

The Hunger Games Now?: Young People and Hard Times

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The phenomenon of Suzanne Collins' book trilogy the *Hunger Games*, and the four movies that have spun off from the books, is a very big deal. 65 million copies of the trilogy have been sold in the US alone; it has been translated into 51 languages; world-wide, it's outsold the seven books of the *Harry Potter* series; ticket sales from the movies are approaching three billion dollars; and its main character, the teenage female hero, Katniss Everdeen, has been cited by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people who never lived. Have any of you heard about this? Read the books? Seen the movies? Know what's going on?

It was our former DRE Cristin Scheider, fresh from teaching secondary school age young people, who first told me about the *Hunger Games* five years ago, and that it was huge among the students she was teaching, "Epperson, you should read this," she told me. Well I ended up fudging it; I've seen the movies, and read the final book *Mockingjay* twice to atone for not having read the other two. I'm glad that I did and have, because I was ushered into a landscape perhaps fairly remote from us Canadian boomers, but one, unfortunately all-too-real for our young people—to our youth and young adults. More about that in a minute.

But first, for those of us who don't know the score—a synopsis of the *Hunger Games*: It's a post-apocalyptic future. The action takes place in what is roughly the landscape of the US; a landscape radically de-populated by wars, environmental disasters and divided into thirteen regions which, together, constitute the realm of Panem, which in Latin means "bread." Eleven regions specialize in the production of a valuable natural or technological resource; their populations, reduced to immiserating slavery, and their resources, exist to subsidize the lavish, baroque standard of living enjoyed by District One, called the Capitol—a gaudy, decadent metropolis situated in the fastness of the Rocky Mountains. Think of a futuristic, high tech, mass

media saturated Imperial Rome with subject provinces near and far, dominated by extreme violence exercised by the Capitol, and you get part of the idea.

Zoom in closer. The Capitol exercises a monopoly of violence on the subject peoples in the other districts by occupying troops—that, and by an annual, nationally televised bloodsport called the “Hunger Games.” A rebellion against the Capitol seventy-five years earlier was brutally put down. In retribution, and to underline its control, the rulers of the Capitol started the “Hunger Games.” Each year, two youths between the ages of 12 and 18, a boy and a girl from each of the subject Districts, are randomly chosen and forced to participate in televised gladiatorial combat in a high tech arena filled with booby traps and murderous mutant creatures, fighting each other until only one young person survives. It’s like a competitive reality game show gone totally, homicidally, nuts. Before entering the Arena, contestants are given crash combat training; they are gowned, coiffed and groomed, feted in parades, displayed on TV talk shows, and garner individual and corporate sponsors who cash in on the outcome. (In the books and movies, a lot of attention is given to make up, fashion design, and media production values—just think Jennifer Lawrence and the advertizing blitz for the movies. Layers of irony going on here.)

Final zoom in on Katniss Everdeen the trilogy’s complicated teenage hero. She’s sixteen when the story begins. Her father’s dead from a coal mining accident and Katniss provides for her mother and younger sister by illegal hunting with bow and arrow in the nearby woodlands. She’s depicted as stubborn, vulnerable, and confused; incredibly strong in heart and will, charged with focused pain and fury, and imbued with an unwavering sense of what is right and fair. Throughout the whole story, Katniss keeps getting forced into situations she doesn’t want to be in; she’s often terrified, but knows she must carry on in order to save her her family and others, and to achieve autonomy from those who, time and again, scheme to deny her freedom and destroy her—body and soul.

She’s thrown into the Arena with the two dozen young people of the Districts and fights, as they all must and do, to stay alive. I’m not going to give away any more of the plot in case you

haven't journeyed into the dystopian world of Panem. Just a couple of comments. Violence is not glossed over in *The Hunger Games*. "This is not a fairy tale; it's a war," the author Suzanne Collins has said. "And in war, there are tragic losses that must be mourned." For those who survive the Games, their battle is far from over—the psychic scars of violent death, betrayal and survivors guilt, of being used heartlessly as cruel entertainment for an adult world are frankly and distressingly depicted throughout the books and films. These young people are under titanic stress—and it takes everything they can muster to keep from breaking down.

Going further, this is no Harry Potter world of magic, candlelit dining halls and student dorm room shenanigans. There are no, or vanishing few, strong, wise or trustworthy adults. No Dumbledore comes to the rescue in *The Hunger Games*. Instead, adults, ruthlessly manipulate young combatants and the populace at large, dole out brutal punishment to those who dare defy the standing order, or get crushed by the power of the Capitol, or charge off to wreak violent revenge and foment revolution. It's a nightmare world: severe poverty, real hunger, oppression, ruthless ideologues, perverse inequality, murderous reality TV shows, pervasive surveillance... At the end of the day, Katniss and her crew must fight, and can only rely on themselves and their sense of what's right and fair if they are to have any hope for human happiness at all.

