

## **“Aesthetics of resistance”<sup>1</sup>.**

### **Billy Bragg, Ideology, and the Longevity of Song as Social Protest.**

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What can a song text and its performance tell us about society, privilege and the political sphere? Following on from Cashell’s (2012) line of argument, I contend that British singer Billy Bragg (1957-) has employed his lyrics and activism to represent the struggles of the International working class and build a counter narrative to discourses which present the capitalist worldview as innate, ‘natural’ and inevitable. Centered on a deep textual reading of Bragg’s song(s) “Ideology” / “The Clashing of Ideologies” (1986; 2006)<sup>2</sup>, the chapter is organized in five key sections. I begin by discussing the continuing importance of social protest and the use of song as a mechanism of protest. I then present a brief account of Billy Bragg – the artist and activist – to contextualize my analysis of his work. The third section of the chapter reflects on neoliberal understandings of meritocracy in order to situate “Ideology” / “The Clashing of Ideologies” (1986; 2006) as a sonic response to such understandings. The fourth section of the chapter offers a close contextual reading of these tracks. Finally, I conclude that “Ideology” continues to resonate more than thirty years after its initial release - perhaps even more so now. Ultimately, I argue that while the track 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 certain protest songs are a product of their time, they also have the ability to transcend that historical moment and have a longer shelf-life in terms of their capacity to foment protest.

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## **Social Protest**

Social protest is a method of “political expression” that aims to achieve social change by “influencing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the public or the policies of an organization or institution” (McLeod 2011). Protests can manifest as public demonstrations and civil disobedience, or organising and signing petitions, engaging in boycotts or lobbying for particular outcomes. Contemporary protest groups 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). Essentially the “grievances” of the majority of protests find their roots in the “structural conflict of interests” (Klanderman 1986, 19, cited in Cable 2016, 3) that continue to exist in our societies.

Cottle (2008) argues that protest should be seen as a message; in that the purpose of protest is to convey the concerns of those protesting and their demands for a change in whatever situation that they are protesting about. Similarly, Cable (2016, 4) argues that in order to investigate the messages that protest groups are disseminating we are required to examine the “collective action frames contained in protestor communications”. Indeed communication is an essential component in any successful protest group as it expedites “information exchange, mobilization, coordination, integration, identity formation, and many other essential functions” (McLeod 2011). Following Power et al. (2016, 266) I understand protest as “a discursive intervention, designed to dramaturgically disrupt dominant discourse, to promote alternative frameworks of understanding and to demand their actualisation”. The arbitration process between protestors and the general public can mobilise public (and on occasion political) support (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993), while in contrast a protest movement can haemorrhage support on the back of unfavourable coverage. “Representation”, together with the reach and reception of protest is therefore “... consequential for

democracy” (Cottle 2008, 854), and as such it is imperative that social scientists pay close attention to how protest is enacted and spoken about in contemporary times.

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that while such alternative “frameworks of understanding” (Power et al. 2016, 266) and the demand for their actualisation are always evident, they are few in number, often occupy marginal positions and in general don’t tend to infiltrate popular discourse / consciousness to the same extent. In essence, a lack of access to the mechanisms of “symbolic production” has ensured that there have been very limited occurrences of *sustained* critiques of the ways in which our societies operate, and privilege and inequality are reproduced (Skeggs 2005, 975-76). Accordingly it is reassuring to note that in societies where the hegemonic discourse continues to be produced by the upper and middle-classes, the capacity to articulate a contradictory narrative to the marginalized can be aided by the ‘reach’ of popular music (Botta 2006, 123), a view which I examine next.

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### **Song as a Mechanism of Protest**

Billy Bragg has on numerous occasions argued that music is communal. For example in 2015 (xvi) he said that

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.

