

## Historiographical Essay

Scholarship on Eugene Victor Debs began even as the famous socialist lived, and persisted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In recent years, historians have continued to be drawn to Debs' story and new insight on this famous orator emerges as modern political and social trends beg for his guidance. In reviewing the work of three major contributors to our understanding of Debs, themes become clear. Consistently entrenched in the study of Debs is a discussion of the man versus the myth, the public Debs versus the private Debs, the transformation from Debs the capitalist to Debs the socialist, and the true impact Debs had on the labor movement and politics during his lifetime. Close consideration of the writings of Ray Ginger, Nick Salvatore, and James Chace ultimately reveals the argument that Debs' relevance endures as long as there is a class system entrenched in American society.

Scholars of labor history note that Debs is always at risk of becoming a myth instead of a man. Indeed, the life of Debs is often described as being epic. Interpretation at this level puts Debs squarely out of the reach of more nascent historians and suggests that Debs is inaccessible as a man – more of a symbol or an instrument than a flawed pursuer of labor rights. Michael Nash refers to Debs as 'Mr. Socialism', a title that places Debs within a narrow context, offering little room for nuance. (Nash, 525) Further, H. Wayne Morgan suggests that Debs' life reflected a "personal odyssey", framing the socialist in classical hero-worship terms that requests idolatry of the student historian. (Morgan, 440) The most recognized commentators on Debs, however, make the clear effort to shatter the myth and present Debs for the man he was. Ray Ginger, in The Bending Cross (1949), relies on primary sources and interviews of Debs' colleagues to offer a story of Debs that is complimentary, yet mundanely honest. David A. Shannon writes, "Mr.

Ginger's portrait of Debs is not a caricature, as were the various Debses pictured by previous biographers." (Shannon, 641-642) As the first highly regarded biographer of Debs, Ginger looks to use Debs' voice to tell of his life's work. Combined with a true respect for his subject, this commitment to letting Debs frame his own narrative ensures Ginger the respect he seeks for presenting a Debs that scratches far beneath the surface.

Nick Salvatore, in his Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist (1982), continues Ginger's mission, rather than diverting from it. In a clear example of an enduring historiographical interpretation of Debs, Salvatore seeks to present Debs within context, eschewing the laudatory overview offered by earlier commentators. Critics recognize that Salvatore is working within the Ginger tradition and, in most cases, applaud Salvatore for the scholarship he adds to The Bending Cross. Norman Markowitz writes, "Rising above the...almost mythological history of the Socialist party in the early twentieth century, Nick Salvatore's biography of Debs...easily surpasses Ray Ginger's fine old study." (Markowitz, 151) Reviewers specifically mark Salvatore's commitment to painting Debs as a hero of the labor movement without unnecessary embellishment or dramatization. In other words, Salvatore proves that the life of Debs is fascinating in and of itself. Debs stands on his own as a strong biographical subject, without the need to be made into a myth separated from context.

James Chace, like Salvatore, pays his respects to the innovative Ray Ginger through his presentation of Debs in 1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft & Debs – the Election that Changed the Country. In a book that examines the politics and personalities that shaped the presidential election of 1912, Chace dedicates considerable space to building Debs' legacy through contextual analysis. Like Salvatore, Chace's Debs emerges a hero specifically because of the well-framed portrayal of Debs' actions within specific events and circumstances. Ultimately, the

most revered Debs' historians recognize that the labor leader is deserving of dimension, as are the students of history looking to understand the Socialist Movement in turn of the century America.

More recent scholarship of Eugene Victor Debs also reveals a new dedication to disclosing the private Debs alongside the public Debs. Just as Debs' historiography progressed from celebrating the myth of Debs to scrutinizing the man, so too has the historiography of Debs' public service increasingly paid attention to his private struggles. Salvatore represents a true break from Ginger in this vein. Certainly, Ginger believes that Debs' political philosophy was shaped by personal experience. The Bending Cross contains much information about Debs' wife Kate, his penchant for liquor, and, as W.M. Brewer writes, his "willingness for suffering." (Brewer, 470) Further, Ginger's desire to portray Debs as a man, instead of a myth, means that he must delve into Debs' psyche. Ultimately, however, Ginger's biography does not spend a significant amount of time considering Debs' private life – especially in comparison to Salvatore.

