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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | CRITICAL ESSAY

The enduring culture and limits of political song

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Abstract: The connection between song and politics is well documented, but in recent years is said to be severed. This is not the case. The relationship between politics and song endures, reflecting and revivifying a culture of political struggle. In this essay, I survey political song, outlining how it is approached, before arguing for a tighter definition after working through the claim that all song is political. In doing so, I build a platform for discussion of songs by English singer-songwriter Leon Rosselson. For over 50 years, Rosselson's songwriting has illuminated historical and topical events from a left-wing perspective, but he is also clear a song converts no-one and changes nothing. To think otherwise misunderstands that songs are neither mobilisers or opiates, but an idiom for people to express their everyday lives and struggles. The essay concludes by assessing Rosselson's insights on the power and limits of song.

Subjects: Popular Culture; Media & Communications; Popular Music

Keywords: song and politics; political song culture; songwriting; Leon Rosselson; power of song; limits of song

1. Introduction

In 2015, Jeremy Corbyn was newly installed (for the first time) as leader of the British Labour Party. Soon after, he was embroiled in a political row for not singing *God Save the Queen* at a Battle of Britain commemoration, at which the Queen was also in attendance. Corbyn's decision not to sing the national anthem was interpreted by some as insulting, unpatriotic, that he was a political relic from past times (Dominiczak, 2015).¹ We can assume Corbyn's Republican sympathies left him unwilling to participate in obsequious collective singing, but what is certain is Corbyn's reluctance to sing the national anthem is not because he shies away from singing in public, because on the day that he was *first* elected Labour leader he was filmed at a victory party singing "The Red Flag", Labour's political anthem.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Cross is a senior lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Nottingham Trent University. He has written widely on media history, including various policy and political matters relating to young people, the representation of politics, political parties and leadership. This also includes work on news reporting practices and news coverage of sensitive topics, including drugs, paedophiles and the recent Jimmy Savile case. His various other published works reflect his long-standing interest in understanding the past and includes *Mediating Madness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan) as well as assorted other publications exploring the interaction between media representation, crime and mental illness.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This commentary defines political song before exploring why it endures. Against the grain of complaint that political song in our current era is missing, presumed dead, we see how political song written in and for past times is revived for new political times and struggle. At the same time, the idea of song as a political weapon gets in the way of our understanding the limits of political song. My approach unravels this complication by exploring songs written by English singer-songwriter Leon Rosselson. For more than five decades, Rosselson has written songs that speak to recent political times yet he also says that songs per se do not bring create political change. We can use Rosselson's songs to help resolve this paradox.

With lyrics that begin, “The people’s flag is deepest red/It shrouded oft our martyred dead”, “The Red Flag” was written for the singer/listener to be conscious of its socialist politics. Indeed, it was composed by Jim Connell in 1889 to inspire a revolutionary consciousness finding favour in the ranks of the Labour Party, perhaps because it was sung to a jaunty Irish tune called “The White Cockade”. Labour’s leadership reckoned this tune lacked socialist dignity insisting it be sung dirge-like to the German tune “Tannenbaum”, a decision which persists to this day. During Tony Blair’s tenure as Labour leader, the party frowned on members singing ‘The Red Flag’ because it was a consciously socialist anthem.²

In keeping with its purpose of socialist consciousness-raising, Jim Connell would no doubt be pleased his song is still sung by a twenty-first century Labour leader. It tells us that the corpse (or in this case corpus) of a political song tradition not only breathes, but *means* something to those wanting solidarity created by a chorus with simple lyrics, simple melody and chord structure (see Moore, 2012 on the meaning of song). “We Shall Overcome” is a celebrated example of a solidarity song that makes a community (not necessarily left-wing) of the already converted, to make them feel less alone (Rosenthal, 2001). By definition a solidarity song does little for the unconverted. As songs they have limited value. This is why US political campaigns often soundtrack a candidate using contemporary pop and rock songs.

In Great Britain, a country with a different history of political campaigning, songwriters have documented our own defiance of authority. A case in point is a corpus of songs written in opposition to Margaret Thatcher (see Denselow, 1989). But in these songs there is a definitional problem concerning political song. For instance, in Billy Bragg’s 1997 song “Thatcherites”, his socialist politics are consciously on display:

Your doctrines I must blame, you will hear,
You privatise away what is ours, what is ours,
You privatise away what is ours,
You privatise away and then you make us pay.

By contrast, a song, such as Elvis Costello’s 1989 “Tramp the Dirt Down”, which imagines Thatcher dead and buried (and labels her a “madam” to England’s “whore”), seems motivated only by personal animus. The problem we must, therefore consider this as the analytical value in defining all songs as political.

