The Hunger Games Trilogy and Nonviolent Revolution:

How our national conversation has missed the point

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Analysis of War and Peace

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I, like many others, first became intrigued by The Hunger Games trilogy by Suzanne Collins after talking to a friend. This friend knew that I liked fantasy literature and talking about social change, and figured the books would be right up my alley. I started reading the trilogy and was immediately engrossed by the story, but most importantly by the social critique contained within. I am hardly alone in my experience. The struggles of Katniss Everdeen, who offers herself in her sister’s place to fight to the death in the hated Hunger Games and who reluctantly becomes the symbolic head of a revolution, have captured the imagination of many. With 36.5 million copies in print in the United States alone and the book being published in at total of 47 countries, this series is clearly on its way to joining our cultural canon.1

More important, however, is how this trilogy is being discussed. There are certainly many readers who simply appreciate the story and the characters, but for the most part our national discussion has shifted to include many voices speaking and writing about the social commentary the novels offer for our world. From when the first book was published in 2008 until now, there have been at least six full length books analyzing a variety of critiques contained within the novels. These critiques have covered topics such as the role of reality TV and media, the power of perception in our ability to trust, and the role of violence in literature marketed towards children, among others.

What seems to be missing in this discussion is an analysis of the use of violence in the revolution that takes place in the latter half of Collins’s series. Although Collins provides a scathing indictment of violent revolutions, our culture’s general blindness to how violence is counter-productive has kept us from bringing this critique into our national conversations about

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the novels. Her critique is all the more powerful because alternatives existed. Along the way, she includes moments in which it is clear that nonviolence could have been utilized to great success, which makes the devastation at the end of the novels all the more heart-wrenching. Perhaps her message would have been more widely recognized if, rather than focusing on the destructive and counter-productive nature of violent revolution, she had continued to build on her groundwork and allowed her characters to carry out a nonviolent revolution based on Gene Sharp’s work. If she had done this, the outcome of the story would have been very different, both for her characters and for our national discussions surrounding the use of violence.

“Nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change now”[^2]

Collins’s writing is undoubtedly violent; however, it is violent in a way that doesn’t sugarcoat the reality of the world she has created. This is a reality in which children are forced to kill children. Pretending that violence doesn’t occur, or lessening the impact of the violence would just detract from her purpose. In an interview she stated that, “This is not a fairy tale; it’s a war, and in war, there are tragic losses that must be mourned.”[^3] Her writing has been viewed allegorically by some who say that this world should best be seen as a reference to the adolescent social experience in which almost every event is seen as life or death. Collins refutes this reading, saying that “I don’t write about adolescence. I write about war. For adolescents.”[^4] Indeed, her writing can best be viewed as an attempt to educate readers about the realities of warfare, a legacy she received from her military father. About the necessity of this education, she says, “If we wait too long, what kind of expectation can we have? We think we’re sheltering them, but what we’re doing is putting them at a disadvantage.”[^5]

[^4]: Ibid
[^5]: Ibid
It is well known at this point that her inspiration for *The Hunger Games* “…came to her one evening when she was channel-surfing and flipped from a reality-television competition to footage from the war in Iraq.”6 Her critique of violence is overt, yet most analysis done on the text seems to be focused on her critique of the media, and our own roles as voyeurs in a society dominated by reality-based TV. In my search for commentary on the social critiques contained within the novels, only “Suzanne Collins’s War Stories for Kids”7 blatantly acknowledged her critique of violence. And what a critique it is.

