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Starving for Equality:

Food for thought in *The
Hunger Games*

Table of contents

- 1 INTRODUCTION..... 1**
 - 1.1 THE HUNGER GAMES..... 1
 - 1.2 METHODOLOGY 2
 - 1.3 HOW AM I JOINING A CONVERSATION ALREADY IN PROGRESS?..... 5

- 2 CLOSE READING 6**
 - 2.1. THE REAPING..... 6
 - 2.2 CAREERS 7
 - 2.3 TESSERAE..... 8
 - 2.4 CORNUCOPIA 9
 - 2.5 THE HUNGER GAMES..... 10
 - 2.6 REASONS FOR THIS DISPLAY OF POWER THROUGH FOOD 10

- 3 CONCLUSION..... 13**

- 4 BIBLIOGRAPHY 14**

1 Introduction

1.1 The Hunger Games

Hunger is hunger; but the hunger that is satisfied by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork differs from hunger that devours raw meat with the help of hands, nails and teeth.

– Karl Marx (Marx, Grundrisse 25)

In Suzanne Collins' dystopian novel, *The Hunger Games*, we are introduced to the country of Panem through the perspective of Katniss Everdeen. The narrator is a young woman from the poorest of Panem's twelve districts, called District 12. All district citizens between the age of 12 to 18 are entered in a lottery to compete in The Hunger Games. The Hunger Games is a punishment for the districts after trying to rebel against the controlling state, the Capitol. The Capitol is controlled by the totalitarian leader President Snow. Twenty-four children, one boy and one girl from each district, fight to the death in the state's public arena. The one victor remaining lives the rest of their life in luxury, and he or she benefits the entire winning district as well by bringing more food and wealth to the district. This game is broadcasted to the entire population of Panem. It is entertainment for the people of the Capitol, and a way of controlling and punishing the districts. In the novel, we follow Katniss' journey from living in the slum of District 12 to being a victor of the games. The quote above from Marx is an accurate description of how life is for the lower-class citizens – or the Proletariat – of Panem, and particularly the starvation experienced by Katniss. Furthermore, Marx's closest collaborator Friedrich Engels, made another fitting observation that we can use as a parallel to the Proletariat in Panem: "It is utterly indifferent to the English bourgeois whether his working-men starve or not, if only he makes money (Engels 224)."

The vast contrast shown between the excessive lifestyle of the Capitol and the starving citizens in the districts is what made me interested in using this novel for my BA thesis. Throughout the novel, starvation and food is a recurring topic, and usually it is a vehicle to expose the abuse of power of the state. Because production of food by the proletariat is a main tenet of Marxism it makes sense to compare it to Collin's technique: it is understood that some people are starving only because someone in power has made it so, and not because of the lack of resources or will to work. Therefore, I want to explore how food represents the extent of the

injustice perpetrated against the people of Panem, through the eyes and hunger of Katniss and her family. In order to explore this, we need to narrow it down. One way to do so is to look at food as a display of power in the novel, and by doing a close reading we can see how it changes meaning to the text in terms of the power Marx's identified in the Bourgeoisie (or State Ideological Apparatus) denying the lower class worker Proletariat the fruit of their labour (Althusser). The analysis will be a Marxist literary criticism, to see how this power is used between the divided people of Panem.

1.2 Methodology

In order to find an answer to my argument, I will be using a Marxist literary perspective of *The Hunger Games*. In the analysis of the book, I will use criteria to determine power. Afterwards, the criteria for power will be used to explore how food represents power in a close reading of *The Hunger Games*.

When first hearing the term Marxism, one might get associations to the iron curtain and men with moustaches, but there is more to Marxism than the political-economic theory. Karl Marx wanted to end human suffering by establishing equality. He predicted that the Proletariat would eventually overcome the bourgeoisie and create a classless state. From his works, two different ways of thinking has sprung out. One is as already mentioned, which is the political-economic theory supposed to create a utopia. The other way of thinking is the critical theory. The critical theory is a philosophical tool used to analyse anything from literature to historical events (Drake).

