

Eugene Debs Believed in Socialism Because He Believed in Democracy

Eugene Debs's unswerving commitment to democracy and internationalism was born out of his revulsion at the tyranny of industrial capitalism. We should carry forth that Debsian vision today — by recognizing that class struggle is the precondition for winning a more democratic world.



Eugene Debs in 1912. Photo: Library of Congress

In January 1917, John Hays Hammond, a balding, mustachioed mining engineer, [appeared](#) before the convention of the National Civic Federation, an alliance of business leaders and conservative unions, to deliver a stark warning: the country's workers and farmers were dead set against entering World War I.

“Some influence or combination of influences has certainly brought about a weakening of the patriotic sprit in this country,” Hammond lamented. “We find that neither the workingmen nor the farmers . . . are taking any part or interest in . . . movements for national preparedness.”

By the following year, however, a combination of government propaganda, repression, and wartime hysteria had shoved anti-war views out of the political mainstream. President Woodrow Wilson's declaration of war in April 1917 was the

opening shot, and a fusillade of jingoism soon followed: suppression of radical publications, sacking of dissident organizations' offices, tarring and feathering of war opponents, hyperpatriotic displays at sporting events, a \$50 state bounty for draft dodgers, government-financed cartoons comparing Germans to barbarous, rampaging animals.

Eugene Debs, the fiery elder statesman of American socialism, knew he was risking his freedom by delivering speeches questioning Wilson's war. Undeterred, Debs condemned Wilson's war in front of audiences that spring. On June 16, 1918, in Canton, Ohio, the Indiana native [gave the speech](#) that would soon land him in prison garb.

"The master class has always declared the wars," Debs proclaimed, his hands in motion, his voice ringing through the city park. "The subject class has always fought the battles." He ridiculed the idea that Wilson was trying to "make the world safe for democracy." Just look, Debs [insisted before the crowd](#), a sea of hats in the summer heat: the American ruling class had consorted with the German aristocrats they now chided as reactionary. They upheld an economic system that exploited workers and enriched bankers, defended a political system where money trumped popular rule. How did they have any standing to wage a war for democracy?

If any American could level the charge, it was Debs. From his time heading the American Railway Union and spearheading strikes against business titans, to his peripatetic journeys throughout the country speaking to hyper-exploited workers, to his quadrennial runs for president decrying "industrial despotism," Debs was a leading critic of the way capitalism corroded American democracy. The "cooperative commonwealth" he extolled was self-government incarnate, the internationalism he professed a challenge to tyrants everywhere. "Where liberty is not," Debs [declared](#), "socialism has a mission, and, therefore, the mission of socialism is as wide as the world."

Today, Debs is widely hailed for his courage and convictions, treated as a sort of saint of the American left. Contemporary observers couldn't help but reach for ethereal comparisons either — for all his militant rhetoric, Debs's disarming compassion made even his prison wardens melt.

But canonization doesn't admit much room for scrutiny, and for a man committed to worker self-emancipation ("I would not lead you into the promised land if I could, because if I could lead you in, someone else would lead you out"), it isn't in keeping with his legacy, either.

Much more interesting is to bring Debs down from his otherworldly perch and examine his life and politics as we would any other human being. Safely removed from that rarefied position, we can nonetheless see a remarkable man whose unswerving commitment to democracy and internationalism inspired millions — and who realized, after participating in the tectonic strikes of the late nineteenth century, that class struggle is the precondition for winning a more democratic world.

From Moderate to Socialist

The end of the Civil War in 1865 quickened America's turn toward industrial

capitalism. Railroads snaked across the country, establishing new towns and fortunes overnight. Industrial corporations, a recent invention, [amassed](#) immense wealth and political power.

This new economic form razed established social relations and pressed people into factories, mills, and mines — dangerous, frequently lethal places where workers lost limbs and toiled, often for the first time, under the authority of a boss. Economic growth would surge, only to seize up, throwing millions out of work and pummeling others with steep wage cuts. Moving from job to job [was extremely common](#), reinforcing the sense that nothing was permanent. Across the ocean, Karl Marx [observed](#) that under capitalism, “all that is solid melts into air.” And a lot was melting into air.

Born November 5, 1855 to French immigrant parents in the then-booming city of Terre Haute, Indiana, Eugene Victor Debs was spared most of these vagaries. He enjoyed a comfortable, middle-class life as the son of successful grocers. At the age of fourteen, he left school to go to work on the railroad, more out of a sense of adventure than destitution. After working as a paint scraper and then a locomotive fireman, he returned to Terre Haute and, with his father’s help, found a job as an accountant for a wholesale grocer.

