

MODERN CHESS ANARCHY?

by Macon Shibut

DO NOT LET THE TITLE CONCERN YOU—this isn't an essay about FIDE! Nor is it a book review, although my thoughts were inspired by John Watson's recent book *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy* (Gambit Publications, 1999). Indeed, my review of *Secrets* has already appeared in *Virginia Chess* #1999/5. My purpose here is to debate one of Watson's central premises. Just so there's no misunderstanding about my admiration for his work overall, I'll begin with a quote from that review: "In turning his focus towards the wider field of middlegame strategy, Watson has produced a masterpiece. ... Watson's probing, rational and, above all, intellectually honest comparison of classical and 'modern' chess, however one defines it, is a wondrous contribution to the game's literature. Insightful, literate, even funny at times, it manages to be simultaneously readable and profound. Its 272 pages strike a perfect balance between breezy text and probing analysis. Reading it is not just a pleasure, it's often exhilarating. Time and again it articulates some elusive aspect of a chess player's inner dialog in a way that is so breathtaking that I had to pause and just contemplate how perfectly Watson had nailed these slippery common experiences."

Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy aims to identify and elaborate what is distinctly modern about modern chess. Since chess games, like works of art and literature, are not impersonal phenomena but rather products of human intellect and personality, what begins as a technical inquiry inevitably wades into muddier subjective waters. Questions arise about how today's grandmasters think and how they differ from leading players of the past.

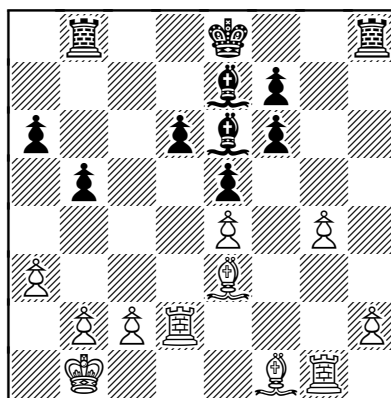
Characteristically, Watson has no interest in just rehashing the usual tiresome debate over whether Morphy could give pawn and move to a modern master, or if Janowski today would be just a class B player. Both mindful of technical advances and respectful of the past masters, Watson basically dismisses most speculation about absolute strength as pointless. Then he proceeds to more fertile investigations of style and method. In a thousand different ways, both explicit and implicit, Watson presents a case that the evolution of modern chess is not merely a question of progressing technique; nor accumulation of concrete knowledge about certain openings and endgames; nor even new 'principles' and insights into formations (pawn structures, classes of position) which were formerly misunderstood. On the contrary, regarding such "'principles' of positional play, which are often descriptions of advantages or disadvantages of various elements of play, eg, bad bishops backward pawns, knight outposts, centralized pieces, doubled pawn complexes, pawn chains," Watson asserts, "This type of 'rule-oriented' and principle-oriented theory was worked out or at least substantially understood by the time of Nimzowitsch's death in 1935."

So what, then, is the modern difference? According to Watson it's something more philosophical than technical: a new understanding of the scope, the utility — let's say the *meaning* of 'principles' altogether. From page 97: "Many changes have taken place in modern chess, for example, with respect to new ideas about weaknesses, the relative strengths of minor pieces, the value of the exchange, and considerations of time and dynamism. But the forerunner and in some sense precursor to these changes has been a philosophic notion, now so entrenched that we barely notice it. I call this notion 'rule-independence', for lack of a more comprehensive way to express it. It is simply the gradual divestment on the part of chess players of the multitudinous generalities, rules, and abstract principles which guided classical chess, and which still dominate our teaching texts."

I would say that we barely notice this notion because it is timeless, and not novel or modern at all. The intellectual basis for believing in a “gradual divestment from abstract principles” finds a pattern in what indeed happened over the course of the past century in physics. The Theory of Relativity altered scientists’ attitude towards laws governing the natural universe. But chess players have always appreciated the relative nature of their strategic ‘rules’. Even when they adopted the jargon of pre-relativity physicists and waxed philosophical about ‘immutable laws governing the chessboard,’ their actual games proved that old time masters understood their laws to be mere generalizations subject to myriad exception. In what follows I hope to show that today’s spirit of rule-independence, whatever it means, is little different from the understanding which informed the play of Botvinnik, Lasker, Morphy, Philidor...

