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All It Ever Does Is Rain: Bruce Springsteen and the Alienation of Labor

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The popular singer and songwriter Bruce Springsteen is a product of the working-class family, and his songs often creatively capture not only working-class life but also workers' alienation from their labor. In an unsystematic way, Springsteen's lyrics portray how modern workers are alienated from the products of their labor, the process of working, other workers, and ultimately, from themselves. Although Springsteen primarily has blue-collar, industrial workers in mind, his thoughts on the alienation of labor continue to have relevance for workers in the American consumer society and in the contemporary global economy as well.

Keywords: Bruce Springsteen, labor, work, alienation, popular music

Introduction

American political leaders have said a great deal in recent years about the need to create jobs. The assumption appears to be that greater numbers of Americans should hold jobs and through these jobs sell their labor to owners of private enterprises. The workers will then be able to use their wages to buy assorted goods and services. Greater employment, the thinking goes, will thereby help the economy to grow and prosper. More jobs, political leaders insist, are good not only for the men and women who get them but also for all of us.

Unfortunately, those calling for more jobs rarely address the quality of jobs, be they the existing ones or the ones that are in the making. Many workers are underpaid and find little satisfaction in their jobs, and workers are routinely alienated from their labor. This widespread alienation is a major factor in the contemporary societal malaise. If workers are numbed and dispirited by their labor, do we really want more and more people scurrying off to more and more jobs?

This article uses the lyrics of the immensely popular singer and songwriter Bruce Springsteen to explore labor at a deeper level. The article begins with a consideration of his career, noting how his working-class background contributed to his creative practice. As the scholar Lisa Delmonico has observed, Springsteen not only "represents" the working class as a member himself but also "re-presents" that group as a singer and songwriter (2011, p. 45). The article then considers Springsteen's songs regarding the alienation of labor. In an unsystematic but nevertheless insightful way, Springsteen is sensitive to the role labor plays in our personal condition, in our relationships to one another, and in our understanding of ourselves as human beings. His thoughts on the alienation of labor surprisingly correspond to those of Karl Marx in his theoretical essay "Estranged Labor," without a doubt the most influential of traditional writings on the subject of alienated labor (1964).

In general, both Springsteen and Marx primarily have blue-collar, industrial workers in mind, but Springsteen's understanding of the alienation of labor has relevance to other kinds of white-collar, service workers in the modern economy. Springsteen, in his own way, alerts us to the presence and special dangers of alienated labor in the global economy and also in the contemporary American consumer society.

Bruce Springsteen's Creative Practice

Bruce Springsteen's humble origins are the foundation of his remarkable career as a popular singer and songwriter. Time and again, he has creatively drawn on his parents' working-class lives to create songs that are not literally autobiographical but rather "emotionally autobiographical" (Primeaux, 1996, p. 8). The songs are sympathetic to blue-collar Americans, and according to Martin Scorsese (2004), who has directed such films concerning working-class Americans as *Mean Streets* (1972), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), Springsteen has demonstrated a "rock-solid commitment to the working class" (2004, p. xiii).

Springsteen's boyhood family was "white-trash poor" (Heylin, 2012, p. 5). His father Douglas Springsteen dropped out of school after ninth grade and served during World War II as a driver in the United States Army. He then married Adelle Zerilli, a secretary, and they settled in a working-class section of Freehold, New Jersey, known as "Texas" because of the large number of southerners who lived there. The Springsteens' home was a dirty-looking, two-family frame structure located next to a gas station, and Springsteen recalled later how his family was always short on money:

I lived in a household that was caught in a squeeze, endlessly trying to make ends meet. My mother running down to the finance company, borrowing money to have a Christmas, and then paying it back all year until the next Christmas and borrowing some more. (Heylin, 2012, p. 6)

Adelle Springsteen worked more or less regularly as a secretary, but Douglas Springsteen floated from one basic job to another without ever finding satisfaction in any of them. According to Bruce Springsteen, work and the search for meaningful work left his father distraught and defeated:

