EXACERBATED CAPITALISM AND GLIMPSES OF FAILED COMMUNISM IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S MADDADDAM AND SUZANNE COLLINS'S THE HUNGER GAMES

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Abstract : This article aims to compare the socio-economic systems described by Margaret Atwood and Suzanne Collins in their recently published critical utopian trilogies –MaddAddam and The Hunger Games– and reveal the ways in which these authors perceived and translated into literature past and present ideologies in order to sound a warning signal regarding the future of the Western society.

Keywords: capitalism, communism, globalization, specialized economy, discrepancy

Economic discrepancy, social hierarchies, as well as the problems generated by them have constantly preoccupied Utopian authors, including Margaret Atwood and Suzanne Collins whose complex analyses of the contemporary society brought them international recognition. The Utopian realm defined by Suvin in terms of "estrangement" and "cognition" (37) has proved to be propitious for speculations regarding the future while systems of thought and organization such as capitalism and communism have provided the intellectual tools necessary for such constructions. The former favours the competitive environment and private property while the latter promises to ensure every person's well-being through tight cooperation and equal sharing of the available resources. Worried by the economic discrepancy, social stratification and the problems generated by them, Margaret Atwood and Suzanne Collins present an extreme form of these systems. The *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013) depicts a dark image of a savage capitalism gone out of control while Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008, 2009, 2010) juxtaposes an exploitative form of capitalism with the strict communism from District 13.

The term 'capitalism' evolved in the early nineteenth century from the late Latin word *capitale*, which depending on the context refers to movable property such as livestock, merchandise or money but also other financial assets such as factories, machinery and equipment. Capitalism was born together with modern economies and over time, it has become the dominant economic system in the developed countries. The main engines of capitalism, private firms and proprietorships, distribute their products in an open market where the availability of resources is then determined by the forces of supply and demand. The result of the demand meeting the supply is the price. In this system, individuals work for wages and use them to purchase further goods or resources. If there is a demand for a given resource, then there opens a market for it. Once the market is established, the producers will adjust their prices to it until they reach the highest rate of return (the point at which most units sell their resources for the highest price). In a truly free market the most efficient producer makes the resources for the least input, and sells them for the highest output, taking control eventually over the market. Therefore, the competition of many producers provides the best resources for the lowest price, creating an advantage for the buyers.

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James Fulcher observes that capitalism is "essentially the investment of money in expectation of making profit" or the "nature" of an economic activity oriented towards profit (2-14). Profit becomes the main force that drives capitalism. Because the owners of the business keep for themselves a higher share of the profit than the workers who actively produce it, this fact leads to higher gap in terms of well-being between the workers and the stakeholders (Fulcher 15). Greater profit usually means higher salaries for workers but the percentages are never equal and the stakeholders accumulate capital faster than the workers. An important aspect of capitalism is the free market which produces an interesting effect: it separates the production from the consumption leading people (who no longer produce the goods that they need) to become solely dependent on the market as "the only means by which to obtain anything" (Fulcher 16). The market becomes the playground where supply and demand gives rise to prices.

With the help of industrialization, the production centres represented by factories and plants of any kind, are optimized towards obtaining higher and higher stocks of products at an ever falling price with the sole intention of selling them as fast as possible only to start all over again, at an even faster pace. The market is literally flooded with goods, the supply becomes higher than the demand in an effort to ensure jobs and revenues and preventing "factory closures, unemployment and ultimately social and political unrest" (Fulcher 61). This fact has social consequences, gearing the whole western society in what is defined by Sklair as the "culture-ideology of consumerism" (108). The recipe for success in this scenario is convincing people to buy beyond their financial capabilities or beyond their real needs because this is the only thing that generates growth (meaning more profit for companies and more jobs for the buyers). And thus, the capitalist system survives another day.

