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Original Citation

Woodcock, Pete (2006) The Polis of Springfield: The Simpsons and the Teaching of Political Theory. *Politics*, 26 (3). p. 192. ISSN 0263-3957

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The Polis of Springfield: The Simpsons and the Teaching of Political Theory

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Abstract

When students commence the study of political theory, they often lack the vocabulary necessary for that study and any specific examples of political societies other than their own. As a result of this, this article examines *The Simpsons* for examples that might help teachers of political theory to communicate key themes in political thought to undergraduates. In particular this article suggests that Springfield is a model of a deliberative and participatory democracy, and therefore can be used as a model of these ideals, as well as providing examples of some of the challenges that they may face. In addition, it examines how *The Simpsons* may be used in teaching Mill's 'Harm Principle', and Plato's *Republic*.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the members of the University of Huddersfield Politics Reading Group, and students of mine both past and present who have had to put up with my incessant *Simpsons* references. I am also indebted to Dr Sarah Hale for her comments on an early draft of this paper, as well as the anonymous referees who provided comments as part of the submission procedure for *Politics*.

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Theory and examples

In his article examining role playing as a means to gain a deep holistic approach to learning, Andrew Schaap points out that political theory is ‘necessarily abstract and general’, and that the language involved ‘either alienates or inspires’ students (Schaap, 2005, p. 46, p. 51). He invites us, therefore, to think of alternate methods of delivering our subject to teach this abstract and general language. Schaap also defines learning political theory as being ‘about acquiring a vocabulary that enables one to reflect more critically and precisely about the terms on which human beings (do and should) co-operate for and compete over public goods, symbolic and material’ (Schaap, 2005, p.46), a vocabulary, we must assume, that learners lack when embarking upon a particular course. When students have started to get to grips with political theory and its vocabulary they do indeed relish it as ‘it provides them with a space in which to reflect on their own, previously unexamined, but cherished, views on what politics is for’ (Coleman, 2000, p.152).

A problem facing any teacher of political theory is that learners in the early part of their degree course often have limited examples of the political make-up of political societies other than their own to which they can apply the vocabulary of political theory. Reading and study of a variety of political and sociological disciplines will, of course, provide learners with these kind of concrete examples, however, this article will suggest that most learners already have a bank of examples that teachers can call

upon to illustrate political ideas in practice, and that examples from the television programme *The Simpsons* provides a model of a democracy that teachers may exploit.

Popularity of the Simpsons

Slowly but surely *The Simpsons* has become part of the collective consciousness, building from a short series of sketches on the Tracey Ullman show in America, to a syndicated show being broadcast worldwide. Chris Turner (2004, p.5) likens *The Simpsons* to a 'climate change: it built incrementally, week by week, episode by episode, weaving itself into the cultural landscape slowly but surely until it became a permanent feature'. What marks *The Simpsons* out from other cartoons not necessarily aimed at children (such as Mike Judge's *Beavis and Butthead* and *King of the Hill*, and Trey Parker and Matt Stone's *South Park*), and therefore makes it a legitimate subject for academic enquiry and use, is its multi-referential nature.

The writers of *The Simpsons* refer to, and make use of, a variety of differing artistic genres in the production of the show. One episode, for example, where the Springfield Elementary school bus crashes off a bridge and is swept into the ocean leaving the schoolchildren to start a new civilization on a deserted island is a thinly disguised parody of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (*Das Bus*: 5F11).¹ Another episode (*Homer vs. The Eighteenth Amendment*: 4F15) briefly shows a shot of a diner which is depicted as similar to that in Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*. Film references are also legion, such as the episode entitled *22 Short Films About Springfield* (3F18), which contains numerous parodies of Quentin Tarentino's *Pulp Fiction*.. The writers of *The Simpsons*, therefore, are prepared to make reference to and discuss a variety of

different sources, from films to art. Indeed, as we shall discuss later on, there is even an episode that is based upon Plato's *Republic*. Whereas this gives us some idea as to the serious intent in the writing of *The Simpsons*, it is less their references to culture that will interest us at first, but more the model of everyday society that they create in Springfield.

