

## Reflections on the American Dream in the Views and Songs of Bruce Springsteen

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ملخص :

عندما رَوَّجَ لألبومه الذي يحمل عنوان: "كرة هَدْم الملباني" في باريس سنة 2012، صرَّحَ بروس سبرينغستين لصحافيين بان عمله الفني كان دائماً حول تَفْحُصُ الفرق بين الحلم الأمريكي و الحياة الحقيقية الأمريكية. يهدف هذا المقال الى تحليل عنصر بنيوي أساسي في ثقافة الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية و هو الحلم الأمريكي، و ذلك في بعض أغاني الفنان بروس سبرينغستين، ثم محاولة قياس الفرق بين الحلم و الحقيقة في أمريكا القرن الحادي والعشرين.

**الكلمات الدالة:** الحلم الأمريكي، الحقيقة الأمريكية، بروس سبرينغستين، الأجنب، التضاد، الأصالة

### Abstract :

When promoting his album *Wrecking Ball* in Paris on 2012, Bruce Springsteen told journalists that his artistic work had always been about judging the distance between American reality and the American Dream. This article explores one founding myth of the United States, the American Dream in some songs of Bruce Springsteen and tries to measure the gap between the dream and real life in the U.S. today.

**Keywords:** American Dream, american reality, Bruce Springsteen, immigrants, ambivalence, authenticity

## Introduction :

When promoting his album *Wrecking Ball* in Paris, on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Bruce Springsteen told journalists: “My work has always been about judging the distance between American reality and the American Dream- how far is that at any moment?” (“Wrecking Ball: A Conversation with Bruce Springsteen”). Springsteen’s comment on the American Dream suggests that he explores the possibilities of fulfilling it in the shadow of American reality. The American Dream can be summarized in the following statement: anyone can achieve prosperity and success through hard work, courage and good opportunities. However, in trying to pursue the dream, people may be disappointed in the fact of American reality that may disenchant them of their idealistic hopes and stereotyped expectations.

Yet, fulfilling the dream is possible. Consider Springsteen’s artistic as well as financial success. He embodies the American Dream of the rock n’ roll star which was epitomized by Elvis Presley. Springsteen started his career in the mid 1970’s singing in local New Jersey clubs such as the Stone Pony and the Student Prince, and climbed to success becoming an international millionaire rock star.

We may attempt to judge the distance between American reality and the American Dream as Springsteen does in his songs. However, the task seems rather complex and difficult. How is real life in America? Are all Americans sharing the dream in their country? Perhaps, our conception of America may be ambiguous and misleading. Our interest in American life from a cultural perspective may blind us from perceiving its reality. Our understanding of America is linked to our cultural background. We think we know this country because our standards and beliefs are shaped by the different trends of its culture. We watch its movies, read its literature, listen to its rock n’ roll music, study its founding myths, visit its cities and landscapes and eat its food. Yet, we have no clue about American reality unless we settle there as citizens, and even so, it can only be a partial view.

From a philosophical standpoint, American humanities scholars analyze various twenty-first century American character types and claim that they struggle with their human condition. For Donald L Deardorff, fulfilling the American Dream is a “basic human condition of the contemporary age” (37). Similarly, Richard Lingeman views the American characters as trying to “escape from the awful loneliness of the human condition” (107). But perhaps these American characters do not struggle with their human condition, rather they struggle with their American condition. Springsteen seems to understand the American condition and offers some insights into real life in America.

The purpose of this article is to explore one major founding myth of the United States, the American Dream in the views and songs of New Jersey native rock singer Bruce Springsteen. The method consists of deconstructing some songs that deal with the distance between American reality and the American Dream. The deconstruction process includes an analysis of the lyrics, the albums covers, the musical instruments and some statements given by Springsteen during shows and interviews.

First, I will briefly discuss the American Dream by giving a definition and a short overview of the myth. Subsequently, particular focus will be placed on analyzing some of Springsteen’s songs that deal with the issue from both the external viewpoint of new immigrants and the internal one of Americans. The main goal here is to judge the distance between American reality and the American Dream from a Springsteenian standpoint. Is Springsteen still optimistic about the United States and its promises? Is the dream still valid in the twenty-first century America? These are the main issues of the paper.

### **The American Dream: a founding myth of the United States**

There are numerous definitions of the American Dream. It gives room to different interpretations and can be summarized as a basic philosophy or a set of rules to be followed blindly to achieve a

successful life. The dream can be considered as one of the founding myths of the United States as well as the Promised Land or the Frontier. After all, America was founded on myths as suggested in Greil Marcus's 1975 *Mystery Train*. "To be an American, unlike being English or French or whatever, is precisely to imagine a destiny rather than to inherit one; since we have always been, insofar as we are Americans at all, inhabitants of myth rather than history" (5).