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Against the backdrop of this statement I now want to discuss song as a mechanism of protest. While acknowledging that songs of social protest are “associated with opposition, contestation, revolt and resistance” (Piotrowska 2013, 280), it is also worth noting that popular social protest music is too diffuse to be pigeon-holed into any one genre, category, or period of history (Peddie 2006, xvii). Indeed, Ruth Sanz Sabido (2016, 61) argues that they “function as a site of protest at three different but interrelated levels: the content of the song,

its public performance and the resistive nature of some music styles or genres”. In essence, as a “reflection of a particular society at any given time” protest music becomes a “vehicle for the transmission of ideas that are socio-politically relevant and meaningful at specific moments” (Blanco 2004, cited in Sanz Sabido 2016, 59).

Denisoff (1968) was one of the first sociologists to critically investigate protest songs; concluding that they were a function of wider political movements (Friedman 2013, xvi), which, in turn he deemed to be a form of propaganda. He understood such songs as being either "magnetic" which were intended to bring people into the social movement and promote in-group solidarity and commitment to the particular cause, or "rhetorical", which he argued offered a direct political message with the purpose of changing an individual's political opinion on a specific issue. In essence such songs of protest are “inherently oppositional; ... vehicles for the expression of the oppressed or those opposing” whatever issue is being protested against. Accordingly we should conceive of protest songs as ways of “resisting or undermining power relations of various kinds, or as a pivotal element in shaping the expression of politically relevant identities” (Piotrowska 2013, 280).

Eyerman and Jamison (1998) see protest songs not just as propaganda (in the way that Denisoff [1968] does); they are simultaneously interested in how they function as performance events. As such, the ‘actors’ involved in the performance ‘transaction’, i.e. “musicians undertaking various actions which could be labelled as resistance” and the audience, the consumer of the “coded message of contestation” (Piotrowska 2013, 283), who may or may not have the ability to decode the implied or explicit message contained within the lyrics, are the central areas of interest<sup>3</sup>. 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). 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).<sup>4</sup>

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. Moreover, as consumers (and scholars and critics) of such music we participate in “a lived social experience with music”, where the music turn out to be a “discursive element in our worlds” and “offers insight into our lives” (Peddie 2006, xxiv). Accordingly, methodologically when contemplating on the relationship between protest and song, many scholars have tended to focus on delivering a deep contextual analysis of the lyrics (“treating song words as manifestos contesting social conditions”) and their reception by the audience (Piotrowska 2013, 282)<sup>5</sup>. I pursue the same approach here, while all the while being cognisant of the fact that music is also central to the delivery and reception of the message.

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### **Billy Bragg**

“I don’t mind being called a political singer/songwriter, but I really object to being dismissed as a political singer/songwriter. I write about the way the world is” (Bragg, cited in Hutcheon 2004, 83). Billy Bragg is an anti-establishment figure who continues to provoke debate amongst critics and fans. But who exactly is he? Cashell (2012) posits that while Bragg is frequently seen as merely following in the footsteps of American singer-songwriters Guthrie

and Dylan, he in fact radicalized the British folk tradition, opening up new avenues for musical activism. Following this line of argument, in this chapter I contend that Bragg has employed his lyrics and activism to represent the struggles of the (international) working class and in the case of this particular song build a counter narrative to discourses which presents elite privilege (via the political system) as innate and ‘natural’.

Billy Bragg was raised in the working-class East London suburb of Barking and is a passionate supporter of the political Left<sup>6</sup>. He had a brief ‘career’ in the British army, having left formal education at 16, before committing exclusively to music. The short stint in the army however was an important factor in teaching Billy about class. “This was the first time he’d tangibly seen class... In the army, class is an important, clearly defined issue. You can see it in operation, in living colour, within the ranks” (Collins 2002, 78-79). Crucially, Bragg developed his political consciousness at a time when the then British primeminister, Margaret Thatcher’s policies were devastating working class communities across Britain<sup>7</sup>. Her neoliberal programme amalgamated a free-market economy, privatisation of state-owned industries, lower direct taxation, and the retraction of the welfare state (Bhattacharyya 2002, 63). The destruction of traditional working-class industries in particular was a consequence of the Tory governments’ economic policies which were “explicitly political and intended to destroy the capacity of the organised trade union movement in its citadels of power” (Byrne 1999, 65). By 1981 Thatcher’s “radical market driven policies” saw unemployment rates hit 3 million (Rogan 1992, 133).

