Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations

MINNA BROMBERG, Northwestern University
GARY ALAN FINE, Northwestern University

Abstract

Reputational change can occur both posthumously and within a person's lifetime. Championed by reputational entrepreneurs, reputations emerge from competitive fields of interpretive possibilities. The purification of Pete Seeger's image, from vilified Communist to national hero, lets us study both reputational change and the relationship between art and politics. An objectivist model suggests that reputations simply reflect truth. An ideological model claims that Seeger's redemption is shaped by a biased media. Neither sufficiently explains the competitive nature of reputational politics. Our constructionist model takes into account both the role of reputational entrepreneurs and the structural constraints they face. We chart Seeger's reputation through four historical periods: recognition among his peers on the Left (1940s), ruin in the McCarthy period (1950–62), renown among sympathetic subcultures (1960s), and institutionalization as a cultural icon. While it has clear advantages, institutionalization can also have a dampening effect on an artist's oppositional potency.

What makes commies so cuddly? What is it about them that gives so many people the warm-and-fuzzies? I've never felt the rosy glow that Bolsheviks seem to evoke in others. . . . There must be something lovable about those who promote the most evil doctrine since slavery, since smart people are forever fawning over and snuggling up to them. I just can't imagine what it is. Wherever communists rule, after all, the results are poverty, misery, refugees, and death. Like Nazis, you might say. Only — nobody celebrates Nazis anymore. Why are commies different? (Jacoby 1995:15)

In November 1994 Arlo Guthrie, son of the late folk singer Woody Guthrie, stood on the stage of the Kennedy Center in Washington and looked out at a house packed with politicians and other luminaries. Pete Seeger had been named a Kennedy

* The authors would like to thank Wendy Griswold for her comments on an earlier version of this article. Direct correspondence to Minna Bromberg, Northwestern University, 1810 Chicago Ave., Evanston IL 60208. E-mail: minna@minnabromberg.com or g-fine@northwestern.edu.
Center Honoree. Guthrie, a presenter, recalled that when there was a move afoot to make his father’s song, “This Land Is Your Land,” the national anthem (McCarthy 1989), Seeger had vehemently opposed the idea. Guthrie remembered Seeger arguing that the worst thing you could do to a song was to make it official. Then Guthrie looked out into the audience and said, “I wonder what we’re going to do now that you’re official” (Pareles 1994:C11).

Pete Seeger’s installation as an “official” cultural icon raises questions about the dynamic qualities of reputations, reminding us that reputations can change dramatically, that states institutionalize reputations (even of those who do not embrace the state), and that the institutionalization of a reputation can affect how an individual is perceived. The case of Pete Seeger provides a powerful instance of the institutional establishment of a reputation in the face of potential objections. This case helps us understand reputational politics in general, while simultaneously providing a case study of the linkages between radical politics and the arts in the latter half of the twentieth century. Specifically, Pete Seeger’s institutional enshrinement is striking when contrasted with his vilification as a political subversive during the McCarthy era, most notably in his 1955 appearance as an “unfriendly witness” before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and subsequent conviction for contempt. How could a figure who at one stage of his career was seen by many as traitorous, and by all as controversial, come to be seen as so beloved that the state would invest its considerable symbolic resources in honoring him? In turn, the case of Pete Seeger, alive and active during his reputation’s purification, raises questions about the effects of the new reputation on how Seeger was treated.

Though every case has its own historical and political peculiarities, the case of Pete Seeger is not unique, other members of the “hard Left,” such as Paul Robeson, Carl Sandburg, Aaron Copland, Woody Guthrie, Arthur Miller, and Studs Terkel have similarly entered into the pantheon of American cultural heroes. That such figures, “beloved Stalinists,” are now embraced, largely without active controversy, allows us to examine how reputations can be purified.1

Broadly speaking, three contrasting models — objectivist, ideological, and constructivist — present alternative views for understanding how reputations are established (Fine 1996). An objectivist (or “realist”) model suggests that Pete Seeger was as admirable as he is perceived today. He was a commendable human being. Put more starkly, Seeger’s “communist” politics really represent “American” values. As Bob Dylan stated in a letter to Broadside magazine, Seeger is “truly a saint” (Filene 2000:211), and another observer speaks of Seeger’s “moral ebullience” (Cox 1998:22). In other words, reputations can reflect reality.

An ideological (or “bias”) model, in contrast, posits that those who construct reputations — media and cultural elites — are fundamentally biased (Weisberg 1999:156). There is no truth, only the interests of a single, powerful group of reputation makers. In this interpretation, Seeger was made a cultural icon because
his politics agreed with those who control collective memory. The facts of his life were irrelevant; what mattered were his supporters’ desires. From this perspective, his enshrinement is a result of what Ronald Radosh (2000:36) calls “a virtual academic industry dedicated to the rehabilitation of the Communist Party of the United States.” Had Seeger been aligned with the Right, such a societal embrace would be unthinkable.

There is some truth in each of these two views. Pete Seeger, surely no angel, fought for some causes that are widely admired today, even by conservatives. He demonstrated for civil rights and for environmental clean-up. Yet this admiration requires forgetting the more controversial side of Seeger’s reputation: his support for the foreign policy of the Stalinist Soviet Union into, at least, the 1950s, including supporting the Nazi-Soviet pact and his lack of condemnation of the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. This veneration also requires embracing Seeger’s homey self-presentation and ignoring any troubling aspects of his character. In turn, we should take into account that cultural elites in America do tend to be more sympathetic to the Left than to the Right. Artists and critics, including journalists and social scientists, tend to be more liberal than most Americans. In addition, Seeger received his honor from a Democratic administration.

