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Friends, Enemies and the Hunger Games

It is expected of authoritarian regimes to maintain control through the oppression of their subjects. Oppression reduces the possibility of social mobilization, which in turn ensures that no entity can challenge the regime's exercise of power. The movie adaptation of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, however, takes this to new heights, where the upper classes not only impose brutal measures on their poorer counterparts but also draw entertainment from meting out and watching their unnecessary suffering and death. *The Hunger Games* is a dystopian film set in the fictional nation of Panem, which consists of two divisions: the "Capitol", a technologically-advanced and utopian city inhabited by the ruling government and the nation's wealthiest, and the twelve "Districts", which are demarcated sections of society forced to live under varying degrees of poverty and subjugation imposed by the Capitol. As punishment for a past rebellion of the Districts, the Capitol established the "Hunger Games", an annual competition where two children (a boy and a girl) – also known as "tributes" – from each District fight each other to death in a no-rules setting. For the citizens of the Capitol, the Hunger Games is a televised phenomenon and a reality show; the tributes are seen as celebrities, and events like alliances and deaths are highly dramatized. This shows the brutality of the Capitol's power, which can be so sadistic that an event which forces the Districts' children to kill each other can be an instrument of pleasure for the Capitol's population.

Considering the presence of such a brutal ruling class, one might wonder why the Districts never rebel against the Capitol's oppression. While it is true that the last rebellion was brutally punished by the Capitol, most who witnessed the immediate aftermath of it are no longer alive, and 75 years of oppression (since the last rebellion) should have prompted some bitter feelings among the population. It is striking that those in the districts seem to lead almost mechanical lives, having accepted the existing conditions, without even occasional discussions on the cruelty of the ruling government. Shouldn't it make sense for the Districts to join resources, band together, and fight the common evil they are all suffering under? Instead, the only fighting we see is among the Districts' population in the annual Hunger Games. One might wonder how the Capitol's justification of Games as a "punishment" fits in the ruling government's agenda. Apart from drawing entertainment or instilling fear, does the Hunger Games serve a more important purpose, which can thus explain the lack of any revolt from the Districts' population?

Exploring how identities are created through the social structure of Panem and the Hunger Games can provide deeper insight into these questions. This essay argues that the Capitol employs identity politics over the Districts as a tool to stay in power. "Identity politics" here refers to the formation of exclusive political alliances between groups of a particular shared identity, and enmity between groups of different identities. This leads to the manifestation of political dynamics between different identity groups, moving away from traditional party-based politics. The Capitol fosters distrust among the Districts, making them think of each other as "enemies", a feeling which is further solidified through the annual Hunger Games. Pitting the population against each other ensures that they do not join forces and target the Capitol as a whole. Like any other form of politics, however, this also leads to contestation and opposition to the Capitol's power, which is what we see in the form of Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of the movie.

The identity politics employed by the Capitol enables it to create artificial friends and enemies for the Districts, shifting the population's focus from who the true enemy is. This kind of manipulation can be effectively analysed by *The Concept of the Political*, which is a book written in 1932 by Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt. According to Schmitt, the 'Political', unlike the general connotation of the word, can refer to "a machine or an organism, a person or an institution, a society or a community, an enterprise or a

beehive...”, this encompassing any social structure within itself. Schmitt then goes on to say that “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy”. Here lies the central claim of his book, establishing the friend-enemy distinction as intrinsic to any social structure. According to Schmitt, any distinction, be it “economic, moral or religious” ceases to be purely that in a political, and eventually transforms into the friend-enemy distinction pushing aside the other differences. The friend-enemy distinction is not defined by any ideological differences in the book, but only by the “degree of an association or dissociation” between different groups, and not individuals. Moreover, the state can fabricate “internal enemies” so as to unite the people of a group together against that enemy and ensure “tranquility, stability and order” within the Political. Schmitt however falls short of explaining why an individual like Katniss is able to challenge the Capitol’s power. According to him, an individual has no power in the Political and cannot play any role in affecting the friend-enemy distinctions of society. Regardless, the friend-enemy distinction serves as an adequate lens to explain how the Capitol introduces identities in the Districts’ population to maintain power.

