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Inspiration or Distraction: Eugene Debs at the Head of American Socialism 1895-1921

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Abstract

This project seeks to provide historical context for the modern revival of avowed socialism in America through an examination of Eugene V. Debs leadership of American Socialism from 1895 to 1921. The paper argues that Debs' leadership of American socialism was unsuccessful because he left the critical task of convincing the American people that the ideology of Socialism is correct and fundamentally different from traditionalism, capitalism, and progressivism, incomplete. Reform Socialism did not distinguish itself from local progressivism, and revolutionary Socialism adopted violent, opportunistic methods which prevented broad support. Debs' unique ideology of Founding ideals, faith in democracy, and total societal transformation stood in the middle of these factions, offering distinction without danger. Unfortunately, Debs permitted party infighting and spent his energies in unwinnable Presidential campaigns. This research hopefully provides insight about the uniquely American challenges and circumstances relating to Socialism, relevant as avowed Socialism has appeared in America once again through Bernie Sanders. Sanders falls into the category of reform Socialism, slowly winning municipal and Congressional elections and fostering Socialism's positive image. To establish Socialism as a legitimate political entity, Sanders must move farther to the left, to ensure that the mainstream Democratic candidates do not appropriate the idea of free college without accepting its Socialist ideology. Still, Sanders might find himself, like Debs, awkwardly positioned between reformers and revolutionaries, unable to convince America that the idea of abolishing private property will create utopia.

Keywords

Socialism, reform, labor, electorate

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Inspiration or Distraction? Eugene Debs at the Head of American Socialism: 1895-1921

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Background

In the 1912 American presidential election, four men ran for the office. The Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson won the election with 42 percent of the popular vote. Former President Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party platform brought him 27 percent of the popular vote, leaving incumbent President William Howard Taft with only 23 percent as the rump of the Republican Party resulting from their split. The fourth candidate, who before 1912 had run for the office of president more times than the other three put together, was Eugene V. Debs. While Debs' 6 percent of the popular vote may seem insignificant, it was an important moment in American politics. In fact, his achievement remains the high-water mark of the influence of the Socialist Party of America as a legitimate political entity in the United States.

Though Debs would return to run for president in 1920 and would achieve numerically more votes, his percentage of the total had fallen to less than 4 percent. Furthermore, his failed bid occurred while he was in prison for speeches against World War I that were considered seditious. After Debs' health failed, Norman Thomas emerged to keep the party together for a time. Ultimately, schism and decline led to the collapse of the Socialist Party of America as an independent political unit, replaced by a Communist Party directed and financed by Moscow. Indeed, the nature of the Cold War and the later Communist Party makes the accomplishments of the Socialist Party of America in the early decades of the 20th century seem quite impressive. Despite the presence of two former presidents and a leading liberal on the 1912 ballot, almost one million Americans cast their vote for a Socialist with a jail record who had never held public office.

The Socialist Party of America and its influence on the political process and everyday people in the United States in the early 20th century thus presents an interesting and valuable historical topic. During this period, Eugene V. Debs was the ideological heart and public face of the party, if not its most cunning and powerful apparatchik. Yet, opinions on Debs were divided in his own time and remain so to this day. Was he a unique figure whose great influence, ability, and character galvanized the disparate socialist elements in

America into a relevant political entity? Or was he a lightning rod whose demagoguery created a personal following while his indifference to Party organization doomed it to decline when less favorable conditions to socialism developed in America? As in most debates, the truth likely lies somewhere between the extremes, but a detailed historical investigation can create the context necessary for a factual, nuanced, and meaningful conclusion.

Most of the historiography on Debs attempts a full biography. His life is examined from birth to death with as much of an emphasis on his upbringing, his family, and his health as his historical impact. In these works, either the introduction or the conclusion usually serves to establish the author's perspective on Debs' significance as a historical figure and thus make the reader aware of the possible biases which may flow through the examination of Debs throughout his life. Yet, these treatments do not satisfy the need and opportunity to delve into the practical leadership of Eugene V. Debs and assess its effects from the perspective of history. This work aims to fulfill that goal. This project is intended to serve as a focused treatment of Eugene V. Debs' time as a political leader in the Socialist Party of America and come to a conclusion about the ultimate value of that leadership and its implications for the future of the Party.

The temporal bookends of this study of Debs are his time spent in jail in 1895 and his 1921 pardon from President Warren Harding. Before the first jail stint, Debs was not yet a socialist but merely a union organizer. As such, he had not contributed as a principal figure in the Socialist Party. It was during this time that he was converted to socialism through literature and the efforts of eminent Milwaukee socialist Victor L. Berger. Upon his release, Debs quickly rose as an important member of the political party of American socialism, the Social Democracy of America that eventually became the official Socialist Party of America. His national prominence as a labor organizer in charge of the Pullman strike, his natural communication ability, and his enjoyable personality all served to thrust him rapidly into an authority position with his new party. He maintained his success until his release from prison, physically broken by the years of toil and imprisonment. He would pass away only five years later, leaving the Socialist Party of America bereft of the necessary successor.

During these 26 years of Eugene Debs' leadership as an American Socialist, The United States underwent unique and influential events and changes. The *Maine* incident, in which the U.S. naval vessel *Maine* mysteriously exploded in harbor at Havana, Cuba, created tension with Spain, which was fighting to maintain colonial control of Cuba. The tension ultimately led to the Spanish-American War and to the United States taking overseas colonies. President William McKinley was assassinated while in office, and his successor, Theodore Roosevelt, would attempt to run for a then-unprecedented third term. Deeper historical trends for American politics, culture, and society permeated this period as well. Laws like the Sherman Anti-Trust Act were passed to regulate and limit trusts and restrain the excesses and damages wrought by big business, signaling a gradual movement toward greater government involvement in the economy. The U.S. Constitution was amended four

times, allowing for an income tax, the direct election of senators, the right of women to vote, and the later-repealed prohibition on selling alcohol. In some ways, Americans and their representatives saw something deeply imperfect about their nation and sought large-scale changes in order to bring improvement. Due to America's military actions overseas, her global position changed to the status of a leading power. The United States was changing internally, and the outside world was changing around her, providing an interesting and powerful background for a study.

These 26 years of Eugene V. Debs' life provide the historical setting for an examination of his impact as a leader of the Socialist Party. The relevant topics towards which this study will be directed include the state of socialist political parties in America before Debs, his impact on membership as a popular figure, his influence on ideology and its spread, the results of his presidential campaigns, his effect on the structure and health of the Party organization, and the external, national trends in favor of or opposition to socialism which contextualize his leadership. By considering these various categories, this work will seek to synthesize a matrix for evaluating the effect of Eugene Debs' leadership. Achieving understanding of each subject and Debs' influence in relation to each will allow for a general consideration of the overall results of his actions and presence as the key figure in the political party of American Socialism.

As far as the overall view of the field toward Debs, there is a fairly consistent division of positions among scholars. Eugene Debs was a controversial figure in his day, and the analysis of historians has maintained the sharp dichotomy of opinion despite the fact that both sides are working from basically the same sources. Given Debs' proximity to the present day and his nature as an activist, speaker and writer, his speeches, papers, and the many opinions of various others are readily and fortunately available for those who have attempted to compose a thorough account of his life and achievements. There has been some variance due to the different aspects of Debs' life and work which have been considered. Still, two major opposing perspectives in the field prevail. One is that Debs was a powerful, energetic speaker who brought the Socialist movement in America together as a Party and forced the major parties to coopt its progressive social agenda. The other claims that Debs was a distracted, ineffective idealist whose grand plans and utopian initiatives combined with his obstinate unwillingness to actively work in the organization of the Party's political apparatus undermined the opportunity for the Socialist Party to succeed meaningfully in its heyday. While the polarization is not this complete, these are the bookend distinctions, with most works falling on a continuum in between.

Characteristic of the two main opinions relating to Debs are the works *Eugene V. Debs Speaks* and "Labor Hero Eugene V. Debs: 'A Dedication to Unpopularity'" against "Debs' Cooperative Commonwealth Plan for Workers" and *Eugene V. Debs: A Biography*. The former was originally published as *The Bending Cross*, by the authors James Cannon, Frederick C. Gamst, Bernard Brommel, and Ray Ginger respectively. While other writers and works have elaborated on both sides, these books and articles are characteristic and authoritative and thus warrant some further examination to establish the key arguments that historical analyses of Debs use.

