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The Utopia of Eugene V. Debs

THE DECADE SINCE 1945 HAS PRODUCED SEVERAL STUDIES OF THE LIFE OF Eugene V. Debs. His writings and speeches have been collected, for the first time since 1908; a comprehensive biography has been written; and recent histories of the Socialist movement in America have added to our knowledge and understanding of his life and work. Why? Why should Americans who, we are told, abhor socialists as much as communists, be interested in the life and work of the man who for twenty-five years was the living embodiment of American socialism; a man who was an avowed, albeit gentle, revolutionary who hated capitalism and all it stood for? Perhaps the answer is that there is a tradition of American radicalism and that Eugene Debs conformed to that tradition as much as any American radical. Perhaps we admire and respect him for the same reasons that we admire and respect people like Lincoln, Garrison, Bryan and the Suffragettes, because we know that they felt they had a mission and pursued that mission with a singular devotion, faithfully if not always wisely.

Debs is best remembered as the Socialist politician and agitator who was a leader in his party from its formation in 1901 to his death in 1926. Since his time no other Socialist, not even Norman Thomas, has been able to communicate as effectively with the masses of Americans. He it was who conducted five presidential campaigns between 1900 and 1920; who polled almost six per cent of the national vote in 1912; who defied the Wilson administration by opposing the war effort; who spent almost three years in federal prison for that defiance.

The political, social and economic system envisaged by Eugene Debs and toward which he worked all his life was nothing less than a Utopia, the heavenly city that so many philosophers and reformers had sought

before him. He himself had no elaborate design for his Utopia except to base it on common ownership of property and common wealth for all and he had no grand design for its accomplishment except by common consent and common action. With these two things at work he believed all things possible, even Utopia.

Good socialist that he was, Debs' orientation toward all problems was basically economic, but solving the economic problem was simply the start of his proposed renovation of society. Once the "bread and butter problem," as he called it, was solved the jigsaw puzzle of human society would fall into place. During the course of his colorful presidential campaign of 1908 he wrote that

> When the bread and butter problem is solved and all men and women and children the world around are rendered secure from dread of war and fear of want, then the mind and soul will be free to develop as they never were before. We shall have a literature and an art such as the troubled heart and brain of man never before conceived. We shall have beautiful houses and happy homes such as want could never foster or drudgery secure. We shall have beautiful thoughts and sentiments, and a divinity in religion, such as man weighted down by the machine could never have imagined.[1]

Such was his vision of Utopia. His references to art and literature are interesting since he himself admittedly had little interest in either. This fact did not preclude his recognizing their value. His remarks on religion are also interesting. Never an orthodox Christian, his religion was based on the ideals of human love, brotherhood and community action implicit in the Sermon on the Mount. He was sure that Jesus of Nazareth had been a practicing socialist. Like most Socialists and some ministers of the Gospel of his day he insisted that organized religion as practiced in America too often acted as an apologist for capitalism and was guilty of the same sins—discrimination, falsehood and oppression.

He believed that industrial capitalism and the profit motive that it inspired were the root of all evil. If capitalism could be replaced with a more humane co-operative socialism then the whole social system, the very nature of man and his world, would be changed for the better. Any idea of reforming capitalism to achieve these ends was met with scorn by Debs. The cause of evil and unrest among men "does not lie in a maladministration of present government but in the very nature of society as at present constituted," he told a Western audience during his

[1] Eugene V. Debs, "Socialist Ideals," *Arena,* XL (November, 1908), 433-34.

hectic but highly effective presidential campaign of 1912. "And the remedy must be found in a reconstruction of all existing systems." [2]

Debs carried this theory so far as to insist, during the course of his 1904 campaign, that prior to the Civil War there had been neither tramp nor millionaire in the United States, that both these types had been produced by the industrial revolution triggered by that heroic conflict. American society, one based on agriculture in colonial days, had been transformed after the Civil War into one characterized by a machine-made and machine-enforced class struggle. Debs' history may have been weak but his logic was characteristic: both types, tramp and millionaire, had come and would go with industrial capitalism. The hand of the System corroded everything it touched but the fault lay in the System, not in the objects that it touched.

