The Diva and the Socialist

Sarah Bernhardt, *Camille*, and Eugene Debs's Crusade to Save the Fallen Woman

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ABSTRACT: Sarah Bernhardt was a great dramatic actress, considered one of the best of her era. Eugene V. Debs was an unrepentant radical, a member of the Socialist Party who ran for U.S. president five times. In 1920, Debs was in prison, convicted under the 1917 Espionage Act for speaking out against the war. While in prison, Debs wrote a letter to his brother Theodore about a night in February 1881 when he had seen Bernhardt perform in Indianapolis's Park Theater. By Debs's own account, Bernhardt's Marguerite in *Camille* helped to shape his attitudes about women's vulnerable place in modern society. Author Jason Martinek reflects on how that influence played itself out in Debs's social activism.

KEYWORDS: Eugene Debs, Sarah Bernhardt, Indianapolis, Socialist Party, theater history

In 1920, Terre Haute socialist Eugene V. Debs celebrated his sixty-fifth birthday behind bars. He was serving the second year of a ten-year sentence at the federal penitentiary in Atlanta, Georgia, having been found

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guilty of violating the Espionage Act, which essentially made it illegal to speak out against the Great War. Prison was hard on Debs. The conditions shocked him. To the world he put on a brave face, but he lost an alarming amount of weight, so much so that he was moved to the infirmary. Boredom and depression took their toll, too.

Debs found some comfort, even if fleetingly, in his letters to his brother Theodore. Sometimes he took the opportunity to write about a happy memory that provided a momentary release from the monotony of prison life. This essay focuses on one such letter, from which we also learn about Debs's gender politics. The letter describes the influence of the actress Sarah Bernhardt upon Debs's life. While he had never met Bernhardt, Debs had seen her perform in *Camille* during her first American tour. This performance moved him deeply, and, as he explained to his brother, came to shape his ideas about women's place in modern society. In this letter, Debs transported himself from the dreariness of the penitentiary to the bright lights of the Park Theater in Indianapolis, as a young man with a future full of possibilities.

Debs opens the letter by saying that the prison chapel was hosting a production of *Camille* that afternoon. He would miss the play, in part because he had a lot of mail to go through, and in part because he was already feeling blue and did not need "the particular kind of accentuation that pathetic story would have given." He recalls what it was like to see Bernhardt in her prime: "She did not play Camille—she *was* Camille .... I was young when I saw Bernhardt in Camille but not too young to be thrilled, overpowered, carried away, and everlastingly impressed by her supreme art." "The gods," he goes on to say, "must have joined in the divine gift they laid upon her altar." As the memory washes over Debs, he writes further about the experience, lost in the past and glad of a reprieve from the grayness of life behind bars. Of Bernhardt's performance, he adds: "I am sure it had a marked influence in shaping my future, especially my attitude toward woman, and more especially toward what the world is pleased to call the 'fallen' woman. There is not one so low or so vile on the face of the earth that I would not put my arms about her as my Mother, or my sister, and minister to her lovingly, and stand by her against the world."[1]

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[1] Eugene V. Debs to Theodore Debs, [1919–1921], in J. Robert Constantine, ed., *The Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 3 (Urbana, Ill., 1990), 13.

A poster for Sarah Bernhardt's American tour of 1896. Eugene V. Debs saw Bernhardt perform in *Camille* at the Park Theater in Indianapolis in February 1881, during her first American tour.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Debs's sentiment here echoes one of the most quoted lines of his career, made on September 18, 1918, at his sentencing hearing: "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."[2] But now he adds to that sentiment a particular concern for the precarious place of women in bourgeois capitalist America.

Debs stands in a long tradition of people expressing the profound power of the theater to shape the mind's eye, leading to reevaluations of assumptions and initiating new ways of seeing and being. Those in the theater have been especially self-reflective.[3] Bernhardt herself wrote of the first play that she ever saw, Jean Racine's *Britannicus*. It was not the play per se, she recalled, that was transformative, but the whole experience: "When the curtain slowly rose I thought I should have fainted. It was as though the curtain of my future life were being raised. Those columns . . . were to be my palaces, the borders above were to be my skies, and those boards were to bend under my frail weight."[4] A new world opened up to her, just as a new world opened up to Debs after seeing *Camille*.

