

## EUGENE DEBS, “THE ISSUE,” GIRARD, KS (16 MAY 1908)

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**Abstract:** Eugene Debs’ “The Issue” has long been accepted as one of Eugene Debs’ greatest speeches. In this essay we argue that it is the seamless integration of emotional appeal and political strategy that makes this speech shine as an example of American oratory at its best. Debs faced the complex situation of having to speak to two audiences with divergent interests in the same speech: the general public of Girard and his own Socialist Party. Debs resolved the dual audience by presenting socialism in simple terms that addressed common human interests and showed its roots in American ideals. His appeal to both socialists and the farmers needed for electoral victory makes “The Issue” an important example of creating common ground across partisan divides in American political rhetoric.

**Keywords:** Eugene V. Debs, Socialism, Audience, Presidential Campaigns, Socialist Party

Eugene Debs is a key figure in the study of American rhetoric. He was a popular and very effective third-party candidate. He has been more studied as an orator than most presidential hopefuls and third-party candidates in American political history. His transcendently hopeful progressive speech is, if there were a word for it, the very opposite to elegiac. He repeatedly points toward a better dawn for humanity, no matter the evils he also vividly depicts in his words. Scholars have commented on this quality, characterizing it as prophetic style.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, he was instrumental in transforming Socialism into a viable political party within the American system.

“The Issue” has long been accepted as one of Eugene Debs’ greatest speeches. It was selected as one of the top 100 speeches of the twentieth century in a survey of rhetoric scholars by Lucas and Medhurst.<sup>2</sup> It is certainly exemplary of Debs’ style in many ways. But is this estimation of its value merely a legacy of the fact that it was hailed as his greatest speech by one of his coworkers, in the edition where it was likely first published? What is its enduring value for readers and critics today? In this essay we argue that it is the seamless integration of emotional appeal and political strategy that makes this speech shine as an example of American oratory at its best. Debs faced the complex situation of having to speak to two audiences with divergent interests in the same speech, and while he must have been thinking of what to say should he be nominated, he had not planned to speak that morning. After first discussing the text itself, and the importance of Debs as a major figure in the American tradition of oratory, we will go on to consider the dual audiences he addressed and examine the speech, considering its original context as well as its lasting value for audiences today.

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## Eugene Victor Debs

Eugene Debs was uniquely placed to become the linchpin between the international Socialist movement and the American political system. He was born in 1855 to a family of Alsatian emigrants. His father, Daniel Debs, was an avid student of the revolutionary classics of France and Germany. Debs' mother, Marguerite "Daisy" Debs, used slim family savings to start a successful grocery store in Terre Haute. Since the availability of schools in the frontier river town of Terre Haute was often unreliable, Debs spent many hours in his father's study being schooled in the works of Goethe and Victor Hugo. Debs grew up trilingual in English, French, and German. At the age of 15, he left school to work on the railroads and contribute to the family income. He never stopped educating himself, however, taking day classes in business while working nights as a locomotive fireman on the run between Terre Haute and Indianapolis. His organizational gifts and warm personality soon drew the attention of local politicians. Debs returned from his life on the rails to Terre Haute and the wholesale grocery business as a result of layoffs during the depression of 1873. Still, he never abandoned his sympathies with railroad workers and began to serve the newly formed railroad unions, beginning with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF). At the same time, he was drafted to serve in local politics, winning election to City Clerk of Terre Haute in 1879. By 1880, he had become secretary general of the BLF, using his own funds to restore it, and while still serving there was elected to the Indiana General Assembly as a Democrat.

Already in his early career, several aspects of Debs' later political *ethos* evinced themselves. He was a gifted and generous extrovert, exhibiting an inspired ability to befriend others and bring them along in his train. He was generous to a fault with his personal income, often to the despair of his wife, Kate. Debs also showed early his reluctance to endorse violence and so did not participate in the Railroad Strike of 1877. Similarly, he was slow to defend the actions in Chicago that led to the Haymarket riot of May 1886.