A significant way in which the Capitol introduces divisions between the Districts in Panem is through socioeconomic differences, which divides Districts and shifts their focus from who the true enemy is. The “victors” of the Hunger Games get to bring riches back to their hometown, and also live in a special part of the District called the “Victor’s Village”, leading comfortable lives with their families. Thus the Districts are tricked into believing that their tribute’s victory can help overcome their socioeconomic status. However, this is only an illusion, because the riches that a victor brings can never improve the entire District’s situation to any substantial level. District 12 is mired in poverty and its population lives in slum-like conditions struggling for food, and at the same time, Districts 1 and 2 send their tributes to specialised academies to train for the Hunger Games and thus have increased chances of winning. The economic disparity soon turns toxic, and the Districts treat the “class adversary” as a “real enemy” (Schmitt 37). While we do not see any physical fights erupting between the Districts, we do see the intense rivalry. Clearly, those who are the most resourceful and come the closest to challenging the Capitol’s power instead spend huge amounts of time preparing their tributes for the competition, when they should be working with the other Districts for the common good. This use of socioeconomic differences as a way to maintain power is highlighted by the Capitol’s President Coriolanus Snow

himself, who says that the objective of Hunger Games is to instill hope amongst the population, implying that hope is a more effective deterrent against rebellion than instilling fear through the use of force. The Districts' focus is shifted to the more immediate hope of one of their own improving his/her socioeconomic situation by winning the Hunger Games, although this does not uplift the District's living conditions as a whole. Thus, the Capitol effectively uses socioeconomic divisions to generate enmities and shift the focus of the Districts to the rivalries among each other, thus avoiding them from addressing the oppressions the Capitol itself imposes on them.

This group identity in the Districts finds a more tangible platform – and is further intensified – through the annual Hunger Games itself. The annual games lead to a self-sustaining cycle, where existing enmities result in physical killing, which in turn fosters even more distrust and competition among the Districts. The government of Panem places tributes in an environment where they are forced to fight each other, and each District wants their tributes to emerge as victors. As mentioned by Katniss's boyfriend Gale, the intensity of this association between the Districts and their tributes is so strong that “you root for your favourite, you cry when they get killed”. The Districts do not mind the death of other Districts' tributes, which is clear from the immense applause Katniss and Peeta receive on coming back to District 12, which rejoices in happiness and seems to ignore the horrors and death that families from the other Districts are experiencing. Some Districts take victory as a matter of honor even, as highlighted by District One's tribute Cato who views the games as a way to “bring pride to my District”. Similar to the associations described by Schmitt, Districts band against one another in an endless game of death. This is hinted towards at the very start of the movie by the Head Gamemaker Seneca Crane, who praises the Hunger Games as “something that nets us together” – except that the “netting together” does not refer to Panem as a whole, but rather to bonding within Districts, enabling the Capitol to pit them against one another. The Hunger Games thus serves as a more tangible extension to the friend-enemy distinction, and it is the Capitol's “formula for the declaration of an internal enemy” (Schmitt 46) in the form of other Districts' tributes. In the midst of rooting for their tributes and seeing the other Districts as fierce rivals, the population in the Districts forget that it was the Capitol who devised this concept of treating their death as a game. This is apparent from the lack of any condemnation or frustration about the Hunger Games in the Districts. The Hunger Games

gives the Districts a channel to vent their anger towards each other through actual physical violence, and the violence and competition also reaffirm existing enmities every year so that there is an absence of any organized rebellion and the Capitol's control of power is sustained.

