Their Debs and ours: A review of *American Socialist: The Life and Legacy of Eugene V. Debs*

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Shawn Gude. *American Socialist: The Life and Legacy of Eugene V. Debs*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2026. ISBN 978-1-6680-5673-8

At the conclusion of his new biography of Eugene Debs, Shawn Gude, former senior editor of *Jacobin*, attempts to link the founding figure of American socialism to Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), New York City mayor Zohran Mamdani, and even to Shawn Fain, the corporatist bureaucrat who presides over the United Auto Workers.

Gude writes,

> The two presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders… revitalized [Debs'] tradition, spurring the rebirth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the institutional descendant of Debs's Socialist Party. When Zohran Mamdani won the mayorship of the nation's largest city in November 2025, he began his victory speech by quoting Debs: "I can see the dawn of a better day for humanity." A Socialist mayor of a city of 8 million people! … As I write, more than two hundred democratic socialists hold public office across the US… United Auto Workers president Shawn Fain is a fiery blue-collar worker from Indiana and a democratic socialist in all but name…

Debs would be horrified.

In Gude's telling, the legacy of this great revolutionary figure amounts to a pipeline of candidates and officeholders working within the Democratic Party and the union apparatus. Gude, in other words, "honors" Debs by enlisting him in the service of the very institutions he spent his life trying to tear down. It would be akin to a biographer of Lincoln locating his legacy among the Jim Crow Democrats who overthrew Reconstruction.

The life of the real Eugene Victor Debs (1855-1926) does not support Gude's project. From the time of his jailing after the great Pullman Strike of 1894 by Democratic President Grover Cleveland until his imprisonment at the hands of another Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson, in 1919 for opposing World War I, Debs repeatedly staked out his position in terms that Sanders, Mamdani and Fain should prefer not to recall.

Debs opposed imperialist war and any attempt by socialists to accommodate it in the name of "national defense," saying he would prefer "to be shot for treason" than to vote for war funding. He opposed the "aristocracy of labor" and the "labor lieutenants of capital" that controlled the unions. He demanded that workers "sever all relations with the capitalist parties." He opposed reformist socialism as "the mask of fraud" authored by "'reformers' of chicken hearts" who were "for everybody, especially themselves, and against nobody." He was a revolutionist, stating that he "would destroy all enslaving and degrading capitalist institutions and re-create them as free and humanizing institutions." One could go on.

Debs' own words are available, including in *Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs* (1948) and the three-volume *Letters of Eugene V. Debs* (1990). Much of this material is freely accessible online. Haymarket Books is also publishing *The Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs*, edited by Tim Davenport and David Walters, of which four of a planned six volumes have so far appeared

Gude does not reference James P. Cannon's essay "Eugene V. Debs," an assessment of Debs' revolutionary strengths as well as the political limitations of the early Socialist Party, included in *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (1962). Gude's book does rely on, but does not replace, Nick Salvatore's *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (1982), and Ray Ginger's *The Bending Cross* (1949). Much less does it warrant the designation "the definitive biography" bestowed by one hopeful reviewer.

Salvatore, a Cornell historian who died in November 2025, showed the broad layers of the working class that gathered behind Debs: railroad workers breaking from the craft unionism of the Brotherhoods, miners and tenant farmers of the Southwest and West, and immigrant workers crowding into the industrial cities. Drawing on Debs' letters, speeches and publications, and on the words and actions of his chief antagonists within the Socialist Party, Victor Berger of Milwaukee and Morris Hillquit of New York, Salvatore brought into focus the conflict between Debs' revolutionary aspirations and the reformist leadership that controlled the party machinery, though Marxists cannot accept the historian's thesis that the fight for international socialism in the United States was "quixotic."

Published in 1949, just 23 years after Debs' death, Ginger's *The Bending Cross* draws not only on archival research but also on firsthand interviews with Debs' surviving contemporaries, including his brother Theodore. "[T]he incomparable Gene comes to life in its pages," Cannon said of *The Bending Cross*. "All the lights and shadows in that marvelous life as it was actually lived are there, the shadows making the lights shine brighter." Gude's book lacks the dramatic force with which Ginger brought Debs and his world to life. Ginger himself became a victim of the anti-communist witch-hunts, forced out of Harvard in 1954 and subsequently blacklisted for refusing to submit to a political loyalty oath.

