“Bruce Springsteen on the Political Costs of Loneliness in America”

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The size and behavior of audiences at Bruce Springsteen’s performances suggest that his art both echoes and informs how many in the United States think about themselves. The concert-goers, who seemingly were strangers beforehand, scream in unison that America comprises a series of “badlands” that need to be challenged, and publicly proclaim that they are “tramps” who will “never surrender” and whose “hungry hearts” need a “home.” The energy and enthusiasm arise partly from the rhythmically catchy and bouncy feel of many of his songs. Think of “Glory Days,” “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out,” and “Waitin’ on a Sunny Day.”

But, the palpable energy among the crowds at Springsteen’s concerts also arises from his musical accounts of how Americans live and of the world they have collectively constructed. The rhythms, cadences, instrumental arrangements, and guitar sounds are familiar to his audiences, which sometimes include a goodly number of senior citizens whose musical experiences and memories resemble those of the now sixty-year-plus Springsteen. His music comforts the audiences. His songs invite Americans to invest their emotional energies into objects and situations that they already value. His art reinforces certain conventional self-understandings of insecurely employed Americans, who are urged by the mass media to see themselves as Average Joes.

Yet, the music that Springsteen composes and performs is not simply conservative in the sense of wistful, nostalgia, or reassuring. It draws attention and emotions toward particular social institutions, such as marriages, unemployment offices, and factories. It celebrates spaces for unregulated movement and moments of intense spontaneity. And, it generates targets of group anger – targets that potentially, but not necessarily, contradict the plans of the wealthy and of holders of public and private corporate power.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Springsteen, in interviews and speeches, has consistently stated that he wants his music not simply to entertain and momentarily reduce listeners’ personal miseries.[[2]](#footnote-2) He also wants to offer listeners an honest account about how they live; an account that may help them in their personal struggles and that one day may facilitate more ambitious collective action; and an account that conveys neither the unwavering fatalism of American country music nor the blind celebration of physical movement in classical rock-and-roll tunes but that, somehow, combines the insights of both genres.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The remainder of this paper analyzes some elements of Springsteen’s musical message about American society. My method of analysis is fairly simple. Following the example of other students of Springsteen’s music, I presume that a coherent interpretation of Springsteen’s vast output of music becomes possible when his artistry is viewed as moving between poles or positions, and when his hundreds of compositions are tentatively clustered according to thematic emphases.[[4]](#footnote-4) It follows from this “clustering method” of interpretation, that no single song or album captures the entirety of Springsteen’s political vision. Rather, when his dozens of his pieces are listened to, certain rhythms, waves of volume, and instrumental sounds start to stand out and then become familiar. Furthermore, certain types of situations and characters reappear in the lyrics. In addition, I borrow from the tradition of British cultural studies a predisposition to think about music in terms of expressions of affect. Stated differently, those patterns of sounds and stories that constitute Springsteen’s music convey the type of emotional investments that he perceives his fellow Americans to be making and that he wishes either to reinforce or to deflect.[[5]](#footnote-5) I try to think about the arrangement of sounds in Springsteen’s music – for example, the beats that he accents, the repetition pattern in his riffs, the speed of the presentation – and about the feelings (primarily affections and fears) that the arrangement of sounds fosters. Finally, being a political theorist by training, I ponder the meaning of the words he uses, the tales he tells, and the philosophic issues that he ignores primarily in the lyrics of his songs, but also in his speeches, interviews, and, occasionally, published prose.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is my thesis that Bruce Springsteen’s music tells emotionally moving stories about two levels of struggle in the United States today. First, there are songs about micro-level struggles to remain honest, energetic, daring, and creative in a society composed largely of paid laborers on the cusp of losing their jobs. In interviews and speeches, he occasionally calls this type of struggle “being alive” or attaining a “transformative self.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In his tunes, these struggles are carried out either by individuals on their own or by couples in a semi-permanent or permanent relationship. The goals of the micro-level struggles are physical liberty, domestic shelter, and staving off the temptation to hurt either oneself or others. Then, there is less comforting music about the increasingly skewed distribution of power toward Americans who are financially independent, about the lack among the political powerful and the economically protected of empathy for the non-wealthy, and, finally, about the need for the have-nots to band together. In his musical discussions about America on a larger scale, terrifying visions of working-class violence and more hopeful visions of a new communal struggle see-saw. After summarizing Springsteen’s musical representation of each type of struggle, the paper will reflect on the implications of Springsteen’s music for the promotion of democratic politics in America.

1. Wild Nights: Surviving Work life

When asked to discuss the key influences on his music, Springsteen typically cites three artists: the pioneering rockabilly singer Elvis Presley, the 1960s British blues-rock musical combo “the Animals,” and the seminal country-and-western singer Hank Williams. Springsteen usually says that he learned from the Animals how to make music that captures the amazing power of machines and the endless drudgery of industrial work. He learned from Williams how to feel sorrow and remorse for moments of wildness and thoughtless acts of cruelty. And he learned from Presley how to see and convey magic.

Springsteen often refers to a performance by Presley in 1956 on Ed Sullivan’s weekly variety show. Springsteen’s mother was an avid fan of “Elvis” and often listened to his music while doing housework. So, Springsteen was at some level aware of Elvis Presley’s cultural impact on families of modest means. Springsteen’s parents broke their household rules and permitted Bruce stay up past bedtime and watch the performance on television. He remembers being stunned by what he saw.

…I realized a white man could make magic, that you did not have to be constrained by your upbringing, by the way you looked, or by the social context that oppressed you. You could call upon your own powers of imagination, and you could create a transformative self.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is unlikely that Springsteen at the age of nine could articulate such sophisticated ideas. But this statement reveals what Springsteen, now an adult and a professional musician, wants to see in Elvis. For Springsteen, Elvis provokes deep wonder because he so openly transgressed the expectations of straight-laced, responsible society. He refused to self-regulate his body so as minimize earthly impulses; he refused to wear his hair according to expectations of economic leaders, and he refused to sing a tune from the great American song book composed by Euro-American song writers in New York. Elvis, in the adult Springsteen’s imagination, publicly spurns religious, economic, and racial rules of the time, and seems to enjoy his contrariness.

Moreover, Springsteen, when constructing childhood memories, sees in the 1950s rock crooner a cultural teacher. Springsteen believes that Elvis was doing more than entertaining and defiantly saying “hell” to social convention. Elvis’ snarling mouth, swagger, and undignified yet seemingly heartfelt physical movements was inspiring others to act defiantly. Springsteen comments in retrospect:

Elvis was the first modern twentieth century man, the precursor of the Sexual Revolution, of the Civil Rights Revolution, drawn from the same Memphis as Martin Luther King, creating fundamental, outsider art that would be embraced by a mainstream popular culture.

 Television and Elvis gave us full access to a new language, a new form of communication, a new way of being, a new way of looking, a new way of thinking – about sex, about race, about identity, about life. A new way of being an American, a human being, and a new way of hearing music. Once Elvis came across the airwaves, once he was heard and seen in action, you could not put the genie back in the bottle.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The significance of Elvis’s performance, in other words, lay not in the performance alone but in its broader cultural context: in what he opposed, in his refusal to conform, and in the way his act challenged the range of life choices normally portrayed on television. His unusual performance (like Reverend King’s restrained, steady demeanor and erudite rhetoric) clashed with the current expectations among television owners – who at that time were largely white and holders of steady if not always well-paid job – about the about the trappings required for social success.

As the lyrics and rhythms of the Animals taught Springsteen (as well as, presumably, pre-Animals popular tunes transmitted on transistor radios, such as “Sugar Shack” and “Down in the Boondocks”), a widespread assumption in the United States during the 1950s and early 1960s was that standards of living were rising for all who would work hard, who would obey supervisors at the work site, and who would accept without dissent the dictates of the market as interpreted by webs of organizational superiors. The performances of Elvis on record consoles and television and movie screens, however, suggested that each person contained an innate ability to do the unexpected and to embrace novel values: to be “transformative.” To the nine-year-old Bruce, who soon would be laughed at and excluded in high school and whose father would seem to be forever losing low-paying jobs, the televised event was a small but important dike against the pressures to conform to middle-class dreams and norms.

