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Gil Fagiani

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Remember! Justice Crucified* A Synopsis, Chronology, and Selective Bibliography of the Sacco and Vanzetti Case

Gil Fagiani

The Enduring Legacy of the Sacco and Vanzetti Case

Two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, became celebrated martyrs in the struggle for social justice and political freedom for millions of Italian Americans and progressive-minded people throughout the world. Having fallen into a police trap on May 5, 1920, they eventually were indicted on charges of participating in a payroll robbery in South Braintree, Massachusetts in which a paymaster and his guard were killed. After an unprecedented international campaign, they were executed in Boston on August 27, 1927. Intense interest in the case stemmed from a belief that Sacco and Vanzetti had not been convicted on the evidence but because they were Italian working-class immigrants who espoused a militant anarchist creed.

The Sacco and Vanzetti affair remains one of the most famous and controversial cases in American legal history and one of the world's great trials. The issues that impacted so tragically on their lives—anti-immigrant sentiment, capital punishment and persecution of political opponents—strongly resonate today.

Nicola Sacco

Nicola Sacco came from a family of property owners and

*In spite of a police order not to display banners, red velvet armbands stamped with the words "REMEMBER! JUSTICE CRUCIFIED" were worn by many of the thousands of mourners at Sacco and Vanzetti's funeral procession

employers in the Southern Italian town of Torremaggiore. In search of freedom and adventure, he immigrated along with his brother Sabino to the United States in 1908. In 1917, he married Rosina Iacovelli and had a son and a daughter by her. At the time of his arrest, he had been employed for eleven years as a skilled and highly-paid worker in a shoe factory in Milford, Massachusetts, where he was known as a steady workman absorbed in his family, his work, and his garden.

Sacco was drawn to anarchism for both moral and emotional reasons, his temperament being such that he couldn't ignore the plight of the less fortunate. Influenced by the famous Lawrence Textile Strike of 1912, and the Industrial Workers of the World, he took part in various strike activities. Eventually he became a follower of Luigi Galleani, the militant leader of the antiorganizational faction of Italian American anarchism who endorsed violence as a legitimate tactic in the struggle for a classless society.

Bartolomeo Vanzetti

Bartolomeo Vanzetti came from a family of well-to-do farmers in the Italian town of Villafalletto. Like Sacco, economic hardship played no role in his decision to leave Italy. Distraught at the death of his mother, he immigrated in 1908 to America. Unlike Sacco, he never married and worked at many jobs, including common laborer, cook, cordage-plant employee, and itinerant fish peddler. From an early age he loved books and had an insatiable appetite for knowledge. His letters, articles, and autobiographical writings comprise some of the most compelling documents in the enormous literature that has grown around the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Vanzetti became a convert to political radicalism as a result of the harsh ethnic and class prejudices he experienced in the United States. As a follower of Galleani, he fled along with Sacco to Mexico in 1917 to avoid being drafted into the Army.

After more than seventy years, the question of whether Sacco and Vanzetti committed the crimes for which they were executed still generates intense passions and controversy. Millions of people came to view Sacco and Vanzetti as symbols of class justice, and in the process created a distorted image of them as harmless idealists. Based on the depth of their allegiance to Galleani's brand of anarchism, it seems probable that they participated—if only indirectly—in some violent political activities. Today a consensus exists among scholars that their trial was a travesty of justice, but there still remains a sharp debate about their innocence or guilt, with more suspicion of guilt focusing upon Sacco than Vanzetti.

The Critical Issues—Then and Now

The Relationship of Italian Americans to American Society

Between 1880 and 1920, more than 4.1 million Italians (more than any other immigrant group) entered the United States. Coming at a time of virulent anti-Italian prejudice, the Sacco and Vanzetti case marked a crossroads for Italian immigrants and their children. A majority of Italians viewed the case as a lynching no different than the 30 Italians lynched elsewhere in the country. It confirmed for them the beliefs they had already acquired in Italy: that justice had little to do with laws and institutions.

