In June 1984 American rock and roll singer/songwriter Bruce Springsteen released his album *Born in the U.S.A.* Through the huge success of the record—it has sold more than 20 million copies in the U.S. alone (cf. Cullen, *Born in the U.S.A.* 235)—Springsteen became not only an “international superstar” (235) but also a “multi-layered symbol for millions” (Alterman 150)—a national and transnational pop icon that was truly populist in its politics. It was especially Springsteen’s ambivalent Americanness that put him, as Stuart Hall described it in 1986, “both in the White House and On the Road . . . at the same time” (“Postmodernism” 50). In a larger context, the ambiguity of the ‘America’ that Springsteen represented made the icon “a pawn in the country’s ongoing culture wars” (Alterman 150). In 1984 and 1985 Springsteen became involved in what can be called, with Lawrence Grossberg, a struggle over “a certain ‘national popular’” in the United States (*Dancing*)—that is in a cultural struggle for political hegemony in which the Reagan administration was pitted against its ‘liberal’ opponents and that hinged upon the contested representation of ‘America.’ Springsteen was both a site on which that struggle was articulated and one of the major assets to be gained in it, and the question that different audiences asked was—in the binary manner in which James Kavanagh has pointedly phrased it—“[Is] Bruce Springsteen obviously reaffirming or challenging Ronald Reagan’s version of the American Dream?” (Kavanagh 319).

In the following, I will look at two opposing answers that were given to this question: I will examine how left and liberal cultural critics on the one hand and conservative Republicans on the other interpreted representations of Springsteen’s body in relation to his music as both groups were affirming what they considered the ‘correct’ reading of Springsteen and his politics. More specifically, I will look at how liberal and conservative readings of Springsteen related issues of class and masculinity to make the icon productive for their respective politics in the struggle over ‘America.’
For *Born in the U.S.A.* the icon Springsteen underwent a physical transformation. The singer received, as Eric Alterman puts it, “the full Annie Leibovitz celebrity treatment” (154) for the artwork of the *Born in the U.S.A.* cover. The cover photograph shows Springsteen’s “newly tightened rear end,” in a worn pair of Levi’s, “posed before a waving American flag,” the baseball cap that was stuffed into his pocket completing a Springsteen in red, white, and blue. The display of “more media-friendly” (154) looks was not restricted to the symbolism of the album cover. Springsteen had hired a personal fitness trainer and “emerged from the *Born in the U.S.A.* fitness sessions with biceps bulging” (154), signaling a bodily transformation that could be widely seen, for instance, in the video for “Dancing in the Dark,” in which the new Springsteen for the first time in his career appeared in person, and which received extensive airplay on MTV. In the video, and live onstage, night after night, throughout the one-and-a-half year *Born in the U.S.A.* world tour, Springsteen displayed the muscular body of a white male, clad in “blue jeans, work shirt, and an occasional bandana or baseball cap to absorb the sweat of his brow” (Cullen, *Born in the U.S.A.* 126).

Springsteen’s body apparently signified “a vibrant, working-class, white male heterosexuality” (Cullen, *Born in the U.S.A.* 125) that was, as Jim Cullen put it, the “vital center” in a historical moment in which “Michael Jackson’s sexual identity was unclear, Prince’s eroticism boldly crossed gender boundaries, and Madonna turned femininity into a series of disposable images” (125). It does not follow, however, that the masculine working-class identity of that center was stable, nor that it provided a unified ground for the politics of the icon Springsteen. The “personal and political, psychological and ideological boundary of meaning” (Smith 127) as which the body functions is precarious; it is, according to Judith Butler, “variable . . . , a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field . . .” (139). Stuart Hall’s theory of articulation offers a way of understanding how despite that instability, the body yet “serve[s] to function as the signifier of the condensation of subjectivities in the individual” (“Introduction” 11). In Hall’s account of the double meaning of “to articulate” (cf. “Postmodernism” 53), identity and meaning are conceptualized as the results of contingent acts of articulation, i.e. of moments of both “linking” and “uttering” the historical, genealogical, and discursive formations and the disciplinary practices which shape the
body and through which identity and meaning are constructed on and from the body.

