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## **“WEARING BADGES ISN’T ENOUGH IN DAYS LIKE THESE”<sup>1</sup>** **Billy Bragg and His Opposition to the Thatcher Governments**

The 1980s were a difficult period for the British Labour movement, as politics were dominated by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party. Having been elected in 1979, the Conservatives were re-elected twice, in 1983 and 1987. For the Labour Party, the main left-wing party, the 1983 defeat was particularly crucial. Its programme for the 1983 elections was a radical document and led to hopes on the left for the implementation of far-reaching reforms. The election results were consequently a severe blow. The Labour Party was heavily beaten, finishing well behind the Conservatives, and its percentage of the vote was only marginally better than that of the Alliance of Liberals and Social Democrats

It was in this context that a number of pop singers and musicians began openly to express their hostility to Mrs Thatcher and their support for some form of Socialism. The singer-songwriter Billy Bragg was at the forefront of this movement. I shall explore the forms that this subversion took, the limits imposed on it by Bragg in the name of entertainment, and its political consequences. I shall analyse one of his songs, “Between the Wars”, considering it as an attempt to rally support behind the miners. I shall then look at how and where he performed his work and link this to his efforts to help the Labour movement, particularly his role in the creation of Red Wedge, a group of musicians who actively supported Labour. Finally, I shall situate Billy Bragg in relation to previous attempts to use popular music in aid of political and social causes, and in relation to some of his contemporaries. In doing that, I shall throw light on a Socialist subculture that existed for a short time in the 1980s. Before studying Billy Bragg, I shall briefly present my approach to the subject.

1. Line from the single “Days like These” released in 1985.

### ***The Dominant Trends in Contemporary Popular Music***

Entertainment is obviously related to notions of pleasure and of pleasing an audience, be it spectators at a concert or listeners to recordings at home. Rather than looking at Bragg solely in terms of “pure entertainment”, it is more fruitful to study the forms taken by his work in relation to the dominant trends in contemporary popular music. An exhaustive study would, of course, be impossible, but three areas are of particular interest: lyrics, performance and style.

Most pop songs can be considered as love songs. They have lyrics that express personal feelings and emotions, and they usually concern relationships between members of opposite sexes. Characters are often used in the lyrics, creating a distance between the artist and the text, and allowing listeners to identify with the emotions expressed by the characters. Pop songs tend to avoid controversial issues, particularly if they are directly linked to politics, and reflect the dominant ideas in society. Although there is a tradition of protest music in Britain, it is very much a minority trend. While analysing Billy Bragg’s lyrics and their political content, I shall draw on the work of the popular music specialist Richard Middleton and British Marxists, especially the historian Willie Thompson.

As Simon Frith remarked in his book *Performing Rites*, a song can be considered simply as a literary object, its text being dissociated from the music.<sup>2</sup> However, a song can also be analysed as an integrated whole, in which case its meaning comes not only from the lyrics but also from other elements. It is therefore useful to study Bragg’s delivery, that is his voice and his accent. The vast majority of pop singers try to sing in tune or, if they are unable to do so, have their voice “improved” artificially by studio technicians. Most British singers also adopt an American accent or a mid-Atlantic accent so that their original accent with its regional and class connotations is no longer clearly recognizable. Again, there are exceptions to these conventions, but they concern a minority of artists.

I shall adopt a broad definition of performance, looking not only at these aspects, but also at the places where Bragg performed his work, and consequently at the reasons for his performances. Traditionally, singers perform their work at concerts held in venues such as concert halls which exist for that purpose. As well as allowing contact between the artist and his/her audience, concerts are aimed at giving the artist publicity and boosting the sales of recordings. They are thus often organised just after the release of an al-

2. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

bum. Concerts themselves tend not to be lucrative, but they increase the size of the market for the product. In a capitalist music industry this is, of course, fundamental.

Finally, the style of an artist, that is how he/she dresses and acts, is also important. Maintaining a close link with the music business, many artists spend part of their wealth in an ostentatious way, leading a “rock star’s life-style”, which involves attending high-profile parties and frequenting other celebrities. Other artists use their wealth to live as recluses, buying property in isolated areas and withdrawing from social life. In both cases, they adopt dominant capitalist values and maintain a certain distance from their fans. Style is, of course, also linked to subcultures. Drawing on the seminal work of Dick Hebdige and on more recent studies of subcultures, I shall examine the case of Billy Bragg.

These are the dominant tendencies in three areas of contemporary popular culture. Artists that transgress such conventions can be considered as subversive. However, the difference between entertainment and subversion is not as clear-cut as it may seem at first sight. In fact, the two are often intertwined, as a brief glance at the career of an artist such as Madonna shows. However, by looking at three categories individually and collectively, it is possible to ply them apart and examine the nature and extent of Billy Bragg’s subversion.

