

From the archives

The O.J. Simpson trial: Some ugly truths

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14 April 2024

The commentary below appeared in the October 9, 1995 issue of the International Workers Bulletin, the US predecessor of the World Socialist Web Site. It was written in response to the not-guilty verdict returned by the jury in the O. J. Simpson double-murder trial, and the subsequent claims that this result was in some sense a blow dealt to a racist justice system. Similar comments have now been made in the wake of Simpson's death, at the age of 76. He outlived the two victims, Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman, by nearly 30 years.

Two additional articles from the IWB on the Simpson case, by David Walsh, are reposted here and here.

The outcome of the O.J. Simpson trial proved once again that the essential issue in American society is class, not race. A very wealthy man was able to manipulate the legal system and, as in this case, literally get away with murder.

The overwhelming majority of defendants in criminal cases are poor and, therefore, subject to rough justice, Simpson is free because he spent millions on an army of hired guns, from attorneys like Johnnie Cochran, Robert Shapiro and F. Lee Bailey to professional witnesses like Dr. Henry Lee.

In its own grotesque way, the trial was a stark reaffirmation of the class principles, values and ideology that govern American society. From the very beginning it was obvious that everything and everyone involved in this so-called Trial of the Century would be debased and dishonored by the avalanche of money and the media sensationalism that followed in its destructive path.

The trial's conclusion has merely set the stage for a new round of obscene commercialism. Johnnie Cochran, it is reported, has signed a \$5 million book contract, and Judge Lance Ito and DA Marcia Clark are considering similar deals. Barry Scheck, of DNA fame, is working on a movie about his life. Simpson himself is expected to rake in as much as \$20 million through an agreement to be interviewed on pay-per-view television. Who knows how many schools and hospitals could be built with the sums that are being showered on these venal and insignificant human beings? So much for the adage that crime doesn't pay.

The jury too presents a not very edifying spectacle. Accompanied by their lawyers and newly acquired agents, many of the jurors have begun the inevitable process of cashing in on their encounter with celebrity. They are being pursued by reporters, who, we have read, are waving wads of money to obtain interviews. As one prospective juror observed more than a year ago, "This is better than hitting the lottery."

Far from representing a legal or social milestone, the acquittal of O.J. Simpson merely confirms that everything in America has a price tag on it. The presidency costs \$50 million. A seat in the House or Senate goes for \$500,000 to \$10 million, depending on the state. To create reasonable doubt in the minds of a jury, in the face of seemingly irrefutable scientific evidence, the going rate now appears to be between \$5 and \$10 million.

In the final analysis the corpses of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman, riddled with stab wounds and nearly beheaded, the devastating

evidence of blood and DNA analysis, the documented record of Simpson's past threats and acts of violence, all counted for little when stacked up against the money and fame of a millionaire celebrity.

The immense sums expended by the defense were not sufficient by themselves to turn reality upside down. The other decisive factor was the defendant's public persona as popular athlete, movie actor and pitchman. Simpson, a black man who rose from childhood poverty to success and wealth, was for years a symbol of the false values of American capitalist society, in which the worth of individuals is judged, not by their contributions to human progress and welfare, but by the size of their bank accounts and lavishness of their lifestyle.

One juror commented admiringly, as though it were evidence that Simpson could not have killed his wife, "He had everything." This demonstrates the most important power of wealth—the tyranny which it exercises over the minds of the great mass of people, including those who are the most oppressed by it.

In a society which virtually bans the public and explicit discussion of class issues, the power of money produces terrible and bizarre distortions in social consciousness and its perception of reality. The communalization of American politics, of which white racism and black nationalism are mutually complementary products, develops within an ideological framework devoid of class consciousness. Groups of black youth, workers and college students—confused by a false racial identification and a servile admiration for Simpson's money and fame—gathered in Los Angeles and many other cities to cheer the acquittal. These scenes testify to widespread popular illusions in those who have "made it" in capitalist society. His supporters prefer not to believe that behind the facade of a success, Simpson is a sick man who abused his wife and was subject to homicidal rage. They seemed oblivious not only to the facts of the case but also the unbridgeable social gulf between themselves and this millionaire celebrity. As for Simpson himself, he left the courthouse not to thank his cheering supporters in South Central Los Angeles, but to sip champagne on the lawn of his Brentwood mansion.

The claims of frame-up

No great principles were vindicated, no great truths laid bare in the Simpson trial. Testimony revealed the incompetence and cynicism of the police investigation. The exposure of detective Mark Fuhrman as a liar and pathological racist undoubtedly had its effect on the jury.

Nevertheless, the claims of frame-up confuse routine sloppiness, lies and arrogance with a genuine conspiracy to manufacture a case. In the Simpson case, with the notoriety it quickly received, this would have required the rapid and high-level coordination of literally hundreds of police officers and technicians, for no discernible political motive.

America has a tragic history of legal lynchings and of heroic struggles to expose them. For all the official proclamations of democracy and due process, the courts have been used repeatedly as an instrument for attacking the working class and the political enemies of big business. Frame-ups of such martyrs as the Haymarket anarchists, Sacco and Vanzetti and the Rosenbergs have more often ended on the gallows or the electric chair than in legal vindication.

It cheapens and demeans this history to equate an O.J. Simpson with the many victims of police and government frame-up. Simpson was not a poor fish peddler and anarchist, like Bartolemeo Vanzetti, or a low-paid clerk and Communist Party member, like Julius Rosenberg. He was not a radical political activist from the middle class, like Angela Davis. Simpson had never been identified with any political or social struggle. He reportedly had very friendly relations with the Los Angeles cops, who treated him with kid gloves during an earlier arrest for beating his wife, and he wore, for promotional purposes, an LA police uniform in a series of comic movie roles.

