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**Transcending the moment: Ideology and Billy Bragg
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Transcending the moment: Ideology and Billy Bragg

Abstract: Our paper argues that British singer Billy Bragg performs protest songs that cleverly draw upon musical forms underpinning his positioning as a voice of, and for, the ordinary person, ultimately disenfranchised by governmental adherence to neoliberal policies. While political songs are a product of their time, many of them can also transcend that historical moment and have a longer shelf-life in terms of their capacity to inform political thinking and action. Our song(s) of choice in this paper do so not just in terms of the relevance of their 'literal' message but also in how they draw upon traditional structures of feeling and generic elements of folk song to underpin this sense of 'grass-roots' critique via a modified, acoustic ballad form and a performance style. This serves to authenticate and legitimate the singer and his message and, in turn, allows Bragg to accumulate political and cultural capital.

Keywords: Billy Bragg, Ideology, Protest Songs, Performance,

Transcending the moment: Ideology and Billy Bragg

This special issue is concerned with (amongst other things) the role of musical sounds in articulating politics, and the politics of particular sounds and structures. What can a popular music song and its performance tell us about society, privilege and the political sphere and in what ways might we ‘read’ such songs in order to come to contingent yet plausible interpretations at particular moments in time?

Our paper argues that British singer Billy Bragg (1957-) has, over the duration of his career, built a counter narrative to discourses that present the capitalist worldview as innate, ‘natural’ and inevitable. He does so by performing protest songs that cleverly draw upon musical forms underpinning his positioning as a voice of, and for, the ordinary person, ultimately disenfranchised by governmental adherence to neoliberal policies. The article is organised as follows: initially, we discuss our understanding of politics, democracy, the continuing connection between politics and social protest, and the use of song as a mechanism of protest. We then present a brief account of Billy Bragg – the artist and activist - to begin our analysis. The third section of the paper reflects on understandings of ideology and its role, to situate Bragg’s work as a sonic response to such understandings. We then offer a close contextual, textual, and musicological reading of two versions of essentially the same song, ‘Ideology’, which was released as track four on Bragg’s album “Talking to the Taxman About Poetry” (Go! Discs, 1986) and ‘The Clashing of Ideologies’ (Alternative Version)¹ which appeared on the ‘Talking to the Taxman about Poetry’ reissue (Go! Discs 2006, - CD2). We argue that while the track(s) may have been an attack on the ideological underpinnings of elite governance and ‘democracy’ in Thatcher’s Britain, the subject matter remains as relevant now as it was then. This, in turn, highlights that while political songs are a product of their time, many of them can also transcend that historical moment and have a longer shelf-life in terms of their capacity to inform political thinking and action. Our song(s) of choice in this paper do so not just in terms of the relevance of their ‘literal’ message but also in how they draw upon traditional structures of feeling and generic elements of folk song to underpin this sense of ‘grass-roots’ critique via a modified, acoustic ballad form and a performance style that authenticates and legitimates the singer and his message. The question of the songs’ efficaciousness to date proves less important than its potential to be part of the change it seeks.

The politics of social protest

Politics is essentially about power and how it is exercised. Globally, most countries now consider themselves to be democracies, which generally have key components such as governments who are put into power via ‘fair’ elections, citizens who can actively participate in political and public life, and a legal system where all citizens are treated equally before the law (see Diamond and Morlino 2016). However, over the last number of decades more and more people have been arguing that democracy is an illusion which has overseen the enormous transfer of wealth upwards to ‘the 1%’ and hidden the reality of elite rule in plain sight (see for example Femia 2001). In that context we have continued to see “political expression” that aims to achieve social change by “influencing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours of the public or the policies of an organization or institution” (McLeod 2011). Following Power et al. (2016, 266) we understand protest as “a discursive intervention, designed to dramaturgically disrupt dominant discourse, to promote alternative frameworks of understanding and to demand their actualisation”. Contemporary protests have tended to focus on causes which may seem to some to be “politically contentious” and which range from “identity politics, to cultural, social, economic or political issues” (Cable 2016, 2). In investigating the messages that protest groups are disseminating we should examine the “collective action frames contained in protestor communications” (Cable 2016, 4), as the process of negotiation between protestors and the general public can (and does) mobilise public (and on occasion political) support (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the capacity to articulate those alternative “frameworks of understanding” (Power et al. 2016, 266) to the marginalised can be aided by the ‘reach’ of popular music (Botta 2006, 123), which we examine next.