2. Defining political song

In 2010, the Political Studies Association and *New Statesman* published the 20 greatest English-speaking political songs. The list included (at the number 1 spot) Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land”, followed by The Specials AKA “Free Nelson Mandela”, and then Bob Dylan’s “The Times They Are a-Changing”. The politics watchers avoided asking the question: what is a political song? They were wise not to have done so because there is an argument that says all songs are political—as all art is political. The argument goes along these lines: songs can make audiences feel comfortable with the world as it is so that there is no need for change or make the audience feel that something is wrong with the ways things are and change is needed. In short, songs can either confirm or challenge the status quo.

There is certainly a case to be made for the view that uncontroversial and non-political songs are political. Consider Cole Porter’s smart, sophisticated songs for 1930s-rich New York café society, which ignored American realities—mass unemployment, soup kitchens, rising levels of childhood TB, as well as a growing threat of American involvement in a European war—with frivolous songs about rainbows, roses and blue skies just around the corner to make people forget their troubles (Rosselson, 1979). By ignoring US realities are not Porter’s songs also, even if unconsciously, political? The idea only songs

challenging the status quo count as political creates a neat division into those that subvert what is and those that do not. The problem is how we sustain this division in our analysis of song and politics.

For instance, Woody Guthrie's "Dustbowl Ballads" written in the second half of the 1930s are typically cited exemplars of twentieth century American political song (Kaufmann, 2011) that acknowledges the world of workers and bosses, and you knew which side you were on. Guthrie's politics famously emblazoned his guitar, "This machine kills fascists", and his song protests on behalf of America's Dustbowl refugees answered American Communist Party prayers for a songwriter who was the voice of his class (though ironically he was born into a middle-class family—see Denisoff, 1971). His empathy for the underdog fuelled a rudimentary songwriting technique identifying with the travails of working folk, as for example, with the broke/broken sharecropper in *I Ain't Got No Home* who laments: "My wife took down and died upon the cabin floor/And I ain't got no home in this world any more". Little wonder Communist musicians like Pete Seeger took him to their bosom.

We can contrast Woody Guthrie's "I Ain't Got No Home" with Yipsel Harburg's lyrics to 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' written for the 1939 Hollywood film *Wizard of Oz*:

Somewhere over the rainbow,
Way up high,
There's a land that I heard of,
Once in a lullaby.
Somewhere over the rainbow,
Skies are blue,
And the dreams that you dare to dream,
Really do come true.

On first hearing there seems no better example of a popular song wilfully missing the harsh realities of daily life for America's homeless and dispossessed. But Harburg also wrote *the* anthem of the Depression era, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime", one of the few popular songs that did reflect the realities of the era. And once we realise Harburg was a Jew and a communist whose family had experienced anti-Jewish pogroms in their native Russia, then his 'dreams that you dare to dream' takes on a new meaning.

The quest to establish the view that all songs are political might be on firmer ground if we acknowledge it is the perspective of the listener that really matters. "If music is 'meaningful', says the music critic Greil Marcus, 'its meaning must be free enough to depend on how one hears it'. 'Shooby doo wah', heard in the right mood, has more meaning than a flat-out protest song ever does, because by definition when you listen to a protest song absolutely nothing is in doubt—the listener is in a box" (Marcus quoted in Nehring, 1997, p. 147). But what is political about "Shooby doo wah?" This is equivalent to saying the blandest love song is political if you listen to it in the right way. Even if true, it is not intentionally so. The problem with Greil Marcus' position is that it stretches the definition of "political" to vanishing point.

We see this stretched definition snapped in 1979, when Mrs Thatcher was asked to name her favourite song on BBC local radio in Lancashire. Her answer was Rolf Harris' "Two Little Boys". A year earlier it did not feature on her "desert island discs" on the Radio 4 show. Her choices then were either classical or opera reflecting the station's demographic. 1979 was general election year, and as the BBC TV documentary, *The Making of the Iron Lady* (BBC4, 17 April 2013, dir. Michael Cockerill) shows, the promotional effort to market Mrs Thatcher to working class, so-called "C2" women voters, explains her selection of "Two Little Boys" for a popular local radio show; the song's mawkish sentimentality intended to soften her appeal to Lancashire housewives by reminding them that she,

like them, is a mother (contra Huq, 2015; who misunderstands Thatcher's song choice as a straightforward case of politics meets music fandom). Defining "Two Little Boys" as "political" is technically correct, but misses seeing how any song can be used for propaganda (Street, 2003).

3. Song as a political weapon

This leads me to now consider song as a political weapon, but I concentrate only on songs overtly and consciously political. This narrow approach defines political song as conscious of its own politics, its own view of the world, acknowledges the kind of society we are living in, and would advocate it should be changed. For instance, in the 1930s, American communists debated the "correct" music to win over the workers, rejecting more popular tin pan alley and settling on folk song as the apparently authentic musical voice of "the people" (Denisoff, 1971). The idea that folk song would bring revolutionary change may appear wishful thinking, but history is peppered with revolutionaries challenging authority in song.

