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STAND DOWN MARGARET: THE REACTIONS OF BRITISH MUSICIANS TO
THE GOVERNMENTS OF MARGARET THATCHER

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Abstract

Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, which lasted from 1979 until 1990, was quite polarizing. Despite being elected thrice, in 1979, 1983, and 1987, Thatcher nonetheless faced a great deal of opposition. This opposition is perhaps most evident in the form of popular music in the 1980s. Two previous musical groups, the Sex Pistols and The Clash, largely laid the groundwork for the forms that opposition to Thatcher assumed. The first form of opposition was to reflect the alienation and dissatisfaction felt in society, or to simply reject Margaret Thatcher as an individual. The second form was to offer more specific critiques or responses to events or policies enacted under the administrations of Margaret Thatcher.

The paper is organized into four sections: Section one provides background information, section two documents the songs reflective of alienation and rejection, section three documents the songs that offer criticisms and responses, and section four is a conclusion that briefly examines the effects Thatcherism rendered upon music after her premiership.

Song lyrics comprise the bulk of primary sources; a smaller portion of primary sources is comprised of contemporary news accounts, interviews with relevant artists, government documents, and speeches given by politicians. Musical biographies, political biographies, and scholarly accounts of British politics and society in the 1980s compose the bulk of secondary sources.

Introduction and Background

Many public figures, both politicians and non-politicians alike, felt compelled to offer their reactions and responses to the death of Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, upon her death in April 2013. These responses were—much like British society itself during Thatcher’s premiership—noticeably polarized. The news magazine *The Economist* reacted by brazenly declaring Thatcher a “freedom fighter” for her role in the rise of neoliberal economic policies.¹ David Cameron, the current Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, said that Thatcher “rescued [Britain] from [its] postwar decline.”² “Thatcher,” Cameron continued, “was a woman of great contrasts.” These contrasts were certainly evident in posthumous reactions, not all of which were nearly as positive and supportive as those offered by David Cameron or *The Economist*.³ The reactions put forth by many musicians who were active during Thatcher’s premiership were strongly critical of Thatcher. Stephen Morrissey, the lead singer of the seminal 1980s alternative rock band The Smiths, did not hold back in his vociferous criticism of Thatcher: “Thatcher,” Morrissey said in an editorial written for *The Daily Beast*, “was a terror without an atom of humanity.”⁴ Elvis Costello, a popular British musician and songwriter, justified his decision to continue performing his song

¹ The Economist, “Margaret Thatcher: Freedom Fighter,” *The Economist*, 13 April 2013. <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21576094-now-especially-world-needs-hold-fast-margaret-thatchers-principles-freedom-fighter> (accessed 28 April 2013).

² David Cameron, “Margaret Thatcher Tributes: David Cameron Speech,” *The Guardian*, 10 April 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/10/margaret-thatcher-tributes-david-cameron-speech> (accessed 28 April 2013).

³ Consider the fact that the song “Ding-Dong! The Witch Is Dead,” from *The Wizard of Oz*, reached the number two spot in the UK Singles chart within a week of Thatcher’s death. (http://www.officialcharts.com/archive-chart/_/1/2013-04-20/)

⁴ Morrissey, “Morrissey: ‘Thatcher Was a Terror Without an Atom of Humanity,’” *The Daily Beast*, 8 April 2013. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/04/08/morrissey-thatcher-was-a-terror-without-an-atom-of-humanity.html> (accessed 28 April 2013).

“Tramp the Dirt Down,” a strongly anti-Thatcher song: “The same bunch of slimes” remain in control of the British political system, Costello said.⁵

While the aforementioned reactions were made posthumously, the reactions that were made contemporarily are perhaps the most interesting. This is especially true of the reactions made by musicians including Morrissey and Costello. Music and politics, of course, engage in a cyclical process of interplay. Music has, for traditionally disempowered groups such as women, racial minorities, and working-class individuals, long served in a role of both political expression and empowerment. Music allows its fans to “deliberately reverse reality” and construct a new one.⁶ This is certainly true in Britain during the 1980s, when many musicians sought to reverse the realities of Thatcherism.

It is necessary to understand what Thatcherism was—and the ways in which it impacted Britain—in order to better appreciate the relationship between music and politics in 1980s Britain. Nearly all facets of British society underwent something of a sea change during this time period. Margaret Thatcher was able to achieve “a total transformation of British society.”⁷ Thatcher represented the first legitimate attempt to undo the so-called Postwar Consensus, which saw the formation of a welfare state after the conclusion of the Second World War.⁸ The consensus refers to the agreement from all sides of British politics—Conservative, Labour and, Liberal—to not attack or otherwise attempt to dismantle the welfare state, which included features such as nationalized

⁵ Adam Sherwin, “Tramp the Dirt Down: Elvis Costello Defends Decision to Continue Singing Anti-Thatcher Songs,” *The Independent*, 12 July 2013. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/tramp-the-dirt-down-elvis-costello-defends-decision-to-continue-singing-antithatcher-songs-8706270.html> (accessed 8 October 2013).

⁶ Thomas Geyrhalter, “Effeminacy, Camp and Sexual Subversion in Rock: The Cure and Suede,” *Popular Music* 15, no. 2 (May 1996): 223. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/931219> (accessed 29 April 2013).

⁷ Anirudha Gupta, “England: Then and Now,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, no. 7 (12 February 1994): 354. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400785> (accessed 29 April 2013).

⁸ Kenneth Harris, *Thatcher* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1988): 13-14.

healthcare system and full employment rooted in demand-side, Keynesian economics.⁹ The Postwar Consensus went unchallenged throughout the 1950s and 1960s; there were some British politicians, however, who sought the demise of the Consensus beginning in the 1970s.¹⁰ These challengers and would-be reformers were largely unsuccessful, though. It was not until Thatcher's election in 1979 that the Conservative Party, colloquially known as the Tories, was able to successfully shift the political center in Britain to the right.¹¹ Despite Thatcher's numerous pronouncements regarding the perceived evils of top-down, authoritarian socialism in the Soviet Union, "[the Thatcher government], in seeking to 'bury socialism and generally undo the achievements of the [P]ostwar [Consensus], embarked on a path of creeping authoritarianism."¹²

Not all scholarship of Thatcherism has been so frankly dystopian. Earl Reitan, a scholar of contemporary British politics, offers a brief summary of Thatcherism: "[Thatcher] advocated a diminished role for government, fiscal responsibility, free enterprise in a market-driven economy, reduction in the powers of the unions, tight management of the welfare state, tough control on crime and public disorders, and sturdy British patriotism."¹³ To simply state what Thatcher advocated is of course insufficient; it is necessary to explore in greater detail the policies her governments enacted.

⁹ Liberal in this sense refers to classical liberalism, with its support for *laissez-faire* economics, and not contemporary American liberalism; European liberalism is more synonymous with American libertarianism.

¹⁰ Dennis Kavanagh, *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): vii.

¹¹ Geoffrey Garrett, "The Political Consequences of Thatcherism," *Political Behavior* 14, no. 4 (December 1992): 361. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/586570> (accessed 29 April 2013).

¹² Kent Worcester, "Ten Years of Thatcherism," 298. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40209109> (accessed 8 February 2013).

¹³ Earl A. Reitan, *Tory Radicalism: Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and the Transformation of Modern Britain, 1979-1997* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997): 31.

The first Thatcher government, elected in 1979, was confronted with a myriad of problems from the start. Perhaps the most pressing problem faced by Thatcher was the poorly-performing British economy. The economic problems were threefold: Stagnant growth, increasing unemployment, and high rates of inflation.¹⁴ Thatcher opted to solve Britain's inflationary problem first; she regarded inflation as a deterrent to private investment, which thereby lead to economic stagnation and rising unemployment. Thatcher successfully reined in inflation, which dropped from a rate of 10.5% at the start of her premiership to 5.4% in 1982.¹⁵ The rate of inflation fell again to 3.4% in 1986, seven years into Thatcher's premiership. Thatcher, despite her success in tackling the problem of inflation, regarded her mission of restructuring Britain's economy as incomplete.

Thatcher furthermore considered the power of British labor unions as a barrier to economic growth. Thatcher, in order to curb union power, enacted a series of laws known as Employment Acts. The first such piece of legislation was passed in 1980. The Employment Act of 1980 severely limited the ability of labor unions to strike by requiring an approving vote of at least 80% for any strike to move forward.¹⁶ This law contained additional limitations, including an effective ban on 'sympathy strikes,' as well as a stipulation that a picket could only occur at the place of employment of those on strike. The second Employment Act was passed in 1982, and it reversed a long-standing legal tradition which held that unions were granted immunity from any civil damages

¹⁴ Elhanan Helpman, Kent Matthews, Patrick Minford, and Stephen Nickell, "Mrs Thatcher's Economic Policies 1979-1987," in "The Conservative Revolution," special issue, *Economic Policy* 2, no. 5 (October 1987): 60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344621> (accessed 29 April 2013).

¹⁵ Helpman et. al, "Mrs Thatcher's Economic Policies," 61.

¹⁶ Reitan, *Tory Radicalism*, 40.

incurred during union-supported strikes; the Employment Act of 1982 enabled unions to be sued for civil damages that occurred during such strikes.

Due to the policies of Thatcher's government, the British economy was in a vastly better position for growth in 1982.¹⁷ This position did not come without a price: A still-rising unemployment rate and an increase in bankruptcies. Unemployment continued to rise despite—or perhaps because of—Thatcher's assault on both inflation and labor unions. Whereas 1.3 million Britons were unemployed in 1979, this figure more than doubled to 3 million by 1983.¹⁸ The manufacturing sector comprised a significant portion of jobs lost in Britain.¹⁹ Unfortunately for unemployed Britons, these were jobs that were unlikely to return. The neoliberal economic policies of Thatcher—privatization, or the selling of entities hitherto owned collectively and managed by the government, and deregulation—were an important factor in this.