The violence and nativist hysteria embodied in the Sacco and Vanzetti case impelled Italian immigrants and the first and second generation of Italian Americans to turn inward, and move in a more conservative direction. It decimated the Italian American radical movement which sought the correction of deeply imbedded social wrongs, and damaged progressive forces within the Italian American community. As a result, Italian Americans would be dependent upon reactionary *padroni* and *prominenti* in politics. However, important exceptions to this general trend did exist, the most notable being the substantial support given by Italian Americans to the political campaigns of progressive Congressman Fiorello La Guardia, Communist New York Councilman Pete Cacchione, and seven-term radical Congressman Vito Marcantonio.

Today, right-wing Italian American politicians seek to convince Italian Americans to view their vital interests as being linked with those of the rich and powerful and to view as enemies liberals, immigrants, people of color, and poor people. Along with conservative and assimilationist Italian American organizations, they have obscured the Sacco and Vanzetti case, making its powerful legacy of oppression and struggle inaccessible to new generations of Italian Americans.

Nativism

All U.S. citizens (except Native Americans and African Americans) trace their origins to immigrants. Nonetheless, the United States has had a long history of scapegoating immigrants during times of economic crisis and uncertainty. At the time of the Sacco and Vanzetti case, nativist reaction to what were considered the inferior races of Southern Europe took the form of public attacks by people as prominent as Woodrow Wilson, the formation of groups like the Immigrant Restriction League, legislation restricting immigration, and mob attacks and lynchings.

Today immigrant-bashing is again on the rise. Pat Buchanan, a

Republican candidate for the 1996 Presidential race, has called for a five-year moratorium on legal immigration and a fence constructed along 200 miles of the United States-Mexico border. We also recall that California voters passed the legislative initiative known as Proposition 187, whose intent is to deny health care, social services, and public education to undocumented immigrants. Mexicans were the primary targets of Proposition 187, but Italians, who constitute the second largest undocumented immigrant group in New York State, would be gravely threatened by the further spread of this initiative.

Political Repression

American entry into World War I precipitated wide-ranging legal and extralegal vigilantism against radicals that included repressive legislation, mass deportations and arrests, as well as extorted confessions, beatings and murder. No political organization suffered more from the repression than the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.). Founded in 1905, the I.W.W. represented the major American expression of anarcho-syndicalism, in which economic actions on the job, federated industrial unions, and ultimately a massive general strike would lead to the revolutionary transformation of society in the interests of the working class. Italians, who were often shunned by A.F.L. unions, were welcomed by the I.W.W. which reminded them of similar organizations they had known in Italy.

The I.W.W., along with most of the U.S. left, opposed U.S. entry into World War I, which they viewed as an imperialist war. In September 1917, the U.S. Justice Department agents began raiding I.W.W. offices throughout the nation with warrants branding the entire leadership—over two hundred men and women—as subversive. In the first major trial in Chicago, nearly 100 members, virtually the entire first and second tier of past and present leaders, were sentenced to federal terms of ten to twenty years.

Sacco and Vanzetti's political beliefs and activism influenced every aspect of the case, from their arrest to their execution. They became victims of the post-World War I "Red Scare," popularly known as the Palmer Raids (named after U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer) which were precipitated by a fear of the influence of the Bolshevik-led Russian Revolution. Both Sacco and Vanzetti were deeply involved in the anarchist movement. In 1916, Vanzetti led a strike of 4,000 rope and twine operators, and in 1918 Sacco was a minor leader in a long shore workers' strike. Judge Webster Thayer who presided over all of these trials said of Vanzetti, "This man, although he may not have committed the crime attributed to him, is nevertheless morally culpable, because he is the enemy of existing institutions." The very day that he refused a motion for a new trial, he

was heard boasting to an acquaintance, "Did you see what I did to those anarchistic bastards the other day?"

