

Steinitz and the Inception of Modern Chess

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THE HISTORY OF CHESS IS A discipline in its infancy. It still is done in subordination to other purposes, mainly to technical instruction in textbooks, or anecdotal variety in game collections. Very early in his training, alongside with relative value of pieces, the basic mates, and the rest of elementary principles, the chess student learns the general outline of the history of chess: Philidor and the pawns, Anderssen and combination, Steinitz and positional principles, Nimzowitsch and the Hypermoderns, the rise of the Soviet School, But this ‘historical awareness’ of every chess player is rather uncritical and not very faithful to the way history really unfolded—just as happens with the casual historical conception of science or art. To be a chess player it is not necessary an acquaintance with the life of Philidor or the circumstances in which his work and discoveries took place, or an understanding of the conditions to which Steinitz reacted—just as a physicist does not need to know the biography of Robert Hook, or as a biologist can harmlessly ignore the development and importance of the theory of spontaneous generation. Of course, this gives the student a poor understanding of Steinitz or Hooke as historical figures, but this is okay as long as they grasp the theory of position play or the law of elasticity—the focus is technical and a-historical.

There are works that pioneer an independent approach to the history of chess. Authors such as Anthony Saily and Raymond Keene have given the historical record a more historical treatment, using them no longer to illustrate principles of chess theory but their *development*.¹ The title of

¹Anthony Saily, *The Battle of Chess Ideas* (London: Batsford, 1972); Raymond Keene, *The Evolution of Chess Opening Theory, from Philidor to Kasparov* (Oxford, New York: Pergamon Press, 1985) and *The Chess Combination from Philidor to Karpov* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

Max Euwe's (World Champion from 1935 to 1937) *The Development of Chess Style*² reveals its historical leaning, and is to my knowledge the earliest book to identify the paradoxical rejection of Philidor's ideas by the generations that followed him, and attempt an explanation more substantial than 'Philidor was ahead of his time and little understood by his contemporaries.' Similar, by far more popular—and in my view less historically successful—is Rihard Réti's *Masters of the Chessboard*.³ Emmanuel Lasker (World Champion 1894–1921) approaches chess with a strong philosophical eye in his *Manual of Chess*,⁴ where he finds chess to be but one case of his universal philosophy, presented independently from chess in *Das Begreifen der Welt* (The Comprehension of the World, 1913) and *Die Philosophie des Unvollendbar* (The Philosophy of the Unattainable, 1918). So Lasker's history of chess does from time to time escape the narrowness of chess technicality. With the exception of the latter (which in any case is more 'philosophical' than 'historical' in that it does not concern itself with the actual unfolding of events), however, the discussions are still very technical and confined to the ideas and perceptions about the game itself, not drawing on outside influences. Contemporary concepts and knowledge permeate the appraisal of past developments, and thus one of the main and perhaps foundational traits that make history of science a separate discipline independent from science itself, namely the constant watch-out for anachronism, finds no analogue in the realm of chess.

The present essay is an attempt in that direction: a reassessment of the history of chess with the methodological standards borrowed from the mature history of science. Among them are a close and ideally un-biased reading of the different authors, trying to forget what we know but their contemporaries did not (and recover what we have forgotten); and the conviction that the 'wrongness' of past theories and views can and should be explained without resort to teleological ideas of an endogenous, unique and inevitable 'progress,' i.e. without saying that it was simply a matter of time before the obvious revisions were accomplished. This latter point is of course

²Max Euwe, *The Development of Chess Style*, translated from the Dutch by W. H. Cozens (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1968 [1966]).

³Richard Réti, *Masters of the Chessboard* (New York: Dover, 1932).

⁴Emmanuel Lasker, *Lasker's Manual of Chess* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. [David McKay Company], 1960 [1947]).

related to the mentioned suspicion against anachronism, against projecting notions from one time into another. At least from Adolph Anderssen, the greatest master of Romantic chess, on, it can be safely assumed that any of the chess players mentioned in this history would easily beat the average amateur player of today. So the fact that they failed so utterly to understand what the average player today finds obvious imposes hard thinking—it certainly overcomes the boundaries of the 64-square board. On the other hand, as usually happens in history of scientific disciplines, the enrichment of the history of chess with careful tracing of historical development sheds a completely new and refreshing light on the theories themselves. An a-historical summation of the theories of, say, Steinitz, such as is found for instance in Kurt Landsberger’s biography,⁵ however well done and useful for technical purposes, gives the impression that the theories stem solely from a cold analysis of the game; as we will see, history helps explaining why the theories emphasize certain aspects, why it was at all necessary to explicitly state others, etc.

My initial intention was to focus on the so-called ‘Hypermodern Revolution’ of the 1930s, the most famous instance of upheaval in chess theory, and probably the most consciously understood as such by its protagonists, Aaron Nimzowitsch at its head. To that end, I planned to make a survey of the historical development up to the point where the revolt starts, and then direct the bulk of the philosophical and meta-theoretical discussion to the hypermoderns. But the ‘survey’ soon showed to me that philosophical discussion is very worth pursuing with regard to the revolution of Steinitz around the 1880s. My current view, barely surprising but learned the hard way, is that any philosophical treatment of the hypermodern revolution needs a previous philosophical consideration of Steinitz and his generation. In the end, because of reasons of space, I had to choose one of the two, and I had to decide in favor of Steinitz.