At the heart of Margaret Thatcher's economic policies was the belief in *laissez-faire* capitalism, a model of capitalism which held that trade and enterprise should be free from nearly all government interference. Such a model of capitalism, Thatcher believed, would result in greater economic efficiency and productivity. Thatcher's ideological conviction of the superiority of *laissez-faire* capitalism led her to pursue both privatization on a mass scale, as well as widespread deregulation.²⁰ Given the overwhelming acceptance of the Postwar Consensus as the status quo, Thatcher understood that it was necessary to tread lightly as she began her program of privatization. In order to do so, Thatcher began by privatizing those industries with low

¹⁷ Reitan, 37.

¹⁸ Reitan, 33-34.

¹⁹ Reitan, 58.

²⁰ Helpman et. al, "Mrs Thatcher's Economic Policies," 67.

public recognition and, perhaps more importantly, weak political constituencies.²¹ The government furthermore benefited financially from the sale of national assets to private interests. This is seen in the gargantuan increase in the income of the Treasury, which rose from £377 million between 1979 and 1980 to £6 billion between 1988 and 1989.

Thatcher remained in control of the Conservative Party—and the United Kingdom—until 1990. Her downfall was brought about by the so-called Community Charge, which was in effect a poll tax enacted at the local level.²² The Community Charge sought to address the issue of local taxation, and it functioned by replacing the previous system of taxation of domestic property with a tax on individuals eighteen years of age and over.²³ That the Community Charge was applied equally to citizens both rich and poor caused consternation—both among the general public and members of Thatcher’s Conservative Party.²⁴ The legislation was rushed through Parliament, and a final vote was taken in January 1990. The unpopularity of the Community Charge produced a handful of ramifications: First, Britain witnessed massive rioting, such as that in Trafalgar Square in March 1990. Second, the anti-Thatcher elements within the Conservative Party used the unpopularity of the Community Charge to openly challenge her leadership. Thatcher, in a bid to preserve the unity of the Conservative Party, resigned as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in November of 1990.²⁵ Thatcher’s efforts to preserve this unity were ultimately successful, as the Tories united around John Major, a

²¹ Reitan, *Tory Radicalism*, 43.

²² Reitan, *Tory Radicalism*, 91.

²³ Stephen Smith, “Distributional Issues in Local Taxation,” *The Economic Journal* 101, no. 406 (May 1991): 585. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2233563> (accessed 10 November 2013).

²⁴ Reitan, *Tory Radicalism*, 92.

²⁵ Reitan, *Tory Radicalism*, 98.

member of Thatcher's cabinet; Major ultimately succeeded Thatcher as Prime Minister, a position he held until 1997.

As the events in Trafalgar Square demonstrate, Thatcher's policies were not implemented in a vacuum. She of course faced opposition from many segments of society, including musicians and songwriters. Perhaps one factor that contributed to the rise in the politicization of British popular music in the 1980s was a rise in the sense of disempowerment. The difference between those living in the 1980s and previous generations was that "[those in the 1980s] lost the voice of protest."²⁶ This voice of protest was naturally assumed by British musicians and songwriters. The criticisms of Thatcher that were put forth by musicians are of great importance for historians and those interested in British society during this period: They not only offer a glimpse into the views these musicians held, but they also offer a glimpse into the views held by the fans who consumed this music. Contemporary responses and criticisms—like their aforementioned posthumous counterparts—were varied. One similarity, though, seems to be the overwhelming opposition to Thatcher and her politics. Regarding the depictions of Thatcher in popular culture, Robert Everett-Green, a journalist with the Canadian publication *The Globe and Mail*, said that she was "mostly a hate-filled, miserly figure, like Scrooge with all the power and no midnight conversion. [...] Artists who [...] responded to her favourably ma[d]e up a small group."²⁷

The responses of British musicians, put forth in song lyrics (and sometimes album artwork or interviews), fall into two primary categories. The first category contains two

²⁶ Gupta, "England," 354.

²⁷ Robert Everett-Green, "Margaret Thatcher in Pop Culture: A Scrooge with All the Power and No Midnight Conversion," *The Globe and Mail*, 9 April 2013. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/thatcher-portrayed-as-scrooge-with-all-the-power-and-no-midnight-conversion/article10885380/> (accessed 24 October 2013).

subcategories: First, songs that are reflective of the alienation felt by many British citizens at this time. Second, songs that are simply anti-Thatcher. Songs in this category are critical of Thatcher as an individual without offering criticisms of any specific policies or actions. The second category is comprised of songs that are critical of specific policies or events enacted by the Thatcher administrations. These songs fall largely into three subcategories: Economic policies and unemployment, the Falklands War and foreign policy more generally, and labor relations.

The artists who produced these songs came from a wide variety of backgrounds. While some artists hailed from the more affluent English south, other artists were from the working-class English north or Scotland. These artists also enjoyed varying degrees of commercial success: Some became household names, and witnessed success even outside the United Kingdom. Other artists performed and produced music in relative obscurity; their names and songs were largely unknown apart from their dedicated fan bases. Despite these wide-ranging differences, there are two noticeable similarities. First, these artists were almost unanimous in their opposition to Margaret Thatcher and her political agenda. Second, these artists were greatly influenced, either consciously or unconsciously, by either the Sex Pistols or The Clash, two British punk rock bands from the 1970s. The lyrical and musical approaches of these two groups largely determined the ways in which British artists and songwriters in the 1980s responded to Margaret Thatcher and her impact on British society. Before these categories and songs can be examined, it is necessary to understand the relationship between British politics and music prior to Thatcher's rise to power.

One would be mistaken to assume that Thatcher's rise to power was the catalyst for a newfound politicization of popular music in Britain. Elements of political commentary, albeit to varying degrees, can be found long before the election of Thatcher in 1979. One such example is The Beatles' 1966 song "Taxman." The song, written by lead guitarist George Harrison, reflects Harrison's shock and disappointment upon learning the amount of money he and his bandmates were paying in taxes.²⁸ The song specifically makes reference to Harold Wilson and Edward Heath. Wilson was a Labour politician who was Prime Minister at the time; Heath, who would serve as Prime Minister from 1970 until 1974, was the leader of the Conservative Party at the time. John Lennon demonstrated his growing political consciousness in the song "Revolution" and its companion from *The Beatles*, "Revolution 1."²⁹ The song's lyrics depict Lennon's evolving attitudes toward the use of force and violence in the context of political revolution. In the more hard-rocking "Revolution," released as the B-side to the Paul McCartney-penned "Hey Jude," Lennon sings, "But when you talk about destruction / Don't you know that you can count me out?"³⁰ This is contrasted with Lennon's different—albeit still ambivalent—position in the slower, more bluesy "Revolution 1": "But when you talk about destruction / Don't you know you can count me out? (In?)."³¹

Politicized songs such as those of The Beatles can be considered somewhat anomalous; it wasn't until the late 1970s that British music assumed a more cognizant

²⁸ Bob Spitz, *The Beatles: The Biography* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2005): 611.

²⁹ *The Beatles* is colloquially referred to as *The White Album* due to the album's minimalist, all-white cover.

³⁰ The Beatles, "Revolution," *Hey Jude/Revolution 7* (Apple, 1968). Music and lyrics by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

³¹ The Beatles, "Revolution 1," *The Beatles* (Apple, 1968). Music and lyrics by John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Additionally, both versions of the song contain a dismissive reference to overtly left-wing movements: "If you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao / You ain't gonna make it with anyone, anyhow."

political consciousness. This type of political consciousness largely took shape with the advent of a genre of music that came to be known as punk rock. Punk rock emerged within a context of alienation and hopelessness; British youths faced widespread unemployment, rapidly rising inflation, and a social and political establishment that was perceived as offering no genuine solutions.³² The punk rock movement of 1970s Britain laid the groundwork for the variety of approaches to the politicization of music in the 1980s. This is exemplified in the cases of the two most prominent British punk rock groups, the Sex Pistols and The Clash.

The music of the Sex Pistols was rooted in an “anarchic rage.”³³ This fact is quite evident throughout the music and lyrics of the group. Consider the song “Anarchy in the U.K.,” which opens with a menacing, if not outright threatening, laugh, and then continues: “I am an Antichrist / I am an anarchist / Don’t know what I want / But I know how to get it / I want to destroy passersby.”³⁴ Johnny Rotten, the Sex Pistols’ lead singer, identifies himself in this opening stanza with two of the most detested and feared monikers in Western society, that of an Antichrist and an anarchist. The Sex Pistols’ rejection of society as a whole is exemplified in Rotten’s lack of concern for the opinions others may have of him regarding his self-identification as an Antichrist and anarchist. Rotten’s desire to “destroy passersby” reflects the notion of “anarchic rage.” That Rotten does not “know what [he] want[s]” is reflective of the aforementioned pessimism felt by many British youths.

³² Kenneth J. Bindas, “‘The Future Is Unwritten’: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982,” *American Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40642496> (accessed 28 September 2013).

³³ Bindas, “‘The Future Is Unwritten,’” 69.

³⁴ Sex Pistols, “Anarchy in the U.K.,” *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols* (Virgin, 1977). Music and lyrics by Steve Jones, Glen Matlock, and Johnny Rotten.

Although the Sex Pistols reference their pessimism in “Anarchy in the U.K.,” they more fully explore it in “God Save the Queen”: “There’s no future / And England’s dreaming / [...] / There’s no future / No future / No future for you.”³⁵ The band clearly believed that were any future to exist—which they saw as a doubtful prospect in itself—it was not accessible to them or to their fans. Rotten concludes “God Save the Queen” by repeatedly singing that there is “no future for you” and “no future for me.” Within this context of perceived bleakness it becomes entirely understandable why one would desire to “destroy passersby” in search of entertainment. In addition to expressing the Sex Pistols’ pessimism, “God Save the Queen” also documents the group’s staunch opposition to one of the most enduring features of British society—the monarchy. The song itself was released in 1977, a year which happened to be that of the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II; this fact was, however, lost on the group, who were unaware of the coincidence. The song was perceived as especially threatening, owing to both its lyrical content, which compares the monarchy to a “fascist regime,” as well as to the proximity of its release to the Queen’s Silver Jubilee.³⁶ Although “God Save the Queen” reached the impressive number two spot on the British music charts, there were nonetheless allegations that industry insiders had fixed the charts to prevent the song from reaching the top position.

