

# **METAL MUSIC AND THE RE-IMAGINING OF MASCULINITY, PLACE, RACE AND NATION**

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# **METAL MUSIC AND THE RE-IMAGINING OF MASCULINITY, PLACE, RACE AND NATION**

BY

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## About the Author

**Karl Spracklen** is a Professor of Sociology of Leisure and Culture at Leeds Beckett University (UK), and the Editor-in-Chief of *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*. He is interested in leisure and identity and belonging and exclusion, and has published over a hundred papers, books, textbooks and book chapters.

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## Chapter 1

# Introduction, Context and Methods

### Reflection

I am at Tilburg in the Netherlands to watch the Norwegian band Enslaved. Ivar Bjørnson, the guitarist of the band and one of the band's founding members, is officially curating the Roadburn Festival. Roadburn is an alternative metal festival that has grown out of its doom/stoner focus to be experimental and extreme. The role of curator for Ivar Bjørnson means he has chosen some of the bands and the special theme for the night Enslaved headline. The presence of the band and their guitarist as the curator means the band have been accorded credibility as musicians and artists. I have followed the career of the band ever since I first heard the album *Below the Lights* (2003), back when I was returning to be a fan of heavy metal and extreme metal. I was attracted to the combination of black metal with songs drawing on Viking themes, and the epic progressive rock that Enslaved combined with the fierceness of the metal. From *Below the Lights*, I went back earlier in the catalogue and found *Eld* (1997), which starts with the epic song “793 (Slaget om Lindisfarne)”. In fact, the song starts with the sound of people rowing a boat, obviously Vikings on their way in 793 CE to attack and ransack the Anglo-Saxon monastery at Lindisfarne. As a review of the album puts it<sup>1</sup>:

Although I'm reluctant to give anything 100%, I do feel that this is one album that deserves it. From the epic opening track “Slaget om Lindisfarne” to the powerful closer and title track “Eld”, it just oozes atmosphere and quality. The album's beginning is deceptively calm, opening with a moody string section that crescendos towards the sounds of a boat coming ashore, firmly instilling the Viking atmosphere in the listener. This is definitely the highlight of the album for me. Next comes the more straight-up Hordalendigen (“The Man from Hordaland”), with its classic opening riff

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<sup>1</sup>Not by me: I do not write any such reviews. All material posted on the internet in this book is cited as written. <https://www.metal-archives.com/reviews/Enslaved/Eld/909/JeremiahTwattenfaust/8691>, Posted on 19 May 2004. Accessed 31 July 2019.

and descent into a fast yet atmospheric song that sets the standard for the rest of the album. Alfablót (“Sacrifice to the Elves”) again has more of an epic sound, with the almost operatic vocals completing the Viking imagery; Kvasirs Blót (“The Blood of Kvasir”), however, builds up more vocal track, with Grutle’s rasping vocals doing justice the song’s themes of Nordic Gods. For Lenge Siden (“A Long Time Ago”) begins with the sound of a man speaking in some unknown language, and then tells the story of a people’s thirst for revenge at the killing of their ancestors. This is followed by the anger of Glempt (“Forgotten”), with the powerful vocals and consistent riffing that have become Enslaved’s trademark. Finally, we have the closing track, Eld (“Fire”). The commanding vocals and atmosphere really compliment the destructive and apocalyptic lyrics and the song is an incredible finish to the album. Overall, I’d say that this is one of my favourite metal albums of all time, and is definitely deserving of a 100% rating.

I agree with this reviewer: this is still one of my favourite albums. Enslaved at the time seemed to connect to some authentic pre-Christian or anti-Christian roots in Norway. As an atheist with a poetic interest in paganism, I found the music and lyrics exciting, even though I knew the band were part of the notorious and egregious second wave of black metal in Norway (even if they distanced themselves from the crimes and the fascism: Spracklen, 2012). At Roadburn, I listen to all the songs they have chosen and I am in a rapture. It does appear that they have some uncanny, otherworldly connection to the ancient past and the ancient gods. Then they play a cover of the Led Zeppelin song “The Immigrant Song” from Led Zeppelin III (1970), the song that has lyrics about ice and snow, and Valhalla and the Hammer of the Gods, and suddenly it all makes sense. Enslaved are playing this famous song about Vikings because they are from Norway. They are playing this song because they are confessing this as their source, this is the song that they listened to over and over as young metal heads, just as they listened to Rush and Pink Floyd. The Viking metal trope and mythotype may have been gestated by extreme metal and its elitist underground, but I recognised the origins of the myth: the same rock and metal mainstream anyone growing up as a child in the 1980s knew – when metal was for nerds like me who played role-playing games and over-read Tolkien (Spracklen, 2018a).

