Stäheli, 2013, p. 240) between the realms of

entertainment, risk, play, and profit, and the regulatory boundaries between them, that emerge as of central interest to critical political economists.

The role of regulation in shaping the diverse, entangled political economic meanings of everyday life is especially crucial for gambling scholars, because it relates to core concerns within the subfield about legal harmonization and game standardization. At issue here is not only the empirical question of whether legal frameworks around gambling are converging across jurisdictions but also whether vernacular forms of play are being ‘Las-Vegasized,’ as Sytze Kingma (2010) puts it, or commodified into standard packages that extract profit in predictable form. As Gerda Reith (2013, 732) notes, commercial gambling is in many respects a highly efficient ‘extractive’ industry, especially in its electronically mediated forms. In a similar vein Natasha Dow Schull (2013) has researched the processes of ‘cultural adaptation’ involved in trying to increase the use of slot machines in Macao’s casinos, in order to reduce labour costs and risks to the house associated with table games. Adaptation involves attempts by the gambling industry to shift the proclivities of customers to see gambling as less about exciting risk-taking and more about individual escape.

Rebecca Cassidy highlights the key role played by regulation in shaping, and sometimes standardizing, the games at issue here. In her account of social gaming and gambling, she notes that the business model of social gaming is reliant on low compliance costs, and relatively light regulation (Cassidy, 2013, p.76). Social games can be changed instantly, and companies can easily test out different profit-extraction options (p.79). In contrast gambling companies typically operate in heavily regulated environments, leading to path-dependent preferences against experimenting with

game formats (p.83). The creativity and flexibility of the entertainment championed by social gamers is thus co-created by the regulatory environment, and dependent on maintaining the discursive and regulatory separation of gaming from gambling.

In a similar vein, this article asks what we can learn about how economic contingency is understood and regulated within the realm of bingo as commercial gambling; entertainment; care; harmless fun; and charitable fund-raising. It seeks to analytically hold those diverse motivations together, while critically exploring how regulatory boundaries between them are invoked or unsettled. The point, as I hope to make clear below, is not to isolate the commercial gambling thread from the rest but rather to analyse the entanglement itself, especially as it is mediated by workers encountering industry attempts to standardize play.

Section 3: Rule-Making and Uneven Standardization in Bingo.

‘Are you the singer, love? Are you the Cher?’ (questioning the researcher in the toilet before the bi-weekly bingo game in a non-commercial members’ club, South Wales).

At the most general level, bingo is a lottery-style game where players buy tickets and cross off numbers, arranged in a grid, to (hopefully) win prizes. The game spread globally through military and missionary circuits in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it remains popular in many countries. I focus this discussion on land-based bingo play in England and Wales. This is most obviously associated with commercial bingo halls, which require both an operating license for the company

(from the national regulator, the Gambling Commission,) and a premises license (from the local authority). According to the trade association representing commercial operators, there are 745 licensed bingo premises in the UK, employing 14,000 people (Bingo Association 2015; see also Gambling Commission 2015, 10). However bingo is played more widely than these figures suggest, in ex-services clubs, miners' welfare institutes, politically-affiliated clubs; working men's clubs; sports and social clubs, gay bars; village halls, community centres; amusement arcades, holiday camps, churches, and cruise ships. Games in members' clubs may require a local authority permit depending on stake and prize levels, but often they are exempt.⁵ Since by law all the stakes in cash bingo must be returned to players as prizes⁶ commercial halls make money from participation fees built into the ticket price, or from machines played in intervals.⁷ Members' clubs can charge limited participation fees as well, although they must use them for the benefit of members. Proceeds can also be used for charitable causes, including supporting the work of non-commercial members' clubs (see s 297-301 of the 2005 Gambling Act).⁸ However money is rarely made from bingo in members' clubs. Sometimes operators benefit in additional food or drink sales, or separate admission fees to see a performer in the interval between games. But frequently the surplus generated is described in non-monetary terms. As a volunteer caller in an ex-services club put it 'we're just having a laugh, really. It's a bit of fun. It's providing a service. It is not like big bingo halls. It's about meeting friends, comradeship, friendship.'

