

Winter 12-7-2017

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Recommended Citation

Moyer, Gabrielle, "The Spokesman of the Working Class" (2017). *Faculty Curated Undergraduate Works*. 45.
https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/undergrad_works/45

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The Spokesman of the Working Class

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Dr. Buckley

Bruce Springsteen and The American Dream

7 December 2017

Abstract

Throughout his life and career, Bruce Springsteen has continuously included the working class as a major focal point and theme, whether it be in his music or other works. His music provided him with an outlet to express his own experiences, as well as others that are a part of the working-class community and all that entails. His lyrics illustrate and praise their hard-work and effort into achieving what is known as the American dream, while also shedding a light on the many downsides and injustices that are inflicted upon those people. Further into his career, he begins to recognize and highlight those negatives more as he comes to realize the many people, including those in his own family, who have been failed by the American dream. Frustrated with difference between the American dream and this now American reality, Springsteen has taken on the role of a spokesman for the working-class community by using his platform and music to unify people not only in the working-class, but all classes, while drawing attention to the injustice this country has placed on those people by calling for social and economic change.

It was two weeks before Christmas, when my mother sat my sister and I down to inform us that we were required to accompany my aunt and herself in delivering about thirty gifts to a woman in need. Through a local organization, my family and I were assigned a family to buy Christmas presents for, however, my sister and I were not involved in the collection of the gifts for the family. So, for my mother, it was “imperative that we understand just how great we have it” by delivering those gifts. So, we begrudgingly helped to load up the car and sat quietly during the half an hour drive to meet up with the mother of this family. When we arrived in the parking lot of her work and opened the trunk, she was immediately moved to tears. She gave us each a hug and repeatedly thanked us, before explaining how much this meant to her. She went on to explain that she never thought this was a position she would have to be in (receiving gifts for her 3 daughters from strangers), but when her husband left her alone with her children two years ago, she was forced to be the sole provider. This woman worked at a local salon as much as she could, while still caring for her young children, but it was not enough. She knew that realistically she would not be able to give her children the magical Christmas they deserved and feared their disappointed faces come Christmas morning. After leaving the tearful, and incredibly grateful single-mother, I was lost in my thoughts over how different other people’s lives and situations could be from my own. I was always so sheltered from anything concerning money, so when meeting this woman, I struggled with the fact that she could not provide everything she wanted for her children even as a working-class woman. This experience started to shape my understanding of the world around me and the undoubtedly real situations people I share a community with face on a daily basis.

Growing up, I was never completely sure what socioeconomic class my family and I belonged to, which should have been the first sign that I was not a part of the poor or working

class. As I got older and older, with the help of my parents, my experiences exposed me to the way most of the country lived and their realities as they struggled to make ends meet while also trying to achieve more for themselves and for their families. This was something my parents seemed to accomplish, seeing as my sister and I never wondered if we would be getting the insane amount of presents we would receive every Christmas, if we would not be able to go to summer camp with all our friends, or even if our mother would have to start working to help make ends meet. Our parents created a life of opportunity for us, by creating opportunity for themselves.

My father and mother both grew up working class, my mother the daughter of a New York City police officer and nurse, while my father grew up the son of divorced parents who both worked various jobs to sometimes be able to put food on the table for their three children. My father often recounts the nights, when left alone, his sisters and himself made themselves the “delectable dish” of cereal and milk (if there was any) for dinner. So, when he was given the opportunity to create a better life for himself and future family, he took it, ran with it, and succeeded. He was able, with the help of my mother, to climb the social and economic ladder and achieve their own American dream. My parents met while studying at King’s College, the first and only members of their families to attend college, of course, until my generation. My father graduated with a bachelor’s in accounting and worked several jobs before becoming the CFO of a successful real estate company. After her four years at Kings, my mother went on to medical school and became a doctor. Unfortunately, her career was short-lived after being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, and has since spent her days as a stay at home mother. Even with my father being the sole bread-winner of the family, my parents were still able to achieve their goal of giving us a completely worry free life, one that they were unable to have growing

up. This achievement was not the case for everyone, however, many people to this day struggle to make that jump from one socioeconomic class to the next, stranded with no way up. This lack of a ladder from the working-class to the upper-class, is depicted largely in Bruce Springsteen's writing and other works.