Current U.S. political prisoners include:

- Since 1982, Silvia Baraldini, an Italian national, has been serving a forty-year sentence for RICO (racketeering) conspiracy charges growing out of her support of the Black Liberation and Puerto Rican Independence Movements. In spite of joint petitions by Baraldini and the Italian government in 1989, 1991, and 1994, based on the Strasbourg Convention (which provides for the transfer of prisoners to their country of origin to complete their sentences), the letters of a million Italian citizens, and the support of 90% of the Italian Parliament, the U.S. government has refused to repatriate her. In August, Italian President Scalfaro, at the behest of 70 Italian intellectuals, has again asked President Clinton to allow Baraldini—who is gravely ill with cancer—to complete her sentence in an Italian prison.

- Fifteen *independentistas*—supporters of Puerto Rican independence—are in prison for attacking symbols of U.S. colonialism. Thirteen of them arrested between 1980 and 1983 were accused of being members of the Armed Forces for National Liberation (F.A.L.N.). The New York City Council passed a resolution supporting the prisoners' release, and in 1993, *Ofensiva '92*, a broad, Puerto Rico-based defense organization, made a formal application to the Clinton Administration for release.

- Mumia Abu-Jamal, former Black Panther Party leader, long-time critic of the Philadelphia police force, and prominent radio journalist (in 1981 the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists had elected him president) has been imprisoned since 1981, and has spent 12 years on Death Row.

- Leonard Pelletier, a national leader of the American Indian Movement, was convicted of shooting two F.B.I. agents during a day-long siege in 1975 in the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. World religious leaders, Democratic and Republican Congressmen, as well as the National Association of Defense Lawyers, and millions of petitioning private citizens, have asked the White House for a new trial.

Anarchism

Until recently, anarchism remained one of the more neglected dimensions of the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Reaching its high point during the period from 1912 to 1916, the Italian-American anarchist movement was once a significant part of the American left. During this period it supplied the shock troops and most of the outstanding

intellectuals of class-conscious U.S. anarchism. Between 1870 and 1940, Italian anarchists published nearly one hundred newspapers and journals—more than any other ethnic group. Anarchists played an important role in the 1912 Lawrence textile strike, the 1913 Paterson silk strike, the 1916 Mesabi Iron Range strike, and many coal strikes in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

The brutal repression that began during World War I succeeded in shutting down the anarchist press and dispersing its members. Criminal syndicalism laws were passed in many states with the specific objective of destroying the I.W.W. However, the Italian American anarchist movement still managed to summon sufficient forces to fight the fascist supporters of Mussolini in the streets of Little Italies and to defend political prisoners.

Elements of anarchism have continued to survive. During the 1960's, aspects of anarchism appeared in the beliefs and practices of the New Left. With the collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, left oppositional movements have begun to re-examine the antiauthoritarian and antistatist tenets of anarchism. The militant, direct-action wing of the ecology movement has directed—for the most part nonviolently—"propaganda of the deed" against forces exploiting the world's natural resources.

Death Penalty

Two major legal executions of political dissidents have occurred in the twentieth century during reactionary periods following wars. Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested and eventually executed during the most brutal, if not most extensive, period of political repression in U.S. history. In 1950, with the onset of the Cold War and McCarthyism, the government accused two Communists—Julius and Ethel Rosenberg—of divulging the secret of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union, and in 1953 put them to death in the electric chair. These executions sent powerful messages that in times of crisis the government will not tolerate radically dissenting views.

The United States remains virtually the only western industrialized democracy that continues to judicially kill convicted criminals. Recently, even South Africa has abolished the death penalty. Some legal experts argue that the U.S. government may be in breach of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that it ratified in 1992: specifically, Article 5, which deals with the execution of juveniles, and Article 7, which deals with protection against cruel and unusual punishment.

Ten days before Mumia Abu-Jamal's August 17th execution date, Judge Albert Sabo granted an indefinite stay in order to grant ample time to have the judicial proceedings reviewed by higher courts. While

the judge hotly denied it, Jamal's supporters attribute the stay to intense pressure, both at home and abroad, to halt the first court-ordered execution of the U.S. political dissident in forty years. A strong support movement has grown in Italy where 100,000 signatures have been gathered on petitions demanding a new trial.

