

CHESS AND FREEDOM

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Abstract. The tension between the game of chess as strictly regulated by rules and the idea of freedom can be traced in three radical examples separated by media and different periods of the twentieth century. The first emphatic employment of the concept of freedom is in the title of a chess journal issued by the Communist opposition of the central German working-class chess organization at the end of the Weimar Republic. In the journal *Frei Schach!* the radical subsection of “Red Sports Unity” asserts its claim for supremacy, demanding revolutionary goals in the class struggle. But this journalistic appeal to freedom was countered by the use of the same concept by the moderate alternative central chess organisation, and soon even by the National Socialists suppressing both working-class organisations. In the cultural scene after the second world war there was a distant, strangely depoliticized echo of freedom in chess. In the Austrian avantgarde dramatist Wolfgang Bauer’s version of Ibsen’s modernist revision of classical drama in the play *Ghosts* there is a farcical use of everyday objects as a replacement of chess elements. They function as a postmodern parody of the conventional structures of a conversation play. Compared to such highly idiosyncratic ludic transformation of chess games, today’s digitalized chess in which the computer is the final arbiter makes the game more accessible to the masses. The surface democratic appeal in which average players can turn into critics of the chess elite is accompanied by the complete subjection to digitalisation on a late capitalist agenda. However, this does not completely deprive the traditional game of chess of its promise of playful enjoyment for an increasing number of people on a global scale.

Keywords: Freedom, Liberty, Class struggle, Avantgarde, Digitization

Introduction

What does chess, a culturally privileged but largely apolitical pastime, have to do with freedom? The strict set of rules of the game traditionally limits freedoms both in the sense of freedom from arbitrary authority and liberty within a social framework. In many European languages there is a similar semantic split, though not in German.¹ Historically, the elitist exclusivity characterizing the game of chess marked its social position. It ranged from aristocratic dominance in the game to gradual middle-class participation in it and eventually also its limited appropriation by the working-class movement. The game's barrier from universal access also had roots in the relative hermeticism of its documentation, be it in the notation of games, in endgame studies or problem compositions. All these can only be deciphered by initiates. But there are also boundaries from the inside, for the players. Albert Einstein noted in his foreword to Jacques Hannak's biography of the chess world champion Emanuel Lasker that the game "holds players in its bonds, captivates the mind and in a certain way shapes them, so that the inner freedom and impartiality of even the strongest suffers as a result".²

Despite such reservations, a cultural analysis can highlight points of intersection between the game of chess and the claim to freedom. Three important scenarios of modernity will illustrate such an emphatic claim. Their succession is mirrored in the linguistic progression from German "Frei Schach" through the hybrid "Free Schach" into the globalized English "Free Chess". The first of those sceneries was the media coverage of the game during the crisis of the German workers' chess movement before 1930. Then, in chronological progression, the literary employment of the chess motif in a play by the avant-garde dramatist of the cultural evolution after 1968, in Wolfgang Bauer's version of Ibsen's play *Ghosts*. Finally, such claim to freedom goes with the completely digitalized version of the game of chess in the present boom of its unlimited global accessibility. Today, the number of countries represented in chess Olympiads often exceeds Olympiads organized by the International Olympic Committee.

The reference to freedom is a common feature of these three obviously heterogeneous reference points of chess. For long periods of its history, chess

¹ Cf. Slavoj Žižek: *Freedom. A Disease without a Cure*. London: Bloomsbury 2023, 16-18.

² Albert Einstein: „Geleitwort“, in J. Hannak: *Emanuel Lasker. Biographie eines Schachweltmeisters*. Berlin-Frohnau: Engelhardt 1952, 3.

was by no means associated with any kind of concept of freedom. In this relationship mediated by rationality, it stood in contrast to freedom as a core postulate of the French Revolution. Its pioneers of the Enlightenment, the philosophers around the French *Encyclopédie* around Diderot and Rousseau, were regulars at the Café de la Régence, the Paris centre of chess.

Revolution thwarted: Frei Schach!