James P. Cannon's thesis in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks* is that, "In Debs, the movement finally found a man who really spoke the language of the country and who knew how to explain the imported idea of socialism," but that "the history of American socialism in the first two decades of the [20th] century was a double story." Thus, Debs was both an emotional and intellectual leader of the first order, the exact man the party needed in America due to his personable and loving nature, his perseverance, and his powerful, experienced mind.

Nevertheless, "the official actions and policies of the party," were not in accordance with Debs' vision due to the facts that America was not yet in a revolutionary situation, that Debs was not as involved or effective an organizer in the Socialist Party as he should have been, and that there were self-seeking figures within the Party who were willing to take up Debs' abandoned mantle for their own benefit. Thus, while "Debs' mistaken theory of the party was one of the most costly mistakes a revolutionist ever made," this is the only way he can be criticized, and the success of his movement was the only thing lacking in Debs' profile as a uniquely great man, according to Cannon. Frederick Gamst takes a similar view in his article "Eugene V. Debs: 'A Dedication to Unpopularity,'" not claiming that Debs is without faults, but concluding strongly that he was an impactful, even great, figure in American history. Gamst goes so far as to say that Debs "paved the way for Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal" and that even in defeat, Debs forced the government to act, accomplishing his goal to diminish the influence of big business. Thus, one perspective often taken towards Debs is that although he was imperfect and was undercut by the forces of the day and his own potential allies, he remains a strong and effective leader who had a powerful, positive impact on the course of American history.

Professor of History Ray Ginger's thesis is that "Debs deserved little credit for whatever was worthy about his motives" and "On the accuracy of [his socialist ideology] must rest the ultimate worth of his career." This ideology is described critically by Ginger in saying that "the common people were being crucified by an outmoded economic system." With a century of hindsight, historians can see the rapid advances in technology, standard of living, and human rights in capitalist countries next to violent, oppressive poverty throughout much of the rest of the world, revealing that Debs' ideology was clearly flawed. Further, Ginger notes that Debs' contemporaries were critical of his personal morality that was later romanticized into near-sainthood, pointing to his prison sentence, his praise of Soviet Russia, and other various behaviors such as "drinking sprees" and "coarse and indiscriminate humor." Debs is seen as directly responsible for the failure of his movement since he established the agenda of the party, led its operations, and embodied its spirit. His charm and appeal were not universal and cannot whitewash the ideological instability, organizational errors, and political ineffectiveness which characterized Eugene Debs. The chief scholar on Debs, Bernard Brommel, delves deeply into the ways in which these facets of Debs' persona disrupted the Socialist Party of America in his piece "Debs' Cooperative Commonwealth Plan for Workers." The work recounts Debs' actions from 1897 to 1901, the period in which he was concerned with colonizing a western state with socialists. Brommel unveils the way in which Debs constantly changed focuses, disrupting the party

and creating schisms. Further, in this early stage, Debs continually refers to his “grand plan” for the spread of socialism but never fully lays it out or explains it. Then, he consistently refuses to serve in party offices, preferring instead to make speeches and public appearances which have little lasting effect. The result is that the party organization is unstable and that Debs’ attempts often go awry, dragging the Socialist Party of America down and preventing it from taking advantage of favorable conditions for its growth and empowerment. Thus, the major opposing position in the historical works on Debs sees his legacy as that of a “misguided zealot.”

My research supports the conclusion that the position represented by Professors Ginger and Brommel is more accurate of the impact and effectiveness of Eugene Debs. If Debs was an influential figure of the strong, positive nature argued by James Cannon, there should have been more sustainable political success for Socialism. Ginger’s criticisms are more convincing and reflect reality, and Brommel’s in-depth examination shows the connection between Debs’ failings as a leader and the problems, such as ineffectiveness and schism, which resulted for the Socialist Party of America. My research conducts a nuanced examination of Debs’ ideology to provide a more thorough understanding of the reasons for his lack of success. His program of nonviolent, democratic revolution was stuck in the middle ground between the two wings of American Socialism: social democratic reform and violent, anarchist revolution. While his ideology was a strong balance with a greater popular appeal that provided Debs prominence within the Party, he refused to consistently leverage this strength to set Party positions and strategies. Distracting presidential campaigns and Debs’ own ideological insecurities, having become a Socialist relatively late compared to contemporaries, led him to avoid Party conflict, even skipping nearly every Socialist Party convention. This doomed American Socialism to internal schism, limiting its appeal, legitimacy, and success to the degree that it could not survive without Debs’ personal magnetism after his death. Thus, Debs’ achievements must be measured in relation to the setting in which they occurred and the missed opportunities, ineffective tactics, and specific failures he had as a leader of the Socialist Party of America. While his skilled rhetoric, tireless energy, effective ideology, and ability to relate to the common worker brought increased attention to the Socialist Party of America in his lifetime, Eugene Debs’ obsession with national politics, unwillingness to work on the foundation of the Socialist Party, and failure to create, promote, or implement an organized plan for the spread of socialism led to a rapid decline for socialism as a legitimate political entity in America after his death.

Inspiration or Distraction?

When Eugene Debs emerged from Woodstock Prison in 1895, it was not in obscurity. The workers of the Illinois town shouted, “Lift him up so we can see him,” attempting to get a

glimpse of the tireless, selfless advocate for change on their behalf.¹ Debs' imprisonment was due to his leadership of the American Railway Union (ARU) in the recent Great Pullman strike. He had organized such effective resistance to any operation of Pullman car-carrying trains that the federal government was forced to step in to break the strike and maintain the nation's commerce. The nationwide effects of the strike were so great that Debs' notoriety spread; one contemporary noted, "The mysterious Mr. Debs, like the Black Death, was spreading over the continent and there was no escape from him."² Furthermore, despite the practical defeat, Debs and the ARU had won a moral victory. The use of federal troops against peacefully assembled strikers seemed an improper application of force, perhaps due to government corruption. Nevertheless, Eugene Debs did not carry this momentum on into further strikes because his time in Woodstock Prison had fundamentally changed his approach to America's problems.

During Debs' sentence, Milwaukee Socialist Victor Berger brought him a copy of Karl Marx' masterwork, *Das Kapital*. The hot-blooded, 40-year-old Debs had seemingly reached the pinnacle of the labor movement. His strike had done more to paralyze commerce than any other and had required an alliance of the federal government, big business, and some of the more conservative unions to bring it to an end. Still, from where Debs sat in Woodstock Prison, this ultimate achievement likely seemed something of a failure, naturally opening his passionate, focused mind to other ideas. As a result, during his stay in Woodstock Prison, Eugene Debs formulated a "more militant type of Socialism" for his program of action, based around political methods, which his inspiring character transformed into a "gospel" for his followers.³

Debs' first foray into the political arena came almost immediately after his release from Woodstock in November 1895. In the following year, he campaigned hard in support of William Jennings Bryan's presidential candidacy. Despite Bryan being a member of the regular Democratic Party, not a socialist, Debs no doubt sensed a kindred spirit in Bryan's passion, populism, oratory, and strict adherence to principle. There is certainly some parallelism between the two, with a combined eight presidential runs, all unsuccessful, as well as ideological similarities, including the commitment to pacifism which resulted in some ostracism for both during World War I. However, with William McKinley's victory in 1896, Debs undoubtedly saw that the entrenched system of business and government had won yet again despite the weight of the people and the principles he believed were on his

¹ Salpeter, Harry. 1920. "Martyr or Felon?." *Nation* 110, no. 2859: 520. *Points of View Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 15, 2016).

² Nym Crynkle, in Chicago newspaper clipping, Debs scrapbook, Taminent Library, July 1, 1894, p. 1, quoted in Ganst, Frederick C. 2007. "LABOR HERO EUGENE V. DEBS: "A DEDICATION TO UNPOPULARITY." *Journal Of Transportation Law, Logistics & Policy* 74, no. 2: 241-269. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 15, 2016).

³ 1926. "Eugene V. Debs." *Time* 8, no. 18: 14. Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File, EBSCOhost (accessed March 15, 2016).

side. To break this conservative, oppressive combination, a more radical method and approach was necessary.

For Debs, defeating the dominant social forces of his day required a full commitment to Socialism, including political campaigns, social programs, and ideological promotion. Therefore, following William Jennings Bryan's defeat in the campaign of 1896, Debs declared his departure from the People's Party and joined the Socialist Party, declaring in a letter to his former organization the American Railway Union that the "money power" was thwarting the common people.⁴ Nevertheless, with the next Presidential campaign some distance away, Debs needed a program of action to rally support for the Socialist Party and better the plight of American workers. This was a deep and powerful motivation for Debs. When he visited the site of one strike and interacted with the workers, he reflected, "I wish every foe of labor agitation could see the poverty I have seen in the last week."⁵ To relieve the conditions he saw firsthand in company towns and slums grown up next to mines and oil rigs, Debs proposed a cooperative, commonwealth colony in the American West for unemployed workers and set about trying to achieve broad support for this measure.