Debs' whole career as a politician and socialist was given its sense of direction and meaning by his work as a labor organizer among the railroad workers before the turn of the century. All the sweat and agony, defeat and disappointment and hard work that Debs encountered in his efforts to unite the railroad men into one big union remained indelibly impressed on his mind and memory. He remembered above all else the reluctance with which his efforts were greeted by the men he sought to help. He knew that they had families to support on their meager wages and that unionization would involve striking for recognition. Strikes meant that pay would be lost and that loss would be reflected in less food and fewer clothes for the strikers' families. Here was first awakened in Eugene Debs the belief that there were two classes in America, the oppressors and the oppressed, and that if the oppressed could only organize and enforce their claims they could change society for the benefit of all mankind.

Debs himself worked for a time on the railroads but quit to allay his mother's fears for his safety. But he could not forget the railroaders and set about to help them. His incessant preaching and the intolerable conditions under which the men worked finally hit home and out of the struggle was born the American Railway Union, an organization that included all ranks of railroad workers. In it the firemen were not pitted against the engineers, the yardmen against the clerks, the roundhouse men against the maintenance crews. In this union they all worked together for the common good. To Eugene Debs this was the only answer to the power of organized business, the only logical way in which labor could progress. When it came to translating his ideal of common

[2] *Arizona Republican* (Phoenix), September 8, 1912.

action to include socialism and an ultimate Utopia, he did not hesitate for he had always found that co-operative efforts succeeded much faster than competitive efforts.

In 1894 the Pullman workers struck for higher wages and better working conditions and appealed to the ARU for support. Debs was hesitant. The ARU was not strong enough to enter as extensive a strike as the Pullman effort promised to be. He felt that it would be a mistake to identify the ARU with the violence that seemed inevitable. But the membership voted to join the strike and Debs concurred. He directed his men from Chicago and was especially anxious to see that they committed no acts of violence which could be used to discredit the union. He more than other men realized that the reputation of organized labor was on trial and that management would stop at nothing to strike at that reputation. As the strike progressed Debs' worst fears were realized. The whole strike developed into an effort to break the unions. Debs was not surprised when the strike was finally broken by federal troops.

Debs, along with other union leaders, received a jail sentence for his part in "obstructing the mails" and for contempt of court. He emerged from jail on the road to socialism but not yet ready to take the final step. Even though the ARU was crushed and its membership blacklisted the strike had not been a failure to Debs because it impressed something on his mind that he never forgot: the strikers had stood together for a common cause until the power of the state itself had been called in to crush them. Here was the secret of success for any movement, whether it be in labor or politics—unity of purpose and action. This was the embodiment of socialism itself and if it could be translated to a larger field of action it would bring about the Utopia that Debs longed for. He was to spend the remaining thirty years of his life pleading for unity among his Socialist comrades, unity that he knew in his heart would bring success, unity that he never achieved.

We do not know the exact moment at which Debs became a socialist but we have it on his own authority that the event took place shortly after he left Woodstock jail and that his conversion was the result of much thought and reading in socialist literature. Debs had had his doubts about capitalism for some time and those doubts crystallized during the course of the Pullman strike when he realized that capital was not intent upon negotiating with labor but on crushing it. Once convinced that capitalism and the society it had raised must be replaced with socialism he attacked the whole problem with the same vigor that had characterized his work with labor.

As much as anyone else, perhaps more, he realized that he was the

evangelist of socialism, not its philosopher or theorist. It was his job to agitate, to jolt, to shock the people into a realization of their true state and to show them what they could do about it. "Progress is born of agitation," he told a crowd during his campaign of 1908. "It is agitation or stagnation. I have taken my choice." [3] He realized that the people had been deluded with dreams of Utopia before, that the promises made to them by politicians of the past had been broken, that they were apt to disregard him for this reason. Therefore he set out deliberately to be forceful and vivid, to agitate the people and thereby to educate them in socialist doctrine and to convince them that socialism was the only answer to their problems.

