

Neoliberalism in Dystopia: An Analysis of Neoliberalism and How The Hunger Games Illustrates Mechanisms of Ideology

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine how neoliberal ideology maintains its dominance through internalised ideological mechanisms. Using the constant comparative method and a case study of *The Hunger Games*, it explores the roles of individualism, self-reliance, and the media in legitimising neoliberal ideology. It highlights the effects of neoliberal values, including weakening collective responsibility and depoliticising the public. Drawing on theorists such as David Harvey, Gramsci, and Althusser, it argues that neoliberal values are embedded in everyday structures. It concludes that individualism, self-reliance, and the media legitimise neoliberal ideology, as reflected in *The Hunger Games*. Ultimately, this work calls for greater media literacy and political engagement in contemporary democracies.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has become a dominant ideological framework, shaping social norms and institutions in contemporary democracies (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). There is much debate over whether neoliberalism is better understood as a set of economic principles or as an ideology. This dissertation will examine what constitutes an ideology in order to determine

whether neoliberalism fulfils the criteria. Drawing on the work of Harvey (2007), Brown (2015; 2017), and Piketty (2014), it argues that neoliberalism is in fact an ideology, before subsequently proceeding to analyse how neoliberalism is legitimised. I shall analyse the identified legitimising mechanisms - individualism, self-reliance, and media - which render neoliberalism the dominant ideology in contemporary democracies, illustrating these three dimensions through *The Hunger Games (THG)* as a case study. This dissertation will further show how dystopian fiction provides valuable insight into issues in contemporary democracies.

What is an Ideology?

Ideology can be broadly understood as a system of beliefs; however, Antonio Gramsci offers a foundational framework for understanding it as an active force that shapes the lives of individuals and their perception of the world, producing a worldview and ‘common sense’ that align with the core values of the ruling ideology (Bates, 1975, p. 251). Gramsci’s central theory of ideology is the idea of hegemony (Bates, 1975, p. 352), whereby the ruling class secure the consent of the rest of the population, embedding its values as ‘common sense,’ making the ideological values appear natural (Bates, 1975, p. 352). Bates (1975, p. 352) articulates this: “Political leadership [is] based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class”. This diffusion of the ruling class’s worldview produces what Gramsci calls ‘common sense’, a term which refers to the normalisation of these ideas, transforming this ideology’s core values into a “natural view of the world” (Woolcock, 1985, p. 205).

In Gramsci’s view, ideology is spread through civil society through institutions such as the media, government, and education (Woolcock, 1985, p. 206). These institutions disseminate and reinforce the ruling class’ worldview, sustaining its authority and entrenching the ideology (Woolcock, 1985, p. 205). A core aspect of Gramsci’s conception of ideology is that it acts as a force that normalises and justifies societal issues like inequality, framing them as accepted

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results of a “certain way of life” within the worldview (Woolcock, 1985, p. 204). Gwyn Williams (1960, p. 587) describes the idea of hegemony as “an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional manifestation”. Thus, through internalisation and normalisation, ideology is the active force that embeds and legitimises itself. Gramsci’s framework helps to analyse how ideologies are legitimised.

Louis Althusser’s structural conception of ideology is also useful to these ends. In the essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” he distinguishes between repressive state apparatuses, which function through coercion (such as the police and military,) and ideological state apparatuses, which operate through ideology (Althusser, 1971, p. 80). Given that my focus is on neoliberalism, the concept of the ideological state apparatus is particularly relevant. He explains that institutions like education and religious systems disseminate and reproduce the dominant ideology, thus embedding the ruling class’ worldview into everyday practices (Althusser, 1971, p. 80). This is unique in democracies, where such dominance of ideology is not done by overt force but through naturalisation of thought. As Althusser (1971, p. 82) states, “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices”.