Taking into consideration, then, the significance of the body in examining how conservatives and liberal critics implicated Springsteen in their struggle over ‘America,’ one needs to account for the different ways in which both groups have articulated in their readings of Springsteen the raced, sexed, gendered, and classed elements and discourses intersecting on his body. And, significantly, one needs to account for the ways in which the discourses of the body were articulated to other elements and discourses to produce the identity of the icon Springsteen. As Lawrence Grossberg points out, “the effects of rock and roll depend upon the fact that particular musical and verbal practices . . . are always received as already having been inserted into a range” of different ensembles and alliances of not only “musical texts and practices”; also “economic relations; images (of performers and fans); social relations; aesthetic conventions; styles of language, movement, appearance, and dance; media practices,” and the like need to be considered (Dancing 75). For Springsteen’s politics in the middle of the 1980s, in addition to the lyrics of his songs, elements of the singer’s biography and his enactment, through his body, of a working-class masculinity were of particular significance. Put differently, the political meanings that liberal critics on the one hand and Republicans on the other made of the icon Springsteen can be understood as two opposing articulations of these elements.

Two years before Born in the U.S.A. Springsteen had released Nebraska, an album full of narratives of characters driven to desperate acts, such as “Johnny 99.” This is the first verse of the song:

Well they closed down the auto plant in Mahwah late that month
Ralph went out lookin’ for a job but he couldn’t find none
He came home too drunk from mixin’ Tanqueray and wine
He got a gun shot a night clerk now they call ’m Johnny 99.

The closure of the Mahwah, New Jersey, Ford factory actually took place and left more than 2000 workers without jobs, and critics were quick to relate the conditions in which Johnny 99 commits his murder—unemployment, debt, and easy access to guns—to the consequences that an economic recession inherited from the Carter administration and Reagan’s first massive tax cut had for the American working class at the time when Springsteen wrote and released Nebraska. Although, as
historian Alan Brinkley maintains, Reagan's economic and financial program was "not directly to blame for the problems, critics claimed that the administration's policies were doing nothing to improve the situation" (883), and some even regarded supply-side economics and the loss of union power as signs that "all forms of communal, psychological, and political support for workingpeople in Ronald Reagan's America" were being destroyed in the name of 'National Renewal' (Alterman 131). Greil Marcus, in 1982, voiced an opinion that was exemplary of many left/liberal cultural critics' views on Springsteen. He wrote that Nebraska was "the most complete and probably the most convincing statement of resistance and refusal that Ronald Reagan's U.S.A. has yet elicited, from any artist or any politician" (236).

Two years later, critics like Marcus read Born in the U.S.A. in very much the same manner. Underneath the layer of the album's mostly streamlined and charts-friendly pop music critics detected narratives that could be heard as continuing Nebraska's intervention in the official story of the United States—such as the narrative of the Vietnam veteran of the album's title track.

Born down in a dead man's town  
The first kick I took was when I hit the ground  
You end up like a dog that's been beat too much  
Till you spend half your life just covering up  
(Chorus:)  
Born in the U.S.A.  
I was born in the U.S.A.  
I was born in the U.S.A.  
Born in the U.S.A.  
Got in a little hometown jam so they put a rifle in my hand  
Sent me off to the foreign land to go and kill the yellow man  
(Chorus)

In his reading of the lyrics of "Born in the U.S.A.,” Mikal Gilmore is exemplary of those critics who regarded the song, and Springsteen, as critical of contemporary U.S. society in general and Reaganism in particular. Gilmore calls the narrative a "tale of outright devastation; a tale of an American whose birthrights have been torn from his grasp, and paid off with indelible memories of violence and ruin" (251). The class aspect of this narrative plays a significant role in critical accounts
such as Gilmore’s: The reference to the misguided policy of offering to youthful delinquents a place in the armed forces as a substitute for jail time (cf. Cullen, *Born in the U.S.A.* 95)—the protagonist is sent to Vietnam because he “got in a little hometown jam”—and the socially devastating conditions into which the protagonist was born and which provide the background for his delinquency in the first place—“The first kick I took was when I hit the ground”—can be read as distinct class elements in the song’s narrative. So can the narrator’s being turned down after his return by the Veterans Administration as well as by potential employers and the fact that a decade after the war, the narrator is still on the road, alienated and clueless:

Come back home to the refinery
Hiring man says “son if it was up to me”
Went down to see my V.A. man
He said “son don’t you understand now”
...
Down in the shadow of the penitentiary
Out by the gas fires of the refinery
I’m ten years burning down the road
Nowhere to run ain’t got nowhere to go.