“In 1984 Bragg began to “hit his political stride” with the release of *Brewing Up with Billy Bragg* (Willhardt 2006, 40) and it was the Miners’ Strike<sup>8</sup> of that same year, which gave Bragg his “political education”. “Having grown up in a household where politics was seldom if ever mentioned”, playing gigs in support of the striking miners taught him to “think in an ideological way” and encouraged his inner activist (Bragg 2006, 3). When it was over he

“considered himself totally politicised” (Collins 2002, 145). At one particular gig in Sunderland in September 1984, Bragg found himself having to justify his position (“where I was *vis-à-vis* the class struggle, where I was *vis-à-vis* Marx, the Labour Party...”) to the miners and their supporters “in a more ideological way” (Collins 2002, 144). These gigs were also instrumental in broadening his “musical palette”, via his encounters with “the more politically motivated folk musicians, activists in a field from which he’d taken so much indirect inspiration” (Collins 2002, 144).

Yet it should be noted that it was “the lessons he learnt from the mistakes of The Clash” (Bragg 2007, 198) which provided the template for his specific method of “organising the scatter bomb anarchism of punk into coherent ‘aesthetics of resistance’” (Weiss 2005, cited in Cashell 2011, 6-7; see also Collins 2002) in order to “mobilize culture for social change” (Bragg 2007, 199). Bragg’s lyrical content therefore, while conscious of his folk predecessors, is infused with the spirit of punk rock.

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Punk rock injected my songwriting with urgency and attitude and helped me to find my voice... I began formulating a plan whereby I would utilise the vulnerability of the singer-songwriter and mix it with the angry attitude of punk rock. To do this, 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... As I became more confident, my early influences began to seep back into my songwriting. (Bragg 2015, xiii- xv)

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Being a solo-performer thus embodies Bragg’s continued faithfulness to the “DIY ethos of punk culture” (Collins 2002, 137). Cashell (2011, 13-14) argues that social injustices and class politics<sup>9</sup> form the “essence” of Bragg’s compositions and subtly govern their “structure at a deep level”. Bragg for example effortlessly captures the seemingly endless struggles of the working class in “Between the Wars” (1984), while “Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards” (1988) engages the “pop-and-politics-don’t mix” argument head on (see Collins 2002, 193). Moreover, Cashell (2011, 13) argues that ultimately his earlier songs (in

particular) significantly depart from the accepted standard for successful commercial songs<sup>10</sup> in that “typically they are composed of two or three stanzas sometimes with a chorus, but more often a coda, concluding couplet, or last-line refrain. The latter is prominent in “Ideology” (1986), which I examine shortly.

While Bragg began his career “building social protest” (against the Thatcher administrations’ attempts to smash the Miners) as a supplement to his “musical message” he has arrived at a place where he can now engage “the national press to profess his ideas” (Willhardt 2006, 46). Bragg’s understanding of his evolving place in the British “political landscape” has allowed him use “music for one final authentication”. For over two decades now he has written pieces for the English political magazine *The New Statesman*, in the process “making substantial political proposals”. His music and political activism has given him regular access to “widely disseminated ‘legitimate’ magazines which other pop musicians simply do not have”. As a consequence he has created “an authentic, political use for his art” (Willhardt 2006, 44).

