

Conflicted identity of the working class in born in the usa



The conflicted identity of the working class in *Born in the USA*

Bruce Springsteen is widely regarded as a 'working class hero'. His seminal 1984 album 'Born in the USA' is often viewed as a symbol of the identity of working-class Americans in the 1980s. In this commentary, I will explore the reflection and creation of collective class identification in Springsteen's lyrics. I will reflect upon how this group identity is linked with his own typically masculine performance style and public image using social identity theory and theories of gender performativity. Ultimately, I will argue that *Born in the USA* provides a conflicted representation of working-class America which both idealises and critiques the blue-collar identity.

The collective identity of social groups is central to the representation of identity in *Born in the USA*. Francesca Polletta and James Jasper define collective identity broadly as 'an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connections with a broader community, category, practice, or institution' (284). In this commentary, I will focus more specifically on Springsteen's representation of working-class and masculine groups as identity 'categories'. Early class theorists defined 'class' in terms of economic means and social power. However, recent sociology increasingly 'places issues of cultural identity at the heart of class theory' (Bottero 988). Signs of this type of socially constructed group identity can, therefore, be found both in Springsteen's lyrics of economic and social hardship as well as in the audience's reception to his work as a cultural text.

Firstly, Springsteen's lyrics convey the nature of working-class identity through the depiction of a collective nostalgia. Elizabeth Seymour argues

that this nostalgia is fundamental to the construction of identity in Springsteen's work. This nostalgia is evident in the track 'glory days' in which the lyrics use images familiar to ordinary, working-class Americans such as a 'roadside bar' and 'assembly line'. The 'assembly line' is symbolic of manual labour, a key stereotype of working-class identity. The 'roadside bar' is also closely associated with small-town America. The fact that these images exist so prevalently in Springsteen's work reflects the fact that he identifies as part of this working-class group. Furthermore, nostalgia, as defined by Seymour, centres around the 'nostos', meaning return home (63). This focus is evident in the album's final track, 'my hometown', in which the narrator recounts images of his hometown during different points in his life. This concept of a 'hometown' is fundamentally linked to a communal identity that, whilst rooted in geography, encompasses a wider social identity. The 'hometown' provides a universal image to which audience members can relate.

As well as simply reflecting an existing working-class identity in American society, it could be posited that Springsteen's work ultimately furthers this sense of identity amongst the audience. The common bond that fans share due to similar musical preferences can be seen to reinforce their identity as a collective. This is in line with Bourdieu's view that class differences are reproduced through the differentiated nature of the tastes of class groups (Bourdieu). However, even if this grouping is assumed to be unrelated to class boundaries, the appreciation of Springsteen's music could be seen to create an entirely new 'community' of fans that would still fit Polletta and

Jasper's definition of a collective identity. This could perhaps be interpreted as a limitation of this broad description of collective identity.

Whilst group identity plays a large part in the cultural significance of this album, it would be remiss not to explore Springsteen's presentation of his individual identity in the performance of this material. Richard Jenkins argues that group categorization and self-definition are fundamentally 'interdependent' (9). If we adopt this perspective, then Springsteen's own self-image can be seen to cement his place within the wider identity group of the working-class.

In many ways, Springsteen embodies the values and stereotypes of working-class Americans. This process of adapting to the stereotypical characteristics of a group is labelled 'social identification' (Tajfel & Turner 1979). He fashions himself as a patriotic and hard-working figure, a traditional stereotype of working-class men. Despite the hard times of the 1980s, a sense of patriotism was still a defining characteristic of working-class America. This patriotism was put on show during Springsteen's concerts in the *Born in the USA* era in which he often held a 'huge American flag' on stage (Heissenberger 107).

Springsteen also arguably adheres to the hypermasculine stereotype of the working-class. Jim Cullen regards Springsteen's persona as one of 'vibrant, working class, white male heterosexuality' (Heissenberger 102). This self-defined identity is reinforced through Springsteen's physical appearance. In concert, he wears 'blue jeans, work shirt and occasional bandana or baseball cap to absorb the sweat of his brow' (Heissenberger 102). This image a man

labouring on stage provides a visual representation of this working-class masculinity. He is also represented wearing these 'blue jeans' on the cover of the album itself, suggesting that he identifies strongly with his working-class background. This reflects Judith Butler's ideas about the way that gender is performed. She emphasises the significant role of physical appearance in gender construction, stating that 'the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body' (Butler 25). This 'performativity' of gender is arguably heightened in public figures such as Springsteen who physically perform for an audience. Springsteen's individual aesthetic choices can, therefore, be taken to reinforce his status as a member of both the working class and masculine social groups.