Debs identified with the downtrodden and felt a paternalistic responsibility to help the especially vulnerable in American society. For him, none fit that bill more than the fallen woman—that tragic Victorian figure ruined by her perceived promiscuity, whose stigmatization marked the beginning of a downward spiral into sex work, drug addiction, and early death. The fallen woman was caught in a cycle of degradation. Debs was right when he surmised that Christian propriety trumped Christian charity when it came to helping these women.

Bernhardt helped to deepen Debs's understanding of what was then called the "woman question." His analysis was not steeped in abstract theory; it was emotional and visceral. Although he recognized women's potential strength as political actors, he largely portrayed them as susceptible victims of capitalism. He used his national reputation to render these transgressive women visible, much as Bernhardt did in her stage portrayals. He differed from social purity reformers by arguing against the dehumanization and criminalization of sex workers, wanting instead to humanize

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[2] "Debs' Speech to the Court," in *The Debs White Book: Full Text of Important Documents in the Famous Debs Case* (Girard, Kan., 1918), 58.

[3] Ben Hodges and Paula Vogel, eds. *The Play That Changed My Life: America's Foremost Playwrights on the Plays That Influenced Them* (New York, 2009).

[4] Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: Memoirs* (London, 1907), 57–8.

them and show their actions not as a matter of free choice but as a result of limited options in a system that held women as second-class citizens. He concluded that the only way for women to overcome their oppression was through access to the vote—and specifically, votes for the Socialist ticket. Government, he believed, had a responsibility to ensure women's full rights as citizens, but little change would come under a bourgeois capitalist order that reinforced patriarchal power structures. Socialism, according to Debs, was the only road to women's liberation and would help save the fallen woman.

Debs had been in the audience for the evening performance of *Camille* at Indianapolis's Park Theater, Bernhardt's only stop in Indiana. The Park, originally the Metropolitan, gained a new name after a major renovation in 1879. According to historian Eva Draegert, the renovation marked a transformation from a bawdy vaudeville house to a "legitimate theater." Bernhardt's performances took place on Saturday, February 26, 1881, and audiences packed the twelve-hundred-seat theater, with receipts totaling almost $6,300.[5] Bernhardt spoke very little English at the time of her first tour, but her acting served as a lingua franca. Debs, raised by Alsatian parents, read and spoke French and so could appreciate not only her acting, but also the dialogue. Those without French-language skills could follow along with an English-language libretto.

The Dumas play *Camille* was, as one theater historian put it, "one of the preeminent examples of the new realistic drama, depicting the world of the demimonde with frank language and psychologically complex characters."[6] The character of Marguerite, based on Dumas's own mistress, became the prototype for the "doomed courtesan" figure so dominant in nineteenth-century French theater.[7] The play was first performed in 1852, but Bernhardt did not make it part of her repertory until 1880. In the interim, the play had become an international sensation. Considered shocking because the plot revolved around a courtesan, the play ended with the woman's death, providing a clear moral lesson.

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[5] Eva Draegert, "The Theater in Indianapolis Before 1880," *Indiana Magazine of History* 51 (June 1955), 127.

[6] Rachel Rusch, "The Doomed Courtesan and Her Moral Reformers," *Theatre Symposium* 15 (2007), 80. The play's name was shortened from *Camille: Or, the Fate of a Coquette*, to *Camille* in the U.S. to downplay its suggestive themes.

[7] Ibid., 75.

In the play, Marguerite, "the Lady of the Camellias," is a baron's mistress who falls in love with a young aristocrat named Armand. They run off together to live happily ever after; however, she leaves him after finding out that, if she stays, his sister's fiancé will refuse to marry her. This selfless act comes at great personal cost. Marguerite dies of consumption in the end, but not before Armand reappears, after learning the truth about why she left. The play's last scene depicts Marguerite dying in his arms. Camille was a nineteenth-century tale of star-crossed lovers, sweepingly sentimental and romantic. Bernhardt must have identified with aspects of Marguerite's character. Each woman had a "habit of luxury" and knew the pain of love. Both were much adored, yet simultaneously judged for flouting social convention.

