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THE SOCIOLOGICAL PARADOX OF CHESS: THE TRANSCONTRAST DISTINCTION OF THE GAME OF KINGS

Abstract. The article deals with the sociological paradox of chess. On the one hand, this game gives people who belong to its social world a kind of desirable distinction, but on the other hand this distinction is not connected with the class position. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, if we treat chess as part of the sports field, then class distinction should be interconnected with it. Why is chess extremely popular and widespread, and therefore egalitarian, although it seems to be an excellent instrument for increasing class advantage? What makes so many people play chess, and how does chess confer the transclass distinction upon them? In answering these questions I will focus on the accessibility and openness of chess, its social nature, the totality of chess experience and the impossibility of defining it within one field: sport, science or art, and – last but not least – on the possibility of manipulating chess's *illusio*.

Keywords: chess, sociology of chess, distinction *illusio*, sociology of sport.

Introduction

For several years I have been organizing the open chess tournaments “Szachy w Harmonijce” at my Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences at the Nicolaus Copernicus University. Players compete for the dean's prize, a metal statuette of a chess horse designed in the modernist style of the faculty building, Collegium Minus (the so-called Harmonijka). During one of the tournaments I encouraged a friend of mine to take part, an academic professor, a person with a considerable chess practice and knowledge, who is also a prime example of the academic *intelligentsia habitus*. My colleague fought bravely, but was badly defeated by all his opponents, people located far away from him on the ladder of social status. After the tournament, while thanking me for the invitation, he commented both with some regret and reflexivity that “chess is bloody egalitarian!”.

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At first, I treated this only as a material for an anecdote, but after careful consideration I understood that the matter was more serious and not so obvious, and the professor's comment was about a social riddle which deserves a sociological explanation: whether chess is an elite game, which we usually *implicitly* assume, or was my unlucky colleague right and chess is essentially egalitarian? The research and reflection on the problem make me accept the conclusion that we are dealing here with the sociological paradox of chess, which means that, on the one hand, chess gives people who belong to its social world a kind of distinction, but on the other hand, this distinction is not connected with their class position. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, if we treat chess as part of the sports field, then class distinction should be interconnected with it, and chess activity could be treated as an indicator of class affiliation, but this is not the case. The special aura of chess, which gives players recognition from others, seems to have nothing to do with class membership.

Therefore, I would like to consider what makes so many people play chess, and how does chess give players transclass distinction? Are there really no divisions among chess players? Why is chess essentially egalitarian and democratic, even though it seems to be a great tool for increasing class advantage?

The attempt to answer the above questions is based on research that has been ongoing since 2014. In accordance with the guidelines of the ethnographic method, I conducted observations and in-depth interviews with players, coaches and activists of chess organizations. I also analyzed chess magazines, chess portals and forums, and used autoethnography as an active participant in chess tournaments and organizer of such events. I was interested in amateur chess, played both by people without any affiliation, and those gathered in chess clubs, but excluding professional chess players for whom playing chess is the primary source of income and is treated by them as a profession. My observations relate to contemporary Poland and Western countries. Apart from them, the specificity of chess may be different and my findings do not take this into account.

The sociological paradox of chess: obverse and reverse

In the Western tradition it is generally although not universally agreed that nowadays chess belongs to those forms of sport activity¹ which enjoy almost universal recognition and respect – regardless of cultural circle. The game of chess is called “the game of kings” and playing it is perceived as positively distinguishing, developing mathematical skills, learning to think abstractly, shaping the will to win. It is also associated with intelligence, the ability to think effectively, patience,

¹ Defining chess as sport is a matter of some controversy, but as I explain later in the article there are convincing sociological arguments to accept such suggestion. Furthermore, what is most important to me, the vast majority of chess players think about their beloved game in such categories.

self-control and consistency. Let us add to this that the metaphorical references to chess are numerous in Western culture, and they have a long tradition, both in art, literature, many fields of knowledge (including esoteric) and in colloquial language (see DiCicco-Bloom, Gibson 2010; Raphael 2011). The symbolic imagination presents images of a chess player as a thinker, a person absorbed in contemplation of a complex problem, probably not very attractive socially, but certainly extremely intelligent and thoughtful.

