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The Legend of Sacco and Vanzetti: Keeping the Story Alive in Literature, Song, and Film

On 15 April 1920 the robbery of a shoe factory payroll in South Braintree, Massachusetts resulted in the murders of paymaster Frederick A. Parmenter and security guard Alessandro Berardelli. The authorities charged Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti with the crime. Although the two men proclaimed their innocence, Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted and executed by the state of Massachusetts on 23 August 1927. Much of the case focused upon the anarchist and antiwar beliefs of the two defendants, illustrated by presiding Judge Webster Thayer's reported comment that he was going "to fry those anarchist bastards." The evidence against Sacco and Vanzetti was flimsy at best, and many observers of the trial perceived the convictions as evidence of prejudice against anarchists and the "new immigrants" from Southern and Eastern Europe during the post World War I Red Scare. Appeals from intellectuals in the United States and around the world, as well as global protests by workers, failed to halt the executions.¹

However, in 1977 on the fiftieth anniversary of their deaths, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, citing the prejudicial atmosphere in which the trial was conducted, signed legislation exonerating Sacco and Vanzetti. In proclaiming 23 August 1977 as Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti Memorial Day, Dukakis stated, "Any stigma and disgrace should be forever removed from the names of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti,

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from the names of their families and descendants, and so, from the name of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; and I hereby call upon all the people of Massachusetts to pause in their daily endeavors to reflect upon these tragic events, and draw from their historic lessons the resolve to prevent the forces of intolerance, fear, and hatred from ever again uniting to overcome the rationality, wisdom, and fairness to which our legal system aspires.”²

The issues of equal justice before the law pointed out by Dukakis explain why the case of Sacco and Vanzetti continues to resonate in American culture. The saga of Sacco and Vanzetti is kept alive in the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay and William Carlos Williams; Ben Shahn’s painting *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*; Sherwood Anderson’s play *Winterset*; and the music of Joan Baez, Irish folksinger Christy Moore, ska band Against All Authority, and classical composer Anton Coppola.³ Nevertheless, the case remains on the fringes of mainstream popular culture. Perhaps this is due to the association of Sacco and Vanzetti with terrorism and the anarchist propaganda of the deed which would raise the consciousness of the masses and foment revolution. In his study into the anarchist backgrounds of Sacco and Vanzetti, Paul Avrich documents that the two men were followers of the Italian anarchist Luigi Galleani, who was suspected by the American government of involvement in the bombing of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer’s home. Galleani was deported in June 1919. Meanwhile, Galleanist Andrea Salcedo died in May 1920 while in the custody of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. While asserting that he finds it impossible to establish the innocence or guilt of Sacco and Vanzetti for the South Braintree murders, Avrich concludes, “Both men, it must be emphasized, were social militants, advocates of relentless warfare against government and capital. Far from being the innocent dreamers so often depicted by their supporters, they belonged to a branch of the anarchist movement which preached insurrectionary violence and armed retaliation, including the use of dynamite and assassination.”⁴

This is the historical context in which the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti was conducted, and this guilt by association continues to exert considerable influence. But not all scholars concur with the portrait painted by Avrich. Howard Zinn, author of the best-selling *A People’s History of the United States*, offers a more positive take on the politics of Sacco and Vanzetti in his introduction to the 1978 reprinting of Upton Sinclair’s 1928 novel *Bos-*

ton: A Documentary Novel of the Sacco-Vanzetti case, insisting, “They believed, as anarchists generally do, that the resources of the earth should be distributed fairly equally among all people; that decisions should be made collectively in small groups in touch with one another; that such a system of equality in wealth and political power would make crime, punishment, and prisons unnecessary.”⁵ But in order to implement this vision, a class struggle would be necessary, culminating in a general strike by the working class and overthrow of the capitalists. Thus, Sacco and Vanzetti were a threat to the political establishment which had a motive to prosecute the Italian anarchists. Zinn concludes, however, that the state was never able to provide a motive for Sacco and Vanzetti to engage in the Braintree robbery, as the stolen payroll was never recovered.

There is, nevertheless, a reluctance to embrace Sacco and Vanzetti as the xenophobia and anti-radicalism of American culture retain a strong hold upon the popular imagination. Thus, keeping the story of Sacco and Vanzetti alive has fallen upon the more marginalized elements of popular culture on the political left, who recognize that the saga of the two Italian immigrants reminds us of the dangers inherent in limiting freedom of expression and curtailing civil liberties. This paper will focus upon two major manifestations of this progressive political tradition in American public culture, in addition to more recent related film representations from Giuliano Montaldo, Hal Ashby, and Peter Miller. The first examined major source will be the Socialist writer Upton Sinclair’s novel *Boston*, originally published in 1928, the year after the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti. The second major work came later. When the United States faced another wave of political persecution after the Second World War, folksinger Woody Guthrie wrote and recorded *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti*, connecting the Italian-born anarchists to the struggles of working-class Americans. Although Guthrie wrote and recorded these songs in 1946-1947, record producer Moses Asch did not release the music until 1960 when the political winds of change seemed more receptive to them.

