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The Hunger Games are playing on loop— And I am tired of watching

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Abstract

Say you wanted to take over the world—how would you do it? Let's agree it looks much like the world we live in today, where some countries hold inordinate power over the lives of people in others; where global systematic racism, the shameful legacy of colonization and imperialism, has contrived to keep many humans poor and struggling. Now, let's add climate change to that picture. How would you take over the world as landmasses slip underwater due to rising ocean levels, storms become more and more destructive, droughts decimate the agricultural stability of multiple countries (like in [Syria](#), for example), and resources become more and more scarce?

Disciplines

Cultural History | Family, Life Course, and Society | Fiction | Food Studies | Human Ecology | Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance | Sociology of Culture

Comments

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The Hunger Games Are Playing on Loop— And I Am Tired of Watching

Say you wanted to take over the world—how would you do it? Let’s agree it looks much like the world we live in today, where some countries hold inordinate power over the lives of people in others; where global systematic racism, the shameful legacy of colonization and imperialism, has contrived to keep many humans poor and struggling. Now, let’s add Climate Change to that picture. How would you take over the world as landmasses slip under water due to rising ocean levels, storms become more and more destructive, droughts decimate the agricultural stability of multiple countries (like in [Syria](#), for example), and resources become more and more scarce?

The answer is so easy it is almost banal: control food supplies, of course. Hunger is a great way to control the masses, which is exactly what *The Hunger Games* illustrates, as I have argued [elsewhere](#).

In case you have been living under a rock and haven’t read *The Hunger Games* or seen the film, here is a brief synopsis: after Climate Change has reduced the borders of the United States and many die, the country is divided into thirteen districts and one powerful city, The Capitol, which is the seat of the government. Each district supplies food and resources to the Capitol, in return for which they are given “security” and barely enough food to keep them working. At some point in the novel’s imagined past District Thirteen rebels, is bombed into oblivion, and in order to atone for Thirteens’s arrogance as well as ensure no other District will attempt the same, every year each district must supply two children for The Hunger Games, a grotesque gladiatorial spectacle where the children are forced to enact national policy—the fight and control over resources—until one “winner” remains. In Collins’ world as in ours, food is the key piece in an oppressive political game.

I am not the first writer to point out that food can be leveraged as a political weapon—[Raj Patel](#), [Susan George](#), [Vandana Shiva](#) argue the same in great depth—and we can see this ideology enacted world-wide as powerful countries import food from others with starving populations. In fact, some countries like the United States have declared through legal maneuvers that food supplies (and, in turn, [genetic food patents](#)) are vital to national security. But since I live in a powerful country, the real-life version of Collins’ Capitol, a country that benefits from and controls global trade, why should I care?

Well, let’s say you are a person who can’t invest in the suffering of others. In *The Hunger Games* the residents of The Capitol are taught not to care about the lives of people in the Districts, to worry only about themselves. People suffering far away seem too remote, or maybe you are busy worrying about your own family, job, and survival to extend your concern to strangers. Compassion requires practice, I believe, and in today’s society we are rarely encouraged to express and practice such a radical anti-individualist and anti-capitalist emotion. So, too, the societal and environmental costs of our American lifestyles are often hidden from us, perhaps because if we witnessed and knew the full price of how we have been taught to live our lives we might demand other choices, choices that would not [enrich so few](#) while leaving others in devastated and polluted landscapes.

Collins’ book lays the global control of food resources bare for the very people who will inherit our political situation, also making us invest in her characters so we cannot look away, cannot afford *not* to care. In turn, we realize the Capitol is never satisfied, can never have enough capital. Exploitation benefits them... until it doesn’t. After all, capitalism, the endless accumulation of goods, has no end in sight. Barry Lopez writes about this very problem in *The Rediscovery of North America* when he notes that the ideology behind founding America, and indeed of global imperialism, was an “ruthless, angry search for wealth [. . .] in which an end to it had no meaning” (9). As in Collins’ book, power, money, food, and the basic needs for survival are being aggregated on the top of the economic chain, leaving everyone below to barter their lives—as the children of districts are forced to do—for survival.

So here’s why you should care: right now you may live in a wealthy country, you may be able to drive to the grocery store to buy your next meal and maybe you will be able to do so for a long time yet. But Climate Change will threaten global food supplies, *period*. It will turn the entire world into a fight for food (and water), a global Hunger Games. Already we can see its effects on the weakest, the most marginalized—the exact situation Collins wants young adults to imagine and picture. I live in a powerful country but my family is not particularly wealthy, and it would be easy for them to become a few more of the many considered “disposable.” My community could be District Twelve, where Katniss is from (Appalachia, the unfortunate seat of Big Coal and devastated by [Mountaintop Removal](#)), though more likely, since I live in Iowa, it is District Eleven, the agricultural district. I care about the suffering of others—social and environmental justice is what I write and think about for a living—but I am also motivated for personal reasons. I have a child and people I love, much like Katniss, and much like you, reader. I can see the end game of the fight for resources in an overpopulated world teetering on either disaster or massive restructuring, and like so many others, scientists and humanists alike, I am afraid of what the future holds.

Collins' imagined world may seem exaggerated. Yes, it is—she makes global politics visible for young and unsophisticated readers, so she strips our situation bare of its complexity, thereby making it visibly chilling in its clarity. When I was asked to write this blogpost, I couldn't help but think that as I write *The Hunger Games* play on loop, maybe not here in my small sleepy town but elsewhere, places where people are forced to fight one another for resources to survive, and like many I am tired of watching. It is not *entertaining* in the slightest, and also like many I wish a single heroine would save us from ourselves. But as we see in *The Hunger Games*, it takes far more than one girl to change an entire social structure—it takes large groups of people brave enough to declare loudly that the global economic system is exploitative and needs to change, that we will no longer live by consuming the health of our planet or the lives of others. Like the characters in Collins' novel, we can practice compassion, embrace the ethical imperative that the strong have a duty to protect the weak, and declare that true democracy—in which each voice matters in governance—is worth fighting for.



Finally, it may be strange to think that Climate Change offers us an opportunity, but it does. In *The Hunger Games*, Climate Change has already enacted its violence, but we stand on its precipice right now. For too long, we have known we need to change what it means to be human on planet Earth, how we live and consume, how we treat others, how we see ourselves in relation to the rest of the species on the planet. The changes required of us are tremendous and scary. We have been reluctant to tackle them, understandably afraid, but inaction is a luxury we can no longer afford. Climate Change demands of us—not *will* demand, but demands of us right now—that we embrace global social equality and begin implementing large-scale social and environmental change. As I write this, world leaders are in the process of debating our ability to enact such change at COP21 in Paris. I hope they won't let us down.

As I watched the last installment of *The Hunger Games* series just this past weekend, the final portion of *Mockingjay*, I was struck by the ending. I know critics will say it is too easy, clichéd in its happiness, heteronormative and unimaginative. I can agree with all of those things, but what I saw was a declaration of how we will sacrifice our very lives for common, simply human, desires: family, love, futurity, and peace.

I can't imagine a more profound message to send to young adults as we teeter on the verge of global instability. If that is a cliché, it is a powerful one I would like to see realized in my lifetime.