Although Bragg has been 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” and is the “ultimate critique” of “traditional, Frankfurt school approaches to the relevance of popular music” by “tying music to political concerns” (Power et al. 2012, 387)

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### **Ideology**

“Ideology is the most elusive concept in the whole of social science... it asks about the bases and validity of our most fundamental ideas” (McLellan 1986, 1). “Until very recently ‘ideology’ was almost always used pejoratively. It was, as the philosophers used to put it, a ‘boo word’ (Drucker 1972, 157). But our understanding of ideology has undergone many



revisions and re-developments (see Wodak and Meyer 2016). While acknowledging that de Tracy (1801) was the first to define Ideology as the Science of Ideas, I am in agreement with Drucker (1972, 152-53) who argues that “the career of ideology begins with Marx” and is “of value precisely because it points to a complex relationship between phenomena not usually seen to be related at all”. Moreover “Marx’s partizanship towards the proletariat and his attempt to direct that class to the path of revolution...is central to his concept of ideology” (Drucker 1972, 158). Ideology according to Marx is essentially ‘false consciousness’, a mechanism utilised by the Bourgeoisie to prevent people from seeing the inherent injustice of the economic base and convince the working class that the current state of production is ‘natural’ and justified, in the process ensuring compliance. Following Marx, Antonio Gramsci developed his theory of ‘cultural hegemony’, whereby he saw the bourgeoisie using ‘cultural institutions’ to maintain power (Gramsci [1935] 1971). In this process the institutions that form ‘the superstructure’ utilise ideology to produce a hegemonic culture, which underpins and protects the status quo to the benefit of the ruling class (Harkins and Lugo Ocando 2017; see also Althusser 1969 for a discussion on ideology as a function of class power).

In the political sphere the existence of a dichotomous Left / Right cleavage (see Dukelow and Considine 2017) was evident globally right up until the beginning of the 1990s when the collapse of State Communism behind the ‘Iron Curtain’ occurred. Francis Fukayama’s highly influential *End of History* was published in 1992 and argued that liberal democratic capitalism had ‘won’. In essence these events (amongst others) heralded the beginning of the ‘Post-Ideological society’, and the promotion / acceptance of Neoliberal ‘Meritocracy’. The Rightward shift of many centre Left political parties during this period, which was also marked by intensifying economic integration, was significant in “facilitating the predominance of market neo-liberalism” which has “become the major challenge of our

times” (Dukelow and Considine 2017, 116). This particular period saw many academics (and politicians and commentators) arguing that ideology was a dated concept which served little use in contemporary debates (see for example Abercrombie and Turner 1978; Corner 2001; Hawkes 2003) and in turn saw critical Marxist ideas jettisoned wholesale in academia and elsewhere. Although this was not a universal viewpoint (see for example Gitlin 1980; Eagleton 1991), ideology as a concept was nonetheless severely criticised for being intangible and too ambiguous (Marron 2016, 31).

Yet I argue that the ‘Post-Ideological’ world is a myth, a fallacy of neo-liberalism; which in fact works as an ideological strategy in itself. Thompson’s (1990, 8) understanding of ideology continues to resonate and is still particularly useful for my analysis in this chapter. He focuses on the interplay of meaning and power; examining how meaning serves to sustain “asymmetrical relations of domination”. In essence ideology is understood as the provision of “meaning in the service of power” (Marron 2016, 32). Thompson’s definition focuses on 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). Finally, by focusing in on dominant ideology Thompson is acknowledging that alternative / counter hegemonic ideologies exist, which offer us the possibility of resistance to the dominant perspectives we are subjected to (see Van Dijk 1998 for a discussion on how dominated groups need ideologies as a foundation for resistance).

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### **Meritocracy: A Fair and Equitable Society?**

In our so-called ‘Post-Ideological societies’ the Neoliberal Meritocracy has been consistently championed. In a meritocracy it is the individual alone who decides whether they are a success or failure (Drudy and Lynch 1993; Considine and Dukelow 2009). Yet Meritocracy is

itself an ideology which proffers that unlimited opportunities exist for each and every one of us to achieve social mobility – the world is essentially our oyster (see Considine and Dukelow 2009, 287–99), with innate talent, hard work, and having the right attitude and moral virtue seen as the only requirements for success, and a corresponding lack of same being the cause of failure (McNamee and Miller, 2004). Essentially in a meritocratic society “ability and effort count for more than privilege and inherited status” (Hurn 1993, 45). Proponents of this system argue that a meritocratic society is more just and productive and the impact of class, race and gender will weaken over time (McNamee and Miller 2004).