As John Sharples, author of *A Cultural History of Chess-Players* (2017), notes that in Europe, since the Middle Ages, chess has developed the status of a game that is not only intellectually unique, surpassing others, but also socially useful, even if slightly ambivalent due to possible transgressions of some players overly immersed in the world of chess.

The modern chess-player has resisted disenchantment. A chess-player is not simply one who plays chess just as a chess piece is not simply a wooden block. Shaped by expectations and imaginations, the figure occupies the centre of a web of a thousand radiations where logic meets dream, and reason meets play. Questions of usefulness and value intimately connect the chess-player to the most basic philosophical questions of how an individual should live and occupy one's time. The chess-player has both sat comfortably within the halls of civilisation, welcomed as a possessor of desirable intellectual power, and, in its tendency towards excesses and absences, appeared on the cultural edge, challenging common sense and cognitive, emotional, and behavioural norms (2017: 1–2).

Therefore, it would seem that in the real world chess is elite, snobbish and exclusive, but various attempts to estimate the number of players worldwide show that the subjects of Caissa, the goddess of chess, can be counted in hundreds of millions.² At the same time, chess is growing in strength due to the popularity of online games, which allow not only playing in a variety of chess set-ups, but also education and training, puzzle solving, exchange of opinions, access to databases containing records of millions of games, chess engines to analyze games, chess TV with live commentary about the course of the most important chess tournaments. The internet boom has been further accelerated by the coronavirus epidemic, thanks to the suspension of tournaments in the real world. For example the Magnus Carlsen Invitational Tournament (April 18 – May 3 2020), organized by the current world champion in chess Magnus Carlsen, with a prize pool of \$250,000, according to the organizer, chess site chess24.com, was watched by more than 10 million people. Another portal, chess.com boasts over 35 million members, who play more than five million games a day. On another website, lichess.org, around 60,000 people are playing at any given time (Ingle 2020).

In Poland, in the post-war period, chess continued to enjoy great popularity, even if its achievements did not match the position of pre-war chess, which

² <https://www.chess.com/article/view/how-many-chess-players-are-there-in-the-world> (accessed 19.05.2020).

was called the golden era of Polish chess. Since around 2000 chess has become almost fashionable in Poland: children's groups at hundreds of chess tournaments organized annually are bursting at the seams, new chess schools are being set up for children, to which parents send their offspring to paid classes, and the Ministry of National Education has introduced learning chess in selected schools as compulsory classes (the programs "Szachy w szkole" and "Edukacja przez szachy w szkole"). Recently, the popularity of chess in Poland has certainly been supported by the spectacular successes of Polish chess players in the international arena (Jan-Krzysztof Duda, Radosław Wojtaszek, Mateusz Bartel). According to data from the Polish Chess Federation (May 2020), the organization has almost 90,000 registered members (3 years ago it was 65,000, which means an increase of almost 30% in a short period of time).³

What is also important, in the community of amateur chess players that my article is concerned with, there is a wide range of economic and educational status, employment, gender, age or even health. At the chessboard one can meet people from the bottom and the top of the ladder of social prestige, power or wealth: a professor plays with an elementary school student, the unemployed with a private entrepreneur, a doctor with a construction worker, an amateur plays with a professional, a 10-year-old with an 80-year-old, a wheelchair user with a marathon runner, a person with intellectual disability with a member of Mensa, a dandy with an ascetic. In addition, they play like equals, without going easy or giving any kind of head start. High status is not a predictor of the result of the game, but also, and this is less obvious, does not correlate with the interest in chess itself. Chess transcends socioeconomic background, age, gender, educational status, race and religion, which does not mean that representatives of all these categories can be found in proportionally equal numbers but rather openness to all these categories. The most important value and variable is one's chess ability.

Let me repeat the main question: what makes so many people play chess, and how does chess generate distinction without relation to the class system?

I: Chess is accessible and open to anyone interested

The first thing I would like to consider may seem obvious, but it has such crucial value that I cannot fail to mention it. It is widely accepted that chess sets minimal restrictions on access, both when it comes to the necessary equipment and opportunities to play, but at the same time it offers great opportunities for creative thinking and self-expression. A chessboard, chess pieces and a chess clock are a small and one-time expense. One can play with one's friends anywhere, for free. Chess tournaments usually are not free because of the usually small fees paid to the chess organizations and

³ In the central register of the Polish Chess Association (<http://www.wwww.cr-pzszach.pl>) only persons who won at least the 5th rank in chess (the lowest one) are included.



