Music, class, and protest. hard hats and hoodies: the songs of two working-class British protest singers

Music, Class & Protest: The Case of Two Working-Class, British Protest Singers.

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This chapter is concerned with what popular music protest song texts (music and words) and their performance/performers tell us about society and the class system, and how, in the process of doing so, articulate a class politics. Any critical reading of a singer/song/performance requires both broad theoretical and contextual readings of class and protest, along with fine-grained analysis of specific examples. In order to illustrate the complex relationship between popular music, protest, and class, we hone in on two artists from British, working-class backgrounds and from different popular music genres. Folk singer-songwriter Billy Bragg (1957-) and hip-hop MC Lady Sovereign (1985-) are treated as particular kinds of exemplars in the study of white, working-class, protest singers from the UK. These case studies do not attempt to offer all-encompassing theoretical or methodological approaches to studying popular music, class, and protest, particularly given the many variables and intersectional issues any artist, music genre, or geographic/temporal location brings. However, our intention is to illustrate that any discussion of class and protest within popular music needs to rigorously define what constitutes class as well as critically appraise how protesting becomes aligned with class identity, as illustrated through specific music examples. In this chapter, Bragg's "Between the Wars" (1985) represent a critique of neo-liberal capitalism and the concomitant decimation of working-class lives, while Lady Sovereign's "Hoodie" (2006) speaks to the demonisation of working-class youths and the stigmatisation they receive for their sartorial choices (that are viewed as deviant), which in turn has real-life implications for the wearers.

The chapter is structured as follows; it begins with a critical appraisal of social class and the more recent attempts to undermine it by suggestions that we live in a post ideological world. Particular attention is paid to working-class Britain and the neo-liberal political agenda, providing a broader context for a later discussion of Bragg and Lady Sovereign. The next section discusses social protest in general terms and then offers a brief overview of some key political events from 1985 to the present in the United Kingdom, in order to provide a historical, and socio-political and cultural context for the two songs to be discussed. Prior to performing this song analysis, a discussion of the relationship between music and protest is offered. On turning to the two case studies, "Between the Wars" and "Hoodie" are analysed, illustrating how they grapple with working-class struggles and act as powerful protest songs, drawing on different structures of feeling and different target audiences in order to make their respective points. We conclude by reflecting on the efficacy of protest song in the articulation of class struggles and consider the impact of artists such as Bragg and Lady Sovereign.

Class is Dead! Long Live the Class War from Above!

Social class is one of the most widely debated concepts in social science. Evans and Tilley 2017: 2) argue that "characterizations of class position have included numerous occupational classifications, status rankings, income levels, educational levels, subjective class identifications and lifestyles." Moreover, Calvert (1982: 214) observed that class is an "essentially contested concept" because of its social and political significance.

A Marxist philosophical perspective holds that there are intrinsic restrictions imposed by the structure of society on individual social actors, which ensures the continuance of dominant class interests in the implementation and make up of economic

and social policies (Sherman 1995). Critical theory, focusing on the construction of ideologies, culture, and the accumulation and use of capital, thus proves useful in illuminating the process whereby "material conditions and systems of ideology reproduce class structures" (Lincoln and Denzin 1998: 11). Marx's efforts to set the proletariat on the path to overthrow capitalism is of fundamental importance in understanding his concept of ideology (Drucker 1972: 158). For Marx, ideology is essentially "false consciousness," a mechanism utilised by the bourgeoisie to prevent us from seeing the inherent injustice of the economic base and to convince the working class that current arrangements are "natural" and therefore justified, which consequently ensures compliance. Following Marx, Antonio Gramsci developed his theory of "cultural hegemony," whereby he saw the bourgeoisie using "cultural institutions" to maintain power (Gramsci, 1971 [1935]). In this process the institutions that form "the superstructure" utilise ideology to produce a hegemonic culture, which reinforces current arrangement to the benefit of the ruling class (Harkins and Lugo Ocando 2018).

The early part of the 1990s proved to be very influential in terms of how our world operates. We saw the collapse of State Communism in Eastern Europe and Fukayama's (1992) highly influential "End of History" thesis argued that liberal democratic capitalism had won, signalling the commencement of the "Post-Ideological society," and the promotion/ acceptance of neoliberal ideas. In academia, the "death of class" thesis was widely accepted, partly as a result of the work of authors such as Pakulski and Walters (1996). Interestingly, Skeggs (2005: 45) argues that class disappeared from the academic radar at the exact moment that economic division reached unprecedented heights in the UK. Simultaneously there was an emergence of a political rhetoric of inclusion, classlessness, and social mobility (Skeggs 2005: 47 qtd. in Tyler 2008: 20).