In 1898 he helped form the Social Democratic Party and ran as its candidate for president in 1900. In 1901 he helped found the Socialist party of America, a fusion of most of the many socialist sects in the country. In 1904 he ran as that party's presidential candidate and quadrupled his vote of 1900. He and the Socialists were plainly committed to political action after that. But to both Debs and the Socialists political action was inexorably bound up with work in labor unions, for it was largely to labor that the Socialists directed their appeal. The rival organization with which the Socialists contended for labor's support was the American Federation of Labor. Debs himself had no use for the conservative policies pursued by Gompers and the AFL leadership. Debs felt that labor should be more militant in asking for betterment of its condition.

The labor problem was one which plagued the Socialists throughout their history. By 1908 there were two distinct groups within the Socialist party, the conservative or evolutionary socialists and the radical or revolutionary socialists. Debs found himself between these two groups but flirted with the radicals. He classed himself a revolutionary socialist and was recognized as one of the leaders of that group. In essence, however, he occupied the middle position between the two groups and managed to move so skilfully that he was often the arbiter between them and never lost his appeal to all socialists. Debs had once hoped to work through the AFL and to introduce socialist doctrine to its members without having to build a rival union. It was not long, however, before it became evident to him that the Socialists could not dominate the AFL. The conservative Socialists hoped to continue to work with Gompers in a friendly way, slowly building up islands of Socialist strength in the AFL ranks.

[3] *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches* (Girard, Kansas: Appeal to Reason, 1908), p. 484.

To Debs this was not the answer. The basis of his whole program was education of the masses in socialist doctrine but this was a slow process and he felt that faster progress could be made by working with labor unions. Despairing of ever converting the AFL, he lent his name and support to the establishment of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905. He made numerous speaking and organizational tours of the mining regions of the West where the IWW strength was strongest and conducted a spirited defense of Bill Haywood and other IWW leaders in the memorable Steunenberg case of 1906.

Although he gave his support to the IWW until 1908, Debs found himself on the horns of a real dilemma as far as that group's use of industrial violence was concerned. By 1908 he had let his membership lapse, presumably because of disagreements with the IWW leadership over their use of violence. Conservative Socialists had been alarmed from the start by Debs' work with the IWW because they feared that Wobbly violence would boomerang on the whole socialist movement. Debs scoffed at their fears and insisted that a strong, militant labor union could do nothing but advance the cause of socialism in general. When attacked by the conservative Socialists he countered that they did not understand working-class problems because they were middle-class in their outlook.

The showdown within the Socialist party on the problem of industrial violence came in 1912 when the conservatives managed to amend the party constitution with a clause that expelled any members who advocated industrial violence. Sensing that this was the year of promise for American socialism and that the party had much to gain from the groundswell of progressive sentiment that was moving across the country, Debs made a strong plea for unity among the Socialists. In the process he denied that he had any sympathy for industrial violence and condemned such action as anarchistic, not socialistic.

The crux of Debs' dilemma was obvious. For years he had been preaching the overthrow of capitalism; he had defended men whose actions looked like revolution. Now at the crucial moment he denied that he had advocated violence. At the same time that he condemned syndicalism he stated boldly that he himself had no respect for capitalist property laws and obeyed them only because he had to. Many of his followers were puzzled and found it difficult to reconcile some of his past statements with his present stand.

The truth of the matter was that any form of violence was distasteful to Debs. He always insisted that the revolution he preached could be accomplished by peaceful means as soon as the electorate was taught the

soundness of the socialist position. The revolution which he had in mind and the Utopia that it was to establish transcended a limited program of industrial sabotage. Furthermore, these were actions which in the end would only redound to the party's harm by further intensifying the mistrust, fear and suspicion with which the average American regarded the Socialists. Debs was committed wholeheartedly to political action and he was far too astute a politician to subscribe to beliefs which would destroy the party's hope of political success.