Music and Politics: Song as a mechanism of protest.

Grayson et al.’s (2009, 158) seminal work argued that world politics and popular culture should be seen as a continuum rather than “a product of mapping where intersections between the two take place.” They argued that politics and popular culture are inseparable and that ultimately, “even at the extreme polar ends” they “cannot be divorced” from each other. Political systems and our ‘rulers’ have always understood that culture is a “key battleground in the battle for hearts and minds” (Randall 2018, 26). Even in contemporary times where the dominant narrative is that ‘politics has no place in Sport’, Association Football continues to be tied to political events and symbols such as the prohibition of the Palestinian flag by UEFA, the governing body of European Football, or the wearing of symbols such as the

poppy, which continue to spark controversy among player and fan communities alike (See Carr et al. 2017). It is simply not tenable to believe that popular culture has no connection to the world of politics. “The two are intimately and inextricably bound together” (Caso and Hamilton 2015, 4).

This special issue is concerned with the role of musical sounds in expressions of politics in both traditional, and less traditional, political contexts. While music has the “potential to reach across social and political divides, or, at the very least, reveal our shared humanity” (Dillane et al. 2018, 1) it is neither fundamentally good or innately utopian (Small 1998: xi). It can also be / is used for malign purposes and singers; songs, and their performance can buttress oppressive structures and behaviours (see Turino 2008). Indeed, Randall (2018) argues that that rulers throughout history and across cultures have understood that music was an important weapon in their armoury (See also Van Leeuwen 2012). It has been very effectively utilised to “distract us from the things that matter, stir tribalistic enmity and march us off to fight unnecessary and unjust wars”. However, it has also brought diverse groups of people “together in celebration” and given them “hope, confidence and an expanded sense of what's possible” (Randall 2018, ix). Singing is a mechanism that people utilise to “sonorously raise their voices in an appeal for justice” and which has “a power and persuasiveness beyond mere rhetoric” (Dillane et al. 2018, 1).

“Music has the ability to draw us out of isolation and connect us with a greater community where we feel that our troubles and concerns are recognised and shared... if music has any real power, it lies in this moment, when we experience the solidarity of song, the cathartic realisation that you're not the only person who shares the sentiments that are being so forcefully expressed” (Bragg 2015, xvi).

Against the backdrop of this statement, we now discuss song as a mechanism of protest. Denisoff (1968) was one of the earliest sociologists to critically examine protest songs; concluding that they were a function of wider political movements (Friedman 2013, xvi); in essence, a form of propaganda. He understood such songs as being either "magnetic" (intended to entice people into the social movement, promote in-group solidarity and a commitment to the cause in question), or "rhetorical" (offer a direct political message with the intention of changing the listener's political opinion on the specific issue). Essentially songs of protest are “inherently oppositional; ... vehicles for the expression of the oppressed or those opposing” whatever issue is being protested against. Accordingly, we conceive of

protest songs as ways of “resisting or undermining power relations of various kinds” (Piotrowska 2013, 280).

Eyerman and Jamison (1998) were interested in how protest songs function as performance events. They saw the “musicians undertaking various actions which could be labelled as resistance” and the audience as being the consumer (who may or may not have the ability to decode the implied or explicit) “coded message of contestation” contained within the song (Piotrowska 2013, 283). We should never “understate the impact of performance” in this arrangement as it facilitates a “process of exchange – between artists and audiences, between the past and the present – where new societal formations emerge” (Friedman 2013, xv). Moreover, the delivery by a perceived ‘authentic’ artist in these circumstances is key to the message of the protest song being taken on board by its target audience (see Peddie 2006; Power, Dillane and Devereux 2017; Way 2018).