Those adhering to the death of class thesis can be placed into a body of work which has a "theoretical focus on the decline of structural divisions more broadly" (Evans and Tilley 2017: 8) The primary argument being advanced is that increasing social mobility, prosperity, and educational attainment have weakened the unique characteristics of each of the social classes in an increasingly globalised world. Fundamental to much of this work is the postulation that classes are no longer immovable influences on our social identity and that very few people now hold "exclusively middle-class or working-class social characteristics" with the amount of overlap between class characteristics increasing significantly with each successive decade (Dalton 2008: 156 qtd. in Evans and Tilley 2017: 9). Yet, claims about the demise of class stratification contrast with copious evidence of persistent and increasing "class based inequalities of resources, opportunities and risks" (Evans and Tilley 2017: 9). For example, in the present-day UK the situation is that even when people from working-class backgrounds successfully secure employment in "elite occupations" they earn "on average, 16% less than colleagues from more privileged backgrounds" (Friedman and Laurison 2019: 209).

While those subscribing to the "death of class" thesis no longer see social class as being an element of social identity with which to strongly identify, others reconfigured understandings of class to focus on the cultural aspect (see for example Bourdieu 1986; Skeggs 1997), in the process demonstrating that processes of dis-identification from what has become a devalued working class identity are in fact "the result of class processes" (Bottero 2004: 989), in turn demonstrating that class remains an important element of social identity. A considerable body of the literature on social mobility begins from the assumption that once a person has arrived at their "class destination," via entry to a specific occupation, then the persons" starting class position no longer matters. Yet such an

assumption is ill informed as “class origin is deeply “sticky”” (Friedman and Laurison 2019: 221). While some of those individuals who have benefited from social mobility “no longer experience the hardships of economic poverty” they continue to “identify their culture of origin as the poverty class and remain grounded in that identity as surely as members of the middle class maintain their own class identities despite economic fluctuations” (Adair and Dahlberg 2003: 2).

Bourdieu’s (1986) forms of capital highlights how children of middle and upper class families have learned a type of cultural behaviour that allows each successive generation to “succeed” over and over again. In that context “beyond affordability lies a class-based preference in status symbols” (Henslin 2010:267) such as certain types of clothing, a person’s accent, cars, accessories, address, etc., which all act as visible signifiers of a person’s class background. In essence they are forms of embodied cultural capital (see Friedman and Laurison 2019: 213), which are devalued if they come to be seen as cultural manifestations of working class identity. Moreover, “networking with the ‘right’ people and crucially, knowing them well enough to leverage their backing [in the Bourdieusian sense] rigs the game of progression in favour of the privileged” (Friedman and Laurison 2019: 211). In essence, “similarity breeds connection.” This principle of “homophily” is “rooted in class origin” and has significant explanatory powers in understanding why the “class ceiling” remains relatively impervious to change (Friedman and Laurison 2019: 214).

Some would argue that recent decades have seen an accelerated class war from above, the enormous transfer of wealth upwards to ‘the 1%’ and market neo-liberalism achieving a hegemonic position globally, a scenario which has in effect “become the major challenge of our times” (Dukelow and Considine 2017: 116). Demonising the most disadvantaged in society has become an endemic feature of contemporary political and

popular discourse. Social issues like poverty, unemployment, and homelessness were once understood to be a consequence of the "inherent flaws of capitalism," yet in contemporary times these, and other similar issues have been constructed by the media, popular entertainment and the political establishment (via the Moral Underclass Discourse (Levitas 2000: 360) and the widespread acceptance of the meritocracy myth) as being the result of personal deficiencies, poor parenting (see Jensen 2018), lifestyle choice and a societal culture of dependence (Jones 2011: 10). Such victim blaming intentionally obscures the real reasons behind social problems such as poverty (see Shildrick 2018) and in the process conveniently absolves the state of their responsibility to address them (Jones 2011: 194-195). Yet in reality, such discourses merely reaffirm long held views about the "dangerous" working class who are declared to be a key risk to the moral and social order (see Tyler 2013; Skeggs, 1997; Golding and Middleton 1982), non-contributors to wealth and a major contributing factor to the decline of our societies (Skeggs 2005; Morris, 1994). The inevitable result has been that the welfare state has been eroded and "the poor live more precariously, more unhealthily, and die earlier. The low paid strata of the working class are duped and failed by the ideological apparatus of the state, kept in line and in prison by the repressive apparatus of the state" (Hill 2012: 149-150). Globally, many citizens have come to the conclusion that they have been sold out by their respective political systems undermining the "Social Contract" (Rousseau 1762), and in the process creating a "crisis of democratic legitimacy" (Foa and Mounk 2016: 6).

