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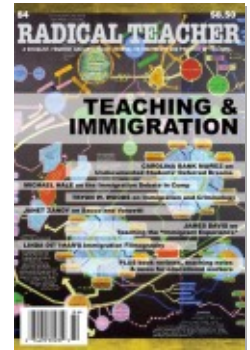
## Teaching the Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti In and Against the American Grain

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# Teaching the Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti In and Against the American Grain

By Janet Zandy



August 22, 1927

In his iconic *In the American Grain* William Carlos Williams distinguishes between the bodies of conquerors and the souls of the murdered and defeated: “History, history! We fools, what do we know or care? History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery. . . . Fierce and implacable we kill them but their souls dominate us” (39–40). Williams’s “souls” are not otherworldly or religious, but rather historical ghosts, those persistent residues of injustice that permeate the American grain.

Such ghosts, reminders of the contradictions embedded in American ideals, have particular relevance and resonance in remembering the story of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

The letters of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, written during their seven-year imprisonment from 1920 to their 1927 execution, slice back into a history of violence and oppression of Italian radical immigrants in the early twentieth century. Like the Triangle fire of 1911, and perhaps for the same reasons of blatant injustice, the fate of Sacco and Vanzetti evoked an

outpouring of cultural responses—poetry, novels, music, plays, and art (particularly Ben Shahn’s paintings and mural). The symbolic power of these two anarchists, shoemaker and fish peddler, continues with the recent documentary by Peter Miller and journalistic history by Bruce Watson. Theirs is not a dated story. Their arrests amidst a climate of terror and fear, their confusion about the charges against them, and their limited English resonate with our own time of terrorist anxiety and treatment of undocumented immigrants.

FRED ELLIS, 1927. THE CASE OF SACCO AND VANZETTI IN CARTOONS FROM THE DAILY WORKER. CREDIT: MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS DIVISION.

Why come to America? Sacco emigrated at the age of 17 in 1908 with his older brother. He recalled, "I always remember when my brother Sabino and me were on ship board on the way to this free country, the country that was always in my dreams" (Letters 10). Vanzetti, who was apprenticed to a baker at the age of 13 by his father and faced long hours of labor instead of the education his intellect craved, also came in 1908 at the age of 20. Sacco from Torremaggiore, the boot of southern Italy, and Vanzetti from Villafalletto, a province in northwestern Italy, emigrated to America not as stereotypically impoverished and jobless Italian peasants (both families owned land in Italy) but for their own complicated reasons—grief over a dead mother, independence from parental control, employment opportunities, rejection of Catholicism—and the lure of an ideal America of freedom and liberty.

The sinking of Sacco and Vanzetti's dream of America is a large story that lends itself to specific analysis. Although their names are forever linked in history, their personalities and interests differed. Ferdinando Sacco, who later adopted the first name of a deceased older brother Nicola, was a husband, a father, and a skilled worker who at one time held three jobs—an edge trimmer in a shoe factory by day, a night watchman in the same factory by night, and as gardener tending his boss's property (Polenberg ix-x, 3). He had little formal schooling and was not particularly interested in education, seemingly content to be working with his hands and, because he loved nature, being out of doors. Due to a technicality in Massachusetts law, he was not allowed to work while he was imprisoned because he was not yet officially sentenced. In a 1922

letter he alludes to the extent of his work deprivation, "I am joy when I am work" (Letters 7).

In contrast, Bartolomeo Vanzetti was unmarried, worked a string of low paying jobs, and lived in a boarding house. Intensely interested in learning both in Italian and English, he was a careful and keen interpreter of literary, philosophical, and political texts. For example, in response to Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* (*Gitanjali*) he praised "the beauty of language, the wonderful style and grammatical correctness," but added, "there is nothing new, nothing of unknown in it. . . . Not a word in all of Tagore's beautiful poetries about social problems" (Letters 88). Vanzetti's intellectual development involved a deliberate process of deconstructing and reconstructing his ideas, even as they veered away from the teachings of his parents and their Catholic faith. "It is a quarter of century that I am struggling to dislearn and relearn; to disbelieve and re-believe; to deny and re-confirm. By little of school and very much experiences (well and rightly understood) I became a cosmopolite perambulating philosopher of the main road—crushing, burning a world within me and creating a new—better one" (Letters 242).

What Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti held in common was a fierce belief in anarchism as a philosophical and political answer to injustice against workers. They believed—and it was a belief system akin to religious beliefs—that freed of government, police, judicial, and institutional control, human beings would form bonds of mutuality and communal values based on individual liberty and freedom. Anarchism—literally without government or hierarchy—was and is an

appealing shape-shifting philosophy of many accents, interpretations, and actions ranging from the nature-based anarchism of Thoreau to the rash “propaganda by deed” of Alexander Berkman. Sacco and Vanzetti were members of a group of anarchists, “Gruppo Autonomo” who met on Sunday afternoons in East Boston (Watson 15) and who may or may not have had some association with the spate of anarchist-inspired bombings in 1919. They were followers of Luigi Galleani, who wrote a primer on bomb making and was deported back to Italy in 1919. Believers in “direct action,” some anarchists answered state violence with the language of bombs. Although they were not pacifists, anarchists challenged the patriotic fever of World War I. During the trial, Sacco and Vanzetti were labeled “draft dodgers” because they went to Mexico to avoid serving in what they believed to be a capitalist war where workers were forced to fight other workers. Anarchists were swept up alongside Socialists, Wobblies, and Bolsheviks during the Palmer Raids of 1919-1920 and many were deported. Believing in the ideals of liberty and justice, Sacco and Vanzetti were Italian *and* American radicals out of a particular American grain. As Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale note in *La Storia*, Sacco and Vanzetti learned their anarchism in America: they “believed in human dignity, freedom, and justice. Anarchism made the Italians feel superior to the materialists who scorned them as ignorant and docile. It was essential to their mental and spiritual survival” (297).

At first, Sacco and Vanzetti were minor actors in a larger drama about the disjuncture between the ideals of America and the brutal conditions laborers, espe-

cially immigrants, faced. Juxtapose their idealistic language with the newspaper accounts, public rhetoric, and the anti-immigrant climate of government crack-downs and suppressed strikes of the time, and one begins to reconstruct a kind of Manichean struggle between the enormity of state power and the miniscule efficacy of radicals to disrupt the status quo. It is important to understand that Sacco and Vanzetti were not interested in advancing the aspirations of bourgeois individualism. Although Sacco, in particular, had a stable working-class life, his sensibility and Vanzetti’s were not the American Dream of individual upward mobility, but rather a political philosophy that held America accountable for economic justice for all its inhabitants. While Sacco was appreciative of the efforts of many in his defense, he was also stubbornly conscious of their class differences. In June of 1927, awaiting what he called “the ignominious execution” (Letters 52), he wrote to his sympathetic supporter Gardner Jackson:

“Although knowing that we are one heart, unfortunately, we represent two opposite class; the first want to live at any cost and the second fight for freedom, and when it come to take away from him he rebel; although he know that the power of the first, of the opposite class will crucify his holy rebellion. It is true, indeed, that they can execute the body but they cannot execute the idea which is bound to live. And certainly, as long as this system of things, the exploitation of man on other man reign, will remain always the fight between those two opposite class, today, and always” (Letters 56).

Vanzetti, identifying himself as a “humble worker anarchist,” viewed the class struggle as human division: “Of course, we Anarchists are so because we differ in

opinions from all the other humans who are not Anarchists.” (Letters 94). And from his deathhouse cell he wrote to his Defense Committee: “We are innocent. This is a war of plutocracy against liberty, against people. We die for Anarchy. Long life Anarchy” (Letters 314).

Revolutionary rhetoric is one thing; broad daylight banditry is another. The letters make a compelling case for recognizing the nuanced complexities and differences between voiced revolutionary ideas and brutal acts of robbery and murder. In a 1921 letter expressing his appreciation for belief in his innocence, Vanzetti writes:

I did not spittle a drop of blood, or steal a cent in all my life. A little knowledge of the past; a sorrowful experience of the life itself had gave to me some ideas very different from those of many other humane beings. But I wish to convince my fellowmen that only with virtue and honesty is possible for us to find a little happiness in the world. I preached; I worked. I wished with all my faculties that the social wealth would belong to every humane creatures, so well as it was the fruit of work of all. But this do not mean robbery for a insurrection.