Photo 1. (by Krzysztof Olechnicki)

collecting funds for prizes. In Poland, depending on the type and duration of a tournament, the cost of participation is usually 10 to 100 PLN (approx. 2 € – 20 €). One can also play for free on the internet, on chess servers (here one must have a computer, tablet or smartphone). What is also important is that language barriers are not an obstacle in chess (thanks to universal chess notation one is able to not only play, but even analyze a game with someone who uses a different natural language). In terms of the openness and affordability of chess, it is difficult to find an analogy with other sports or sport-like activities, because more prestigious ones have incomparably greater prerequisites, financial and other (e.g. tennis, golf, horse riding).

Nevertheless, it should also be noted that while amateur gaming itself is generally widely available and not financially burdensome, the training of chess players, especially the more advanced ones, is much more demanding. This is a particularly serious problem for the parents of young chess players who, if their children have caught the bug, must invest considerable financial and time resources in the training of future grandmasters. Classes with a private trainer are a considerable expense, which grows along with the teacher's chess ranking. Participation in longer tournaments entails the costs of registration, transport, accommodation and meals, as well as the time that parents must spend on overseeing their children during hours of play.⁴

⁴ The issue of time as an important resource is not the subject of this article, but I think it would be worth considering the potentially de-egalitarian impact of time-shortage.

II: Chess is a social activity

Another issue is much less obvious, because it goes against with common-sense intuitions. The point here is that both the activity and the logic of chess seem to be extremely individualistic, but reducing them to an individual hobby actually misrepresents the highly interactive and even community nature of chess. As Robert Desjarlais notes,

Chess is primarily a social enterprise. While playing chess you can spend five intense hours with someone you hardly know otherwise-and might never see again. A sense of comity often comes with playing chess at a neighborhood club or a tournament hall, as you're surrounded by others who endorse what you're doing and likewise find it to be a meaningful endeavor. Chess is often taken to be a lonesome, semisolitary matter, in which a person is alone with his thoughts for long stretches of time. But playing chess is often a deeply social affair, as opponents, friends, acquaintances, and potential onlookers are often close at hand (Desjarlais 2011: 15).



Photo 2. (by Zuzanna Kopidurska-Olechnicka)

Chess is a game that requires a consistent interactive order. Around the game, networks of relationships are created in connection with the activity of chess players, which in turn generates collective emotions. Specific communities, the social worlds of players, trainers and fans who use a specific language, are created around chess. Chess is deeply social, because playing an immortal game, finding an unusual combination, making a great move require opponents who will take

part in the creation of a given situation. Chess is a game of winning, competing in tournaments with other players, gaining the highest ranking and position in the hierarchy, which is built on the basis of skills and knowledge tested in accordance with the criteria of sports competition.

Gary Alan Fine, author of one of the few comprehensive sociological analysis of chess (2015), studying the social world of chess describes it as a *sticky culture* and he considers that the most important component of this bind is a community of understanding and meaning nested in an interactive order,

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 2013: 396).

The shared meaning and understanding is based on collective memory and common cultural knowledge (*sticky knowledge*) that connects individuals with the group, satisfies the need for affiliation and integrates the group, and at the same time eliminates class differences.⁵ As a social world, chess is more than sufficiently developed in time and space to create a community of meaningful history: we have a long tradition here, disputes about the beginning of chess, mythical characters and heroes, immortal games, a separate language, numerous references in art and literature, and publications in chess literature counted in tens of thousands of items. Acculturating into the social world of chess is largely about acquiring knowledge and skills related to playing chess. The more the player gets involved in the game, the more he or she participates in the communal culture. While talking during a chess tournament with chess players about other chess tournaments in which they took part (or even those which they have only heard about second-hand), one can notice that people have a very vivid memory of them, recalling behaviors that aroused attention, the controversial decisions of the referee or the course of specific games, especially those that went against expectations or had a spectacular course. During a tournament, chess players take part in current competitions, but also recall and rewind past events, which is an important element of constructing the whole chess event.

