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Bruce Springsteen: Voice of the Working Class

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Bruce Springsteen and the American Dream

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Abstract

This paper explores the notion of Bruce Springsteen as the voice of the working class. It touches on Springsteen's background and the development of his working class identity. It then goes on to discuss how Springsteen's working class identity is portrayed in his writing in a generalized fashion to represent a large portion of working class people. He does this through storytelling and the creation of characters. Springsteen also looks to represent common emotions rather than specific circumstances. Specific examples from Springsteen's writing are given. The paper also examines how Springsteen has advocated for the working class people both through his music and other means. Overall, the central idea is that Springsteen has used his platform and experiences to speak for the working class people in such a way that they cannot be ignored.

Bruce Springsteen: Voice of the Working Class

As a self proclaimed “rich man in a poor man’s shirt,” Bruce Springsteen emulates all that is working class. Coming from a working class background allowed him to develop a working class identity that many people share. Working class themes are heavily prevalent in his writing. Over the course of his career, Springsteen has spoken for the working class community in various forms. “Springsteen not only ‘represents’ the working class as a member himself but also ‘re-presents’ that group as a singer and a songwriter”(Papke, 2014). He has, quite literally, become the voice of working class. Through his powerful stories of working class characters and advocacy for the working class people, Springsteen has used his platform to assure the working class community is not ignored, as they are often a class that is disregarded or looked down upon. Although Springsteen is no longer working class, the working class identity has stuck with him, and because of this, he continues to be their voice through his songs and provide support to these people.

Bruce Springsteen was born in 1949, to a Catholic, working class family. They resided in Freehold, New Jersey, a town filled with factories, race-riots, and a great deal of people working day in and day out just to get by. In Springsteen’s autobiography, he writes, about Freehold, “There is a place here—you can hear it, smell it—where people make lives, suffer pain, enjoy small pleasures, play baseball, die, make love, have kids, drink themselves drunk on spring nights and do their best to hold off the demons that seek to destroy us, our homes, our families, our town”(Springsteen, 2016, p. 6). Springsteen speaks of the commonalities of working class people. His family was no exception to these. Bruce always had clothes on his back and a roof over his head, however, his family was “pretty near poor”(Springsteen, 2016, p. 9). His father

found it hard to keep a job, as he struggled from mental health illnesses. Despite this, Springsteen wrote, “My pops was built like a bull, always in work clothes; he was strong and physically formidable”(Springsteen, 2016, p. 29). When Bruce was born, he was working on the line at the Ford Motor plant. As for Springsteen’s mother, she was the primary breadwinner in the family. Unlike his father, his mother was not born into these circumstances. She came from a well-off family and instead married into the working class life. Although she never lifted a finger growing up, Springsteen’s mother developed an incredible work ethic that he greatly admired. “She goes to work, she does not miss a day, she is never sick, she is never down, she never complains. Work does not appear to be a burden for her but a source of energy and pleasure”(Springsteen, 2016, p. 34). She held a stable job as a legal secretary while also taking stupendous care of her children. Bruce traces all he does now to his family and the life he had while growing up. He told one reporter, “The deepest motivation comes out of the house that I grew up in and the circumstances that were set up there(Leopold, 2012).

In Lillian Rubin’s book, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family*(1976), she performed intensive interviews during the 1970s of 50 white working class families in which neither the husband nor the wife had more an a high school level education and the husband held a traditional blue collar job. She also, for comparison purposes, interviewed 25 similar middle class families in which both the husband and wife had at least a college level education and the husband was in a professional occupation. In doing this, Rubin uncovered much about the attitudes of working class people(chp 1). These attitudes can be seen in Springsteen’s music as well him himself. One of the most prominent is the meaning of work to these people. “Work tends to be seen as a given in life—more or less enjoyable, but ultimately unavoidable”(Rubin,

1976, p.161). As a result of this, many working class people develop an incredible work ethic. When Rubin asked working class people what they would do if they suddenly inherited a million dollars, most responded in a similar fashion. Many of them said they would purchase something like a ranch or a store, that they would run themselves. Almost all of their dreams involved hard work in some way. Many others said that they would use the money to take classes to better themselves in art or music. As children, working class people's talents usually go unnoticed because they seem useless. The children are expected to straight into the workforce when they are of age. In contrast, when middle class people were asked this same question, many responded that they would use the money to pay off all their bills. This is not the case for working class people because they do not have many bills to pay off(p. 161-167). Since they are struggling to afford basic living necessities, they certainly cannot afford any extra luxuries. With this, it is clear that the working class have an idea of work that is different from any other class because of the socioeconomic situation they occupy.