In addition to being men of the left, both Sinclair and Guthrie were going through some personal issues regarding their political convictions. As a member of the Socialist Party, Sinclair had broken with Eugene Debs and many of his comrades in supporting Woodrow Wilson’s entrance into the First World War. Following his disillusionment regarding the Versailles Treaty

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and post-war repression of dissent and radicalism, Sinclair had second thoughts regarding his support of the Wilsonian crusade. In advocating the innocence of Sacco and Vanzetti, Sinclair could restore his more radical credentials. Yet, as his novel indicates, Sinclair often struggled with the case and expressed some reservations regarding the assumption on the political left that the Italian anarchists were not involved with the South Braintree robbery and shooting. The author, nevertheless, concluded that the defendants were certainly the subject of class and ethnic prejudice in the post World War I atmosphere of xenophobia and antiradicalism gripping the United States.

Guthrie was undergoing a similar process of disillusionment following the Second World War. The folksinger embraced the global conflict as a crusade against fascism which would usher in a better world. In addition to destroying militarism in Japan and Nazism in Germany, Guthrie assumed that the struggle against fascism would end Jim Crow and assure a more egalitarian America. Guthrie moved around New York City with the slogan “This Machine Kills Fascists” engraved on his guitar and joined the Merchant Marine. But the post-war utopia he envisioned failed to materialize. The anticommunist crusade of the Cold War labeled reformers, civil rights advocates, and labor activists as potential communist fronts undermining the American way of life. Dissent was muted in an atmosphere of fear. Meanwhile, Guthrie’s marriage deteriorated and his young daughter perished in a fire. Beginning to feel the effects of a hereditary disease that would stifle his voice by the late 1950s, Guthrie struggled to regain his political equilibrium. He believed that the Sacco and Vanzetti project would restore him to the radical tradition of protest in America which linked the persecution that vested economic interests inflicted upon Italian immigrants and Oklahoma migrants. Guthrie and Sinclair perceived the story of Sacco and Vanzetti as essential to understanding the post-war efforts of American capital to assure its political and economic dominance by associating voices of dissent with acts of murder and terrorism. In the current post 9/11 political climate of fear and anxiety, perhaps it is time to once again resurrect Sacco and Vanzetti—as well as the works of Guthrie and Sinclair.

When Upton Sinclair published *Boston* in 1928, the novelist’s reputation for political activism was already well established. He joined the Socialist Party in 1902 and wrote for the Socialist weekly *Appeal to Rea-*

son. After observing the horrid working conditions of Chicago slaughterhouses, Sinclair produced *The Jungle* (1905), earning political acclaim and financial success. In *The Jungle*, Sinclair was aiming for the hearts of Americans and hoped to advance the cause of socialism. Instead, he hit his fellow citizens in their stomachs. *The Jungle* did not usher in the socialist millennium, but it did contribute to such progressive reforms as the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act.

Sinclair's novels following *The Jungle* continued to raise themes of class and politics. *The Industrial Republic* (1907) envisioned America's conversion to socialism under the direction of William Randolph Hearst, while *The Moneychangers* (1905) exposed a financier based upon J. P. Morgan. Sinclair picketed the New York City offices of John D. Rockefeller, whom he blamed for the bloody suppression of the Ludlow, Colorado coal strike in 1914 and denounced in the muckraking novel *King Coal* (1914). The novelist, however, broke with the Socialist Party over American intervention in the First World War. While initially supporting the war effort, Sinclair was critical of President Woodrow Wilson's record on civil liberties and opposition to the Russian Revolution. During the 1920s the prolific Sinclair published seventeen books. In his so-called "Dead Hand" series, Sinclair produced a half-dozen nonfiction polemical works depicting how capitalism was undermining American democracy. The author also continued to address political and social issues in his fiction. *Oil!* (1927) focused upon the California petroleum industry and the Teapot Dome scandal, while in *Boston* he turned his attention to the Sacco and Vanzetti case.⁶

In his preface to *Boston*, Sinclair explains that he was attempting to write a "contemporary historical novel" with both historical and fictional characters. For his novel, Sinclair carefully read the trial record and interviewed key participants in the case, including defense attorneys Lee Swanson and Fred Moore as well as defendant Bartolomeo Vanzetti. While clearly sympathetic to the cause of the working class and Sacco-Vanzetti, Sinclair does introduce a degree of ambiguity into his book, writing, "I wish to make it clear that I have not written a brief for the Sacco-Vanzetti defense. I have tried to be a historian. . . . My book will not satisfy either side completely; both have expressed dissent—which I take to mean that I have done my job."⁷ As a socialist, Sinclair was clearly uncomfortable with elements of anarchism which he perceived as advocating violence.

