

# Sacco and Vanzetti

By Howard Zinn

Fifty years after the executions of Italian immigrants Sacco and Vanzetti, Governor Dukakis of Massachusetts set up a panel to judge the fairness of the trial, and the conclusion was that the two men had not received a fair trial. This aroused a minor storm in Boston.

One letter, signed John M. Cabot, U.S. Ambassador Retired, declared his "great indignation" and pointed out that Governor Fuller's affirmation of the death sentence was made after a special review by "three of Massachusetts' most distinguished and respected citizens: President Lowell of Harvard, President Stratton of MIT and retired Judge Grant."

Those three "distinguished and respected citizens" were viewed differently by Heywood Broun, who wrote in his column for the *New York World* immediately after the Governor's panel made its report. He wrote:

It is not every prisoner who has a President of Harvard University throw on the switch for him....If this is a lynching, at least the fish peddler and his friend the factory hand may take uncton to their souls that they will die at the hands of men in dinner jackets or academic gowns.

Heywood Broun, one of the most distinguished journalists of the twentieth century, did not last long as a columnist for the *New York World*.

On that 50th year after the execution, the *New York Times* reported that: "Plans by Mayor Beame to proclaim next Tuesday 'Sacco and Vanzetti Day' have been canceled in an effort to avoid controversy, a City Hall spokesman said yesterday."

There must be good reason why a case 50-years-old, now over 75-years-old, arouses such emotion. I suggest that it is because to talk about Sacco and Vanzetti inevitably brings up matters that trouble us today: our system of justice, the relationship between war fever and civil liberties, and most troubling of all, the ideas of anarchism: the obliteration of national boundaries and therefore of war, the elimination of poverty, and the creation of a full democracy.

The case of Sacco and Vanzetti revealed, in its starkest terms, that the noble words inscribed above our courthouses, "Equal Justice Before the Law," have always been a lie. Those two men, the fish peddler and the shoemaker, could not get justice in the American system, because justice is not meted out equally to the poor and the rich, the native born and the foreign born, the orthodox and the radical, the white and the person of color. And while injustice may play itself out today more subtly and in more intricate ways than it did in the crude circumstances of the Sacco and Vanzetti case, its essence remains. In their case, the unfairness was flagrant. They were being tried for robbery and murder, but in the minds, and in the behavior of the prosecuting attorney, the judge, and the jury, the important thing about them was that they were, as Upton Sinclair put it in his remarkable novel *Boston*, "wops," foreigners, poor workingmen, radicals.

Here is a sample of the police interrogation:

Police: Are you a citizen?

Sacco: No.

Police: Are you a Communist?

Sacco: No.  
Police: Anarchist?  
Sacco: No.  
Police: Do you believe in this government of ours?  
Sacco: Yes; some things I like different.

What did these questions have to do with the robbery of a shoe factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts, and the shooting of a paymaster and a guard?

Sacco was lying, of course. *No, I'm not a Communist. No, I'm not an anarchist.* Why would he lie to the police? Why would a Jew lie to the Gestapo? Why would a black in South Africa lie to his interrogators? Why would a dissident in Soviet Russia lie to the secret police? Because they all know there is no justice for them.

Has there ever been justice in the American system for the poor, the person of color, the radical? When the eight anarchists of Chicago were sentenced to death after the Haymarket riot (a police riot, that is) of 1886, it was not because there was any proof of a connection between them and the bomb thrown in the midst of the police; there was not a shred of evidence. It was because they were leaders of the anarchist movement in Chicago.

When Eugene Debs and a thousand others were sent to prison during World War I, under the Espionage Act, was it because they were guilty of espionage? Hardly. They were socialists who spoke out against the war. In affirming the ten-year sentence of Debs, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes made it clear why Debs must go to prison. He quoted from Debs' speech: "The master class has always declared the wars, the subject class has always fought the battles."

Holmes, much admired as one of our great liberal jurists, made clear the limits of liberalism, its boundaries set by a vindictive nationalism. After all the appeals of Sacco and Vanzetti had been exhausted, the case was put before Holmes, sitting on the Supreme Court. He refused to review the case, thus letting the verdict stand.

