

The Hunger Games and Human Security

Written by Alexis Henshaw

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ALEXIS HENSHAW, DEC 16 2013

Introduction

While cinema on international relations has been critiqued for its hegemonic realism (including a focus on power, war, and relations among states) (Gregg 1998), the interrelationship of life and art means that emergent concerns like health crises, civil conflict, and issues of post-conflict transition are making their way on-screen more often now than in previous decades. In particular, the cinema presents an ideal genre for exploring the topic of human security. Literature on human security discusses the importance of centering the individual as the referent of security threats and of attempts at protection, as well as creating an expansive definition of “security” that encompasses freedom from fear, freedom from want, and protection from other threats focused on the individual and the community (Takasu 2012; Newman 2010). By centering characters within the narratives of oppression and insecurity, film allows us to become witnesses to the individual experience of insecurity and to develop a clearer understanding of what “human security” means.

The cinematic adaptation of Suzanne Collins’s popular *The Hunger Games* trilogy offers an excellent illustration of many aspects of human security.[i] Set in Panem, a dystopian, post-nuclear war version of the United States, the story was inspired by a combination of ancient myth and present-day conflict, as well as Collins’s own childhood experiences as the daughter of a Vietnam veteran (Dominus 2011; Margolis 2008). Visual media also plays a key role in the stories themselves. Collins’s experience of war has largely been as a witness to media coverage, a different type of “reality TV” where war is both information and entertainment. In presenting *The Hunger Games* as a cinematic illustration of human security, I focus on two main themes relevant to the topic: violations of personal integrity rights and economic insecurity, including food insecurity. In particular, both of the current releases in the series, *The Hunger Games* (2012) and *Catching Fire* (2013), show how individuals experience insecurity in societies that are not (yet) at war, a key element of human security studies. Additionally, since young adults are the target audience of the stories, young characters feature prominently in the series. This may give the films a special advantage in pedagogy, since undergraduate students who are well-versed in pop culture are likely to at least have a passing familiarity with the films or the books that inspired them.

Personal Integrity Rights

Panem is a confederation of 12 districts administered by a capitol under the autocratic control of President Snow. We learn in the introduction to *The Hunger Games* that Panem was born following a brutal civil war in which The Capitol emerged victorious. The twelve districts were then created and placed into isolation from one another. Peace in Panem relies heavily on controlled movement and surveillance: Government “peacekeepers” monitor the districts, electric fences restrict movement, and participants in the Hunger Games are closely watched at every stage up to, during, and (for the victors) after the games.

The most egregious violation of human rights in Panem is the Hunger Games themselves. The games were established by The Capitol as a reminder of and a punishment for the civil war several decades earlier. As an annual commemoration of that war, each district (but not The Capitol) is forced to send one adolescent boy and one adolescent girl as “tributes” to fight to the death in a futuristic arena. Selection is to some degree random, though we learn that young people may have their names entered extra times as punishment for offenses like taking extra food

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rations. Although participation in the games is repeatedly framed by President Snow and others as an honor and a privilege, the process by which tributes are selected (“The Reaping”) belies the climate of fear and oppression underlying the games. The Reaping also marks the point at which structural violence becomes entertainment, as each district’s reaping is televised and broadcasted throughout Panem. Katniss Everdeen becomes District 12’s female tribute to the 74th Hunger Games after she volunteers to take the place of her young sister Primrose, whose name was selected at The Reaping. This act makes her somewhat of a celebrity, since we learn that District 12 has never had a volunteer for the Hunger Games.

From the time of their selection, it is evident that Katniss and her male co-tribute Peeta Mellark have lost all right to privacy and free movement. They are taken from their families and sent to The Capitol, where they are forced into public appearances, makeovers, and training exercises with other tributes. The only way to win the Hunger Games—thus securing a lifetime of celebrity and wealth—is to sacrifice one’s humanity. The last person standing is the victor, meaning tributes must be prepared to kill and manipulate one another. More than that, though, since the Hunger Games are aired live throughout Panem, tributes must also be prepared to pander to an audience. “Sponsors” who watch the games may send life-saving gifts to tributes including food and medicine. To get sponsors, then, tributes must also rely on charm and sexuality.

In pre-game interviews and appearances in *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*, we see that most of the older female tributes and some of the males are sexualized. Costumes are deliberately provocative and tributes are coached to appear desirable. When Peeta announces at a pre-games appearance in *The Hunger Games* that he has romantic feelings for Katniss, she believes it is part of the game. She attacks him physically almost as soon as he’s left the stage, complaining that “he made me look weak.” Their mentor, Haymitch Abernathy, counters by telling her he made her look desirable, which will be beneficial to them both. As time goes on, it becomes clear that Peeta’s feelings for Katniss are real. She, however, is less committed. She fakes an emotional and physical relationship with Peeta to get gifts including food and—ultimately—to save both their lives at the end of *The Hunger Games*, making them the games’ first co-victors.

Winning the games, of course, is not the end of the story. Though victors become wealthy and respected, they are far from free. Their affiliation with the games becomes lifelong, as they are forced on a victory tour and pressed into service as mentors to future tributes. For Katniss and Peeta, this not only means becoming mouthpieces for a government they despise, it also means they must continue the appearance of being in love for the media. Many victors also show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. We learn in *Catching Fire* that Katniss and Peeta have flashbacks and nightmares. Haymitch (a past victor) is an alcoholic, and other former victors in *Catching Fire* are addicted to drugs or show signs of psychological trauma. The final blow to what little personal security the victors have comes when we learn in *Catching Fire* that former victors will be sent back into the arena for the special 75th Hunger Games, a thinly veiled attempt by Panem to control a growing population of winners who have become too outspoken.