The promotion of the ‘meritocratic’ society has occurred at the same time as Neoliberal governments have been introducing policies which have increased social and economic inequality (for an overview see Considine and Dukelow 2009; Dukelow and Considine 2017). I would argue that the rhetoric around our ‘meritocratic’ societies serves to ensure that the “existing unequal societal status quo seem ‘natural’” (Hill 2003, cited in Kennedy and Power 2010, 226). Consequently, the discourse of meritocracy ‘justifies’ the privileged societal position of the dominant classes exclusively on the basis of their innate “giftedness” (Bourdieu 1977), while simultaneously ensuring acceptance of this unequal system from the disadvantaged – essentially it is part of the process that both Marx and Gramsci identified. In this context, it is significant that Michael Young, who coined the word ‘meritocracy’, conceived of it in profoundly negative terms. “If such individuals / groups believe, as they are encouraged to, that their success results entirely from their own ability, they will feel they fully deserve the fruits of their labour, while those who fail in such a system may well internalise that they are the cause of their own misfortune” (Young 2001).

“In such ‘Post-Ideological’ societies “where individualistic self-interest is the default position and any attempt at political discussion is likely to be met with cynicism, the potential

for music to once again become a medium with a message is apparent... Music can act as the glue that binds us together in our struggles for a fairer society” (Bragg 2011, xi-xii).

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### **Ideology: A Reading**

Against this contextual background I now examine Bragg’s song(s) “Ideology”<sup>11</sup>, which was released as track four on Bragg’s album *Talking to the Taxman About Poetry* (1986)<sup>12</sup> and “The Clashing of Ideologies” (alternative version)<sup>13</sup> which appeared on the *Talking to the Taxman about Poetry* reissue (2006). It is important to note that while the song(s) do(es) not only operate at a lyrical level, for the purpose of this chapter I am solely concentrating on providing a textual reading (see endnote 4 for further details).

Frith (1998, 103) argues that it is “possible to read back from lyrics to the social forces that produced them”.<sup>14</sup> The lyrics of “Ideology / The Clashing of Ideologies” (1986; 2006) critique 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 song begins with Bragg questioning the clarity of the path that our ‘democratically elected’ Neoliberal ruling elite have 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”. By way of resolving this disagreement we can look to the European Social Survey (2014; ESS) which provides data on European’s understandings and evaluations of democracy. What the ESS data clearly shows is 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. However, these same people are resolute in their belief that their democracies “fall short of these expectations” (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”). The lyrics talk 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 European polities (Svallfors 2012, 3). The ESS data shows that participants from almost all countries are supportive of relatively “far-ranging government involvement in the well-being of its residents”, yet overall satisfaction with “what the welfare state actually achieves is not overwhelming anywhere in Europe” (Svallfors 2012, 5-6).

Bragg (2015, 120) has previously spoken of how his “belief in parliamentary democracy was severely tested during the Red Wedge campaign. His views on this clearly influence the song(s) in question, and the lyrics discuss how politicians that we elect for “their high ideals” in reality just pay our democratic wishes “lip service” when they feel like it. He continues; “Far from being committed to radical change, elements of the Labour Party were just time-serving hacks who had little interest in engaging with a new generation of potential Labour voters (“Is there more to a seat in parliament than sitting on your arse”). Tellingly, Bragg 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”. This was especially the case when considering the electoral success of New Labour under the stewardship of Tony Blair. In 2006 Bragg (153-54) argued that while the

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perceived wisdom is that Blair won (the General Election) by taking his party to the centre of British politics. In fact, Blair has governed from the right of centre, cosyng up to big business... and doing things that Thatcher never dared attempt, such as gifting the private sector vast swathes of education and health care... The notion of Blair as a centrist only makes sense when seen against the backdrop of the ideological divisions of the 1980s.