The study of myths is linked to the field of mythology. Claude Lévi-Strauss' analysis gives some insights into the contradictions surrounding the smallest device of mythology which he calls a "mytheme". For him, "Myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways: as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of esthetic play, or as the basis of ritual" (Lévi-Strauss 208). The American Dream is an abstract concept, a transcendental entity and its perception differs from one person to another. Consequently, people may view it differently depending on their own experiences and cultural representations. The American Dream may be perceived in terms of contradictions.

In the field of semiology, the science that deals with signs or sign language, the comments of Roland Barthes on myths deserve a deep examination. For him, "The relation which unites the concept of the myth to its meaning is essentially a relation of deformation. [...] The concept, literally, deforms, but does not abolish the meaning; a word can perfectly render this contradiction: it alienates it" (Barthes 121). Barthes considers myth as a "stolen language" since its characteristic is "to transform a meaning into form. In other words, myth is always a language-robbery" (Ibid. 131). However, one may ask the following: what does the American Dream signify? What are the signifier and the signified of this ambivalent concept? Is it just a dream or a reality? Perhaps the American Dream is also a language-robbery concept.

The American Dream starts with the creation of the United States of America. The Founding Fathers established the basis of the concept in one of the most important historical documents of America, the Declaration of Independence. They stated in its preamble that every

man has the right to: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. In 1931, James Truslow Adams came up with the phrase “American Dream” in his book *The Epic of America*. He defines it as the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Adams 404). But it must be noted that Adams’s book was published in the midst of the Great Depression in order to give Americans a sense of hope and confidence after their lives were ruined by the biggest economic crisis of the twentieth century. He wanted to comfort Americans that the crisis would be over and that their living standards would be reestablished. This optimistic view about America is similarly embodied in the 1933 first inaugural address of President Franklin D. Roosevelt as he asserted that “the only thing we have to fear is ... fear itself” (“First Inauguration, 1933”).

The American Dream is also reflected in the words of President Bill Clinton as follows: “The American Dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one: if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you” (“Speech to Democratic Leadership Council, 1993”). The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2008 seems to show the idea that the American Dream is possible for everyone; an inclusive dream for all Americans regardless of their ethnic background or their country of origin. In November 2007 when he was campaigning, then-senator Obama delivered a speech in Bettendorf, Iowa, in which he claimed that: “Americans share a faith in simple dreams. A job with wages that can support a family. Health care we can count on and afford. A retirement that is dignified and secure. Education and opportunity for our kids. Common hopes. American Dreams” (“Speech on the American Dream”).

In his book, *American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (2004), Jim Cullen summarizes the American Dream in the following assertion: “[...] anything is possible if you want it

badly enough” (54). He suggests six American Dreams: the Puritan dream based on religious faith and reform, the dream embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the dream linked to upward social mobility, the dream of Martin Luther King of social equality, the post-World War Two dream of suburbanization and home ownership, and finally the ‘Dream of the Coast’ in California which is linked to fame and Hollywood stars.

The American Dream is represented in many works of literature, cinema and popular music. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), deals with the decline of the American Dream during the Roaring Twenties. The author depicts two different Americas: the one of Gatsby and his beloved Daisy in Long Island where “the rich get richer” (Fitzgerald, 96) and the other in the desperate Valley of Ashes under the billboard eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg where “the poor get children” (Ibid. 96).

Numerous Hollywood films also tackle the topic of the dream. Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* (1941) tells the story of Charles Foster Kane (played by Welles), a poor child who is raised in Colorado. He becomes a wealthy newspaper publisher in New York City, an archetype of the self-made man who fulfills the dream. Yet his life of luxury becomes meaningless because it does not bring him happiness. He dies in his estate of Xanadu with no companions, surrounded only by his possessions.

Dennis Hopper’s 1969 counterculture movie *Easy Rider* is also less optimistic about the American Dream. In the last conversation between the two protagonists, Billy (Dennis Hopper) says: “we’ve done it, we’re rich!” to which Wyatt (Peter Fonda) replies: “we blew it”. Wyatt’s comment suggests that the American Dream is not just about achieving financial success; it is also about achieving individual freedom. Apparently, selling drugs and smoking grass does not bring freedom to Wyatt who tries to pursue a utopian dream that has its own limitations.