In his work, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, Gene Sharp discusses nonviolent tactics revolutionaries might use to overthrow dictators. He argues against the use of violence, saying that “*By placing confidence in violent means, one has chosen the very type of struggle with which the oppressors nearly always have superiority,*” (emphasis in original).8 The citizens within the world of the Hunger Games rely upon guerilla warfare for their revolution, a method that Sharp critiques in particular. He argues that guerilla tactics involve an immense number of casualties among one’s own population, usually result in the attacked regime becoming even more dictatorial, and that even when these tactics do succeed they often result in a “new regime [that] is often more dictatorial than its predecessor due to the centralizing impact of the expanded military forces and the weakening or destruction of the society’s independent groups and institutions during the struggle — bodies that are vital in establishing and maintaining a democratic society.”9

From Sharp we know that violence begets violence, and Collins takes this understanding to heart. She does not flinch in depicting the costs of violence, showing the psychological trauma and high body count of characters that the readers have come to identify with and care for. The number of deaths on the rebel side only increases as the novels progress, including the complete

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6 Ibid
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid. 5
destruction of Katniss’s home District and eventually the death of Prim, Katniss’s younger sister. It is Prim’s death that provides the clearest moment of critique, as up until this moment the plot of the books has primarily been based upon Katniss’s desire to see her sister survive. Katniss only enters the Hunger Games in an attempt to protect Prim, and her decision to become the figurehead of the movement rests upon her perception that this revolution will eventually make her sister’s life safer and give her more opportunities.

However, if readers were hoping that these enormous costs could be justified by the newly instated free government, they were sorely disappointed. In a gut-wrenching move that was hardly surprising, the tactical leader of the revolution, President Coin, revealed that she would like to reinstate the Hunger Games for one last time to symbolically punish the Capitol for the evils they committed. She puts the issue to the remaining victors for a vote, and Peeta, Katniss’s fellow tribute from District 12 and complicated love interest, is the loudest dissenter, crying out “This is why we rebelled! Remember?” It is in this moment that Katniss realized what those of us who understand Sharp’s critique of guerilla tactics already know, that “Nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change now.”

Collins does not present the revolution as something glorious or honorable. The trilogy ends with Katniss exhausted and broken, psychologically haunted by all that has transpired. She

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10 Collins, *Mockingjay*, 14783. Prim’s death also serves as an example of how the new regime can be just as dictatorial as the oppressor. She is killed when a new type of bomb is dropped—one that is disguised as aid packages, explode once, then explode again when rescue crews come in. Although it initially appears that these bombs came from the Capitol, Collins provides ample hints that in actuality it was the rebel forces that dropped the bombs.


12 Ibid, 14889. The entire issue of District 13, President Coin’s home District, is also used to show how the new regime can become just as dictatorial as the oppressor. District 13 started the old rebellion, and then escaped by using their stockpile of nuclear weapons as an ultimate deterrent, leaving the rest of the Districts to suffer under the Capitol’s rule. They provide the primary leadership for the current rebellion, but are described as being more controlling than the Capitol in some respects and often use Katniss as a pawn, just as the Capitol did.

13 Ibid 14889
14 Ibid, 14914
is plagued by flashbacks and at one point strongly considers suicide.\textsuperscript{15} Even in the epilogue, which is set twenty years into her future, Katniss experiences flashbacks and spends time reflecting on how she will have to explain these to her children. Violent revolution did result in a new world order, but as Sharp describes, the costs are so high that it is unclear how the violent tactics could ever be seen as redemptive.

\textit{“It must be very fragile if a handful of berries can bring it down,”}\textsuperscript{16}

Violent revolution clearly did not work for the rebels of Collin’s literary world, but what makes this failure even more devastating is the fact that contained within the texts was the beginnings of nonviolent alternatives that would have likely had a greater chance of success. Sharp makes it clear that, “Violence against violence is reinforcing. The nonviolent group not only does not need to use violence, but they must not do so lest they strengthen their opponent and weaken themselves….Nonviolent action tends to turn the opponent’s violence and repression against his own power position, weakening it and at the same time strengthening the nonviolent group.”\textsuperscript{17} Additionally, nonviolent actions empower the group using them by ending submissiveness, revealing one’s ability to make a difference, increasing fearlessness, increasing self-esteem, bringing satisfaction, enthusiasm and hope, increasing group unity and internal cooperation, and providing a constructive outlet for aggression.\textsuperscript{18} Ultimately, Sharp argues that nonviolent tactics are strategically superior and are more likely to “…contribute to the diffusion of effective power throughout the society,”\textsuperscript{19} which is essential to a successful revolution.