This working class notion of work and the exceptional work ethic is very much alive in Springsteen, even despite his wealth and success. As a musician, Springsteen is in a profession that requires a hefty amount of work in order to gain and retain success. Springsteen has gone above and beyond what many other artist do. Springsteen has released 18 studio albums, the first being in 1973, and the most recent in 2014. He also has done projects outside his music. Springsteen wrote an autobiography, which was published in 2016. More recently, Springsteen has been performing in his own show on Broadway. He is also well-known for being an unbelievable performer, as he is extremely lively on stage and does shows that are up to four hours long. Even with his age, he has not slowed down. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*,

Springsteen said, “We want to take it as far as we can go — I don’t feel any differently physically onstage then I felt in my late 30’s. I’ve got things going on already. I have songs I’m writing. Time off is always my struggle. I’m not great at sitting still”(Hiatt, 2009). That not being “great at sitting still” is very working class. Springsteen’s urge to continue to work, and hard at that, can very much be accredited to his working class identity. This retention of working class identity makes him a creditable voice for the working class. People are more likely to listen to and connect with Springsteen because he has shared their same struggles.

Springsteen expresses his working class identity in his songs. However, he does so in such a way that the allows many working class people to relate. “Time and again, he has creatively drawn on his parents’ working-class lives to create songs that are not literally autobiographical but rather ‘emotionally’ autobiographical”(Papke, 2014). This means, that Springsteen has taken from his own experiences, and the experiences of the people around him, and withdrew the emotions that come with common struggles of working class people in order to make his songs more general to the group. When presenting this in his music, he tells stories using characters to make the songs less about himself and more to speak for the working class community. “Springsteen presents in his songs the unpleasant circumstances which often complicate the lives of working class people, and he does so in a way that grants integrity to these people without passing judgement”(Smith, 2000). While many only see the negative in the working class and pass judgement upon them, Springsteen does not. He insteads pulls from shared themes and emotions amongst the working class to promote unity and share the truth of these people with the world.

The characters Springsteen writes about in his songs are dreamers, filled with hope. They are lonely lovers looking for someone to help make life a little less painful. They are outlaws who looked to crime as their last resort. They are discouraged and beaten down. They are angry. They are content. They are depressed. They are prideful. They are many things that represent the working class. In Springsteen's breakout song, "Born to Run," the narrator is trying to convince his love interest, Mary, to run away with him towards the American Dream. "Everybody's out on the run tonight but there's no place left to hide/Together, Wendy, we can live with the sadness/I'll love you with all the madness in my soul/Oh, someday girl, I don't know when, we're gonna get to that place." These characters illustrate the feeling of wanting a companion to make life a little more tolerable. They also portray the urge to flee towards a better life. Springsteen's song "Darkness on the Edge of Town" reveals the feeling of defeat that is often closely related to the feeling of wanting to get out, as many try and fail. "Lives on the line where dreams are found and lost/I'll be there on time and I'll pay the cost/For wanting things that can only be found/In the darkness on the edge of town." The characters in this song are less hopeful and more despondent. Another feeling frequent within working class people is the willingness to do whatever they have to in order to get by. Springsteen takes this to the extreme with his character in the song "Johnny 99." Johnny 99 shot a cashier clerk in order to obtain desperately needed money. "Now judge, judge I had debts no honest man could pay/The bank was holdin' my mortgage and they were gonna take my house away/Now I ain't sayin' that makes me an innocent man/But it was more 'n all this that put that gun in my hand." While the circumstance may seem severe, the feeling Springsteen conveys with this story is certainly relevant.