However, whilst Springsteen provides an often-nostalgic view of working-class identity and identifies with several stereotypical working-class male characteristics, I will argue that he also exposes the darker side of this type of rigid social identity. A key criticism of patriotic working-class identity is exemplified in the album's title track which traces the roots of a soldier sent to Vietnam. On one hand, the refrain of 'Born in the USA' in the chorus mimics the singalong nature of a sports chant or an anthem, with powerful, repetitive instrumentation to support it. This seemingly patriotic chorus arguably conforms to the expectations of working-class national pride.

However, there is a clear contrast between the anthemic chorus, which could even be interpreted as ironic, and the lyrics of the verses that reveal the damaging impact of war on social identity.

Social identity groups become less clear upon a closer reading of the lyrics of this song as the distinction between the central character, a soldier, and his

<https://assignbuster.com/conflicted-identity-of-the-working-class-in-born-in-the-usa/>

enemies is hard to pinpoint. This soldier is sent to war by an unidentified group in his hometown, referred to as 'they' (Springsteen). This creates a sense of othering, suggesting that the soldier does not identify with this group, presumably the authorities in his hometown. This is particularly interesting as these would typically be viewed as his 'allies' both in terms of class and military status. From this, it could be concluded that he does not identify with his own regional or class group. In the narrator's descriptions of the supposed enemy there is a similar sense of ambiguity. Vietnam is described as 'a foreign land' and the Viet Cong as 'the yellow man' (Springsteen). Perhaps troublingly, these similar descriptions create a parallel between the 'they' of the Vietcong and the 'they' of the draft authorities. If we apply Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, which suggests that the in-group defines itself in relation to an external group, then the vague and undefined nature of the allies and enemy could be seen as the root of the soldier's own isolation (Tajfel and Turner).

The final verse focuses on the soldier's struggle to find employment on his return from the war. This shows the darker side of the social patriotism that led the men to war. In fact, the song ends with a sense of confusion. 'Nowhere to run ain't got nowhere to go'(Springsteen). The character is left without a job and is no longer in the army. Without the membership of these social groups, the man's social identity seems unclear. Tajfel and Turner suggest that social identity is a vital part of the person, and without this group membership the narrator appears alienated (Tajfel and Turner). The total confusion of the individual character that results from a loss of group membership appears to support Jenkins' theory that self-definition is strongly

linked to the categorization of groups. Therefore, this narrative can even be read as a warning against the dangers of exclusion from a group identity.

If we push this reading further, the confusion and alienation could also be taken as a metaphor for the wider shift in working-class identity that occurred during the Vietnam War. This conflict blurred the boundaries of group identity as the working class was expected to be ' pro-America' but many were disproportionately impacted by the conflict and so considered themselves to be ' anti-war' (Cowie and Boehm 364). These ideals can be seen to clash and arguably create two different identity ' categories' as outlined Poletta and Jasper's collective identity definition. It can, therefore, be concluded that this song exposes the ' dualities' of working-class social identity' (Cowie and Boehm 359).


In conclusion, when reflecting through the lens of collective identity theory and examining ideas of gender performativity, the audience can gain an understanding of the multifaceted portrayal of identity contained in *Born in the USA*. Springsteen's work is rife with nostalgic and stereotypically masculine images that reflect key determinants of class and gender identity. However, the album was not only a reflection of this identity but rather a ' redefinition of civic identity for white male workers' (Cowie 354). On the surface, through his portrayal of identity on stage and in his lyrics, Springsteen demonstrated a positive sense of collective identity.

Nevertheless, the application of identity theory reveals a more complex picture of working-class male identity. The isolation that comes from an inability to define collective identity is clear in Springsteen's lyrics. Overall,

Springsteen's album is a powerful one as it embraces the conflicted nature of social identity.

Bibliography:

- Bourdieu, P., 1987. What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, Volume 32, pp. 1-17.
- Butler, J., 1990. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Cowie, J., 2010. *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. New York: The New Press .
- Cowie, J. & Boehm, L., 2006. Dead Man's Town: ' Born in the U. S. A.' Social History and Working-Class Identity.. *American Quarterly*, 58(2), pp. 353-378.
- Heissenberger, K. D. 2003. An All-American Body? Bruce Springsteen's Working-Class Masculinity in the 1980s. In: Tschachler, H, Devine, M & Draxlbauer, M eds. *The Embodiment of American Culture*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, pp. 101-11
- Jenkins, R., 2008. *Social Identity*. 3 ed. London: Routledge.
- Moss, Pamela. " Where Is the ' Promised Land'? : Class and Gender in Bruce Springsteen's Rock Lyrics." *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* , vol. 74, no. 3, 1992, pp. 167-187.

 **Seymour, E. “Where dreams are found and lost”: Springsteen, Nostalgia and Identity”. *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream.***

 **Springsteen, B. *Born in the U. S. A.* Columbia, 1984**

- Tajfel, H. & Turner, J., 1979. An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In: W. G. Austin & S. Worchel, eds. *The social psychology of intergroup relations.* Monterey: Brooks/Cole, pp. 33-47.