In addition, Eyerman and Jamison (1998) argued that (all) music needs to be understood through a far-reaching “framework” where tradition and ritual are understood as “encoded and embodied forms of collective meaning and memory”. Song is a “discursive practice” which is impacted upon by “complex intersections of culture, class, gender etc.” in peoples lived experience (Ballinger 1995, 13 cited in Peddie 2006, xvi). The “social, historical and political formations” by which we “filter cultural narratives” is a central cog in the process of negotiating our relationship with popular music in general and songs of social protest in particular (Peddie 2006, xxiv).

Billy Bragg

Billy Bragg is an anti-establishment figure who, we argue, has employed his music and personae to present counter arguments to a hegemonic discourse which presents social injustices and class privilege as innate and meritocratic (see also Cashell 2011). Bragg is a working-class man who was born in Barking in what is technically Essex county, but which is also considered to be part of metropolitan London. This borderlands position of being both of London’s East End and part of East Anglia², which is reputed for its folk traditions, ballads and, in particular, protest songs, would have profoundly shaped Bragg. Musically this is manifest in his music through the influence of the ballad and broadside form as well as the presence of punk elements. Bragg was and remains a fervent supporter of the political Left, a political standpoint which he acquired at a time when Thatcher’s New Right ideological

policies were devastating working class communities across Britain. The politics of ‘class war from above’ resulted in Bragg (2006, 3) developing a “dissenting faith, internationalist in spirit, collective in principle, committed to social justice, and determined to hold those in power to account”. In 1984 Bragg released the overtly political *Brewing Up with Billy Bragg*, yet it is widely accepted that it was the UK Miners’ Strike of that same year, which politically educated him. Bragg played numerous gigs all over the UK in support of the striking miners and their families. These encounters with “more politically motivated folk musicians, activists in a field from which he’d taken so much indirect inspiration”, were hugely influential in broadening Bragg’s “musical palette” (Collins 2002, 144). Yet it is important to note that while Bragg’s musical cannon is conscious of his folk predecessors, it is also infused with the spirit of punk.

Punk rock injected my song writing with urgency and attitude and helped me to find my voice... I needed a new kind of material; short, sharp songs delivered in a choppy, percussive style that ran contrary to the traditional image of the solo singer-songwriter strumming an acoustic guitar and playing ballads... (Bragg 2015, xiii- xv).

While Bragg’s political activism was initially a supplement to his “musical message” he now regularly engages with both print and broadcast media to profess his ideas and make “substantial political proposals”. As a consequence, he has created “an authentic, political use for his art” (Willhardt 2006, 44). Accordingly, we would argue that Bragg’s catalogue is the perfect critique of “traditional, Frankfurt school approaches to the relevance of popular music” because it clearly ties his music to political issues and concerns in a form that is familiar, accessible, and reproducible (Power et al. 2012, 387).

Ideology & The Clash of Ideologies: A Reading

Marx posited that Ideology is in effect ‘false consciousness’, a mechanism utilised by the Bourgeoisie to hide the inherent injustice of the economic base and to convince the working classes that current arrangements are both ‘natural’ and justified, thus ensuring their compliance. Building on the work of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci (1971 [1935]) developed the theoretical concept of ‘cultural hegemony’, where he argued that the ruling class utilise ‘cultural institutions’ to maintain their power and privilege. The process sees institutions that form ‘the superstructure’ utilise hegemonic ideology to produce a dominant culture, which in turn underpins and protects the status quo – which is of course to the benefit of the ruling class (Harkins and Lugo Ocando 2017). However, the collapse of State Communism in the

1990s, and the publication of Francis Fukayama's highly influential 'End of History' thesis saw many academics (and politicians and commentators) arguing over the next decade that ideology was a dated concept which was of little use in contemporary debates (see for example Hawkes 2003). Yet we agree with Thompson's (1990, 8) understanding of ideology, which focuses on how meaning serves to sustain "asymmetrical relations of domination". Essentially, Thompson's definition emphasises the "social contexts within which symbolic forms are used" and directs us to position the "study of meaning" and how it is utilised in maintaining the mechanisms of domination within the larger "social, cultural and historical framework" (Marron 2016, 32). Moreover, it is important to note that Thompson (and other scholars working in this area) acknowledge that counter hegemonic ideologies exist, which provide at least the possibility of resistance to the dominant ideologies that we are exposed to.