The expansion of the concept of freedom since the Enlightenment soon turned into a discursive commonplace. In chess matches, the greeting “Frei Schach!” was a friendly social code in a playful competition. As in other sports, the phrase was also associated with the emancipation from social exclusion through the working-class sports movement which had been developing since industrialization. But even in club chess, “free chess associations” could accompany the breakaway from hegemonic organizations such as the German Chess Federation founded in 1877, or of middle-class clubs on a local level. In the workers' chess movement, “Free Chess!” became not only a routine in team matches, but also a fighting term in the conflict between two competing sections of the German Workers' Chess Association at the end of the Weimar Republic. The minority faction of the workers' chess movement linked to the German Communist Party published a magazine called “Frei Schach!” from 1928 to 1932. It was the organ of “Red Sports Unity”.³ Its emphasis became a signal of the social class struggle, from which the social democratic leadership of the Workers' Chess Association had gradually distanced itself. Here there were links to the freedom discourse of the international left, a bone of contention between pro- and anti-Bolshevism, and soon also between Stalinists and their Socialist and other opponents.⁴

The first issue of the new working-class chess magazine *Frei Schach!* in November 1928 carries a double battle cry. On its first page, under the journal's heading, the chess greeting was transformed into a programmatic appeal in two directions. It was directed both against the conservative middle-class chess clubs and the spreading of professional players, but also,

³ Joachim Petzoldt: „Die Arbeiterschachbewegung in Deutschland“, in: *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 32 (1990), 458-471.

⁴ Sergey Voronkov: *Masterpieces and Dramas of the Soviet Championships*. I: 1920-1927. Moscow: Elk and Ruby 2020, 168-171; Andrew Soltis: *Soviet Chess 1917-1991*. Jefferson (N.C.): McFarland 2000, 45f.

within the internal controversy of the German Workers' Chess Association, against its social democratic leadership. It was accused with the Stalinist slogan of “Social Fascism”. The article blames it for reneging for failing to follow its original revolutionary goals: “‘Frei Schach!’ as a greeting, ‘Frei Schach!’ to fight! Until we are given the central magazine under the old, unchangeable proletarian class struggle slogan.”⁵ This attack on the German Workers' Chess magazine, the *Deutsche Arbeiter-Schachzeitung* founded in 1909 and published by the national leadership, was the starting point for the beginning rivalry between two chess publications of the German workers' chess movement.

Frei Schach! was published from 1928 to 1932 by the radical Greater Berlin section of the Workers' Chess Association. Most Berlin clubs had been excluded from its Chemnitz-based organization. The renaming of *Frei Schach!* to *Workers' Chess* in April 1932, in line with the unity slogans of the “Fighting Group for Proletarian Sports Unity”, could no longer remove the fatal split in German workers' chess. It is also noteworthy that the greeting referring to freedom was also used by the opposing side in the Workers' Chess Association. An article in the last annual issue of 1928 in *Frei Schach!* refers to the attempt by the SPD-oriented leadership of the Workers' Chess Federation to attract members in the radical Berlin section for a new local foundation: “Through systematic subversive work in the Berlin Workers' Chess Club, the ‘loyalists’ are trying to bring new members to their ‘Free Workers’ Chess Association Greater Berlin’.”⁶ The social democratic Workers' Newspaper had shortly before formulated a political justification for this new foundation of a cartel by the Worker’s Chess Association leadership: “Should we run after a cartel which follows the instructions of the Communist Party headquarters and is run by comrades who have been systematically undermining any unanimity and unity?”⁷

There had been a similar conflict immediately after the revolution of 1918, when a “Free Gymnastics Association of Greater Berlin” opposed the large, communist-oriented workers' sports club Fichte as an alternative, reformist workers' sports club. In organized chess, this opposition was revived in 1930 with the foundation of a “Freie Arbeiter-Schach-Vereinigung Groß-Berlin” (Free Working-class Chess Association of

⁵ *Frei Schach! Organ der Groß-Berliner Arbeiter-Schachvereine*, 1, Nov. 1928, 1.

⁶ *Frei Schach!* 2, Dec. 1928, 19.

⁷ K. Frank: „Spaltung in Berlin“, in: *Arbeiterzeitung* Nov. 928, 349.

Greater Berlin).⁸ It combined non-Communist working-class chess clubs. The competing chess associations in German workers' chess over the course of the 1920s drew on the same rhetoric. Both originally claimed their connection to the proletarian class struggle. In both cases, this was problematic. More obviously in the case of the revolutionary opposition to the social-democrat central organisation. In the case of the Communist “Red Sports” movement, the employment of the social fascist polemics of the German Communist with its authoritarian discipline also motivated the Greater Berlin group around the magazine *Frei Schach!* In contrast, the reformist Socialist majority of the Workers' Chess Association was heavily dependent on the conservative bourgeois bloc that helped make Hitler an option, especially in the Communist majority areas of Berlin's working-class districts. Similarly, in the “Frei Heil!” greeting used by radical rightist popular sports groups the Social-democrat party newspaper *Vorwärts* saw an ominous premonition of ties between Nazi and Communist politics.⁹