The Impact on the Left

The efforts of the Boston Defense Committee, the openly and aggressively political defense by lawyer Fred Moore, and the Communist-led International Labor Defense transformed the little-known Sacco and Vanzetti case into an international *cause célèbre*. The case represented a coming of age for a whole generation of liberals, socialists, and Communists. Pietro Di Donato, the pre-eminent Italian American novelist of the first half of the twentieth century, joined the Communist party the night that Sacco and Vanzetti were executed. After being arrested several times for protesting Sacco and Vanzetti's imprisonment, William Patterson, a prominent African American leader, joined the Communist Party. Indeed, one of the central ironies of the Sacco and Vanzetti case is that while both victims were dedicated anarchists, their judicial martyrdom resulted in thousands of sympathizers joining the socialist and communist movements.

American intellectuals and artists were powerfully moved by the case. The dance innovator Isadora Duncan turned her Paris apartment into an unofficial headquarters of the Sacco and Vanzetti Defense Committee. Novelist Katherine Anne Porter and poets Edna St. Vincent Millay and Meridel Le Seur picketed and went to jail for Sacco and Vanzetti. Macolm Cowley immortalized them in verse:

March on, oh dago Christs, whilst we
march on to spread your name abroad
like ashes in the winds of God.

Other artists who were inspired by Sacco and Vanzetti include: the writer Maxwell Anderson whose play, *Winterset* (1935), was made into a movie; Bernard De Voto; James T. Farrell; Howard Fast; Frank Harris; John Dos Passos; Upton Sinclair; James Thurber; and H. G. Wells. The musicians include: Marc Blizstein, who refers to the case in his opera, *The Condemned* (1932), and Woody Guthrie. Painters include Ralph Fasanella, and Ben Shahn, whose series of paintings (1931), are called *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*.

Hundreds of thousands marched in solidarity with Sacco and Vanzetti in protest demonstrations throughout the world. Upon hearing the news of their death, Europe seethed. In Paris, sixty police were injured in a pistol battle when a mob tried to set up barricades in front of the American embassy. In Geneva, the evening before their execu-

tions, a mob of five thousand roamed the streets, overturning American cars, sacking shops displaying American goods, and gutting theaters showing American films. At one of the largest meetings in the history of the Weimar Republic, Ernst Thälman, the leader of the German Communist party, compared the murder of Sacco and Vanzetti to that of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.

Miscarriage of Justice

The execution of Sacco and Vanzetti became a watershed in twentieth-century U.S. history. For many of its citizens the workings of American democracy now seemed as unjust as the world's older societies, no longer serving the common people, but once again serving the interests of the rich and powerful.

Chronology of the Sacco and Vanzetti Case

June 11, 1888

Bartolomeo Vanzetti was born at Vallafalletto, in the province of Cuneo, in the Piedmont region of Northern Italy.

April 22, 1891

Nicola Sacco was born at Torremaggiore, in the province of Foggia, in the Puglia region of Southern Italy.

April 12, 1908

Nicola Sacco arrived with his brother in Boston and settled in Milford, Massachusetts.

June 20, 1908

Bartolomeo Vanzetti arrived at Ellis Island.

January 1912

"Bread and Roses Strike" in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The solidarity between largely unskilled, diverse immigrant groups constituted a landmark in working class history. Socialist lawyer Fred Moore helped defend I.W.W. strike leaders Joe Ettor (a Brooklyn-born Italian American), and Arturo Giovannitti, known as the "poet of the workers", arrested on trumped-up murder charges.

April 20, 1914

During a strike against the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, two Italian women and 10 children were burned alive when their tents were set on fire by the National Guard, an atrocity that became known as the Ludlow Massacre.

Spring 1917

After the United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917, Sacco and Vanzetti fled to Mexico to avoid registering for the draft.

September 1917

Severe political repression of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.).