This does not mean that Springsteen (or other Elvis fans, for that matter) became a revolutionary and rejected whole sale liberal values such as self-restraint, self-reliance, and limits on the exercise of public power. To be a fan of Elvis in the 1950s and 1960s was never to reject the ideological premises of American society. To want to dress, dance, and play music like Elvis was, however, a declaration about wanting – in addition to having a good job and amassing material goods – to be loose, loud, and wild; and, conversely, it was a decision to reduce one’s emotional investment in the values regimentation, discipline, and obedience. Elvis’s seemingly ear-splitting music, the slightly weird harmony of his backup singers, and his hyperactive arms and legs made it possible to imagine briefly turning one’s back on the endless tedium and obsequiousness of blue-collar work life. Presley’s performances encouraged the joyful celebration of instabilities in selected pockets of one’s life.

Springsteen sees himself as a working-class musician who composes music whose rhythms, melodies, metaphors, analogies, lyrical stories, and characters are intended to feel pleasant to those who physically labor for others and who neither own the tools of their trade, design the goods that they make, nor have a say over the process of production. The music is to be valuable to people who work hard for their money. Springsteen, when asked about possible coffeehouse influences on his career, denies that he ever was a “bohemian” who embraced contrariness for its own sake and who looked down upon those who submit themselves to a boring work life.[[10]](#footnote-10) The characters in his lyrics hold low-wage, blue-collar jobs. They find the workweek unpleasant, monotonous, and regimented. Yet, they also recognize that laboring for others is necessary for survival. In some cases, they find the goods that they produce and the services that they provide, ultimately, a source of pride – regardless if the labor entails serving customers at a restaurant counter, slaughtering cattle at a corporate farm, or building a bridge.

Instead of proposing the overthrow of an enslaving system of wage labor and calling for a revolution by the have-nots, Springsteen in his musical short stories talks about ways to slyly adjust to and negotiate the challenges of surviving in the United States. He tells of daring attempts by individuals to find pockets of pleasure in an inescapably tough situation, about seeing a bit of hope in a largely frustrating series of low-paying jobs. Although there is monotony in the factories and on the docks, and at the canneries, there is freedom in the streets and the boardwalks. As Springsteen puts it, rock and roll resembles a magical elixir that revitalizes listeners and that creates faith that one’s closed spaces during the workday are less permanent that they seemed:

It’s a certain thing…Like rock and roll came to my house where there seemed to be no way out. It just seemed like a dead-end street, nothing I like to do, nothing I wanted to do except roll over and go to sleep or something. And it came into my house – snuck in, ya know, and opened up a whole world of possibilities. Rock and roll….Rock and roll motivates. It’s the big, gigantic motivator, at least it was for me.[[11]](#footnote-11)

When describing his relationship to his audiences, Springsteen emphasizes his responsibility to help people realize that that they have options, even if they currently feel cornered: “it’s your responsibility to try and close the gap with the audience, to give them the sense that there are other possibilities than the ones they may be seeing.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The blinders, he believes, are emotional and are imposed by the fears, disappointments, and petty daily insults that constitute work life at the service of others. As he states in the lyrics of such songs as “Adam Raised a Cain,” “Badlands,” “Born in the USA,” “Factory,” “The Promised Land,” “Working on the Highway,” and “Shackled and Drawn,” working dutifully all day for someone else makes one feel impotent, passive, and imprisoned. Over years, pain and anger well inside and leaves one feeling broken hearted. But, Springsteen believes, through the listening of rock and roll music, resilience is buttressed at least, in the short run.[[13]](#footnote-13) Springsteen therefore compares his concerts to the stirring short speech about poor people’s capacity confront daily frustration that is added to the end of the film version of The Grapes of Wrath: “Our job is, we just blow into town, tell everybody to keep going, and then we kinda blow on out.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Springsteen’s mixes various rock and roll traditions – rhythm and blues, blues shuffles, punk – but he almost always returns to rockabilly. It is a frenetic style of music, with minimal structure. The short duration of a rock song (because of the space requirements of 45 rpm records) means that there cannot be complex shifts in tempo, lots of counter melodies and multiple stages in the composition. Everything is quick and to the point. And because it is easy to reproduce on small records, it is a portable type music that younger teenagers could play on small record players in the privacy in their basements, and that older teenagers could use as background music for dances with friends in the evenings. Through rock songs, one remembers the metamorphosis of teenage years; recalls the discovery of unexpected new interests, impulses, and desires; and celebrates unregulated movement. This is the beauty of a piece as seemingly primitive as “Wooly Booly,” one of the songs that Springsteen likes to play whenever he can jam informally at a bar. At concerts he typically will perform an “oldie” rock song from the 1950s and 1960s, such as “A Quarter to Three” by Gary “U.S.” Bonds or the Isley Brothers’ unrefined version of “Twist and Shout.” According to such tunes, it is OK to shake, rattle, and roll, and to wear unconventional hairdos and dazzling clothing after work. The only code is to be “authentic,” to be “real,” to “feel alive,” to enjoy the new urges magically surging through your body, and to dare to resist the orders by parents and other adults to control one’s self.[[15]](#footnote-15)

According to the lyrics of countless of old fashion rock-and-roll songs from the twentieth century – from Chuck Berry and the Everly Brothers to the Ramones and Cyndi Lauper – unrestrained movement typically occurs late at night, in backstreets, along boardwalks and beaches, and on the edge of towns. In such circumstances – that is, when and where adult supervision is absent – individuals’ buried impulses to race, to battle, to kiss, and to dance without restraint emerge. Springsteen’s music likewise celebrates these settings. Through unexpected sounds (including accordions) and rhythms, he makes the boardwalks, alleys, and highways seem irregular, open, formless, and exciting. In his records, Springsteen’s describes events and characters in these places that are sinister unpredictable, but that are also thrilling and adventuresome. These spaces thus become experienced (both by narratives and by sounds) as magical, without order, open-ended. They are, his music insists, alternative places to which one can escape from the monotonous days and demeaning shackles of paid work.[[16]](#footnote-16)

This off-hours and non-workplace experience of freedom that Springsteen’s songs valorize is not an organized, collective experience, however, even though it may occur in semi-public places like amusement parks, dance halls, pool halls, and bars. In terms of its largely informal and minimally planned activities and its acceptance of diverse behavior, the exercise of freedom resembles the gleeful parallel play of toddlers in a sandbox. It does not involved public deliberations about what a group should seek and undertake or about the development of codes of conduct to which all members of a community must conform. One simply can, say, do whatever one wishes at the time, without having to conform to any permanent identity. From the perspective of the history of Western political thought, this vision of freedom is an American rock-and-roll cousin of the type of anarchistic freedom that is outlined in Book IX of the Republic. There, Socrates patiently tries to explain to the socially aristocratic and morally old-fashion Adeimantus as the defining characteristic of democratic societies, in which members of the demos see their inward impulses as equally valuable, find a diversity of personal codes acceptable, and view efforts to raise some aspirations above others as tyrannical and illegitimate.[[17]](#footnote-17) Springsteen’s songs of working-class freedom describe and celebrate that sort of non-judgmental, immediate experience – a release of inhibitions on whatever appetites currently lie within one’s soul.

