

EUGENE VICTOR DEBS

1855-1926

IN HIS EXCELLENT SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY OF DEBS, NICK SALVATORE states a fact that should be kept in mind in remembering almost every American radical, from Thomas Paine to Dorothy Day and David Dellinger. Too often, Salvatore warns, Debs is regarded as a "larger-than-life hero," as someone born eternally at odds with the culture around him. Such a view does violence to Debs' full story, especially to the indigenous nature of his radicalism, nurtured as it was by the land, people, and traditions shared by most Americans.

Debs was a product of the American experience and his hope in the reconstruction of the social order resembled that of settlers from the 17th century to the present. At twenty-eight, for example, still under the influence of William Riley McKeen, whom Debs called "the model railroad president," he gave this ringing endorsement of America as "preeminently the land of great possibilities, of great opportunities, and of no less great probabilities. . . . We all have a fair chance and an open field. Long may it so remain. The time, the occasion is auspicious. Nothing like it was ever known before."

Such a statement is as representative of the man as his later and more famous statement at his sentencing for draft resistance in 1918: "While there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." Five times the Socialist party's nominee for president of the United States, Debs received a significant percent of the vote on two occasions. Warren G. Harding, elected president in 1920, released Debs from Atlanta prison; earlier Woodrow Wilson had granted amnesty to other political prisoners after the war ended in 1918, but not to the popular Debs.

Ammon Hennacy, in Atlanta prison for draft resistance at about the same time, regarded Debs and Malcolm X as the two greatest

Americans who ever lived. Hennacy admired Debs for his courage, but also for his faithfulness to the poor and the down-and-out. Debs' dedication to the railroad workers and the Wobblies did not end once he became a popular leader. He was not running for office or seeking a power base from which to launch a political career; he was a leader who cast his lot with workers and who remained loyal to them to the end.

Born on November 5, 1855, in Terre Haute, Indiana, where his parents had settled several years after immigrating from Alsace-Lorraine, Debs left school at fifteen to work on the railroad. Within five years he was secretary of the local Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. In 1885, the year of his marriage to Katherine Metzel, he was elected to the Indiana legislature as a Democrat, where he voted for measures that would now be regarded as anti-union.

In 1893, Debs helped to form the American Railway Union and subsequently became its president. The next year, when employees of the Pullman Company went out on strike, he took charge of the campaign, after some initial reservations, and later served a six month prison sentence in the McHenry County (Ill.) jail for refusing to abide by a court injunction against the strikers.

In jail, a reading of Marx and Engels further radicalized Debs, and within four years, he was nominated for president by the Socialists. Shortly afterward, he became an editor of the party's weekly, *Appeal to Reason*, which eventually achieved a circulation of over 800,000. In the summer of 1905, in Chicago, Debs co-founded the Industrial Workers of the World, with Mother Jones, Lucy Parsons, and Big Bill Haywood; and although he later disagreed with the Wobblies, he always supported their right to organize. During the presidential campaign of 1908, Debs drew large crowds speaking from a train known as the "Red Special," and in the election of 1912, he polled almost a million votes, a figure exceeded in the election of 1920, when he campaigned from prison.

Debs' arrest in Canton, Ohio, in 1918, at a Socialist state convention, followed several warnings about his speaking against wartime conscription; but he believed strongly in the party's policy and

its slogan, "Don't be a soldier, be a man." Sentenced to ten years for violation of the Espionage Act, he was one of many victims of the so-called Red Scare, during that repressive era in American history. (The actions of the Attorney General and an ambitious young lawyer named Edgar Hoover led to the deportation of Emma Goldman and two hundred and forty "radicals" in 1919 and the harassment and denial of basic civil liberties to many others.)

Although he remained active to the end, the time in prison weakened Debs' health. Back in Terre Haute he wrote articles on prison conditions, published later as *Walls and Bars*, and continued leadership of the Socialist party. When he died in October 1926, 10,000 people attended the funeral services, and his home in Terre Haute is now a memorial to a man admired and loved by many. In 1971, when she received the annual Debs award, Dorothy Day spoke at his gravesite, acknowledging his influence on her own life, as a friend of the poor and as a writer and worker for social justice.

Among Debs' contributions to social history, as Nick Salvatore points out, were his understanding of the complex character of the democratic tradition and his ability to re-define it for the twentieth century. Integrating social and economic themes in a way that his audience understood, Debs recognized the central place of the class struggle and of social protest in American history, without ignoring cultural and religious traditions. "Christ," Debs argued, "organized a working class movement. . . for no other purpose than to destroy class rule and set up the common people as the sole and rightful inheritors of the earth." In this and similar statements, Debs showed his mastery of the political and religious exhortation characteristic of American oratory since the time of the Puritans. In his personal example, as well as in his national leadership, he is, as Salvatore says, "a constant reminder of the profound potential that yet lives in our society and in ourselves."

BY EUGENE VICTOR DEBS

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