

A black and white photograph of Joan Baez. She is shown from the chest up, smiling and singing into a vintage microphone. Her long, dark hair is visible. She is holding an acoustic guitar, with her left hand on the fretboard and her right hand near the soundhole. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights her face and the guitar.

MARKUS JAEGER

# POPULAR IS NOT ENOUGH: THE POLITICAL VOICE

A Case Study in the  
Biographical Method

OF **JOAN  
BAEZ**

*ibidem*

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Dedicated to the sister to my soul since 1987,  
Susanne Rundl, without whose friendship  
I would be an entirely different person.

And to Janice Schiestl, my former teacher  
and now dear friend, without whose support  
this book would not have been possible.

I think one of the saddest and stupidest things in our world is the segregation and discrimination of different races [...] (Joan Baez, 1955).

There's a consensus out that it's OK to kill when your government decides who to kill. If you kill inside the country you get in trouble. If you kill outside the country, right time, right season, latest enemy, you get a medal [...] (Joan Baez, 1968).

[...] people play this very loud music so they won't have to confront the quietness. They don't want to think about death. A lot of my songs, especially the songs I first played, were about death [...] (Joan Baez, 1976).

The prevailing ethos is: No negative thoughts, and everything is beautiful. You just jog, eat enough of the right yogurt, and everything is going to be all right [...] (Joan Baez, 1987).

It was simply a case of saying I would quietly disappear from mainstream music or fight my way back in, as a result, I have made a commitment to my own career [...] (Joan Baez, 1990).

I did have a flight booked and a hotel booked and the final agreement, yes. Maybe four days before the concert, then I was told that I was not approved [...] (Joan Baez, 2007).

That's my little song/ about a man gone wrong./ He's nasty from his head to his feet./ When the dirt on this man / finally hits the fan,/ and no one gives a damn about his tweets,/ he'll be finally and forever obsolete [...] (Joan Baez, 2017).

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## Introduction

When artistic expression engages with political activism, unavoidably arising doubts tend to result in forthright lack of differentiation. The choice of artistic genre, political attitude, ideological background and specific political demands of those who are involved in offering their audiences a mixture of art and activism repeatedly leads to heated debates about the authenticity of politically active artists. This case study aims to find an answer to the question of whether a generalization about such credibility can be considered as intellectually satisfying or not. Its line of argumentation points out that lavishing care and attention on passionately upheld convictions like the alleged impracticality of popular music in relation to activist work might perhaps be not enough to adequately analyze the connection of artistic expression with political activism.

The current study explores the coalescence of Joan Baez's work as a singer and songwriter with her endeavors as a political activist throughout the last sixty years. It aspires to illustrate an American popular singer's significance as a political activist—for her audiences, for her opponents, as well as for those victims of politically organized violence who have profited from her work. Baez has never clearly separated her artistic work from her efforts as a political activist and in this sense has continually falsified Theodor W. Adorno's rigid pessimistic view on the political potential of popular music. Her attainments during the most successful decade of her career—the 1960s—have been co-influential for a whole generation's political conscience. Baez later resorted to this fame when she used her reputation to publicly speak, act and sing out against war and other kinds of organized violence from either the right or the left side of the political spectrum. More than once, she has been able to save numerous lives in the course of her activities (see, for example, Chapter 6.4).

The journalistic material on Joan Baez throughout more than half a century would fill libraries; the growth of published serious scholarly material about Baez, however, is still in its infancy. Countless scientific sources on topics like the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, political prisoners in Latin America and all the numerous other dimensions of her work positively refer to Baez and repeatedly point out the significance of her work. They are, nevertheless, not dealing with the topic of Joan Baez on a general level. One very well written and highly recommendable exception is German musicologist Jens Rosteck's book *Joan Baez. Porträt einer Unbeugsamen* (in German, Osburg Verlag, 2017). The most comprehensive bibliographical source of information to start any form of research on Baez, however, is Charles Fuss' highly recommendable informative bio-bibliography of 1996 (see also Fuss, 1996).

