

Political theories in
mockingjay, by
suzanne collins



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- Karamveer Lalh

From the beginning of *Mockingjay*, we are confronted with the prospect of a brutal conflict between the Districts and the Capitol for control of Panem. For both parties, the conflict is critical. For the Capitol it is an opportunity to extinguish the flames of rebellion, and for the Districts, it is an opportunity to win their freedom. In order to achieve these ends, control of the country is critical in order to either maintain, or acquire the power necessary to achieve their objectives. Power can be most simply defined as the influence that A has on B in order for B to do a task that B would not ordinarily do without the influence, whether consciously or subconsciously of A. In *Mockingjay*, the interactions Collins develops all use power in its most basic form, and this effects every major interaction between the societies, individuals, and governments presented in the novel.

These two societies, The Capitol, and The Districts (primarily District 13), provide the framework for the power structures within the novel to exist. District 13 is a highly regimented autocratic society, with each citizen having responsibility and purpose. It is unknown to us the exact government structure and mechanisms of District 13, but it is known that President Coin exerts near unlimited executive power over District 13.

We are introduced to the makeup of this society when Katniss and the other refugees from District 12 arrive at District 13 where they are immediately instructed to conform to their new role. German sociologist Max Weber suggests that classes, status groups, and political parties are considered to be associated with power, attempting to achieve one's will, even in the face of opposition from others. We see that District 13's power structure is

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imposed on the newcomers rather swiftly, and met with mixed reactions. Most, such as Katniss's mother, are grateful for District 13's 'generosity' and conform quickly falling into the status group of "nurse" which is a valuable to the functioning of District 13, and is then accorded the privileges of that group as a reward for fulfilling her responsibilities. Others, such as Katniss, are more reluctant to do so. In the case of Katniss, we know that she does not need to conform to the expectations imposed on her by District 13, because she has power as a symbol. For Coin, being able to control or influence Katniss by winning her favour is more valuable to her goals than the possibility of alienating her by forcing her to conform to the societal expectations that would otherwise be imposed on her.

It is important to consider why the District 12 refugees conform to the expectations of their new society. Weber argues that status honour is a more important source of group social action than is class or relation to markets. Status groups can do this in various ways. Status may be a means of maintaining the position of a group that does have privilege. The status group may be closed, with privileges available only to those in the group, and denied to those outside the group. Further, a status group may lead to the development of parties to further some specific interests of the status group. Thus, status groups may become the means by which power or authority is exercised. Social honour may be accorded those who behave in the manner considered desirable by the status group. In this way, the ends of a status group may be furthered. Social approval is a means of achieving the ends of the group while social disapproval may be used as a means of disciplining those who do not behave in the approved manner. (Weber 1920)

Therefore, in order for the citizens of District 12 to be accepted into their new society, they must act in a way that would gain them entrance into new status groups within District 13. Due to Katniss's privilege as the Mockingjay, and the alignment of Coin's goals, Katniss finds herself in a far higher status group that affords her more freedoms that would not normally be available to most other citizens of Districts 12 and 13.

The premise of the story is that there is a brewing civil war between the rebelling Districts (led by District 13) and the loyalists (led by The Capitol). The rebel vs. government relationship is important when discussing traditional vs. revolutionary power, which was outlined by Bertrand Russell. For Russell, all topics in the social sciences are merely examinations of the different forms of power - chiefly the economic, military, cultural, and civil forms. (Russell 1938, 35) Although Russell discusses many aspects of power in his book, a couple concepts stand out when discussing the power dynamics in *Mockingjay*. One of these is the concept of traditional power. By "traditional power", Russell has in mind ways in which people will appeal to the force of habit to justify a political regime: traditional power is psychological and not historical. For many of the districts, rule by the Capitol is a given, and their rule had gone more or less unquestioned since the first rebellion, with the apparent destruction of District 13. As Russell claims, traditional power need not be based on actual history, but rather be based on imagined or fabricated history. This falls in line with Capitol propaganda, which suggests District 13 was destroyed for disobeying their rule. Thus, the districts are quite content to submitting to Capitol rule.

