

bigger profits. And in casinos' pursuit of "productivity enhancement," Schull sees a manifestation of capitalism's tendency to seize control of time and degrade workers to the level of machines, just as Michel Foucault and Karl Marx warned.

The productivity revolution has come to casinos, and the random number generator, or RNG, is its revolutionary agent. Embedded in the digital microprocessor that runs video poker machines, the RNG speeds through number combinations until the play button is pressed, compares the selected number with a table of payout rates, and instructs the hopper to deliver a win or not.

What happens in Vegas may stay in Vegas, but it also stays in the circuits of video poker machines, which track a player's game preferences, wins and losses, number of

coins played per game, number of games played every minute, length of play, number of drinks ordered, etc. Machines also foster the illusion that players are calling the shots. "The ability to modulate play—adjust volume [and] speed of play, choose cards and bet amounts—is understood by game developers to increase psychological and financial investment," writes Schull.

But once players are far enough into the zone, even the illusion of control and skill ceases to matter. In Australia, an "AutoPlay" option allows some players to insert money, press a button, then watch as the game plays itself. AutoPlay hasn't made it to North America, but some gamblers reportedly jam the "play" button down with a toothpick to achieve the same effect. Schull doesn't say how Marx and Foucault would parse that.

The Self-Esteem Scam

"Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth" by Roy F. Baumeister, Jennifer D. Campbell, Joachim I. Krueger, and Kathleen D. Vohs, in *Scientific American* (Jan. 2005), 415 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017-1111.

Self-esteem has become the great American elixir, the cure for everything from bad grades to social ineptitude. A California state task force declared in 1989 that "many, if not most, of the major problems plaguing society have roots in the low self-esteem of many of the people who make up society." But having reviewed some 200 studies, Baumeister and his colleagues, all university-based psychologists, suggest that self-esteem belongs on the same shelf as miracle diet pills.

Take the seemingly plausible idea that higher self-esteem helps students do better in school. Researchers at the University of Iowa tested more than 23,000 10th graders in 1986, then again two years later. "They found that self-esteem in 10th grade is only weakly predictive of academic achievement in 12th grade." Other studies have produced similar results, and "some findings even suggest that artificially boosting self-esteem may lower subsequent performance."

Does low self-regard predispose teenagers to engage in more or earlier sexual activity? "If anything, those with high self-esteem are less inhibited, more willing to disregard risks and more prone to engage in sex."

Does low self-esteem encourage drink-



ing or drug use? Studies "do not consistently show" that there's even any connection. A large-scale 2000 study by New Zealand researchers found no correlation between children's self-esteem measured

Periodicals

between ages nine and 13 and their drinking or drug use at age 15.

Psychologists long believed that low self-esteem was an important cause of violence. But a number of studies point to a different conclusion: "Perpetrators of aggression generally hold favorable and perhaps even inflated views of themselves."

It's important to note that Baumeister and his colleagues eliminated from consideration thousands of studies that relied on the subjects' own assessments of their self-

esteem, a notoriously unreliable gauge.

Lest champions of self-esteem lose all of it themselves, the authors report that some studies show "that people with high self-esteem are significantly happier than others." But it's not clear whether high self-esteem *causes* happiness. Both may be the product of success at work, in school, or in one's personal life. The champions can take heart from one last finding: High self-esteem does seem to promote persistence in the face of failure.

PRESS & MEDIA

Tuning Out the World

"The News Media and the 'Clash of Civilizations'" by Philip Seib, in *Parameters* (Winter 2004–05), U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Ave., Carlisle, Pa. 17013–5238.

For Americans groping to understand the world in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the non-Islamic West offers a familiar paradigm. But the news media need to think twice before stealing a ride on this ideological horse, says Seib, a journalism professor at Marquette University.

Journalists like us-vs.-them stories. With the end of the Cold War, they searched for new ways to frame international coverage, and found one in the "clash of civilizations" theory political scientist Samuel Huntington first aired in 1993. It holds that a world order is emerging based on civilizations rather than national boundaries, and that the West is increasingly in conflict with other civilizations, especially the Islamic world and China.

Caveats and alternative theories to Huntington's idea get short shrift in the news. Other thinkers point to divisions within Islam itself, the power of globalization to blur cultural divisions, and the fact that the radical Islamic groups in conflict with the United States do not represent all of Islam. These views rarely get much of a hearing in the mainstream media. "Aside from their occasional spurts of solid performance, American news organizations do a lousy job of breaking down the public's intellectual isolation," writes Seib.

One reason is that there's little space or time to provide more nuance. According to one media analyst, the big three U.S. television networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, offer mere dribbles of international news. For all of 2003, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict received a total of 284 minutes of coverage in the three networks' weeknight newscasts, an average of less than two minutes per week per network. Afghanistan received 80 minutes, the global AIDS epidemic 39 minutes, and global warming 15 minutes. Iraq earned 4,047, but only because of the U.S. invasion. Meanwhile, the number of foreign bureaus is shrinking. As of mid-2003, ABC, CBS, and NBC each maintained only six overseas bureaus with full-time correspondents, having scaled back even in major cities such as Moscow, Beijing, and Paris. But picking up a newspaper won't necessarily fill you in: Nearly two-thirds of print foreign news editors polled in a 2002 study rate the news media's foreign coverage as fair or poor, and more than half were critical of their own newspaper's reporting.

More and better international news coverage is needed, Seib insists. Journalists shouldn't embrace any theory about the world but should familiarize themselves with "the diverse array of ideas about how the world is changing."