
Saint Gene: A Review Essay

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Letters of Eugene V. Debs. Volume I: 1874–1912; Volume II: 1913–1919; Volume III: 1919–1926. Edited by J. Robert Constantine. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990. Pp. lxxxvii, 591; xxix, 560; xxxi, 642. Notes, illustrations, indexes. \$120.00.)

Like few political leaders of his era, and few American radicals of any other generation, Eugene V. Debs generated an enduring cult of hero worship. To his Socialist party comrades and to political soul mates of the Left ever since, Debs was a secular saint, the center of a modern morality play. A talented man who looked as if he were going to be an all-American success story, Debs gave up personal security to become the voice of the downtrodden and dispossessed. Ignoring his own safety, welfare, and even physical health, he spoke eloquently for victims of capitalism who would otherwise not have been heard. Twice he went to jail for refusing to abandon his principles, the second time, at the age of sixty-two, despite the urging of friends who feared that his unsteady health would not survive the rigors of prison. Indeed, when he left prison after three years, he was sick; and he died only five years later without ever regaining his earlier vigor, a martyr to the cause.

Anyone who quickly read through his vita might wonder why he attracted such adoration. During most of his career as a national union leader, he served as secretary-treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and editor of the union's monthly journal. In those years there was no better example than the BLF of the elitist, conservative, business unionism deplored by the Left. Were it not for Debs's leadership of the 1894 Pullman strike, his union career would rate barely more than a footnote

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from labor historians and nothing but scorn from his political admirers. Likewise, as a politician he hardly seems noteworthy, elected to no office higher than Indiana state representative. As a five-time presidential candidate he averaged only 3 percent of the popular vote and never exceeded 6 percent. Although he was a prolific writer, he added nothing to left-wing political theory and even his most enthusiastic supporters would not claim an important place for him in the history of American letters.

Yet Debs endures. He rates far more scholarly attention than seemingly more prominent contemporaries. He has been the subject of two prize-winning biographies,¹ many other books, and recently an edited three-volume collection of his letters published by the University of Illinois Press. The only other American labor leaders who have received even close to the scholarly recognition accorded Debs have been Samuel Gompers and John L. Lewis, both founders and longtime presidents of the nation's two largest trade union federations.

Few of the politicians who received millions more votes when they ran against him for the presidency have attracted as much interest from historians. To obtain a quick approximation of Debs's scholarly prominence, I compared the number of entries for Debs in the subject listings of my university library with the number for his political opponents and contemporaries. With 19 entries, there were more books about Debs than about any of the losing major party nominees of his era except William Jennings Bryan (22 entries). No books were listed for Alton B. Parker, the 1904 Democratic nominee; only one each for James M. Cox and John W. Davis, the 1920 and 1924 Democratic contenders; only seven for Charles Evans Hughes, the 1916 Republican candidate (as much for his judicial career as his political); and only 15 for Alfred Smith. As for the presidents of Debs's era, fewer books were listed for Benjamin Harrison (9), Warren G. Harding (18), and Calvin Coolidge (17) than for Debs. Grover Cleveland matched Debs (19). William Howard Taft (21) and William McKinley (27) barely exceeded him. Only Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt have received significantly more scholarly attention.

Clearly admiration for and study of Debs depend on something other than conventional measures of political or organizational success. Understanding why Debs generated veneration, both in his own day and after, may help us not only to understand Debs but, as importantly, to understand something about American politics and the functions of political symbolism within it.

¹ Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1949); Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, Ill., 1982).