Bruce Springsteen was born into an Irish-Italian family of catholic belief in Freehold, New Jersey, a town made up of mostly working-class citizens. These people were divided amongst factory jobs at either the Karagheusian Rug-Mill, Nescafe's coffee plant, or 3M's tape factory. His father held several titles as he moved from job to job serving as a jail guard, factory worker, and bus driver, while his mother earned most of the family's money as a legal secretary. His family was "pretty near poor, though [he] never thought about it" (Springsteen, 2016, p.9). Later on, as the American dream of climbing up social and economic classes grew farther and farther away, Springsteen was exposed to the challenges of confinement and money crises when his family did all they could to make ends meet and save money. Whether it was digging through the upper-class neighborhood's trash bins for broken radios with his grandfather to repair and resell, or only getting to bathe a couple times a week since their house was strictly cold water only. These norms in his life separated him from the upper-class so much so that if he were to see a man with a suit on they "were immediately under suspicion" (Springsteen, 2016, p.261). As his life went on, he started to understand those discrepancies between the two as he "witnessed firsthand the unpleasant reality of contemporary working-class America, from the dead-end factory jobs and shutdowns, to the disproportionate government sapping of the working class for soldiers to conduct the Vietnam conflict" (Smith, 2000, 307).

The confinement his socioeconomic status held him in became more apparent as the latter occurred. Like most of the country, wanting nothing to do with the war in Vietnam, Bruce

Springsteen looked for solutions to avoid the draft, even though he knew he “didn’t have the recourse to do anything so extravagant”, such as paying for doctor’s notes to be declared unfit (Springsteen, 2016, p.101). His lack of ability to do so stuck with him and even became a topic addressed in one of his most famous songs, “Born in the U.S.A. Using music as an outlet of expression for the experiences he had and the voice he wanted to be heard was something Springsteen learned to do early on in his music career. It was not long before Springsteen could be found performing these songs at local shows, and soon in major arenas that provided people like himself a voice and a connection to others that allowed them to feel less alone (Springsteen, 2016,).

When writing, Springsteen turned to his own experiences for inspiration. More recently, Springsteen has addressed that his music’s “deepest motivation comes out of the house that [he] grew up in and the circumstances that were set up there, which is mirrored around the United States with the level of unemployment” (Leopold). He recognizes that the piece of him that was once a part of the working class community, was a permanent piece in who he was as a person, as well as a permanent piece in his music. Therefore, when writing he sought to “blur the lines between the personal and psychological factors that made [his] father’s life so difficult and the political issues that kept a tight clamp on working-class lives across the United States” (Springsteen, 2016, p.264). To do so, he began to create characters in his songs that “narrate histories that link class experiences across generations, representing these experiences not in terms of individual success or failure but as products of complex social and historical forces” (Garman, 1996, p.71). Through this, Springsteen successfully highlights the hardships faced by those stuck in the middle class, while still “grant[ing] integrity to those people without passing judgement on them” (Smith, 2000, p. 308). Early on, these characters were an inspiration for

hope for a better tomorrow and an escape from the ties that bound him to his socioeconomic class, a world he and others always desperately wanted to leave behind.

One of the first examples of this hope he held as a once working class man is seen in his song “Born to Run”. Through this song he introduces the theme of the American dream for the working class people, singing “in the day we sweat it out on the streets of a runaway American dream”, which illustrates the motivation behind their daily hard work at jobs they do not particularly care for (Springsteen, 1975). He goes on in the song to explain this idea of a better future through hard work and the American dream, that taunts them during the day, so when night rolls around and their work is done “the highway’s jammed with broken heroes on a last chance power drive...but there’s no place left to hide” (Springsteen, 1975). Bruce explains that these people are still stranded in their towns and confined to their jobs, in which their American dream is only a vision of hope that “these people are left to fantasize at night in cars and on cars that go nowhere” (Smith, 2000, p. 309).

This theme of the road and the hope it symbolizes continues in his other works like “Thunder Road”. His characters in this song use the road much like those in “Born to Run”, with the speaker asking “Mary” to “rid[e] out tonight to case the promise land” and escape the town and socioeconomic class that has confined them in search of a better life (Springsteen, 1975). Throughout much of his earlier work, Springsteen has recognized this theme of confinement to fuel and explain the motivation behind seeking freedom in a car and driving away to a better life in an attempt to bring hopefulness to his audience. However, “the problem for Springsteen is that the respite found in the automobile is false” (Bellamy, 2011, p.224).

This idea of the freedom for the working-class people that was once an encouragement for people to keep chasing, has now become just a far off dream for many as they realize that

confinement will almost always prevail. Springsteen begins to recognize this in the albums and songs that follow, especially in songs like the “The River”. In “The River”, it is assumed that Springsteen reintroduces the speaker and Mary from “Thunder Road” a couple of years later. The couple, once filled with hopes and dreams of creating a better life for themselves, has now faded away enclosed in a failed marriage and living without work (Smith, 2000). This transition in tone within his writing and music was also seen previously in the album *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, as well as the albums *The River*, *Nebraska*, and *Born in the U.S.A.*, “document[ing] and g[iving] voice to the unemployed and the working poor” (Loss, 2016).