Bernhardt knew how to bring an audience to tears. The reviewer for the *Indianapolis News* raved about her performance: "Her acting is a revelation to the American play-goer." She brought a realness to her character not typically seen on the American stage. The *News* reviewer went on: "Her schooling is essentially different from that of our native artists. . . . Bernhardt, the best exponent of French dramatic art, shows us how genius, severely trained in methods of expression, may manifest its power without violent efforts, how it may guide the actor upon the waves of passion steadily and triumphantly."[8]

On the boards, Bernhardt existed in a league of her own, made all the more apparent by the extent to which she overshadowed her castmates. In her autobiography, she proudly recounted that at one New York performance she "counted seventeen calls after the third act and twenty-nine after the fifth," which extended the show by an hour.[9] Bernhardt was known for embellishing the truth (or even outright fabricating it), but newspaper reports confirm that her premiere performance of *Camille* lasted until nearly midnight because of the number of curtain calls and the rounds of applause.[10] Bernhardt had her critics, but the overwhelming consensus was that she had few equals.

Bernhardt's talent was such that she could, even if only for a moment, make middle- and upper-class audiences identify with society's outcasts. On the rostrum, Debs had the same talent. His silver tongue could convert the

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[8] *Indianapolis News*, February 28, 1881.

[9] Bernhardt, *My Double Life*, 375.

[10] *Yorkville [S.C.] Enquirer*, November 18, 1880.

unconverted and open minds to the possibilities of a socialist tomorrow. Even the fallen woman, damned to the lowest rungs of the social order, was redeemable and, more importantly, rendered visible in the hands of such talent.

How did Bernhardt help to shape Debs's ideas about gender? Unfortunately, Debs did not explicitly lay this out; however, we can see some clues in his writings. In many ways, Debs's position on women's rights was fairly typical among pre-feminist radicals. Women needed special protection from the harsh realities of bourgeois capitalism because they were not in the position to protect themselves. Debs's position, shaped as it was in the 1870s and 1880s, evolved little in the first two decades of the twentieth century. He believed that socialism was the only solution to women's inequality and sexual exploitation, and made it clear that class trumped gender on the road to a better tomorrow.[11] Under capitalism, he wrote in "Woman—Comrade and Equal," "woman is made the slave of a slave, and is reckoned fit for a companionship in lust." While the class struggle would end gender inequality, paradoxically, male superiority would play a pivotal role in women's liberation: "Man's superiority will be shown, not in the fact he has enslaved his wife, but in that he has made her free."[12] Women, it seems, had little role to play in their own emancipation. Historian Mari Jo Buhle summarized Debs's view of womanhood as one of "sentimental reverence."[13] He viewed himself and his movement as their best hope for salvation.

Debs viewed the fallen woman paternalistically, through a lens of victimization. Ironically, a midwestern, bourgeois prudery shored up his thinking. In *Walls and Bars*, he told the heart-wrenching story of a sixteen-year-old girl arrested for solicitation. Prison was not the answer in such cases, he argued:

> If there had been the least human kindness, sympathy and understanding in the police matron … she would have found a way to manifest it by cautioning the child against continuing the sad life which she had involuntarily persuaded herself to follow. It seems

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[11] Debs, "Woman's Day is Dawning," *Justice* (February 1911), 6.

[12] Debs, "Woman—Comrade and Equal," *The Progressive Woman*, 3 (November 1909), 2.

[13] Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana, Ill., 1983), 155.

