Using Historical Simulations to Teach Political Theory

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Abstract: As teachers of political theory our goal is not merely to help students understand the abstract reasoning behind key ideas and texts of our discipline. We also wish to convey the historical contexts that informed these ideas and texts, including the political aims of their authors. But the traditional lecture and discussion approach tends to obscure the historical and political dimensions of political theory. Reacting to the Past historical simulations provide a powerful tool for remedying these shortcomings. The simulations foster three kinds of lessons that are difficult to impart with more traditional approaches. First, they help students see the intimate and reciprocal connections between politics, history and political philosophy. Second, the simulations bring to light the inherently political dimensions of interpreting key political ideas. Finally, drawing upon the ideas of Hannah Arendt, we argue that the simulations educate students about the nature of freedom and political action.

Introduction

Political theory is largely about big, abstract ideas – freedom, equality, justice, power. As political theory instructors, we try to get our students to examine these ideas critically. The standard approach to fostering such inquiry is to take students on a tour through the classics: the works of Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau and Burke, Mill and Marx, and the other luminaries of our discipline. We hope that our students will read these difficult texts closely and come to class eager to discuss them. In practice, however, students tend to shy away from abstract theorizing, often finding its connection to contemporary politics, as well as their own concerns, obscure. Our students, we have found, gravitate toward the concrete, the factual, and the practical.
Regardless of the subfield – or the academic discipline, for that matter – theoretical inquiry tends to produce the greatest challenge to student engagement. Given that our subfield, as its name announces, concerns principally the theoretical, it often presents the toughest sell to undergraduates.

This is an unhappy state of affairs for those of us whose teaching duties lie principally in the field of political theory. There are, of course, a variety of options available to try to improve student engagement. They include daily quizzes or reaction papers to encourage students to read the day's assignment. While these approaches have their merits, they are also time-consuming (especially for large classes) and the students may tend to view them as punitive or busy work. Moreover, they often fail to inspire genuine engagement or understanding of the readings or to generate greater class participation. Another response of sorts to student disengagement is simply to teach to the handful of attentive students and effectively write off the majority. Obviously, this is a less than ideal solution, but it is a tempting default approach, and we have at times found ourselves falling in to it.

However, a historical simulation series called Reacting to the Past has, we believe, largely overcomes these problems. The series provides an ingenious way for students to explore the interaction of political theory and politics in the context of key historical events. The concept for the Reacting series was first developed by Mark C. Carnes, a history professor at Barnard College, in the mid 1990s. Since that time, eight historical simulations have been created, and a dozen or so more are currently in development. Historians have created many of the simulations, but academics from other disciplines, including political science, philosophy and psychology have also contributed
to them. In the simulations, students read historical accounts of key political events, such as the French Revolution, the trial of Socrates, or the American Revolution. In conjunction with the historical readings, students also read works of political theory that informed the debates and actions surrounding the political events. For instance, the Athenian Democracy simulation includes contemporary historical accounts of the development of Athens in the 5th century and the Peloponnesian War. But it also includes readings from Plato, Xenophon, Thucydides and Aristophanes. Students are assigned roles in the simulation corresponding to key political groups in 5th-century Athens. They then draw upon both history and philosophy to inform their characters actions and arguments. Students assigned to be “oligarchs” draw upon the works of Xenophon and Aristophanes to critique the “Socratics,” who in turn read the Republic and other Platonic dialogues to mount their defense of Socrates and his political vision. For the French revolution simulation, students are assigned various roles – Jacobins, clergy, aristocrats, and even specific historical figures, such as Louis XVI and Lafayette. The radicals in the National Assembly cite Rousseau's Social Contract and Discourse on the Origin of Inequality to support their republican ideas, while the clergy and the nobility pore over Burke's Reflection on the Revolution in France in search of arguments supporting the old order. Individual students and groups are given specific goals, for example, replacing Athenian democracy with an oligarchy, executing Socrates for treason, or establishing a constitutional monarchy in France. Students score points for achieving their goals and may form alliances with other students or groups to advance their aims. But they must remain true to their assigned characters in doings so, and much of their grade for the
simulation is based upon how well they can articulate their characters’ political worldview.