Significantly, as this veteran is looking back in anger and bewilderment upon a decade of alienation and frustration, his reflections are located in the 1980s. In 1984, these classed elements of the narrative could be articulated to elements of Springsteen’s biography that were still playing an important role in the public image of Springsteen’s persona—the singer’s own working-class upbringing, with his father drifting through jobs as a factory worker, a bus driver, and a prison guard, being only barely able to support the family. And, importantly, these class elements could be linked to the working-class masculinity signified by Springsteen’s body, especially in Springsteen’s live shows—some time in the early 1980s, the singer had taken over, as Christopher Sandford has noted, “from James Brown as the hardest working man in show business” (183), and the muscular male body, clad in the working man’s outfit, could be seen virtually laboring and sweating every night on stage, in highly intense performances that lasted, as a rule, three and a half hours and longer and often seemed to leave the singer nearly exhausted. At the intersection of the perceived class critique of the lyrics, Springsteen’s own class background, and his
repeated bodily enactments of a working class masculinity, the icon Springsteen became representative of the workers themselves who were economically and socially disenfranchised under the Reagan administration. The assertion of masculinity articulated an assertion of working-class identity that was the actual meaning of Springsteen's Americanness—a critical, oppositional Americanness that sought to "strip away that mythic America that was Reagan's image of America," as Springsteen put it himself (qtd. in Alterman 157).

The conservative conviction that the icon Springsteen represented a Republican version of America was best expressed by the President himself. Seeking reelection in the fall of 1984, Reagan proclaimed at a campaign rally in Hammonton, New Jersey—Springsteen's home state—that "America's future rests in a thousand dreams inside our hearts. It rests in the message of hope so many young people admire: New Jersey's own Bruce Springsteen. And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about". Reagan's confidence in the convergence of Springsteen's and his own vision of America had been boosted some days earlier when conservative columnist George Will had written a "glowing [concert] review that echoed dominant Republican campaign themes". Will was fully aware that the intensity of Springsteen's live shows and the fact that, as Will put it, "an evening [with Springsteen] tends to wash over into the a.m." could be articulated to the 1980s' Republican appropriation of an American work ethic that stressed to the extreme competition and a privatized individualism. That part of Springsteen's biography that represented the singer as the working-class New Jersey bar band musician who had become a millionaire through hard work and perseverance quite plausibly underwrote that ideology and underscored Will's observation that "flags get waved at [Springsteen's] concerts while he sings songs about hard times. He is no whiner, and the recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful affirmation: Born in the U.S.A.!". 3

To that affirmation conservatives like Will could articulate Springsteen's working-class masculinity in a peculiar way. Springsteen's physical appearance was strikingly similar to what Lynda Boose calls the masculine "techno-muscularity" of the heroes of popular culture's representations of the Vietnam war that became increasingly popular in the 1980s. Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo comes to mind. First Blood, the first film of the series released in 1982, is a fantasy of a
re-staging of the Vietnam war. Rambo returns from Vietnam to be arrested by a local sheriff for vagrancy. His subsequent escape from jail results in a manhunt that involves the arrival of the National Guard and Rambo’s burning down much of the town before his superior officer finally confronts him, telling him, “it’s over, Johnny.” In the sequel, *First Blood: Part II* (1985), John Rambo actually returns to Vietnam to liberate American prisoners of war, who are still held captive in the jungle.

The significance of films like *First Blood* lies in the way in which they were inserted in the dominant discourses of nationalism, patriotism, and of the Republican’s ‘America’ in the 1980s. Reagan himself was “determined to restore American pride and prestige in the World” by arguing that “the United States should once again become active and assertive in opposing communism” (Brinkley 884). Lynda Boose explains that in that political climate the reasons for 1970s antiwar protest had largely “receded into oblivion” (583-584), and residual anti-war discourse had been assigned to a feminized space.4 “The symbol-laden depiction of the male body” (590), a “militarized male physique“ such as Sylvester Stallone’s, played a powerful role in redefining the Vietnam experience and, through it, ‘America.’ Revisiting, on screen, the forests and rice paddies of Vietnam, Rambo’s all-powerful masculine body promised to undo the loss of the war and to save American self-recognition and self-respect, quite in the sense of Reagan’s National Renewal.