International Socialists have complained that Debs was not an orthodox Marxist revolutionary.<sup>3</sup> But he was a gifted American orator, and in the tradition of American oratory he developed much of his political thought in the medium of public address. While still a young man in Terre Haute, he had helped to create the Occidental Literary Club, a debate club that invited great speakers of the day.<sup>4</sup> Through this club, Debs was introduced to such figures as Robert G. Ingersoll, Wendell Phillips, Susan B. Anthony, and James Whitcomb Riley. True to Debs' gift for friendship, many of them became friends and correspondents for much of his life.

When the railroad unions were new, they were organized into craft or trade guilds according to the skilled work being done by "brothers." Debs was an enthusiastic supporter of collective action across trade "brotherhoods."

By 1894, Debs had collaborated to found the American Railway Union, initially on federated lines. The ARU supported the Pullman Strike, and Debs along with several other labor organizers were arrested for a national union boycott of Pullman cars. It was during this period that Debs came to national attention while abandoning mainstream politics in favor of Socialism.

The American labor movement during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was divided between craft unions composed of skilled workers who referred to themselves as a "brotherhood," such as the Brotherhood of Railway Conductors or Debs' own Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. An alternate form of labor organization was that of the industrial union, which sought to organize all workers in an industry regardless of their specialty or degree of skill required to do their jobs. One of the first American industrial unions was the Knights of Labor, an organization to uplift

working people that featured rituals of brotherhood (including women) somewhat reminiscent of Free Masons. By the late 1880's the Knights had lost much of their membership, with many workers joining craft guilds. The American Federation of Labor, led by Samuel Gompers, organized these guilds into a "federated" model in which the craft unions remained distinct but could pursue broad goals through the voice of the federation. The federated union model mirrored the organization of corporations into "associations," such as the General Managers Association which represented 24 railroad corporations that had terminals in Chicago and was the principal opponent of the American Railway Union in the Pullman strike.<sup>5</sup>

Gompers opposed the founding of the ARU, and called a meeting on July 12, 1894, at the behest of a number of the AFL's unions to address the Pullman strike. Gompers invited the chiefs of the various railroad brotherhoods against the wishes of the ARU even though they were not affiliated with the AFL and were opposed to the strike, and following the meeting issued a statement urging AFL unions engaged in sympathy strikes to return to work, calling the Pullman strike "impulsive." For many years afterward Debs believed that Gompers intentionally sabotaged the strike, which resulted in a major setback for the union movement and led Debs to support broad industrial unionization and a socialist movement that could empower all working-class people.<sup>6</sup>

By 1908, Eugene Debs was a seasoned campaigner and labor agitator. He steered a course for the Socialist Party that opposed Samuel Gompers' federated labor policies in favor of a true political party of the working class. At the same time, he opposed the militant revolutionary tactics of the Industrial Workers of the World. These two decisions alone created a viable American political party out of the Socialist movement.

The estimation of "The Issue" as one of Debs' best speeches comes down to us from commentary included in its first published versions. There were two slightly variant texts of the speech printed in about the same year. One was published in *Appeal to Reason*, the Girard, Kansas socialist newspaper where Debs was living and working as a contributing editor.<sup>7</sup> At some point in 1908, a slightly variant text was published in pamphlet form by the Chicago-based Socialist publishing house Clark Kerr.<sup>8</sup> There is no reason to believe Debs did not oversee the changes himself, since he was certainly personally familiar with both publishers. However, on close reading it seems that the Kerr version includes several minor edits intended to bring the speech in line with the wider Socialist audience, while the *Appeal to Reason* version perhaps conforms more to the speech as delivered, since where it differs from Kerr it appeals to a mixed audience of citizens of Girard who were mostly not Socialists.

The tension between versions may seem insignificant; yet it illustrates Debs' drive to appeal to a dual audience, simultaneously offering Socialism to a general public while staking a leading position in the internal ideological turmoil of the Socialist Party. At every point in the speech, we can see his emotional appeals strategically linking Socialism to American values on both fronts.