> to me that the innate instinct of a woman would have prevented the matron from adopting the brutal and unreasoning course which she, in her infinite ignorance, probably deemed a most worthy and virtuous action.[14]

Rather than blaming the victim, Debs asked his audiences to look at the world through the girl's eyes and to put the blame on an exploitative system that provided few avenues for women to earn a decent living. As anarchist Emma Goldman bluntly put the matter, working women were tied to a form of "economic prostitution."[15]

Indeed, as Debs acknowledged in *Walls and Bars*, almost the only option for working women to earn significantly more money than the average wage at the time was sex work. Men working in the manufacturing sector in 1914 earned an average twenty-six cents per hour, whereas women earned only fifteen. The average weekly pay envelope contained $13.65 for men and only $7.76 for women, an astounding forty-three percent pay gap.[16] Debs wrote: "We know beyond question of doubt, after the most searching investigations, that among women poverty is responsible in an overwhelming number of cases for what is known as prostitution. Is it not shocking to think, for instance, that a woman can command more money for traffic in her sex in an hour than it would be possible for her to earn in a week of legitimate labor?"[17]

Debs discussed the fallen woman most strikingly in an article for the *International Socialist Review* in 1916. "Fantine in Our Day," drew on Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* to describe the tragedy of innocent girls and women caught up in bad circumstances: "Fantine—child of poverty and starvation—the ruined girl, the abandoned mother, the hounded prostitute, remained to the very hour of her tragic death chaste as a virgin, spotless as a saint in the holy sanctuary of her own pure and undefiled soul." Under bourgeois capitalism, Debs argued, upper-class women who commit "indiscretions" can be forgiven, but not so poor women: "Let a

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[14] Debs, *Walls and Bars* (1927; Chicago, 2000), 151–52.

[15] Emma Goldman, "The Traffic in Women," in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York, 1910), 184–85.

[16] Ben J. Wattenberg, ed., *The Statistical History of the United States, From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, 1976), 172.

[17] Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 144.

poor shop-girl, a seamstress, or a domestic servant—in a word, a working girl—commit some slight indiscretion, and that hour her doom is sealed, and she might as well present herself at once to the public authorities and have the scarlet letter seared into her forehead with a branding iron." Debs does not hold back his anger in the name of America's Fantines:

> The Fantines have been raped of their virtue, robbed of their womanhood, dishonored, branded, exiled; the ignorance of childhood is with them still, but not its innocence; they have been shamelessly prostituted, but they are not prostitutes. They are girls, women who have walked the path of thorns and briers with bare and bleeding feet; who know the ways of agony and tears, and who move in melancholy procession as capitalist society's sacrificial offering to nameless and dishonored graves.[18]

Anger is layered with pity, but Debs offers only one solution to this social epidemic: the replacement of capitalism with socialism. "The system which condemns men to slavery, women to prostitution, children to poverty and ignorance, and all to hopeless, barren, joyless lives," he wrote, "must be uprooted and destroyed before men may know the meaning and morality, walk the highlands of humanity, and breathe the vitalizing air of freedom and fellowship."[19] Debs cast himself as the voice of the voiceless.

Later feminist scholars would view such stances as problematically one-dimensional. Historian Ruth Rosen, for example, argues that "by characterizing the prostitute as a victim, reformers were prevented from understanding that many women made rational choices to enter prostitution: that they acted upon their environment as well as being acted upon by it."[20] Rosen acknowledges that socialists like Debs proposed a more radical solution to the problem of prostitution than social purity reformers offered (liberation versus criminalization); his alternative nonetheless denied agency to the historical actors at the center of the debate. For socialists like Debs,

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[18] Debs, "Fantine in Our Day," *International Socialist Review* 16 no. 9 (March 1916), 541–42:

[19] Ibid., 542.

[20] Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore, Md., 1982), 148.

Rosen asserts, prostitution "became a romanticized symbol of one of the most exploited members of the American working class."[21]

Debs's gender politics cannot be fully discussed and understood without delving into his complicated personal life. In 1913, the press reported on his efforts on behalf of Helen Hollingsworth Cox, who had been arrested for prostitution. Debs apparently knew Cox's father, a down-on-his-luck minister. Debs picked her up from jail and brought her to his home. The fact that the Debs family had welcomed a "scarlet woman" turned the action into a major news story. One local newspaper's headline read: "Eugene Debs has taken this girl from jail into his home and declares friends must receive her." Debs, an outsider by choice, pushed himself even further outside the norms of respectable society through this compassionate act. The lines between the sanctity of the middle-class home and the subterranean world of the red-light district were blurred to the point of social rupture. To be anything but horrified might reveal (to put the matter as a nineteenth-century phrenologist might) the overdevelopment of one's amativeness, a sure sign of a perverted mind.[22] The press, to be sure, played up the potentially titillating aspects of the situation. Yet the tone of disapproval that ran through press articles contained the threat by further marginalizing Debs and his cause.