Of course, there are occasions when even wealthy people find themselves ensnared in the tentacles of unscrupulous prosecutors; and all who value justice would and should spring to their defense. There are even occasions when significant social questions are revealed in the trial of individuals who committed a terrible crime. Clarence Darrow, who combined legal brilliance and a social conscience, gave an example of this in the 1925 case of Leopold and Loeb.

The scions of wealthy Chicago families, Leopold and Loeb were brought to trial for the “thrill” killing of 14-year-old Bobby Franks. The crime was monstrous and public opinion was incensed, Darrow, already in his 70s, challenged the public mood and conducted his defense in such a way as to reveal a great social truth, that his clients’ actions could not be separated from the conditions and values of American society. He did not plead that they be freed, but successfully argued that they should be spared execution.

One can only imagine how the Leopold and Loeb case would be treated today. In the 1990s, a period when social thought is systematically degraded, social problems are raised, not to educate public opinion, but to provide an alibi for the crimes of individual millionaires. Thus, the attorneys for the Menendez brothers exploited the issue of child abuse, and the high-priced Simpson legal team seized on police racism.

No doubt there was an element of protest against abuses in the Los Angeles Police Department in the jury’s verdict, reflecting the well-founded distrust of black residents of the city. But it would be wrong to attribute to this sentiment a great progressive significance. Racism, it should not be forgotten, is only a secondary and incidental basis of the oppressive role of the police. Those who, solely on the basis of race, support Simpson and hate the police, would hardly understand that the essential role of the LAPD—to protect the property and social interests of the ruling class—would not change one iota if every member of this police force were recruited from the city’s African American population.

At any rate, the brief deliberation and the subsequent statements of some jurors hardly suggest that the verdict was based on a thoughtful consideration of the facts. Moreover, even if the jury had decided after appropriate deliberation that the state, under the standard of reasonable doubt, had failed to prove its case, this would hardly—in the light of the mass of incriminating evidence—justify the post-trial expressions of sympathy and moral solidarity with O.J. Simpson. It is difficult to imagine that in more thoughtful times, when there existed a powerful and socially conscious labor movement, O.J. Simpson would have been the object of an outpouring of sympathy and support within the working class.

The trial of Sheik Rahman

Those inclined to applaud the Simpson verdict as a blow against police corruption and racism make the serious mistake of believing that the ills of society can be rectified on the basis of a false, confused, and, we might add, essentially conformist social consciousness. To the extent that the Simpson trial and its fallout contribute to a continuing debasement of social consciousness, political reaction is strengthened. And a consequence of that reaction is the perpetuation and escalation of injustices of all kinds, including those that occur routinely in the courtroom. Indeed, while public opinion was distracted and bamboozled by the goings-on in Lance Ito’s circus, government prosecutors pulled off a massive and frightening legal frame-up in a New York City courtroom.

On October 1, Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, a blind Muslim cleric, and nine followers were convicted on charges of conspiring to bomb various New York City landmarks. This trial was a monstrous state conspiracy against real outcasts of American society, Muslim immigrants opposed to the foreign policy of US imperialism in the Middle East.

The key charge against all 10 defendants was “seditious conspiracy”—speech and actions directed toward the overthrow of the United States government—a charge which has not been prosecuted since the American Civil War. In the New York City case, the charge was further extended to include speech and actions directed toward changing the policies of the US government, a definition so broad that it would brand as “seditious” most of the political activity carried out in the United States.

The alleged terrorist plot was concocted by a US-Egyptian police agent, Emad Salem, who received million-dollar payoff for setting up the “conspiracy” and recruiting the defendants in the case, all followers of Sheik Rahman’s preachings at mosques in Brooklyn and Jersey City. Salem’s actions were a clear case of entrapment. He proposed the bombings, persuaded the others to help him, convinced doubters when they wavered and recorded everything. The Queens warehouse where the bombs were to be manufactured was rented by Salem and equipped with hidden cameras and tape recorders supplied by the FBI.

Those of the defendants who did act under Salem’s direction were simply dupes of an FBI-generated operation. Government prosecutors conceded that none of the defendants had the technical knowledge required to bomb tunnels and buildings and that the chemicals they were allegedly mixing would never have exploded. All 10 men now face lengthy prison terms, and some of them life imprisonment, in a case which did not involve the commission of any violent act and in which no one was injured or killed.

The defense lawyers for the immigrant defendants uncovered a mountain of evidence of police misconduct. The police agent Emad Salem admitted to perjury. An FBI laboratory technician, Frederic Whitehurst, testified that lab results had been deliberately falsified to obtain convictions. There was evidence that a woman FBI agent had begun a personal relationship with Emad Salem during the probe and lied about it.

Unlike the Simpson case, here police racism and fabrication of evidence were elements in a full-scale frame-up. But there were no chanting crowds supporting the defendants, no denunciations of the FBI, the police and the prosecution. None of these revelations received significant publicity in the media, or saved the victims, whose conviction was required by the FBI and the State Department.

The Simpson verdict comes in a period of mounting social tensions. It can be expected that this grotesque spectacle will disquiet and unsettle those who are beginning to think more critically about the nature of American society.

A serious struggle against a social order so sharply polarized between wealth and poverty, privilege and injustice, requires the building of a mass political movement of the working class. This is impossible without the development of a revolutionary socialist party which provides both an analysis of the source of the crisis and ideals worth living and dying for.



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