

CHAPTER 1:

The Theory of Chess

By this time, the theory of chess is well advanced, yet it seems that no one has really taken the time to codify all of the theory in existence in to an over-all approach that is cohesive.

Let us start at the dawn of modern theory, and review all of the relevant axioms so that when I apply them later on, you will understand where I am coming from.

First, we consider the thoughts of Wilhelm Steinitz, Emanuel Lasker and Siegbert Tarrasch in what I term to be the “classical” era of chess. Note that I do not include Aron Nimzowitsch in this group. This is because Nimzowitsch’s concepts were so far advanced for his time, that I really had to include them in the axioms of modern chess theory.

We will cover none of Tarrasch’s work, as the author shares the opinion of Lasker in his belief that Tarrasch was too dogmatic in his approach to the game.

We will deal with the axioms of theory in chronological order of the years in which they first appeared.

The Axioms of Steinitz

1. A plan must have a reason.

This concept was a novelty in the time of Steinitz. In his era, the plan in any game of chess was simple: Attack, attack and attack some more. Participants were honor bound to accept gambits, and such theories as prevention of the opponent’s plans were in the future. Steinitz opined that one should only

attack if one was justified by the position, or in other words, if one had a concrete and viable reason to believe an attack would succeed.

2. The basis of a successful plan is always a valuation of advantages and disadvantages.

Plans of attack should logically only succeed if one held some type of advantage in the position on the board.

3. Valuations of advantage or disadvantage should stem from the body of chess knowledge.

Factors such as advantages or disadvantages in material, time and space are all relevant.

4. Don’t try to win the game out of the opening.

Building on the previous axioms, it is simple logic that one must build carefully from the opening moves in to a position where a reasonable advantage has been achieved, and one now has the right to attack.

5. The way to a strong advantage is through efficiently placed (optimal) pieces, and the accumulation of many small, seemingly insignificant, advantages.

Steinitz felt that small advantages such as more actively placed pieces and/or a better pawn structure, would tell in the end. From such positions of advantage, combinations would grow like flowers on the vine.

6. Economy of Defense is important.

One should play all moves necessary to the defense of one's position, but never more. The minimal number of moves to establish adequate defense is all that is required. No more, no less.

7. The natural end of all balanced positions are more balanced positions, from which it is not possible for either side to win. Therefore, seek imbalances in the position on the board, and seek balance in the position in the form of compensation in structure or material

Imbalances in structure of the opposing sides, or material imbalances such as rook + piece + pawn versus queen, or rook + pawns versus a pair of minor pieces, as a few examples, are desirable, and should be actively sought when their creation is of advantage to the player.

8. Don't be afraid to make strange or provocative moves.

As long as a move meets the dictates of our axioms, in that it brings a piece to an efficient (optimal) square, performs a necessary function of defense, or serves to provoke the opponent in to a rash and/or precipitous act, it is permissible.

9. Think of your and your opponent's position as a chain of interlocking and complex links.

Steinitz felt that one could then discern what moves to play based on the strength or weaknesses of the various links (squares or pieces). (Author's Note: Lasker felt this device too simplistic, but I disagree. - WTD)

The Axioms of Lasker

1. Pieces must co-operate.

"The result of co-operation, in attacking positions is to strengthen each element of the group; in positions of defense, to protect each other; in positions of balance, to complement each other"

– Emanuel Lasker

2. The less distance between pieces, the stronger and more cohesive is the whole of the position.

"A defect in co-operation is often indicated by great distance between the points [that] pieces occupy.....considering the simple geometry of the chess-board and the laws of motion of the pieces, distance is a first...measure of the degree [to which pieces co-operate.]"

– Emanuel Lasker

3. One must combine both the exploitation and defense of weaknesses.

Whereas Steinitz and Tarrasch concentrated mainly on the exploitation of weaknesses, Lasker espoused the defense of weaknesses as an integral part of the game.

4. Memorization of vast numbers of opening variations is folly.

"[Lasker] did not believe in memorizing ...fashionable variations [that] would soon be out of fashion...In opening theory, the only certainty is change, flux and capricious taste. Most players prefer to have their choice of openings derived from dogmatic authority."

– Fred Reinfeld

5. Every game of chess is unique.

“[Lasker feels that each position] ...has some hidden aspect [that] the sceptic; the man of resource, will unearth.”

– Fred Reinfeld

6. Avoid Dogma

“Of my fifty-seven years, I have applied at least thirty to forgetting most of what I had learned or read, and since I have succeeded in this I have acquired a certain ease and cheer which I should never again like to be without.”