"You can't have a revolution without songs" read the banner suspended high above Salvador Allende during his swearing-in ceremony as socialist president of Chile. The idea that song can be used as a political weapon, that its emotional power can stir people into action, has a long history and is not peculiar to the left. The popular song "La Carmagnole" is supposed to have empowered the common people in the French revolution. The violent hymn singing of the Hussite's reportedly caused the Pope's Crusaders to flee in terror. The Vietcong were said to have carried song sheets into battle (Rosselson, 1979). Ho Chi Minh was a keen student of the history of warfare so perhaps got the idea from the British Political Warfare Executive, which during the Second World War, amidst their black propaganda leaflets, letters and posters also produced song sheets to be used against the Germans.

Music and song have been used to further causes like the seventeenth-century Diggers noted above, the movement to abolish American slavery in the nineteenth century and the suffragettes in the twentieth century. Songs have given courage to Chartists in the 1840s, and heart to Civil Rights protestors in the 1960s. Songs have been proscribed as dangerous and kept from the ears of common folk by such authorities as Queen Elizabeth I (who objected to Papal ballads) and the Controller of BBC Radio 1 (who decreed that Paul McCartney's 1971 "Give Irish Back to the Irish" was seditious). General Pinochet in Chile was more ruthless in suppressing the "new song movement" supporting President Allende. On seizing power, Pinochet's soldiers dished out murderously brutal treatment for the folk singer-songwriter Victor Jara, who played guitar and sang to his fellow left-wingers detained alongside him. Before they machine-gunned Jara, soldiers broke his fingers in a mercilessly symbolic gesture: "Sing now, if you can, you bastard", spat an enraged officer" (quoted in Milne, 1998, p. 23).

When the military took over in Chile, they set about destroying Victor Jara's recordings and tried to seize his master tapes. They also blasted American rock music into the streets of Santiago (Klein, 2007). In such futile acts, we see what the eighteenth-century Scottish politician Andrew Fletcher meant when he wrote: "... if a man were permitted to make all the ballads he need not care who should make the laws of a nation" (quoted in Lynskey, 2010, p. 686). As the case of Chile demonstrates, songs are a serious business, whereby a society run by generals requires an ideological cleansing of the wrong tunes. In societies ruled by a dictatorship, songs and singers are widely censored, controlled and surrounded with restrictions. If only music and song were harnessed to political authority, musicians would not be so suspect or often imprisoned, and so frequently silenced.

Therein, we see the importance of song for groups who need a weapon. The political movement on the left to have weaponised songs most effectively was the early twentieth-century American radicals known as "Wobblies", the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World. The Wobblies were anarcho-syndicalists who believed in the one big trade union that would bring the boss class to its knees. In the years before First World War, the Wobblies were a singing crusade taking the union message to the unskilled "workingstiff", America's poorest, most exploited workers (Marvin, 2011). In 1909, they published a collection of poems/lyrics that became known as the *Little Red Songbook*.

The most popular were by Joe Hill (born Joel Hägglund in Sweden, 1879) whose witty words reached workers unlikely ever to read a political pamphlet: “A pamphlet, no matter how good”, Hill reasoned, “is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over” (Marvin, 2011, p. 248).

The Wobblies understood that singing allowed people to congregate, to raise their voices. Audience participation in singing was nothing new, of course. The Salvation Army was the Wobblies main enemy on the street (Chaplin, 1948), and competing visions of a better life to come were played out in a singing recruitment battle. In a real sense, the Wobblies transformed the singer and song into a weapon for street fighting where rolling the language and making jokes dented the hymn weaponry deployed by the Salvationists. Thus, Joe Hill’s best known song, “The Preacher and the Slave”, is a parody of the Baptist hymn, “In the Sweet Bye and Bye”, where the Christian message is turned inside out and sharpened with a subversive irony: “Work and pray, live on hay/You’ll get pie in the sky when you die”.

The propaganda message in songs like “The Preacher and the Slave” was unequivocal: the union was the only guarantee of a better life to come. Today, the idea of singing songs to further the cause of unionisation belongs to an age far removed from our own era of marginal trade union relevance. Nonetheless, Hill’s songwriting for the Wobblies’ cause steers us toward the following question: how can a songwriter best be political in popular song? There are two approaches to this question: concentrate on the music or concentrate on the politics.

With no mass media, no technology and no money, the only route open to Wobblies was to prioritise their radical politics. They did so by taking the propaganda message in songs like “There is Power in the Union” onto the streets, into meeting halls, or wherever workers gathered. For those at the bottom, with nothing very much to sing about and only the *Little Red Songbook* “to fan the flames of discontent” (as the *Songbook*’s sub-title has it), the union propaganda in Hill’s songs was a life or death struggle, not least for Joe Hill himself. On a IWW recruitment drive in Utah in 1915, Hill was arrested, tried and executed by firing squad on trumped up charges of robbery and a double murder. Newspaper reports on his trial and execution show authorities took seriously Hill’s songs as a political weapon (Marvin, 2011).