This view connects to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Both thinkers argue that ideology is deeply embedded and reinforced within society and its institutions. Moreover, for both philosophers, the sustained dominance and legitimacy of the ruling class depends on the extent to which its ideology is perceived as common sense. Althusser and Gramsci thus provide a rich framework for understanding ideology to be an active and structural force which creates hegemonic discourse through institutions and society, rather than a mere set of ideas. Their theories show how ideology flows through society and is simultaneously internalised, legitimising the ruling class’s ideology and maintaining its dominance. This foundation is essential for analysing neoliberal ideology in contemporary democracies.

Ideology vs Economic System, or Both?

Neoliberalism has been described as both an economic policy created in response to the financial crises of the 1970s, and as an ideology that reshapes society and its individuals (Harvey, 2007). These perspectives are not mutually exclusive; instead, neoliberalism relies on both. Economic policies that emphasise deregulation and privatisation become more acceptable when an ideological framework presents them as natural and rational. This section explores how neoliberalism is a comprehensive framework, where its ideological aims coexist with economic logic, drawing on Harvey (2007), Brown (2015; 2017), and Piketty (2014).

David Harvey (2007, p. 2) defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices”. However, he argues that neoliberalism operates as a hegemonic discourse that shapes how individuals understand and interpret the world. He states, “It has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2007, p. 3). Importantly, he shows how neoliberal ideology functions as a “system of justification and legitimization” to achieve class restoration (Harvey, 2007, p. 19). Thus, neoliberalism results not solely as an economic logic but as a political project. In my view, Harvey’s argument strongly aligns with Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, demonstrating how ideology becomes embedded in creating ‘common sense’ (Martin, 2023). This shows the ideological nature of neoliberalism, highlighting the intersection between neoliberal economic policies and ideology.

Wendy Brown (2015) builds on this analysis. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, she argues that neoliberalism is neither solely a set of economic policies nor an ideology; neoliberalism operates on a deeper level, shaping perceptions as a “distinctive mode of reason” (Brown, 2017, p. 21). Aligning with Gramsci and Althusser, Brown highlights how neoliberalism is legitimised through state apparatus and by altering and normalising a worldview that becomes internalised as ‘common sense’ of individuals in contemporary

democracies. Through this, neoliberal values like individualism and self-reliance become integrated into one's rationale, thus bridging the gap between economic policies and ideology.

Piketty (2014) further contributes to this analysis of the intersection of ideology and policy, contending that the belief in meritocracy justifies growing inequalities within contemporary democracies (Piketty, 2014, p. 65). He emphasises how certain narratives suggest inequalities result from individual effort and labour, deflecting structural causes, thus maintaining the system of ideology. He employs the example of high pay gaps, which are framed as 'earned' whilst often based on arbitrary factors like bargaining power (Piketty, 2014, p. 236). Whilst Piketty's work focuses on empirical data, he critically examines how neoliberal outcomes are justified through ideological narratives. This is integral for my discussion of how ideology and policy are interlinked and how neoliberalism must be acknowledged as an ideological endeavour.

Harvey, Brown, and Piketty thus show that neoliberalism must be understood as an intersection between economic policies and ideology. Policies such as deregulation, privatisation, and austerity are legitimised by the neoliberal ideological framework that presents these policies as natural and rational (Harvey, 2007). This interplay mirrors Gramsci and Althusser's theory of hegemony and ideological apparatus, demonstrating how neoliberalism becomes internalised as 'common sense.' Therefore, it is clear that neoliberalism is more than a set of economic principles and policies; it is a distinctive political theory (Machan et al., 2021). Its market logic coexists with normative aims, like reducing the welfare state and promoting self-reliance, confirming that it is inadequate to call neoliberalism an economic doctrine or ethos; it is a comprehensive framework (Harvey, 2007, p. 23).

How can we define neoliberalism as an ideology?