For all these reasons, we would 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, which focuses on the "social contexts within which symbolic forms are used" directs us to position the "study of meaning" and how it is utilised

in maintaining the mechanisms of domination within larger frameworks. Thompson acknowledges that counter hegemonic ideologies also exist. Thus, the development of (subjective) class consciousness, whereby people see through the "blindfolds of media manipulation and scholastic segregation, and become committed to class struggle" (Hill 2012: 156) is entirely possible, though it is largely dependent on how those alternative ideologies are communicated to us. This argument is important when we come to look later at our chosen artists' work.

Social Protest

What is protest and why do we need it? Protest is a legitimate, even essential, aspect of modern democratic societies, "a discursive intervention, designed to dramaturgically disrupt dominant discourses, to promote alternative frameworks of understanding and to demand their actualisation" (Power et al. 2016: 266). Social protest is a form of "political expression" that seeks to bring about meaningful social change on causes which range from "identity politics, to cultural, social, economic or political issues" (Cable 2016: 2), by influencing the existing "knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours of the public or the policies of an organization or institution" (McLeod 2011). Mass protest epitomizes the operationalisation of democracy outside of the formal political system, and is an essential function in a just society, even if such protest can sometimes be violent. Contemporary times have seen a renewal of "mass movement as a popular means of responding to structural inequalities requiring fundamental changes in the manner in which we organise our societies" in the process, speaking to the failure of institutional politics to adequately address those challenges" (Dillane et al. 2018: 4).

Billy Bragg's "Between the Wars" was issued in 1985, the same year that Lady Sovereign was born; a year that proved pivotal for class politics in the UK when the "organised British working class" were defeated by the Thatcher government following the year-long national Miners' strike. The strike itself was a monumental class protest, which saw "20,000 miners injured, 13,000 arrested, 200 imprisoned and almost 1000 summarily dismissed" together with a number of infamous altercations (such as the Battle of Orgreave in 1984) between miners and the Police (Canaan et al, 2013: 177). This suppression of working-class miners would signal that more was to come from what was now a neoliberal British government.

In April 1990 millions of people across the UK were scheduled to receive their Poll Tax bills, a form of property tax that was particularly punishing for the working class. In Scotland the Strathclyde Region had issued 250,000 summary warrants against those who hadn't paid, with 107,000 of these in Glasgow alone (Sheridan qtd. in Socialist Party 2018). A huge campaign against the Poll Tax culminated in a number of mass demonstrations on 31 March, with a mass riot occurring at the event in London's Trafalgar Square. Ultimately the campaign and mass demonstrations "were a visible and dramatic expression to the British ruling class and to the world of the scale of opposition to the poll tax and the burning hatred of the Thatcher government and the system upon which it rested" (Socialist Party 2018). Thatcher attested to this in her memoirs when she stated:

> "A whole class of people - an 'underclass' if you will - had been dragged back into the ranks of responsible society and asked to become not just dependants but citizens. The violent riots of 31 March in and around Trafalgar Square was their and the Left's response. And the eventual abandonment of the charge represented one of the greatest victories for

these people ever conceded by a Conservative Government" (Thatcher 1993: 661).

A little over 20 years later in 2011 (just five years after Lady Sovereign released "Hoodie"), riots swept across a number of English working class locales and city centres following the fatal shooting of a young man by police officers in London. Reflecting the dominant, stigmatising, moral underclass discourse, the immediate aftermath of the 2011 riots saw Prime Minister Cameron, supported by the media placed the blame for the riots on "Broken Britain" where feral youth lacked "proper parenting… upbringing and morals" (Porter 2011). Yet, the *Guardian* and London School of Economics (2012) "Reading the Riots Report" clearly shows that a number of social and economic factors contributed to those riots, particularly the extremely high levels of poverty and deprivation, and the impact of austerity cuts to education and youth services. Instead of the government acknowledging that their austerity policies had contributed to the outbreak of the riots, they facilitated "magistrates to work in night courts so as to expedite" (Rogers 2012) the "tough love" that Cameron had advocated as a response. Average sentences were almost 1½ years in duration in comparison with sentences imposed for similar offences the year previous which were approximately 25% of this length (Bawden et al. 2012 qtd. in Canaan et al. 2013: 182). Once again, sections of the working-class were demonised and criminalised.