Yet to suggest that the strong version of either view explains Seeger’s honors is not fully persuasive. Seeger is loved and admired by those who are otherwise conservative, and politicians and journalists on the Right are powerful enough that they could have made Seeger’s honor controversial. Given a society of multiple audiences, either an objective or an ideological argument is too simple.

We argue instead for a constructionist approach. Collective memory is constructed and maintained by “reputational entrepreneurs” in a competitive setting, drawing upon historical evidence. In whose interest is it to put forth a claim about a reputation, and how do potential opponents of that claim decide to respond? Seeger’s reputational shift from political threat to cultural icon underlines both the malleability of reputations in competitive discursive arenas, as well as limits on this malleability: reputations are constructed, but the construction is limited by a set of recognized facts.

Like other domains of collective memory, reputations are constructed in such a way as to make the past relevant to the present (Halbwachs 1992; Schudson 1992; B. Schwartz 1991). Rather than arising sui generis from the facts of an individual’s life, reputations connect historical events to shared values. Like any cultural object, reputations can be studied to determine how they are produced and received by multiple audiences against the backdrop of changing social contexts (Griswold 1994).

This malleability can be likened to a process of natural selection (Taylor 1996). Like social problems (Gusfield 1981; Hilgartner & Bosk 1988; Loseke 1999; Schneider 1985), reputations evolve out of a multiplicity of possibilities. This
evolution is not random. Rather, reputations are championed by entrepreneurs (Fine 1996) who operate within “mnemonic communities” (Zerubavel 1996, 1997).

Implicit in Zerubavel’s analysis is that memories (and, hence, reputations) can thrive in some communities — or subcultures — and not in others. Further, shared memories can have distinctive meanings that depend on the group that refers to them. Lang and Lang (1988) distinguish between recognition and renown. Recognition represents how well a person is known within his or her own “social world” (Barker-Nunn & Fine 1998; Becker 1982). In contrast, renown is measured by how well a person is known outside that specific world. Whereas recognition is defined by a particular community, renown depends on awareness by a multiplicity of communities.

Not only do different mnemonic communities remember different people, they also remember the same person in distinct ways. Divergent reputations can exist simultaneously within different mnemonic communities. Groups compete to control collective memory, and this is subject to dynamic change over time (Olick & Robbins 1998; Wagner-Pacifici 1996; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz 1991).

Who gains the upper hand in this competition depends on two factors. First, there is a generational factor; events are recalled in light of generational imprinting. Second, within generations, the cultural capital of reputational entrepreneurs is vital.

Schuman and Scott (1989) provide empirical backing to Mannheim’s theory of the “ideological distinctiveness” of generations (359). They argue that people give increased importance to events that happened during their late adolescence and early adulthood (Swidler & Arditi 1994:309). However, events that are important to a given generation can nonetheless be significant in multiple ways. A single meaning need not occur, although over time consensus tends to develop (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz 1991). In the case of a contested reputation, the response of those at the prime age for generational imprinting will be particularly crucial, especially if the person’s most active supporters are influential in crafting historical memory.

When a reputation is controversial, “society segments or splits the image of the actor or event, thereby permitting the simultaneous preservation of positive and negative characteristics” (Ducharme & Fine 1995:1311). A split image in the case of artists is one constructed between art and politics. To what extent should an artist be defined by his or her politics?

In the case of “Nazi artists,” politics can lead to a spoiled reputation (Lang & Lang 1996). Conversely, artists can benefit from having their work linked to a popular political idea. Artists “whose art can be made to serve a broader cause, such as defining an emerging identity or dramatizing new aspirations, are more likely to be granted a prominent place in the collective memory” (Lang & Lang 1988:100). For example, some female artists have been rescued from relative obscurity through the efforts of feminists.
When a group victimizes or rejects an artist on political grounds, this can sometimes heighten the victim’s renown, if the rejecting group is no longer warmly held in collective memory. Lang and Lang (1996) use the example of artists suppressed by the Nazis being honored after the fall of the Third Reich. Having one’s works destroyed and deemed “degenerate” can become a badge of honor. This can happen not only to artists, but to martyred political figures as well. John Brown’s execution by the slave state of Virginia helped to legitimate his political stance (Fine 1999).

Having a positive reputation affects how a person is seen; some of an individual’s actions become inappropriate, given his or her reputation, and even when “inappropriate” actions are taken, they may not be “seen” by the person’s audiences. Such behaviors do not fit, and so may be ignored. There is a cost for possessing a strong reputation. Having one is particularly problematic when the reputation has been built on an oppositional stance. For example, being commemorated as “official” can limit one’s radical role. Sandage (1993) uses Martin Luther King Jr.’s reputation to illustrate some of the dangers of “becoming official.” Being adopted — posthumously in the case of King — as a “consensus hero” lessens a figure’s efficacy as a symbol of opposition: “The icon that belongs to all can be the weapon of no faction in particular” (166). King’s radicalism, like Seeger’s, has been largely erased. In Seeger’s case, even though he is still “alive and kicking,” he is often perceived as a consensus hero.