From this discussion, it is clear that neoliberalism as an ideology espouses core beliefs and values; this is how it creates a worldview and ‘common sense’. I will now discuss the core values of neoliberalism, which will serve as a definition for this dissertation. Neoliberalism is grounded in the belief that liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills can best advance human well-being (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). This emphasises individualism, where individuals are viewed as singular political units (Harvey, 2007, p. 176). Individualism fosters self-reliance, which is a core tenet of neoliberalism: indeed, responsibility for oneself, rewarding individual initiative and endeavour, is central to the competitive environment created by neoliberal ideology (Brown, 2017, p. 37). Margaret Thatcher said, “Who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women (...) people look to themselves first” (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 1987). This encapsulates neoliberalism’s belief in individualism and self-reliance, framing poor outcomes as personal failings rather than structural issues. This neoliberal rationality makes society individualistic through neoliberal norms and environments (Brown, 2017, p. 36). Moreover, neoliberalism champions competition as central to growth and development. Brown (2017, p. 36) shows this value of neoliberalism through job applications and university scholars, framing humans as “entrepreneurial and investment capital”. Here, market values enter all aspects of life. The state’s role is to maintain competition, individualism, and self-reliance, aided by the media in disseminating these values. Thus, neoliberalism is an ideology that promotes individualism, self-reliance, and competition by framing individuals as singular atoms in society.

How is neoliberalism legitimised?

Despite growing evidence of neoliberalism’s harmful consequences, it remains dominant in contemporary democracies. Research shows that with the rise of neoliberalism, both as an economic model and ideology, economic inequality has increased, and social and cultural rights have eroded (Macnaughton & Ahmed, 2023, p. 105). In Australia, a study on the impacts of

neoliberalism found that income inequality has risen definitively since the 1970s, a period defined by its shift to neoliberal policies, such as reduced welfare (Western et al., 2016, 413). It also found that neoliberalism fosters an “atomised society” and a “breakdown of interpersonal trust” (Western et al., 2016, p. 402, p. 409). Their findings are supported by a Global Health Report from 2022, which states that “the bottom 50% of adults in the global wealth distribution together accounted for less than 1% of total global wealth at the end of 2021...while the top 10% owns 82% of global wealth” (Macnaughton & Ahmed, 2023, p. 105; Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2022). From this, we see how neoliberalism erodes community and societal values. In an environment shaped by neoliberal ideology, competition displaces solidarity, and collective responsibility is overshadowed by individualism. Nevertheless, neoliberalism maintains its legitimacy, is implemented through policy, and is internalised by individuals. The contradiction between adverse outcomes and the sustained dominance of neoliberalism highlights how the ideology succeeds as a legitimised discourse. This raises the question: how has neoliberalism maintained its legitimacy despite its damaging effects? Understanding these mechanisms reveals how it endures. This section examines how neoliberal values are legitimised through individualism, self-reliance, and media, which disseminate, naturalise, and sustain neoliberalism.

Individualism within neoliberalism is multifaceted. It champions individual freedom, prioritising individual action over collective responsibility (Harvey, 2007). Gramsci’s theory of ideology connects to how this idea becomes accepted as ‘common sense’ and how prioritising the individual becomes natural. Internalised by the public, individualism undermines collective responsibility, and shifts blame for social issues onto individuals. This view seems intuitive but is deeply ideological and aligns with neoliberal market logic, given that self-reliance is a crucial element in framing individuals as solely responsible for their well-being and success. People are viewed as ‘human capital’, expected to continuously improve and refine themselves (Adams et al., 2019, p. 195; Brown, 2017, p. 10). This ideological element seeps into welfare and

healthcare, presenting systemic issues as personal shortcomings (Harvey, 2007, p. 65). Neoliberalism thus promotes the need for self-reliance, creating an illusion of self-sufficiency (Harvey, 2007, p. 76). Critically, this narrative prioritises responsibility for one's actions and reduces empathy and support for welfare policies (Adams et al., 2019, p. 196). As such, Neoliberalism is legitimised through the internalisation of individualism and self-reliance, which aligns with market logic, making neoliberal principles appear natural and legitimate. Individualism and self-reliance legitimise neoliberal ideology by concealing structural flaws. Individuals blamed for health or financial issues demonstrate the damaging influence of the extreme focus on self-reliance and individualism. Consequently, space for critical reflection is limited, with individualism and self-reliance legitimising neoliberalism as the only viable framework.

