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## **Using Global Simulation to Study Ethnic Conflict**

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### **Abstract**

Modern political science is dominated by quantitative methods and rational choice theory. However, ethnic conflict situations are often irrational, unquantifiable, highly unstable and unpredictable. Field investigations are likely to be out of the question for practical reasons. In this paper it is argued that the *global simulation* teaching method, introduced in France for language learning, has a valid application in political science.

### **The Historical Development of Simulation Techniques**

Simulation games have a long history in the study of war. The Chinese war game of *wei-hai*, meaning encirclement, is estimated to have started in about 3000 BC and the Japanese game GO is a modern version of the same game. A problem with games is that there is competition that can be dominated by scoring mechanisms such that the players' thoughts can become dominated by thoughts of winning or scoring so that wider educational objectives can become subverted (Jones, 1985: 4).

In the 1930's a growing interest in small group behaviour by psychiatrists, sociologists, and psychologists led to the use of role-play to help understand human behaviour and as a form of therapy. Jacob Levy Moreno (1889-1974), an Austrian psychiatrist, was the inventor of group psychotherapy, psychodrama and role-plays. His idea of *humans as actors in situations*, acting or acted on the stage of daily life, the fundamental idea of role-play and psychodrama, dates from 1917 – 1921 (Yaiche, 1996: 23). Moreno's work with psychodrama was aimed at treating problematic personal relationships through the revelation and analysis of a more or less neurotic subconscious revealing difficulties of the person, including painful repressed experiences often going back to childhood (Debyser, 1976: 26). In addition to psychodrama, which is a technique still in use today, role-plays of a non psychodramatic nature have been used by psychologists to help patients to reveal certain social behaviors.

In a political science class, the aims are not to reveal deep-seated psychoses and behavioural problems in the learners, but rather to help them grasp the psychotic, neurotic and otherwise disordered motivations of real life participants, including the ideological constructions they might hold, which is done through role play after preparatory reading of works by authors such as Robins and Post (1997), Lifton (1999) or Brooks (2002).

It must not be forgotten that role-plays in this context can generally only be educational, as the political science teacher may not have the expertise, qualifications, and desire to become a psychotherapist. The role-play is *pedagogical*, as one cannot take the risk to see developing a situation that is getting out of hand (Caré, 1983: 41). One should always be conscious of the likelihood of having among any cohort of students, one or more with psychiatric disability (Ebert, 2000). If this is known for example by confidential notification, or even suspected, it is sufficient reason to avoid or abandon a role-play exercise. The role play therefore has its limitations when used in political science, as it does in other disciplines, chiefly that a certain amount of knowledge must be assumed, just as in the language teaching context, basic vocabulary and syntax must be assumed to exist for the role-play to work.

Nonetheless, Caré underlines the importance of risk taking, noting that an excess of prudence can also have negative effects. To refuse emotivity and the progressive climbing of a certain dramatic tension can diminish the meaningfulness and depth of the game (Caré, 1983: 41). The leader has certain tools at his/her disposal: to stay empathetic with the participants and measure the intensity of the implications and to intervene if necessary; to suggest to some participants the roles of political participants, mediators, police officers, military personnel including irregulars or guerrillas, to intervene discretely with the participants, and to stop the game if he/she feels that he/she has lost control (Caré, 1983: 41). In any case, one should accept that teaching in the field of identity politics is a high-risk area, but the instructor will by intuition seek to follow risk minimisation strategies.

### **Global simulation**

The feature which distinguishes a global simulation from what has been called a simple simulation is that it requires the construction of a whole universe in which the actors are playing. In a simple or ordinary simulation, say a market place, it is not necessary to know the religion and the politics of the players involved in a simulated transaction. In a global simulation, it is a whole universe of religion, politics, epistemology, gender, age, physical and mental health, and individual and collective history that can be involved. In language teaching this is obviously important, and similarly but possibly less obviously in political science, political transactions also may involve the intrusion of many other factors.