A last note on terminology before starting: the word ‘modern’ refers here to chess as it is conceived from Steinitz on. I am perfectly aware of the differences of contemporary chess and that of the ‘Classical’ era inaugurated by Steinitz and closed by Siegbert Tarrasch just before Nimzowitsch. Contemporary chess is soundly called ‘modern’ by John Watson in one of the

⁵David Hooper, “The Theory of Steinitz,” pages 465–70 of *William Steinitz: A biography of the Bohemian Caesar* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland & Co., 1993)

books that most closely shares my ideal of history.⁶ But I think even Watson would agree that contemporary and Steinitz's chess can be grouped as opposed to the previous Romantic era of Anderssen and Morphy. Since I am stopping at the aftermath of Steinitz's defeat of Zukertort—this is, much before the raise of the hypermoderns—the appellative of 'modern' does not involve perilous overlaps. Furthermore, I find it particularly suitable since Steinitz's conception of chess is most consistent with what 'modernity' has come to mean in philosophy and the history of Western thought.



THE HISTORY OF CHESS AS WE CONCEIVE OF IT TODAY⁷ can be safely assumed to start with the composer (of music) François-André Danican Philidor (1726–1795). His undoubted status as a 'founding father' stems mainly from the famous sentence that everyone associates with his name, 'the pawns are the soul of chess.' That 'pawns are the soul of chess' is the fundamental law of chess theory. It is the identification and elaboration of the fact that pawns are heavily limited in their movement,⁸ so that the structure of pawns is much more static and rigid than that of pieces; this, coupled to the

⁶John Watson, *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy: Advances since Nimzowitsch* (Gambit Publications Ltd., 1998).

⁷This qualification is intended in two senses: on the one hand, it refers to the moment (around the Renaissance) when chess rules reached the state today accepted; but it also excludes early activities (there are theoretical studies dating back to the late 16th. century whose conclusions still hold true today; the Spanish priest Ruy López (ca. 1540–1580) is one of the most frequently heard names in chess today, if only because the opening that bears his name ranks among the most important ones). The boundary between what is chess as 'conceived of today' and what is not is of course very hard to trace, but it seems to be related with the transcendence of the individual game. At some point in history, chess players start regarding the game as an instance of chess, rather than chess as an instance of a game. Two kinds of consequence are apparent: firstly, scores and results start being taken, and a notion of there being better and worse players comes to the surface; secondly, chess is understood to be susceptible of being taught and learned *generically*, by anyone interested: *textbooks* appear. Both circumstances are first clear with Philidor, who is the first player of whom contemporaries speak with awe, and whose is "the first book that captured *public* interest and retained it for a considerable length of time," Harry Golombek, "Writers who have Changed Chess History," pages 127–147 of *The Chess Companion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 127 (my italics).

⁸It is not that they move only one square at a time. Much more important are the limitations that pawns cannot move backwards, and that they can 'change lanes' only when capturing.

fact that an advantage of a pawn is usually enough to win the game (if the endgame, where pawns are potential queens, is reached), gives the handling of pawns an importance and a difficulty that goes beyond that of pieces. The consequences of a pawn move are lasting, and cannot generally be pondered by ‘concrete analysis,’ the sheer calculation of variations. Moving pieces always involves of course the risk of mistakes and blunders that immediately ruin a game—but these can be calculated and avoided. Moving pawns means a much more subtle risk, for relevant negative consequences might appear a long time afterwards; there is no need for blunder to lose a game because of a pawn move.

This distinction between pawns and pieces is at the core of the distinction between ‘strategy’ and ‘tactics,’ the two branches of chess theory, training, education, etc. (Strategy is the identification of the general long-term ideas and plans of the game, usually based on the configuration of pawns reached after the opening; tactics refers to the actual moves and short-term variations that execute the plans, and it usually focuses on the action of pieces. ‘Tactics consists in knowing what to do when there is something to do; strategy is about knowing what to do when there is nothing to do,’ Tartakower is reported to have said.) In this sense, the discovery of strategy, and with it the birth of chess theory as such, is essentially linked to the name of Philidor. Thus (and I choose the following source for no other reason than having it at hand—assertions to the same effect are easily found in any book on chess strategy),

It was master Filidor, the luminous French musician and chess player, the first to understand, already at the end of the eighteenth century, the importance of pawns in chess; it is actually with him that the game’s positional strategy is born.⁹

This is what the name Philidor means for chess today. He plays the role of the symbolic point of reference, the recipient that contains the essence and the primary source of chess theory. But, as usually happens with such figures—think of Thales as the father of philosophy, Pithagoras as the father of mathematics, and even of Aristotle as the father of empirical science—, he himself

⁹“Fue el maestro Filidor, el luminoso músico y ajedrecista francés, el primero que comprendió, ya a fines del siglo XVIII, la importancia de los peones en ajedrez; con él nace en realidad la estrategia posicional del juego.” Roberto G. Grau, *Conformación de Peones*, volume 3 of *Tratado General de Ajedrez* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sopena Argentina, 1982), p. 5.

is exiled from his name, and what he actually thought or understood is ignored in favor of what we think and understand. Historical fact is of little importance for the role of the figure—just as Homer, and more recently as Saussure, he is defined *by* us as the author of his works, rather than his works being defined *for* us as the product of his efforts.

In fact, ‘the pawns are the soul of chess’ is a corruption of what Philidor really said. (The fate of this sentence is similar to that of other myths like Newton’s apple or Galileo at the Tower of Pisa: dubious recollection of facts modified by tradition to suit its fancy.) The actual quotation from Philidor’s foreword to his 1749 *Chess Analysed or Instructions by Which a Perfect Knowledge of This Noble Game May in a short Time be Acquir’d* (his own translation of the *Analise des Échecs*) reads

My chief intention is to recommend myself to the public, by a novelty no one had thought of, or perhaps ever understood well. I mean how to play the Pawns. They are the very life [*not* ‘soul’] of this game. They alone form the Attack and the Defence; on their good or bad situation depends the Gain or Loss of each Party.