The recent (2016) Brexit referendum result on continued membership of the European Union, and the subsequent fall out explicitly exposed existing social divisions in the UK once more. Ford (2016) and Goodwin and Heath (2016) argue that "the result was driven by so-called "left-behind" voters: older, white, economically disadvantaged people who had turned against a political class they regarded as privileged and out of touch. Others

have focussed on divisions produced by globalisation (Curtice 2016), while Bernstein (2016) and Dorling (2016) explicitly attribute the referendum result to recent government austerity measures" (Evans and Tilley 2017: 201). Whatever the reasons were for the Brexit referendum result, and they were many and complex, it most certainly can be considered a protest vote.

Protest and Music

The degree to which popular music can become a site of intervention or simply a chronicle of injustices is at the centre of any study of protest music. There is no doubt that the capacity to articulate contradictory narratives to the dominant discourse is within the "reach" of popular music (Botta 2006: 123) so it is imperative to pay close attention to this area of cultural production and reception. The need to focus on songs and their performances as multi-modal "texts" (Way and McKerrell 2017) generated in performance contexts is also important. Peddie (2006) shows how protest songs draw upon a "resisting music," pushing against history. In this way, song is a particularly efficacious means of communicating dissent; when it combines with social protest, something very powerful happens, particularly if people really listen to what is being communicated to them, whether exclusively through pre-recorded tracks or live performances (Bragg's "Between the Wars"), or through media that rely on extra-musical narratives, such as an accompanying video (as in the case of Lady Sovereign's "Hoodie"). If songs of social protest are broadly "associated with opposition, contestation, revolt and resistance" (Piotrowska 2013: 280), then music as social protest is too far reaching to be neatly packed into a particular genre, geographic location or time period (see Peddie 2006: xvii for a discussion). The polysemic nature of music means that it can take on different meaning for different

people in a wide range of contexts. But in the end *all* songs of social protest seek to do one thing: bring our attention to an issue that needs redress, which ultimately challenges the status quo.

It is rarely in one's economic interest, as a professional musician, to be exclusively dubbed a protest singer, and in places where freedom of expression is curtailed, it is often a highly risky practice. Some protest singers conceal the very subversive nature of their message in beautifully crafted melodies and harmonies, in opaque metaphors, or in unthreatening performance contexts. In other situations, the singing is loud, defiant and in unison, buoyed by the power of numbers and by the sheer, effervescent force of the resonating human bodies, singing civil disobedience with pure, noisy exuberance (Dillane et al, 2018). The examples in this chapter come from the commercial sphere, and from an open democracy where such freedoms are not curtailed and therefore the artist enjoy a degree of autonomy and creativity, while undoubtedly still facing some backlash from members of the public and the political class who do not agree with their stance.

A protest song, therefore, is a powerful medium that requires committed performers willing to stick to their beliefs. Denisoff (1968) was one of the first social scientists to publish on the phenomena of protest songs. He understood such songs as a form of "magnetic" or "rhetorical" propaganda. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) were concurrently interested in how protest songs function as performance events, where a "process of exchange – between artists and audiences, between the past and the present" enabled new and alternative "societal formations" to materialise (Friedman 2013: xv). Song is in part "a discursive practice … situated in particular social relationships and locations that are a product of complex intersections of culture, class, gender etc., in lived experience" (Ballinger 1995: 13 qtd. in Peddie 2006: xvi; see also Sanz Sabido 2016). As critical consumers of protest songs

we participate in “a lived social experience with music,” where the songs become a productive “discursive element in our worlds” (Peddie 2006: xxiv). Songs are acts of performed solidarity and particularly effective (and affective) in terms of moving the spirit (Turino 2008). We would argue that while songs themselves may not change the world, they certainly have the capacity to change the minds of people who can change the world.