The number of sources specifically dealing with Baez's work, on the other hand, is limited: Mexican scholar Avital Bloch, for instance, has added comprehensive essay contributions about the different points of view from which Baez's work can best be analyzed in the wide field of Peace Studies. In the book *Impossible to Hold: Women and Culture in the 1960's*, her essay "Joan Baez: A Singer and Activist" analyzes the complex ways her rise to fame answered difficulties resulting from the cultural and political generation gap between the 1950s and the 1960s (see also Bloch, 2005). Her contribution "Peace Activism and Paradox of Gender Values: Joan Baez and Vietnam" to the anthology *American Studies and Peace*, which was published after the 25<sup>th</sup> conference organized by the Austrian Association of American Studies in Salzburg in 1999, is an essay about Baez's image as a woman and the multifaceted significance of a changing perception of femininity for Baez's development as a peace activist (see also Bloch, 2001).

These versatile American Cultural Studies attempts to grasp the relevance of Baez's work find a comprehensive scholarly addition in the

field of pedagogy, where Fletcher Ranney Dubois published his study *A Troubadour as Teacher: The Concert as Classroom?*, which analyzes Baez's role as a teacher of activism to her young audiences in music halls (see also Dubois, 1985). The study *Joan Baez and the Issue of Vietnam: Art and Activism versus Conventionality* (Jäger, 2003) exemplifies the significance of art and activism in the development of resistance against war with an analysis of Baez's activities in regard to the atrocities in South East Asia during the Vietnam War. The ten chapters of this current study attempt to take the logical next step: analyzing Baez's most incisive artistic and political activities throughout her career. This analysis depicts the multi-layered accomplishments of Baez as a popular singer and investigates their relevance for her efforts as an influential political activist.

The first chapter demonstrates the necessity to step over boundaries when setting the course for the subsequent analysis. It illustrates the theoretical background for my examination of the marriage between popular music and political activism and explains the five main features of my research. First of all, it outlines reasons for the requirement to be open-minded to scientific interdisciplinarity, because rigid limitations to one scientific branch narrowly support the search for truth, but often articulate nothing but mere argumentative inflexibility. Particularly a complex topic like the relationship between the artistic and political dimensions in the professional activities of Joan Baez necessitates the closing of ranks between several scientific branches. As a scholar of American Cultural Studies and Political Science, I look for help in the expertise of my colleagues in the fields of History, Musicology, Philosophy and Sociology with humility. The second sub-chapter points out the relevance of social movements for a politically active artist like Baez. She has repeatedly supported the most various kinds of social movements—providing publicity for them through her famous name and actively supporting them in their specific demands. Afterwards, a closer examination of the biographical method (or life

history) explains its advantages for a chronological discussion about Baez's most significant endeavors as an artist and activist. The fourth step is to undermine the disparaging interpretation of popular culture as nothing but entertainment for duped masses—especially in the face of the many-sided work of Joan Baez. The last sub-chapter then presents a theoretician, who would certainly not have been a great fan of this study's heroine. It offers a closer investigation of Theodor W. Adorno's philosophical stance on the relationship between art and society in general and between popular culture and political activism in particular, giving reasons why Joan Baez can be regarded as an exception to his bluntly pessimistic view and as a falsification of his totalitarian generalizations. Sociologist Bühl correctly points out that Adorno would have been more authentic as a theoretician if he had concentrated much more intensely on an analysis of popular music—which Adorno brusquely dismissed as nothing but an inferior derivative of serious music (see also Bühl 128). The last argument of my first chapter is intended to support this hypothesis, leading into an analysis of Baez's work, which in the end contradicts Adorno's pessimism about society.

