

Chess through an Anthropological Lens: A Comparison of *Counterplay* and *The King's Gambit: A Son, a Father, and the World's Most Dangerous Game*

Justin Lin Lee

Mountain Lakes High School, Mountain Lakes, NJ, USA

Email: justinlinlee06@gmail.com

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Abstract

Chess is a popular game with a very unique culture that may not always be recognized or appreciated. There have been few thorough anthropological assessments of chess in the literature. Two books in the literature, *Counterplay*, by Robert Desjarlais, and *The King's Gambit: A Son, A Father, and the World's Most Dangerous Game (The King's Gambit)*, by Paul Hoffman, address chess from an anthropological viewpoint—specifically through an ethnographic lens as both authors fully immerse themselves in the chess culture. While *Counterplay* is written by Robert Desjarlais, who is an anthropology professor, *The King's Gambit* is a biography written by Paul Hoffman, who is an author and chess player. Hoffman writes the book from a similar viewpoint as Desjarlais though he is not an anthropologist. These two works thoroughly address chess culture, exploring themes such as competition, psychology, obsession, rage, physical stress, and the aesthetics of chess. The two books share not only similarities but also a number of unique viewpoints. Both works significantly contribute to the anthropological study of modern-day chess and its issues.

Keywords

Chess, Anthropology, Biography, Culture, Ethnographic

1. Introduction

Chess is a game which has a unique culture, involving participants from diverse backgrounds. Just like other activities, it draws players ranging from those who merely dabble and play it casually, to serious, competitive tournament players.

Chess is one of the oldest and most popular games in the world, with an estimated 600 million routinely playing chess ([chess.com](https://www.chess.com), 2017), but despite this, there has been little written in the literature devoted to the anthropology of chess. A number of biographies have been written which touch upon the chess experience, but there are few, dedicated, well-known anthropological studies of chess. *Counterplay* is a unique book written by anthropology professor Dr. Robert Desjarlais which attempts to describe chess from his unique perspective as a chess player and anthropologist. *The King's Gambit*, written by Paul Hoffman, is a biography written by the author who is a chess player as well. Though not marketed as an anthropology book, it is written in a similar manner to *Counterplay*, with thoughtful analysis of the culture of chess. The two books share an ethnographic lens and discuss several common themes, including the discussion of the interplay of chess and rivalries/competition, psychology, obsession, rage, gender, physical stress, aesthetics, and gender. Together, these two books make significant contributions to the anthropology of chess.

2. Rivalries/Competition

Chess is a unique activity because it is one of the only activities where ratings, rankings, and tournament results are updated regularly, even live at times, and it is easy to compare one's rating and ranking to another's by simply checking online. Because tournament results are often entered quickly after the end of an event, one can figure out where one stands relative to others up to the minute. This is unusual for most activities, and can stoke the competitive spirit in many chess players. In *Counterplay*, Desjarlais discusses how chess is a particular activity that results in inevitable comparisons to others. He quotes Elizabeth Vicary, a chess coach at a public school in New York, as stating, "particular snobbery is endemic to the chess world—just because we can instantly and accurately slot people into a rating hierarchy, we do. If you've ever been accosted by a stranger at a tournament who demands to know—even before you're introduced—what your rating is, then you can understand what I'm talking about." A person's rating can appear to index, at times, his or her self-worth" (Desjarlais, 2013). There are player lists where one can check one's ranking and how they compare to the players around them. In addition, Desjarlais talks about how underlying competition is always an undercurrent and is always present. He states, "And that's because somehow it always comes back to the games, it always comes back to people basically competing about who's the better player. That can be hidden in all sorts of ways, but it's still there" (Desjarlais, 2013).

