



# Sticky Cultures: Memory Publics and Communal Pasts in Competitive Chess

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## Abstract

Although examinations of social memory have largely focused on societies and large populations, much remembrance occurs within bounded publics. This memory, especially when it is held in common, ties individuals to their chosen groups, establishing an ongoing reality of affiliation. I term this form of memory work as *sticky culture*, recognizing the centrality of the linkage of selves and groups. To examine how sticky culture operates, I examine the social world of competitive chess with its deep history and rich literature. More specifically, I examine forms through which chess publics are cemented through remembrances of the past, focusing on the hero, the critical moment, and validated styles. Champions, memorable games, and recognized strategies establish a lasting public.

## Keywords

chess, collective memory, communal, community, culture, groups, leisure, memory, tiny publics

Chess gives not only contemporary fame, but lasting remembrance. To be a great chess player is to be surer of immortality than a great statesman or popular author . . . The chess player's fame once gained is secure and stable. What one of all the countless chivalry of Spain is so familiar a name as Ruy Lopez? What American (except Washington) is so widely known as Paul Morphy? Chess, in fact, has lasted so long that we are sure it will last forever. Institutions decay, empires fall to pieces, but the game goes on.

- Robert Shindler, 1889

Excluding national cultures and expansive subcultures, bolstered by institutionalized systems of power and control, most collective memory is embedded in bounded communities based on the recognition of common interest and shared resources, supported by ongoing interaction. Tamotsu Shibutani (1955) famously suggested: 'Culture areas are coterminous with communication channels.' Affiliation and contact create the

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emotional basis for remembrance, and remembrance is a means through which identity is situated in community. Within communities participants are linked because of belief in the value of their shared concerns. We establish memory through joint activities, organized through churches, social movements, artistic domains, or leisure groups. As Zelizer (1995: 214) points out, collective memory refers to 'activities of sharing, discussion, negotiation, and, often, contestation'. These domains constitute what Anselm Strauss (1978) and David Unruh (1980) speak of as social worlds: scenes (Silver et al., 2010; Grazian, 2007) in which participants recognize that they hold meanings, emotions, and commitments in common. Collective memory operates not only through common knowledge, but through the recognition that knowledge is shared. Representations are collective (Suttles, 1984). Meaning is established and solidified through networked realms of interaction.

This recognition of knowledge regimes leads to the possibility that shared meaning, when embedded in interaction orders (Goffman, 1983), produces communal affiliation. I term this *sticky culture*, a body of understanding that cements participants to their community. The concept of sticky culture emphasizes that it is not memory itself that matters, but the shared knowledge demonstrates that community exists and becomes a basis for self-referential actions. The idea of sticky culture emphasizes the linkage of cultural knowledge to the local domains of groups and the interaction orders that they comprise (Fine, 2012; Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003; Gladwell, 2000). Culture is more than collective (cognitive) representations; it is also embedded within local action spaces. Despite the prevalence of communities with norms, values, and histories (Mische and White, 1998; Ikegami, 2000), much research on collective memory has ignored bounded publics. Social memory studies (Olick and Robbins, 1998) focus on defining memory, rather than defining the boundaries of the collective to which the memory adheres (Fine and Kleinman, 1979).

To speak of *sticky culture* is to recognize the essential connection between culture and identity, as meaning operates within the context of group belonging. Being engaged in a cultural realm even provides a model for how one sees the world (Kasparov, 2007). Not only does investment in a sticky culture create ongoing affiliation, but it may also create a barrier to exit. One has spent time and effort in the acquisition of skills and group knowledge and, in so doing, one is validated by others in the community. To leave is to give up this acceptance and this status, perhaps creating an interpersonal emptiness. So, even if the activity itself no longer provides optimal satisfaction, the reverberations of the culture exert a hold.

This model builds on the concept of *tiny publics* (Fine and Harrington, 2004), local communities and focused networks, whether explicitly political or not, that constitute the grounding of civil society (Warner, 1995). Participation in these publics allows individuals to feel a part of a larger scene (Silver et al., 2010): they *belong to* a community and they know what the community knows (Zerubavel, 1997). Some groupings are instrumental (work domains, political fields), while others are based on a shared commitment to forms of expressive culture, but in each case there is a linkage between the individual and the community through the affiliative properties of memory.

To address the role of a public in establishing sticky knowledge I examine how a focus on bounded domains reveals the process through which collective memory shapes

affiliation. Memories are not separate from publics but are integral to them (Olick, 1999). They gain interpersonal and organizational traction in interacting groups and through networks that are constituted by connections among groups. In addition to mere presence, participants are pressured to demonstrate commitment through the display of common awareness of what matters to the collective (Suttles, 1984). Put another way, a public requires collective memory, but it cannot be reduced to it. Publics are more than cognitive domains, they are interaction orders. As such, memory emerges from places of action. People are linked through what they know, and this facilitates what they do together.

## Chess as a Bounded Public

Many social worlds might demonstrate the power of sticky cultures to connect individuals and community. Any group that defines itself as a group distinguished from others by its history could suffice: Quakers, surfers, libertines, librarians, or libertarians. To examine how memory is linked to interaction orders, I draw on competitive chess. Chess is a dynamic, extended interaction order with a robust culture (for more on the sociology of chess as a game-like activity see DiCicco-Bloom and Gibson, 2010). As a subculture it is sufficiently extensive in time and in place that a meaningful history is recognized.

A surprisingly large number of Americans know how to play chess, at least the awareness of basic rules. According to Susan Polgar, a prominent grandmaster, there are 45 million chess players in the United States. Other figures are lower, but most hover around 40 million ('Chess Players Demographics', 2006). In such chess centers as Russia, Eastern Europe, Iceland, Cuba, and Argentina, the proportion is far higher. Polgar suggests that there are 700 million players worldwide.