But, participating in this profoundly individualist, socially unregulated form of freedom has costs, Springsteen warns through his music. And, here, he mutates the raucous tradition of American rock and roll by such pioneering artists as Presley, Bonds, Ritchie Valens, Chuck Berry, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Springsteen, as intimated earlier, not only celebrates efforts by working-class Americans to resurrect uninhibited feelings of pre-adult physical movement and to end the intense self-denial and constant self-regulation promoted at work. Springsteen’s longer songs, which sometimes have multiple acts (such as “Jungleland”) note the inevitable costs of off-hours risky behavior. These range from drinking to excess to racing excessively powerful cars to entering short-term romances that will have long-term sexual consequences. Of course, the quick pace and back-beat feel to many of his songs on the whole suggest that gratification of repressed appetites (and, as a result, euphoria and fantasies of being completely in control of one’s destiny) is natural and, from the perspective of the characters involved, laudable, given an economic system that relentlessly demands self-deprecation in exchange for survival via a paycheck. But his rocking songs also are often paired with puritanical narratives. Such thrills often lead to next-day regrets that, in Springsteen’s estimation, the honesty and pessimism of American country music more accurately describes than does old-style rock and roll.[[18]](#footnote-18) Rock and roll can momentarily reduce the emotional aches from the deadening experience of wage earning and being treated day after day as an object under someone else’s control. But the moments do not eliminate the cause of the workers’ spiritual problem. Thrills must, invariably, end at sunrise.

In addition, classic country singers realize that long repressed desires for physical freedom are often fused with diffuse anger and desires to harm others who surround one, including vulnerable women.[[19]](#footnote-19) In country tunes, bars and backstreets are sites of fights, not just joy. Country music, slower in step and lower in register than is rockabilly, is basically music about regret that acknowledges the violence, resentment, and rage deep within the hearts of those who are shamed, humiliated, and physically driven by their bosses day after day. These anti-social feelings are unleashed at night in bars, at pool halls, and even within bedrooms. The sinners, regretting the harm they have caused, seek redemption the next morning.

Springsteen, both on his albums and at his live concerts, fuses the up-beat attitude of escapist rock-and-roll with the regret and self-recrimination of country music. Springsteen’s mournful, tragic ballads, his dead-man’s marches, and his almost operatic arrangements – for instance, in “Incident on 57th Street,” “Nebraska,” and “Point Blank” – are the flip side of his up-tempo “let’s dances” songs. Together, the two types of music capture what Springsteen views as the flip sides of an ongoing struggle by individual members of the American working-class people to stay alive. In his words: “Life is a struggle. That’s basically what the songs are about. It’s the fight everyone goes through every day. Some people have more success than others.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

1. Warm Nights: Romeos and Juliets

When listening to Springsteen’s music, many listeners find themselves in an exhilarating yet nightmarish social predicament. His music contends that many Americans are trapped in spirit-draining and brain-killing labor with almost no chance of escape. When away from work, they are capable of exuberance and non-directed movement, but available spaces for freedom often lead to self-destruction. What to do? When representing ways of handling this profoundly no-win situation upon which modern American society is built, Springsteen looks at three options: love, violence, and collective action.

Springsteen’s music draws listeners’ attention to a widespread economic-cultural problem, to a non-political sense of freedom, and both the joys and dangers of spaces without control. His music also (as does rock-and-roll in general) focuses on a human desire and social relationship called “love.” Love, according to Springsteen’s music, is partly amorous and erotic. It is a powerful hunger that arises directly from one’s bones and blood. But, it also entails a desire for permanent partnership. One wishes not only to experience physical pleasure but to create a mini-Eden: to pool resources, share joys, and battle alongside each other in a confusing, chaotic universe. To employ the technical language of classical Western thought, Springsteen, when discussing love, imagines a fusion that combines physical intimacy and sensual pleasure (eros), mutual respect among equals (philia), and unselfish service to another (agape).

The music of Elvis, again, provides insight into what Springsteen has in mind. Springsteen admires Elvis’ rendition of “Can’t Help Falling in Love,” which Springsteen sometimes covers on tour.[[21]](#footnote-21) The song’s lyrics, baritone delivery, and slow tempo sonically fuse images of physical tenderness, undivided devotion, and life-long sharing. The male singer expresses his thoughts without backup singers and with a minimal number of instrumental ornamentations (whose presence might inadvertently suggest a staged performance and pretense), and offers not only his physical “hand” but his “whole life, too.”

Springsteen takes seriously this vision of love: he does not dismiss it as silly, wildly implausible, or a ruse for nefarious goals. In this respect, his music feels old-fashion. It is more akin to romantic currents of 1950s and 1960s rockabilly, “do-wop” rock and roll, and rhythm and blues than to late twentieth-century new wave, punk, and post-punk music.[[22]](#footnote-22) But, Springsteen maintains that monogamous love, like off-hours carousing and strutting, offers a frail solution to the tribulations that accompany daily labor for others. In fact, love often dissolves before the endless challenges posed by America’s economy.

 Stated differently, unlike teenage dance songs of the 1950s and early 1960s that celebrate unbridled libido and unfocused sexual discharge – for example, “The Wanderer,” “Traveling Man,” “Great Balls of Fire,” and “Surf City” – Springsteen’s music highlights the compensatory value of monogamous relationships. In his songs, working-class males yearn to escape from their deadly work situations and discover new possibilities for self-expression. But, they almost always want to travel with a partner. Otherwise, they will die alone, and their existence on earth might go unnoticed. And being forgotten after endless days of laboring for others is a terrifying prospect for Springsteen’s characters.[[23]](#footnote-23) Hence, there is a natural propensity for males from non-elite families to seek Juliets, who not only will satisfy immediate fleshy pleasures, but then will ride alongside a male protagonist as the pair looks for adventure together.

Perhaps the epitome of the courtship experience, in which an unattached male suddenly realizes that his physical yearning for a female is leading to a new type of dependency, occurs in the tune “Going Down.” The song begins with the simple, soft sounds of a mandolin that calls to mind the famous American-Italian crooners – the Franks Sinatras, the Tony Bennetts, and the Dean Martins – of the mid-twentieth century. After this quiet, tranquil opening, a four-bar electric guitar solo occurs, with considerable string-bending of notes, creating in the listeners a sense of instability and uncertainty. The identity of the notes is far from clear. The singer then describes his physical yearning for his date, who allegedly constantly tests the depth of his devotion through minor trials and postponements of physical gratification. The young man concedes in the chorus lines his growing sense of helplessness. He feels that his independence is disappearing because the object of physical desire enjoys watching him grovel for her affections. He feels as if he is “going down” farther and farther. Late in the song, the narrator finally gives up searching for words to describe his torn feelings, starts to utter staccato be-bop sounds, and ends with an understated, deep “yeah.” He is both hopeful and fearful about the social fetters and weights that physical attraction generates.[[24]](#footnote-24)

This theme – of the discovery of a deeper love entailing a profound loss of one’s previous understanding of self-reliance and autonomy – is common in early rock-and-roll music, especially the late 1950s and early 1960s rockabilly songs of Ricky Nelson (“Hello, Mary Lou”), Johnny Cash (“Ring of Fire”), and Elvis Presley (“Teddy Bear”). In the early rock tradition, the loss of autonomy in a narrow sense is offset by an expansion of autonomy in a broader sense: with an expansion of hope and an excitement about having a partner with whom to share one’s adventures. Love involves surrender, accepting bonds, giving up some previous brashness. Still, knowing that one has a partner who really cares for your and who will fight alongside you also helps a young male American gird his loins to attempt more than the harshness of working-class life has thus far offered. One can stand up against the claims of overseers, bosses, supervisors, and other imperious authorities and not feel imprisoned. After experiencing true love (as opposed to one night flings, infatuations, or puppy love), one can try to violate, transcend, and discard the new social conditions that have defined and limited one’s life.