Protest Songs, Protest Singers, and the Hidden Injuries of Class

When it comes to thinking about music and the working class, Fox’s (2004: 152) exploration of the lexical trope of “feeling” seeks to connect “sensory experience, embodied attitudes, and rational thought to the domain of social relations.” This idea of feelingful qualities is particularly pertinent when one considers the degree to which social interactions may become “generic and institutionalised” (Fox 2004: 153), something which music *itself* is capable of producing and reproducing. Even though Fox is specifically talking about American country music, his ideas are equally applicable here, particularly when married to approaches from Middleton (1990), Cook (1998), and Schuker (2001), with their respective neo-Marxist approaches to music scholarship

From the earnestness of a declamatory folk song (Bragg) to the cheeky playfulness yet hard-hitting message of a hip-hop performance (Lady Sovereign), music is shown to embody complex ideas around class, critique, and belonging, all of which become part of a protest song’s meaning and efficacy. Popular music scholar Sheila Whiteley (2014: 231) reminds us 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 in the analytical realm, “interpretation is supported by relevant cultural and historical research.” If the previous sections have sought to offer the broader context in

order to critically locate these artists, the following sections interpolate and combine the socio-cultural, historical and political with the personal/biographical, in genre-specific, close-readings, that are recursive and mutually-constitutive.

Billy Bragg was raised in the working-class East London suburb of Barking[1] and is an ardent supporter of the political Left who continues to provoke debate amongst critics and fans (see Power 2018). Cashell (2011) argues that while Bragg is frequently seen as following on from US singer-songwriters like Willie Guthrie and Bob Dylan (see Willhardt 2006); he also radicalized the British folk tradition in the service of musical activism. While Bragg's political activism was initially supplemental to his "musical message" he now regularly engages with mainstream media to "profess his ideas" and make "substantial political proposals" (Willhardt 2006: 46). As a consequence, he has created "an authentic, political use for his art" (Willhardt 2006: 44). "Political music" according to Bragg (speaking in McIntyre 2016), "is all about context… you can't just make political music in a vacuum. There has got to be a momentum already there that comes from people's activism… there are times when things happen and you say I should really write about this. I've got something to say about this."

"Between the Wars" (1985) is one of countless protest songs penned by Bragg.[2] Reflecting on the song's origins and inspiration, Bragg has spoken of how "the miners' strike was a real education in what a real struggle is about, how music can play a role, what people expect, what class war looks like, what happens when the government of the day decides to take on their own people and keep at them and keep at them until they break." It led him to "go away and think about" what he was "articulating and saying" (qtd. in McIntyre 2016). The song was Bragg's first single; a 4-track EP[3] that sold for "no more than £1.25 and was resolutely not advertising a forthcoming or existing LP" (Collins 2002: 154). For Bragg the

release of this record was not simply about articulating his genuinely held beliefs; it had the added dividend of getting “into the charts towards the end of the strike” and acting “as a banner for people who felt strongly about that” (qtd. in McIntyre 2016).

The song’s structure is relatively straightforward, with lines in each verse following four-beat patterns and the harmonic language drawing from largely I-IV-V-I-VI-I patterns or some variation therein. The “governing principle of the melo-poetic relations of popular song” is, according to Griffiths (2003: 48-54), based on rhyme; whether full, near, or deliberate, non-rhyme. In “Between the Wars” the easy flow of end of line full, but more commonly half or near rhyme (“docker,” “miner,” “family,” “austerity,” “grave,” wage”), along with internal assonance (“glory,” floor), presents a song that is unselfconscious, and not trying to be overly clever, which matches the sincerity of the message. The words are declamatory with largely one note assigned to each syllable. The interval movement is largely stepwise, especially when skipping easily over three-syllable words following the contours of everyday speech. At other times there are open, guileless leaps of fifths, sixths and octaves, all of which convey a simplicity and sincerity, harking back not just to English folk song but also to English hymnody. Such text setting to an easily reproduced melody makes the words easy to understand, locating them front and centre of the song, with guitar accompaniment providing harmonic support and the metric architecture. But equally this is a song that could be sung unaccompanied, in true ballad style. As Gammond (1991: 80-84) argues, broadsides and ballads were originally meant to convey the news of the day and, as unaccompanied songs, needed to have melodies that emphasise the story, not detract from it. “Between the Wars” may be understood as part of this long tradition. It is an 80s broadside, but equally, a timeless one.

In terms of the subject position in the song, the singer is a narrator who essentially represents the everyday working class man—a rail worker, a foundry worker, a person who has raised a family all the while staying in employment to ensure that his country stays productive and safe. Bragg (2015: 117-118) recounts how he penned the lyrics of the song against the backdrop of a "terrible sense of drift towards world war, coupled with soaring unemployment and rising union militancy," which "gave the impression that we were back in the 1930s" so he "peppered the lyrics with images from that period." All the narrator asks for in return for his contribution is a decent, living wage and supports for those who are unable to support themselves. In many ways the song's message is timeless. "Between the Wars" might literally mean between any of the wars involving Britain, where everyone made a contribution, or between moments of strife when it comes to fighting for working-class rights. The lyrics imply that by working hard to create arms for the various British wars, this worker and others like him have kept the economy going. Yet at the same time, he doesn't want any more young men to go to war. The commodification of war, as part of neoliberal capitalism, is in itself part of the problem, especially as manual jobs are increasingly being deregulated and undermined. Bragg's voice is direct, unadorned, and authentically working-class in its accent and its delivery as he pleads for fairness and mutual respect on behalf of all working-class folk, and particularly on behalf of the miners of the 1984 strike.

