

Hope and Violence in Dystopia

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ABSTRACT: The fact that America has been plunged into a period of dystopia cannot be argued. The nation not only meets the dictionary definition of dystopia itself, but we are daily watching an Orwellian present, which includes censorship, “alternative facts,” blows to education, muzzling of scientists and constant incitement of fear. Typically, dystopian fiction offers an escape that is so farfetched; it is not a real threat to daily life. In these stories humanity always steps up to help one another and anyone can make a difference; this is what makes these stories both hopeful, and relatable. But how does this translate into real life? In the days since the election of President Trump, we have seen this hope spill into the streets in the form of resistance. This paper will argue that while we might live in a dystopian present, there is a newfound surge of hope we have seldom seen in this nation that comes in the form of protest and violence. With each march, hashtag and moment of defiance, an ally speaks for the downtrodden and as history has proved, sometimes violence is the direly needed catalyst for change. Even in the face of dystopia, like reflecting the novels we have all come to know, the average person can and in certain cases, has a duty to fight for a hopeful future.

KEYWORDS: Dystopia, President Trump, *The Hunger Games*, protest

Introduction

Fiction has often warned of a far-fetched dystopian world; popular examples include improbabilities such as reproduction based on a caste system (*The Handmaid’s Tale*), books and education as banned (*Fahrenheit 451*) and even the concept of children battling in deadly arenas for the amusement of the few and privileged (*The Hunger Games*). These novels almost scold us from the future, detailing political consequences often not within the realm of the protagonist’s control. “Reader, turn back. Do what you must today to steer the world away from this eventuality now!” they shout. Yet, what would be the result if the warnings of such fictional books were not heeded? Within the first few months of filling the White House vacancy, President Trump’s initial acts as President included: a global gag order barring any American funding from going to NGOs which might provide abortion services or reproductive education, appointment of a Secretary of Education with no education experience, and spending much time engaging in questionable social media practices on Twitter. Additionally, American citizens have been detained and questioned about their religion, many fear round-up style deportations and environmental concerns such as global warming or the expansion of the North Dakota pipeline, continues to be ignored.

The architecture of a created dystopic world varies from novel to novel, but they all inflict similar feelings within the reader. In particular, these works of fiction seem to reinforce the idea of oppression by the rulers or government. That we currently live in the world fiction once warned us about cannot be denied. The Webster dictionary definition of dystopia states, “an imaginary place where people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives” (Dystopia 2017). It is a simple explanation but since the election and rise of Donald Trump rhetoric, many US residents have witnessed a type of dehumanizing fear, unlike any election before. There has been an increase of racial tensions not seen since the Civil Rights movement, constant threat of trade wars with international allies and anti-media or “fake” news hysteria; dystopia is no longer imaginary for the American populace but the period in which we now live. However, dystopia can also exist as a period for the populace effected. Essentially, a certain peoples can experience dystopia till change knocks everything askew. For example, 1800s US slavery was heinous and unbeatable dystopic way of life for the slaves but utopic for wealthy owners. Both groups lived in slavery as a system, till the metaphorical deck was suddenly re-shuffled with the Emancipation proclamation and that dystopic period had changed for both parties. Typically, dystopian fiction offers an escape that is so farfetched; it is not a real threat to daily life. Often in stories such as *Hunger Games*, *When She Woke*, and *The Uglies*, humanity always steps up to help one another and anyone can make a difference; this is what makes these stories both hopeful, and relatable. But how does this translate into real life? In the days since the election of President Trump,

we have seen this hope spill into the streets in the form of protest, social media awareness and even violence. This paper will argue that while many Americans might live in a period of dystopian present, there is a newfound surge of hope we have seldom seen in this nation that comes in the form of violent and non-violent resistance. With each march, hashtag and moment of defiance, an ally speaks for the downtrodden and as history has proved, sometimes violence is the direly needed catalyst for change. Even in the face of dystopia, as reflected in the novels we have all come to know, the average person can and in certain cases, has a duty to fight for a hopeful future.