The National Socialist terror of suppression, persecution and murder soon brought a violent end to both working-class factions in chess and their sympathizers. For Walter Benjamin, the chess games with Hannah Arendt in exile in Paris and in the Lourdes detention camp were a residual episode of leisure on his flight from the fascists. For his brother Georg Benjamin, the chess set he produced of bread in the cell of the Brandenburg Nazi prison was a reminder of his success in a correspondence chess tournament organized by *Frei Schach!*¹⁰ The fight for the word “Freiheit” was also undermined by its appropriation by the National Socialists as their own slogan. Niklas Frank, the youngest son of Hans Frank, the Governor General in occupied Poland, one of the most important promoters of chess in Nazi cultural politics, remembers: “My father and the other Nazis always spoke of freedom. But they meant something completely different, something terrible for freedom.”¹¹

⁸ *Vorwärts* Oct, 1930.

⁹ *Vorwärts* Aug. 1930.

¹⁰ Bernd-Peter Lange: “Zeitvertreib und Widerstand. Walter und Georg Benjamins Schach“, in: Karen Aydin et al (eds.) *Games of Empires*. Berlin: LIT 2018, 305-328.

¹¹ Pers. Communication Niklas Frank, Jan. 2024.

Taking liberties: Free Schach

In the working-class sports movement during the restoration of capitalism in the German western zones after the 1945 liberation, the old greetings and political paroles quoting freedom were no longer used. The social greeting in workers' sports: "Frei Sport!" were revived in the GDR in physical education classes in schools, in team training and in youth sports Olympics. In a highly idiosyncratic and singular way, the concept of free chess reappeared in the cultural movement in the German-speaking area after 1968. It found a literary reflection in the adaptation of Ibsen's drama *Ghosts* by the radical playwright Wolfgang Bauer.

The motif of the game of chess does not reflect any particular interest in chess on the part of the author from the Graz literary scene after 1960. Long before writing the play *Ghosts*, at the point in his career that his biographer Antonic calls his "Beat and pop era", Bauer was helped by the influence of his friend Gunter Falk, who held a doctorate in sociology with a thesis on "game systems and gaming attitudes", to overcome his aversion to chess.¹² However, this was mainly due to the construction of an absurd real-life variant of the game of chess with another friend, Georg Janoska, which they called "Free Schach". Bauer staged it at some real locations. This included a meeting at Vienna when one player swallowed a cake of soap as a move in a chess game, and the writer Bauer took off his glasses as a sign of resignation.¹³ "Free Schach" in this way quickly gained a legendary local reputation.

Bauer described the creation of this game at an artist party in 1962:

Perhaps Georg [Janoska] made the first move to offer me a game that was for me a game that was abstract and total, a game that, under the guise of combat, had only one common goal: to emerge at the end as a work of art of a game, as a game beyond games.¹⁴

When Bauer tried out his "Free Schach" with friends on some occasions, it served as an analogy to avant-garde free jazz. A critic translated Bauer's style as "Free Schach is played like jazz." This served an aesthetic purpose that severed itself from all traditional class variants of organized chess, from

¹² Thomas Antonic: *Wolfgang Bauer. Werk – Leben – Nachlass – Wirkung*. Klagenfurt: Ritter, 114.

¹³ Pers. Communication Ernst Strouhal, June 2024.

¹⁴ Antonic: Wolfgang Bauer, 115.

the workers' chess and from traditional club chess forced into the Greater German Chess Association, with which the Nazis had been yoking German and, later, Austrian Chess. This playful, pre-political anarchism is evident in the very first scene of the play *Ghosts* premiered in 1976.

The chaotic dialogue between Bauer's two hippy-esque central characters Fred and Robert (an unsuccessful writer and a sociologist) initially thematizes the realms of gender relations, alcoholism and property quarrels. It offers a parody of the structure of a conversation play in the regional Graz dialect. Early in the play, a chess phrase breaks into their dialogue and is immediately accepted as the beginning of a fake chess game:

ROBERT: Check! (He puts a beer bottle further forward)
FRED: Okay, let's play a game... a `free Schach¹⁵

The following stage directions explain the special nature of this alternative game:

They play a game of 'free chess'. The physical rituals are the same as in a conventional game of chess. Anything that is within reach serves as a piece, and the whole table serves as the playing surface. There are no rules, anything is possible. Fred stares at the table. After thinking for a while, he carefully pushes an ashtray to the left edge of the table.

This absence of rules is soon limited by a practical consensus about its conventional limits:

FRED: (pours the contents of the ashtray into Robert's beer glass) Check!
ROBERT: (takes an empty glass, pours schnaps into it) This is not a move! (Drinks)
FRED: Okay. (Drinks too) Doesn't count as a move either!