The Sex Pistols, music critic Robert Christgau said, “promise[d] to tear [the system] down.”³⁷ It was another band, The Clash, that “help[ed] [fans] imagine what it might be like to build [the system] back up again.” In doing so The Clash occupy a

³⁵ Sex Pistols, “God Save the Queen,” *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols* (Virgin, 1977). Music and lyrics by the Sex Pistols.

³⁶ Jon Savage, *England’s Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001): 365. 2nd edition.

³⁷ Bindas, “The Future Is Unwritten,” 74.

unique position vis-à-vis the Sex Pistols. “[I]f the Sex Pistols implicitly and then explicitly advocated the destruction of all values,” says music journalist Jon Savage, “[T]he Clash were more human, closer to the dialogue of social concern and social realism – more in the world.”³⁸ The Clash, like the Sex Pistols, recognized and rejected a broken system. Unlike the Sex Pistols, though, The Clash believed in the possibility of a better future. This duality of The Clash is strongly reflected on the album cover of *London Calling*. The artwork depicts bassist Paul Simonon wielding his bass guitar in the air, preparing to smash his instrument against the ground; the image reflects both an anger directed towards a dismissive system as well as an urgent sense of the necessity to change the system.³⁹ The London-based punk rockers “took the raw anger of British punk and worked it into a political and aesthetic agenda. [T]hey were rebels with a cause.”⁴⁰ Rather than espouse the nihilism prevalent in the Sex Pistols’ songs, The Clash’s songs encourage their listeners to go a step further: More than simply reject a broken system, listeners are encouraged to replace it with a system of their own.

Pervasive nihilism and apathy are strongly repudiated by The Clash in songs such as “White Riot”: “Black people got a lot of problems / But they don’t mind throwing a brick / White people go to school / Where they teach you how to be thick.”⁴¹ The song was written in response to the riots that occurred at the Notting Hill Carnival in 1976.⁴² The Carnival was “one of the few places where England’s blacks [could] relax on their own terms in an otherwise cold, often hostile climate.” Relations between English blacks

³⁸ Savage, *England’s Dreaming*, 231.

³⁹ The Clash, *London Calling* (CBS, 1979).

⁴⁰ Rolling Stone, “The Clash,” in *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*, ed. Holly George-Warren and Patricia Romanowski (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001): 182.

⁴¹ The Clash, “White Riot,” *The Clash* (CBS, 1977). Music and lyrics by Mick Jones and Joe Strummer.

⁴² Savage, *England’s Dreaming*, 233-34.

and the police were increasingly tense, especially at the Notting Hill Carnival. When the police attempted to arrest a single individual, the other attendees of the carnival, most of whom were black, began to riot.⁴³ “...I realized I had to write a song called ‘White Riot,’” Strummer said, “because it [the rioting] wasn’t our fight. It was the one day of the year when blacks were going to get their own back against the really atrocious way that the police behaved.” The lyrics can then be seen as supportive of the way in which English blacks resisted police violence. This support evolves into The Clash’s desire to see English whites resist similar injustices, and not to be indoctrinated by a system that “teach[es] [them] how to be thick.” “All the power’s in the hands / Of the people rich enough to buy it / [...] / Are you taking over? / Or are you taking orders? / Are you going backwards? / Or are you going forwards?” Strummer sings, imploring young Britons to seize the broken, repressive system and transform it into one that will work in their interests.

The Clash are also critical of the widespread unemployment in Britain, especially in the song “Career Opportunities.” Strummer sings, “Career opportunities – the ones that never knock / Every job they offer you is to keep you out the dock / Career opportunity – the one that never knock / [...] / Careers / It ain’t never gonna knock.”⁴⁴ The song reflects the perceived futility of looking for a career, suggesting that British citizens faced immense difficulty in the labor market. The Clash’s album *Sandinista!* features two young boys singing a cover of “Career Opportunities,” further referencing that unemployment is especially hard on youths. The Clash, in “Lost in the Supermarket,”

⁴³ The Notting Hill Carnival riot in 1976 was the first riot in Britain since 1958, which also occurred, perhaps not coincidentally, in Notting Hill.

⁴⁴ The Clash, “Career Opportunities,” *The Clash* (CBS, 1977). Music and lyrics by Mick Jones and Joe Strummer.

criticized more generally the concept of a market-oriented economy, suggesting that such a mode of production is detrimental to personal development: “I’m all lost in the supermarket / I can no longer shop happily / I came in here for the special offer: / A guaranteed personality.”⁴⁵

Whereas the Sex Pistols’ Johnny Rotten dismissively and sardonically claims in “Holidays in the Sun” to be “waiting for the Communist call,” The Clash’s songs reflect a principled left-wing stance.⁴⁶ This is reflected in album titles—the band’s 1980 album *Sandinista!* is a supportive reference to the left-wing movement in Nicaragua—as well as in song lyrics; “Spanish Bombs” is an ode to the left-wing republican fighters of the Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936 until the victory of Francoist forces in 1939, and saw the formation of a fascist state in Spain. “Washington Bombs,” from *Sandinista!*, rejects the perceived imperialistic tendencies—“the killing clowns, the blood money men”—of both the United States and the Soviet Union, especially with regards to developing countries.⁴⁷ The song furthermore expresses sympathy for Victor Jara, a Chilean musician and member of the Communist Party of Chile who was executed under the right-wing military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

The Sex Pistols’ and The Clash’s responses to events and circumstances surrounding them can be said to constitute the forerunners for the politicization of British music in the 1980s: Some groups would follow the Sex Pistols’ tradition of making music reflective of alienation, pessimism, and apathy; other groups would follow The Clash’s

⁴⁵ The Clash, “Lost in the Supermarket,” *London Calling* (CBS, 1979). Music and lyrics by Mick Jones and Joe Strummer.

⁴⁶ Sex Pistols, “Holidays in the Sun,” *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols* (Virgin, 1977). Music and lyrics by the Sex Pistols.

⁴⁷ The Clash, “Washington Bullets,” *Sandinista!* (CBS, 1980). Music and lyrics by The Clash.

tradition of making music that offered a more pointed critique of political happenings as well as the belief in the potential for a better future.

Alienation and Rejection: “We Cannot Cling to the Old Dreams Anymore”

Many musicians and songwriters in the 1980s, like the Sex Pistols in the decade prior, wrote and performed songs that reflected the widespread alienation felt by many in Britain. Of all the groups whose songs accomplished this, none was more prominent or more important than The Smiths.⁴⁸ The Smiths’ existence as a musical group was “an intense five-year campaign that [turned] British music upside down, deposing the southern elitism that was then supreme, and installing in its place a more humane northern sensibility based on [...] exquisitely crafted songs of the past, present, and an imagined future.”⁴⁹ Kari Kallioniemi, a Finnish scholar of British culture, argues that issues of geography and class were at the heart of The Smiths’ music: “[T]he Smiths articulated an uncompromising and discomfiting response to the traumas visited on working-class northern communities.”⁵⁰ The songs of The Smiths largely use personal relationships—more aptly, the lack thereof—as an analogy for society at large in order to express their alienation. The central image of the group was undeniably its frontman, Stephen Morrissey, better known by his mononym, Morrissey.

⁴⁸ Indeed, in 2002 the British music publication *NME* selected The Smiths as the most influential artist of the past fifty years, ahead of artists such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, the Sex Pistols, and The Clash.

⁴⁹ Andrew Harrison, “His Satanic Modesty Requests,” *The Word*, 7 September 2007, 82.

⁵⁰ Kari Kallioniemi, “‘Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty’: Englishness, Pop and The Smiths,” *Why Pamper Life’s Complexities: Essays on The Smiths*, ed Sean Campbell and Colin Coulter (New York: Manchester University Press, 2010): 236.

The future vocalist of The Smiths grew up on a council estate in working-class Manchester.⁵¹ The sale and privatization of such council estates, as previously noted, was an important element of Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal economic policies; this certainly impacted Morrissey's outlook and, later on, lyrics. Morrissey, like many other young British males, was unemployed in the 1970s.⁵² Morrissey met an individual named John Maher at a concert in 1979. Three years later, in 1982, this same individual—better known as Johnny Marr—arrived at Morrissey's doorstep holding a guitar, and announced that he was in search of a lyricist and singer.⁵³ Despite the additions of two other Mancunians, bassist Andy Rourke and drummer Mike Joyce, the songwriting partnership of Marr and Morrissey remained at the heart of The Smiths' music; together, Marr and Morrissey claim songwriting credits on all but a small handful of songs The Smiths recorded. The group's existence was largely coterminous with the second administration of Margaret Thatcher: The Smiths' first single was released in 1983, when Thatcher was elected for the second time, and their final album was released in 1987, when Thatcher was elected for the third and final time.

The song "Still Ill," from their eponymous 1984 debut album, stands out among The Smiths' canon as one of the more politically oriented. "I decree today that life is simply taking and not giving / England is mine; it owes me a living," sings Morrissey.⁵⁴ Morrissey seems to regard this as self-evident and axiomatic: "[A]sk me why and I'll spit in your eye." "[W]e cannot cling / To the old dreams anymore / No, we cannot cling / To

⁵¹ Phil Sutcliffe, "I'm Not There," *Mojo*, March 2008, 92.

⁵² Rolling Stone, "The Smiths/Morrissey," in *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*, ed. Holly George-Warren and Patricia Romanowski (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001): 906-907.

⁵³ Tony Fletcher, *A Light That Never Goes Out: The Enduring Saga of The Smiths* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2012): 1-2.