Dystopia Now

On November 8th, 2016 the day after the US election, the Atlantic's (2016) front page was plastered with a jarring headline: "Deportations to Begin." In font much larger than the typical newsprint, the story went on to expand on President Trump's promise to deport illegals so fast, one's head would spin. The article also outlines a looming trade war as worldwide stock markets plunge and the extension of curfews across major cities. For the average US citizen, these are a world-shaking headlines. Mass round-up style deportations? Economic collapse? Curfews? This article outlined clear violations of civil liberty and outlined a martial-law way of living, opposed to the American values of equality and democracy, as if they were the normal news of the day. Was this reality? Fortunately, it was not, yet. The "dispatch from the future" type warning was a follow up of, former speech writer for President Obama, Jon Lovett's (2018) article outlining a post-Trump world. The Atlantic headline would seek, in a fairly jarring way, to make clear how terrifying a certain future, on a generally trusted medium could be. The article may have been alarmist, creating a colorful vision of a post-Trump America but the article was based on a then candidate Trump's own promises; how far-fetched was it really? Initially a part of the election, satirical critique of our media environment is an author's prerogative. However, candidate Trump is now President Trump and Lovett's piece – which traces Trump's tenure as the 45th president – is starting to look like plausible, if unintentional, prophesying.

While the Atlantic article is easy to dismiss as election year propaganda, a collection of news headlines within the first year of the Trump administration state: "Trump Signs Executive Order to Increase ICE deportation officers," "Trump Orders Mexican Border Wall to Be Build and Plans to Block Syrian Refugees," "White House Proposes Steep budget Cut to Leading Climate Science Agency," "Trump Bars Refugees and Citizens of 7 Muslim Countries." No longer propaganda, this is now the American reality and despite living in one of the safest times in human history, we are living in an age of fear. According to Glassner (1999), author of *The Culture of Fear*, "we are living in the most fearmongering time in human history. And the main reason for this is that there's a lot of power and money available to individuals and organizations who can perpetuate these fears." The 2016 election year held a mirror up to the American face and what we saw was a culture choked by fear; then candidate Trump was able to ride this fear into the White House by claiming he alone could save us from the rapists, the Muslims, gays, etc. Left in its wake is America in a dystopic period, full of distrust of each other. According to the Pew Research Center, anti-Muslim hate crimes has increased by 67%, over seventy bomb threats to Jewish community centers in 2017 alone, 2018 saw a mass shooting in a synagogue of worshipers primarily over 55 years old in age and there increasing displays of White Supremacy across the nation (Kishi 2016). Americans are full of fear, insecurity, angst and face uncertain odds, living in a dystopic period worthy of any classic "warning" novel.

Upon establishing that minority populations in the current Trumpian presidency live in a dystopic period of dehumanization, dystopic fiction can be referred to as a roadmap for what the future holds in upcoming elections and generation. The overall theme of nearly all dystopic fiction is either resistance leading to change, or termination of the protagonist and acceptance of the status quo. For example, in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, by Suzanne Collins (2008, 2009, 2010) a young girl is looped into an elitist government's sadistic game of pitting children aged twelve and above, into an area to battle to the death. The reason for the games as stated by the government, is to serve as a constant reminder of the price of resistance. Unwilling to play, the female volunteer from District 12 displays a resistance seldom televised on mandatory viewing. Across the trilogy, constant acts of resistance incite several, mostly of poorer income, Districts, to also rebel, threatening the very

structure and existence of the existing government. She becomes a living symbol of resistance. Only by becoming this, does the idea and will for resistance continue. *The Hunger Games* is only one of many books, to offer the idea of resistance to battle the existing order, holding dystopia in place. In *Fahrenheit 451* by Bradbury (2003), we are presented with a future in which firemen start fires to burn books. The practice is started to prevent offending anyone or causing anyone to think critically, and escalates till the world no longer has to think, enjoy nature or humanity at all. Every routine is the same and only the firemen handle the dangerous notion of destroying that which may induce thought. When a fireman becomes curious about books and starts to read some, he seeks to upset the world order by bringing books back. He is hunted and chased by government agencies to near death. He is only safe when taken in by a group of renegade intellectuals called, “the Book People.” The fireman’s act of resistance ultimately results in fighter jets bombing to city to ashes but the resistance, with their worldwide network of readers and philosophers, remain to attempt to rebuild civilization.

The point these books and countless others prove is that when faced with dystopia, there will always be resistance to oppose it and to preserve or better, the existing way of life. Each day the Trump presidency and with it, the stripping of basic human rights continues, a resistance across social media, marchers and protestors will continue and expand till it reaches a crescendo, demanding change.