The young Debs [was no radical](#). Handsome, the picture of ambition, he confidently strode into the world of mainstream trade unionism and Democratic Party politics. He began editing the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen’s magazine — where he preached sobriety and upstanding citizenship rather than class struggle — and was elected city clerk (1879) and then state representative (1884). Debs’s rise to political office failed to spook local elites, who viewed this future socialist firebrand as a responsible spokesperson for clean government and modest reform — pro-worker, to be sure, but not one to visit revolutionary doctrines upon their fair city.

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A young Eugene Debs. (Library of Congress)

Around the same time, Debs married Kate Metzel, the daughter of a well-known Terre Haute druggist. Historians have painted sharply divergent portraits of Debs's lifelong spouse. [Nick Salvatore](#), one of Debs's most capable biographers, depicts Kate as status obsessed and hostile to socialist politics. In a recent [journal article](#), Michelle Killion Morahn, a member of the Debs Foundation, presents a much different Kate: one whose family background predisposed her to radicalism, who was a socialist in her right, and who shaped her husband's intellectual development. She was, in this telling, "Gene's true partner."

There's more scholarly consensus about Debs's relationship with his younger brother, Theodore. Early in his career, Gene began leaning heavily on Theodore for all manners of labor, emotional and otherwise. "When his older brother was on the road," Salvatore writes, "it was Theodore who answered the mail, kept the books, and edited

the journal for the printer.” He was Debs’s “alter ego,” someone who “understood that his brother’s public career depended upon the intense dedication and unquestioning emotional support of the family.”

By the late 1880s, Debs had started his trek away from conservative unionism. A railroad walkout in 1888 convinced Debs, who served as strike leader, that a harmonious relationship with massive corporations was impossible without the counterweight of organized workers. He also began to criticize the craft unionism that dominated the labor movement. Rather than self-balkanize according to job task, “federationists” like Debs insisted that workers — whether conductor or fireman, engineer or brakeman — organize “under one common fold,” as Debs explained in May 1893. That same year, he cofounded the American Railway Union (ARU), putting his vision of a fighting industrial unionism into practice.

For many workers, Debs’s vision made instinctive sense. As companies blacklisted union members, sicced private security guards on strikers, and mowed down obstreperous workers to safeguard corporate property and prerogatives, what were they to conclude, except that liberty for capitalists meant tyranny for them?

The country heaved with worker discontent, producing a string of bloody walkouts that became metonyms for “[the labor question](#)”: the [Great Strikes of 1877](#), the Great Southwest Railroad Strike of 1886, the Homestead Strike of 1892, and, finally, the 1894 Pullman strike — the battle that would rocket Debs to national prominence and help transform him into a socialist. “I was to be baptized in socialism in the roar of conflict,” Debs [would later write](#). “In the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle *the class struggle was revealed*.”

Pullman, Illinois, located right outside of Chicago, was supposed to be the paragon of company towns, a model of employer benevolence that would deliver clean, decent living to employees at the same time it molded them into loyal workers. It ended up being neither. When an economic depression hit in 1893, Pullman’s Palace Car Company slashed wages while refusing to lower rents or utility rates. The workers who built the company’s luxury sleeping car fleet walked out on May 11, 1894. Debs, already a household name for leading a successful strike that spring, decried the “paternalism of Pullman” at a union assembly a few days later. To Debs, a great believer in “[republican liberty](#),” noblesse oblige was another name for tyranny, a prettified despotism where masters and slaves persisted despite the accoutrements of goodwill.

At the same assembly, Debs pushed the strikers to include black workers. Decades away from their own industrial labor struggles — where they would unionize under the leadership of famed Socialist and Debs admirer [A. Philip Randolph](#) — black workers toiled on the line as porters. Working for tips, they served passengers in plush surroundings with heads bowed, pride suppressed, swallowing any words of protest at being called “George,” the catchall name that denoted servility to their employer, George Pullman. Debs rightly saw the porters as fellow workers resisting potentates. But the majority at the assembly disagreed. Debs’s motion failed.

Hampered by the lack of cross-racial solidarity, the strikers nonetheless seemed to have momentum on their side. By the end of June, one hundred thousand railroad

workers were out on strike, with the Midwest, the West, and the Southwest all brought to a standstill. The corporate media howled: the ARU president was a tyrant; this “Debs rebellion” was anarchy incarnate. Railroad companies likewise brooked no compromise. They obtained court injunctions to halt the fast-spreading labor action and applauded President Grover Cleveland when he dispatched federal troops to Chicago. Bludgeoned by the strong arm of the state, the strikers were forced to stand down.

“To Debs, noblesse oblige was another name for despotism.”