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The plot for *Boston* is somewhat contrived, and Sinclair was not a great stylist. The novel of over 700 pages could have used some editing. Nevertheless, one can learn a great deal about the Sacco-Vanzetti case through reading this massive volume. The protagonists of *Boston* are sixty-year old Cornelia Thornwell and her college-aged granddaughter, Betty Alvin. They are members of the wealthy and prestigious Thornwell family, but the two women turn their backs on their social class to embrace the cause of working class immigrants. This dialectic is at the heart of Sinclair's novel.

Boston begins with the death of Cornelia's husband, former Massachusetts Governor Josiah Thornwell. Tired of always keeping quiet and doing as she was told, Cornelia decides to abandon the family banking fortune along with the overbearing families of her three daughters. The runaway grandmother ends up in North Plymouth, where she boards with an Italian family and becomes good friends with the gentle and philosophical Bartolomeo Vanzetti. To support herself, Cornelia finds employment in a cordage plant. Although the work is difficult, the elderly woman finds comfort in the simplicity of the Brini family and Vanzetti, but she does come to realize that her social class is living off the labor of these Italian immigrant workers.

Cornelia is eventually discovered by her family, who are appalled by her actions. They convince the eccentric lady to give up her job, but she refuses to reassume her life of affluence. Cornelia takes an apartment in working-class Boston, where she is joined by her bohemian granddaughter, Betty. The two women take a European vacation, and Betty is caught up in the euphoria of the Russian Revolution, becoming a communist and taking up with a divorced journalist whom she eventually marries. Meanwhile, their friend Vanzetti has been arrested along with his colleague Sacco.

Cornelia and Betty return to New England, where, to the shock of the respectable Thornwell family, they assume an active role in the Sacco-Vanzetti defense committee. When denounced as a class traitor for deserting her Boston Brahmin roots, Cornelia reminds her detractors of the Boston dissenting tradition going back to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips. It is the hypocrisy of the ruling class which incites the wrath of Sinclair, who perceives the Sacco-Vanzetti trial as an effort to stifle working-class discontent. Sinclair writes, "It was the aim of the prosecution, not so much to refute the testi-

mony of Vanzetti, as to rouse the prejudice of the jurors against him; to fill them with emotions of hatred and fear, so that they would be incapable of thinking; to make them see an anarchist infidel draft dodger as a depraved wretch, deserving to die many deaths.”⁸

The key point of conflict comes when defense attorney Lee Swanson asks Cornelia to take the witness stand and provide a fictitious alibi for her friend Vanzetti. Swanson explains that Vanzetti will be acquitted as no one in Boston will dare challenge the veracity of a Thornwell and member of her social class. But Cornelia cannot bring herself to lie, even to save her beloved Vanzetti. Yet, she knows that other members of her family and social class are willing to lie under oath to protect their economic interests. When bankrupt businessman Jerry Walker sues the family banking business for fraud, the Thornwells have no problem with committing perjury. As Cornelia observes, “There were fifteen millions of dollars at stake; and the driving power of this sum was so colossal that it swept every barrier before it, and truth, honor, dignity, justice, law, country, God and religion went out like the contents of a chicken-ranch when a dam bursts at the head of a valley.”⁹

Without Cornelia’s testimony, Sacco and Vanzetti are convicted. But Cornelia continues to believe in the system and pushes for an independent commission under the leadership of the legendary Harvard University President A. Lawrence Lowell to investigate allegations of prejudice in the trial. Lowell and his commission uphold the verdict and discount the confession of Celestino Madeiros that he and the Morelli gang in Providence were responsible for the South Braintree robbery and shootings. Betty describes her grandmother as naive. After all, Lowell was a mill owner and only protecting the investments of his class.