Compassion and fellowship constituted a large part of Debs's socialist ethos. He wanted to help Cox get a new start, which apparently she did. He called out the hypocrisy of Terre Haute's Christians for turning their backs on this woman in her time of need: "There is but one thing remarkable about opening our home to an unfortunate young woman, and that is that anyone should consider it remarkable. . . . Persecution of these unfortunate girls is the rule, and so common that it attracts no attention. Kindness is so exceptional that it provokes widespread comment."[23]

Debs added: "The Red Light district is a challenge to the Christian church. . . . The sinful woman is, as a rule, not a wicked woman, but a sick and suffering woman. Instead of being persecuted, maltreated, preyed upon, and driven to destruction, she needs care and kindness, sympathy, and love, and that is what Christ gave her in the fullest measure and what

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[21] Ibid., 50.

[22] R. H. Collyer, *Manual of Phrenology, or, the Physiology of the Human Brain* (Dayton, Ohio, 1842), 61.

[23] *The Ogden Standard*, July 31, 1913.

the church cruelly denied her, as it did in His day."[24] Debs's paternalism comes out in full force in this press release. Even more, it shows just how much the odds were stacked against these "sick and suffering" women. Wherever she went, stigmatization followed.

Debs's own sexual history, or speculation thereon, must also be noted. Some historians, as well as some of Debs's contemporaries, have suggested that Debs visited brothels and patronized prostitutes. One Terre Haute restaurateur was certain that Debs "had some intimate experience with the habitues of the demi-monde," although little evidence can be found to back up this claim. That did not stop cultural critic Adam Shatz from asserting that "the private Debs was a morally troubled man, given to hard drinking and racked by depression. Miserable with his wife, Kate, a social climber who was no less miserable being married to a Socialist, he was a frequent visitor to the brothels of Terre Haute." We do know that Debs was by no means a perfect model of fidelity. He exchanged passionate love letters with Mabel Curry, the wife of an English professor at Indiana State Normal College.[25] But the historical record does not meet the standard of evidence to allow historians to state definitively that Debs consorted with sex workers.

Bernhardt's Marguerite, it seems, underscored for Debs his conviction that women were capitalism's greatest victims, one step away from ending up in houses of ill-repute, demoralized and degraded, living lives of quiet desperation. He departed from social purity reformers in his belief that the criminalization of prostitution was not the answer. Instead of criminalizing the sex worker, he pleaded for her humanization on one hand, and opportunities for economic equality on the other. Like Bernhardt, he wanted us to see the world through Marguerite's eyes. Dumas's tormented character became Debs's lifelong lamentation. Marguerite's speech in Act II of *Camille* captures the pathos that drove Debs's desire to render the fallen woman visible:

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[24] *The Cairo Bulletin*, July 17, 1913.

[25] Scholars must be careful not to overstate what the historical record actually reveals about Debs's personal life. Debs's image has been sanitized, a process that began while he was still alive, which makes it all the more difficult to untangle fact from fiction. See Nick Salvatore, *Eugene Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, Ill., 1982), 276; Adam Shatz, "The Prophet of Terre Haute," *New York Times,* September 26, 1999. Ernest Freeberg refers to Curry as Debs's "lover" in *Democracy's Prisoner* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 114. See also Salvatore, *Eugene Debs,* 277, 279.

> There have been days when I have wearied of the life I lead and longed for something different; because in the midst of this restless existence of ours, our senses live but our hearts are stifled. . . . For a moment I built a whole future on your love. I longed for the country. I remembered my childhood—one has always a childhood to remember whatever one may have become since; but it was nothing but a dream.[26]

[26] Stephen S. Stanton, ed., *Camille and Other Plays* (New York, 1957), 133.