Of course, when formerly oppositional figures are reconstructed as consensus heroes, their reputations are not created de novo. Structural conditions constrain how the past can be made relevant in the present. Rather than shedding the deviant label altogether, reputational entrepreneurs reshape the deviant label — and the facts behind it — as a badge of honor. This echoes B. Schwartz’s (1991) synthesis of Halbwachs’s view of memory as “constructed” with the more Durkheimian idea that the past outlives itself.

We argue that Pete Seeger’s reputation is constructed through a competitive process involving a multiplicity of reputational entrepreneurs. Out of a field of possible reputations, the one that Seeger now bears is that of cultural icon. He has outlived his enemies and his controversial causes; potential critics have chosen to ignore him; and elite members of the younger generation have embraced him. Rather than remaining a stain on his record or being forgotten altogether, the controversy surrounding him has been transformed into a badge of honor, a mark of courage for those who care about his reputation. Those who might legitimately object are no longer invested in debating that controversial past. Becoming official both protects his reputation from attacks and constrains those who wish to see him as an oppositional figure. To understand this process, we focus on the creation of Seeger’s reputation in four different periods of reputation building: recognition, ruin, renown, and institutionalization.
Pete

Pete Seeger was born in 1919 to musicologist Charles Seeger and violinist Constance Seeger. Both sides of his family reflected a legacy of Yankee intellectual pacifism. When his political views forced Charles to leave his faculty position at Berkeley, the family moved back East. Educated in elite boarding schools from the age of four, Pete spent his summers at his paternal grandparents’ wooded estate in Patterson, New York. As a young adult, Seeger dropped out of Harvard at nineteen; he moved to New York City, where he aspired to a career in journalism. Soon he discovered that his forte was playing the banjo. After he was introduced to Woody Guthrie in 1940, the two traveled the country playing for gas money. By December of that year, they returned to New York where, along with Lee Hays and Millard Lampell, they founded the Almanac Singers, a loosely organized musical group with close ties to left-wing social movements. During this time Seeger officially joined the Communist Party of the U.S. (CPUSA). It was only gradually that Seeger disengaged from the party, long after many had recognized the dangers of Stalinism. Even during the Hitler-Stalin pact, Seeger continued to support the party line vocally, singing antiwar songs critical of President Franklin D. Roosevelt until the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Seeger later commented to one journalist, “With the failures of the Soviet government, I started drifting away in the 1950s, and when the tanks rolled into Prague in 1968 that was pretty much it” (Grow 1994:3B; see also Dunaway 1981:148; Seeger 1997:238).

Shortly thereafter Seeger was drafted. Upon returning from the service, he became a founding member of the musical group, the Weavers. A much more polished group than the Almanac Singers, the Weavers seemed poised to combine leftist politics with popular success. However, in 1950, at the height of their success, with “Goodnight Irene” topping the charts, the group came under investigation by the FBI and the McCarran committee. In 1952, Harvey Matusow3 testified before HUAC that three of the four Weavers were Communists. At that point the group began to be blacklisted, and by 1953, it had disbanded. Seeger was called to testify before HUAC in 1955 during hearings on alleged Communist infiltration of the New York entertainment industry (Gould 1955:1). He refused to answer the committee’s questions, “rejecting the whole line of inquiry as ‘improper’ and ‘immoral’” (Bracker 1955:6). He claimed that his refusal to testify was protected by the First Amendment, rather than relying on the Fifth Amendment’s guarantee of protection from self-incrimination, which would have protected him from prosecution but would also have suggested that he had something to hide. Seeger’s tactic had previously led to prison sentences for the Hollywood Ten, a group of Communist screenwriters (Ceplair & Englund 1983). The anti-Communist concerns of potential sponsors and promoters ensured that most mainstream avenues for professional success were effectively blocked.
Seeger was cited on ten counts of contempt of Congress in 1956, but the legal process dragged on until 1961, when he was finally convicted and sentenced to a year and a day in prison. However, in 1962, with Seeger having served just a few hours of his sentence, the U.S. Court of Appeals overturned his conviction because of problems with the language of the indictment.

Unable to make a living through conventional pop music, Seeger supported his family by playing at summer camps and college campuses, smaller audiences than he was used to (Norman 1996:4E). An active participant in the civil rights movement, he introduced Martin Luther King Jr. to his adaptation of the spiritual “We Shall Overcome.” A vocal opponent of the Vietnam War, he also sang at antiwar demonstrations. Inspired by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and the growing environmental movement of the late 1960s, he began working on efforts to clean up the Hudson River, traveling up and down the river on the 106-foot sloop *Clearwater*. Although Seeger, now past eighty, has recently slowed his performing schedule, he remains active in social causes.