My father, he worked a lot of different places. He worked in a rug mill for a while, and he was a guard down at the jail for a while. I can remember when he worked down there, he used to always come home real pissed off, drunk, and sit in the kitchen. At nine, nine o'clock, he used to shut off all the lights, every light in the house, and he used to get real pissed off if me or my sister turned any of them on. He'd just sit in the dark kitchen with a six-pack and a cigarette... (Remnick, 2012, p. 7)

It appeared at first that Bruce Springsteen would take the same dead-end path in his own life. He graduated from high school, but as a young man, he lived in a flop house, applied for food stamps, and took whatever part-time jobs he could find. "If you wanted your house painted green," he told John Rockwell in a famous interview in *Rolling Stone*, "I painted it green" (1975, p. 41).

Fortunately, Springsteen found fame and fortune, but his working-class roots and the emptiness of his parents' lives seems never to have left him. He said earlier in his career, "There isn't a note I play on stage that can't be traced directly back to my mother and father" (Heylin, 2012, p. 6). He repeated much the same thought in an interview in 2012: "My parents' struggles, it's the subject of my life. It's the thing that eats at me and always will." (Remnick, 2012, p. 9). Blue-collar life is surely not the only theme in his music; romance, rebellion, and—of late—religious belief are also important themes that he frequently employs. However, one

senses that his songs concerning poverty and working-class deprivation are especially personal and mean the most to him.

In 1975, *Born to Run* became Springsteen's great breakthrough album, both financially and thematically. The album includes youthful paeans to the highway and holds out fast cars as a means of escape. Yet if one listens carefully, one also hears accounts of working that might prompt escapist longings. In the song "Night," for example, Springsteen complains of a mythic "boss man" who gives you hell if you get to work late. As if that is not bad enough, while you work all day from nine to five, they never stop "busting you up to on the outside" (Springsteen, 1975, track 3).

Darkness on the Edge of Town (1978) followed, as did the haunting, acoustic *Nebraska* (1982) and, of course, *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984). By the time of the latter album and the year-long tour accompanying its release, Springsteen had become "the biggest rock star in the world, capable of selling out Giants stadium ten shows in a row" (Remnick, 2012, p. 19). Many of Springsteen's songs from this period continued to capture the disappointments in a workingman's life. In "Promised Land" from *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, to cite just one example, he spoke for an angry and despondent working man when he sang:

I get up every morning and go to work each day
But your eyes go blind and your blood runs cold. (Springsteen, 1978, track 6)

The working-class anthems and tributes in these albums and in subsequent albums from the 1990s were so pronounced they caused Springsteen to reflect on the contradiction between his personal wealth on the one hand and his working-class loyalties on the other. Could one be unbelievably wealthy and still identify with the working class? He admitted his uncertainty in various interviews and also addressed it in his songs themselves. In the song "Better Days" from *Lucky Town* (1992), Springsteen's tenth album, he described his situation as a "sad funny ending" and called himself "a rich man in a poor man's shirt" (Springsteen, 1992, track 1).

Yet the contradiction between his personal wealth and working class loyalties notwithstanding, Springsteen continued to sing of poverty, working-class life, and inequality. His two most recent albums—*Wrecking Ball* (2012) and *High Hopes* (2014)—are no exception to this pattern. *Wrecking Ball* has struck some as a musical manifesto for the Occupy Wall Street Movement and its angry condemnation of the rich. *High Hopes* illustrates the ongoing influence of novelist John Steinbeck on Springsteen (Cologne-Brookes, 2002). The album includes a blistering remake "The Ghost of Tom Joad," which quotes Tom Joad's famous lines from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*:

Where there's a fight 'gainst the blood and hatred in the air
Look for me Mom I'll be there
Wherever somebody's fighting for a place to stand
Or a decent job or a helpin' hand
Wherever somebody's struggling to be free
Look in their eyes Ma and you'll see me. (Springsteen, 2014, track 10)

Through it all, Springsteen has been engaged in what the literary critic and historian Raymond Williams called a "creative practice" (1977, p. 206). This is different than the work of social scientist, which customarily relies on social description, analysis, and—in the present—lots of data. Springsteen's variety of "creative practice" is also not quite the same as the work of playwrights and novelists, who have a more sustained and self-consciously literary approach. His field is mass entertainment, and he is a pop cultural singer and composer.