Debs never really overcame a distinctly American attitude toward political violence and despite his years of preaching revolution it is evident that he desired no upheaval for America such as occurred in Russia in 1917. Although he was distinctly to the left of most of his Socialist comrades and deserved the self-adopted classification of revolutionary socialist, he never completed the circle of violence by adopting the Soviet brand of communism. To Eugene Debs, any Bolshevik or Marxist doctrines of the necessity of violence and bloodshed remained foreign doctrines and he never adopted them. Violence if necessary, but not as an avowed instrument of policy was his answer. Thus when the Russian revolution came he could praise the overthrow of the despotic Czarist regime and at the same time condemn the bloodshed that accompanied that overthrow. He could even go so far as to cable Lenin a plea to spare the lives of some revolutionaries who had been found guilty of treason. The final questions and problems which led to his sharpest criticisms of the Russian communists and which led finally to his break with them were in essence questions concerning what he believed to be their excessive use of force and violence.

In actuality, Debs advocated violence only in the sense that he advocated the overthrow of the capitalist system and its replacement with a radically different type of economic and social system. The Utopia envisaged by Eugene Debs had no place for force and violence and it could not afford to be established by bloodshed. Debs' faith in the abilities of the masses of men told him that education, not armed revolution, would bring about his Utopia. If anything, he was representative of a generation of American reformers that sought revolutionary ends by orderly means. What placed Debs most squarely in the tradition of American radicalism was his reliance on common sense, on education, on the ballot instead of the bullet to achieve social reform. In 1918 he could face the jury that found him guilty of violating the Espionage Act and say "I have never advocated violence in any form. I have always believed in

education, in intelligence, in enlightenment and I have always made my appeal to the reason and to the conscience of the people." [4]

The basic premise of Debs' program was the existence of a class struggle in America, a belief that was shaped by his experiences as a labor organizer when he saw workers pitted against the hired agents of management, and when he saw the power of the state invoked to crush strikes. This meant only one thing to Debs, that the machinery of state was owned and operated like any other business concern by the capitalist interests. But the class struggle was a thesis that many of Debs' conservative comrades could not swallow. They preferred to believe that socialism would evolve naturally out of the existing order over a period of time. These "scientific socialists," or those men whom Debs called "parlor socialists" because they were more interested in the theory than in the practice of socialism, had all the answers. This theory of the natural evolution of socialism was their answer to the question of how to avoid revolution and violence. Scientific socialism was advocated by Socialists of high standing in the party as well as by college professors, scholarly ministers and cautious reformers. Victor Berger, who next to Debs was the most widely known Socialist, subscribed to the belief, at least in 1912, that socialism was the logical outcome of the Progressive Movement. The scientific socialists wrote large books, contributed to learned journals and worked out elaborate theories of government for the socialist commonwealth. It was a type of socialism that was logical, orderly and architecturally sound, a type of socialism that given time and tranquillity would solve the problems of low wages and high living costs, no job security for workers, and high dividends for bond holders. But like so many scientific undertakings, it lacked life, it lacked the invigorating quality of human appeal that meant so much to Debs and his followers. It depended on time and Debs had less time than anything else.

In fairness to the scientific socialists it should be noted that they as much as Debs were humanitarians who desired to better the lot of their fellow men. Their differences with Debs and his followers were concerned with means, not with ends. Where one group was patient, the other was impatient for success; where one group looked at Man in capital letters, the other looked at men as individuals, as shopkeepers, farmers, laborers, as people. Both groups were sincere, both desired the

[4] Eugene V. Debs, "Address to the Jury," reprinted in *The Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs* (New York: Hermitage Press, 1948), p. 434.

co-operative commonwealth, both worked toward the same Utopia—that of Eugene Debs—but for one the road was long and for the other it was short. Eugene Debs belonged to the latter group.