The Simpsons and Democracy

'I've said it before and I'll say it again' states Kent Brockman, Springfield's news anchor in Episode 2F11 (*Bart's Comet*), 'Democracy simply doesn't work.' Brockman's ire is prompted by Congress' failure to pass a bill to evacuate Springfield when it is threatened with annihilation by a comet whose trajectory is in line with the city. Brockman's frustration here, however, is directed at the US federal government, and the failure of the representative system therein, not at the local democracy he sees around him every day in Springfield. Therefore his statement that democracy simply doesn't work is slightly misleading as at the local level in Springfield, as we shall see, democracy works very well indeed. Springfield's citizens enjoy 'a surprising degree of local control and autonomy' (Cantor, 1999, p.743), and can be regarded as, and used by teachers as a model democratic society. Indeed, if we define a deliberative democracy as a system whereby citizens have 'not only equality of votes, but also [the] equal and effective opportunity to participate in processes of collective judgment' (Warren, 2002, p.174), in order to 'draw forth the otherwise unarticulated knowledge and insight of citizens' (Kymlicka, 2002, p.291), then Springfield can be regarded as a model of a deliberative democracy.

For example, there is the ubiquitous use of public meetings in Springfield that, although they do not always lead to successful policies, do allow the citizens to participate in the governance of their town. The Mayor of Springfield, 'Diamond' Joe Quimby seems perfectly content with allowing issues to go to a general vote in town meetings and for citizens to raise issues and come up with ideas from the floor. The decision to build a Monorail in Springfield was taken by a public meeting (*Marge vs The Monorail*: 9F10), admittedly after the travelling con-man Lyle Lanley had influenced (or possibly manipulated) the meeting with a catchy song. Perhaps more remarkable about this meeting was that the Mayor allows the citizens to decide how to spend the \$3 million the City has just received (a court imposed fine on Mr Burns for dumping toxic waste in the park). This was not the only time that Quimby turned to town meetings to look for ideas. In episode 1F08, *Springfield (or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Legalized Gambling)*, the Mayor calls a town meeting to ask for ideas on how to rejuvenate the City's economy. Principal Skinner proposes, and gains public support for his suggestion that Springfield legalise gambling to increase revenue. A town meeting was also held to recall Homer from his disastrous spell as Springfield's sanitation commissioner (*Trash of the Titans*: 5F09) where in order to cover his massive spending on uniforms and other maladministration, he had to allow other cities to dump their garbage in Springfield's abandoned mines. This action results in garbage erupting from the ground, and so the people of Springfield decide to move the entire town five miles down the road to avoid this pollution.

Not only do the citizens of Springfield have the opportunity to make decisions and deliberate on matters of public concern, but the citizens also staunchly portray themselves as being morally equal participants in this decision making process.

When Principle Skinner and teacher Edna Krabappel begin a romance Superintendent Chalmers tells Skinner to either end this workplace relationship or be fired (*Grade School Confidential*: 4F09). To this Edna democratically suggests that they ‘take [their] case directly to the townspeople’ for approval. Chalmers mockingly replies ‘who do you want to talk to first? The, the guy with a bumblebee suit, or the one with a bone through his hair?’ Sideshow Mel (the one with a bone through his hair) replies to this indignantly ‘[m]y opinions are as valid as the next man's’.

Town meetings are not, however, the only source of citizen participation in civic affairs in Springfield. The local media, despite their flaws, seem open and accessible to an extent that townspeople can participate in political discussion and air their opinions. In *They Saved Lisa’s Brain* (AABF18), Lisa Simpson has an open letter to the people of Springfield published in the town’s newspaper the *Springfield Shopper* in which she decries the lack of culture in Springfield saying: ‘we have eight malls, but no symphony. Thirty-two bars but no alternative theatre. Thirteen stores that begin with ‘Le Sex.’’ This is a recurrent theme in *The Simpsons* as when Lisa discovers from Grampa that she will soon become stupid due to the ‘Simpson Gene’ (which she later discovers only effects Simpson men) she manages to get on a Channel 6 newscast in order to tell people to ‘treasure their brains’ whilst they still have them (*Lisa the Simpson*: 4F24). Elsewhere, Channel 6 allows Lisa and Bart to set up their own news programme entitled *Kidz Newz* (*Girly Edition*: 5F15), to the delight of Lisa who claims that this will allow her to ‘tackle all the hard-hitting children’s news the grown up controlled media won’t touch.’