Both authors have used Reacting to the Past simulations to teach political theory courses. This article draws upon both Professor Havercroft’s and Professor Gortons’s experience using the French Revolution simulation to teach modern political thought as well as Professor Gorton’s use of the Athens 403 BCE simulation to teach ancient political thought. Our experience using the historical modules has been overwhelmingly positive. Not only do the simulations increase student engagement and enthusiasm (not to mention attendance), they also help students learn valuable lessons about political theory that are difficult to impart through the traditional methods of lecture and Socratic questioning. Specifically, we think that the simulations foster three kinds of lessons. First, they help students to see the intimate and reciprocal connections between politics, history and political philosophy. Second, they bring to light the inherently political dimensions of interpreting key political ideas. Finally, we argue that the simulations educate students about the nature of freedom and political action.

Simulations in Political Science Teaching

Use of simulations in undergraduate sociology and political science courses dates back to at least the mid 1960s (Greenblatt, 1971). (An early example of simulations for political science was the “Inter-Nation Simulation,” published by Science Research Associations, Inc., in 1966.) The following decades saw the increased use of simulations, as well as the publication of numerous scholarly studies designed to gauge their
effectiveness. The findings have been generally encouraging. Krain and Lantis for instance, found that students who participated in a "global problems" summit simulation “helped boost student understanding of some of the broader dimensions of international cooperation” (2006, 405) when compared with students who were exposed to the material via traditional lecture, while McIntosh (McIntosh 2001) found that Model United Nations simulations enhanced cooperative learning and encouraged peer interaction. Bernstein and Meizlish concluded that participation in an American government simulation enhanced understanding of the course's concepts and reduced students' cynicism (although no increase in actual political participation was detected) (2003). A study by Endersby and Webber found that students who participated in a simulation designed to show the impact of “iron triangles” on American public policy making performed better on standard measures of student achievement, such as papers and written exams, than students receiving traditional instruction (1995). Wikenfeld and Kaufman provide evidence that, among other benefits, student participation in the ICONS computer simulation for international relations improved communication and teamwork skills, and also enhanced understanding of interdependence of issues and cultural differences (1993).

Little is known, however, about the effectiveness of using simulations to teach political theory. The lack of knowledge stems in part from the limited use of simulations to teach such courses. A recent survey of political theory instructors found that only 38.2% use simulations, and most of those who do use them use them only occasionally (Moore 2009, 12). This compares with 49.8% use by instructors in all of political science's subfields combined (Hartlaub and Lancaster 2008, 380).³ One obvious reason
for the lack of simulations in the political theory curriculum is the difficulty of devising a way to explore the abstract philosophical ideas of our subfield’s key thinkers by simulating some concrete political activity.

Although the *Reacting to the Past* simulations were originally designed by historians to teach students the importance of contingency and agency in history, we have found that these simulations are easily adapted to political theory classrooms. The primary reason for this is that many of the simulations use classic texts in political philosophy as primary source material for the students. Built into the simulation are strong incentives (both in terms of “victory objectives” in the simulation as well as the students’ final grade) that encourage students to read political philosophy texts and to draw upon the arguments of classical political theory in order to persuade others.

Prior to the simulation we spend two to three class periods introducing both the historical context of the simulation and providing an overview of the ideas of the thinkers with which the students will be working in the simulation. After this introduction, we distribute to the students their roles in the simulation. While the simulations were originally designed for classes of 17–30 students, Professor Havercroft has had success adapting the simulation for a class as large as 40. In the French Revolution simulation, there are four factions – the Feuillants (the moderates), the Conservatives, the Jacobins, and the crowd. All of the factions except the crowd sit in the National Assembly and debate the proposed Constitution of 1791. Each student has a block of delegates (i.e. votes), and the size of this block will fluctuate depending upon their actions and the actions of the others. If students achieve important objectives in the simulation (such as writing a good editorial), their character will receive extra delegates. They can also lose
delegates for not attending a session or if they are targeted by the crowd. The crowd (as was the case in 1791 in France) is not represented in the National Assembly and their task is to figure out how to achieve their objectives without any political representation. Within the simulation, their primary instrument is to riot against members of the National Assembly who act against the interests of the sans-culottes. In addition, a handful of students are assigned the role of “indeterminants.” They represent the undecided voters in the National Assembly. Often they have competing interests that could lead them to align with either the Right or the Left. As such, the various factions attempt to persuade the indeterminants to support their actions.