I have explored my early introduction to heavy metal in an introduction to chapter on Satanism and black metal in Norway (Spracklen, 2014a). This is what I wrote at the time reflecting on my perception of what metal meant to me in the 1980s (Spracklen, 2014a, pp. 183–184):

We would watch videos of Maiden playing live, drink cheap lager and air-guitar along with whatever everyday household tool we could find serving as the totem of our pubescent dreams .... Of course, we were aware that teachers, parents, priests and politicians complained about heavy metal: not only was it music for

idiots, it was dangerously Satanic. Iron Maiden wrote songs with titles like “Number of the Beast”, Venom posed with skulls and spoke about worshipping the Devil, and we all knew about the spooky stories associated with earlier rock and metal bands such as Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath. Every so often there would be a story in the tabloids, on the news, often from America, often from some fundamentalist Christian lobbying group, warning parents about the evil forces in heavy metal. For a thirteen-year old in Yorkshire, England, this only made my love of heavy metal more solid: I knew there was no real Satanism in heavy metal, no dark undercurrent to Iron Maiden and the other bands I loved – how could there be a Satan when there was no God? .... Being linked to this evil Satanic movement made me and my friends much more cooler than we actually were, so we ditched the role-playing games, went out with our Maiden tee-shirts and our pentagram badges, and pretended to do black masses in the cemetery at the bottom of Coal Hill Lane.

This recollection is not entirely true – and here is a confession.<sup>2</sup> I think I had wanted to suggest I had left the childish things behind me. Playing role-playing games, listening to Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, goth rock and heavy metal all combined to make me and my friend pretty much outcasts at school. We all loved Star Wars, and Star Trek, and Monty Python, and we could bore our parents and teachers by our obsessions. We went to a rough school in the middle of the council estate on which most of us lived, on the white, working-class periphery of Leeds. Listening to heavy metal and goth rock was our way of standing out against the rest of the kids at school, a way of rising above the limited cultural tastes and ambitions of our classmates. Being fans of science-fiction and fantasy allowed us to find community an identity in a similar manner: a community of fandom that stretched around the world, but one that needed its members to read and be knowledgeable. We were the clever ones, the arty ones, the scientists, with our weird music and our talk about dragons – as such we were all relentlessly bullied. I was relatively lucky because my older brother played rugby and hung out with some of the cocks of the north, and I played a bit, too: so I was never physically attacked. But my friends were routinely punched and pushed and humiliated. We liked heavy metal because we were convinced it made us better than the rest of the boys, the rough working-class sorts who were too bad for the army, as well as the more respectable ones who were already planning families with their first serious girlfriends. Metal gave us a way of proving we were proper men: we were as tough as the barbarian warriors and knights we read about in the pages of *White Dwarf*. We could not be drug dealers or car thieves.

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<sup>2</sup>I think I wanted to make out I left the childish things behind and became an adult. But I wanted to show the other editors, and the readers of the chapter, that I was actually cooler than I was.

We were not that sporty or handsome to actually get loads of girlfriends. Being into metal allowed us to fantasise about being men, having power, laying women as effortlessly as any metal musician of the 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