#### **“Between the Wars“: Rallying Support for the Miners**

I shall begin by briefly giving some background details about Billy Bragg, as, although he is quite well-known in Great Britain, his work has received little coverage elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Billy Bragg was born in 1958 in Barking, Essex. He left school at the age of 16 and in the following years did a variety of jobs, working in factories and spending three months in the army. He became a professional musician in 1982. In 1983 he released his first album, *Life’s a Riot*, which sold 150,000 copies, becoming a minor commercial success and receiving critical acclaim from the music press. He followed this up with a second album, *Brewing Up*, which was equally successful. Although he wrote and performed love songs, he became known mainly for his more overtly political work<sup>4</sup>.

3. Although his records have been released in France, none have been commercially successful or critically acclaimed. The sole, partial, exception is his recordings of texts written by Woodie Guthrie. They have been mentioned in the media in France as well as in the United States.

4. The fact that a cartoon picture of Bragg appears on the front cover of an influential book about the left in the 1980s shows how closely associated he was with the Left. See the cover of Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal. Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (Verso, 1988).

I am therefore going to concentrate on the title track of the E.P. *Between the Wars*, which was released in February 1985 during the year-long Miners' Strike. The other three deal with police harassment on picket lines, the radical seventeenth-century sect the Diggers, and the political bias of the tabloid press. As the title track and the first song on the A side of the record, "Between the Wars" is the most important of the four tracks.

The song was written before the strike began, but was released during the strike. Significantly, no changes were made to the lyrics. In my opinion, the release of this song was an attempt to rally support around the striking miners and against Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government.<sup>5</sup> Given the commercial success of "Between the Wars" (it reached number 15 in the charts making it Bragg's best-selling single),<sup>6</sup> this attempt must be deemed to have partly succeeded. I shall now explain this success, suggesting that it was mainly due to two factors which outweighed the tensions that appear on closer inspection of the song. However, these factors, which can be viewed as concessions to entertainment, weaken the subversive nature of the text.

"Between the Wars"

I was a miner  
I was a docker  
I was a railway man  
Between the wars  
I raised a family  
In times of austerity  
With sweat at the foundry  
Between the wars

I paid the union and as times got harder  
I looked to the government to help the working man  
And they brought prosperity down at the armoury  
We're arming for peace, me boys  
Between the wars

I kept the faith and I kept voting  
Not for the iron fist but for the helping hand  
For theirs is a land with a wall around it

5. Richard Middleton's basic distinction between subjective and objective lyrics does not hold in the case of Bragg. According to Middleton, lyrics either express subjective values "in which political content, references and symbols are mobilized to confirm or develop group identity and aims" or objective values "in which they are put to the service of a critique of external or general positions and assumptions". Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Open University Press, 1990): 253.

6. Bragg did actually have a number one hit in 1988 with a cover version of the Beatles' "She's Leaving Home", but it can hardly be counted. It was a double A-side released for charity with the popular group Wet Wet Wet. It is obvious that most people probably bought it for Wet Wet Wet!

And mine is a faith in my fellow man  
Theirs is a land of hope and glory  
Mine is the green fields and the factory floors  
Theirs are the skies all dark with bombers  
And mine is the peace we knew  
Between the wars

Call up the craftsmen  
Bring me the draftsman  
Build me a path from cradle to grave  
And I'll give my consent  
To any government  
That does not deny a man a living wage

Go find the young men never to fight again  
Bring up the banners from the days gone by  
Sweet moderation  
Heart of this nation  
Desert us not, we are  
Between the wars

First, "Between the Wars" contains only vague references to the past, and no direct references to the present. Although the title of the song makes it clear that it deals with the period between 1918 and 1939, no precise event is mentioned. Nevertheless, the text mentions the suffering and the aspirations of the Working Class during that period as well as its solidarity. It thus conjures up images of poverty during the Depression of the late 1920s ("times of austerity"), the fear of war and rearmament in the late 1930s ("We're arming for peace") and the demands for a Welfare State ("Build me a path from cradle to grave"). In mentioning miners, dockers and railwaymen, it also reminds the listener of the close links that existed between their unions in the interwar period.

In the context of the Miners' Strike of 1984-85, the song had a particular resonance, inviting the listener to link it to the current situation. The use of a miner as the first example of a manual worker points the listener in the direction of the strike, while "Land of Hope and Glory" is also the name of a piece of patriotic music often associated with the Conservative Party. The binary structure of much of the text based on the opposition between "us" and "them" reminds the listener of the conflict between two sections of the population, the Working Class and the ruling class, and in the context of the mid-1980s the main example of this conflict was the Miners' Strike. The reference to increased spending on defence no doubt also struck a chord with the audience as the Conservatives had modernised Britain's nuclear weaponry, justifying the expense by the need to improve the country's defence and to prevent war with the Soviet Union. Furthermore, comparisons between the

1930s and the 1980s were frequent, some historians such as Eric Hobsbawm claiming publicly that Mrs Thatcher's governments were similar to the National Government.