The first requisite for an alternative is, of course, knowledge of what that alternative might be. Several characters share Sharp’s understanding of political power, most specifically

\textsuperscript{15} Collins, \textit{Mockingjay}, 14982
\textsuperscript{16} Collins, \textit{Catching Fire}, 5194
\textsuperscript{17} Gene Sharp, \textit{The Politics of Nonviolent Action}, (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973) 112.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 777-799
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 802
that it “…depend[s] on acceptance of the regime, on the submission and obedience of the population, and on the cooperation of innumerable people and the many institutions of the society.” This acceptance can be revoked, and once done the power of the dictator crumbles away. Katniss most clearly exemplifies this understanding when she states that, “The Capitol’s fragile because it depends on the districts for everything. Food, energy, even the Peacekeepers that police us. If we declare our freedom, the Capitol collapses.” One of the most powerful ways to accomplish the collapse of the oppressor is through, “…courageous mass action of political defiance by the population and its institutions.” There are several moments throughout the novels in which this defiance takes place, and many more moments in which individual actions serve as a catalyst to inspire the population towards these actions.

One of the most significant moments in the trilogy that serves as a catalyst for the movement comes at the conclusion of the first book. Katniss and her fellow tribute, Peeta, are carrying out a romance for the cameras, a romance that gains enough popular support that the rules of the Hunger Games are changed. If both tributes from a district survive until the end, they will both be allowed to survive. Katniss and Peeta both make it to the end, but rather than letting them live, the Gamemakers revert to the original rule that there may be only one victor. Faced with the choice to kill her friend or die herself, Katniss suddenly realizes that she doesn’t have to play by the Gamemakers’ rules. She reflects that, “Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers’ faces. They’d have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country.” She gives a handful of poisonous berries that she had found earlier to Peeta, and they both prepare to commit

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20 Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, 19
21 Collins, *Mockingjay*, 12274
22 Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, 22
suicide. At the last possible second, the Gamemakers allow them both to live, a decision that
does indeed result in the execution of the Head Gamemaker. It is this moment of rebellion that
sparks revolution across the districts.

A spark cannot light fires without tinder, however, and similarly this moment could not
have had the same impact without an underlying rebellious spirit already present. Collins
includes several moments in which symbolic challenges are present. Sharp describes symbolic
challenges as political actions that are limited in scope and are designed to, “test and influence
the mood of the population, and to prepare them for continuing struggle through noncooperation
and political defiance.”24 Early in the novel, this type of challenge can be seen. When Prim is
selected for the Hunger Games at the age of only twelve and Katniss takes her place, the citizens
of District 12 refuse to applaud. Katniss narrates this, saying “I stand there unmoving while they
take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree.
We do not condone. All of this is wrong.”25 When Katniss’s ally within the Games, a twelve year
old girl from District 11, is killed, Katniss deals with her grief by symbolically challenging the
legitimacy of the Hunger Games. She says, “I want to do something, right here, right now, to
shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to
do there is a part of every tribute they can’t own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games.
And so am I.”26 She gathers wildflowers to decorate Rue’s body, knowing that the cameras will
have to show the flowers when the Capitol hovercrafts collect her corpse. As she leaves the area,
Katniss salutes Rue.