Bragg seems to have had his finger on the pulse with the lyrics talking of wishing to be protected "from cradle to grave," noting that "those who built the welfare state in the post-war years believed that the government should provide all citizens with social security – free health care, free education and decent affordable housing" (Bragg 2015: 118). In other words, the song's central character is longing for the existence of a properly functioning welfare state. "These feelings are particularly strong amongst the poor – the

visible retreat of the state over past decades has left those without skills or opportunities with the feeling that nobody cares for them" (Bragg 2006: 10). 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 qtd. in Power 2018: 518). Bragg would return to this "crisis of democratic legitimacy" (Foa and Mounk 2016: 6) a year later in "Ideology" (1986). In that track, the lyrics suggest that while the demands from citizens for access to the benefits afforded to them under the social contract were becoming more vocal, politicians continue to ignore them, as the ideological nature of the political system continues to dictate policy responses which detrimentally impact on people's lives as part of the class war from above (see Power 2018 and Power and Dillane 2019 for an in-depth discussion of this track).

"Between the Wars," then, is a song that seeks to bring about change through critique, logic, persuasion, and an appeal to emotions on the basis of seeking social justice. As a protest song (and performance), it is decidedly, rhetorically persuasive in its message, and delivered by a highly charismatic singer (Denisoff 1968). Bragg's commercial success may, for some, potentially undermine his apparent "authenticity" and the power of his protest songs, where the argument is made that one cannot truly protest if one does not experience these material conditions anymore[4]. But as any class warrior will insist, class is not something you leave behind. For Bragg, the continued fight for workers' rights and human rights continues unabated.

In the decades after "Between the Wars" other critical voices emerged to deal with the treatment of working-class people in the UK. One such artist to insist on the fair treatment of people, irrespective of what sort of embodied cultural capital they possess,

was Lady Sovereign, who like Bragg, also hails from the greater London area, though they are a generation apart. Born in a run-down council estate in Wembley, Louise Herman took on the MC moniker Lady Sovereign purportedly after stealing a gold sovereign ring, something that she wore throughout her rather short career as a hip-hop artist. Along with heavy golden chains, such jewellery is an outward sign of a particular kind of working-class life, representing the commodified "bling" of her musical culture (Krims 2002), along with her side ponytail, trainers and Adidas tracksuit with hoodie, the very things she seeks to defend and valorise in her song "Hoodie" (2006). Indeed, Tyler (2008, 26) has previously noted that the "chav mum or pramface with her hooped earrings, sports clothes, ponytail ("Croydon facelift") … is imagined / constructed as the quintessential "filthy, ignorant, vulgar, tasteless, working-class whore…"

Described as "the gobby princess of grime" (Hoby 2009), Lady Sovereign's approach to lyrics is in stark contrast to Bragg's. In a local patois that combines the vernacular of numerous minorities found in London, she raps in a manner that is far less accessible to the untutored listener and which, in many instances, requires lyrics to be provided for full understanding[5]. Insider words and slang are part and parcel of this subcultural sound, as is the hip-hop matrix from which it emerges, with its particular London grime undertones developed from combining African-American hip hop, Asian dub, Caribbean-influenced dancehall, and numerous other popular forms along with local British electronic music forms and expressions (Hancock 2018). The song appeared on Lady Sovereign's debut album *Public Warning* (2005). Produced by renowned American hip-hop artist J-Z, who reportedly was hugely impressed with Lady Sovereign's song and attitude in her song "Love me or Hate Me" (2003), J-Z gave her a contract with his label Def Jam. Some critics have argued that London grime elements were overly muted (Empire 2007), but in "Hoodie"

there is no doubting the local authenticity of Lady Sovereign's style and personae (even with the high levels of production).