The chess game prefigures the game of personal interactions with a fragile mosaic of the characters' gender identities. This creates a response to Ibsen's family drama. The strict rules of the classic chess game are dissolved,

¹⁵ Text translated from: Wolfgang Bauer: *Ghosts, manuskripte* 13 (1973), 41, 55-70.

as are the stable identities of the characters obsessed with property, sexual identities and alcohol. The anarchy of the chess game deconstructs what the text calls Ibsen's "bourgeois game". It suitably ends with a checkmate.

The dramatic clamour of "Free Schach" in Wolfgang Bauer's parodistic adaptation of Ibsen's *Ghosts* reflects a rigorous rejection of Ibsen's place in the emergence of modern drama. At the beginning of literary modernism, Ibsen's analytical technique focussing on human inner life, in *Ghosts* and in other plays, answered classical tragedy's claim to truth.¹⁶ Bauer upends this modern deconstruction of the tragic with his highly grotesque figure of freedom in the field of strictly rule-bound chess. His experimental avant-gardism and farcical unorthodoxy had its impact before the success of other Graz Group writers such as Gerhard Roth and Peter Handke who soon moved into literary mainstream modes. This was in a context that made Bauer an "early burnt-out" case - despite the opinion of Elfriede Jelinek, who described him as the "most important contemporary writer".¹⁷ His revolutionary theatre, however facile its aestheticist rejection of the culture around it may have been, soon shed its scandalous momentum. Soon the author lost much of his initial international impact, until he "was famous world-wide only in Graz", as one critic has it.¹⁸

Playing games now: Free Chess

Digitalisation at the present time allows an idea of freedom beyond any avant-garde alternative movements. However, some scepticism towards the advocates of the internet as a "realm of freedom", and of social media as democratization, is now becoming increasingly prevalent. In chess, the term "freestyle chess" now often refers to the variant of chess constructed as "Chess 960". In this innovation the position of all chess pieces, except the pawns, on both base lines of the chessboard, is fixed by drawing lots. In this way, chance sets a limit to the predictability of the game, with otherwise unchanged rules. This new variant of the game is given the term "Fischer Random" (after its inventor, the former world chess champion Robert Fischer). It comes close to the surrealist André Breton's claim that it is not

¹⁶ Peter Szondi: *Theorie des modernen Dramas*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1964, 29.

¹⁷ Cited in Wolfgang Kralicek: „Grazer Aktionismus“, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 30th Nov. 2018, 16.

¹⁸ Florian Neuner: „Trapp trapp, knarr knarr, quietsch knarr“, *ND Die Woche* 20th Jan. 2024, 9.

the chess pieces that need to be changed, but the game itself, which Montaigne had already regarded as too serious.¹⁹

“Free Chess” is now also available on various internet websites free of charge. Its suitability for social networks is what makes it so popular at present. In the global advertising market they serve, the adaptability of chess for financial calculation is a recurrent motif. The term “Free Chess”, standardized internationally in the key language of English, radicalizes what in Wolfgang Bauer’s postmodern conversation drama came across as the hybrid “Free Schach”. In today’s Berlin alternative leisure chess scene, Bauer’s familiar connection of “Chess and Jazz” is organized as a popular event. Such impulses serve to save “something old-fashioned like chess” from extinction, according to a local newspaper.²⁰ The near-homophonous combination of jazz and chess retains something of the popular cultural impulse and nonconformist tendencies of Bauer’s theatrical experiment.

The triumph of the *lingua franca* English in “Free Chess” accompanies a historical reference in the cultural history of chess to the early periods of industrialization. Since then, the beginnings of machine development of artificial intelligence have often coincided with ideas about the rational calculation of chess games. This was a collateral effect in Charles Babbage’s “Analytical Engine” and for Ada Lovelace, as later for Torres Quevedo, Konrad Zuse and Alan Turing. Previously, such a connection had already been cleverly simulated by Baron von Kempelen’s famous chess automaton in 1770 (A popular term in colloquial German for faking is, literally, “building a Turk”). The ubiquitous implementation of the computer in the era of neoliberal capitalism has enabled a great expansion in global leisure. The worldwide spread of those actively or passively involved in the game of chess is almost limitless and no longer tied to access to highly specialized expert circles or hegemonic arbiters. Particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic, millions of fans have started following influencers in chess.

