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CHESS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN
VALUES: PROSPECTS FOR POPULAR ACCEPTANCE

by Troy L. Armstrong

Chess never has been and never can be ought but a recreation. It should not be indulged in to the detriment of other and more serious avocations--should not absorb or engross the thoughts of those who worship at its shrine, but should be kept in the background and restrained within its proper provinces.

Paul Morphy

Chess is life.

Robert J. Fischer

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I. Introduction

In a conference which has chosen to address itself to a topic as rich in possibilities as the uses and values of chess as a leisure activity, the present paper proposes to take the rather bold step of attempting to reach some tentative conclusions about the role that chess plays in American society at the present time. Let us assume that we can discern a set of societal factors that determine: (1) the way in which chess is perceived by the American public, and (2) the extent to which chess is currently pursued as a leisure pastime in our society. If these assumptions are correct, then some insights can be gained regarding the meaning and significance of chess in our society.

Max Lerner has rightly observed in his well-known work, America as a Civilization (1957), that no American can truly achieve detachment in studying America. However, I do feel that by exploring the underlying issues of cultural context, social value, and world view some sense of the patterns and priorities of our society can be revealed. In this way I hope to arrive at some conclusions about the way chess has come to be perceived by the American public. The essence of my inquiry is best expressed by the following question: As contemporary U.S. society has increasingly experienced a restructuring of its value system, what if any effect have these changes had on the traditional perception of chess as an acceptable, leisure pastime?

II. Traditional American Values And The Work/Play Dualism

Scholars from a number of disciplines have been trying to work out a way of isolating the key traits of American character. They have also been trying to compile a list of these predominant, American values. So far there is a good deal of confusion and disagreement among these scholars. For example, Francis Hsu, an anthropologist who has worked extensively on the problem of national character, has pointed out that in the study of the American value system

What they have done so far is either to present pictures of contradictions with little or no attempt to reconcile the opposing elements, or to construct models of what, in their view, ought to be, with little or no attempt to deal with what actually occurs (1972:241).

In the present paper I do not intend to become embroiled in the debate about the nature of the American value system and how best to study it. Rather, I simply want to use one idea that has gained wide acceptance in this area of study. I feel this idea can be extremely helpful in understanding how chess is perceived as a leisure activity by the American public. This idea is that in American society there has traditionally been a dualism in the respective values attached to work and play. In order to understand the significance of work and play in American society one must understand the nature of this dualism.

The existence of a work/play dualism in our society appears to be rooted in the structure of Indo-European languages. English happens to be a member of this language family. Indo-European languages tend to generate two-value logics and as a result lend themselves to two-fold judgments. We can see this quality of thought in a vast range of perceptions in American life. Americans seem to think usually in terms of oppositions such as moral-immoral, clean-dirty, practical-impractical, introvert-extrovert, sin-virtue, ad infinitum. It would be possible to put together an almost endless list of these oppositional pairs in our language. The important point is that the existence of these pairs indicates one of the important principles for organizing thought and behavior in American society.

Two prominent, American social scientists, Conrad Arensberg and Arthur Niehoff, have suggested that this pattern of dualistic thinking has historically extended into the areas of work and play in our society (1971). In this case, the two-fold judgment has produced a major distinction in the meanings associated with work and play. Work has always been a necessary and important activity. In contrast, play has always been an escape from work and therefore without significance or serious purpose. As Arensberg and Niehoff have observed

To most persons brought up in the American environment of farming, business, or industry, work is what they do regularly, purposefully, and even grimly, whether they enjoy it or not...A man is judged by his work. When strangers meet and attempt to establish cordial relationships, one of the first topics of discussion is the kind of work each does. It is a primary role

classifier. Work is a serious, adult business; and a man is supposed to "get ahead" or "make a contribution" to community or mankind through his work. Play is different. It is fun, an outlet from work, without serious purpose except possibly to make subsequent work more efficient. It is a lesser category, a later topic of conversation after one's occupation is identified...Work and play are considered to be different worlds; there is a time and place for each, but when it is time for work, then lighter pursuits should be put aside (1971:369).

