

Effects of Precariousness on Early Modern Board Games

This proposal investigates the condition of uncertainty that was prevalent in early modern Europe and its effects on early modern game players. The significance of games in analyzing a culture and society has been pointed out by scholars, such as Roger Caillois who emphasized in *Man, Play and Games* (1961) that games “necessarily reflect its culture pattern and provide useful indications as to the preferences, weakness, and strength of a given society at a particular stage of its evolution.” According to evidence, chance-based board games gained increasing popularity in early modern Europe. As opposed to the traditional games that had been played since the Middle Ages (chess, backgammon, checkers, etc.), one of the main characteristics of board games that were invented in early modern period is that they were based mostly on chance, like the Game of the Goose and its variations. With their highly reduced sophistication, these games did not require the players to decide on any strategy, except requiring them to roll the dice. Then the players moved their counters on a spiral track or landed on a space that bears the dice combination that the player had rolled. Although unsophisticated in their mechanisms, these chance-based board games became popular so much so that they were produced in many forms and themes (Seville 2008).

The quick spread of chance-based games in early modern Europe suggests a phenomenal transition in the society that simultaneously became reliant on luck and fortune. Studies have explored this phenomenon in fields such as art and literature (Vogt 2017). The focus of these studies has been on the use of Fortuna (the goddess of luck) images in visual arts, the change of meaning of concepts of fortune and misfortune that became increasingly money-related, and the demise of Fortuna images with the invention of probability calculation that had been premised on better predictions in gambling. Gerolamo Cardano (1501-1576), Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), Pierre de Fermat (1607-1665), Abraham de Moivre (1667-1754), and Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749-1827) established the new mathematical analysis of probability primarily through careful reflection on gambling (Bewersdorff 2005). Anthropological studies on games, on the other hand, point at some factors that shed light on the underlying reasons of such transitions. Accordingly, “games of chance appear to flourish in the presence of environmental, individual, and social uncertainty regardless of the relative complexity of the cultures in which they occur” (Sutton-Smith & Roberts 1971). This finding is relevant in drawing a rightful connection between social uncertainty in the early modern period and players’ changing preferences of what kind of games they wanted to play.

I propose that environmental and religio-political factors played an important role in creating the state of precariousness ubiquitously found in early modern period, which, then, shifted the player preferences in early modern period. Some of these factors were broadly investigated and discussed by scholars as the ‘General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century’ (Parker & Smith 1978), ‘Little Ice Age’ (Mann 2002), and ‘Climate of Rebellion’ (White 2011). With this lecture I would like to discuss these findings with a wider academic audience.

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Department of History
Bogaziçi University, Istanbul.

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