One thing I noticed about heavy metal when I started going to clubs was it was mainly white, mainly working class, as well as mainly male. This is just my memory of Leeds and Bradford in the 1980s. Metal at the time in Yorkshire was not just working class, it was connected to a residual working class of men who were engineers, electricians, mechanics and tradesmen. These were people who were all hit by the changes to the economy at the time of Margaret Thatcher, as public sector spending and contracting was slashed. The whiteness of the metal scene was self-evident – it was as white as the intake at my school. When I was still at school my circle of role-playing gamers included the only two non-white boys in my year: my British Chinese best friend X who did not actually get into heavy metal; and Y, someone we might now call multi-racial or polyethnic, in the UK Census category “White and Black Caribbean”, but who was called *half-caste* by the bullies. Looking back I do not remember consciously deciding to befriend these two because I wanted to show solidarity in the face of racism – even if they were racially abused by the bullies. I had been friend with X since he had arrived at my primary school from another part of the country and the teacher asked me to look after him; I really knew Y through a mutual friend before we all started hanging around together. But I was politically liberal, with radical parents who had been activists in the Labour Party. I was too heteronormative to fail to see and reflect on my own normalisation of the Gender Order (Connell, 1987, 1995) – my own sexism and assumptions about male power and sexuality – but I knew and saw racism at work. I knew it was considered okay among most of the children at school to call the local shop the *Paki shop*. I knew the family who ran the shop were abused by children and their parents. I could see that the council estate on which we lived was predominantly white, and tragically isolated from the more multi-cultural communities of the inner areas of Leeds. And as I started doing my A-Levels at a college in the centre of the city, I realised that heavy metal shared this whiteness and marginality, although my estate had not been a centre of heavy metal.

As I got older and went to university, I drifted away from heavy metal. I still listened to my favourite rock and metal bands – but at university my identity as a goth became prominent, probably as a way of retaining a link to Leeds and the goth rock north of England while being exiled in the flatlands of Cambridge (Spracklen & Spracklen, 2018). My love of real ale became pronounced at the same time, for the same reason: I felt the need to retain a link with the

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<sup>3</sup>The irony of Rob Halford not being out in the 1980s is clear now, but back then I would not have guessed anything about him was remotely non-heteronormative. We did not think other forms of sexuality were possible – all we ever discussed at high school was how to pull girls and which girls and women in popular culture who we fancied. I was in love with Yeoman Janice Rand from *Star Trek* – not even Princess Leia could overcome my pre-pubescent feelings for Janice.

working-class North surrounded by white, upper-middle-class Pimm's drinkers. Through the 1990s, I did not see myself as belong to any heavy-metal community but I listened to all kind of alternative rock, including the metal bands that were in the mainstream at the time such as Sepultura. I was more interested in world music and the continuing saga of goth in this period. I still read metal magazines when I had money to spend and time to kill. I attended a few rock gigs and metal nights at Rio's in Bradford, where we were living at the time – and it was these nights that made me realise I was still a metallur. White Zombie helped me along because they crossed over into the goth scene. I was still thrilled by the power of heavy metal's heavy riffs. It did not take me long to find a band that pulled me right back to the dark side. I read a review of *Blackwater Park* by Opeth in *Kerrang!* magazine and bought it on the strength of the reviewer's words. They did not disappoint. Seeing Opeth play at Rio's confirmed to me that I was not only a metalhead but also an extreme metalhead (Spracklen, 2018b). Then I found Norwegian black metal, and listened to Darkthrone, Immortal, Enslaved and Emperor, and realised I had missed something vital about extreme metal when the Church burnings were taking place (Spracklen, 2006, 2013a). Before I knew it, I was sending money to small one-person labels around the world for obscure releases and reading everything I could find and talking about black metal with other people who hung around Hellraiser Records, a shop in Leeds.

All the time I was defining my leisure life through music, I was becoming a leisure studies scholar, or to be more precise a sociologist of leisure. I did a PhD in the 1990s on rugby league, community, class, race and gender. I continued to do research on rugby league in part time while working as a Policy and Research Officer with Bradford Council and then as a National Development Manager with the Commission for Racial Equality. I taught and did guest lectures when and eventually secured a full-time lecturing post at Leeds Metropolitan University. As a sociologist of leisure, I have been interested in how leisure is constrained by the structures of society and of modernity (Spracklen, 2009, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2015a). Heavy metal, I have argued, is in many ways like rugby league: a marginal leisure space that is an imaginary, imagined community, where identity is conferred through understanding invented traditions, symbolic boundaries and myths. 1895 and the Split, mean nothing to anyone who is not a rugby league fan. Similarly, anyone who is not an extreme metal fan really cares much or understands about the difference between death metal and black metal. The marginal nature of rugby league and heavy metal – especially extreme metal – makes them both spaces of resistance against the taste setters of the ruling elites (Spracklen, 2009). I have argued that both rugby league and black metal are spaces where communicative leisure takes place. That is, they are spaces where people can find meaning and purpose by rejecting the mainstream fashions of the culture industry, and the norms and values of the elites (Spracklen, 2009). That is a strength that allows me as a white man to feel safe and welcome in a pub full of rugby league fans, or in a mosh-pit. But of course the spaces and communities constructed in sport and metal are white, male, heteronormative spaces. My PhD explores this for rugby league (Spracklen, 1996). In a series of papers in the last

