

American Attitudes Toward Immigrants in the 1920s

1. The following quotes were made by two Congressmen during the debate over immigration quotas in December, 1920 (Congressional Record, 1921).

Congressman James McClintic, Democrat Oklahoma: "I say the class of immigrants coming to the shores of the United States at this time are not the kind of people we want as citizens in this country."

Congressman Lucian Parrish, Democrat Texas: "We should stop immigration entirely until such a time as we can amend our immigration laws and so write them that hereafter no one shall be admitted except he be in full sympathy with our constitution and laws."

2. Nicolas Vanzetti was tried in Massachusetts twice, first for bank robbery and then for murder. In the first trial, Webster Thayer, who was the judge in both cases, told the jury: "This man, although he may not have actually committed the crime . . ., is nevertheless morally culpable, because he is the enemy of our existing institutions."

3. Statement by Bartolomeo Vanzetti, April 10, 1927: "Sacco too is a worker from his boyhood, a skilled worker, lover of work, with a good job and pay, a bank account, a good and lovely wife, two beautiful children and a neat little home at the verge of a wood, near a brook. Sacco is a heart, a faith, a character, a man; a man, lover of nature and of mankind. A man who gave all, who sacrifice all to the cause of Liberty, and to his love for mankind; money, rest, mundane ambitions, his wife, his children, himself and his own life. Sacco has never dreamt to steal, never to assassinate. He and I have never brought a morsel of bread to our mouths, from our childhood to today, which has not been gained by the sweat of our brows. Never.... Oh yes, I may be more witty as some have put it. I am a better babler than he is, but many, many times in hearing his heartfelt voice ringing a faithful sublime, in considering his supreme sacrifice, remembering his heroism I felt small, small at the presence of his greatness and found myself compelled to fight back from my eyes the tears, and quench my heart throbbing to my throat not to weep before him: this man called thief and assassin and doomed. But Sacco's name will live in the hearts of people and in their gratitude, when... your laws, institutions, and your false gods are but a dim remembering of a cursed past in which man was wolf to the man. If it had not been for these things I might have lived out my life talking at street corners to scolding men. I might have died, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life could we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man, as now we do by accident. Our words, our lives, our pains -- nothing! The taking of our lives -- lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fishpeddler-- all! That last moment belongs to us -- that agony is our triumph."

4. "Chicago Girl Urges General Protest Strike" was published in the Johnstown, Pa. *Tribune*, on August 10, 1927. It is about a female teenage Italian immigrant who led a political protest in Chicago against the threatened execution of Sacco and Vanzetti.

"A bright-eyed 18-year-old high school girl paced her cell at police headquarters today shouting she was an anarchist after having been arrested while leading thousands of shouting Sacco-Vanzetti sympathizers through the streets last night. It was the girl who brought chaos to an orderly Sacco-Vanzetti protest meeting. As the meeting ended she dashed to the street, shouting: "General strike! general strike!" This added a splash of color to the otherwise drab proceedings of the meeting and inflamed the gathering.

With the girl, Aurora D'Angela, at the lead, the crowd surged into the street and marched along shouting the "Third Internationale" and appealing for a general strike. For a few blocks the protest parade was orderly. Then a motor car was ripped and torn by the crowd. A street car was boarded and the girl slapped the motorman. One small police motor car attempted to stop the parade, but its passage was blocked. Additional police motor cars swept into the tide of shouting enthusiasts and tear gas bombs were unloosed into the crowd. The tear gas bombs caused the crowd to disperse and 15 of the leaders--including the 18-year-old girl--were arrested.

She maintained she had long attended Liberal meetings in Chicago and said: "I am an anarchist. My father was an anarchist." Throughout the entire din there was a cry that Sacco and Vanzetti were being persecuted by capitalism. No signs were in evidence and the only means of identifying the crowd was in the constant shouting.

Join the Multicultural Debate

Consider the issues raised in this chapter and read the following statements by different authors who discuss multicultural social studies:

James A. Banks (1993): “One misconception about multicultural education is that it is an entitlement program and curriculum movement for African Americans, Hispanics, the poor, women and other victimized groups. . . . Multicultural education . . . is not an ethnic- or gender-specific movement. It is a movement designed to empower all students to become knowledgeable, caring, and active citizens in a deeply troubled and ethnically polarized nation and world.”

Maxine Greene (1993: 17): “Learning to look through multiple perspectives, young people may be helped to build bridges among themselves; attending to a range of human stories, they may be provoked to heal and to transform. Of course there will be difficulties in affirming plurality and difference and, at once, working to create community. Since the days of De Tocqueville, Americans have wondered how to deal with the conflicts between individualism and the drive to conform.”

Octavio Paz (1993: 57-58): “You are already a hybrid culture, which to me is a positive thing. I believe all cultures are richer when they assimilate others, and change. I don’t believe in a pure culture. Here we are sitting and talking in New York, a city populated by the minorities that are the world’s majority. It is marvelous, no?”

Diane Ravitch (1990c: 3): “Almost any idea, carried to its extreme, can be made pernicious, and this is what is happening now to multiculturalism. . . . Advocates of particularism propose an ethnocentric curriculum to raise the self-esteem and academic achievement of children from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. Without any evidence, they claim that children from minority backgrounds will do well in school only if they are immersed in a positive, prideful version of their ancestral culture.”

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1992: 29): “The use of history as therapy means the corruption of history as history. . . . Let us by all means teach black history, African history, women’s history, Hispanic history, Asian history. But let us teach them as history, not as filiopietistic commemoration.”

Albert Shanker (1995): “As practiced by some, ‘multiculturalism’ takes the shape of something approximating a new ideology of separatism. It challenges the idea of a common identity and rejects the possibility of a common set of values. . . . Often, the claims of multiculturalists and other separatists reflects the attitude that no one group may make a judgement on any other, since all ‘depends on your point of view’. This extremely relativistic viewpoint conflicts with the need that all societies have of establishing some basic values, guidelines and beliefs.”

Christine Sleeter (1991:12): “Education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist forges a coalition among various oppressed groups as well as members of dominant groups, teaching directly about political and economic oppression and discrimination, and preparing young people directly in social action skills.”

Add your voice to the discussion:

1. Which statement(s) come(s) closest to your understanding of multiculturalism? Why?
2. Which statements do you disagree with? Why?
3. What are the implications of this chapter and the quotations for planning social studies curricula?