An 1894 political cartoon depicting “the condition of the laboring man at Pullman.” (Wikimedia Commons)

On July 17, 1894, Debs and other ARU officers were hauled in on charges of defying a court injunction. He would eventually spend six months incarcerated at a [county prison](#) fifty miles northwest of Chicago, though in relatively humane settings. He was invited to join the county sheriff’s family for dinner, read socialist pamphlets and books he obtained through the mail (the writings of German Marxist Karl Kautsky [were among his favorites](#)), and received numerous visitors (the Milwaukee Socialist Victor Berger, later one of his greatest intraparty rivals, brought Debs all three volumes of Marx’s *Capital*).

The prison stint further inflated Debs’s stature in the minds of America’s workers. True, the Pullman strike had been lost. But Debs had stared down George Pullman, that besuited embodiment of corporate capitalism, and gone to jail to stand against their oppression. When Debs was released in November 1895, one hundred thousand people, braving a downpour, packed into Battery D at the Chicago train depot [to listen to him thunder](#): “I greet you tonight as lovers of liberty and as despisers of despotism.”

Debs was still not prepared to mouth the “s” word quite yet. He lent his increasingly influential imprimatur to William Jennings Bryan’s populist-tinged presidential candidacy in 1896. He brushed aside various attempts to enlist him to the Socialist cause.

But on January 1, 1897, less than two months after Bryan’s resounding loss and his own forty-second birthday, Debs made a ringing announcement to the ARU membership: “The issue is Socialism versus Capitalism. I am for Socialism because I am for humanity. We have been cursed with the reign of gold long enough.”

American socialism — still an inchoate force with no mass party of its own — now had its one of leaders, and a nationally known one at that.

The Socialist Party of America

The turn of the century was a halcyon time for the budding socialist movement. In Europe, socialism [was already a mass phenomenon](#), with working-class clubs, educational organizations, and cultural institutions that rooted workers in strong unions and parties that seemed to poll better with every passing year. For most European socialists, the goal was to [first win workers the vote](#), then net parliamentary majorities, and finally — backed by a united working class — inaugurate a socialist society.

The Socialist Party of America — formed in 1901 out of the fusion of the Social Democratic Party of America, of which Debs was a member, and the smaller Socialist Labor Party — had a seemingly easier task. Though many workers were disenfranchised (particularly African Americans), suffrage rights reached a much larger share of the population than in Europe. And capitalism, its booms and busts already on full display, seemed headed toward the cliff. Many in the Socialist Party thought that the “cooperative commonwealth” was an election cycle or two away — and Debs was no exception.

“Viewed today from any intelligent standpoint, the capitalist not excepted, the outlook for socialism is luminous with incomparable hope, certain of realization,” Debs [wrote](#) in 1902. “It is the light upon the horizon of human destiny and it has no limitations but the walls of the universe.”

Debs quickly got to work removing any remaining impediments. Always an agitator and organizer more than a theoretician, Debs zigzagged the country, spreading the good word. He waxed poetic about the coming cooperative order at lyceums, spoke of the unbridgeable divide between workers and capitalists at labor halls, and lamented the unchristian world capitalists had created at socialist encampments, which were modeled on tent revivals.

The characteristic Debs speech was by turns hopeful and remonstrative, revolutionary and religious. He aimed to grab his audience by the overalls and shake them into action: once they realized they no longer had to live in the bondage of industrial despotism, once they awoke from their capitalism-induced slumber and embraced the Socialist Party, freedom — true freedom, not the ersatz capitalist variety — was theirs. “Debs talks to us with his *hands*, out of his *heart*, and we all understood everything he said,” one Polish socialist commented, explaining Debs’s allure. Others resorted to comparisons of the divine. “When Debs comes out, you’ll think it’s Jesus Christ,” one woman told another before a speech in Illinois.

Debs appealed to his audiences with a socialism that took seriously the proclaimed ideals of American democracy. While the United States was marred from the beginning by chattel slavery, he insisted that it could realize its avowed principles (popular sovereignty, equality, republican liberty) if workers took on their bosses at the workplace and the polling station.

“Debs talks to us with his *hands*, out of his *heart*, and we all understood everything he said.”



Debs addressing a political meeting in New York in 1912. (Keystone/Getty Images) Presidential campaigns lent Debs his biggest platform. Having run in 1900 on the Social Democratic Party ticket, the Hoosier socialist launched bids again in 1904 and 1908. The party went all out for his third run, raising funds for a campaign train they dubbed the [Red Special](#). From August 31 until the November election, the locomotive — carrying Debs, a host of speakers and support staff, and a fifteen-piece band — sounded its whistle at appointed stops, where the presidential candidate would trumpet the wonders of socialism as party members distributed campaign literature. The band — “excellent,” in the estimation of the *Iowa City Citizen* — would then entertain the crowd. At night, Debs would display his oratorical prowess before large audiences at convention halls and auditoriums.