And then, immediately:

A player, who, when he had played a pawn well, can give no Reason for his moving it to such a square, may be compared to a General, who with much practice has little or no Theory.¹⁰

Philidor’s wording (Attack, Defence, Reason, Theory) reveals that ‘strategy’ and ‘tactics’ are not part of his conceptual net. When ‘the pawns are the soul of chess’ is interpreted today, what it brings to mind is the classification of pawns into weak pawns (isolated, doubled, hind pawn) or strong pawns (passed pawns), some especial configurations (chain of pawns, hanging pawns), and the concept of weak and strong squares. All this obviously remains at best inarticulate in Philidor’s book. As Cecil Purdy says, “in Philidor’s system of play, it is not at all evident to a mediocre player even if experienced why ‘on the good or bad situation (of the pawns) depends the gain and loss to each Party.’”¹¹

¹⁰Quoted by Keene, *The Evolution of Chess Opening*, p. 3.

¹¹Quoted by Keene, *The Evolution of Chess Opening*, p. 4.

FEW PLAYERS TODAY HAVE played over any of Philidor's games—rarely reproduced in books—and fewer still have actually read his book. He is often depicted as the unchallenged but solitary, never understood sage of eighteenth-century chess, a 'man ahead of his time' with no interlocutors in a hopeless sea of ignorance. Philidor's approach had virtually no theoretical offspring for the next hundred years, although his book was widely and constantly read until well into the nineteenth century; the most immediate (but also, of course, the most naive) retrospective explanation to that paradoxical fact is the usual one that nobody was up to his teachings: "An exception [to pre-Morphy dark ages in chess] was the great chess philosopher, A. D. Philidor, who was too much in advance of his time to be properly understood," says Réti in a footnote to his *Modern Ideas in Chess*;¹² "of course, Philidor's audience (and, indeed, most of his opponents) were far below him in playing strength and consisted mainly of social players," is Keene's assessment.¹³ But the assumptions that, on the one hand, Philidor understood the pawns as the world did only one hundred years later, and on the other that Philidor was *not* a 'social player,' are rather dubious contentions.

It is curious and a little bit surprising that Keene falls in the trap of giving Philidor a special, prophetic status. After all, it is he who quotes more cynical and skeptical assessments of Philidor's work, and who recovers "A Letter from the Celebrated Anonymous Modenese to a Friend, Respecting the Book of Mr Philidor," in which Ercole del Rio "lashed the great Philidor."¹⁴ So he is fully aware that Philidor "is very doctrinaire, to the point of nonsense at times," and dogmatic; that his examples resemble Galileo's dialogues in that White plays well, while a Simplicius-like Black knows nothing: "There is hardly a struggle."¹⁵ All of this, if arguably has some didactic advantages, make Philidor's claims hardly tenable. Ercole boils over:

In the Third [example] Game Philidor decides that after the two king's pawns have been pushed two squares he who has the move must not play the king's knight to bishop's third square, concluding that such a step would lose the attack, and he gives it to the adversary.

¹²Richard Réti, *Modern ideas in chess*, 2nd. edition (New York: Dover [G. Bell & Sons], 1960 [1943]), p. 2.

¹³Keene, *The Evolution of Chess Opening*, p. 1.

¹⁴Idem, p. 8.

¹⁵Quoted in Idem, p. 3.

It is truly admirable how the writer will discard the Giuoco Piano Games, which have been approved of from age to age by the best chess-players in Europe: we may collect from this what influence the love of novelty has upon the mind of man.¹⁶

Max Euwe, notably, takes another way, and emphasizes the dubiousness of Philidor's analyses to account for the failure of succeeding generations to develop along his lines: "The trouble was that Philidor himself was not altogether happy in the application of his theories. He tended to go too far, deeming the pieces hardly more than the servants of the pawns, and underestimating their powers. . . . This and other similarly exaggerated conclusions. . . damaged Philidor's reputation. A full century had to elapse before the pawn-lore of the great Frenchman was reinstated by Steinitz and refined to its true worth."¹⁷ And later on: "Philidor influenced the style of his immediate successors in a totally unexpected way. The fact that the examples with which he sought to substantiate his pawn theories were on the whole not very convincing. . . , resulted in the true value of his teaching being overlooked. Players were only spurred on to do better by tactical means."¹⁸ This is a more sophisticated tackling of the question why Philidor's views did not take root. But there are still anachronistic assumptions: the opposition of 'tactical means' to Philidor is dangerous, and saying that Philidor chose the wrong examples for the right theories begs the question whether Philidor's theories were not all that right after all—maybe these are right examples for wrong theories. . . . Once again, a skeptical spirit would tend to regard with suspicion the idea that Philidor anticipated the development of chess theory by a full hundred years; the fact that he did not know how to expound his foresight renders the idea less, not more, credible. Besides, it seems an established historical fact that Philidor was the best player of his time, and that he was regarded as such, and that his book was widely read.

¹⁶Quoted by Keene, *The Evolution of Chess Opening*, p. 7. In fact, Philidor's assessment amounts, in modern notation, to the question mark in **1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3?**—certainly a joke. Ercole was one of several important analysts from Modena, Italy, active in the latter part of the 18th. century. Unfortunately, they had a different rule for castling, so much of their theory is quite simply inapplicable, it is theory of another game.

¹⁷Euwe, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁸Idem, p. 11.

The issue is very difficult in part because the historical record is not very generous as it comes to Philidor's actual play. A reassessment is needed of his games, done not with the purpose of showing how he was 'ahead of his time,' but in order to form a better idea of what he really meant by his theories.¹⁹

To sum up, it is doubtful that the great Philidor, if asked today about the meaning of his assertions, both the general ones like the one about the pawns and the particular ones like '2. ♖f3?,' would answer satisfactorily. This of course is not to his demerit, but the anachronism of the chess community's appreciation of Philidor is patent. Philidor was not 'a man ahead of his time.' Rather on the contrary, his book might be very well a manifestation of the contemporary conditions of chess: as it becomes less and less of a merely social activity, there is a nascent need for 'general principles' of (apparently) easy teachability, reinforcing, and reinforced by, the elevation (or downgrading) of the individual game to an instance, an *exemplar*—in all the Kuhnian sense—of chess. The conceptual net of modern chess theory is starting to see the light—'the pawns are the life of this game' is the first, but still incipient step.

THE NEXT MAJOR DISCONTINUITY in the history of chess occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the advent of William Steinitz (1836–1900). Steinitz holds the historical position of being the first 'World Champion,' important not so much because he held the title, but because he *invented* it. The creation of such a title is an index to an underlying revolution that affected from the outside the history of chess, and the game itself, at the time. In a natural outgrowth of the process by which chess had turned into a tradition rather than a mere social activity, chess achieved, toward 1880, *professionalisation*.

Steinitz's invention and claim to the the title of 'World Champion' would have no effect had it

¹⁹Publishing House Moravian Chess has issued in 2001 facsimile reprints of George Allen's *The Life of Philidor, Musician and Chess Player* (1863) and *A Selection of Games at Chess: Actually Played by Philidor and his Contemporaries* (1835). This testifies and contributes to the building-up interest around this issue, which seems to be turning from unsettled to unsettling. I had no access to these texts, and in any case the proposed analysis is a major undertaking.

not met with ‘resonance,’ i.e., had eventually also other masters not found such a title meaningful and legitimate. It is interesting to note that twenty years had to span between Steinitz’s first claim to the title (in 1866, after defeating Adolph Anderssen) and the first match organized explicitly to decide who had the honor (in 1886, when Steinitz and Johannes Zukertort vowed to recognize the winner as ‘World Champion’; Steinitz won). Before the time of the match, the title seems not to have been very relevant to the members of the chess community, and today it is at first sight hard to understand why nobody objected Steinitz’s early claim (especially in view that Morphy had previously defeated Anderssen). Kurt Landsberger, the author of Steinitz’s definitive biography, says that nobody objected the claim,

especially since Steinitz was always willing and never hesitant in defending his title. Morphy would have been entitled to such a title if he would have accepted and won challenges against Paulsen or Kolisch. Since he did not care to do this, the question of championship was left open until the claim of Steinitz.²⁰

But this is anachronistic. What Morphy (or his fans) lacked was not reasons or arguments to support a claim; what he lacked was the claim, in the first place. He could afford denying matches because he had, quite literally, nothing to lose or to gain. It is not that he was not the World Champion because he failed to meet the challenges, but the other way around: he did not meet them because he was not the World Champion. Nobody was. Before Steinitz, the question was not exactly “left open,” but directly unasked. Even when the concept of World Champion first appeared explicitly (in Steinitz’s claim), it did not immediately elicit any substantial reaction.

The professionalisation and institutionalization of sports are related phenomena that first took place in England during the later part of the nineteenth century. In many respects, chess is a typical case. Throughout the century England had become the main center of the chess world, at least as it comes to ‘institutions’ (clubs, tournaments, journalism, etc.). Howard Staunton, today remembered as the best player next to Anderssen, had organized the first International Chess Tournament in 1851 (as part of the great International Exhibition). England had attracted Philidor, and it would attract both Zukertort and Steinitz (the latter wrote there chess columns for London journal *Figaro* and the

²⁰Landsberg, Op. Cit., p. 36.

newspaper *The Field*). Just as had happened with cricket, rowing, rackets, real tennis, athletics, shooting, billiards, steeple-chasing, golf, soccer, rugby, and polo,²¹ an encounter between Oxford and Cambridge was (by suggestion of Steinitz) organized in 1873. Chess was a middle-class activity, like tennis (invented in 1873, first national tournament 1877, Davis Cup in 1900), and golf, and shares with them several interesting characteristics: “it was not based on team-effort, and its clubs. . . were not linked into ‘leagues’ and functioned as potential or actual social centres.”²² The issue of amateurism/professionalism has to be understood in that context, for it had a social connotation that it lacks today:

Middle-class sport. . . represented [an] attempt to draw class lines against the masses, mainly by the systematic emphasis on *amateurism as the criterion of upper- and middle-class sport* (as notably in tennis, rugby union football as against association football and rugby league and in the Olympic Games).²³

In fact, Steinitz (who had moved to London “primarily because they played there for higher stakes”²⁴) had to struggle throughout his life against moralist anti-professional criticism. To mention just two instances:

After the match between Steinitz and Blackburn at the West End Chess Club in 1876, a writer in the *Chess Player’s Chronicle* took violent objection to the half-guinea admission charge and wrote that “the thoroughly mercenary spirit in which the latest exhibition of professionalism was conducted throughout, has heartedly disgusted all true chess players.”

As late as 1890 Leopold Hoffer wrote in the *Chess Monthly* that the agreed terms for a match between Steinitz and Gunsberg, were “contrary to the English ideas of sport,” because for the first time it was stipulated that the loser would receive one-third of the stakes.²⁵

In his responses, Steinitz was the first to publicly defend professionalism, and very likely the first player not to feel shame for it (Zukertort, for example, used a totally spurious title of ‘Dr.’²⁶). It is not a coincidence that he was to come up with the idea of a Chess World Champion.

²¹Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), table 3, p. 298.

²²Idem, p. 299.

²³Idem, p. 300 (my italics).

²⁴Landsberg, Op. Cit., p. 21.

²⁵Idem, p. 28.

²⁶Idem, p. 147.