One of Springsteen's songs that is more closely related to his own life but still tells a story that many working class people can relate to is "The River." The tale in "The River" is based off of Bruce's sister. The song tells the story of a young couple that was full of love and hope until Mary, the girlfriend, fell pregnant at 17. The couple had to grow up quickly and the man had to find a way to support his family. "And for my nineteenth birthday I got a union card and a wedding coat." Many working class people are forced into workforce at a young age in order to support their families. Springsteen also mentions the lack of available work. "I got a job working construction for the Johnstown Company/But lately there ain't been much work on account of the economy." This is another common struggle amongst working class people. The song repeatedly mentions the couple going down to the river. This is where their hope lies that they will break the endless working class cycle. However, the river runs dry and the couple is left to live the same life that their parents lived before them. This idea, and the feelings associated with it, is something almost every working class person can relate to. It is remarkably difficult to escape the working class once you are put in it and many working class people have seen generation after generation try to make it out but somehow remain stuck. "Speaking in working-class language, his characters 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). A main theme in "The River" is the idea of hope for a better and different life, but ultimately realizing the hope is no more than a dream that will not come true. This is common amongst the working class people as they are systematically kept in their status.

Not only has Springsteen told the story of the working class through his music, he has also created music that advocates for the working class on a political and social level. It was not enough for Springsteen to just shed light on their everyday struggles, he also aims to promote change in the systems that are against the working class. One of Springsteen's most well-known songs, "Born in the USA," is a protest song about the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War hit the working class the hardest because those were the people that were being sent off to battle. One major way to avoid the draft was to be a college student. However, most people from working class backgrounds could not afford to go to college. Therefore, they could not avoid the draft this way. Another way people dodged the draft was by knowing someone on their local board. Except, working class people were not likely to know anyone on their local board because the members were of higher class. When these people came back from the war, if they made it back, they were thrown into farther financial strain due to the downfall of the economy. Springsteen did not only write about these issues, but he acted on them as well. Three years prior to "Born in the USA," Springsteen had given a benefit concert to support the Vietnam Veterans of America (Smith, 2000). Springsteen has spoken up for, and given back to, the working class community in regards to other issues as well. For example, his album, "Wrecking Ball," touches on topics such as Hurricane Katrina and the economic crisis of 2008. Despite his fame Springsteen has not forgotten about the little guys and where he came from. He instead uses his platform to be a voice for the working class community and give back. "Springsteen suggested ... that 'maybe our salvation' is not in what we accomplish as an 'individual,' but rather is in the progress we make as a 'collective' society (Garman, 1996). And this is what Springsteen continues to present because, individually, Springsteen has accomplished what every working

class person wishes for. He fulfilled the American Dream. However, as a group, there is much more to be done and Springsteen continues to fight for the community.

While the typical blue collar, factory job, working class that appears in most of Springsteen's writing may seem out of date, the central themes are alive and well. "Those steel mills and their surrounding communities may be gone, but the workers are still out there -- part of the new Wal-Mart working class. Women, immigrants, minorities, and, yes, white guys, all make up the 'new working class' ... "(Cowie, 2010). The jobs may be different, fast food, retail, supermarket, etc., however the working class identity still holds. People can still relate to Springsteen's music. Personally, I would say I grew up working class. Both my parents have no more than a high school education. My mother currently works as a service adviser at a car dealership, but she started as just a receptionist, and a slew of other low paying jobs came before that. I watched her struggle just to provide basic necessities my entire life. Although she never worked a typical blue-collar, factory job, I can relate to a lot of the messages in Springsteen's songs. I know the feeling of wanting to get out of your hometown, to make a better life for yourself. I have experienced the feeling of hopeless and defeat. I have seen people go to their last resorts for money. All of these things Springsteen has depicted in his writing.

The motif of the working class Springsteen has created within his music has and will be relatable and relevant for as long as there is a working class, no matter what they may look like. And because of this, it is reasonable to say that Bruce Springsteen is the voice of the working class. His background gave him the experience needed to accurately portray the working class. Not only did it do that, but it also create his working class identity that has inspired his work ethic and given him a reason to still care about the issues of the working class. Through his

songs, he has represented the working class in such a way that the community can relate to his music and others outside the community can see working class people for what they truly are. And as if this all was not enough, he has advocated for change in the systems that influence the struggles that the working class endure. Through Springsteen, the working class is loudly heard..

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