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“The Clashing of Ideologies” (2006) takes aim at New Labour in this regard when the lyrics highlight that “another dose of welfare cuts is passed without a word, From those who claim to represent the centre of this nation”.

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 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%)<sup>15</sup>, with the overwhelming majority of them also having a university education<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, their study highlights the “professionalization of politics”<sup>17</sup> with approximately 25% of MPs

having politics as their occupational background, which was the largest percentage for any occupational group (Hunter and Holden 2015, 2). As educational credentials become increasingly devalued<sup>18</sup> 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 recognized 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 and Stanley Lewis 1990, xiii) and this has led to the charge that the system serves primarily as a “screening device, effectively operating as a gatekeeper to these positions” (Young 1990, 207).

Ultimately, Bragg’s “Ideology” and “The Clashing of Ideologies” are persuasive enough for us to come to an understanding that millions of citizens have been sold out by their respective ideological ‘democratic’ political systems, which have undermined 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. “The Western model of market democracy is losing its universal appeal and the West’s own liberal-democratic regimes are facing an internal crisis” (Krastev 2016, 5). Of course, they are still democratic in that “voters can change governments” come election time, but given that Neoliberalism has gained such a hegemonic position globally, changing governments doesn’t necessarily (and in many cases has not) result(ed) in a change in policies, and as a consequence social inequalities have continued to increase in recent decades (Krastev 2016, 5-8). Over this period trust in political institutions has quickly deteriorated across what are established democracies, and citizens (particularly younger ones<sup>19</sup>) “have not only grown more critical of their political leaders,

they have also become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives” (Foa and Mounk 2016, 6-7). This process has certainly had a significant role to play in the Brexit result (2016), the election of Donald J Trump as president of the United States<sup>20</sup> (2016) and the rise of the Right in Europe (such as Marine Le Pen in France) and elsewhere. The ever increasing democratic deficit may well see such “anti-establishment feeling” further increasing with “traditionally ideologically opposing cohorts” ending up on the “same side of key debates but for completely different reasons”. The extent to which it impacts on politics and how our ‘democracies’ function into the future can only be addressed by the “will and capacity of nation states to rebalance their policies in favour of their peoples” (Dukelow and Considine 2017, 117). In essence, I would argue that a move away from the hegemony of the Neoliberal model is required to achieve such an outcome.

In that regard, the UK General Election of 2017 offers some interesting food for thought. Jeremy Corbyn, a self-styled democratic socialist committed to the reversing of austerity and the renationalisation of public services was elected as Leader of the UK Labour Party in 2015. In June 2016, following the resignation of the majority of his ‘Blairite’ Shadow Cabinet, Labour MPs passed a vote of no confidence in him by 172 votes to 40, yet he survived a leadership contest (which was voted on by the Party members) with an increased vote share. In the snap election called in 2017 “most of his MPs expected him to lead Labour to a shattering defeat; in the event, he has inspired an astonishing revival” (*New Statesman* 2017), with the Labour Party’s share of the vote nationally increasing by almost 10% from the 2015 election (BBC 2017). The public (particularly a re-energised youth vote) had spoken. They didn’t want a return to the politics of New Labour and had backed Corbyn’s policy commitments. “Labour’s performance in the general election seals the deal



after at least 20 years of discussion. The question now is not whether but how to put democratic socialist ideas into practice” (Fletcher 2017). Does this now signal the return to a clear Left v Right ideological divide in British Politics and a genuine challenge to the hegemonic position of Neoliberalism?