The novel concludes with the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti, but not until Cornelia has a final visit with her old friend Vanzetti (The novel tends to focus upon Vanzetti while Sacco remains in the background.). Cornelia is distraught with the executions, but the younger generation embraces the anarchists as martyrs. Betty exclaims to her grandmother:

Don’t you see the glory of this case—it kills off the liberals! Before this, it was possible to argue that injustice was an accident, just an oversight—in a country that was so busy making automobiles and bathtubs and books of etiquette! But now here’s a test—we settle the question forever! We take our

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very best—not merely cheap politicians, but our great ones! Our biggest business man! Our most cultured university president! Our supreme court judges—even the liberal ones! We prove them all alike—they all know what flag they fight under, who serves out their rations! They all take their places in the ranks, with every button in position, and all them washed behind the ears! They all obey the great capitalist drill sergeant, and not a man deserts to the enemy—not one single man!¹⁰

Sinclair concluded his lengthy novel by stating, “To a hundred million groping, and ten times as many still in slumber, the names of Sacco and Vanzetti would be the eternal symbols of a dream, identical with civilization itself, of a human society in which wealth belongs to the laborers.”¹¹

However, some doubt has been expressed recently that Sinclair was less than honest in his presentation of the case. A letter dated 15 September 1929 from Sinclair to his attorney friend John Beardsley, and uncovered by a California rare book dealer, states that Sacco-Vanzetti defense attorney Fred Moore told the novelist that the two anarchists were guilty of the robbery and murders. To some the letter appeared to be evidence that Sinclair was guilty of the same hypocrisy as the upper class villains of *Boston*. In a piece for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sinclair biographer Kevin Mattson suggests that critics of the novelist take a closer look at the Beardsley letter as well as the text of Sinclair’s *Boston*. Mattson points out that later in his correspondence with Beardsley; Sinclair expresses reservations regarding the veracity of Moore, noting the attorney’s bitter split with the defense committee as well as Moore’s confession that Sacco and Vanzetti had never admitted their guilt to the attorney. Mattson goes on to observe that in *Boston*, Sinclair does express ambiguity regarding the innocence of Sacco and Vanzetti, especially Sacco whom the novelist did not know particularly well. In fact, an essential plot device in the novel is the effort by the defense attorneys to elicit perjury from Cornelia Thornwell. In the final analysis, Sinclair maintained his suspicions of anarchism, but he was convinced that Sacco and Vanzetti had not received a fair trial. He also believed that revolutionaries and the working class were driven to violence by the oppression of the ruling class.¹²

Similar opinions regarding class warfare were expressed by Woody Guthrie in his series of songs on Sacco and Vanzetti recorded in the post World War II years of 1946-1947. Guthrie was born on 14 July 1912 in

Okemah, Oklahoma. His perception of humanity and political ideas were grounded in an agrarian tradition of protest in Oklahoma, where a strong Socialist Party operated before the First World War; a Christian tradition that Jesus was the champion of the poor and meek who would inherit the earth and drive the moneychangers out of the temple; a tragic family history; and the experience of his generation with the Depression and dust bowl of the 1930s.

Guthrie's father Charlie was an entrepreneur whose real estate schemes were unsuccessful. The family was then beset by a series of financial and personal disasters. Guthrie's mother Nora was institutionalized, suffering from Huntington's chorea, a degenerative disease of the central nervous system which eventually claimed her son.

Guthrie's father moved the family to Pampa, Texas in 1927, and Guthrie joined them three years later. Guthrie married and attempted to support a young family on his meager earnings as a musician and sign painter. In 1936, Guthrie, like many dust bowl refugees, journeyed to California, where he found work on Los Angeles radio station KFVD, teaming with Maxine Crossman for the popular show "Here Comes Woody and Lefty Lou." While working at KFVD, Guthrie began to perform at Communist Party functions and wrote a column called "Woody Sez" for *The People's Daily World*, denouncing the profit system and injustice of Depression-era America.

Guthrie's politics were becoming too radical for the progressive Fred Burke, who owned KFVD, and Guthrie departed for New York City in 1939. In February 1940, Guthrie wrote "This Land Is Your Land" in response to what he considered the shallow patriotism of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." After performing at a concert to benefit John Steinbeck's Committee for Agricultural Workers, Guthrie was discovered by folklorist Alan Lomax, who helped Guthrie record his first commercial effort, "Dust Bowl Ballads." The Oklahoman also hosted two radio shows for CBS, but when sponsors pressured Guthrie to abandon his "Woody Sez" column for the communist *Daily Worker*, Guthrie left New York City and secured employment with the Bonneville Power Administration. Inspired by the potential for public power, Guthrie penned such classic songs as "Roll On, Columbia" and "Pastures of Plenty."