The plan for a cooperative colony advanced by Debs was conceived of as a politically practical and socially beneficial measure. With the sparse populations in the Western states, a directed colonization effort of high numbers of unemployed eastern workers could lead to a significant majority in several states. These states would elect Socialist candidates, providing a national platform for Debs' new ideology. Further, it would relieve the suffering and distress that Debs confronted on a daily basis. Not too long before this, the Mormons had begun their colonization attempt, and by the late 1890's they had achieved general success. Therefore, Debs put his plan into action, issuing a circular to ARU members to achieve financing for the project.⁶ Nevertheless, while Debs could call on his old associates, he had to deal with the legacy of his past actions, including a \$40,000 ARU debt from the Great Pullman strike.⁷ Further, many of the workers who had participated in the Great Pullman strike had been blacklisted by their employers, which essentially meant that they were unable to find jobs in the railroad industry and therefore contribute income to Debs. Thus, the decisive actions that granted him the notoriety to be an influential figure and lead a movement toward cooperative colonization also undermined his practical resources, handicapping his ability to achieve real change.

Other problems with the cooperative colony plan sprang up, which would continue to impede Debs' efforts throughout his politically active career as a Socialist. The first major problem was the opposition of other key Socialist leaders, including Henry Demarest Lloyd,

⁴ Brommel, Bernard J. 1971. "DEBS'S COOPERATIVE COMMONWEALTH PLAN FOR WORKERS." *Labor History* 12, no. 4: 560. Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 15, 2016).

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 564.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 561.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 561.

Seymour Stedman, Jesse Cox, and most prominently, Victor Berger, the Milwaukee Socialist who had first given Debs *Das Kapital* in Woodstock Prison. These key leaders, who would later hold important posts such as Socialist Party Chairman and Socialist Party Vice-Presidential Candidate, saw Debs' colonization scheme as impractical. They instead devoted their efforts to building up a political machine on the local, county, and state levels, with Berger's Wisconsin machine becoming particularly successful in several elections.⁸ While Debs was ignited with a passion for ameliorating the suffering of the poor workers, these men were more concerned with the Party organization, political success, and power. This led to an inherent conflict. While Debs attracted much popular attention and acclaim because of his fiery oratory, passion for the worker, and demonstrable, beloved character, he was never at the center of the Socialist Party bureaucracy. As will become evident, the fault for this division lay at the feet of both sides, and it would continue to undermine the Socialist Party and Debs' efforts throughout his time as its figurehead.

A second problem with the development of Debs' colonization scheme was his own personal desire to be on the frontlines, speaking and writing to advance the Socialist cause. When a major strike broke out among the miners of West Virginia, he quickly left his preparations and other engagements and headed directly to the site, attempting to convince operators to back down and non-striking workers to leave their posts. As the strike spread to Ohio, Illinois, and other states, Debs cancelled the articles he was writing for the Party newspaper called *The Social Democrat* and continued to work personally to inspire and organize miners. Nevertheless, the breakneck pace eventually took its toll, and he suffered a sunstroke that curtailed his activities.⁹ The strike never became general and ultimately failed, although Debs gained more personal and popular notoriety after receiving injunctions against appearing in multiple states because of his activities. More importantly though, his inability to stay out of labor conflicts to create a comprehensive, coherent plan for American socialism undermined his goals. After the strike, he proposed colonization in Sparta, Tennessee and chose a piece of land with a price of \$1,300,000, well beyond the Party's ability to raise funds and in a well-populated state, factors that would inhibit the original goal of political domination.¹⁰ This poor attempt doomed the colonization scheme, but the resulting fiasco reveals both Debs' strengths and weaknesses as a leader of the Socialist Party.

The Social Democracy of America met on June 10, 1898 to determine their party platform for the upcoming set of elections with an eye towards the presidential election of 1900 as well.¹¹ The delegates quickly divided over whether they should focus on colonization or direct political action. Nevertheless, instead of working to resolve the conflict, Debs resigned from his party position and left, taking his supporters with him and joining Victor Berger and others in abandoning the convention. They started a rival party, the Social

⁸ Ibid, p. 563.

⁹ Ibid, p. 564.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 566.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 567.

Democratic Party. Further, after abandoning those in support of his original position, Debs refused the chairmanship of the new party when it was offered.¹² The various factions of the party would not be reunited until 1901, crippling the possibility of effective Socialist political action in 1898 or 1900. Thus, Debs' leadership of the party internally first set it on an unrealistic course, then led to a schism as he abandoned his initial supporters while refusing to take leadership of the other faction. His influence was crucial in healing the Party's wounds between 1898 and 1901. But perhaps if he had been willing to exert it properly in the beginning, the destructive schism would not have happened in the first place. This unwillingness to organize or exert influence inside the Party would be an ongoing problem for Debs, allowing Socialists of slightly different ideals to lead the Party and preventing the fulfillment of its potential for political influence.

Despite the animosity and factionalism preventing a strong effort by a united Socialist Party, the Social Democratic Party still sought to nominate a candidate for the presidential election in 1900. The immediate choice was Eugene Debs, due to his residual popularity from the Pullman Strike and decision on the issue of the cooperative commonwealth. Debs was prominent and well respected, having promoted the local campaigns of Socialists in Massachusetts in 1898 and having negotiated the incorporation of the Socialist Party of Texas.¹³ This made his rejection of the nomination an unexpected problem. With the schism of the Social Democracy of America still fairly fresh in the mind of the members of the Social Democratic Party, many no doubt wondered if their faction could survive as an impactful organization if Debs refused to lead. Nevertheless, after incessant appeals by many leading members of the Social Democratic Party, including Victor Berger, Debs recanted his initial refusal and accepted the Party's Presidential nomination.¹⁴ Debs' initial reticence to accept the Social Democratic Party's presidential nomination is another example of his confusing unwillingness to take leadership of the movement of which he was a part. This called his ability and commitment into question in the minds of some of his comrades. Berger was emboldened, as Debs had essentially granted him a measure of control and ceded ideological dominance to his more reform-focused associate. Debs' actions had essentially put him in the worst possible position, forcing him to be the voice and face of Socialism but only at Berger's behest and only with Berger in charge of the organization controlling Debs' campaigns. Nevertheless, with the vagaries and weaknesses his own actions had fostered in the convention behind him, Debs set out to spread his message of Socialism in the Presidential campaign of 1900.

Despite Debs' best efforts on the campaign trail, his 1900 campaign would be marred by continued party infighting which, when coupled with opposition from both traditional parties, resulted in meagre election results. Another independent faction of Socialists

¹² Ibid, p. 567.

¹³ Ginger, Ray. 1949. *Eugene V. Debs : a biography*. n.p.: [New York] : Collier Books, [1970], 1949, 224.

¹⁴ Ginger, Ray. 1949. *Eugene V. Debs : a biography*. n.p.: [New York] : Collier Books, [1970], 1949, 225.

known as the “Kangaroos” sought to join with the Social Democratic Party and held a unity gathering in New York City three weeks after the convention of the Social Democratic Party.¹⁵ Nevertheless, this merger was less than jovial. The Kangaroos attempted to foist their presidential ticket upon the larger Social Democratic Party. Victor Berger actually supported the idea for a few months until Debs and others expressed their outrage at such a betrayal.¹⁶ In the meantime, the two factions quibbled over a name for the united political entity, confusing the rank and file even as the compromise ticket of Debs for president and leading Kangaroo Job Harriman for vice president managed to build some headway. This pairing was not the most enjoyable for the two candidates. Harriman had originally been the presidential candidate for the Kangaroo faction and naturally felt animosity toward Debs. While in most cases, “the slightest acquaintance with the socialist leader left most men completely charmed by his affability,” Harriman continually critiqued Debs’ methods and motivations in private, claiming that Debs’ was “filled with self-importance” and urging the publication of an anti-Debs leaflet in the middle of their cooperative campaign.¹⁷ Facing disjointed support and outright betrayal, Debs still had some momentum. But when the established parties took notice and turned their newspapers against Debs, his ceiling for popular appeal was limited. The Democrats contended that the Republicans were funding Debs’ campaign, and the Republicans countered that Debs’ would endorse William Jennings Bryan, which forced the Socialists to spend time and effort battling rumors instead of staking out a position.¹⁸ Debs’ final tally was 96,878 votes, a minor showing compared to the Populists’ third party total of over 1 million votes in 1892. Nevertheless, with a more united, better organized Party and a further fleshed-out Socialist doctrine, the Socialist Party’s appeal and electoral success could no doubt increase.