Marxist theory has many facets, and we could not possibly investigate all of these in such a short research project. Therefore, we must isolate certain things that specifically inform the scenes we are explicating about food in the novel. One of Marx's main principles is that the working class are exploited by the Bourgeoisie. This main principle will be the basis to define the Marxist reading of this essay. Marx defined the working class as the Proletariat, the ones who produce the goods but do not have access to the goods. The Bourgeoisie are the opposite and are those who control the production and its produce. Drake explains the relationship between the Proletariat and the Bourgeoisie as a constant battle between the two social classes over the means of production (Drake). But how does Marxist theory illuminate the relationship between The Districts and The Capitol? How is the relationship of each class to food as a produced good portrayed in *The Hunger Games*? And how does that illuminate our understanding of class struggle today?

First, we need to consider what Marxist literacy criticism is. To define this, we will use Marx's famous quote: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* 219). By using this quote as our starting line for defining Marxist literacy criticism, we can base it on class struggles, the conflict between the classes and the exploitation of the proletariat. Marx explains that in all of history there has always been two groups, where one group dominates and exploits the other. This creates an imbalance of power between these groups, and our foundation of an understanding of Marxist literacy criticism. By combining these, we can therefore use Marxist literacy criticism as a lens to explore the injustice and exploitation in *The Hunger Games* by looking at imbalance and unfairness between classes, and the number of resources they have at hand.

The reason for choosing a Marxist perspective in this essay is based on Eagleton's argument that a Marxist perspective lets the literary work be explained more fully. It lets us be sensitive to the small details in the forms, styles and meanings in a text. (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 3). It is first when reading the novel (in this way) that we notice how food is used as a symbol of power and who controls it. When first reading *The Hunger Games* one might think that food is only food, but with a Marxist perspective we see that it is actually a vehicle to expose the power of the state. Looking back to Marx' quote about history, we notice how fitting it is to the story in the text. Class struggles is in the core of the book, without class struggles there would be no story. Using Marx's concept of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, we see that we get a clear division between the oppressed districts (Proletariat) and the Capitol (Bourgeoisie).

Since class struggle can be seen throughout the novel in many shapes and forms, we must narrow this down even more. Marx himself does not suggest a definition of power, but instead refers to it as oppression. One can, however, look at the word power's meaning as the burdensome, severe, or unjust application of authority or power. Using this definition one can look at class struggle is as the power relation between the classes. We also get a definition from Althusser who argues that "The State is a 'machine' of repression, which enables the ruling classes (...) to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion (i.e. to capitalist exploitation) (Althusser)."

In "The Concept of Power in Marxist Theory: A Critique and Reformulation", Donald McQuarie and Marc Spaulding quote Nicos Poulantzas concept of power in Marxism:

“The concept of power is related to that precise type of social relation which is characterized by class “conflict” and struggle, that is, to a field inside which, precisely because the existence of classes, the capacity of one to realize its own interest through its practice is in opposition to the capacity and interest of other” (McQuarie and Spaulding 6)

Using Poulantzas’ definition of power, we need to look for instances where power is used when one class puts their interests above others. Therefore, by doing a close reading combined with a Marxist literary criticism, one can explore how power is displayed in the novel.

Now that we have established criteria to define power, we need to figure out how food can represent power. In “Marx as a Food Theorist” John Bellamy Foster argues that food has become a core “contradiction of contemporary capitalism”. When thinking about the criticism of food division in modern society, people often overlook Marx’s contribution to this topic. However, Foster argues that not only was Marx a food theorist, but also one of the people talking about the issue early on and that it has every connection with his criticism of capitalism. Therefore, even if Marx did not write much on the concrete matter of food, it must be seen within his larger criticism of capitalism. Furthermore, he states that: “From the start, it centred on the notion of global food “regimes,” based on specific and unequal distributions of **power** and resources...” (Foster 8). This means that the unequal distribution of food could be viewed as power. Capitalism with free markets inevitably lets the market demand give disproportionate power thereby creating and maintaining unequal distribution of food. This means that Marx’s sense of a more equal, indeed classless society, that could emerge when the proletariat took over the middle class, would eventually lead to more equitable distribution of food across society.