**Recognition, Ruin, Renown, and Institutionalization**

How can we explain Seeger’s evolving reputation, from subversive to saint? By examining four distinct time periods, we analyze how Seeger’s reputation has shifted in light of changing communities of concern. We begin with the establishment of subcultural recognition of Seeger among leftist circles in the 1940s. Second, we examine the establishment of the Weavers in late 1949 and their subsequent pop-music prominence, through which Seeger became a known public figure. This fame made him vulnerable to reputational ruin in the McCarthy period and the subsequent anti-Communist years (1950–62). During the 1950s Seeger developed a subversive reputation, coupled with a positive strengthening of his subcultural reputation. Third, we explore his renown, beginning with the folk revival and the emerging social movements of the 1960s. Expanding his positive reputation required reaching new sympathetic communities. The cultural and political successes of the movements he participated in and the social position of members of these movements strengthened Seeger’s reputation. With the dissipation of the Left as a significant political force in the U.S., attacks on Seeger increasingly came from culturally marginal groups, concerned about demonizing a nearly moribund and increasingly irrelevant political movement. Finally, we discuss Seeger’s institutionalization as a cultural icon culminating in his 1994 Kennedy Center Honor. We ask what happened to those potentially hostile reputational entrepreneurs who could have provided opposition to his honor. Through this event Seeger became, in effect, canonized, and, given his attachment to more socially legitimate movements, increasingly seen as mainstream, despite his own pronouncements.
RECOGNITION

The Almanac Singers at first played widely before communist-affiliated groups and to supportive workers. Their pacifism during the Hitler-Stalin pact led to a critical article in the June 1941 issue of the Atlantic Monthly by a Harvard professor, Carl Frederick, provocatively titled “Poison in Our System” (as quoted in Dunaway 1981:86), which accused the group of subversion. They even attracted the attention of the FBI. The group soon disbanded, and public attention turned elsewhere. Seeger was not a sufficiently known presence to achieve a negative reputation, although information on his activities remained in the FBI files.

By singing at political rallies and labor union gatherings during the 1940s (both before and after his military service), Seeger became increasingly well-known among Communist and leftist groups. He was an active, effective, and known member of an integrated, subcultural community, campaigning for “progressive” Henry Wallace and organizing the leftist People’s Songs. His social movement activity was directly linked to the Communist Party and had a strong revolutionary (although nonviolent) component.

During the 1940s, Seeger slowly gained recognition among his political peers, but his activities were largely unknown to the wider public. Indeed, in the most dramatic anti-Communist protest of the decade, Seeger was a mere bystander. This event was the attack on the Communist-organized Paul Robeson concert held at Peekskill, New York, in September 1949. Seeger participated in the concert, but Robeson, the Communist-affiliated African American actor and singer, was the target of the protesters’ anger. Seeger’s stature apparently had not become a serious threat to his potential opponents.

RUIN

By 1950, with the emerging fame of the Weavers, Seeger was developing a public reputation as a popular singer. No longer was his fame confined to leftist activists; he and the other members of the Weavers were reaching a broad national public. This public at first barely knew them as people, but it admired their musical ability. Ultimately it was this fame, not anchored in personal identification, that made the group vulnerable to demonization. For purposes of this analysis, it matters little whether those who promulgated the blacklist were justified. What is central is that Seeger’s reputation was susceptible to the attacks of reputational entrepreneurs.

Following the accusations of Seeger’s leftist politics in the 1950 publication Red Channels and subsequently during the time of his testimony before HUAC, those who were opposed to Seeger’s political affiliations were effective in shaping his reputation because his potential defenders were also being attacked. By 1953 the Weavers’ record label, Decca, had dropped them (Alarik 1999:D13).
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Seeger himself seemed ambivalent about whether he wished to protect his reputation with the wider public at the cost of damaging it within his subgroup. Was public renown more important than subcultural recognition? For instance, when the Weavers were first being investigated, the group’s manager, Pete Kameron, urged Seeger to focus on establishing a positive reputation by avoiding singing at leftist events: “A few years from now, you’ll be in a position to do anything you want. Right now we’ve got a real problem to get you cleared and give you a good reputation. A brand new one. Your old reputation has got to go” (Dunaway 1981:149). Seeger ultimately rejected this warning, and his decision led to being called to testify before HUAC in 1955.

A central issue involved in the interpretation of activist musicians is whether the reputational audience should interpret their activities as primarily musical or political. If political, is it reasonable to look for “indirect” messages in the lyrics, including in the core values or metaphors of the songs? The question then became, “Was what Seeger did with an audience musical or political?” (Dunaway 1981:192). Political artists want it both ways: art is a weapon, but it is a weapon that artists should be allowed to carry and to suffer no penalty for doing so. Can singers be both harmless and effective? HUAC and its supporters’ answer to this question was “No.”

A 1958 court battle over a concert in Detroit exemplifies how the intertwined nature of Seeger’s art and politics affected his career. When the Detroit Labor Forum tried to host Seeger in concert at the Institute of Arts auditorium, the Detroit Arts Commission sought to stop the performance on the grounds that the auditorium “may not be rented for programs of a political or controversial nature” (New York Times 12 July 1958:19). The Labor Forum countered, somewhat disingenuously, that Seeger was being presented as a singer and not as a political figure. After a legal battle, a U.S. Circuit Court judge eventually ruled that “Seeger would be singing; ergo, he was a singer and the concert could proceed” (Dunaway 1981:192). Such a position was problematic: can a singer never be a political figure? Is music never political speech?

Yet, the standard means of defense was precisely this: the claim that it was “only music.” Consider the following endorsement from Carl Sandburg, himself a man of the Left: “I would put Pete Seeger in the first rank of American folk singers. I think he ought to be a free man, roving the American landscape, singing for the audiences who love him — Republican, Democrat, and independents” (New York Times 15 March 1961:22).