Taxes and regulations imposed by the state authorities on the economic activity play also an important role in a capitalist environment. Capitalism requires a free market so that the prices are set only according to the rules governing the ratio between supply and demand. Any outside intervention hinders the profit. A modern derivative of capitalism is neoliberalism which, among other things, promotes a market free of any intervention from any kind of political authority. So radical is this concept that a proper definition of it is, according to Dieter Plehwe, very difficult to establish (2). Its proposals stretch outside of the economic domain straight into public affairs, relieving political authorities of some of their traditional duties, while promoting an aggressive "decentralization", "deregulation (of the economy)", "liberalization (of trade and industry)," and "privatization (of state-owned enterprises)" (Steger and Roy 14). Neoliberalism is actually a form of capitalism which replaces the traditional state and presents itself as a "political project" which brings "freedom" to the people (Munck 65).

Advances in telecommunication and transportation technologies have radically transformed the world we live in by facilitating global cultural and economic exchange. In this context, companies grow bigger and stronger than ever before and have an important word to say when it comes to public policies. This is the reason why Steger and Roy (53) as well as Duménil and Lévy (10) consider globalization a phenomenon that greatly helps neoliberalism. Although firmly present in our daily life, the definition of globalization is still debatable. According to Held and McGrew, globalization is "the expanding scale, growing magnitude, speeding up and deepening impact of transcontinental flows and patterns of social interaction" (1). In this global context multinational corporations dominate the market (Held and McGrew 53) and increase the economic gap between the rich and the poor, creating in Sklair's terms a "class polarization crisis" (48).

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Communism, on the other hand, militates against the harsh and tyrannical rule of the economic elite. The term 'communism' comes from Étienne Cabet's 1840 utopian novel, *Le Voyage en Icarie* (*Travels in Icaria*) and is the practical implementation of Marxism, a political and social ideology which promotes an economic system in which all resources are owned, or controlled by the state, everyone working for it. Its basic ideas can be found in two famous works: Engels's *Principles of Communism* (1847) and Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) which embody, as Csicsery-Ronay argues, "a sophisticated critique of the capitalist economic system, a conception of history as the dialectical process of human selfconstruction, and a vision of a universally just and democratic way of life in the future as the goal of human history" (113).

The Marxist theory starts from the *relations of production and consumption* and the different forms of social and cultural articulation they generated. In this sense, Marx identifies four economic systems: primitive, slave, feudal and capitalist, out of which the last one seems to be extremely unsatisfactory as it maintains *class antagonisms*, now redefined as: capitalists (the owners of the productive resources) and the proletariat (the workers). If in feudal societies land is the most important factor in productivity and lords own it while vassals, (serfs, or free peasants) work on it, in capitalism, technology and industry become the key elements. However, while serfs directly receive a certain part of the harvest they worked for, in capitalist societies proletarians are paid enough to survive. Likewise, they experience a feeling of alienation resulting from the fact that they cannot afford the very goods and services they produce. The *surplus value* or the profit of their labour is taken by the owners of the means of production, resulting in a lopsided distribution of material assets. As capitalists tend to exploit their workers and get richer, the increasing economic gap between the two social categories leads to *class struggle*, and its translation into cultural practices, exemplified by "popular culture" and "high art." Marx encouraged workers to develop a sense of common identity or class consciousness, unite and rise up in a global revolution against Capitalists. Once the dust settled, consumption or c*ommodification* had to be the socially revalorized and the means of production as well as their benefits had be equally shared by everyone.

Marx's critique of capitalism provides the necessary tools to expose social injustice and sustain a revolution meant to create a better society. This inspired numerous utopian works such as: Samuel Butler's *Erewhon, or Over the Range* (1872), H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905), *Men Like Gods* (1923) and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) or Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908) and turned countries like Russia or China into Communist states. Though in theory communism is very attractive, in practice it seems to fail profoundly, human nature and the cracks of the system leading to the unequal division of resources and even worse, totalitarianism (the state controlling all aspects of public and private life wherever possible) and crime. Marx himself was quite reluctant in describing the Utopian society that would result from the proletarian revolution and in the end of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), he offers only a vague description of it:

Such fantastic pictures of future society, painted at a time when the proletariat is still in a very undeveloped state and has but a fantastic conception of its own position, correspond with the first instinctive yearnings of that class for a general reconstruction of society. (32)

The trilogies that we explore within this thesis, *MaddAddam* and *The Hunger Games*, reflect these two systems of political and socio-economic organization, capitalism and communism though they substantially process them.

