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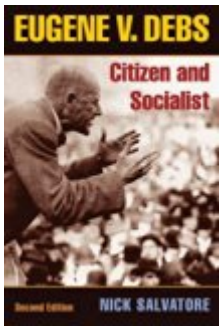
Nick Salvatore. *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. xx + 437 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07452-3.



Reviewed by Elizabeth Jozwiak

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Parallels between today's economic and social challenges and those faced at the beginning of the last century abound. In the midst of major economic change, what values will a society deem important? Eugene V. Debs spent his life trying to figure out the answers to the economic and social questions of his day. As Nick Salvatore points out in his preface to the new edition of *Eugene V. Debs* , Debs's "commitment to democratic principles and the fundamental American values that structure them remain more instructive than ever before" (p. xv). In the twenty-seven years since its original publication, this book has become a classic study of not only Debs but also American socialism and an era.

In this well-researched work, Salvatore explores in depth the evolution of Debs's political thought. His journey from middle class Terre Hautean to socialist was not a smooth one. He began as a rather conservative unionist in his early days with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. For example, he viewed strikes as a last resort and advocated a cooperative relationship between labor and capital. Even during his time in the Indiana State Assembly in the 1880s, where he considered himself the workers' representative, Debs emphasized individual rights much more than collective action. It is not the resume one would expect of the future leader of the Socialist Party of America.

Debs began his evolution toward more radical thought after the painful railroad strikes of 1889 and the Pullman strike of 1894. According to Salvatore, Debs began to see such actions as strikes as part of the right of citizens "to oppose the destructive social and economic effects of a maturing capitalist society" (p. 85). Moving beyond the craft unionism of the American Federation of Labor (and his early union perspective), he came to the position that industrial unionism would be most beneficial for workers. In forming the American Railway Union (ARU), Debs was willing to brave charges of dual unionism because he believed in his cause. After mobilizing the ARU to support the Pullman strike in violation of an injunction, Debs served six months in Woodstock Prison. Salvatore explores Debs's famous transforming experience in Woodstock and shows that

despite Debs's encouragement of the legend, Debs hardly emerged from prison a fully formed socialist. Nonetheless, his move toward socialism had begun. As he became increasingly convinced that socialism was the answer to the depredations of capital, one of his main strengths, Salvatore points out, was his ability to relate socialism to workers' own experiences regardless of geography or ethnic background.

As he grew in prominence within the movement, Debs found himself in conflict with socialists of differing points of view. He never bought into the economic determinism of Marxism, for example. As is to be expected, Salvatore spends much time on the political infighting among the Debs camp, the Milwaukee Social Democrats led by Victor Berger, and Morris Hillquit's New York socialists, and manages to present a clear picture of these messy conflicts and the personalities involved.

Another recurring theme Salvatore explores is the way that Debs characterized the fight for rights and dignity in terms of manhood. Today familiar to many historians, Salvatore was one of the early historians of labor and socialism to pick up on this perspective. The attitude of the struggle for rights as a man's issue left many women out of the socialist picture. Debs, like many socialists of this era, on the one hand advocated women's rights, and on the other, remained a traditional man of his time, seeing women mostly as mothers or romantic interests. He was also a bit less than enlightened on racial issues. Like most socialists of his era, he took the position that socialism would eliminate racial strife, but did not push the issue much. Even while refusing to speak before segregated audiences, he also enjoyed telling racist jokes. Though this is primarily a political biography, Salvatore explores Debs the man and does not hesitate to point out his less endearing characteristics.

To say Debs was egocentric would be putting it mildly, and his marriage was a mess. He worked himself into some type of nervous exhaustion periodically and had a bit of a martyr complex. Of course many socialists could understandably see him as a martyr for the cause when he was imprisoned for his opposition to the First World War. Emerging from prison a physical wreck, Debs still had the power to draw a crowd because on his reputation.

Debs had asked many of the same questions other Americans of the era did regarding how to deal with this new industrial capitalism of the turn of the century and explored various solutions, ultimately finding socialism. Though not for the casual reader, this detailed work is valuable not only for students of socialism but also for those who would like a broader understanding of the era. It is definitely worth reading or re-reading.

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