The unity the party displayed during presidential elections obscured the deep divisions within. Ideological factions — left, center, right — clashed ferociously, with trade unionism, electoral strategy, and racial equality all inspiring mountains of barbed words.

Debs was a denizen of the party’s Left, miles away from the cautious reformism of his youth. In his mind, unions must be militant and industrial (taking in workers of all races and skill sets), electoral campaigns must educate workers for the class struggle (rather than push middle-class-friendly reforms), and Socialists must never waver in their anti-racist commitments (no matter the short-term electoral consequences). Victor Berger, the imperious leader of the Milwaukee Socialists, thought this was ultraleft nonsense. A former schoolteacher of Austrian descent who personified the party’s right wing, Berger had built an impressive local organization with close ties to Milwaukee’s trade union movement. The “Sewer Socialists” touted “clean government,” public provision, and prudent regulation. Class struggle, that propelling force of Debsian socialism, was nowhere to be found in their campaign literature. “I can say from actual experience,” Berger [bragged in 1906](#), “that the Social-Democrats in this city have opposed almost every strike that has ever been declared here.” Others on the Right eagerly publicized millionaire converts to the party, seeing in them totems of moderation that could attract other reform-minded members of the middle and upper class.



Debs and Victor Berger in 1897. (Wisconsin Historical Society)

Debs tended to hover above intraparty disputes, much preferring speaking tours to factional fighting. But no one doubted where he stood on key questions. In 1905, he cofounded the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical alternative to the “[labor-dividing and corruption breeding craft unions](#).”

While he stepped away from the IWW before the decade’s conclusion — thinking its focus on direct action at the workplace was crowding out political action — Debs never second-guessed its basic principles. Any effort in the political arena that failed to forge the working class into a fighting force — or elevated professional and affluent classes above workers as the catalyst of social transformation — was unworthy of the Socialist Party. Nationalization, for instance, was desirable only if it gave workers more control over the economy. Similarly, a party without a strong working-class foundation would become indistinguishable from middle-class reformism, averse to attacking the roots of tyranny and oppression in society.

“The Socialist Party is necessarily a revolutionary party,” Debs [wrote in 1902](#), “and its basic demand is the collective ownership of the means of production and distribution and the operation of all industry in the interest of all the people. This will mean an economic democracy, the base of the real republic yet to be.”

Racial equality [was another source of fierce debate inside the party](#). Debs refused to address segregated crowds, [lamented](#) “that the white heel is still upon the black neck is simply proof that the world is not yet civilized,” and urged black people — as Ira Kipnis [writes](#) in his 1952 history of the Socialist Party — to “reject the false doctrines of ‘meekness and humility’” and fight for their equality through the labor and socialist movement. In 1915, when *Birth of a Nation* was released to critical acclaim, Ida B. Wells praised Debs for denouncing the virulently racist film: “Of all the millions of white men in this country,” [she said to Debs](#), “you are the only one I know that has had the courage to speak out against this diabolical production as it deserves.”

Recounting the Pullman Strike, Debs would inform his audiences that “one of the factors in our defeat” was the union’s failure to include black workers. He vigorously opposed a 1910 party resolution — supported by Berger and mirroring the mainstream labor movement’s position — that called for excluding Asian immigrants from the country.

Many others in the Socialist Party, particularly on the Right, held shockingly racist views. Berger, only slightly less contemptuous of black people than of nonwhite immigrants, [insisted](#) in 1902 that “negroes and mulattoes constitute a lower race.” An anonymous party member complained to Debs in a 1903 letter that “you will jeopardize the best interest of the Socialist Party if you insist on political equality of the Negro.”

Debs’s response [was withering](#):

The Socialist Party would be false to its historic mission, violate the fundamental principles of Socialism, deny its philosophy and repudiate its own teachings if, on account of race considerations, it sought to exclude any human being from political equality and economic freedom . . . Of course the Negro will “not be satisfied with ‘equality with reservation.’” Why should he be? Would you? Suppose you change places with the Negro just a year, then let us hear from you — “with reservation.” Despite these explosive debates, by the end of the decade, Debs and the rest of the party could boast that theirs was a truly mass movement. Jewish garment workers in New York City, German brewery workers in Milwaukee, white tenant farmers in Oklahoma, black lumber workers in Louisiana — [all carried the “red card.”](#) And with Debs’s preternatural ability to speak to the rank and file, the party posted its highest-ever vote total in the 1912 presidential election: 900,000, or 6 percent of the electorate.