As a literary studies project, the method of this research project is close reading. A close reading requires to focus on specific parts of the text and explore the deeper meaning in these parts. This close reading will mainly focus on passages concerning food or in other ways showing to the unequal distribution of food in *The Hunger Games*. But this project also has a methodology as I have outlined above using Marxist concepts and discourse to explore why *The Hunger Games* uses food as a display of power. I employ other secondary sources as needed. For example, Althusser helps understand Marx’s ideas and looking at *Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs* we find that food, water, warmth and rest are the fundamentals of a human’s well-being, a useful starting place for investigating the plight of District 12. Without these the human body will not function, and this may be the means by which power is maintained in the novel (McLeod). Since these are essential things for a human’s survival, it is interesting to follow the characters in the book who are not receiving all of what they need. It is because of

this essential need for food for a human to survive that it is interesting to see how the Capitol is using food against its own population.

To tie all the pieces together, I will use a close reading with a Marxist perspective where I focus on the passages including food. Now that we have established this, I argue that food represents the wide gap of power in Panem and forms the basis for analysis of Collins' food passages *The Hunger Games*.

1.3 How am I joining a conversation already in progress?

In order to join a conversation already in progress, I have taken inspiration from scholarly articles. These articles have inspired this essay greatly, and therefore I wanted to explore food even further in a close reading. This is far from the first text to notice the importance of food in *The Hunger Games*, or to see it in a Marxist perspective. Therefore, I can only hope to give a small contribution to the already abundance of thoughts on the topic.

In the article "Consumed: Food in *The Hunger Games*", one of Lori L. Parks and Jennifer P. Yamashiro research questions are "How does food represent and enact power" (Parks and P.). In their article they point out how food gets a lot of focus in the novel. In the text Collins describes how the food is gathered, prepared and consumed. She also gives a detailed description of the food itself, like how it tastes, how much or little food there is, and how meagre or extravagant the meal is. She describes everything from chewing bark to eating the rich food of the Capitol. In their article, however, they do not see it in the context of a Marxist perspective. Instead, they are using Memento Mori as their lens. This is where our analysis differs, even though our thoughts are quite similar.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, John Bellamy Foster's article "Marx as a Food Theorist" is also an inspiration for this essay. He connects the dots between Marx and food, arguing that even though Marx did not mention food much, it must be seen within his larger critique against capitalism.

There are several other articles discussing *The Hunger Games* in a Marxist perspective that could be mentioned here as well, but the idea for the thesis sprung out from the two already mentioned articles. I have however read many great articles on the subject of Marxism, *The Hunger Games*, power and food, which have all created the basis for this thesis. These are of course cited but not mentioned in this chapter. Without further ado, let us begin to explore how food represents the wide gap of power in Panem

2 Close reading

In order to see that food is in fact used as a display of power, we will look at some examples from the text. It is clear from the beginning of the novel that food is an important symbol and reoccurs many times throughout the text. Even though food is a repetitive symbol, it does not necessarily have the same meaning every time. Looking back at the definition of power, the criteria for finding power was “power (through food) is used when putting their interests above others”. This is what the close reading will show us.

There are a few things to be aware of before the close reading. All twelve districts have specialities in production. For instance, District 12 produces coal and District 1 produce luxury items. One could argue that the names of the districts is a ranking list over more favourable district. This is both because of what they produce and their proximity to the Capitol.

From the beginning of the text, we get detailed descriptions of Katniss’ hunger and how inhabitants of District 12 die in the streets from diseases related to malnourishment. Katniss explains how the Capitol has built an electric fence to “protect” the twelve districts, but that the fence is also dividing the inhabitants from a plethora of food. She describes District 12 as “where you can starve to death in safety” (Collins 7). She does, however, admit that there certainly are wild animals outside the fence, but that the fence is causing more death than the animals would. This fence shows the reader that the Capitol wants to control every aspect of the district people’s lives.