Thus, the song works according to an implicit comparison between the interwar period and the 1980s, and makes no direct reference to the Miners' Strike. In this way, Billy Bragg avoided some of the controversial aspects of the strike which dominated its news coverage, such as violence on picket lines or the strategy of Arthur Scargill, leader of the miners. Bragg also moved away from the technical issues at stake such as the definition of economic pits, inviting the listener to view the strike as part of a long-term struggle for justice, better conditions, and decent wages. This approach had positive practical consequences for the song, as it received a considerable amount of airplay on the radio, and Bragg was allowed to perform on television programmes such as the BBC's *Top of the Pops*. A more overtly political song would no doubt have been censored, as the media would have been put under pressure by the government not to play it. The vagueness of the text can thus be interpreted as conforming partly to the conventions of popular music as set out above.

The second factor that explains the success of the song is the use by Billy Bragg of a character expressing his experiences. The "I" does not refer to Bragg himself, but to a fictional member of the Working Class invented by Bragg. The "working-classness" is reinforced by grammatical errors such as "me" instead of "my". This approach allowed the author of the lyrics to encourage the listeners to identify with and be moved by the everyday experiences of the character. He was also able to avoid an openly ideological or political stance. This may have alienated some listeners and exacerbated the tensions inherent to the status of the text as both a piece of poetry and a political document. One of the consequent dangers would have been to reduce the song to a simplistic slogan, creating the impression that Bragg was haranguing his audience.<sup>7</sup> The use of a character and of emotion, can also be viewed as conformity to the dominant tendencies in popular music.

The way "Between the Wars" functions as a text explains the success of the song as a rallying call. These strengths outweigh three basic tensions present in the song, but show the limits of Bragg's work.

First, a closer inspection of the interwar period shows that it was a time of despair for the Left. Although the Labour Party formed two governments,

7. An additional danger would have been the possible subversion of the slogan. The most obvious example of this concerns the Strawbs' 1973 hit, "Part of the Union". Intended as a criticism of union militancy, the title of the song and its chorus were adopted by strikers and sung on picket lines.

both were short-lived and the second ended in a split in the Party which weakened it in the following years. Even though the trade union movement gained members, it suffered a number of humiliating defeats such as the General Strike of 1926. Moreover, the aspirations of the Working Class mentioned by Bragg were only met after the Second World War, when the Welfare State was established. It is thus ironic that this decade of despair was used by Billy Bragg to rally support around the miners and against the government. Only the vagueness of the references to the interwar period prevents this irony from showing through and the song from appearing to wallow in misery.

Secondly, it can be argued that the ideological and political underpinning of the character's opinions, which some historians such as Willie Thompson, have called "Labourism", has contributed to holding back the Working Class in Britain. Thompson has defined Labourism thus:

Labourism has taken its colour from the conditions to which the mainland British industrial workforce was exposed in the second half of the nineteenth century and the opportunities available to those who composed it. Whatever the exact character of the change which set in from around 1850, it is incontestable that the dynamic mass movement associated with Chartism, one highly aware of irreconcilable conflict with the powers-that-be over the nature of the state, was utterly eclipsed. It was replaced with a more loosely articulated, much less politically ambitious network of organisations and agencies, willing to pursue their objectives within the framework of established political and social institutions under the mixed aristocratic/bourgeois hegemony which commanded the British state and social order.<sup>8</sup>

Two aspects of Labourism are clearly present in *Between the Wars*. The line "Build me a path from cradle to grave" is particularly revealing. It conveys the image of a passive Working Class which elects representatives who then provide it with services. It ignores, for example, the idea of popular participation in the everyday running of the Welfare State. It could be argued that the practical consequence of this vision was the alienation and dissatisfaction of many users of the National Health Service which Mrs Thatcher was able to exploit in the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> The second aspect of Labourism is the limited ambitions of the character who declares "And I'll give my consent/To any government/That does not deny a man a living wage". Although the character is aware of class conflict (as the binary nature of the text suggests), he refuses to envisage radical changes in the economic system, limiting his aspirations to a decent wage and Social Security.

Interestingly, the character's outlook differs somewhat from that of Billy Bragg himself. Despite his being a member of the Labour Party, Bragg

8. Willie Thompson, *The Long Death of British Labourism* (Pluto Press, 1993): 7.

9. The Marxist sociologist Stuart Hall, for example, has said as much.

was on its left wing; he was sympathetic to Marxism and was involved in extra-parliamentary activity. He had also been openly critical of the ideas traditionally expressed by the leadership of the Labour Party and of its record in office. Nevertheless, it is revealing that, in order to rally support around the miners, he felt obliged to make his character conform to the dominant vision of the British left and express a vision that he did not share. This obligation shows the extent of the domination of this vision as Bragg felt unable to be critical of it *and* arouse sympathy for the miners. Ironically, he was, to a certain extent, helping to reinforce Labourism by legitimising it. Nevertheless, in the context of the Miners' Strike and the struggle against the Tories this went unnoticed.