In an effort to introduce enmities and identities between groups, however, the Capitol fails to consider the possibility of an individual challenging its power. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of the movie, does not get affected by the Capitol's divide-and-conquer policies, and her individual measures eventually harbor collective rebellion. She presents herself as an anomaly not only to the Capitol but also to Schmitt-style politics, who says that "a private person has no political enemies", and that friend-enemy distinctions have no meaning in a "private-individualistic sense" (Schmitt 28), undermining an individual's role in the political sphere. Katniss's role fits adequately into the political dynamics of a society, where a certain kind of policy by the ruling authority always generates some form of opposition to the policy. The presence of a challenging authority like this is warranted by the literary requirements of the movie since without a character who is willing to do the righteous thing and thus challenge the status quo, the story cannot move forward. Katniss repeatedly violates the friend-enemy lines the Capitol enforces on its population when she befriends Rue and tries to save her life, when most would not hesitate to kill for even a moment if given the chance. Moreover, she repeatedly expresses her private frustrations with the Capitol in the public sphere. Her simple gestures, like the three-finger salute, spark a rebellion in District 11. Even from an individual caliber, she manages to dictate the Capitol's actions. Her decision to die with Peeta and give the Capitol no victor prompts the Capitol to change a traditional rule, allowing the provision of two victors instead of one. Katniss is thus a physical embodiment of a challenge to the Capitol's authority, and also to Schmitt's viewpoint that the friend-enemy distinction only manifests in groups and that an individual can have no effect in the sociopolitical arena.

The notion of friend-enemy distinctions holds extra weight in recent times, where certain leaders are increasingly relying on divisive and nationalistic rhetoric to garner popular support. Observing the mechanisms through which the Capitol maintains power can serve as an effective example of how far identity politics can go towards the continuation of authoritarian regimes. Katniss harboring rebellion against such an authoritarian regime is

an allusion to individualistic principles, where every individual is given the power to affect decisions and express concerns. In essence, the fictional nation of Panem in the movie serves as a microcosm for the two most distinguishable power structures, that of the authoritarian regimes, which are the prime focus under Schmitt's ideas, and that of the democratic ones, where the individual is placed at a higher pedestal than the state. The first movie only begins to explore the conflict between the two, and how this conflict pans out for Panem in further installations of the movie would be interesting to analyze.

Works Cited

The Hunger Games. (2012). [video] Directed by G. Ross. United States: Lionsgate.

Schmitt, Carl; Strong, Tracy B. & Strauss, Leo (2007). *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition*. University of Chicago Press.

PAPER 2 (SUBMISSION REVIEW)

Please ensure that this document is completed and attached to the paper that you will be submitting for conferencing. Please ensure that this document and the paper are in the same file before uploading.

1. Please summarize your motive and thesis. If you have a well-defined sentence or two that underscores the motive and thesis (motive and thesis statements), please include them as well.
Considering the presence of such a brutal ruling class, one might wonder why the Districts never plan a rebellion to the Capitol's oppression. This essay argues that the Capitol employs identity politics over the Districts as a tool to stay in power. Pitting the population against each other ensures that they do not join forces and target the Capitol as a whole.
2. Please provide a list of the main claim (claim 1s) of each argument in between your introduction and conclusion. You may cut and paste from your paper or summarize them, but remember to number each item on this list.
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A significant way in which the Capitol introduces divisions between the Districts in Panem is through socioeconomic differences, which divides Districts and shifts their focus from who the true enemy is.2. This group identity in the Districts finds a more tangible platform – and is further intensified – through the annual Hunger Games itself.3. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of the movie, does not get affected by the Capitol's divide-and-conquer policies, and her individual measures eventually harbor collective rebellion.
3. How persuasive do you think your argument(s) is (are)? What do you think is (or are) the strongest aspect(s) of your essay?
I would personally think that my arguments are persuasive. While the purpose of argument two might not seem clear, it serves as an extension to argument one, as a reason to the claim that the Capitol creates constructs which help it in imposing identities among the population. I think another strong aspect is that the text is substantially complex with various themes, but I have managed to narrow down my frame of reference to one important aspect of it.
4. Please briefly describe what revisions you have made to this paper since you attended (1) the conference and (2) consultation session at the Writing Centre (if applicable).

I have made the context more directional, with the context revolving around the control of power by the government in Panem. Moreover, the motive and thesis have undergone a change, with the entire introduction having a smoother logical flow. The ideas from the lens text are mainly discussed in a post-introduction paragraph, and only passing references are made to it in the rest of the essay. This makes the ideas seem more like mine (which is the case) instead of Carl Schmitt. Reasoning improved at a lot of other places throughout the essay.

5. In what ways do you think that the paper you are now submitting is an improvement over the version you submitted for peer review and conferencing?

- Authorial voice clearly present, I do not simply rely on lens text to do my work
- Claims are more focused, and supported by more reasoning and evidence
- The introduction has a smoother logical flow