The American Dream is celebrated in the *Rocky* saga. The six movies feature Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), a poor boxer who

lives in a difficult condition in his Italian neighborhood. He finds refuge in the ring which allows him to climb to success. The scene where Rocky run up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art along with the unforgettable theme song “Gonna Fly Now” became a significant motif of American popular culture. James Brown’s song “Living in America” (1985) is also a Rocky IV soundtrack which portrays a never sleeping, joyful country. “Many miles of railroad track, all night radio keep on runnin’ through your rock ‘n’ roll soul; all night diners keep you awake on a black coffee and a hard roll” (Brown 11-13). Brown refers to one of the founding myths of American history, the Promised Land when he sings: “You might not be looking for the Promised Land but you might find it anyway” (Ibid. 23-24).

Some other patriotic songs praise America as a land of opportunities in which everything is possible. Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” (1918) is an anthem that was popularized by singer Kate Smith in 1938. The lyrics urge the listener to “swear allegiance to a land that’s free” and then to “be grateful for a land so fair” (Irving 2-3). However, this idyllic vision of their country is not shared by all Americans. Folk singer Woody Guthrie criticized Irving Berlin’s song and considered it too idealistic. In 1940, after hearing this anthem too many times on the radio, he wrote “This Land is Your Land”, a folk song that he originally entitled “God Blessed America For Me!” to show his anger. The lyrics reflect Guthrie’s deep love of his country. They celebrate the beauty and grandeur of America.

This land is your land, this land is my land,  
from California to the New York Island,  
from the Redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters,  
this land was made for you and me (Guthrie 1-4).

There is an understatement that suggests that the working class should have the same rights as the rich because America was made for them all. “This Land is Your Land” is regarded as a patriotic anthem

and one of the most famous folk songs in America. It was covered by several artists including Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen.

### **The American Dream from the external viewpoint of immigrants**

Springsteen celebrates the experience of immigration in his joyful song “American Land”. The dream is a major factor that draws people from all over the world. The United States was founded on immigration and accordingly the country welcomed people from all nations regardless of their origin, religion or culture. Even today, no one can deny that millions throughout the world apply to come to the United States and share the dream. Over 14.6 million applicants for the 2014 Diversity Visa Lottery were submitted (“U.S. Department of State 2014”). However, the United States only gives 55,000 permanent resident visas annually.

It must be noted also that the federal government voted several laws that restricted immigration to the United States. For instance, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 established the use of a quota system to each European country in order to limit the number of immigrants (“U.S. Immigration Legislation Online, n.d”).

“American Land” is a bonus track on Springsteen’s 2006 *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions (American Land Edition)*. The tribute album includes some famous folk songs like “Jesse James” and “Mrs. McGrath” that Pete Seeger made popular. The song is inspired by “I Lie in the American Land”, a poem written by Slovak immigrant steelworker Andrew Kovaly. In 1947, Pete Seeger met Kovaly who told him that the poem was about the death of a colleague. The man had saved enough money to bring his family from Slovakia but when they were on their way to America, he was killed in the factory before Kovaly’s eyes. This is one of the first implications of immigration in America. Some immigrants lost their lives and were buried anonymously in a cemetery without any family member to mourn



them. Seeger recorded an English version of the poem that inspired Springsteen.

“American Land” uses the first verse of Seeger’s “He lies in the American Land” but the phrase ‘he lies’ from the original title was removed because it connotes death and funeral ceremony. Kovaly’s friend is unfortunately dead and buried, but not Springsteen’s character.

What is this land America, so many travel there

I’m going now while I’m still youn’ my darling meet me there  
wish me luck my lovely, I’ll send for you when I can and we’ll make  
our home in the American land (Springsteen 1-4).

With a first person point of view, Springsteen tells the story of this new arrival. The narrator speaks an informal language of folk songs with contractions like: I’m, I’ll, and youn’. It is the language of common people which makes use of simple and short structures. It reflects a traditional way of life of people who are pejoratively depicted as belonging to the uncultured classes.

There’s diamonds in the sidewalk, the gutters line in song  
Dear, I hear that beer flows through the faucets all night long  
There’s treasure for the taking, for any hard working man  
Who’ll make his home in the American land (5-8)

Springsteen humorously depicts America as a paradise, a place in which one enjoys life to its fullest without doing anything. But, he reminds us that immigrants will not literally find diamonds in the streets, nor will they drink beer gratuitously. They, rather, have the guarantee of achieving a successful life through perseverance and hard work. Springsteen uses assonance in the second line by repeating the diphthong /ɪə/ in the words: dear, hear, and beer and thus produces a repetitive sound that triggers auditory associations in listeners. He also creates an internal rhyming in the third line (taking / working),

and thus, links the idea of achieving a successful life in America to the principle of hard working.