Communists and fellow travelers defended themselves primarily by framing HUAC’s accusations as false or misleading, often attacking the process rather than embracing the charges as true and self-enhancing. Put another way, they did not “proclaim their right to be revolutionaries” (Lipset & Marks 2000). Thus, “the issue was frequently whether a person targeted by McCarthy was in fact a Communist, not whether he or she had a right to be one” (259). Proving the claim was equivalent
to demolishing one’s public renown. This made the Left play according to the anti-Communists’ rules.

Ultimately the tactics of Seeger and his supporters proved no match for the aftereffects of his appearance before HUAC and the subsequent trial. There were enough Americans for whom these events mattered. Reputational ruin caused Seeger to be banned from many mainstream venues either because there were outspoken anti-Communists to oppose him or because venues wished to avoid potential controversy. Seeger did not appear on prime-time network television until 1967. In the competitive field of reputational politics, anti-Communists triumphed — for a while. Seeger’s reputation had become disjointed: highly positive with a small, intense community, and generally negative with a larger but more diffuse public.

Seeger’s ability to make a living as a musician during this period was due in part to his not being famous enough to set off alarms. Seeger later reflected, “If I’d been better known it would have been different. There wasn’t an auditorium in the country that would let Paul Robeson sing” (Shipp 1980). At the same time, Seeger had a very positive reputation among a sufficiently large subpopulation to support him, even though he was largely rejected (or forgotten) by those mainstream audiences that had catapulted “Goodnight, Irene” to number 1 on the pop charts. Seeger himself notes, “I didn’t pay as high a price as most people think. . . . My kids never went hungry. I just sang for smaller audiences and perhaps that was a good thing. I sang for a sector of the population that didn’t think much of the House Un-American Activities Committee” (Norman 1996:4E). Indeed, from singing to his own community, Seeger was earning a six-figure income by 1960 (Filene 2000:202).

RENOWN

The reputational problem to consider is how Seeger’s positive reputation expanded while his negative reputation contracted. The explanation involves generational change coupled with an altered, and diminished, role for opponents of domestic Communism. By winning politically, the anti-Communists faced cultural defeat. By making domestic Communists marginal and irrelevant, they also made their own concerns marginal and irrelevant.

From the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, Americans witnessed a “folk revival” (Cantwell 1996). It was during this period that Seeger’s reputation witnessed a generational shift; a new set of reputational players entered the scene, individuals who had been too young to be part of the battles over Communist subversion in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The backlash that followed Seeger’s HUAC testimony caused him in some ways to be forgotten professionally. Ironically, this process of forgetting allowed a younger generation, little interested in the old Left and little concerned about its threat, to
define Seeger in a new way. Seeger was forced underground; he reorganized his career by singing at colleges and reaching a younger generation (Cantwell 1996:271-272) that was ready to adopt figures who would challenge the status quo.

The folk revival involved a selective forgetting of the past. The music of the earlier period could speak to the younger generation in new ways specifically because they were unfamiliar with its more politicized origins. Lieberman (1989) attributes the survival of songs from the earlier People's Songs movement, in which Seeger was a central figure, to the ability of these cultural forms from the heyday of American Communism to outlive the old Left organizations themselves. Cantwell (1996) suggests:

What is most interesting about the revival is not its political affiliations, but the absence of them. . . . Nothing was more tiresome, once the revival was in full swing, than to endure the contributions of some antediluvian communist songster with a bag full of “banker and bosses” union songs, stirring as they must have been in their time. (22)

The meaning of Seeger’s music to folk revivalists is unclear, but certainly it did not refer to sectarian leftist politics. However, Seeger’s impact was important enough to warrant leftists labeling him the “Karl Marx of the Teenagers” (Dunaway 1981:172).

The termination of Seeger’s seventeen-year absence from prime-time television exemplifies this process. The early 1960s’ television show “Hootenanny,” grounded in the folk revival, which arguably owed much of its popularity to Seeger, decided against having him as a guest when he refused to sign a loyalty oath. Seeger finally did appear on prime-time television in September of 1967. The Smothers Brothers broke the network ban and invited him to appear on their show, only to have CBS censor his song, “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy,” because its last verse was seen, and no doubt intended, as a direct attack on President Johnson. While the song starts by describing the plight of a platoon in World War II, the last verse made its reference to Vietnam clear: “Now every time I read the papers/That old feelin’ comes on/We’re waist deep in the Big Muddy and the big fool said to push on.” The event became a cause célèbre, producing a firestorm of protest over the network’s “censorship.” In February of the following year Seeger was invited back on the show and allowed to sing the entire song. Only one station, in Detroit, cut the last verse.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Seeger’s “lovable underdog” image continued to gain ground. The opposition to his political views remained sporadic as his reputation grew. While occasional local protesters recalled Seeger’s Cold War notoriety, for most the old Left seemed to be merely a curious historical relic.

Seeger’s growing renown is evident as his description in the popular press changes from “folk singer” to “Pete Seeger” without the need for an accompanying description. Eventually, his fame became such that his name could be invoked as a modifier to describe other people. A book reviewer described ecologist Garrett
Hardin as “the Pete Seeger of ecology” in reference to his ability to involve his “audience” in understanding human ecology (Swain 1985:14).