few years, I have made the same argument about heavy metal, with a particular emphasis on folk metal (Spracklen, 2015b, 2017a, 2018c), Iron Maiden (Spracklen, 2017b) and black metal (Lucas, Deeks, & Spracklen, 2011; Spracklen, 2006, 2010a, 2013a; Spracklen, Lucas, & Deeks, 2014). Heavy metal remains a very masculine place, a very heterosexual place and a very white one.

For suggesting that heavy metal was a bit racist and a bit sexist in Spracklen (2015b), I was viciously attacked on-line as a traitor to heavy metal, a traitor to the white race and to the brotherhood of man, somebody who knew nothing about heavy metal, and someone who was a bad academic. At the nadir I received 50 angry emails in one day. This book, then, is my response to that reaction. I want to spend more time exploring race, nation, place and masculinity in heavy metal, so that the case I make can be more nuanced, and more compelling. I am sure the trolls who attacked me back then will not be able to see beyond their hatred of anyone who is a traitor to the cause of white, heterosexual men. However, I hope metallers will see that I like metal, and are sympathetic to many of its themes, ideologies and mythotypes – even if some (or many) of them need to be overturned for the good and the future of metal.

## Introduction

Metal is a form of popular music. Popular music is a form of leisure. Historically, people made music and listened to live music for recreation and on holy days. In the modern age, popular music has become part of popular culture, a heavily contested collection of practices and industries that construct place, belonging and power (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). There is no doubt that popular music like radio and television is part of a wider hegemonic industry of control and exploitation, as Adorno suggests (1991). Popular music is produced for the consumption of the masses, ensuring docile obedience in the workplace and in the city. But popular music spaces are sites of leisure: leisure forms, practices, identities and behaviours. As such, they could be argued to be spaces for agency, resistance and communicative leisure (Spracklen, 2009). People make meaning in their lives through listening to music and talking about music with their friends in a communicative way. People get pleasure from the music they enjoy, by dancing or simply appreciating it in their own rooms. People find identity and community in popular music scenes and tribes, through the wearing of fashions, make-up and hairstyles (Bennett, 2000). Metal is one other form of popular music, one that claims a supposed unique ideology of individualism and alternativeness (Kahn-Harris, 2007; Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 2000), which in fact it shares with other subcultures. Since the 1960s, alternative popular music has shaped the birth and evolution of a supposed, self-acclaimed authentic, communicative counter-cultural leisure space (Bennett, 2000). In the 1970s, Hebdige (1979) showed how a number of British youth sub-cultures constructed around style and popular music (such as mods and punks) were sites of counter-hegemonic resistance for marginalised (working class) groups. However, he also suggested, following the work of Gramsci (1971), that these sub-cultures were inevitably co-opted and drained of their transformative potential by mainstream culture. Following Williams (1977), Hebdige (1979)

suggested that all alternative subcultures become co-opted into the mainstream, then fade away to residuality, or disappear altogether (as members of the scene die). Metal is thus currently in process of being co-opted by the mainstream – and is a space where instrumentality is at work, creating hegemonic forms of belonging and control.