The Trial of Socrates simulation also features four factions -- radical democrats, moderate democrats, oligarchs and Socratics -- as well as various indeterminant characters, such as metics, fishmongers and artisans. All are permitted to speak in the Pynx, ancient Athens’ official public forum, where they try to win support for their initiatives. Socratics’ are saddled with the improbable task of convincing their fellow Athenians to abandon democracy and establish rule by a guardian class modeled on Plato’s Republic. The moderate democrats seek to reestablish the Athens of Pericles’ heyday, while the oligarchs try to put in place the aristocratic politics that predated the Periclean era. Key goals of the radical democrats include expanding citizenship to metics and possibly slaves, and rebuilding the Athenian empire. They also align with the moderate democrats to attempt to put Socrates on trial for undermining democracy. As in the French Revolution, the different factions strive to win the support of the indeterminants, whose interests and beliefs make them open to allying with different factions.
The simulations take six class sessions. In the French Revolution simulation, every other class session each faction must produce a newspaper, for which each student is required to write a 500-750 word article. For the Trial of Socrates game, each student is required to make at least one formal address to his fellow Athenians, and students also write essays, which are distributed to the class via email, describing their views and goals. In our classes, we make clear to the students that we will be evaluating how well they draw upon the arguments of the relevant political philosophers to support their position. In the French Revolution simulation the right tends to draw upon Burke, the left tends to draw upon Rousseau and the moderate faction attempts to combine the two. Similarly, in the Athenian Democracy simulation, the oligarchs and Socratics draw upon Plato and Xenophon, whereas the radical and moderate democrats draw chiefly upon the ideas of Pericles. The best students will engage in “opposition research,” and attempt to find passages in the writings of Burke or Rousseau or Plato that are particularly damning to their opponents. During the class sessions, the students run the class with the instructor filling the role of Game Master. Essentially, this means that instructors act as arbitrators, and point out when students are getting too far off track or acting anachronistically. This can be a scary experience for instructors because it requires that we surrender control of the classroom to our students. Yet we have found that the reward is worth the risk. The immediate payoff is that students begin to take an active role in the classroom. While the simulation may save us a bit of time in terms of lecture preparation, our office hours become especially busy and email inboxes are full with eager questions from students. Students often seek a richer understanding of the actual history upon which the simulation is based. Many of the emails are written in character petitioning the Pope, a
foreign monarch or a Spartan general (all roles that the instructor may assume during the simulation) to intervene in the game to the student’s advantage.

Fostering this enhanced student participation are the competitive nature of the simulation, which encourages students to stay engaged in order to “win,” and the fun of the simulation itself. The increased student engagement manifests itself in three ways. First, student attendance increases. Professor Havercroft teaches at a large state school where, by mid-semester, classroom attendance can often hover near the 50% mark. Once he begins the simulation, student attendance increases to 95 – 100%. Teaching at a small liberal arts college, Professor Gorton has often achieved perfect attendance for his simulations. The high level of engagement no doubt partly explains the improved turnout. But it can also be attributed to the various factions policing their teammates to make sure that everyone shows so that their group has enough votes to achieve their victory objectives. Second, student behavior shifts dramatically. Normally one of our challenges as college instructors is to figure out creative ways to engage students with the course material and combat student apathy. This is particularly challenging in history of political thought classes where students often find the texts abstract and the political problems that the authors are grappling with distant. But as students assume a character role, they more readily understand why Rousseau would be compelling for a sans-culotte or why Xenophon would be attractive for an oligarch. The act of role-playing helps students see how seemingly abstract ideas do matter in very concrete ways. Third, we find that as instructors we often have to shift from our traditional role of motivating students’ learning to helping extremely enthusiastic students keep the simulation in perspective. We have had students in or offices crestfallen over a negative outcome for their character...
in the simulation and students who occasionally get overzealous in their persecution of
non-jury priests during the French Revolution or followers of Socrates in ancient Athens.
Professor Havercroft had one student remark to him: “My friends think I’m crazy
because all that I want to talk about these past few weeks is what happened in the
simulation.”

