ROBERT DESJARLAIS

COUNTERPLAY

An Anthropologist at the Chessboard

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Berkeley · Los Angeles · London

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit www.ucpress.edu.

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Desjarlais, Robert R.
Counterplay : an anthropologist at the chessboard / Robert Desjarlais.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-520-26739-8 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Chess—Philosophy. 2. Chess players—Psychology. 3. Anthropology—Philosophy. I. Title.
GV1314.7.D47 2011
794.1—dc22 2010026534

Manufactured in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on Cascades Enviro 100, a 100% post consumer waste, recycled, de-inked fiber. FSC recycled certified and processed chlorine free. It is acid free, Ecologo certified, and manufactured by BioGas energy.

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The publisher gratefully acknowledges the generous
support of the General Endowment Fund of the
University of California Press Foundation

The essence of chess is thinking about the essence of chess.

—David Bronstein

Chess is life or death. The pieces are alive, but what actually happens on the chessboard is about 1 percent of the game. It goes on in the heads of the opponents, at almost a psychic level, and that's what makes it so absolutely intense.

—Maurice Ashley

. . . and everything disappeared save the chess position itself, complex, pungent, charged with extraordinary possibilities.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *The Defense*

TEXT
10/13 Sabon

DISPLAY
Sabon

COMPOSITOR
BookMatters, Berkeley

PRINTER AND BINDER
Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group

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CHAPTER 1

Blitzkrieg Bop

You know, comrade Pachman, I don't enjoy being a Minister, I would rather play chess like you, or make a revolution in Venezuela.

—Che Guevara

Khan's got a bishop aimed at my kingside. He's staring at the guts of my position, looking for weaknesses. He wants to slice my pawns open to get at my king. I watch as his eyes scan the board. He sees how his queen can take action. He grabs that potent piece, slides it three squares forward, swings his arm to the side of the board, and hits the chess clock, stopping his timer and starting my own.

It's my move. There are two minutes left on my clock. I take seconds to decide on a good response. Khan's on the attack. I've got to get some counterplay going, some active maneuvering to keep his initiative at bay. I drop my knight onto a square in the middle of the board. The move looks good, but I'm not sure. I hit my clock. It's back to Khan, his eyes trained on the board.

We're playing five-minute blitz games on a damp summer night at a chess club that convenes Monday evenings on the ground floor of a Presbyterian church in the crowded suburban city of Yonkers, New York. We're tossing pins and skewers, forks and double attacks. We've been at it a good hour now, each of us winning and losing playfully cutthroat games, but I'm starting to fade. I'm trying to hold on, but it's not easy playing Khan. He has a sharp eye for tactics. He's infinitely resourceful and thinks and moves fast. I feel like a middle-aged jogger trying to keep pace with a track star.

The position is fraught with possibility, but neither of us has the time to consider it closely. We're down to a few seconds each. A fierce tension heats the board; something's going to break. Khan snares my king in a

deadly mating net. I try some desperado moves, sacrificing my knight for two pawns; but Khan sees through my tricks, and my pieces lie scattered about. No choice but to resign. I stop the clocks.

"Damn," I say. "I thought I'd get out of that."

Khan smiles as he gathers up the pieces.

It's late, close to midnight. Other club members were here earlier tonight, playing rounds of a tournament, but they've all gone home.

We switch colors and arrange our pieces. Khan resets the digital clock.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Yeah."

Khan taps the clock. I make the first move of a new game.

COGNITIVE JUNKIES

I first met Khan in November 2002, at the same chess club, when he was nineteen. Since then we've played hundreds of blitz games together. When he worked at a restaurant in my town, he would drop by my place during his lunch break. We would play for an hour or more, racing pieces around on a cloth board at my kitchen table, until he had to return to work. The games were a gleeful respite from our daily labors. Once the clocks start, I find myself trying to follow his imaginative, quick-witted play while plodding through my more methodical moves.