Adults can also make put forward their views on TV, as Marge discovered when she founded the pressure group Springfieldians for Nonviolence, Understanding, and Helping (S.N.U.H). The aim of S.N.U.H. was to end violence in cartoons after Maggie Simpson, imitating an incident from an episode of *Itchy and Scratchy*, hit Homer on the head with a mallet (*Itchy & Scratchy & Marge*: 7F09). Marge gains adherents to her cause, and is asked to defend her views on Kent Brockman's television programme *Smart Line*. Despite the belief of Roger Myers, the producer of *Itchy and Scratchy*, in his discussions with Marge that 'one person cannot make a difference', her campaign ends with such force that violence is removed from cartoons. This campaign is a double edged sword for Marge, however, and she begins to realise that censoring what people can see is problematic when her followers ask her to lead the campaign against the exhibition of Michelangelo's *David* on the grounds that it is full frontal nudity. Marge believes that *David* should be exhibited, and as a consequence begins to realise that it is difficult to argue in favour of one kind of censorship, and against another. This episode can be used to discuss a variety of political issues that touch on what should, and what should not be censored, and could provide for an interesting discussion of, for example, Mill's Harm Principle (the idea put forward by Mill in *On Liberty* that the sole basis for preventing a person from doing what they wished is to prevent harm to others). Homer was clearly harmed by being hit on the head by a mallet, however was this harm a direct result of *Itchy and Scratchy*, or could it be said that Maggie was the only one directly harming Homer. Likewise, the discussion could be broadened to look at whether being offended by something constitutes harm, and therefore if we should ban something because it offends people. We should not doubt that many members of S.N.U.H. were indeed offended by the exhibition of the nude figure of Michelangelo's *David*, but does being

offended by something constitute the type of harm that gives us reason to ban something, and precisely where do we draw the line on this issue?

Finally, in an age of lack of participation in politics and in society in general, Springfield provides us with a refreshing example of a city with abundant social capital with people being members of numerous different organisations, clubs and networks. Community events in Springfield are legion; there are, amongst others, the Swap Meet (*Homer's Barbershop Quartet*: 9F21), the Chilli Cook-Off (*El Viaje Misterioso de Nuestro Jomer*: 3F24), the Renaissance Faire (*Lisa's Wedding*: 2F15), and the Food Festival (*Guess Who's Coming to Criticize Dinner*: AABF21), all of which gain a large amount of support from the local community. There are organisations such as the 'Investorettes', where women combine to own and run a small business (*The Twisted World of Marge Simpson*: 4F08), indeed Springfield even puts on a franchise fair to encourage such local investors. The Parent Teacher Association is robust, and takes over the running of Springfield Elementary School when a strike threatens to disrupt the children's education, and local residents stand in as teachers (*The PTA Disbands*: 2F19). There is also an extremely popular bowling league in Springfield, with teams that represent every area of the community (*Team Homer*: 3F10), so there is no need to go bowling alone in Springfield.

Therefore, Springfield provides us with a model of a deliberative democracy and a participatory society that might ring true with learners that are new to political theory. Indeed, Springfield may be a Utopia, but for the presence of one man: Springfield's oldest resident and Nuclear Power Plant Owner Mr C. Montgomery Burns, whose villainy knows no bounds. His pollution of the local environment has resulted in

three-eyed fish to populate Springfield's fishing lake (*Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish*: 7F01), although this issue did result in him losing his gubernatorial election. He is a dreadful employer, sexually harassing his female employees (*Marge Gets a Job*: 9F05), taunting his employees with dismissal until they have a heart attack (*Homer's Triple Bypass*: 9F09) and exchanges his employees' dental plan for a keg of beer (*Last Exit to Springfield*: 9F15). Despite his wealth, he is not civically minded in the slightest, and one time designs a device to block out the sun, which he refers to as his 'greatest nemesis' that 'still provides our customers with free light, heat, and energy' (*Who Shot Mr. Burns? (Part One)*: 2F16). The Simpsons, therefore, can be used to demonstrate not only democracy, but also the challenges that it sometimes faces.

The political world that *The Simpsons* portrays is, of course, one that will be more immediately recognisable to American students than to UK undergraduates. It portrays a world of gubernatorial elections and elected Sanitation Commissioners whereby decisions are made by powerful Town Mayors as well as town meetings all of which are (with the possible exception of elected town Mayors) alien to the *practical* political experience of most UK undergraduates. Whereas this political world is alien to them in a *practical* sense, it is not (due to programmes such as *The Simpsons*) alien to them in the theoretical sense and as a result can aid understanding of the differences between the American and UK system of politics. *The Simpsons* provides learners with a familiarity, therefore, of a system of politics of which is different from their own and therefore gives them the opportunity to reflect on this political world and compare it to their own. It is for this reason that *The Simpsons* provides the teacher of political theory with such a rich bank of resources; students

who are familiar with *The Simpsons* will have a bank of political examples that are different from the political system that they have grown up in.