In *The King's Gambit*, Hoffman writes extensively about the rivalry that his father had with him. This extended to academic pursuits as well as to chess ability. "It wasn't until later that I realized my father, too, wanted me to give up chess altogether. Yes, I sensed that he was jealous of my accomplishments in the game and envious of my ability to buckle down and focus on improving my play, but historically chess had been a big part of our bond" (Hoffman, 2007). Hoff-

man also discusses how it is the competition which always brings chess players back to chess. He states, “The thrill of competition, the euphoria of victory, is what really keeps players returning to the board. Its warlike struggle awakens the minds and bodies of people who may be anesthetized to other aspects of their worlds. “Chess is like life,” Spassky once proclaimed. Fischer was more extreme: “Chess is life” (Hoffman, 2007). Hoffman references that this undercurrent of competition is implicit in aggressive language that is used by chess players. He describes some of the more “low language” used by players in which they refer to sexualized physical abuse and violence. He gives examples of language used by chess players discussing their games such as, “I tore him a new one!” and “He screwed me over.” This type of language though can be offensive to some players, especially women, and Desjarlais reports how one of the players, Elizabeth Vicary, asked men to stop using this “sexually violent language” when reviewing games with her (Desjarlais, 2013).

3. Psychology

In *Counterplay*, Desjarlais discusses how psychology plays a significant role in chess, and how different players used psychological tactics to give themselves an advantage. He describes a situation in which he plays an opponent, Asa Freeman, who has a higher chess rating than him. Desjarlais describes how he looks for Freeman at the start of a game, and finds Freeman outside, appearing casual, with “a sandwich in his hand.” After informing Freeman that he has started the game by starting the clock, his opponent dismisses him. “We’re actually playing each other,” you say. “I’m your opponent. I didn’t know if you were here or not, so I’ve made my first move, and started your clock.” “Asa turns, makes eye contact, and says, “Good. That’s what you should do.” He turns to the pairing sheet, bites into his sandwich” (Desjarlais, 2013). The author is left feeling minimized, like a “student returning to the classroom.” Later, when he analyzes the situation with a friend, he realizes that his opponent was trying to use psychological tactics. “He was trying to psych you out,” someone says later. “Asa knows all the tricks in the book, and he uses them” (Desjarlais, 2013).

Similarly, in *The King’s Gambit*, Hoffman discusses how psychological factors played a significant role in his games. He described how he worked with a chess coach, Bruce Pandolfini, to help him. He recounts, “My games exhibited the kind of dramatic swings on the chessboard that Sosonko had described—my opponent is winning, he screws up; I’m winning, I blunder; it’s drawish, he’s winning again. We worked on my being Zen, on my smoothing out my internal reactions so that I could stay focused on the game. I had particular difficulty not capitulating if the game suddenly swung in my opponent’s favor. Rather than making my adversary work for the full point, I would in effect pout and roll over. With Pandolfini’s guidance, I tried to arrest my self-defeating attitude. Even a theoretically winning game doesn’t win itself; a fallible human being must correctly marshal his forces move after move if he is going to bring home the victo-

ry. If I put up sufficient obstacles, it was not inevitable that my adversary would win “a won game” (Hoffman, 2007). Hoffman describes that Pandolfini advised that most games are won by the person who makes the “next to last” blunder (Hoffman, 2007). Through this passage, it is apparent that psychological fortitude is needed in order to win a game. While things happen in chess games which can frustrate each player, the winner is often the one who is able to overcome psychological factors and pushes through until the end.

4. Obsession

In *Counterplay*, Desjarlais describes how chess has a strong magnetic draw on its players, making it difficult to fully step away from chess. Many players can become fixated or even obsessed with the game. He describes stories of players who have left chess, only to return. “The temptation is to leave the game, cold. Some do just that—only to return to it once again. A month after Nolan exclaimed how “pointless” chess was, he was back at it, contemplating the intrigues of rook and pawn endings. Chess is a fever that’s hard to shake. Its fascinations pull a person back” (Desjarlais, 2013).

Similarly, in *The King’s Gambit*, Hoffman writes about how at its extreme, this can lead to dysfunction in one’s life. He states, “Although chess is regarded as a game of great intelligence, at the same time it is often associated with insanity and obsession. Every chess club, it seems, has at least one resident who left his wife or job to play the game all day. The only two Americans to reach the pinnacle of chess, Paul Morphy and Bobby Fischer, suffered from paranoia” (Hoffman, 2007). Here, Hoffman describes the spectrum of playing chess, with the extreme ending in obsession and even a loss of one’s mental health completely—insanity. This can result in the inability to balance chess with other responsibilities, allowing one to lead a normal life, including having a healthy family life or work life.

