

**RESISTANCE AND HEROIZATION IN PROTEST SONGS  
IN THE U.S. IN THE 1950s:  
MAINTAINING COMMUNIST POLITICAL IDENTITY  
DURING THE MCCARTHY ERA**

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**RESISTENCIA Y HEROIZACIÓN EN LA CANCIÓN PROTESTA  
EN LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS EN LA DÉCADA DE 1950:  
MANTENIENDO LA IDENTIDAD POLÍTICA COMUNISTA  
DURANTE EL MACARTISMO**

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**Abstract:** Since the 1940s at the latest, singer-songwriters of U.S.-American workers songs related themselves closely to the CPUSA, the Communist Party of the United States. Not surprisingly, their political identity filtered into their songs. The lyrics reflected the social grievances typical for the living and work conditions of workers and their music became epitomes of socio-political protest. This turned out to be dangerous in the late 1940s and early 1950s when the U.S.-American state fought the global spread of communism by prophylactically destroying the existential fundamentals of those individuals in the U.S. whom they suspected to have communist ties. Being among the victims, singer-songwriters of protest songs dealt with this frightening situation by musical means.

In this article, I will investigate three protest songs released on a single by the communist-leaning label Hootenanny Records in 1952: “Talking Un-American Blues”, “In Contempt”, and “Die Gedanken sind frei”. My musical and historical analysis will reconstruct how protest songs served the musicians and their listeners — both inclined toward communist ideas — as a resource for moral uplifting and the reassurance of their political identity.

**Keywords:** U.S.-American folk song in the 1950s, CPUSA, McCarthy era, moral and political identity, heroism in music and politics, Pete Seeger.

**Resumen:** Desde la década de 1940 como máximo, los cantautores de canciones sobre trabajadores estadounidenses estaban estrechamente relacionados con el Partido Comunista de los Estados Unidos (CPUSA). No es sorprendente que su identidad política se filtrara en sus canciones. Las letras reflejaban las reclamaciones sociales típicas sobre las condiciones de vida y laborales de los trabajadores y sus canciones se convirtieron en epítome de la protesta socio-política. Esto se convirtió en peligroso desde finales de la década de 1940 y principios de la de 1950 cuando el Estado estadounidense luchó contra la extensión global del comunismo a través de la destrucción profiláctica de los principios existenciales de aquellos individuos de quienes se sospechaba que tenían conexiones con el comunismo en los Estados Unidos. Puesto que también se encontraban entre las víctimas, los cantautores afrontaron este aterrador proceso a través de medios musicales.

En este artículo investigo tres canciones protesta aparecidas en un single publicado por la compañía de tendencia comunista Hootenanny Records en 1952: “Talking Un-American Blues”, “In Contempt”, y “Die Gedanken sind frei”. Mi análisis musical e histórico reconstruye cómo la canción protesta sirvió a los músicos y sus oyentes —ambos cercanos a las ideas comunistas— como recurso de inspiración moral y de reconfirmación de su identidad política.

**Palabras clave:** Canción folk en Estados Unidos en los años 50, Partido Comunista de los Estados Unidos, identidad moral y política, heroísmo en música y política, Pete Seeger.

## I. Folk song and its communist ties in the McCarthy era

If there is a musical genre in the U.S. that can be considered the *musica della casa* of individuals with left-wing and especially communist inclinations and ties, it is the folk song and its various subgenres such as topical song, union song, and protest music.<sup>1</sup> When John and Alan Lomax, Lawrence Gellert, and other musicians and scholars interested in American folk music began to collect songs in the early twentieth century, they soon found that many songs had served farmers, workers and/or black people in the nineteenth century to express dissent and protest against social grievances that affected their quality of life.<sup>2</sup> These songs corresponded with and mirrored the political inclinations of the U.S.-American communist party (CPUSA), which likewise addressed and protested diverse social grievances ranging from racial discrimination (of black people and Jews especially), over the repression of women to the intolerable labor conditions of miners and factory workers.<sup>3</sup> As I will demonstrate, the U.S.-American folk songs were particularly valuable for some of their promoters because the songs' lyrics resonated with their personal morals and, thus, (co-)constituted their —moral and political— identity.<sup>4</sup> This is so because what we call identity is an effect of a set of moral, social and political values as well as cultural preferences we hold. Additionally, moral concepts and political positions are closely intertwined with each other. The result of elections, i.e. the elected state system and/or party, is heavily influenced by the moral identities that voters hold and that make them prefer one party to another. After the elections, it is the moral ideas of the elected deputies, ministers and president that determine their politics, first and foremost the design of laws and the negotiations with cooperation partners and adversaries. The important role that folk songs have played for the consolidation and articulation of the folk musicians' moral and political identity became visible in the McCarthy era of the 1950s.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome L. Rodnitzky emphasizes the socio-political character of folk music: «[S]ince the 1930s folk music had a close connection to the radical left in America (especially communists and socialists)» (Rodnitzky 1976, p. xiv).

<sup>2</sup> See additionally: Cohen 2002, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Rodnitzky 1976, p. iv. The CPUSA was not the only leftist association at this time that targeted social grievances. It was complemented by major unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

<sup>4</sup> On this intertwining: Croce 1945 (1946); Lakoff 1996 (2005); Hösl 1997; Zentrum für Ethik und Nachhaltigkeit (ZEN-FHS) 2014.