Nick Salvatore's Bancroft Prize-winning biography, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*, offered one plausible explanation. Debs, Salvatore argued, was able to represent himself as the culmination of a long democratic republican tradition seriously threatened by nineteenth-century capitalist development (and, some would argue, all but extinguished in our own day). Debs did so, according to Salvatore, by equating socialist class conflict with the moral dualism of evangelical Protestantism: Good vs. Evil; God vs. Mammon; Labor vs. Capital. Certainly not all of his contemporaries accepted such an equation, not even all of his admirers, but Debs's ability to wrap himself in the mantle of outraged radical democracy struggling against evil allowed him to stand for something far more central to American culture and politics than his socialist utopianism. Salvatore's Debs was a hero to at least some of his fellow Americans because they agreed that fighting the encroachments of corporate capital was the manly, patriotic, and Christian thing to do. He failed to convince more of his fellow Americans, according to Salvatore, because so many of them were in the process of abandoning radical democracy for bourgeois conservatism.²

The publication of a three-volume collection of Debs's letters gives a wider audience of historians ready access to a sampling of Salvatore's most important source. I found little in the volumes that would lead me to present a very different picture of Debs, but after reading the collection I understand better why Debs, unlike any other American socialist of his time or since, was able to situate himself in the center arena of American political and cultural debate. The volumes were expertly edited by J. Robert Constantine. The editor included a straightforward thirty-six-page introductory biographical sketch of Debs as well as copious annotations identifying nearly all of the events or individuals mentioned in the letters. I found little to quibble with in the biographical sketch or annotations. The University of Illinois Press produced handsome and readable volumes.

The volumes' heavy emphasis on letters from late in Debs's career may be disappointing to those who want to understand the evolution of his character. I had hoped to be able to use the correspondence to learn more about Debs's background and early life and to trace the shifts in his thinking as he changed from conservative craft unionist to socialist revolutionary. Unfortunately, most of the collection covers the years after his conversion. Only about 1 percent of the letters included in the three volumes were

² This part of Salvatore's argument comes out even more clearly in a brief article that appeared after the book was published rather than in the book itself. See Nick Salvatore, "Response" (to Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism"), *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 26 (Spring, 1984), 25-30.



EUGENE V. DEBS SPEAKS AT A "RED SPECIAL" TRAIN STOP IN ILLINOIS, CAMPAIGN OF 1908

Courtesy Socialist Party of America Papers, Special Collections Department,
William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

written before 1890 (when Debs was thirty-four), only about 6 percent before 1897, the year Debs formally announced his conversion to socialism. I do not know enough about the Debs papers to judge whether this simply reflects the actual distribution of the collection or whether the editor chose to emphasize Debs's years of greatest prominence as the Socialist party presidential candidate.

Nonetheless, there is ample material here to understand Debs's character and attitudes, at least in the later parts of his career, and to understand his symbolic appeal to his audience. American political culture is suffused with idealism and moral fervor; indeed, the very definition of nationality is based on loyalty to a set of political values (liberty and justice for all) rather than to territorial integrity or linguistic or ethnic identity. Yet American politics is a dirty business, and American politicians, because of the coalitional nature of our party system, are far more likely to be safe, conventional, and bureaucratic than inspirational and visionary. They are rarely men of ideas. The more we know about them, the more they disappoint our moral expectations. Ideas or social conscience in American politics rarely come from politicians. Politicians are necessary but usually not to be trusted. Ideas and moral vision come from political outsiders.

Debs probably could have been a successful political insider. While still in his twenties, he rose rapidly in both Indiana politics and national railroad unionism, but he abandoned these prospects and chose instead to be an outsider. Whether Debs consciously thought about his political role in such a way, these letters reveal someone who positioned himself outside of and above the normal political fray, in terms of both national politics and the factional wars within the Socialist party. He avoided political infighting, but he jealously and vigorously defended his personal reputation for political integrity, in effect assiduously cultivating his canonization at the same time that he professed to reject any role as prophet or hero. For example, he (and his brother Theodore, who served as his personal secretary and answered much of his mail) regularly answered the most petty and small-minded scurrilous gossip about his finances and family life in copious and lengthy detail.³ He seemed quick to take offense at any suggestion of personal failing. One sentence at the end of a letter from an old friend urged Debs to do more for Industrial Workers of the World prisoners in 1917 because, by being denied Debs's active presence, "history . . . is being cheated." Debs replied with a lengthy and bitter recitation of his many sacrifices for the IWW. "Who was the first