Margaret Atwood exposes an exacerbated capitalism throughout the *MaddAddam* trilogy. Everything is privatized and several corporations such as OrganInc, HelthWyzer, CryoJeenyus,

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or RejoovenEsense expand themselves "like helium" acquiring global power, dominating the market and dictating what customers should buy (Atwood, *OC* 87). Furthermore, as technological development allows them, they conduct all sort of experiments over the population, manipulate clients through aggressive publicity, exploit their weaknesses and take their money. OrganInc, for instance, makes a profitable business from organ transplants. In the OrganInc Farms, also known to as Organ-Oink Farms, scientists conduct projects such as *sus multiorganifer*, or *pigoon*. Their purpose is "to grow an assortment of fool proof human tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host – organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses, of which there were more strains every year" (Atwood, *OC* 20). Such creatures can grow several kidneys at a time and regenerate themselves faster than expected. As the company has invested a lot of money in this project, nothing is to be wasted, and after total harvesting, Pigoons usually end up as sandwiches and pies served at André's Bistro, the staff cafeteria. Likewise, patients are made to paid a lot of money for the transplants and the company assumes no responsibility if the operations are not successful.

HelthWyzer is a another huge corporation which includes different subsidiaries, such as NooSkins or Happicuppa and dominates both food and pharmaceutical markets and imposes its products crushing small producers (Atwood, *OC* 87). The food they promote such as WyzeBurgers, SoyOBoyburgers, ChickieNobs, SoYummie Ice Cream, Three-Fruit Joltbars or Happicuppa coffee contain all sort of artificial flavors and colours, preservatives, addictive and genetic mutations. They are unhealthy and have a "bland tofu like consistency and their inoffensive flavor" but customers continue to buy them due to their accessibility and intense publicity (Atwood, *OC* 290). Likewise, in collaboration with AnooYoo, a company which "prey[s] on the phobias and void the bank accounts of the anxious and the gullible" (Atwood, *OC* 245), it sells all sort of cosmetic products, pills and workout equipment, taking advantage of their desire for perfection and playing with their ego. Zeb describes their mutual agreement as it follows: "If it hurts and you feel sick and it's making you ugly, take this, from HelthWyzer; if you're ugly and it hurts and you feel sick about it, take that, from AnooYoo" (Atwood *MA* 247). The exploitation of the customers can go even further. Companies such as CryoJeenyus guarantees rich people that after they experience "a life suspending event", they will have their bodies put in a freezer and resurrected when the technology is developed enough to allow that (Atwood *MA* 307). Likewise, extremely powerful corporations like RejoovenEsense make mega-millions by selling, as Crake says, "Immortality" (Atwood, *OC* 301). In other words, it initiates global projects and convinces people that they can improve and prolong their youth by taking the extraordinary BlyssPluss Pill, and genetically design their future babies.

Such corporations own everything from their Compounds, security forces to people. The official image promoted by them is that of a "one big happy family, dedicated to the pursuit of truth and the betterment of humankind" (Atwood *MA* 230). In this sense, Professor Nikki Mandell explains that the "familial metaphor" adopted by various companies is meant to unite the public and private lives of the employees in order to "increase productivity and loyalty" (42). All employees act as children of the mother company and have to fraternize attending weekly barbeques and other common activities. But as people in HelthWyzer reveal, even in a family there are limits that cannot be overpassed and interaction is many times just a formal one, a masquerade (Atwood *MA* 230).

Corporations do not enjoy equal status or advantages. Employers of these corporations are part of a well-established hierarchy and submitted to the prejudices that derive from this situation. Working as a Desinfector, First Rank, (in other words, as a janitor), Zeb spends his time cleaning

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toilets and digging out someone else's trash, passing most of the time unnoticed by the busy rich people. This is very common when it comes to the interaction between lower and higher classes. According to Lucy Lethbridge, servants' existence is "a complex paradox" as they have to be "simultaneously visible, their presence [representing] a sign of status, and invisible, the details of their individual experience being subsumed into that of their employers" (8). This situation also extends to a larger scale, intensifying the "class polarization crisis" Sklair talks about (48). The poor from the Pleeblands although they are so numerous pass almost invisible for the Compounders who have a privileged status.