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### **Conclusions**

It is refreshing to find that in spite of hegemonic discourses still being fashioned by elite sections of our societies, popular music<sup>21</sup> continually provides counter-hegemonic narratives (such as those offered in the tracks examined in this chapter and volume) which circumnavigate the globe. This chapter has argued that “Ideology” (1986) continues to resonate more than thirty years after its initial release - perhaps even more so now. 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.

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Music can play a role in bringing about change but it doesn’t really have agency... Only the audience has the agency and the ability to change the world and what we can do is by bringing people together around a particular event, around a particular song, to express solidarity, to express financial support like I did during the miners’ strike but fundamentally I have believed for a long time that in this wonderful exchange of ideas it’s only the audience that can change the world, not the artist. (Bragg 2017)

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While I agree to a certain extent with Bragg’s assertion here, I would argue that he does himself (and other singers of protest songs) a disservice in arriving at such a conclusion. The ideas presented in “Ideology / The Clashing of Ideologies” (1986; 2006) are interpolated into Dennisoff’s (1968) categorisation of protest song as ‘magnetic’ or ‘rhetorical’ and I conclude that they operate as both. Both tracks offer a direct political message which 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 'authentic' (as Bragg is) proves to be vital for the target audience taking the message offered in these protest songs on board. Finally, the longevity of the message contained in "Ideology" (1986) 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). To this end, I argue that song lyrics, rather than merely being social commentary at a given point in time, actually have potential as social intervention, with many tracks taking on a new life with a different set of social circumstances.

In conclusion, I concur with musician and author Dave Randall (whose own political awakening began when he heard the Special AKA's "Free Nelson Mandela"<sup>22</sup> for the first time) who argues passionately that

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...those of us who love music have a role to play... we need to take concrete steps towards securing music as a tool for social progress – one that contributes to the building of a mass movement capable of changing the world... Understanding culture and reclaiming music will help to reveal the bigger picture and inspire hope. (Randall 2017a, 196-97)

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This chapter (and indeed this volume) hopefully provides a road map to show how this is both desirable, and entirely possible.

Over to you readers!

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Weiss (2005) cited in Cashell (2011, 6-7).

<sup>2</sup> These are in effect versions of the same song.

<sup>3</sup> Those who write / sing protest songs fall into three groups: those who take their involvement in protest / activism seriously (such as Billy Bragg), those who criticize power

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relations through their art alone (Piotrowska 2013, 284) and a third group who cynically exploit an opportunity to sell their work and make profit.

<sup>4</sup> Songs of protest in particular need strong and charismatic figures to perform them (see Peddie 2006).

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this chapter a deep contextual reading of the lyrics of this song makes an interesting case study in how a song of protest can be read. However, I acknowledge that “in focusing on lyrics, scholars all too often overlook the importance of music and the choice of musical devices” I am not arguing that “music in protest song merely serves as a background for the lyrics” (Piotrowska 2013, 283), on the contrary, “the delivery of the message must be as profoundly satisfying musically as it is politically potent” (see Peddie 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Bragg’s commitment to International socialism has remained steadfast throughout the numerous “disappointments of the recent past: from the defeat of the miners to the loss of the 1987 election, from the disintegration of Red Wedge to the fall of communism and the rise of far-right nationalism to the ultimate failure: New Labour’s capitulation to Thatcherite neoliberalism and its betrayal of the principles of democratic socialism” (Cashell 2011, 24).

<sup>7</sup> Bragg (2006, 3) describes how during this time he “found a new dissenting faith, internationalist in spirit, collective in principle, committed to social justice, and determined to hold those in power to account”.

<sup>8</sup> The 1984 UK Miners’ Strike was one of the most bitter industrial disputes in British history and was characterised by violent confrontations between strikers and the police. The strike arose from an attempt by the British coal industry and the Tory government to close collieries. The end result was a decisive victory for the Thatcher government (see Macintyre 2014 for a discussion on the lasting legacy of the strike).