The third tension in "Between the Wars" concerns the relations between the text and the Miners' Strike. Billy Bragg invites a comparison to be made between the past and the present, but his portrayal of an essentially male Working Class had limited relevance in the 1980s when women were massively present in the workforce and played an important role in the strike. For example, one of the most novel aspects of the strike was the formation of Women Against Pit Closures which sought to broaden support for the miners. "Between the Wars", dealing explicitly with the interwar period, could not refer to such developments. More importantly, the lyrics seem to refer to a united Working Class and trade union movement. However, important divisions existed in the 1980s. The Labour Party and the trade unions were divided in their attitude to the strike, and no union leadership sympathetic to the strike was able to persuade its members to take industrial action in solidarity.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the miners themselves were not united, as in some areas such as Nottinghamshire the majority of miners continued to work. Portraying a united Working Class, Bragg appears to solve in his narrative problems that continued to exist in reality.

Despite the tensions present in "Between the Wars", the song functions successfully and is a prime example of Bragg's political work. The most famous of his songs, it works partly because of the context of the time it was released which prevented it from being seen as misplaced nostalgia. Nevertheless, the problems solved verbally by Bragg remained throughout the strike which ended in defeat for the miners. The songs also functions as he adheres to some of the major tendencies in contemporary popular music and uses them for political ends. His aim was therefore more subversive than the lyrics he used to achieve it.

10. Moreover, as a result of Margaret Thatcher's new legislation unions were bound not to take sympathy action.



***Billy Bragg: A Labour Movement Musician***

Bragg's performance of his work was also very revealing and was fundamental to the effect it produced. This was particularly so for his delivery of "Between the Wars". He sings flat and in a monotonous voice, giving the impression that he is incapable of singing in tune. The line "Mine is the green fields and the factory floors" is a good example of this. He has a regional, working-class English accent. The vowels are clearly those of the South East of England, for example "railway". The dropped "h" in "harder" and the glottal stop in "sweat" also have regional and class connotations. By not attempting to sing in tune and not using an American accent, he transgressed the conventions of much British popular music of the time.<sup>11</sup> This may have reinforced the sense of identification that some listeners felt for Bragg's character as most people do not sing in tune and have regional accents. Bragg thus presents his character as an authentic voice of the Working Class.<sup>12</sup> However, this authenticity was obviously constructed. Bragg's later recordings prove that he was capable of singing in tune and in different ways.<sup>13</sup> The music was also very basic. The words were sung to two electric guitars which played a simple and repetitive melody. The impression created was one of simplicity and straightforwardness. Coupled with the lyrics, it reinforced the feeling of sincerity exuded by the character. Again this was a deliberate ploy by Bragg, as he was able to compose and play more complex music. His delivery was thus an example of careful subversion.

Billy Bragg did not limit himself to his recordings and concerts to publicise his work. He was also involved in a variety of political activities.<sup>14</sup> He played at numerous benefit concerts, particularly for the miners. He was not paid for his performances and the admission fee was donated to the National Union of Mineworkers. He also regularly attended picket lines and demonstrations until the end of the strike. As well as being respected by miners, he was held in high regard by leaders of the Labour Party and fellow musicians, as is shown by his role in the Jobs for Youth tour and Red Wedge.

In February 1985 the Leader of the Labour Party, Neil Kinnock, invited musicians to the House of Commons to discuss how the Party could reach out to young people. This was an important issue as in the 1983 election only 33% of 18-24 year-olds voted Labour, while 42% voted for the Tories. This was a

11. The punk movement, which had pioneered such transgressions, had largely disappeared by the mid 1980s.

12. His performance can also be seen as a reaction to the increasingly synthetic nature of popular music due to the widespread use of new technology.

13. A comparison with "Upfield", released in 1996, clearly shows this.

14. For a detailed account of his activities, see Andrew Collins, *Still Suitable for Miners. Bill Bragg: The Official Biography* (Virgin Books, 1998): 156-186.

catastrophic result for Labour, which had traditionally been the most popular party among first-time voters, and led to the growing realisation that some form of action was needed. The meeting at the House of Commons had two direct consequences. The first was the Jobs for Youth tour in which Billy Bragg played an important part. It consisted of a series of concerts in major British cities to publicise Labour's economic policy, particularly its measures concerning young people. The concerts were a mixture of music and politics, as leading figures from the Labour Party spoke between musical acts. The Jobs for Youth tour was seen as a success by all concerned since the Party recruited new young members and experienced an increase in inquiries about membership.