Bingo can thus involve a diverse set of leisure practices, making debates about its regulation and standardization especially pertinent. 'Going to the bingo' refers both to a premises, and to a game played in that premises. It can mean playing for a six figure

nationally-linked prize in a commercial environment; singing along with the Cher impersonator between games in a social club; or watching live sex acts performed on players by drag queen callers when particular numbers come up. Prizes range from the resolutely mundane—vegetables, turkeys, knife sets, pickled onions; and out-of-date Easter eggs (a disappointing victory, I must admit) —to the spectacular: Las Vegas holidays, new cars, and life-changing jackpots. The tickets can be paper or digital, the caller reading out the randomly chosen numbers can be human or automated, and the mix of entertainment, spectacle, profit-making, and socializing can vary considerably.

Consequently local-level rule-making plays a significant role. Sometimes this is developed within the confines of formal legal rules and/or official guidance, and sometimes it is developed without. In the broadest sense there are many rules at issue here, including norms of sharing winnings between friends; the strongly-held sense in some places that ‘a woman can’t call here: players will not stand a woman calling’ (working men’s club, South Wales); or company rules on marketing. I focus, though, on three commonly-raised regulatory topics that emerged as key from the research, over how to win; who can participate; and what defines the game. These give a flavour to the different understandings of how bingo should be governed, related to its different meanings as a political economic practice, and to the plural regulations shaping play.

Firstly, winning bingo is an arena of diverse rule making, particularly in relation to procedures around missed calls (where a player fails to shout loudly or fast enough to stop the caller from moving onto the next number, and who therefore misses out on

her prize). There is nothing in legislation requiring the game to be won on the last number called. Rather this is a convention, recognised across operators in the UK. Commercial halls enforce the rule around missed calls most strictly and it is often the most contentious part of the play, generating the most customer complaints. The independent arbitration panel established to investigate customer disputes in the commercial sector spends most of its time investigating missed calls. Although most commercial halls allow the customer to play using an electronic device, it only alerts her of a win: she has to shout out or press a claim button to stop the game. Companies are reluctant to award a prize to someone who has missed a call, even for a small claim, since they fear setting a precedent that will hold in the case of a large jackpot. Moreover callers—who are often using technology which alerts them to the fact that there is a winner on that number—are trained not to slow down or vary their voice if alerted: the alert is intended to make them extra vigilant about listening for a claim.

Conversely in other bingo spaces the rule around missed calls is enforced more selectively, with attentiveness to the varying capacities of players. As one woman explained when talking about the variable enforcement of missed call rules in a non-commercial bingo game:

Well, sometimes we do (impose the rule) and sometimes we don't. I have known that someone, they have started the next number and someone has called and they have been given it. You have got to make allowances for the fact that these are, a lot of them are, as I say, elderly. They can't always keep up with it all. We are not so particular about it. We do like them to call on the last number called. I know, maybe its discrimination,

but we know who can play bingo efficiently and who can't play it so well. So if the person who can play really good calls up on the next number then we might be more inclined to sort of say—because we know they can keep up and there is no reason why they couldn't call on the number before. (London, female bingo organizer in a non-commercial members' club)

Here care for slower players leads to principled flexible enforcement of rules. To do otherwise would, as a male bingo organizer in a Northern non-commercial members' club explained, be 'taking it too seriously. I hate that.'

A second example of local-level rule-making—this time involving a clash with formal law – is over participation in bingo in members' clubs. In part in recognition of the key role of gambling as a social activity in this sector, the 2005 Gambling Act (the key legislation governing gambling in England and Wales) allows members' clubs to operate some small-scale equal chance gambling without the need for a permit. They can also apply to local licensing authorities for club gaming permits and club machine permits, which allow gambling of other kinds up to certain limits.⁹ Clubs must be genuine members' clubs, with participation in gaming restricted to members and their bona fide guests, but open to them all. The rules around this are extensive. The Act lays out minimum numbers of members required to establish a members' club and waiting periods to play, and the Gambling Commission has issued guidance to local authorities on determining whether a club is a genuine members' club (Gambling Commission 2012, p 137), and whether there is 'substantial evidence of activities

other than gaming,' to ensure that the club is not established wholly or mainly for gaming.¹⁰ (p 138).