As impressive as they are, these numbers do not constitute the boundaries of a *community*. I distinguish between those who have knowledge of the basic rules and a smaller group who reveal commitment to a chess community. There are no statistics for *serious* players, although as of 2010 approximately 80,000 were members of the United States Chess Federation (USCF). Some members are inactive, and others (particularly children) play chess outside of the auspices of USCF-rated tournaments.

For five years (2006–2010) I observed various chess worlds; this research was coupled with interviews and extensive analysis of books, magazines, websites, and discussion boards. Most ethnographers study a single site or several parallel sites. However, I hoped to examine the diversity of chess. I wished to explore a Bourdieuan cultural field that was characterized by specialization, differentiation, and authority. How is community established in a world of status divisions and differential involvement? This required that I immerse myself not in the world of chess but in the *worlds* of chess.

To this end I observed at the following locations:

- 1) The Marshall Chess Club on West 10th Street in Greenwich Village, one of the oldest and most prestigious American chess clubs, in both 2006 and 2010: a total of six evenings.
- 2) The open chess tables in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village on four afternoons in 2006.

- 3) Several elementary school chess programs in New York and Chicago on six occasions in 2006 and 2008.
- 4) Weekly meetings of a suburban chess club during 2006 and 2007 and several matches and lessons at the Touch Move Chess Center in Chicago during 2008.
- 5) Twice weekly meetings of a suburban Illinois high school chess team for a season from September 2007 until April 2008.
- 6) Weekly meetings of a collegiate chess team for ten weeks during fall 2008.
- 7) Six private chess lessons in 2008.
- 8) Weekly meetings of a private adolescent chess group, taught by a grandmaster, for ten weeks in 2009.
- 9) Weekly matches of one of the professional chess teams in the United States Chess League during fall 2009 for ten weeks.
- 10) During the period 2006–2010 I attended several dozen tournaments, including the World Open, the Chicago Open, the United States Open, the Illinois State High School Chess Championship, the National Youth Action Tournament, the Atlantic City International Tournament, the National High School Tournament, the Super Nationals (a 5000-person tournament in Nashville, held every third year for children and adolescents in high school, junior high school and elementary school), matches in the Chicago Industrial Chess League, the Pan-Am Collegiate Championship, a ‘simul’ and lecture conducted by former World Champion Anatoly Karpov, high school matches and tournaments, and local tournaments sponsored by the Renaissance Knights in the Chicago area.

Over the years I met perhaps a dozen of the top 100 American chess players, and became friends with several of them. Finally, I relied on my memory of being a chess parent in the late 1980s and early 1990s when I took my son to elementary school tournaments and for two years organized a chess club at my son’s elementary school. My own abilities in chess are limited. I have played, but I am not a ‘tournament-level’ player. My goal was not to understand chess strategy but to understand chess culture.

During the course of this project I conducted in-depth interviews with 50 players at various skill-levels from elite grandmasters (a title given to those with high ratings and tournament successes) to players of modest abilities. I interviewed adults, collegians, and high school players. These interviews lasted from 45 minutes to three hours.

I also had access to several public internet sites, including discussion boards operated by the United States Chess Federation and real-time discussion boards during leading chess matches, operated by the Internet Chess Club during major tournaments. I also read several chess blogs regularly. This was bolstered by reading chess literature. During the period of research (2006–2010) I read USCF’s *Chess Life* and the international journal *New in Chess*. I also spent three days at the John G. White Collection of Chess Literature at the Cleveland Public Library, one of the largest collections of chess literature in the United States, focusing on works from the 19th century. Sociologist Antony Puddephatt shared his ethnographic field notes from Canadian tournaments and club meetings and transcripts of approximately a dozen interviews with tournament-level Canadian players.

## Chess and Memory

While the empirical warrant for Robert Shindler's 1889 quotation is doubtful, he captures something fundamental about local communities. Communities create heroes and recall crucial events. As Stebbins (2006) emphasizes, communities with a common focus develop means of keeping their history alive, cementing their ties through shared awareness. Chess is exemplary in this regard, treasuring its past, commemorated in both written volumes and oral discourse (Murray, 1913; Golombek, 1976; Olson, 2006). A 'chess historian' is a recognized and honorific title, and the library of chess is large. Chess depends on a community of readers as well as players. Instruction manuals, biographies, histories, accounts of tournaments, and novels comprise chess literature. Blogs, discussion forums, Facebook pages, and websites encourage a field of discourse.

Scholars of collective memory emphasize the social sedimentation and placement of memory: what Nora (1996) refers to as *lieux de memorie*. History is preserved through solidarities. But what does it mean that a social field relies on the past as a commitment mechanism? As a social world, chess is not unique in the desire of members to create a shared history, but its depth and longevity makes it an ideal case for the examination of local memory. To cement affiliation, participants establish a past that demonstrates belonging. Through memory one recognizes that one is the kind of person who belongs to a social world. These worlds form systems of categorization that draw boundaries, critical to identity.

In emphasizing that the chess community creates remembrance, Robert Shindler was correct. People are devoted to chess and to chess worlds (Puddephatt, 2008), just as is true in other voluntary domains. Following Bourdieu (1993), some activities are characterized as fields, having distinctive and characteristic cultural logics, recognized and elaborated by participants. Just as society can be treated as a game (Long, 1958; Goffman, 1967; Lamaison and Bourdieu, 1986; DiCicco-Bloom and Gibson, 2010), some games are social systems.

The chess community prides itself on its longevity: successful engagement presumes historical awareness, and participants must demonstrate knowledge to gain credibility. This commitment is reflected in the number of books published on chess. The Library of Congress lists 4767 books under the keyword 'chess' (in contrast to 452 for checkers). One author claims that there are more 'how-to' books written on chess than on all leisure and sports combined (Puddephatt, 2008).