Springsteen, in turn, could literally be seen feeding into that fantasy in the shows of the 1984/1985 tour, as he performed “Born in the U.S.A.” standing against a huge American flag that was draped as the background of the stage, his body—as Springsteen seemed to be embodying the first-person narrator of the song—a prime specimen of the muscular American male, with a clenched fist stretched towards the sky for a chant of “I was born in the U.S.A.”. In the song, just as in films like *First Blood*, the failure of the Vietnam War—that which alienates the American veteran from his country when he returns home—was not so much the fact that the war was an ultimately unjustifiable imperialist project but that the American people failed to support their troops. The refusal to accept the consequences of that failure, which is voiced by the veteran in “Born in the U.S.A.”, could in fact be interpreted as an unambiguously proud declaration of his Americanness—in fact, in an interview in 1986, Springsteen stated that
"Born in the U.S.A." "has an enormous amount of pride in it; pride in being an American" (*Glory Days*). Even though in Springsteen’s view, this pride is tainted by the fact that "the guy . . . is just proud he lives, he’s survived," this "shameful part" of the song was easily "missed," as Springsteen explained, by his audience (*Glory Days*). The pride in being alive, in America, in the 1980s, could easily be constructed as the same kind of pride that the national fantasy embodied in John Rambo delivered for a mass audience. Springsteen’s body was thus made productive for the conservative Right as the assertion of an aggressive working-class male heterosexuality could be articulated with the narrative of the veteran who was used by and then alienated in his home country. His working-class masculinity produced Springsteen as an icon that could be credibly inserted into the Republican political project of reorganizing pride in ‘America’ through the reaffirmation of a classed masculinity.

The question of what constitutes the ‘correct’ reading of the icon Springsteen, then, can only be answered in specific contexts. As liberal critics on the one hand and conservatives on the other answered the question whether Springsteen was reaffirming or challenging Ronald Reagan’s ‘America’ in their respective contextualized, interested readings, the different meanings of Springsteen’s identity they articulated were also positions in a struggle over Springsteen’s body. This struggle aimed at determining and defining the politics of the “vital center” of the white working-class masculinity that Springsteen’s body signified. It was, to a considerable extent, the inherent instability of the body as a site of cultural inscription that helped to produce the political ambiguity of that center; that prevented Springsteen’s politics from being pinned down all too early to either of the opposing camps’ positions; and that made Springsteen’s Americanness, in the mid-1980s, indeed cut two ways.

Notes

1 Grossberg reads Antonio Gramsci through Stuart Hall, who characterized popular culture as “one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises and where it is secured” (qtd. in Grossberg, *Dancing 7*). Grossberg’s project is “to understand how the popular defines at least one set of the conditions of possibilities for the increasing appeal of a new conservatism” in the United States (9). I will attempt to locate my analysis of the politics of the icon Bruce Springsteen in the mid-1980s in the space that this reading of the national popular opens up.
Grossberg calls the ensemble of these elements and their interrelated functions "apparatuses" (cf., for instance, *Dancing 75*). While attempting to develop fully the consequences of Grossberg's argument about the functioning of different rock and roll apparatuses would go beyond the scope and purpose of this paper, I nevertheless think that it is necessary to heed Grossberg's warning that the politics of rock and roll must be understood not only as being grounded in its musical and textual practices, but as effects of specific articulations of elements that are outside of the music and the lyrics, and to which the notion of an "apparatus" calls attention.

As Boose explains, in the 1980s residual antiwar discourse and memories of the Vietnam war as an imperialist enterprise were increasingly understood as "a perceived threat to masculinity" that in turn came to underwrite the "revalorized aggressiveness of the national character" under Reagan (587). Boose makes an elaborate argument how the masculine rhetoric "reconfirming the ethics of 'getting tough,' 'playing hardball,' 'being a winner,' etc." (586) that film fantasies such as *First Blood*—and conservative politics—proposed, contributed to reassert Americanness through the assertion of masculinity.

**Bibliography**