In relation to the songs structure and form, in contrast to the "verbal space" created within the melodic structure of a ballad, where "words agree to work within the spaces of tonal music's phrases…for the sake of clarity of verbal communication," the "verbal garrulousness," density and intensity of a song like "Hoodie," create a sense of urgency (Griffiths, 2003: 43-46). Run-on lines, syncopation, and verbal density is all part and parcel of the hip-hip idiom. There, musical texture is dense, with drums, synthesisers, bass-lines, counter-melody lines and other sonic layering. The song does have an identifiable musical chorus featuring the lines:

"*Fling on an Adidas hoodie and just boogie-woogie with me/Or you can just put on your dancing shoes, and get loose, can you, get loose, can you?*"

While not exactly rendered as a lyrical melody, the first part is sung on a repeated syllabic note 1, vacillating briefly to a flattened 7th on the word "with." The second line of the chorus moves more into the tonal realm of note of 6 (and 7). Notes 1 and 6 are also the predominant notes in "Between the Wars" but in this different musical context, that relationship seems a distant one. And unlike in Bragg's "Between the Wars," the "story" in Lady Sovereign's song is not solely or simply accessible through the lyrics. While the specific vernacular employed and the rapid pulsating of her rap may make some of the song potentially unintelligible to a listener, even where fully understood, the song still requires further framing through visual cues. Crucially, the accompanying video[6] provides an important second layer of narrative to this song and warrants special attention as part of a

multi-modal approach to understanding the semiotics of an audio-visual performance (see Way & McKerrell, 2017).

Given that the song explores the stigmatization of working-class youths who dress in hoodies, it is important to understand the broader context for this song/video. In 2005 the Bluewater Shopping Centre in Kent banned the wearing of hoodies and baseball caps (McLean 2005; Cowie 2006), evidencing the growing trend of aligning hoodies with the antisocial behaviour of particular demographics. Cowie (2006) points out how "a Manchester young offender, served with an Anti-Social Behaviour Order under the 2003 Anti-Social Behaviour Act, was banned from wearing a hoodie for five years' noting that "while the stipulation has been removed, the sentiment that people who wear a hoodie are predisposed to crime was made clear." Such treatment was not just reserved to youths in the UK. Six years after "Hoodie" was released, protests following the death of Trayvon Martin in the USA featured people wearing hoodies, the same garment that the unarmed Martin was wearing when he was shot.

In a less fraught but nonetheless critical way, "Hoodie's" lyrics deal with the demonization of a young, street-wise youth for not wearing what are deemed suitable clothes. Lady Sovereign describes how a bouncer won't let her into a club because of her hoodie, in spite of the fact that all she wants to do is dance and express herself freely. The video to the song, however, takes this idea of exclusion based on appearance a step further by introducing the characters of a well-to-do, middle class woman and her compliant teenage daughter, sartorially indexed by pearls and conservative dress. While shopping in a local shopping centre, they exchange disdainful glances with Lady Sovereign and her crew. For the remainder of the video, it seems that Lady Sovereign and her female marauders are hassling this innocent, middle-class family as the viewer is treated to the growing panic of

these two shoppers as they try to get away from Sovereign's intimidating glares and seemingly hostile actions. The end of the video reveals that the gang, whose membership appears to grows considerably as the middle-class characters' panic accelerates, is only pursing them in the car park in order to return their dropped purse. It is an act entirely at odds with the expectation of the viewer who is invited to be compliant in stigmatizing the gang and to expect nothing but criminal behaviour from them. While Lady Sovereign sings and raps lyrics from her subject position criticizing the ridiculous sartorial choices of more conservative people, turning the discourse on its head, clearly "the gaze" in the video comes from the direction of a middle class person who panics when forced to interact with the hoodie "scum." In that way the video offers a dimension to the critique that the lyrics, sung both aggressively and defensively by Lady Sovereign, never quite attend to.

Members of Lady Sovereign's "gang" all wear "save the hoodie" hoodies in the video, in reference to a campaign led by Lady Sovereign to reclaim the hoodie as a comfortable and non-threatening item of clothing. Various writers (MacPhearson 2007; Davis 2006) have queried whether Sovereign's "Hoodie" song is, in fact, a genuine protest song in defence of sartorial choices of working-class or related subcultural style, given that she launched her "save the hoodie" campaign in advance of the single's release in what might be viewed as a marketing ploy (London_Ricky 2005). Successful working-class popular music performers often see moves to undermine the "authenticity" of their protest songs with the argument that they cannot legitimately / authentically protest if they no longer experience material deprivations on account of their acquired wealth or their work is deemed to be commercially exploiting a particular group or issue for their own financial benefit (see Power and Dillane, 2019 Forthcoming for a discussion of this argument). Regardless, while

perhaps not immediately rhetorically persuasive, there is no doubt that Lady Sovereign proved to be a "magnetic" performer (Dennisof, 1968), in her own authentic Londoner way.