BETWEEN PHILIDOR AND STEINITZ CHESS went through a period that has been called (rather appropriately) ‘Romanticism.’²⁷ It is the time of the great attacks, full of ‘combinations’ (sacrifice of pieces that force a quick decision, usually mate),²⁸ and epitome of beauty in chess. Romantic play turns around attack and counter-attack (here meaning a direct assault to the opposite King). Strategic goals like the importance of the center, of open lines, of the pawn structure, which today (and since right after Anderssen) stand on their own, were then appreciated only as a means, as a (sad?) necessity that could not be dispensed of, for attack.

A fairly sharp dividing line can be traced between a Romantic player (or game) and one from the ‘positional’ tradition (‘positional’ is the appellative that has been given to the opposite of Romantic chess, i.e. the emphasis on strategic, long-term characteristics of the game over direct tactical attack). But to find the actual nature of this divide it is important to realize ‘position play’ and direct attack are not incompatible. There are many post-Steinitz players that resemble Romanticism, and at any rate any good ‘positional’ player has to be able to switch to a ‘Romantic’ stance when the situation arises. After the Steinitz’s generation, being more or less ‘Romantic’ (or, as is more frequently said of modern players, ‘combative,’ ‘combinative,’ ‘with a taste for complications’) is a deep psychological characteristic: it amounts to feeling at home in positions with complicated tactical possibilities and nuances, or else preferring the quite, sober way of accumulating small advantages and keeping away from potential over-the-board revolutions that tactical means might bring about. A good example of this contrast is the recent rivalry between Karpov (the sober, precise positional player) and Kasparov (the imaginative seeker); but also Mikhail Botvinnik and David Bronstein (and later Mikhail Tal), Tigran Petrossian and Boris Spasski, etc. The leaning toward direct tactical attack is too weak a criterion for distinguishing between two epochs in the history of chess.

²⁷Saidy, Op. Cit.

²⁸Adolph Anderssen represents the peak of this style. Two of his games have been granted special mythical status with the epithets ‘*The Immortal*’ (against Kieseritzky, London, 1851) and ‘*The Evergreen*’ (against Dufresne, Berlin, 1852). Counting both games, Anderssen sacrificed his two Queens, three of his four rooks, and one of his bishops. In the *Evergreen*, his King is himself about to be mated.

And yet two facts remain true (and it is these that allow speaking of a divide between Romanticism and Modernism): firstly, before Steinitz everybody was a Romantic; secondly, the shift from Romanticism to positional play is historically irreversible, i.e., however much a modern player resembles the Romantic style, he is not a Romantic proper. After Steinitz's generation, failing to adopt a modern paradigm means automatically failing to count as a chess player (there is no way that a non-modern player has *any* success in modern chess). The relevance of the games from the Romantic period for modern chess theory is of the same kind as the relevance of the Greek method of exhaustion for calculus: they are briefly referred to (and even sometimes explained) in textbooks, collected in anthologies, admired with genuine awe as achievements. But their survival is like that of works of art: they belong in a museum, not in a laboratory.

All of this points to a particular way of describing the change: it is a paradigm shift (accepting all the implications and all the difficulties of such a notion). The very *nature* of the game changed with Steinitz and his generation, and it is impossible to compare, even in a speculative way, the greatness of a Romantic and that of a modern player—they are simply playing *different* games. Steinitz, of course, had to play Romantics (Anderssen for one, but also later his challengers Zukertort and Mikhail Tschigorin), so there would seem here to be a case of direct comparison. But Steinitz was not simply *a* modern player: he was the first. Also Newton and Leibnitz (and the Bernoullis, etc.) had to cope with received ideas about genuine mathematical proof (their methods were all but sound by the geometrically-oriented standards of the time), and they had to 'beat' them in actual practice, in reaching useful results. But the confrontation is accidental, contingent on history; there was no genuine 'translation' or 'debate' with deciding criteria, but rather a complete *replacement* of standards—of paradigm. The thinkers of the past were not 'convinced,' they simply died, and the old way of thinking extinguished as the new way, more powerful in practice, attracted the new practitioners. Not to mention that automatically and unqualifiedly assigning either Newton, Leibnitz, or Steinitz to the new period that they founded is a gross simplification.

What did the shift from Romantic to modern chess consist in? The core of the matter is the notion of defence. Shocking as it may seem, the Romantics did not systematically defend from attacks. Rarely did they even consider refusing an attacking sacrifice by their opponents. Both

the *Immortal* and the *Evergreen* (see footnote 28) are instances of most unsound chess: in both cases, Anderssen's opponent could have accepted a first sacrifice but refused the following ones—the attack could thereby have dissolved, and the material advantage resulting from the original sacrifice would decide the game in their favor. This does not only mean that the defence was faulty, but that the attack itself was wrongly conceived. (This, concretely, is a difference between the Romantic player and the most combinative of modern players. The brilliant attacks by an Alekhine, a Keres, or a Fischer are, or at least are supposed and expected to be, 'correct' in the sense that there is no possible escape, and if after all there is one, the attacker acknowledges having made a mistake.)

So the ways of Romantic play are absurd. And as such, they immediately impose upon the historian the task of finding a frame of mind in which they make sense (for, after all, Anderssen was an intelligent man, quite capable of beating our contemporary amateur chess player). Why is there such a contempt for defence and such an obsession for direct attack or counterattack on the part of chess players between roughly 1750 and 1870?