In practice, regulators generally assign low priority to gambling in members' clubs, and—with local authority inspections and enforcement capacity under severe strain with austerity cuts—they cannot be said to make the rules in a simple way. Moreover the rules they make on membership are often considered irrelevant. For example typically the bingo is run on a small scale and involves only regulars, so organisers know who belongs in the space. Records on dues—which are supposed to be used to help ascertain membership - are not considered relevant in determining who can play. Likewise new people are not always asked to sign in. However they are almost always asked by the bingo organisers who they are and why they have come. One steward in a seaside-based members' club said that often new people want to play while on holiday; once she has established this someone will always sign them in.

However, if a portion of the stakes of regular players are rolled over, into accumulating jackpots, clubs must decide what happens if a guest wants to play for that prize. Often clubs ask such people to refrain from playing that game. When playing in members' clubs as a guest I have been asked twice not to play the accumulated jackpot in this way. However I do not need to be asked: it would be manifestly unfair for an outsider to win a large, equal chance prize made up of regular members' contributions. I was told that a woman had tried to violate that rule in a South London members' club—which runs a weekly bingo of around 25 people – by insisting on buying the 'snowball' ticket even though she was a new attendee, and had been signed in out of friendliness by someone who had never met her before. She was

told to leave, and that she would not be welcome back. As she left she threatened to report the bingo organisers to the council for not letting her play. They remembered laughing at the threat.

In both of these arenas—winning and participating—local-level regulations reflect and shape the mix of entertainment, play, fun, and care that constitutes ‘going to the bingo.’ In the first instance these operate in the absence of state rules; in the second they operate against them. I thus wish to highlight a third example, of a recent state initiative surrounding the official definition of the game itself. This gives excellent insight into the uneven processes of homogenization that result when officials encounter the everyday.

In a key sign of its vernacular nature, bingo “is the only form of gambling recognised in the Gambling Act 2005 that does not have a specific statutory definition, the Act providing simply that ‘bingo’ means ‘any version of that game, irrespective of by what name it is described’ (Gambling Commission 2014, 1.1). Or as the national gambling regulator’s guidance to local authorities states, bingo ‘is to have its ordinary and natural meaning.’ (2012 part 18.1). This lack of a statutory definition, which defers to ‘ordinary’ understandings, had not caused a widespread problem until recently. However, since the Gambling Act 2005 liberalized the legal framework governing gambling in the UK some operators have eagerly developed new forms of bingo, and there has been an expansion in the type of operators and premises classified as offering bingo. In short because bingo licenses offer access to lucrative games machine entitlements (under s. 172 of the Act), there is a commercial incentive created by the regulations to defend game innovations as bingo, and a growing need

for regulators to rule on boundary disputes between bingo and other forms of gaming. Some adult gaming centres have introduced bingo to get reclassified as bingo premises, a move which increases their gaming machine entitlements.¹¹ The bingo is offered either via occasional games called live, or via bingo-variant machines which offer short, automated, random number generated games. Classified as bingo machines they offer additional benefits to operators (besides potentially qualifying them for a bingo premises license), because they do not count towards the quota of gaming machines that come with a bingo premises license, and neither are they subject to the limits of stakes and prizes that apply to gaming machines (Gambling Commission 2014 s. B2).

Hence in the last few years officials at the Gambling Commission have had to give definitive guidance on what constitutes a bingo environment versus an environment for other forms of gaming, and on what constitutes bingo itself. These civil servants are usually very far removed in class and age terms from the game's roots – but they have worked hard at providing clarity. The criteria of 'primary gaming activity' has been developed for local authorities by the Gambling Commission, to try and ensure consistency between the premises license held and the gambling activity predominating in that establishment. In June 2009 the Commission issued a document on 'key characteristics of bingo', intended to help clarify the game's boundaries (Gambling Commission 2009). This focused on how rules on stakes and participation fees applied to bingo variant machines. Most recently, in January 2014, continuing boundary disputes caused by new technologies resulted in the Commission publishing a guidance note on 'what constitutes bingo.' This guidance is intended 'to help bingo operators avoid creating and offering products that we consider to be casino games,

lotteries or fixed odds betting” (2014, s1.1). It identifies 3 ‘fundamental principles of bingo: that the game is an equal chance game; that it must involve a degree of participation, and that it must have a clearly defined end point’ (2014, s 3.3).