The universal access to the cognitive and combinational knowledge required for the game of chess has led, among other things, to a surface democratization of the game. What was once a hierarchically limited competence is now available to everyone at great speed, on the level of replaying tournament games and of live performance. The Viennese

¹⁹ André Breton: “Profanation“, quoted in English transl. in Larry List (ed.): *The Imagery of Chess Revisited*. New York: George Braziller 2005, 75.

²⁰ Carola Tunk: „Bretter, die die Welt bedeuten“, *Berliner Zeitung* 26th Feb., 2024, 12.

cultural analyst Ernst Strouhal has lucidly described the change in chess-community's mindsets due to technological progress:

Through computer analyses of tournament games during live broadcasts, grandmasters are now viewed like fish in an aquarium. The question is no longer what the best move is and what plans the grandmasters are pursuing, but whether they will see the best move we already know. This appears on the screen in a fraction of a second, and when we see it, it often seems logical, even obvious to us.

This results in a deceptive liberation from personal limitations: “The onlooker emancipates himself; the know-it-all turns into an expert with a view of the screen, who now actually knows better with technical support.”²¹

The game of chess structurally facilitates liberation from the traditional individual barriers to access. When the sociologist Steffen Mau, in his study on the quantification of the social in the current phase of neoliberal capitalism, shows how digitization is affecting different areas of fundamental capitalization, many of the phenomena he describes can be found in today's chess culture.²² The “practices of measuring, evaluating and comparing” he sees as “quantifying forms of social ranking” are just as characteristic of chess as the universalization of competitive behavior in tournaments and duels. A new addition is the self-monitoring of the players, which is based on evaluation figures on the ELO scale. In its practical impact on the game, this corresponds to the “singularity for all” described by Andreas Reckwitz as a defining feature. It tends to promote a renewed “regime of inequalities”, replacing older forms of hierarchy in chess through tournament success and gender-related, graded championship titles.

One of the consequences of the digital globalization of chess is a loss of a charismatic aura for the top players. The former world chess champion Magnus Carlsen, who voluntarily retired from that title despite continuing to dominate the classic game, now prefers more entertaining forms of play with tighter time limits. None of his predecessors could ever have risked this without sinking into public nemesis. The victory of the chess computer *Deep*

²¹ Ernst Strouhal: „Der digitale Karneval. Schach in der postindustriellen Gesellschaft“, *KARL* 2 /2022), 33.

²² Steffen Mau: *Das metrische Wir. Über die Quantifizierung des Sozialen*. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2017, 14-18.

Blue over world champion Kasparov in 1997 contributed to this loss of charisma. The prevalence of quantification leads to a new, all-encompassing hierarchy in which individual performance is measured against the computer scale set as a benchmark.

In the marketable quantification as a characteristic of the culture of neoliberal capitalism, the concept of freedom is split within itself. Slavoj Žižek has formulated its critical side in a radically totalizing way by ignoring the individuals in the game culture. In his view, the contradiction between freedom and its opposite is paradoxically eliminated.

In capitalist slavery we simply feel free, while in true liberation we voluntarily accept slavery as a service to a cause and not just to ourselves. In today's cynical functioning of capitalism, I know very well what I am doing and will continue to do, the liberating aspect of my knowledge is suspended... In capitalism I am precisely enslaved when I “feel free”. This feeling equals exactly the form of my slavery.²³

But it is this ambivalence in the meaning of freedom that energizes the growing number of academically educated people in the expanding service industries.

The political-economic form of Žižek's criticism of global networks, however realistic it may be, because of its totalizing perspective is not immediately on a par with the social practice of playing chess. It draws on the Marxist tradition of separating everything that claims an autonomous identity from a “central contradiction”. However, a nostalgic reference back to the non-commercial roots of digital development is a precarious antidote to the hegemonic sway of corporate business over it.²⁴ Žižek's position has an equivalent in Janis Joplin's pop-cultural line: “Freedom is another word for nothing left to lose.”

In the field of chess, such pessimism is contrasted by individual self-empowerment through the globalized game. The game's intellectual and aesthetic attractions increase with its general accessibility for millions of players. They become visible, for example, in the current boom in chess

²³ Slavoj Žižek: *Wie ein Dieb bei Tageslicht. Macht im Zeitalter des posthumanen Kapitalismus*. Frankfurt/Main: Fischer 2019, 265.

²⁴ Cf. Sahra Wagenknecht: *Die Selbstgerechten. Mein Gegenprogramm für Gemeinwohl und Zusammenhalt*. Frankfurt/New York 2022, 391.

following the success of the streaming series *Queen's Gambit*. They refute, in both private and public spaces, the assumption that the traditional board game has turned into an anachronism, which has briefly resurfaced following the inevitable defeat of super-grandmasters of chess by digital programs.

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