Now I began these remarks by saying that the *Hunger Games* is a big deal. It's had a huge impact on a generation that came to Katniss as young teens and have grown up these past five years reading the books and queuing up for the movies, young people who are responding to Katniss's story—her mix of fury, resignation, trauma and defiance—in a very personal way.

Hold that thought.

Noreena Hertz is a young English academic economist and granddaughter of the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. Not so long ago, she was dismissed by her establishment colleagues, business leaders and politicians for spooky predictions of an impending global financial crisis—predictions that proved to be astonishingly accurate. Post 2007-08, and the global financial meltdown, Hertz is now in high demand as a speaker and consultant by the very people who trashed her only a few years ago.

(on Hertz, see Danielle Sacks, “How an Economist’s Cry for Ethical Capitalism was Heard,” <http://www.fastcompany.com/1400876/how-economists-cry-ethical-capitalism-was-heard>)

To her credit, she’s also taking the world-wide *Hunger Games* phenomenon very seriously. “I think the Hunger Games resonates with them,” Hertz said. “This is a generation riddled with anxiety, distrustful of traditional institutions from government to marriage” and yet, still imbued “with a strong sense of what is right and fair....They are [like] Katniss, trying to navigate a dark and difficult world....[Remember], this is a generation who grew up through 9/11, the Madrid and London bombings, Islamic State terrors, austerity and Edward Snowden. They see danger piped into their smart phones...and Facebook pages. They’ve seen parents and other loved ones thrown out of work. “My data,” Hertz says, “shows very clearly how anxious they are about everything....Today’s teens are shaped by three factors: technology, economic recession and coming of age in a time of great unease.”

To tune into young people and the world into which they are growing and coming of age, Hertz conducted two thousand interviews via internet survey sites, and supplemented these with in-depth, face-to-face interviews with teens in the US and UK. Here are some of the results:

For this generation, life is increasingly like the *Hunger Games*: unequal, harsh, violent and unfair. 75% of teens are worried about terrorism; 70% by climate change; 85% are terrified about not being able to find a job; and 77% are deeply anxious about falling into debt. 4% trust big corporations to do the right thing, and only 10% trust government to get things right (versus 60% and 50% among adults). Since 2012, in a given year, 22% of female high school students seriously considered suicide. More than a third of them are either unsure, or definitely do not want to have children. And of all the things they are worried about, these teens are most worried about *inequality*: economic inequality, social inequality, gender inequality.

(see Noreena Hertz at Women in the World Conference 2015, noreena.com/women-in-the-world-new-york-generation-katniss-unique-uber-connected-and-terribly-anxious/; <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2015/04/21/generation-k-who-are-they-and-what-do-we-know-about-them/>; <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/31/hunger-games-mockingjay-teenage-anxiety>)

These are teenagers, people! The picture this data reveals is unprecedented, and heartbreaking. Do we even *vaguely* remember those days? Did we lie awake at night dreading the prospect of unemployment and debt? Of the planet heating up to unsustainable levels? Of business and government remote and running amok? Of terrorism suddenly snatching a semblance of normalcy away? Of the humiliations and violence of inequality? Of feeling so hopeless about the future that we'd consider offing ourselves, or giving up on there even being a next generation?

And it's not that they're feckless, detached, and lazy. Far from it. They're drinking and taking less street drugs than their recent predecessors, and working harder—willing to work day and night in order to succeed. “Like the generation who grew up during the Great Depression,” Hertz writes, “whose experience of poverty led them to endorse greater economic *equality*, this generation's amplified experiences of injustice are leading them to have a much more pronounced sense of community.”

They're going to need it. “Millennials,” writes Louise O'Neill, and I'm reading this over and over again all over the place, “Millennials are a generation unlikely to achieve a higher standard of living than their parents enjoyed. They've been priced out of the housing market.”

Genuine concerns about all this, and social, political and ecological crises which *they did absolutely nothing to create*, have generated fear and anxiety among young people. It's no wonder so many young people are drawn to dystopian fictional works like the *Hunger Games*; it helps them get an interpretive grip on the world we're handing on to them.