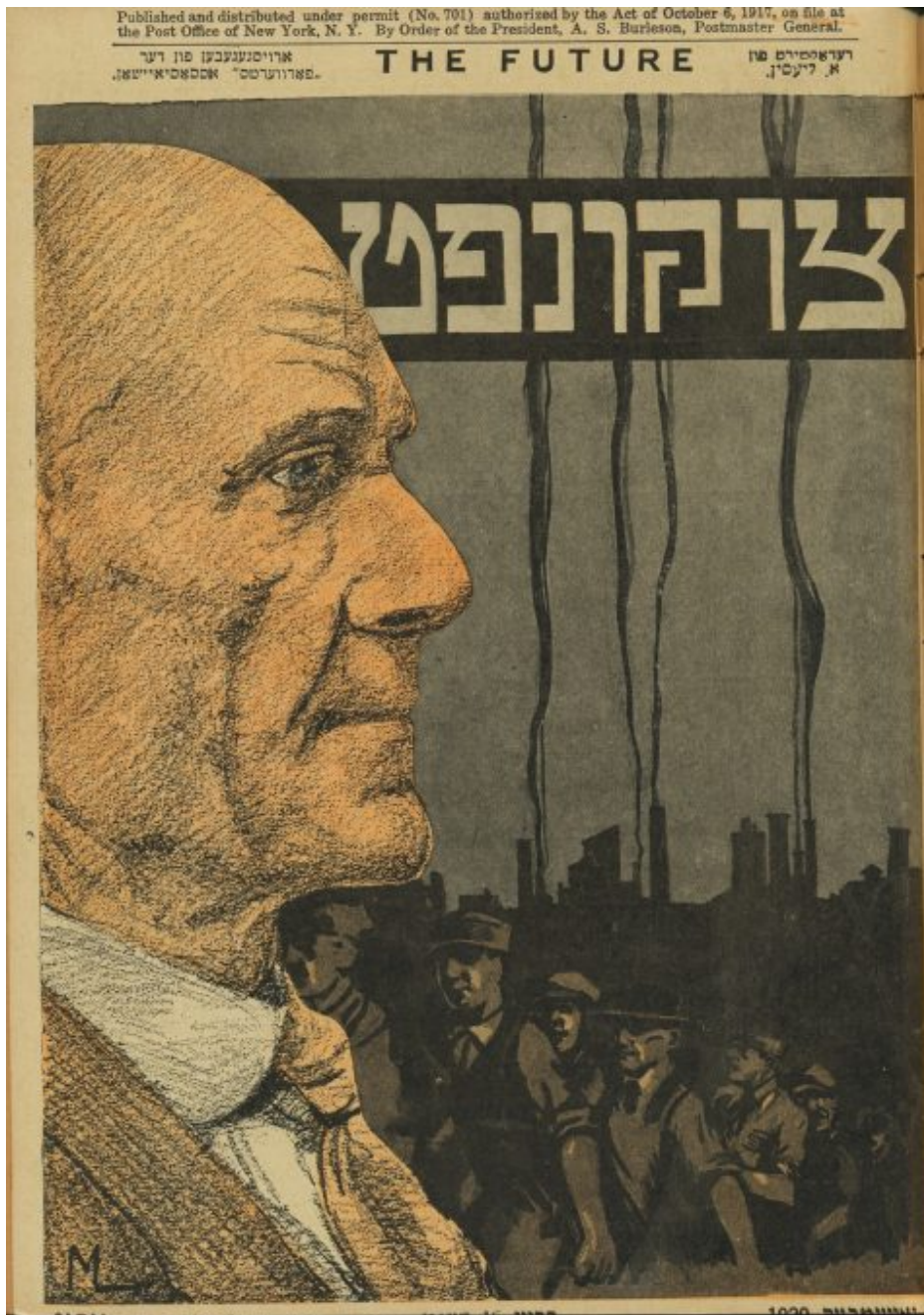
Debs’s Wartime Stand

Eugene Debs turned fifty-seven on Election Day 1912. His blond hair had long since receded, and years of unstinting travel had taken their toll on his slim frame. Every extended trip would send him staggering back to his bed, where he would spend weeks or months convalescing, often doted on by his younger brother and wife.

It was in this state that Debs found himself five years later — desperately attempting to recover from a rash of speaking engagements — as comrades like [Kate Richards O'Hare](#), the charismatic Socialist orator from the prairies of Kansas, were prosecuted for fulminating against US involvement in World War I.

American socialists had distinguished themselves for their stance against the war. The European Socialist parties, so inspirational to Debs and others in the US movement, had bowed to their respective ruling classes, either out of perceived pragmatism or nationalist fervor. Even the German Socialists, ardent foes of Prussian autocracy, had assented to the war. But in the United States, the popular mood was against involvement, and Socialists happily carried the anti-war torch. When the Socialists proposed an amendment to the party constitution that would make voting for war or war credits punishable by expulsion from the party, well over 90 percent of members voted “yea.”

“In the United States, the popular mood was against involvement, and Socialists happily carried the anti-war torch.”



