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THE JUNGLE AND THE POLDER

One need not travel to the wilds of Kalimantan or the forests of Zimbabwe to find the laws of the jungle in operation. Some purists even hold that the chess-board itself retains too many reminiscences of jungle warfare, quite apart from its barely disguised class consciousness, dividing the pieces into Officers and other ranks and enslaving the Pawns by severely restraining that infantry's mobility.

To the minds of some, matters appear in an even more unfavourable light by the commando (German: Läufer) assuming the ecclesiastical garb of a Bishop. In brief, to the ultra-pure to whom everything should at least be pure, even the game of chess might seem tainted with impurity.

To some other purists, commerce is unclean by instinctive aversion, reeking with the fetor of sweat-shops and the effluvia of ill-gotten gains. Combining the chess-board, with its ancient jungle associations, and the teeming of commerce must therefore hark back to the jungle with its overpowering reek, at least to some oversensitive senses.

This powerful combination of ancestral and modern jungle warfare is precisely what occurred at the unlikely location of Amsterdam, happily remote from the primeval forests of this world. Amsterdam, on the face of it, is the very seat of moderation, capital of the country of which Baudelaire declared:

"Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté."
[There, nothing is found but order and beauty,
Comfort, calm and pleasure.]

Yet the combination of chess and commerce has proved to be so powerful as to overcome the Netherlands' essential tranquillity. Even in the brand-new, surgically clean surroundings of the World Trade Center, the law of the jungle re-asserted itself with a will, in spite of the subduing influence of the Dutch polders with their infinite, sedate horizons.

Firm fought firm, brand did battle against brand, the threefold powers of darkness, Mephistopheles in triplicate, were engaged, tooth and claw, against Plymate, luscious but defenseless in her nakedness. The outcome was predictable to pessimists, realists and purists alike: the powers of darkness won the day.

Indeed, the law of the jungle seemed to be vindicated. Not only did the strongest prevail crushingly, but a successful appeal was made to altruism among kinsmen: the Amsterdam jungle laws prescribed that near relations, stable-mates so to speak, should not compete. Any sociobiologist will tell you nowadays that this seemingly altruistic behaviour is, in fact, for the greater glory of its kin and hence egotistical in the end. So it turned out to be: co-operation among the stable-mates made them fitter for championship, hence for sales, hence for reproduction than they would have been had they vied with one another.

The Editors would not agree with the biases, distortions and general iniquities so acutely reproducing the laws of the jungle in a field as human and as humane as chess. They strongly support their contributors' proposals to arrive at fairer laws and would dearly love computer chess to be an equal-opportunity employer and to be perceived as such.

So we plead for better rules and more equitable practices. Yet we have no illusion that rules rather than strength and cunning will continue to dominate the jungle. The laws of the jungle, however crude, express the struggle for life.

Nor do the Editors despair: after all, the jungle was the cradle of evolution and such jungle as is bound to remain within the dignified precincts of computer chess can only serve further to promote the cause of evolution, which is the emergence of ever better chess-playing programs. We shall applaud the outcome while deploring the jungle.

Bob Herschberg
Jaap van den Herik

Ch. Baudelaire (1861). L'invitation au voyage. No. liii from *Les Fleurs du mal*, quoted after Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. I, p. 53, Paris, Gallimard, 1975.