Springsteen seemingly shares with the earlier rockers the notion that such love helps a working-class male who dreams of achieving long-term freedom. With a partner, one has someone who will provide protection and encouragement when the world seems too tough and mean to endure (claims made by the protagonists in “This Depression,” “Cover Me,” “Two Hearts,” “Valentine’s Day,” and “Living Proof,” and the omniscient narrator in “Cautious Man”). With a partner who is one’s equal in age, who loves one for one’s spirit, and who also distrusts the world that adults have created, a man (and thus far in Springsteen’s career, he writes primarily about the choices of men) can race down “Thunder Road” and battle through “Badlands” (to cite two other Springsteen tunes composed at roughly the same period as “Going Down”) and try to break free of the bonds of impersonal, distant, and cold workplace authority.

This may seem to resemble the position of liberal theorists, such as Locke, Mill, and Tocqueville, who hope that stable families can provide the emotional, social, and moral glue that can keep a universe of self-oriented individuals working together peacefully and without excessive intervention of the state.[[25]](#footnote-25) Families, liberals say, foster non-selfish sentiments, teach social skills, and heal bruises suffered in the work world. But for such love to evolve, someone in the house needs to be spared from the harshness and meanness of a commercial society. Someone needs to be a specialist in nurturing.

Here, Springsteen seems to be more conservative in his social thinking than liberal. He chooses not to connect his vision of true love to a public-private dichotomy, in which someone at home is expected to sever relationships to the world of work. In his imagination, both partners in a loving relationship, when finally and firmly committed, will see themselves as nurturers, will truly attempt to be empathic toward each other, and will postpone immediate wants for those of the partner. Even the caring of infants and children is apparently conducted by both partners.[[26]](#footnote-26) There is no obvious domestic division of labor or distinct male and female spheres of activity in Springsteen’s vision of true love. Rooted in natural affection and physical attraction, cooperation is spontaneous. The island of love is happy; it is not inherently conflictual or political. The chains, to the extent that they exist, feel surprisingly light, at least at first.

This vision of love is also profoundly nuclear. In a typical Springsteen tune, a romantic couple establishes a household. But, no other adults reside in or visit the domicile beyond the couple and their offspring. One might even call his vision of true love “pioneer love” because he describes self-sufficient households without a broader polity that provides necessary goods (health care, primary education, sanitation services, and transportation infrastructure). These public conditions would seem worthy of comment not just because they make modern households viable, but because they can prompt inter-neighborhood and intra-neighborhood conflict, which bears on the possibility of progressive collective action by the have-nots.

But, even if one judges Springsteen’s notion of true love as too abstract and romantic to serve as a practical model for micro-level happiness within the broader working-class environment that he describes, perhaps it can be seen and judged from another viewpoint. Perhaps Springsteen intends to describe not reality (how working-class nuclear families actually work in practice), but the dream that many people grasp when then feel beaten and betrayed by a capitalist economy where you always feel ordered about, subjugated to constant threats of unemployment and charges of redundancy, and targeted by sales folks who sense your financial vulnerability. In other words, perhaps he is describing as honestly as he can the fantasy that working-class folk grasp in order to meet real-world pressures. So long as people clutch an image of mature love and use it to make sense of their lives, it deserves examination and critique with sincerity and compassion not dismissive ridicule.[[27]](#footnote-27)

 Springsteen, it should be noted, is not totally blind to the fragility of monogamous relationships. In such songs as “Stolen Car,” “Independence Day,” “Straight Time,” and “The Price You Pay,” the fictional narrator admits that the balance of maintaining individual identities yet serving another is too tricky a social maneuver to accomplish. Relationships inevitably crack, the narrators contend, as desires for personal freedom crash with demands of selflessness. But, in other songs, Springsteen seems to contend that the maintenance of a monogamous relationship is possible so long as one is patient with and trusting in the odd life choices made by a partner.[[28]](#footnote-28) Springsteen’s overall position, especially in his middle-aged albums such as “Lucky Town” and “The Rising,” seems to be that the reconciliation of selfless love and independence is difficult, but nonetheless possible so long as the partners retain “faith” about the spiritual benefits flowing from a coherent home life.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The primary threat to true love, marriages, and healthy domesticity is the shifting broader economy. Poor pay and bad fortune at work, including closings of factories and losses of jobs, reinforce and accelerate normal domestic corrosion. When economic conditions become unfavorable (as often happens to those who are born economically disadvantaged), the initial promise of a life of shared adventure and independence often seems illusory because one partner cannot keep contributing and, furthermore, finds unhealthy releases (including dalliances) for feelings of shame. It bears repeating that Springsteen does not believe in the myth of upward mobility for the deserving poor. He assumes that increasing comfort is not the typical experience of Americans without status, wealth, or political power.[[30]](#footnote-30) Job prospects worsen and life gets tougher in the musical plots of “Atlantic City,” “The New Timer,” “Darkness at the Edge of Town,” “Across the Border,” “My Best Was Never Good Enough,” and “Downbound Train.” To pay bills and survive, characters accept illicit jobs and undertake demeaning work. The choices seem work at a car wash, hoe sugar beets, or criminal activity. Slowly and surely, the once erotic flames between partners are extinguished as feelings of self-esteem drop; and alongside them die the flames of friendship.

In Springsteen’s imagination, the breakup of working-class lovers seldom produces the blissful freedom that those who finally choose to leave the partnership expect. Probably it is no coincidence that in the album “The River,” the bittersweet song “Independence Day,” in which a couple with feelings of regret choose to part ways, is followed by the tune “Hungry Heart,” in which a man, after deserting his family, realizes that his fear of being alone is a more powerful than his fantasy of self-reliance. One cannot survive in America entirely on one’s own. Without the hearth, one is diminished and empty.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Thus, Springsteen again, leaves his listeners with a painful paradox. America’s constantly shifting economic order makes permanent monogamous relationships difficult for working-class males, yet that same order also makes such relationships emotionally necessary. Without an affectionate domestic haven to balance a tedious and humiliating work life, socially isolated and desperately lonely men appear. And, Springsteen believes, death could follow.

1. Lonely Nights: Guns and Anger among the Non-Rich

Springsteen takes more seriously than most rockers that many Americans are victims of a broader social system in which the odds for attaining happiness and achieving security are against them.[[32]](#footnote-32) Factories close in many of his songs, and joblessness is not a foreign experience. As we have seen, these phenomena corrode domestic relationships, leaving physically isolated and emotionally battered men and women. These situations provide the motivations and choices of many of Springsteen’s most dramatic tunes. Suffering losses of possessions and friendships, working-class males either die inside, or they snap and attack blindly.

His tale of economically induced loneliness in America leading to violence is partly a product of Springsteen’s imagination. But the vision also is based partly on accurate recollections of the ubiquity of violence in post-war America and its salience in the American imagination. Springsteen came to age when violence was widely covered by the mass media. The U.S. government’s secret bombings of Vietcong outposts in Cambodia made further evident the illegality and immorality of the Vietnam War. This crossed the line of many long-time opponents of the war. In 1969 and 1970 alone, there were 250 politically motivated bombings in the United States.[[33]](#footnote-33) Some high-profile bombings took place in Manhattan, near the small towns in which Springsteen lived and worked. The late 1960s and early 1970s were, also, a time when growing frustration in poorer communities, which prompted some to destroy their own local worlds.[[34]](#footnote-34) Springsteen in interviews recalls watching the working-class town in which he resided during his twenties engulfed in flames and filled with rioters.[[35]](#footnote-35)

In Springsteen’s stories, violence does not simply emanate from the bottom. A considerable amount of destruction is prompted by the decisions by those at the top, who in Springsteen’s songs are not portrayed primarily as job creators and points of entrepreneurial light. Instead, they are socially deaf consumers of material goods. As the song “Badlands” puts it, those who already enjoy a great deal of wealth want to be “kings.” That is, the rich want to be unquestionable masters, not just amassers of wealth. They want to be envied and obeyed, and do not want their decisions to be questioned. Consequently, they are largely indifferent to the upheaval of local lives and the destruction of towns that their decisions, such as the relocation of firm or the downsizing of a plant, may make. They are sources of havoc and, consequently, the objects of resentment and even hatred among those who labor.[[36]](#footnote-36)

 In some songs, such as “Nebraska,” “Johnny 99,” “Born in the U.S.A.,” “My Hometown,” and “Jack of All Trades,” Springsteen links in a mechanical way (1) the economic instability and insecurity that many Americans face, (2) bubbling desires to kill and hurt someone, and (3) subsequent tragic acts of violence. Macro-economic change produces angry dispossessed and insecure men locally, who in turn lash out and hurt innocent people, sometimes fatally. Stated differently, mean social circumstances (or, what in one song he calls “Streets of Fire”) create mean, isolated people who feel profoundly vulnerable. They kill strangers not for gain, but out of aggression and in response to fears of exposure.