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<sup>9</sup> Though of course his songs are not only concerned with issues of social class. “I was fortunate that my breakthrough in 1983-84 coincided with a resurgence in the art of songwriting... These were politically charged times and my songwriting reflected the struggles that were going on, not only on the picket lines, but also in the bedroom (Bragg 2015, xv-xvi). *Don't Try This At Home* (1991) for example opened with “Sexuality”, a track which illustrates “a shift from a social politics figured around groups such as unions to a politics figured (literally) on the bodies of individuals” (Willhardt 2006, 42).

<sup>10</sup> This is the “verse-chorus format” and usually the song will also include a “middle 8 section” (Cashell 2011, 13).

<sup>11</sup> The lyrics to this song are available at

[http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/billy+bragg/ideology\\_20018227.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/billy+bragg/ideology_20018227.html).

<sup>12</sup> Collins (2002, 179) contends that many think of this album as Bragg’s finest work, describing it as an “‘ideological cuddle’, to lift a phrase from “Greetings” [to the New Brunette]”, which was the second single released from the *Talking to the Taxman about Poetry* album in 1986.

<sup>13</sup> The first two verses of the song are the same but this version has two different verses to finish the track. The lyrics to this song are available at

[http://www.lyricsmania.com/the\\_clashing\\_of\\_ideologies\\_lyrics\\_billy\\_bragg.html](http://www.lyricsmania.com/the_clashing_of_ideologies_lyrics_billy_bragg.html).

<sup>14</sup> In undertaking this process I was mindful of Creswell (1998) and Berger (1972) arguing that how we interpret things and understand the social world is affected by our prior beliefs and experiences as well as our social position at present. They further comment on the necessity of being reflective as our values and ideologies may replicate in our work. While I am currently an academic, I come from a strong working class background. The town where I spent my formative years has a long history of coal mining and a strong connection to working class political movements. My father in particular had an enormous influence on my

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political and social beliefs and from a relatively early age I was aware of the structural reasons why certain groups are pigeonholed by dominant groups who have their positions of power to protect.

<sup>15</sup> Around 52% of Conservative MPs; 17% Lib Dems; and 12% Labour MPs went to fee paying schools (Hunter and Holden 2015, 2).

<sup>16</sup> Nearly a quarter (23%) went to Oxford or Cambridge (similar to 2005 and 2010). Approximately 45% of Conservative MPs attended Oxbridge with the corresponding figure for Labour MPs being 14% (Hunter and Holden 2015, 2).

<sup>17</sup> Hunter and Holden (2015, 2) report that “the occupational background of MPs continues to be ever more biased toward business and the ‘metropolitan professions’, particularly finance, law, public affairs, and politics” Again there are significant differences between the parties with only 4% of Labour MPs having worked in finance compared to almost ¼ of Tory MPs.

<sup>18</sup> See Kennedy and Power (2010).

<sup>19</sup> See for example Squires and Goldsmith (2017) on broken society, anti-social contracts and the failing State in the context of rethinking youth marginality.

<sup>20</sup> The electoral system of the ‘Greatest Democracy on Earth’ came under greater scrutiny with the election of the Republican Party nominee, businessman and reality television personality Donald Trump. Trump won 304 Electoral College votes but lost the popular vote by just short of 3 million votes.

<sup>21</sup> Some would argue that popular music is now dominated by an elite and while I would agree with this viewpoint to a certain extent I am of the view that no other area of popular culture has consistently produced counter-hegemonic narratives in the manner that popular music has.

<sup>22</sup> In 1984 British musician Jerry Dammers and the band The Special A.K.A released this song which protested against the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela by the apartheid South

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African government. “This was my introduction to Global Politics, to politics full stop... I washed up to this festival and the DJ dropped this tune... Now I had no idea who Nelson Mandela was at the time, I was only in my early teens, but I knew by the end of the first chorus that I wanted him to be free... being surrounded by these festival goers hollering the hook I had a sense for the first time that maybe the future is unwritten and maybe ordinary people like me can have some sort of a say in what happens next (Randall 2017b).