The second consequence of the meeting in the House of Commons was the foundation of Red Wedge in the summer of 1985. The name was chosen by Billy Bragg and was intended as a pun on the word "wedge". As well as being an object used to exert pressure or create an opening, it was also the name of a hairstyle. Financed by Labour and the trade unions, Red Wedge had offices at the Labour headquarters, but was created outside the traditional youth organisation, the Labour Party Young Socialists.<sup>15</sup> In the following years Billy Bragg played a pivotal role in the development of Red Wedge, contributing to its monthly magazine *Well Red*, organising concerts and cajoling other musicians to take part.

The highpoint of Red Wedge was the 1987 pre-election tour which welcomed the participation of musicians such as Paul Weller and the Style Council, Tom Robinson, Johnny Marr of the Smiths, Lloyd Cole, The Communards, Brian May of Queen, and Madness. Red Wedge also issued a pamphlet, *Move On Up*, with a foreword written by Neil Kinnock, and spawned a comedy tour involving Harry Enfield and Lenny Henry. Labour's defeat in this election was the beginning of the end for Red Wedge. Although Labour improved on its 1983 performance and won the support of 40% of first-time voters, it was admitted among the Labour leadership and members of Red Wedge that it had made little, if any, difference to the result.<sup>16</sup> Dejected, many musicians were not prepared to continue campaigning for five more years and dropped out of political activity. Billy Bragg, however, ensured that Red Wedge continued to exist for a few years, organising a number

15. This was probably because as the L.P.Y.S. was dominated by the Trotskyist organisation Militant and was openly hostile to the Labour Party leadership.

16. The overall results for the 1983 and 1987 elections were as follows: 1983— Conservative 397 seats (42.4%), Labour 209 seats (27.6%), Alliance 23 seats (25.4%). 1987— Conservative 375 seats (42.3%), Labour 229 seats (30.8%), Alliance 22 seats (22.6%).

of low-key concerts and encouraging local projects. The organisation was finally wound up in 1990 due to lack of interest and finances.

Red Wedge had a short existence, but it was an interesting and revealing experience. With the benefit of hindsight, some of those involved such as Geoff Mulgan, consider it to have contributed to the modernisation of the Labour Party.<sup>17</sup> According to Mulgan, the supporters of Red Wedge wanted Labour to adopt a more professional approach to the media and give more attention to the way it put its message across. Consequently, he believes that, to a certain extent, developments in the presentation of Labour policy in the following years drew on the experience of Red Wedge. His evaluation of the significance of Red Wedge is probably exaggerated: it is interesting to note that very few authors of works on the recent history of the Labour Party have considered it worthy of interest or have given it a major role in the recent developments in the Party. Nevertheless, it is clear that the thinking behind it—the need to find new channels of communication with sections of the community that it had neglected—exerted a growing influence on the Labour Party leadership during the second half of the 1980s. It was defended by influential figures such as Peter Mandelson. It also came to play an important role in the elaboration of policy in the late 1980s.<sup>18</sup> On reflection, Red Wedge can thus be seen as one of the first significant examples of this phenomenon and as part of a wider process. Consequently, it is highly ironic that Billy Bragg, who later became a vocal opponent of changes in the Labour Party, was an active supporter of Red Wedge. As such, he participated in the changes taking place within Labour.

Red Wedge was also interesting as it was a rare venture by Labour into the world of culture and popular music. The Labour Party had previously underestimated the importance of culture and its significance in everyday life, concentrating on economic questions such as wages and the standard of living. Its main contribution to British culture and everyday life is the Trades and Labour Club which conjures up images of middle-aged men drinking beer and playing snooker and has a rather limited appeal. The only serious attempts to mix politics and culture have come from outside the Labour Party.<sup>19</sup> From the 1970s on, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (C.N.D.)

17. Mulgan was the driver of the 1987 election tour bus. He was in later years involved in the think-tank Demos.

18. For an indepth analysis of developments in the Labour Party at this time, see Eric Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1945* (Routledge, 1994).

19. A partial exception is provided by the Greater London Council under the leadership of Ken Livingstone. Before its abolition the G.L.C. organised a series of free concerts, but it must also be added that Livingstone probably wanted to spend the G.L.C.'s resources rather than give them back to the government.

organised an annual festival at Glastonbury, while the Communist Party of Great Britain organised various activities such as Festivals of Marxism, and its monthly review *Marxism Today* engaged in similar activities.

Red Wedge was Labour's first and last attempt to use pop music to attract young people. It was, in fact, the only organised attempt ever in British politics to integrate pop musicians into an election campaign, rather than using individual celebrity endorsements. The problems of the relations between Labour and young people stem partly from Labourism. According to Willie Thompson, Labourism includes an adherence to a certain form of respectability in all areas of life, as the Party acts within the boundaries set by the Establishment. This explains its traditional reluctance to engage in extra-parliamentary activity, which could be portrayed by its opponents as hostile to democracy, and the tendency of its leading figures to conform to established norms. For example, its leaders dress in a similar way to Conservatives. This was particularly the case under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, especially as his predecessor, Michael Foot, had strayed from the accepted sartorial wisdom and had been pilloried by the press and Conservative politicians alike.