### **Dual Audience: The Citizens of Girard and the Socialists in Chicago**

In 1908, Eugene Debs was in poor health, with a condition that plagued him off and on for most of his life, subjecting him to fits of exhaustion and muscle pain. Partly for his health, he had settled for a while in Girard, Kansas, where he was helping his friend, Fred Warren, on the editorial pages of the Socialist newspaper, *Appeal to Reason*.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Girard Audience*

Typical of presidential nominees prior to FDR, Debs did not attend the Socialist Party convention of 1908.<sup>10</sup> It was in Girard that the news came to him that the party had nominated him for President of the United States at its convention in Chicago on May 10-17, 1908. Before World War II it was conventional that the nominee would not attend the convention, nor deliver his acceptance address from the convention podium. Doing so would have violated the notion, conventional since the Founding, that American presidents did not campaign but rather accepted the duty their country demanded. The convention was evident when Franklin Delano Roosevelt acknowledged the rule in the act of violating it, in his 1932 acceptance speech:

The appearance before a National Convention of its nominee for President to be formally notified of his selection is unprecedented and unusual, but these are unprecedented and unusual times. I have started out on the tasks that lie ahead by breaking the absurd tradition that the candidate should remain in assumed ignorance of what has happened for weeks until he is formally notified of the event. That is sheer sham and hypocrisy [sic]. May this be the symbol of my intention to be honest and to avoid all hypocrisy [sic] or sham or silly shutting of the eyes to the truth in this campaign.<sup>11</sup>

But even when given away from the convention, nomination acceptance addresses usually have been delivered with the candidate surrounded by members of his own party. In Debs' case, however, he may actually have campaigned against himself behind the scenes. The result appears to have been that he was not prepared with a venue to accept the nomination, other than his own residence. Instead, he was taken by surprise as the town of Girard rose to the occasion.

On Saturday, May 16, 1908, according to *The Appeal to Reason*, Debs was told there was a parade going on in the town square. When he arrived, the parade turned out to be for him. Citizens of Girard, few of them Socialists, turned out to congratulate him on his nomination as the Socialist Party candidate for President of the United States. The Contributing Editor, most likely Fred D. Warren, recounts the scene vividly:

Comrade Debs had been kept in complete ignorance of the little surprise party. For a few moments he seemed overwhelmed at the expressions of good will and the smiling faces on every hand. But he quickly recovered from the slight embarrassment, and began to talk. And such a talk! As a father talks to his children, Debs talked to those gathered under the shade of the spreading elms in the court house yard. It wasn't a wildly enthusiastic gathering, such as one would expect to see on an occasion like this. It was rather a gathering of men and women in dead earnest, who realized the deep significance of the occasion and were determined to let no single word which fell from the speaker's lips escape them. One could almost feel the spirit of the revolution—it impressed me as a counterpart of those meetings of colonial patriots just prior to the signing of the Declaration of Independence. "Momentous and significant." These words sum up the Girard meeting at which the citizens of this village, without a dissenting voice, expressed their congratulations to their fellow townsman, nominated for the presidency by the Socialist national convention.<sup>12</sup>

This description evokes the admiration felt by those who heard the speech in person—and tells a romanticized story illustrating Debs' character. It is clear he was popular in Girard, from the

Socialist minority that shared his views to the majority that voted narrowly for Taft in the upcoming election.<sup>13</sup>

The immediate audience for this speech was therefore not an audience primarily of Socialist Party members and supporters. It was a general audience, there to honor one of their own, regardless of often considerable political differences. Girard, the county seat of Crawford County, Kansas, was a mining town and while Crawford was split between Taft and Bryan that year, Debs and the Socialist Party won 14 % of the vote, which was several points higher than the national average. The Socialist Party House candidate for the Girard area Congressional District 3, Ben Wilson, won about 10 % of the vote.<sup>14</sup>

Debs was above all a crowd pleaser. His affection for the people of Girard who welcomed him is apparent. It was his formidable task, on little notice, to deliver a speech that should have been staged in front of a cheering crowd of supporters, to a general audience of townspeople most of whom accepted him for reasons other than his politics. The immediate audience was mixed. Many of them were not Socialists and needed to be reassured about the goal of Socialism by relating it to them sympathetically. The more distant audience of party members needed to hear Debs establish a position on the main platform controversy: whether to include farmers in the “working class” to whom Socialists appealed. This question turns out to cut to the heart of what it meant to be a Socialist in 1908.