The albums previous to *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *The River*, *Nebraska*, and *Born in the U.S.A.*, all offered a sense of “upward mobility as a way to escape a truncated working-class life” (Garman, 1996, p.74). This transition is one of tone, in which the music “asserts that social status is in part determined by social and historical forces that even the hardest working people cannot overcome” (Garman, 1996, p.74). Springsteen’s song, “Adam Raised a Cain” illustrates this idea, in what is assumed to elude to his troubled relationship with his own father explaining, “Daddy worked his whole life, for nothing but the pain/now he walks these empty rooms, looking for somebody to blame” (Springsteen, 1978). The character of the father in this song demonstrates that feeling of “the deep sense of personal failure which casts a shadow” and traps him in this depression searching for an outlet that cannot be found, a similar dilemma found in households across America including Bruce Springsteen’s (Garman, 1996, p.74).

His own personal familial experiences are also present in other songs, such as “The River”, a song he describes being based on “the crash of the construction industry in late-seventies New Jersey, the recession and hard times that fell on [his] sister Virginia and her family” (Springsteen, 2016, p.279). During this time, Springsteen’s first-hand witness of this

collapse through the downfall of his brother-in-law's main source of income and his ability, despite the circumstances, to still work hard to survive led him to speak out against the betrayal of working-class men and woman in this song by giving those people a voice in popular America.

In other works, Springsteen also recognizes that this betrayal is often too much to bear for some people. Specifically, in his song "Atlantic City", the character, who feels stuck with "debts no honest man can pay", eluding to the fact that he must resort to other means to be able to support his family. This is in contrast to the characters described in "The River", in which specifically in that verse, "it is as pure an admission of spiritual defeat as any other line in American verse" (Petrusich, 2015). The let down and abandonment of the American dream for the working-class citizens, is a theme consistently present throughout the rest of his work. His characters have a sense of familiarity and humanity that allow Springsteen to be "able to connect the lives of these characters to the lives of the listeners", which is an influential ability of Springsteen's work and allows him to give those people a voice where they usually do not have one (Smith, 2000, p. 309).

Springsteen's audience throughout his career gave him a sense of purpose through the power of giving them a voice. He felt a duty to not only to speak his grievances of the struggles in his personal life as a member of the working-class community but also to those "who'd been shuffled to the margins of American life", and were the same people who continuously gave back to America through their hard work only to have their dreams of reward denied (Springsteen, 2016, p.328). This allows him to be the sort of spokesperson for the working-class people with an authenticity that "is legitimized by [his] biographical roots; that is, by something [he] ha[d] no control over" (Loss, 2016).

Through his work and the use of his characters and their integrity, he is then able to be influence the possibilities of cultural and political change (Garman, 1996). Outside of music he has voiced the call for these changes through his platform. For example, during a recent interview with Matt Frei, of Channel 4 News in the U.K., Springsteen called to both political parties, weeks before the 2016 election, who, in his opinion have not addressed the issue of the working class, saying “if [he] couldn’t be a musician tomorrow and [he] had to find something else to do [he’d] be at a loss...because the past forty years as the deindustrialization and globalization has affected a lot of work lives the issues that matter to a lot of hard working folks haven’t been addressed”. For this reason, Springsteen has dedicated most of his career to “mapping that territory, the distance between the American dream and American reality”, in the hopes of influencing the people and politicians of America to take a stand for change and justice for the working-class community (Springsteen, 2016, p.204). Since historically for most Americans, they “have not been greatly worried about that sort of inequality: we tend not to begrudge others their success or care how high the socioeconomic ladder is”, Springsteen desires to prompt change in the current reality of what the American dream entails (Putnam, 2016, p.31).

For Bruce Springsteen, who has been directly affected by the working-class community, he finds the concept of the American dream and its failure to be in an injustice. In his autobiography, he explains that for those who work hard daily, “a dignified decent living is not too much to ask” and should be a given for this country (Springsteen, 2016, p.265). He populates his music with those haunted by the American dream and “its promises of prosperity, equality, and mobility for all”, for the purposes of not only relating to the real people in America affected by this and unification amongst the classes through awareness, but to draw attention to the falsity

of what this country was founded upon and instill an inspiration for change within society
(Smith, 2000, p. 306).

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