

# Will *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* “stir up” revolution?

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*The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, the sequel to *The Hunger Games* (2012), opened with a weekend box office take of more than \$161 million in the US, and approximately \$308 million worldwide.

With the trilogy of novels by Suzanne Collins, on which the films are based, also selling in the millions of copies, it is clear that some sort of a chord has been struck. Issues raised by *The Hunger Games*, including social inequality and the build-up of police-state measures, certainly weigh on the minds of many, especially young people, all over the world.

The first book in the science fiction series (*The Hunger Games*), released in 2008, ignited a controversy as to what exactly was being argued, with both left- and right-wing commentators claiming the stories for their own. Collins has indicated that her outlook is a left-liberal one; she is concerned with the environment, war, and economic deprivation. Her stories inspired a following, however amorphous their message is.

The overarching motif is the emergence of Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) as a symbol of revolt in Panem, a post-apocalyptic North American nation ruled by a violent dictatorship. In the first film, she survives her involuntary participation in the “Hunger Games,” an annual event in which 24 young people between 12 and 18 (two from each District, chosen by lottery) are pitted in a fight to the death against one another as punishment for their Districts’ rebellion against the wealthy Capitol some 70-odd years earlier. Katniss’s acts of kindness and solidarity toward her fellow “Tributes” during the Games are considered a dangerous flashpoint by the authorities, which give “hope” to the angry and oppressed masses, who to commence rioting.

Katniss is unaware of this, through a combination of her isolation by government design and her own self-absorption. Her main concerns, at least initially, are solely for the safety of her family and her own continued survival. As *Catching Fire* (directed by Francis Lawrence) opens, Katniss and her District partner, Peeta Mellark (Josh Hutcherson), are about to embark (unwillingly) on an officially sponsored Victors’ Tour—for the first time a plural, since only one Tribute is supposed to survive. That two did survive, through Katniss’s unwillingness to kill Peeta, has incurred the wrath of President Snow (Donald Sutherland), who threatens to destroy everyone Katniss loves if she does not come to heel and participate in the pacifying of the population.

While Katniss wants to flee, those around her are apparently starting to stand up and think about their situation, in the form of the “Mockingjay revolution.” As the authorities proceed with the tour, she is horrified and frightened by the violence of the ever-present riot police.

Ultimately, angry at the continuing calls for rebellion and “hope” inspired by Katniss—however unwittingly—President Snow calls for a “Quarter Quell.” This involves another lottery-type reaping from among the surviving Tributes of each district. As Katniss is the only female Tribute from her district, she is forced back into the Games. The second half of the film treats the competition among the 24 competitors, as well as the machinations of Snow and his associates, who are determined to discredit Katniss in the eyes of the rebellious population and, ultimately, exterminate her.

Veteran actor Sutherland told the *Guardian* recently, “I want *Hunger Games* to stir up a revolution.” Leaving aside what Sutherland, prominent in the radicalization of the late 1960s and early 1970s and now aged 78, might precisely mean by a “revolution” (he also admits in the interview to being a supporter of Barack Obama), and taking him at face value, we socialists are entirely in favor of works that will encourage such a vast social transformation. The question that needs to be asked, however, is: Will *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, in fact, help to bring on a social revolution?

No doubt, the intimations of a mass social response to poverty and authoritarianism have a certain significance. It is difficult to envision a film like this emerging two decades or perhaps even a decade ago. That a major Hollywood blockbuster depicts a popular revolt erupting on American soil suggests that something about the current situation is sinking in. Moreover, there is a growing recognition that the powers that be promote celebrities, brutal entertainment and other forms of spectacle to divert the public’s attention from the ills devastating society. Stanley Tucci is effective as a dreadful television host, grinning and glad-handing his way through human tragedy.

The chief difficulty with the film is that its supposed central concerns, inequality and political repression, are not the driving force of the drama. *Catching Fire* is constructed, to a large extent, as a series of red herrings, dead ends and arbitrary elements. The very fact that, according to the logic of the film, a presumably historic, world-changing social revolution is to be staved off by the ability of two young people (Katniss and Peeta), at the peril of their lives, to pretend to be in love with another in public provides some indication of the level at which the work is operating. In any event, once the Games get under way, this element is largely forgotten about.

The Games themselves are something of a red herring, or come from a different film. The competition is tedious and relatively pointless. The question of who survives and who doesn’t has little to do with the social and political issues supposedly fueling *Catching Fire* (except in the meager sense that the competitors learn the virtue of cooperation). How does Katniss’s skill with a bow and arrow relate to the problems of poverty and dictatorship? Or the structure of the game as a clock,

which is disposed of almost as soon as it raised? These are simply action film ingredients, which don't enlighten anyone about anything.