### *The Socialist Audience*

The Socialist Party Convention of 1908 was contentious. One issue was whether to form a Farmers’ Committee or make a separate appeal to farmers to join the Socialist cause. This issue was proving to be a “third rail” for the Socialists, since single family-owned farms broke a critical distinction between workers and owners in Socialist ideology. A Farmers Committee seemed out of place both to those who believed that land-owning farmers were not the same class as factory workers, and to those who believed that farmers belonged in the working class and in the party, and therefore there was no need to establish a separate Farmers’ Committee. Others pointed out that the party could not win agricultural states like South Dakota and Oregon without the farmers.<sup>15</sup> Without support from farmers, electoral victory was unlikely; yet farmers were landowners, and other points in the platform called for public, collective, or national ownership of land. During the discussion, Socialists’ ideological dependence on European theory was evident. Also evident was a failure to complete the transition from a revolutionary movement to a political party. On the one hand, the so-called “opportunists” argued that you can’t win a state like South Dakota without the farm vote. On the other hand, the so-called “impossibilists” argued that all land should be collectively owned, leading one unnamed delegate to expostulate:

the impossibilists want ownership of all the means of production and distribution, which would mean the whole of my yard, if I raised some potatoes... When I see a plank in the platform that tells the American working people that the Socialists stand for government by the working people, the working class, a working class dictator, then I am in favor of immediate demands, but not before. ... Under Socialism what will we stand for, a political representative state, or an industrial state?<sup>16</sup>

The fact that “collectively” owned land would be in the hands of a government not necessarily ruled by a working-class collective, but by a democratic system in which the

Socialist Party was just one among several, was a problem for Socialist political identity. Are they a movement bent on ushering in the dictatorship of the working class, or are they a political party negotiating for worker interests among other political parties in a democracy? If a worker revolution, only “workers”—the definable proletariat—need apply. But a political party in a democracy must address the entire electorate.

Of the two major party candidates in 1908, Bryan came closest to addressing issues that appealed to Socialists. For instance, Bryan also made an appeal to the farm vote, while Taft promised to continue Roosevelt’s policies and “not rock the boat.”<sup>17</sup> While Debs never had a chance to win the presidency, therefore, his 14% of the vote in Crawford County, Kansas demonstrated his potential as a third party candidate to exceed the difference between Bryan and Taft.

### A Reading of “The Issue”

While the speech was extemporaneous, Debs certainly had planned at least in outline what he needed to say to the Socialist Party. He was well aware of the clash over the idea of farmers as workers and had a strategy to include farmers in the Socialist Party. Yet when it came to the day and the immediate audience, he also had to make Socialism appeal to a more general audience, in Girard and ultimately nationwide.

The speech began with an expression of proper deference to the honor bestowed and a profession of humility which was made vivid by his generous embrace of Girard: “As the rosebud under the influence of sunshine and shower opens, so does my heart to receive your benedictions” (1).<sup>18</sup> While acknowledging the many differences of opinion that separated them, he figuratively opened his arms to them as friends who had taken him in. This endlessly renewable quality of openness toward his audience was a hallmark of Debs’ campaign speeches for most of his career. In this particular context, it also performed the conventional deprecation of himself as a presidential candidate. Even this convention was turned to the task of establishing the *ethos* of servitude toward the working class: “To the extent that I am able to help others who are unable to help themselves, to that extent, and to that extent alone, do I honor myself and the party to which I belong” (3). From this standpoint then, Debs launched into a winning appeal to accept Socialism as the party of the common American people, farmers and workers alike.