Given that the folk songs addressed the same leftist sociopolitical critique as the communist party, they appeared suited for advancing the communist and other leftist associations' cause in the U.S.<sup>5</sup> The entanglement between the musical genre and a leftist, especially communist, political orientation, however, also meant that performers and folk singer-songwriters, whose songs addressed racial, gender, and labor problems, could easily be classified as communist or communist-leaning – rightly or wrongly. This assumption turned out to be devastating for the professional and private lives of many musicians and publishers of folk songs in the late 1940s and early 1950s. During those years, the so-called McCarthy era, the U.S.-American state fought the global spread of communism by prophylactically destroying the existential fundamentals of those individuals in the U.S. whom they suspected to have communist ties. State authorities did not sufficiently distinguish between communist and other leftist orientations such as the membership in the workers unions Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the American Federation of Labor AFL.<sup>6</sup>

Beginning in the 1940s, the U.S. congress passed various acts – the so-called Smith Act (or Alien Registration Act) (1940),<sup>7</sup> the Taft-Hartley Act (1947)<sup>8</sup> and the McCarran International Security Act (1950)<sup>9</sup> – that served as the legal basis for the investigation and interrogation of real or suspected communists. The acts responded to the new global political situation that had arisen from the allies' successful defeat of Hitler's Third Reich. While, *before* the collapse of the Nazi regime, followers of the antagonistic political and economical systems towards each other – capitalism vs. communism – had allied with each other in order to overcome Hitler, *after* the collapse and the emergence of the Cold War, their contrasting beliefs and value systems became all the more influential. From the perspective of the U.S.-American government, communism appeared to be an increasing menace in light of the communist ideologies' and state

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<sup>5</sup> Denisoff 1971, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 3.

<sup>7</sup> The 18 U.S. Code § 2385 (1940) – with its proper name – was initiated by the congress member Howard W. Smith.

<sup>8</sup> The Taft-Hartley Act – officially: Labor Management Relations Act, 29 U.S.C. ch. 7 §§ 141-197 – was introduced by the senator Robert A. Taft and the representative Fred A. Hartley and passed despite president Truman's veto.

<sup>9</sup> This act was initiated by the congressmen Patrick Anthony McCarran, later chair of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, and John Stephens Wood, chair of HUAC from 1949 to 1953 (on HUAC: see main text before footnote 12).

system's growing presence in Asia.<sup>10</sup> In the view of the U.S. government, the developments in China and Korea verified that the danger provided by the communist ideology with its core imperative of using revolutionary or violent means to overthrow non-communist governments — non-elected as well as elected— was not to be underestimated.<sup>11</sup> Against this background, the U.S. government considered forbearance untenable regarding communist activities, especially those of the U.S.-American communist party, the CPUSA, to whose ideology many intellectuals and artists had felt inclined since the 1930s economic crisis.

The acts that the government implemented since the 1940s not only targeted public employees and scientists in nuclear research who were particularly vulnerable to betraying state secrets (such as Julius Rosenberg<sup>12</sup>) but also persecuted artists, such as motion picture professionals and folk musicians. Not surprisingly, in the spring of 1952, Irvin Silber, the editor of the folk song magazine *Sing out!*, the unofficial musical organ of the U.S.-American communist party, and Betty Sanders, a folk singer and reviewer for the magazine, were subpoenaed as so-called 'witnesses' by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC).<sup>13</sup> HUAC operated on the basis of Smith Act, which stated that it was "unlawful for any person" to advocate the "propriety of overthrowing or de-

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<sup>10</sup> After the USSR, it 'conquered' China and Korea.

<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, during the Supreme Court trial 'Dennis v. United States', the U.S. attorney John McGohey argued the Marxist-Leninist doctrine as the CPUSA taught it to members and adherents advocated the violent overthrow of governments (McCohey 1949 (2009)).

<sup>12</sup> Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, U.S. citizens, were executed in June 1953 for committing espionage for the Soviet Union. There is consensus among historians and jurists today that sufficient evidence proves that the Rosenbergs committed espionage, but the seriousness of their crime continues to be unclear. In the context of the persecution of communist individuals and organizations in the U.S., the accusation and maximum punishment of the Rosenbergs appeared to be a pretext for the communists, that aimed at weaken the communist movement in the U.S. *The Worker* pointed this out by quoting an open letter of Ethel Rosenberg: "Mrs. Rosenberg charged she and her husband were victimized for their political and social views, their alleged adherence to the Communist Party. 'We are victims of the grossest type of political frameup known in America,' she said" (*The Worker*, Sunday, March 9, 1952, p. 2). This perspective also implied that every other communist could easily be charged and executed as the Rosenbergs were. *The Worker* pointed out the irrationality and mania by which the 'red scare' was marked: "This is the voice of McCarthy saying: 'Those who deny the Communist menace are themselves Communists. Put them on trial!'" (*The Worker*, Sunday, February 22, 1953, p. 7).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Sing out!* 1:3 (March 1952), p. 2.

stroying any government in the United States by force and violence”,<sup>14</sup> that is, to pursue what the communist theory suggested to do: implement the communist system by revolutionary means.

As was the case for any individual subject to a subpoena under one of the anti-communist acts, the ‘state invitation’ to act as a witness in service of the investigatory committees represented a considerable threat for Silber and Sanders. Regardless of whether they would demonstrate willingness or refusal to cooperate with the federal authorities, being the subject of the committees’ investigation stigmatized them with the suspicion of being ‘unpatriotic’, ‘disloyal to the country’, ‘subversive’, in brief ‘un-American’ (according to the then prevailing jargon). Their names were entered into official as well as unofficial written and mental blacklists which many Americans observed and complemented with anticipatory obedience.<sup>15</sup> In the 1950s-McCarthy era, employers refrained from contracting individuals on blacklists. Because their passports were withdrawn (on the basis of McCarran Act) blacklisted individuals could seek neither employment nor engagements outside the U.S. In effect, a subpoena from one of the investigatory committees was a character assassination and professional disaster for the victim. As a consequence, their personal relationships, including friendships and marriages, also often broke down. Some of the —real and alleged— communists became alcoholics, a kind of slow, hidden suicide.<sup>16</sup> Usually, the investigatory committees demanded the witnesses answer questions about their political convictions. Those who refused to answer those questions and did not plead the Fifth Amendment of the constitution<sup>17</sup> received prison sentences on charges of so-called contempt of Congress. (The Fifth Amend-

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<sup>14</sup> Title I (<http://legisworks.org/sal/54/stats/STATUTE-54-Pg670.pdf>, last access: 24.10.2016).