⁵⁴ The Smiths, "Still Ill," *The Smiths* (Rough Trade, 1984). Music and lyrics by Johnny Marr and Stephen Morrissey.

those dreams,” Morrissey continues, reflecting his belief that his—and by extension, Morrissey would have us believe, that of the common people—possession of England is something from a bygone era. The notion that “life is simply taking and not giving” is also echoed in “I Don’t Owe You Anything,” in which Morrissey sings, “I don’t owe you anything, no / But you owe me something / Repay me now.”⁵⁵

Morrissey’s lyrics to “How Soon Is Now?” paint perhaps the bleakest picture of any song in The Smiths’ repertoire—no small feat in itself. “You shut your mouth / How can you say / I go about things the wrong way?” Morrissey sings in the chorus, suggesting that the Thatcher government was attempting to enforce a uniform view of culture and society upon British citizens.⁵⁶ Morrissey, “the son and heir of nothing in particular,” continues, “I am human and I need to be loved / Just like everybody else does.” The song’s first bridge most strongly expresses the loneliness and isolation felt by Morrissey, who sings, “There’s a club if you’d like to go / You could meet somebody who really loves you / So you go and you stand on your own / And you leave on your own / And you go home and you cry / And you want to die.” The Smiths’ singer feels alienated and isolated even in a dance club, an establishment specifically designed for human contact and interaction. Morrissey ultimately gives up hope that he will ever feel a sense of belonging: “When you say it’s gonna happen ‘now’ / Well, when exactly do you mean? / See, I’ve already waited too long / And all my hope is gone.” This second bridge suggests Morrissey’s skepticism, expressed in personal terms, regarding the political

⁵⁵ The Smiths, “I Don’t Owe You Anything,” *The Smiths* (Rough Trade, 1984). Music and lyrics by Johnny Marr and Stephen Morrissey.

⁵⁶ The Smiths, “How Soon Is Now?,” *Meat Is Murder* (Rough Trade, 1985). Music and lyrics by Johnny Marr and Stephen Morrissey.

climate in Britain: Morrissey has abandoned hope that a beneficial political system will emerge.

Morrissey, in a handful of The Smiths' songs, explores the concept of "the dream." For Morrissey, this appears to represent two concepts: First, "the dream" as a lost ideal, and second, "the dream" as a place where fantasy can become reality. "The dream has gone / But the baby is real," Morrissey sings in "This Night Has Opened My Eyes," referencing Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey*.⁵⁷ The suggestion in this lyric is that the political dream of a better future "has gone," but the negative social ramifications of this fact—"the baby"—remain. Morrissey describes an attempt to live in hostile conditions such as these: "In a river the colour of lead / Immerse the baby's head / Wrap her up in the *News of the World*." Any attempt to clean the baby, or rectify the negative conditions, nonetheless must occur within a less-than-ideal, seemingly polluted, environment that is characterized by "a river the colour of lead." Morrissey regards such efforts as futile, singing, "This night has opened my eyes / and I will never sleep again." Morrissey, like any individual, ultimately grew tired, whence comes another song, "Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me." "Last night I dreamt that somebody loved me / No hope, no harm / Just another false alarm / Last night I felt real arms around me," Morrissey sings on the 1987 album *Strangeways, Here We Come*.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the "Strangeways" in the title of The Smiths' final album is a colloquial name for the Manchester Prison. In titling their final album *Strangeways, Here We Come*, The Smiths suggest that attempts to bring "the dream" to life will be criminalized. Morrissey reveals

⁵⁷ The Smiths, "This Night Has Opened My Eyes," *Hatful of Hollow* (Rough Trade, 1984). Music and lyrics by Johnny Marr and Stephen Morrissey.

⁵⁸ The Smiths, "Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me," *Strangeways, Here We Come* (Rough Trade, 1987). Music and lyrics by Johnny Marr and Stephen Morrissey.

in the song that his feeling of love and human connection are little more than elements of a dream. Morrissey's depiction of love and belonging as a simple dream suggest that true love and connection were impossible in Thatcher's Britain. Much like the American comedian George Carlin, who proclaimed that "[t]he reason they call it the 'American Dream' is because you have to be asleep to believe in," Morrissey expresses his belief that love and a better future can only be experienced in dreams—certainly not in Thatcher's Britain. Morrissey claimed in 1992 to be a "big fan" of another musician who sang about alienation, Billy Bragg.⁵⁹

The Essex-born singer-songwriter Billy Bragg—"a true working-class hero"—was, and remains, one of the most ardently political musicians in Britain.⁶⁰ Bragg ended his formal education at 16 and instead opted to pursue music. Many of Bragg's songs contain strong left-wing, pro-labor themes, likely owing to his having grown up in an industrial suburb of London.⁶¹ Indeed, Bragg, who performed at concerts alongside Johnny Marr and Andy Rourke of The Smiths, organized the pro-Labour Red Wedge with Paul Weller, the former lead singer of the punk rock group The Jam.⁶² The impact of Thatcherism upon Bragg and his music is quite evident: "Were it not for [Thatcher], I probably wouldn't be a socialist," Bragg admitted in an interview in 2011.⁶³ Bragg's admission suggests that the impact of Thatcherism on Britain pushed him to more radical

⁵⁹ Adrian Deevoy, "Ooh I Say!," *Q*, September 1992, 65.

⁶⁰ Rolling Stone, "Billy Bragg," *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*, ed. Holly George-Warren and Patricia Romanowski (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001): 109-110.

⁶¹ Indeed, Bragg released *The Internationale*, a 20-minute record consisting solely of left-wing anthems, in 1990.

⁶² Joseph Brooker, "'Has the World Changed or Have I Changed?': The Smiths and the Challenge of Thatcherism," *Why Pamper Life's Complexities?: Essays on The Smiths*, ed. Sean Campbell and Colin Coulter (New York: Manchester University Press, 2010): 26.

⁶³ Democracy! Now, "British Rocker Billy Bragg on Labor Strikes and Songs, Activism, and the Murdoch Hacking Scandal," *Democracy! Now*, 5 September 2011. http://www.democracynow.org/2011/9/5/billy_bragg_british_rocker_on_labor?autostart=true (accessed 29 April 2013).

ideas about resisting Thatcher's political program. The validity of Bragg's statement is expressed in the fact that his debut album, *Life's a Riot with Spy vs Spy*, was released in May 1983, four years after Thatcher's ascension to the position of Prime Minister.

Three years later, in 1986, Bragg released *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry*, an album which contains the song "Ideology." The title of the album itself is borrowed from a poem penned by Vladimir Mayakovsky, a Russian-turned-Soviet poet whose political sympathies resided with Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks; this fact further documents Bragg's own left-wing political stance. The song reflects Bragg's perception of a seemingly unconcerned political establishment, and the alienation with which it is associated. The overall political climate in Britain, with its "increasingly illiberal tone," greatly diminished in quality under Thatcher's governance.⁶⁴ Bragg, in "Ideology," sings about a worrying political climate in which politicians were increasingly unable to meet the needs of their varying constituencies. Bragg singles out Margaret Thatcher: "When one voice rules the nation / Just because they're on top of the pile / Doesn't mean their vision is the clearest."⁶⁵ Thatcher's position of power, for Bragg, does not inherently qualify her or her policies to serve as the "[sole] voice [to] rule the nation." "The voices of the people / Are falling on deaf ears / Our politicians are all becoming careerists / Is there more to a seat in Parliament / Than sitting on your arse?" Bragg sings, expressing his belief that the concerns of the British citizenry were going unnoticed. Politicians no longer sought to represent their constituencies; they instead sought to establish careers within the political system. Commenting on his dissatisfaction with the British Parliament, Bragg humorously wonders whether being a Member of Parliament requires

⁶⁴ Worcester, "Ten Years of Thatcherism," 298.

⁶⁵ Billy Bragg, "Ideology," *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry* (Go! Discs, 1986). Music and lyrics by Billy Bragg.

more work than simply “sitting on [one’s] arse.” The final verse of “Ideology” reflects Bragg’s view that Britain’s elected leaders were not only failing to meet the needs of their constituencies, but that this is in actuality not an interest of theirs: “While we expect democracy / They’re laughing in our face / And although our cries get louder / Their laughter gets louder still / Above the sound of ideologies clashing,” Bragg sings, this final lyric recalling the Bob Dylan song “Chimes of Freedom.”

The newfound political status quo, that of Bragg’s “sound of ideologies,” was not only targeted by groups or artists whose musical beginnings were relatively recent; popular and long-established groups such as The Kinks also criticized the system. The Kinks, who formed in London in 1963, initially rose to prominence as part of the British Invasion in the early-to-mid 1960s, joining other critically acclaimed and commercially successful groups such as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones.⁶⁶ The group rose to prominence with guitar-based songs such as “You Really Got Me” and “All Day and All of the Night.” The Kinks were centered around the Davies brothers: Dave Davies, the lead singer, and Ray Davies, the lead guitarist and principal songwriter. Given that “most of [...] [Ray] Davies’ songs [were] elegies for the beleaguered British middle class,” it was only natural that The Kinks should respond to the politics of Britain under Thatcher; this is primarily reflected in the group’s song “Young Conservatives.” The song, which is from the 1983 album *State of Confusion*, satirically documents the aforementioned rightward shift in British politics: “Have you heard the word? / The revolution’s over / Now the anger’s disappeared / And the rebels are much older / And the schools and

⁶⁶ Rolling Stone, “The Kinks,” in *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*, ed. Holly George-Warren and Patricia Romanowski (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001): 532. That Davies’ songs reflect a “beleaguered middle class” also suggests that opposition to Thatcher was not solely a venture of the working class.

universities / Are turning out a brand new breed of young conservatives / [...] / The establishment is winning / Now the battle's nearly won / The rebels are conforming / [...] / All the urgency and energy / Have turned into complacency / [...] / It's a victory for order / Now they've beaten everyone."⁶⁷ "The revolution's over" is a lyric with two interpretations, both of which can be regarded as simultaneously true. The first interpretation is that Margaret Thatcher's revolution is over, and that Thatcherism now comprises the new political paradigm in the United Kingdom. The second interpretation, suggested by a later lyric "[t]he rebels are conforming," is reflective of the left-wing movement in Britain, which was in a state of rapid decline. The lyrics suggest that these "rebels" who would once have opposed the system are now "rushing down the streets to join the young conservatives." This implies a mentality of political disempowerment; it is simply easier for the former opposition to join the Conservative Party than to struggle against its increasing hegemony over British politics.