A bright guy with a movie-star-handsome face, Furqan Tanwir—or Khan, as his friends know him—grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Yonkers. By his late teens he had severed ties with his parents. Without family support to fall back on, he has gotten along in life through his resourcefulness, his smarts, and his good nature. I sometimes wonder if this is reflected in his approach to chess: he's wildly creative at the board; he takes a lot of chances, some of which fail; and he plays best, by his own admission, when he's faced with a losing position. "My strength lies in creativity," Khan once said. "I'll salvage something, and I find that when I'm down, I'll tend to play a lot better, for whatever reason. I think largely for me a survival instinct kicks in, and in a sense it becomes almost easier. You don't have the choice to create anymore because you're forced to find the right moves, and if that pressure is not on you, it's much more difficult to find the same moves."

Khan enters a lot of tournaments, where he's out for the big-money prizes. He also likes to play quick games, day or night. He has an abiding love for the game.

Chess gets a hold on some people, like a virus or a drug. Just as the chemical properties of heroin directly and immediately affect the central

nervous system, so chess can lock into certain pathways of the mind, and it doesn't easily let go. "Playing chess got to be a problem," writes Charlie McCormick in one of his poems, published on his blog:

> Because I would play
> To the exclusion of everything else,
> Including eating and sleeping.
> I quickly discovered
> Chess was my one real addiction,
> That it would get in the way
> Of all the other areas of my life
> If I let it.[1]

This has been going on for centuries now. A person's body, thoughts, consciousness become wrapped up in the ideas of the game. "It hath not done with me when I have done with it," laments the anonymous author of "A Letter from a Minister to His Friend Concerning the Game of Chess," penned in England in 1680. "It hath followed me into my Study, into my Pulpit; when I have been Praying, or Preaching, I have (in my thoughts) been playing at Chess; then have I had it as were a Chess-board before my eyes; and I have been thinking how I might have obtained stratagems of my Antagonist, or make such motions to his disadvantage; nay, I have heard of one who was playing at Chess in his thoughts (as appear'd by his words) when he lay a dying."

Marcel Duchamp, the French artist, was similarly smitten. "My attention is so completely absorbed by chess," he wrote in a letter in 1919. "I play day and night, and nothing interests me more than finding the right move. . . . I like painting less and less." Duchamp gave up painting altogether to concentrate on chess, for he found chess to be a purer, more compelling medium for artistic creativity. The story goes that when he married in 1927 he spent much of his honeymoon in Nice at a chess club. One week into the marriage he stayed up late studying chess problems. The next morning he awoke to find that his wife had glued the pieces to the board. They divorced weeks later. "Duchamp needed a good game of chess like a baby needs a bottle," his good friend Henri-Pierre Roché wrote in 1941. He wasn't the only one. Many committed chess players are cognitive junkies. They need their daily fix of tactics and strategy.

CHESS OR DEATH

I felt the same way a while back, the year Khan and I first met. I am an anthropologist by trade—a sociocultural anthropologist, to be precise. By

training and inclination, I am interested in getting a read on the social, cultural, and experiential dimensions of people's lives around the world in an effort to understand better what it means to be human. Many evenings and weekends these days, however, I can be found seated before a chessboard, looking for good moves. I've got the fever.

I returned to playing seriously in the summer of 2002, after a twenty-year break from competitive chess. I had played as a teenager while growing up in a residential town in western Massachusetts. Chess was one of my main interests in life. "All I want to do, ever, is play chess," Bobby Fischer once said.[2] That idea made perfect sense to me then. I homed in on the game's strategic nuances and competitive challenges. During my high school years I woke up early to study the masterworks of Fischer and Anatoly Karpov, the best players of that era. I snuck a pocket chess set into my classes to mull over game positions. I felt at home at the board, less so anywhere else. Chess formations patterned my thoughts. Some days, after looking at a board all day, my chess-crazed mind would construe game positions—a knight here, a rook there—out of the arrangements of people and furniture in a room.