<sup>15</sup> An important official blacklist was “Red Channels” (No editor 1950). Seeger remembered later: “Nor did they care too much about the questions. It was enough that you were subpoenaed; that was the stigma, and stigma was their purpose. If you finked, fine; you were cleared’ and magically disappeared from the blacklists. But if they didn’t expect you to fink, you were called anyway. Your refusal to answer, even on legal grounds (the Fifth Amendment), was enough to brand you in the public eye. Once branded, you couldn’t get a decent job nor make a decent living. You were punished when the subpoena was served” (Cohen and Capaldi 2014, p. 23).

<sup>16</sup> Sorin 2012, p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> On the content, implications and functionality of the First and Fifth Amendment in the context of HUAC hearings, see pp. 342-343.

ment guaranteed the right to refuse answers “in any criminal case to be a witness against himself”<sup>18</sup>).

## II. The response of the protest song community to the threats

Being among the victims, singer-songwriters of protest songs dealt with this frightening situation by musical means. Betty Sanders and three other colleagues, Laura Duncan, Ernie Lieberman, and Osborne Smith, reflected the rituals and threatening implications of the interrogations by producing a record. In 1952, the same year as Silber and Sanders’ subpoenas, they released a single with Hootenanny Records that openly addressed the governmental threat<sup>19</sup>. The single comprised three songs: “Talking Un-American Blues,” “In Contempt,” and “Die Gedanken sind frei.”<sup>20</sup> These three songs all referred to the state’s investigations of artists and other individuals with suspected communist ties. “Talking Un-American Blues” (for voice and accompaniment<sup>21</sup>) revolves around HUAC subpoena and interrogation rituals. The fictive story of a hearing presented by Sanders starts with the arrival of the ‘invitation letter’ with the requested witness (first-person narrative):

Early one morning got an invitation  
To help Congress out in an investigation;  
Man came around a-knocking at my door,  
Give me a paper that said what for.  
Subpoena, looking for Un-Americans;  
Look in the mirror.

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/fifth\\_amendment](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/fifth_amendment), last access 23.10.2016.

<sup>19</sup> Their summons were eventually canceled (cf. Cohen 1996, p. 192).

<sup>20</sup> Duncan, Lieberman, Sanders and Smith 1952 (re-released on Cohen 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Sanders, vocal and —probably— guitar, accompanied by Jerry Silverman, probably playing the banjo. The single of 1952 that seems to have not been sold with a cover does not indicate the performers of the individual songs. The book that accompanies the new release of the songs in 1996 (Cohen 1996), indicates Sanders and Silverman as performers of this song and specifies that Silverman plays a guitar (but does not mention the banjo). Because the banjo’s accompaniment is rhythmically more complex and autonomous than that of the guitar part, it is likely that Silverman played the banjo while the simple guitar part was carried out by Sanders and allowed her to focus on the presentation of the lyrics.

In addition to the ridiculing rhetoric, the lyrics, first and foremost, aim at reassuring the persecuted individuals — Sanders and their fellow-promoters of folk songs— of the moral and political rightness of their socio-political beliefs and activities. Correspondingly, the lyrics are highly moralizing: not just in the last two verses of the first stanza — Sanders reproaches the government members of being the true Un-Americans (“Look in the mirror”)—, but also in the stanzas nos. 2 and 9. They highlight the peaceful attitude of the members of the CPUSA in contrast to the bellicose U.S. and refuses to assume the role of an informant.

Now if you want an invite, here' s what to do,  
 You got to talk with peace, sing it too;  
 Visit your neighbors, hear what they say,  
 Before you know it, you're on your way.  
 Fare paid! Ride in style. First class!

Now I like chicken, I like duck  
 And I don't object to making a buck.  
 But I ain't got wings and sure can't fly,  
 But there's one bird that I won't buy:  
 That's Stoolpigeon! I'm strictly in the market for doves of peace!

From the fifth stanza onwards, Sander's first-person narration, which she declaims rather than sings, becomes increasingly visible as an angry internal dialogue with Wood and McCarran during the fictive hearing.<sup>22</sup> She describes a fictional HUAC hearing that turns the tables. After having plead the Fifth Amendment to the constitution with which she claims her right to refuse to respond to questions of HUAC, she starts to interrogate Wood and McCarran. Not unlike HUAC questions, her questions are rhetorical, aiming at revealing Wood's and McCarran's lack of moral integ-

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<sup>22</sup> On the roles of Wood and McCarran regarding McCarran Act see footnote 9. The McCarran Act aimed at the discrimination of members of organizations considered communist by themselves or by the U.S. government. It interdicted communist organizations to publish or broadcast unless they explicitly indicated their communist orientation in the publication. It also excluded members of communist organizations from holding “nonelective office or employment under the United States [...], in any defense facility”, and apply for or renew a passport (Statute 64: 997, 992, 995 (<http://legislink.org/us/stat-64-987>)).

riety and respect of individuals who refuse denunciation.<sup>23</sup> The heightened speech of the narration comes across as cheeky and rebellious, not just because of the impish role play, but also because of the laconic, crunchy language that alludes the threatening, absurd situation and the narrator's indignation.

[The interrogators:] "Did you go to a meeting, did you sign a petition,  
Did you ever hold an executive position?  
Did you make a speech, carry a card,  
Did you ever hold a conference in your back yard?"  
[The subpoenaed:] Fifth Amendment!