The media further entrenches neoliberal ideology by shaping public perception and constructing and disseminating narratives. Drawing again on Gramsci, the media constructs 'common sense' narratives. John Downing (2011, p. 150) notes that it manufactures "the consensus". Noam Chomsky (1988) contends that the media serve the interests of privileged groups, which in Gramscian terms are the ruling class. The purpose of the media is to "inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate (...) society" (Chomsky, 1988). The choice of topics and framing of issues align with and reinforce the ruling class's interests, legitimising neoliberalism. Promoting neoliberal ideals like self-reliance and depoliticising issues like poverty disguises systemic flaws and frames issues like inequality as inevitable. This selective reframing actively creates hegemonic discourse, as it is manufactured through the media.

Through this, the media operates as an ideological institution, legitimising and shielding neoliberal ideas from scrutiny. As of 2022, just six companies controlled 90% of US media (Nalbandian, 2022). As media ownership is concentrated and privatised, output aligns closely

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with business interests. AJ Liebling (1960) famously quoted, “Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one,” highlighting the connection between ownership and content produced. Crucially, this concentration translates into an institutional bias, “self-censorship”, which presents a specific worldview and reinforces the dominant ideology (Chomsky, 1988). Robert McChesney (2004, p. 18) notes that corporate media increasingly focus on “fluff” and celebrity news, distracting from substantive political discussion, with Downing (2011, p. 150) similarly observing that news often needs to be entertaining to “survive in the market”. Promoting individualism and self-reliance aligns with neoliberal values, presenting them as natural and inevitable. By leaving little room for critique and amplifying ideology-aligned narratives, the media fortifies neoliberalism’s hegemony.

In summary, neoliberalism promotes individualism and self-reliance and overall champions personal responsibility. These values frame dependence on state resources as a personal failure, justifying neoliberal policies and obscuring systemic root causes of widespread issues. The media constructs and broadcasts narratives reinforcing these ideals, entrenching neoliberal ideology. Individualism, self-reliance, and the media are mechanisms that reinforce and legitimise neoliberalism as a hegemonic discourse. Their interconnectedness sustains neoliberalism’s dominance by making its goals and principles appear natural and inevitable. I will now move on to the case study section, examining how these dimensions manifest in *The Hunger Games*.

Case study of *The Hunger Games*

I will examine *The Hunger Games* (THG) as a political case study illustrating key mechanisms of neoliberal ideology, focussing on individualism, self-reliance, and media influence. Fictional works offer valuable lenses for illustrating and analysing political and ideological systems. In this instance, I will be employing THG as my study. Others have utilised dystopian literature for political analysis, such as *1984* by George Orwell, which is used to analyse authoritarian

governments (Tyner, 2007). Tyner (2007, p. 130) argues that dystopian literature offers a unique lens for examining themes like ideology, power, and resistance, whilst Khaghaninejad (2015, p. 92) contends that literary analysis is inherently political and can provide a way of understanding real-world political realities. In addition, Frame (2019) postulates that the media is a product of its political and cultural context.

THG was written in 2008, thus coinciding with the 2008 global financial crisis, which highlighted several flaws in neoliberal policies, raising issues with wealth concentration among the elite and widespread precarity (Jaques, 2016). Frame (2019, P. 2) suggests that *THG* embodies this context, reflecting the logic of neoliberalism and its legitimising mechanisms. He further proposes that dystopian fantasies should be treated as historical fiction, given that they offer narratives of present-day ideology and reality (Frame, 2019, p. 17). As such, *THG* provides a valuable medium through which cultural attitudes and dominant values are reflected, offering an opportunity for ethical reflection. Although fictional works do not offer empirical representations of real-world dynamics, they do offer powerful illustrative case studies of ideology in its most extreme form. *THG* is, therefore, an advantageous subject for studying how neoliberal mechanisms operate. As a cultural product, I believe literature can reach broader audiences differently than academic work, providing powerful opportunities for practical political theory. For example, the *THG* series has sold over 100 million copies, showing how fictional books can reach broad audiences and thus are an important point of study (Pereira, 2018).