In the last novel of her trilogy, Atwood proposes, among others, a solution to this crisis– namely a "waterless flood" (Atwood *YF* 4) meant to erase human race. The few survivors try to organize themselves and form a stable community. They equally divide all tasks and resources, working together for the common good. Women such as Rebecca work in the kitchen, others like Lotis Blue, Ren and Amanda help making adobe and extend the sleeping places, and Toby takes care of the vegetables, bees, and makes traditional medicines. Meanwhile men, like Zeb and Manatee, try to protect the community and boys like Crozier and Zunzuncito guard the flock of sheep. Their tasks are not fixed like in the Capitalist society they used to live. They can learn from each other and rotate their activities. Likewise, all the benefits of their work are directed towards their common profit and survival.

This small community reminds us of the primitive economic system based on total equality and which was very much appreciated by Marx. It is fully functional and people are free from hieratical constraints and economic divisions especially because it lacks the intervention of a higher authority such as the state. But as this community will continue to grow, strict work division, power relations and hierarchy become imminent.

In Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, Panem surprisingly represents a sort of a failed Communist state. The Capitol and the twelve Districts which surround it are meant to function together and work for the good of the nation. Likewise, the government headed by President Snow are supposed to wisely take care of the people encouraging equality, assigning them homes, getting involved in their daily lives. However, this is not the case and state intervention is abusive.

The economic system which sustains Panem is problematic right from the beginning as it promotes the specialization in a particular branch of production. In this sense it resembles the strategy approved by The Council Session of Comecon, under the title "The Basic Principles of the International Socialist Division of Labour" in 1961. The objectives of ISDL aimed: "a more efficient social production, a higher rate of economic growth, higher living standards,…industrialization and gradual removal of historical differences in economic development levels of the socialist countries and the creation of a material basis for their more-or-less simultaneous transition to communism"(qtd. in Bideleux and Tayler 185). Such objectives would be achieved through "the co-ordination of economic plans," "specialization and co-operation", "any deviation leading to disturbances of the economic cycle" (qtd. in Bideleux and Tayler 185). In other words, socialist countries united around Rusia, were supposed to specialise in specific industrial areas: engineering, chemical, ferrous and non-ferrous metallurgy" as well as in agricultural production. Due to the categorical opposition of Romania, such a strategy has never been implemented. Although Panem appears to be a single nation, it is in fact an association of states which stage the failure of the socialist specialized economy. If history had not been different, perhaps Romania would have been a sort of District 11 in the relation with Russia.

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Similarly, the twelve districts reunited around the Capitol are supposed to be specialised in a specific economic sector. Thus, District 1 produces luxury goods while District 2 focuses on masonry and builds the nation's superb stonework. District 3 makes computers, televisions and all sort of electronic appliances. District 4's main industry is fishing and it supplies the seafood. Electricity is produced by district 5 which has numerous power plants. District 6 ensures transportation and builds hovercrafts, high-speed or cargo trains. The following one is covered by large portions of forest and processes lumber. Next in line, District 8 produces textiles and District 9 is Panem's bread bowl and processes grains. Meanwhile, District 10 takes care of the livestock, 11 specializes in agriculture and finally, District 12 focuses on coal mining.

The Capitol, however, represents a "deviation" or an anomaly of this system as it does not specialize and co-operate together with the other Districts. It exploits the Districts taking most of their goods, giving them nothing in exchange. This way, the Capitol gets more and more powerful and rich, while the districts become impoverished and over controlled. Furthermore, this situation leads to the "estrangement" or the "alienation" of the workers living in the districts. Although they work really hard they can never afford their "labour object" to use Marx's terms (33). The coal miners of District 12 can rarely warm their homes during winter time. The agricultures from District 11 are malnourished despite all the grains and vegetables they produce. The transport builders from 6 cannot travel, and the privileged jewellers from 1 cannot wear the expensive ornaments they create. Depriving workers from the districts of their labour products, (only the Capitol people are able to enjoy them) leads to their Self alienation; they become objects, "commodities".

