

# A Critical Review of Lisa McGirr's *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*

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SASS ROGANDO SASOT, APR 3 2015

### **The Political Performance of Sacco and Vanzetti: A Critical Review of Lisa McGirr's *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti***

"History knows that it can wait for more evidence and review its older verdict," says William Stubbs, "it offers an endless series of court of appeal, and is ever ready to re-open closed cases" (qtd. in Southgate 117). That is precisely what Lisa McGirr has done in revisiting the case of Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti: A Global History*. However, for McGirr, re-opening the case does not mean telling the story of Sacco and Vanzetti along the familiar lines of ascertaining their innocence. She takes a different route and a distinctive angle. Employing a transnational approach, McGirr limns the "global nature of the mobilization in support of Sacco and Vanzetti" and the global relevance of the United States, illuminating how the two men emerged from the ashes of obscurity to become a monumental global *cause célèbre*, haunting the world with their stubborn legacy (McGirr 1086-1087).

McGirr attributes Sacco and Vanzetti's international prominence to three major factors: the power of mass communications; the case serving as a "unifying cause" of different social movements connected by a dense transnational network, sharing the same concern "over issues of political tolerance, discrimination, and social justice;" and America's status as a world power. Among them, McGirr asserts that the last is the most potent in explaining the global prominence of Sacco and Vanzetti (McGirr 1114-1115).

In this review, I will appraise whether McGirr is justified in asserting this. Following this introduction, I will present the purpose and summary of McGirr's article. I then evaluate the evidence from which McGirr draws her conclusions. Afterwards, I will examine her major conclusion. I will argue that McGirr is only partially right. I will then move to enrich her assertion by providing evidence that along with the external characteristics of the United States (i.e. its international status), the features of its political culture and the strategy anarchists use in performing their politics contributed to ensuring the case's global prominence. To conclude, I will situate McGirr's historical interpretation within the conversation over the benefits of taking a transnational approach to history. I will take a position on whether or not her methodology of focusing on circulation allows her to avoid what Isabel Hofmeyr believes transnational history attempts to overcome: "an over-reliance on a 'grand narrative' of domination and resistance" (Bayly et al. 1444).

A specialist in the 20th century history of the United States, especially on politics and social movements, McGirr charts the map of the widespread international solidarity engendered by Sacco and Vanzetti. She infers from this map the reasons that can adequately explain their international prominence. No one has done this before, she says, for others have neglected this angle by focusing on determining the guilt of these Italian anarchists who were convicted for the murder of a guard and a paymaster in 1920 (McGirr 1086-1087).

She carries out her gargantuan task in three parts. The first part provides the scaffoldings of the international movement to rescue Sacco and Vanzetti. Highlighted are two transnational processes. First, the presence of "transnational communities, networks, and identities." This intercontinental connection was forged by "the massive

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European migrations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century." Meanwhile, the 1864 First International enfolded this connection with a powerful ideological narrative: "labor internationalism" (1088). The second process is the intensification of global mass communications, which at that time, had already "filtered down to the working classes" (1101). While in the first part McGirr focuses on the contribution of radicals, militants, and their international connections, in the second part she spotlights how Sacco and Vanzetti became global *cause célèbre* through the efforts of intellectuals and middle-class liberals. She also emphasises how the position of the U.S. as "the new world centre of business and capital" further catapulted the two into global significance (1106). Lastly, McGirr demonstrates how this global significance got translated into a palpable legacy. Sacco and Vanzetti were immortalised through art, countless books, plays, street names, films, and music. They served as a "grand symbol of the struggle of the weak, the poor, and the working class for social and economic justice and of political minorities for tolerance" (1114). As a testament of this legacy, the title of McGirr's article itself is derived from the title of the painting of the Lithuanian-born American artist Ben Shahn, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*.

McGirr reconstructs the crucial incidents of this global drama by largely utilising declassified U.S. diplomatic cables. The frantic and frequent messages of American diplomats in Latin America and Europe lend texture to the events. We feel the urgency of the situation. We hear the stentorian support for Sacco and Vanzetti reverberating beyond Massachusetts, where their cases was being tried. The diplomatic cables vividly reported what was happening in different countries where one can find an American Embassy: a bomb damaging the U.S. embassies in Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro; the protests in China and Sweden supporting Sacco and Vanzetti coupled with complaints against police and government corruption; the "popular front mobilization" forged by "the middle-class citizens and intellectuals in Europe and Latin America" from 1926-1927; and the criticisms of a Danish newspaper, the *Ekstrabladet*, against what it perceived as America's intention: world hegemony (1091, 1102-1103, and 1107).