In our time, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were sent to the electric chair. Was it because they were guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of passing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union? Or was it because they were communists, as the prosecutor made clear, with the approval of the judge? Was it also because the country was in the midst of anti-communist hysteria, communists had just taken power in China, there was a war in Korea, and the weight of all that could be borne by two American communists?

Why was George Jackson, in California, sentenced to ten years in prison for a \$70 robbery, and then shot to death by guards? Was it because he was poor, black, and radical?

Can a Muslim today, in the atmosphere of the "war on terror" be given equal justice before the law? Why was my upstairs neighbor, a dark-skinned Brazilian who might look like a Middle East Muslim, pulled out of his car by police, though he had violated no regulation, and questioned and humiliated?

Why are the two million people in American jails and prisons, and six million people under parole, probation, or surveillance, disproportionately people of color, disproportionately poor? A study showed that 70% of the people in New York state prisons came from seven neighborhoods in New York City: neighborhoods of poverty and desperation.

Class injustice cuts across every decade, every century of our history. In the midst of the Sacco Vanzetti case, a wealthy man in the town of Milton, south of Boston, shot and killed a man who was gathering firewood on his property. He spent eight days in jail, then was let out on bail, and was not prosecuted. The district attorney called it "justifiable homicide." One law for the rich, one law for the poor: a persistent characteristic of our system of justice.

But being poor was not the chief crime of Sacco and Vanzetti. They were Italians, immigrants, anarchists. It was less than two years from the end of the First World War. They had protested against the war. They had refused to be drafted. They saw hysteria mount against radicals and foreigners, observed the raids carried out by Attorney General Palmer's agents in the Department of Justice, who broke into homes in the middle of the night without warrants, held people incommunicado, and beat them with clubs and blackjacks.

In Boston, 500 were arrested, chained together, and marched through the streets. Luigi Galleani, editor of the anarchist paper *Cronaca Sovversiva*, to which Sacco and Vanzetti subscribed, was picked up in Boston and quickly deported.

Something even more frightening had happened. A fellow anarchist of Sacco and Vanzetti, a typesetter named Andrea Salsedo, who lived in New York, was kidnapped by members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (I use the word "kidnapped" to describe an illegal seizure of a person), and held in FBI offices on the 14th floor of the Park Row Building. He was not allowed to call his family, friends, or a lawyer, and was questioned and beaten, according to a fellow prisoner. During the eighth week of his imprisonment, on May 3, 1920, the body of Salsedo, smashed to a pulp, was found on the pavement near the Park Row Building, and the FBI announced that he had committed suicide by jumping from the 14th floor window of the room in which they had kept him. This was just two days before Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested.

We know today, as a result of Congressional reports in 1975, of the FBI's COINTELPRO program in which FBI agents broke into people's homes and offices, carried out illegal wiretaps, were involved in acts of violence to the point of murder, and collaborated with the Chicago police in the killing of two Black Panther leaders in 1969. The FBI and the CIA have violated the law again and again. There is no punishment for them.

There has been little reason to have faith that the civil liberties of people in this country would be protected in the atmosphere of hysteria that followed 9/11 and continues to this day. At home there have been immigrant round-ups, indefinite detentions, deportations, and unauthorized domestic spying. Abroad there have been extra-judicial killings, torture, bombings, war, and military occupations.

Likewise, the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti began immediately after Memorial Day, a year and a half after the orgy of death and patriotism that was World War I, when the newspapers still vibrating with the roll of drums and the jingoist rhetoric.

Twelve days into the trial, the press reported that the bodies of three soldiers had been transferred from the battlefields of France to the city of Brockton, and that the whole town had turned out for a patriotic ceremony. All of this was in newspapers that members of the jury could read.

Sacco was cross-examined by prosecutor Katzmann:

Question: Did you love this country in the last week of May, 1917?

Sacco: That is pretty hard for me to say in one word, Mr. Katzmann.

Question: There are two words you can use, Mr. Sacco, *yes* or *no*. What one is it?

Sacco: Yes

Question: And in order to show your love for this United States of America when she was about to call upon you to become a soldier you ran away to Mexico?

At the beginning of the trial, Judge Thayer (who, speaking to a golf acquaintance, had referred to the defendants during the trial as "those anarchist bastards") said to the jury: "Gentlemen, I call upon you to render this service here that you have been summoned to perform with the same spirit of patriotism, courage, and devotion to duty as was exhibited by our soldier boys across the seas."