Springsteen's best tools in his creative practice are metaphors and narratives. With metaphor as a type of figurative speech, the metaphorical term conveys connotations for the subject term. If it is done well, metaphor captures a feeling or speaks to emotion. With narrative or story, the payoff is meaning or even a lesson. Lengthier narratives are central in novels or feature films, but short, often succinct narratives serve as the spines of Springsteen's songs.

Overall, Springsteen uses metaphor and narrative to create literally meaningful songs about working-class life. He deals with his impoverished youth by "ordering and organizing it, converting and restructuring it for himself, assuming its power to himself and directing it toward his own objectives" (Primeaux, 1996, p. 26). The songs have provoked empathy among even those without working-class backgrounds, and his songs invite listeners to imagine and reflect. It is little wonder that Springsteen has been America's most popular singer and songwriter for the past 40 years.

The Alienation of Labor

Bruce Springsteen is "clearly a man of the left, but he is no Marxist" (Michels, 2008, p. 28). He once mentioned that he found American historian Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* to be inspiring, but Springsteen does not employ anything resembling dialectical materialism or demonstrate a theoretical sophistication (Michels, 2008).

However, even as a non-Marxist, Springsteen engages in a creative practice that surprisingly dovetails with Karl Marx's treatment of the alienation of labor in the essay "Estranged Labor." Highly respected and often cited, "Estranged Labor," was written in the early 1840s by the man Marxian scholars have dubbed the "Young Marx." Like other writings from Marx's early adult years, "Estranged Labor" is more free-form, philosophically inclined, and skeptical, while the writings of the "Mature Marx" from later years tend to be more logical, engaged by economics, and doctrinaire (Anthony, 1977, p. 114). The philosopher Louis Althusser has argued that Marx's very epistemology shifted from the "ideological" to the scientific" as he matured (Althusser, 1965, pp. 52-59).

To be sure, there are examples of contented workers in Springsteen's extended creative practice, but for every worker in Springsteen's songs who finds fulfillment in his work; a dozen workers are discontented and disappointed. Many of these workers find little of redeeming value or meaning in what they produce. In the classic "Working on the Highway" in the album *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984), an alienated man works construction "out on 95" (Interstate 95, incidentally, runs the length of Springsteen's New Jersey home.). "All day," the man says, "I hold a red flag and watch the traffic pass me by." Alerting and dodging interstate motorists are hardly inspiring work tasks. "Someday Mister," the man promises, "I'm gonna lead a better life than this" (Springsteen, 1984, track 4). Or in the album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995), Springsteen spins tales of Mexican illegals who can hardly be proud of the products of their labor. In "Balboa Park," assorted "border boys" bring cocaine across the border in swallowed balloons which they then excrete. Later, they provided sexual favors for local men in order to pick up extra cash (Springsteen, 1995, track 7). Then there's more poignant story of two brothers in "Sinaloa Cowboys." They understandably tire of picking in the fields and turn instead to cooking methamphetamine in the desert. The product of their labor is illegal, but as Springsteen assures us in his narrative:

You could spend a year in the orchards
 Or make half as much in one ten-hour shift
 Working for the men from Sinaloa. (Springsteen, 1995, track 5)

It all makes sense until the meth shack explodes, one of the brothers is killed, and the surviving brother buries him in a deserted eucalyptus grove.

Balloons filled with cocaine, oral sex for pay, and newly cooked meth are particularly degraded products of one's labor, but if one overlooks the degradation, these objects and services are representative of the larger process by which products of one's labor come to stand distant and apart from a worker. Although Marx had chiefly in mind the way nineteenth-century industrial workers were alienated from their labor, his words are relevant to the workers with whom Springsteen empathizes:

The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (1964, p. 108)

If a worker becomes alienated from the product of his labor, as is often the case, little likelihood exists that the product will contribute to the worker's personal satisfaction and sense of self-worth.