Debs on the November 1920 cover of *Di Tsukunft* (“the Future”), a Yiddish-language socialist magazine. (Tobias Higbie / Flickr)

Anti-war antipathy failed to recede when the United States entered the war. While prominent Socialist intellectuals like Upton Sinclair defected to the pro-involvement side, the great bulk of the Socialist Party’s elected officials, publications, and members dug in their heels against the war.

And they suffered for it. Postmaster general [Albert Burleson](#), a conservative Texan with a sly grin who segregated the postal service upon his appointment, revoked the mailing privileges of publications he saw as undermining the war effort. Scores of Socialist publications ended up on his blacklist.

At the same time, the government ramped up its propaganda campaign to remake public opinion, and “patriotic groups,” typically led by businessmen, unleashed

violent vigilantism across the country. In Terre Haute, historian Ernest Freeberg [writes](#), “vigilantes attacked stores owned by German-Americans, beat the editor of the local Socialist paper ‘almost to death,’ and lynched an immigrant coal miner who was unwilling to buy war bonds.” Still the Socialists refused to budge. In the summer of 1917, party delegates congregated in St Louis [to write an anti-war resolution](#) that declared “the working class of the United States has no quarrel with the working class of any other country.”

As his fellow Socialists were putting together the St. Louis Proclamation, Debs was lounging at a sanitarium run by Seventh Day Adventists in Boulder, Colorado, trying desperately to recover his lost vigor. Doctors had told him he was risking his life by keeping up the feverish pace he had set. And so, in 1916, Debs only ran for an Indiana congressional seat — not his customary presidential bid — and in the summer of 1917, he took a long vacation, first in Minnesota and then in Colorado. He hoped that the “[cool night air, cold water, daily massages, and regular exercise](#)” — coupled with a no-alcohol and doctor-prescribed vegetarian diet — would extend his life. “After decades on the front line of social struggle,” Freeberg writes, “Debs was now strangely removed from these conflicts, insulated by the structured daily routine of his mountain idyll.”

It wouldn’t last. After finishing his convalescence in Terre Haute, Debs returned to the speaking circuit the following May, fired with the spirit of a new moral crusade. “I cannot be free,” he insisted to a Socialist Party organizer, “while my comrades and fellow workers are jailed for warning people about this war.”

On June 16, 1918, he traveled to Canton, Ohio, to deliver an address at a Socialist Party picnic. It would go down as one of the greatest orations in US history. Now known as “[The Canton Speech](#),” Debs’s lengthy talk to the 1,200 assembled jumped from subject to subject — the German Socialists’ persecution under the kaiser, the revolutionary politics of Jesus Christ, the promise of the Russian Revolution, the role of industrial unionism in socialist politics — while driving home a central point: workers around the world must unite against their despotic oppressors.



Debs delivers his famous speech in Canton, Ohio on June 16, 1918. (National Archives)

Reading the speech today, it's striking how little Debs trained his fire on the war effort itself. Nowhere did he call on workers to resist the draft or soldiers to desert their company. He simply insisted, in typically Debsian hortatory fashion, that ordinary men and women must carry forth the Socialist banner, "destroy[ing] all enslaving and degrading capitalist institutions" instead of allowing themselves to be "cannon fodder" for the country's political and economic autocrats. Federal authorities arrested him the following month.

At Debs's trial in Cleveland, the government sought to tar him as a crazed radical, a dangerous insurrectionist impeding America's prosecution of the war. Debs's defense was simple: the Espionage Act was unconstitutional, an affront to a free, democratic society. But the jury — "[drawn exclusively from the city's established Yankee middle class](#)" rather than its "growing, assertive, and ethnically diverse working class" — wasn't swayed, not even by his [final statement to the court](#).

"Years ago," Debs began, "I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

He excoriated the rule of Mammon over the world, and registered his opposition to "a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence." He confidently predicted the coming of the socialist republic. Then he

became Convict No. 9653.

Debs ultimately landed in a federal penitentiary in Atlanta, where he would launch his fabled 1920 presidential bid. The campaign was, in many ways, the last hurrah of his political career. Allowed to write weekly dispatches, Debs again implored workers to reject the perfidies of the two major parties and vote for the movement that would stamp out the iniquities of capitalism. The Socialist Party, meanwhile, insisted that a vote for Debs [was a vote for civil liberties](#). On Election Day, nearly 1 million people pulled the lever for the jailed socialist, the fifth and final time he would run for president.

Debs was well treated by his prison wardens, but he nevertheless saw his environs as the brutal product of capitalism. He refused to look down on his fellow prisoners, insisting that the social conditions that had produced their penury and shoved them into a life of crime were the true culprits.