It is against this contextual background that we examine Bragg's song(s) 'Ideology' and 'The Clashing of Ideologies'. Negus (1996, 191-2) asks how does music/popular song "encode political messages" and how do we "identify the political content of music"? Warning against merely locating "the political meaning of music in any sound text" he instead looks at "the way that music connects with meaning that indicates how it can work and be made to work for particular political agendas" (192).

With an initial focus on lyrics, we turn to Frith (1998, 103) who argues that it is "possible to read back from lyrics to the social forces that produced them". In a more recursive model, Whitely (2014: 231) insists that "meaning is always both socially and historically situated, generally specific, and inextricably bound up in relationships of power" and that it is incumbent upon us to ensure that "interpretation is supported by relevant cultural and historical research". Drawing upon these ideas, we deploy Machin's (2010) 'activity schema' approach with Griffiths' (2003) 'lyrics/anti-lyrics' distinctions in order not just to 'interpret' the words but also to understand how they operate to "tell a story" within a genre, at a moment *in* time, and also cumulatively, given that meanings and interpretation accrue *over* time as part of a dialogic process. This is followed by a brief structural analysis of the modified ballad form deployed by Bragg, which discusses harmonic structure, pitch range, voice quality, and the role of (electric) guitar accompaniment (Machin 2010), in the delivery of what is essentially a broadside.

The overall valuing of Bragg's raw sound is one that, along the lines of Hibbett (2005) and Stokes (1994) argument, is part of an authenticating discursive practice that is identifiable by

audiences. For Stokes (1994, 11) authenticity is not a quality of music, *per se*, but rather “a discursive trope of great persuasive power.” In other words, it is what we as listening communities engaging with the music and the musicians *say* about the music that creates the terms to describe and authenticate experiences. Like Stokes, Moore (2002, 210) insists that “authenticity does not inhere in any combination of musical sounds”, but rather, is “ascribed”. Though he speaks of the ‘loaded’ implications of terms such as ‘authentic’ in relation to rock music, Moore (2002, 211) posits that his analysis may be “applicable to other genres”, and this is certainly the case in relation to (folk) singer songwriters such as Bragg. Moore goes on to trace a discourse of authenticity in popular music that begins with ‘folk’, in opposition to “commercial dance hall” (211); the former apparently being unmediated and thus inherently more authentic. This is a trope that persists in the folk-inflected, singer-songwriter, close-to-the-source personae, where the ‘who’, rather than exclusively the ‘what’, is authenticated in performance. Moore does not extend his analysis to thinking about how, in turn, this authentication forms a recursive cycle in which particular performers and their listeners re-inscribe the discourse, and more especially, how the performer benefits from this process, even in the face of apparent contradictions (such as amassing considerable wealth while still speaking of working class values as Bragg does)³.

Terms of reference for authenticity vary with genre and historical context, but in the context of folk singing, especially of a protest bent, discourses of authenticity are peppered with such constructs as a ‘natural voice’, ‘local (unaffected) accent’, ‘down-to-earth appearance’ and ‘unpretentious’ stage talk. All of these things happen most often not in the context of recorded music, but in live performances, as theorized by Auslander (2008, 184), who problematises the notion that though ‘liveness’ as historical context was superseded by mediatised performance, nowadays even mediated performances have to accommodate an aesthetic of liveness, driven by a desire for “proximity and intimacy” (2008, 184). In this regard, Bragg proves masterful both in the live performance context that is often mediatised, and on sound recordings where he maintains, for the most part, an intimate and ‘honest’ aesthetic. But even in cases where his music proves highly mediated, the discourse around Bragg’s authenticity, extended each year given the longevity of his commitment to critique and to working class politics, means it almost becomes impossible to tarnish his ‘working class hero’ credentials.