After building up these theoretical columns of my research, the second chapter offers first basic information about the biographical background of Joan Baez, emphasizing the importance of several occasions and developments during her childhood and youth for her later artistic and political future. One of the main instances in this regard was the fact that her parents turned to Quakerism when Baez was a little girl. The passionate and literal interpretation of Christian non-violence within this religious denomination is the topic of chapter 2.1, as this kind of understanding about non-violence tremendously influenced Baez for many years to come. Another aspect during her childhood, which turned out to become a significant factor for her later professional life, was an intense feeling of isolation, which—compared to other teenagers—was aggravated through her dark skin (an inheritance from her Mexican

father), turning her into a victim of discrimination on an ethnical level. Her most successful way to overcome such minority complexes was to share her talent as a singer and ukulele player with her fellow pupils. Apart from these general religious and psychological facets of her early childhood and youth, Baez also underwent concrete immediate experiences, which turned out to become significant driving forces for her later political view of the world. In 1951, when she was ten years old, Baez accompanied her whole family to Iraq, where her father took over a one-year job to help building up a Physics Department at the University of Baghdad. Baez repeatedly referred to witnessing the poverty of the Iraqi nation as the birth for her social conscience. Only a few years later, back in the United States, she met one of her most influential heroes in regard to political activism and social conscience for the first time—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with whom she later was about to work together on behalf of the Civil Rights Movement. Another incisive personality, who entered Baez's life on this relatively early stage, was Jewish scholar Ira Sandperl—he was to become her friend, mentor, and co-activist for decades to come. A brief sub-chapter about this friendship with an obvious political background concludes the second chapter about significant influences during Joan Baez's early childhood and youth.

The third chapter presents a summarizing examination of the philosophical impetus behind Baez's political view of the world. It outlines the tenor of Henry David Thoreau's transcendentalist posture on a citizen's duty to cling to acts of political disobedience when it comes to what is referred to as injustice in society. Thoreau points out the relevance of organized non-violent activities in order to be politically active. This approach was an authentic encouragement for Baez's entire career as an activist. Thoreau's stance on disobedience also formed a philosophical basis for the leader of the Indian Liberty Movement, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and enormously encouraged the leader of the later



Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Both of these influences were often referred to as inspirational by Baez—this is the reason why a closer observation of Thoreau’s arguments is a fruitful means of supporting an analysis of Baez’s synthesis of her artistic work with her political activism. The subsequent seven chapters then chronologically present this analysis, step by step focusing on each decade of Joan Baez’s musical and political career.

This considerable chronology starts with chapter four about the 1950s, when Baez, still a teenager, committed the first public act of disobedience and took her first steps as a local folk musician in the Coffee House scene in Boston during the end of the decade. It offers a short synopsis of culture and politics of the United States during the 1950s and describes the radical Cold War paranoia which was the background of Baez’s tender beginnings as an activist. It refreshes basic information about the Folk Music Revival during the end of the decade, which turned into the most relevant musical root for Joan Baez as a singer.

Chapter five about the most triumphant decade in the career of Baez starts with a summarizing outline of the most significant developments within American culture and politics during the 1960s, when more than ever since World War II, current moral, social, ethnical and political demarcations in a fragmented society were experienced with growing doubts by a majority of American citizens. The second subchapter continues the observation of Baez’s friendship with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and explains the contribution of her fame as a singer of national and international renown to the success of numerous demonstrations on behalf of the Civil Rights Movement—the famous March on Washington in August 1963 being just one example. Afterwards, a discussion of Baez’s commitment to the so-called Free Speech Movement highlights the fact that this movement started with just a few courageous students and teachers on American campuses and

soon turned out to become the basis for the later massive anti-Vietnam War Movement. Baez also became a sincere spokeswoman for the anti-war protest activities, which were aimed to loudly articulate dissent against the American intervention in South East Asia and turned into a significant factor for ending the increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam.

