

The Nation in *The Hunger Games*: Fact or Fiction?

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Sociology

Throughout both the Hunger Games books and films, Suzanne Collins has depicted a future dystopian world full of poverty, inequality and segregation. The story depicts a 16 year old girl who is forced to fight to the death in an arena full of other young district members aged between 12 and 18. The Hunger Games are an annual event which is mass-televised to both the Capitol; who provide the funding, and also to the individual districts; as an attempt to punish the communities for a previous uprising. The games and competitors rely on sponsors from the Capitol residents, who provide resources and aid to the most popular contender. As the female protagonist fights for her life, the story follows her development from merely a provider for her family, into the leader and symbol of a revolution.

Although the world presented sounds ruthless and wholly divergent to modern day, there are many similarities between the two, with the depiction of poverty and capitalism being significant in the comparison. Within the story, the land is separated into enclosed districts which differ in terms of economic wealth, with the wealthier areas being closer to the Capitol, and the destitute areas which are high in unemployment and lacking resources, further away. This representation of the segregation of class in society is prevalent in the UK in 2013, with poverty-stricken areas lacking in health care, education, social capital, employment and many

other basic necessities that are readily available in affluent areas. "So many opportunities and resources still depend on where people live. Wide and persisting inequality is reflected in big differences between "rich" and "poor" areas" (JRF - Dorling, 2013).

This theme of poverty and capitalism is central when linked with consumerism and technology. A prominent theory explaining the division between different social classes is the segregation caused by new technologies, especially in terms of work, transport, information and communication. "Inequalities



related to information technology are understood as highly structural and technology is seen accountable not only for strengthening existing inequalities but

even for creating new ones. If there are any suggestions, they are radical: end global capitalism" (Chossudovsky, 1999, cited in Sassi, 2005: 694-695). This "Digital Divide" is portrayed in the story by showing how technologically advanced the Capitol is, and the way technology is used to control and monitor others around them and also to isolate themselves (via a train link and gated community).

A central theme of Capitalism is the idea of commodification and consumption, where any

goods or services can be bought and sold through the global market; this applies to both the film and modern day, as within the film, the tributes sent to the arena are used as objects to be bet on and as a means of profit and entertainment; consumerism is what keeps the games funded. Within society, this is applicable to the darker side of Capitalism and tourism, where in countries such as Thailand and the Philippines, sex tourism and the commodification of the body is common; it is seen as merely a consumable product and a source of enjoyment for those with the money to exploit others (Gottdiener, 2000: 232).

The most common theme in both the Hunger Games and worldwide is that of surveillance. It is estimated in 2004 “over 4 million cameras were being used in the UK... and that the average Briton was caught on camera 300 times a day” (Nouw, Vries & Prins, 2005: 91). This estimate shows the increasing surveillance imposed on not only the UK, but worldwide, with CCTV being used to combat crime and terrorism. However, this increase has potentially created a loss of freedom for the individual, with citizens being constantly monitored and assessed. This idea of surveillance is presented in the Hunger Games through the arena itself; which is equipped with cameras throughout, as are the districts in which they live; ensuring behaviour is under constant observation.

An up to date example of this is the outrage caused by the National Security Agency, where the telephones of Government officials were accessed and monitored without consent; this not only shows a violation of the individual, but also presents “public participatory

surveillance”, defined as the “many watching the many on behalf of the few” (Larsen and Piche, 2009: 196). This is due to the agency asking others to supply the organisation with personal data; “A US official provided NSA with 200 phone numbers to 35 world leaders” (Ball, 2013).

There are emerging aspects of surveillance that have been made possible through new types of technology, making it easier to surveil others, and for others to surveil you. The concept of surveillance technology has developed due to social networks and the rise in mobile applications. “Surveillance technology is defined as any computing technology that allows one party to monitor the behavior of another to modify behaviour in a specific way... surveillance technology is the most common in today’s marketplace” (Fogg, 2003: 46). Sites of

communication, such as Twitter and Facebook, have provided society with the opportunity to “follow” the movements and lifestyle of celebrities and strangers. This has created synopticon societies who surveil one another (Mathieson, 1997), much like the concept of a “neighbourhood watch”. As individuals have constant access to the lives of others, it should theoretically reduce problem behaviour.

Many of the themes presented are restricting on society; however, there are aspects in the story that reflect successful post-modern developments. For example, Katniss, the protagonist of the story, is portrayed as a strong, independent woman who is essentially the bread-winner in the family. Her skills ensured

she stayed alive whilst living in the day to day, and survived whilst subjected to the extremes the game masters generated. This could be said to reflect the growing independence and self-sufficiency that many women have acquired within modern society; women are delaying starting families in order to pursue careers, and are in some households, the main wage earner.



“The number of ‘maternal breadwinners’ – working single mothers and working mothers who earn as much as or more than their partner – has dramatically increased” (Galim & Silim, 2013: 3). This is partly as a result of the globalised world in which we live, due to an increase in technology, there has been a shift in women’s roles within the workplace, to one where international networks are easily established and maintained; this has not only created more opportunities for women in their careers, but for everyone. “Knowledge of timing and location has become pervasive in the computerised, connected and co-dependent just-in-time flows of people, goods, money, and information in the ‘network society’” (Castells, 1996 & Thrift, 2005, cited in Urry & Grieco 2012: 140).

This reflection on the similarities between a dystopian world and modern day show there is no substantial difference between the two, both are heavily surveilled, controlled by a capitalist system and rely heavily on consumerism and tourism. Although Collins created the story based on a futuristic perception of North-America, this Nation is not so dissimilar from the reality in which we live. Apart from the extremities of the games themselves, the story of the Hunger Games could be argued to be a valid representation of our post-modern lives.

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