In the body of the speech, the opposition between capitalism and socialism bracketed the details of Debs’ platform. This opposition was cast in transcendent terms based in nature. The nature theme in turn enhanced Debs’ support for bringing farm issues into the Socialist fold. He expressed opposition to capitalism (paragraphs 4-8), followed by an agenda laying out the needs of workers (paragraphs 9-28) and the needs of farmers (paragraphs 29-39). The opposition returned as he closed the speech with the history of Socialism as an American idea.

While some socialists did not consider Debs to be a doctrinaire follower of socialist principles, Debs’ genius, as evidenced here in “The Issue,” was his ability to explain socialist principles in a way accessible to the average American. In introducing his support of socialism, he uses the socialist idea of the *alienation* of the workers from the meaning and purpose of their work. This concept, which came to be termed “false consciousness” in later socialist theory, is presented by Debs as the “ignorance” of the worker:

I know the poor fellow is too ignorant to understand his self-interest, and I know that as a rule the workingman is the friend of his enemy and the enemy of his friend. He votes for

men who represent a system in which labor is simply merchandise; in which the man who works the hardest and longest has the least to show for it (8).

Debs cast opposition to capitalism as an opposition between the bounty of nature and human ignorance. By leading with the first person, Debs positioned his persona as an individual pivot of choice between “Nature’s bounties” and an “iniquitous” system that prevented us from freely partaking at Nature’s table. He thus set the stage broadly against the backdrop of Nature itself to invite farmers to the table of Socialism. The individual who spoke out against the existing order was characterized in the *Appeal to Reason* version of the speech as standing in a line that runs from Jesus Christ to Fred Warren, citizen of Girard and editor of the *Appeal to Reason*. Debs’ personal voice made his radical position inoffensive to the mixed group of Democrats, Republicans and Socialists alike: “I am opposed to capitalism because I love my fellow men” (7).

The positions that followed were similarly voiced as a moral opposition to and remedy against capitalism. Unemployment, poor working conditions, homelessness, and industrial machinery that took jobs away from workers were all enhanced by the personal voice, local examples, and a standard of human dignity based on access to creation and creativity—both natural and aesthetic. For example, Debs represented the socialist concept of commodification—that workers were reduced to a commodity of labor in which they have no choice but to sell themselves for a wage, and where surplus labor reduced that wage to starvation levels and produced unemployment—by personalizing the experience of unemployment in his own voice:

Quite fortunately for me I had an experience of somewhat similar nature to this quite early in my life. Quite fortunately because, had I not known from my own experience just what it is to have to beg for work, just what it is to be shown the door as if I were a very offensive intruder, had I not known what it is to suffer for the want of food, had I not seen every door closed and barred in my face, had I not found myself friendless and alone in the city as a boy looking for work, and in vain, perhaps I would not be here this afternoon (10).

The stylistic effect of repeating “had I not known,” “had I not seen,” “had I not found,” allowed Debs to use his own experience of joblessness to represent the structural role of surplus labor in the capitalist system, but in an easily-accessible and emotive form.

Socialism juxtaposed the work that people did in traditional societies with the capitalist industrialization of work that alienated the workers from the products of their labor. Debs linked this socialist precept to common American values by using Abraham Lincoln as an example:

Your grandfather could help himself anywhere. All he needed was some cheap, simple, primitive tools and he could then apply his labor to the resources of Nature with his individual tools and produce what he needed. That era in our history produced our greatest men. Lincoln himself sprang from this primitive state of society... Yes, but Lincoln had for his comrades great: green-plumed forest monarchs. He was in partnership with nature... Had Lincoln been born in a sweatshop he would never have been heard of (14-15).