Usual answers appeal to the notion of 'beauty.' So, Euwe says that the Romantic "was spell-bound by the beauty of combination. . . His concern was not for sober truth. In his chess he sought only for beauty."²⁹ But this answer is deceptive in that when the new approach had taken over, it was quickly accepted that there could be 'beauty' also in a resourceful, tenacious defence, and in a patient, quiet accumulation of small positional advantages. "Steinitz [convinced] the chess world that defensive play could be beautiful, and that a strategic retreat was not necessarily a cowardly flight from the enemy."³⁰ In general, the quality of 'beautiful' will invariably be granted to the flawless execution of what is (already) accepted as legitimate. Therefore it is not that Anderssen does not consider legitimate (and therefore does not strive for) what is not 'beautiful,' but rather that he does not find it 'beautiful' precisely because it is not considered legitimate. The opposition of 'beauty' and 'sober truth' at the same ontological level is, once again, misleading and naive.

²⁹Euwe, *Op. Cit.*, p. 12. The last two sentences refer specifically to Anderssen, but they can be generalized without being too unfaithful to the author.

³⁰Chernev, *Op. Cit.*, p. 186.

What has to be looked for is a change in the criteria of legitimacy, before which the ‘correct’³¹ defence against Anderssen’s combinations is illegitimate (and ‘ugly’), and after which it becomes legitimate (and ‘beautiful’). To find an answer we must turn back to the social conditions that influenced chess at the time—in fact, the answer is closely related to what has been said about professionalism.

The ethics of the amateurism, that ethics which finds so offensive any material, ‘mundane,’ interest, is also the ethics of ‘what matters is competing, not winning.’ A passive defence, or a passive attack for that matter, would be seen as cowardice. If you are attacked, anything other than a counterattack is an offense to chess and to your opponent. It is a matter of fair play not to escape your opponent’s bright combination with fastidious stubbornness (should the occasion arise, look for an even brighter combination!). In Romantic times, “you either won gloriously, or you succumbed to a counterattack and lost gloriously.”³² At stake, amateur decorum required, was honor—fairly independent from victory or defeat.

Now, what is decidedly *not* independent from the victory or defeat is the accorded prize for the winner. The establishment of chess as a profession, one of whose consequences is an upheaval in priorities (for, no matter what, money, when needed, will always be a higher priority than honor), is probably the major factor at play for the appearance of defensive play and technique. Again, the fact that Steinitz was the first to *assume* his professionalism helps explain why it should be he the first to develop the defence. For even if Zukertort and the rest were professionals (in the sense that they earned a living through chess), they were—tied to the received scale of values—still ashamed of it, and they would not pursue the ignoble business of not fighting with knightly disinterest.

It is now possible and important to understand that defence in chess was a *positive invention* of Steinitz (just as the World Championship had been), and that it is not accurate to attribute to the Romantics any positive dismissal of it. For the Romantics, defence quite simply *did not exist*. Saying that they recognized and positively rejected it is equivalent to saying that Galen positively

³¹‘Correct’ in an objective sense: that which provides the better chances of winning a chess game. This criterion of ‘correctness’ is true regardless of style and time, and creates no problems as long as it is not raised to the level of an absolute, timeless ‘desirability.’

³²Chernev, *Op. Cit.*, p. 186.

rejected circulation, or that Priestly denied oxygen before Lavoisier's papers. Obviously, resistance and reaction against the innovation appear—often with much-maligned irrational overtones—only *after* the new idea has been advanced.

The claim that it is the creation of defence what constitutes the main separator between Romanticism and modern chess faces a difficulty: it has not been perceived that way, by either the protagonists or the commentators of the story. More often, the change is attributed to the coming to the fore of general principles. It is from this perception that the epithets (not entirely misled) of modern chess as “the scientific tendency” (Réti³³), the “Classical” period (Watson³⁴), and even my own “modern,” stem. But that view also leads to difficulties in accounting for several facts: Philidor's early search for general principles, that as has been said cannot be assumed to have passed unnoticed, Staunton's books before the time of Steinitz, and Paul Morphy's impact by the revelation of new general principles. And it provides no real answer for the question of how possibly could players of the Romantic period defend so badly, and show as much tactical incompetence in defence as they showed brilliance in attack.

But it is clear that the rise of defensive play was not consciously realized. Minor commentators observed from time to time that the game was becoming ‘duller.’³⁵ But this kind of remark could only come from outsiders who could not appreciate chess ideas below the immediate surface of combinations and sacrifices—relevant figures seem not to have consciously perceived anything of the sort. Steinitz's comment on Paulsen (today regarded as his forerunner) is very revealing in what it does not reveal:

I freely beg to state that in the early part of my career I myself was an absolute believer in the old system, and I well recollect that when I first met Kolisch and Andersen [*sic*] I expressed myself in very derogatory terms about Paulsen's style of play. But both those masters warmly defended Paulsen against my general criticisms and that set me thinking. Some of the games which I saw

³³Réti, *Modern Ideas*, p. 27.

³⁴Watson, *Op. Cit.*

³⁵I remember having read a couple of things like that quoted in Landsberger's biography of Steinitz. But I was unable to find them again—there is no single entry or sub-entry for ‘defence’ in the index to the book, which only shows how unarticulate and underlying the concept was.

Paulsen play during the London Congress of 1862 gave a still stronger start to the modification of my own opinions, which has since developed, and I began to recognize that Chess genius is not confined to the more or less deep and brilliant finishing strokes after the original balance of power and position has been overthrown, but that it also requires the exercise of still more extraordinary powers, though perhaps of a different kind to maintain that balance or respectively to disturb it at the proper time in one's own favor.³⁶

This excerpt is extremely interesting. As a Romantic, the early Steinitz did not like Paulsen's dull style. After he has developed his arguments about the balance of position (central to his whole theory, see below), he recognizes Paulsen as having been onto something. Steinitz speaks pretty directly of attack (the 'finishing stroke'), but fails to mention defence. His language is unclear and cumbersome (although this is not unique in his writings), and the feeling one gets is that he himself cannot pinpoint what he wants to mean. Today, knowing how Paulsen played, what the difference between Romantic and modern chess is, and what Steinitz's theories are, it is fairly easy to recognize Steinitz here referring to the value of a willingness toward defensive play (and more precisely to Paulsen's recognition, of course unarticulate, that when the attack is not justified by a positional disequilibrium, it is doomed to fail against a correct defence). The whole matter resembles the tantalizingly close approximations to Newton's second law in Kepler's writings, and to some of Kuhn's most radical tenets in Carnap. Only definite and clear enunciation is missing, and maybe subsequent elaboration.