When a worker finds limited satisfaction in the goods and services he produces, it is little wonder that the worker will find limited satisfaction in the process of producing those goods and services, that is, in working. Springsteen sings of a man who works in a car wash in "Downbound Train" from the album *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984). For this man, Springsteen says metaphorically, "All it ever does is rain." The worker's attitude about his work is morose, and he feels as if he's "a rider on a downbound train" (Springsteen, 1984, track 5). In "Straight Time," on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995), an ex-con is trying to stay out of trouble and lead a normal life with his wife and little children, but it feels to him like he is doing "straight time." He works at a rendering plant, but the working experience is hardly enough to provide meaning in his life. When he comes home in the evening, he says, "I can't get the smell from my hands" (Springsteen, 1995, track 2). But really, it is not the animal fat that stinks but rather a severely alienating work experience.

Springsteen, as previously suggested, is capturing the alienated workers at the car wash and in the rendering plant as part of his creative practice. His songs are metaphorical and narrative more than theoretical and analytical. However, we can once again turn to Marx for theory. In "Estranged Labor," Marx observed:

How could the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself? The product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production. If then the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity. In the estrangement of the object is merely summarized the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of labor itself. (1964, p. 110)

When you do not respect the products of your labor or find fulfillment in the process of working, it is likely that negative feelings about and attitudes regarding one's fellow workers will result. These feelings sometimes rise to the level of active dislike. More commonly, workers feel a vague discontent with fellow workers, a sense that they have had enough of them. Regardless of the intensity of the feelings, the sense of distance from fellow workers precludes any sort of collectivity. In "Atlantic City" from the album *Nebraska* (1982), a man loses his job, watches his debts grow, and contemplates others with the same plight:

Looking for a job, but it's hard to find.

Down here it's just winners and losers and don't get caught on the wrong side of that line. (Springsteen, 1982, track 2)

Springsteen's saddest narrative regarding workers alienated from one another is "Galveston Bay" on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995). The song concerns a Vietnamese immigrant who works in a factory and saves enough money to buy a shrimp boat to work the Bay. Jealous Texas fishermen, who have grown tired of their own jobs, try to drive out the Vietnamese man, but their ambush fails, leaving two Texans dead. Those on the political left have long reveled in the image of workers locking arms and struggling for a better tomorrow. When you are alienated from the products of your labor and from working itself, you are often alienated from your fellow workers. It becomes extremely difficult to merge your dreams and aspirations with theirs.

Perhaps predictably, alienated workers also encounter difficulty respecting themselves. When discussing this troubling lack of self-respect among workers, Marx points to the existence of a "species being" or, in the original German, "Gattungswesen" (1964, p. 112). His discussion is difficult, but basically Marx argues that man as a "species being" routinely takes his activity to be the object of his will. This presumption on man's part leaves him feeling his activity is intentional. Man believes he or she is free-willed. Being alienated or estranged from one's labor, meanwhile, reduces man. Here's how Marx puts it:

The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man's species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the objects of his production, estranged labor takes from him his species life, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over animals into disadvantage. His inorganic body, his nature, is taken away from him. (1964, p. 114)

A postmodernist might take issue with this line of thinking, but as suggested earlier, the "Young Marx" is best seen as a humanist rather than a postmodernist. For traditional humanists, the human "subject" is "a coherent identity, endowed with purpose and initiative" (Abrams, 1999, p. 239). Humanists take their species' reasoning and thoughtfulness to distinguish the species from the instinctual passions and appetites of animals. Postmodernists, by contrast, subvert humanism in that "they undertake to 'decenter,' or to eliminate entirely, the focus on the human being, or subject, as the major object of study and the major agency in effecting scientific, cultural, and literary achievements" (Abrams, 1999, p. 118).

Springsteen's epoch is most decidedly different than the one Marx encountered, but he is also a humanist, albeit with a creative practice rather than theoretical inclinations. His metaphorical narratives include tales of individuals whose alienation in the workplace causes them to lose touch with their own being, to pull apart. His metaphors convey a sense of personal disassociation and also suggest the self-destruction that can result.