Confirming this, Yaiche stated that while global simulations are of particular use in the teaching of languages, they could easily be applied in the field of political science, with the international conference being a particularly valuable subject for simulation. Global simulation requires two fundamental components: a “theme-place” and “fictitious identities”(Yaiche, 1996: 10). The “theme-place” will bring construction of a universe where everyone will be a participant and everything is possible (Yaiche, 1996: 10-11).

Despite the dominance of quantitative methods and rational choice theory in contemporary political science (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2002), there is clearly a need for global simulation. This should not only include interpretivist and critical theories, but be combined with a case study method. Where behavior cannot be controlled or

manipulated, the case study method is appropriate (Merriam, 1988:8). The imaginative leap to gain insight into another identity requires some insight into one's own identity (Merriam, 1988:13).

It seems doubtful that insight could be taught: one can only provide a suitable learning environment where the dangerous interplay of emotions and politics can take place with safety. Simulations have a distinguished if intermittent use in general political science education either generally (Johnson, 1999), (Linser, Naidu and Ip, 1999) or with specific applications in, for example, legislative process (Josefson and Casey, 2000), (Shellman, 2001), diplomacy and international relations (Newmann and Twigg, 2000), and ethnic conflict. Simulation in ethnic conflict resolution is used in the Program on Negotiation (PON) at the Harvard Law School and in the War and Peace in Africa course at the University of California, Los Angeles (Sklar, 2002), to name just a few examples. Where simulations in political science can be globalized, this would be an enhancement.

### **An Example of a Conflict Resolution Simulation Exercise**

An example of an ethnic conflict resolution simulation exercise is one used by the present writer for the course *Race and Ethnic Politics* presented recently at the University of Tasmania. The course aimed at trying to understand why in some countries, people of diverse backgrounds can peacefully co-exist, while in others there is conflict, civil war and genocide.

The nature of the subject meant that it was necessary to develop a sensitive approach. Theoretical content was presented drawing on political psychology and sociology, giving an introduction to the construction of concepts of race, ethnicity, language, religion, culture and identity, caste, class and modes of domination. From experience it has been found best to exclude from the course content any country where students might have a personal background. The case study selected here was the civil war in Sri Lanka, and an intensive briefing was necessary before the simulated identities could be constructed.

In the classroom, basic information about Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict was presented. Sri Lanka has a population of around 21 million of whom about 75 percent are Sinhala-speaking Buddhist-practising Sinhalese and 12 percent Tamil-speaking Hindu practising Tamils, with the rest of the population being Muslim or Christian identifying with either language group. The language proportions are Sinhala 72 percent, Tamil 20.5 percent the remainder being English or other language-speaking. While both great religious traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism preach non-violence, Sri Lanka has in fact been the theater of a civil war in which language and religion as well as other factors are deeply implicated.

In the post-independence period, Sinhalese majority agitation led to a 1956 declaration of Sinhala as the sole official language of the nation. In 1972 in response to protests from Tamils, the Sinhalese-dominated government changed the constitution. Not only did it reaffirm the dominant position of Sinhala but also gave state blessing to Buddhism. However, the Tamil language is not a small and localised competitor with Sinhala, but is in fact one of the major languages of Southern India, the official language of Tamil Nadu, and a language spoken by some 70 million people in India, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere.

Another dimension to the conflict is the economic disparity along community lines that has continued to widen. In 1981 a State of Emergency was declared and in 1983 a Civil War began between the Tamil Tigers of Elam (LTTE) and the Sri Lanka State, with atrocities on both sides. In 1987 an Indo-Lanka Peace Accord was signed under which India would cease to supply the LTTE, in exchange for concessions by the Sri Lankan Government to the Tamils of the North East.

Since that time, some sixty thousand have died and several hundred thousands have been displaced. After two decades of fighting, the government and the LTTE signed a ceasefire in 2002 brokered by Norwegian peace negotiators. The tsunami of 2004 severely affected Sri Lanka and for a short while there was some cooperation between Sri Lankan and LTTE forces, but unfortunately this was short lived. Violence resumed in 2006 and the government regained control of the Eastern Province in 2007. In January 2008, the government officially withdrew from the ceasefire, and has begun engaging the LTTE in the northern portion of the country.