Within self-referential communities history operates through several paths: the heroic and the eventful. Champions and moments help participants identify with their past. Charismatic figures demonstrate the 'extraordinary' worthiness of the community (Wendling, 2002; Goode, 1979; Klapp, 1962). To understand the power of collective memory in establishing a recognizably shared endeavor, I examine the hero and the focal event, and then I turn to how group styles (in this case, chess openings) become local traditions.

## The Hero at the Board

A cultural field links persons and acts in networks of power and recognized authority (Bourdieu, 1993). However, that linkage is established through common knowledge.

Participants point to their shared past, available to those with sufficient commitment, and use it to justify personal connections even with those who would otherwise be strangers. Seeing someone playing chess provides for conversational access. It is not that every field has an equally extensive history (compare chess with checkers or Scrabble – despite Fatsis, 2001), but shared references, linked to those with the authority to define history, establish conditions under which community allegiance is built.

One of the most consequential features of an ongoing field is a pantheon of recognized heroes, often enshrined in the material architecture of Halls-of-Fame, establishments that in their bricks and mortar demonstrate a solid history. Not every community has sites of memory, but many create ceremonial or literary remembrances. Reuben Fine, a psychiatrist and chess champion, argues that the veneration of heroes results from the need for idolatry; perhaps the claim that they are shared role models fits better. Fine underlines the worship of Bobby Fischer, at least early in his career: ‘There is a deep need on the part of many people to project their own grandiose ambitions on to him’ (Fine, 2008: 53). This emotional regard is embedded within a tight-knit community where admiration is collectively recognized. It is not (only) individuals who select heroes, but communities. The existence of an American Chess Hall-of-Fame in St Louis provides institutional support for collective memory. Each year chess players are inducted, establishing a *lieux de memorie* (Nora, 1996). These shrines become the destination for pilgrimages. A heroic past is central to affiliation. Fred Reinfeld (1952: viii) writes:

Whenever I had come to the Manhattan Chess Club to play in interscholastic tournaments, I had always found myself drawn to the portrait of Paul Morphy. He was a glamorous figure. ... My first glimpses of Lasker, Capablanca, and Alekhine at once established them as beings from another world. ... Ever since those early days I have been a hero-worshiper of the World Champions. ... For thirty years I have reflected on their lives, their destinies, their triumphs, and their failures.

A middle-aged chess player explains: ‘When I was young, chess was about hero worship; now that I’m old it is ancestor worship. You have an obligation to the game ... I feel that I am in the middle of the great tradition’ (Field notes). Jeremy, an American International Master, explained that ‘I take my [chess] notation in Russian ... I take it so I can summon the Russian school’ (Field notes). Jeremy sees himself as part of a chain of culture: a congealed history within an interaction order.

## **Bobby Fischer: A Sticky Hero**

Many communities have touchstone figures: icons to which all respond. Fame makes personal connections enduring (Cooley, 1918). The awareness of heroes transforms an activity into a family (or in male-dominated chess, a brotherhood). Shared admiration generates emotional energy, binding people together (Freud, 1922; Collins, 2004).

For chess players – in the United States and globally – no more consequential figure exists than Robert James ‘Bobby’ Fischer (1943–2008). Bobby Fischer is central to chessic memory. He is like the weather that all can discuss. Whether Fischer was the greatest player ever, he is surely the most widely debated. He was idealized as a fighter

in an activity that is often considered the preserve of nerds, but also rejected for his chess afterlife. Fischer was the dominant player of his era, (1962–1972), he shaped Cold War politics by defeating the Soviet World Champion Boris Spassky, he inspired parents to have children learn chess (producing the ‘Fischer Boom’), he wrote two influential and best-selling chess books (*My Sixty Memorable Games* and *Bobby Fischer Teaches Chess*), and his demands, outrageous at the time, led to multi-million-dollar prize funds. Even after he left competitive chess, Fischer represented chess for good and ill. Later in life Fischer’s strangeness continued to capture public attention. Fischer was known for anti-Semitic rants and on September 11, 2001, in a radio interview he reveled in the attacks, suggesting ‘It’s time that the ... U.S. got their heads kicked in. ... Death to the U.S. This is a wonderful day!’ (Lawrence, 2007: 23). Whether or not he had a ‘paranoid mental derangement’ (Bohm and Jongkind, 2004: 45), Fischer was central to how chess players thought about their game: a world of creativity and edginess, a domain in which eccentricity was often taken as indicating brilliance.

Fischer’s charisma generated a shelf of books. An early one was by Frank Brady, a long-time acquaintance, who in 1965 published *Profile of a Prodigy: The Life and Games of Bobby Fischer*. A recent one was by the same Frank Brady (2011), entitled *Endgame: Bobby Fischer’s Remarkable Rise and Fall – From America’s Brightest Prodigy to the Edge of Madness*. From Fischer’s victory over Boris Spassky, the Fischer literature flowed in books as *Bobby Fischer vs. the Rest of the World* (Darrach, 1974) and *Bobby Fischer Goes to War* (Edmunds and Eidinow, 2004). One count found over 30 books about the match (Bohm and Jongkind, 2004: 21). As with connections with the great and famous (Ferris and Harris, 2011), many recount a ‘Fischer story’. Observing at the Marshall Chess Club in Greenwich Village, I was struck by the number of older members who willingly shared their Fischer story – winning a game against him, sharing a meal, refereeing in a tournament that he attended, or watching him analyze a match. The fluency of the stories suggested that they were regularly performed and that the ability to share a story was a status marker. Fischer’s interpersonal location was such that one player commented, ‘You’ve heard of six degrees of Kevin Bacon. This is six degrees of Bobby Fischer’ (Field notes). The popular book (and then movie) *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (Waitzkin, 1988), even though not about Fischer himself, captures the fascination with the man. The community searches for the next Fischer.