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In 1941, Guthrie accepted an invitation from Pete Seeger to return to New York City and join the Almanac Singers, who supported the organizing efforts of the CIO and opposed American entrance into the Second World War. However, Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor would make Guthrie a supporter of the war effort. In 1943, Guthrie wrote his autobiography *Bound for Glory*, extolling the virtues of the common people and Guthrie's early struggles. During World War II, Guthrie served in the Merchant Marine with his singing partner Cisco Houston. Near the war's conclusion, Guthrie was drafted into the Army for a year's service, but the discipline of military life did not sit well with him.¹³

The immediate post war years were difficult ones for Guthrie as the emerging Cold War and anticommunist reaction dimmed his vision for a better world that would emerge from the sacrifices of a global struggle against fascism during the Second World War. And perhaps the folksinger held out too much promise for the post-war world, as is revealed in his voluminous journals and correspondence with Marjorie Greenblatt Mazia, who would become his second wife in 1945. Writing to Marjorie, with whom Woody was expecting a child, the folksinger made clear his hopes for the future, writing:

It makes me glad when I think that this is the war that's going to give not only Jews, but Irish, Negro, Catholic, Protestant, Italians, Mexicans, Hindus, Indians, everybody of every race and color, an equal place to work and live equal, under the sun. This is the war the world has been waiting on for twenty five million years. This will settle the score once and for all, of all kinds of race-hate, and it will give everybody their job doing what they do best; time for learning, time for rest, and time for fun and singing; nobody can push a man off his farm, and nobody can make a family live like rats in a filthy dump; nobody can toss a family of kids out into the streets for the rent. Singers will sing! Dancers will dance! Writers write! Planter will plant and reapers will reap! Boy, ain't that something to think about, huh?¹⁴

In a similar vein, Guthrie prepared a notebook for the birth of his and Marjorie's child, whom Woody insisted upon calling Railroad Pete, although the singer asserted that he would be equally happy with a female child. Guthrie wrote to Railroad Pete, "A girl can do just as much in any field as a boy, to beat fascism—although I'm hoping this is one monster that your

eyes won't have to see. . . ." Guthrie told Railroad Pete to envision the world through the eyes of his mother, who was a dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company. His admiration for his future wife was most evident in the vision he shared with Pete, "My particular dream is to see her plans of dancing reach the most people in the best way . . . and to show the real joy and fun of being a human being in the first place, and do you know that this is a thing which so many people lose sight of too early in life? The work is the dance and the joy is the doing it. The job is the fun of being here."¹⁵

As it turns out, Railroad Pete was a girl. Cathy Ann Guthrie was born 6 February 1943, and Woody was delighted with a girl just as he promised. His pet name for Cathy was "Stackabones," and he composed numerous children's songs in her honor, maintaining that the future belonged to the children who should not be controlled and coerced by their elders. But with the exception of Cathy, Guthrie was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the post war world. The struggle against fascism did not eradicate imperialism, war, exploitation, the profit system, and Jim Crow. The union millennium idea of equality with all workers finding fulfillment and happiness in the fruits of their labors was not materializing. In addition, Guthrie's marriage was entering a troubled time. The singer found it difficult settling into married life. In theory, he could wax eloquent about Marjorie's commitment to dance, but in reality he felt neglected and increasingly sought sexual liaisons with other women. He also wrote passionate and graphic love letters to various women. Mary Ruth Crissman, the younger sister of his former singing partner Maxine, pressed charges against Guthrie, and he served a short jail term. Guthrie did not believe that he was doing anything wrong, proclaiming, "No human here among us has got any right to walk up to any other human and tell you what to do, and when to do it." In fact, Guthrie biographer Joe Klein believes that the singer "inferred that his legal troubles were of a piece with the HUAC hearings, the blacklist, and the other attempts to limit free expression. He saw himself as yet another victim of right-wing fanaticism. . . ."¹⁶ But Guthrie took solace in his devotion to daughter Cathy. His world, however, came crashing down upon him when Cathy perished in a tragic apartment fire three days after her fourth birthday.

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It is in this tragic period that Guthrie received his commission from Moses Asch at Disc Records to compose and record a collection of songs on the legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti. Asch appreciated the Guthrie children's songs, but the record producer hoped to move the composer in the more political direction of his *Dust Bowl Ballads* and the *Struggle* album of labor and protest songs. Guthrie was certainly taking this assignment seriously, dedicating a notebook entry to the martyred anarchists. Observing that this was the first entry in the book, Guthrie pledged, "I have read the pamphlets about you and my mind is not a blank. I will prove this to you by filling this book with your story, the case, and your frame up." Guthrie promised Sacco and Vanzetti, "I am going to write your history all over again, because the history of you two men is the pure and perfect reflection of the battle of the whole movement of Labor." Recognizing that with his rural origins in Oklahoma and Texas, some might find Guthrie an odd choice to write the story of two Italian anarchists residing on the East Coast, Guthrie sought to build a union bridge between Oklahoma and Italy. Guthrie wrote, "You are Italian and I am from Oklahoma, but I have left out from Oklahoma to do some bigger jobs, just like you left your native house and home back in Italy." Guthrie perceived his migrants from Oklahoma as similar to the immigrants from Italy who were forced to leave their homes and seek a new promised land. Guthrie concluded, "I saw the same vision that you did and all of us dust bowl families saw your same vision. It is the one big union we all saw. It shines just as bright over your Italy as over the prairies and the flatlands of my dust bowl." As Peter La Chapelle suggests in his account of the "Okie" migration to Southern California, Guthrie's genius was to use the concept of refugee to "form a symbolic alliance" between migrants from the Southern Plains and immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.¹⁷