With two such fine biographies in print, what does Gude add? Not major new research—Salvatore's writing is based on 2,076 separate references, about seven times the number of sources Gude consulted. Not a new interpretation of Debs' life, either. Gude follows both earlier efforts by tracing Debs' political development against that of the emerging

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industrial order. What is new is the "use" that is made of Debs.

Gude's book arrives as the DSA, an organization of the affluent upper middle class, surveys a world of mounting opposition to the capitalist order and finds that its own "success" is the source of its predicament. Every city hall it wins binds it to the administration of capitalism. Every paid union post it secures binds it to the apparatus that polices workers. These ties set it on a collision course with the working class. Fearing where that opposition may lead, the DSA reaches for borrowed authority: the legacy of America's most famous socialist.

To be sure, Gude does not, or cannot, fully conceal the political development of his subject. The main episodes of Debs' life—the railroad brotherhoods, Pullman, the two imprisonments, the presidential campaigns—are recounted. The problem is what Gude tries to make of it all.

To yoke Debs to a strategy of realignment within the Democratic Party and the official unions, Gude must tame him. He reduces the struggle over the class character and revolutionary purpose of the Socialist Party to a matter of personality, tone and "tactical dexterity," avoiding the question of what social forces were involved. The emerging working class found a revolutionary tribune and agitator in Debs. But the vast American middle class found their representatives in the reformists who dominated the party, Berger and Hillquit above all. Gude obscures this antagonism, transforming Debs from a revolutionary fighter into a paragon of moral virtue who suffered for lofty convictions that could never be realized. Gude's is a Debs that well-to-do liberals can admire, and they have. The book has been warmly received in the *New Republic*, the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Book Review*.

His distortions allow Gude to claim in his epilogue that the DSA is the "institutional descendant" of Debs' Socialist Party. This is a lie. The DSA descends politically not from Debs but from his reformist rivals, along a rightward path that runs unbroken to the present. It is a lineage that runs through the Socialist Party's reformist remnant to Max Shachtman, who broke with Trotskyism in 1940, ended up supporting the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Vietnam War, and placed his followers in the anticommunist apparatus of the AFL-CIO. It then runs to his protégé Michael Harrington, who founded the DSA's predecessor on the program of "realignment," working inside the Democratic Party as "the left wing of the possible." Debs' fight for the political independence of the working class was repudiated at every stage.

To test Gude's claim that the DSA represents Debs' political estate, and to answer the question it raises—who are his real heirs?—one must set his actual life against the biographer's account of it, beginning with the world that made him.

Debs' path to socialism

Debs was born on November 5, 1855 in a country on the threshold of its transformation from a predominantly agrarian republic into the world's leading industrial power. He belonged to the same generation as other leading figures of the Second International, all born within five years of one another—Karl Kautsky (1854), Eleanor Marx (1855), Georgi Plekhanov and Keir Hardie (1856), Filippo Turati and Clara Zetkin (1857), and Jean Jaurès (1859).

Debs was not quite 10 years old when the Civil War ended, when Thaddeus Stevens and radical Republicans shepherded through Congress the 13th Amendment abolishing chattel slavery, and when an assassin killed Abraham Lincoln, whose own youth was separated from that of Debs by four decades, but less than 100 miles of Indiana countryside.

Gude finds no importance in any of this. The Civil War could have "only occasionally intruded into Eugene's life," he asserts, and then merely as "an abstraction." Gudes asks, "Chattel slavery, emancipation, the rights of man… what did these have to do with his life?" His answer? The "most direct bearing the Civil War had on Eugene's life was economic: the end of the war triggered a mild recession."

Revolution is so remote from this DSA writer's historical imagination that he can reduce the Civil War's impact on Debs to a dip in the business cycle!

The war certainly "intruded" on Terre Haute. A significant Union Army camp was located in Debs' hometown, and, as Ginger notes, the boy "spent many afternoons idly watching troop trains move," perhaps the start of his attraction to the life and work of the railroader. Some 200,000 Indiana men fought in the war, more than 15 percent of the state's total population—the second highest share in the country—and roughly 25,000 died, more than the number of Hoosiers who died in WWI, WWII, Korea and Vietnam combined. Perhaps 500 to 600 of the Civil War dead were from Debs' home county. A mere abstraction!