5. Rage

In *Counterplay*, Desjarlais describes how Elizabeth Vicary, who teaches chess at the New York public school IS 318, describes chess as the only thing that fully engages her and “doesn’t get boring after awhile” (Desjarlais, 2013). Chess is such a central part of her life that she wrote a blog entitled, “I Hate Myself” after losing a tournament one weekend. She states that, “I realized that I play chess because it’s pretty much the only time I ever feel anything. The rest of the time, with just a couple exceptions, I am almost completely numb. Somewhere along the way I turned into a zombie” (Desjarlais, 2013). She concludes that chess is... “the only time I feel extremes of emotion” (Desjarlais, 2013). Through these descriptions, one can see that chess causes Vicary to feel a deep passion, and is one of the only things that stirs emotion and fervor in her. This may be a common theme in chess players.

Hoffman describes in *The King’s Gambit* that losing chess games can not only cause the stirring of deep emotion, but may even cause fits of rage, which can be

extremely upsetting. Hoffman discusses how, “When a player gets violent, his wrath is often directed not at spectators or his opponent but at himself. One contemporary Russian grandmaster has been known to pick up the pointiest chess piece, usually the bishop or a knight with a particularly jagged mane, and stab his own head until it bleeds. Then he rushes out of the tournament hall only to return for the next round as if nothing untoward has happened. At one event, this grandmaster was among the tournament leaders who were playing on an elevated stage. When he lost a key game, he bloodied his face and then, in an extreme masochistic flourish, dove off the three-foot-high stage, belly-flopping onto the hard floor” (Hoffman, 2007). Here we can see the extreme passion that can cause fits of rage and violence, likely uncontrolled, that chess can cause.

6. Physical Stress

Chess is known for being very stressful—not only mentally taxing, but also physically draining, which is not something many people recognize. “Chess is very unhealthy,” explained Nigel Short, the top British player of the twentieth century, when I visited him in the Athens apartment he shares with his Greek wife. Short was speaking from more than three decades of experience. During his world title bout with Kasparov in 1993, Short ate normally yet lost ten pounds—7.5 percent of his body weight—in just the first three games. “What could be more unnatural,” Short said, “than sitting still for four or five hours while your heart is racing sometimes at 140 beats per minute? There’s no outlet for all the stress. You can’t punch the guy, kick a ball, or run laps.” Illness during games is not uncommon. Even Kasparov himself, arguably the best player in the history of chess, has broken out with fever blisters in the heat of battle” (Hoffman, 2007). In these descriptions, we can see that chess takes a toll on the body which can sometimes be significant and detrimental.

Desjarlais also recounts the physical toll the chess tournaments took on him as a chess player, even though he was more of a casual player not playing at the highest levels. However, many chess tournaments are multi-day events, where games can last up to 4 - 5 hours. “It’s easy to get tired, especially during a day’s second game or toward the end of a tournament. “Twelve hours of chess is too much at any age,” notes grandmaster Vadim Milov. “Physical conditioning counts for a lot. And as a player has to conserve energy for upcoming matches, games are more often arenas of down-and-dirty survival than canvases of richly contested ideas. It’s tournaments like these and a general trend toward faster time controls that led David Bronstein, a former world champion contender, to posit, “Chess has changed from a philosophical play to a sporting game” (Desjarlais, 2013). This has led many to propose that chess should be viewed as a sport and not just a sedentary activity, since it takes such a physical toll on the body.

7. Beauty/Aesthetics

Many are drawn to chess because of the beauty and aesthetics they feel that are

an integral part of chess. Desjarlais refers to the beauty of chess as being comparable to other creative arts. This comparison may not be something that is widely acknowledged by the public at large, but is appreciated by many chess players. “Many appreciate the beauty to be found in chess, both in their games and in those of others, and they enjoy the myriad acts of creativity that illuminate the game” (Desjarlais, 2013). He described one person as stating, “Chess is beautiful enough to waste your life for” (Desjarlais, 2013). He adds that, “A player can orchestrate a sequence of moves that pleases the mind as much as a painting or a poem can”. Marcel Duchamp might have had this in mind when he wrote, “Beauty in chess is closer to beauty in poetry; the chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making visual design on the chess-board, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem. From my close contracts with artists and chess players, I have come to the personal conclusion that while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists” (Desjarlais, 2013). Viewing chess through this lens makes sense since openings and moves are recorded, for future chess players to appreciate, just as works of art are preserved.