To bring about this success, the immediate task following the 1900 election was to heal Party schisms and increase Party membership. The results of success in these areas would be a clearer and therefore stronger ideological appeal as well as an increased base of support, activism, and organization. Nevertheless, these needs were complicated once more by the nature of the circumstances facing the party and by Debs’ own unhelpful actions. There was a division of the Party into left and right wings based on the question of whether or not capitalism should be completely abolished or gradually reformed. The immigrant, urban Socialist leaders like Victor Berger carried with them European ideas of reforms that were bringing change on the continent. Extending the vote, reforming labor practices, and improving public utilities had bettered workers’ quality of life and political situation in England, France, and many other industrial countries in this period. However, the other key Socialist faction was a radical one, led by Americans like Bill Haywood, centered in the West with most of its strength in the mines. This faction was more distant from urban improvements and on the receiving end of violent strikebreaking by the mining

¹⁵ Ibid, 225.

¹⁶ Ibid, 226.

¹⁷ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 184.

¹⁸ Ginger, Ray. 1949. *Eugene V. Debs : a biography*. n.p.: [New York] : Collier Books, [1970], 1949, 227.

industrialists, such as at Ludlow, Colorado in 1914, which Debs described as “a massacre.”¹⁹ Therefore, they were unwilling to accept reform as a goal and sought the overthrow of capitalism, even if violence was necessary.

Ideologically, Debs stood somewhere between these two extremes of reform or revolution. A quote that demonstrates his position comes from a 1912 speech: “For the first time in the world’s history, a subject class has within its own power to accomplish its emancipation without an appeal to brute force.”²⁰ Thus, Debs firmly believed that capitalism made workers a subject class, that this was wrong, and that it required a remedy beyond simple reform. Nevertheless, he saw no need for violence to accomplish this liberation due to his unmatched confidence in the ability of workers to resolve their problems through the democratic process. If the mass of oppressed workers simply came together and asserted the weight of numbers, then the fundamental freedom and equality meant for America could be realized. In a speech the day his sentence at Woodstock Jail ended after the Pullman strike, Debs said of the ballot, “There is nothing in our government it cannot remove or amend.”²¹ These beliefs and ideas are part of what made Debs so appealing to the masses. He gave his audiences confidence in themselves, and appealed both to something old, Americans’ Constitutional freedoms and liberating heritage, and something new, an even greater future utopia. This made Debs a perfect candidate to unify the Socialist factions, but unfortunately, he once more abdicated his opportunity to lead. In November 1900, Debs wrote “if there is any attempt to harmonize or placate *count me out*. We must go forward in our own lines & those who don’t choose to fall in need not do so.”²² This unwillingness to compromise and bring the two wings of the Party into harmony with his own ideology led to continuing internal tension as the 1904 election approached.

Despite the friction resulting from the different Socialist factions coming together, with the merged organization renamed the Socialist Party of America in 1901, the existence of a single, coordinated organization had already reaped benefits between 1900 and 1904. In the congressional elections of 1902, the combined Socialist vote reached almost 227,000, well over twice as much as Debs received in 1900, with strongholds developing in Colorado, New York, and the Midwest in general.²³ This expansion was paralleled by a vast increase in Socialist literature; over 25 Socialist newspapers in English sprung up alongside

¹⁹ Eugene V. Debs, “Homestead and Ludlow,” in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 219.

²⁰ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 135.

²¹ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 154.

²² Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 188.

²³ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 62.

more in Yiddish, French, German, and other immigrant languages.²⁴ As a result of this increased experience, popular appeal, and organizational assets, the Socialist Party of America entered 1904 with significantly more momentum and grassroots potential than in 1900. When the Socialist Party of America held its first national convention, the leaders served to ironically remind the party of its ideologically unsettled condition when Leon Greenbaum was confirmed as national party chairman. Despite having only been in the Party for one year, Greenbaum was an uninfluential man who had managed to offend no one on either side during the factional conflicts of the years between elections.²⁵ By appointing a fairly insignificant figure to the chief organizational post for the entire Party apparatus, the real leaders of the Socialist Party sent the unfortunate signal that the theorists and speakers remained in control of the Party. Unfortunately, the result was to dis-incentivize further organizational growth just at the moment when the Party's expansion as a formal political entity was creating the growth required for political significance. As the 1904 campaign approached, the leadership of the Socialist Party saw good reason to be encouraged but continued to make the same mistakes, patching up conflict without resolving it and ignoring the necessity of practical organizational growth.

The 1904 Presidential Campaign was a solid victory for the Socialist Party as a whole and Eugene Debs in particular. To begin with, Benjamin Hanford, a well-known socialist editor and writer, replaced Debs's former running mate Job Harriman.²⁶ The newly built Socialist machine was extremely valuable in this campaign. Debs received \$32,700 to campaign, with 45 other pro-Socialist speakers on the trail, twenty-two paid state organizers, and millions of red stickers, Socialist newspaper copies, and other literature distributed.²⁷ Debs himself crisscrossed the continent, moving from the West Coast to the East Coast before returning to the Midwest, delivering a message of "the untrammelled will of the people as the supreme law of society."²⁸ He belabored and mocked the Republicans and Democrats as two "wings of the same old bird of prey" throughout the campaign, appealing to workers and farmers to stop supporting those who would institute oppression against them.²⁹ Debs cried out that for workers "under Republican rule and Democratic rule conditions for them have remained unchanged" but that "the Socialist Party is unequivocally committed ...to the abolition of the wage system and the freedom of the worker from exploitation."³⁰ Despite the organizational support, this campaign still took a toll on Debs; he himself often had to attend to details such as his own luggage and hotel accommodations in an era when

²⁴ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 63.

²⁵ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 191.

²⁶ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 68.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 71-73.

²⁸ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 75.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 76.

³⁰ Eugene V. Debs, "The Socialist Party's Appeal," in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 108-109.

William McKinley had won the presidency with a passive Front-Porch Campaign in 1896.³¹ The effort ultimately paid off, as Debs collected over 402,000 votes, a quadrupling of his previous total, and another boon for the Socialist Party's organizational growth. The Party was in an upward spiral, but its electoral success forced it to confront some growing issues in the aftermath of the 1904 election.

As Debs toured the South as part of his presidential campaign, he became concerned with the status of African-Americans there. While most politicians in this post-Reconstruction, pre-Civil Rights era simply ignored the oppressive conditions facing the black community, Debs thundered, "The history of the Negro in the United States is a history of crime without parallel."³² He saw the sharecropping and political exclusion of blacks as another example of the inequality, exploitation, and harm inherent in the capitalist system. Nevertheless, some members of the party saw African-Americans as a threat, a possible substitute for industrial jobs. One member publicly argued that "the negro worker of the South lacks the brain and backbone necessary to make a Socialist."³³ In fact, this was the attitude of much of the Socialist Party toward minorities in general. Some Party members opposed immigrants and approved of immigration restrictions such as the Naturalization Act of 1906, its predecessor the Alien Contract Labor Law of 1885, and its successor the Immigration Act of 1924, which imposed a permanent numerical limit on immigration. Debs opposed these measures and always sought to align the Socialist Party with working class minorities, proclaiming that the Party was "the whole working class of the whole world."³⁴ Debs sought to bring minority causes, especially those of African-Americans, under the Socialist Party umbrella and gain support in this way, arguing "There never was any social inferiority which was not the shriveled fruit of economic inequality."³⁵ Despite Debs' advocacy in these areas, the Socialist Party never took up any civil rights issues as a serious part of the platform or fully relinquished its suspicion of immigrant labor. This left a source of conflict within the party, albeit a comparatively minor one.

The second critical concern the growing Socialist Party faced between 1904 and 1908 was the divisive question of which strategy of action by labor was best. The debate over labor strategies arose as a result of the founding of the IWW. The Industrial Workers of the World, organized in January, 1905, sought to unite labor unions on an industrial basis around a revolutionary ideology, opposed to the conservative, reformist tendencies of the craft-union based American Federation of Labor. Unfortunately, this development

³¹ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 80.

³² *Ibid*, 78.

³³ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 225.

³⁴ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 78.