May 16, 1918

In response to antiwar resistance and the November 7, 1917 Bolshevik seizure of power, Congress passed the Sedition Act. This law made it a crime for anyone to discourage recruitment, to utter, print, write, or publish any "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" against the government, constitution, or uniform of the United States.

July 18, 1918

Edited by Luigi Galleani (1861-1931), and serving as the leading organ of Italian American anarchism, *Cronaca Sovversiva*, was outlawed by the authorities. Galleani represented the major figure of antiorganizational anarchism in the U.S. and the mentor and spiritual leader of Sacco and Vanzetti. Unlike the anarcho-syndicalists, he rejected participation in labor unions, and other structured vehicles of social change and believed that "natural law"—including all spontaneous acts of violence aimed at the state—ensured the inevitability of revolution.

June 2, 1919

Expulsions, widely attributed to Italian anarchists, took place in: Boston, Cleveland, New York, Paterson, Philadelphia, and Pittsburg. In Washington, D.C. the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer was bombed.

June 24, 1919

Luigi Galleani deported to Italy.

January 2, 1920

The full brunt of the Palmer Raids. During the night an estimated 5,000 suspected radicals were arrested in 33 cities throughout the United States. Many, especially in Boston, were systematically beaten and their property was destroyed. In addition, 800 aliens were deported in 1920, largely for political reasons. The antiwar supporters of Galleani were deported wholesale in perhaps the most intensive case of selective repression.

April 15, 1920

The paymaster and the guard of the Slater and Morrill Shoe Factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts, were shot dead and robbed of \$15,776.

May 3, 1920

Andrea Salsedo, one of Galleani's chief assistants, was arrested without due process. After being held for eight weeks and illegally and tortured, he either jumped or was pushed to his death from the fourteenth floor of the New York City office of the Department of Justice.

May 5, 1920

Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested and charged with the South Braintree robbery and murders. A few days after their arrest, their friend, typesetter Aldino Felicani organized a 17-member defense committee among the East Boston anarchists. Felicani also started the defense journal, *L'Agitazione pro Sacco-Vanzetti* in Boston (1920-1925).

August 16, 1920

Despite a strong alibi supported by many witnesses, Nicola Vanzetti was found guilty of a botched robbery attempt in Bridgewater, Massachusetts on December 24, 1919, and sentenced to 10 to 15 years (an unusually harsh sentence for a first criminal offense in which nobody was injured).

August 19, 1920

Through the efforts of labor leader and anarchist editor Carlo Tresca, Fred Moore took up the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti.

September 16, 1920

An Italian American anarchist set off a dynamite bomb at the corner of Wall and Broad Streets in retaliation for Sacco and Vanzetti's arrest, killing 30 people and wounding 200 others. Before the April 19, 1995 bombing of a federal office building in Oklahoma City, it was viewed as the worst terrorist incident of its kind in American history.

1921

President Harding signed a bill establishing a quota system for immigrants coming into the United States that drastically reduced Italian immigration.

May 31, 1921

Sacco and Vanzetti's joint trial began.

July 14, 1921

Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted.

October 1921

Mass demonstrations in Europe against verdict.

December 24, 1921

Judge Thayer denied a motion for a new trial.

August 23–Sept. 29, 1923

Sacco committed to Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

August 1924

Moore withdrew from case.

October 1, 1923

Judge Thayer denied all five supplementary motions.

January 2–May 28, 1925

Vanzetti committed to Bridgewater Hospital.

June 1925

The Communist Party-led International Labor Defense (I.L.D.), took up the case. The I.L.D. believed that legal strategy had to be complemented by a mass protest movement.

November 18, 1925

Celestino Madeiros, a young immigrant from the Azores, convicted of murder and robbery, claimed responsibility for the crimes charged to Sacco and Vanzetti.

1926

Much collaborative detail pointed to the theory that the South Braintree murders were the work of professional bandits called the Morelli gang from Providence, R.I.

April 9, 1927

Judge Thayer imposed the death sentence on Sacco and Vanzetti.

July 27, 1927

Committee headed by Harvard president A. Lawrence Lowell concluded that judicial process had been just and clemency unwarranted.