Writing in 1982, over thirty years after Ginger, Salvatore writes a social history of Debs, a clear departure from Ginger's work. For instance, although Ginger pays close attention to Debs' rocky relationship with Kate, he mentions only in passing Debs' extra-marital relationship with Mabel Dunlap Curry. Salvatore, however, considers Debs' complicated love to be just as significant for the reader to know as certain aspects of Debs' public life. Also contained in Salvatore's work is discussion of Debs' narcissistic penchant for begging the approval of others. As Melvyn Dubofsky writes, "Salvatore...enlarges our understanding of [Debs'] private life...the book captures its subject's deepest emotional crises and his inability to resolve them.

We see a man at emotional war with himself...” (Dubofsky, 1337) Salvatore represents a new biographical philosophy that argues that the private can never be truly separated from the public.

Chace mirrors this belief as he also pays close attention to the effect Debs’ personal life had on his public front. In discussing Debs’ run for president in 1908, Chace tells a particularly revealing story about Debs’ psyche. Suffering from rheumatoid attacks, Debs was sentenced to bed for months in the lead-up to his campaign. However, Chace writes, “it is hard not to conclude that many of these illnesses were psychological rather than strictly medical. In most cases, Debs’ doctors could find no illness to cure.” (Chace, 88) Debs is so much more than the two, or three-note character that Ginger presents. He is a man whose political success and failure were heavily influenced by personal factors. It is clear, then, that the passage of time has made social histories, such as those by Salvatore and Chace, more popular among the readership masses. Ginger’s work represents the mid-century commitment to keeping the private lives of America’s leaders in the background – as evidenced by the longtime concealment of President Roosevelt’s physical condition as well as President Kennedy’s health afflictions. Salvatore and Chace, however, write in a time of increased interest in how character traits and personal experience shape political decisions and ideologies. They also write in a time when social histories are requested by a public always interested in the juicy story behind the historical facts. The value in pursuing social history remains to be seen and mirrors a considerable debate inherent in modern American society. It is unclear whether our access to the personal lives of our leaders – typically provided by a saturated media – offers necessary insight or gratuitous gossip.

One of the dominant questions considered by Debs’ historians is when Debs transformed from a labor capitalist to a socialist. Indeed, despite Debs’ “self-propagated [claim that he

experienced]...a sudden conversion to socialism following his brief imprisonment after the Pullman Strike”, much evidence suggests that the transformation was gradual. (Young, 587)

Consistent among the work of Ginger, Salvatore, and Chace is the central influence Terre Haute, Indiana had on Debs’ career. All three historians agree that Debs’ fight for the working class was shaped by his growing up in this small mid-western town that valued hard work and democratic ideals. However, conclusions vary when it comes to identifying when Debs changed from the strike-opposing capitalist to the radical socialist. Chace’s theory most closely mirrors that of Debs’ claim. Despite in-depth coverage of Debs’ role in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and the American Railway Union, Chace points to the Pullman Strike and Debs’ ensuing incarceration in Woodstock’s McHenry County Jail as the moment of transformation. Reflecting upon the failure of the Pullman Strike, Debs entered prison as a man still adherent to democratic values and labor capitalism. However, with his release from jail, “Debs...became the living symbol of discontent with the oppressive order of unrestrained capitalism. He had entered Woodstock jail as a pragmatic labor leader. He left as a labor radical.” (Chace, 82)

Ginger, as opposed to Chace, consistently portrays Debs’ transformation to socialism as gradual. In his work, Ginger specifically denounces the myth that reading Victor Gerger’s Capital while in the Woodstock Jail made Debs a socialist. Rather, Ginger makes the argument that each individual labor struggle was merely part of Debs’ education in how typical capitalist vehicles could not meet his demands in dealing with the sudden arrival of a modern industrial mid-west.