Another element of alienation in British music can be described as a patriotic type of alienation. Songs of patriotic alienation lament the perceived loss of one's country to forces, ideas, and individuals that are seen as harmful. "England / I'll wait for you in England / England / What's happened to England? / [...] / And still I'll wait..." sing the Oi! group Red London, who longingly draw out the final syllable of "England" in their song "This Is England (Part Two)."⁶⁸ Angelic Upstarts were another Oi! group who felt

⁶⁷ The Kinks, "Young Conservatives," *State of Confusion* (Arista, 1983). Music and lyrics by Ray Davies.

⁶⁸ Red London, "This Is England (Part Two)," *This Is England* (Razor Records, 1984). Music and lyrics by Red London. Oi!, it should be noted, it is a subgenre of punk rock that is often considered synonymous with street punk. The subgenre, while originally and overwhelmingly supportive of proletarian ideals such as multiracial, working-class solidarity, has largely been associated with racist skinheads due to its co-optation by far-right nationalist and 'white power' movements, both in Britain and abroad. Despite the popular association of Oi! music with racism, nearly all original performers within the genre vehemently rejected racism and neo-fascist politics.

that Britain was slipping from their grasp. Their song, simply titled “England,” reflects this belief: “And never a country been so great / The stories Britannia could tell / I never want to live my life away from the English shores / There’s never a country in the world / With the scent of an English rose / England, oh, England, a country so great / [...] / There’ll never be any colors like the red, the white, and the blues / [...] / St. George’s spirit has never died / It all keeps coming back.”⁶⁹ Angelic Upstart’s lyrics emphasize the beauty of England, and in referencing that “St. George’s spirit” lives on, the group implore British citizens to adopt a fighting attitude in order to resist Thatcherism and to reclaim England.

Other artists rejected Thatcher as an individual, to varying degrees of vehemence. One such song is Morrissey’s “Margaret on the Guillotine,” from the singer’s 1988 debut solo album *Viva Hate*. “The kind people / Have a wonderful dream: / Margaret on the guillotine / ‘Cause people like you / Make me feel so tired / When will you die?” sings Morrissey.⁷⁰ Morrissey’s blatantly obvious yearning for the death of Margaret Thatcher did not limit itself to the realm of desire; this is demonstrated in the song’s final verse, which seemingly implores the “kind people” to place Thatcher on the guillotine: “And kind people, / Do not shelter this dream / Make it real / Make the dream real.” Indeed, Morrissey’s dream was nearly made real four years prior to the song’s release. In the early morning of 12 October 1984, members of the Irish Republican Army detonated a bomb in the Brighton hotel in which Thatcher and other Conservative politicians were

⁶⁹ Angelic Upstarts, “England,” *2,000,000 Voices* (EMI, 1981). Music and lyrics by Thomas Mensforth and Cowie Mond.

⁷⁰ Morrissey, “Margaret on the Guillotine,” *Viva Hate* (HMV, 1988). Music and lyrics by Stephen Morrissey and Stephen Street.

staying, killing five and injuring 31.⁷¹ Despite this loss of life, Morrissey opined that “the [real] sorrow of the Brighton bombing is that Thatcher escaped unscathed.”⁷²

“Margaret on the Guillotine” was seen as especially threatening by the British political establishment. Morrissey recounts in *Autobiography* that he was interrogated by a task force of the Special Branch.⁷³ “I was cross-examined,” Morrissey says, “for allegedly welcoming the assassination of Margaret Thatcher.” Morrissey is blunt in his assessment of Thatcher: “Disconnected and dispassionate, Thatcher’s torrent of hate (for she has no other emotion) drains the young people of England, who see [sic] the Thatcher regime as militant and blinkered, and a dangerous tyranny clouds little Britain.”⁷⁴ For nearly thirty years more, the death of Margaret Thatcher would remain solely a dream for Morrissey. “Margaret on the Guillotine” seems emblematic among those songs that criticized Thatcher on a personal level: “Unlike [other musicians], Morrissey [did] not bother exploring Thatcher’s policies and their effects. His death sentence [in ‘Margaret on the Guillotine’] is all the more outrageous for its lazy refusal to examine the charge sheet.”⁷⁵

While Morrissey seems prepared to personally execute Thatcher, it is Elvis Costello who desires to bury her. Costello is often associated with a genre known as pub rock, a fact that may partly explain his attitudes toward Thatcher.⁷⁶ The singer-

⁷¹ Chris Ogden, *Maggie: An Intimate Portrait of a Woman in Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990): 211-213.

⁷² Fletcher, *A Light That Never Goes Out*, 9.

⁷³ Morrissey, *Autobiography* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2013): 226.

⁷⁴ Morrissey, *Autobiography*, 227.

⁷⁵ Brooker, “Has the World Changed or Have I Changed?,” 28.

⁷⁶ Pub rock is largely viewed as a reaction to the more ostentatious trends within musical performance, such as stadium rock, which began to seep into more ‘anti-mainstream’ genres such as punk rock; pub rock then sought more intimate settings for performances, such as local pubs, and deliberately avoided the grandeur of arena concerts. In doing so, pub rock attempted to redress the issue of musical alienation.

songwriter's attitudes may also have developed in his upbringing. Costello grew up in a working-class neighborhood of London until the age of 15, when he and his recently-divorced mother moved to the predominantly working-class city of Liverpool.⁷⁷ While Costello did write the lyrics to "Shipbuilding," which shall be examined later, he saved his personal attack on Thatcher until 1989, nearly a decade into her premiership. Costello, in "Tramp the Dirt Down," expresses his seemingly all-consuming desire to see Thatcher buried in her grave: "Well, I hope I don't die too soon / [...] / Because there's one thing I know / I'd like to live long enough to savor / That's when they finally put you in the ground / I'll stand on your grave and tramp the dirt down."⁷⁸ Costello hopes to live a long life, owing not to any personal ambitions, but out of an intense desire to see Thatcher dead and buried. "When England was the whore of the world / Margaret was her madam," Costello sings, expressing his opinion that Thatcher is allowing the English people—and England itself—to be exploited from without.

Other groups, while not explicitly calling for the death of Thatcher, were nevertheless unequivocal in their hatred for the Prime Minister. The Exploited, who originated in Edinburgh, Scotland, formed in 1980, one year after Thatcher's ascension to power. The group's debut album "[is] as much a rallying cry as a record," suggesting that The Exploited wish to have their music and their message reach a disaffected segment of British society.⁷⁹ The Exploited, in their desire to convey the anger and frustration they felt, frequently employ profanity in their lyrics. In the chorus to the 1982 song "U.S.A.,"

⁷⁷ Rolling Stone, "Elvis Costello," *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*, ed. Holly George-Warren and Patricia Romanowski (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001): 213.

⁷⁸ Elvis Costello, "Tramp the Dirt Down," *Spike* (Warner Bros., 1989). Music and lyrics by Elvis Costello.

⁷⁹ Morat, "The Exploited History," *The Exploited Official Website*. <http://www.the-exploited.net/history.htm> (accessed 1 December 2013). 'Morat' is the only identifying information listed on the website.

for example, the group sings, almost anthemically, “Fuck the U.S.A.!”⁸⁰ In their 1985 song “Maggie,” though, the group’s profanity and anger assumes a vastly more personal and gendered shape. The profanity in “Maggie,” which is already quite shocking in itself, becomes superseded by jarringly and vehemently sexist language. The band sings, “Maggie, Maggie, Maggie / You cunt / Maggie, Maggie, Maggie / You fucking cunt.”⁸¹ The Exploited, to be certain, used such language previously; Queen Elizabeth II is referred to as a “dirty little bitch” and a “fucking little cow” in “Royalty.”⁸² This type of language can only be described as sexist—and violently so. The use of distinctly gendered profanity raises the inevitable issue of the role gender played in Margaret Thatcher’s politics, as well as in public perception of Thatcher. “The effects of [Thatcher’s] persona were overdetermined by gender,” writes Joseph Brooker, a scholar of contemporary British culture.⁸³ “As the first female Prime Minister, Thatcher emphasized her strength to a degree that might have seemed eccentric in a male politician, but for a woman in her position was more a necessary ideological compensation,” Brooker states. One must only consider Thatcher’s appellation as “The Iron Lady” to appreciate the degree of strength she was perceived to exude.

The Exploited’s extreme anti-Thatcher sentiments were not limited solely to their lyrics. The album artwork from the group’s 1987 album *Death Before Dishonour* is a visual example of their opposition to Thatcher. The artwork depicts Margaret Thatcher and the Grim Reaper, both of whom are grinning, almost malevolently, as they embrace

⁸⁰ The Exploited, “U.S.A.,” *Troops of Tomorrow* (Secret, 1982). Music and lyrics by Wattie Buchan, John Duncan, and Gary McCormack.

⁸¹ The Exploited, “Maggie,” *Horror Epics* (Taang!, 1985). Music and lyrics by Wattie Buchan and Wayne Tyas.

⁸² The Exploited, “Royalty,” *Punks Not Dead* (Secret, 1981). Music and lyrics by The Exploited.

⁸³ Brooker, ““Has the World Changed or Have I Changed?”” 24-25.

in a cemetery attached to a derelict stone church. The two are surrounded by tombstones that read, “DIED FOR WHAT?”⁸⁴ A terror-stricken corpse rises from the ground in front of one of these tombstones, suggesting that not even death can provide respite from the politics of Margaret Thatcher.

The theme of alienation and lack of representation is also found in genres outside of rock and punk rock. The Beat (known in the United States as The English Beat) are a ska group whose debut album *I Just Can't Stop It* was released in 1980.⁸⁵ Like many other British ska groups, The Beat are multiracial; they formed in the English city of Birmingham in 1978.⁸⁶ One song from the album, “Stand Down Margaret,” implores Thatcher to resign as Prime Minister: “I said I see no joy / I see only sorrow / I see no chance of your bright, new tomorrow / So stand down, Margaret / Stand down, please.”⁸⁷ The Beat furthermore dismiss Thatcherist ideals, which they regard as being inapplicable to much of Britain. Much like Billy Bragg, The Beat express their belief that the political establishment—and Thatcher in particular—was unconcerned with the problems facing common people: “I sometimes wonder / If I'll ever get the chance / Just to sit with my children / In a holiday jam / Our lives seem petty in your cold, grey hands / Would you give a second thought? / Would you ever give a damn? / I doubt it / Stand down, Margaret.”