 But, at times Springsteen’s argument about violence seems much less fatalistic and ideas of contingency and personal responsibility come to the foreground. In “Galveston Bay,” the potential killer is an American-born fisherman, Billy Sutter, who toils at the same craft that his father did: shrimp fishing. In addition, he was a soldier early in the Vietnam War, when hopes for a U.S. victory were still high. He returned from Southeast Asia seriously wounded and honorably discharged. Seven years later, he watched the collapse of South Vietnam and the Americans’ humiliating departure from Saigon on his television set, an experience that surely must have been painful given his personal sacrifices for his country. One day, a new competitor appears: a used fishing vessel manned by Vietnamese refugees (one of whom, ironically, had fought alongside the United States forces). The newcomers, whose plight had justified much sacrifice from Americans, settle in the same neighborhoods and fish in the same waters that Sutter and his harbor friends have traditionally lived and worked. The state’s Ku Klux Klan chapter fans the locals’ simmering resentment. Waterside battles between white-skinned Americans and the Vietnamese immigrants break out. Sutter instinctively sides with his friends and vows to kill one of the outsiders to his hometown. But, the daily habits of tenderly caring for his family unexpectedly prevail. At the last moment, Sutter pockets his knife, resists the temptation to racist violence, kisses his wife and child as they sleep, and quietly resumes his daily labor.

In “Nothing Man,” the name of the chief character is never revealed, but, according to the lyrics, he allows a stranger at a bar to call him “Joe” (perhaps implying that the character symbolically represents an “average Joe”?). “Joe” shares his bed with someone for at least one night, but there is little evidence that he has entered a long-term loving relationship or has a family. According to the song’s story line, “Joe” recently committed a heroic act that was covered in the media. The action is never named. He seems to have been was a rescue worker (perhaps a fire fighter who entered the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001?) who put himself directly at risk for others and, for a while, seemed doomed to die amid red smoke. Despite his momentary fame, “Joe” feels hollow and perceives no major change in his daily circumstances. The lyrics state that in his eyes, the sky looks as before. Despite being a young adult, “Joe” does not see exciting opportunities opening before him. He feels despair and he is of no consequence. In the final verse, he tells the stranger at the bar that if the stranger wants to understand the true meaning of “courage,” it involves deciding whether to use the gun beside one’s bed. The likely target of the possible shooting is never identified in the song, but presumably is “Joe” himself. Despite his publicized act courage and selflessness, he still considers himself to be “nothing man.” He is a “zero” to use alternative slang, or a “dime-a-dozen” person as Biff Loman puts it Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman.[[37]](#footnote-37) The fifteen minutes of media fame do not offset the painful prospect of being treated as a nothing for the remainder of his earthly existence. Therefore, every night, “Joe” looks at the gun and prays about whether and how to use the gun.

The protagonist in “The Ghost of Tom Joad” is also a male who is without work.[[38]](#footnote-38) He has lit an evening campfire and plans to sleep in a cardboard box under a highway. The vagrant carries a “prayer book” and holds a gun. He might be a preacher. If so, he seems to have doubts about the promises of cosmic justice in the Beatitudes as he looks across the troubling economic landscape of southern California, at the long lines outside homeless shelters, and at the numerous unemployed families surviving in their cars-turned-homes with police helicopters tracking their movements from above. The vagrant may be insane (a condition that Springsteen in other songs often suggests is related to chronic joblessness[[39]](#footnote-39)) because one night, he sees a phantom. The spirit sits by his campfire and delivers an abbreviated version of the rousing farewell speech that Tom Joad delivers to his mother in the film The Grapes of Wrath before striking on his own and abandoning the family. The ghost gives promises to his unseen mother that he will be present wherever and whenever poor people struggle for decent existence and the hungry fight for food. The determined and militant-sounding speech by the invisible figure seems to give the traveler momentary peace despite pangs of intense hunger and lack of permanent shelter. But the tramp, nonetheless, holds a gun in his hand, suggesting his potential for violence.

Powerful currents of anger and fear are described in the three narratives that Springsteen has constructed. Yet, none of the characters is a natural-born killer who finds joy in harming others. Only one of the characters faces immediate destitution, but all three see their economic fates as problematic. They resist, at least for the moment, the temptation to kill someone (including, possibly, themselves). So, the stories contain an element of hope without being hopeful. The tales are troubling, nonetheless. Springsteen wants his listeners to believe that the underlying the daily lives of the non-wealthy Americans are neither harmonious nor happy, but a tinderbox of frustration that easily could lead in the evenings to physical attacks and death. Economic hard times are not passing moments (or what owners of stocks call “market corrections”) that will pass if only one perseveres. So long as current social conditions continue, violence is nearby.

1. Soulful Nights: Salvation through Community?

Springsteen’s vision of loneliness and vulnerability in working-class America – where people feel regimented, insignificant, and disposable except within loving homes and during off-hours indulgence of private of urges, and where market shifts lead to sudden plant closings and endless downsizings – leads to a political question. Can those who have little chance of amassing wealth, achieving job security, or experiencing creativity during their workdays transform the broader social order and make it more decent, secure, and free? Or, are they fated to suffer unhappy fates for most of their lives with only chances for wild evenings, domestic love, and violence against neighbors and one’s self as ways to respond?

 Around the turn of the century, Springsteen began to write tunes about social transformation in which he looked not to the government for salvation but to everyday people banding together to reconstruct American society. Meanwhile, his concerts increasingly became settings for community groups to recruit, obtain donations, and share information. His emerging political posture seemed to be bottom-up voluntarism in which the non-elites would help each other without the interference of the wealthy and state elites, whose propensity was to command and patronize and who were more interested in macro-economic growth than in preserving existing working-class communities. As he put it in one song: “We Take Care of Our Own.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

 Springsteen is neither a professional politician nor an academic political theorist. Despite his periodic candidate endorsements, Springsteen stays arm’s length from partisan politics, partly because he finds candidates’ interest in the working poor and the chronically unemployed miniscule in comparison to their interest in enhancing the ability of the wealthy to amass more.[[41]](#footnote-41) He therefore does not discuss details about constitutional procedures for securing input from everyday people; and he carefully refrains from debating the likely consequences of specific policy alternatives and from imagining new ways of reconciling political conflict. What he tries to do, instead, is spark the imaginations of his individual listeners about the possibility of working with strangers and, through that alliance, successfully conserving jobs and hometowns.

 The metaphors that Springsteen currently uses to convey his views are trains, parties, and street-level militancy.[[42]](#footnote-42) Trains are a familiar image in American popular music, especially in the rock and roll, blues, and country-western traditions that Springsteen often draws upon.[[43]](#footnote-43) The metaphor conveys immense power, shared passage with strangers, and the connection of past, present, and future destinations. In terms of musical genres, dance parties are more purely a rock-and-roll image of social health. One overcomes what seems to be deep sadness and frustration through wild, unchoreographed movement within a crowd, and happily expressing oneself without any bosses or rulers issuing orders about how to move. For rock and rollers (as opposed to, say, ball-room dancers), parties are collective events without hierarchy and with almost limitless rights to self-expression.[[44]](#footnote-44) Finally, there is the to-the-barricades image of the working classes fiercely protecting what exists through determined refusals to respect the commands of the rich and powerful, and to deny their claims of authority to shape the world. This image of collective action in Springsteen’s music call to mind the defiant class-conscious rock found in Britain – for example, the music of Billy Bragg and the Clash. The wealthy, according to this approach, are non-apologetic parasites on, not contributors to, a nation’s production of goods and services. They have no right to determine the fates of workers and working-class communities. Citizens whose physical labor literally made the social order are the only ones who should decide the community’s fate and whether particular homes and neighborhoods should continue to exist.

