

# How Many “Trials of the Century” Can One Century Have?

## Famous and Infamous Trials of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Ever since the days when Socrates was put on trial for “corrupting the youth of Athens,” people have been utterly captivated by judicial proceedings. Even before the advent of mass media, people found in certain famous [or infamous] judicial cases that indescribable mixture of comedy, tragedy and sensationalism that makes for riveting, spellbinding entertainment. Mass media, which placed first journalists, then microphones and finally cameras into courtrooms, spawned a degree of sensationalism [not to mention hucksterism] worthy of P.T. Barnum.

This course will investigate eight of the so-called “Trials of the Century” that took place within the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our investigation/examination will, hopefully, give us insights not only into the cases in question, but, more intriguingly, into the times and circumstances that led to their fame and notoriety.

### Eight Lectures

1. **Harry Thaw (1907):** This trial had it all: fame, fortune, insanity and sex.
2. **Sacco & Vanzetti (1921):** Were these two Italian immigrants victims of post-war hysteria, or did they really kill two armed guards?
3. **Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle (1921):** Accused of the rape/murder of a young starlet, Arbuckle, one of the world’s most beloved movie stars, suffered through not one, not two, but three trials.
4. **Leopold & Loeb (1924):** Two incredibly bright young men charged with the murder of young Bobby Franks. This trial made Clarence Darrow a household name.
5. **The Scopes “Monkey” Trial (1925):** Scopes was put on trial for daring to teach the theory of evolution, thus launching a debate that yet continues.
6. **Mary Astor (1936):** A nasty divorce case turned into a jaw-dropping scandal when Astor’s private diaries were made public.
7. **Alger Hiss (1949):** Put on trial for perjury, the suave, Harvard-educated Alger Hiss squared off against Whittaker Chambers and a young Richard Nixon.
8. **The Army-McCarthy Hearings (1954):** For three months in 1954, the nation was held spellbound by the world’s first televised trial, in which one of America’s most powerful (and feared) politicians was effectively destroyed.