Local controversy continued to spring up occasionally. For example, in 1975 the town fathers of Newburgh, New York were divided about whether to allow Seeger to participate in efforts to save the 276-year-old Balmville Tree. Seeger was scheduled to perform a benefit concert to raise funds and awareness of the tree’s plight, but “some members of the town board . . . charged Mr. Seeger with favoring left-wing causes.” The local school superintendent raised his concerns to the town supervisor: “He may be known for advocating a cleaner Hudson River . . . but he is also a veteran supporter of causes hardly exemplary for young people in our community” (New York Times 14 June 1971:27).

During this period, with the virtual disappearance of the Communist Party as a major force within the U.S., Seeger himself became more open about his previous CPUSA affiliations, seeing Communist Party membership as no longer fundamentally discrediting and perhaps as part of a nostalgic past. As one Washington Post reporter wrote, “Nowadays, of course, he’s considerably more comfortable saying: ‘I’m a communist,’ though it is hard to tell whether it’s wit or wariness that keeps him from answering [whether] it’s with a big C or a little one. ‘Capitalize all the letters,’ he says” (Allen 1980).

Despite local skirmishes over Seeger’s reputation and its uses, nostalgia is by far the most striking feature of this period (B. Schwartz 1998:65). This backward-looking attitude had the effect of turning Seeger into a living legend, his reputation taking on a “frozen in amber” quality. Interestingly, the time in which he was frozen is the 1960s, not in either of the prior two decades in which he was active as a musician and an activist. Sometimes this nostalgia is framed humorously, as in, “Dust off your love beads, all you peaceniks — there’s a Pete Seeger concert Sunday night” (Washington Post 6 Jan. 1978, “Weekend”:5), making clear that the focus of the nostalgia is the audience, not the musician. For example, a different article announcing the same concert reads, “In these self-indulgent Seventies, protest has been relegated to the museums” (Richman 1978:39). The solidification of the 1960s, rather than the 1940s, as Seeger’s decade contributes to the elimination of the public memory of Seeger as “too controversial.”

INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The Washington Post described the fall of 1994 as “a season of honors for Pete Seeger” (Trescott 1994). Just weeks after his selection for the Kennedy Center Honors, Seeger was awarded the National Medal of Arts, the highest official accolade for an artist in the U.S. This confluence was noteworthy to the Washington Post, which reported that it “suggests that the government today doesn’t share the distaste for his leftist politics that was felt in Washington 40 years ago. Or maybe it’s just that
a generation weaned on his folk anthems is finally in charge” (Trescott 1994:D2). But what happened to Seeger’s natural opponents?

The construction and use of Seeger’s reputation in this period is taken up by a number of reputational entrepreneurs, including President Clinton, members of Seeger’s artistic community, and the right-wing press. Though honored by the president and other official governmental figures, the Kennedy Center Honorees are nominated by performing artists. Each year the Kennedy Center honors five artists for their lifetime contributions to the performing arts. The selection process begins in the spring when the office of George Stevens, the Honors creator and producer, solicits nominations from an Artists’ Committee of approximately 200 performing artists. Members of the public can also make suggestions, which sometimes take the form of organized letter-writing campaigns. The center’s board of trustees then examines the information and comes to a decision on the year’s honorees.

Dottie McCarthy, who works for George Stevens, does not recall any mention of Seeger’s politics as part of the board’s discussion nor does she remember getting any feedback from the public, either positive or negative, in regard to his politics (D. McCarthy, pers. comm., 29 Aug. 2000). She did mention with some dismay the Washington Post headline that described Seeger as “America’s Best-Loved Commie” (Fisher 1994), describing it as “a shame” for him to be invited to be honored and then be greeted with this headline by the local newspaper.

The Kennedy Center’s own publicity on Seeger cleanses his controversial past (Kennedy Center Honors Website 2001). After identifying Seeger as “arguably the most influential folk artist in the United States,” it goes on to claim that his songs “have served as anthems for an entire generation of Americans.” The “generation” being referred to is the 1960s generation, seen as Seeger’s main point of influence, one that erases the politics of the generation in which Seeger was nurtured. The events of the past are transformed in light of a generational history. The Kennedy Center describes Seeger’s pre–World War II Almanac Singers–era compositions as “prounion and antifascist.” It goes on to describe the Weavers as following the tradition of the Almanac Singers by “performing at picket lines and union meetings.” It also describes them as having “sparked the urban folk song revival of the 1950s and served as the model for the protest songwriters of the following decade.” On the Weavers disbanding, the publicity blames McCarthyism and not the politics of the Weavers: “At the height of its popularity, the group was attacked as subversive, and Seeger refused to answer questions about Communist affiliations. The McCarthy-era blacklist kept the Weavers out of concert halls and off television, and the group was forced to disband.” The Kennedy Center ends their description by citing Carl Sandburg’s appellation, “America’s tuning fork,” and calling Seeger “the living embodiment of America’s traditions in folk music.”

One could argue that Seeger’s iconic status is simply a function of outlasting his enemies. As early as 1963, fellow Weaver Lee Hays advocated this tactic: “As far
as blacklists are concerned . . . all you have to do is hang around and outlive 'em” (“Togetherness” 1963:95). Additionally, a long life has allowed Seeger to play a role in shaping his own reputation. For example, in Where Have All the Flowers Gone?: A Musical Autobiography, he writes, “Today I'll apologize for a number of things, such as thinking that Stalin was simply a ‘hard driver’ and not a supremely cruel misleader” (Seeger 1997:22). However, it is doubtful that this apology has been particularly widely heard or, after over forty years, deeply felt.