Our experience with increased student engagement in the simulation confirms what
numerous studies in post-secondary educational psychology have confirmed over the
years. Since Benjamin Bloom introduced his taxonomy of cognitive behavior important
in learning, educational psychologists have studied which teaching techniques are most
effective in promoting different types of learning behavior. In Bloom’s taxonomy,
knowledge refers to the memorization of factual data. While the lecture method has been
demonstrated to be very effective at imparting knowledge to students (as measured by
their ability to reproduce information from lectures in exams) (Antepohl and Herzig
1999; Nandi et al. 2000), research has not demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting the
other learning behaviors: understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
In political science, there is evidence that lectures are more effective at imparting
knowledge to students, but in active learning techniques such as debates “students
acquired better comprehension, application, and critical evaluation skills” (Omelicheva
and Avdeyeva 2008, 606). In the case of the Reacting to the Past simulations, a recent
study demonstrated that the simulations enhanced student rhetorical skills and elevated
their empathy, self-esteem, and external locus of control without compromising student
skills in areas such as comprehension and writing ability (Stroessner et al. 2009). In a
study of the Reacting to the Past simulation in an introductory Political Science seminar,
Tracy Lightcap found that the simulations “stimulated critical thinking, teamwork, active learning, consideration of real world problems, incorporating diverse perspectives, and application of theories to course material” (2009, 178). Lightcap also observed that evaluation scores for courses that used Reacting to the Past simulations were higher compared to sections of the same course that did not use Reacting simulations. So, there is a growing body of evidence that incorporating simulations into courses can achieve learning objectives and outcomes that are not possible in courses that only use traditional lecture and discussion techniques. However, from the perspective of teaching political theory what do these simulations enable us to do as teachers that we cannot accomplish with more traditional methods such as lecture and discussion?

Politics, History, and Political Thought

One of the big challenges in teaching historical political theory is demonstrating why political theory matters. Students often find ideas such as natural law, social contract, negative liberty, and the general will too abstract and lacking in applicability to their lives. While linking these concepts with contemporary events can be useful to help students understand these ideas, this technique often downplays the historical significance of these ideas. It is difficult, for instance, to impart to students exactly why Rousseau needed to defend popular sovereignty or why Plato found democracy so unnatural. Often students see democracy as so self-evidently desirable that they are unable to defend the idea. As one student in Professor Gorton’s ancient Athens simulation commented,
“Being a Socratic, I had to argue against democracy, which is extremely hard, because everyone in the class has grown up under democracy and has been taught that that’s the best form of government. However, after reading Socrates’ and Plato’s ideas about democracy, I think some of their ideas do make sense. I can see how sometimes democracy can be ineffective.”

The merit of the simulation from a political theory perspective is that it shows students how key political ideas shaped the values and interests of people in historically significant events and how these individuals in turn shaped history. This is particularly beneficial in helping students to understand political theories that seem alien to our contemporary political worldview – such as Burke’s defense of the aristocracy or Plato’s critique of democracy. For example, in taking on the role of a French aristocrat a student learns to think through an idea from that character’s perspective. While the odds that after the simulation ends students will remain partisan defenders of the Ancien Régime are slim to none, they at least get a sense of why someone might defend the value of aristocracy. A student in Professor Gorton’s simulation noted, “Even I wouldn’t call myself an oligarch, I got so into my role that I started to think as an oligarch while reading.” In a sense, the great virtue of these simulations is that they enable students to do through their role playing what R. G. Collingwood famously said all intellectual historians must do: “the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind” (Collingwood 1956, 282). In addition to gaining historical perspective, this element of the simulation encourages students to critically engage ideas that first seem alien to them. This skill hopefully allows students to interact with contemporary ideas that may seem alien (such
as radical Islam or Marxism) in a manner that recognizes that they, too, are borne out of political exigencies. Through this re-enactment the students are able to understand the ideas of the thinkers they use in a way that they never could have if they had only grappled with these ideas through the traditional methods of reading texts and listening to lectures.

In addition to being able to enact the ideas of political theorists (and those historical figures influence by their ideas), simulations help students gain an appreciation of the political dimension of political theory. More traditional teaching methods emphasize reconstructing the logic of a political philosopher’s argument. The lecture/discussion model of teaching political theory has the advantage of helping students learn to read texts and reconstruct difficult arguments. This sharpens the logical skills of students, helps them to learn and evaluate influential arguments in the history of political theory and develops their ability to make arguments in their own discussion and writing. While simulations may downplay the reconstruction of arguments element of political theory, they play up something that is often lost: the political element of political theory. Political theorists and their readers were trying to do something in and through writing and interpreting political texts. The canonical works of political theory were deeply political tracts. Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau all combined astute reasoning with compelling rhetoric to try to persuade their readers to support particular political objectives. Indeed, Quentin Skinner has persuasively argued that in order to properly understand a text in political theory, “[w]e need . . . to grasp not merely what people are saying but also what they are doing in saying it” (Skinner 2002a, 82). By this Skinner means that a mere logical reconstruction of the content of an argument of a given
political thinker is likely to miss some important elements in our understanding of that text. The main goal of Skinner’s methodological writings over the last 40 years have been to emphasize the performative dimension of political philosophy – i.e. what political act an author was performing in writing the text. His insistence upon interpreting a text within its historical context arises from his belief that what a given author was doing in writing a given text only becomes intelligible when we understand what political problems he or she was responding to.