The emotions evoked by a bomb that exploded at Attorney General Palmer's home during a time of war: like emotions set loose by the violence of 9/11: created an anxious atmosphere in which civil liberties were compromised.

Sacco and Vanzetti understood that whatever legal arguments their lawyers could come up with would not prevail against the reality of class injustice. Sacco told the court, on sentencing: "I know the sentence will be between two classes, the oppressed class and the rich class...That is why I am here today on this bench, for having been of the oppressed class."

That viewpoint seems dogmatic, simplistic. Not all court decisions are explained by it. But, lacking a theory that fits all cases, Sacco's simple, strong view is surely a better guide to understanding the legal system than one which assumes a contest among equals based on an objective search for truth.

Vanzetti knew that legal arguments would not save them. Unless a million Americans were organized, he and his friend Sacco would die. Not words, but struggle. Not appeals, but demands. Not petitions to the governor, but take-overs of the factories. Not lubricating the machinery of a supposedly fair system to make it work better, but a general strike to bring the machinery to a halt.

That never happened. Thousands demonstrated, marched, protested, not just in New York City, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, but in London, Paris, Buenos Aires, South Africa. It wasn't enough. On the night of their execution, thousands demonstrated in Charlestown, but were kept away from the prison by a huge assembly of police. Protesters were arrested. Machine-guns were on the rooftops and great searchlights swept the scene.

A great crowd assembled in Union Square on August 23, 1927. A few minutes after midnight, prison lights dimmed as the two men were electrocuted. The *New York World* described the scene: "The crowd responded with a giant sob. Women fainted in fifteen or twenty places. Others, too overcome, dropped to the curb and buried their heads in their hands. Men leaned on one another's shoulders and wept."

Their ultimate crime was their anarchism, an idea which today still startles us like a bolt of lightning because of its essential truth: we are all one, national boundaries and national hatreds must disappear, war is intolerable, the fruits of the earth must be shared, and only through organized struggle against authority can such a world come about.

What comes to us today from the case of Sacco and Vanzetti is not just tragedy, but inspiration. Their English was not perfect, but when they spoke it was a kind of poetry. Vanzetti said of his friend Sacco:

Sacco is a heart, a faith, a character, a man; a man lover of nature and mankind. A man who gave all, who sacrifice all to the cause of liberty and to his love for mankind: money, rest, mundane ambition, his own wife, his children, himself and his own life.... Oh yes, I may be more witty, as some have put it, I am a better babbler than he is, but many, many times, in hearing his heartfelt voice ring a faith sublime, in considering his supreme sacrifice, remembering his heroism I felt small, small at the presence of his greatness, and found myself compelled to fight back from my eyes the tears, quench my heart throbbing to my throat to not weep before him: this man called chief and assassin and doomed.

Worst of all, they were anarchists, meaning they had some crazy notion of a full democracy in which neither foreignness nor poverty would exist, and thought that without these provocations, war among nations would end for all time. But for this to happen the rich would have to be fought and their riches confiscated. That anarchist idea is a crime much worse than robbing a payroll, and so to this day the story of Sacco and Vanzetti cannot be recalled without great anxiety.

Sacco wrote to his son Dante: "So son, instead of crying, be strong, so as to be able to comfort your mother...take her for a long walk in the quiet country, gathering wild flowers here and there, resting under the shade of trees...But remember always, Dante, in this play of happiness, don't you use all for yourself only...help the persecuted and the victim because they are your better friends.... In this struggle of life you will find more love and you will be loved."

Yes, it was their anarchism, their love for humanity, which doomed them. When Vanzetti was arrested, he had a leaflet in his pocket advertising a meeting to take place in five days. It is a leaflet that could be distributed today, all over the world, as appropriate now as it was the day of their arrest. It read:

You have fought all the wars. You have worked for all the capitalists. You have wandered over all the countries. Have you harvested the fruits of your labors, the price of your victories? Does the past comfort you? Does the present smile on you? Does the future promise you anything? Have you found a piece of land where you can live like a human being and die like a human being? On these questions, on this argument, and on this theme, the struggle for existence, Bartolomeo Vanzetti will speak.

That meeting did not take place. But their spirit still exists today with people who believe and love and struggle all over the world.