At first, Fischer was the great hope of American chess. Noting the increase in prize money that resulted from Fischer’s intransigence, Boris Spassky, speaking for grandmasters, labeled him ‘the honorary chairman of our trade union’ (Kasparov, 2011). But over time his reputation became tarnished. The trouble with Bobby Fischer as a touchstone is that players must apologize for him or distance themselves from his deviance, suggesting that although they love him as a chess player, they dislike or pity him as a man. One player mused, ‘Fischer should have died young’ (Weinreb, 2007: 200).

Fischer’s brilliance was recognized early. By 1956, age 13, he was a significant presence in American chess after defeating Donald Byrne at the Rosenwald Memorial Tournament in the ‘Game of the Century’ (a century then only half over), a game labeled by the tournament arbiter Hans Kmoch, who served as a reputational entrepreneur (Brady, 1965: 64). By 1965, aside from Paul Morphy, Fischer was considered the ‘greatest American chess genius’ (Brady, 1965: 2). World Champion Mikhail Tal called Fischer

‘the greatest genius to have descended from the chessic sky’ and Grandmaster Raymond Keene described him as ‘a kind of angry chess god incarnate’ (Hallman, 2003: 48).

But Fischer’s difficult reputation, particularly after 9/11, made him toxic as well as beloved. The United States Chess Federation, which never examines the political positions of its members, revoked Fischer’s membership in 2002, a decision that provoked controversy (all American grandmasters are automatically members of the organization). The decision was revoked in 2006. After his death in 2008, comments referencing ‘triumph and tragedy’, ‘hope and disappointment’, ‘rise and fall’, and ‘pride and sorrow’ were common (Lawrence, 2007: 20–24).

### ***Boom and Bust***

The relationship of community and hero is shaped by publicity and built through celebrity. The hero is tied to all those in the field, and in a sense his presence makes the field. Celebrities make attractive all that surrounds them. In chess we speak of the ‘Fischer boom’, but a century before there was the ‘Paul Morphy boom’, coincident with Morphy’s grand and successful tour of European chess capitals:

The New York *Chess Monthly*, to which Morphy himself had been contributing games as co-editor since early in 1858, reported in 1859 that ‘Hundreds of people now play chess who, a half-year ago, were utterly ignorant of the moves.’ (Eales, 1985: 149)

When Morphy withdrew from active playing, ‘chess-mania’ evaporated.

A century later it returned as another heroic and flawed figure demonstrated that America could hold its own against the world. Now the competition was the Soviets and the moment was the Cold War. The enormous attention to the Fischer-Spassky world championship in the summer of 1972 contributed to the Fischer boom. The game of chess became a well-publicized space for childhood education: the cultural logic created chess as a training ground for science and mathematics. The membership of the United States Chess Federation doubled from 1972 to 1973 – although by 1980 half of those new members had been lost. Perhaps if Fischer had remained in the public eye chess would have thrived, but the moment passed, and Fischer the hero was left to those committed to the game. The effects of collective attention depend on the connection of ongoing publicity to communal engagement. Borrowing Isaac Newton’s refrain, communities ‘stand on the shoulders of giants’. The hero provides the sticky memory that creates a local interaction order. The reality that these heroes are often unknown beyond the boundaries of the social world means that they serve to ‘stick’ individuals to their interaction partners.

### **The Sparkle of Dusty Games**

It is not heroes alone who create the basis for communal remembrance, but events do as well: elections, battles, marriages, or civic rituals. When chess players consider the indelible moments that shaped their community, they typically think of games. For players, games comprise their history. If chess itself is an open system, incorporating new



ideas, chess as a sequence of games is closed, limited to the moves on the board. In examining the community of chess, Cary Utterberg (1994: 214) argues that understanding games provides shared intuition: he labels this *existential understanding*. Others suggest that games from different periods ‘fit together like links in a chain’, revealing a knowledge sequence on which chess depends (Shenk, 2006: 100). Although most games are quickly forgotten, chess continually builds on its past. Chess games lay down roots, treated as part of the infrastructure of memory. Publications, such as the World Chess Federation’s *Chess Informant*, make available major tournament games (over 300 games are annotated in each triannual issue). Online databases provide hundreds of thousands of games. As a result, the past never dies, but is illuminated and extended through replaying and referencing games. The commitment to this communal past is such that for many players studying past moments is the heart of the game. As Harry, a well-regarded chess teacher, explained,

[the game] is the chess equivalent to those art masterpieces. Each game is like a painting of Renoir or a Cezanne or *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky, or *The Magnificent Ambersons*, or *Citizen Kane*. Each one of those is where the form takes on its highest expression of beauty and where it delivers the most. (Interview)

A player remarked, ‘I was fascinated by the fact that here I was, I was playing out a game, and this game had actually taken place like a century before. To me that was a romantic feeling’ (Interview, Puddephatt). The Game of the Century (Bobby Fischer vs. Donald Byrne, 1956) and the Immortal Game (Adolf Anderssen vs. Lionel Kieseritzky, 1851) are studied by generations of aspiring players, both for technique and for inspiration. While we may belong to a scene without reference to the activity’s past (Silver et al., 2010), we only become committed through collective memories. As Hallman (2003: 232) notes, ‘The end of a good chess game is more like a birth than a death – it’s a beginning. Once completed, games become public fact and property that are scrutinized, appreciated, distributed, and retold. They may achieve a fame of their own, wriggle into databases both figurative and literal, and eventually constitute lore.’ The games studied typically involve a victor and a loser (some games are draws), and the goal is to learn how the hero triumphed in pitched battle. I have watched a dozen Fischer games replayed, but in the five years of my research I never watched one of his defeats analyzed. The games chosen are not just good but are symbolic, ratifying the moral order.