Few more astute politicians than Eugene Debs ever lived in America, for he knew and understood the common people and the issues and means to which they were susceptible better than any of his contemporaries, except perhaps Bryan. If anyone deserved the title Socialist Great Commoner it was Debs. His appeal was formulated for and directed toward the common people, people who were uneducated, who worked in factories or dug in mines or tilled the soil for their livelihood. To Eugene Debs the common people, especially the workers, were the unique depository of goodness and virtue. Debs was often anti-intellectual because the intellectuals he saw wrote books rather then led parades, preached sermons rather than made speeches, counseled caution rather than action. To Eugene Debs the highest common denominator was always the common man, the common man with whom he had worked on the railroads, to whom he had lectured on the evils of capitalism, in whom he placed supreme confidence, toward whom he looked for the enactment of his Utopia.

Just who constituted the working class was another bone of contention among the Socialists. Debs himself had not been a worker long and once having embarked on the role of union organizer and socialist politician he worked with his brain not his hands. Did this make him middle-class, no longer a worker, no longer entitled to represent the working class? Not in his own mind. Anyone who depended on another for his work was a member of the working class to Debs, whether he was a factory worker, farmer, clerk or whatever.

Debs' followers were often embarrassed by those who contended that he no longer represented the workers' views. In almost every outward appearance, Debs looked the part of the respectable merchant or official. He liked tailored tweeds, conservative cravats and impeccable hats. His favorite poet and personal friend was James Whitcomb Riley. He admired, perhaps without understanding all its implications, the work of Elbert Hubbard. The charge that he was middle-class in outlook and actions was given further support by his often vacillating position on crucial questions, such as that of industrial violence. But if Debs' hat and coat were middle-class, the head and heart they covered were working-class in origin and sympathy. He could hardly forget that he himself sprang from poor but respectable immigrant stock, that he had worked for his living, that his reputation had been made as a labor organizer, not as a merchant or intellectual.

Indeed, he was almost radical by birth. His Alsatian father, remembering his own admiration for the work of two European radicals, Victor Hugo and Eugène Sue, named his firstborn son Eugene Victor in their honor. Debs never sought anything but to be a good workman and in these terms he felt that the marks of his socialist leadership were but marks of workmanship, just as much so as the dirty clothes and sweaty brows of miners, factory workers and farmers. He may not have been—at least late in life—a true workman in the sense that he worked with his hands but he was always acutely conscious of the fact that he had not risen far from the workmen's ranks and that only their devotion and trust had raised him at all. He may not have wished it but given his circumstances he could hardly have escaped leadership. He was the stuff that America's prophets have been made of.

If not a theorist, Debs was at least a dreamer, a visionary who believed in the goodness and soundness of the program that he advocated as he believed in nothing else. The distribution of property, the collective ownership of industry, the abolition of the profit motive, the working together of all men for a common cause were things that did not appear chimeric to Debs. On the contrary, he had seen them partially fulfilled too many times to believe them impossible of accomplishment. To those who insisted that any such society would have to wait for a change in human nature before it could be established Debs retorted that men were bad because of the system under which they lived. Change the system and you change the men. If socialism could be instituted and men could see the benefits gained by co-operation rather than competition they would adopt co-operation wholeheartedly. Had not man originated as a co-operative being, moving and working in groups rather than singly?

Debs harbored no hatred for the individual capitalist as such nor was he opposed to those capitalists who had become millionaires. They too were products of the System, just like the men they exploited. In his time the most pressing public question was regulation of the trusts and in his five presidential campaigns Debs asserted that he bore no ill will toward the trust owner and that the trust in itself was not an evil. On the contrary, once expropriated for the common good it would be beneficent for society in general, not just for a few. But the point at which Debs and the conservative Socialists parted company on the trust question was confiscation. The conservatives would have paid for the trusts but Debs would merely have seized them in the name of the common good. Had not the trust owner been paid many times over for his labor and original investment?

