

Analyzing the scope trial: a study of the sacco and vanzetti

Law



In 1920, for the first time, the United States census revealed that more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas. This fact speaks to a dramatic cultural shift that had taken place. The older ethnically homogenous white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture, characterized by their traditional religion and farm life fell into decline. Overtaking its influence was a new, secular, urban mass culture rooted among diverse ethnic groups. It was a culture that provided more opportunity for equal participation to women and minorities than did the older traditional culture. Like all periods of change, however, the Twenties were accompanied by a reaction against these changes, as the older culture tried to reassert itself as the dominant group. The result was a decade marked by striking cultural conflict. Those who considered themselves traditional Americans, committed to traditional ways of life, launched a cultural war against those who presented a threat to it. There were many common themes that connected the three essays, Sacco and Vanzetti, The Scopes Trial and the American Character, and Rural-Urban Conflict in the 1920s. Together they present an accurate interpretation of the Roaring Twenties.

The case of Sacco and Vanzetti represented a deep division in American society. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were Italian immigrants who came to America in 1908. In 1920, Sacco was working in a shoe factory and Vanzetti was selling fish on the streets. On April 15, 1920 a double murder and robbery took place at the Slater and Morrill shoe factory where Sacco worked. Three weeks later, the two men were arrested for these murders and the robbery. They were put on trial one year later and found guilty of all charges. Sacco and Vanzetti were executed for their alleged crimes. Many

experts today and back then agree that the prosecution did not present the two men to be guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. There were many conflicting factors during the trial. Sacco and Vanzetti were avowed anarchists, people who believed in the absence of government. Their radical ideas were considered unacceptable in a society that was at the time experiencing a deep hatred of non-democratic ideas. Their political beliefs and ethnic backgrounds worked to their disadvantage. The judge presiding over the case of Sacco and Vanzetti made clear his hostility toward the defendants and even went as far as calling them anarchist bastards. Many critics of the verdict believed that widespread anti-immigrant sentiment, and a bigoted judge out to railroad the two, led to scapegoating. To some historians, the Sacco and Vanzetti verdict represents one of the darkest moments for American democracy. Today, it is clear that Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested and convicted because of who they were- Non-Protestant, Non-Fundamentalists who believed in something different from the majority of the people.

The battle between modernism and traditionalism is most apparent as a battle between the city and the country. In geographical terms, this was how the multi-cultural modernism and mono-cultural traditionalism were separated. Most non-Western European immigrants lived in large cities, and in the eyes of traditionalists, it was these immigrants who responsible for the problems of sin, alcoholism, and radicalism. These large cities were the center of liberal Protestantism while the small towns were the home of the old-time religion.

No group symbolized the way in which these different strands of cultural reaction came together as much as the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK was prevalent in the Southwest and Midwest, where few African-Americans lived. While the Klan was profoundly racist, in the 1920s, it was better known for its protests against Catholic and Jewish immigrants and the threat to traditional Protestant morality which Catholics and Jews represented. Aside from being racist, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Semitic, the Klan also preached a traditional morality in which women's place was confined to the home. They also condemned drinking as sinful and adhered to the old-time religion of Protestant Fundamentalism. WASP nativism and anti-modernism thus blended together in the Klan to form a revolt against multi-culturalism and modernity. In the cities, workers sometimes joined the KKK because of the competition they faced from immigrants and blacks. In the 1920s a new black militancy appeared which was centered in the North. This militancy expressed itself most visibly in the Back to African movement led by Marcus Garvey and in the Harlem Renaissance. The New Negro was threatening to whites who were unused to seeing black people assert themselves in this way. Many traditionalist groups including the Ku Klux Klan met the newfound freedom for women, like that of blacks, with resistance. Many called for women to return to their traditional place in the home.

Besides an attempt to keep women and blacks subordinate, the reactionary culture movements of the Twenties was also an attempt to preserve traditional WASP culture. This attempt was clearly revealed in the effort to prohibit the teachings of evolution. The effort to ban the Darwin evolution theory was part of a broader conflict that had emerged between the liberal-

minded Protestants, who made their accommodation with science, and the Fundamentalist Protestants, who held stubbornly to a literal interpretation of the Bible. For Fundamentalists, a reliance on prayer instead of science to solve problems made more sense. They regarded the teachings of Darwin on evolution as the most present threat to the truth. With evolution as the enemy, they set out to eradicate it from their society, beginning from the education system. By 1925, states across the South had passed laws prohibiting the teaching of evolution in classrooms. The controversy between the evolutionists and the creationists reached its peak during the trial of John T. Scopes, a high school teacher in the Dayton public school system of Tennessee. John T. Scopes was accused of violating a state law prohibiting the teaching of evolution. The Scopes Trial was broadcast around the country, with the old Populist, William Jennings Bryan, acting as the prosecutor. Bryan had taken up the case because he saw Darwinian science as an attack on the culture of small town traditionalists. Modernists at the time portrayed Fundamentalism as a last gasp of a dying traditional religious culture. They claimed that as soon as modern technology reached the backwaters where Fundamentalism was strongest, modern religion would triumph. However, traditionalists may have had the last laugh in the long run. Decades after the conviction of John T. Scopes, there was a decline in the membership of liberal Protestant church members and a corresponding rise in the membership of Fundamentalist denominations.

When immigrants first began arriving in America, business owners welcomed them because they worked for less money. However, ever since the labor radicalism of the World War I era, and particularly since the Sacco and

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Vanzetti trial, business owners have increasingly come to view immigrants as the source of labor unrest. Because the common American felt that the United States was becoming too much of a multi-cultural, multi-belief nation, the government passed the Immigration Restriction Acts of 1921 and 1924. The latter reduced the number of Catholic and Jewish immigrants to a trickle by setting extremely low quotas for the number of people to be allowed in each year from Southern and Eastern European countries. As modernists questioned the beliefs of Fundamentalists, they ended up making a religion out of science. Modernists in the Twenties often acted as if science could provide all the answers to the questions of life, a role that religion had assumed in the past. If fundamentalist religion continues to remain a force in American culture and politics, perhaps it is because of the failure of science to answer these questions.