

DO “NEW IDEAS” STAND UP IN PRACTICE?

by Richard Reti

(translated by R Tekel and M Shibut)

Translators' Note: In 1922 Richard Reti published one of the undisputed classics of chess literature, *New Ideas In Chess*. In this book Reti described the historical development of chess ideas up through the then-current “hypermodern movement.” He elaborated upon this theme in a later book, *Masters of the Chessboard*, which was published in 1932 (three years after the author's death.) In the meantime, however, the following supplement to *New Ideas* appeared in a 1926 edition of *Календарю Шахматиста* (Chessplayer's Calendar). Calendar was a Soviet periodical under the editorship of masters Veinstein and Levenfisch. The October 1987 issue of *Шахматный Бюллетень* (Chess Bulletin) reprinted the article with the observation, “in these days when the study of openings emphasizes concrete variations, Reti's general approach to the problems of the opening and his reasoning are of special interest.” As far as we know, this is the first appearance of Reti's essay in English.



I WILL TRY TO ANSWER the question in the title, which was posed to me by the editor of a recent book. I will also use this opportunity to comment on the hypermodern school of chess, as my name is associated with this idea in the eyes of the general public. My work is often cited in this connection by critics and adherents alike.

Tartakower originated the term “hypermodernism.” In my opinion it is not especially attractive, but in view of its widespread acceptance I will adopt it.

To address the principle question of whether hypermodernism has justified itself, we first must agree on what the word represents. Confusion surrounds even this point. Many chess enthusiasts regard the fianchetto and the holding back of center pawns as the essence of hypermodernism. In fact, while these are striking features, they are only manifestations of its underlying ideas and are not the ideas themselves. To others, hypermodernism is at least a bending of the laws of strategy if not a complete rejection of healthy positional tastes. Still others see in hypermodernism a return to the ideals of Anderssen and Morphy at the expense of the principles laid out by Steinitz. This notion portrays hypermodernism as a kind of “neoromanticism.”

My first task, by no means easy, is to overturn such false views of hypermodernism. The disciples of the neoromantic interpretation tend to be close adherents of my 1922 book *New Ideas In Chess*. Earlier than others, they proclaimed me to be an innovator. They also regarded me as a liberator from “dull” or “boring” positional play. (I'm expressing their views - not my own!) Their euphoria became something of an embarrassment for me inasmuch as I was received by them as a “messiah” to common chess players. Nonsense! Hypermodernism really has nothing to do with such neoromanticism. It strives not to destroy but to create; to continue the development of theory founded on the work of the great masters of the past.

Now we may consider the true meaning of hypermodernism:

Principles of play in so-called “open” positions were well known to chess masters in the era preceding Steinitz. That type of position occurs when the pawns of both sides do not bypass each other during the initial skirmish but are exchanged or sacrificed, as in gambits. As a result the board is cleared; free

lines and diagonals appear. Masters of that age correctly appreciated how the loss of a tempo was tantamount to loss of the game; they knew that attacks undertaken with insufficient force on hand were doomed to failure; etc.

Then came Steinitz. He established a whole new school of chess. He discovered principles governing so-called "closed positions." In this category of position, pawns lock against one another and exchanges are minimal. Both sides try to limit the opponent's freedom of movement in the center. This new school paid particular attention to questions of pawn structure; the use of strong and weak points; etc.

Up until then, only open and closed positions were known. A third type of "mixed positions" - half open and half closed - were hardly ever encountered in practice. For it was assumed that each side had to use the pawns straightaway to prevent the opponent from occupying the center and to fight for space.

Thus games of that time began with the double step movement of one or the other center pawn; for example, the move 1 e4, which lays claim to space in the center. The opponent usually answered 1...e5, fighting for space himself and preventing White from forming a broad pawn center. Black also tried 1...c5 or 1...e6 however, for any appearance they give of neglecting the basic requirements is illusory. Experience demonstrated that Black could not in any case advance both center pawns two squares, eg, after 1...e5 Black's d-pawn had to remain at d6. So in playing 1...e6 Black had in mind the move 2...d5, whereby he would be no worse off than usual in terms of his pawn center. The e- and d-pawns merely exchanged roles, while the space occupied by the defense was undiminished. The essential situation remained unchanged, although White had to decide whether to open the game by exchanging pawns or to close the position by 3 e5. Similarly 1...c5 appeared, although not with the purpose of playing a true Sicilian Defense. Black's intention was again 2...e6 with ...d5 soon to follow. The purpose of 1...c5 was to hinder the formation of a chain of White pawns at d4 /e5.

An analogous idea underlay Tchigorin's method of defending the queen pawn game (the Old Indian Defense). Instead of 1...d5 and satisfying himself with a single step by the king pawn, Tchigorin began 1...Nf6 to hinder e4 by White and next moved the d-pawn one square (2...d6) to prepare the double-step advance of his e-pawn (assisted by ...Nbd7). Thus we get the same idea as in the French Defense but on the opposite flank. (Today Tchigorin's defense appears in an ultra-modern form where Black surrenders the center.)