It is this last action that serves as inspiration for the first mass action of political defiance
that occurs in the trilogy. In the second novel, Katniss and Peeta are taken on a Victory Tour of

24 Sharp, From Dictatorship to Democracy, 60.
26 Ibid, 3079.
all the Districts. When they arrive at District 11, they speak to the crowd of citizens about their
grief for Rue. At the conclusion of this speech, the mass action begins. Collins writes,

> What happens next is not an accident. It is too well executed to be spontaneous, because it happens in complete unison. Every person in the crowd presses the three middle fingers of their left hand against their lips and extends them to me. It’s our sign from District 12, the last good-bye I gave Rue in the arena….The full impact of what I’ve done hits me. It was not intentional—I only meant to express my thanks—but I have elicited something dangerous. An act of dissent from the people of District 11. ²⁷

What is most intriguing about these symbolic challenges is how close they come to succeeding. While the Capitol reacts harshly to this moment of rebellion, the retribution is not enough to quell the rebellious spirit.

Indeed, by the middle of the second book, a symbolic challenge takes place that is so powerful that it actually moves the citizens of the Capitol to call for change. The Hunger Games, once again, must take place, but this year conditions are special. It is the 75th anniversary, and rather than selecting tributes from the general population, the tributes must come from the pool of surviving victors, to serve as “…a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol….”²⁸ During the pre-Games interviews, the victors who have been selected speak of how awful this rule is, how the creators of the Games must not have anticipated the level of connection that would take place between the victors and the citizens of the capitol.²⁹ The members of the crowd, all from the Capitol, are moved to the point where, “People have been weeping and collapsing and even calling for change.”³⁰ At the conclusion of the interviews, a striking moment of symbolic challenge occurs. Collins writes, “And then it happens. Up and down the row, the victors begin to join hands….By the time the

²⁹ Ibid. 8173. The “relationship” is one in which the citizens of the Capitol admire and have favorites amongst the victors, a “relationship” that is very similar to one a modern citizen of the U.S. might have with a favorite celebrity.
³⁰ Ibid. 8179.
anthem plays its final strains, all twenty-four of us stand in one unbroken line in what must be the first public show of unity among the districts since the Dark Days.”\textsuperscript{31} With this action, Collins displays the power of a concept that Sharp calls “political jiu-jitsu,” or using the power and repression of the opponent against it.\textsuperscript{32} In this case, Collins makes it clear that it is unlikely the original creators of the Games wrote this rule—more likely, this is a current reaction to the rebellions that have been occurring. Unfortunately for the Capitol, their policy of repression backfired and instead gave the rebels something with which to garner popular support from the citizens of the Capitol.

With these acts of symbolic challenge, Collins illustrates that the characters in her literary world are indeed ready for a revolution. If they had continued with these nonviolent tactics, they might have had a more successful revolution that actually resulted in the empowerment of the citizens and our national discussion of the social commentary might have included Collins’ critique of violent revolution.

\textit{“They can design dream weapons…but they will never again brainwash me into the necessity of using them”}\textsuperscript{33}

\textit{The Hunger Games} trilogy as it stands contains a potent critique of violent tactics and the seeds of a nonviolent revolution. So what might that revolution have looked like? First, Sharp repeatedly stressed the importance of a well-thought through strategy, one that takes into account the objectives of the revolution. In his own words, “We have argued here that overthrow of the dictatorship or removal of the present dictator is \textit{not} enough. The objective in these conflicts needs to be the establishment of a free society with a democratic system of government.”\textsuperscript{34} With

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid. 8276.
\textsuperscript{32} Sharp, \textit{The Politics of Nonviolent Action}, 110.
\textsuperscript{33} Collins, \textit{Mockingjay}, 14994.
\textsuperscript{34} Sharp, \textit{From Dictatorship to Democracy}, 47
this goal in mind, the rebellion within the Hunger Games would need to plan a strategic approach that would empower the citizens of all Districts to be able to take part in the revolution, and ultimately the democratic process.

The first step, then, would be to educate the citizens about the methods being used. This could be accomplished a variety of ways. Underground radio broadcasts might be the easiest, especially when communicating across Districts. Communicating within Districts, however, could also be accomplished by using underground newspapers and pamphlets. Collins has already included mention of an alternative media. In *Mockingjay*, the rebels develop a series of propaganda messages that can be aired on TV by hijacking the Capitol’s network. This type of communication is one example of actions that Sharp calls nonviolent protest and persuasion, which is “…a class which includes a large number of methods which are mainly symbolic acts of peaceful opposition or of attempted persuasion….” Protest and persuasion is one of three broad categories of actions that can be used in a nonviolent revolution.