The music of “American Land” looks like the traditional Scottish song “Gallant Forty Twa” which was popularized by Irish folk group The Glancy Brothers. The Forty-Twa is the famous 42<sup>nd</sup> Highland Regiment of Scotland which is also called the Black Watch. By imitating an Irish folk group, Springsteen shows that immigration to America brings also an aesthetic dimension found in new sounds of music. He himself is of European descent. His father was of Dutch and Irish ancestry, while his mother was of Italian ancestry (Marsh 15).

After the long transatlantic voyage, the main character finally arrives at New York City. “I docked at Ellis island in the city of light and spire” (13). Springsteen uses metonymously the expression “the city of light and spire” to describe New York City with its lights and its skyscrapers. Ellis Island was an immigrant inspection station in Upper New York Bay (1892-1954). Arrivals were processed by government officials who checked their health and background. Some applicants were not admitted and had to go back home. The protagonist is on a boat and as he docks on Ellis Island, he must certainly be overwhelmed by seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time. Springsteen interweaves the American Dream and the immigrants’ emotions as they see the Statue of Liberty for the first time. This feeling is reflected in the scene of Don Corleone in *The Godfather* part two, where the boy Vito flees from Sicily and arrives at New York City in 1901. He stares at the Statue of Liberty which symbolizes the free country in which every dream can come true.

This spontaneous impression of America as experienced by many immigrants was criticized by some American intellectuals, who decided to radically reject their country and leave it once for all. In 1894 on an immigrant ship, Du Bois expressed his feeling of seeing the Statue of Liberty: “I know not what multitude of emotions surged in the others, but I had to recall a mischievous little French girl whose eyes twinkled as she said:” Oh yes the Statue of Liberty! With its back

toward America and its face toward France!" ” (182). In 1963, Du Bois symbolically became a citizen of Ghana and was buried in its capital, Accra, in the same year. In his essay “I Choose Exile”(1951), Richard Wright described his emotions when he was leaving the United States: “I felt relieved when my ship sailed past the Statue of Liberty!”. Wright’s gesture can be interpreted as an ironic Ellis Island scene in which the destination of his journey is not America but France. This Jerusalem for Plymouth Pilgrims and New England Puritans obviously segregated its African American citizens who found in exile the only way of salvation.

Springsteen’s song can be viewed as an underlying criticism of America. He implicitly reveals that perhaps this country promises too much to immigrants who choose it as their home. He also criticizes rich and greedy businessmen, without mentioning their names, because they benefit enormously from the work of immigrants as he asserts:

The McNicholas, the Posalski, the Smiths, Zerillis too, the Blacks, the Irish, Italians, the Germans and the Jews (21-22) [...] they died building the railroads, they worked to bones and skin, they died in the fields and factories, names scattered in the wind, they died to get there a hundred years ago, they’re still dying now, their hands that built the country we’re always trying to keep out (25-28).

Springsteen utters the names and the nationalities of immigrants with an emphatic stress to express the disenchantment of the protagonist who was very enthusiastic in the beginning when he sailed to America. The country was built by immigrants who died on its soil, but there is no doubt that some of them enjoyed a great life and had much better opportunities for themselves and their children.

The current situation of American society indicates that there is no significant disparity between Americans and immigrants. While, it is true that green card holders can neither vote in U.S. elections nor remain out of the country for unlimited periods of time, both

Americans and permanent residents have almost the same rights and benefits. They have a Social Security Number (SSN) with which they pay taxes. They have also the same opportunities of holding a full-time job, starting a business or having access to property. However, the less fortunate among them face the same difficulties as Americans, who also struggle just to make ends meet

It is important to note that the situation of immigrants in America is very complex and difficult. Even if they become American citizens, it is difficult for them to leave the United States. They find themselves trapped in their adopted county. They work nine to five, forty hours a week, fifty two weeks a year. They have no annual leave since America is the only developed country in the world that does not require employers to provide paid vacation time. However, some employers offer ten paid days off a year at best. Employers can fire them at their discretion at any moment because most of American states have adopted the at-will employment principle that allows the employers to fire or lay off employees without having to provide a justification for that. On top of that, these employees rent a house in a peripheral neighborhood far from the center of the city because of their modest incomes.