These moves towards an official definition of the game are unlikely to have an immediate impact on bingo in most members’ clubs, where new technologies and state rule-making play little role in game innovation. However the changes may significantly impact commercial halls, and operators interested in expanding bingo into new types of premises. Several commercial bingo executives said that they were enthusiastic about the guidance document, since it allows for game innovations seen by some to offer enormous profit potential. For example it permits players to select their own numbers (Gambling Commission 2014, s.3.6), and it allows the pre-selection of winning numbers (rather than real-time calling), providing that they are subsequently called or displayed (s.3.9). It also formally recognizes that lower degrees of participation are now required to win. In conventional bingo, aside from buying the ticket the key participation moment is at the end; players must stop the game by shouting out that they have won on the last number called (hence the aforementioned tension over missed calls). In bingo variant formats, however, players can buy tickets and have them scanned after the game has been (auto) called, to see if they have won. Likewise in online bingo, winning is automated. The Commission’s guidance has essentially folded these newer practices into the game’s overall definition. It states that:

A fundamental element of a game of bingo, as with any game, is that it needs to end at a predetermined designated point or time. This end point

needs to be appropriate, realistic and clearly communicated to players.

The period within which a player is able to claim a prize should be factored into the timeframe of the game; determining who has won is part of the game. (Gambling Commission 2014, s. 3.10 emphasis added).

Somewhat ironically, this decentres the specificity of the ‘bingo’ call to the land-based game of bingo. If bingo simply needs to end, as with any game, then a machine can end it, and if the key moment of player action is defined as the initiation of the game—not also the stopping of it—then the degree of human participation alters considerably. Bingo becomes almost impossible to distinguish from electronic lotteries, the profit potentials of which are eagerly anticipated by some operators.

Section 4: Working at the Speculation: Technology, Labour, and the Contested Standardization of Play.

To get a better sense of the grounded implications of the new state guidance on defining bingo, I wish to end with a closer look at commercial bingo spaces that have most actively embraced new technologies and which may be seen as most likely to benefit from state-backed standardization of the game’s definition and the further automation of its format. In particular, I wish to focus on the role of paid workers in such spaces, in recognition of the key role that they play in mediating between the different understandings of bingo held by players, company executives, and regulators. In her research in Slovenia’s casinos, Pisac (2013) has explored how croupiers act as ‘emotional buffers’ between the players and the house, making

players feel special and absorbing their anger when they lose (Pisac, 2013, p.60).¹² They perform complex emotional labour which is, they feel, under-valued by their bosses. Turning to bingo, emotional labour becomes even more central. Staff claim that halls are often used as a form of self-referred ‘day care’ for older people, who go to keep warm and have company as much as to gamble. I have been repeatedly told (by staff and customers) that when halls close some of those people die; it is hard to imagine a more powerful assertion of the social value of the game. Moreover, there is often genuine fondness between staff and players: many workers address regulars by name, they call to check on them when they do not come to the hall, and they are sometimes given photographs of their grandchildren. There is also an element of teasing and banter (sometimes flirtatious) between workers and players: apparent insults are exchanged which look nothing like corporate models of good customer service but which create a differently-classed sense of closeness and welcome. In one example, an elderly customer told a manager that her grandson was applying for a job in the hall, so to look out for his form. He replied that anyone related to her would be trouble. She then turned to me, laughing, to ‘put on record’ that ‘this one is the worst caller. The worst.’

I was interested in what the new official definition of the game might mean for the interactions between workers and players, given that many operators wish to use it to take forward game automation. Hence in April 2014 I was in a sports club in northern England, part of a chain that offers a variant form of linked electronic bingo called automatically and silently with numbers flashing up on screens hung on the wall. Players purchase tickets from the bar. No calling out is needed to stop the game: the system automatically registers winners, and the screens show that they have been

detected in club x. Prizes depend on how many people were playing—a score board shows a league table of winners from clubs around the country. On the day I visited, play had been delayed due to installation of new software. As we waited there were some conversations at the bar about the bingo. A bar worker joked that she'd call it herself; another asked if they could telephone another club to get them to call out the numbers flashing up on their (functioning) screens. When the hitch was resolved the numbers began flashing up silently on our screens, and the female bar staff started calling those numbers out. Sometimes they included traditional number rhymes or sound effects associated with bingo numbers in the UK (e.g. whistles after 11); sometimes they added words of encouragement to customers, referencing a rivalry with a club that they wanted to beat in bingo sales and winners. A head office executive there to oversee the new software called them 'my bingo girls' and remarked that 'the staff love the bingo: it gives them an opportunity to interact with the customers and have a laugh. They are a key reason bingo does so well in this club.' I assumed that this interaction was unrepresentative, with the interest of the workers in the bingo caused by head office's presence, or the boredom of the delay, or the fact that two of them used to work in a near-by commercial hall that had recently closed. But I saw the same interaction three months later in another club in this chain in the south of England (with none of those things present): bar staff were calling out numbers while players crossed off their tickets.