Just as the rich man could conceivably enter Debs' Utopia, so could

the Negro or immigrant and neither would have to enter through the back door or the needle s eye. Like the question of working through labor unions, the question of the disposition of the Negro in the co-operative commonwealth was one which divided the Socialists. By and large the conservatives sidestepped the issue and many of Debs' own followers were frankly antagonistic toward Negroes. Victor Berger spoke for many of the conservative Socialists when he frankly asserted that

> There can be no doubt that the Negroes and mulattoes constitute a lower race—that the Caucasian and indeed even the Mongolian have the start on them in civilization by many thousand years—so that the Negroes will find it difficult ever to overtake them. The many cases of rape which occur wherever Negroes are settled in large numbers prove, moreover, that the free contact with the whites has led to the further degeneration of the Negroes, as well as all other inferior races. [5]

Berger did not stop to explain the plain inference that contact with whites caused the degeneration of the Negroes. His solution to the problem, like Debs' own, was to change the social system. In the process of change, however, the Negroes would have to remain on their side of the tracks. Many Socialists who worked with labor unions pointed out with irrefutable logic that Negro labor tended to work against unionization because it could be bought cheaper by management. Many times labor leaders had seen Negro strikebreakers arrive at a beseiged plant, hired cheaply by the owners to rout the union forces.

Debs had a simple answer to the problem: the Negro like everyone else was a victim of the System. Change the System and you change the Negro. Give him full opportunity and you give him equality with his white counterpart. Give him this and he will no longer have to sell himself at a cheaper price. During the presidential campaigns of 1904 and 1908 Debs clearly stated his position. While frankly admitting that he wanted every Negro vote he could get he asserted that he appealed for them on the same basis that he appealed for any other votes. As for the reverse side of the coin, he worked out no plan for the rescue of the Negro from his bondage except the adoption of socialism. Because the Negro had been persecuted did not entitle him to special favors in the coming Utopia; no one was entitled to special favors. That the Negro was oppressed and exploited should serve only to awaken him to the fact that the capitalistic system must go.

Debs was no doubt unaware of the tremendous complications of the

[5] Berger in the *Social Democratic Herald*, May 31, 1902.

Negro problem, especially in the South. The source of his anger against those who exploited the Negro was personal and humanitarian. He detested any social inequality. Furthermore, he insisted that the Negro was being kept in bondage by the capitalists so that they could use him as a tool against organized labor. In asserting that the Negro possessed the same inherent rights accorded to his white counterpart, Debs was firmly in the Natural Rights tradition of American reformers.

If anything the general Socialist attitude toward the immigrant was less sympathetic than its attitude toward the Negro. Repeatedly the conservative Socialists deferred action in organizing the huge numbers of immigrants that poured into America during the two decades before World War I. As in the case of the Negro, many Socialists, radical as well as conservative, feared the immigrants because they were a source of cheap labor that threatened the union movement. Many Socialists were also suspicious of the uneducated immigrants because they were easy prey for machine politicians.

Debs had a characteristic answer for those who favored immigration quotas and restrictions. If socialism was restrictive in its membership, if it picked those whom it rewarded and those whom it punished, how was it different from capitalism? If the foreign-born were excluded for no better reason than that they were foreign-born and uneducated what justice was there in the Socialist proclamation of the co-operative commonwealth? Bring them here, educate them and then let them vote for socialism; that was Debs' answer to the problem. Just as the Negro's inequality could be erased by changing the system that oppressed him, so could that of the immigrant be changed by a society that worked for all men instead of a select few. The Utopia of Eugene Debs was one in which all men were intrinsically as well as legally equal. For Debs the term socialism embraced all men regardless of their station or background and not just those to whom the secrets of the co-operative commonwealth had been revealed by some special insight. Time and again he charged that those who favored exclusion did so because they did not understand the immigrants, because they had never worked with uneducated people.