All of these metaphors, if treated as some sort of poetic shorthand that outlines a healthy political order, are inspiring and problematic. Trains, for example, may transport a wide variety of passengers to new places, which suggests inclusivity and an awareness that one’s situation is not fixed. That seems to be what Springsteen wishes to convey in the gospel-sounding closing of “Land of Hope and Dreams.” But, as Johnny Cash has taught us in “Folsom Prison Blues,” trains are also moving prisons. The destinations of trains are fixed and not open to debate. While trains may include all sorts of passengers, the passengers are often segregated by class into separate cars, enjoy different amounts of comfort, and experience the trip as if their fates are disconnected. Finally, trains *carry* people. Although the passenger list can be inclusive and diverse, the riders are not the engineers; they are not the conductors; they do not exercise power over the running of the train. The political status of passengers on a train is comparable to that of passengers on a Platonic ship of state.

The problem with dance parties as an image of democratic rule is that while the metaphor celebrates freedom, equality, and being a creative subject, it does not clarify how collective decision-making may take place and how diverse wills and passions can be channeled into common projects. The radical open-endedness of the dance floor, in fact, can distract from, if not impede, the expression of some non-dancing virtues – such as moderation, listening, empathy, persuasion, and willingness to critique – that collaborative efforts and collective power require.

Finally, the image of defensive street fighting – that is, the working-class community rising up for forceful resistance against encroaching outsiders and building makeshift barricades to protect its own – correctly highlights the role of force asymmetry in all politics and demystifies the patronizing phrases of those who rule. But it also encourages moral rigidity, not just courage. One takes sides; familiar moral borders are reinforced; and enemies are declared, identified, and reviled. Furthermore, the idea of a community under siege can contribute to an intolerance of internal critique. So as not to help the enemy, one hesitates to judge one’s own community. This can help those within the community who benefit from unjust inequalities and privileges. Refusal to capitulate to outsiders and silence about internal injustices are flip sides of the same military metaphor.

 So, as first approximations of healthy working-class politics, all of these lyrical metaphors are problematic and, arguably, carry implications that listeners should be wary of. Still, maybe there is alternative way of thinking about Springsteen’s musical poetry. Perhaps his images are intended not to be blueprints of a healthy social order. It could be that they are intended to be rallying cries that help browbeaten and apprehensive Americans recognize their collective capacity to change their lives. The function of these images, in other words, might be less to inform the drafting of a constitution for a new polity than to stir hope in the possibility of struggling with others for a new world. Viewed this way, the poetic ideas help listeners ignore linguistic conventions of politicians and the rich (for example, the elite’s assertions of “a new world order” and “global imperatives”) that buttress claims of expertise, that muffle thoughts of radical change, and that promote working-class resignation. Trains, dance parties, and street fighting allow the hierarchical lingo of the ruling class to be side-stepped. The metaphors resemble mini “counter-narratives.”

At concerts and in some of his compositions, Springsteen also conveys his faith in the collective capacity of everyday Americans through his use of a gospel tradition known as “call and response.”[[45]](#footnote-45) In this musical convention, the lead singer issues a statement about the shared condition of the congregation. The rest of the congregation then sings in turn, but with ample opportunities to modify and enhance the original call. The process is, in theory, one of free exchange of beliefs, without a governing body making a final decision or acting without the community’s assent. It is a shared experience of diffused authority, of hierarchy without order, and of repeated opportunities to participate.[[46]](#footnote-46)

In his images of collective actions that transcend the individual pursuit of freedom and the autonomy of nuclear families, Springsteen tries to imagine ways that Americans’ vulnerable working-class males can escape their misery and live in a more dignified manner. He has in interviews expressed doubts that the U.S. government can do what needs to be done to stop the systematic abandonment of those born to and living in working-class homes.[[47]](#footnote-47) Elections are not enough, he believes, because elected officials seldom have the working-classes’ needs in mind. Better for people to act on their own, draw upon their own resources and feelings of loyalty, and independently push for a new America.

1. Conclusion: Democratic Theory and Springsteen’s Music

Springsteen’s life spans two distinct periods in American social and cultural history. First, there were the post-war boom years of inexpensive gadgets, big corporations, and affordable tract homes. Perpetual and widespread affluence seemed to be just beyond the horizon. Amid the cheap records and transistor radios, rock and roll emerged and flourished. Its artists looked irreverently at the underbelly of the American dream: the social conformity, the empty consumerism, the workplace monotony, and the fixed, “square” social roles that, together, seemed to resemble a prison rather than a paradise.

The second period began mid-way through the Cold War and continues today. It coincides with endless waves of factory closings, cycles of product obsolesce, persistent homelessness, and “de-industrialization.” In addition, there are recurrent Wall Street scams, ongoing stock-market “bubbles,” and dramatic slashes in governmental social services for the poor and the unemployed. Springsteen achieved his popularity and celebrity status shortly after Woodstock and amid the twilight of the Cold War. He is part of what might be called a “rustbelt current” of American rock and roll, whose artists see hard times as a permanent feature of America’s capitalist economy. For these musicians, extreme inequality in wealth, tedious workdays, and the constant threat of joblessness are perennial problems for those who work with their hands.[[48]](#footnote-48) Springsteen’s lyrics and tempo, while often joyful and rollicking, conspicuously avoid the optimistic tales about summer holidays, beach parties, and spending money that American teen music of the early 1960s celebrated. Instead, he incorporates the rhythms, chord progressions, street slang of early rock music to disclose the tough times that he sees in America.

In his representations of American life, a plurality, if not a majority, of American citizens face a lifetime of poorly paid, ceaseless, monotonous factory work. This arrangement is arguably acceptable because one can emotionally recover at one’s love nest and can momentarily feel alive through licit and illicit adventures at night and in bars and alleys. But the threat of unemployment never ceases, and local jobs, factories, and neighborhood meeting spaces continue to disappear because of decisions made by unknown figures. The fear of finding no work whatsoever – a degrading and humiliating condition that Hanna Arendt calls “superfluousness”[[49]](#footnote-49) – is more commonplace in America than those in positions of power admit, Springsteen contends. In his words, “There is a part of our population whose lives and dreams are declared expendable as the price of doing business.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

In his songs, Springsteen sometimes simply denounces this outrageous inequality of life chances and expresses anger at the sloth and greed of those who enjoy a carefree existence at the expense of others. At other times, he encourages those who suffer from regimentation and joblessness to continue to struggle for private opportunities to feel free, loved, and protected. He, however, sometimes calls on those who are downtrodden to be more ambitious, to band together, to help each other, and to construct an alternative social order that facilitates feelings of self-pride and creative freedom in all. In his musical efforts to summon collective action by those who are economically vulnerable, he exhibits faith in the political capacity of the poorly paid and the chronically unemployed. His songs encourage them to continue to value physical autonomy; to seek monogamous relationships and use such love to offset the endless belittlement at the workplace. His performances summon them to fight for existing jobs and to resist external attempts to close factories and terminate working. And his lyrics ask them to resist the endless temptations channel their doubts and fears into inter-personal and self-destructive violence.