The more intense one’s commitment, the greater the desire to be aware of communal events. World Champion Garry Kasparov observed, ‘A grandmaster needs to retain thousands of games in his head, for games are to him what the words of their mother tongue are to ordinary people, or notes or scores to musicians’ (Desjarlais, 2011: 96). As one chess teacher emphasized, ‘Intuition is the historical knowledge from your brain that you can’t quite recall, but that you think is right’ (Field notes), but the intuition is linked to a desire to be part of this skein of history. Soltis (2008: 10) describes a game between two young grandmasters, in which Black, losing, moved his rook to square e5; White quickly agreed to a draw. Looking at the position, White remarked, ‘The ghost of Lasker’, referring to an identical position in the 1908 World Championship by Emanuel Lasker.

Communal knowledge is such that a game a century old was known to both players and, as sticky culture suggests, that communal knowledge builds a bond.

To be remembered and to be accessible a chess match must be inscribed.<sup>1</sup> In formal play competitors write down their moves and their opponent's moves, and these can be reviewed after the match by the players or others. The written record of a chess match is a script that permits participants to reenact the game. The game in memory demands inscription by notation and annotation, connecting 'human memory and written memory' (Wendling, 2002: 184). In other words, the narrative of the game – moves chosen sequentially – is crucial. It constitutes a bridge between knowledge as used by players in a moment of action, and knowledge as used by readers in a moment of contemplation: connecting past and present through words and symbols.

Annotations – commentary on games – are central, and are found in books and in all chess magazines. For instance, the September 2010 issue of the United States Chess Federation's *Chess Life* contains 15 annotated games. Setting aside works aimed at novices or outsiders, annotations are the literature of the chess community. Louis Menand (2004: 87) notes astutely:

Chess is not friendly to prose. Chess is, after all, a sport, but there is almost no way to convey what's exciting about it to people who are not themselves deep students of the game. 'Then, on move 21, came Black's crusher: a6!' – totally opaque, as are references to the Najdorf Variation of the Sicilian Defense, the Giuoco Piano, and the Queen's Gambit Declined. You can ignore the technical stuff and write about powerful queenside attacks, hammering rook assaults, intense positional struggle, and so on; but the truth is that the game *is* the technical stuff.

Studying past games is a special form of literary analysis that, like all institutionalized genres, depends on and builds an appreciative audience. 'Deep students' use imagination to see their position in a shared world behind the words, no less than in science fiction or literary erotica. Action is never friendly to prose unless readers have the desire and cultural experience to make it so. But once that develops, the reader is tied to the community that treasures the genre.

In annotated games either one of the players (typically winners) or some other knowledgeable person provides commentary, writing assessments of moves deemed to be decisive, brilliant or misguided. If the annotator has triumphed, the text is, implicitly, self-glorification, a less writerly form of the memoir. If the player lost, he accounts for failure. While the games create a sticky culture for chess as long as they are recalled collectively, it is through writing – notation and annotation – that chess history and affiliation is built for those who were not present.

Analyses vary widely. Some provide extensive explanations, some address the scene of play, and others focus on alternative possibilities. But each creates the sense that the reader is there. Some are filled with evaluative adjectives, whereas others are mostly the moves with a few guiding words. And a grammar exists that members of the community must know to read the texts. In annotations, sometimes the pieces are referred to by letter (K-king, Q-queen, B-bishop, N-knight, R-rook; pawns are recognized by the absence of a letter) and by the square to which it will move and whether it takes an opposing piece (x) or places the opposing king in check (+). Castling is 0-0 or 0-0-0, depending on the side of the board. Checkmate is #.

The forms of notation depend on social psychology. The key feature of any system of natural language, even a constrained one like chess, is that the moves are unambiguous to its audience (Miller, 1951: 108–10; Mason and Peterson, 1967). Once the linguistic rules are comprehended, each system makes chess communication transnational, understood in addition to more elaborated language (Aycocock, 1988: 134). At important inflection points, a diagram of the pieces is presented. This is not done for the early moves, but for when the game becomes complex. In a game of 40 moves, four or five will be diagrammed. Longer and more complex games will have more diagrams.

Reading annotations requires subcultural knowledge, and the effort involved builds a commitment to chessplay. Strong players must develop the skills to visualize the board in its absence, and to have the social commitment to share their assessments. Within this knowledge regime the idea of a ‘good pawn’ or ‘bad bishop’ or ‘minority attack’ has solidified meaning tied to metaphor, chess theory, and game praxis. A chess reader must share the conceptual understanding of his community (Wending, 2002: 118). To those outside the domain of shared knowledge these accounts are dry, but they are drenched in communal emotion, through descriptions such as ‘the crusher’ or ‘horrible’ (Fischer, 1969: 275). In their desiccated way, these comments suggest common excitement. The subtlety of this sticky culture is evident in the power of punctuation. Annotators indicate good, surprising, or brilliant moves by means of exclamation points (! or !!). Questionable or bad moves are, politely, indicated by question marks (? or ??). The symbols !? and ?! stand for interesting move and dubious move, respectively. These symbols provide shared evaluation and bring audiences into the text. Even simple marks reveal affiliation.

When I asked informants which annotation was most influential, I was surprised at the consensus. Many serious players named David Bronstein’s *Zurich International Chess Tournament 1953*. The account of the tournament is canonical, at least among upper-level players, and receives enthusiastic responses on Amazon.com, where 34 of 43 reviewers give it five stars (‘It is universally considered one of the classics in chess literature’; ‘perhaps the greatest tournament book ever written’). To know of Bronstein’s volume is to connect one’s identity to chess culture. One Amazon reviewer writes: ‘The whisperings of my fellow players at the club, as if to hide a secret, first clued me in to this book. ... After reading and playing through the first game, I knew ... why my fellow players did not want anyone else to find it. It’s a jewel ... find it, read it and try to keep it from your rivals.’ Another writes, emphasizing chess history, that Bronstein provides ‘a look into the minds and thoughts of some of the best players of that era’.

