

New York Times column falsifies legacy of Eugene Debs

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The growing interest in socialism continues to provoke attempts to falsify its history. This is the aim behind the *New York Times*' publication last week of a column on the pioneering American socialist, Eugene V. Debs. Written by Hamilton College professor Maurice Isserman, the article presents Debs as a tragic figure who attempted to create a distinctly "American socialism" only to see it fail.

Debs's fervent insistence on the centrality of working class revolution, which dominated his writings and speeches, is overlooked entirely. Isserman makes no mention of the Russian Revolution, though Debs enthusiastically supported it. Indeed, in Isserman's rendering, Debs was not much of a socialist at all.

Though he admits that Debs "certainly read his Marx and Engels," and that he never joined a church and professed no religious faith, Isserman nonetheless argues that Debs really stood in the tradition of "Protestant radicalism," tracing this pedigree back to religious dissent in "the founding days of Massachusetts Bay Colony." After religious influences, Isserman gives pride of place in Debs's political worldview to the concept of "citizenship," writing that Debs "spoke American, not Marxist."

To Isserman, Debs was, in sum, a moral crusader unwittingly mobilized ("whether consciously or not") by religious and patriotic concepts. All Debs really wished for, according to Isserman, was "another, more equitable America." This portrayal serves a definite political purpose, revealed by Isserman in the column's last sentence. What is needed today, he argues, is a form of American radicalism that joins "the redemptive promise of moral protest and the practical achievements of political action. ..." One suspects the professor may have in mind Bernie Sanders.

Debs would be horrified. He spent his entire 25-year career as a socialist fighting against—albeit within the straitjacket of the "all inclusive" American Socialist Party—just such anodyne politics and those "experts" and intellectuals who, like Isserman, espoused them.

In his attempt to discover "the real Debs," Isserman is compelled to overlook what Debs himself said and wrote. In answer, it is worthwhile to let Debs speak for himself. In countless speeches and hundreds of articles, Debs railed relentlessly against capitalism and capitalist exploitation in the most searing language.

He could not have been much clearer. "The Socialist Party is not a reform party!" Debs thundered in a speech to miners in 1902. "It proposes to abolish the capitalist system to transfer from private hands all the means of production and distribution and turn them

over to the people in their collective capacity."

In his several runs for the presidency, Debs always "campaign[ed] on a program of straight class-struggle socialism," in the words of James P. Cannon. Debs traveled the country demanding the expropriation of the capitalist and the liberation of the "wage slaves." With such slogans Debs won 6 percent of the vote in the 1912 election. An equivalent outcome in the last presidential election would have meant some 8 million votes.

But Debs viewed elections only as a means of political education. "Voting for socialism is not socialism any more than a menu is a meal," he said. "Of far greater importance than increasing the vote of the Socialist party is the economic organization of the working class. ... Socialism must be organized, drilled, equipped and the place to begin is in the industries where the workers are employed."

The overriding aim of Debs's political activity was to wrest workers away from the Democratic Party. "This world only respects as it is compelled to respect, and if you working men want to be respected you have got to begin by respecting yourselves," he told striking workers in Philadelphia in 1908. "Get out of the capitalist parties. You do not belong there."

To be sure, Debs's speeches and writings—like those of Abraham Lincoln whose youth in rural Indiana was only a few decades and 100 miles removed from Debs's own in Terre Haute—feature biblical metaphor and invocations of equality and liberty, the revolutionary legacy of 1776. This did not make him a moralizing patriot, as Isserman implies, but a man whose grasp of history and unmatched moral courage cut a path for his revolutionary agitation to the hearts and minds of workers.

In tours of the Deep South at the very height of Jim Crow segregation, Debs refused to appear before segregated audiences and delivered speeches insisting on the equality of all toilers. In the cities and mining towns, Debs spoke before immigrants who, in spite of linguistic barriers, somehow understood his revolutionary message. "Debs talks to us with his hands, out of his heart, and we all understood everything he said," a Polish audience member explained in his native tongue. The tenement homes of Jewish immigrants were often adorned with his photograph. "Debs, Debs, they called him," one informant said of the Yiddish-speaking socialists.