The Resistance

For many minorities, every day headlines can feel like a personal attack. It is quite possible we are living in the throes of a full fascist insurgency. An argument can be made that economic and ecological collapse are looming and the consequences of these events will only accelerate the state’s backside into fascism as the ruling classes seek to consolidate power. And yet, all is not lost. The rise of President Trump has also given rise to a period of government resistance, seldom seen in this generation. They have taken the form of marches, person-person interaction, an explosion on social media, and any medium in-between. Calls for civility have been rendered meaningless and no political party has any plan to effectively combat or address the will of President Trump or those who follow his rhetoric. The only solution thus far, has been to challenge the world order.

Protest, even when violent, slow or lengthy, has been the only way to enforce the will of the people and America is a nation rich in the act of objection. Famous acts of protest include the Boston Tea Party, The Suffrage Movement, The Civil Rights Movement, protests of the Vietnam War, the Occupy Movement of 2010, the Women’s March in 2016 and many more in-between (Cromwell 2016). It is clear, American citizens are no stranger to standing up for their beliefs. In each of these periods, much like protagonists from the books we know, a person or peoples arose to fight the perceived oppressor. Similar to dystopic fictions, each of these movements had a similar protagonist who became a figure for change. In the Boston Tea Party, and subsequent Revolutionary War, General George Washington became the face of the moment, as Katniss is the symbolic Mockingjay in *The Hunger Game* series. The Suffrage Movement saw Susan B. Anthony, the Civil Rights Movement had Dr. Martin Luther King, etc. In these moments, whether colonial British subjects, women or blacks, each party saw themselves in a bleak world where they were barely regarded as a person. In other words, their lives were in a period of dystopia. Only through resistance and protest, did these periods end to result in new nations, new voters and even faster ends to wars.

In the current era, protest has taken many forms, but none more powerful than social media. Not only is there ease and accessibility, but additionally, the need for the charismatic Mockingjay figure, no longer exists. This face has been replaced by powerful hashtags. Facebook and Twitter posts, for example with #metoo have not only raised awareness of widespread sexual assault, they have ended careers of powerful Hollywood actors and executives. Since the presidential election of Donald Trump, there have been marches for women, science, the Dreamers, refugees, immigrants and often, gun control. In all these events, multitudes of voices—including those of celebrities, authors, scientists, etc.—have represented each cause. Washington’s Top News states, “Decades ago, it could take weeks of planning, newspaper ads, phone trees and a rousing speaker to organize a successful protest. Now a Facebook post or a series of tweets can fill the streets, jam a state capitol or block an

expressway” (Cohen 2018). This is a newfound power, born of a generation raised on the Internet and well versed in social media as a method of organization. So the question becomes, why does protest matter in this instance?

It is clear based on the above that there are portions of the populace, since the election of President Trump, who are under attack in some way. Whether it is a travel ban, stripping of rights or general increase of the threat of violence, the President himself often defames these minorities through his own Twitter account. If protest and social media is power and portions of the population are thrust into dystopic periods, fiction assures a counter peoples will rise to resist and provide the oppressed population hope for a better tomorrow. And thus, it has. Protest alone has accomplished the following, early in the Trump presidency: House Republicans have abandoned a plan to gut the Congressional Ethics Office, the VA was granted an exemption from President Trump’s hiring freeze, 500,000 green card holders were granted exemption from Trump’s immigration orders, the Department of Defense has secured permission to grant exemptions to the ban for Iraqis who work with the US military, and House Republican plan for a massive sell-off of public lands has been canceled (Yglesias 2017). These are remarkable gains but the bleak reality is President Trump’s hard-lined and ill-informed policies will continue to harm both individuals and the standing of the US in the world. However, as we can see, when the cries become loud enough, we the people can force those in power to bow.

Conclusions

Many living with and among us today, live in an era of fear, anxiety and dehumanization. This is a harsh truth that must be recognized as a society. For example, if a parent is unsure if a child will end up in a cage without release in sight, it is their period of dystopia. These periods can be cyclical in nature but for those experiencing it, the feeling of oppression is ever present. This must end. While we see the power of protest and social media harnessed to combat and defend the downtrodden, the fact government has come this far and executive power has become this unrestrained forces a long questioning of our future.

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