The insurrection, the great movements of the soul, do not need dollars. It need love, light, spirit of sacrifice, ideas, conscience, instincts. It need more conscience, more hope and more goodness. And all this blessed things can be seeded, awoked, grewed up in the heart of man in many ways, but not by robbery and murder for robbery.

. . . I do not need to become a bandit. I like the teaching of Tolstoi, Saint Francesco and Dante. . . . I do not care for money, for leisure, for mundane ambition. And honest, even in this

world of lambs and wolves I can have these things. My father has many field, houses, garden. He deal in wine and fruits and granaries. He wrote to me many times to come back home, and be a business man. Well, this supposed murderer had answered to him that my conscience do not permit me to be a business man and I will gain my bread by work his field. (Letters 81-82)

Documentation of the legal case against Sacco and Vanzetti fills six volumes. Briefly, they were convicted of the killing and robbery of a paymaster and a guard in South Braintree, Massachusetts, on April 15, 1920, a crime that was linked to an earlier attempted robbery in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, for which Vanzetti was later accused, tried, and sentenced despite eyewitness accounts that he was selling fish at the time of the robbery. Those eyewitnesses were all Italians and their testimony virtually discounted. Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested on May 15 for the Braintree murder and robbery. At the time of their arrests, they thought they were picked up because of their radicalism, given the Red Scare hysteria in Boston at the time. A jury not of their peers found Vanzetti and Sacco guilty of the South Braintree robbery and first degree murders in July 1921. Their appeals for a new trial based on significant evidence of their innocence were denied by the same Judge Webster Thayer who presided over their first trial. (Thayer’s name later became associated with “rank injustice” and H.G. Wells coined “Thayerism” to mean “the self-righteous unrighteousness of established people” quoted in Watson 116-117). After seven years of mostly separate imprisonment, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed shortly after midnight on August 23, 1927.

Their conviction, like the hanging of the Haymarket anarchists in 1887 and the arrests of Arturo Giovannitti and Joseph Ettor during the 1912 Lawrence strike, cannot be properly understood merely based on forensic evidence (which was dubious at best). Rather, their case attests to a palpable class war in America, intense prejudice against immigrants (the Italian “race” was not viewed as “white”), and the widespread practice by those in power of assuming guilt by association.

Numerous sources from differing perspectives trace the crime and the fate of Sacco and Vanzetti. Peter Miller’s documentary *Sacco and Vanzetti* contains the perspective of sympathetic historians and artists as well as news clips of police rounding up immigrants viewed as terrorists. The collected letters in the Penguin edition include an Appendix with a detailed summary titled “The Story of the Case.” Journalist Bruce Watson’s in-depth investigation, *Sacco & Vanzetti: The Men, the Murders, and the Judgment of Mankind*, describes Sacco and Vanzetti as “a study in chiaroscuro . . . light/dark,” claiming they “may have been lambs, but they belonged to a wolfpack” (18). Although Watson resists “shout[ing] their innocence” (368), he too is affected by the power of Sacco and Vanzetti’s seven-year insistence of their innocence. He concludes that they deserved a second trial (368) and notes that their case, “more than eighty years after their executions” still “haunt[s] American history” (351).