Like other young people captivated by the game, I entertained the notion of devoting my life to it and becoming a professional chess player. But since I wasn't especially talented, and since the mill towns and farmlands of western Mass. were by no means a hotbed of chess praxis, there was little logic in doing so, and I played competitive chess only infrequently in college. When I left for graduate school in California in 1985, I sold all of my once-cherished chess books at a used bookstore.

Over the next twenty years I played casual games with friends now and then or against a program on a computer. I had other priorities; chess was only an occasional, fleeting diversion. I also knew that even a half-serious flirtation with the game could chew up valuable time. One day, while perusing a bookstore in Manhattan in the mid-1990s, I came across a collection of the games of Garry Kasparov, then the world champion and widely regarded as one of the greatest players of all time. The diagrams of the chess positions found on every page—pictures of dynamic forces in tension, the product of richly creative ideas—hit me hard. The intense pleasures I had known as a teen but long ago effaced surged through my nervous system. I thought about buying the book, to work through in my spare time, but it was dangerous, addictive stuff. I put the three-hundred-page narcotic back on its shelf.

On a Saturday in June 2002 I found myself walking through the streets below Washington Square Park, in New York. I happened upon one of the

chess shops on Thompson Street, where anyone can play for a dollar an hour. I had been there once or twice before. I decided to try a few games and soon realized how much I enjoyed the act of thinking about my next moves and responding to my opponent's ideas. *Why can't I take up the game again?* I thought when leaving three hours later. I was in the middle of writing a book on the death and funeral rites of Nepal's Yolmo people, an ethnically Tibetan Buddhist society. This was my second book project in quick succession, and I was tired of writing, tired of the anthropological profession, and tired of thinking about death all the time.

A few days prior to my visit to Manhattan I had pulled my car into a parking space by my home in Bronxville, New York, after running some errands. As I stepped out of the car I'd found myself thinking, *That's a great parking job. If I could have a death like that, as neat and fluid and comfortable as the way my car slipped into that spot, then that would be a good death.* The perversity of this logic struck me, and I stood silent in the parking lot, car keys in hand. *Time to take a break,* I thought, *from the seductive aesthetics of death.*

Two days after playing chess in Manhattan I drove up north a ways to the national office of the United States Chess Federation, then in New Windsor, New York, and purchased a year's membership, a chess set, and a handful of books that would reintroduce me to the game. I quickly found that the game, at the highest levels, differed from what it was when I was in my teens. It was more dynamic, more aggressive, with a complex revolution of thought emergent in its recent history. It was rife with energy, imbalances, precision, flush with lines of thought waiting to be gleaned. I was hooked again.

"So you're making a comeback," quipped the director of the first tournament I played in, when I told him that these would be my first rated games in twenty years. "Yeah, right," I replied. Sitting at the board was at first like dusting off old memories.

Gradually I got a finer feel for matters. I continued to pore over chess after returning to teaching in September. I attended chess clubs three nights a week and competed in tournaments. I came home from work each day and immersed myself in the rich, bounded world of chess. My bookshelves were soon lined with twenty, then thirty, then fifty books on diverse aspects of the game. Attending professional anthropology meetings became a chore; I would find ways to sneak back to my hotel room to study Capablanca's rook endgames. Chess had become infinitely more interesting than keeping up with the scholarly research in my field.

There was much to learn. It was all so new, so exciting and intriguing.

I felt as if I were separating from my spouse of fifteen years, anthropology, and reigniting a passion for my high school sweetheart.

I had gone native. Or, to lift a term from the social sciences, there was a keen shift in the *illusio* that motivated my efforts in life. The concept of *illusio* comes from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.[3] A Latin word, *illusio* involves the interest that a person holds in a particular field in life—be it scholarly work or religion or football—or in life in general. It's the investment people make in the activities that give meaning to their lives, their commitment to them. Devoted cliff climbers, dog show attendees, Buddhist monks, religious fundamentalists, novelists—each of these engage with their own *illusio,* their own "interests, expectations, demands, hopes, and investments."[4] Bourdieu draws on the fact that the word *illusio* relates etymologically to the Latin word *ludus,* "game," in speaking of the ways in which people are invested in a number of social games over the course of their lives. "Illusio," he suggests, "is the fact of being caught up in and by the game, of believing the game is 'worth the candle,' or, more simply, that playing is worth the effort."

