

THE GAMES OF HISTORY

Hélène Valance – The research program I am conducting at INHA is called *Histoire en Jeux* (History in Games). It involves studying a corpus of games dating from the long 19th century, from 1789, with for instance the first revolutionary card game, to the First World War, with the anti-German games. I am looking into the way the narrative of national history is reflected in images, images that can be manipulated, which are games, images aimed largely - but not only- at children. This collection of games consists mainly of illustrated games, such as lottos, puzzles, board games, in which clearly three major trends of the 19th century are represented:

First, the rise of history as a discipline and its democratization. Secondly, the rise of new teaching methods, teaching through play and entertainment. And thirdly, the rise of the image and mass imagery. So my point of view is to address the question of national memory and its narratives, and how national history was taught to children through these games. The first question is that of memory as memorization, because the primary ambition of these games, at least according to the manufacturers when they advertised them, is to enable children to memorize a number of dates and historical facts, such as "1515 - battle of Marignan", etc. And secondly, when we talk about memory and history, we are obviously also talking about how we tell the story of the nation's formation, and these are games whose production peaked at the end of the Second Empire and the beginning of the Third Republic, so we are right in the middle of the national narrative here, and we can see a little bit how this memory is constructed, it revolves around very symbolic figures: we have Joan of Arc lotto games and Napoleon board games, for example, but we also have small historiographical variations. For example, the list of French monarchs begins with a certain Pharamond, who is still visible today as the tribal chief hoisted onto a shield in Asterix comic books, but this Pharamond, who was in fact a pagan king, tends to disappear as the 19th century progresses, we sense that historiography is evolving, and we see in board games that the first king on the list of monarchs in puzzles and lotto games gradually became Clovis (the first Christian monarch)!

Memory is also a visual memory, in the sense that the images we find in games are very often already familiar images, *déjà-vu*. For example, there are the great historical paintings in the Gallery of Great Battles at Versailles, as well as images that circulate in the form of advertising chromos, small collectible cards, postcards, etc.

What interests me in particular is also memory lapses, the way in which memory can also play tricks on us. For example, we have jigsaw puzzles, with medallions

for all the monarchs, but it's important to know that in these jigsaw puzzles, which were then called "patience" in French, all the pieces were cut out identically! So you could put Clovis's head on Charlemagne's body and vice versa. And you can imagine that when these objects are handled by children, who are left to play unsupervised, there is potentially some kind of play with history, and a way of playing tricks on memory through these formats.

If these games talk about national history, they can also talk about current events, especially political events. We have a lot of games, for example card games and board games, about the Dreyfus affair. We have anti-Dreyfusard games and Dreyfusard games. There's the "Game of the 36 Heads", which is actually a response to a game called the "Game of Truth", which encouraged players to really take part in Dreyfus's personal history and in the political crisis.

I am a historian, an art historian, a historian of visual culture, and what has always interested me is everyday life, so a history that is written from the bottom up, and through objects that are not particularly valued today in major museum collections, etc. So I am interested in the images that people lived with and played with...

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