To execute this case study, I will first provide an overview of *THG*, then define and conceptualise the mechanisms of neoliberalism, operationalise these concepts, and compare the three mechanisms - individualism, self-reliance, and media - in *THG* and neoliberal democracies. This study employs the constant comparative method to analyse how *THG* illustrates these legitimising mechanisms. This method allows me to identify and compare

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themes within the novel to understand the legitimising mechanisms of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is legitimised by individualism and self-reliance, with the media playing a pivotal role. By approaching *THG* as a case study, I can examine these ideological mechanisms of neoliberalism in an exaggerated yet recognisable form, comparing their portrayal in the novel and neoliberal democracies. *THG* is a thought experiment revealing specific ideological trends pushed to the dystopian extremes. I do not claim that *THG* directly represents a neoliberal society, but it exposes neoliberalism's core assumptions and contradictions.

THG follows 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen, living in a dystopian nation of Panem, where the authoritarian Capitol controls 12 districts. Every year, two tributes from each district must compete in the televised Hunger Games, a fight to the death designed to entertain the Capitol and assert dominance over the districts. Tributes quickly become 'fan-favourites' and are treated as celebrities, more so if they emerge victors. Victors are promised wealth and glory. From the impoverished District 12, Katniss volunteers for the Games to protect her younger sister. Skilled in hunting and survival, Katniss has to navigate both the physical dangers of the arena and the media spectacle that manipulates the life-and-death outcomes. The novel explores themes of control, inequality, and spectacle (Collins, 2011).

Individualism in *THG*

The story's main event, The Games, is a televised gladiator-style fight to the death with the promise of wealth and success to the winning tribute (Collins, 2011). The Games normalise competitive individualism, promoting personal survival over all else, framing one's continued existence as a personal success or failure. Evidently, this reinforces the neoliberal logic of prioritising the self. Alliances form but are fragile and often betrayed, underscoring the narrative of placing the self before the collective. Katniss' victory is celebrated as 'earned', and she becomes a celebrity, masking the rigged nature of The Games, where the Gamemakers intervene and manufacture obstacles to enhance the spectacle. Katniss's success highlights skills

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she developed under hardship, such as her hunting skills due to food scarcity in her home district (Collins, 2011, p. 8). This supports the myth of self-made success despite significant systemic oppression and obstacles. Hence, promoting individualism shifts scrutiny away from the Capitol and sustains its ideological dominance. Both Panem and neoliberal democracies promote individualism to maintain the dominance of a neoliberal ideology. Portraying success or failure as personal responsibility shifts blame from institutions to individuals and obscure structural obstacles while celebrating individual success (Harris, 2021). The competition between districts mirrors real-world precarity, where effort is the determinant of success, overlooking the role of systemic privilege or obstacles.

Self-reliance in *THG*

In the arena, Katniss's survival entirely depends on her abilities, exemplifying self-reliance. Neoliberal ideology similarly emphasises self-reliance over dependence on the state, illustrated by the rollback of welfarism in the UK since the 1970s (Harvey, 2007). The Games institutionalise self-reliance in a competitive environment where it is every person is for themselves. Alliances are temporary and eroded by fear of relying on others. This makes Katniss' journey unique in the story, as she begins alone but comes to value the ability to work with others to survive, whilst others begin in alliances, which they eventually break to survive alone. The system of Panem and the objective of The Games is to fracture solidarity and fragment society, mirroring neoliberalism's subsequent erosion of collective solidarity and trust (Harvey, 2007, p. 23). As Brown (2017, p. 37) states, neoliberalism tasks individuals with "being responsible for themselves in a competitive world of other human capital". Therefore, the narrative of self-reliance reinforces the Capitol's values and power.