What made Debs different from the right-wing socialists was his uncompromising view of the class struggle. From the time of his incarceration at Woodstock prison for his leadership of the

Pullman Strike of 1894, Debs always credited Marx, Engels, and their great German popularizer, Karl Kautsky, as his primary influences, and forcefully rejected conceiving of socialism as a reformist program. The “spirit of bourgeois reform,” he warned, would “practically destroy...a revolutionary organization.”

Debs’s hostility to imperialist war was legendary. In 1915, after observing the betrayal of Europe’s socialists in the defense of “their” ruling classes, Debs wrote:

I have no country to fight for; my country is the earth; and I am a citizen of the world I am not a capitalist soldier; I am a proletarian revolutionist. ... I refuse to obey any command to fight from the ruling class, but I will not wait to be commanded to fight for the working class. I am opposed to every war but one; I am for that war with heart and soul, and that is the world-wide war of the social revolution. In that war I am prepared to fight in any way the ruling class may make it necessary, even to the barricade.

In 1917, Debs enthusiastically welcomed the Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd. In 1919, he wrote an essay defending Soviet Russia and eviscerating the treachery of reformist socialists:

Lenin and Trotsky were the men of the hour and under their fearless, incorruptible and uncompromising leadership the Russian proletariat has held the fort against the combined assaults of all the ruling class powers of earth. ... In Russia and Germany our valiant comrades are leading the proletarian revolution, which knows no race, no color, no sex, and no boundary lines. They are setting the heroic example for worldwide emulation. Let us, like them, scorn and repudiate the cowardly compromisers within our own ranks, challenge and defy the robber-class power, and fight it out on that line to victory or death! *From the crown of my head to the soles of my feet I am Bolshevik, and proud of it.*

Debs wrote these lines weeks before he began a prison term for violating the Espionage Act, in his famous Canton Speech opposing US entry into World War I. This same reactionary law will serve as the legal basis for any prosecution of another class war prisoner, Julian Assange, 100 years later, a fact that Isserman and the *Times* fail to note.

Lenin and Trotsky reciprocated Debs’s admiration. In his 1918 Letter to American Workers, Lenin called Debs the “most beloved” leader of the American proletariat. He went on:

I am not surprised that Wilson, the head of the American multimillionaires and servant of the capitalist sharks, has thrown Debs into prison. Let the bourgeoisie be brutal to the true internationalists, to the true representatives of the

revolutionary proletariat! The more fierce and brutal they are, the nearer the day of the victorious proletarian revolution.

Debs’s own words leave no doubt that he was a revolutionist and committed fighter to the class struggle. There is, however, another side to the story that, in Debs’s own time, allowed him to be manipulated by right-wing socialists like Victor Berger of Milwaukee and Morris Hillquit of New York--and which today provides the origin of the attempt to manipulate his legacy.

Debs delivered his fierce attacks against the reformist socialists publicly, for all the workers to hear. On speakers’ platforms and in newspaper articles, he launched fusillades against the “labor lieutenants of capital” such as Samuel Gompers and the whole American Federation of Labor bureaucracy, as well as the SP right wing--whom after the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in 1919 he referred to as “the Scheidemanns.”

Yet Debs withdrew completely from the internal party struggle against reform--and in fact refused to attend national conventions and even take a seat on the SP’s national committee--thereby ceding the ground to the right wing. He refused to fight it out within the party, believing that ultimately the workers themselves would chase out the Bergers and Hillquits. This was a losing proposition.

Trotsky, in only a brief stay in New York, developed a quick appreciation for this dynamic. “Hillquit’s art lay in keeping Debs on his left flank while he maintained a business friendship with Gompers,” Trotsky wrote in *My Life*, memorably adding that while Hillquit was a “Babbitt of Babbitts...the ideal Socialist leader for successful dentists,” Debs was “a sincere revolutionary.”

What Debs and many other “sincere revolutionists” of the Second International did not understand was that the reformist leaders were not simply mistaken. They were a conduit for the pressure of capitalist politics on the workers’ movement. Of course, the lessons of Lenin’s world-historic struggle against Menshevism had had but little time to be assimilated before Debs was vindictively imprisoned by order of Woodrow Wilson.

In the balance of history, Debs’s contributions are the patrimony of the revolutionary socialists. The attempt to harness this heroic figure in the fight for the emancipation of the working class to reformist politics today are best undermined by his own words.

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