The Zurich tournament was one of the most highly regarded and influential round-robin tournaments of the 20th century. One reviewer considers it ‘the best tournament of all time’. Fifteen of the world’s top players competed. Thirty rounds were played. Each competitor played each other once as white, once as black (with two byes). The winner, Vasily Smyslov, subsequently became world champion. David Bronstein was tied for second with two other players. Nine of the 15 players were from the Soviet Union, and two others hailed from Eastern Bloc nations. Of the 210 games, 118 (56.2%) were draws, and some allege that the Soviets fixed the outcomes of crucial games (Blunderprone, 2009). Whatever the politics, within chess literature Bronstein’s book is part of the canon. The work has plot and character, a context, and a denouement.

Bronstein's annotations are impressive for detail and narrative quality. They historicize and commemorate the tournament. Bronstein does not merely provide a list of possible moves but also explains how he understood the games in light of the collective wisdom of his epistemic community. I focus on the best-known game of the tournament, Paul Keres (USSR, Estonia) vs. Samuel (Sammy) Reshevsky (USA) in round 11 (Bronstein, 1979: 128–32). Reshevsky as black plays the Nimzo-Indian defense against Keres' opening of d4 (the Queen's pawn moving two squares; a closed game). This is a well-studied opening defense by black, using the classic Indian opening, but reconceived by Aron Nimzowitsch, a leader of the hyper-modern movement in chess, and, thus, the enchantingly esoteric name Nimzo-Indian (E40, E41 in the *Encyclopedia of Chess Openings*). The power of the game – what the chess community calls its brilliancy – is that dominance in the game oscillates. The daring, brilliant move is one that suggests an error, while revealing a hidden attack. In the second edition of Bronstein's book, he adds the perspectives (and criticism) of his colleagues ('V. Turchuk has rightly upbraided me for uncritically accepting this analysis'), making clear that this text is part of a conversation among colleagues as to how collective memory is to be solidified.

Bronstein is delightfully chatty, even witty. He refers to one of Reshevsky's moves as 'Fierce!' and notes that Keres 'concocted an astounding combination'. Of a difficult position of Reshevsky, Bronstein writes: 'In such situations, many players are ready to throw up their hands and play the first move that comes to mind; but Reshevsky does not despair.' Later: 'Under severe time pressure, with his emotions in a turmoil from the whole preceding phase of the struggle, Keres fails to find the correct maneuver' (Bronstein, 1979: 131). The emotions of the games are depicted in these four pages.

I emphasize how Bronstein links his writing to his community. The text is implicitly dialogic. He begins by asserting that chess knowledge is fundamentally social, not personal:

If the reader should ask which game I liked best of all in this tournament, I would have to pass over my own two encounters with onetime American *wunderkind* Samuel Reshevsky in favor of one of the tournament's most note-worthy games from the viewpoint of its depth of conception, beauty and complexity. This game has been reproduced in chess journals in every language, and has been subjected to dissection by dozens of masters, almost all of the grandmasters, and even [world champion] Botvinnik himself – and yet one cannot say with absolute certainty that these analyses represent the final answer. The reader will have the opportunity to examine for himself, and perhaps to add his own contribution to the collective effort of all the world's chessplayers. (Bronstein, 1979: 128)

Many subcultural communities establish forms of literary inscription, even if abbreviated (see Fine, 2007: 135–72 for professional meteorologists). The texts build upon shared knowledge. But Bronstein goes further by demonstrating the presence of the community in characterizing his analysis as a text to be critiqued. By noting the popularity of the game he situates it as central to community belonging. He invokes the community of grandmasters, including World Champion Mikhail Botvinnik. Finally, he brings in 'the reader' as a contributor to common knowledge. He advises the reader how to approach texts, including his: 'And now the reader who would like to poke about with us through the byways of these combinations should follow the analysis, as Nimzowitsch once

recommended, on two chessboards: one to make the moves of the game, and the other to examine the variations' (Bronstein, 1979: 129). One board is for the knowable past; the other for the imagined future.

But this is not all. Bronstein brings in alternative lines of play, and situates these lines within chess knowledge. He refers to the analysis of others, including such stars as Botvinnik, Najdorf, Euwe, Reshevsky himself, but also the insight of R.G. Ashurov, a Class-A player from Baku, Azerbaijan (a player well below the level of grandmaster). Bronstein creates a mosaic of insight, as much communal literature does.

Despite the importance of the occasion, the game lacked a winner. In 1953 games were often adjourned, and Keres seals his 41st move (so he cannot change it, and Reshevsky will not know what it is). The players retire for the evening to study the position. Bronstein reports:

Both players analyzed all night and the next day as well. ... Both Keres and Reshevsky knew there was no need to play off the adjourned position beyond the opening of the sealed move; if they had known better, then at least one would not have agreed to the DRAW without playing on. (Bronstein, 1979: 132)

The game was a draw, despite being the most revered match at the Zurich tournament. It was not that it did not have an outcome; it did, but that outcome reminds us that outcomes may be other than victory and defeat. The recognition of the salience of the game is such that it is listed as among the 100 best games of the 20th century by several chess historians, and described as 'miraculous', 'stunning', and 'brilliant'. Perhaps most significantly, even 60 years later players discuss the game and lines that could have led to victory ('Paul Keres vs. Samuel Reshevsky', 2012). Bronstein's text helped to focus the attention of subsequent generations on the game's shared history. Even in this vast sub-cultural library, the analysis of events – building blocks of history – is social.