Debs was no doubt sincere in this humanitarian appeal to favor the immigrants but there was more at stake than scruples. He was fully aware that the immigrants were by and large people of poor stock, farmers and workers who had been uprooted from their homes by war, depression or revolution. He was quick to see that they would be more susceptible to radical doctrine and more easily educated in the ideas of socialism than native Americans who had a long tradition of orderly

political process behind them. This does not mean that Debs was a rabble rouser or was intent upon foisting a common mob on the American political scene. He was merely alive to the fact that these groups would be receptive to a certain amount of socialist propaganda.

Marking as it did the high point of Socialist strength in American politics, the year 1912 also marked Debs' greatest effort. As the party's presidential candidate that year he polled over 800,000 votes, almost six per cent of the total cast. But in that campaign Debs was as anxious to refute other liberal doctrine as he was to gather votes for he was always fearful that the Socialist program would be adopted by less radical parties, as indeed it was. Many Progressives believed that heaven could be enacted into law if only enough honest men could be found for public office, but Debs still insisted that the whole basis of society would have to be changed before any substantial social progress could be made. He conceived of progress only as it helped the common people and the common people could never be helped by paternalistic leadership. Capitalism would never evolve into a system of benevolence because it was based on competition not on co-operation. Therefore, under capitalism there would always be the weak and the strong, the rich and the poor and their weakness and strength, richness and poorness would be sustained by the social system which the powerful had devised for their own ends. Any thought of reforming capitalism, however well intended, was therefore doomed to failure.

To achieve his Utopia, Debs relied on the power and reason of the masses of the people. That was why he so earnestly advocated education for them, why he so sincerely believed that once educated they would choose the right course and that course would be socialism. The secret of his success was his knowledge of the common people and the effectiveness of the program which he advocated relied entirely on them. If Debs appealed to the orderly process of elections and political action, if he relied on the common sense of the people as a whole, if he in truth advocated no revolution why then was he considered dangerous? Why was his very name used as a byword by "respectable" people and opposition politicians? Why did he call himself a revolutionary?

The most obvious difference between Debs and other reformers was his insistence on the presence of a class struggle in America, a constant, often subtle, often open warfare between the haves and the have-nots. This belief in turn caused him to reject any idea of reforming capitalism. Whereas the Progressives who followed Theodore Roosevelt and the Democrats who followed Woodrow Wilson believed that capitalism could be reformed by distinctly political means, Debs' approach was

economic. A more honest and powerful ballot was the basis of the Progressive program but the Socialists carried that idea to its logical conclusion—the power of the people to vote out capitalism and substitute socialism. It was a conclusion that the Progressives shunned like the plague. Cleaner politics, politics of any kind, was but a means, not an end with the Socialists. Debs and his followers could loudly deplore the best efforts of the New Freedom, and later the New Deal, because these great reform programs were intended to bolster capitalism not to destroy it.

Such then were the broad outlines of the Utopia of Eugene Debs. To achieve this end he used every vehicle at his command and in an age of consummate politicians he possessed most of the successful politician's tools. He spoke well, a fact admitted even by his enemies. During his presidential campaigns admission was charged to his speeches to help defray the cost of the campaign but no matter where he spoke or how large the auditorium he always addressed capacity crowds. His speaking manner was forceful and direct, displaying all the honesty of his own thinking.

Likewise, his manner of writing—and he wrote as much as or more than he spoke—was simple and direct for he knew and gauged well the interests and educational level of his readers. He never tired readers and audiences with academic discussions on the theory of capitalism, partly because he was not capable of such discussions, a fact as readily admitted by himself as others, but mainly because he knew that such talk washed easily off the minds of the worker and farmer audiences that he addressed. He limited himself to a few key phrases and hard hitting ideas and these he repeated over and over as if to implant them in the very subconscious of his listeners and readers.

