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

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Research + Scholarship SYMPOSIUM



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

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.