⁸⁴ The Exploited, *Death Before Dishonour* (Rough Justice, 1987).

⁸⁵ Ska is a genre of music that originated in Jamaica, a member of the Commonwealth, and was then brought to Britain by Jamaican immigrants; it is noted for its use of brass instruments and intricate basslines.

⁸⁶ Rolling Stone, “The English Beat,” *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll* (New York: Fireside, 2001): 305. The Beat are largely known in the United States as ‘The English Beat’ to differentiate between themselves and a Los Angeles-based group with the same name.

⁸⁷ The Beat, “Stand Down Margaret,” *I Just Can't Stop It* (Go Feet, 1980). Music and lyrics by The Beat.

Criticism: “Anger Is No Substitute for Disciplined Rebellion”

While many artists, such as those previously mentioned, chose to record music documenting alienation, or their rejection of Thatcher personally, other artists opted to make music that offered more specific criticisms of the policies of Margaret Thatcher. One of the primary targets for criticism among British musicians and songwriters was the economy, specifically with regard to unemployment. Unemployment was a significant concern in 1980s Britain. While not solely a British problem, unemployment nonetheless affected Britain more acutely than many other European countries. The unemployment rate, which for British men was 3% in the late 1960s, rose to 15% by the middle of the 1980s; this figure would undoubtedly be higher if women were included in these statistics.⁸⁸ A great number of songs written during Thatcher’s tenure as Prime Minister reflect unemployment and the lack of opportunities in Britain.

Pink Floyd were a group that formed in London in 1965, and its members were primarily from a more comfortable, middle-class background.⁸⁹ Indeed, most of the members of Pink Floyd met while studying architecture at a polytechnic school. The band’s music is exemplary of the genre of progressive rock. While the lyrics from earlier albums reference topics such as loneliness and mental illness, the band’s lyrics in the late 1970s and early 1980s began to exude a growing political cognizance. This awareness is quite explicit in the band’s 1983 album *The Final Cut*. The album’s opening song, “The Post War Dream,” attacks Thatcher’s economic policies and the dismantling of the Postwar Consensus and its system of full employment: “What have we done, Maggie,

⁸⁸ Martin Hellwig, Richard Layard, and Christopher Pissarides, “Unemployment and Vacancies in Britain,” *Economic Policy* 1, no. 3 (October 1986): 499. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344583> (accessed 24 September 2013).

⁸⁹ Rolling Stone, “Pink Floyd,” *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll* (New York: Fireside, 2001): 761.

what have we done? / What have we done to England? / Should we shout? Should we scream? / What happened to the post war dream? / Oh, Maggie, Maggie, what have we done?”⁹⁰ In wondering whether to “shout [or] scream,” Pink Floyd suggest an uncertainty, one which parallels The Kinks “state of confusion,” in how to respond to the government of Margaret Thatcher.

A large portion of the songs of the repertoire of the aforementioned Billy Bragg deals with the issue of labor. His album *Life's a Riot with Spy vs Spy* contains the song “To Have and to Have Not,” which specifically focuses on the problem of unemployment vis-à-vis British youth: “If you look the part you'll get the job / In last year's trousers and your old school shoes / The truth is, son, it's a buyer's market / They can afford to pick and choose.”⁹¹ This first stanza expresses the poverty in British society—and the dismissal of such a problem. The government tells Bragg that he will be hired “[i]f [he] look[s] the part,” but Bragg has no choice but to attend job interviews dressed in old, seemingly unimpressive clothing. A parent of Bragg rejects the government's position, confessing to Bragg that the labor market is a “buyer's market,” and that during times of high unemployment, employers “can afford to pick and choose.” Bragg continues: “The factories are closing and the army's full / I don't know what I'm going to do / But I've come to see in the land of the free / There's only a future for the chosen few.” The rising unemployment and lack of opportunities is reflected in the spread of the factory closings; this leaves Bragg unsure of his future. The only future that exists in the Bragg's eyes is that of the privileged few—there certainly is no foreseeable future for the working majority in Britain.

⁹⁰ Pink Floyd, “The Post War Dream,” *The Final Cut* (Harvest, 1983). Music and lyrics by Roger Waters.

⁹¹ Billy Bragg, “To Have and to Have Not,” *Life's a Riot with Spy vs Spy* (Charisma Records, 1983). Music and lyrics by Billy Bragg.

The “closing factories” of which Bragg sings were a result of privatization and deregulation, which formed an integral component of the economic policies of the administrations of Margaret Thatcher.⁹² Thatcher, like her counterpart and ideological compatriot in the United States, Ronald Reagan, sought to reduce government influence, especially as it concerned the economy. One aspect of privatization, which overall has been described as “remarkably successful,” saw hitherto nationalized assets sold to private businesses.⁹³ Thatcher’s program of privatization was criticized not only by the British left, which regarded any sale of nationalized assets as anathema, but also by *laissez-faire*-oriented economists, who disliked the lack of economic competition that resulted.

The song “Everything Counts,” by the Essex-based Depeche Mode—“the quintessential 80s electropop band”—seems to describe this program of privatization.⁹⁴ The group sings, “The handshake / Seals the contract / From the contract / There’s no turning back / [...] / The grabbing hands / Grab all they can / All for themselves / After all, / It’s a competitive world.”⁹⁵ The “grabbing hands” depicts a country in a state of economic free-for-all, and the reference to the “competitive world” does not appear to refer to the lack of competition, which was criticized by economists; it instead appears to be satirical, and refers to the situation average British citizens faced in an increasingly liberalized, market-oriented economy. The theme of a return to *laissez-faire* capitalism is also reflected in the song “Opportunities (Let’s Make Lots of Money),” by the London-

⁹² Helpman et al., “Mrs Thatcher’s Economic Policies,” 67-70.

⁹³ Helpman et al., “Mrs Thatcher’s Economic Policies,” 68.

⁹⁴ Rolling Stone, “Depeche Mode,” in *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*, ed. Holly George-Warren and Patricia Romanowski (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001): 254.

⁹⁵ Depeche Mode, “Everything Counts,” *Construction Time Again* (Mute, 1983). Music and lyrics by Martin Gore.

based synthpop duo Pet Shop Boys, who are “[l]ess a band per se than a musical vehicle for wry, cheeky commentary on pop culture.”⁹⁶ The twosome sing, “I’ve got the brains / You’ve got the looks / Let’s make lots of money / You’ve got the brawn / I’ve got the brains / Let’s make lots of money / [...] / I’m looking for a partner / Someone who gets things fixed / Ask yourself this question: / Do you want to be rich?”⁹⁷ The Pet Shop Boys, in “Opportunities,” satirize the new economic paradigm by suggesting that simply possessing brains and brawn is sufficient to be financially successful in Britain.

As Earl Reitan states, “sturdy British patriotism” formed a cornerstone of Thatcherism. This instilled in Thatcher the desire to protect British sovereignty, a fact which is exemplified in the Falklands War. The decision to invade the Falklands remains one of the most crucial events of Margaret Thatcher’s tenure as Prime Minister. The Falkland Islands, located off the coast of Argentina in the South Atlantic Ocean, had been British possessions since 1833.⁹⁸ Plainclothes Argentine soldiers invaded South Georgia Island, one of many islands comprising the Falklands, on 19 March 1982. The right-wing Argentine government, which had unsuccessfully petitioned the United Kingdom for control of the islands, used the invasion to raise its domestic popularity and divert attention away from human rights abuses taking place in Argentina. On 2 April, two weeks after the initial soldiers invaded South Georgia Island, the Argentine government sent 2,500 soldiers to the capital of the Falklands. Henry Leach, head of the British navy, subsequently prepared a task force for Thatcher, which was then dispatched to the

⁹⁶ Rolling Stone, “Pet Shop Boys,” in *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*, ed. Holly George-Warren and Patricia Romanowski (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001): 753.

⁹⁷ Pet Shop Boys, “Opportunities (Let’s Make Lots of Money),” *Please* (Parlophone, 1986). Music and lyrics by Pet Shop Boys.

⁹⁸ Ogden, *Maggie*, 178-79.

Falklands.⁹⁹ British forces quickly defeated their ill-prepared and ill-equipped Argentine counterparts. “Today has put the Great back in Britain,” Thatcher said upon the United Kingdom’s victory just ten weeks after the conflict began.¹⁰⁰ A total of 877 soldiers—225 of them British and 652 of them Argentine—died by the end of the conflict on 14 June.¹⁰¹

Many British musicians and songwriters stood in opposition to the invasion of the Falkland Islands, and in doing so they constituted a minority—upwards of 80% of British citizens supported retaking the Falklands, and more than 50% believed that military force was justified in the government’s desire to retake the Islands.¹⁰² Furthermore, a common consensus holds that Britain’s victory in the Falklands War led to a surge in support for the Thatcher government, the popularity of which had been in decline prior to the conflict; this notion, however, has not been without contention.¹⁰³ The Exploited, a previously mentioned group, were certainly not among those Britons swayed to Thatcher’s side by the British victory in the Falklands.

“Let’s Start a War (Said Maggie One Day)” is highly critical of Thatcher’s decision to retake the Falklands: “‘Let’s start a War,’ said Maggie one day / ‘With the unemployed masses we’ll just do away’ / ‘They won’t mind, like sheep they’ll go’ / ‘They won’t suss us, they’ll never know.’”¹⁰⁴ This opening stanza suggests that Thatcher’s decision to invade was something of a panacea for the government: Military service and production for the war effort could solve the problem of unemployment, and

⁹⁹ Ogden, *Maggie*, 180.

¹⁰⁰ Ogden, *Maggie*, 191.

¹⁰¹ Reitan, *Tory Radicalism*, 50-51.

¹⁰² Ogden, *Maggie*, 184.