Their exilic condition of living literally on the margin of the center represents a deterritorialization, a movement from the developed area to the undeveloped one as noted by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. “[...] the center itself has its organized enclaves of underdevelopment, its reservations and its ghettos as interior peripheries” (231). The authors of *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) give the example of the United States by quoting Pierre Moussa, the French economist, who has defined America as “a fragment of the Third World that has succeeded and has preserved its immense zones of underdevelopment” (Ibid. 231). The deterritorialization of immigrants in America produces a displacement within a displacement. First, they have left their motherland to settle in a foreign country. Then, they live in an underdeveloped area of a developed country. Such a place includes the poorest and most deprived people who live on the margin

of the American society. They include blue-collar factories workers, part time workers holding odd jobs that require little training or skill, single mothers receiving welfare, and people facing unemployment and homelessness. In the next section, I will explore the condition of this category, the less fortunate class of people who failed to share the dream.

### **Springsteen's distance between American reality and the American Dream**

Judging the distance between American reality and the American Dream is an issue which is highlighted in a significant number of Springsteen's songs. He has spent his whole artistic life examining the social condition of the most deprived and disadvantaged people who failed to accomplish the dream. He analyses their social condition, gives clues to understand their situation, but never judges them. Unlike protest singers like Phil Ochs or Neil Young, Springsteen sings songs without confrontation, shows his anger without being indignant at anyone and provides his listeners with reflections on social issues to reveal the contradictions that shape America. He sings "reflective songs" that convey covert statements of social or political disapproval.

His listeners are heterogeneous including young and old, lower class and middle class families, veterans as well as people that encounter unemployment. He sings for them and utters their experiences and their hardships. He gives them a sense of meaning for their lives.

Springsteen is also involved in several social causes and has participated in benefit concerts and philanthropic actions that raise money for food banks, cancer research centers, and Vietnam veterans<sup>1</sup>. The reason behind Springsteen's involvement in social activism can be found in his own life. The New Jersey native singer grew up in a blue-collar family with a modest income. His father, Frederick Springsteen, held different part-time jobs to make ends meet. He even encountered unemployment. The early life of Springsteen inspired

him to construct a narrative about what he underwent before becoming an international rock star.

The theme of the American Dream is overtly developed in “Born to Run” (1975). Springsteen draws attention to young desperate characters who leave their hometown in an attempt to make a living. “In the day we sweat it out in the streets of a runaway American Dream, at night we ride through mansions of glory in suicide machines” (Springsteen 1-2). Fulfilling the dream in early seventies America seems impossible for young people if they stay in their hometown. The only remaining existential solution is to drive in search of the Promised Land. Written in the first person, the song is a love letter to a girl named Wendy. The protagonist invites her to run away from their town, which he describes as “a death trap, it’s a suicide rap” (4-5). He encourages her to come with him because as he asserts: “we gotta get out while we’re young, cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run” (5-6).

Springsteen uses the American driving machine as a metaphor to epitomize the two myths of “social mobility” and the “frontier”. Lingeman noted this trait in the American character: “Complementing and clashing with the communal tradition was the frontier psychology of mobility and disposability. There was a strong impulse to seek the better place just over the next hill” (Lingeman 102). The protagonist and his girlfriend are like pioneers who keep moving in search of this utopian community. Springsteen proposes a poetic dream of mobility without giving clues about how to effectively make it true. His characters, mostly young men, ride the street with a Chevrolet from town to town in search of a Promised Land. The movement is the only way to avoid disintegration and falling apart. The road itself becomes a destiny.

With his fourth album, *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), Springsteen illustrates the frustrations of people who, despite their hard work and dedication, failed to realize the dream. This is particularly the case in “The Promised Land”, the sixth track of the album. The protagonist works in his father’s garage by day, and drives

all night “chasing some mirage” (6). He acknowledges this is not the life he wanted as he bursts into the chorus:

The dogs on Main Street howl, ‘cause they understand, if I could take one moment into my hands, mister I ain’t a boy, no I’m a man, and I believe in a promised land (8-12).

This chorus sounds remarkably like an Arabic poem that goes: “When dogs see the rich they worship them and move their tails, however when they see the poor they bark at them and bare their teeth” (Abbas Ibn al-Ahnaf). Springsteen’s imagery brilliantly reveals that the character’s condition is not better than the pack of hounds that bark at him. He leads a miserable and an uncertain life as suggested by the phrase “if I could take one moment into my hand”.

In the second verse, the character’s frustration reaches its climax when he claims that the moment in which he will reach the Promised Land will never come.

I’ve done my best to live the right way, I get up every morning and go to work each day, but your eyes go blind and your blood runs cold, sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode, explode and tear this whole town apart, take a knife and cut this pain from my heart, find somebody itching for something to start (13-19).

There is a kind of routine in the life of the character as shown with the use of the simple present tense. He wakes up and goes to work repeatedly every day. He has no purpose and views his life as meaningless. This existential void leads him to desperation. The feeling of powerlessness is stressed by the electric guitar solo, which is directly followed by the sax solo of the late Clarence Clemons alias The Big Man (1942-2011).