On his page 95, Watson states: “Even the greatest of the old masters were limited by a powerful dogmatism based on general principles which they supposed to be true.” A provocative phrase, this “general principles which they supposed to be true.” What exactly does it mean? Somehow the masters who discovered the rules in the first place lacked discretion in applying them. They wound up as tails wagged by their own dog. Are we to understand that in the solitude of his analysis, while the clock was ticking, Tarrasch really believed that somehow his rook *invariably* belonged behind the passed pawn? that knights on the rim were, *without exception*, dim? Of course not — and to stretch Watson’s point this way may seem unfair. But otherwise it’s hard to pin down what “limited by a powerful dogmatism” looks like. Or at least it’s impossible to distinguish it from the sort of practical reliance on abstract principle that still ‘limits’ great players today. Consider, for example, a thought GM Jon Speelman shared over the internet concerning the game Shirov-Short at the 1999 FIDE Knockout tournament: After 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Bg5 dxe4 5.Nxe4 Be7 6.Bxf6 gxf6 7.Nf3 Nd7 8.Bc4 c5!? 9. 0-0 0-0 10.Re1 Nb6 11.Bf1 cxd4 12.Nxd4 Kh8 13.c3 e5 14.Qh5 Nd5 15.Rad1 Speelman stated, “It did occur to me that just conceivably White should have moved the ‘e’ rook to d1 so that lines with ...Bxf2+ later don’t hit e1: but I absolutely don’t believe that the chess universe is constructed that way — it must be better in the wide spread of lines which can currently be entered to have a rook on e1 rather than a1”.

Watson presents a case on both ends of the timeline — modern examples of rule-independence, classical examples that are supposed to indicate a fundamental myopia — but the arguments are circular and unsatisfying. Here’s an extract from *Secrets* that illustrates Watson’s idea of contemporary chess thought:



Ivanchuk - Anand, Linares 1992
Black to Play

Anand continued 20...Bc4!! (Watson: “A paradoxical move in the modern spirit. This stops h3, but at the seemingly devastating cost of trading Black’s very good bishop for White’s very bad one. Just look at those weaknesses on d5 and f5!...”) 21 b3 Bxf1 22 Rxf1 Rh3. Now Watson quotes Anand — “Black appears to have committed a whole list of positional sins: allowing doubled f-pawns, giving White an outside h-pawn and exchanging his ‘good’ bishop with ...Bc4; yet he is better. Paradoxical? Yes, but this doesn’t mean that the old positional rules have been suspended for the course of this game.” — and then adds his own commentary:

He [Anand] goes on to explain that his rook on h3 disrupts the White position and that Black has the long-term plan of exchanging his d-pawn for White’s e-pawn by ...d5, and his f-pawn for the g-pawn by ...f5, to give him connected central passed pawns. Well, I guess there are two ways of looking at this, but I think most people would say that such rules have not only been ‘suspended’ for this game, but have also shown to be unreliable guidelines! The whole point of rules is that they allow the player to use them in the place of extremely lengthy calculations to confidently enter certain types of positions, as Ivanchuk has done here. Of course, if by achieving the better bishop and classically superior pawn structure (holes on d5 and f5), White had allowed a mating attack, one could argue that, after all, you can’t expect too much from rules. But when, in a simplified position with Black’s e7-bishop contributing no activity, the mere presence of one active rook can throw such a position entirely in Black’s favor, I think we can rightly question whether such rules are serving their purpose. Put this another way: how many other players in the world would have played 17...gxf6, at the same time foreseeing 20...Bc4 (or come to think of it, even played 20...Bc4 given the enormous advantage of being given that position to think about)? My guess is: very, very few (after all, Anand himself gives ‘!!’ to both moves). But why? Because we would automatically reject this combination of ideas on principle. We put our faith in these rules, and dogmatically assume that the good bishop and far better pawn structure will favor White. It is one of the insights of modern players, and especially of the best ones, that one has to play the position itself, not some abstract idea of the position. In fact, as we shall see, the development of that simple notion characterizes most of the progress which chess has made in the modern era.