¹⁰³ Tony Fletcher, David Marsh, David Sanders, and Hugh Ward, “Government Popularity and the Falklands War: A Reassessment,” *British Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 3 (July 1987): 281-282. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/193822> (accessed 29 April 2013).

¹⁰⁴ The Exploited, “Let’s Start a War (Said Maggie One Day),” *Let’s Start a War... (Said Maggie One Day)* (Pax, 1983). Music and lyrics by Wattie Buchan and John Duncan.

it additionally could increase support for Thatcher's Conservative government. The song's lyrics also suggest that British citizens had nothing to gain from the war: "You fight for your country / You die for their gain." "Their gain" suggests that The Exploited believe the British elite was callously using a war to reap economic benefits—benefits that would not be realized by the majority of British citizens. This loss of human life, perceived as wholly unnecessary, is also echoed by Crass, another punk rock band. Crass' song "How Does It Feel?" poses a question to Margaret Thatcher: "How does it feel to be the mother of a thousand dead?"¹⁰⁵ Crass, like The Exploited, accuse Thatcher of having lied to the British public: "Your arrogance has gutted these bodies of life / Your deceit fooled them that it was worth the sacrifice / Your lies persuaded people to accept the wasted blood."

The nexus of war and the British economy is also noted in Robert Wyatt's "Shipbuilding." The lyrics of the song, which were written by Elvis Costello for Wyatt, notes the sense of tragic irony between the decline in unemployment and rise in material possessions, and the fact that these are the results of building ships for a war: "Is it worth it: / A new winter coat and shoes for the wife? / And a bicycle on the boy's birthday?"¹⁰⁶ "Shipbuilding" additionally suggests that when newly employed shipbuilders are forced to choose between opposing the war and being employed, they will choose the latter: "It's just a rumor that was spread around town / Somebody said that somebody got filled in / For saying that people get killed in / The results of their shipbuilding." This newfound employment is sustained due to the fact that the ships being built are sinking—meaning that people are dying: "Within weeks they'll be reopening the shipyard / And

¹⁰⁵ Crass, "How Does It Feel?," *Best Before 1984* (Crass, 1986). Music and lyrics by Crass.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Wyatt, "Shipbuilding," *Nothing Can Stop Us* (Rough Trade, 1982). Music and lyrics by Elvis Costello and Clive Langer

notifying the next of kin / Once again / It's all we're skilled in / We will be shipbuilding.” Simon Goddard of the British music publication *Q* interviewed Elvis Costello in 2008, and asked the singer-songwriter about “Shipbuilding.” Costello, who called the lyrics to “Shipbuilding” among his favorite compositions, said, “Whatever you say about the conduct of war, that crime alone will see Thatcher in hell,” in reference to the controversial sinking of an Argentine cruiser by British forces.¹⁰⁷

Apart from her desire to preserve British sovereignty, exemplified in the Falklands War, Thatcher's opposition to the Soviet Union and fear of the expansion of Communism constituted a fundamental part of her foreign policy. Thatcher, as Leader of the Opposition in 1976, delivered a speech criticizing the then-ruling Labour Party's stance toward the Soviet Union, which she regarded as too lenient: “[The Labour Party doesn't] seem to realise that the submarines and missiles that the Russians are building could be used against us. [...] The Russians are bent on world dominance, and they are rapidly acquiring the means to become the most powerful imperial nation the world has seen.”¹⁰⁸ The newspaper of the Soviet Army, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, replied to her critique of the Soviet military apparatus by calling Thatcher the “Iron Lady,” a moniker that remained with Thatcher the rest of her life.¹⁰⁹

Thatcher's hostile and hardline attitude toward the Soviet Union motivated groups such as the Angelic Upstarts to oppose her hawkish foreign policy. The group's song “I

¹⁰⁷ Simon Goddard, “Elvis Costello,” *Q*, March 2008, 66.

¹⁰⁸ Margaret Thatcher, “Speech at Kensington Town Hall (‘Britain Awake’)” (speech, Kensington Town Hall, Chelsea, United Kingdom, 19 January 1976). <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=102939> (accessed 21 October 2013). Thatcher ironically ignores the fact that the label of “most powerful imperial nation” was once applicable to Great Britain itself. (One cannot help but recall Richard Nixon's pronouncement that “When the president does it, that means that it is *not* illegal.”)

¹⁰⁹ A Russian phrase that translates to “The Red Star.”

Don't Wanna Fight the Soviet" describes singer Thomas Mensforth's opposition to any potential military action against the Soviet Union: "I feel a sense of disbelief / When I read the lies of media street / What to do and when to hate / 'Come on, lads, let's fight a war' / But what are we going for? / They are not the enemy / It's closer to the land I feel / [...] / I don't wanna fight the Soviet / I don't believe he is a threat."¹¹⁰ The lyrics suggest that the collusion between the media and the political establishment is central in pushing for military action against the Soviet Union. Mensforth argues that the actual threat is "closer to the land [he] feel[s]," reflecting his belief that the policies of the Thatcher administration are more harmful than the Soviet Union, which has never asked him "what [he] think[s] or feel[s]."

Thatcher's attitude toward left-wing politics abroad clearly influenced her views regarding left-wing politics domestically: "[Socialism] is bad for Britain. Britain and socialism are not the same thing, and as long as I have health and strength, they never will be."¹¹¹ Thatcher strongly identified organized labor with socialism, and this was reflected in her policies and attitude toward organized labor. The strike is perhaps the strongest tool at the disposal of organized labor; this was certainly understood in Britain, where strikes became known as the "English disease."¹¹² Strikes were quite common from the outset of Thatcher's premiership.¹¹³ The frequency of strikes in Britain certainly brought organized labor and Margaret Thatcher into conflict with one another. This

¹¹⁰ Angelic Upstarts, "I Don't Wanna Fight the Soviet," *Blood on the Terraces* (Chameleon Records, 1987). Music and lyrics by Bryan Hayes, Thomas Mensforth, and Ronnie Roker.

¹¹¹ Ogden, *Maggie*, 136.

¹¹² Paul Johnson, "The English Disease, 1945-1979," *The Wilson Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (Autumn 1987): 116. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40257808> (accessed 24 September 2013).

¹¹³ Reitan, *Tory Radicalism*, 37.

conflict was clearly demonstrated in the miners' strike of 1984-1985. Despite the fact that members of the National Union of Mineworkers had thrice voted against a strike, the union's leader Arthur Scargill nonetheless "engineered" a strike in March 1984.¹¹⁴ Thatcher placed Ian MacGregor, who had previously struggled with British steelworkers, at the head of the National Coal Board; she additionally placed MacGregor in charge of dealing with the striking National Union of Mineworkers.¹¹⁵ Thatcher also placed British police forces at MacGregor's disposal. The police, to the chagrin of Scargill, were placed outside coal mines to ensure they would remain open for workers who desired to enter. The popularity of Scargill continued to plummet, even among his fellow trade unionists; Kenneth Harris argues that this was the result of the vast changes Thatcher had effected on British society.¹¹⁶ Scargill was forced to concede defeat by March 1985, one year after he "engineered" the strike.

Billy Bragg's "Between the Wars" was written in support of the striking miners during the strike of 1984-1985. In addition to being supportive of organized labor, the song also reflects themes Bragg touched on before—namely, an unresponsive government: "I paid the union and as times got harder / I looked to the government to help the working man / [...] / I kept the faith and I kept voting / Not for the iron first but for the helping hand / For theirs is a land with a wall around it / And mine is a faith in my fellow man / [...] / 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."¹¹⁷ Bragg sings of an individual who, despite facing difficult times, is nonetheless committed in their support

¹¹⁴ Kenneth Harris, *Thatcher*, 167.

¹¹⁵ Kenneth Harris, *Thatcher*, 169-71.

¹¹⁶ Kenneth Harris, *Thatcher*, 173-74.

¹¹⁷ Billy Bragg, "Between the Wars," *Between the Wars EP* (Go! Discs, 1985). Music and lyrics by Billy Bragg.

for the union. Despite the many failings of the government to address the concerns of workers, this individual manages to “keep the faith and keep voting.” The narrator votes, though, for a government that is not exclusionary—“a land with a wall around it”—but one that is inclusionary, and takes people’s voices into consideration. Such a government, Bragg suggests, is that of a welfare state, which will provide citizens with “a path from cradle to grave.” This ideal and wholly hypothetical government would also recognize the difficulties facing the working class with regard to wages.

Billy Bragg, in “There Is Power in a Union,” posits that organized labor is the most—if not the only—effective method by which the working class can achieve its aims, as they relate to wages and otherwise. “There is power in a factory / Power in the land / Power in the hand of the worker / But it all amounts to nothing / If together we don’t stand / There is power in a union,” Bragg sings, suggesting that the rising tide of individualism was harmful for labor and the working class.¹¹⁸ Bragg furthermore implies that the government is in fact pursuing the aforementioned path of “creeping authoritarianism,” and that a unionized working class is the sole element of society capable of defending civil liberties: “The union forever defending our rights / Down with the blackleg / The workers unite! / [...] / Now I long for the morning that they realize / That brutality and unjust laws cannot defeat us.”¹¹⁹

The Redskins were another group that were strongly supportive of the striking miners as well as organized labor in general. Socialist principles are quite clear in the lyrics of the band, whose very name is derived from a term denoting the far-left elements

¹¹⁸ Billy Bragg, “There Is Power in a Union,” *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry* (Go! Discs, 1986). Music and lyrics by Billy Bragg.