Texts and Contexts

‘Ideology’ and ‘The Clashing of Ideologies’ are essentially the same song, though they feature different final verses. Nevertheless, their combined lyrics do essentially the same work by critiquing a number of crucial political issues, including hegemonic ideology, political ‘careers’, corruption (They must declare their interests but not their company cars / The offender faces jail or resignation), elite privilege, the retraction of the welfare state, and ultimately, how democracy itself functions. The songs both begin with Bragg questioning the clarity of the path that our ‘democratically elected’ Neoliberal ruling elite has set us on (When one voice rules the nation, Just because they're on top of the pile, Doesn't mean their vision is the clearest). This echoes the much later work of Ferrin and Kriesi (2014, 4) who posit that “even if there is agreement among political theorists and citizens that democracy is to be valued in and of itself, there is much less agreement on what democracy is or should be”. European Social Survey (ESS) (2014) data clearly shows that European citizens desire a social dimension, which sees the attainment of particular social outcomes like a decrease in social inequality, as being a central component of democracies (Ferrin and Kriesi 2014, 4-12). Bragg seems to have his finger on the pulse when expressing the sense of disillusionment that ordinary citizens have with the political system and those that they have elected to serve them (The voices of the people are falling on deaf ears).

In ‘Ideology’, Bragg sings of what these “patient millions” long for; education, health care, etc. – essentially the existence of a properly functioning welfare state. This is a crucial point, “since the public both receive and ultimately finance welfare policies, their views about the extension and form of the welfare state are of paramount importance for the legitimacy” of the state (Svallfors 2012, 3). He sings of how the politicians we elect for “their high ideals” in reality just pay our democratic wishes “lip service”. He continues (“Is there more to a seat in parliament than sitting on your arse”). Tellingly, Bragg (2015, 120) identifies the impact that Neoliberalism has had on the political system when he argues that “while they (Labour MPs) might make a great show of displaying differences with the Tories” in the House of Commons (“And the best of all this bad bunch are shouting to be heard above the sound of ideologies clashing”), underneath the bombastic rhetoric, “they were much the same”.

The song(s) conclude by returning to the “the crisis of democratic legitimacy” (Foa and Mounk 2016, 6) arguing that although the demands from citizens for the benefits of the ‘social contract’ that they are tied into is becoming more vocal (And although our cries get

louder) politicians continue to ignore them, as the ideological nature of the political system continues to dictate the policy responses which ultimately impact on people's lives (Their laughter gets louder still / lost above the sound of ideology clashing / crashing).

In 'The Clashing of Ideologies' (2006), Bragg modifies the final verses, taking aim at New Labour in this regard when he sings "Another dose of welfare cuts is passed without a word, from those who claim to represent the centre of this nation". This was a government voted in for its apparent "high ideals" but like its Conservative/ Tory predecessors, nothing seems to change and the clash of ideologies continues; hence the modification to the 2006 title. In both tracks Bragg appears to lay a large part of the blame for this democratic deficit at the feet of politicians who are increasingly coming from the same socio-economic groups, attending the same small pool of elite schools etc. and ultimately becoming political careerists. Almost thirty years after the release of 'Ideology' little has changed in that regard. Hunter and Holden's (2015) study showed that 1/3 of British parliamentary members (MPs) still went to fee paying private schools (the national average was approximately 7%), with the overwhelming majority of them also having a university education. Moreover, their study highlights the "professionalization of politics" (Hunter and Holden 2015, 2). As educational credentials become increasingly devalued in our modern 'meritocracies', attending the more prestigious school or university becomes of greater importance (Collins, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984). In essence, this process increasingly results in those who have attended elite schools being able to 'credentialise' themselves as intellectually superior by virtue of having graduated from schools recognised as producing the 'brightest and best'. These elite credentials act as 'cultural markers' (and are underpinned by identifiers such as "the old school tie"), allowing those who possess it to be recognised as the 'right sort' (Kingston & Stanley Lewis 1990, xiii).