The Reacting to the Past simulations provide a means of getting this point across. These simulations encourage students to use the texts to make strategic political arguments within a given historical context. In addition to learning what, for example, Rousseau’s concept of the general will is, the students learn what political problems of 18th-century France Rousseau was attempting to solve by developing this concept. So, one of the great virtues of these simulations is that it enables student to develop an understanding not only of the abstract arguments of a given text, but also an understanding of the historical context in which political theorists wrote. This serves to broaden student understanding of the significance of the great works of political theory.

**Politics, Persuasion, and Interpretation**

In addition to deepening their understanding of the texts, the simulations develop the political skills of students. Most notably, the simulations sharpen students’ political skill at interpreting political thought. Nearly all of the simulations use some version of a political assembly as the primary arena in which competing factions in the simulation
resolve their differences. This enables students to experience a deliberative model of politics. For example, in the French Revolution simulation most of the students are members of the National Assembly debating the proposed French Constitution of 1791. Each student has a set of victory objectives – things that need to happen in the simulation in order for his or her character to win. In order to achieve any of these objectives students must form alliances and persuade undecided indeterminant characters to support their positions. To accomplish these objectives students use the arguments found in political texts instrumentally and strategically. To paraphrase Skinner, the successful students need to combine reason and rhetoric in order to persuade other students (Skinner 1996). For example, in the French Revolution simulation students are divided into four factions: the conservatives, the Feuillants (moderate bourgeois), the Jacobins (the left-wing bourgeois) and the crowd (who are not members of the National Assembly but represent the majority of French citizens). Three of the four factions – the Feuillants, the Jacobins, and the crowd – have at least nominal sympathies to democracy and the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Yet each faction interprets Rousseau’s writings differently. These differences in interpretation often focus on the meaning of a core concept such as the general will. While members of the crowd will try to present the general will as promoting universal suffrage and equal distribution of wealth, the Feuillants will try to temper the concept to defend limited suffrage and a constitutional monarchy. Similarly, in the Athenian Democracy simulation followers of Socrates use Plato’s Republic to defend rule by philosopher kings, while oligarchs use the same text to find support for a government headed by the educated and financially independent.
During these moments in the simulation the primary texts students draw upon are transformed into sites of interpretive struggle. Students learn an important lesson through these moments: that interpretation is itself a political act. Skinner has argued that much of the history of political thought has been struggles over the interpretations of concepts such as liberty, justice and equality. For him, political philosophers attempt to re-describe the meaning of a word to suit their own political objectives (Skinner 2002a, 175 - 87).

Within the simulations students engage in similar struggles over the meanings of words. To return to the example of the disputes over the meaning of the “general will” in the French Revolution simulation, all three factions share the view that the general will is a desirable political objective. Each group attempts to describe the meaning of the words “general will” to suit the interests of their faction. In Professor Havercroft ’s most recent simulation, the right tried to accuse the Jacobins of factionalism and hence distortion of the general will, while arguing that a constitutional monarchy would reflect the interests of all of France. The Feuillants tried to emphasize the “common interest” and argue that they – as the political moderates – were seeking the “common interest” whereas the Jacobins and the right were speaking for particular interests. The Jacobins and the crowd, whose ideology at the outset most closely matched Rousseau’s, had to contend with these alternative readings of Rousseau in order to advance their argument that a radical democracy was closest to Rousseau’s vision. In an interesting way, the conceptual ambiguity in Rousseau’s writings served as fertile grounds for students to re-interpret Rousseau for their political purposes. Students thus experienced a crash course in the politics of interpretation. They learned that contests over the meaning of a text are as important – if not more important – than the apparent straightforward reading of the text.
And, students learn to appreciate textual ambiguity, which in our experience is one of the key frustrations that many undergraduate students of political theory experience.

