Teaching about Oppression and Rebellion: The "Peasants Are Revolting" Game

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ABSTRACT   Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote that "Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains." Whereas the former claim of the quote is contestable and gendered, the latter part is empirically true from slavery to economic exploitation and widespread oppression that occurs to this day. Nevertheless, history shows that rarely will people take up weapons and rebel against the powerful. We have found that students often do not understand why this should be the case, given the rights that all people deserve. We use the Peasant Game exercise in class to shine a light on why most people, most of the time, endure repression and choose not to rebel. The game is played in turns with some students as lords, who decide how "food" will be apportioned, and other students as peasants, who produce the food. We discuss how power differentials occur and the difference they make. Students who play the game come away with a better understanding of why many people decide not to fight back against oppression—even if it is the right thing to do.

The oppression of the weak by the powerful is ubiquitous; examples abound throughout history. Although grievance can be a powerful motivation for action, revolutions and rebellions by the weak against the powerful are relatively rare (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Kuran 1989; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2003; Olson 1965). One major reason is that collective action is difficult and the costs of failure are high. This dilemma—an application of the famous collective-action problem to revolution—argues that structural factors militate against revolution and rebellion. The state generally possesses a decisive advantage in terms of military and policing power. This means that the costs of action for an individual dissident are very high, including imprisonment or even death. Thus, most citizens will choose to freeride, hoping that there are more risk-acceptant individuals sufficiently motivated to overthrow an oppressive government on their own. Moreover, citizens in harshly repressive societies are atomized and isolated from one another, unable to share information to plan collective action against the object of their common grievances. Despite the worldwide ubiquity of grievances, most citizens in most societies choose not to revolt. Grievance is a necessary but insufficient condition for revolt.

We find that it often is difficult to relay to students this puzzling outcome. Although all individuals in a society may benefit collectively from overthrowing a repressive dictator, they opt to endure oppression rather than rebel most of the time. We argue that students can understand the rarity of revolutions and rebellions through a game we introduce in this article: the Peasant Game. It highlights how structure interacts with agency, thereby influencing an individual's choice to participate in collective action. In doing so, this game is suitable for use in concert with readings about grievance, collective action, revolutions, rebellions, and rational-choice perspectives of rebellion. We have used the game in an introductory international relations (IR) and comparative politics class with 150 students, as well as upper-level classes on political violence with 25 to 30 students. In both frameworks, the exercise has worked well. This article aims to contribute to the

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small but growing repertoire of comparative politics games. Game rules are included in the online appendix.

LITERATURE

Before describing the Peasant Game, we discuss the value of interactive games in the classroom, with specific reference to concepts and theories prevalent in the study of political violence.

must match the goal of the course (Ellington, Gordon, and Fowlie 1998). Fourth, many students dislike active learning and prefer traditional methods (Torney-Purta 1996). Indeed, some scholars argued that games and other forms of student-driven learning are little more than a case of the "blind leading the blind," with unknowledgeable students discussing politics with one another, wasting valuable classroom time (Raines 2003; Rochester 2003).

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The Value of Interactive Games

We first address the value of interactive games as a pedagogical tool, particularly for the subjects of political violence and revolution. Many students have preconceived notions about the motivations of dissidents, conflict processes, and government responses to social unrest. These notions are influenced by partisan media, and students often are not prepared for objective discussion. Moreover, public discussion of such phenomena—which tends to focus on anecdotal cases—is distinct from the complex theoretical concepts that scholars use to study and discuss them. Students expecting to focus on anecdotes are often at a loss when confronted with abstract theory (Siegel and Young 2009).

Indeed, as with most concepts in political science, teaching undergraduate students about revolution requires relaying complex concepts, layered with a contextualized understanding of different levels of analysis, actors, and theories. For example,

Yet, a growing body of evidence suggests that simulations and other active-learning techniques enhance learning in comparative politics and IR by giving life and immediacy to the subject matter (Hess 1999). Classroom simulations reinforce student acquisition of facts and analytical skills and aid in forming a more complex view of the world. Shellman and Turan (2006) found empirical support that IR simulations improve substantive knowledge and analytical-thinking skills (see also Bonwell and Eison 1991; Brown and King 2000; Coffey, Miller, and Feuerstein 2011; McCarthy and Anderson 2000; McKeachie 2002; Smith and Boyer 1996).