Ultimately, the arguments advanced in these tracks are persuasive enough that the listener may thoroughly consider how millions of citizens have been sold out by their respective 'democratic' political systems, in turn undermining the 'Social Contract' (Rousseau 1762). But he does more than simply address "the crisis of democratic legitimacy" (Foa and Mounk 2016, 6); he speaks to possible futures as a consequence of the increasing democratic deficit.

Machin (2010, 78) argues that most songs are underpinned by what he calls an activity or discourse schema, which is not just an analysis of the text but "of the form of knowledge that

underlies the text”, thereby “revealing the social values that underlie the song”. In Machin’s terms, the ‘activity schema’ of both songs is essentially the same:

we are calling on the government to be fair

⇓

they pay no heed

⇓

there is an ideological clash.

Arguably the change in key words in the 2006 version points to a different conclusion. In spite of calling the 2006 version ‘The **Clashing** of Ideologies’, Bragg actually sings the word ‘crashing’ of ideologies where he previously sang ‘clashing’. This rhyme/replacement is critical in extending the reach of the critique. The mood now has turned to one of “resignation”, echoed in the slower pace of this version from a perhaps more jaded but equally critical Bragg.

we are calling on the government to be fair

⇓

they pay no heed

⇓

our ideological position has come crashing down

The role played by rhyme (clashing/crashing) in the song structure warrants further attention, not just because of the way in which words can change in different iterations, thereby changing its potential meaning, but how at a more deeply structural level, the poetics of the verse is revealed to be doing a particular kind of labour that enhance the message in a multi-modal manner (see Way and McKerrell 2017).

As well as outlining the importance of rhythm and alliteration and emphasising the sonorous qualities of words “the governing principle of the melo-poetic relations of popular song” (Griffiths 2003, 48-50) sees him make the distinction between what he terms lyrics (as having particular rhythm) and anti-lyrics, the latter of which he most strongly associates with Bob Dylan’s songs of the mind 1960s (54). For Griffiths, it is rhyme that is the key technique of

lyric, and such rhymes can be “*full* rhyme; *near* rhymes; and deliberate *non-rhyme* in a rhymed setting” with the first two types being the most common (50-51). In the case of ‘Ideology’, there are plenty of examples of the first two, which are the most common, including full rhyme between the third and sixth lines (clearest/careerist), and near rhyme in the next two couplets (cars/arse). In this case, the words are largely operating within a lyrical framework, complete with other examples of internal rhyme, assonance and alliteration. Other examples in the song include taxes/relaxes; rely/tie/justify; grace/face. In the different verses of ‘The Clash of Ideologies’ full rhyme examples include resignation/nation; and ideals/feels. The most deliberate non-rhyme in both song iterations is in, of course, the final line ‘above the sound of ideologies clashing/crashing’. As a ‘rhyme’ it actually only exists in the comparison of both version, binding them inextricably in a web of meaning. Otherwise, there is no rhyme for this final line of each verse, which, is, in its own way, the most Dylanesque in its attempt to say things like they are, in plain language, and not a melo-poetic form. In such instances, Machin argues, the emphasis of a song shifts away from its sonorous rhyme towards the detail of its statement, “away from *rectitude* of rhyme and rhythm towards the novelty or *interest* of words and ideas” (55). In certain instances, it becomes “a manifesto” (54). But different popular song forms (and their composers), of course, make different use of structural elements, and while many feature newly composed structures others, particularly narrative and protest songs, will often return to more traditional forms in order to generate a clear message to an audience versed in not only the sounds but also the meanings of such structures and their attendant values. It is hardly surprising that ‘Ideology’ and ‘The Clash of Ideologies’ should draw from a folk resource in this context, not just because of its strong local, regional and English associations, but also because of the very purpose of this form of medium in the past.