While Guthrie considered the Sacco and Vanzetti songs as his most important writing since he left the Army in December 1945, he struggled with the project just as he was encountering problems in his personal life and perhaps early signs of the Huntington's chorea that would institutionalize him by the mid 1950s. On 4 November 1946, Guthrie wrote Moses Asch, reluctantly informing the music publisher that it would be necessary to postpone the Sacco and Vanzetti record, stating that he felt rushed. Perhaps when he was able to afford a car of his own he would be in a better

position to investigate Boston and Massachusetts, rather than being dependent upon public transportation. Calling the Sacco and Vanzetti material the “most important songs I have worked on,” Guthrie explained to Asch, “I’ve read all the booklets and pamphlets over not once but lots of times. I am very familiar with the case down on paper. I’ve made several drawings of all sorts based on the trial, but I just can’t make up these songs till I’ve set my foot on every spot related to this Sacco & Vanzetti story and case. I won’t let this be one of those hit or miss affairs. I just can’t. I wouldn’t for no kind of money.”¹⁸

Although Guthrie was disappointed with his effort, he did record eleven songs which Asch released in 1960 along with “Sacco’s Letter to His Son,” in which Pete Seeger put the words of Sacco to music. The *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* was re-released in 1996 by Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings. Guthrie biographers tend to dismiss the Sacco-Vanzetti recordings. Wayne Hampton simply states, “The *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* are merely a few weak, unenthusiastic, and unconvincing songs with which to remember the martyrs.” Ed Cray and Joe Klein conclude that *Sacco & Vanzetti* was ultimately a failure because the songs were too lengthy and polemical as Guthrie was growing increasingly frustrated with the political direction America was taking in the early Cold War years.¹⁹

However, a closer reading of the Guthrie lyrics and music suggests that the folksinger had not totally lost his ability to communicate the endeavors of working class people. In “The Flood and the Storm,” Guthrie places the story of Sacco and Vanzetti within the broader historical context of the post World War I Red Scare and fears by the ruling class that the spirit of the Russian Revolution might sweep the world. Guthrie concludes this song by noting the global implications of Sacco and Vanzetti as martyrs for the working class:

The peasants, the farmers, the towns, and the cities,
 The hills and the valleys they did ring
 Hindenburg, Wilson, Harding, Hoover, Coolidge
 Never heard this many verses sing
 The zig-zag lightnings, the rainbow of the thunder,
 The singing of the clouds blowing by,
 The flood and the storm for Sacco and Vanzetti
 Caused the rich man to pull his hair and cry

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This larger historical perspective is less important for “I Just Want to Sing Your Name” and “Two Good Men,” as Guthrie extols the Italian immigrants more as workers than symbols. In “Two Good Men,” Guthrie wrote:

Sacco earned his bread and butter
Being the factory’s best shoe cutter;
Vanzetti spoke both day and night,
Told the workers how to fight
Two good men a long time gone²⁰

The details of the case as a political conspiracy to frame Sacco and Vanzetti are presented in “Suassos Lane,” “You Souls of Boson,” and “Red Wine.” The folksinger’s background research on the case is evident in his familiarity with discrepancies in the testimony of prosecution witnesses, ballistic tests of weapons, confessions regarding the Morelli gang, and the supporting evidence for the alibis of Sacco and Vanzetti on the day of the South Braintree murders and robbery. Guthrie’s contempt for Judge Webster Thayer is apparent in “Old Judge Thayer,” which employs a folk technique of having animals represent humans. The animals conclude that Thayer is a threat to all innocent life.

The more articulate of the two defendants, Vanzetti, who demonstrated some mastery of the English language, is the subject of two songs, “Vanzetti’s Rock” and “Vanzetti’s Letter,” based upon the anarchist’s appeal to Massachusetts Governor Alvan Fuller. While denouncing Thayer and the manipulation of evidence in support of the state, Vanzetti refuses to beg, proudly proclaiming:

Your Excellency, we’re not asking pardon, but asking to be set
free
With liberty, and pride, sir, and honor, and a pardon we will not
receive;
A pardon you’ve given to criminals who’ve broken the laws of
our land;
We do not ask for pardon, sir, because we are innocent men²¹

The more upbeat tempo tune “Root Hog and Die” seeks to convey the urgency of protesters seeking to reach Boston before the two men are put to death, but the most powerful song in this collection is “We Welcome to Heaven,” in which Guthrie again demonstrates his faith that a heavenly award awaits those who fight for social justice in this world. Guthrie concludes:

If you work for wages, you support the rich capitalist;

If you don't work, you're a lumpen to them;
If you play the gamble, of course, you're a gambler,
And if you don't gamble, you never do win²²

Guthrie's discontent with capitalism led to the singer's association with the Communist Party, an organization he perceived as at least willing to fight for social equality and combat the profit system. However, the philosophical differences between the communists and anarchists did not appear to be on Guthrie's radar screen. The folksinger continued to espouse the solidarity of the Popular Front in which all those on the political left could march under the banner of union.

Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti demonstrate Guthrie's commitment to working class protest and his concept of union during a troubled time during which he was increasingly angry with the state of the world. In a 1947 journal entry, Guthrie lamented:

No matter how much my U.S.A. did do, in one hour, or in one year, or in our good two hundred. I hurt and I smile when I say that if we'd not let our crooks mess up so much and if we had not got to be so bad afraid of our cowards, and beat down and killed out so much by our robbers that hate labor unions, we could now be ten times farther on down my good road and feeding and housing and clothing ten times more of us than we are doing this early summery morning of the Twenty Third Day of August of this rough year called 1947. My wheels and my plows and my trucks and my planes and my ships just don't move the way they'd ought to move.²³

As Guthrie's voice was silenced by disease, and political reform was contained by repression, *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti* was forgotten. However, as a new decade dawned and young people were rediscovering folk music in 1960, Asch released the Guthrie songs of Sacco and Vanzetti, keeping the story of the two Italian anarchists alive in an era more conducive to political dissent.

In 1971, American film audiences were also treated to Italian filmmaker Giuliano Montaldo's *Sacco and Vanzetti*. Montaldo's film strongly championed the innocence of Sacco and Vanzetti within the historical context of the post World War I Red Scare oppression, with overtures to the political activism of the 1960s. Montaldo learned his filmmaking techniques under the tutelage of radical director Gillo Pontecorvo, directing the second unit for Pontecorvo's revolutionary masterpiece *The Battle of Algiers* (1966).

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Political engagement was less evident in Montaldo's Hollywood features of the late 1960s, the heist movie *Grand Slam* (1966) and the gangster film *Machine Gun McCain* (1969). Montaldo returned to Italy, and political questions were at the core of well received international films such as *Fifth Day of Peace* (1969) and *Sacco and Vanzetti*, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and earned a Best Actor Award for Riccardo Cucciolla as Nicola Sacco.²⁶

Although the film achieved only limited release in the United States, *Sacco and Vanzetti* generally earned praise from American film critics. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun Times* described *Sacco and Vanzetti* as one of the best films of 1971. Acknowledging that it is easy for a filmmaker to become bogged down in the details of a courtroom drama, Ebert praises Montaldo for maintaining the audience's focus upon the big picture of "how law can be used as a blunt instrument of politics." Ebert also agreed with the filmmaker's decision to use English for the courtroom scenes and employment of point-of-view shots such as showing Sacco's "arms being strapped into the electric chair as he would have seen them himself." Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* was less enthusiastic than Ebert, but he was generally favorable in his treatment of the picture. Canby asserts that some may discount *Sacco and Vanzetti* as yet another anti-American foreign art film, but the critic concludes that "because the film calls our attention to a terrible chapter in American history, it can't be easily dismissed." Believing Sacco and Vanzetti to be innocent, Canby is disappointed that Montaldo relied more on emotional appeal than an "eloquent plea for the truth." Thus, the film critic has little patience for the film's theme song "The Ballad of Sacco and Vanzetti" by Joan Baez, whom Canby calls "Miss Protest of 1968." Canby goes on to describe the depictions of Judge Webster Thayer (Geoffrey Keen) and prosecutor Frederick Katzmann (Cyril Cusack) as mere evil caricatures, but he finds the portrayals of Cucciolla as Sacco and Gian Maria Volonte as Vanzetti to provide developed and complex "flesh-and-blood characters."²⁷

A more complex investigation of the film's politics is presented by Richard Porton's *Film and the Anarchist Imagination*. Porton suggests that by focusing upon the courtroom drama and questions of innocence and guilt, the anarchist politics of Sacco and Vanzetti are obscured by Montaldo's film. Porton credits the Italian filmmaker with depicting the anti-radicalism

of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer as well as the historical context which led to the Red Scare and arrests of Sacco and Vanzetti; however, he argues that the film shrinks from addressing the anarchists' belief in the propaganda of the deed. Porton writes, "This failure of nerve becomes even more pronounced as the film progresses. The contretemps between the two anarchists and Katzmann is followed by footage of demonstrators urging freedom for 'Bart and Nick.' Montaldo, like a barrage of writers with liberal, Marxist, and even anarchist sympathies, is primarily preoccupied with Bart and Nick's presumed innocence, despite the film's unavoidable acknowledgement of their anarchism. *Sacco and Vanzetti's* urge to vindicate its heroes ends up (despite the compensation of Gian Maria Volonte's moving portrayal of Vanzetti) diluting their political convictions."²⁸