Now they were asking questions, but we wouldn't buy it,  
Like those union brothers did it, it was time for us to try it;  
Added up the facts and the figures historical,  
Asked them a question which sounds a bit rhetorical.  
[The subpoenaed:] Mister Wood — Are  
you now or have you ever been a bastard?  
You don't have to answer that question if you think  
It might tend to incriminate you.

Now Mister Wood, get out of your rut,  
Do you swear to tell the truth and nothin' but?  
Well, Wood said he would, but we knew he wouldn't  
And even if he would, well he damn well couldn't,  
But that's Congress for you,  
Week in, week out, weak all over.

Although, in musical respect, the declaimed tune and its accompaniment of guitar and banjo —two-beat plus bump-ditty figures— remains rather uncharacteristic, the lyrics of stanza no. 11 emphasize the significance of the music and music making to support the communist musicians' identity:

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<sup>23</sup> The American communists' claim of peace was not fully unquestionable because it did by no means just abstractly advocate universal harmony and love, but included very concrete political positions such as the continuous loyalty to Stalin and his political decisions even after the Soviet Union and Hitler Germany had signed the nonaggression pact in August 1939 which meant for the CPUSA that it would also stop to pursue the idea that the U.S. should attack Nazi Germany (Klehr, Haynes, and Anderson 1998, p. 71-72).

So here's the moral without a doubt,  
 If you want to be free, you've got to sing out.  
 Sing it loud, sing it strong,  
 People are singing a freedom song!  
 That's my music! Solid with a freedom beat!  
 So keep singing, and keep fighting!<sup>24</sup>

Similar to “Talking Un-American Blues,” “In Contempt” takes an explicit stand against the red-scare investigations and reassures musicians and their listeners inclined toward communist ideas of their moral righteousness. The title refers to the reason for frequent prison sentences following the HUAC investigations: contempt of congress. As a variant of the offence ‘contempt of court’, the charge ‘offence of congress’ served as menace to compel testimony from ‘witnesses’ or the production of requested documents. During the McCarthy era many communists were sentenced to prison because they refused to answer questions that would charge themselves or fellow-communists.

While the sentence basically punished insufficient cooperation with the congress, the term itself, ‘contempt’, has strong moral implications. We contempt (or disdain) a person who behaves amorally in our personal moral view. Therefore, contempt and disdain are moral emotions. Focusing the moral connotations of ‘contempt’, Aaron Kramer and Betty Sanders, the authors of the song’s lyrics,<sup>25</sup> used the double signification of the word in order to articulate disdain for politicians and state officials who persecuted leftist musicians because both did not share the ideas with each other. The song performed by four voices and guitar accompaniment<sup>26</sup> is a dystopian harangue that mourns and condemns the persecution. Like “Talking Un-American Blues”, “In Contempt” is a fictive dialogue in the guise of a monologue: an individual addresses another individual or group of individuals—the U.S. government and its anti-communist deputies—who are imagined to listen to the reproaches. Stanzas nos. 1 and 3 emphasize that the accusing individual is backed up by a huge group of like-minded individuals.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted after <http://www.folkarchive.de/talkunam.html>, last access: 27.10.2016.

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.protestsonglyrics.net/Law\\_Police\\_Songs/In-Contempt.phtml](http://www.protestsonglyrics.net/Law_Police_Songs/In-Contempt.phtml), last access: 22.8.2017.

<sup>26</sup> The book that accompanies the new release of the songs in 1996, indicates Duncan, Lieberman, Sanders and Smith as performers of “In Contempt” and “Die Gedanken sind frei”. The recording indicates two female and two male voices (two mezzos, tenor and bass) and a guitar accompaniment (see additionally footnote 21).

Build high, build wide, your prison wall,  
That there be room enough for all,  
Who hold you in contempt, build wide,  
That all the land be locked inside

The birds who still insist on song,  
The sun-lit stream still running strong,  
The flowers still blazing red and blue,  
All are in contempt of you.

In the second stanza, Kramer and Sanders heroize those with communist inclinations, including themselves (keywords are ‘valiant’ and ‘glory’).

Though you have seized the valiant few,  
Whose glory casts a shade on you.  
How can you now go home with ease,  
Jangling your heavy dungeon keys.<sup>27</sup>

The heroization in this stanza is, in various respects, significant for the topic of this article that reconstructs the maintenance of the communist political identity of protest-song musicians and listeners during the McCarthy era. This becomes visible if we recapitulate the function of heroic figures in human societies. Heroes and heroines do not exist per se, but are ‘effects’ of semiotic attributions. Sign users attribute the word ‘hero’ (or ‘heroine’ respectively) to a person —fictive or real— whose deeds they or a group to which they belong admire. For the sign user and her group, the ‘hero’ acts as a moral model; he exemplifies action imperatives and values. Needless to say that because value systems differ between cultures and individuals, the notion of who deserves to be called a hero or heroine can strongly differ between people who belong to different cultures and hold different political ideologies.<sup>28</sup> In this light, the (self-)heroization such as that one by Kramer and Sanders plays a sig-

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted after [http://www.protestsonglyrics.net/Law\\_Police\\_Songs/In-Contempt.phtml](http://www.protestsonglyrics.net/Law_Police_Songs/In-Contempt.phtml), last access: 27.10.2016.