2.1. The Reaping

The event, in which the tributes are chosen, is called “The Reaping” (Collins 3). The word to reap means both to cut down and collect a grain crop, but also to obtain or receive something as a result of your own actions. This is quite the fitting name from the Capitol point of view, and it reflects the Capitols attitude towards the districts and the unequal distribution of food. The name signifies how the inhabitants of the districts, especially the children, are nothing more than this season crops to harvest and “eat”, or to reap the benefits of the crop so to speak. The people of the districts are presented as something that is theirs for the taking, their lives belong to the Capitol from the moment they are born. It shows how the districts inhabitants’ existence is stolen from them. Even if they are lucky enough to never be chosen for the hunger games, chances are their children’s names could be drawn from the lottery.

By thinking of the people of the districts as something harvestable, could mean that the Capitol has graciously “sowed” them in their districts. The interesting part is the comparison to plants that will not move from where they are planted instead of livestock that could be moved around. Plants are also considered lower life forms – without intelligence – but also, they are indicating that they do not even qualify to be considered as carnivores and therefore a threat to the Capitol. Because of this insult, it is worth mentioning once more that all districts are fenced in “for their own safety”. Therefore, the people aren’t only harvestable, but they will sit still until they are harvested and not move around.

Looking at the second description of the word “reap”, we could see this in the reference of the rebellion 74 years previously. It is this rebellion that caused the hunger games as a punishment. The saying, “you reap what you sow”, could be used against the districts as a way of saying this is your own fault. Therefore, the reaping could be a symbolic name to put the blame back on the districts instead of the Capitol being the big bad wolf.

Lastly, one could also think of it as a cannibal reference. The Capitol is looking at the inhabitants of districts as something “harvestable”. This could also be to intimidate the people of the districts, as well as dehumanising them for the Capitol people. The citizens of the Capitol only see the hunger games as entertainment after all, but they view the district people as barbarians, as other and as less developed than themselves.

2.2 Careers

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, District 12 is the poorest of the twelve districts. This means there are also some better off districts, particularly District 1, 2 and 4. The tributes from these districts are often referred to as “Careers”. It is usually one of the six careers who win the games. This is due to an unfair advantage they are given. These tributes have grown up in the richer districts, because of their proximity to the Capitol and because of the luxury items they produce. Because of this, they have always had enough food to eat. Therefore, they are healthier and stronger than most other district children. They have also often trained prior to participating in the hunger games, and they choose to volunteer when the time comes. Training for the games is not allowed, but the Capitol tends to look the other way when it comes to the careers. Most likely it is beneficial that the same districts keep winning. Because of their geographical locations surrounding the Capitol, they can act as a sort of shield if someone should challenge the authority of the Capitol.

Considering that the entire district benefits if the victor is from their district, it is beneficial for the Capitol to gain strong alliances with some districts, but also establish their dominance by starving other districts. By doing so, they are creating a strong connection with the districts who benefit from the division of power and make all other districts weaker. The Capitol has created a circle where the winner is most likely one of the Careers, which benefits the entire district, and feeds the children who grow up to become new victors. This circle ruins the chance for a fair fight, but also to create an equal distribution of food between the districts. This creates losers like the lower districts, and making the higher up districts feel content with the system. Katniss also explains in the novel that for any other kids, volunteering would be suicide. This comes to show once more the benefit and power food can give in Panem.

But how is it that the districts, who are not producing food, are the ones receiving it? The Capitol controls all the produce and it is forbidden for the districts to keep their own produce above the amount decided by the Capitol. This amount is of course barely the minimum required for survival. The Capitol redistributes the produce after keeping most of it for themselves. The richer districts do have higher wages than the poor districts, making sure they would still be the stronger tributes for the games and as allies.

2.3 Tesseræ

This unfair advantage some districts have brings us over to another example of how food is used as power in *The Hunger Games*. Katniss explains how the reaping system is unfair, and how it is designed to make the lower classes suffer even more (Collins 15). When the children of the districts turn 12, their name will be put in in the Reaping bowl once, and one more time for every year they participate from the ages between twelve to eighteen years old. This means a person's name must be added at least one till seven times the years they are of age. So far, the reaping system is "fair", looking away from the issue discussed in the previous chapter.