Meanwhile, due to a sort of "divide et impera" policy, some of the Districts such as 1, 2, 4 are privileged by the Capitol and seem to be wealthier while others struggle in abject poverty. On a micro scale, the citizens of the districts continue to be socially stratified based on their financial power. Social stratification existent in the districts increases the alienation of people and becomes painfully visible during the annual reaping for the Hunger Games, which is unfair to the poor, as Katniss explains:

You become eligible for the reaping the day you turn twelve. That year, your name is entered once. At thirteen, twice. And so on and so on until you reach the age of eighteen…But here's the catch. Say you are poor and starving as we were. You can opt to add your name more times in exchange for tesserae…[For] someone like Madge, who has never been at risk of needing a tessera, the chance of her name being drawn is very slim compared to those of us who live in the Seam. Not impossible, but slim. (Collins, *HG* 11)

Facing a dramatic situation such as premature death of their children, the poor citizens of the districts become aware of their limitations and very soon their bitter pain takes the form of hate– class hatred. The children who are forced to participate in the Hunger Games but also their families interiorize this feeling and direct their aversion towards the Capitol but also towards those who occupy a better social position in their own districts. Katniss knows that the mayor's daughter, Madge, can also be selected for the Hunger Games, but she is aware of the fact that such a thing has limited chances to take place. The sadistic procedure according to which the reaping takes place is deeply influenced by class and financial power. Panem becomes, therefore, a failed example of communism but a successful exploitative one very similar to the Colonial one. Here we define Colonialism as "the policy and practice of a power in extending control over weaker people or areas" (Fomerand 169) and speculate upon it stating that the Capitol represents the dominating power while the Districts function as its colonies, though there is no invasion and

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no ethnic conflicts. As we find out from the beginning of the trilogy, Panem "rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America" (Collins *HG* 16).

In contrast, Suzanne Collins also presents a relatively successful Communist society. District 13 which obtained its independence after the rebellion of the Dark Days, functions separately from Panem and the Capitol. Here, the government takes equal care of its citizens and everyone has to obey specific rules, including President Alma Coin herself. There are no exceptions made over others. All citizens are assigned a cubicle, a uniform and three meals a day. Food comes from the underground farms and is rationalized, but everyone leaves with "enough calories to take you to the next meal, no more, no less" (Collins *MJ* 314). In return, citizens function according to a daily schedule which is temporarily tattooed on their arms, going to work or to school and obeying the orders coming from President Coin. In some respects, this society resembles to an anthill, where all citizens rigorously accomplish their duties. For almost seventy five years this type of organization has been functional especially due to is small size compared to Panem. However, it starts to crumble when it challenges the Capitol and tries to extend its power.

After the rebellion meant to change the current situation from Panem and eliminate dictatorship and the economic discrepancy, Collins does not propose a new solution. Apparently things are improved from a socio-political and economic point of view but Districts continue to exist though they get specialised in a new industrial branch. For instance, District 12 had its coal mines closed and begins to produce medicines. As Katniss says: "Machines from the Capitol break ground for a new factory where we will make medicines" (Collins *MJ* 386).

Comparing *MaddAddam* and *The Hunger Games* we underline the fact that they try to sound a warning signal regarding the increased economic discrepancy and social stratification which unbalance the United States, and propose two dysfunctional socio-economic systems that might evolve out of these problems if they are left unattended. Moreover, we stress the fact that omnipotent corporations such as those described by Atwood or a totalitarian regime like that from Collins's trilogy resemble very much when it comes to the masses they control. Although they use manipulation or terror, the corporations would be nothing without the customers who buy their products, and the Capitol would totally collapse without the Districts which work for it. To conclude, any socio-economic form a state might adopt can be shape and reshape as it represents only a facet of the institutional mechanism that lies beneath it. Additionally, systems of thought such as capitalism of communism can be fully functional and beneficial in theory, but putting them in practice and preventing them from reaching monstrous dimensions proves to be extremely challenging; an utopian impulse.

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