<sup>28</sup> Radicalized Islamists consider those skyjackers heroes who directed the airplanes into the towers of the World Trade Center on 9/11. In contrast, for the Americans, it have been the firefighters attempting to rescue people out of the collapsing towers who have been the actual heroes. To put it bluntly: “One’s terrorist is the other’s freedom fighter or hero” (Gilinskiy, Gilly, and Sergevnnin 2009, esp. 14 and 40; Zullo 2015).

nificant role in the context of political struggle: it points out the moral and political values the communists or individuals with communist ties holds, to the combatants as well as the opposed camp, the U.S. government. Moreover, it serves to morally uplift combatants and advocates, especially if the heroization occurs together with music. This also applies to “In Contempt” as I will demonstrate in the following two paragraphs.

In contrast to the indignant, accusing and heroizing ‘spirit’ that the lyrics articulated, the composed music is a minor-mode lament. The performance, in turn, aimed at bridging the heteronymous modes and moods —disdain, indignation, and heroization vs. lament— manifesting themselves in the lyrics and the composition. The setting of the song draws on popular-music idioms that were often employed in Hollywood musicals of the 1940s: three voices constitute a homophonic three-part choir who chordally and ornamentally accompany the solo singer —Sanders in stanzas 2, 5 and 6; Duncan in stanzas 3 and 4— by crooning in a sickly-sweet, sentimental manner. In sum, the performance of stanzas 2 to 6 supports the lament character. However, in the interpretation on the record, the last stanza of “In Contempt” constitutes a kind of climax achieved by means of reduced tempo, slightly increased intensity, energetic vocal interjections (two-note figure with upbeat (iambus) and octave leap upwards of the tenor), and weighty articulation, as well as active ornamental figures in the accompanying vocal voices. The guitarist supports the climax by giving the stroke of the second beat of the simple two-beat figure (alternation of chord/note between bass and higher register)<sup>29</sup> particular weight (whereas this beat is rather muted in the preceding stanzas). In sum, the last stanza appears to be ‘enlarged’.

In combination with the specific emotional mode of the lyrics ranging from disdain over indignation to heroization, the performance allows for the experience of elevation, an elevation that is closely related to our ideas of and response to heroic figures. Although this cannot be proven for the perception of “In Contempt” by 1950s communist-inclined listeners because everyday language has not developed a discourse on the experience of elevation in response to specific music and verbal texts,<sup>30</sup> we can con-

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<sup>29</sup> Sometimes interspersed broken chords loosen up the regular two-note accompaniment figure.

<sup>30</sup> Research on the connection between heroism and moral elevation has started to be carried out only recently (Czikszenmihalyi, Condren, and Lebud 2016; Nakamura and Graham 2016).

clude this from the context. The music-performative means that shape the last stanza of the song in relation to the preceding stanzas can — similarly, just much more intensely — be found in compositions that we classify as strongly heroic: Lully’s overtures, baroque vengeance arias (based on the justified desire of retaliation), Beethoven’s 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> symphonies, and Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsodies, for instance. According to our current knowledge that is mostly based on the discourse analysis of reports, emotional elevation is closely connected with the appraisal of heroes. It helps individuals who struggle for a goal from which other individuals will profit more than the struggling individual herself and whose risk of failure is high, to experience her enterprise in a positive light.<sup>31</sup> Against this background, it is not unlikely, that Duncan, Lieberman, Sanders, and Smith intuitively heroized the music. In order to gain the courage and energy to live in ‘difficult times’, they performed music with a heroic, elevating, uplifting mode.

This is all the more likely in light of the fact that the U.S.-American communist movement of the 1940s and 50s, like socialist-communist movements in general,<sup>32</sup> was marked by a strong tendency to heroization. This manifests itself in *The Worker*, the American communist party’s central organ, of the early 1950s. *The Worker* of February 8, 1953, for instance, reported that, on the basis of Smith Act, “Thirteen American *patriots* [all being communist party leaders] were sentenced to a total of 32 years and one in prison in New York last week [my italics]”.<sup>33</sup> The article underscored the martyr-heroic status of the convicts by implicitly characterizing the sentence as illegitimate.<sup>34</sup> It did so by pointing out that the sentenced communists not only were patriots,<sup>35</sup> but also

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<sup>31</sup> Czikszenmihalyi, Condren, and Lebud 2016, p. 258ff; Nakamura and Graham 2016, p. 428ff.

<sup>32</sup> I implicitly distinguish between two kinds of heroizations: heroizations for the purpose of maintaining dictatorship (as the Soviet Union carried them out) and heroizations from the position of a persecuted individual or group of individuals (such as that one of U.S. communists in the 1950s). Both heroizations take place in communist environments, yet with different orientation. On the first kind of heroization see: Gries and Satjukov 2002; Sartorti 2002; Günther 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous 1953.

<sup>34</sup> The martyr-hero is a type of hero who holds moral values that are so strong that he/she is willing to cruelly suffer for their maintenance (cf. Anonymous 1698; Fischer 1696).

<sup>35</sup> Regarding the identification of Americanism with patriotism, on the one hand, and anti-communism, on the other, see main text, penultimate paragraph of section I.

held moral values that defined *core values* of the American society (but were undermined by the current government): “They were fined a total of \$64,000. Their crime: fighting for peace, democracy and freedom – nothing more.”<sup>36</sup> *The Worker* of March 1, 1953, reported of Bessie Mitchell, the sister of one of six black men who were unjustly accused of murdering a white man, under the title “Bessie Mitchell, a People’s Heroine”. Again, the newspaper emphasized the insisting faithfulness to her own moral values. “I’m Going to Search All Over This Country for Justice” is the subtitle.<sup>37</sup>