Contemporary society is global, and hybrid, and has changed rapidly since heavy metal first emerged as a working class, white male subculture in America and Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. As heavy metal became more cosmopolitan and welcoming of difference in this century, so mainstream society supposedly became more progressive and liberal. Far-right activists in black metal were seen as aberrations, frustrated white men being angry about being overlooked. But the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House has shown that angry white men still wield huge social and cultural power. The aim of this monograph is to explore how true metal, folk metal and extreme metal might be seen as leisure spaces that resist the norms and values of the mainstream, but also how they might also serve to re-affirm and construct those norms and values. In particular, I am interested in how these forms of metal might work to re-imagine masculinity, race, nation and class in an intersectional way. As I have already mentioned above, I have written already about hegemonic masculinity and nationalism in black metal, folk metal and Iron Maiden (Spracklen, 2013a, 2013b, 2015b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018c). This monograph builds on that work but is based on new, unpublished research. The focus is extended to true metal as well as folk metal and extreme (Viking/black/pagan) metal, because true metal captures (and, historically, inspired) the same lyrical and symbolic mythotypes about warriors, roots and nations, standing firm and being true in the face of change. The focus is also extended to bands that use the warrior-nation mythotype in places and countries beyond the global North, and in ways that challenge or subvert hegemony.

## **Context**

In this chapter, I set the book in the context of my own work and the work of others in metal music studies who have researched folk metal and Viking metal, and metal and gender and masculinity. On folk metal and Viking metal, there is a growing range of research which includes the PhDs by Mark Deeks (2017) and Imke Von Helden (2017). I will refer to this work in the relevant chapters later on in this book but it is important here to spell out how this book relates to the work of Deeks and to the work of Von Helden. Deeks takes a musicological approach to explore the themes used in the works of key Viking metal and folk metal bands. He shows that the artists have taken their job of re-presenting folk tunes and motifs as seriously as they have done with the histories and traditional songs adapted in their lyrics. For Deeks, the musicians in these bands are not racist or nationalist, but they are concerned rather with preserving histories that are at danger of being forgotten. In earlier work, I wrote with Deeks and co-author Caroline Lucas on the so-called English Heritage Black Metal bands we concluded (Spracklen, Lucas, & Deeks 2014, p. 62):

These black metal bands are not politically racist (though they do accept, legitimate, and play with the racism associated with the Norwegian, second wave of black metal), but they are interested in constructing exclusive imaginary communities based around historicized notions of Englishness (and hegemonic constructions of whiteness – see Lucas, Deeks, and Spracklen). For Winterfylleth and Wodensthron, the *frissance* of far-right politics taps into the misanthropy of the black metal scene and serves as a convenient way to sell records to black metal fans used to the excesses and racisms associated with National Socialist Black Metal (NSBM) (Spracklen, “Blaze”), i.e. being controversial makes sound business sense even if the allegations are unfounded. For the musicians, making this music is part of their leisure lives – they are not full-time music professionals, though Winterfylleth are beginning to earn fees from the lucrative metal festival circuit. The musicians share this way of life, this leisure activity, this leisure community of imaginary communities, with their fans – so they are limited in the ways in which they can transcend the symbolic boundaries and invented traditions of their historicized imaginations.

This is still the view shared by Deeks (2017) for the wider folk/black/Viking metal scene and not just the bands from the north of England, though as I will show later in this book, I have grown to change my opinion on whether the bands are – and the scene is – politically racist. For Von Helden (2017), the crucial element of Viking metal is its anti-Christian nature. The struggle against Christianity in northern Europe is for her associated with the changing socio-economic conditions of northern Europe (see also Mustamo, 2019). That is, traditional families, agricultural villages and small towns that had the church at the centre of their lives have been marginalised in the rush to the cities in the late twentieth century. As the first generation of Scandinavians grew up and embraced secularism as an identity that rejected the church, it was a logical step for some of these secularists to search for meaning in the paganism and heathenism that had been replaced by Christianity (Asprem, 2008). While I agree with Von Helden about this turn to paganism, I think the consequences are more problematic.

There has been a strong growth of radical and third-wave feminist research on heavy metal, so much that only a sample can be discussed here. Vasan (2011) shows how women in death metal are offered two ways of being women in the scene: they can be band-followers dressed in heteronormative fashions, or they can be in the mosh-pit dressed in the same clothes as the men: band shirts and jeans. Riches (2015, 2016) provides a sophisticated moshography of gender performativity in the mosh-pits of Leeds. For some of her female respondents in her PhD (Riches, 2016), getting into the pit is something they do to prove to the men that they are proper metalheads. For some of her male respondents, women in the pit are treated as women, and they are uncomfortable with them being the victims of flaying hands and feet. Hill (2016) shows how women construct a positive identity for themselves through listening to emo and metal, claiming the scene