The lack of bodily integrity experienced by tributes and residents of Panem’s districts shows a lack of free choice in both their daily lives and in the context of “security emergencies” like those created by the Hunger Games. Limitations on lifestyle choices, free movement, and political repression are among the type of chronic threats identified by the UN as threats to human security (UN Development Programme 1994). The sexualization of tributes also suggests sexual violence as tributes are coerced and exploited, a violation of human rights in general but also when considering the age of tributes, which ranges between 12 and 18.[ii] These children also become, in a sense, child soldiers, fighting a proxy war in the arena. The after-effects faced by victors resemble the psychological trauma experienced by child soldiers, including those active in over a dozen conflicts worldwide (WHO 2009). The fictional violations of Panem also mirror violations of personal integrity rights in today’s world, where an estimated 1 million children worldwide are forced into the sex trade annually and where the seven-year trend is toward declining levels of freedom (including personal integrity rights) worldwide (Freedom House 2013; Kristof and WuDunn 2010).

Economic Security

In practice, Panem more closely represents a neocolonial system than a Westphalian state. Districts have some

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degree of home rule, but it is suggested that their leaders serve at the pleasure of The Capitol. Economically, the districts serve primarily as suppliers of raw materials and/or processed goods for the capitol and its citizens. Over the course of the two films, we learn that District 12 produces coal, District 11 is devoted to agriculture, District 3 produces electronics, District 4 is a maritime province devoted to fishing, and so on. Movement within and between the districts is closely controlled, so these districts each have limited knowledge about one another. Indeed, we the viewers primarily see life in District 12 as we follow Katniss's journey in *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*. Her district is a monochrome wasteland, where most adult males are engaged in coal mining. Katniss's friend and love interest Gale Hawthorne says in *Catching Fire* that he works in the mines six days a week, yet mining still does not provide a living wage. Food insecurity is widespread, and Katniss and Gale are among many who rely on illegal poaching and black market activities to supplement household incomes and provide for their families.[iii] Katniss first encounters her male co-tribute Peeta Mellark when he tosses her bread as she is searching for food after her father's death. She clearly regards this memory with shame, but desperation has driven her actions. We learn in *The Hunger Games* that Katniss's father died in a mining accident, leaving her family without a source of income—the implication being that Panem is a society without any social safety net.

Economic conditions in District 12 stand in sharp contrast to The Capitol. Once selected for the 74th Hunger Games, Katniss (and, by extension, the film's viewers) experience The Capitol for the first time. In contrast to District 12, The Capitol is lavish. Abundant disposable income is evident from the flashy hairstyles and clothing adopted by Capitol citizens, some of whom seem to have undergone cosmetic surgical procedures. There is heavy investment in public works, with efficient transportation services and ultra-modern government facilities. In contrast to the districts, where people are starving, The Capitol hosts parties with so much food that guests must periodically purge in order to taste everything. We also learn in the course of the films that Capitol citizens and government peacekeepers in the districts have access to advanced weaponry and top quality medicines. When Katniss is severely injured in the arena in *The Hunger Games*, an ointment paid for by a sponsor heals her quickly. In contrast, when Gale is whipped in District 12 in *Catching Fire*, the Everdeens must rely on more basic medicines to treat him.

Disease and hunger are also among the chronic threats to human security identified by the United Nations (UN Development Programme 1994). Though reducing global poverty and hunger has been a target under the Millennium Development Goals, an estimated 384 million working poor lived below the poverty level in 2011, and 870 million people worldwide are malnourished (UN 2013). The practice of illegal poaching in Panem, a sign of the scarcity and desirability of meat products, also suggests parallel experiences in the developing world, where iron deficiency is the most common nutritional disorder, resulting in anemia, lethargy, and impaired pre-natal and childhood development (WHO 2013). The reliance on primary commodities in areas like District 12 may also mirror the "resource curse" theorized in developing countries, where research suggests an abundance of natural resources inhibits broader development and enhances insecurity.[iv]

Conclusion

The lived experience of insecurity is at the heart of the concept of human security. While this concept is expansive and difficult to define, the cinematic portrayal of *The Hunger Games* series offers insight into various elements of human security, and how one can be insecure in a society that is (by traditional definitions) at peace. The aspects of human security identified here—lack of physical integrity rights, economic and food insecurity—also have their analogies in today's world. The popularity of these films and the novels on which they are based makes them useful as pedagogical tools. Films on international relations have the benefit of making abstract ideas concrete, while opening the door to critical discussions of concepts and theories in IR (Weber 2001; Gregg 1998). Used in the classroom *The Hunger Games* films can make students a witness to fictionalized insecurities, but the series also provides a useful jumping-off point for discussions of the daily experience of insecure persons worldwide.

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[i] This piece focuses primarily on the cinematic adaptation of the novels, rather than the novels themselves. The first film, *The Hunger Games*, was released in 2012. The second, *Catching Fire*, debuted in 2013. The final two films—based on the book *Mockingjay*—will be released in 2014 and 2015.

[ii] The question of sexual coercion and exploitation may also provide an opening for discussion about the issue of defining and identifying "sexual violence."

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[iii] Indeed, it is implied in both films that The Capitol knows about these activities and turns a blind eye to them, until it decided to increase the level of repression in District 12 in *Catching Fire*.

[iv] See, e.g., Thies 2010; Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner 2009; Collier and Hoeffler 2004 on the relationship between state capacity, state security, and natural resource rents.

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