A highpoint of the kind of heroization effected in *The Worker* was certainly the Rosenberg case. During the particularly dramatic phase of the trial when the Rosenbergs, having been sentenced to death, awaited the outcome of their plea for clemency from the President of the U.S.,<sup>38</sup> an article in *The Worker* of January 4, 1953 quoted the Rosenbergs, who heroized themselves by means of a rhetorical trick: they *refused* that other people might consider them heroes. “We are not martyrs or heroes,” they remarked, “nor do we wish to be.” The journalist joined the martyr-heroic tone: “They thought of themselves as representatives of the American people, or ordinary people everywhere, fighting against tyranny, against world war and a growing fascism.”<sup>39</sup> Six days later, another article on the Rosenbergs labeled them again as heroes and attributed heroic characteristics to them. “[T]he *heroic* Rosenbergs refuse” to “back up the government’s lie that ‘communists’ in America got them into ‘the spy ring’ which did not exist.”<sup>40</sup>

Their letters from the death house bring before us the heart-rending and at the same time the *heroic*, inspiring portrait of two loving, tender, human beings, filled with all the joys and sorrows of ordinary parents, yet unflinching in their refusal to trade decency and truth for their lives... [my italics].<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Anonymous 1953. On the communist attitude toward peace see footnote 23.

<sup>37</sup> Salwen 1953.

<sup>38</sup> President Eisenhower denied to commute the death sentence (Mayer 2010, p. 659).

<sup>39</sup> Boyer 1953.

<sup>40</sup> Howard 1953.

<sup>41</sup> *The Worker*, of Sunday, January 11, 1953, p. 8.

### III. “Die Gedanken sind frei”

The third song that Hootenanny records released in 1952, “Die Gedanken sind frei”<sup>42</sup> [Thoughts are free], continues the mildly heroic tendency already encountered in “In Contempt.” It does so by presenting a verbal message with a strong moral impetus. (It is in no doubt that the lyrics have provided the basis for the popularity of “Die Gedanken sind frei”.) The poem in its current form can be traced back to the 1780s, while the first source associating the melody to these lyrics dates from the late 1820s.<sup>43</sup> However, the song is said to have been sung in socio-political struggles and upheavals as early as the sixteenth century: specifically, during the German peasants’ war (1524-1526), an early-modern workers’ struggle from a Marxist perspective, when the serfs demanded liberty. None of the ‘reporters’, however, can give any details regarding the source of information and the tune to which the lyrics were sung at this time. The next two historical landmarks for the use of the song are during the era of Metternich in the early nineteenth century, a political situation marked by censorship and a large spy network suppressing freedom of speech, and the failed German revolution of 1848; in sum, a situation that seemed to possess some similarities with the McCarthy era. Furthermore, various historiographies mention the song in the context of resistance against Nazi terror. Sophie Scholl, a member of the Munich resistance group *Weißerose*, is said to have comforted her imprisoned father who opposed the dictatorship, by playing the tune on the flute outside the prison. She was later executed for distributing flyers that, like her father, called for resistance against the Hitler regime.

The message of the lyrics —thoughts are free and cannot be repressed or restricted by any authority— perfectly resonated with the credo that various communists and leftist-leaning Americans adopted during the McCarthy era and that fueled their mental resistance against HUAC investigations. Not surprisingly, *Sing Out!* featured the song. Between 1950 and 1953, the journal printed the song not one time, as

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<sup>42</sup> Lyrics available on <http://www.songlyrics.com/pete-seeger/die-gedanken-sind-frei-lyrics/>, last access: 27.10.2016. For the German versions of the lyrics see: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die\\_Gedanken\\_sind\\_frei#.C3.9Cberlieferung\\_Versionen](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Gedanken_sind_frei#.C3.9Cberlieferung_Versionen), last access: 27.10.2016.

<sup>43</sup> No editor 1827.

it usually did, but twice: in the issues of October 1950 and November 1952.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to the lyrics' high, heroic spirit of resistance, the tune, like "Talking Un-American Blues" and "In Contempt," does not show any conventional characteristics of heroic music such as fanfares, triads, trumpets, and drum rolls. "Die Gedanken sind frei" is a simple song; and the folk-song ensemble on the single made considerable efforts to emphasize this musically-naïve character. Choosing a cheerful allegretto tempo for the triple meter, they made the music an invitation to *Schunkeln*.<sup>45</sup> The musical settings of the individual stanzas support this impression. The accompaniment consists of broken, waltz-like chords. The three stanzas have a charming four-part setting with the tune's melody in the tenor; in verse 3 of each stanza, the bass voice (Osborne Smith) hums in a comedian-harmonist-like manner accompanying the tenor, Ernie Lieberman, while the female voices are silent. Moreover, in order to increase the playful, innocuous appearance of the song, the performers included interludes between the stanzas whose melody is played by a recorder that bestows the song with a naïve grace.

Despite this presentation of the rebellious lyrics in an innocuous guise, the recording, like "In Contempt," also includes hints of heroization. (Here again the heroic character is to be understood as the sum of musical means and verbal content.) To this end, the melody of the repetition of the fourth verse in the second and third stanzas has been varied. It imitates the melody of the flute interlude. In doing so, the vocals replace the original sixth leap from  $\overset{\hat{A}}{5}$  to  $\overset{\hat{A}}{3}$  at the beginning of the verse by a heroic octave upward leap. The impression of the heroic character of this leap results from the fact that the voice cannot as easily master intervals of larger sizes as most musical instruments (such as the flute playing the interlude) can. In the third stanza, the ensemble intensifies this emphatic ending by a variation of the vocal accompaniment. Whereas in the second stanza the accompanying singers remained in the middle register, in the third stanza they join the tenor in his upper register. Placing the female voices above

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<sup>44</sup> *Sing out!*, issue 1:6, p. 38 and issue 3:3, p. 191. There are only three other songs that were printed twice in the same time period: "Decorum" (*Sing out!*, issues 1:6 and 1:8) and two songs from Puerto Rico, "Basta Ya" and "La Borinqueña" (*Sing out!*, issues 1:6 and 1:7; and 1:1 and 3:12 respectively).