Another theme of socialism is the inevitability of technological advance. Industrialization allowed the capitalist system to make workers interchangeable, like cogs in a machine. But this technology, because it amplified the labor of workers, also had the potential for liberating workers from toil—if they owned the means of production and could benefit from the surplus it produced instead of having it turned into profit for a few owners. Debs introduced this topic in paragraphs 20 through 28, pointing out that the “primitive tools” of fifty years ago had been replaced by mammoth machines, and that this was the law of evolution in modern economies. He then presented the socialist vision:

Your material interest and mine in the society of the future will be the same. Instead of having to fight each other like animals, as we do today, and seeking to glorify the brute struggle for existence—of which every civilized human being ought to be ashamed—instead of this, our material interests are going to be mutual. We are going to jointly own these mammoth machines, and we are going to operate them as joint partners and we are going to divide the products among ourselves (28).

Debs then showed his awareness of the second audience for the speech—the leaders of the Socialist Party who had nominated him for president. He addressed the contentious issue of the place of farmers in socialist politics, given that they are capitalist landowners but also workers living by the sweat of their toil. In an oblique nod to the issues confounding the Socialist Party platform, Debs implicitly acknowledged here that it was more important for socialists to win elections than to adhere to a strict interpretation of socialism:

I want to awaken that farmer to the fact that he is robbed every day in the week, and if I can awaken him to the fact that he is robbed under the capitalist system he will fall into line with the Socialist movement, and will march to the polls on election day, and, instead of casting his vote to fasten the shackles upon his limb more firmly, he will cast a vote for his emancipation. All I have to do is to show that farmer, that day laborer, that tramp, that they are victims of this system, that their interests are identical, that they constitute the millions and that the millions have the votes (37).

Yet immediately after his appeal to farmers, Debs returned to basic socialist doctrine—the conviction that all aspects of society emanate from the structure of economic relations. “The material foundation of society determines the character of all social institutions—political, educational, ethical and spiritual” (40). Here he introduced the example of the institution of slavery as an analogy to capitalism:

In the north it was the small capitalist at the beginning of capitalism, who, with the machine, had begun to manufacture, and wanted cheap labor; and the sharper the competition [among workers] the cheaper he could buy his labor. Now, chattel slavery to the southern plantation owner was the source of his wealth. He had to have slaves, and what the plantation owner had to have in economics the preacher had to justify in religion (40).

Debs argued that the status quo of power and oppression was supported by religion, the law, and other institutions dominated by the wealthy. He identified with Wendell Phillips, the



great abolitionist publisher and speaker, in that abolitionists were reviled before the Civil War just as socialists were often reviled in Debs' day. Thus he compared the Socialist Party of his day to the Republican Party, dominant in 1908, in its beginnings in 1858.

Debs returned to a positive, indeed visionary stance after enumerating the problems facing workers and farmers. He portrayed socialism as the solution and inevitable outcome of American history. In a nod to the issues occupying the Socialist Party convention, he reassured his audience that Socialists did not plan to "destroy private property" (47). Rather, they would establish it on behalf of the dispossessed. Despite his criticism of Christianity as upholding an oppressive status quo, he related socialist principles in terms of Christian sentiments. Indeed, by framing the opposition to capitalism in terms of the bounty of nature, Debs was able to sneak in language of Christian charity without offending the general atheism of socialists. "You are not your brother's keeper in this [capitalist] system" (47), he argued. The socialist spirit coalesced with the spirit of Christianity:

If you and I must fight each other to exist, we will not love each other very hard. We can go to the same church and hear the minister tell us in good conscience that we ought to love each other, and the next day we approach the edge of some business transaction. Do we remember what the minister told us? No, it is gone until next Sunday. Six days in the week we are following the Golden Rule reversed (48).

Debs closed his speech on a note of optimism and a promise to "work side by side" in the co-operative interests of his audience. His concluding statement again emphasized his use of emotion and his gift for eloquence:

From the very depths of my heart I thank you, each of you—every man, woman and child, for this splendid testimonial, for this beautiful tribute which I shall remember with gratitude and love until memory empties its urn into forgetfulness (53).