## Tactics and Memory

I have on my desk a weighty paperback. The 734-page book is entitled *Modern Chess Openings*, currently edited by three-time American chess champion Nick de Firmian and abbreviated as *MCO*. It is called the 'chess player's bible' (Evans, 2007: 249). I purchased the 14th edition. The first edition was printed in 1911. Each edition asserts that the standard opening moves from which chess players choose have evolved, charting communal progress. The *MCO* is the equivalent of the psychiatrist's *DSM*. Each edition adds new lines and deletes ones deemed outdated, providing a space between the latest innovations of Grandmasters, not yet in the *MCO*, and what amateurs can access (Soltis, 2006: 9). Along with the *MCO* is the *ECO*, a five-volume *Encyclopedia of Chess Openings*, first published in 1966. These volumes contain 500 openings arranged in five broad categories. Their review constitutes a serious commitment. Openings, tying players to the community, reflect sticky culture. Like other domains, chess has core knowledge that has been awarded the honorific title 'theory'. This justifies the claim that top players are 'professionals', whatever their income. They have specialized knowledge, not easily accessible to those not committed.

Openings are the theoretical heart of chess, predetermined beginnings that have stood time's test. Each has a style, described alternately as quiet, sharp, boring, classical, formal, crazy, or murky. Desjarlais (2011: 91) suggests that 'different motifs and auras apply to different openings. ... The French Defense resembles a labyrinth of forking paths, while the Najdorf Sicilian is a brutal street fight, with a swirl of knives slashing about.' Desjarlais suggests that chess players fall in love with particular openings, and make them central to identity. As he suggests for his own opening play: 'In playing the Sveshnikov, I felt I was participating in its history, however minutely. The more I played and studied the opening, the more Sveshnikovesque my thoughts became' (Desjarlais, 2011: 91). Given this diversity, numerous books purport to explain openings in more exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) detail than the *MCO* or *ECO: Easy Guide to the Bb5 Sicilian, The Chigorin Queen's Gambit, Nimzo-Indian Defense, Play the Benko Gambit, Play the Caro-Kann*. The names sound exotic and enigmatic, linking a participant to others, present and past (Shenk, 2006: 81). One chooses an opening and builds a library.

All players know how a chess game begins. White moves a pawn (one square or two) or a knight, and then black moves a pawn or a knight. There are no other possibilities. Twenty options for each player, even if most are not effective strategy. By black's first move the players are in conversation. Each move is a response and a provocation. Over time these moves became codified into named 'openings'. Accomplished players use the term 'book' to refer to 'opening theory': 'is this book?', being 'booked up', 'playing book', 'getting off book', using 'book knowledge'. Some players are known as being 'theory players' if their moves follow standard openings. These openings are also termed 'lines' or 'main lines'. This commitment to book, lines, and theory reveals attachment to the past and to the community, constituting what one chess grandmaster termed 'opening theory addiction' (Rowson, 2007: 87). When Reuben Fine (2008: 55) wrote of Bobby Fischer's World Championship victory, he expressed the wide-spread belief that: 'The codification of the openings does not have far to go before it is complete.' The communal problem is when should a player move outside 'book', deviate from collective knowledge, and by creating new openings, create new culture. As Garry Kasparov (2007: 111) notes, the shaping of opening lines represents the heart of chess:

By the time a player becomes a Grandmaster, almost all of his training time is dedicated to work on this first phase. The opening is the only phase that holds out the potential for true creativity and doing something entirely new. For finding something that no one else has found.

Opening theory reflects the triumph of collective memory, revealing both the hardened stability of this form of play and the possibility of change.

Over centuries multiple opening lines have developed, each with their own reputation. As noted, the *Encyclopedia of Chess Openings* lists 500. Openings developed with the professionalization of the game (Wendling, 2002: 114). In 1749, Philidor named only five or six openings, and it was not until the first half of the 19th century that openings such as the 'French Defense' or the 'Sicilian' or the 'English' were

named. As chess became a historicized, self-referential activity, openings were codified. The existence of names suggests the stickiness of chess culture, tying selves to the community.

The naming of openings depends on the characteristic elements of the position (the King's Gambit Declined, the Queen's Pawn Game), geographical areas that locate the development of the opening (the Dutch, the Vienna), or a player associated with the opening (Bird's Opening or the Ruy Lopez). A few reference the style of play (the *Giuoco Piano*, or quiet game). Players in their local cultures create names for openings, such as 'the cheesecake', because it is 'smooth and easy' (Field notes).

Learning openings involves a slow process of acculturation. Less committed players do not make the effort, and so they stand outside the communal culture. Openings are so important that some chess instructors, including one elementary school teacher, begin with basic openings, such as the Two Knights Opening and the Caro-Kann, feeling that even if students do not understand or recall the opening, they learn that openings are important (Field notes). As Bryce, a high school player, remarked of his youthful training: 'In elementary school we toyed with the idea of knowing openings, but we didn't really know them. ... I know I thought I played the French. What I was playing is not what it really is, and it was actually quite different' (Interview). But for young players, just like sex talk, talking about openings suggests maturity. In time, based on experience, local cultures, and personality, players who continue to play chess become committed to a set of opening lines to use as white and a set of preferred responses as black (McClain, 2008: 42). As one International Master reported, 'you want to choose an opening that matches your style of play' (Field notes).

But more than personal taste openings are faddish within chess communities. The Scotch Game was unfashionable until Kasparov used it. One player remarked ruefully:

I find it hardly fair that, for example, the Alapin Opening or the Nimzowitsch Defense, among others, are described as 'relics' or having only 'surprise value'. Then, suddenly, because an official source has made such pronouncements, players start learning what they believe are winning opening lines by rote. (Patel, 2009: 6)

Donald, a chess teacher, explained: 'Openings come and go. Openings that are not currently in will be in again. So you can see different openings come and go through the lifetimes of chess players. The Colle might come back. You never know what the next thing is to be brought back to life' (Interview). These choices may be esoteric, but they depend on cultural reflection, whether or not these judgments reflect their success in practice.