Other empirical studies have shown that games are vital for teaching facts, analytical skills, and development of a more complex view of the world (Torney-Purta 1996). In essence, participation in simulations allows students to become their own "guinea pigs, subjects for observation and inquiry" (Christopher 1999). In this way, games provide an added level of student motivation that

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students should understand how structural factors contribute to rebel mobilization and success. However, acquiring a deep understanding of seminal studies such as Skocpol (1979) and Lichbach (1995) can be daunting for political science scholars as well as undergraduates. Games and other methods of active learning therefore allow instructors to address these problems, directly connecting abstract theory to in-class activity (Caruson 2005; Shellman and Turan 2006).

Games have been shown to be useful in teaching about various concepts related to revolution, including cases such as the Cyprus dispute (Hatipoglu, Müftüler-Baç, and Murphy 2014). One study examined quiz scores of students who participated in simulations, with highly encouraging results (Levin-Banchik 2018). Similarly, the Peasant Game allows students to understand the complex motivations of political actors and assists them in deconstructing the most nuanced aspects of theory.

That said, games and other active-learning techniques can encounter significant resistance. First, they take time away from traditional course content and often require substantial upfront preparation time (Christopher 1999; Ellington, Gordon, and Fowlie 1998). Second, because games require participation, students must bring their own interest and motivation to the subject matter. Unmotivated students may result in a failed game and, ultimately, poor pedagogical outcomes. Third, the chosen game

other types of active learning lack (Ellington, Gordon, and Fowlie 1998; Hess 1999). The Peasant Game accomplishes this by allowing students to play as aggrieved "peasants" or repressive "lords,"[1] seeing firsthand how rationality can militate against rebellion even in the presence of grievances, while also demonstrating how structural factors can shift the decision calculus in favor of rebellion. Although peasants in the game have agency, game rules prohibit coordination with one another, whereas lords can inhibit rebellion against their authority by distributing "patronage." Only when structural conditions in the game change do peasants have an incentive to rebel.

Games also have important secondary benefits: they provide students the experience of taking the initiative and create an environment in which the instructor can observe how students interact with one another (e.g., natural leaders, those with potential but need coaxing, and those struggling in class). These are important qualities for any instructor when assessing student performance (Pettenger, West, and Young 2013). The Peasant Game accomplishes these aims by allowing students to volunteer as leaders within a small-group setting and allowing the instructor to identify which students are more enthusiastic than others.

Before proceeding, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss guidelines for student interactions with the instructor, the course material, and among themselves. Participation is the primary point for

interaction (Pettenger, West, and Young 2013). Student participation in a game allows them to directly experience abstract theories, providing an understanding that lectures cannot. When playing a game, the instructor should be aware of its costs in terms of time spent and benefits reaped. Similarly, the instructor should be cognizant of potential moments to pause the game in order to analyze an event underway or a student's sudden realization. These pauses in the game's action give students a launching point for their own discussions and often produce interesting points for the debriefing (DeNeve and Heppner 1997).

Postgame oral or written debriefing is another key component. The main goal of the debriefing is to have students analyze their experiences. Oral debriefings should focus on several questions, including describing details of the game's proceedings from students' perspectives, explaining what happened in the context of the course's theoretical material, predicting what would happen if the game continued, and offering policy options based on those predictions (Christopher 1999). We recommend that instructors using the Peasant Game explicitly connect it to course readings, liberally pause the game to explain theory, and devote time to debriefing. An entire class period is ideal. Finally, learning also can occur during written examinations, which allow students to reflect on their experiences and more carefully apply the theories they learned. This practice encourages integration of experience gained from the game with lecture-based content. Instructors can easily include questions about the Peasant Game in preexisting exams.

Teaching about Exploitation and Revolution

The Peasant Game is designed to facilitate understanding of revolutions. Instructors may opt to run the game as a prelude to the material discussed in this section or as a capstone. One of the concepts that students often encounter first is the "grievance" oriented approach to dissent and rebellion (Gurr 1970). This perspective teaches that mass political unrest occurs when the goals of social groups are unjustly impeded. Over time, frustration mounts among aggrieved groups as a result of this injustice, ultimately exploding into violence and revolution. Moreover, aggrieved groups compare their status with others within the same society. If an

military and policing apparatus of a repressive state is too strong, rebellion is unlikely (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Kuran 1989; Lichbach 1995; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2003; Olson 1965; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1978).