The basic unit of the chess community structure is neither a pair of players at a chessboard, nor a chess club. A club performs important functions, but belonging is not mandatory and a large part of a tournament's participants are not affiliated with any chess club. It seems that the basic building unit in the world of chess are tournaments, which structure the time of chess players, set the rhythm

⁵ It is not an accident that the FIDE International Chess Federation motto is *Gens una sumus* (latin "we are one family"), which at the educational or promotional level can be treated as quite naive, but at the level of the sociological analysis it quite accurately describes the mechanisms of functioning of a social group and the reality of the social world of chess players.

of chess life, and because they are often cyclical, they allow the continuity of chess tradition to be built.

The social dimension of chess is also associated with its performative nature and the involvement of viewers. Fine and Young note that “While chess is meant to be played, it is also performed, becoming discussable and notable” (2014: 96). The chess game can be compared to a theatrical spectacle which engages not merely the main actors but also the audience, not only the one directly observing the struggles, but also the viewers following them via online relations, simultaneously commenting on the course of the action and creating a temporary audience focused on the performance.

III: Chess as a total game

In the vast majority of cases chess at a low level of involvement can be treated as a form of entertainment, one of many games. If it is taken more seriously, it creates a cultural and social sub-world, governed by a limited number of rules, which are logical and orderly, and thanks to which chess fulfills the needs of individuals and becomes a way to break away from mundane concerns of the everyday world or existential dilemmas. At the highest level of commit-



Photo 3. (by Krzysztof Olechnicki)

ment, chess can take control of players and lead them to lose themselves in the game, as happens with Aleksandr Ivanovich Luzhin in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *The Defense*,

He glanced at the chessboard and his brain wilted from hitherto unprecedented weariness. But the chessmen were pitiless, they held and absorbed him. There was horror in this, but in this also was the sole harmony, for what else exists in the world besides chess? Fog, the unknown, non-being... (Nabokov 1964: 138).

In *Counterplay: An Anthropologist at the Chessboard* (2011), Robert Desjarlais compares chess to a virus or drug that holds some people in an iron grip. Just as heroin directly and immediately affects the addict's central nervous system, so chess "can lock into certain pathways of the mind, and it doesn't easily let go" (2011: 2–3). Desjarlais calls those chess players "cognitive junkies" who "need their daily fix of tactics and strategy" (2011: 3). In an interview I conducted with one of the senior players in Toruń, a common topic was that of chess being responsible for losing fortunes, and contributing to bad life decisions by players possessed by Caissa.

There is no doubt that a high level of involvement in the game comes with serious risk and this topic appears in most writings on chess. Fine emphasizes that strong acculturation in sticky culture of chess creates,

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 (Fine 2013: 396).

In some cases a player can become addicted to chess to such an extent that he/she risks losing control over their life, neglects family, falls into poverty, and loneliness. These are extreme cases, but they happen, especially in the era of internet chess, where one can play endlessly. Full immersion in the world of chess can be dangerous, but as a consequence it can mean total detachment from reality, escape from the linear time stream, immersion, a kind of trance during which players abandon everyday life and move to a better world in which everyday trouble ceases to have any meaning, and at least as long as the game lasts they feel a sense of happiness and fulfillment. The engagement required to achieve this is costly, but also makes all socioeconomic differences and class-based limitations transparent and non-valid.

IV: Chess transcends sport, science and art

The fourth explanation of the phenomenon of chess popularity and their transclass distinction is connected with its "flickering" and ambiguous identity, which effectively hinders its use to build the symbolism of class distinction. Many types

of human activity are easy to categorize: biology is undoubtedly science, painting is part of art, and ski jumping is sport, but chess defies easy classification and it is easy to point to elements of the social world constituting it either as a sport, as an art or as a science, at least in the eyes of many chess players. As the former chess world champion Anatoly Karpov once said, “Chess is everything: art, science, and sport”.⁶

The impossibility of confining chess to one social field of activity makes it difficult to identify the *illusio* of chess. In Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, *illusio* denotes people’s tendency to engage in a social game based on their belief in the reality and the significance of benefits from the game. *Illusio* is a belief in the priority character of the goal or stake in the game, which takes place in one of the social fields. *Illusio* is founded on the unchallenged axiom that such a fight makes sense, is meaningful and is worth investing in (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992: 115–117). *Illusio* motivates efforts and gives meaning to lives. In chess, understood as a community, sport, art, science, entertainment or total game, various *illusio* forms can be pointed out, but since there are many of them and they often invalidate each other, they effectively neutralize the emergence of a coherent symbolic implication that can become the foundation of class distinction.