One could also argue, as did the New York Times (Pareles 1994), that in the case of the Kennedy Center honors, “For Once, Art Bests Politics.” As Seeger phrased it, “They decided to give the award to me for my music and try to ignore my politics” (Pareles 1994:C11). The argument is that Seeger’s art is recognized as “excellent” and that this recognition overrides concerns about his political affiliations, past and present.

However, neither of these arguments is fully persuasive. Certainly being alive to present one’s own case is helpful (Lang & Lang 1990). However, some reputations are so sticky that even longevity does not change perceptions about them. Likewise, the ability of art to best politics depends on the politics in question. Elia Kazan makes an interesting case for comparison. Kazan was a Kennedy Center Honoree in 1983. The center’s biographical information makes no mention whatsoever of Kazan’s 1952 testimony before HUAC, in which he “named names.” More recently, Kazan was snubbed by many members of the audience at the 1999 Oscars in which he was given an honorary Oscar for lifetime achievement. Many in attendance refused to stand or applaud. We argue that neither a generational explanation, nor one that posits that art has bested politics, is sufficient. Rather, we argue that Seeger’s reputation is created and used by multiple audiences.

The American public potentially contains a multiplicity of reputational communities. The Washington Post article, “America’s Best-loved Commie,” which discusses Seeger’s music, his politics, and the relationship between the two, elicited some of these contrasting views. One letter to the editor states that using the term commie denigrates Seeger’s “lifetime of musical achievements” (“Two Sides” 1994:G2). The writer is offended and asserts that whoever chose the headline “must have been motivated by a malevolent purpose.” On the opposing side, a second writer expresses outrage that Seeger’s politics were not taken into consideration in deciding whether or not he deserved a Kennedy Center Honor in light of Seeger’s “affair with totalitarianism.” In particular, the author cites Seeger’s support of Ho Chi Minh. Significantly, this letter writer feels the need to defend himself against accusations that he is a McCarthyite, insisting that it is “possible to be a liberal and still be suspicious of a man who had so consistently over so many years sided with some of the worst tyrants in human history.” In this view, Seeger’s politics warrant not only mention but censure, and no amount of artistic worthiness or the passage of time should override this concern.
Seeger's supporters define McCarthyites as paranoid witch-hunters now (and often even then) fighting a nonexistent enemy. The disappearance of Communism as a global threat makes continuing anti-Communist sentiment seem outdated. Anti-Communists could make the argument that their efforts shortened the Cold War, but McCarthyism has come to be seen mainly as a fruitless "moral panic" (Goode & Ben-Yehudah 1994).

Frequently, Seeger's troubles are discussed as the fault of McCarthyism rather than of Seeger's actual political affiliations or sympathies. The Washington Post's framing is typical: "In the 1950's, when Seeger and his group, the Weavers, were shooting song after song onto the charts and performing protest songs at union meetings and nightclubs, the group was accused of being subversive. Ultimately, the group was blacklisted" (Trescott 1994:D2).

In this view, the group is merely producing music, whereas others are making political accusations. One implication is that Seeger's Kennedy Center Honor and National Medal of the Arts are "means of atonement" for his former mistreatment. In this light, President Clinton labeled Seeger as "an inconvenient artist who dared to sing things as he saw them." He described Seeger's television ban for refusing to sign a loyalty oath as "a badge of honor" (Pareles 1994:C11).

The right-wing press used Clinton's description of Seeger as an opportunity to criticize the president. The National Review remarked:

President Clinton's post-election "turn to the center" evidently came too late to reverse the invitation to fellow-traveling folk singer Pete Seeger to be a Kennedy Center honoree. The President heaped praise on Seeger as "an inconvenient artist who dared to sing things as he saw them." Clinton did not ask Seeger to sing "The Ballad of John Doe," the anti-war ditty he wrote during the Hitler-Stalin pact (no doubt, to spare him any inconvenience). ("President Clinton's" 1994:13)

Even the National Review avoids tarring Seeger as a Stalinist, describing him mildly as a "fellow-traveling folk singer," avoiding any taint of McCarthyism.

Yet Clinton's "inconvenient artist" comment did not contradict his "post-election turn to the center," but rather helped him make this turn. Clinton's honoring of Seeger came just in time to give the Left some form of cultural reassurance in a time of structural shift to the right. Clinton's comments on the occasion of Seeger's Kennedy Center Honor lean on the oppositional aspect of Seeger's reputation and serve as a cultural "fake to the left." Here, Clinton uses one aspect of Seeger's reputation to shore up his own appearances with a certain constituency.

The Constraints of Institutionalization

Becoming institutionalized also means that one's reputation can become constraining. One disadvantage of popularity is a loss of privacy: "Pete Seeger said he's starting to miss the 'good old days' when he was blacklisted for alleged
Communist sympathies in the early 1950's, 'because then the phone didn’t ring every five minutes and I didn’t get a bushel of mail every day’” (Holston 1994).

Seeger asserts that his radical reputation once protected him from the constant calls of journalists and the “thousands, not hundreds, thousands of pieces of paper” that now clutter his desk (P. Seeger, pers. comm., 18 July 2000). His controversial reputation, in effect, had a gatekeeping function.