Structural explanations also bear on dissident mobilization in important ways. Because grievance-oriented explanations overpredict rebellion, work on political opportunities emphasizes that structural conditions are important because they shift an individual's decision making in favor of rebellion. Civil war literature, for example, emphasizes state weakness, whereby the diminishing ability of the state to deter rebellion is correlated with the onset of conflict (Fearon and Laitin 2003). Skocpol (1979) merits special attention in this regard; her work examines some of the most well-known revolutions. Regime elites often must extract more resources from repressed subjects to maintain parity with rivals. In this scenario, the state and its aristocratic elites may find themselves in a pre-revolutionary situation vulnerable to sudden shocks (e.g., famines and defeat in war) that further alter dissident decision-making calculus.[2]

It is interesting that although there are many simulations and games related to IR (Starkey and Blake 2001) and interstate conflict (e.g., Haynes 2015; Kanner 2007; McCarthy 2014), there are relatively few related to comparative politics (e.g., Archer and Miller 2011; Asal et al. 2017; Asal et al. 2018; Shellman 2001). There are even fewer available games that focus on revolutions and why they start, although some explore civil war termination (Shaw 2006). The Peasant Game fills an underserved niche for instructors.

As in other games and active-learning techniques, students can place themselves in the role of disenfranchised actors and navigate decision making given limited resources and mobility (Ambrosio 2004). In this way, the game illustrates the collective-action problem, with additional understanding about the role of grievances and structural constraints. Some scholars note that the combination of a case study and a simulation provides students with the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge and apply theories in a tangible way (Langfield 2016). By assuming the role of an aggrieved actor, students are faced with a makeshift case study in which to navigate and apply their own understanding.

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aggrieved group is unable to achieve its collective goals, relative to a comparison group, then unrest and rebellion are likely.

However, grievances such as these are ubiquitous (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Tilly 1978). Structural inequality, repression, discrimination, and a lack of democracy are commonly felt. The grievance perspective thus "overpredicts" rebellion by making the case that any sufficiently aggrieved group of people could revolt against authority. The clear absence of rebellion in most societies, despite the presence of grievances, gives rise to an important empirical puzzle. This is probably counterintuitive to students, who may believe that grievances are sufficient conditions for rebellion. The rational-choice perspective in revolution and rebellion argues that individuals are utility maximizers (Lichbach 1995). In any given situation, citizens will choose a strategy that produces the best outcome at the least possible cost. Thus, if the

Whereas the Peasant Game aligns well with comparative politics courses and theories, it also can be useful in IR courses. Specifically, this exercise ties directly into the Marxist meta-theoretical approach (Anievas 2010) found in some IR textbooks (e.g., Baylis 2020; Burchill et al. 2013). The game addresses the Marxist argument about the oppression of the poor and revolution and how these factors can change international dynamics (Wallerstein 1990).

GAME SUMMARY

The game starts by dividing the class into groups ("countries"). The groups then select one member as their leader (the "lord"). Alternatively, the instructor can select group leaders. The other group members are the "peasants." The game is played over several rounds; each round has seven phases. At the beginning

of each round, the lord publicly distributes points ("crops") to the peasants to eat for survival.[3] Lords also may store points in their own treasury. The number of points available per round depends on "weather" determined by the instructor. Importantly, peasants are not allowed to communicate with one another; the lord, however, may issue public statements and converse with individual peasants. Peasants then privately decide to attack another player (either the lord or fellow peasants) and how many of their points to allot to the attack. A successful attack on the lord brings the possibility of revolution. If there is more than one attacker with the same target, their points are combined. The difference between the attacker's and the defender's points is added to the stronger player's total. Players involved in the attack then roll a three-sided die and each player's roll is added to their total. The party with the highest point total survives, the other "dies." If the lord is attacked and "dies," the attacker takes their place. A full description of the game is in the online appendix.

CONCLUSION

The game described in this article offers a way for students to learn about collective action given structural and even cultural constraints. In this exercise, we divide students into lords and peasants: there should be one lord to about 10 to 15 peasants. A set of communication rules governs how the lord and peasants can interact. Students then play the game in phases, with conditions such as weather, crop production and distribution, consumption, and conflict affecting how many points each party may receive. We found that students gain a better understanding of several comparative politics concepts and theories from this exercise. It provides a context for understanding concepts including oppression, grievance, and rational decision making. We base our understanding of the effectiveness of the game on the students' enthusiasm for engaging in and their sound understanding of the concepts during exams. In the near future, we plan to test whether the game can improve students' understanding to a statistically significant level.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520001675. ∎

NOTES

1. Instructors may substitute gender-neutral titles such as "liege."
2. We acknowledge that the relationship between lords and peasants is often more complex. We use this simplification to assist students in understanding the fundamental power asymmetries among these actors. Instructors may opt to discuss complexities during a debriefing of the game.
3. The distribution often is done publicly at the beginning of each turn so that students can make calculations about giving food to one another, for example. It also can be private, depending on the instructor's theoretical need.

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