After the classroom presentation, a video report on the ending of the truce in the Sri Lankan civil war was screened. In this report the LTTE regime was revealed as authoritarian but with no shortage of volunteers for the main form of military action, the suicide-bombing mission. The father of a 22-year-old woman who gave her life to the cause of Tamil independence was interviewed, and in the report he expressed satisfaction that his daughter's mission was accomplished. Leaders of the LTTE were interviewed and while not ruling out the possibility of a negotiated settlement, expressed grim determination to continue the struggle. The then President was also seen addressing Parliament, before she herself was seriously injured in an assassination attempt (ABC, 2006).

### **Stages in the Simulation Exercise**

#### **Stage 1**

Ethnic conflict is a potentially very painful subject in view of the personal backgrounds of students whose forebears may have belonged to targeted groups. Therefore, after a brief introduction, an assessment of the feasibility of the project was made. Moreover, the simulation was in accordance with the Code of Conduct of the University "...to provide a secure, supportive yet challenging environment for teaching and learning..."

#### **Stage 2**

The students were requested to form three simulated ethnic groups called 'Alphas', (who perceived themselves as original and rightful owners of the land, 'Betas', (who were perceived as intruders and who to some extent accepted this characterization), and one neutral group of negotiators called 'Deltas'. The groups were tasked to find a leader, by whatever means they chose, and then to leave the room and rehearse their perceptions of grievances and their strategies in private. Generally, leaders emerged, without election or argument, in all three groups.

#### **Stage 3**

The three groups re-entered the classroom and the simulated ethnic conflict began. After a little initial shyness, some accusations and insults began to flow: these concerned rights (to possess homeland, to enter and reoccupy), cultural stereotypes (lazy, greedy, unworthy), and insults about religion, food, and moral behavior. Then followed threats: to desecrate holy places, to drive the intruders out, and to take complete control. Though threats of physical violence are often part of ethnic conflict, it was interesting to see how simulation replicated this type of behavior. Simulated volunteering for suicide missions also emerged. Thus, participants were able to observe directly how identity narratives quickly developed on each side.

#### Stage 4

As the conflict intensified, the negotiators tried to become involved. They suggested a number of strategies and attempted to persuade the conflicting parties to come to the negotiating table but often without noticeable success. Here students realized the difficulty of conflict resolution without addressing the underlying fears, insecurities and grievances or "raw materials" of the conflict.

#### Stage 5

The instructor brought proceedings to a close at a point considered appropriate (about two hours) but this was not stated in advance (because one of the defining characteristics of ethnic conflict is that it will be perceived as a "war without end"). There was an intensive workshop debriefing as to practical measures to manage conflict, bringing together all of the mechanisms of conflict already analyzed in the course, such as fear (Lake and Rothchild, 1996), unresolved grief (Bostock, 1997), organized riot systems (Brass, 1997), past atrocities, arbitration negotiation, and neutral third parties (Harris and Reilly, 1998). Perhaps not unsurprisingly, students saw ethnic identity as meeting important psychological needs, such as the sense of a need for ownership, justice, victimhood, retribution, revenge and life meaning.

The method was thus to try by simulation to gain insight into identity "...the essential, continuous self, the internal, subjective concept of oneself..." (Reber, 2001: 338), which is a challenge for teacher and student in the interpretivist approach.

### **Conclusion**

The magnitude of the ethnic conflict issue in the real world makes the study of it imperative and the simulated ethnic conflict resolution exercise using the language teaching approach of global simulation is a valuable exercise. When insight into ethnic conflict as not just as an interaction of actors with different identities, but also as a collision of world-views, has been achieved, then the exercise has achieved its primary objective. The dangers of a simulated conflict becoming too realistic to students, either as individuals or as groups, are obvious but with careful management the risks can be minimized.

### **Note**

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