Broadsides and Ballads

Gammond (1991, 80-84) discusses the origins and purpose of urban ballads or broadsides as functioning a news of the day, bringing up topical issues within the framework of well-known, traditional airs so that the verses became memorable when presented on cheap paper. The ballad form harks back hundreds of years and in traditional form typically features four lines of rhyming verse in narrative style. Songs were sung unaccompanied and needed to have a strong, memorable melodic line, with an emphasis on the story told and not on musical embellishment. Both of Bragg’s tracks fit these criteria in some of the most obvious ways,

where the emphasis is on the words, most of which have one syllable set to one note, with clear repetition of melodic material, underpinned by essentially uncomplicated harmonic materials.

A popular structure within the ballad form is the four-line stanza, where the first and third lines are in iambic tetrameter and the second and fourth are in iambic trimeter. This four iambs or durations/beats (over eight syllables) followed by three iambs (over six syllables) can be loosely ascribed to the opening of ‘Ideology’, where certain words are treated as upbeats at the start of a line.

Fig 1. Mapping on traditional ballad iambics

(Upbeat) Iambs: 1.	2.	3.	4.
When/	One voice	rules the	nati-on
			just be-
Iambs: 1.	2.	3.	
	-cause they're	top-of the	pile

This pattern, with varying degrees of syllabic density and semantic spill over across lines, can be found throughout the song. Griffiths (2003, 43) talks about the “verbal space” created within the melodic structure of the song where “the words agree to work within the spaces of tonal music’s phrases, and the potential expressive intensity of music’s melody is held back for the sake of clarity of verbal communication”. He goes on to point out that density or “verbal garrulousness” (46) can create a sense of urgency in a song. ‘Ideology’ has that sense of words spilling out to convey the sense of urgency and importance, but at the same time, operates within the familiar, traditional structure of a ballad song to underscore its provenance as coming from the people. This is further highlighted by the use of Bragg’s locally-accented voice, free of nasal affectations, with strong vowel sounds and clarity of expression, marking him as ordinary, truthful, and representative.

The simplicity of the song structure is also revealed in the prevalence of pitches 1, 3 and 5 (which outline chord I and the key of the song – E major) and contained harmonic movement, where chord I’s prevalence anchors the song throughout at key points, and the chord changes are essentially chord IV and V, thereby keeping the song firmly ground in its key (where the C#min and F#min chords are simply preparing us for the move to V).

Fig 2. Harmonic Structure.

Pattern A (which is repeated initially)			
E	E2	E	E2
(When/ One voice rules the	nation, just be-	cause they're top of the	pile)
E	E2	B	E2
(Doesn't mean their	vision is the	clearest ...	
Pattern B			
A		E	
They/ Must declare their interests but		not their company car	
E	C#min	F#min	B
Is there/ More to a seat in	parliament than	sitting on your	arse
Pattern A is then repeated			
Harmonic macro structure of each 'verse' based on the patterns above = A, A, B, A			

For Machin (2010, 107), this kind of movement does not create “tension” or “trouble” in the song, noting “research suggests that major chords and notes are associated with *positive* feelings” (emphasis ours). While this might seem at odds with the message of the song, which is full of frustration, the actual singability of the song, with its concomitant hopefulness, may be one of the reasons this major key was chosen. Further, the melodic movement, which vacillates throughout between pitches 1 to 5 predominantly, is also an open and honest sound that underpins the sincerity of the critique here and its aspiration for change. It is also possible to find a creative tension in the apparent innocuousness of the musical structure and the intensity of the message of the lyrics, with the former throwing the latter into even greater relief. Instrumentation, in this case, a plugged in guitar, is equally important to the overall values embodied in the sound (Machin 2010, 114) The use of electrified guitar, a nod to punk, rather than acoustic guitar, further supports this idea of a broadside for the times, while still retaining that close proximity to and intimacy with the accompanying instrument, indicating that Bragg is positioned to be a social commentator and contemporary troubadour. Further, it illustrates the degree to which Bragg was enormously influenced by punk, especially by The Clash, in terms of their politics and sound. By placing this song in an open E major key, it allows for him to engage with producing resonant power chords (in both versions), which index an insistence as well as a kind of fidelity, and the basic expertise of a self-made man/musician who has the authority to speak out in this manner.