The strength of Watson’s book lies in its wealth of insight about chess — not least about the “whole point” of rules and the need to qualify them. It’s the historical perspective (“one of the insights of modern players...”) that doesn’t follow. Isn’t Ivanchuk a modern player too? And if, as Watson emphasizes, “very, very few” players — meaning modern players — would be so perceptive as Anand, what does that say about characteristically modern chess thought? If anything, it would seem to refute Watson’s own point. “We would automatically reject this combination of ideas on *principle*” — just the same as, say, a typical Lasker opponent!

We will return to this example later, but for the moment we turn to the other side of Watson’s case. Regarding the capacity of old masters, he presents selected quotes in which great champions like Capablanca and Steinitz commit errors of judgment that even moderately skilled amateurs might avoid today. Tarrasch is a veritable font of closed-minded, if not downright bizarre, opinion: “1...e5 is,

theoretically and practically, the only completely satisfactory answer to 1 e4"; the Sicilian Defense is, "bound to fail" against proper play; accepting the Queen's Gambit is a "strategic error."

Such remarks must be considered in light of chess's literary tradition. As Watson notes, abstract generalities and rules "still dominate our teaching texts" today. But today we have Bruce Pandolfini to turn out beginners' books. The world's best players — the ones by whom future generations will gauge the state of our theory — concentrate (if they write at all) on 'serious' game collections (or, alas, opening books). But Capablanca's *Last Lectures*, Lasker's *Common Sense in Chess*, Tarrasch's *The Game of Chess* — these are really great players writing for rank amateurs in a way we haven't seen in a while. A goodly portion of *The Game of Chess* consists of rules all right — not rules as in 'principles,' but rules, as in "the Bishop moves diagonally..." This is the point: *a degree of simplification which might violate the understanding of experienced players is both appropriate and necessary in a beginner's text.* We should not take such remarks to be the master's complete and final word on difficult problems of strategy.

My database reveals that in the 253 games where his opponents opened 1 e4, poor old close-minded Tarrasch saw fit to deviate from his "only completely satisfactory" reply fully a third of the time (!), to wit: 44 French Defenses; 31 of those doomed Sicilians (usually with success against such opponents as Mieses, Teichmann, Maroczy, Tchigorin, Marshall...); 4 Center Counters Defenses; 2 workouts with the 'hypermodern' Alekhine's Defense; and 1 Caro Kann. I've read that Tarrasch was an insufferable egotist with a habit of talking as if his listener were a rather dim student. But however unequivocally he may have preached in *Dreihundert Schachpartien*, Tarrasch does not appear to have been so "limited by a powerful dogmatism" when it came to his own play.

Of course Watson also looks into the old masters' play, performing numerous statistical analyses of his own. Their point, taken as a whole, is supposed to be: while an increasing tendency by leading players to violate a strategic rule may indicate simply that the particular rule is not very good, an increasing pattern of disregard for *all* rules expresses something more fundamental about how chess is being played.

Thus on page 108 Watson takes on the old (eg, it appears in *Common Sense in Chess*) maxim about developing knights before bishops (italics added):

There arose the general feeling that the development of knights by principle preceded that of bishops. After all, we already know where the knights are going (f3 and c3, f6 and c6, right?), but the bishop has several options along its natural diagonal, so why tip your hand too early? But like so many rules, this one often fails in concrete situations. ... Black has recently (beginning in the early 1980s) turned his attention to [after 1 c4 e5] 2 Nc3 Bb4!?