As for the "economic" "bearing" of the Civil War, this went far beyond the "mild recession" of the late 1860s. The Second American Revolution birthed an entirely new social order. It created modern industrial capitalism, and with it the working class. It was, in other words, constitutive of Debs' entire social reality, his life tracing the entire arc of the emergence of the working class as a social force between the Civil War and the Russian Revolution.

But Debs was more than a product of the new social order. He also carried forward America's earlier revolutionary traditions. Growing up amid the Second American Revolution, when the First was still within living memory, Debs absorbed the traditions of both. He held up as his models the abolitionist and early labor agitator Wendell Phillips, whom he had known personally, as well as John Brown and Abraham Lincoln. His relentless indictment of "wage slavery" carried the moral force of abolitionism into the struggle against capitalism. He addressed American workers as heirs to the unfinished work of 1776 and 1861, which they would complete through socialism—the Third American Revolution. The language of those revolutions appears in the speeches and writings Gude quotes, but he makes nothing of it.

Blind to Debs' rootedness in 1776 and 1861, Gude nonetheless presents him as an "all-American" socialist, and so jumps over the other half of his inheritance: his immigrant background. Debs was the son of immigrants from Alsace, on the borderlands of France and Germany. He carried something of that upbringing into his everyday life, retaining the French custom of greeting with a kiss, as well as a fondness for wine. As Trotsky recalled of their time together in New York in 1917, "Whenever we met, he embraced and kissed me; the old man did not belong to the 'drys'"—the "socialists" who supported state bans on alcohol.

But the larger impact of his French immigrant parents came in the spheres of politics and literature. According to Ginger, Debs' ancestors "had led the French Revolution in Colmar." A great-grandfather sat in the National Assembly. Debs' father taught him French and German, reading aloud from Racine, Corneille, Hugo, Dumas, Goethe and Schiller, while busts of Voltaire and Rousseau looked on. He was named Eugene Victor after the French novelists Eugène Sue and Victor Hugo.

Gude does not cite Debs' own account of what this education meant to him. "The revolutionary history of the United States and France stirred me deeply and its heroes and martyrs became my idols," Debs wrote. "Thomas Paine towered above them all. A thousand times since then I have found inspiration and strength in the thrilling words, 'These are the times that try men's souls.'"

Gude's neglect of these revolutionary traditions has a contemporary political meaning. When the *New York Times*' 1619 Project claimed in 2019 that the American Revolution had been fought to preserve slavery, the *World Socialist Web Site* led the opposition, interviewing leading

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historians of the American Revolution and Civil War. The DSA milieu, responded to the 1619 Project with a combination of approval and silence. For Debs, the democratic principles proclaimed in the Revolution were part of the working class' own political inheritance. To dismiss those principles as a cover for "anti-black racism" was to disarm opposition to the threat of dictatorship and fascism. On January 6, 2021, Trump's attempted coup showed what was at stake. Since then, millions marching against Trump under the banner of "No Kings" have reached instinctively for the language of 1776. Debs would have recognized the language at once. His biographer has passed it over.

From the railroad brotherhoods to socialism

Carrying these revolutionary traditions into the industrial age, Debs' life passed through the stages by which the American working class emerged as a social force: from craft unionism to industrial unionism, and from industrial unionism to socialism. Each stage arose from the limitations exposed by the struggles of the one before, and in each, Debs was among the first to grasp the lessons and among the boldest in leading workers forward. In tracing this path Gude follows Ginger and Salvatore, but he obscures its revolutionary logic and the political conclusions toward which Debs was driven.

Debs went to work for the railroad at 14. In 1875 he helped organize a lodge of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in Terre Haute, and five years later he became its national secretary-treasurer and the editor of its magazine. At first he shared the brotherhoods' conservative outlook: organization by craft, mutual insurance, cooperation with employers, aversion to strikes. But the bitter railroad struggles of the 1880s exposed the weakness of dividing workers by craft in the face of powerful corporations. In 1893 Debs helped found the American Railway Union (ARU) to organize railroad workers across craft lines. In April 1894 it struck the Great Northern Railway and humbled "the Empire Builder," James J. Hill, one of the era's most powerful robber barons.