³⁵ Eugene V. Debs, "On Race Prejudice" in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 93.

exacerbated the tension between the left and right wings of the Socialist Party. Victor Berger and the more conservative reformists in his camp had always advocated for cooperation with the AFL and a gradual method of gaining influence. On the other hand, the western miners who formed the party's progressive wing had taken offense at the AFL's refusal to support their more radically oriented strikes. Naturally, many of them flocked to join the IWW, as did their leader, Bill Haywood, but Berger refused his invitation to attend the convention and sought to persuade Debs to do the same. Threatening to undermine Debs and start internal Party conflict, Berger wrote that if Debs did not come out decidedly against the IWW, "there will be war" and "that will be the end of Eugene V. Debs."³⁶ Such was the character of Victor Berger, whose vanity convinced him that he had control of the party and whose selfishness caused him to fight tenaciously to exclude those of different ideological persuasion. Nevertheless, despite this proposed betrayal by a key ally, Debs was still one of the IWW's founding delegates. Arguing that the conservative, reformist nature of the AFL meant that staying in it as unionists would be akin to staying in the Republican or Democratic parties politically, Debs argued "that there is a middle ground that can be occupied without the slightest concession of principle."³⁷ Debs won this battle for effective party unity, as there was no outright conflict in the newspapers or in party circles between Berger and the IWW like there had been between the Kangaroos and Social Democrats earlier. Nevertheless, as the 1908 election neared, these ideological conflicts formed dark clouds on the horizon for the currently growing Party.

The 1908 convention unveiled a new factionalism that threatened to undo much of the productive growth accomplished by the Socialist Party and undermine Debs at the same time. The issue of the IWW resurfaced. Left-wing delegates demanding formal recognition of the labor organization by the Socialist Party and a condemnation of the AFL while right wing delegates opposed both measures.³⁸ A compromise called on all labor organizations to support the Socialist Party. But this did not solve the issue, and the balance of power between the two factions presented a final resolution. Debs could perhaps have decided the issue, but once again he deferred, deciding to forego attendance at the convention despite his status as a formal, voting delegate. Such lax fulfillment of duties merely for the sake of avoiding conflict was a critical mistake and would result in almost immediate harm to Debs, as both sides sought to seize the Socialist Party's presidential nomination for themselves. Berger, saying "It is my fate to do unpopular things," rose to nominate a longtime ally, Carl D. Thompson.³⁹ Presumably Berger thought that Thompson would be easier to control than Debs, but this betrayal of the Socialist standard-bearer who attracted huge crowds even in 1900 and who was converted to Socialism in part due to Berger's

³⁶ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 206.

³⁷ Eugene V. Debs, "Speech at the Founding Convention of the International Workers of the World" in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 115.

³⁸ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 91.

³⁹ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 222.

efforts was harmful to party unity. For their part, the radical left-wing of the Party sought to give thnme nomination to Haywood, the most popular party figure other than Debs.⁴⁰ While Debs ultimately won the nomination, Berger held his Wisconsin delegation for Thompson to the end, making a bitter point. If Debs was unwilling to lead in deciding Party policy, then the extreme wings would support their own candidates to serve as the Party's figurehead.

The 1908 campaign began on this note. Fortunately, the Party organization had come up with more support for Debs, as over 200,000 individuals had contributed to fund a train for Debs' campaign called the Red Special.⁴¹ This allowed Debs to travel farther and faster, giving more and more speeches to rally support for the cause. By now he was a legendary figure. In Illinois, as two workers listened to Algie M. Simons speak, one asked the other if it was Debs speaking. The other replied, "Oh no, that ain't Debs - when Debs comes out, you'll think its Jesus Christ."⁴² Nevertheless, open conflict between Debs and Berger was also the worst it had been in some time. When the two former allies secured an interview with prominent progressive journalist Lincoln Steffens, a sign of the increased impact the Socialist Party was making, they proceeded to disagree over policy. When Steffens asked what Debs would do with trusts and the candidate proposed confiscation without payment, Berger immediately jumped in, countermanding Debs and claiming that the Socialist Party would have the government pay to confiscate the trusts.⁴³ This open defiance of the Party's presidential campaign was simple spite on Berger's part, and it led Steffens to conclude that Debs was not "presidential timber."⁴⁴ Despite this opposition, Debs campaigned harder than ever, hoping to capitalize on the increased support and maintain the strong track record of growth that his presidential campaigns had thus far created. Unfortunately, this incredible pace resulted in health problems for Debs. His throat became increasingly weak, forcing him to leave others to complete his speeches at times.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, he continued on, although the campaign was ultimately a disappointment. Debs collected only around 420,000 votes, a discouraging increase of 20,000 from 1904. As a result, the ideological divisions would flare up even more fiercely within the Socialist Party.

While these issues smoldered in the immediate wake of the 1908 election, the Party evaluated the disappointing results. The Party membership had more than doubled since 1904, rising to well over 40,000. But a correspondingly large increase in the popular vote

⁴⁰ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 93.

⁴¹ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 111.

⁴² Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 223.

⁴³ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 98.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 105.

did not accompany this increasing base of support right away.⁴⁶ This indicated that the mass of American workers was intrinsically disposed against Socialism, and that the environment of a Presidential election was not the best one to foster or measure Socialist strength. The number of those committed to Socialism, indicated by the Party membership, was increasing rapidly, but it remained a tiny fraction of the electorate. While Debs would draw huge crowds on his campaigns, the vast majority of his audience did not find Socialism to be the superior ideology on which they would stake their vote for the nation's future. Nevertheless, the midterm elections of 1910 showed that time and patience could translate the increases in Party membership into electoral success. Socialist Party candidates for state and local office accumulated roughly 700,000 votes together, and Victor Berger was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.⁴⁷ These victories brought about positive feedback. Party membership doubled between 1909 and 1911 and continued to increase until it reached 118,000 by the time of the 1912 Presidential election.⁴⁸ While most Americans were unwilling to trust this new Party with the White House, more and more were willing to trust them with the state house or town hall. If this steady growth were nurtured in an atmosphere of ideological stability and if a second wave of skilled Socialist leaders arose, then the possibility of a future Socialist President seemed not far off.

Unfortunately, Debs misread the lessons apparent in the voting and membership patterns that occurred during this period. Instead of taking the time to appreciate and cultivate the organizational growth offered on the lower levels of governance, Debs became more concerned about the ideological purity of the Party. In an article written in January 1911, Debs publicly argued that the increase in votes was achieved "by methods inconsistent with the principles of a revolutionary party and in the long run will do more harm than good."⁴⁹ He was of course referring to Berger and reform socialists like him who did not advocate revolution and watered down the Socialist message of sweeping change leading to utopia in order to achieve broader political relevance. Some of this criticism was justified. After all, in some past municipal elections, Berger's Milwaukee machine had not run any Socialist candidate at all but supported the Republican instead. Nevertheless, when Debs claimed that "the economic organization of the working class...in their respective industries" was more important than gaining votes, he was very mistaken.⁵⁰ Despite the AFL's continued dominance of the labor movement as a craft-focused organization, Socialist Party membership, an effective indicator of informed, passionate commitment to true, core Socialism, had increased significantly. Party membership increased as the Socialist Party became a legitimate political entity with respected, effective administrations

⁴⁶ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 90.

⁴⁷ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 223.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 223.

⁴⁹ Eugene V. Debs, "Danger Ahead" in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 178.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 180.

in cities and state legislatures. Thus, political organization should have taken precedent over economic organization. But Debs romantically believed that “With the workers efficiently organized industrially...they will just as naturally and inevitably express their economic solidarity in political terms and cast a united vote for the party of their class as the forces of nature express obedience to the laws of gravitation.”⁵¹ Unfortunately, American workers had repeatedly shown their willingness to remain in the craft union system because of the practical benefits it brought. If Debs was concerned about ideological purity, he should have recognized that he could not win presidential campaigns and taken a more active role in establishing Party doctrine to guide the organizers like Berger and influence the new Party members who joined after they observed Socialism’s political legitimacy. Nevertheless, in the midst of the internal party battles over the IWW and industrial unionism, Debs lost sight of the political realities of his time and failed to lead the Socialist Party toward long-term success.