Finally, in addition to helping students appreciate the politics of interpretation, simulations give students the opportunity to hone their power of persuasion -- a supremely important skill in the art of politics. However, as the students quickly learn, persuasion is not as easy as it first seems. An argument that at first glance makes complete sense to one who utters it, might make no sense at all to the person on the receiving end. Arguments from one’s political adversaries are likely to be treated with (great) suspicion. So many of the acts of persuasion in a simulation fall on deaf ears or otherwise fail. Many students express frustration that their political opponents are not necessarily persuaded by their arguments. Yet even these failures in persuasion can be valuable: they can underscore how difficult successful political speech is, how hard it is to be a Barack Obama or a Ronald Reagan.

That said, not every attempt at persuasion in the simulations fails. In Professor Havercroft ’s French Revolution simulation, some of the students tried to appropriate the political philosophy of their adversary. For example, one student offered a selective reading of Rousseau to defend a constitutional monarchy, while another student playing a member of the crowd quoted from Burke to defend giving bread to the poor. Both of these exchanges led to rebuttals in subsequent student newspapers. Occasionally, these arguments did succeed in persuading some students, especially indeterminants. How these students decide to vote and act in the simulation is largely a function of which arguments they find more persuasive. In Professor Havercroft ’s French Revolution simulation the delegate from the rural provinces was horrified by the anti-clerical arguments of the left
wing of the National Assembly and was persuaded through the speeches of the right to support a constitutional monarchy. By his own admission, it was the tone and temperament of the differing factions that persuaded him to shift allegiances.

Yet, not every act of persuasion succeeds. Quite often students complain that the other factions are not persuaded by their speeches and editorials. Even these rhetorical failures can have important pedagogical value. As one of Professor Gorton’s students noted in a post-simulation evaluation: “[The simulation] helped establish the fact that even though the philosophy is sound and makes sense it will not necessarily be put into action in ‘real’ politics.” Professor Havercroft assigned his class a brief essay after the French Revolution simulation asking his students how the ideas of Burke and/or Rousseau shaped their character’s beliefs and actions. One student responded:

"My conclusion is that political philosophy is only applicable so far as it has the force of power behind it. Much can be said of the truths of a particular philosophical framework, but it ceases to become relevant when people have fundamental disagreement as to what the framework should be. At points of absolute disagreement there is a choice; people can either continue to argue semantics or can engage themselves in some sort of direct action. And if a society is in such a state, its actual philosophy simply becomes the philosophy with the most power behind it. Understood in this way, Rousseau's historical importance is clear. His writings prompted a realization about power. He made a great number of people recognize that they, together, could constitute a more powerful association than those previous."
This student points out that political philosophy alone cannot cause actions or alter opinions and he expresses frustration, based on his experiences in the simulation, over the limits of political theory to change the minds of people that do not agree with you. But he does note that arguments do have an effect – in this case, Rousseau’s arguments did not persuade the nobility, but it did raise the consciousness of the sans culottes and the Jacobins, thereby calling a political movement into existence. The simulation teaches students that political theories need not persuade everyone in order to achieve their desired effect. Interests and power will always prevent everyone from ever agreeing to a single political doctrine. But the simulation demonstrates how arguments can mobilize a group and win sympathetic supporters from different factions whose interests and goals at times overlap. It is difficult to imagine how a student could achieve such a deep understanding of the complicated relationship between theory and praxis through more traditional pedagogical approaches to political theory.

**Public Spaces and Political Engagement**

We think that the simulations teach students important lessons about the relationships between political thought, historical context, politics and interpretation. As a result, they may learn to steer clear of crude ahistorical understandings of political thought and also avoid a naïve view about the power of ideas when unaided by political power. But we think the simulations may impart another kind of lesson about history and political thought. This lesson concerns understandings of politics that have been lost to history. In particular, we think the simulations provide students with a glimpse – and
perhaps more – of a lost kind of freedom found in the ancient Greek polis, Republican Rome, the Italian republics of the renaissance, the American Founding and the early phases of the French Revolution. There is a long tradition in political theory that celebrates active participation in the public realm as essential for political freedom and a good citizenry (Aristotle 1981; Cicero 1991; Machiavelli 1995; Arendt 1958). Two elements of political freedom that the simulations effectively impart to students are the irreducible plurality of public life and the potential to disclose oneself through political speech and deed.