Plato's Republic and the Simpsons

Providing an example of a deliberative democracy is not, however, the only use the Simpsons has for teachers of political theory. It also provides us with an episode that outlines Plato's *Republic*, which could be used in the classroom. In the episode *They Saved Lisa's Brain* (AABF18), Lisa, disgusted by the antics of her fellow residents in a 'gross-out competition' that descends into a food fight, writes a letter to the local media denouncing Springfield as being a town of 'lowbrows, no-brows, and ignorami'. When this letter is read, Lisa receives an invitation to join the local branch of Mensa, the high IQ society. At Lisa's first Mensa meeting, the local GP and Mensa member Dr. Hibbert bemoans the fact that those that govern are less intelligent than them asking why 'do we live in a town where the smartest have no power and the stupidest run everything?' This all changes, however, when a mix up over the booking of a gazebo in the local park takes Lisa and her fellow Mensa society members to the office of 'Diamond' Joe Quimby. Quimby, ever involved in shady deals, misunderstands their intentions, and believing them to be about to uncover his corruption, flees Springfield.

Following Quimby's departure, the town charter is consulted, which states that in the absence of the Mayor, 'a council of learned citizens shall rule in his stead'. The members of Mensa self-appoint themselves to this role, and take control of the reins of local government. Lisa suggests that 'with our superior intellects, we could rebuild

this city on a foundation of reason and enlightenment. We could turn Springfield into a Utopia.’

The similarities with Plato’s republic here should appear obvious, and can be used to reinforce his critique of democracy. Firstly, Dr. Hibbert’s lament printed above can be linked in with the idea of the craft analogy (the idea, as propounded by Plato’s tutor Socrates, that just as you would go to an expert in, say, the training of a horse, so to should you go to an expert (the wisest) to lead people). Secondly Lisa’s argument about governing upon the basis of reason can be used as illustrative of Plato’s belief that reason should govern society. The Springfield Mensa members, therefore, become Philosopher Kings, dominating the rest of society; however this is not where the analogy ends, as further developments in this episode allow us to look at some criticisms of Plato’s theory.

The reforms the Springfield philosopher kings introduce are indeed sweeping. For example they notice how nobody likes to turn up to jury service, so they re-brand the experience along the lines of a comic book; jury summonses now read ‘you have been chosen to join the Justice Squadron, 8 a.m. Monday at the Municipal Fortress of Vengeance.’ Mensa’s goals, however, do not cease at this re-branding of jury service, and divisions appear amongst the junta and opposition forms against them with Comic Book Guy’s plan to allow breeding only once every seven years. This causes an argument amongst the members of Mensa as to who is the most intelligent, and complaints from the towns people about the power held by the elite. The situation is resolved by Stephen Hawking’s appearance (played by himself as the guest voice), disputing why they should govern as they have a lower IQ than him. This could, of

course, open up classroom discussion as to precisely who we regard as being the most intelligent in society, and precisely how we measure that intelligence.

So far we have addressed how *The Simpsons* are relevant to a number of discussions in politics, and have hinted on how this could be used in a classroom setting. As a practical example of this, try the exercise in figure one in a seminar group as an introduction to political philosophy, having already delivered a lecture on Plato (or used an alternative method to introduce Plato's ideas). This exercise does two important things that will aid enjoyment and understanding of political theory. Firstly it will allow students who are new to the study of politics and political theory to engage in a discussion around the idea of who should govern in society, and it will allow learners to assess the justification for Mensa's role in Springfield, along with the policy decision that they make. They will be able to judge, therefore, whether it is reasonable for the intelligent to govern (and if not who should), and what powers those that govern should have and what decisions should be left in the hands of ordinary citizens (linking in to the towns people's critique of Mensa's rule). This discussion will introduce them to many of the key ideas in political theory. Secondly, it will enable learners to link the episode with Plato's republic, and delve further into the idea of what Plato meant by the idea that reason should govern. This second opportunity is perhaps the most important as whereas *The Simpsons* provides an excellent introduction to the discussion of political theory and a way to make it accessible, this article does not intend to suggest replacing the core texts and ideas of political theory with a discussion of *The Simpsons* alone.

Figure One

Watch The Simpsons episode "They Saved Lisa's Brain", and answer the following questions:

- (A) What justification did the members of Mensa give for taking control of the town?
- (B) How similar is this to the argument laid out by Plato in *The Republic*?
- (B) Is this a good argument for justifying who governs? Is it democratic?
- (C) What objections did the townspeople give to the junta's new policies?
- (D) How did Stephen Hawking challenge their power?

Conclusion

This article has not attempted to extract any political truths from the Simpsons, nor has it tried to show that the Simpsons favour one political party or another (for a discussion of this issue see Cantor (1999), pp.734-5). It has been an attempt to show how we can, as teachers of politics, make use of this remarkable multi-referential television programme that provides us with a model of society.

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¹ All episode details come from either Richmond & Coffman (1997), Gimple (1999) or McCann (2002).