Today, IWW songs are barely remembered let alone sung except perhaps by stalwarts of the IWW, which still exists but is not a political force. Ralph Chaplin, a Wobbly who wrote the song “Solidarity Forever” in 1915, in support of Joe Hill, later reflected on what he had written: “I wanted a song to be full of revolutionary fervour and to have a chorus that was singing and defiant” (Chaplin, 1948, p. 152). The notion of a song “full of revolutionary fervour” is so out of step with the rampant individualism of modern times one can barely take the song and its songwriter seriously. Yet there is a persistent belief on the left that songs can help bring about a revolution (see for instance Widgery, 1986; cf. Herman & Hoare, 1979). It is ironic then that in Great Britain, where trade unions birthed the Labour Party, it has not historically produced a body of politically conscious song to compare with America.

4. Politically conscious song

Where the IWW understood that a singing community is also a political community (see Rosenthal & Flacks, 2011), British socialists in the same era missed their opportunities for harnessing consciously political song to a living song tradition. A case in point is a 1912 song book of labour anthems published by the Fabian Society, a grouping of left-wing intellectuals and romantic poets. These songs/poems about “coming good times” exhort the working class to “Awake”, “Rise”, “Unfurl the flag”, and so on, but they lack a language of truth. Written by the likes of William Morris, Edward Carpenter and Ernest Jones, they were technically competent examples of utopian writing about “the people”, though not necessarily written *for* them (Waters, 1990). The Fabians were (and still are) a hierarchical organisation, and unlike the non-hierarchical Wobblies, were unable to harness a living song tradition.

The British labour movement's failure to produce a body of serviceable songs for the cause of socialism is, arguably, its greatest missed cultural opportunity. This is despite Britain having a song tradition in which workers' hardships and deprivations are seemingly primed for a socialist steer, as it were. This song tradition includes a corpus of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century songs about punitive treatment meted out to those who cross picket lines—"blacklegs" or "scabs"—working in opposition to union policy (see Harker, 1980, pp. 171–173). For instance, while a song, such as "The Blackleg Miners" ("So join the union while ye may/Don't wait till yer dying day/Cause that may not be far away/Ye dirty blackleg miner") is an obvious call to join the union, it more forcefully conveys a desire to exact violent revenge for class betrayal rather than advance a working class or socialist consciousness.

The British labour movement's failure to ferment a socialist consciousness in song form did not stop others taking up the challenge. Foremost was Ewan MacColl, who after a long period writing and performing agitprop theatre in Northern England, turned his energies in the 1950s to steering a left turn in the path taken by folk song (Harker, 2007). MacColl put Marxism centre-stage in his first consciously political song, "The Manchester Rambler", written in 1932 for a mass trespass by right-of-way protestors. The chorus is a lesson in capitalist labour relations:

I'm a rambler, I'm a rambler from Manchester way,
I get all my pleasure the hard moorland way
I may be a wage slave on Monday,
But I'm a free man on Sunday.

In the 1930s, rambling was a free mass participation activity and singing was central to rambling culture (Harker, 2005). Context matters because it underlines why political songs are written.

Born into a poverty-stricken Scots family forced to migrate to England for work because of his father's union activity, this memory shaped MacColl's political songwriting: "If you have spent your life striving desperately to make ends meet; if you have worked yourself to a standstill and still been unable to feed the kids properly, then you'll know why these songs were made" (MacColl quoted in Young, 2010, p. 140). Stirring though these words are, political songwriting that is conscious of its own politics and advocates for political change is more often made to rally the revolutionaries. A case in point is MacColl's 1954 song "The Ballad of Stalin", which opens: "Joe Stalin was a mighty man and a mighty man was he/He led the Soviet people on the road to victory". MacColl later regretted writing it (MacColl, 1990, p. 234) and underlines the folly of tying a song to a party political line.

In the 1950s, MacColl began a sustained political songwriting career consciously adapting a (mainly) non-commercial folk idiom to relay a socialist reading of contemporary events (Young, 2010). For instance, his anti-nuclear compositions in the late 1950s, reflected grassroots politicisation against the Bomb, instantly updating the folk canon's most recent item: "In the pastoral songbook of the Edwardians, the most recent news item is the Napoleonic War" (Young, 2010, p. 140). MacColl viewed the British folk song as a conduit to the hearts and minds of the people and his songwriting is part of a longer process of renewal and revival in the language of musical dissent. So it is apt that a later British singer-songwriter came to attention in the 1980s, revivifying political song via a punk rock aesthetic.