August 3, 1927

Governor Fuller refused clemency.

August 5, 1927

Bombings in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

August 23, 1927

Sacco and Vanzetti were executed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, while hundreds of thousands protested in Rome, Paris, Moscow, London, Barcelona, Milan, Genoa, Mexico City, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Havana, Tokyo, Berlin, and Lisbon. In Boston, the police arrested 154 participants in a death-watch picket line. In New York's Union Square Park, the police clashed with a throng of 50,000.

August 24, 1927

After disrupting a funeral procession of thousands in downtown Boston, the police attacked marchers without provocation, as they reached a suburban cemetery, beating women and innocent bystanders.

September 27, 1932

The home of trial judge Webster Thayer was destroyed by a bomb blast.

August 23, 1978

Governor Michael Dukakis signed a proclamation stating that Sacco and Vanzetti's legal proceedings were permeated with unfairness. The proclamation called for vigilance, "against our susceptibility to prejudice, our intolerance of unorthodox ideas, and our failure to defend the rights of persons who are looked upon as strangers in our midst."

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La Situazione Politica d'Italia

Gil Fagiani

I giornalisti stimati
del mio paese,
fanno presto a fare i critici
del sistema politico d'Italia.
É un pasticcio di partiti,
secondo loro,
che servono tanti interessi,
che hanno tante preoccupazioni
con ideologie sorpassate,
e principi senza significato,
che il governo non funziona
per nulla.

É la opinone di
questi signori eruditi,
che l'Italia si debba adattare
allo stesso sistema
del suo fratellone americano,
un sistema dove il vincitore
prende tutto,
e il solo principio
è il potere.

E prima che mi dimentichi,
c'è la famosa corruzione
all'italiana,
un'altra invenzione degli italiani,
come la pizza margherita.
Guardate ai giornali,
i nostri sapienti ci dicono,
ogni giorno, in Italia,
ci sono più funzionari,
alti o bassi,
di politica o d'affari
che sono messi
dietro alle sbarre.
Ma mi piace immensamente
vedere
i ricchi criminali
che vanno in galera,

invece della abituale folla,
di giovani drogati.
E scusate, se qui
nella terra della libertà
mi secca che il figlio
di un ex-Presidente
abbia rubato un miliardo di dollari
e poi viene comunque
eletto senatore
del grande stato del Texas.

Non saprei dire
cosa gli italiani dovrebbero fare
con il loro sistema politico.
Però un giorno
vorrei
entrare in cabina elettorale
e per una volta
nella mia vita
votare per un partito
che non sia schiavo dei ricchi
e per un candidato
di mia propria scelta
invece di—
con l'arrivo
del Signor Perot—
tre versioni
del Partito Repubblicano.

Gil Fagiani
21 giugno 1995

The Political Situation in Italy

Gil Fagiani

Esteemed journalists
of my country
are quick to criticize
Italy's political system.
It's a mess of parties,
according to them,
serving so many interests
that are so preoccupied
with out-of-date ideologies
and meaningless principles
that the government doesn't work
at all.

It's the opinion of
these erudite gentlemen
that Italy should adopt
the same system
as its American big brother,
a system where the winner
takes all,
and the only principle
is power.

And least I forget,
there is the famous corruption *all'italiana*
another invention of the Italians,
like *pizza margarita*.
Look at the newspapers,
our wise men tell us,
every day, in Italy,
more officials
high or low,
politicians or businessmen
are put
behind bars.

But it pleases me immensely
to see
rich crooks
go to jail
instead of the usual crowd
of young drug addicts.
And excuse me, if here
in the land of liberty
it bothers me that the son
of an ex-President
can steal a billion dollars
and still be elected senator
of the great state of Texas.

I'm not sure
what the Italians should do
about their political system.
But I know that one day
I would like
to go into a polling booth
and for once
in my life
vote for a party
that isn't a prisoner of the rich
and a candidate
of my choice
instead of—
with the appearance
of Signor Perot—
three versions
of the Republican Party.