Vanzetti and Sacco knew that their fate was connected to something larger, that they were historical players. They were also prescient anti-Fascists, and so their “rescue” as Vanzetti hoped for and described it, might be “a moral rescue; the re-evaluation of the human liberty and

dignity. It must be the con-damnation of the Fascismo not only as a political and economic fact, but also and over all, as a criminal phenomenon, as the exploitation of a purulent growth which had been going, forming and ripening itself in the sick body of the social organism” (Letters 92). Shortly before his execution Vanzetti expressed a wish that “our fate may . . . serve as a tremendous lesson to the forces of freedom—so that our suffering and death will not have been in vain” (Letters 325). Their letters reveal the seven year tension between hope and despair and, ultimately, the absorption of the fact that despite the thousands of words uttered and printed, the international support of demonstrations and petitions, the significant sums of money collected for their defense, and the credible evidence of their innocence (including a death cell confession by career criminal Celestino Medeiros that his gang committed the holdup and murders), despite the judicial case for a new trial and the recognized prejudice of Judge Webster Thayer, despite the loyalty of family and friends, despite all this, the oligarchy of power and self interest in Massachusetts could not be moved. Vanzetti summed up the weight of prejudice against them: “Not even a sheep-killing dog would have been found guilty by an American Jury on the evidences produced against us. . . . They convicted us because we are Italian, against war, and anarchist” (Letters 268). Their funeral procession drew two hundred thousand mourners (Watson 349).

It is tempting to teach just to the legalities of their case—were Sacco and Vanzetti guilty or innocent? But I want to suggest enlarging that analysis through a series of perspectives that get to that undercurrent of defeated bodies but undead souls that



William Carlos Williams identified as integral to the American grain.

First, their letters reveal a process of self-education, a compressed *bildungsroman* of intellectual development during their seven-year incarceration. They were manual workers who were also thinkers. They had an almost religious sensitivity to what the theologian Dorothee Soelle describes as “the worlds of pain created by the structural organization of our work”(112). Their literacy in English was minimal at the time of their arrests. As they acquired competency in reading and writing the English language (especially Vanzetti, who was monkish in his devotion to texts), their historical consciousness deepened. Sacco was inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s letters. Vanzetti wrote his autobiography, published translations, and critiqued other writers. Vanzetti commented on his own development from “humble worker anarchist” through “incessant mental work” to a more mature philosophical thinker. Tracing their incarcerated self-education (a process evidenced in other prison literature) honors them as liberatory thinkers and gives them a larger legacy than simply casting them as sentimentalized martyrs of a radical cause.

Next, consider teaching the letters through the intersections of transnationalism and Americanism, perhaps juxtaposing the letters with Randolph Bourne’s 1916 essay, “Trans-National America.” Within six months of their unexpected guilty verdict, the Sacco and Vanzetti case would take on international material and symbolic importance. Seven years later, as the day of their execution approached, newspapers throughout Europe and Latin America, from Moscow to Montreal to Manila, uttered an “international out-

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cry” (Watson 330). Sacco and Vanzetti were worker internationalists, transnational and cosmopolitan figures who resisted the pressure of the melting pot and embraced, in Randolph Bourne’s words, an ideal democratic federation, a “Beloved Community” whose members would build an economically and socially just America. Vanzetti described Sacco’s position against war as based on cosmopolitan principles of human solidarity (Letters 371). Their letters are examples of interethnic worker solidarity. Their fate resonated with contemporaneous Swedish labor activists and Chinese students living in France. They had an epistemology of work, a way of reading the world through the materiality of labor. Vanzetti observed in a letter, “I was looking at the people going up and down of the streets. I can tell which of them are employed and which are not by their way of walking” (Letters 85).

The letters have contemporary resonance especially as viewed through a keyword analysis of “radical” or “terrorist.” Shorn of ideological romanticism, especially from the comfort of the academy, what does *radical* mean then and now? How important were pamphlets, speeches, and newspapers to their cause? Why did they feel compelled to carry weapons the night of their arrests? Who were their compatriots? What did they have in common with other resisters, par-

ticularly those whom the press separately labeled the “most dangerous women” in America—Lucy Parsons, Mother (Mary Harris) Jones, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn? What sustains or quells radical opposition in America? Have radicals been muted for fear of being labeled terrorists?

The praxis of their belief system is complicated. They were practitioners of anarchism as a kind of secular religion. The letters are replete with religious allusions to their calvary and martyrdom. They were called “two poor Christs.” But theirs is a secular spirituality, not exactly *tikkun* in the Jewish cultural sense of repair, but more transformative, a leap in human evolution. In particular, the poetic Vanzetti used religious imagery and Biblical references to speak about injustice and how “the proletarian Jobs” might be transformed into “Sampson” (Letters 186).