In the 1980s, Billy Bragg emerged as heir to Woody Guthrie (not MacColl) for his non-conventional singing style and politics forged on picket lines. Time spent performing in working-class communities during the 1984–85 miners' strike saw a period of songwriting in the service of a labour struggle (e.g. songs like "Ideology" and "There is Power in a Union") that spoke to lived experience of a bitter year-long strike in which the miners were eventually defeated. During the strike, Bragg wondered why large swathes of working-class Britain seemed indifferent to their plight (Lynskey, 2010). By the time it was over, Bragg understood that the "bread and circuses" populism espoused by Rupert Murdoch's

tabloids had been a key ideological weapon of mass distraction crucial to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's defeat of the miners, or "the enemy within", as she provocatively *mislabeled* them.

Courtesy of YouTube we can revisit the moment in 1984, when Billy Bragg told British breakfast TV viewers what was going on in a live performance of "It Says Here", a song attacking the political abuses of UK tabloids. When Bragg sings the line, "Where politics mix with bingo and tits", we can imagine the spluttering over breakfast tables of middle England compounded by his *coup de gras* final couplet: "When you wake up to the fact that your paper is Tory/Just remember there are two sides to every story". Fast-forward to the 2012 Leveson Inquiry into the failure of press ethics in predominantly Murdoch-owned tabloids like *The Sun* and now defunct *News of the World*. They failed their Fourth Estate responsibilities by tacit consent and moral ambivalence of political leaders including Margaret Thatcher benefiting from Murdoch's brand of populist support. This is not an argument against the effectiveness of a political songwriter who exposes right-wing contradictions but is ignored. Rather it is a reminder how some songs await their moment in the sun (pun intended): post-Leveson, "It Says Here" is now more relevant than ever.

For a song to be politically relevant, context is all. When Margaret Thatcher died in 2012, "Ding-Dong! The Witch Is Dead" from the *Wizard of Oz* musical was adopted by many celebrating her demise. The song's celebration of the ending of the wicked witches' tyranny underlines how the political context in which a song is sung defines its meaning. A campaign on social networks culminated in the song reaching Number 2 in the UK charts generating headlines about speaking ill of the dead. But the idea we ought not to speak ill of the dead belies the hypocrisy that many do speak ill of living politicians. For instance, singer-songwriter Frank Turner denounced Margaret Thatcher's legacy in his 2007 song "Thatcher Fucked the Kids". Perhaps no-one complained because it preached only to the already converted. But political converts do sometimes rail against songs they are expected to like.

In a twist to the leftist singer-songwriter stereotype (Marc & Green, 2016), Frank Turner was later "exposed" as a right-winger, though it is less surprising when we realise he is an Old-Etonian. A music blogger revisiting Turner's interview quotes ("I consider myself a libertarian"; "I'm pretty right-wing"; "socialism's retarded") realised his leftist image was wrong, and he now dislikes his anti-Thatcher song: "writing that [song] was almost dipping a toe into the world of being a protest singer. I tried it, I really didn't like it, and so I did something else with my life" (Beaumont, 2013). When Turner received death threats, Billy Bragg (2012) intervened suggesting Turner's view was the apolitical logic of a post-ideological Thatcherite culture. Bragg's socialist songs do not necessarily jar with his view that we are living in a post-ideological period so much as confirms his own songs may only preach to the converted. After all, Mrs Thatcher was toppled not by socialist songs, but by her own backbenchers worried her toxic persona would spread amongst their own constituencies.

There is at least one reported case, where the overthrow of toxic political authority has been accompanied by a socialist song, though it did not end happily for the singer. When Romania's last Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was toppled by a popular revolution in 1989, he and his wife Elena were put through a show trial before their summary execution by firing squad. Ceausescu protested the illegitimacy of his trial arguing he was the country's legitimate president. The bloody finale to Ceausescu's reign was tinged with musical nostalgia because, as the firing squad was assembled, the ex-president reportedly sang the socialist anthem "The Internationale". Elena Ceausescu endured her own final moments in silence, perhaps recognising the limits of her husband's solidarity singing had been reached.

5. The limits of song

The gathering of revolutionaries at the Karl Marx mausoleum in London's Highgate cemetery to sing the "Internationale" on the anniversary of Marx's death embody political and musical endurance. They also generate a conundrum because the song's stated commitment to "unite the human race" divides singer and audience into believers and non-believers. Perhaps it is enough for the revolutionaries to imagine a workers' paradise "free from toil", no longer "prisoners of want" (as the song puts

it). A parallel vision is found in English folk song populated by pretty young maidens, fair milkmaids and brisk young ploughboys all busy frolicking in folk's "imagined village" to do any actual labour. The pastoral idyll of the "Internationale" and folk song endures, but their honesty is questionable (Harker, 1980).