First, and most importantly, the simulations feature what Hannah Arendt called “plurality.” Plurality refers to human diversity – the fact that no two human beings are alike. Though we belong to the same species, and thus are intelligible to others, we also have different histories, different social places, different abilities, and thus different viewpoints as well. This plurality, she said, marks a fundamental aspect of the human condition and also provides the possibility of politics as arena for human action: “While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition – not only the conditio sine qua non, but the conditio per quaaum – of all political life” (Arendt 1958, 7). Why is this so? Action, Arendt said, cannot occur in isolation. It requires others to witness it, both in word and deed, and to judge its worthiness, in the same way that art or music requires an audience as source of feedback and potential validation. Such judgment is valuable in large measure because of the different perspectives that human plurality ensures. Action for this reason is inherently public.
The simulations entail plurality in that they recreate a public forum where opinions can be voiced and acted upon, and critiqued by others. Naturally, the students who participate bring different backgrounds and perspectives to bear. But plurality also emerges in another sense because of the character roles that the students take on. Students in the Trial of Socrates simulation, for instance, may be assigned roles as radical or moderate democrats (including specific historical figures, such as Thrasybulus), oligarchs, followers of Socrates, or assorted indeterminant characters (metics, merchants, fishmongers, athletes, even a woman in disguise). Roles from the French Revolution simulation include historical figures, such as Louis XVI, Lafayette, and Danton; radical Jacobins and moderate Feuillants; as well a various members of the nobility, clergy, and members of the Parisian crowd. Thus the students must forge a hybrid identity of sorts, one that reflects the worldview and interests of their role, but also one that they infuse with their own views.

A second way in which the simulations foster a space for Arendtian action is by creating political, though not social, equality among the students. For Arendt, equality was not a natural condition, as modern liberals hold. Rather, equality must be created by men and women via construction of a polis – a public space where people may speak, debate and cooperate with each other as citizens. Each role offered to the students is permitted to speak, to make proposals, and (in most cases) to vote in the public forums featured in the simulations. This does not accurately reflect history, of course. Metics in ancient Athens, for instance, were not normally permitted to speak in the agora. Nor were random Parisian crowd members typically granted the opportunity to address the National Assembly during the French Revolution. But it is fortunate, we think, that the
Simulations’ designers have taken this license, because in doing so it reproduces key elements of political spaces that Arendt thought were necessary for action to emerge. These two essential features – plurality and political equality – together help to create a genuine (however simulated) public space that allows for action to emerge. And this in turn permits students to experience what Arendt said were the unique blessings of action: the ability to produce the new, the unpredictable, even the unimaginable; the experience of power through concerted action with others; and the opportunity to disclose and distinguish the self.

The medium through which action takes place is speech. In fact, Aristotle, Cicero and Arendt all argued that political action is impossible without speech. Speech makes action meaningful – an action must be articulated in words to make its meaning manifest – and also serves as way to check a speaker’s veracity. Without words being followed through with deeds, it would be difficult to tell if a speaker is being sincere or rather using her words mask her real intentions. Speech and action in the context of the simulations provide an opportunity for students to experience what Arendt called disclosure. The polis, Arendt said, “was permeated by a fiercely agonial spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all (aien aristeuein). The public realm, in other words, was reserved for individuality; it was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were” (Arendt 1958, 41). Public speech and action, in Arendt’s words, allow individuals to disclose “who” they are – their unique, individual selves – as opposed to merely “what” they are, that is, their particular talents, abilities, and shortcomings. In a way unimaginable in a traditional classroom setting, students in
our simulations were offered myriad ways to disclose and distinguish themselves. From an instructor’s standpoint, one benefit of overseeing historical simulations is the insight gained about the students’ selves. Some are daring, ambitious and singled-minded in their pursuits, others are cooperative and consensus seeking, still others timid and easily rolled by others. Some do indeed distinguish themselves and leave lasting marks upon the world (at least in the context of these artificial worlds). But the real benefit here, we suspect, is the self-disclosure made possible in the simulations. That is, students are provided the opportunity to better know themselves in terms of both their values and their powers.

In the simulations Arendtian disclosure through action happens at two levels: at the level of the character and at the level of the student. Students are assigned their identities within the simulation and both the character and the structure of the simulation shape their identities, interests and actions. Of course, this is not all that different from real life, where our various identities and positions in society are structured by factors beyond our choosing. In Arendt’s language this would be our “whatness” – our traits that distinguish us from others. When the student plays the role of the character the distinctness of the character changes depending upon the student. For instance, in Professor Gorton’s French Revolution simulation, the student who took on the role of Danton had a naturally boisterous and theatrical bearing, which led him to indulge in the rabble-rousing potential of the character (while perhaps downplaying the historical Danton’s intellectual facets). So, who Danton is will vary greatly depending upon who the student is who plays this character. The student has control over what that character says and how that character acts, thus altering the course of history within the simulation. Both of us having now taught the same simulations multiple times, we have found that
how the events in the simulations play out vary greatly depending upon who plays which character. So, each student’s interpretation of a given character simultaneously discloses a new dimension of the character – in much the same way that different actors playing Hamlet may offer vastly different interpretation of the character – and each student discloses him or herself through playing the character.