Songs about personal disassociation and self-destruction can be found in the previously mentioned "Working on the Highway" from *Born to Run* (1984) and also in the poignant "Highway 29" from *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995). The man aimlessly waving a red flag on highway whom Springsteen introduces in "Working on the Highway" runs off with an under-aged girl, gets caught, and ends up not only imprisoned but also working on a prison road gang. His new job involves "blasting through the bedrock," but the song conveys an even deeper existential malaise. The song ends with the drums pounding in listeners' ears and in the worker's head (Springsteen, 1984, track 4). Even more disturbing is the story of the bored and alienated shoe salesman in "Highway 29" in the album *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. He arranges a roadhouse liaison with a customer and then, as he puts it, "everything slipped my mind." He shoots up a small town bank, leaving blood and money

everywhere, and the salesman and his lover flee across the Mexican border and into the Sierra Mountains. A pronounced lyricism, especially for a pop song, captures an alienation from the self:

The winter sun shot through the black trees
 I told myself it was all something in her
 But as we drove I knew it was something in me
 Something that'd been coming for a long time now
 And something that was here with me now.
 The road was filled with broken glass and gasoline
 She wasn't saying nothin', it was just a dream
 The wind come silent through the windshield
 All I could see was snow, sky, and pines
 I closed my eyes and I was runnin'
 I was runnin' then I was flying. (Springsteen, 1995, track 3)

Overall, one hears in Springsteen's songs a lyrical representation of the ways the working experience might be empty and disturbing. Springsteen's creative practice captures the most important aspects of alienated labor, pointing to workers who are frequently alienated from the products of their labor, from the process of working, from other workers, and, ultimately, from themselves. Building on his working-class parents' experiences, Springsteen proves exceptionally sensitive to how labor can be disorienting and fundamentally draining.

Alienation of Labor in the Present

Does Bruce Springsteen's creative practice related to the working class still generate empathy in the present? Do his lyrical narratives about the alienation of labor illuminate important aspects of contemporary life?

Some would argue that Springsteen's understanding of working-class life is irrelevant in the contemporary, postindustrial present. There is a sense, in this regard, that Springsteen is old-fashioned. Reviews of Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball* (2012), the album thought to provide anthems for the Occupy Wall Street Movement and for 99-percenters in general, were representative of this sentiment. Writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, Greg Kot found the songs "stiff and forced" and said they "sound sterile, as if they were punched out on a computer set to 'football-stadium' volume" (2012, p. 1). John Pareles and Jon Caramanica, who engaged in an extended dialogue about *Wrecking Ball* in the *New York Times*, voiced a similar, albeit more nuanced, opinion. While Pareles credited Springsteen with "a gospel of hard, sweaty work and earned income, while venting direct fury at vulture capitalism," Caramanica said that when Springsteen intones "I'll mow your lawn, clean the leaves out of your drain" in *Wrecking Ball's* "Jack of All Trades," the song's "sodden workingman empathy literally made me nauseous." For Springsteen to ring true in the postindustrial present, Caramanica was sure, Springsteen had to "balance sensuality with dogma" and "understand the body as a locus of pleasure not just labor" (2012, p. 18).

Modern social scientists might buoy the negative reviews by adding that labor has become increasingly variable, making it difficult to generalize about how people experience it. The prominent sociologist Gale Miller has articulated this line of thought in his much-praised *It's a Living: Work in Modern Society*. He devotes lengthy chapters to peasant work, industrial work, professional work, hustling work, household work, and so-called "countercultural work." Miller is also explicitly critical of Marx's assumption that work is a key

feature of human life. For Miller, no reason exists to think people can find themselves through their labor and develop rewarding personal relationships with not only fellow workers but also all of nature. In reality, Miller argues, present-day workers do not necessarily take work to be important human activity or complain about lousy jobs; many just want to “make a living” (1981, pp. 93-94).

Surely one might tire of Springsteen’s themes and concerns and stop listening to his songs, but a case might still be made that Springsteen’s suggestions about working-class life and the alienation of labor still have relevance. To begin with, while deindustrialization is certainly a reality in the United States, industrialization continues in other parts of the world. If we bear in mind the “global economy,” large numbers of exploited industrial workers are toiling in developing countries, and many of these workers are no doubt alienated from their labor. At the end of a long day making sneakers or assembling electronics hardware, many sense their work is draining away their humanity. Some might even leave their plants in such a shredded, disassociated state that, as Springsteen sings in “Working on the Highway” on the *Born in the U.S.A.* album, they “are looking to get hurt” (Springsteen, 1984, track 4).