The honesty of English folk song was challenged with the emergence of singer-songwriters in the 1960s. The folk club boom and anti-nuclear protest marches fuelled a specifically *British* songwriting culture (quite separate from the US singer-songwriter scene), where the seemingly imminent threat of nuclear annihilation cast doubt on the relevance of singing the past, while the near-future was in jeopardy (Irwin, 2008). One of the most prolific songwriters then, as now, is Leon Rosselson, whose songs are a rare example of English-language chanson in their lyric-driven content. A career performing his own topical-political songs in folk clubs led Rosselson to reflect on dishonest pastoral images in folk song:

It ought to be apparent (though some folkies seem not to have noticed) that things have changed somewhat since John England gave Cecil Sharp his first folk song. The banks of the sweet primroses have turned into uniform fields of yellow rape, the little lambs are contaminated by radioactivity and the fair young maidens are sitting tight pondering on the problem of men or Aids or both. *The art of the past is always being challenged by the politics of the present to prove its validity.* No song—no work of art—has a fixed and final meaning untouched by time and social change. (Rosselson, 1981, p. 25, my emphasis).

The emphasis given above underlines how the question of a song's endurance is that it speaks to our present predicaments. For instance, Labour's anthem "The Red Flag" is vulnerable to the charge it is rooted in the political past, turning singer and song into a joke in the political present. We saw earlier how Jeremy Corbyn's rendition of Labour's political anthem is a case in point, although the charge applies equally to those singing the national anthem.³

One of Rosselson's early satirical songs transforms "The Red Flag" (singer and song) into a joke at the expense of the Labour Party. Written in 1960, "Battle Hymn of the New Socialist Party" is sung to the familiar (as opposed to original) tune of "The Red Flag". It lampoons ritual singing of Labour's anthem at the party's annual conference:

The cloth cap and the working class, as images are dated,
For we are Labour's avant-garde, and we were educated,
By tax adjustments we have planned, to institute the Promised Land,
And just to show we're still sincere, we sing The Red Flag once a year.

When the song was performed at Labour's 1960 conference it was apparently enjoyed by (presumably) "old" Labour members, but when it transferred to television not everyone got the songwriter's joke. In 1962, "Battle Hymn" was used on the ground-breaking BBC TV satire show *That Was The Week That Was*. Soon after, Rosselson was excited to learn a request had been made to record his song until he discovered it came from the Conservative Party! That Conservatives failed to get the joke confirmed "there is a limit to what can be done in a satirical-political songwriting mode" (Rosselson, 2011). In 1992, Rosselson revived his song with new lyrics in response to Labour leader John Smith's "modernising" efforts to remove Labour's constitutional commitment to public ownership, Clause IV:

Excerpt from 'Battle Hymn of the New Socialist Party':

We feel we ought to drop Clause IV,
To make the public love us more,
And just to show we're still sincere, we sing The Red Flag once a year,
Firm principals and policies are open to objections,
And streamlined party images, the way to win elections.

Following Smith's sudden death in 1994, Tony Blair's success in seeing Clause IV struck from Labour's constitution once again drained "Battle Hymn" of its satirical power. It is not difficult to imagine another revivification of the song under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership.⁴

The question of revivifying old songs for new political times must deal with the conditions in which they were originally produced. For instance, Woody Guthrie turned out anti-war songs after the Hitler-Stalin pact but wrote pro-war songs when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union and the party line changed (Kaufmann, 2011). It is worth pausing to consider whether Guthrie's more honest class-based songs of the American Depression-era could be a model for left-wing songwriters today. It is unlikely because, while class inequalities do persist, it is complicated by other political developments such as green politics, the women's movement, gay liberation, black consciousness and racism, and so on. The challenge for a left-wing songwriter today is to create songs to find common ground:

In our fragmented society, a songwriter cannot be a mouthpiece for any cause or class, can only have a responsibility to translate into song form (as honestly as that form allows) what she or he feels about the world, in the hope that others will share those feelings and find their voice in those songs. *The point at which the public world presses on, chafes, constricts the personal life is the point at which songs are born.* Songs can try to make sense of what is happening, can make connections between the personal and the political. (Rosselson, 1981, p. 25, my emphasis)

The sheer toughness of life, the oftentimes invisible harshness it dishes out is the moment when "the public world presses on, chafes, constricts the personal life". Rosselson's phrasing hints at something unpleasant, things we find difficult or even impossible to comprehend such as how a generation of Welsh children came to be wiped out by powerful seen and unseen forces that quite literally "presses on, chafes and constricts" to death.