Since recording her second album *Jigsaw* in 2009, which she released on her own label, *Midget* (in reference to her diminutive stature), Lady Sovereign has not released any more music, protest or otherwise. Yet even a cursory look on Youtube reveals an up-to-date fan base that laments the absence of her satirical critique and boundless energy and seeks her return to popular cultural life. Perhaps there is more ambivalence around her (and her authenticity) than around Bragg, as some perceive this white working-class, female singer as having co-opted a cultural expression that is generally the preserve of black men; the term "wigger" has often been thrown at her for example (see Kitwana, 2005). But as a Londoner surrounded by considerable diversity, and springing from the local Grime scene that brings together artists of different nationalities and colour precisely because of their shared working-class, minority status, her songs continue to resonate. Like Bragg's output, Lady Sovereign's, and the work of other white, working-class British artists, continues to have an impact, illustrating the different ways in which white British identity can be expressed and understood.

Conclusions

When it comes to protest, musicians and singers undertake "various actions which could be labelled as resistance," directing them to 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. Performance context and style prove critical, as does the perceived authenticity of the singer. If Bragg's protest songs leans into older Anglo (American) narrative song forms that decry the debasement of

working class lives and the undermining of the social contract, Lady Sovereign represents, at least generically, the other end of the scale, performing her particular brand of British, urban existence that addresses social exclusion and class disgust in a local version (grime) of a global form (hip-hop). Yet both songs, "Between the Wars" and "Hoodie", undoubtedly have much in common as protest song, in terms of their critique of working-class people's lived experience and the constant onslaught they face in relation to the erosion of their identities and ideological positionings.

The trajectory of these two white working-class singers in the UK also reveals something else about the ability of song to persist at a time when other forms of protest do not. Bragg notes this when he states:

> "*When I was 19 and I wanted to say something about the world I really only had one option which was learn to play the guitar, write songs, do gigs. Now if you are 19 you can write a blog, you can make a film on your phone, you can rustle up a Twitter storm or get a Facebook page together, there is plenty of ways to get involved and they are all great. More people that can get involved in the conversation as a result of that, but no one is ever going to ask you to tour America reading out your tweets!*" (qtd. in McIntyre 2016)

Lady Sovereign's twitter account ceased posting in 2013. Little is known of her musical or activist activities now. Meanwhile, Bragg, perhaps channelling some Lady Sovereign satire, released "Full English Brexit" in 2017, a song that takes on the ambiguous position of speaking as a white, working-class person who feels left with no choice but to vote to leave the EU in order to protect white, working-class, British culture from so-called

foreigners (including generations who have brought those very influences that make Lady Sovereign's grime so potent). The discourse around class has shifted yet again, and as always, popular song forms (and singers) are there to comment, chronicle, challenge, and even potentially predict the next phase of class warfare. We are, surely, still between the (class) wars and the next one will not just be about hoodies.

Notes

[1] Barking is in the county of Essex and is the administrative centre of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

[2] The lyrics of the song are available here: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/billybragg/betweenthewars.html

[3] The other tracks on the EP were Bragg's adaptation of Pete Seeger's 'Which Side are You on', 'The World Turned Upside Down' and 'It Says Here'.

[4] Bragg has for example 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.

[5] The lyrics of the song are available here: https://genius.com/Lady-sovereign-hoodie-lyrics

[6] The video of the song may be viewed here: https://www.universal-music.de/lady-sovereign/videos/hoodie-87763 (accessed 20 Dec 2018). Interestingly this official video is

not readily available on Youtube, though the song is widely circulated on Youtube and other websites. The www.savethehoodie.com website is no longer operational and when this domain name is typed in the browser the user is sent directly to the Island Records website

Discography

Billy Bragg (1985), "Between the Wars," *Between the Wars*, Go! Discs.

Billy Bragg (1986), "Ideology," *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry* Go! Discs.

Billy Bragg (2017), "Full English Brexit," *Bridges, Not Walls,* Cooking Vinyl.

Lady Sovereign (2006), "Hoodie," *Public Warning,* Def Jam.

Lady Sovereign (2006), "Love Me or Hate Me," *Publish Warning,* Def Jam.

Lady Sovereign (2009), *Jigsaw,* Midget.

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