The problem comes after the obligatory times a name must be added. If a person is poor and starving, they can add their name an extra time for "a meagre year's supply of oil and grain", called tesseræ (Collins 15). The name can be added up to as many times as they have family members. Katniss herself does the math for us, saying instead of adding her own name once when turning twelve, her name was added four times. This number does not reset for every year, so the year Katniss participates in the game her name was added twenty times. Not only is this an advantage to the more favourable district (1, 2 and 4), but is also even more unfair for

the people of the Seam, where the poor, working class coal miners live. Just like the careers will most likely be healthy and older teenagers volunteering, the tributes from district 12 will most likely be from the Seam. Thus, not only will the better districts have better tributes, but the poor districts have an even lesser chance of winning the games by sending their weakest and most malnourished children. This creates tension between the districts, and between the poor and rich (or rather, less poor) within the same district.

Thinking the other way around, one could also argue that the Capitol are generous giving the poor, starving people this option. They Capitol are hiding behind this unfair system while having the opportunity to call it 'welfare'. Chances are after all that they will not be drawn in the lottery and have therefore gotten free supplies. It is also interesting to see that the Capitol wishes to keep the potential tributes alive, as well as their families and younger siblings. Is this just to make sure the next year's harvest survives? Or could we think even further ahead, is this so that some will grow up to have more, harvestable children? Even so, they are hiding behind their generosity while saying "we are the reason you were starving in the first place".

This shows us that Capitol, being in control of food and how food is distributed, has power over the districts. One of the most iconic lines from the novel is said right before the tributes are chosen – "may the odds be ever in your favour" (Collins 23). The line is delivered with sincerity, but it is oozing with irony. As Katniss has just explained with the tesserae, the odds are never in their favour.

2.4 Cornucopia

The Cornucopia comes from classical mythology and is used as a symbol of abundance and overflowing supply. It is often a horn containing plenty of food and drink. The Cornucopia also appears in *The Hunger Games* (Collins 179). When first entering the arena, the 24 tributes stand in a circle around the Cornucopia. Before being allowed to begin, there is a countdown of 60 seconds where they are tempted by the horn filled with weapons, food, water and supplies needed to survive the harsh landscapes of the arena. This is a way to lure the tributes to the same spot and is a massive bloodshed.

The Cornucopia is also a symbol of the wealth of the Capitol, and that they are merciful by giving the tributes the opportunity to gain an advantage. However, the tributes who usually gets to the cornucopia first, are often the careers. This adds another benefit to the already better off tributes. The problem is that not all tributes have the luxury of just running the opposite

direction. Most lack the skills to survive outside or to gather food. Therefore, they must take their chances at the horn. This still gives them the same odds hypothetically, but as we know the odds are never in their favour.

2.5 The Hunger Games

One cannot discuss the unequal distribution of food in Panem without mentioning the name of the gameshow itself. The Hunger Games is an ironic name for the competition and looking back to what we have just explored, we know that the lower class is worse off in every possible way. They are more likely to be picked for the games as well as more likely to lose. By not winning the games, the losing districts also do not receive more access to food and wealth.

The name of the game is also ironic because the people of the Capitol are most likely not aware of the daily life struggles of the district people inflicted by the controlling state and the president. Calling it The Hunger Games, from the game makers point of view, tells the district we are fully aware of your issues, and we do not care. As mentioned, they are given the option of tesserae, but that means that children might have to sacrifice themselves to feed their families. Katniss informs us that for most other districts, volunteering would be looked at as suicide. However, choosing to sign up for the extra food rations increases the chance of being picked for the games, and therefore not that distant of a choice as volunteering.

Perhaps the worst part of the name itself is 'game'. When hearing the word game, we might think back to childhood memories playing games with our loved ones. In The Hunger Games however they are running away from kids trying to kill them whilst it is being filmed for other people's amusement. The question really is, for who is this really a game?

2.6 Reasons for this display of power through food

Combining all the examples above, a pattern can be noticed. The districts closest and friendliest with the Capitol are given more food and better odds in The Hunger Games. The opposite can be said for the rest of the districts. By doing so, the Capitol hits two birds with one stone. But what could the reasons for this be?

