

It was better not to know

What have we learnt from Andrew McGettigan's reconstruction (in *RP* 161) of the photographed Svendborg chess match? In a nutshell, that Brecht played bad moves and Benjamin failed to take advantage. For those of us who have long cherished the idea of these two playing matches of the highest standard to match their contributions outside the chess board, the twelve moves shown to us in *Radical Philosophy* are a great disappointment.

McGettigan looks on the bright side, concluding that Benjamin and Brecht show from their play that they are not mere 'wood-pushers'. Another point of comparison might be a favoured term of chess columnists – 'the average club player'. This figure of gentle condescension is generally invoked as a way of assessing the relative difficulty of any given chess problem. If it is within the grasp of the 'average club player', then it is fairly straightforward. Based on what McGettigan has provided for us (and it is hard to see, given the two photographed positions, any other move order), the average club player would make quick work of both Benjamin and Brecht.

Annotation

Brecht with the White pieces, playing first.

1. e4. The most common opening move in chess, and 'The primary cause of all White's subsequent difficulties.'¹
e6. Benjamin plays the French defence. What else?
2. d4 d5.
3. e5. The advance variation of the French, as McGettigan notes. Emanuel Lasker, World Chess Champion 1894–1921, says of this variation: 'What a pity that the first player has it in his power to reduce the French game to a sterile and lifeless position almost certain to end in a draw.' The advance, he concludes, is 'not to be recommended'.² Of Lasker, Gershom Scholem notes: 'In May 1919 I attended a philosophical lecture by the international chess champion Emanuel Lasker and then complained to Benjamin about the utter emptiness of that talk. Benjamin looked at me wide-eyed and said: "What do you expect of him? If he said anything, he would no longer be the world chess champion."³
c5. The correct response, attacking White's centre.
4. f4. A departure from the main lines, but not unheard of. John Watson in *Play the French* scores it as ?!, which is to say, a sharp but objectively weaker move, which may contain dangers for an unprepared opponent.⁴ Brecht's subsequent play suggests, however, that such considerations didn't come into it at all, rather that he was following that beginner's maxim 'When in doubt, push a pawn.'
c4. As McGettigan notes, with this move Benjamin takes the tension out of the position, and defeats the purpose of playing c5 the move previous, because he is no longer challenging Brecht's central pawn. With this move, the players have officially left 'theory', or the openings 'book' – rather early at the fourth move.
5. g3. Brecht, against all advice given to children learning chess, continues to push pawns rather than develop his pieces. As the empty-headed Lasker puts it, 'Avoid the moves of Pawns in the Opening as far as possible. The distrust of Pawn moves [is] founded on experience in tournament play. If one was worsted in the Opening, one could invariably point to a Pawn move as the original offence' (41).

- Bb4+. Developing his Knight to c6 is a better choice for Benjamin.
6. Nd2? Bxd2? The key point in the position. Brecht must block the check and repel the Bishop by moving his Pawn one square from c2 to c3. Now the simple pawn push from c4 to c3 would win Benjamin a Pawn immediately, make a mess of Brecht's centre, and virtually guarantee Benjamin a win with careful play (6... c3 7. bxc3 Bxc3 8. Rb1 Bxd4). The average club player would have found the move in thirty seconds, but Benjamin chose the exchange of Bishop for Knight, after his standard thirty minutes of thought. What is more, Benjamin has given up his strong dark-squared Bishop, and is left only with the light-squared one, which is locked in, a perennial weakness of the French player.
 7. Bxd2 f6 (or f5) Nc6 is still better for Benjamin, who has caught the bug of Pawn-pushing from his friend.
 8. exf6 (or exf6 *en passant*) Qxf6. Benjamin captures the f6 pawn with his Queen in order to threaten Brecht's Pawn on d4, but the threat is innocuous and easily defended. Benjamin should capture with his Knight (Nxf6) instead. Again, the usual advice to beginners is to leave the development of the Queen till later: 'do not bring out your Queen too early in the game. It is too valuable a piece to expose to the attack of lesser forces and you will only lose time and have to retreat if you make a premature sortie with the Queen.'⁵
 9. Be3 Ne7. When Brecht *should* be pushing a Pawn (still c3) he chooses to move a piece he has already moved. Probably even better for Brecht is Qh5+, with the Queen then coming to e5. If Benjamin had captured with the Knight on the previous move, Brecht would not have this threat.
 10. h4? Hopeless. Brecht still declines to develop a new piece, choosing instead to weaken the Pawn on g3 and expose his King further. The Queen check on h5 is still worth trying. Nf5 Benjamin has a plan. He wants simultaneously to threaten Brecht's Bishop on e3 and the pawn at g3, but Brecht has an easy defence, and Benjamin should move his undeveloped Knight to c6 (the move recommended at 5 and 7).
 11. Bf2 Having got himself into this bizarre position, Brecht now moves his Bishop for the third time in the opening to protect the Pawn at g3. The check by the Queen on h5 was still possible, messing up Benjamin's King-side.
Nc6. Finally!
Brecht should now castle Queen-side, offering the Pawn sacrifice, with many attacking chances, but instead he pushes a pawn.
 12. c3. Quite an achievement by Brecht, to have played twelve moves and developed only two of his pieces. And by Benjamin, to have made no headway. On the other hand, if the aim is not to win, but to produce an eccentric position with many dynamic possibilities, the two friends have succeeded.

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Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, John Calder, London, 1963, p. 167. Based on his annotation of the game between Murphy and Mr Endon, and taking into account his permutational talents, the smart money would be on Beckett against the other two chess-playing Bs.
2. Emanuel Lasker, *Lasker's Manual of Chess*, Dover, New York, 1960, p. 99. Lasker fled Germany in 1933 to Moscow, and escaped the Soviet Union in 1937 to the USA where he died in 1941.
3. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1981, p. 83. Benjamin's statement is ambiguous. Does he mean that as a public figure Lasker could not risk saying anything controversial, or that to become chess champion necessarily means a lack of ambition and flexibility in the intellectual realm?
4. In chess annotation, ! = a good move, ? = a bad move, ?? = an immediately losing move, !? = a good move, but with potential pitfalls.
5. Harry Golombek, *The Game of Chess*, 3rd edn, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980, p. 39.

Further discussion of the Benjamin–Brecht chess game will be restricted to the chess discussion board of the *Radical Philosophy* Facebook page. [Ed.]