In the United States, itself, meanwhile, the alienation of labor remains a possibility among professionals, service providers, pink-collar office staff, and others. In fact, according to a 2013 Gallup Poll, a mere 30 percent of employees in the United States felt engaged by their work (Schwartz & Porath, 2014, p. 1). “For most of us, in short, work is a depleting, dispiriting experience, and in some obvious ways, it’s getting worse” (p. 6).

The rise of consumer capitalism plays a role in this increased alienation, at least as it involves 99-percenters. In the context of consumer capitalism, commodification is rampant, and markets are ubiquitous. Just about anything can be bought and sold, and some markets facilitate a preying on people who are ignorant of the workings of the markets (Satz, 2010).

Perhaps needless to add, advertising plays a major role in the marketing of commodities by highlighting commodities’ supposedly best features and also by calling attention to how many commodities are available in various marketplaces. Even more generally, advertising suggests the whole process of buying goods or services is the road to contentment and a sense of well-being. Advertising, what with its smiling faces and happy outcomes, promotes “consumption as a way of life,” to quote the historian Christopher Lasch (1979, p. 72).

Although Springsteen cannot be credited with any kind of extended critique of consumer capitalism, he does sense its dangers. In Springsteen’s “Used Cars” on the *Nebraska* album (1982), a man complains: “Me I walk the same dirty streets where I was born.” His father “sweats the same job from mornin’ to morn.” The father wants a car, but the best he can afford is a “brand new used car.” The neighbors delight in the purchase, but the son festers and feels only an actual new car will bring him satisfaction: “Now mister the day the lottery I win I ain’t never gonna ride in no used car again” (Springsteen, 1982, track 7). In Springsteen’s title song on the recent album *High Hopes*, the refrain is “Don’t you know these days you pay for everything?” (Springsteen, 2014, track 1).

In contemporary consumer society, goods might have such a hold on many consumers’ state of mind as to become fetishes. Commodity fetishism unthinkingly transforms an object into value, and the longing for the supposedly valuable object mounts and mounts. In a “commodity society” goods are everywhere, and they acquire “an independent, anti-human power” (Boer, 2010, 116).

Unfortunately, Springsteen did not tease out the ways labor might become especially alienated in the context of consumer capitalism, rife as it is with commodity lust and fetishism. Springsteen remains focused on

how the economic and political system exploits workers, recent immigrants, and people of color—worthy concerns, to be sure.

Nevertheless, Springsteen's understanding of alienated labor could be particularly relevant in the present-day United States, a society in which people for the most part work not to survive but rather to get the money to get the goods and services they desire. Their labor would still be alienated in the sense that they are distanced from what they produce, do not enjoy the work they do, dislike or do not care about their fellow workers, and on the deepest level find working personally disorienting. This alienation could be exacerbated because they are working just to get stuff—flat screens, smart phones, perhaps motor vehicles. Producing goods and services in order to get money to buy goods and services could result in a troubling divorce from one's humanity.

Conclusion

The singer and songwriter Bruce Springsteen has pursued a remarkable, long-term creative practice built on the working-class deprivations experienced by his parents. Some of his songs do not concern working-class men and women, but the ones that do often examine the alienation of labor. Springsteen's lyrical metaphors, succinct descriptions, and engaging characters symbolize the ways the working experience might be empty and disturbing. He captures through his creative practice what Marx took to be the dimensions of alienated labor, pointing to workers who are frequently alienated from the products of their labor, from the process of working, from other workers, and ultimately, from themselves. Springsteen has not pinned down everything we need to know about alienated labor, and, more generally, the alienation of labor is not the only way alienation as a larger socio-psychological phenomenon comes about. But still, Springsteen is extraordinarily sensitive to how labor can separate us from human promise and possibility.

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