At any rate, it is safe to interpret that relevant figures in the world of chess did not pick the concept up—they were of course too busy trying first to cope with the new universe of possibilities that the concept had opened up.³⁷ And, since outsiders who were not prepared to comment on the game itself (so as to find support for their claims of 'dullness') found an easier target in profes-

³⁶Steinitz in 1891, quoted by Landsberg, *Op. Cit.*, p. 55.

³⁷The closest to an appreciation of defence as the core of the change I have come across is Réti's discussion on 'closed games,' and its role in his distinction of Morphy and Steinitz. But this remains unclear, and 'closed game' is a far deeper strategic concept than plain 'defence,' so the risk of anachronism is considerably worse. It is tempting to think, on the other hand, that the 1930s fears of 'draw death' (one of the main signs of 'degeneration' that preceded the 'Hypermodern Revolution,' the 'draw death' is the idea, held by such figures as Tarrasch and Capablanca, that chess was approaching perfection and that soon all games would be a draw) are an—almost Freudian—manifestation of the acceptance of defence.

sionalism, as reviewed above, it is understandable that ‘defence’ is not an open issue in writings of the time. We are not to find explicit rejections of defensive play as we find explicit rejections of the circulation of the blood or of oxygen. And yet it is worth reviewing the atmosphere around the first World Championship match of 1886 and the way the result, favorable to Steinitz, was received and appreciated.

Even if the systematization of defence was not understood as the main feature of the new way of playing, as the true innovation of Steinitz’s, a feeling of uneasiness about just how to play chess comes through in the documents from the time. In 1885, a newspaper writer commented that

For some time past it has generally admitted that the claim to the championship rests between Steinitz and Zukertort, the respective winners of the great tournaments of 1882 and 1883; but the connoisseurs have been almost equally divided in opinion as to which player was the better of the two. There was no possible way of determining the question except by a set match between them. . .³⁸

One can almost feel the tremor and the ‘essential tension’ that the chess world must have been going through. It could be entertained (but there is no way to prove it) that, in addition to what has been said about the social conditions and opinions around professionalism, the solution to the questions raised by the appearance of a systematic defence were becoming (unarticulately) more and more urgent, closer and closer to the center of chess thought. Almost as though a series of Kuhnian anomalies were approaching the boiling point and their settling down could no longer be postponed. No other chess match in history has been so clearly perceived, by protagonists and audience alike, as having such historical importance. “Zukertort thought that the encounter would be historical and of benefit to chess. . . .Steinitz gave thanks to all his friend, and agreed that the contest was good for chess.”³⁹ It was the needed, long awaited, ‘crucial experiment.’

Speculation about what would have happened had Zukertort won the match is aided by the already referred case of Luois Paulsen. Zukertort was a consummate Romantic (as was every major player save Steinitz and Paulsen):

Zukertort relied on combinations, and in that field he was a discoverer, a creative genius. . . . Steinitz seemed to have the mysterious capacity for divining combinations long before they were

³⁸Quoted in Landsberg, *Op. Cit.*, p. 152.

³⁹Landsberg, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 152–3.

realizable on the board. . . . Thus Zukertort, the great discoverer, searched in vain, whereas Steinitz, rather poor hand at combinations, was able to foresee them. Zukertort could not understand how Steinitz was able to prevent combinations nor how he could win by such a method, since up to that time—this seemed to Zukertort indisputable—games, fairly won, had been won by fine combinations.⁴⁰

Zukertort was close to win (the first four games of a match played to the first winner of ten games were won by him!), and the chess world must have felt for a moment that the Steinitzian anomaly would be finally conquered and incorporated into the mainstream of articulated Romantic paradigms. Steinitz's unsettling theories would have probably been reconciled as an eccentric, although interesting and worth bearing in mind, deviation by a major player, just as had already happened with Paulsen, and something of the sort (admittedly around a far less essential issue) was to come later with Chigorin's (one of the later, failing challengers of Steinitz's title) conviction that knights were *clearly* better than bishops.⁴¹

But the winner was Steinitz, and this proved decisive for this 'shift of paradigm.' Romantic chess practically died with Zukertort (only two years after the match, by the way); all the players who would later on become notable started their careers well after Steinitz and his ideas had appeared (the two major figures are Siegbert Tarrasch, 1862–1934, and Lasker, 1868–1941, who would dethrone Steinitz in 1894), so that they had never lived completely in the Romantic feeling. And it perhaps not surprising that Chigorin (1850–1908), the last, benighted Romantic, who challenged Steinitz in 1889 and 1892, grew to chess in isolation before his arrival to the international scene. Anderssen had died in 1879, Staunton in 1874, and Morphy retired from chess 1858.

⁴⁰Lasker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 190–1.