Chapter six about the 1970s suggests a sharp cultural – and later also political – comeback of conservatism in the United States, particularly during the years after the military defeat in Vietnam. In such a tightening climate, no one wanted to talk about war or anti-war activities anymore and a politically active singer like Joan Baez increasingly had to face difficulties in getting the attention of the same audiences as during the successful first decade of her career. Nonetheless, Baez continued working with her very own combination of being a popular singer and a political activist at the same time. The next three sub-chapters explain how she adapted her activities to other political realities and started to focus on political developments in numerous countries abroad. A human rights organization like Amnesty International profited immensely from Baez and her fame during the 1970s, when she – as only one example – supported the process of freeing political prisoners in Latin America. Baez articulated another significant dimension of her social conscience when she publicly supported the first activities of the Gay Liberation Movement – outing herself as having had bisexual experiences and releasing several self-penned songs which explicitly dealt with the topic of homosexuality long before it became en vogue to be out and proud about it. The end of the decade found Baez returning to the topic of Vietnam, when she ignored the national suppression of the traumatic experiences in Vietnam and – against all odds – publicly protested against organized violence in South East Asia only four years after the end of the Vietnam War.

Chapter seven outlines Joan Baez's most important musical as well as political endeavors during the apolitical times of the 1980s. Her musical career started to tumble over the prevailing ethos of the decade that commercial success was the one and only thing that counted for an artist. A politically active singer, who was increasingly seen as a remnant of times long gone by, had to face difficulties to keep up with a career in a climate which primarily propagated national economic and political narcissism. The first argumentative step of this chapter is again a synopsis about the then current cultural and political state of affairs in the United States, which offered nothing but this kind of collective bow in front of nothing else than profit. Baez, however, did not give in to these professional difficulties and continued with what she had done before. The second sub-chapter explains the overtly political background of her musical tour in Latin America in 1981. A few years later, Baez visited Poland – once more as a singer with much more to offer than the 1980s' ethos of the big commercial hit. The third sub-chapter has a closer look at this 1985 trip by Baez to Poland and her meeting with the leader of the politically very successful workers' movement *Solidarnosc* and later President of the country, Lech Walesa. The last incisive effort of Baez during this rather difficult decade of her career was a highly political performance in Czechoslovakia in 1989, several months before the Velvet Revolution, a successful non-violent political development, which President Vaclav Havel later explicitly connected to the Joan Baez concert earlier that year. This undertaking concludes the analysis of Baez's artistic and political activities during the 1980s and most outstandingly marks the reason why the combination of popular music and political activism includes much more than Adorno's pessimism.

The following eighth chapter analyses artistic and political challenges for Baez during the 1990s, when she had to face the necessity to re-arrange her professional priorities. Several younger producers and new and fresh songwriting talents supported her successful attempts to

hold on to a musical career, including the release of studio and live-music albums and a Grammy nomination as well as numerous promotion tours through the United States and Europe and many other regions around the globe. The general growing political dissatisfaction in the United States, as outlined in the first sub-chapter, among other dimensions, was driven by a generation conflict which labeled young people with the not very flattering X—standing for a lack of orientation. Such youth and their changing musical taste created an artistic surrounding in which it was a mentionable success for an artist like Baez (whose music often was wrongfully labeled as still purely folk) to professionally survive. The political dimension of her work forced Baez to more selective engagements, but she did not stop lending her voice to political issues. The second sub-chapter exemplifies this professional integrity in her earlier activities with an analysis of her trip to Bosnia in the middle of the Balkan War. It accentuates her experiences as well as her passionate attempts to draw international attention to the horrors of the war in former Yugoslavia.

The ninth chapter welcomes Baez in the New Millennium. It triggers off the analysis of her activities in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with another summation about the most important driving forces within the culture and politics in the United States and examines the question in what ways these developments are relevant for Baez's professional life. Secondly, a discussion about her return to the anti-war movement explains in what ways the massive international protest activities against the war in Iraq differ from the organized protest movement against the Vietnam War during the 1960s and the 1970s. It gives, however, reasons why those two different historic dimensions are still comparable. The last sub-chapter observes the necessity to point out that democracy and censorship do not fit together and discusses Baez's experiences in this regard in 2007.