By acting in this way, the Labour Party ran into problems with young people, especially at a time when fewer and fewer of them were attracted to formal politics. According to Dick Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* young people express in style their opposition to ruling class ideas and notions of respectability.<sup>20</sup> He gives the example of the punk movement of the late 1970s. Obviously Labour would not have wanted to be associated with the punk movement, or any of what Hebdige calls spectacular subcultures, that is subcultures with a strong sense of style. The number of musicians it was ready to approach was thus limited, as was its potential support among working-class youth.

Moreover, youth culture exists in opposition to the adult world, and pop stars depend upon their fans' sense of identification with them. Few were therefore prepared to be openly identified with the adult world by helping the Labour Party. Seen from this angle, it is hardly surprising that the Labour leadership was attracted to Billy Bragg. Bragg dressed in a very unostentatious way, refusing to adhere to the passing fads that appealed to most young people. Furthermore, he had working-class origins and had made his name as a politically committed singer.

However, his music only had a limited audience. Despite the relative success of his first two albums and of the E.P. *Between the Wars*, he was not a

20. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Routledge, 1979).

well-known figure in the world of popular music or among the general public. He had little airplay on the radio and was rarely seen performing on television, restricting severely the mass public's exposure to him. The category of the population which was the most aware of his music was students. His records were frequently played on student radio stations and he often performed at universities. He was also unlikely to appeal to people who were not on the left given the political orientation of many of his lyrics and his support for left-wing causes which was sometimes reported in the press. His audience was thus mainly composed of left-wing activists and sympathizers, many of whom were students.<sup>21</sup> The impact of his subversive performance and activities was clearly limited. As the figurehead of Red Wedge he restricted its potential support, and he could be seen as partly responsible for the clear lack of mass appeal of Red Wedge.<sup>22</sup>

#### ***The Brief Flowering of a Socialist Subculture***

Bill Bragg was, of course, not the first British musician to have an active interest in social and political issues, nor was Red Wedge the first attempt to involve musicians in campaigns outside the world of music. The 1960s saw the appearance of protest music, but it was mainly an American phenomenon which never really took off in Britain in the same way. An important turning point in Britain was the Rock against Racism campaign of 1976 to 1978. Rock against Racism was part of a broader political initiative (the Anti Nazi League) from the Socialist Workers Party in response to the rise of the National Front in the mid 1970s and to racism expressed by rock musicians. For example, Eric Clapton proclaimed his support for the ideas of the National Front in public, while David Bowie had been photographed giving Nazi salutes to his fans in London. Rock against Racism organised a series of concerts and carnivals, and published a monthly magazine, *Temporary Hoarding*. Its activism culminated in a free concert organised in Victoria Park, London in 1978. Attended by more than 100,000 people, the concert included performances by Steel Pulse, the Tom Robinson Band, the Clash, and X-Ray Specs. In the following years the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

21. This is a subjective description of Bragg's audience based on my own personal experience in the 1980s. As far as I know, no research has been carried out into the social and political composition of his following.

22. The whole experience of Red Wedge can thus be seen as an example of the problems facing the Labour Party in its relations with young people. The Party has since reverted to seeking individual endorsements by rock stars and allowing itself to be identified with their success. Tony Blair's attitude to members of Blair and Oasis, for example, is thus reminiscent of Harold Wilson's to the Beatles. In fact, it is difficult to imagine the current Labour Party leadership supporting a semi-autonomous organisation, which would by its very nature escape its total control.

organised similar events. But by the mid 1980s, musicians' engagement with political and social issues was taking a rather different form.

A number of groups and singers appeared who expressed Socialist political ideas and were part of a Socialist subculture which briefly flourished in the 1980s. It was composed of left-wing activists and sympathizers. Despite ideological and political divergences, there was significant common ground. They were all radically opposed to Margaret Thatcher's governments and favoured a distinctly left-wing alternative. They met and worked together in broad movements that actively opposed the Thatcher governments such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (C.N.D.). They could be recognized by their ordinary, unspectacular clothes, their political badges (C.N.D. badges being particularly common) and political T-shirts (such as the Sandino T-shirts of the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign). They were derided as "trendy lefties" by the right-wing press.