One of the benefits this has for the Capitol is that the twelve districts will look at each other as enemies both in the games, but also by creating a division between the districts in everyday life. The real punishment behind the hunger games, is that the Capitol can take away

what you love the most – your children. This fear is not the same in the rich districts, because there are always tributes volunteering. This means that the fear factor will not be the same in these districts. The rich districts will relate more to the Capitol than the poor districts, creating a tighter bond between them. From the perspective of the Capitol however, all districts are the lower class even if some are better behaved than others. If the districts are busy hating each other, they just might forget who the real enemy is.

By starving a great portion of the districts, the Capitol makes them too weak to fight back against the unjust rule. This could also work as a form of population control. Not giving the people enough nourishment alters their life expectancy. The reason for doing this could be to avoid another rebellion. By giving enough food to both the Capitol inhabitants and the wealthier districts, they hope to build a bigger and stronger army if the day comes that it is needed. If that is the case, why give them options such as the Tesseræ and the Cornucopia? Both are used to pretend that the Capitol are merciful and kind to the districts, when they only make bigger differences in society and keeping the benefits to themselves.

As mentioned already, the Capitol has made their inhabitants look at the district people as something different from themselves, something less developed. But they have also created a difference between the districts, where the winners are often from District 1, 2 and 4. This adds up to the richer districts looking like more desirable comrades in case a new rebellion would happen.

There are many reasons for using food as a display of power in *The Hunger Games*, but does the power stay constant throughout the novel? By following Katniss' perspective, we see that it does change. Katniss should technically be a girl without power, if we look at all the instances where there is an unequal distribution of power. She is not only from the poorest district in Panem, but also from the slum. Her father, the provider of the family, died when she was twelve, leaving her as the sole provider of the family. Katniss turns this lack of power around using the knowledge her father taught her about hunting. This same skill is what gains her power in the games. Therefore, by being a victim of the Capitol's display of power, she gains power from learning to fend for herself and her family. The Capitol changes the arena for the Hunger Games every year, and the year Katniss participates they use the same type of woods that she hunts in back home. This also gains her power because of her already acquired skills. Because of her illegal hunting she has also grown stronger than most in her district.

Even though Katniss is not doing as bad as many others from the Seam, she still goes from the slum to the victor's village, a place built for the winners of the hunger games. Being a winner, she is guaranteed enough food and money for the rest of her life, as well as the

added benefits to the rest of the district. The tributes who win the games return to the Capitol every year to help the new tributes in the hunger games as mentors. Therefore, after winning, a victor is nearly looked upon as a Capitol inhabitant, but just nearly. They are considered something more than just district and has in a way climbed in ranks. This also shows that with food comes power, even if it is given power.

3 Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to see how food represents the wide gap of power in Panem. To do so the following research questions were explored: How does Marxist theory illuminate the relationship between The Districts and The Capitol? How is the relationship of each class to food as a produced good portrayed in *The Hunger Games*? And how does that illuminate our understanding of class struggle today?

Marxist theory helps to illuminate the relationship between The Districts and The Capitol by using one of the main principles from Marx, which is that the Proletariat is being exploited by the Bourgeoisie. We see this through the text that the districts are the ones behind the production but does not have access to the goods. By using power through food as our lens we got to witness how the Capitol put their own interests above the districts and exploits them as a working force.

The relationship of each class to food as a produced goods portrayed in *The Hunger Games* is shown through the starvation experienced by the Proletariat. The Capitol is taking away the power of the districts by limiting the resources they are given, including food. They also make sure that the odds are only in the favour of the richer districts. However, the Capitol also ended up giving Katniss power by accident. Because of their choice to starve her and her family, she had to learn how to hunt. It is because of this skill that she won their games and turned into a symbol of defiance against the power of the Capitol. By trying to keep a rebellion from happen they have created the perfect heroine to stand up from the ashes of the coal district. If they will not provide the people with food, she gets the food herself. This takes away the power the Capitol has against the districts. If starvation is no longer weaponised, people might just remember who the real enemy is.

How does it illuminate our understanding of class struggle today? It uses the basic concepts of the Proletariat and the Bourgeoisie to show a dystopian and future version of the United States. Through the eyes of Katniss, we see the critique against our own, western mass-consumerism while being fully aware that people are starving. It criticises how we have the means to end world hunger, but we choose not to because of our own greed. We do after all put our own interests above others.

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