<sup>45</sup> For a definition and the cultural background of *Schunkeln* see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schunkeln>.

him, they avail themselves of an established component of heroic music. The doubling of upper octaves is a common means to create a ‘gleaming’ effect of music that is considered heroic or apothecic.<sup>46</sup>

Two other recordings of “Die Gedanken sind frei” support my argument that American folk singers threatened by the anti-communist legislation in the U.S. during the McCarthy era included heroic musical elements as a way of uplifting themselves and maintaining their moral and political identity in face of the state persecution.<sup>47</sup> Both recordings were produced by Pete Seeger, in 1953 and 1966. Both are strikingly different. It is these differences, I will demonstrate, that reflect the changing attitude toward the U.S. government with which folk-song musicians responded to the changing strategies of the government dealing with the ‘red threat’.

In 1953, aiming at producing a weighty, heroic emphasis, Seeger, in the second and third stanzas, increased the articulatory pressure on his larynx in such a strong way that he almost lost control over his voice and was at risk of falling into shouting or yelling.<sup>48</sup> His purpose seems to be similar to that one of Duncan, Lieberman, Sanders, and Smith two years earlier: the heroic climax. Unlike the group on the single of 1952, however, he uses not compositional, but performative means, i.e. his vocal articulation.

Contrary to this, the production of 1966 is remarkably anti-heroic, or rather a-heroic, in that heroism does not play any role, not even *ex negativo*. This later recording is noticeably relaxed; Seeger sings in an easy manner, reminiscent of heightened speech. The durations of the light accompaniment figures (broken chords instead of compact strikes) are uneven; the melody is

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. the first movement of Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* sonata; Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsody*, no. 2; Prokofiev’s piano concerto no. 1. Light is an established symbol of heroism. In occidental pictures the mandorla of Jesus Christ or Jesus Christ himself who was explicitly considered a hero especially in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, is shining or gleaming (see *De herrezen Christus* by Peter Paul Rubens (1616), <http://www.artbible.info/art/large/106.html>, last access 3. 1. 2016, or *Giudizio universale* by Fra Angelico (1450), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fra\\_Angelico\\_-\\_The\\_Last\\_Judgement\\_\(Winged\\_Altar\)\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fra_Angelico_-_The_Last_Judgement_(Winged_Altar)_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg), last access 3. 1. 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Seeger 1953 (2014); Seeger 1966 (1998).

<sup>48</sup> Cf., for instance, his presentation of „dictator“. Singing like playing a string or wind instrument requires a sensitive balance between pressure and the avoidance of pressure in order to make the larynx, strings or air vibrate freely, yet at the same time in a controlled way.

recited with syncopation. What are the likely reasons for this change of the song's interpretation? Are they purely aesthetic? Although aesthetic reasons cannot be excluded, I suggest tracing the differences back to the relationship between U.S.-American communists and the government prevailing in the 1960s and this relationship's development during the 1950s.

As a former member of the communist party (1942-1949),<sup>49</sup> Seeger was subpoenaed for a hearing by HUAC on August 18, 1955, three years after Silber and Sanders had been.<sup>50</sup> The committee presented undeniable evidence — newspaper announcements and reviews of musical entertainments, mostly published in the *Daily Worker*, like *The Worker*, an organ of the CPUSA — that Seeger had supported the CPUSA and, thus, 'proved' that, being inclined towards communism, he was also willing to advocate the overthrowing of the government. The situation was aporetic. Denying that he participated in any of the events would have been highly implausible; confirming that he participated would have convicted him violating Smith Act. Consequently, like many defendants subpoenaed by HUAC before him, Seeger refused to answer the questions. He explained:

I am not going to answer any questions as to my associations, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election or any of these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this.<sup>51</sup>

In arguing in this way, Seeger seemed to draw implicitly on the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States as David King Dunaway believes he did.<sup>52</sup> Unlike the Fifth Amendment, the First Amendment has not been fully suited to defend oneself against the charges of having communist ties. For the right of individuals to speak freely that the First Amendment guaranteed,<sup>53</sup> the *positive* expression that this amendment

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<sup>49</sup> Wilkinson 2009, p. 116.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Hearings* 1955.

<sup>51</sup> *Hearings* 1955, p. 2449.

<sup>52</sup> See Dunaway 1981, p. 202.

<sup>53</sup> Amendment I: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" ([https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/first\\_amendment](https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/first_amendment), last access 23.10.2016).

guaranteed, does not necessarily include the right of negative expression, i.e. the *refusal* to reveal one's beliefs and activities that one is principally able to express. According to the protocol of the hearing Seeger explicitly refused to take the Fifth Amendment, but neither did he explicitly claim the First.<sup>54</sup> In this light, the HUAC committee interpreted the refusal to answer its questions as mere demonstration of contempt of congress. For the latter Seeger was in fact cited and convicted, first, in 1957 and, confirmed, in 1961. It is well known from autobiographical sources that Seeger experienced these law suits and the threat to be jailed for a year as drama of existential significance.<sup>55</sup> (In prison he would not have been able to make an income for his family.) Correspondingly, he must have felt much relief when the Court of Appeals discharged him in 1962.<sup>56</sup> In this light, it is likely that the relaxed performance mode of "Die Gedanken sind frei" of 1966 was also caused by a newly won existential security.

Furthermore, the New Left (the student movement) that was coming to the fore in the early 1960s changed the power relationship between the U.S. state and leftist oriented citizens. Unlike the members of the Old Left (the communist movement), the members of the New Left, students who did not think much about their later professional careers and their responsibilities as parents, were immune to the state authorities' intimidation and the menace to be blacklisted. They responded much less submissively and, instead, were self-confident and provocative towards the government's demands. This also affected the Old Left. Resistance against the persecution of communists became bolder as the rhetoric in *The Worker* of the mid-1960s demonstrates. The newspaper labeled the activities of communists dangerous, meaning 'dangerous for the U.S.-American government'. The keywords "dangerous thoughts" of a 1966 article by the well-known Marxist historian

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<sup>54</sup> *Hearings* 1955.