Debs [later](#) compared the domination of the cell block to that of the workplace: On the outside of the prison walls the wage slave begs his master for a job; on the inside he cowers before the club of his keeper. The entire process is a degenerating one and robs the human being, either as a wage slave walking the street or as a convict crouching in a cell, of every attribute of sovereignty and every quality that dignifies his nature.

The prisoners loved Debs. He gave them many of the gifts (flowers, cakes, boxes of fruit) that streamed in from supporters around the country. (He held on to the “[silk pajamas monogrammed in red](#)” that one union sent.) He helped them write letters, offered them counsel on their cases, provided advice about their personal problems. When Debs was finally released on Christmas Day 1921, the incarcerated — let out of their cells to watch their fellow prisoner walk free — gathered to offer a final goodbye. As Debs [strode down the sidewalk](#) outside, hat and cane in hand, attired in a black suit and winter jacket, noticeably more haggard than when he entered, the prisoners roared from inside.

A Debsian Politics for Today

Eugene Debs died on October 26, 1926, his health never having fully recovered from his time behind bars, his party — the victim of factional fighting following the Russian Revolution — in shambles. He worried that his life’s work was for naught. But he never wavered in his belief that the hierarchies of capitalist society stunted human life.

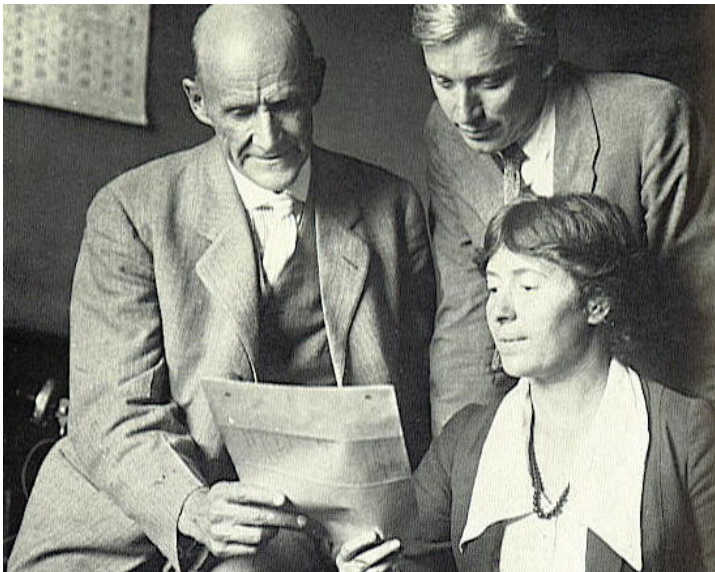
In [Walls and Bars](#), his first and only full-length book, published posthumously in 1927, Debs drew a historical comparison:

The capitalist of our day, who is the social, economic and political successor of the feudal lord of the Middle Ages, and the patrician master of the ancient world, holds the great mass of the people in bondage, not by owning them under the law, nor by having sole proprietorship of the land, but by virtue of his ownership of industry, the tools and machinery with which work is done and wealth produced. In a word, the capitalist owns the tools and the jobs of the workers, and they are his economic dependents.

The great mass of people in bondage. They are his economic dependents. Here was a man who observed not just capitalism's horrid miasmas (poverty, inequality, racism) but climbed into its boiler room, gazed at its machinery, and saw the unfreedom that powered it all. Capitalism was an unjust system because it ran on autocracy rather than industrial democracy; the socialist movement's historic purpose was to win the "working-class republic."

We still haven't, of course. But in thinking about Debs's relevance today, it's useful to start there: democracy — understood as [the drive to replace unaccountable hierarchies with something approximating an equality of power](#) — should be our animating principle, and reforms should be judged based on whether they tilt the balance of power away from those who unjustly wield it. Are heavily policed neighborhoods gaining power at the expense of cops? Are workers gaining power at the expense of fossil-fuel companies? Are tenants and women gaining power at the expense of landlords and abusive spouses? A benevolent employer giving a worker a raise is a nice sentiment. What's better, and qualitatively different, is a set of workers winning a union so they can hold their boss to account, or a pro-worker government pouring investment into a long-neglected neighborhood so it doesn't have to prostrate itself before a vulture capitalist.

"Debs never wavered in his belief that the hierarchies of capitalist society stunted human life."



Debs with fellow socialists Max Eastman and Rose Pastor Stokes in 1918. (Wikimedia Commons)

Based on his experience in the labor movement, Debs knew that workers harbor immense untapped power, despite their subordinate status. The middle class could act as adjuncts in the struggle, additional numbers to swell the ranks, but workers would have to be the core. The [last century has confirmed](#) what Debs understood instinctually from agitating on the railroads and in mining camps: only workers, organized into parties and unions, have the structural wherewithal to tug back when plutocrats are pulling. Democratic struggles — even those outside the workplace, [like efforts to roll back police power](#) — are at their most potent when workers flex their

muscles and disrupt the economy or pool their resources to organize independently of the wealthy.