In my opinion, it is possible to divide the pop groups involved into two categories: a core and a periphery. This type of basic division has been criticized in recent years. David Muggleton has claimed that it is dangerous as it is linked to notions of authenticity, the core being seen as more authentic than the periphery.<sup>23</sup> This raises the thorny issue of what authenticity is in the context of subcultures. It seems to me, however, that in the case of the Socialist subculture of the 1980s the division is significant. Without suggesting that some members were more authentic than others, it reveals that there was a core of highly committed musicians whose music, lyrics, activities and lifestyle represented a relatively coherent whole, surrounded by a periphery of rather less committed musicians. The periphery included performers such as Jimmy Sommerville and the Communards who occasionally supported left-wing causes, but whose music was quite conventional. The core was composed of the likes of Billy Bragg, the Housemartins and Redskins, which I shall use as examples. This is not to suggest that others are unimportant, but simply recognizes that people like Bragg tended to lead the others, trying to set an example to be followed. His role in Red Wedge is proof of this.

Significant similarities existed between the three groups. Musically, they produced a traditional guitar-based sound, making no use of synthesizers or new technology. They all expressed Socialist ideas in their lyrics and used their music to criticize Margaret Thatcher and her government. They maintained that music could contribute to changing people's political philosophy. They were actively involved in left-wing politics:<sup>24</sup> two of the

23. David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (Berg, 2000): 20 - 21.

Housemartins were members of the Workers Revolutionary Party,<sup>25</sup> the Redskins were members of the Socialist Workers Party,<sup>26</sup> while Billy Bragg belonged to the Labour Party. They all claimed to be from working-class backgrounds and stressed their organic relationship to the Working Class. Their attachment to the Working Class was expressed in two ways.

Firstly, they consciously attempted to break with traditional pop stars' lifestyles. They led relatively puritanical lives, limiting contact with the music industry and rejecting the usual distance between pop stars and their fans. The Housemartins, for example, slept on their fans' floors during tours, played football in a local amateur side and were frequently seen in their local pubs. Moreover, the Housemartins, like the others, were studiously provincial, living in Hull, in working-class areas. This rejection of the conventions of popular music found its origins partly in the punk movement and fitted in easily with egalitarian Socialist ideas.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, their attachment to the Working Class was expressed in style. Traditionally, pop stars dress differently from their fans who then try to copy them. In the case of the groups in question, they tried not to differentiate themselves from their fans. All wore ordinary, everyday clothes, often bought from charity shops. Nevertheless, it is important to note that a large part of the groups' fans, with the partial exception of the Housemartins, were students.<sup>28</sup> This is partly shown by the fact that the majority of their concerts took place in venues belonging to universities or student unions. The Socialist subculture of which they were part cannot therefore be considered as a purely working-class phenomenon.

The appearance of this subculture, as of all subcultures,<sup>29</sup> must be seen as the reaction to a distinct set of economic, social, political, ideological and musical circumstances. The splintering of the Working Class, a long-term trend due to the decline of traditional, heavy industries and to the growing importance of the tertiary sector of the economy, was accelerated by the policies of the Thatcher governments. New divisions between employed and unemployed also appeared. Moreover, the Thatcher governments received the support of a significant section of the Working Class which accepted, to a

24. For a detailed presentation of the extreme Left in Britain, see John Callaghan, *The Far Left in British Politics* (Blackwell, 1987).

25. For more information about the Housemartins' political activities and their links with other groups, see Nick Swift, *The Housemartins: 'Now That's What I Call Quite Good'. The Authorized Biography (Tales From Humberside, 1988)*.

26. Their 1986 album was entitled *Neither Washington Nor Moscow*, an abridged version of the S.W.P. slogan "Neither Washington Nor Moscow, but International Socialism".

27. For a detailed history of punk, see Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming* (London: Faber, 1991).

28. This again is a subjective observation.

29. Hebdige 84.

certain extent, the Thatcherite philosophy of individualism and materialism. Young people were also attracted to the nascent yuppie culture based on upward mobility and frenetic consumption. However, at the same time rejection of Thatcherism engendered a limited politicisation of some sections of the population, such as students, forming the basis of a Socialist subculture. Finally, the application of new technology to the world of music, assimilated by Billy Bragg and others to the increasingly cut-throat and exploitative nature of the music industry, led to resistance and a return to simpler forms of music. Seen from this perspective, the Socialist subculture encapsulated a mood of radical opposition to Mrs Thatcher and must be viewed as an attempt to reconstruct a homogeneous, ideologically pure Working Class, committed to radical Socialist change.

This type of interpretation of the significance of subcultures has come under criticism in recent years. In a critique of Dick Hebdige and academics of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, David Muggleton claimed that they drew abstract conclusions from subcultures without conducting serious ethnographical research.<sup>30</sup> Failing to take into account the subjective views of members of subcultures led Hebdige to forget that subcultures were not homogeneous and were composed of individuals. According to Muggleton, his research proved that people become involved in subcultures for personal, not political reasons. In the case of Billy Bragg and the Socialist subculture, Muggleton's criticism is not valid. Without carrying out detailed research, it is clear from the declarations of members that they joined together to act collectively. Furthermore, their action was clearly political. It was aimed at spreading political ideas and bringing about political change. Consequently, Hebdige's work is still relevant for the study of certain subcultures and this one in particular.