In all these old openings, an early clash of center pawns occurs and this leads to either an exchange or a blockade. Thus former theory recognized only two classes of position. Positions of the third class were unknown.

Nimzowitsch presses his claim - undisputed, however - to be the first to consciously reject an automatic occupation of the center by pawns. True, he only used such systems as the second player and not as the aggressor. The Alekhine Defense epitomizes the problems arising in such openings. Alekhine plays 1 e4 Nf6. By this move he does not rush to occupy the center with pawns and he even presents White with a chance to gain space by 2 e5 with gain of tempo.

The practice of recent years indicates that 2 e5 is double edged and leads to clear disadvantage for White, since Black's counterattack by ...d6 begins rapidly and finds a convenient target in White's pawns. Thus there is no reason for Black to rush to occupy the center with pawns, because White

hasn't the means to exploit Black's delay nor to strengthen his central grip in the long run. It became evident that the double step of White's pawn, and its dominion in the center, does not amount to a real advantage. To the contrary, Alekhine's Defense shows how the pawn in question can easily become an object of attack. This notion is as valid for White as for Black. And thus crumbled the old image of a pawn center as representing the best method of play.

However, when one or both sides avoids forming a pawn center in the opening we get that category of positions that was unknown in the past. Here both sides' center pawns are neither free nor blocked but retain the possibility of transposing to either of these categories. Prior to hypermodernism no theory existed for such "unfixed" positions.

Just as Steinitz and his new school discovered laws for closed positions, the hypermodern school seeks those principles of play that apply to "unfixed" positions.

By defining hypermodernism in this light I all but answer the question contained in the title. One can measure the practical successes of hypermoderns in various ways; one can regard their experiments as deviations from "correct" play; but one cannot a priori reject their approach to positions of a sort previously uninvestigated.

Theoretically, it is entirely possible that hypermodernism is digging its own grave. Let us suppose that the best method of play in non-fixed positions (including the initial position, which has been investigated empirically but not codified) is shown one day to consist of immediately transposing into some position of the first two categories. This would indicate a predominance or superiority of the old methods of play and a necessity of returning to them. Note, the results of hypermodern research thus far gives no indication for such a conclusion. But even if such a conclusion was possible, even then, by strengthening the general theory of openings hypermodernism would have proven its worth.

Wishing to include a bit more meat in this discussion, I highlight what sort of tasks remain for hypermodern investigation. So for example, one unsolved problem has wide interest: we have already seen that an early advance of center pawns creates points of attack for the opponent and is probably not the optimal line of play. On the other hand, if such moves are delayed a danger arises that they will be prevented altogether, resulting in a cramped position for a long time. In early hypermodernism this very mistake was the cause of many defeats. But even now there are no general rules for determining the proper moment for advancing into the center.

Merely by raising such questions hypermodernism has already contributed a great deal. Now I will propose a thesis, the proof of which the reader and I can seek together. It is known that the significance of a single tempo, and thus the significance of development, is greatest in open positions. In closed positions it plays almost no role. Consequently, it would seem to be in White's interest to open the game (without loss of tempo, of course). How can this be achieved? Most likely by exposing and attacking the opponent's strong points. One would expect Black's strongest point in the center to be d5 since, unlike e5, it has natural protection by the queen. Therefore, the ideal initial move is 1 c4, immediately taking aim at d5. Should Black support d5 by 1...Nf6, then White reinforces the attack by 2 Nc3. Let's assume that Black answers 2...e5. This weakens d5 and reveals his intention of building his position around e5 by such moves as ...Nc6 and ...d6. (Even with 2...e6 he could not control d5 in the long run.) Now White need not continue attacking d5, which Black abandoned without a fight, by 3 g3 and 4 Bg2. Rather, following the logic given above White should strike the new bastion e5 by 3 Nf3 and (in reply to 3...d6 or ...Nc6) 4 d4, and he thereby achieves an advantage.

Alternately, from Black's point of view: having started a tempo behind in development Black is interested in a closed game. It is futile for him to assail the opponent's strong points since that will lead to a dissolution of the position. His plan must be to establish a blockade on the weak squares in White's position. The creation of a mutual blockade will obviously lend the game a closed character. Therefore, if White begins, say, 1 d4 it is disadvantageous to attack the strong point by 1...c5, but preferable to pressure the weakened e4 by 1...Nf6 with the idea of ...b6 and ...Bb7.

Such general considerations do not comprise an exhaustive proof. But I hope this will demonstrate to the reader the value of seeking general laws - in a word, theory - for non-fixed positions.

What will be hypermodernism's future? Nowadays it has many opponents, especially among older masters. But even they cannot ignore its achievements. The more conspicuous the practical benefits of hypermodernism, the sooner it will be accepted by masters in general.

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