Debs possessed many faults, faults that would have to be corrected in his Utopia. He was anti-intellectual and often doctrinaire in the worst way with those who opposed him. His lack of learning and scholarship could well be deplored in a man who claimed to teach a new form of society. His thoughts on many subjects were indeed shallow and as for personal faults, it was generally known that he enjoyed an occasional drinking spree as well as anyone else. In short, as he often repeated, he was neither saint nor prophet. He was a man who had come to the people with an idea of how to build a new society and he awaited their judgment.

Few people who knew Debs long doubted his sincerity. It was a sincerity that imbued everything he touched. When the ARU was broken and dispersed Debs himself assumed the debt left by the defunct union,

a debt of $22,000 that took eighteen years of his life to pay. That he meant every word he said on the public platform, regardless of what heresy was entailed, most observers quickly came to believe, especially those who hated his ideas. He truly believed that the people could make society anew and make it a splendid thing. The wicked might prosper but this was only temporary. That they should ultimately triumph was impossible to Eugene Debs. He may not have believed in formal Christianity but he accepted its basic tenets. Goodness would surely be rewarded and the majority was always right—right if they knew all the facts, right if they were permitted to know, to understand the issues and vote according to their conscience. With knowledge, Utopia could be achieved. That he was never elected president did not dismay Debs. His campaigns were used as means, not as ends, means of spreading socialist ideas and of educating the people. Thus educated, the people would in time see the Utopia of Eugene Debs and would make it a reality.

Debs suffered for his beliefs especially when the World War and the persecution of radicals it engendered ended the Socialist dream of victory. In 1918 he was convicted of having violated the Espionage Act for having publicly stated his opposition to the war and the men who were conducting it. Sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, he served almost three and was released by order of President Harding on Christmas Day, 1921. In 1920 he ran for president from Atlanta Federal Prison in a futile attempt to rally and unify the declining Socialist party. We have no reason to believe that had he been elected president he would have jailed his enemies. Indeed, it is necessary to remember that his election would have signaled the triumph of socialism and the socialism that he envisaged had no place for prisons.

In prison, Debs' ancient dream of Utopia took on new meaning for he came to believe that the majority of his fellow inmates were victims of the System; that when reached with his own personality they softened and became human again; that even they could be taught the meaning of Utopia and could become its useful citizens. His horror at the penal system and the injustices that it bred and propagated was expressed in a book, *Walls and Bars,* published after his death, in which he reiterated the theme that society, the System, was to blame for the flotsam and jetsam that resided behind prison walls and bars. If only the System could be changed, mankind could be changed. This would bring Utopia; of that he was always sure.

Debs' faults were many and manifest but his goodness quickly became legendary. On one thing almost all commentators were agreed: if sincerity of purpose and gentleness of manner were marks of greatness Eugene

Debs was indeed a great man. But good intentions are not enough and with Debs there was more. He came to symbolize a whole generation of American radicals with his incessant campaigning, his sureness of his own right and the enemy's wrong. He impelled others with the sense of urgency that pushed him on. And always before him there was the vision of Utopia that would come when his program had been adopted, the Utopia that would spell the end of want and exploitation, that would usher in a whole new age of human happiness and freedom.

And he continued to preach, proclaiming the virtues of radicalism, the necessity of opposing injustice wherever he met it, the belief that some men would have to make sacrifices before Utopia could be established. "Do you know that all the progress in the whole world's history has been made by minorities?" he asked the faltering Progressives of 1924. "I have somehow been fortunately all of my life in the minority. I have thought again and again that if I ever find myself in the majority I will know that I have outlived myself." [6] Here was the confession of a faith that few others dared espouse, a faith that he espoused gladly. That political success eluded him; that he even represented a minority in his own party; that he was twice jailed for his beliefs, once as an old man; did not seem to bother Eugene Debs. That the Utopia in which he so fervently believed was regarded as a vision by other men did not discourage him. Success would come when the people knew and acted according to their knowledge. Meanwhile, he deemed it enough to preach always the vision of happier times and of a better world. Few men have done as much.

[6] Quoted in Kenneth Campbell McKay, *The Progressive Movement of 1924* (New (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), pp. 233-34.