Other examples of protest and persuasion could include the continued use of the mockingjay symbol. During the Games, each tribute is allowed a token from his or her home District. Katniss wears a mockingjay pin and, after her act of defiance at the conclusion of the Games, the mockingjay becomes the symbol of the revolution. This is particularly apropos because, “a mockingjay is a creature the Capitol never intended to exist,” the result of breeding between normal mockingbirds and Capitol-designed genetic mutations, “Jabberjays,” that were used as spies during the first rebellion. The symbol is used to identify rebels to one another in the novels, but it could also be used in a more widespread way as a symbol of protest. Other

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35 Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2646. Travel between Districts is strictly regulated, and the vast majority of citizens have never left their home District.
34 Collins, *Mockingjay*, 10623
38 Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 6120
types of protest and persuasion could be political mourning of past tributes, silence at the reapings, or public speeches against the Capitol by victors and perhaps even by citizens of the Capitol.

The second group of actions Sharp mentions is non-cooperation, which he describes as when, “…the actionists deliberately withdraw the usual forms and degree of their cooperation with the person, activity, institution, or regime with which they have become engaged in conflict.” For example, citizens could jointly refuse to attend a reaping or to watch the broadcast of the Hunger Games. The workers in each district could carry out a slowdown strike at the beginning of the revolution with the goal of carrying out a general strike when support is spread across all Districts. Once there was enough support garnered amongst the Peacekeepers and Capitol citizens, there could be a refusal of support at all levels. The Peacekeepers could refuse to transport the tributes, the Capitol citizens could refuse to watch the Games, leaving the regime with no audience at all. Ultimately, even if the tributes were still forced to enter the Games they could refuse to kill one another. This last method would take extraordinary support amongst all Districts and would likely occur towards the end of the revolution, acting as the straw that breaks the Capitol’s back.

The third group of actions Sharp outlines is nonviolent intervention, which differs from the previous two categories in that the methods “…intervene in the situation….they may disrupt, even destroy established patterns of behavior….or they may establish new behavior patterns….” This might include a nonviolent invasion of each District and eventually the Capitol. Since citizens are not allowed to travel freely, joining together to do just this would be a powerful act of nonviolent intervention. Citizens from different Districts could join together in

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39 Sharp, The Politics of Nonviolent Action, 183
40 Ibid, 357
this march, establishing a new social pattern of unity where once division was considered the norm. The rebels could establish new economic institutions to take resources and products from each District and distribute them to the Districts rather than to the Capitol. Further into the revolution, when the rebels have a mass of popular support they could develop a parallel government that is democratically elected. All of these actions combined provide an outline of what a nonviolent revolution might have looked like in Collins’ literary world.

“If everyone doesn’t lay down their weapons—and I mean, as in very soon—it’s all over anyway.”

The above line comes from Peeta in the final novel of the trilogy. He reminds his audience that the last time his world fought a war the human race came close to extinction. He calls for a cease-fire, arguing that total annihilation might once again be near at hand. In our world of nuclear weaponry and increasingly tense international politics, this message about the destructive power of warfare is desperately needed. Collins’ work offers a stunning indictment of violent conflict, yet our national discussion has missed this crucial element because the majority of us remain wrongfully convinced that we can solve our problems through bloodshed and combat. Her critique might have been more widely recognized if she had surprised her audience with a successful nonviolent revolution that calls to mind the long history of this approach that spans from India, to Serbia, to the recent Arab Spring. A discussion that looked critically at our culture’s reliance on warfare and the alternatives that exist might have come out of this rendition of the story, a discussion that is sorely needed in our context.

41 Collins, *Mockingjay*, 10360
Bibliography