The question of whether Seeger has “sold out” is answered by his actions in the wake of his Kennedy Center Honor. Has Seeger's newfound institutional acceptance caused him to compromise his ideals in favor of continued acceptance? This does not seem to be the case, as Seeger demonstrated at an April 2000 appearance at the bicentennial of the Library of Congress. While General Colin Powell sat with other dignitaries on the dais, Seeger decided to sing Country Joe McDonald’s “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag (Vietnam Rag)” (Tao Rodriguez-Seeger, pers. comm., 8 Sept. 2000). The darkly humorous anti-Vietnam War song includes the well-known chorus:

And it’s one, two, three,
What are we fighting for?
Don’t ask me, I don’t give a damn,
Next stop is Vietnam;
And it’s five, six, seven,
Open up the pearly gates,
Well there ain’t no time to wonder why,
Whoopee! we’re all gonna die.

The words of the song provide an even sharper criticism. The last biting verse urges parents to “send your boys to Vietnam” so that they can “be the first one on your block/To have your boy come home in a box.” Lest this be dismissed as a period piece, acceptable because of its lost relevance, the song has been updated to include the words:

And it’s one, two, three,
What are we fighting for?
Don’t ask me, ’cause I don’t know,
Next stop is Kosovo.

Why do establishment elites applaud Seeger for this behavior and allow him to perform songs that many might view as insulting? It seems that there is no need here to sell out in order to maintain an “official” reputation. Rather, the freezing-in-time of nostalgia seems to take care of Seeger’s more problematic expressions. He is not dangerous, because he is not taken seriously. He is not fully heard, free to sing whatever he likes because this saintly old man can hardly be “seriously” proposing rebellion. His reputation traps him.
Living Reputations

Seeger’s reputation has changed through five decades, from his near-public ruin in the 1950s to his 1994 season of honors. This case elucidates the possibilities for purifying sullied reputations. Seeger’s shift from political deviant to cultural icon lends support to the argument that reputations are radically malleable, even when the figure has not changed dramatically. It highlights important features of reputational work: the importance of multiple audiences in constructing reputations, and the power struggle among reputational entrepreneurs over who gets to shape reputations.

The malleability of reputations is particularly evident when comparing Seeger’s redemption to Elia Kazan’s fall from grace. While we understand some of the factors in shaping reputations (e.g., the importance of generational shift and cultural capital), reputations remain in part historically unpredictable. No one reading the descriptions of Kazan and Seeger in the press coverage of the 1950s could have mapped out the divergent paths their reputations would take.5

We wish to underscore the importance of structural constraints on this malleability. Make what one will of Seeger’s politics, he will never be remembered as a conservative. Once his political affiliations are a matter of public knowledge (and public consensus), there are limits on how these affiliations can be discussed. They can be ignored; they can be celebrated; they can be transformed from a mark of Cain to a badge of honor, but they cannot be obliterated (B. Schwartz 1998).

While most studies of reputational change discuss posthumous shifts, we focus on a living reputation. This allows us to see the agency of the actor, limited though it may be, in forging his own reputation and responding to the attempts of other reputational entrepreneurs to do the same. Through interviews with reporters, his own writings, and his own performances, Seeger has had a hand in shaping how others view him, even if in the process his renown and institutionalization prevents others from seeing him as a radical. Audiences do not “hear” Seeger’s radicalism and his continued support for oppositional movements. In addition to winning by losing (gaining an acceptable reputation by being on the losing side of the Cold War), we can also see what can be lost in winning. The primary danger of becoming officially accepted is a loss of oppositional potency, at least among large portions of the population.

Pete Seeger’s case is instructive in demonstrating the power of reputational change, in demonstrating the choices of political actors to withdraw from a political arena, and in demonstrating that a highly positive reputation may serve to constrain its target by making inconsistent actions invisible. Pete Seeger continues to sing out, but only a few hear the message, most preferring the saint to the revolutionary.
Notes

1. In examining collective memory of a particular historical period, we do not find “beloved Nazis”; even Charles Lindbergh, who was in no way a Nazi sympathizer, is still controversial because of his isolationism and, perhaps, his anti-Semitism. However, certain southern figures from the Civil War era, such as Robert E. Lee, have entered our cultural pantheon (Connelly 1977).

2. Unless otherwise noted, this section draws mainly on Dunaway’s (1981) How Can I Keep from Singing, considered the standard biography of Seeger. It should be noted that Seeger was not pleased with the work, noting, “I say it’s spinach and the hell with it. . . . He makes some good points, in between a couple hundred factual errors” (Seeger 1980:38). The facts cited in this article, however, are generally accepted as accurate, and most are also found in Seeger’s own autobiography, Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Musical Autobiography (Seeger 1997).

3. Matusow was later convicted for perjury on other matters, although his claims about the Weavers were largely accurate.

4. This issue also applies to Hollywood screenwriters. A film, ostensibly nonpolitical, can include messages about equality, social justice, and tolerance — all core American values, but also linked to Communist ideology. Indeed, the Communist Party of America demanded that screenwriters support the aims of the party in their work (Ceplair & Englund 1983:234–35; N.L. Schwartz 1982:189–90).

5. Kazan was better known than Seeger at the time of his HUAC testimony; he was described as the “noted director” (Bracker 1955:6). By contrast, Seeger is listed nineteenth out of 22 “impressive” witnesses. He was cited as the “head of a group known as ‘The Weavers’” (Trussell 1955:43). Just below him is Lee Hays, described as “another folk song singer.”

References