Two weeks later, I was playing bingo in a seaside amusement arcade on a rainy afternoon. I was offered tea, biscuits, and sandwiches from a plate as soon as I sat down. I played by putting money into a slot: a pound lit up 3 boards, for 30p each, automatically. The numbers flashed up on a screen. A young male caller read them

out. The game was mechanised from the players point of view: you could pull slides across the numbers on your board to make the required patterns (corners or lines)—and most people playing were doing that—but if you won the computer would automatically stop producing new numbers, the screen would flash up the winning position, and your winnings—in the form of tokens that you could exchange for prizes—would drop out of the slot in front of you. Each game lasted a few minutes, and the play was automatic until your money ran out, or until you cashed out the tokens.

I played in the arcade for over two hours, leaving with a prize of matching mugs that spoke rude catch phrases. I had not won enough for these myself but the stranger sitting next to me had silently passed across her remaining tokens to me as she left. What made this arcade experience recognizable as bingo was not just the sharing behavior of the customers and the cheerful, smutty nature of the prizes, however: it was also the labour of the employees. They were busy giving cash, helping winners select prizes, bringing food and drink and, crucially, calling. In the few seconds between one automatically-generated set of numbers and another, the young man would say things like ‘I’ll just shuffle the balls here, see if that changes anyone’s luck,’ and later—with a smile—‘I’ll shuffle my balls here; mix things up a bit’. When the screen in front of him registered a winner, he said ‘hold your dabbers we have a winner on 6’; ‘hold your dabbers, call on number 8.’ There was, of course, no ball, no call, and no dabber. There were machines running random-number generator programmes, and paying out winners automatically.

These experiences suggest to me that the apparent success of the technology introduced to standardise and automate commercial bingo is entirely reliant on low-

paid employees re-turning the game to a localised social experience, with an element of interaction, flirting, teasing, and banter. In the seaside arcade, without the scampering around of the women making and delivering tea and sandwiches and the camp showmanship of the caller we would have been 15 people playing a linked slot machine. With that labour, we were playing bingo. In the Northern commercial sports club, bar staff made a space of vernacular creativity because they wanted the interaction with the customers and the laugh – and only then could the bingo software make a profit. Counter Dow-Schull's experience of Macao's slot machines, here the new technology was re-attuned by workers to fit the dominant vernacular of play.

Certainly this was functional, in a simplistic way, for the operators—they generated more sales, or longer play times. But it can hardly be seen as a programmed part of the rollout. If anything it happened against the programme, with the labour involved in successfully making money from bingo sometimes invisible to executives who think that expanded automation of the game is key to profitability. At issue is not an intentional colonisation of working class life worlds for profit: there are social relations of exchange, and gendered and classed traditions of teasing and flirting also being produced and sustained. Moreover, there is a different meaning of gambling being (re)enabled—one that is as much about entertainment, sharing, and silent sociality among strangers as it is about individual winning or escape into a machine-mediated 'zone.'

Conversely, then, it may be tempting to analyse these observations as proof of heroic, creative resistance to global capitalism. Yet doing so would re-make the distinction between the popular and the economic that I and many others have been trying to

disrupt. Efforts to retain the social, entertaining nature of bingo are not necessarily anti-capitalist: the spectacles created by the flirtatious callers are key features of mass culture, and can be profitable. Moreover the vernacular can not be understood as a communitarian retreat from, or force in opposition to, the market. It is co-constituted by, in, and alongside the market. It is also indelibly shaped by political economic regulation, especially the everyday level of licensing, permits, and inspections. Indeed the everyday of bingo has always been programed, by software or otherwise. Instead what we see are different sorts of rules stemming from different understandings of the game as a political economic site—as about care, winning, sharing, fundraising, flirting, profit-making, socialising, and escaping. State guidance on what constitutes the game, supported by some operators eager for further automation, may appear likely to standardize the pluralist approach to regulations, but in vernacular practice the standard is undercut, and other frameworks are re-articulated instead.