¹¹⁹ “Blackleg” is the British English equivalent to the term “scab,” or an individual who continues to work during a strike.

of the skinhead subculture.¹²⁰ The first song in favor of organized labor is “Unionize,” released as a B-side in 1983: “[A]nger is no substitute / For disciplined rebellion / To unionize is to organize / Unionize! / Fight back! / Unionize! / Stop! Strike! / [...] / Our muscle is our labor / And we flex it when we go on strike.”¹²¹ The next year, as the miners’ strike took place, The Redskins wrote and released “Keep On Keepin’ On,” in which the group offers its support for the strikers: “Keep on keepin’ on, yeah / Till the fight is won / [...] / Can’t remember such a bitter time / The boss says, “Jump!” / The workers fall in line / [...] / Time and time when the workers rise / The fightback’s stabbed (by a neat backstab) and the paper’s lies.”¹²² These lyrics also implore the working class to reject complacency and to instead embrace radicalism. The song titles from the band’s only studio album, *Neither Washington nor Moscow*, emphasize the group’s political stance: “The Power Is Yours,” “Go Get Organized!,” “It Can Be Done!,” and “Keep On Keepin’ On!” are all strongly supportive of socialist ideals.¹²³

The aforementioned Angelic Upstarts were another group rooted in the redskin tradition. “One More Day” was written in response to the strike; like The Redskins’ “Keep On Keepin’ On,” “One More Day” is also strongly supportive of the striking miners. The band released a live album, *Live in Yugoslavia*, in early 1985. Thomas Mensforth, the band’s lead singer, introduced “One More Day” before the song’s performance in Belgrade: “[The strike is] something you might’ve read about in the

¹²⁰ Despite the popular association of neo-Nazism with the ‘skinhead’ label, the skinhead subculture was initially in favor of working-class solidarity—as well as apolitical; the politicization by both the left and the right were later evolutions of the subculture. See the earlier footnote regarding the Oi! genre.

¹²¹ The Redskins, “Unionize,” *Lean on Me 7*” (CNT, 1983). Music and lyrics by The Redskins.

¹²² The Redskins, “Keep On Keepin’ On!,” *Keep On Keepin’ On! 7*” (Decca, 1984). Music and lyrics by The Redskins.

¹²³ The title of the album itself comes from the slogan of the Trotskyist-oriented Socialist Workers’ Party, “Neither Washington nor Moscow, but international socialism.”

Yugoslavian papers. [...] [This is] a song about the bravest bunch of blokes that's ever lived [in] this century, I think; a set of blokes who're fightin' the evil government [that] exists in our country. This song's dedicated to a great man, Arthur Scargill, and his band of followers."¹²⁴

Conclusion: "Rock 'n' Roll Is Our Epiphany"

Just as the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 did not serve as a catalyst for a previously nonexistent politicization of British popular music, neither did her descent from power in 1990 signal its end. Musicians, of course, continued to comment upon political issues. Like the Sex Pistols over a decade prior, some artists saw the British political landscape as wholly broken. Manic Street Preachers, a Welsh alternative rock band, are one such group.

The group's debut album, *Generation Terrorists*, was released in 1992. "Motorcycle Emptiness" is perhaps the most sharply critical and biting song on the album. The lyrics quite satirically reflect upon the dismantling of the Postwar Consensus and the return to *laissez-faire* economics: "From feudal serf to spender / This wonderful world of purchase power."¹²⁵ Thatcher's transformation of British citizens from "feudal serf[s] to spender[s]" is but one aspect of the group's rejection of the political landscape; the most vociferous criticism is found in the the final stanza of "Motorcycle Emptiness": "Drive away and it's the same / Everywhere—death row, everyone's a victim / Your joys are counterfeit / This happiness, corrupt political shit." From the Manic Street Preachers'

¹²⁴ Angelic Upstarts, "One More Day," *Live in Yugoslavia* (Picasso, 1985). Introductory speech given by Thomas Mensforth.

¹²⁵ Manic Street Preachers, "Motorcycle Emptiness," *Generation Terrorists* (Columbia, 1992). Music and lyrics by Manic Street Preachers.

perspective, there is no escape from the newfound political status quo in Britain; even one's "joys are counterfeit." The political status quo in Britain indeed changed greatly. Polarization, an important theme during Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister, continued to exist in the 1990s; the percentage of votes going to third parties (that is, neither Labour or Conservative) dropped—for the third consecutive time—to 17 percent in the 1997 general election.¹²⁶ "Little Baby Nothing," from the aforementioned *Generation Terrorists*, primarily reflects the band's feminism. The final stanza, however, documents the role music plays for the band in a climate of bleakness, and what this climate means to them: "Rock 'n' roll is our epiphany / Culture, alienation, boredom, and despair."¹²⁷

Explicitly political groups such as the Manic Street Preachers are somewhat anomalous in 1990s Britain. This is especially true when one considers the dominant strain of alternative rock during this time, Britpop. Britpop, which is sometimes considered a distinct genre in its own right, placed an emphasis on Englishness and English identity; it "sought to express its ongoing hostility to the mainstream by setting up what amounted to an alternative musical universe."¹²⁸ The songs in this genre can be described as politically depoliticized: They largely refer to the cultural impacts of politics without an examination of the political origins of current cultural predicaments. Jarvis Cocker, the lead singer of Pulp—and one of the icons of Britpop—retroactively said of himself, "I used to think that I was the most apolitical person on the planet."¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Danny Dorling, Ron Johnston, Iain MacAllister, Charles Pattie, Dave Rossiter, and Helena Tunstall, "New Labour, New Geography?: The Electoral Geography of the 1997 British General Election," *Area* 29, no. 3 (September 1997): 253. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20003805> (accessed 29 April 2013).

¹²⁷ Manic Street Preachers, "Little Baby Nothing," *Generation Terrorists* (Columbia, 1992). Music and lyrics by James Dean Bradfield, Richey James Edwards, Sean Moore, and Nicky Wire.

¹²⁸ John Harris, *Britpop!: Cool Britannia and the Spectacular Demise of English Rock* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo, 2004): xiv-xvi.

¹²⁹ Craig McLean, Face Time (with Jarvis Cocker), *The Word*, February 2007, 23.

Consider the 1995 album by Pulp, *Different Class*. Although themes of young, working-class culture pervade the lyrics of the album, there is never an overt call to reform or otherwise alter Britain's class system. This system itself is parodied in Pulp's *magnum opus*, "Common People," which describes the fetishization of working-class—and specifically Northern—culture among more affluent Britons: "She told me that her dad was loaded / I said, 'In that case I'll have rum and Coca-Cola' / She said, 'Fine' / And then in thirty seconds' time she said, / 'I want to live like common people / I want to do whatever common people do / I want to sleep with common people / I want to sleep with common people like you.'" ¹³⁰ Jarvis Cocker goes on to explain what the nameless woman must do in order to have her desired 'common' lifestyle: "I said, 'Pretend you've got no money / And she just laughed and said, / 'You're so funny' / [...] / Rent a flat above a shop / Cut your hair and get a job." The singer ultimately concludes: "You'll never live like common people / You'll never do whatever common people do / You'll never fail like common people / You'll never watch your life slide out of view / And then dance and drink and screw / Because there's nothing else to do / [...] / You will never understand / How it feels to live your life / With no meaning or control / And with nowhere else to go." The song seems to suggest that the class divide is unbridgeable: Regardless of the efforts of wealthy Britons to "live like common people" and appropriate working-class culture, they are nonetheless unable to escape their life of privilege and truly understand life from a working-class perspective.

British musicians' rejection of Margaret Thatcher and their opposition to the Conservative Party seemed to reach its conclusion in 1997. The electoral success of

¹³⁰ Pulp, "Common People," *Different Class* (PolyGram, 1995). Music and lyrics by Pulp.

Labour in 1997 was of course cause for celebration among the party's supporters—it was not only the first Labour victory in 23 years, but it was also the party's largest margin of victory since 1966.¹³¹ Seemingly not content with simply being opposed to the succession of Conservative governments that had been in power since 1979, some British musicians began to openly associate themselves with the Labour Party in the lead-up to the 1997 general election. This alliance of music and politics is most evident in the case of Noel Gallagher, the lead guitarist and principal songwriter of Oasis, perhaps the most widely known band to fall under the banner of Britpop.¹³²

Tony Blair, the new Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, invited Gallagher to 10 Downing Street to celebrate the victory of Labour.¹³³ Gallagher evidently grew distrustful of Blair by the end of the night. “[I] knew [Blair] was a geezer,” Gallagher said in response to a joke made by Blair regarding Gallagher's well-publicized cocaine use. The realization that Blair had allied himself with the Britpop movement solely for political ends came to Gallagher later that night. Gallagher, whose origins were in the Northern, working-class city of Manchester, questioned Blair about a 1995 incident in which striking dockworkers were fired for their refusal to cross a picket line. Blair responded, “We'll look into it.” “Yes, you probably will, won't you?” Gallagher retorted. The noncommittal, quintessentially political response of Blair seemed to confirm what Billy Bragg sang about in 1986: Politicians, regardless of party affiliation, were now careerists. Tony Blair's refusal to overturn the sweeping reforms of Margaret Thatcher—

¹³¹ Dorling et al., “New Labour, New Geography?,” 253.

¹³² Consider the fact that while many Americans have likely never heard of Britpop groups such as Pulp, Suede, or Elastica, nearly all would recognize the Oasis song “Wonderwall.”

¹³³ John Harris, *Britpop!*, 343-45.

thereby giving such reforms his tacit approval—“indicates that Thatcherism [became] the basis of a new consensus.”¹³⁴

This new consensus did not emerge without resistance. Many elements of British society struggled against the growing hegemony of Thatcherism, as well as Margaret Thatcher as an individual; the resistance put forth by British popular musicians and songwriters was perhaps the strongest. This resistance, which was spread across different musical genres and performed by a variety of artists, assumed a number of different shapes. Despite these differences, there are two commonalities: First, popular musicians were almost unanimous in their rejection of Margaret Thatcher and her politics. Second, these musicians drew, either knowingly or unknowingly, from previous musical traditions that were best exemplified in two British punk rock bands, the Sex Pistols and The Clash. Those artists who were more influenced by the Sex Pistols largely opted to make music reflective of both societal alienation and a personal rejection of Margaret Thatcher. Those artists who were more influenced by The Clash, however, chose to make music that critiqued Thatcherist policies or responded to events that occurred during Thatcher’s tenure in power. Thatcher’s premiership drastically restructured British society, a fact which continued to influence British musicians even after her resignation.

¹³⁴ Reitan, *Tory Radicalism*, ix.

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