In Debs's day, he was sure the Socialist Party was the only home for workers; even labor parties didn't pass his litmus test for "class independence." Today's political landscape — dominated by a Democratic Party hostile to social-democratic reform and a Republican Party that celebrates untrammelled corporate power — leaves much room for debate about the best way forward electorally. But more important than the individual form electoral activity takes — a local third-party run, an insurgent bid in the Democratic Party — is the character of the campaign: Is the candidate dedicated to fostering working-class self-organization, not merely passing reforms from on high? Are they financially autonomous from the business class? Do they want to attack corporate power?

Then there was Debs's internationalism. If democracy was the aim, and the working class the primary agent of change, it made no sense to stop at the border's edge.

Socialists around the world [were fighting for the same thing](#): "the universal commonwealth — the harmonious cooperation of every nation with every other nation on Earth." Only workers had an interest in winning this order, though — left to their own devices, the ruling classes of various countries would war with one another, and capitalists would seek out the most exploitable labor force. Global hierarchies of power, just like the most intimate imbalances, must be undone.

The "universal commonwealth" isn't on the horizon. For those in the United States, [we can fight](#) to cut the military budget and reduce the shadow of American imperialism, allowing workers and popular movements in other countries the space to fight their own democratic battles, free of the United States' boot. We can push for debt relief and transfers of technology and resources to Global South countries. But in "the belly of the beast," as the radical left used to say, some of this will be a heavy lift. And herein lies Debs's final lesson: democratic struggles aren't always popular. The socialist left's agenda seems to have more popular appeal today than in years. Majorities support Medicare for All. The Green New Deal polls well. But the US military — the enforcer of global inequality — is the most well-regarded institution in American society. Prisons and police, despite their diminished stature, are still viewed as legitimate. And worker control over the means of production isn't quite a majority position.

Where does this leave us? Should socialists drop the less popular planks of our platform, solemnly concluding that the people have spoken and that holding out a vision of open borders or prison abolition or, indeed, socialism itself, is an act of self-marginalization?

Debs would shake his head vigorously. "[W]hat is said here in regard to abolishing the prison," Debs wrote in *Walls and Bars*, "will be met with incredulity, if not derision, and . . . the theory and proposal I advance will be pronounced visionary, impractical and impossible. Nevertheless, my confidence remains unshaken that the time will come when . . . man will think too well of himself to cage his brother as a brute, place an armed brute over him, feed him as a brute, treat him as a brute, and reduce him to the level of a brute."

Debs was a comfortable lone wolf, a reflexive dissenter. He admitted when he ran for president that he didn't actually want to sit in the Oval Office. Yet he never allowed his sometimes-unpopular opinions to deliver him into the hovels of marginality. His essential optimism, his belief in the working class, his deep conviction that socialist politics had to be a mass politics — each allowed him to hold out hope that opinions would change, workers would coalesce, and the masters of the world would be toppled.

Debs's approach to the "popularity question" differs from one of his ideological heirs, Bernie Sanders. After languishing in minor party obscurity through the 1970s, Sanders dropped the most radical planks of his platform (including socializing the economy's commanding heights) and gained political office by pursuing policies thwarted not by lack of popularity but by the plutocratic order. Often, his goal has been less to gainsay prevailing opinion — [though he's done plenty of that, too](#) — than to press for public sentiment to be reflected in public policy. Popular social democratic reforms like taxing the rich, funding public programs, and boosting worker power are his bread and butter.

We can think of these as the two poles of democratic socialist politics. Both approaches — the minoritarianism of Debs and the majoritarianism of Sanders — carry pitfalls. Debs, perhaps channeling his hero John Brown, seemed at times to bask in the moral clarity of his dissension. Sanders, eager to expand the socialist and progressive ranks as broadly as possible, is much more inclined to take on Jeff Bezos than to talk about defunding the police. An effective socialist politics depends on balancing these two impulses, resisting the extremes of self-satisfied marginalization and vote-getting reticence.

But for anyone who doubts Debs's abiding relevance, who questions his ability to speak to our own world of mass inequality and autocratic rule, they need only dig up his piercing remarks about a social order that confused freedom for the propertied with freedom for the many — yet also contained within it the possibility of a vastly different world, shorn of tyrants, big and small.

For [to read Debs](#) is to be reminded of what it means to be a socialist in the first place, to believe in democracy for all:

If socialism, international revolutionary socialism, does not stand staunchly, unflinchingly, and uncompromisingly for the working class and for the exploited and oppressed masses of all lands, then it stands for none and its claim is a false pretense and its profession a delusion and a snare.