(see Sarah Hughes, “In debt, out of luck: why Generation K fell in love with the *Hunger Games*,” *Guardian*, 31 October 2015; and Rob Carrick, “A house for three times your income? Think again,” *Globe and Mail*, November 5, 2015)

People, if Thomas Picketty and Nobel Prize winning economists Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman and others are right, what you and I have experienced economically/politically in our lifetimes may have been unique. It took two world wars and a world-wide depression to smash the traditional landscape between those who controlled capital and the rest of us. From the 1930s up to the 1980s, massive government regulation of finance, provision for social security,

housing and health benefits, strong unions, cooperation between labour and management, and unprecedented relative equality in wages and the leavening of wealth—that is, a rough consensus about social democracy, its benefits and a dedication to achieve the common good—produced a standard of living and the prospects of upward mobility for succeeding generations unique in the history of the West. And we boomers were the beneficiaries.

Unfortunately, starting back in 1979/80, we've snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Reactionary religious, economic and political counterrevolutions have been eroding that progressive postwar, social democratic consensus. The 1% and the rest of us?—well, increasingly it's becoming the new normal; it's kind of like the old normal—the pre-1930s normal—and it's no joke. Just ask our kids. (Welcome to Panem!)

(see Christian Caryl, *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Beginning of the 21st Century*, Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*, Paul Krugman, *End This Depression Now!*; David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, Angus Deaton, *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality*, Noreena Hertz, "The Death of Gucci Capitalism," *The New Statesman*, October 23, 2008, etc., etc., etc.).

I want to bring this to an end by returning to the beginning: back to the *Hunger Games* and Katniss Everdeen. I had the good fortune of receiving a long letter from a young woman who responded to an invitation to share her thoughts on the *Hunger Games* and the real world she and her young cohort are growing into. Here's some of what she wrote:

"I keep being struck with a deep yearning to be able to return to a simpler life....Nostalgia is a huge thing....I see it EVERYWHERE in my generation—a yearning to return to a time that is safe from the terrifying now and the even scarier future where our chances of survival don't look very good. Young people are desperately patching together and seeking communities focused on developing old-time skills that traditionally made the difference between life and death.

"Katniss is the exemplar of this. She's immensely competent in archery; she's disdainful and clumsy when it comes to petty social graces, which for the most part feel phony, superfluous and manipulative. But she also IS human and had a fierce love and devotion to her kin—this is paramount in her life. She has to participate in the very systems she is so ready to disobey, to

abandon and destroy. We so relate to this—the frustration and loathing of systems that we are dependent on. I know so many young people who have just checked out altogether....I get it. I crave it too. But it comes at a high cost: abandoning humanity at a global scale...and I'm just not ready to do that...

“A huge part of Katniss’s survival in the Hunger Games is a result of having rehearsed lines, fake smiles, make-up artists, a phony romance, etcetc. The message here is: ‘those who put on the best show are the most worthy of surviving.’ Which is what life ACTUALLY feels like these days. The job market is shifting a lot; tons of young people are having to make jobs up that never existed before and a huge part of any success is being able to sell yourself, sell your brand, get “likes” on facebook and instagram....And the way to do that is to *curate* a (usually) fake, hyper-edited version of reality which ultimately makes everyone feel shitty about themselves. Part of what makes Katniss relatable and heroic to us is her refusal to submit to this....And the truth is, in real life, nobody ACTUALLY wants to take part in ‘the Show.’ It’s just that our survival—economic and social—is starting to depend on it in more and more ways.”

And finally, the books explore the crazy-making “relationship between the real world and a performed/mediated reality....The gripping dilemma here is to figure out which reality to engage with when they all seem life-threatening. The institutions that we create are supposed to provide some sort of safeguard from the wild unpredictability of the universe; but in Katniss’s case, and ours, these very institutions pose an imminent threat to her survival and the survival of those she loves. Her only hope of surviving the Games is to dismantle them entirely...There is a momentary flicker of hope that comes with exposing the machinery of the Game and being able to determine what’s real and what’s simulated...So there is a sense of HOPE—it comes with an understanding of the laws of the natural and simulated worlds, together with real skills and knowledge: with these a person can begin to feel that they have SOME control over their own precarious lives.” (from a letter written by Hannah Epperson, Dec. 5, 2015)

I hope you can see why I decided to share so much of this letter with you. It comes directly from the heart and mind of a young person speaking for a generation whose voice we don't listen to enough; to whose concerns, reality, struggles and strengths we too rarely give heed. Nostalgia for a time they may never know. Desperate need for community, autonomy and authenticity. Loyalty to family and kin. Dread in the face of challenges to their very survival. And a stubborn, hard won hope, in spite of it all.

This season is supposed to be a time of family and gratitude and the sharing of gifts. My hope is that we will see the gift of our young people, the hard times they're grappling with, and that our minds and hearts will open up to them in solidarity so that they may see us as allies toward achieving a more just, equitable, meaningful, and compassionate world.