⁴¹This merits further comment. Today Chigorin's opinion is considered wrong. Knights and bishops are in a state of 'unstable equilibrium:' they rarely have the same value, but the distribution of positions that favor (slightly) one or the other is symmetrical. But, again, contemporary judgement is not enough to understand Chigorin's. The discussion about knights/bishops was at the time starting to take its form. The superiority of the two bishops (an obvious axiom for today's player) had just been discovered and stated by Steinitz (again with Paulsen as a forerunner, see Chernev, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 187–8), and the theory of 'closed' and 'open' positions—central to the discussion—was in its infancy. In fact, it would have to wait for the Hypermodern Revolution of the 1930s to begin resembling contemporary discourse (a revealing, but fairly anachronistic, reading of Steinitz and Morphy from this standpoint is found in one of the Hypermodern 'manifesto,' Réti's *Modern Ideas*). The matter about Chigorin's knights deserves more detail than can be given here.

One can still recover some of the irrationality that characterizes the reaction of the old way of thinking before the success of the new. After the match, doubts were cast to the idea that a match (as opposed to performance in tournaments) was the real measure of the rank of a player. Claims (all true) that Zukertort was struck by an illness, that he was not in his best moment, and that time controls (another effect of chess professionalisation I have had not occasion to address) were decidedly against him were marshalled by the part of the audience that could not cope with the advent of a new era. In its short-term aspect, in the weakness of the arguments, and the irrelevance of many of its participants, this reaction resembles the one against Harvey's circulation. In the main, the chess world seemed to have been ripe for the revolution. Professionalisation, as has been said, seems to me to have a major role in this. And I tend to see that part of the answer why Philidor did not revolutionize chess until the advent of Steinitz rests here. But the 'ripeness for change' of the chess world is not a sufficient condition. Competitive success is also needed. And the case of Paulsen, once again, comes to illustrate. The main historical difference between Steinitz and Paulsen is that the latter did not achieve competitive primacy. As long as this was so, his 'modern' style remained covered under the surface.



A WORD IS IN ORDER HERE about the nature of the 'crucial experiment' in chess. Here it is that the nature of chess, the nature of being a *game* (with victory and defeat), enters the picture most relevantly. Victory/defeat, as a criterion of 'truth,' is not theory-laden. Although a lost game can always (and usually is) attributed not to a general theory but to a particular bad move; although competing theories can disagree about what it was that ruined a game, and so end up 'talking through each other;' although there is always available a *ceteris paribus* to tune up any analysis to the needs of a theory; in spite of all that, the difference between 'evidence' in science and the objective result of victory or defeat in chess is rather not one of degree but of nature. Victory or defeat cannot be rendered irrelevant as pieces of observation can. Deciding the relevance of particular data is a resource that the theoretical scientist has always at his disposal—it is just the other side of the coin of choosing the supportive evidence. A scientific theory consists not only in answers to a set of questions, but also in assignments of the status of 'anomaly' to any

counterevidence that might be produced as a criticism. On the contrary, a theory about chess does not have this power of reducing (or elevating?) counterevidence to puzzle: counterevidence, i.e. defeat, is too rigid to lend itself to such manipulation.

I have not spoken of the third possible result—the draw—not because it is simply another possibility, but because I am thinking of a statistically more reliable set of results than the individual game. Between two players this more reliable measure is a ‘match’ of many games;⁴² for a wider population, general performance in matches and tournaments. It is clear that, thus conceived, there can be no ties in the game of chess, and that the contingent circumstances (illness, bad days, etc.) and results of particular games cannot be held as ‘(counter)evidence’ for a theory.

The analogy that I have suggested several times above between chess and mathematics finds here theoretical support. The ‘truth’ of mathematics is also much more powerful than in the (natural) sciences. There are always cases when even mathematical truth is very dubious (a famous case is the obscure nature of infinite series, that allowed so many contradictory results), and truth alone is not enough to direct research (so the raise of algebra, the acceptance of irrationals and of complex numbers, the invention of calculus, etc., depended on enormously important circumstances outside the realm of mathematical truth). But, as analogous to the ‘evidence’ of the sciences, it finds itself generally outside the control of theories. The revolution of calculus in particular shares many features with the revolution of modern chess. They seem to be reducible to this similarity in the nature of their respective ‘evidence.’



ALMOST AS AN APPENDIX, I want here to quote the contemporary, anachronistic, recollection of Steinitz’s theories in light of what has been discussed above. I will take the excellent compilation and summary of Steinitz’s theory by David Hooper’s ‘The theory of Steinitz,’ reprinted in Landsberger’s biography of the Champion. Hooper makes (out of Steinitz’s, Lasker’s, and Euwe’s writings) a list of the seven principal tenets of the theory:

⁴²The two paradigmatic formats for World Championship matches are *a*) the best result in 24 games and *b*) the first winner of 6 games, disregarding any draws. Steinitz-Zukertort was played to the first winner of 10 games, draws not counting.

- (1) At the beginning of the game the forces stand in equilibrium.
- (2) Correct play on both sides maintains this equilibrium and leads to a drawn game.
- (3) Therefore a player can win only as a consequence of an error made by the opponent. (There is no such a thing as the winning move.)
- (4) As long as she equilibrium is maintained an attack, however skilful, cannot succeed against a correct defence.
- (5) Therefore a player should not attack until he already has an advantages caused by the opponents error, that justifies due decision to attack.
- (6) At the beginning of the game a player should not at once seek attack. Instead, a player should seek to disturb the equilibrium in his favour by inducing the opponent to make an error—a preliminary before attacking.
- (7) When a sufficient advantage has been obtained a player must attack or the advantage will be dissipated.⁴³

Beyond their value as strategic principles of the game of chess, how different the meaning of these seven points appears when they are understood on the historical context of Romantic play! One of the most famous of Steinitz's phrases, one of those that the chess student learns alongside with Philidor's pawns, says 'The combination is the natural outgrowth of the position.' The technical and educational value of this maxim of chess wisdom is undeniable. Its historical meaning, when recovered, is simply beautiful and irreplaceable.

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