Media in *THG*

In Panem, the Games are the ultimate spectacle, where the Capitol controls the 'airwaves.' Capitol media censors dissent, manipulates public perception, and echoes the elite's message

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(Collins, 2011). Media coverage of the Games focuses on personal storylines, such as Katniss' relationship with Peeta (the boy tribute from District 12), distracting from the brutal reality of the Games. Consequently, the media is crucial for sustaining the Capitol's dominance. Entertainment and celebrity culture distract from the unjust nature of the Games and Panem's broader struggles. Moreover, the media portrayal of the Games encourages the audience to focus on individual tributes rather than acknowledging the oppressive system (Collins, 2011).

The role of media in Panem mirrors that of media in contemporary democracies, where it is not neutral but shapes political discourse and reinforces dominant ideologies (Couldry, 2008, p. 28). The focus on the individual in the Games mirrors how real-world media focuses on celebrity culture, detracting from critical socio-economic discussions and analysis of institutions. For example, the Johnny Depp v. Amber Heard trial was noted by Michallon (2022) to have received more online attention than *Roe v. Wade*, demonstrating the media's preference for celebrity culture over substantive political discussions. The media, therefore, functions as a tool for maintaining dominance over discourse, reinforcing neoliberal ideological values in the process.

Case Study Conclusion

This case study aimed to explore how *The Hunger Games* (*THG*) illustrates the ideological mechanisms underpinning neoliberal ideology in contemporary democracies. Using the constant comparison method, I revealed that *THG* portrays a dystopian world and amplifies current neoliberal trends to dystopian extremes. *The Hunger Games* presents a world where individual competition, self-reliance, and media manipulation sustain an unequal system, mirroring real-world neoliberal structures. The annual Games entrench extreme competition; individuals are rewarded for survival whilst eroding collective resistance. This reflects how neoliberal ideology frames personal success as the result of individual merit. Systemic and institutional issues are obscured in Panem, in keeping with the neoliberal emphasis on

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individual problems rather than structural ones. Self-reliance is necessary for survival in Panem, becoming an internalised logic, not a choice. Neoliberalism, both in *THG* and reality, relies on the media to manufacture consent and depoliticise the public, weakening solidarity by encouraging individualism and promoting self-reliance, reinforcing dominant ideology. Whilst *The Hunger Games* is constrained as a fictional work and cannot capture all real-world dynamics, it is a powerful and illustrative case study, acting as a mirror to real-world neoliberal democracies, exposing the ideological mechanisms of neoliberalism and urging greater media literacy and systemic critique.

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored how neoliberal ideology sustains dominance through economic practices and deeply internalised social and ideological mechanisms. Drawing on the work of numerous scholars, I showed how neoliberal values are embedded in everyday structures, legitimising inequality and reinforcing neoliberalism's hegemony. Focussing on individualism, self-reliance, and the media, I demonstrated how these mechanisms legitimise neoliberal ideology, framing social issues as personal failings, weakening collective responsibility and depoliticising the public. I illustrated how these mechanisms operate in a dystopian setting through a case study of *The Hunger Games*, where the glorification of individual competition, plus the need for self-reliance media spectacle, are prominent. As such, *The Hunger Games* can be said to mirror real-world neoliberal logic. Using the constant comparison method, I revealed how dystopian fiction exposes ideological mechanisms that resonate today. According to Gramsci's framework, neoliberalism is shown to be an ideology legitimised through such social mechanisms, visible in its most extreme form in dystopian literature. This dissertation contributes to the field by applying a political analysis of neoliberal ideology to fiction, offering new insight into its dominance. Scholars should further analyse fictional work in the future, with literature offering a unique and revealing tool for political study. This work suggests

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critical media literacy, solidarity, and political engagement are crucial in contemporary democracies.

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