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

[Minna Bromberg](#) ✉, [Gary Alan Fine](#)

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Abstract

Reputational change can occur both posthumously and within a persons 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.

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