In terms of the importance of the performer in any performance, Whitely (2014: 232) argues that how the singer constructs and creates the experiences of which he/she sings is crucial, noting that typically “the vocalist takes on the persona of the character and/or storyteller communicating the feel of the song, both in live performances and in the recording”. In Bragg’s case, he is a narrator who positions himself with the ‘we/us’ (ordinary people) against ‘them’ (the government), so there is no persona, per se, but rather an authentic self with a deeply-embodied politics of protest and resistance. ‘Meaning’, then, is achieved through more than simply a literal or even interpretative reading of the words of the song. As well as the performance by a particular performer, the intertextual references to other songs and forms, in this case, from his own local East Anglia and London traditions, prove crucial in a full contextual reading of a song, as does, of course, the positions of those performing the reading.

Conclusions

Despite dominant political discourses still being produced by elite sections of our societies, popular music repeatedly provides counter-hegemonic narratives that work their way around the world. This paper has argued that ‘Ideology’ continues to powerfully resonate more than thirty years after its initial release, not just because of its message but also because of the appealing form in which it is delivered. While the track may have been an attack on the ideological underpinnings of elite ‘democratic’ governance and the maintenance of elite privilege in Thatcher’s Britain, the subject matter remains as relevant now as it was then, and Bragg could just as easily be singing about the situation in contemporary Ireland, the US, or elsewhere. ‘Ideology’ has already illustrated its capacity to move and shift with the times, as evidenced by its change of verse content, while retaining a largely traditional format infused with enough contemporaneous sounds to make it both traditional and radical, historical and of the moment. The ideas presented in ‘Ideology / The Clashing of Ideologies’ are interpolated into Dennisoff’s (1968) categorisation of protest song as ‘magnetic’ or ‘rhetorical’ and we conclude that they operate as both ‘magnetic’ and ‘rhetorical’. Both tracks offer a direct political message that may promote in-group solidarity and commitment to the particular cause, and / or change an individual’s political opinion on this specific issue. Moreover, as discussed in detail earlier, the delivery by an artist who is perceived as being ‘authentic’ is vital if the target audience is to take the message offered in these protest songs on board. Finally, the longevity of the message contained in ‘Ideology’ is evidence that Bragg didn’t merely offer a counter hegemonic narrative on the operation of meritocratic political

democracies; he also offers insight into how the system would continue to maintain itself into the future (see Attali 1985). Bragg's musical offerings strive to create an alternative cultural text and in doing so he rigidly challenges neoliberalism as a political ideology. He might not make much difference in practical terms but "if people can discover literature through pop music then why not politics? Sometimes a seed needs only to be sown" (Pye 1984). Moreover, as Gossberg underscores (cited in Negus 1996, 220), music works at the intersection of body and emotions, and in doing so can generate affective alliances, which in turn can create the energy for social change.

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Notes

¹ The first two verses of the song are the same but this version has two different verses to finish the track.

² Note how Bragg is 'claimed' in the East Anglia folk music website of the East Anglia Music Trust, <http://www.eatmt.org.uk> (accessed 10 Aug 2018)

³ Billy Bragg's commitment to International socialism has remained steadfast throughout the numerous "disappointments of the recent past" (Cashell 2011, 24) and although he is governed by multi-national corporations in the distribution and marketing of his work, his catalogue "evidences how the counter-hegemonic can find space at the heart of the popular" (Power et al. 2012, 387 cited in Power 2018, 514). Yet, Bragg has also been accused of being a 'champagne socialist' who deliberately exploits the commercial aspect of his representations of social class and now lives in a mansion in Dorset. Such accusations have

led some to wonder whether Bragg can be truly 'authentic' and 'of the people' given the considerable wealth he has amassed throughout his career, in part as a consequence of him being perceived as 'authentic' by those who consume his art.