What if *Spartacus* (1960), the historical drama about the famed first century BC slave revolt against the Roman authorities, had spent half its time focused on the various encounters among the gladiators (and, incidentally, *Catching Fire* makes numerous reference to ancient Rome)? What would it prove if Kirk Douglas's Spartacus were victorious in every conflict?

The brutality of the training and contests in *Spartacus* is a subordinate element, meant to give some indication of the rottenness of the entire social order. The film then moves forward to the social conflict between the oppressed and the authorities, the rich. There is a coherence in *Spartacus*, whatever its degree of artistic success, and the various elements make sense in relation to the social picture as a whole.

There is no such coherence in *Catching Fire*. The filmmakers strike at certain social realities (poverty, hunger, the games as social diversion), but they leave out or avoid critical elements. The film makes reference to wretched economic conditions, even "starvation," but provides almost no evidence of these conditions, and they are not, in any important sense, what advances the story. Those circumstances are not the principal source of interest to the filmmakers. Family, personal relations, various machinations take center stage.

Indeed, even in relation to the first book and film, inequality and hunger seem to take a back seat here. Although the preparations for the upcoming Quarter Quell are lavish, there is not the pointed contrast to the poverty in the Districts offered in those previous works. The audience, like Katniss, is largely isolated from the oft-referred-to growing rebelliousness against these conditions, portrayed in brief glimpses of television footage and hurriedly exited situations.

Moreover, *Catching Fire* and the entire series depict a reactionary, almost fascistic regime, but emerging from which social process and serving which economic interests? We see people going to work in the mines. But who owns the mines, who owns the corporations, what is the content of the social relations? This is entirely sidestepped. We simply have an evil president and his henchmen. But who gives the (real) orders to them? Where are the bankers and corporate chiefs? Collins, consciously or otherwise, has accommodated herself to anti-socialist prejudices in avoiding this. And this is one reason why even the extreme right can lay claim to the film. It is not a criticism of capitalism. It is a criticism of authoritarianism existing in mid-air somewhere. Presumably, a political coup or putsch, removing the evildoers, will right things.

The one glimpse we get of the Capitol, in a party scene, does little to suggest the gap between rich and poor. The sated guests, who drink some sort of cocktail allowing them to vomit and eat more, seem more representative of the Hollywood high life than the financial-corporate elite, although Peeta does point out with quiet disgust that there are people starving in their home District while the Capitol's denizens engage in such behavior. But the sequence as a whole could easily fit into the propaganda of right-wing populists inveighing against "cosmopolitan," immoral, out-of-touch "big city" folk.

The performances are perhaps superior in *Catching Fire* as opposed to the first film. Elizabeth Banks's portrayal of Effie Trinket's transformation from perpetual cheerleader of the Games into someone who realizes the unfairness of the Tributes' forced return to the arena, and into an active conspirator in the effort to overthrow the system that has provided her a good living, is well done and convincing. Likewise, Woody Harrelson's Haymitch goes from being just a battle-

scarred alcoholic to someone who has a reason to fight, in a powerfully wrought performance. His discussion of the other Tributes that Katniss and Peeta will face is done with enough bitter humor to bring out the horror involved in the very idea of being forced to kill to survive.

The array of personalities involved in the Quarter Quell, who range from the very young to the aged and possess varying intellectual and physical abilities, suggests what is lost in war and repression. Their reactions to being called back to the Games vary from glee on the part of the more psychopathic to fear, resignation, and in a few cases, open hostility.

One of the film's strengths and the source of much of its appeal, in addition to its references to social problems, is Jennifer Lawrence. Lawrence is one of the most sincere, expressive performers currently working in the film industry and has a genuinely riveting, commanding presence. One fears what may come of her in the Hollywood meat grinder, where even the limited social concerns of *Catching Fire* are still an exception. Jena Malone, Jeffrey Wright, Amanda Plummer and Lenny Kravitz, among others, acquit themselves with dignity.

Sutherland hopes the film will "stir up" a revolution. However, even if one were to grant *Catching Fire* a degree of social insight that it lacks, it is a serious misunderstanding of the process of social revolution to suggest that a work so banal in much of its dialogue and many of its relationships could contribute to the sort of critical-revolutionary climate conducive to social upheaval. The greatest possible contribution to such a climate would be the encouragement of complex thinking about complex problems. A revolution is something more than the combination of harsh conditions and a secret salute.

It would be wrong and unnecessary to mistake the initial, confused fumbblings about big social questions, well-intentioned or otherwise, with the sort of artistic work that can enlighten and galvanize masses of people in a historical instant. Such works still lie in the future, although perhaps not so distant.



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