On first glance, his vision resembles Arendt’s faith in the ability of all humans’ to reshape their inherited social conditions. But the two artists differ in the depths and consistency of their hopes. For her, those who experience themselves as economically expendable also lack permanent social roots. They feel lonely, in the sense of having no one with whom they can communicate candidly and as equals. Without a public sphere in which they can talk regularly with others about what should be done, and without sturdy ties of solidarity with fellow workers, they find meaning for their insecure existence through identification with nationalist leaders promulgating needless war, through the mouthing of simplistic political dogmas and chants that hide the messiness of living with others, and through historically abstract ideologies that find scapegoats for citizens’ bitterness and pain. For Arendt, the lower-income poor in the West therefore should not be viewed as politically blessed. Their collective activities should be greeted with ambivalence, because of their potential contributions to totalitarian politics.[[51]](#footnote-51) For Springsteen, those with dead-end jobs and those without any jobs also have a profound desire for freedom, deep yearnings for love and permanent homes, and personal capacities to resist temptations to violence. They are not predisposed toward ideologies or leadership cults. In fact, their interest in state politics and their trust in political leaders are minimal. Springsteen believes that through their home-grown cultural habits, including rock and roll music, they can learn to take care of their own.

The personal-level responses that Springsteen identifies in his tunes – shame, anger, recklessness – obviously pose hurdles to the course of collective action that he sometimes proposes. Unsympathetic listeners might conclude that his thinking of political change is therefore impractical and undeserving of attention.[[52]](#footnote-52) However, before dismissing Springsteen’s calls for love and communal action as simplistic and silly, perhaps it is worth asking if he is as removed from the ground as are those who either look away from the working-class dimensions of American society; those who place their faith in a permanent boom in the economy that will trickle down benefits and will lead to better paid and more creative jobs for all; those who want to contain uncivil behavior through larger prisons and police forces; or those who dream of solving America’s nightmare for the working-class through the re-design of school curriculum and of tracking systems in high-school that, in theory, will better prepare younger generations for the twenty-first century “post-industrial economy” and its distinctive cycles of job obsolesce.

Arguably, by focusing attention on problems that many affluent Americans prefer to ignore and by suggesting that the have-nots in America can shape their own destiny, Springsteen adds to the democratic spirit of the country and promotes a richer conversation of what is to be done. His counter-narrative to the triumphalist and self-congratulatory songs of professional politicians therefore merits attention.