Many players consider chess to be a sport, because of important similarities, particularly reliance on competition and using a ranking system. The presence of chess in the structure of Western sport as an institution is confirmed by ubiquitous tournaments, competitions, classifications, leagues, rankings, various kinds of points, categories, medals. The logic of sport is what attracts people strongly to chess, because the place in the ranking is directly associated with status, prestige and respect for a player.

Typical considerations about whether chess can be considered as a sports activity attempt to look at them through the prism of various definitions of sport. As expected, depending on the chosen definition, chess is or is not included in the sport category.

An example of such an analysis is an article by Jacek Gajewski, who refers to the definition of the sport provided by Maciej Demel and Alicja Skład, and accepts seven constitutive features of sport as the decisive criteria:

- 1) independence of direct motives from basic life needs
- 2) positive emotions accompanying decisions and actions
- 3) lack of material effect, which is always the result of productive work
- 4) the physical nature of the action with a specialized accent
- 5) regularity in striving to achieve maximum results
- 6) a clear moment of competition as one of the main incentives for improvement
- 7) strict compliance with the provisions specifying equipment standards, operating conditions and forms, which allows measurability and comparability of results (Gajewski 2012: 7–8).

⁶ Quote from <https://www.chessbazaar.com/blog/2017/10/26/chess-art-science-sport-quote-brief/> (accessed 17.05.2020).

From this perspective, chess undoubtedly meets all apart from the fourth criterion, but *physical nature of the action* can also be declared as valid, because after all, a chess player usually makes moves with pieces, which may not be intense physical activity, but it is undoubtedly physical in nature. Gajewski also refers to activities commonly recognized as sports, such as the activity of a sportsman dictating the pace of rowers, motorboat sports, or the struggles of Formula 1 racing, in which physical activity is not intense, but no one refuses them the status of sport, and thus “with all firmness and responsibility based on an in-depth analysis and facts presented, the author of the above considerations states that chess must find its place in the circle of recognized sports” (2012: 10). It is worth adding here that the preparation of chess players for games at the highest level includes both strict chess training and general physical training: hours of struggle at the chessboard are extremely physically demanding, and without good physical condition and endurance the chess player has no chance of maintaining good intellectual shape. So, even if the physical aspect in chess does not reveal itself directly, it is related to intellectual achievement.⁷

A more nuanced approach to the problem of the status of chess as a sport is proposed by Jakub Ryszard Stempień. His analysis starts with Przemysław Nosal’s reflections (2015), in which he distinguishes two approaches to defining sports: an attributive approach, enumerating the distinctive characteristics, and a contextual approach, based on the social definition of sport. Both of these perspectives have disadvantages: the first does not keep up with changes in sport, which means that its value is quickly outdated, while the second risks excessive inclusiveness and conventionality, blurring the specificity of sport. The solution proposed by Nosal, structured contextualism, which combines the universal features of sport activity with the social recognition of a given activity as a sport, is not a panacea for this problem, because the question of proving that the specific activity is socially recognized as sport remains unresolved.

Stempień proposes to solve this methodological dilemma by the adoption of quite a unique perspective of methodological dysfunctionism, assuming that dysfunctions within sport may be treated as indexes of a particular state of social awareness. In other words, if in chess we find negative phenomena which are the “dark side” of sport in general, such as doping, corruption, politicization, commercialization, and mediatization, chess itself should be considered as a sport. Taking into account that the presence of such typical sports dysfunctions has been confirmed, it is reasonable to conclude that chess should be considered a sport (Stempień 2020: 182).

⁷ Anyone who watched the struggle in bullet or blitz chess certainly will not be thinking of their participants as slow or clumsy. In these type of games players have a few minutes for the whole game and when only the seconds remain on the clock moves are made with the ultimate speed and precision. Winning at fast chess requires chess skills and physical coordination at the highest level.