A similar distorting of political ideology takes place with director Hal Ashby's film tribute to Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (1976). *Bound for Glory* concludes with the folksinger departing California for the greener pastures of New York City in the early 1940s. As he rides a freight train, Guthrie, portrayed by David Carradine, sings "This Land Is Your Land," which he wrote in February 1940. Under the direction of Ashby and the cinematography of Haskell Wexler, the film's conclusion becomes a bicentennial tribute to the resilient spirit of the American people. Film viewers, however, would certainly not surmise that Guthrie penned his anthem in angry response to the narrow nationalism of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." As Bryan K. Garman suggests in *A Race of Singers*, the problem with Ashby's film "is that it depicted Guthrie as a romantic individualist." Garman writes, "The most important thing about the filmic Guthrie is not that he fought for social and economic justice but that he celebrated the American landscape and inspired all people to take pride in themselves and their individual accomplishments."²⁹

Fortunately a more honest approach to American radicalism and the story of Sacco and Vanzetti, maintained by political artists of the left Upton Sinclair and Woody Guthrie, re-entered the American political arena with Peter Miller's 2007 documentary film *Sacco and Vanzetti*. Miller asserts, "The case clearly has urgent lessons to offer Americans nearly eighty years after its tragic conclusion. As in the 'red scare' of Sacco and Vanzetti's time, present-day Americans have allowed fear and jingoism to erode our civil liberties, scapegoat immigrants, and compromise our judicial

system.” Clearly, the filmmaker perceives disturbing parallels between the fate of Sacco and Vanzetti and contemporary issues regarding immigration restriction and limitations placed upon civil liberties in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. To support his contention that the Italian immigrants were persecuted and prosecuted for their ethnicity and political views within a xenophobic atmosphere, Miller employs traditional documentary techniques of archival footage juxtaposed with interviews. In addition to activist scholars such as Howard Zinn, who penned the 1978 introduction to Sinclair’s *Boston*, Miller spoke with Sacco’s niece, a neighbor of Vanzetti, and the daughter of the security guard who was killed in the Braintree robbery. The impressive prison letters of Sacco and Vanzetti are read by Tony Shalhoub and John Turturro. A nice touch is to conclude the film with Arlo Guthrie performing his father’s song “Red Wine” from *Ballads of Sacco & Vanzetti*, which Arlo insists was one of Woody’s favorite compositions. Miller’s film, which was also recognized by the Erik Barnouw Film Award Committee of the Organization of American Historians, was praised by film critics, who emphasized the contemporary parallels with the Sacco-Vanzetti story. J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice* concluded his positive review, noting, “It scarcely needs be said how much this case has to do with contempt for foreigners, legal injustice, and xenophobic terror.”²⁴

Nevertheless, the film critics and Miller himself tended to downplay the anarchist views of Sacco and Vanzetti. Paul Avrich is on target when he observes that cultural representations of the trial tend to obscure the political ideas of the Italian anarchists. Still, it is not their political ideology which galvanized global attention in the 1920s and today. Rather, as Lisa McGirr suggests in an article for *The Journal of American History*, “It was the location of the trial in the United States as a world power that above all explains the case’s resonance.” McGirr emphasizes that Americans and the global community are often frustrated by the gap between the rhetoric of the United States as a beacon for liberty and the realities of inequality and injustice in the land of the free and the home of the brave. McGirr concludes her analysis of global protests to the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti by asserting, “Despite the deaf ears of United States officials to the international outcry, its legitimacy was obvious to millions of citizens of the world. A country claiming global influence—partly based on universal values of democracy and freedom—is the rightful subject of interna-

tional criticism when free institutions and democratic values appear to fail. In a world ever more shaped by the United States, that holds true as much today as it did in the 1920s.”²⁵

It is these universal themes of injustice, inequality, and democracy, and not anarchism per se, which elicited the attention of Upton Sinclair and Woody Guthrie as these two artists of the left struggled with personal issues of political commitment during periods of political reaction. The travails of Sacco and Vanzetti will continue to resonate within popular culture, regardless of the power exercised by bottom line profit motives, as long as people are motivated by the struggle for economic and political democracy and against injustice in the world.

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Endnotes

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4. Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, 56-57.

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