1. When I use the phrase holders of “corporate power” to refer to those who left-Weberian academics, such as C. Wright Mills, call the “power elite.” In other words, persons who occupy the bureaucratic “command posts” of government and business and whose official policy decisions have highly disruptive ripple effects for vast numbers of annonymous citizens. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jeff Burger, ed., Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, and Encounters (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), pp. 7, 67-68, 107, 114-118, 237-245, 249-259. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Dave DiMartino, “Bruce Springsteen Takes It to the River” in Creem (January 1981), reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, p. 115; Ian “Molly” Meldrum, “On His Musical Influences,” unaired TV interview in April 1995, reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, p. 208; Bruce Springsteen, “Keynote Speech in South by Southwest Music Festival” (Austin, Texas: March 15, 2012) reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, pp. 395-398. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lawrence Grossberg, “Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life” in Popular Music, vol. 4 (1984), pp. 250-252; DiMartino, “Bruce Springsteen,” pp. 114-115; Bryan K. Carman, A Race of Singers: Whitman’s Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), chaps. 7,8 and encore; Jeffrey B. Symynkywicz, The Gospel according to Bruce Springsteen: Rock and Redemption, from *Ashubry Park* to Magic (Louisville, KT: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); David Masciotra, Working on a Dream: The Progressive Political Vision of Bruce Springsteen (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My interpretation of music – as an art form that does not primarily articulate arguments and investigate ideas but that channels emotions into some particular experiences, places, and institutions and not in others – is inspired by Lawrence Grossberg’s insight that rock and roll seems to make one dance in spite of one’s public declared beliefs and convictions. In my opinion, the following exerpts from one of Grossberg’s essays succinctly capture what he has in mind: “Music almost independently of our intentions, seems to produce and orchestrate our moods, both qualitatively and quantitatively….Music as an environment constructs and maps the rhythms, tempos and intensitives of our activities. In a sense, it determines where we stop and say ‘This matters, this place is important, this kind of activity is important.’” Lawrence Grossman, Dancing in Spite of Myself: Essays on Popular Culture (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 282. See also, Lawrence Grossberg, We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The lyrics to Springsteen’s songs are readily available in song books and sheet music and on album jackets. To my knowledege, there are two major anthologies containing speeches by and interviews of Springsteen: Burger’s Springsteen on Springsteen and June Skinnger Sawyers, ed., Racing in the Street: The Bruce Springsteen Reader (New York: Penguin, 2004). For an example of Springsteen rare public writings, see his highly compressed and passionate one-page introduction to Dale Maharidge, Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass (New York: Hyperion, 1996), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Springsteen, “Keynote Speech,” p. 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bruce Stpringsteen, “Keynote Speech,” p. 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. See also Will Percy, “Rock and Read: Will Percy Interviews Bruce Springsteen” in Double Take (Spring 1998), reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ed Norton, “Interview” at Toronto International Film Festival on September 14, 2010, reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, p. 351; Bruce Pollock, Bruce Springsteen – Live!” in Rock (March 1973), reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Robert Duncan, “Lawdamercy, Springsteen Saves! Testimony from the Howling Dog Choir (or Tramps Like Us, Baby, We’re Born Again)” in Creem (October 1978), reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Richard Williams, “Bruce Springsteen: A Responsible Rocker” in Sunday Times (London), May 31, 1981, reprinted in Burger, Sprinsteen on Springsteen, p. 125. See also Percy, “Rock and Read,” pp. 249-259. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Springsteen seems to have had this experience himself: “I first started to play [the guitar] because I wanted…to feel good about myself.” Kurt Loder, “Interview” in Rolling Stone (February 28, 1985), reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Don McLeese, “The Bruce Springsteen Interview” in International Musician and Recording World (October 1984), reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. When discussing a post-1970 genre sometimes known as “women’s music,” Nancy Love makes similar statements about the impact of rolicking music. Such sounds, she argues, politically inform listeners by physically moving them and, thereby, energizing them and prompting them to feel like active subjects rather than passive objects. Nancy S. Love, Musical Democracy (State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 67-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For examples, listen to “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out,” “Out on the Street,” “Badlands,” “Sherry Darling,” “I’m a Rocker,” “Thurnder Road,” “Cadillac Ranch,” “No Surrender,” “Pink Cadillac,” and “Radio Nowhere.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Plato, The Republic, Book IX, lines 562-563. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Springsteen, “Keynote Speech,” pp. 394-396. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Examples of this insight about re-directed aggression can be found in a number of Springsteen’s songs “Darlington County,” “I’m On Fire,” and “Nebraska.” Interesting, in these songs Springsteen sings with a twang and adopts rhythm-guitar styles and lead-guitar riffs that are reminiscent of country and western music. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Robert Hilburn, “Out in the Streets” (Los Angeles Times, 1980), reprinted in Sawyers, Dancing, p. 95. Allegedly, Pete Townshend of the Who once said that “while rock and roll own’t get rid of your blues, it will let you dance all over them.” This resembles Steinbeck’s view about the very important but, nonehtless, limited contribution of rock and roll to repairing the tired spirit of a wage earner. Cited in Grossberg, Dancing, p. 87 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Dolan, Bruce Springsteen and the Promise, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Listen, for example, to the happy and steady beats of such immensely popular pre-1970 tunes as “Not Fade Away,” “Stand By Me,” and “Just Like Romeo and Juliet.” Then listen to the much more jaded lyrics and less strolling and skipping rhthms of the following artists from the last quarter of the twentieth century: Elvis Costello (“Two Little Hitlers”), the Ramones (“The K.K.K. Took My Baby Away”), and the J. Geils Band (“Love Stinks”). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This fear of being left alone is arguably best expressed in Springsteen’s sadly pleading “Fade Away.” That song explores the emotional stakes underlying the monogomous relationship that Buddy Holly gleefully endorses in his rocker “Not Fade Away.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. One hears a similar story in Springsteen’s composition “Fire,” where the fictional narrator concedes that his deep desire for personal independence cannot offset his desire for merging permanently with his lover. The struggle for personal autonomy, while ongoing, is futile. In the much more recently penned Springsteen balland, “I’ll Work for Your Love,” the narrator calmly and readily recognizes the sacrifice of personal autonomy that love entails. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For more on love in liberal thinking, see James. R. Martel, Love Is a Sweet Chain: Desire, Autonomy, and Friendship in Liberal Polity Theory (New York: Routledge, 20001); and Keally D. McBride, Collective Dreams: Political Imagination and Community (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), Chap. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Sprinsteen does describe childrearing as toil and exhausting when it done one parent alone – for example, in “Spare Parts.” But in his songs, when when two adults raise the child, the experience is portrayed as fun and as even elevating for parents. While this may be true in some modern American families, one need not be a Freudian to know that it is not the entire truth of child rearing. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For juxtapositions of (1) Springsteen’s seemingly sincere appreciation of and respect working-class dreams, with (2) later post-punk distrust of those same dreams, see Grossberg, “Another Boring Day in Paradise,” pp. 248-52, and Jefferson Cowie, Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class (New York: The New Press, 2010), pp. 337-348, 357-62. Basically, Grossberg sees a striking convergence between Springsteen’s “later” music (beginning with “Ghost of Tom Joad”) and post-punk distrust of all social institutions, whereas Cowie sees a fundamental differnece between the ultimately hopeful music of Springsteen and the relentlessly mocking sounds and lyrics of, say, Devo. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For example, “Tougher Than the Rest,” “If I Should Fall Behind,” and “Cautious Man.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Listen, for example, to “Leap of Faith,” “Living Proof,” and “You’re Missing.” As I interpret Springsteen’s songs, this argument appears even in earlier albums, such as “The River,” if we treat the final three tracks (“The Price You Pay,” “Drive All Night,” and “Wreck on the Highway”) as his final position on the many questions about the love that he raises throughout the double-disc collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This profoundly pessimistic outlook may reflect first-hand observations of his father’s difficulties in securing steady work amid factory closings. After comploeting his military service, Springsteen’s dad moved from low-paying job to low-paying job in a small-plastics business, a rug-manufacturing business, and a trucking business (to name but a few of his short-term jobs). In the words of Springsteen biographer Marc Dolan, “If the American economy was expanding and ripe with opportunities during the 1950s and early 1960s, you sure couldn’t prove it by Bruce’s father, Douglas Springsteen.” Dolan, Bruce Springsteen and the Promise, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This theme is repeated in the song “When You’re Alone.” Springsteen states his views on marriage in straightforward prose in Weider, “Bruce Springsteen,” pp. 241-243. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For a focused discussion on how Springsteen’s view of U.S. working classes diverges from those of contemporary pop and rock musicians in America, see Cowie, Stayin’ Alive, pp. 171-187, 207-208, 337-348. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Dolan, Bruce Springsteen and the Promise, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The combination of ideas behind the notions of “race riots” and “ghetto riots” is complex, and how well these notions fit reality is certainly debatable. Some politicians and sholars like the labels because the suggestions of irrationality on the part of the looters and window breakers seems accurate. Furthermore, the terminological implication is that the events are first and foremost criminal in intentions and origins. See, for example, the views on purported family disfuctionality in ghettos in the widely read Moynihan Report by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Other commentators, however, insist that the riots are not the expression of irrational rioters but the manifestation of deeper long-term hositilities between two (or more) societies within the United States, one of which seems to systematically oppress, exclude, and exploit the other. For an example of this second approach to the so-called race riots of the late 1960s, see Garry Wills, The Second Civil War: Arming for Armageddon (New York: New American Library, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The literature on violence in America during the 1960s and 1970s is vast. For Springsteen’s own experiences with violence and with the government crackdowns that followed, including new cerfew laws and vigilante attacks on people who dressed or wore their hair in a perceived unpatriotic manner, see Dolan, Bruce Springsteen and the Promise, pp. 34-43 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Songs that allude to plant closings and the destruction of communities and to the arrogance of the wealthy include “Badlands,” “Born in the U.S.A.,” “My City of Ruins,” “Johnny 99,” “Death To My Hometown,” “The River,” “Wreaking Ball,” “Youngstown,” “My City Is of Ruins,” and “The Ghost of Tom Joad.” For songs about the arrogance of the wealthy, listen to “Mansion on the Hill,” “Badlands,” and “Death To My Home Town.” [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For a discussion of Miller’s play as a paradigmatic account of loneliness in America, see Thomas Dumm, Loneliness as a Way of Life (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), chap. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The following interpretion refers to Springsteen’s soft-spoken, “un-plugged” performance of the song on the album “Ghost of Tom Joad.” The political ideas conveyed through the electrified version, featuring the searing guitar solo of Tom Morello, are quite different. For an interpretation of that musical performance, see Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, “Retelling an American Political Tale: A Comparison of Literary, Cinematic, and Musical Version of The Grapes of Wrath” in Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh and Simon Stow, eds., A Political Companion to John Steinbeck (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), pp. 268-290. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Listen, for example, to “Out of Work.” [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. A similar sentiment is expressed in the outro of “My City of Ruins,” in which the singer decides to rebuild his community with his own hands, with a gospel choir seconding his decision (and soncially implying that he will not be acting alone). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Springsteen describes his ambivalence toward conventional politics in the United States in Percy, “Rock and Read,” pp. 251, 257-61; David Corn, “Bruce Springsteen Tell the Story of the Secret America” in Mother Jones (March/April 1996), reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsten, pp. 214-217; Bruce Springsteen, “Barack Obama Campaign Rally Speech” (November 2, 2008, Cleveland, Ohio), reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, pp. 33-335. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. For example, “Land of Hope and Dreams” (trains), “Mary’s Place” (parties), and “Death To My Hometown” (street-level militancy). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Examples include “Rock Island Line,” “Folsom Prison Blues,” “People Get Ready,” “Fast Train,” “Mystery Train,” and “Peace Train.” [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. For classic examples of rock-and-roll party songs, listen to “Shake, Rattle, and Roll,” “Quarter To Three,” and “You Can’t Sit Down.” [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For example, “My City of Ruins.” [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. For reflections on how call-and-response technique common in gospal music can promote democratic politics, see Love, Musical Democracy, chap. 5. Obviously, this participatory technique can be misued, so that the congregation is reduced to little more than an echo chamber for the caller. Herein lies some interesting paralells with top-down forms of “workplace democracy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See, for example, David Hepworth, “The Q Interview: Bruce Springsteen” in Q Magazine (August 1992), reprinted in Burger, Springsteen on Springsteen, p. 175 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Other Amercian rockers who can be interpreted as contributing to a “rustbelt tradition” of American rock and roll music include John Mellancamp, Steve Miller, Tracy Chapman, and Lou Reed. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism: Part Three of “The Origins of Totalitarianism” (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951), pp. 9, 135, 157, 173-176. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Corn, “Bruce Springsteen Tells,” p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Arendt, Totalitarianism, pp. 13-15, 50, 54-55, 133, 155-177. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Springsteen himself at times wonders about the feasibility of the amount and scale of alternative politics that, in his opinion, are needed today. In at least one interview, he stated that to solve the multiple problems caused by America’s economy, an extraordinary “concentration of national will” is needed “on the order of a domestic Marshall Plan.” He concedes that this sort of commitment is unlikely given how Americans think about themselves and given how they are encouraged by politicians to think about themselves. He therefore tends to be “pessimistic” even thought he wants to believe in hope. See Corn, “Bruce Springsteen Tells,” p. 216, and Percy, “Rock and Read,” pp. 253-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)