By using these diplomatic cables, McGirr achieves two goals. One, she fleshed out the global solidarity in support of Sacco and Vanzetti. And two, she illustrated America's global presence successfully. These cables offered McGirr a brush with which to paint a broad picture limning the global connections of social movements, as well as the relevance of the United States in other countries. The story weaved by the diplomatic cables supports McGirr's claim that America's status as a world power makes it vulnerable to pointed scrutiny (1107). The bold claim of the U.S. that it is "the beacon of light of freedom and democracy" easily invites global spectators to point out its hypocrisy (1115). The case of Sacco and Vanzetti confirmed these spectators' belief that the hegemon has no clothes. The case greatly disappointed the believers of America's promise to spread freedom and democracy. Meanwhile, the doubters of that promise used Sacco and Vanzetti as springboard for condemning and attacking America's world leadership.

Indeed, as McGirr's concluded, Sacco and Vanzetti achieved such global prominence because they happened to be in America; but America's status as a world power is not enough to explain this. McGirr's conclusion can be enriched more by considering America's political culture and the strategy of anarchists in performing their politics.

In *Performing Persecution: Witnessing and Martyrdom in the Anarchist Tradition*, Elun Gabriel explains how anarchists appropriated the vocabulary of witnessing and martyrdom associated with another transnational actor: Christian evangelisers. Sacco, Vanzetti, and their supporters "cast them as martyrs killed for witnessing to their anarchist faith" (42). How anarchists appropriate the narrative of the persecuted Christian is aptly demonstrated by how Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman, two of the most prominent anarchists – and atheists – in the U.S., eulogised Sacco and Vanzetti.

"Throughout the civilised world Sacco have become a symbol, the shibboleth of Justice crushed by Might. This is the great historic significance of this twentieth century crucifixion, and truly prophetic, were the words of Vanzetti when he declared, 'The last moment belongs to us – that agony is our triumph.'"

"Anarchists," Gabriel writes, "were the first non religiously grounded group to develop public witnessing and martyrdom into a central means of propagandizing." This political tactic is "one of anarchism's chief legacies to the culture of the radical Left" (36). However, this tactic is not always effective. Its effectiveness depends on "a social system in which the institutions of power gave those it condemned a space to speak" (55).

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The U.S. is the perfect setting for anarchists to perform this tactic. Its liberal system and firmly established tradition of freedom of speech ensures a theatre on which anarchists can freely enact their tradition of witnessing and martyrdom. Meanwhile, America's free press and global prominence guarantees that the political performance will be watched and reacted to by a global audience. Imagine if this happens in a country where the media were owned by the government and where speech and dissent were greatly suppressed. Would we even hear about the day Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested? During this time, anarchists were also being jailed, tortured, and killed in Russia (Goldman). This, however, failed to attract the same worldwide condemnation and international outcry as the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti. As McGirr also points out, "the twentieth century has witnessed its share of innocent women and men persecuted and executed by repressive states" but Sacco and Vanzetti stood out (1114). They stood out because the internal and external characteristics of the setting of their drama spelled the difference: the U.S. is a global open theatre where performers are assured of a global audience.

The undeniable presence of two opposing ideologies in this historical drama could have easily led McGirr to depict it as a "romance of domination and resistance" (Bayly et al. 1451). But she has carefully avoided this. Throughout the article, she has shown restraint, avoiding to completely fall into the trap of this grand narrative. She does this by focusing on the circulation of the movement to save and free Sacco and Vanzetti. This is the benefit of this methodology of transnational history. "Stressing circulation as a focus," says Hofmeyr, "allows one to sidestep...an over-reliance on a 'grand narrative' of domination and resistance." (Bayly et al. 1450-1451). However, McGirr has not totally freed herself from its snare. But how can any historian totally avoid this pervasive grand narrative if historical actors themselves makes sense of what's happening to them in this simplistic way? In the end, McGirr dips her foot into the ocean of this narrative by ending her article akin to how Aesop's parables end: with a maxim-like statement that can give you a very telling clue of who in the story is in the wrong. "Despite the deaf ears of United States officials to the international outcry," she laments, "its legitimacy was obvious to millions of citizens of the world: A country claiming global influence...is the rightful subject of international criticism when free institutions and democratic values appear to fail" (1115).

Nonetheless, though McGirr has not fully overcome the romance of domination and resistance, she has successfully shown us another benefit of taking a transnational approach to the case of Sacco and Vanzetti. When she traced the global connections of social movements, she has saved this connections from being "lost to vision" which happens when "a firmly national framework is held in place" (Curthoys and Lake 10-11). Furthermore, if the Sacco and Vanzetti case were only seen through the strictly national framework of the United States, we will lose sight of what the international support for these Italian anarchists signifies: the emergence of global citizenship.

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