### **Reactions and Legacy**

Certainly "The Issue" was a key speech in the political mix of 1908. Yet, in the longer view of history, there are many other episodes in Debs' career that are at least equally momentous and also inspired some of Debs' greatest orations. In 1908, Debs had yet to enter the most notable stage of his career. His major electoral inroads in the 1912 and 1921 elections were still to come. Most notably, Debs' challenge to the Sedition Act in his Canton, Ohio speech of 1918 would make the federal court his pulpit. What raises this campaign address to that level of historic significance?

Perhaps the power of this speech and the impact that the sheer force of Debs' personality had on his audience is best illustrated by this quote from the editor of *Appeal to Reason* in his introduction to the speech:

At the close of the address a group of little children, bearing baskets of flowers and wreaths, and their little faces suffused with smiles, marched to the platform and literally smothered their friend with roses. Tears came to the big brother's eyes as he gathered the little ones to him. An hour later, I passed 'Gene sitting on the curb with a dozen bright

haired lassies clinging to his arms and shoulders! Mark my words: "You can pin your faith to the man loved by children."

This sympathetic vignette is almost reminiscent of a "Messianic sign" such as that recorded of Jesus, shown in the Gospels as welcoming children.<sup>19</sup>

In our view, "The Issue" offers an unparalleled example of Eugene V. Debs at the prime of his rhetorical powers and exemplifies his unique ability to make socialism popular to the American public by filling it with emotion, imbuing it with common and deeply held American and Judeo-Christian values, and consecrating it with his own brand of magnetism.

Debs' political career coincided with the Progressive Era in American politics. This period saw the beginnings of many policies and institutions which shaped what we call the modern welfare state, such as the Food and Drug administration and universal public education. Socialism promised a path toward improving the lives of working people through political organization and activism. After the political reaction against socialism and progressivism started after World War One—the "red scare"—socialism receded as a political possibility in the U.S. Debs' success in garnering votes in 1908 and the ensuing decade constitutes the high-water mark for socialism as a political alternative in the U.S. Today Bernie Sanders perhaps most embodies the spirit of Debs, who is his personal hero, and since 2016 the Democratic Socialists of America have seen their greatest increase in members in generations. Socialists also struggled with the issues of race and gender, as did the rest of American society. Most American labor unions excluded Black workers and women. Debs opposed this exclusion, but his sensitivity to the issues of racial discrimination was clouded by his vision of a socialist revolution that would liberate all people, regardless of race or gender. In "The Issue," we see Debs' optimistic vision that a socialist reorganization of society will free all people from oppression. Today the descendant of Debs' Socialist Party, the Democratic Socialists of America, although not a political party, still faces controversies over the intersection of class and race as terms of analysis of oppression and resistance.<sup>20</sup>

Eugene Debs is an example today of a consummate political mind who approached divisive issues in a spirit of unification rather than division. In his time, he was able to reject violent revolution while upholding the continuity of both the Socialist idea and the idea of America, and showed their interconnection. We believe he revalued and thus preserved the spirit of the American system at its best.

The legacy of this speech is therefore more than just a historical footnote. Socialism is more popular today than it has been since Debs' day. Debs' emotional rhetoric, which could fit under the definition of populist, resonates with the resurgence of populist rhetoric in today's politics. In one sense, "The Issue" represents the path not taken by American politics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In another sense, Debs' focus on social justice, oppression, liberation, and humanistic values has a strong relevance to the social justice movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. While much of his work is forgotten or undervalued by the public at large, he continues to influence Progressive movements from FDR to Bernie Sanders.<sup>21</sup> His rhetoric is worthy of study and renewed attention for students and political/social activists today.