The tenth chapter finishes the analyses of Baez's political significance and non-violent authenticity with a closer look at her activities in the 2010s. It summarizes her most relevant accolades during the final decade of her career during one of the most troubled political phases in the United States. Her song "Nasty Man" on the 45<sup>th</sup> President of her home country eloquently sums up the reason why her work is the lifelong prove for the fact that being popular is not enough.

# **1. Stepping Over Boundaries: Materials, Methodology and Theory**

## **Introduction**

The aim of this first chapter is to sketch the theoretical background for my line of argumentation. Additionally, a description of the main method outlines the reasons why the biographical method (or life history) is the most profitable approach to the work of Joan Baez. In this manner, sources and materials used to verify the main thesis are explained. On the following pages, five sub-chapters examine these columns of my research in more detail.

The first step is to plea for open-mindedness regarding the interdisciplinary approach that I take with my analysis, because it can be very unsatisfying to limit research possibilities to one scientific branch only. Secondly, an excursion adds an explanation about the cross-border element of social movements, in view of the fact that they offer Baez's main professional platform, where she melts the borderline between her artistic and her political work. The third sub-chapter offers a summarizing investigation of the biographical method, discussing necessary conditions and advantages of the life history, which is the main methodological approach to my analysis of Baez's combination of art and activism. The fourth step is a closer look at the challenging relationship between popular culture and politics. It explains the reason why I refer to Baez as a popular singer and how far this classification can be a helpful means for a discussion about her political endeavors. As a last step, the incorporation of Baez's work with Theodor W. Adorno's aesthetic theory juxtaposes the activeness of Baez's efforts to the passiveness of Adorno's theory as well as his slack use of musical categories—falsifying his resigned approach to the authenticity of politically active artists (particularly in the field of popular culture). The

most valuable way of building these columns of my analysis is to consider more than one scientific discipline for my research.

### **1.1 Against Wrongful Restrictions: On the Advantages of Interdisciplinarity**

Picking out singer and activist Joan Baez as the central theme for a dissertation reveals a manifold number of risks and poses numerous questions. Satisfying answers to these questions can not be found by sticking entirely to one particular discipline only—meaning: to one specific body of knowledge, which is being delimited from other scientific disciplines. Moran analyses an important aspect of this kind of systematic delimitation: “[...] *in fact, the very notion of the term [discipline] as a recognized mode of learning implies the establishment of hierarchy and the operation of power [...]*” (Moran 2). This is the reason why interdisciplinarity can be regarded as an attempt to overcome structures of limited power; limited to a small number of selected scientists of one single discipline as well as limited in its potential of achieving knowledge. In other words: the often underestimated “[...] *teamwork [...]*” (Rodgers, Booth and Eveline 2003) of different scientific disciplines is a helpful means of producing knowledge, because knowledge is achieved via the verification of hypotheses—regardless on which hierarchical level of a scientific discipline’s power within the academia.

The stability of putting knowledge into structured schemes—enabling us to go back to organized information more easily—shall by no means be generally put into question. Barker, all the same, correctly emphasizes the fact that “[...] *many cultural studies practitioners have felt ill at ease with the forging of institutional disciplinary boundaries for the field [...]*” (Barker *Making Sense* 6). The most incisive boundary that I attempt to overcome is the often far too strict line between the humanities and the social sciences. McClung Lee refers to the process of melting this particular boundary as “Humanist Sociology”, explaining reasons why

it can be fruitful to approach research from a humanist's as well as a social scientist's point of view: "[...] *interdisciplinary contacts, including ones with stimulating artists, are useful to build resistance against closure tendencies, against overlooking alternative views of reality [...]*" (McClung Lee x). Consequentially, the unbending attention to one scientific discipline only includes the danger of overlooking alternative ways to the verification of hypotheses.