Chess can be also considered as an art, because many chess players often apply aesthetic criteria to playing chess, to specific moves, a combination or the whole game. The Ukrainian grandmaster David Bronstein wrote,

Chess is a fortunate art form. [...] Its strength is in its interpretation. This phenomenon, inherent in chess, music or painting, enables one repeatedly to reproduce beauty and to afford aesthetic pleasure, frequently deepening and strengthening it by the talent and artistic experience of the interpreter (Bronstein, Smolyan 1982: 26).

There is no shortage of attempts to systematically compare chess to various fields of art. For example, the main thesis of the book by Achilleas Zographos, *Music and Chess. Apollo meets Caissa* (2017), is that chess is an art in itself, that chess generates art and is strongly associated with mathematics and music. They are all universal languages, they rely on personal expression, have the element of play, refer to symbolic language, and have an educational dimension and emotional impact.

William James admitted that solving complex problems is deeply gratifying and reveals aesthetic satisfaction (after Fine 2015: 10). “All artists are not chess players – all chess players are artists”, claimed Marcel Duchamp.⁸ Chess is sometimes treated as a kind of creative activity that strives for original, innovative solutions,

The specific metaphor used by chess players to describe a moment of artistry is brilliancy: a cut diamond on a square board. Brilliancy results from the awe experienced from a simple and perfect answer to a daunting and complex problem – a victory, but not only a victory. [...] Often the brilliancy derives from the victor’s sacrificing or placing a piece in danger; only later do observers recognize that the stratagem led to victory. “The bigger the sacrifice, the more beautiful” (Fine 2015: 11).

The abstractness and autotelic nature of chess means that the person interacting with it can lose their sense of place and time (as in the case of deep contact with great art). In many tournaments there are not only rewards for winners who scored most points, but also for players who have played the most beautiful games (brilliancy prizes). The most perfect games are described as immortal, and the chess players who played them join the pantheon of chess “deities”.⁹

Some players and some academics think that chess can be recognized as a science, as well, not only in the sense that there are various disciplines of science (mathematics, statistics, neuroscience, computer science) which are interested in chess, but also because of the systematic and value-free inquiry into a specific body of knowledge, consisting of developments of theory (chess theory), its prac-

⁸ <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-12-spring-2008/all-artists-are-not-chess-players-all-chess-players-are-artists-marcel> (accessed 6.05.2020).

⁹ More on the aesthetics of chess compositions and the beauty of chess gameplay see Herman 2012: 186–196.

tical testing, the emergence and disappearance of new paradigms, the creation of theoretical schools, the existence of classics and the emergence of revolutionaries in the evolution of chess thinking. An influential German chess player from the turn of the 20th century, a chess theorist, book author and teacher, Siegbert Tarrasch, associated chess with intellectual creativity that can bring happiness and solace to the player,

Chess is a form of intellectual productiveness, therein lies, its peculiar charm. Intellectual productiveness is one of the greatest joys – if not the greatest one – of human existence. It is not everyone who can write a play, or build a bridge, or even make a good joke. But in chess everyone can, everyone must, be intellectually productive and so can share in this select delight. I have always a slight feeling of pity for the man who has no knowledge of chess, just as I would pity for the man who has no knowledge of love. Chess, like love, like music, has the power to make men happy (Tarrasch 1987: XI).

Chess players looking for the best move in a given position actually become pursuers of truth. The search for the best move is not limited to the duration of the game, because after its end the most common sight is that of chess players who look for some quiet place to analyze (and in a sense to play again) the finished game. The analysis is often supported by chess engines, but also by other chess players who may gather around opponents who are still excited to find out about the source of their victory, defeat or draw. The opponents are looking for decisive moves, decisive mistakes and elusive inaccuracies that have pushed the game to the path of victory or to the defeat of one of the participants. Just as a failed experiment will not be a waste of time for a chemist, because it allowed him or her to verify some specific hypothesis, a lost game can be (and even should be) treated as a valuable lesson. Such a game analyzed in all possible ways, accompanied by the comments of other grandmasters (when it comes to matches at the highest level) goes into the chess annals and enriches chess culture.