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**Author's Note:** Margaret D. Zulick teaches rhetorical theory and criticism at Wake Forest University. Andrew Leslie is an Independent Scholar. They thank J. Michael Hogan for his tireless and insightful encouragements and criticisms along the way.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Darsey, “The Legend of Eugene Debs: Prophetic Ethos as Radical Argument,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74 (1988):434-452; James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Debs, “The Issue”, *Words of a Century: The Top 100 American Speeches, 1900-1999*, ed. Stephen E. Lucas and Martin J. Medhurst, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009: 30-39. This speech was selected by a group of scholars for the volume and also the web site, “Top 100 Speeches of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” *American Rhetoric*, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/newtop100speeches.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Burwood discusses Debs’ position relative to international Socialism in “Debsian Socialism through a Transnational Lens,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2/3 (2003): 253-282.

<sup>4</sup> Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene V. Debs*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1949), 25-28.

<sup>5</sup> Nick Salvatore, *Eugene Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 126.

<sup>6</sup> Salvatore, 126-135.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Debs, “The Issue,” in “Citizens Unite in Expression of Good Will for ‘Gene Debs.” *Appeal to Reason* #651, 23 May 1908, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/appeal-to-reason/>.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Debs, *The Issue*, Charles H. Kerr, ca. 1908. [Industrial Workers of the World, Documents Library](https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/190801).

<sup>9</sup> The *Appeal to Reason* was a Socialist newspaper founded in Girard in 1895. Fred Warren, editor at the time of this speech, was already under indictment in what became a landmark freedom of speech trial. David L. Stirling, “The Federal Government v. The Appeal to Reason”, *Kansas History* 9/1 (Spring 1986): 31-42.

<sup>10</sup> The Convention opened on May 10 and nominated Debs early on Friday, May 15<sup>th</sup>. He was present in Girard to deliver a speech the next day. Nick Salvatore states Debs was “in Chicago but not on the floor of the convention”, citing a letter by Morris Hillquist dated May 8. Clearly either the letter is in error, or it was misread, or Debs traveled over 600 miles by train from Chicago to Girard while the convention was in session. “Debs and Hanford Chosen: Indiana and New York Candidates on the Socialist Ticket,” *The New York Times*, 16 May 1908; Nick Salvatore, *Eugene Debs: Citizen and Socialist*, University of Illinois Press, 1982, p. 222.

<sup>11</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Acceptance Speech to the 1932 Democratic National Convention,” *Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum*. <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/documents/356632/390886/1932+DNC+Acceptance+Speech.pdf/066093f1-bab8-48a8-81b5-65ed8c000f89>

<sup>12</sup> “Citizens Unite in Expression of Good Will for ‘Gene Debs,’” *Appeal to Reason* #651, 23 May 1908, 1.

<sup>13</sup> “1908 United States Presidential Election in Kansas,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1908\\_United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election\\_in\\_Kansas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1908_United_States_presidential_election_in_Kansas), Accessed 01 June, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> “1908 United States Presidential Election in Kansas.”

<sup>15</sup> *National Convention of the Socialist Party, Proceedings*, Chicago: Allied Printing, pp. 14-16.

<sup>16</sup> *National Convention of the Socialist Party*, Morning Session, May 15, 1908, 172.

<sup>17</sup> “Bryan Asks Farmers for Election Funds”, *New York Times* 18 July 1908; “Taft Will Demand Rest for Country”, *New York Times* 18 July 1908. *Times Machine, New York Times*, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1908/07/18/issue.html> .

<sup>18</sup> All passages from Debs’ speech, “The Issue”, are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the printed text that accompanies this essay on the Voices of Democracy website. Succeeding citations to this speech will omit the word “paragraph” preceding the paragraph number.

<sup>19</sup> Mark 10:13-16; Matthew 18:1-5, 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Powell, “A Black Marxist Scholar Wanted to Talk About Race. It Ignited a Fury,” *New York Times*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/us/adolph-reed-controversy.html>

<sup>21</sup> This ongoing influence was mentioned, for at least one instance, in a recent NPR podcast: Rantin Ablouei et al. “American Socialist (2020),” September 1, 2022, podcast, *Throughline*, NPR, MPEG audio, 1:02:40, <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/31/1120244344/american-socialist-2020>