By the time of this writing, there have been many hundreds of high-level games with this move, indicating that it has at least a certain credibility; but up to 1970, I can find only 4 such games, and by 1980, only 19 (and those by unknown players)! *It's hard to believe that this doesn't to some extent reflect the ancient prejudice against bishops before knights. The repeated adoption of 2...Bb4 by players such as Kramnik and Shirov shows what a conceptual shift has taken place.*

Here again we have a paragraph of good technical insight followed by one of questionable conjecture. First of all, it's a rare position in which just one or two classic principles are operative to the exclusion of others. Viewed from a different angle, one could almost use this same example to demonstrate the opposite of what Watson concludes. Thus, 2...Bb4 violates the 'knights before bishops' rule, but one of Black's thoughts is that he might damage — as defined by classical, 'principle-oriented' theory — White's pawn structure with ...Bxc3 etc. We can flip through *Secrets* and find revisionist thinking on this topic too: [p 52] "I want to emphasize this modern pragmatic attitude towards what have traditionally been considered weaknesses. Today, players allow doubled pawns in all kinds of positions, merely because the weaknesses can't be exploited, or because those pawns are useful in covering squares or even helpful in attack." Presumably Kramnik and Shirov are as up to date on this new doubled-pawn thinking as they are on knights-before-bishops, so what's the point? Are they anarchists because they move their bishop first? Or do they in fact affirm traditional dogma in their zeal to inflict structural damage with ...Bxc3?

Moreover, there is way, way more master chess activity today than before. It all gets preserved in electronic form too, so the databases are heavily inclined towards modern examples, with the explosion of material kicking in at about 1980. The entire tournament careers of players like Capablanca, Lasker or Steinitz consisted of fewer games than Viswanathan Anand played in just the 1990s. Frank Marshall was considered an active professional in his day and a man with a legendary appetite for chess, but his preserved record is just a fraction what Anatoly Karpov has added to the databases *since losing the world championship in 1985*. So can we really assert anything about the mindset of old masters by observing that some theme or technique or move 'never showed up' prior 1970 but saw 'repeated adoption' later? I ran my own analysis for the sequence 1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Nf6 3 Nf3 Nc6, which Watson explicitly contrasts with 2...Bb4 as representative of old-style ('knights before bishops') thinking. Using The Ultimate Games Collection CD, I found not just hundreds but thousands of examples, 4733 to be exact, but only 447 of them from pre-1970. Any purported "conceptual shift" needs to explain why this is not just as meaningful as 2...Bb4 appearing in "hundreds" of post-1980 games. Rule-independence or no, it seems that the Four Knights line has always been, and continues to be, the more popular way of playing. The relative interest in 2...Bb4 requires no explanation beyond a desire of some players to move into less-explored terrain.

"I do not consider myself belonging to this or that 'school,' I am guided not by abstract theoretical considerations on the comparative strength of pieces, etc, but only the data as it appears to me in this or that position of the game, which serves as an object of detailed and possibly precise analysis. Each of my moves presents itself as a feasible inference from a series of variations in which theoretical 'principles of play' can have only a very limited significance. ... The ability to combine skillfully, the capacity to find in each given position the most purposeful move, soon leading to the execution of a well-conceived plan, is higher than any principle, or more correct to say, is the only principle in the game of chess which lends itself to precise definition."

One might assume these remarks are further samplings from Watson. Or at least they must be from Dvoretsky, or Suba, or another of the contemporary theoreticians Watson cites to illustrate modern tendencies. In fact this declaration of rule independence comes from Mikhail Tchigorin (1850-1908) as quoted by Romanovsky in another of my favorite books, Jimmy Adam's *Mikhail Tchigorin, The*

Creative Chess Genius. Tchigorin's wording is so clear, so on-topic, as to either refute Watson's premise outright or else force us to accept that the outstanding "insight of modern players", the "conceptual shift" which "characterizes most of the progress which chess has made in the modern era" was anticipated — no, not just anticipated, but fully developed and articulated — over a century ago. (There's an added irony here. It has been said — eg, Reti, in explaining his omission from *Masters of the Chessboard* — that Tchigorin was an anomaly, outside the prevailing current of chess thought. The charge was not, however, that Tchigorin was some kind of crazed visionary, but rather that he was a throwback, an old-fashioned diehard, vainly holding out against Steinitz's progressive, principle-based "Modern School"!)