Hoffman similarly refers to the beauty of a chess game in *The King's Gambit*, comparing it to architectural achievements such as the Parthenon. He writes, “There is mesmerizing splendor to a well-played game, and the aesthetic satisfaction is different depending upon the style of the player. For example, the games of Anatoly Karpov, Kasparov’s archrival and predecessor as world champion, have a certain classic elegance. Karpov’s graceful coordination of pieces and pawns is as pleasing to the eye as is the formal geometry of the Parthenon. Pascal’s victory over Drenchev has a wittier, more contemporary form of beauty” (Hoffman, 2007). This is in contrast to other games, which are compared to some of the deadliest natural disasters. Hoffman purports, “Kasparov’s games, in which he so decisively overpowers his opponents, have the terrifying appeal of a tornado or a tidal wave” (Hoffman, 2007).

8. Gender

In Desjarlais’s *Counterplay*, the role of gender stereotypes is explored at length. The stereotype of men naturally being better at and more interested in chess, a game of deep mental focus, is a widely held belief and misconception. The author consults Woman Grandmaster (WGM) Jennifer Shahade, who states that while it may be expected for men to be obsessed with chess, that type of obsession is less encouraged, and maybe even discouraged in women. She states, “Now, if a girl does that, it’s not just weird, it’s downright unacceptable to most parents. Women are usually discouraged from pursuing chess and other intellectual activities that require time-consuming devotion” (Desjarlais, 2013). Instead, women are often encouraged to take up more mainstream and stereotypically “female” pursuits such as ballet and cheerleading.

Hoffman similarly explores the theme of gender discrimination in chess in

The King's Gambit. He also refers to Shahade, who played in the US Chess Championship in 2002 when the women's section was abolished, and players of both genders faced off against each other. Shahade, who never faced a single female in the tournament, nonetheless became US women's champion by virtue of achieving the highest score of all the women. He writes, "At the players' meeting before the 2002 tournament, some of the men complained that the participation of women would degrade the quality of the play, but Jennifer proved them wrong. In the very first round, she disposed of Gennady Sagalchik, the grandmaster who had been particularly vocal in objecting to the inclusion of women..." (Hoffman, 2007). In this example, we can see that there is still gender discrimination against women, with many men wishing to exclude women from top tournaments despite their achievements and earned rights to participate.

Shahade is unsure whether women and men should be combined in certain tournaments. She raises the issue that while the top women are strong enough to play men, the lower-rated women are weaker than the lower-rated men. She asks, "Is it good for a young woman's confidence and chess career if she has a horrible result in the US Championship?" she said. "Maybe it would be better for her to play in an all women's event? But I can also argue the reverse—that it is motivating to play in a championship with the country's best players, and that women will get better as a result" (Hoffman, 2007). Shahade raises an excellent point. Currently, there are separate titles that only women can achieve, such as Woman Grandmaster, which is a separate and distinct title from Grandmaster. In addition, the chess world has chosen to acknowledge women separately by creating separate top player lists dedicated only to women, like the US Chess Federation.

9. Conclusion

There are few chess books written addressing the anthropology of chess, discussing chess's unique culture and customs. *Counterplay* is a book written by anthropologist Robert Desjarlais, who recounts his own experience immersed in chess culture as a chess player, providing an ethnographic account. In Paul Hoffman's biography, *The King's Gambit*, the author provides similar anthropological assessments of chess culture as a chess player steeped in the game. Though Hoffman is not trained as an anthropologist, he offers excellent insights and analyses on a level similar to Desjarlais. The two books share similar themes throughout, including interesting and thought-provoking discussions of the interplay of chess and rivalries/competition, psychology, obsession, rage, physical stress, aesthetics, and gender. While these two books share common themes, they also offer complementary accounts of key themes prevalent in chess. In these ways, the two works significantly enhance our current anthropological understanding of chess.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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