The juxtaposition of the song’s title with the lyrics reveals that Springsteen includes the definite article “the” in the title: “The Promised Land”, whereas he keeps repeating in the chorus he believes

in “a promised land”, with the indefinite article “a”. By doing so, he seems to covertly doubt the existence of such an idealistic place in America. The last lines of the song validate the protagonist’s hopelessness since his social condition leaves him feeling disillusioned and depressed. “Blow away the dreams that tear you apart, blow away the dreams that break your heart, blow away the lies that leave you nothing but lost and broken hearted” (29-31).

### **“Do I contradict myself? ... I contradict myself”: Of ambivalence, aesthetics and anger**

The American Dream can also be analyzed in terms of contradictions. American people embody the idea of ambivalence because they are simultaneously idealistic and practical. Americans want to fulfill the dream, and for that they know they should work hard, have courage and good opportunities. But they also know there is no guarantee they may achieve it. Some people spend their lives chasing the dream in vain. Walt Whitman cleverly observed this contradiction in the American characters of the mid-nineteenth century when he described himself in his epic poem, “Leaves of Grass” (1855), using a transcendental “I”. “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes” (Whitman 51). The American Dream is an ambivalent concept and Springsteen finds it relevant to use contradictions to deconstruct this ambiguous mytheme.

He examines the gap between American reality and the dream in his ambivalent “Born in the USA” (1984). The song peaked at #9 on the Billboard Hot 100 Singles charts, whereas the album of the same name peaked at #1 in 11 countries including the U.S. Billboard 200.

“Born in the USA” contains various contradictions. First, it had been considerably misinterpreted upon its release as many thought it was a patriotic anthem about American pride. During the Born in the USA Tour, American flags got waved at the concerts and audiences in Tokyo or Paris could only understand the chorus as they shouted the

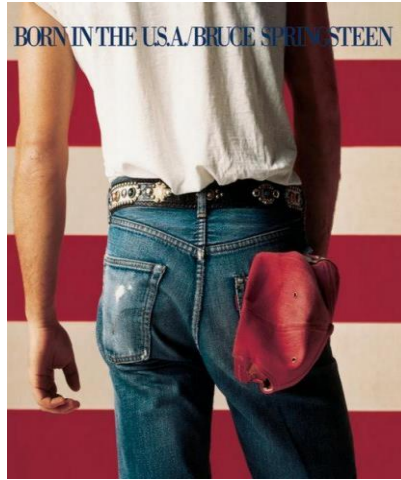


phrase “Born in the USA”. Even Americans were misled into thinking that Springsteen praised the fact to be American. President Ronald Reagan made a campaign stop in New Jersey and claimed Springsteen was his ally, but the rock singer disassociated himself from the president’s words (Marsh 375).

Lyrical speaking, the song narrates the story of a Vietnam veteran who returns home and finds there is nothing left for him anymore. As a veteran who risked his life, he wonders if he does not have the right to achieve the promise of the dream. For Springsteen, not all people born on American soil will necessarily enjoy a happy life. Springsteen’s cry endorses somehow the naturalistic view of American author Stephen Crane who portrays his characters as victims of their environments and circumstances. “A man said to the universe: ‘Sir, I exist!’; ‘However,’ replied the universe; ‘The fact has not created in me a sense of obligation’ ” (Crane 21).

For Simon Firth, “Springsteen’s songs, like Zola’s fictions, are almost exclusively concerned with the working-class, with the effects of poverty and uncertainty, the consequences of weakness and crime; they trawl through the murky reality of the American Dream” (136). Springsteen sings for blue-collar workers. He cares about their working conditions. Their dream is simple: it is about having a full-time job and not being laid off from their factories.

The album cover represents the famous Annie Leibovitz photo of Springsteen’s backside against the backdrop of the American flag. (See below)



Cover art of Bruce Springsteen album : *Born in the USA* (1984)

Springsteen embodies the persona of a working-class hero, which matches the topic of the song. He chooses a cautious image of a blue-collar worker wearing a white T-shirt and blue jeans with a red baseball cap in the back pocket. The cover shows that Springsteen dresses like an ordinary man though he is a millionaire. He sings about ordinary people honoring their ordinariness, but he does not consider himself as an authentic. For him, “we live in a post-authentic world. Today authenticity is a house of mirrors. It’s all just what you’re bringing when the lights go down. It’s your teachers, your influences, your personal history, and at the end of the day, it’s the power and purpose of your music that still matters” (“Keynote speech at South By Southwest in Austin”).