When District 13 deems itself formidable enough to wage another war, it quickly gains the support of many of the districts. With this, the traditional power of the Capitol begins to end alongside a corresponding change in creeds, heavily influenced by Katniss as the Mockingjay, and President Coin. If the traditional creeds are doubted without any alternative, then the traditional authority relies more and more on the use of naked power, or power by coercion. For the Capitol, this is presented as the games during times of peace, and as force used to suppress the dissenting elements of the population in times of turmoil. Where the traditional creeds are wholly replaced with alternative ones, traditional power gives rise to revolutionary power: the goal of the rebel forces.

Russell also tackles role of leadership within power, which is especially relevant within Mockingjay as it explores the dynamic between two powerful leaders, Snow and Coin. Russell claims that this impulse to power is not only explicitly present in leaders, but also sometimes implicitly in those who follow. It is clear that leaders may pursue and profit from enacting their own agenda, but in a “genuinely cooperative enterprise”, the followers seem to gain vicariously from the achievements of the leader, or at least believe the propaganda that is being fed to them. The existence of implicit power, he explains, is why people are capable of tolerating social inequality for an extended period of time (Russell 1938, 16).

To extend upon this point, Noam Chomsky suggests that individuals use their individual agency to abrogate their responsibility to think and will actions for themselves. (Chomsky 1999, 53) Although this definition is very broad, it can be used to explain the popular uprisings that occurred whenever the District

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13 armed forces entered into a new district, where they were generally greeted as liberators instead of conquerors. Chomsky asserts that authority, unless justified, is inherently illegitimate, and that the burden of proof is on those in authority. If this burden cannot be met, the authority in question should be dismantled. After the introduction of District 13 propaganda, this begins to reflect the view of the majority of the districts. This damages the legitimacy of the Capitol in the eyes of the districts, despite the once effective Capitol counter propaganda proclaiming that they bring security and stability.

Institutions such as the hunger games and repressive rule primarily promote this illusion of security. The name of the country: "Panem", itself is an allusion to the doctrine of the Roman Empire: *panem et circenses*, (bread and circuses) which suggests that a distracted populace that's well fed and entertained will not be willing to rise against the existing power structure, despite any other grievances. (Collins 2010)

While the form of government Panem had prior to President Snow is not stated, it is clear that Snow is a demagogue and likely the office of President grants Snow absolute power. Mayors within the districts act simply as governors, ensuring the districts fulfill their quotas of goods to the Capitol and serve no representative roles as a parliamentarian or senator. As a result, the massive poverty, starvation, and brutality witnessed in the districts is either enforced, or ignored. This concept of direct power that Snow expresses is the one-dimensional view of power. This is called the 'pluralist' approach and emphasizes the exercise of power through decision-making and observable behaviour. Robert Dahl, a major proponent of this <https://assignbuster.com/political-theories-in-mockingjay-by-suzanne-collins/>

view, defines power as occurring in a situation where “ A has power over B to the extent he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Lukes 1974). A’s power therefore is defined in terms of B and the extent to which A prevails is determined by its higher ratio of ‘ successes’ and ‘ defeats’ over B. This kind of overt power is the most observable by an outside party. In the context of the novel, it describes almost all interactions between the governments and their people, be that between Snow and his troops, or Coin and her apparent influence over Katniss.

This critique of the behavioural focus and the recognition of unobservable factors of power is discussed in the two-dimensional view of power developed by Bachrach and Baratz by which “ power is exercised not just upon participants within the decision making process but also towards the exclusion of certain participants and issues altogether” (Lukes 1974). The first dimension claims there is an open system and although admitting that political resources are not distributed equally, they are not centralized in one group’s hands. The second approach however, sees a monopolistic system of inequalities created and maintained by the dominant power. The elite have the means and the political resources to prevent political action that would not benefit themselves. Therefore, the elite determine the agenda of both decision-making and non-decision making. In doing so, they establish their dominance and the subordination of those on the bottom of the power hierarchy. The capitol, and more directly, Snow, was able to maintain power via use of both legitimate, and during the war, illegitimate means. The government made extensive use of propaganda during the conflict, and maintained the doctrine of *panem et circenses* to pacify and control the

populations. In order to maintain order during the second rebellion, the 13th district, at least in the view of the Capitol, deployed an array of conventional weapons, using unconventional tactics, in order to attack capitol forces and loyalists representing illegitimate power.