With the disappointments of the 1908 election, dissatisfaction in the Socialist Party was high; both the reform and revolutionary wing felt that the other side’s methods and ideas were responsible for holding back Party success. With the success in 1910, both sides felt energized to take up the ideological struggle in order to produce the best results in 1912. The fundamental issue was very simple: “who was to control the party?”⁵² The IWW was expanding its influence, moving outside its traditional western base to organize workers in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and other labor strongholds in the east. They were initially successful, winning their demands in several key strikes.⁵³ Nevertheless, it was this success that sparked the destructive conflict. The IWW’s boisterous leader, former miner Bill Haywood, made ever-more radical comments, claiming “coercion” as a proper method, calling Berger’s trade union reformers “useless,” and arguing for direct revolution by saying “no Socialist can be a law-abiding citizen.”⁵⁴ As the IWW increasingly accepted violent tactics and opposed the Socialist Party itself, Debs was forced to dissociate from his earlier support of it, arguing that workers should be “law-abiding” and should seek “solidarity” instead of creating division.⁵⁵ Berger’s reformers still held the strength of the Socialist Party and amended the Party constitution to expel anyone who advocates violent direct action instead of political action. As a result, Haywood was removed from the national committee.⁵⁶ Debs failed to keep the disparate elements of the Socialist Party together. First, he alienated Berger and encouraged Haywood through threatening and harmful rhetoric against the 1910 electoral success of reformers. Then, in the ensuing struggle over party control, Debs backed up Berger and criticized Haywood, resulting in the

⁵¹ Eugene V. Debs, “Danger Ahead” in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 182.

⁵² Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 244.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 247, 251-252.

⁵⁴ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 253.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 254.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 255.

expulsion of those who, like Debs, favored economic organization first and political success second. Though still uniquely beloved by the increasingly fractured rank and file, Debs' unskillful maneuvering left him isolated among the party leadership, leading inevitably to another presidential campaign.

The 1912 campaign started inauspiciously for Debs. Berger and Hillquit managed to put together 40 percent of delegates to nominate reform candidates against Debs. Then, they saddled him with J. Mahlon Barnes, a reform-minded, scandal-ridden former Party secretary, when many had considered Debs' brother Theodore a better choice.⁵⁷ Debs was furious and formally protested, but to no avail.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, he campaigned hard. The discontent over Taft's government and Roosevelt's Progressive third-party candidacy provided a situation of general public unrest along with established figures and parties accepting more radical agendas. This was the perfect backdrop for Debs' message that "The cause [of the present unrest] does not lie in a maladministration of the present government, but in the very structure of society" and "the remedy must be found in a reconstruction of all existing systems."⁵⁹ There was little new in his message, but in the favorable environment, each venue was packed to hear Debs. Its membership three times as large as Debs' last campaign, the Socialist Party machine had hundreds of newspapers, with the *Appeal to Reason* at a circulation of above 500,000.⁶⁰ Ultimately, Debs reached his highest electoral total yet, roughly 6 percent of the vote at around 900,000 votes, a far cry from the paltry 96,000 votes of 1900. Many states far exceeded this percentage; Oklahoma yielded 16.61 percent, Montana and Arizona over 13 percent, and Washington and California around 12 percent. With such continued improvement, Socialist Party leaders hoped that Party membership would continue to rise, more state and local elections could be won, and the Party would be the vehicle to give the Socialist movement lasting legitimacy. Unfortunately, despite the hopeful number of votes, after 1912 the Socialist Party would experience the repercussions of expelling the radicals, the loss of its primary standard bearer, and the damage from events overseas.

After the 1912 campaign, Debs was in very poor health. The strong showing had required yet another round of non-stop, cross-country speaking tours that wore out his body. Now fifty-seven, Debs experienced a complete "physical and emotional collapse" in September of 1913, requiring that he spend months bedridden in a sanitarium in Colorado to simply recover his strength.⁶¹ He began touring again in 1914 only to experience once again the limitations that age and past hard use now imposed on his body, as "torn leg muscles,

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 248.

⁵⁸ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 128.

⁵⁹ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 129.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 132-133.

⁶¹ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 272.

congestion, and physical exhaustion” required “large doses of morphine” just to endure.⁶² In this condition, Debs was in no way a contender for the presidential nomination of 1916 and made it clear that he did not want the nomination. As a result, writer and editor Allan Benson received the nomination to follow in Debs footsteps. With both major parties now taking fairly progressive policy stances, some voters were naturally drawn away from Socialism. And without Debs’ speaking power, Benson’s ability to draw votes declined. Nevertheless, the demographics of the decline reveal the outcome of the expulsion of radicals from the Party. Oklahoma remained the strongest state for Socialism, giving Benson almost 16 percent of its votes. But other western states like California, Arizona, and Washington, which had come out in strength for Debs at double-digit vote percentages, fell under 6 percent for Benson; some fell even further. These western areas had been strongholds of the more radical brand of Socialism and were energized by the IWW. When Haywood was forced out of the Party, no doubt the local and state organizations in these areas withered. By contrast, Berger’s Wisconsin remained strong over 6 percent. Unfortunately, without the support of radicals and the extensive connections of radical organizations, Benson collected less than 600,000 votes, a significant decrease, signaling a halt to the positive, upward spiral, and threatening a downward crash for the political relevance of the Socialist Party. The dependence on Debs as a figurehead and leader instead of on a diverse but united and well-organized political base hurt the Party severely in Debs’ absence.

Despite his health problems in 1916, Debs managed the strength to run for Congress in the 5th district of Indiana, the location of his home town of Terre Haute. A shorter travelling distance would be easier for Debs and provide him, he and the party hoped, with a national office as a platform for his powerful message. The Great War in Europe provided Debs with a new line of attack on the capitalist establishment. Many socialist movements in Europe had essentially suspended their mutual attacks on conventional governments in support of their respective war efforts, much to the horror of American Socialists. Debs stood firm against this impulse, proclaiming, “Permanent peace, however, peace based upon social justice, will never prevail until national industrial despotism has been supplanted by international industrial democracy. The end of the profit and plunder among nations will also mean the end of war.”⁶³ Nevertheless, even in this message, Debs miscalculated the political conscience of the American worker. While peace sounds better than war, especially in an isolationistic period of American history, this hard anti-war stance distinguished Socialism too much from the other parties. No realistic American expected their political candidates to seek an end to all war but merely to keep them out of the war currently raging overseas. Debs’ value-based appeal was strong but out of touch with the practical considerations American voters sought. As a result, one prominent Socialist noted that “the capitalist press...will most effectively close the public mind completely for many months” to Socialism because the conventional newspapers could brand Socialism as

⁶² Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 275.

⁶³ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 153.

different and dangerous. Despite this fundamental problem, Debs still ran a good race in Indiana, beating out the Democratic candidate to finish in second to the Republican frontrunner. Nevertheless, Debs had successfully returned to the fray. The question became whether or not he could bring the Party back together and cement its long-term significance with what strength he had left.

There was no doubt about Debs' continued popularity among American Socialism in general and within the Party in particular. In fact, it was perhaps during this twilight period in Debs' career when he had the greatest personal appeal. More and more Debs became idolized, not for his success, but for his continued effort, which naturally turned analysis away from a political focus to a personal focus. One contemporary described Debs as "a great American whose extraordinary courage was the outgrowth of an unflinching humanity."⁶⁴ Debs' fame expanded beyond purely Socialist circles into a national audience, with a publication as prestigious as *Time Magazine* running a very positive story about his character. It contained an anecdote about a visit Debs paid to an obscure anarchist named Tom Mooney in jail and Debs' kind, humble stooping to Mooney's level. "I'd give you the shirt off my back, Tom" Debs said and gave Mooney a "big hug" and "a long kiss on the cheek."⁶⁵ This sacrificial, unselfish character had worked within the Socialist Party for almost 25 years, creating a large degree of deference and respect for Debs. To some degree, a desire not to jeopardize this heroic standing lay behind some of Debs' withdrawal from fractious Party politics, although at this point his venerable legendary status made him almost untouchably free from criticism. As one commentator noted, the Socialists had never been more disorganized or demoralized following the failures of 1916, but the Party was more confident than ever for the upcoming campaign of 1920. Debs was back, and he was "easily the biggest and warmest personality among the presidential candidates." This personality would do "most of the Socialist Party campaigning."⁶⁶ While his personality alone would not win an election, with such faith and support within the Party, it was not too late at this stage for Debs to achieve an internal Party unity and ideological strength that could provide the foundation for success in the future.

Unfortunately, events in Russia intervened to create even more internal division and external resistance for the Socialist Party of America. As the Bolshevik Revolution occurred, the rump of the revolutionary left-wing of the Socialist Party of America was energized and inspired. Debs wrote, "From the crown of my head to the soles of my feet I am a Bolshevik and proud of it."⁶⁷ When Moscow created the Third International, a proposed gathering for

⁶⁴ Mussey, Henry Raymond. 1930. "A Great American." *Nation* 131, no. 3398: 206. Points of View Reference Center, EBSCOhost (accessed April 14, 2016).

