
Book Reviews

Counterplay: An Anthropologist at the Chessboard

Robert Desjarlais

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011. Illustrations, appendices, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. 251 pp. \$50.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780520267398

In his recent book on chess, anthropologist Robert Desjarlais, himself an expert player, speaks of how he tired of the regular “repeating geometries” Sveshnikov defense, a chess opening, and turns instead to another: “This time, though, I hooked up with the Taimonov Sicilian, a dependable, shape-shifting mesh of counter-attacking strategies. The Taimonov’s ways in the world, its sinuous forms and possibilities, fitted well with my own predilections” (p. 100).

Counterplay: An Anthropologist at the Chess Board reminds me of the Taimonov. To transport readers into the culture of chess, and in particular into the lives of individual players, Desjarlais sinuously meshes descriptions of his own chess experiences and firsthand observations with ethnically diverse player accounts, snippets from online blogs and forums, philosophical and literary musings on chess from the game’s luminaries, and

surprising cross-cultural analogies and comparisons. One comes to understand that in this book, as in the Taimonov and in chess itself, much is possible.

In the opening chapter, called “Blitzkrieg Bop,” Desjarlais introduces readers to his study as an example of the anthropology of passion, or of obsession, the two are not easily distinguishable. Then in chapter 2, “Notes on a Swindle,” Desjarlais treats his match with Mr. Grechikhin—a master-level Russian immigrant and regular at their chess club in Manhattan—as a prototypical example of how chess can become “exquisite violence” between competitive “weekend warriors.” In “Psych-Out” (chapter 3), the author explores players’ emotional involvement in chess, the way they put their egos on the line and struggle to improve their ratings and to advance in the game’s skill-based social hierarchies. In “Sveshnikov Intrigues” (chapter 4), Desjarlais shows us the game’s “mathematical sublime,” delving into players’ attempts to master mind-bogglingly complex opening, middle, and end-game tactics and strategies. Chapter 5, “Son of Sorrow,” focuses on how John Riddell, a highly rated player from the Bronx-Yonkers Chess Club, uses competitive chess to enter special states of consciousness and indeed to inhabit

alternate, focused realities, effacing normal time and self and keeping sorrow and distress at bay. In “Ambivalence” (chapter 6), Desjarlais further explores the positives and negatives of chess: its victorious highs, rewarding “flow” states of consciousness, social engagement and even “communitas,” its pettiness, clash of (typically) male egos, and autistic obsessiveness. Chapters 7 (“Cyberchess”) and 8 (“24/7 on the ICC” [Internet Chess Club]) trace the changing contours of contemporary chess. First, we hear about the movement of chess from human art to “cyborgian” calculation, as players become ever more deeply entangled with chess-teaching programs like “Fritz” and with classic chess matches archived on computers. Then, we learn about sleep-deprived human zombies entering trance-like states as they jet from one lightning match to another in the wee hours of the morning on an always available Internet. Finally, the conclusion (Chapter 9, “Endgame”) traces the demise of the author’s own love affair with chess, as he leaves a “five-year reverie” spent in the small world anchored to the chessboard.

Though not dominated by a single theme, *Counterplay* does revolve around an exploration of a passion requiring players to demonstrate cognitive mastery and expertise in competitive clashes. In approaching this topic which we might label “enskilment,” Desjarlais fuses two classic themes from psychological anthropology, emotion and cognition, showing how they work together to fuel motivated selves. The author is better known for his studies of mental health and healing in U.S. and world contexts, having written, for example, persuasively and elegantly on U.S. homelessness and South Asian sha-

manic healing. Readers might therefore think Desjarlais has strayed beyond his expertise, but I would suggest otherwise. As former chess champion Bill Hartson says (p. 148): “Chess is not something that drives people mad; chess is something that keeps mad people sane.” *Counterplay*’s author does not always agree with this statement, as he also traces paths toward compulsive and even addictive play. Nevertheless, this quote draws attention to the book’s central concern with mental well-being. Chess players’ psyches are put on display in *Counterplay*, and one begins to understand how competitive cognition can form the basis of a life well lived (or not).

Stylistically, Desjarlais has written an absorbing book, a fitting tribute to his absorbing subject. The book’s diverse palette and self-consciously playful and metaphorical language (just look at the chapter titles) keep readers guessing and interested. Each chapter is bookended by an opening philosophical or literary epigram (for example, Bobby Fischer’s “To get squares, you gotta give squares” and H.G. Wells’s “No chess player sleeps well”) and ends with profiles of players encapsulated with their own pithy quotes (like American John Watson’s “Things are not getting resolved” and Sri Lankan Sunil Weeramantry’s “I have tried to quit twenty-five times”). The author’s own personal reflections—his chess obsession coincides with a midlife, existential crisis—are a nice touch. I must say I found myself eager to learn the outcomes of the matches he describes, which serve as the narrative grounding of each chapter. I wondered how they would affect his self-perceptions and shape his analysis. Likewise, the cross-cultural comparisons push

readers to identify deeper levels of meaning and healing in the game. One comes to believe that just as the Nepali Yolmo can reconstitute their selves in more satisfying ways through visualization of their deities and just as Sinhalese Buddhists might recover souls devastated by sorcery through shamanic practice, so can chess players find solace and rejuvenation in the game's magical grid and ritualized combat.

I did find myself wishing the author had engaged the more structured and even quantitative studies of games and play now coming out of psychology, communication, sociology, and other disciplines. For example, there exists a rich, burgeoning literature on Internet and gaming addiction in venues like the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, much of it mixing structured survey analysis with other forms of inquiry. Likewise, Desjarlais frequently speaks of addiction, and also of engagement, as matters of brain circuitry and neurochemistry. Yet his language remains suggestive at these points rather than systematic, despite a growing literature in neuroscience and other fields on precisely these topics.

This book will appeal most to humanists, especially anthropologists of a certain ilk, but also games-studies types housed in departments of philosophy, history, literature, education, and the like. Desjarlais can be indirect in his analysis. For example, each chapter's opening epigram and closing player profile are not explained. Rather, they are deliberately left to linger in readers' minds. Readers, like the chess players Desjarlais profiles, are pushed to guess the meaning of their author-opponent's moves. I would think

readers would delight in this book's at times magical, almost mystical treatment of chess. Scientists, too, if they are patient, will find many a hypothesis to test in this overflowing work.

Counterplay, then, is perhaps two (or many) books in one: a thoughtful and invariably interesting analysis of chess from a largely psychological-anthropological perspective, but equally a personal memoir. Some of Sveshnikov's regular geometry remains in the analytical bits. But in the end, an authorial style more Taimonovian dominates and encompasses both the regular analytical and the somewhat irregular personal parts in its diverse mesh of shifting strategies.

—Jeffrey G. Snodgrass, *Colorado State University, Ft. Collins, CO*

The Trouble with Play

Susan Grieshaber and Felicity McArdle
Maidenhead, England: Open University Press, 2010. References, indices, illustrations. 144 pp. \$96.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780335237906

While readers might assume *The Trouble with Play* presents an analysis of the siege on play in schools, authors Susan Grieshaber and Felicity McArdle, in fact, offer a perspective on play that departs radically from the assumed truths of early-childhood education. Early-childhood educators, influenced by developmental theory dating back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Froebel, believe that play is natural, holistic, and innocent. The authors argue, instead, that play is not always inno-