A second feature of disclosure of identity through action is that students disclose a different aspect of their identity through role-playing. We are struck at how students who are very strong in writing essays and taking tests often find the simulations challenging because they are less adept at thinking on their feet or speaking in front of a class. For these students having some of their weaknesses revealed can be an important step in helping them develop as more well rounded individuals. Conversely we have experienced cases of students who are normally quiet or disengaged in traditional courses becoming natural leaders in the simulations. In Professor Havercroft’s French Revolution simulation a student who had been struggling with the written components of the course quickly rose to the top of the Feuillants faction and was elected leader of the National Assembly. From this position he displayed natural political skills – striking deals with other factions, negotiating compromises on legislation and adeptly advancing the Feuillants’ legislative objectives. This experience led the student to realize that he had something meaningful to contribute to the course and once the simulation ended he remained actively involved in the coursework. His subsequent written and exam work was also much stronger.

While we have considered the implications of the simulation for teaching political participation from an Arendtian perspective, we believe that simulations enable students
to experience the type political freedom that so many contemporary political theorists celebrate in their teaching and research. While Arendt is the 20th century political theorist most closely associated with this idea, classical humanists from Ancient Rome through the Renaissance believed that civic freedom – the freedom a polity exercises through self government – could only be maintained if the citizenry dedicated themselves to *negotium* – active participation in civic affairs (Skinner 2002b, ch. 5). The *Reacting to the Past* simulations introduce the students to this type of freedom.

**Conclusion**

Our experience using historical simulations to teach political theory has made us excited about their potential for greatly enhancing not only students’ understanding of our field, but also their engagement and interest. We plan to continue using them in the future, and hope that this essay will convince other political theory instructors to incorporate simulations into their curriculum as well. We do not believe that simulations should be the only teaching method deployed in a political theory course. In fact, we both still devote the majority of our class time to traditional teaching approaches such as discussion and lecture. However, we have found that by including a simulation in our political theory courses we see an increase in student engagement and we are able to teach students important lessons about the political dimension of political theory that we simply cannot impart through more traditional methods. Through the simulations students experience the type of political freedom celebrated by thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Cicero, Machiavelli, and Arendt. They learn important lessons about both the power and
the limits of persuasion. And they learn how the historical context in which a text was written shaped the political views of a political theorist, and how that theorist may have shaped history.

We close by noting that the potential for historical simulations as vehicles for political theory instruction is hardly limited to 5th century Athens or revolutionary France. The Reacting to the Past series currently includes other simulations that require students to engage with the ideas of key political theorists in the Western tradition. These include simulations of revolutionary America and the trial of Antonio Gramsci. And, of course, political theory instructors are free to create their own simulations of other historical events that invite engagement with the key ideas of our field.

Bibliography


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http://www.iep.utm.edu/arendt/
For more information on this series, see the Reacting to the Past website at http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/index.html

For the purposes of the game, the dubious but useful assumption that Plato's dialogues faithfully represent the historical Socrates' views is made.

The exact questions in these two surveys and the groups sampled are different. However, the difference in the use of simulations in Political Theory compared to the discipline of political science as a whole is striking. In the Moore survey, the total of respondents who said that they “very frequently,” “frequently,” or “occasionally” used simulations totaled 18.2%. Conversely, in the Hartlaub and Lancaster the total respondents who said that they “almost always,” “frequently,” or “sometimes” used simulations totaled 36.4% in upper-division courses and 33.6% in introductory courses.

This problem is similar to the problem of “dead dogmas” that J. S. Mill discusses in On Liberty (1998, 40). The simulations teach students to defend their ideas by defending them (or in some cases criticizing them if their character holds an idea that contradicts their personal beliefs).

A danger of the simulations is that students might come to see political thought as merely a source of rhetorical weapons in political battles, reducible without remainder to politics and not properly the object of rational analysis on its own merits. A comment from one of Professor B’s students underscores this: “I read the texts as my character [a woman disguised as a man] looking for reason why women should vote -- not taking in the lessons but looking for reasons to help me win.”