⁶⁵ 1923. "Mr. Debs' Heart." *Time* 2, no. 7: 7. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed April 14, 2016).

⁶⁶ Gannett, Lewis S. 1920. "The Socialist Campaign." *Nation* 111, no. 2884: 401. Points of View Reference Center, EBSCOhost (accessed April 14, 2016).

⁶⁷ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 291.

Socialists and Communists everywhere to prepare for the international revolution, The Socialist Party of America was divided. Because Moscow demanded conformity, the right wing wanted nothing to do with the Third International; the center wanted to join on its own terms, and the left wing wanted to join immediately.⁶⁸ Ultimately, a schism occurred, resulting in the formation of the Communist Party of America, formed from the IWW and the left-wing members who were expelled from or simply left the Socialist Party of America. The Communist Party courted Debs, but, wary of Moscow's autocratic influence and the violence occurring in Russia, he refused to leave the Socialist Party or endorse the Third International.⁶⁹ As a result, the Moscow-backed communists stated, "Between the Communist Party and the Socialist Party there can be no compromise," which evidences the very destructive attitude which made Debs suspicious in the first place.⁷⁰ By this time, Debs influence was too limited to heal this further Party division and overcome the pernicious influence of the USSR in controlling the Communist Party of America. Nevertheless, he never compromised the integrity of his ideology, which he stated clearly in another interview with prominent journalist Lincoln Steffens. Debs said, "When the people of Russia aspire toward freedom I'm all for them, but I detest the terror which the Bolsheviks have imposed to wrest and hold power. I still have, and always will have, a profound faith in the efficacy of the ballot."⁷¹

This faith would be tested in the presidential election of 1920. In 1917 Congress passed the Espionage Act, criminalizing actions that hindered the success of the American war effort. The Wilson administration used this new law broadly to imprison anti-war activists, and Debs certainly fell into that category. He was imprisoned in Atlanta, Georgia for a speech in Canton, Ohio. But ultimately, this imprisonment restored Debs to his preferred position as "the preeminent symbol of American resistance to corporate capitalism."⁷² The event reignited some of his old fervor, and, although he obviously could not campaign across the country as Convict 9653, he still issued fiery statements calling for workers to remember that they were "exploited and starved and degraded."⁷³ Nevertheless, his prison setting fostered a depressed realization that his message to the working class had never really sunk in. Debs wrote bitterly, "The people can have anything they want. The trouble is they do not want anything. At least they vote that way on election day."⁷⁴ Perhaps Debs had finally realized that the Socialist camp could not easily win over the American worker as he had attempted earlier with his non-stop speaking and passionate rhetoric. In the end, Debs

⁶⁸ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 172.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 186-187.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 187-188.

⁷¹ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 193.

⁷² Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 301.

⁷³ Ibid, 325.

⁷⁴ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 189.

brought in roughly 919,000 votes, slightly above his 1912 total but a decrease in percentage of the national vote from 6 percent to 3 percent.⁷⁵ Once more, the old radical strongholds in the west declined in their contribution to the Socialist Party, as less than 6 percent of Oklahoma voters chose Socialism for the first time in a decade. Nevertheless, New York alone contributed over 200,000 votes, and more than 11 percent of Wisconsin voters polled for Debs due to the continued influence of Victor Berger once again in Congress. Therefore, in his last campaign, despite the hopes of the Socialist Party leaders, Debs was unable to regain the support of radicals, instead collecting the support of a slowly dwindling faction of reformers.

Eugene Debs had great opportunities to lead the Socialist Party of America during its zenith from 1896 to 1921, and he often did so as its figurehead. But he missed the need for political organization. In 1904, prominent political figure Mark Hanna noted that American workers would not be “led away from the straight road by hot headed members.”⁷⁶ Several factors contributed to American workers’ disposition against Socialism. America’s basic history of individualism remained deeply ingrained in the fiber of her citizens in this period of history, and workers found it hard to conceive of themselves as part of a collective. Socialism was also new and theoretical. Marx’s historical dialectic was not something that could be explained to miners who had worked to support their families since childhood. Certainly these workers were unhappy with their current conditions, which motivated them to go hear Debs speak when he would campaign. Nevertheless, promises of utopia were not enough to push the majority of workers to cast a presidential vote for a strange new party. The legitimacy of Socialism would have to grow over long periods of time in winnable local and state elections to change this perception.

Unfortunately, those leaders in the Socialist Party of America who favored the workable methodology of gradualism also held fundamentally different conceptions of Socialism from Eugene Debs, leaving him unwilling to fully adopt their methods. Instead, he maintained full confidence in his revolutionary ideology of creating the full freedom for the people that the American Founders intended and that would inevitably lead to a communal utopia. With such faith in the people and the democratic institutions of America, if not the men empowered by them, Debs was naturally led into broad campaigns. He was always hoping that he could open the eyes of the masses and that a sudden flood tide would sweep Socialism to victory. Indeed, one commentator did write that “Debs’ personality is doing most of the Socialist campaigning” because the workers could feel his energetic, caring spirit. But that is not what Americans expected of a president.⁷⁷ These campaigns exhausted his energy and prevented him from playing the leading role in internal party conflicts which might have kept the Socialist Party together through the trials that created

⁷⁵ Ibid, 189.

⁷⁶ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 77.

⁷⁷ Gannett, Lewis S. 1920. "The Socialist Campaign." *Nation* 111, no. 2884: 401. Points of View Reference Center, EBSCOhost (accessed April 2, 2016).

schisms in 1912 and 1920. Unfortunately, for most of his time as the main figure in the Socialist Party of America, Debs did not accept the responsibility to unify and cement the Party as a political organization in order to enable its growth. He wrote, "For myself, I have no stomach for factional quarreling" and "If it has to be done others will have to do it."⁷⁸ Neither the stubborn, prickly Berger nor the arrogant, boisterous Haywood had the ability or desire to bring the Party together broadly. Only Debs could have, but he refused to do so, neglecting to attend any Party convention after 1900 and thus failing to ensure the survival of the Socialist Party as an impactful American political entity after his death.

It could be argued that Debs' would have failed even if he fought within the Party for its existence as a united entity behind his particular, less divisive ideology. The body blows that resulted from the Espionage Act, the Russian Revolution coupled with the entrenched opposition of many workers to Socialism, made the death of the Socialist Party of America inevitable. After all, in later years when Debs did begin to appeal for unity, he was unsuccessful. When in 1914 he publicly wrote "I appeal to all Socialist comrades and all industrial unionists to join in harmonizing the various elements of the revolutionary movement," the IWW and Berger's conservatives did not respond to renew their former, productive association.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, even in this "Plea for Solidarity" as Debs titled the article, he inserted the divisive terminology of industrial unionism, indicating as he said earlier, "We must go forward in our own lines & those who don't choose to fall in need not do so."⁸⁰ In September, 1895, while Debs was in Woodstock Jail, Thomas J. Morgan, a leading American labor activist, brought Keir Hardie, the leading British Socialist, to Debs cell and offered to form an "International Bureau of Correspondence and Agitation" with Debs as President, Hardie as Vice-President, and Morgan himself as secretary.⁸¹ If Debs accepted, he would have had international influence and funding, the opportunity to spread his message farther than before, and a chance to articulate his ideology on a scale broad enough to unify disparate Socialist factions. He refused. This deferred opportunity is simply another example of Debs' passivity in effective, internal leadership, which cost Socialism generally. When Debs was faced with another chance to join an international grouping of Socialists, it was in 1920 with Moscow exercising authority over the gathering. Debs was a greater figure with a stronger ideology than Berger, Haywood, or any other American Socialist of his day. Unfortunately, his willingness to allow them to set Party positions and strategies also permitted them to determine the fate of American Socialism, just as Moscow determined the fate of International Socialism, all to the fundamental detriment of that movement.

⁷⁸ Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. *Eugene V. Debs; socialist for President*. n.p.: Syracuse, University Press, 1962., 185.

⁷⁹ Eugene V. Debs, "A Plea for Solidarity" in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 214.

⁸⁰ Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs : citizen and socialist*. n.p.: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, ©1982., 188.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 152-153.