This quote should provide some sense of the particular qualities that have been associated with the two elements in the work/play dualism in our society. Historically, the seriousness of work and the frivolity of play can be traced to the emphasis on practicality and achievement in the society's formative experiences. The importance of westward expansion and economic growth contributed to the sense of seriousness for work and the sense of relief and release for play. This situation was undoubtedly reinforced by the fact that the United States did not have a feudal past. Widespread, social mobility supported the ideal of hard work and at the same time did not allow context for elaborate, leisure activities to develop.

In this value system the game of chess has come to assume a strange role. In the past chess has always been viewed popularly as a serious, i.e., intellectual, activity which was associated with notions of elitism and high, i.e., artistic, culture. Here, we can identify the two sets of ideas that have prevented chess from becoming a popular, leisure activity for much of the population. First, as a serious, leisure activity chess did not conform to the requirements of play in American society. Therefore, it was arbitrarily excluded from the popular world of frivolous, leisure activity. In addition, since chess was defined as a game, it did not meet the requirements for inclusion in the world of work. The result was that chess was viewed either as a much too serious game or as an illegitimate form of work. The second factor, the notions of social elitism commonly associated with chess, only compounded the problem of its popular acceptance. When chess had been introduced from Europe into the major, urban centers of the eastern and southern seaboard during the 18th and 19th centuries, the game was largely confined to the drawing rooms and parlours of affluent and socially prominent devotees of the arts. The presence of these two factors, the seriousness of chess and its elitist background, caused chess to be placed in a special category where the American public tended to ignore the game as an acceptable, leisure pastime.

It is against this backdrop that this paper will now explore the implications for chess of what appears to be a major shift in values long associated with work and play in our society.

III. Post-Industrial Society And The Emergence Of Serious Play

In a recent article Bernard Mergen (1977) has argued that the rise

of industrial technology in the United States between 1880 and 1930 caused major changes in the existing value system. These changes have produced increased, mass participation in leisure activities. This observation is certainly true. But, if one includes a consideration of the more recent past, the observed changes are even more startling. Economic and technological developments of the past several decades indicate that a whole new way of perceiving leisure activities has emerged with the rise of the post-industrial era.

The following discussion of the transformation of leisure behavior during the post-industrial era in American society owes a considerable debt to Daniel Bell's analysis in his book, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (1976). In this book Bell traces the manner in which social relations and world view in our society have undergone major changes as different forms of economic life have evolved.

Each society in forging rules and regulating behavior establishes a set of meanings which allows the citizens to pursue rewarding lives. This set of meanings tends to arise out of activities associated with religion, the arts, and work. In American society aside from religion, work has always been the primary source from which we have derived meaning in our lives. It is Bell's argument that since a close relationship exists between how we earn our livelihoods and how we view our lives, any change in the nature of work has great significance for the American value system.

In its brief history American society has experienced three major forms of economic life: (1) pre-industrial, (2) industrial, and (3) post-industrial work. The first and oldest form, pre-industrial work, represented a struggle against nature in which the labor force was overwhelmingly employed in the extractive industries: agriculture, mining, fishing, and forestry. This economic way of life persisted in the United States through the last decades of the 19th century. Under these conditions the work/play dualism reached ascendancy in the American value system.

The second principal form, industrial work, represented an attempt to organize nature through the use of the machine. Work became technical and rationalized in a world of economic organization based on hierarchy and bureaucracy. Again, the work/play dualism continued to hold sway, but with the gradual standardization of mass behavior leisure activities began to receive more serious attention. Although play was still largely frivolous, it came to assume a more prominent role in the total range of social activities. In spite of this slight change, it is important to note that during both the pre-industrial and industrial eras the work/play dualism had not yet begun to erode. Significant meaning was derived solely from the work experience. Only with the advent of post-industrial society do we begin to witness a fundamental reordering in the relative perceptions of work and play.