In October 1966, days of heavy rain caused thousands of tons of coal slurry to suddenly collapse on Aberfan's village school in the heart of the South Wales coalfields, killing 116 children and 28 adults. In a few terrible moments the school was engulfed by a man-made disaster for which no-one was ever held accountable. It was all the more poignant for occurring one day before school term was due to end. Why such a disaster happens to some but not others is addressed by Leon Rosselson's 1968 song "Palaces of Gold":

If the sons of company directors,
And judges' private daughters,
Had to go to school in a slum school,
Dumped by some joker in a damp back alley,
Had to herd into classrooms cramped with worry,
With a view onto slagheaps and stagnant pools,
Had to file through corridors grey with age,
And play in a crackpot concrete cage.

Chorus:

Buttons would be pressed,
Rules would be broken,
Strings would be pulled,
And magic words spoken.
Invisible fingers would mould,
Palaces of gold.
If prime ministers and advertising executives,

Royal personages and bank managers' wives,
Had to live out their lives in dank rooms,
Blinded by smoke and the foul air of sewers,
Rot on the walls and rats in the cellars,
In rows of dumb houses like mouldering tombs,
Had to bring up their children and watch them grow
In a wasteland of dead streets where nothing will grow.

I'm not suggesting any kind of a plot,
Everyone knows there's not,
But you unborn millions might like to be warned,
That if you don't want to be buried alive by slagheaps,
Pit-falls and damp walls and rat-traps and dead streets,
Arrange to be democratically born,
The son of a company director,
Or a judge's fine and private daughter.

Buttons *will* be pressed,
Rules *will* be broken,
Strings *will* be pulled,
And magic words spoken.
Invisible fingers *will* mould,
Palaces of gold. (my emphasis)

The modified final chorus with “will” replacing “would” adds a sense of *future* inevitability in the deadly impact of social inequality. The final verse of wishful thinking—*as if* one could ever “Arrange to be democratically born”—illuminates the powerful, oftentimes hidden social structures that consign “unborn millions” to the scrap heap—or slag heap—before they have been born. The continuing struggle to hold Alfred Lord Robens, then head of the National Coal Board (no longer in existence), ultimately responsible for Aberfan’s nightmare underlines how the most powerful song changes nothing especially the struggle for justice.

At the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the Aberfan disaster in 2016, Prince Charles spoke of being at school in Scotland, where he learned the awful news of Aberfan. On the same day, a memorial concert for Aberfan featured new choral work, *Cantata Memoria*, by composer Sir Karl Jenkins. It would be churlish to say “Palaces of Gold” ought to have been sung instead, but it is not churlish to point out that the “royal personage” of the Prince of Wales—occupant of real palaces—was educated not in Wales, but at Scotland’s exclusive Gordonstoun School described on its website as “Set within a safe and beautiful 200-acre wooded campus only a mile from the Moray Firth and eight miles from the nearby town of Elgin”. In 2012, a newspaper freedom of information request revealed Charles was “pressing buttons” and “pulling strings” with his scribbled notes to ministers. In the same year it was also reported that 23 ministers in David Cameron’s cabinet were public school-educated multi-millionaires. As Rosselson’s song has it: “I’m not suggesting any kind of a plot”.

It might seem a contradiction to have noted the power of Rosselson’s song, while also observing its limits. There is no contradiction because song cannot change the world any more than wishful thinking. This is why John Lennon’s “Imagine”—a radical song in many ways with its quasi-communist rejection of God and private property—changed nothing. Statements like “I hope someday you will join us” help make it a favourite song for many, but as a political rallying cry it is hopelessly naïve.

Yet wishful thinking seems a prerequisite for revolutionaries who imagine songs are necessary to steer the masses into political action.

For instance, as dust settled on the late 1970s Rock Against Racism movement, its galvanising impact on British youth was noted by David Widgery, theorist of the Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party who in 1981, announced he had discovered the “correct” musical idiom to rouse Britain’s youth into class struggle was rock music (Widgery, 1981). Widgery proposed that the revolutionary route to socialism requires a mass culture for its emotional appeal, and is where political rock comes in. Widgery gave dubious appreciation to Hitler’s success in cultural and emotional manipulation, what Nazi propagandist Josef Goebbels called “soul-massage”. Widgery’s news was met with a sceptical response by one reader:

To speed the coming of the revolutionary dawn, what the well-turned out lefty has to do is like rock music. Well, not *like* it, necessarily, but, at least *relate* to it. The revolutionary communique on that happy day should be worth reading: “The capitalist system was today overthrown by Bert Goebbels and The Soul Masseurs, a funky rock group in symbiotic relationship with the left. Bert himself admitted to being surprised by this outcome and said, modestly, that all they were trying to do was make the charts”. (Rosselson, 1982, emphasis in the original)

Rosselson’s satire is merciless, but makes a serious point that the power of song is misunderstood by the revolutionary left. The argument that a socialist movement needs a mass (rock music) culture so it can mobilise people who have no interest in political ideology is naïve because it misses contradictions imposed on musicians by the musical market place.

