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Introduction to *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*

Abstract

[Excerpt] This is a social biography of Eugene Victor Debs. It is a traditional biography in that it emphasizes this one individual's personal and public life as far as the evidence allows. But the book is also a piece of social history that assumes individuals do not stand outside the culture and society they grew in and from. I have stressed each aspect of Debs's story in order to present both the importance of the man and a more complete picture of the political and cultural struggles his society engaged in during his lifetime.

Neither in his time nor in ours would Debs stand as an architect of a specific program for the future. His talents were unsuited to such an approach and to that extent limited him. But his life and those of his comrades in the labor and Socialist movements have a far broader significance. The issues first raised in the transition to an industrial capitalist society are not yet resolved. The value of the individual in a corporate-dominated society; the meaning of work in a technological environment geared primarily for profits; and the importance of citizenship amid widespread malaise brought on in large part by the manipulative practices of political leaders—all these are questions of vital concern today. Eugene Victor Debs cannot speak directly to our present; the contexts are not identical. But a study of his life does suggest that the moral and political values this preeminent native son embodied shed light on the past and are still instructive today.

Keywords

Eugene V. Debs, labor movement, socialism, industrialism

Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

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Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist

Nick Salvatore

Introduction

This is a social biography of Eugene Victor Debs. It is a traditional biography in that it emphasizes this one individual's personal and public life as far as the evidence allows. But the book is also a piece of social history that assumes individuals do not stand outside the culture and society they grew in and from. I have stressed each aspect of Debs's story in order to present both the importance of the man and a more complete picture of the political and cultural struggles his society engaged in during his lifetime.

Debs's public career spanned the years after the Civil War to World War I, an era that witnessed the full development of American industrial capitalism. As a result of his activities both as a labor organizer and Socialist agitator, Debs occupied a prominent place in the nation's consciousness for many years. Alternately applauded and attacked, his words and deeds were discussed by Americans of all classes and political allegiances. Yet many today know little about him. When most school texts mention Debs, he is more often than not in a footnote, an historical curiosity who ran for the presidency five times on the Socialist party ticket. Until recently, much scholarly treatment followed a similar pattern. Debs remained an oddity, out of the mainstream of American political discourse, a Don Quixote tilting at windmills. Even those who viewed Debs with sympathy have frequently, if inadvertently, contributed to this perception. Too often Debs became a larger-than-life hero, a born radical eternally at odds with the culture that nurtured him. This approach does violence to his complex history and threatens to make him incomprehensible to Americans who do not already share the faith.

This dichotomy between Debs's place in the consciousness of his contemporaries and his role in our current historical imagination led me to write a new biography. However interesting Debs's personality might be, his primary claim on our historical consciousness remains rooted in the significance of his public words and actions. A symbol of the national protest against the social revolution wrought by industrial capitalism, Debs galvanized Americans in defense of their rights as citizens and working people. Debs was no Luddite, opposed to technological innovation. Rather, as he insisted throughout a long public career, if technological progress was achieved at the price of American democratic traditions, then that "victory" signalled the destruction of American republicanism. His power as a speaker before American-born and immigrant audiences resulted in large part from his profound appreciation of this indigenous democratic tradition. As a Socialist, Debs presented the reality of class struggle in America in sharp, incisive terms, but never at the expense of his commitment to democratic thought. Many in America responded to this message, as they did to Debs himself, and it remains today his most potent legacy. Debs was anything but a tilter at windmills; the core of Debs's thought and the action that flowed from it were firmly rooted in the American experience.

But far more is at stake than just the historical record of one individual. Debs was a prominent figure in his time for two important reasons. First, the questions he raised concerning industrial capitalism and the political and cultural revolution it encouraged were serious issues for Americans of every class in his generation. These issues were not, as we are often encouraged to think today, welcomed uncritically by all Americans; nor was the outcome of the debate assured. Debs was part of a national discussion that ultimately questioned precisely how America's traditions would be reinterpreted within this changed and charged context. Second, his fellow citizens did not support Debs primarily due to his eloquent oratory. He was a powerful public speaker, but he was no manipulative "outside agitator." His appeal stemmed from the fact that his words addressed the very real experience of countless Americans as they encountered industrial capitalism. Debs symbolized their protest, but these American men and women themselves protested the forced changes in their work lives, family structure, and individual sense of self. To ignore Debs and the movements he led distorts the past in a fundamental fashion and seriously limits our vision in the present.

Neither in his time nor in ours would Debs stand as an architect of a specific program for the future. His talents were unsuited to such an approach and to that extent limited him. But his life and those of his comrades in the labor and Socialist movements have a far broader significance. The issues first raised in the transition to an industrial capitalist society are not yet resolved. The value of the individual in a corporate-dominated society; the meaning of work in a technological environment geared primarily for profits; and the importance of citizenship amid widespread malaise brought on in large part by the manipulative practices of political leaders—all these are questions of vital concern today. Eugene Victor Debs cannot speak directly to our present; the contexts are not identical. But a study of his life does suggest that the moral and political values this preeminent native son embodied shed light on the past and are still instructive today.

During the long years of researching and writing this book, first as a doctoral dissertation and now in greatly expanded form, I have benefited immensely from the help and support of many individuals and institutions. As a graduate student, I was fortunate to receive a two-year appointment as a Max Farrand Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, and a third year of support from the Mabel McLeod Lewis Foundation. Since then, former colleagues at Holy Cross College provided me with a semester's support, and the bulk of the final draft was written while on a year's fellowship provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Librarians across the country have been most helpful. Although too numerous to name individually, the staffs of the institutions listed in the notes were unfailingly supportive. I would, however, especially like to thank Dr. Paul Koda, formerly of the Cunningham Library, Indiana State University; Mr. and Mrs. Ned Bush, formerly curators of the Debs Foundation; and Mr. and Mrs. Schubert Sebree of Terre Haute, Indiana. They gave me every possible assistance during a prolonged stay in Terre Haute, shared with me their personal and professional knowledge of Debs, and opened their homes to me. Without them this might be a very different book. I am sorry that neither Ned nor Schubert has lived to see its publication. James

Hogan and Selina Martin of the Dinand Library at Holy Cross treated my requests with patience and imagination during my years there.

I have profited greatly from the criticism and suggestions of many friends and colleagues. Larry Gerber, William A. Green, James R. Green, David Kessler, Bruce Laurie, Staughton Lynd, Peter Mailloux, David J. O'Brien, and Michael True read all or part of the manuscript and consistently encouraged even as they sharply criticized. Roy Rosenzweig read the complete manuscript numerous times in various forms, and I deeply appreciate his intelligence and friendship. I was fortunate in having as my editor David Brody. A perceptive historian in his own right, he helped me transform an unwieldy manuscript into a more coherent book. Scott Molloy shared with me labor material from his private collection and throughout prodded me to address a diverse audience. Christine McHugh, Neil Basen, and Lois McLean shared their research on related topics. Leslie Birmingham, Timothy Dwyer, R. Ken Gilroy, and Mark Pettitt were valuable research assistants. Pearl M. Jolicoeur and Pamela O'Keefe typed various drafts of the manuscript and brought to my attention numerous errors, large and small. I thank them for their care. Hilda Rogin was of great help in preparing the final copy. Richard L. Wentworth and Susan L. Patterson of the University of Illinois Press were consistently helpful and understanding.

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My wife, Ann H. Sullivan, lived with me with patience and love as I learned something of the art of historical writing. Amid the demands of her own career, she also became my closest critic. Many of the ideas and interpretations that follow were first suggested by her. Her spirit and involvement pervade throughout.

Ithaca, New York