– Emanuel Lasker

7. The value of a victory often lies in its aesthetics.

“When mind overcomes matter, we are charmed.”

In chess, the brutal force is composed of the number, strength and mobility of the pieces, and the difficulty of the task set. If this brutal force is bested by the few in number, the slight in strength, in moves which [seem weak],...by the power of the spirit, by an idea which, seemingly absurd, is truth itself, we are delighted.”

– Emanuel Lasker

8. At its core, chess is a matter of mathematics.

In contrasting Tarrasch, who was admittedly poor at mathematics, to Lasker, Fred Reinfeld writes:

“A chess master who lacks a gift for mathematics may very well be deficient in

*specific chess qualities as well. Mathematics requires imagination **and** exactitude. Tarrasch was able to conceive great plans, but he was inclined to be [poor] in execution....To overcome the relatively weak resistance of lesser players was not an insoluble task for Tarrasch, [but] to beat down the resistance of Lasker was...too much for him.”*

Now, we will move on to modern chess theory. We will draw on the guiding lights of Isaac Lipnitsky, John Watson, Mihai Suba, R.N. Coles and Hans Berliner. Theories, ala Nimzowitsch, are mirrored in the comments of Watson and Lipnitsky.

Axioms of Modern Chess Theory

1. Flanking pawn moves are acceptable in the opening, nor is the number of pawns moved in the opening relegated to one or two.

Concerning our pawn moves in the opening, in the books, *Questions of Modern Chess Theory*, and *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*, Isaac Lipnitsky and John Watson write:

“There is no doubt that flank attacks as a means of fighting for the center have a great future.”

“Whether in closed, semi-open or open positions, flank pawn moves are regularly employed for a variety of reasons, e.g., the establishment of space, [or the] discouragement of castling by the opponent. ...the number of pawn moves in the opening can range from one to eight or more, depending on the requirements of the position.”

2. Static strategical aims should be based solely on the position currently on the board.

Concerning our **static** strategical aims, based on a purely pragmatic point of view, Lipnitsky writes:

“The basis for a game of chess is a purposeful plan which, beginning in the opening, is consistently developed in the middlegame. A highly characteristic feature of modern opening play is that from the very start of the game, the players will try to predetermine the channels in which the middlegame fight will be conducted.”

“In the opening, you have to contend not so much with your opponent’s individual moves as with his ideas and plans....The masking of your own plans, which demands flexibility in your play, is also a very significant factor.”

These statements are the essence of modern chess **prophylaxis**, which Watson says, consists of

“...prevention of the opponent’s plans in general, and protection of key points in our position.”

3. Dynamic strategical aims are based not on aesthetic placement of pieces, but on the total latent or potential activity of all pieces and pawns.

Concerning our **dynamic** strategical aims, in his book, *Dynamic Chess Strategy*, Mihai Suba writes:

“As a chess player my feelings were that dynamism was something else, not just a temporary superiority, either numerical or qualitative. Strange combinations sometimes come right out of the blue. Dynamism should

*should show itself not as a momentary ‘firework display’, but also as the **latent or potential activity of all pieces and pawns.**”*

R.N. Coles, in his book *Dynamic Chess*, considers the Dynamic Revolution to be found in the play of such players as Breyer, who:

“...instead of selecting openings where objectives were small but clear-cut from the outset... preferred to build up a position full of dynamic energy - ‘malignant’ energy, Tartakower called it - which could be released at will at a suitable target and at a suitable moment. In the early part of the game, during which this energy was created and accumulated, Breyer often made moves that were in direct conflict with the tenets of the classical style but which were found later to fit perfectly in to his scheme of play, when the pent up energy was finally released. His very odd opening moves are none-the-less in keeping with his dynamic play, for though contrary to Tarrasch’s teaching, he gives up both time and space, his game thereby acquires a certain extra hidden energy.”

Turning to a more purely quantitative view of our strategy, I refer to Hans Berliner’s book, *The System*, in which he puts forth several algorithmic formulae for determining validity of a dynamic chess strategy.

The most important consideration is to control the entire chessboard. Towards this end, Berliner gives the following elements:

1. Pieces placed on optimal squares and in the fewest number of moves.
2. Play moves that leave open the greatest number of attractive options available to other pieces. The piece to be moved ought to have no more than one attractive option at its disposal given the current position.

Berliner states that the strategy can be considered successful if we are better in:

1. Optimal Pieces.
2. Piece Co-operation
3. More fixed targets
4. Good defensive qualities
5. Control of more squares.