An illustrative case in point concerns events surrounding the so-called “Spycatcher” affair resulting from the Thatcher government’s 1987 injunction stopping UK publication of ex-MI5 spy Peter Wright’s *Spycatcher* memoir. The injunction made it illegal to quote from or even refer to events described in Wright’s book about his work for British intelligence. Anti-censorship campaigners pursued a number of tactics to keep government censorship in public view. One tactic was a public reading of *Spycatcher* in Hyde Park, while another was to commission Leon Rosselson to write a song. Having hastily digested a smuggled copy of the offending book, Rosselson released “Ballad of a Spycatcher” (backed by Billy Bragg and the folk-rock Oyster Band). Having directly quoted *Spycatcher*, Rosselson awaited arrest.

Rosselson is still waiting because no legal action was taken. “Ballad of a Spycatcher” set out to provoke a prosecution with the aim of exposing the absurdity of government censorship of Wright’s book (and Rosselson’s song). But instead of prosecution, Rosselson’s song succeeded only in generating a subversive “buzz” amongst “indie” radio DJ’s, helping it become a minor “independent” chart hit (Borchert, 2012). For the songwriter, the song’s subversive intent to cause political embarrassment for the Thatcher government was lost:

I was actually, for the first time in my life, rushing out to buy the *New Musical Express* to see how high it had risen. But wait a minute. This wasn’t what was intended. This was supposed to cause political embarrassment for the government. Eventually, it rose to number 5. So much for subversive intentions. (Rosselson, 2011, p. 42)

The anticipated prosecution did not take place, not just because Rosselson’s song was ignored by the authorities. The song’s limits were reached when the BBC—then the principal mediator of music across its national TV and radio channels—gave the song only minimal attention with a few stanzas played in the context of a Spycatcher-related radio news item on late-night World Service. Rosselson’s brush with the “indie” chart is ironic because a few years earlier he had written that any song competing in the market place by definition is not subversive (Rosselson, 1979). It is an observation that no doubt stems from a songwriting career for the most part ignored by the mainstream broadcast and music industry.

There are few obvious advantages in being a left-wing songwriter, but in Rosselson's case it is his ability to reflect on the power and limits of song without tripping on the idea that the content of his songs can politicise and revolutionise (see Irwin, 2008). As Denselow (1989) notes, music is the most cynical of all art forms and naturally lends itself to "rebellion", but there is no evidence it leads the masses into political action. Indeed, 50 or so years after singer-songwriters, including Leon Rosselson first captured the musical-political imagination with songs about the state of the world, our neo-liberal world is arguably in a worse state than ever. We should not blame the left-wing songwriter for this state of affairs.

6. Concluding remarks

The endurance of left-wing song belies its limits as a cultural-political force for the unconverted. Leon Rosselson makes precisely this point in his 2010 song aptly titled "The Power of Song", written, especially for the Sheffield Socialist Choir. The song's lyrics recall historical examples of left-wing solidarity singing including "We Shall Overcome", which has given heart and hope to those on picket lines, sit-ins, demonstrations and so forth. But in his CD liner notes on the song, Rosselson adds a barbed comment noting how "'We Shall Overcome' could easily be sung by English Defence League [fascists]. It probably will be" (Rosselson, 2011, p. 66). Nonetheless, Rosselson says he wrote "The Power of Song" to pay tribute to songs and singers that play a role "empowering those at the bottom in their struggle for a better life" (Rosselson, 2011). No doubt the left has all the best songs, but given the state of the world it is also an assumption we should perhaps treat with some caution.

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Notes

1. The political furore over Corbyn not singing at a Battle of Britain commemoration was not wholly hostile. Some commentators (e.g. Muir, 2015) pointed out that Corbyn's freedom *not* to sing the anthem was precisely what Battle of Britain pilots gave their lives to uphold.
2. In 1925, the Labour Party held a competition in the *Daily Herald* newspaper to find a modern replacement for "The Red Flag". The contest fielded 300 entries, but despite this stiff opposition, Connell's song remained the party's song (see Gorman, 1985, p. 142).
3. In November 2016, in the wake of the referendum decision that Britain leave the European Union, Conservative MP Andrew Rosindell tabled a Parliamentary motion calling on the BBC to revive the nightly playing of "God Save the Queen" at the end of its main broadcasting hours on BBC1. BBC2's late-evening news and current affairs programme *Newsnight* hosted by Scots journalist Kirsty Wark announced they were happy to oblige Rosindell's request and closed the programme with "God Save the Queen"—by the Sex Pistols. At risk of repetition,

the question of a song's endurance is that it speaks to our present predicaments, otherwise (as Andrew Rosindell MP now knows) it risks public mockery.

4. The potential for a revivification of Clause IV in Labour's constitution is another matter.

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