Emanuel Lasker's *Manual of Chess* has much to offer as a window into the pre-modern chess mind. Let's consider Lasker's speculation on the original mental journey which led Steinitz to, "a great work of thought ... the principles of strategy":

Steinitz felt that a plan, being a prescription or a rule for successful action on the chessboard, could *not* be based on the reason ascribed to it during his time, namely, the genius of the player, the creative fancy of a master, but another reason — a reason residing not in the persons or minds of the players but in the position upon the board; yet not to be conceived as being a combination the solution of which depends upon the necessary consequences of moves, but as something wholly different, namely, a *valuation*. ... Hence, he concluded that a sign, a character, a quality of the given position must exist that to a discerning eye would indicate the success or the failure of the search before it was actually undertaken. And this sign, if explicable by reason, in what could it possibly consist if not in an advantage or a disadvantage? The winning player had the reason of chess on his side provided the win was forced: this seemed a logical conclusion from the premises. The reason of chess gave therefore the win to him who held the advantage. And an advantage, if reasonable, what could that be except the same thing that was generally termed so: greater material force, greater mobility, greater effect against the king — in short, things that chess experience had already defined and circumscribed?

Note that Lasker's whole conception of positional play is as an adjunct to the method of direct analysis. Elsewhere in *Manual* he wrote, "If the players only had a roomy intellect they could do without any plan by relying solely on their power of combination, since they would somehow be able to see through the net of millions of variations with mathematical lucidity." Which brings us back to the Ivanchuk-Anand position discussed previously. Recall Watson's choice of words, so unwittingly reminiscent of Lasker: "The whole point of rules is that they allow the player to use them in the place of extremely lengthy calculations to confidently enter certain types of positions."

Because that confidence can never be complete — and Ivanchuk-Anand highlights this — Watson concludes that this was an exceptional game (*true*) which somehow breaks from the past and indicates something uniquely modern (*doubtful*). Certainly Lasker would not have been shaken by events in this game. He recognized that light-square control and pawn weakness and all the rest are just tools of approximation, and the estimates (or Lasker's term, "valuations") they yield are not foolproof. "The master," Lasker wrote, "must then be the scales to weigh advantage and disadvantage; *and he knows no certainty, for this is no combination*, it is his judgment which decides for good and for evil."

What really happened in Ivanchuk-Anand is as old as chess itself, logically no different than a queen sacrifice leading to mate. Thus, it is a reliable rule that being a queen ahead is advantageous, all other things being equal. But that last phrase is the trick: so rarely does it happen that ‘all other things’ are exactly equal! Not only that, but the variety of possible forms that inequality may take is hardly less than the number of chess positions. So the master sacrifices his queen and we are surprised: both experience in queen-ahead positions and our habit of trusting the rule had suppressed this possibility in our thinking. The master shared our prejudices but he somehow overcame them to initially consider the move. After that he possessed the technical skill to work out the continuation at least far enough that his judgment could accept the risk in giving up the queen. *In no way does the existence of such a combination overturn the general proposition that winning a queen is good.* This is the sense in which we should understand Anand’s remark: “This doesn’t mean that the old positional rules have been suspended for the course of this game.” Anand’s play was exactly the same thing except he overcame a different complex of prejudices. Instead of a queen, he sacrificed pawn structure, light squares, etc. In the same way, in a game at St Petersburg 1914, Lasker surprised Capablanca by advancing pawn to f5, leaving his king’s pawn backwards on a half-open file. In the same way, in 1852, Anderssen baffled Dufresne with material sacrifice, his true purpose concealed behind a smoke screen of even greater imminent sacrifice.

Chess changes over time. Perhaps we can characterize the state of theory as the sum total of an era’s prejudices regarding positions, in whatever form or understanding these prejudices take. We can imagine a time from the distant past when matters of pawn structure, or central control, or tempi were unknown. Indeed, most of us experienced that primordial state during our own first months in the fraternity of chessplayers. Maybe all that we then knew (or thought we knew) is that the queen was “stronger” than the rook, to say nothing of the bishop or knight. Maybe we read somewhere that she was worth “9 points”. So armed, we had an indisputable advantage over an opponent who did not possess even that basic theory. But we also had something else: a potential for surprise, even confusion, when a *better* player reveals the limit of our little theory with QxR!! — precisely the one move we considered unplayable *on principle*.

Whatever the prejudices happen to be at a given time and place, a capacity for spotting or even better, for manufacturing, the occasional exception has always been the hallmark of mastery — today, in 1935, in 1835.