³ See, for example, Theodore Debs to Editor, *Our Sunday Visitor*, June 21, 1913, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs: Volume II, 1913-1919*, ed. J. Robert Constantine (Urbana, Ill., 1990), 51-52.

man appealed to by the IWW victims at Lawrence . . . who issued one of the first appeals for funds to save Joe Hill . . . To whom did the Mesabi strikers turn first when they were arrested . . . ?"⁴

Most of the party faithful supported his choice to remain above the factional strife within the party. Benjamin Hanford, Debs's vice-presidential running mate in both 1904 and 1908 wrote Gene on the eve of the 1908 campaign: "The leader must attack—attack—attack. His shield must be so clean and bright that no shaft can scratch much less pierce it. Gene, *you are that man.*" Likewise, Fred D. Warren, the editor of *The Appeal to Reason*, the country's largest socialist newspaper, urged Debs to ignore the party's interminable internal quarrels, "I love you as no other man on earth and nothing would give me greater pain than to see you dissipate your energy in the hopeless task of keeping the socialist party straight." Undoubtedly Hanford and Warren recognized that Debs's image as no mere politician both motivated the party faithful and gave socialist ideas a visibility out of all proportion to the party's actual voting strength.⁵

Debs's unique aura was perhaps best revealed in the reactions to his imprisonment for opposition to American involvement in World War I. Nearly a quarter of the entire letter collection consists of letters received from and replies to well-wishers while Debs served his prison term at federal prisons in Moundsville, West Virginia, and Atlanta, Georgia. The list of letter writers reads like a catalog of notables of the American Left between 1919 and 1922: IWWs and Communists, left-wing socialists and prowar socialists who had broken with the party in 1917, anarchists, feminists, civil libertarians, and liberal public figures. Perhaps it is not surprising that Debs would be a unifying symbol for all of the squabbling factions and sects struggling to survive the postwar Red Scare. The most striking evidence of Debs's significance as an emotional symbol, however, are the letters by party rank-and-filers. From a small-town Pennsylvania loyalist: "Dear Comrade how gladly would I take your place if by so doing they would release you. Forgive me if I tell you that about a year ago I wrote a letter to *The Appeal* and . . . to president Wilson . . . offering to take your place in prison and serve to the end . . . of your term by so doing they would release you."⁶ From a Louisiana schoolgirl: "I have shed tears for you dear Comrade in prison, but of course I know it is no

⁴ Bruce Rogers to Eugene V. Debs, April 1, 1917, *ibid.*, 296-99; Debs to Rogers, April 9, 1917, *ibid.*

⁵ Benjamin Hanford to Debs, May 6, 1908, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs: Volume I, 1874-1912*, ed. J. Robert Constantine (Urbana, Ill., 1990), 266-67; Fred D. Warren to Debs, August 8, 1912, *ibid.*, 533-36.

⁶ T. T. Ritter to Debs, November 7, 1921, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs: Volume III, 1919-1926*, ed. J. Robert Constantine (Urbana, Ill., 1990), 265-66.

use. If Wilson only knew how my heart feels toward him for being so cruel to you but he has no heart and can not understand. I pity him, and may God bless him!"⁷

It is hard to imagine that the political contemporaries who received millions more votes generated this kind of veneration. Did President Harding's untimely death a few months after his release of Debs produce as much grief beyond his family and acquaintances as Debs's imprisonment? Perhaps it is not so strange that historians have accorded Debs more attention than second-rate presidents. Our presidents rarely measure up as heroes. Quite rightfully John Brown cuts a wider swath in historical memory than the president who occupied the White House when Brown attacked Harper's Ferry. More recently, I suspect that despite the efforts of detractors to smear his reputation with tales of marital infidelity, Martin Luther King will remain a bigger icon in the American pantheon than any of the politicians who wooed him, ignored him, or opposed him. And even the collapse of misbegotten Communist utopias in the East will not turn historians away from Saint Gene.

⁷ Hattie Norris to Debs, April 8, 1921, *ibid.*, 208-209.