To the outside observer, uninvolved and uninvested in the social game being played, it can appear arbitrary and insignificant. Bourdieu makes this point in commenting on the social airs of early nineteenth-century Paris, where the members of court society were engrossed in a culture of status and propriety. "When you read, in Saint-Simon, about the quarrel of hats (who should bow first), if you were not born in a court society, if you do not possess the habitus of a person of the court, if the structures of the game are not also in your mind, the quarrel will seem futile and ridiculous to you." For those caught up in the spell of a certain *illusio,* by contrast, the social game they're playing is an important one; it can give rich meaning to their lives—even to the point of becoming "possessed by the game." As Bourdieu puts it, "The game presents itself to someone caught up in it, absorbed in it, as a transcendent universe, imposing its own ends and norms unconditionally."

That's how I thought of professional anthropology for some twenty years. But by 2002 I had become disillusioned with the academic routines and status rites that came with the profession; I was coming to see it as a shallow game of note-taking and hat-tipping. When I started to play chess again that summer, a new interest took shape for me, with a force and intensity comparable to a religious conversion. Chess emerged as the main *illusio* in my life, much as it has for countless chess buffs. I became absorbed in chess, preoccupied by it, and took it seriously—so much so that I was willing to submit to a social death in the anthropological profession.

AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF PASSION

Chess remained a priority for me over the next few years. At the same time, what sparked my interest in anthropology in the first place—a desire, chiefly, to understand what people are up to in their lives—led me to reflect on the personal and social dimensions of the game. My efforts in chess came to be motivated by two chief aims. I wanted to learn how to play better, so I could appreciate the game's depths and compete at a consistently high level of expertise; and I wanted to gain a better sense of the realities of chess in the early twenty-first century. I also sought an angle on why so many chess players are so passionate about the game.

A few years back I attended the graduation at Sarah Lawrence College, where I've taught since 1994. After the commencement ceremonies ended, family, friends, and faculty were milling about the main campus lawn, congratulating the new graduates. I ran into a former student of mine as I made my way through the crowd. He had graduated two years before but had returned to campus to see a friend receive his diploma.

"By the way, I've kept in touch with Shahnaz since I've left here," he said, referring to another former teacher. "She tells me that you've been spending a lot of time playing chess."

"Yes, that's true. I've been playing seriously for a while now."

"Why?"

"What's that?"

"*Why?*"

Taken aback by his blunt question, I muttered that I found the game fascinating, but my answer was vague and unconvincing. The man soon walked away, no doubt wondering what had become of his former teacher, who a few years before had been expounding on cultural relativism and non-Western medical systems.

The more I gave thought to the question, the more it intrigued me. Why play chess at all? Why take up a game—if *game* is the best word for it—that can be so exhausting, so demanding, so maddeningly frustrating? Why spend summer weekends holed up in an airless hotel convention center, shoulder to shoulder with similarly single-minded chess enthusiasts, staring for hours on end at an array of wooden pieces on a stretch of cloth? Why devote one's energies to a time-intensive pursuit that is little valued or understood in one's own society? How is it that, in a world rife with social inequities, violence, economic upheaval, and fast-paced transformation, people are drawn to chess-playing? The anthropologist in me got to thinking: Why not conduct fieldwork at the chessboard and train an

anthropological lens on the cultures and motives of chess players? Why not hang out with the locals and learn what they're up to?