Springsteen, as the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, refutes the idea of authenticity in art. However, he assumes a subtle pirandellian<sup>2</sup> persona that matches the topic of his song. His audience is unable to make a distinction between the real man and the performer. Firth summarizes this idea of authenticity as he suggests that “What is meant by this is not that Springsteen is authentic in a direct way - is simply expressing himself - but that he represents ‘authenticity’” (134). The notion of authenticity in rock music seems difficult to define because it connotes standards and norms, which are framed by

mainstream culture. On that basis, some subcultural scenes like punk rock or anti-folk will not be viewed as authentic despite the fact there is an aesthetic dimension in their subversive art. It is preferable to avoid embarking on endless debates over the issue of authenticity<sup>3</sup>.

The cover of “Born in the USA” contains two underlying ambivalent messages. After all, art is transgressive and ambivalent as contended by Theodor Adorno when he asserts that: “A successful work, according to immanent criticism, is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure” (31).

First, the red baseball cap in the back pocket of Springsteen can stand as a provocative hanky code, also called the handkerchief code, which is usually used among American males to show they are gays. Springsteen, the heterosexual rock singer, demonstrates in this way his support for the LGBT community<sup>4</sup>, a group that was notably stigmatized during the 1980’s. The second contradiction of the cover depicts Springsteen as if he were urinating on the American flag. In selecting this transgressive photo, Springsteen’s underlying message is “art is something you piss on” (Hicks 196). Springsteen’s gesture is not entirely destructive as he symbolically urinates on America, a country that does not keep its promise.

This ideal is summarized when he tells a crowd on a final night in Stockholm: “In America there’s a promise that gets made, and over there it gets called the American Dream, which is just the right to be able to live your life with some decency and dignity” (Marsh 254). Springsteen’s American Dream is not about becoming a millionaire; rather it is about living a decent life. It is about getting a full-time job to pay the bills and make ends meet. It is about having the opportunity to send one’s children to college. It is about a family being able to go out on a week-end to watch a 3D film in a movie theater or dine out in a Thai or an Italian restaurant.

Springsteen's view of life is embodied in George Orwell's definition of 'common decency'. The British author uses this concept in his personal account in the Spanish civil War : *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). The idea is developed subsequently in his essay : *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941) when he asserts that "It is the liberty to have a home of your own, to do what you like in your spare time, to choose your own amusements instead of having them chosen for you from above" (para.3). Like Orwell, Springsteen views common decency as some basic standards that give people a sense of balance and a meaning for their lives.<sup>5</sup> When substantial things are not available for common people, they have the right to express their strong disapproval.

Similarly, Springsteen shows his anger in "Death to My Hometown", the fifth track of his 2012 album, *Wrecking Ball*. It was reviewed by the Hollywood Reporter as "his angriest yet" (Appelo and Halperin ). The song explores the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in the small towns of America. Springsteen sharply criticizes bankers whose actions led to the loss of hope in his hometown. He calls them: "the greedy thieves who came around and ate the flesh of everything they found" (18-19). He blames them and describes their bad deeds: "They destroyed our families, factories, and they took our homes, they left our bodies on the plains, the vultures picked our bones" (11-12).

Achieving the dream within this context is practically impossible for everyone. Americans just struggle to get by. The so-called suburban middle-class is fading away as suggested by the 2001 Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics Joseph Stiglitz. "US inequality is at its highest point for nearly a century. Those at the top-no matter how you slice it- are enjoying a larger share of the national pie ; the number below the poverty level is growing. The gap between those with the median income and those at the top is growing, too. The US used to think of itself as a middle-class country-but this is no longer true" ("FinancialTimes 2012").

Musically, the song marks Springsteen's experimentation with Celtic Irish folk rhythms. It includes brass instruments (euphonium and tuba), a violon, in addition to the basic rock music instruments. The song is like an Irish jig, a folk dance which developed in sixteenth century England. There is a clear distance between the topic of the song and its musical instruments. Springsteen ironically celebrates the death of his hometown with joyful rhythms that invite his listeners to dance. There is nothing to do but dance and sing as is proposed in the last stanza, "Now get yourself a song to sing and sing it 'til you're done, yeah, sing it hard and sing it well, send the robber baron's straight to hell" (15-17).

The only solution for Americans is to voice their disapproval. Springsteen's statement creates an awareness of social problems. His song is deeply rooted in the folk tradition. He follows the path of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, two protest singers who strongly believed in the effectiveness of their songs as they used them to galvanize people into action. They respectively placed symbolic messages that read "This Machine Kills Fascists" on Guthrie's guitar and "This Machine Surrounds Hate and Forces It to Surrender" on Seeger's banjo.