I recognise that the stakes of this process may appear frivolous to researchers seeking evidence of revolutionary potential in daily life. But bingo is the realm of the self-effacing, not the heroic. The intention is not to posit the game as a redemptive site of opposition to consumption. It is to have consumption and all its entanglements be taken more seriously in our accounts of everyday political economy.

Conclusion.

In this paper I have sought to establish the diverse, plural nature of bingo as a political economic formulation, and to identify the rules that shape play. Bingo is to some extent being standardised by state rules directed to one manifestation of the game's

meaning (commercial gambling), and allowing for greater automation of play. Hence I have illuminated the key role played by paid employees—especially bingo callers—in sustaining the playful, social, flirtatious, and teasing nature of the bingo environment in these more automated spaces. In the face of technological and legal shifts moving in the opposite direction, these workers (re)enable powerful alternative gambling vernaculars, governed by distinct rules.

For those who remain—unreasonably—uninterested in bingo itself, I have sought to make two contributions to broader discussions of feminist political economy. Both relate to how 'entanglements' between markets and everyday life may open up new research agendas. Firstly, the research presented here reinforces the need to understand consumption practices better, especially in places or forms marked as ordinary, dull, conformist, or meaningless. Such consumption—and the continued marginalization thereof by critical IPE scholars—is a feminist issue, not just because women do a lot of it but also because the diverse meanings it holds can tell us a lot about the under-studied centrality of care, generosity, fun, and desire to political economy. Moreover if we accept that play, leisure, and consumption rest on paid and unpaid work, the unhelpful analytic separation of these practices from the 'productive' economy can be undercut, allowing for much richer and more holistic accounts of intertwined everyday relations.

Secondly, as a game with multiple meanings and orientations bingo provides a key example of how daily political economic life is shaped by regulation. In particular, the research presented here suggests the value of a feminist political economy of everyday consumption that is attentive to the socio-legal, in its plural, multi-level

complexity. For the England and Wales case study of the bingo research project, attentiveness entailed a focus on licensing, inspections, compliance, codes of practice, legislation, and case law alongside fieldwork designed to ascertain ‘street-level’ conventions, grounded impacts of rule-changes, and so on. Other projects no doubt require attention to different rule-making systems, practices, and scales. But my suggestion is that the rule frameworks matter more than we have hitherto realized in the everyday sphere of political economic life. Further research to explore how regulations shape, and are shaped by, vernacular practices of speculation, consumption, and playful risk-taking may thus be fruitful.

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¹ See also Langley (2007) and Simon (2004) on synergies between everyday institutional orders and practices of vernacular risk-taking.

² The key exceptions in the Hobson and Seabrooke (2008) collection are chapters by an anthropologist (Wilson) and geographer (Langley).

³ Lawnmowers and roller coasters – along with chimneys and cars – are central to Mohun’s history of risk regulation in the US.

⁴ See summary in Bedford (forthcoming).

⁵ The aggregate stakes or prizes must not exceed £2,000 in any seven day period (see Gambling Commission 2012 part 18); the club must not deduct money from sums staked or won; the participation fee must not exceed the amount prescribed in regulations - £1 per day (or £3 if it holds a club gaming permit) - and there can be no linked games.

⁶ As an equal chance game bingo cannot involve staking against the house – see s. 8.1 of the Gambling Act 2005 and Gambling Commission 2014. Players’ payments must be divided transparently between stakes (all of which are returned in prizes), or participation fees (Gambling Commission 2012, s.25.16). Prize bingo involves no stakes, since the prize is not determined by the number playing or the amount paid for the game (s.18).

⁷ From October 2013 to September 2014 machine revenue accounted for 45% of total revenue for the commercial bingo sector (Gambling Commission 2015, 11).

⁸ ‘A society is non-commercial if it is established and conducted (a) for charitable purposes, (b) for the purpose of enabling participation in, or of supporting, sport, athletics or a cultural activity, or (c) for any other non-commercial purpose other than that of private gain’ (Gambling Act 2005, s19(1)).

⁹ See footnote 3.

¹⁰ Except if established for whist or bridge.

¹¹ A national pub chain is attempting the same.

¹² See also Austrin and Westin (2005) on casino workers. For regulation of unpaid workers in Canadian charitable bingo see Bedford (2015).