Salvatore, like Ginger, offers a more complicated interpretation of Debs’ transformation than Chace. Salvatore stresses that Debs, while eventually a radical, never drifted from his long-held beliefs in republicanism, Protestantism, and democratic ideals. Central to Salvatore’s

argument is that Debs became a socialist because only this political theory met his standards for citizenship and manhood. Having come from a traditional Victorian upbringing, Debs held the belief that manhood was best expressed through civic participation in the political process.

Therefore, as Debs strove to work within the American republic to improve the lives of workers, he gradually realized that only socialism supported his view of manhood. Christopher H.

Johnson writes, “Corporate capitalism, ultimately, violated...the Republic and its ideals.

Through the twin engines of industrial unionism and the Socialist party, the vast majority of ‘citizens, workingmen,’ would establish the Cooperative Commonwealth.” (Johnson, 809) In the end, Salvatore argues that Debs’ view of the Socialist Party – that its fundamental goal must be to protect the right to exercise one’s citizenship – led to the downfall of the Socialist Party. Debs was never truly a Marxist revolutionary, searching for the rise of the proletariat. Rather, he always believed in the Terre Haute republican values and this, in essence, meant that Debs and socialists could often be swayed by the left-leaning Democratic and Republican parties.

Finally, historiography of Eugene Victor Debs unfailingly questions the true impact of Debs on history, coupled with discussion of his relevance to today. In his well-received biography, Ginger set the stage for further research on Debs and the labor movement in America. Ginger argued that knowing Debs was key to understanding the labor movement and the radical nature of 19<sup>th</sup> century America. However, despite its warm reception, The Bending Cross was followed by a backlash against Debs by labor historians. In 1971, Richard Jensen criticized Debs’ role in the Pullman strike, while in 1981 Aileen Kraditor “dismissed Debs as a person with a ‘mind out of touch with reality’.” (Dubofsky, 1336) For a time, Debs was essentially ignored by historians - labor scholarship fell out of favor and Debs was relegated to a simple radical who ultimately failed.

Debs came roaring back with Salvatore in the early 1980s, timed perfectly with a resurgence in labor history following the volatile movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As L. Glen Seretan writes, “[Salvatore writes] on the grounds that earlier biographers have missed Deb’s real historical significance and that an inaccurate image of him as ‘a curiosity’ outside the national mainstream has passed into the textbooks.” (Seretan, 395) Salvatore and his contemporaries argued that the labor movement and socialism deserved revisiting, with a new social and cultural lens. In obvious respect to this belief is Salvatore’s emphasis on Debs’ private life and the cultural environment in which he and his disciples lived and worked. At the same time, Salvatore argues studying labor history in this manner places Debs’ relevance squarely back in the public eye. Debs was not a radical, but represented the everyday man working within the traditions of American history. Therefore, he continues to be a beacon for those workers struggling within the capitalist economy.

Finally, Chace’s work represents what Christopher H. Johnson specifically asks for in new labor history – “now that labor historiography has achieved a solid base in localized, often quantitative, and sometimes blatantly apolitical social history...the key concern is to understand power relationships in the political arena.” (Johnson 804) Examining Debs within the context of the presidential election of 1912, Chace focuses a great deal of attention on how relationships with leaders of the conflicting parties, shaped Debs’ impact on the national election. Detailed interpretation of Debs’ relationship with those within his own party, as well as with Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt, lifts Debs’ impact on history far beyond Terre Haute and Woodstock. Chace gives Debs no small role in the election of 1912, and ultimately, in arguing that the election drastically changed American politics forever, he identifies Debs as one of the most important figures in American history. In connecting the election of 1912 to the birth of

the liberal left and the forging of the New Deal Coalition, Chace ultimately reveals Debs' relevance to 2008. As our country grapples with a banking crises and government takeover of private companies, the question of expanding the reach of our national government begs everyone to review the arguments and work of Eugene V. Debs.

In teaching students the labor movement of turn-of-the-century America, Eugene Debs always plays the role of hero of the common man. However, as biographers such as Ginger, Salvatore, and Chace have consistently argued, Debs must be studied through a wider lens. Although the conclusion each draws is that Debs was indeed the hero he is widely known to be, only by dispelling the myth, questioning his private life, and following his transformation to socialism can students of history truly understand the place Debs holds in history and his relevance today.

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