"Participant observation" is the main research method that anthropologists rely on when trying to learn about a particular way of life through ethnographic research. They participate in the everyday activities of the people whose lives they are attempting to understand, while making observations about their rhyme and reason. As a participant observer, I did what other chess players do: I frequented chess clubs, played in tournaments and informally with friends, read chess books, analyzed positions with the help of computer programs, took lessons, developed a repertoire of openings, sacrificed rooks and blundered away queens, lost sleep after tough games, and played countless blitz games with friends and on the Internet. I played a lot of chess, but I also gave thought to what it means to focus on the game in a serious, committed way. I also spoke with a number of chess players, at both the amateur and the professional level, about their experiences of the game. My guiding idea was that by undertaking such inquiries, I could put myself in a position to portray the lifeworlds of some chess players accurately—much the way anthropologists have attempted to understand and convey in writing why, say, Illongot people of the Philippines used to go on head-hunting expeditions, or how globalization has shaped the ethnic identities of peoples in Peru. Indeed, only through writing this book did I come to appreciate anew what anthropology can offer the modern world.

Considering chess through an anthropological lens makes good sense. Anthropology has been a holistic discipline from its inception in the nineteenth century, with anthropologists attending to the diverse and interrelated dimensions of humanity, from the biophysical and linguistic to the material and sociocultural. In studying the chess-playing world, adopting such a holistic focus helped me to tease out the interconnecting forces—social, psychological, technological—woven into contemporary chess practice. A popular conception of chess is that it's purely a mental activity, conducted in a bodiless, wordless domain by solitary thinkers who grapple with each other in a space of pure thought. But the game—like all human affairs—has always been a product of social, cultural, political, biological, and technological arrangements. A chess player is not a lone, heroic actor but is, rather, caught up in complicated webs of meaning and action. Chess is an ever-shifting tangle of neural networks, bodies, social relations, perception, memory, time, spectators, history, narratives, computers, databases. A combinational complexity fixes any human chess scene, not unlike the combinational interplay of pieces on a chessboard. Giving thought to that complexity, making a study of it, an anthropology of chess

can attend to the thickets of forms and forces involved in contemporary chess practice—and, more generally, in life itself.

It makes sense to think of chess players as participating in distinct cultures or subcultures—or, more precisely, in sets of interconnected chess communities—for the social realities of chess players are defined by culturally specific practices, values, languages, and social relations. Backward pawns, weak color complexes, seizing the initiative, en passant, back-rank mates, weak masters: the game involves an arcane set of rules, concepts, and vocabulary that can prove inaccessible to the uninitiated. Stuart Rachels, a philosopher and former U.S. chess champion, deems this "the curse of chess"—the fact that "even a rudimentary understanding of chess takes time to develop, and until it is developed, chess seems utterly dull."[5] For seasoned players, in contrast, chess is like some enchanted palace they have stumbled across, its beauty and astonishing intricacy known only to a few. "It's an amazing game," one player tells me, "but most people don't understand anything about it." While that may be true, it's possible to convey the complexities of the game to others. The conceptual stance I've adopted in portraying the lives of chess players is not very different from the one I employed a few years back while trying to grasp the cultural logic of shamanic healing practices in Nepal, or the felt immediacies of life in a shelter in downtown Boston for people considered homeless and mentally ill. Through an intensive engagement with the forms of life in question, I've tried to understand those forms well enough to explain their makeup to others previously unfamiliar with them.

There is no single chess culture, just as there are no singularly bounded "cultures" at work in people's lives. Any single portrait of an actual chess player entails a specific time, place, and nexus of people. The temporal setting of this book is the first decade of the twenty-first century, an age of weekend tourneys, fading neighborhood chess clubs, globalized networks of chess players, and rapid innovations in computer and media technologies. Global interconnectedness has made the already intense practice of chess even more fast-paced, information-rich, and cyborgian. The regional setting for this study is primarily the Northeast of the United States, where city dwellers and suburbanites find ways to cram in chess around the edges of hectic, cell-phoned lives. The people under consideration are, chiefly, a multinational mix of amateur, semiprofessional, and professional players, ranging in age from seven years old to eighty-two, from both the United States and elsewhere, whom I've come to know through my engagements with the game. Considering that those engagements are at a decidedly amateur level, the realm of chess I write about most intimately is that of