On one high school team, players enjoyed using the Fried Liver Attack, also known as the Fegatello Attack (meaning 'dead as a piece of liver', a variation of the 'Two Knights Defense') when playing as white. Perhaps these teens enjoyed the colorful name, but the opening has a history that can be traced back to Rome in 1610, and is a reputable attacking strategy (Edwards, 2009: 32–4). Students recognized that the 'Fried Liver Attack' was not as effective as others, but it was beloved, a topic of joking that relied on a shared emotional connection:

[GAF: When did you start to learn openings?]

David: Probably fourth or fifth grade when I started playing what is called the Fried Liver. If the opponent doesn't know what he is doing, you can get a knight and basically a rook for free. But it doesn't work nowadays as well. (Interview)

\* \* \*

If I am playing someone I don't think is very good, then I will try to play Fried Liver. It sort of freaks my opponent out when I sac [sacrifice] a knight. They have to bring their king up to the center of the board in order to keep pieces. ... I think most new players or people who haven't seen that will not know what to do and how to defend it properly. (Interview)

A teammate concurred, 'I want to learn the c4 opening [the English Opening] for when I play good players, but I want the option of Fried Liver as a backup' (Field notes). These teens, socialized to the good opinion of their community, realize that the success of the opening depends on the responses of their opponent, even though they enjoy playing it for its label and its bluster.

Openings are not just good or bad – they may be admired or not, appropriate or not. They are evaluated within epistemic communities in light of other knowledge. As Boris explained: 'An opening cannot be good or bad as far as 90% of openings. There are bad openings and everything else is playable. You study and you say, "Oh, if I like it, I should be able to play it for both sides." It's a style question of course' (Interview). On the high school team, players teased a teammate who often used Bird's Opening, which was not admired. On another occasion Tristan joked with his coach: 'Would you hold it against me if I play the Latvian in a tournament? ... It's like the black King's Gambit, but it's crap', and Cameron remarks: 'The Sicilian, basically that's the one that everyone learns first, but it sucks. It gets all your pieces stuck' (Field notes). These evaluations of openings are common at all levels of chess, although the sophistication of the calculation differs widely. Sometimes fashion waits for the player who takes an unacceptable opening and demonstrates its power, creating a new perspective that becomes diffused.

Opening theory is both historical and interactive. The knowledge base comprises a large part of what it means to be a serious chess player. There is too much for anyone to know, but by selecting properly and limiting one's scope one demonstrates expertise. Beyond this, opening theory is part of competition; one's choice is a function of one's evaluation of an opponent as knowledgeable. Jeremy explained that his selection of an opening depended on 'age, rating, my reading of [my opponent's face], and how I'm feeling' (Field notes). Through both of these aspects – identity and strategy – opening theory is part of history: the history of the public and the history of the game.

## Shared Pasts and Sticky Culture

To understand the creation of participatory allegiance, researchers must examine how shared culture embeds actors within their communities. I describe this process as



constituting a sticky culture, emphasizing that cultures create affiliation. I present a meso-level analysis of culture in which shared cognition and collective activity are building blocks of an interaction order. Identity and meaning are connected through the power of the community of shared engagement. Within society numerous publics exist with their own solidified histories and sticky cultures, operating independently and occasionally overlapping. In this the domain of chess, with its deep commitments, proves exemplary. Chess is a bounded community with a knowledge base to which participants can gain access should they make the effort and in which exit has costs in light of the investment that led to participation. The history and ritual of chess constitute the adhesion of culture and action. While, given its memory and its literature, chess has a richer and more self-conscious history than many domains, like other complex and integrated communities the world of competitive chess depends upon a shared embrace of tradition. As it looks forward, it relentlessly gazes back.

Frequently social worlds build a past with heroes, unforgettable events, and canonized strategies, mobilized by memory entrepreneurs. The presence of consecrated heroes whose skills define the possibility of genius and moments of brilliance, along with the willingness of participants to organize commemoration, provides for the belief that the activity matters. Players are not merely engaged in a pleasurable but slight activity, but their activity has *lasting* meaning and defines the self. Even if participation is bounded, participants constitute a focused public.

Beyond heroes, games – eventful moments – and shared strategies build the memory of chess.<sup>2</sup> While the recording of games – and their replaying – makes chess distinctive among voluntary cultures, other cultural fields have remembered moments that build community. Baseball treasures great games and magnificent plays, and, while not replayed, they may be remembered in shrines such as the Hall-of-Fame. Amateurs in a variety of domains – in sports, in science, and in the arts – connect themselves with professionals, basking in reflected glory (Stebbins, 2006). Finally, chess, like other commitments, has a subcultural literature. One does not only play chess but also writes and reads chess. From scoresheets to annotations, games are narratives with philosophies, styles, and morals. Memory is social by generating common emotional reactions and incorporating the evaluations of others. The doing of an activity contributes to shared sociality.

The history of any voluntary public and the recognition of this history bond people and permit them to think of themselves as belonging to a public, not merely as tourists in a casual enterprise. To have a history is to have a community, and this argues for emphasizing the connection between culture and the interaction orders of which it is part. History is never unmoored, but is embedded in a sticky world of tiny publics.

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## Notes

1. Of course not every chess game will be inscribed and memory may be imprecise. The moves in rapid games in public squares are not written, but the degree to which players can recall and reconstruct their past triumphs (or at least claim that they can) is still remarkable.
2. This is similar to Becker and Faulkner's (2009) description of the improvisational routines of jazz musicians. Improvisation is made possible because of a collective history of 'standards' that they assume they share. In playing, these standards come to life in situated and meaningful ways.

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