But one needs to be realistic; a song cannot change the world as Canadian singer Neil Young contends: "I think that the time when music could change the world is past. I think it would be very naïve to think that in this day and age" ("Spiegel Online 2008"). Indeed, the world today is not a better place and particularly for lower classes in America. Despite the negative effects of the crisis on American households, Springsteen remains hopeful. The title of his last album, *High Hopes* (2014), embodies an optimistic view about his country. Americans are also hopeful when they listen to the songs of Springsteen and at the end of the day they find some reason to believe that the American Dream is still possible.

## Conclusion:

The examination of the American Dream should be linked to the worst economic crisis of the twenty-first century. One wonders to what extent it is possible for an American to fulfill the dream. Springsteen's fans view him as a protector of a newly constructed, more inclusive American Dream. He asserted this idea in Pittsburg thirty years ago on the Born in the USA Tour.

In the beginning the idea was that we all live here a little bit like a family, where the strong can help the weak ones, the rich can help the poor ones. I don't think the American Dream was that everybody was going to make it or everybody was going to make a billion dollars, but it was that everybody was going to have an opportunity and chance to live a life with some decency and some dignity and a chance for self-respect" (Marsh 377).

With so many Americans struggling to make ends meet and feeling unsure about their future in a socio-economically unstable country, it is not surprising that Springsteen's songs have inspired millions of his listeners.

For more than forty years, Springsteen has recorded songs about ordinary Americans. He still continues to care about them. Instead of offering a mere eulogy of the American Dream, he sings about Americans who committed themselves and worked hard, only to fail in trying to fulfill the dream. When lower class Americans cannot pay their bills and raise their families, they lose faith in their nation; they fail to find any meaning at all.

Globally speaking, people live in the most developed country in the world and yet they face unemployment and homelessness. It is almost unthinkable. The current American Dream has become linked to living a life in dignity. It is not about having "two cars in the garage. It is about people living and working together without stepping on each other" (Marsh 388). A decent life in contemporary America implies a

full-time job for everyone which brings about a kind of stability. Springsteen criticizes his country, in a way, by implicitly stating that achieving a happy and prosperous life in contemporary America has become a privilege reserved for only the few. Sharing the dream for every American should be possible. It has to be available to everybody who is willing to work hard for it. Now the question that one may ask is: how can the American Dream be fulfilled by everyone in contemporary America ?

Howard Zinn, the historian and activist, makes a utopian prediction and asserts that if the American middle-class stops obeying, the system would fall. But the point is America is no longer a middle-class country as suggested above by Stiglitz. Besides, the ones who are really concerned with bringing about a change are the jobless and the low paid workers since they do not share the dream. Perhaps, overthrowing the system to guarantee the fulfillment of the dream for the American lower class is a temporary solution which has its own limitations.

American musician Frank Zappa suggests that the system should be modified to the point where it works effectively. For him: “ [...] the idea of busting it all down and starting all over again is stupid. The best way to do it, and what I would like to see happen, what I’m working towards, is using the system against itself to purge itself, so that it can really work” (qtd. in Kofsky 28). How should the system purge itself? is another question to which, I think, there is no answer at this stage. Instead, I may conclude with an interesting comment in the movie *Easy Rider*, in which the civil right lawyer George Hanson (Jack Nicholson) observes, “This used to be a hell of a good country. I can’t understand what’s gone wrong with it”.

Springsteen still believes America is a good country and sings about hope, happiness and the fulfillment of the American Dream as he typifies the successful American artist of European descent. He is the American Dream. He is America, an all-inclusive country in which each member has the right to enjoy a share of the national pie, a land of hope and dreams, a journey on a train that carries “saints and

sinners, losers and winners, whores and gamblers, lost souls” (Springsteen, 19-22).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> : See Hamburger, Susan. “ When They Said Sit Down, I Stood Up : Springsteen’s Social Conscience, Activism, and Fan Response” *Glory Days : A Bruce Springsteen Symposium*. Monmouth University, West Long branch, New Jersey September 9, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> : Resembling Luigi Pirandello’s plays, especially with reference to the relationship between illusion and reality (“Oxford Dictionary”).

<sup>3</sup> : See Chastagner, Claude. *De la culture rock*, Paris, PUF, 2011. p. 77

<sup>4</sup> : It is an abbreviation term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

<sup>5</sup> : For more details see: Michéa, Jean-Claude, *Orwell Anarchiste Tory*, Paris, Climats, 2008.



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