Red Wedge was the highpoint of the subculture's activity which was followed by decline. This decline can be explained by several factors. Although Mrs Thatcher's political and ideological hold on parts of the Working Class was weakened in the late 1980s largely as a result of the Poll Tax, there was no widespread support for a radical alternative set of policies. The collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the changes in Labour Party policy and philosophy led to confusion over the very meaning of Socialism and the abandoning of hopes of radical change. Furthermore, after Mrs Thatcher's resignation in 1990, there was no clear political target to protest against, since John Major adopted a less confrontational approach. New issues also appeared which did not fit easily with the traditional Socialist

30. Muggleton 9 - 79.



agenda, such as the protection of the environment. They attracted young people, some of whom would previously have been attracted to more orthodox Socialism. New groups such as the Levellers identified themselves with protesters, but were unable to join with older groups as many of these no longer existed or had changed direction. The Redskins, exhausted by several years of activism and aware of being part of a political pop market niche, split up. This was a danger which faced the three groups. Although they were using the music business for political ends, the music business was also using them for commercial ends. Political pop singers created a small, but lucrative market which inevitably strengthened the capitalist music business. The Housemartins also disbanded when some members wished to move off in new musical directions, while others became disillusioned with left-wing politics. Finally, Billy Bragg also experimented with new styles, producing more sophisticated, yet conventional music. He also married and wrote more songs about personal rather than clearly political issues.<sup>31</sup>

The conditions, both subjective and objective, which had led to the emergence of a subversive Socialist subculture, disappeared during the second half of the 1980s. The main legacy it left was musical, as none of its political aims were met and the ideology it espoused has largely disappeared from British political life. However, given the political and ideological connotations of the music and its organic links to a specific conjuncture, it is unlikely that a revival will take place, as has happened with music from other periods.

### **Conclusion**

While Billy Bragg's delivery of his music and the choice of venues where he performed was obviously subversive, the lyrics contained concessions to entertainment. These concessions enabled Bragg to mobilize sections of the Labour movement and its sympathizers, but were not sufficient to allow him to reach a mass audience. The political impact of his work was consequently somewhat limited. Billy Bragg's work in the mid 1980s, Red Wedge and the other musicians mentioned above were products of a particular era and of a particular set of circumstances. Although they have been forgotten or ignored, they reveal a great deal about the history, politics and popular culture of

31. He has tried to justify this move by linking personal emotions to the motivations of political activists. See for example the following quotation from Antonio Gramsci that figured on the cover of the 1993 compilation album *Victim of Geography*: "How many times have I wondered if it is really possible to forge links with a mass of people when one has never had strong feelings for anyone, not even one's own parents; if it is possible to have a collectivity when one has not been deeply loved oneself by individual human creatures, hasn't this had some effect on my life as a militant—has it not tended to make me sterile and reduce my quality as a revolutionary by making everything a matter of pure intellect, of pure mathematical calculation".

Britain in the mid 1980s and show the specificity of this decade. They are also interesting examples of the difficulties involved in trying to bring together popular culture and politics. Even though it is difficult to imagine the immediate emergence of a similar group of politically committed artists or a Socialist subculture, any future fusion of popular culture and politics in Britain will no doubt face similar problems.

### Selected Discography

#### Albums

- 1983: *Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy* (Utility/Charisma)
- 1984: *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg* (Go! Discs)
- 1986: *Talking With The Taxman About Poetry* (Go! Discs)
- 1987: *Back to Basics* (Go! Discs)
- 1988: *Workers Playtime* (Go! Discs)
- 1990: *The Internationale* (Utility)
- 1991: *Don't Try This At Home* (Go! Discs)
- 1993: *Victim of Geography* (Cooking Vinyl)
- 1996: *William Bloke* (Cooking Vinyl)
- 1997: *Bloke on Bloke* (Cooking Vinyl)

#### Billy Bragg and Wilco

- 1998 *Mermaid Avenue* (Elektra)

#### Billy Bragg and Wilco

- 2000 *Mermaid Avenue II* (Elektra)

#### Singles

- 1985: *Between The Wars* E.P. (Go! Discs)
- 1985: *Days Like These* (Go! Discs)
- 1986: *Levi Stubb's Tears* (Go! Discs)
- 1986: *Greetings To The New Brunette* (Go! Discs)
- 1988: *She's Leaving Home / With A Little Help From My Friends* (Wet Wet Wet) (CHILDLINE)
- 1988: *She's Got A New Spell* (Go! Discs)
- 1991: *Sexuality* (Go! Discs)
- 1991: *You Woke Up My Neighbourhood* (Go! Discs)
- 1992: *Accident Waiting To Happen* (Go! Discs)
- 1996: *Upfield* (Cooking Vinyl)
- 1997: *The Boy Done Good* (Cooking Vinyl)