Conclusions

When describing the beginnings of the modern image of chess, John Sharples (2015) draws attention to the years 1840–1851, when in England chess became an important part of the Victorian world of leisure time and a form of intellectual entertainment. Its presence in the press (chess columns in newspapers and specialized chess journals) and the development of places where an increasing number of interested players could indulge in the intellectual pleasures of the game of kings, contributed to the dissemination and popularization of the conviction that chess is the game of rationality and respect. Sharples believes that this image is far from completeness, and, recalling the literature of then well-known writer and chess player George Walker, especially his article from 1840 *The Café de la Régence*, argues that,

Walker's text reveals the failure of binary respectable constructions that help organise and classify objects and relationships when confronted with a social type such as the chessplayer. The Victorian chess-player disturbed efforts of social categorisation. In Walker's text it is an unstable form, fluid in terms of sex, nationality, motivation, or age, despite chess's status as a pastime predominantly carried out in the public sphere by white, middle-class males (2015: 20).

The reputation of a chess player is not always crystal clear and his/her motivations are not always unselfish, but there is an even more important circumstance potentially blurring the class character of chess, and that is the game itself. This is the space in which social distinctions are vulnerable, especially in the case of chess, which, "like the tomb, level [led] all grades of conventional rank and distinction, and reserve[d] its high places for the best players" (Sharples 2015: 19). Among chess players, it would be difficult to find divisions rooted in the class system, but this does not mean that there are no divisions at the chessboard. There are, but they are meritocratic and are closely related to the strength of the player and his/her position in a given chess social milieu.

It needs to be emphasized that in the *illusio* concept of agreeing to participate in a fiction does not necessarily mean believing in it. The term *illusio* means primarily 'make fun of' or 'mocking, jeering', and only then an 'illusion' (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992: 97–98). It would appear that if one accepts the belief of many chess players that chess is a miniature of life, it would mean that, from the point of view of aspirations to equality, chess is much more advanced. The image of a chess player is, of course, a socio-cultural construct, but the effects of such a construct grow beyond the social imaginary and have real consequences for the choices made. It is possible that some chess players just put on an act of being convinced that chess truly is egalitarian and treat this instrumentally, as a useful myth (which is facilitated by the previously discussed difficulty in defining the *illusio* of chess). At the level of amateur chess, the people who participate in this social world, although very diverse in many respects, generally seem rather average in terms of the socioeconomic criteria that sociologists would describe. Looking at who appears at chess tournaments and wondering what social category is clearly underrepresented, I would risk the hypothesis that these are generally economically successful people, such as creative professionals or middle and senior corporate managers who cannot afford to spend the time required by participation in chess events, or maybe they do not need successes in chess to raise their status, which is already so high. The distinction and symbolism of the status associated with chess can be used as a tool for gaining social status and a way to stand out above others, which nowadays is one of the most important cultural needs (Szlendak, Olechnicki 2017: 201–218). If it is the case that playing chess leads to social distinction, then the egalitarianism of chess would be paradoxically founded on an elitism which is relatively easy to aspire and imitate.

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SOCJOLOGICZNY PARADOKS SZACHÓW: PONADKLASOWA DYSTYNKCJA KRÓLEWSKIEJ GRY

Abstrakt. Artykuł podejmuje kwestię socjologicznego paradoksu gry w szachy, polegającego na tym, że z jednej strony nadają one osobom przynależącym do ich społecznego świata rodzaj pożądanej dystynkcji, ale z drugiej strony z dystynkcją tą nie jest sprzęgnięte położenie klasowe. Mówiąc językiem Pierre'a Bourdieu, jeśli potraktujemy szachy jako fragment pola sportu, to powinna się w nich zaznaczać dystynkcja klasowa, jednak w tym przypadku tak się nie dzieje. Dlaczego w praktyce szachy są niezwykle popularne i rozpowszechnione, i w związku z tym egalitarne, choć wydają się znakomitym tworzywem do powiększania przewagi klasowej? Co sprawia, że tak wielu ludzi gra w szachy i w jaki sposób szachy nadają graczom ponadklasową dystynkcję?

Odpowiadając na te pytania, należy zwrócić uwagę na kwestie dostępności i otwartości szachów, ich społeczny charakter, totalność szachowego doświadczenia i niemożność zdefiniowania w jednym tylko polu: sportu, nauki czy sztuki oraz – *last but not the least* – na nieoczekiwane możliwości manipulowania *illusio* szachów.

Słowa kluczowe: szachy, socjologia szachów, dystynkcja, *illusio*, socjologia sportu.