Sacco and Vanzetti wrote hundreds of letters in Italian and English. Their extant letters are in the archives of the Harvard University Law Library. The Penguin edition is a selection of those letters edited by Marion Denman Frankfurter and Gardner Jackson in 1928. Richard Polenberg explains in his detailed Introduction how the collected letters were selected and edited and how their authenticity, especially Vanzetti’s “extraordinary eloquence,” was questioned (xxix). Contemporary students might want to reflect on the audience for these letters—then and now. Sacco and Vanzetti’s struggle with a second language was inseparable from their fierce class analysis and collective sensibility. It is a struggle, as Sacco wrote, for “life freedom” (Letters 65). Their two voices, like the men themselves, are distinct. Sacco’s English is imperfect and he is

less inclined toward analysis and interpretation than the self-taught intellectual Vanzetti. (Note, I have deliberately not used *sic* in quoting from their letters.) Yet they both resisted well-intentioned but cheap sentimentality in their correspondence with supporters. During the seven-year effort to secure a new trial, they sustained a confidence in their core beliefs, their innocence, and their dignity as workers in relation to other workers. Anger and bitterness surface but don’t dominate the letters.

When it was clear that all appeals were lost and the end was imminent, Sacco wrote to his son: “Remember always, Dante, in the play of happiness, don’t you use all for yourself only, but down yourself just one step, at your side and help the weak ones that cry for help, help the prosecuted and the victim, because that are your better friends” (Letters 72). In addition to teaching Vanzetti’s rich and complex letters, include his other articulations, especially his last statement to the court, excerpted below:

“Not only am I innocent of these two crimes, not only in all my life I have never spilled blood, but I have struggled all my life, since I began to reason, to eliminate crime from the earth. Everybody that knows these two arms knows very well that I did not need to go into the streets and kill a man or try to take money. I can live by my two hands and live well. . . . This is what I say: I would not wish to a dog or to a snake, to the most low and misfortunate creature of the earth—I would not wish to any of them what I have had to suffer for things that I am not guilty of. I am suffering because I am a radical and indeed I am a radical; I have suffered because I was an Italian, and indeed I am an Italian; I have suffered



more for my family and for my beloved than for myself; but I am so convinced to be right that you can only kill me once but if you could execute me two times, and if I could be reborn two other times, I would live again to do what I have done already.

I have finished. Thank you."

Finally, in addition to the pedagogical and historical consciousness involved in assigning Sacco and Vanzetti's letters, consider using their letters more personally, perhaps as a means to surface family political silences. Working with them evoked my own "identity-estrangement" moment, fairly typical of Italian American intellectuals of my generation. (I was born in 1945.) The very idea of Italian radicalism in America triggered distant memories of growing up (three quarters) Italian American, visiting my grandmother in Hoboken, New Jersey, sitting on her perfect sofa, not eating, speaking, or playing, and never hearing a word of Italian. These were the conservative 1950s and although I could not have put a name to it as a child, I sensed the constrictions of Italian American family life as a kind of double exposure—a preservation of Italian identity, mostly in terms of family, tradition and Roman Catholicism, and a determination to assimilate, to make it as Americans. How my own father reconciled the push/pull of these identities, I have no idea. He was around twelve years old when Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in 1927. Did the family talk about it at the dinner table, read the stories in the Italian and American press, take sides? If there was any recognition of Italian radicalism then, it was long buried and muted by the time my cousins, sister, and I came along. Growing up in Union City and Lyndhurst, New Jersey, I never knew that there was an oppositional American his-

tory or another way to be Italian. I want to reclaim this legacy from the recesses of history to recognize the contributions of Italian thinkers to the preservation of American liberties. It is the "Bread and Roses" kernel in the American grain, but it is not limited to the Lawrence strike of 1912. It is another line and another way to understand cultural formations that emerge out of communal sensibility rather than bourgeois individualism. Sacco and Vanzetti, long dead anarchists, hold a significant place in that line.

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