Although the two dimensional approach to power delves deeper than the first into the nature of power and powerlessness by involving analyses of potential issues, grievances, nondecision-making and non-participation, Lukes finds that it is inadequate because it emphasizes observable conflict only. Nonetheless, an affinity between the two results in their belief that where there is conflict, there is an element of power in both decision-making and nondecision-making. Barach and Baratz (Lukes 1974) states that if “there is no conflict, overt or covert, the presumption must be that there is consensus on the prevailing allocation of values, in which case nondecision-making is impossible.” Here, there is no consideration of latent conflict or attention as to how interests not consciously articulated may fit into the power relationship. Lukes identifies manipulation and authority as two forms of power, which do not necessarily involve evident conflict. People abide by the power of authority because they either respect or accept its legitimacy. Compliance to the power of manipulation often goes unrecognized by the conformer because focus is placed on irrelevant matters and the key aim is downplayed. In neither is there observable conflict, but latent conflict occurs because the individual may be agreeing to something contrary to their interests without even knowing.

The example that best illustrates this in the novel is that the Capitol government is aware of the citizens of the districts' suffering, and primarily <https://assignbuster.com/political-theories-in-mockingjay-by-suzanne-collins/>

enforces suffering, (ex: The Hunger Games), as a means of control, and to essentially use the district citizens as slaves to provide for the Capitol's exorbitant greed. District 2 is of particular note, as they are viewed favourably by the Capitol and typically are more receptive to Capitol policies than other districts, and earnestly believe in serving the Capitol loyally, despite the repressive and subservient nature of their relationship with the Capitol. This is likely not in their interests.

The third dimension of power seeks to identify how A gets B to believe and choose to act in a way that reinforces the bias of the system, advancing the cause of A and impairing that of B, usually in the form of compliance. (Lukes 1974) Such processes can take place in a direct and intended way through media and communication. 'A' takes control of the information channels and 'B' is socialized into accepting, believing, and even supporting the political notions instilled by 'A'. The shaping of individual's conceptions can also take place indirectly or even unintentionally through one's membership in a social structure. Patterns of behaviour, norms and accepted standards apparent in the action and inaction of the group are automatically adopted.

This is relevant when examining the District 13 government and what power it holds. President Coin holds significant executive power over the citizens of 13, as well as other rebel forces. In essence, Coin mirrors Snow especially in regards to the power structure of both governments. Both rule over largely ignorant societies who assume that their leaders have the best interests of the entire nation in mind when they follow them. This, according to Lukes is the highest form of power: one where the subjugated do not consciously realize they are actively being controlled by a higher power. In contrast,

Katniss retains power in herself in this form as she has the ability to influence the opinions of the populations of other districts, in her role as the Mockingjay. These districts follow Katniss because she symbolizes their cause: freedom from oppressive rule.

As for what Collins views as the most effective form of power, it is quite clear that her purpose in writing the novel is by no means a treatise on power, rather a soft sci-fi thriller with an otherwise strong and complex female lead. Collins's inclusion of power is instead a reflection of Russell's perspective that all relationships and conflicts can be viewed as a power relationship. With that in mind, Collins chose Katniss to be the primary agent in the novel, thus she is the individual that wields the most power, especially as a propaganda tool, as the war is one where the legitimacy of both governments are called into question. Both sides in the conflict are aware of this, and by using primarily Peeta as a pawn, they are able to have an influence over Katniss. Another potentially useful example is the influence that Snow still had on Katniss immediately before he was scheduled to be executed, or the huge influence Katniss as the Mockingjay had over the general population by appearing as a symbol to unite behind. Therefore, it can be said that Collins implicitly demonstrates that the third dimension of power, or power over shaping opinions, is the most significant form of power.

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