<sup>55</sup> In fact, after Seeger's conviction, Seeger did not suffer a lack of concert opportunities. On the contrary, despite their knowledge of Seeger's subpoena and conviction, small schools and colleges less susceptible to governmental pressure honored his heroic resistance by extending numerous invitations to concerts in the early 1960s (Wilkinson 2009, pp. 84-85).

<sup>56</sup> The U.S. House of Representatives cited Seeger —like many other leftist-oriented individuals before and after him— for contempt on July 25, 1956, and nine months later, on March 26, 1957, a federal grand jury indicted him on ten counts of contempt of Congress. Seeger achieved to be released on bail three days after by pleading not guilty to all charges. Four years later, on March 21, 1961, a jury confirmed the judgment and sentenced him to a year in jail. In May of 1962, however, the Court of Appeals ruled that the indictment was faulty and dismissed the case" (cf. Winkler 2009, p. 81; Wilkinson 2009, p. 84).

and political activist Herbert Aptheker —“Dangerous Thoughts in Hanoi Bookstores” — refer to Marxist-Leninist literature which was sold in a Hanoi bookstore; “dangerous policy” in the anonymous article “A Dangerous and Futile Foreign Policy” of the same year refers to the new draft program of the CPUSA.<sup>57</sup> In other words, in the early 1960s the communists considered the communist ideology and the communist party powerful enough to withstand the governmental threat. It is also possible to read the rhetoric as irony. They ironized the government’s witch-hunting as overanxious, panicky reaction against citizens who were in essence patriotic Americans. Correspondingly, during the same time, protests by New and Old Leftists against HUAC became louder and more self-confident.<sup>58</sup> Correspondingly, the presentation of “Die Gedanken sind frei” of 1966 conveyed the climate of increasing hope, self-confidence and psychological relief. In this light the differences between the 1953 and 1966 recordings can be explained as follows: the recording of “Die Gedanken sind frei” of 1953, made before the expected and feared subpoena, protested and fought back by musical means against the menace. To this end, Seeger encouraged himself by adopting a heroic attitude that also manifested itself in the performance of the song.<sup>59</sup> On the recording of 1966, after the charges against him had been dropped in 1962,<sup>60</sup> “Die Gedanken sind frei” lost its function as symbol of personal resistance against anti-communist witch-hunting.

Against this background, it does not seem to be a coincidence that the LP of 1966 on which the new version of “Die Gedanken sind frei” was published bears the title *Dangerous Songs*. Indeed, the fact that the U.S. government subpoenaed folk-song musicians in the 1950s indicates that it must have considered the folk-song scene capable of increasing the com-

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<sup>57</sup> Aptheker 1966; Anonymous 1966.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. the issues of *The Worker* of spring and summer 1966.

<sup>59</sup> Self-heroization is a useful tool in the context of existential threat. The emotions of elevation and of moral superiority (including of admiration and triumph, but also rage and indignation with respect to the adversaries) mobilize the energy and courage necessary to transgress and exceed the learned and internalized authoritative limits of social conventions, submission, adjustment and well-behavior, which is so characteristic for civil disobedience. These emotions unleash the willingness to accept the risk of being punished for one’s excess. A similar thought — though not yet fully developed — can be found with James M. Jasper. The sociologist states that characters such as “[h]eroes, villains, victims, and minions are components of identities that carry with them moral judgment and suggest the emotions we are supposed to feel toward these players” (Jasper 2014, p. 50, see also pp. 14 and 55-56).

<sup>60</sup> See footnote 56.

munist danger for the U.S.-American democracy. This however also exhibits that the music or the lyrics that is mediated by means of music are experienced as powerful.

#### IV. **Toward the end**

In my reconstruction of the relationship between the folk-song scene, communist ideologies and red-scare persecution during the McCarthy era, one question is still unanswered. Why did Seeger explicitly avoid referring to the Fifth Amendment, if this could have prevented his conviction? According to his own comments on his HUAC subpoena, Seeger felt a strong desire to maintain his good reputation and self-esteem, both of which the HUAC subpoena considerably damaged. In his view, the reference to the Fifth Amendment would have created the impression that he had something criminal to hide although his communist ideas and activities were not criminal in his view, but most moral. Thus, referring to the Fifth Amendment, he would have betrayed his beliefs and his fellow-communists and this would have humiliated him in addition. Seeger reflected on this in 1980:

The expected move would have been to take the Fifth. That was the easiest thing, and the case would have been dismissed. On the other hand, everywhere I went, I would have had to face ‘Oh you’re one of those Fifth Amendment Communists. ...’ I didn’t want to run down my friends who did use the Fifth Amendment, but I didn’t choose to use it.<sup>61</sup>

By contrast, Seeger’s tacit, half-hearted recourse to the — actually useless— First Amendment served to illustrate his high moral values and maintain the moral esteem his listeners projected onto him. Indeed, the heroic image that the folk-song musicians protesting against McCarthy persecution had acquired is affective until today. If the guitar-strumming singer-songwriter appears on stage, he/she represents not the warrior-hero leading and being backed up by an army of a massive choir and grand-scale orchestra (such as Liszt was leading the orchestra and dominating the piano<sup>62</sup>), but the lonely singer-fighter on stage: superman or Lucky Luke. The image of the lonely hero has become a component of the singers’ political identity.

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted after Dunaway 1981, p. 202.

<sup>62</sup> Gooley 2004, ch. 2.

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