This third and most recent form, post-industrial work, is characterized by the automation of labor, the proliferation of human, professional, and technical services, and the general growth of the welfare state. The greatly increased dependence upon highly complex, impersonal forces beyond the control and often the understanding of the individual has led to the emergence of a new system of work. The reduction of the work week, the alienation of mass production, and the acceptance of high rates of chronic unemployment are radically reshaping our perceptions of leisure pursuits. In preceding forms of economic life significance was only attached to work, but with the

devaluation of labor the traditional work/play dualism appears to be eroding. The source where people are able to derive meaning for their lives is being expanded to include leisure activities. Instead of play being perceived only as frivolous and without profound implication, play has now achieved a position of considerable importance in our society. In this process post-industrial society has provided a set of circumstances which has created a niche for serious play.

Undoubtedly, large segments of the U.S. population still cling to some version of the traditional work/play dualism. However, as the transformation of the American social order continues to reshape the value system, increasing numbers of the citizenry will discover a source of major gratification in leisure activity. There is an excellent chance that they will at least entertain the possibility of making major commitments of time and energy to various kinds of serious play.

IV. Transformation Of Values And The Perception Of Chess In Contemporary American Society

What are the implications of these changes for the role of chess as a leisure activity during the last quarter of the 20th century in U.S. society? First, there is good evidence that chess has experienced an enormous surge in popularity in our society during the past decade. Although this boom unquestionably reflects to some extent the influence of an already legendary, charismatic genius, Robert Fischer, on popular culture, the erosion of the work/play dualism must be considered a critical factor in the recent, increased popularity of chess. In fact, later in this paper I will argue that Fischer himself is an excellent example of the shift in values associated with work and play during the post-industrial era.

In post-industrial America, as leisure has come to be an area where serious participation is accepted and where significant meaning is attached to play, chess appears to be moving from its marginal status into a position of mainstream acceptance. Since work has lost its power to be the central source of significant meaning in a person's life, large numbers of people are now finding serious play to be a source of meaning and gratification. Chess appears to be ideally suited to provide this kind of reward to those individuals who pursue it.

Although it may be risky to try to generalize too widely on the basis of the careers of America's two most legendary chess players, Paul Morphy and Robert Fischer, the contrasts provided by the outlooks of these two world champions are simply too striking to ignore. Each reflects to a remarkable degree the social perceptions of chess which were predominant during their respective eras.

Paul Morphy, whose lifestyle epitomized the values of the typical, 19th century, antebellum aristocrat, was active on the international chess scene for only slightly over one year but during that period demonstrated a total mastery over the world's other leading players. Although his exploits in the European chess arena during the year 1858 (aroused considerable enthusiasm and interest among the American public,

his triumphant return was not followed by any widespread growth in the popularity of chess as an acceptable, leisure activity. Rather, the mystique of chess as an elitist, intellectual activity seems to have been reinforced by his brief career. Eventually, Morphy publicly renounced further participation in organized chess. In a tragic statement where he justified his decision to quit playing chess, Morphy belittled the activity as only a game and something not to be confused with serious vocations (Fine 1956:35). This evaluation of the value and meaning of chess clearly reflected the perceptual dominance of the work/play dualism in American society during the 19th century.

In contrast, the career of Robert Fischer embodies a set of values which suggest an entirely different perception of the significance and meaning of chess. Although Fischer is popularly viewed today as a recluse and an eccentric, his background and public pronouncements show him to be the product of a post-industrial social order. Fischer has repeatedly demonstrated by example in an absolutely business-like approach to tournament and match play his belief in the deep significance which should be attached to the pursuit of chess (Brady 1973). Although still a game, chess to Fischer and a whole generation of youthful chess players nurtured by a transformed society is an endeavor whose meaning is derived from a set of values in which the perceptual boundaries between work and play have totally collapsed.

In conclusion, I simply want to reiterate the fact that the central argument of this paper was based on the premise that any inquiry into the uses and values of chess as a leisure activity benefits from an exploration of cultural context and social values. In the human social order no activity, however trite or serious, operates in a cultural vacuum. I have attempted to show how transformations in the value system as part of changes in the larger social and economic order seem to have important implications for the perception and meaning of leisure activity. The principal conclusion to be drawn from the preceding analysis is that with the advent of the post-industrial era in the United States chess will probably assume a considerably different role in the social order. If the assertion that the collapse of the work/play dualism is occurring is true, there is every reason to believe that chess in the future will meet with widespread popular acceptance. In many instances chess will become a source of significant meaning in somewhat the same way that work has previously been important.