Conclusion: Contemporary Political Integration

Eugene Debs failed to translate his labor connections, passionate oratory, and personal character into a sustainable Socialist movement in America during a favorable period of general progressivism. Nevertheless, American Socialism is currently experiencing a modest revival due to the strong showing of Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Presidential Party. Sanders' relative current success can be more clearly distinguished and understood after a study of Debs' relative failure. Unlike Debs, Sanders spent significant time holding office in both executive and legislative roles, allowing him to cultivate allies and gain a national reputation without correspondingly harming the Socialist cause. Eugene Debs became widely known for his role in the Great Pullman Strike, an event that brought the federal government in opposition to the labor movement, resulted in a loss of jobs for many workers, and therefore crippled funding for later Socialist programs. Bernie Sanders became well known for his opposition to the Iraq War, his criticism of tax cuts, and his admiration for Social Democracy, all positions that garner support without jeopardizing Sanders' base of support. Further, during Sanders' time in Congress, he caucused with the Democratic Party, allowing him to gain senior positions, influence policy, and soften the image of Socialism. Debs never sought to ally with the Democratic Party and was unable to escape outsider status as a result. Even though his ideological professions were passionate and backed by his own admirable character, the national centrist bulk usually rules the day, preventing Debs from ultimately doing much more than influence the political discussion.

The willingness to compromise has provided Sanders with greater ability to affect the political process, but it also obscures the limited actual appeal of Socialism in America. Sanders is currently offering to provide free college education, a unique and distinctive policy proposal filling his rallies with American youth. If this position were adopted by the Democratic Party as a whole, Sanders' reform socialism would lose its distinctiveness. Further, some of Sanders' voters may simply feel alienated by Hillary Clinton's scandals, familiarity, and entrenched frontrunner status. As her main challenger, he automatically collects such voters no matter how they feel about abolishing private property because he has not made ideological Socialism a key part of his campaign. This, then, is Sanders' prime weakness. As Debs wrote, "No possible good can come from any kind of political alliance" with more mainstream groups because they "will only turn to it for use in some extremity," keeping socialism marginalized as a useful tool for progressives or liberals against conservatives.⁸² The unprecedented success of candidates who are seen for one reason or another as outsiders in this campaign, including Donald Trump, Ben Carson, and Bernie Sanders, indicates that many voters may simply be unhappy with the system as it exists. Eugene Debs never sought to gain such votes for socialism, writing, "Mere disgust with other parties is not accepted by Socialists as sufficient reason to vote the Socialist ticket."⁸³

⁸² Eugene V. Debs, "Danger Ahead," in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 181.

⁸³ Eugene V. Debs, "The Socialist Party's Appeal" in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 107.

Debs thought that the only support which mattered was support from those who were willing to “work with us for the overthrow of capitalism.”⁸⁴ Despite his current support, any claim that all or even most of Bernie Sanders’ supporters are in favor of the total overthrow of capitalism is unfounded. Instead of signaling a revived groundswell of orthodox Socialism, his campaign may merely evidence a progressive disgust of some extent within the Democratic Party combined with a faction of young voters enticed by free college education.

Ultimately, the different approaches taken by Bernie Sanders and Eugene Debs are founded on their different approaches to Socialism. Debs was converted to Socialism through the writings of some of its founding thinkers, most influentially Karl Kautsky and Karl Marx, especially the latter’s masterwork, *Das Kapital*.⁸⁵ Thus, he firmly believed in the progression of economic systems with an inevitable, necessary victory of Socialism over Capitalism leading to utopia. This created in Debs a faith that, if expounded with enough strength, passion, clarity, and patience, the American working class would simply vote Socialism. On the other hand, Bernie Sanders has had the historical perspective of the perseverance of capitalism and the bloodthirsty nature of Soviet Russia. This has led him to favor the Nordic brand of Social Democracy that maintains Western institutions to some extent, not overthrowing the current order for a utopian future. Instead of abolishing private property and instituting complete public management through the government, Sanders seeks to institute reforms and policies such as free college education, broad civil rights, and strict regulation of financial institutions. Therefore, a compromise with Democrats and even moderate Republicans that accomplishes these practical goals to relieve the burden of the lower classes is acceptable to Sanders but would not have been to Debs. While the former socialist sees the political sphere as a means to an end, the latter saw worker control through democratic political means as an end. If the Republicans and Democrats remain in power, then capitalist oppression of the lower classes will continue, preventing workers from expressing their naturally socialist inclinations through workplace tyranny. Thus, Debs and Sanders differ ideologically as well as methodologically, creating the broad differences between them which can be seen after a thorough historical examination of Debs’ political leadership and Sanders’ current actions and positions.

Having compared and contrasted Eugene V. Debs and Bernie Sanders, a final summary of each political leaders’ strengths and weaknesses and the resulting picture of American Socialism in general and today particularly is required. Debs was a strong speaker, drawing massive crowds wherever he spoke, allowing him to disseminate Socialist ideology on a broad scale to the American people. His five presidential campaigns gave him funding and a platform that enabled him to travel across the United States and spread his unique message that society was fundamentally broken but could be fixed with a peaceful revolution at the

⁸⁴ Eugene V. Debs, “Danger Ahead,” in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 181.

⁸⁵ Eugene V. Debs, “How I Became a Socialist,” in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 49.

ballot box. All American workers had to do to end their misery and the mistreatment of women, prisoners, and minorities, was vote as a bloc for Debs or other Socialist candidates who would seize property peacefully and return America to its Founding values of freedom and equality for all. Unfortunately, Debs allowed these campaigns to distract him from the internal party squabbles that resulted in regular schisms and policy conflicts, undercutting the support he built with his message. His campaigns and the labor actions he supported drained and exhausted both Debs and the Party. As time went on and factionalism continued to divide the already small Socialist base of support among the workers, the majority of workers remained entrenched in support of major parties. The Socialist ideology never became mainstream or accepted in America as it did in Europe because Debs and the Party of his day never coopted a majority of workers or successfully appealed to the broad range of other class interests.

Bernie Sanders has taken a very different path from Eugene Debs because he faces unique circumstances and embraces a separate ideology within the Socialist camp. Facing a general conservative resurgence in America and the unpopularity of Socialism during and immediately after its fall, Sanders had no national organization supporting Socialism. Instead of attempting the tough slog of forming just such an organization or political party, Sanders decided instead to classify himself as an Independent and seek lower-level political offices. First as a mayor, then as a representative, he demonstrated moderate, reformist Socialism. He was able to win elections as a result, but his consistent critiques of both parties as capitalist establishments prevented him from accomplishing much. Therefore, he compromised even further, allying with the Democratic Party in Congress in order to receive prominent positions so as to have a greater influence on American politics. This provided him with the recognition and respect to have the opportunity to be a key candidate for the 2016 Democratic Presidential Primary. Unfortunately, he has compromised so much in moving toward the Democratic Party, seeking similar goals but abandoning Socialism's hard ideological roots, that it is unclear if the support he receives actually stems from support and acceptance of Socialism in America or simply a combination of free-college seekers and Democrats who dislike Hillary Clinton. By watering down Socialism so much, Bernie Sanders neutralized any opportunity he might have had to found a labor-oriented, revolutionary Socialism in America based on the utopian, scientific principles of earlier thinkers.

While Debs emphasized ideological distinctiveness and popular appeal, Sanders focused on practical reform and steady office-holding. Nevertheless, barring an extremely unlikely Sanders-led schism of the Democratic Party, neither man will have successfully founded a durable American Socialism. Both Debs and Sanders failed to accomplish the necessity of establishing a recognized, broadly based political party of Socialism. The history of the Labour Party in the United Kingdom is instructive. After roughly 20 years of scuffling, gaining less than 10 percent of the popular vote, when the suffering of the two World Wars and the Great Depression struck England, the Labour Party made massive political gains. America, too, saw a great expansion of government and a popular leftist coalition in this period. But because the Socialist Party had crumbled, liberal Democrats were the main beneficiaries. The Socialist Party in America was too dependent on Debs' popularity and

too satisfied in the minor electoral victories of urban mayors and scattered Congressmen, similar to Bernie Sanders. Therefore, America's centralizing trend climaxed in the New Deal, a few steps short of Socialism as were the men who created it. The English Labour Party went much farther, creating a full welfare state and nationalizing much of the economy. If there was an established, organized Socialist Party in America with a national base of support, perhaps it would have achieved political leadership and the Democratic Party would have faded somewhat in the fashion of the English Liberal Party. To create such a party in America, there would need to be a greater emphasis on civil rights and freedoms to allay the suspicions of the more independent American citizenry. Nevertheless, from Debs' appeals for the rights of minorities and women to Bernie Sanders' self-proclaimed feminism and advocacy of LGBT rights, American Socialism has had this socially loosening component ahead of the mainstream Democratic Party. Thus, the main thing holding back the establishment of a formal American Socialism in both Debs' time and the present day has been an insufficient focus on the organization of a formal political party structure extended throughout the country which, if presented with the right circumstances, could achieve political preeminence, if only for a time.

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