Ignoring possible elitist attitudes, which—in a generalizing manner—dismiss such a form of interdisciplinarity as scientific "[...] *vulgarization [...]*" (McClung Lee 151), my intellectual focus follows what McClung Lee describes as "[...] *searching for reality in its historical and cross-cultural contexts and [...] what appears most relevant [...] to our society [...]*" (McClung Lee xi). This definition can well be applied to the work of Joan Baez. Social movements offer the most interesting platform and potential for a successful expression of this continual attempt to non-violently fight against (what is considered to be) social injustice.

## **1.2 Reconstituting Culture: On the Significance of Social Movements**

Social movements offer a concrete manifestation of the melting borderline between culture and politics. Apart from being driven by instantly recognizable political issues, Chester and Welsh summarize their essence in the following definition: for them, social movements are networks, which "[...] *have employed confrontational, imaginative, and highly symbolic repertoires of collective action based upon the ethos of 'direct action for direct democracy' [...]*" (Chester and Welsh, 97). Chapters 4 until 10 of this study present a chronological analysis of the way Baez has supported a variety of social movements throughout her career. Their significance for social change can not be underestimated, as they form appropriate forces for the development of culture; or—in the words of



Eyerman and Jamison – they are “[...] *central moments in the reconstitution of culture [...]*” (Eyerman and Jamison 6). While social movements are driven by particular political intentions – their efforts can shape significant breaks in the cultural development of society.

For a public figure like Joan Baez, artistic work alone is not enough to lead a satisfying professional life. She uses her fame as a singer and songwriter of national and international renown to support initiatives which successfully co-create a political climate in which the constant attempt to revive organized non-violence turns into a (repeatedly successful) means of overcoming organized violence. One of the most important conditions for such a course of action is the implementation of social movements, which represent the main professional platform for an artist and activist like Baez. Eyerman and Jamison constructively define the importance of social movements, already connecting it to the field of popular culture: “[...] *through their impact on popular culture, mores, and tastes, social movements lead to a reconstruction of processes of social interaction and collective identity formation [...]*” (Eyerman and Jamison 10). This study directs its main attention to the various ways a politically active singer like Baez can influence these processes. Two questions summarize the challenge of this research aim: How shall the humanities – which include the analysis of popular culture – deal with specific political positions? How shall the social sciences – which include the analysis of specific political positions – deal with artifacts of popular culture? Eyerman and Jamison mark the reason why these two questions include a cultural and political dimension at the same time and depict the role which social movements play in the melting process of these two dimensions:

[...] by combining culture and politics, social movements serve to reconstitute both, providing a broader political and historical context for expression, and offering, in turn, the resources of

culture—traditions, music, artistic expression—to the action repertoires of political struggle [...] (Eyerman and Jamison 7).

The process of using cultural resources (while being politically active) has to be examined carefully on the edge of potential ideological abuse. Artistic influence on social movements undeniably has to face the possibility of instrumental use: this danger, nonetheless, is no reason to stop any further debate about the combination of popular music and political activism, because “[...] *to the extent that social movements are able to transcend these instrumental (and commercial) usages, music as exemplary action becomes possible.*” (Eyerman and Jamison 24). Organized political activity and artistic expression (in our case: the work of a popular singer) can be intertwined, transcending possible ideological or party-political abuse.

Reproaching this coalescence within social movements with commercial interests and lack of political credibility does not dismiss all of its potential. Eyerman and Jamison seriously doubt whether, for example, music theorist Theodor W. Adorno is right with his assumption that people (who are those people?) merely listened to the radio and not to the music on the radio (see also Eyerman and Jamison 137). The aim of this study is to verify the truth behind this doubt (chapter 1.4 has a particularly close look at Adorno’s approach to popular culture and the authenticity of politically active artists). On the one hand, songs can be able to enhance the political struggle of social movements, which, on the other hand, “[...] *provide a cohesiveness, a kind of social glue, that reconfigures the relations between culture and politics [...]*” (Eyerman and Jamison 78). Throughout her whole career, Baez has offered her own work to the work of social movements and has thereby non-violently added relevant “[...] *social glue [...]*” (Ibid.) to their passionate political efforts. The main methodological approach to analyze this contribution is the biographical method.