That June the ARU launched a boycott of Pullman cars in solidarity with striking workers near Chicago. This time Debs and the union faced not only the railroad corporations but the federal courts and the Cleveland administration, whose injunctions and troops crushed the strike, and with it Debs' illusions in the neutrality of the state. "[I]n the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle the class struggle was revealed," he later recalled. "This was my first practical lesson in Socialism, though wholly unaware that it was called by that name."

When Cleveland mobilized what Engels aptly called "the repressive apparatus of the state" to crush the Pullman Strike, Debs called on the American Federation of Labor to mobilize for a massive general strike in response. There was broad sympathy among workers for a showdown, but Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) scuttled the effort. The experience deepened Debs' opposition to the craft union system of "the House of Labor." As Gude notes, Debs "never forgave Gompers."

Cleveland, whom Debs had supported for president in 1892, presided over his jailing. During six months in Woodstock in 1895, Debs encountered Marxism for the first time. Berger left him a copy of *Capital*, and Keir Hardie brought him a book by Karl Kautsky, "the foremost popularizer of Karl Marx's writings," as Gude puts it. Kautsky made Marx "so clear and conclusive," Debs said, that he "readily grasped" it. Gude calls Debs' embrace of socialism at Woodstock a "transformation of the soul." But, as Cannon observed, Debs' conversion "didn't happen all at once, as if by a sudden revelation. It took him several more years carefully checking the new idea against his own experiences in the class struggle."

Debs briefly supported the People's Party and campaigned in 1896 for William Jennings Bryan, the presidential nominee of both the Democrats and the Populists. After Bryan's defeat, Debs broke with the Populists and publicly declared himself a socialist in an open letter published on New Year's Day 1897.

He then led what remained of the ARU into the Social Democracy of America and then the Social Democratic Party, which in 1901 merged with a dissident wing of Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party to form the Socialist Party of America. Debs was at once its most famous member and greatest orator, the figure who more than any other gave American socialism a mass audience. He first ran for president in 1900 on the Social Democratic ticket, and ran for the Socialist Party in 1904, 1908, 1912 and 1920. At the party's electoral peak in 1912, he won some 900,000 votes, about 6 percent, in a four-way contest against the Democrat Woodrow Wilson, the Republican incumbent William Howard Taft, and former president Theodore Roosevelt, who ran as Progressive.

Gude recounts the physical feat of these campaigns. In one of them, he writes, Debs "crisscrossed the nation twice, traveled over twenty thousand miles of tracks," delivering speeches "sixty-five days straight." He is less comfortable with what Debs said along the way. Cannon described Debs' campaign speeches as "straight class-struggle socialism." Gude calls it "unsparing rhetoric" that the reformists feared "turned off potential supporters."

Debs vs. reformism

The Socialist Party prided itself on being an "all-inclusive." This was reflected in its eclectic hodgepodge of structures. State organizations were virtually autonomous, allowing party grandees to dominate "their own" bailiwicks, as Berger did in Wisconsin. The Foreign Language Federations of immigrant socialists affiliated with the party but were even more independent. There was no genuine "party press" and certainly no central media organ, but rather a series of privately owned publications that sympathized with socialism, such as the wildly popular *Appeal to Reason*, which Debs coedited for several years, and the theoretical journal, *International Socialist Review*, to which he contributed significant articles.

Beneath the organizational looseness lay a fundamental disagreement over how socialism would be achieved.

For Debs, socialism was a fighting program of, by, and for workers, that breathed revolutionary purpose into daily struggles. But for the reformist wing led by Berger and Hillquit, the preparation of workers for revolution fell far, far behind the accumulation of public offices and piecemeal reforms, a program derisively called "sewer socialism" by contemporaries—though it must be noted, in Berger's defense, that his party's improvements to Milwaukee's waste-water system were reforms of epic proportions in comparison to Mamdani's vague proposals for busfare reductions in New York!

Gude, unsurprisingly, does not conceal his sympathy for the reformists who "wanted political power to deliver pro-worker reforms [and] were unapologetic about trying to achieve it to prove they could construct socialism in the here and now." (189) Nor can the *Jacobin* editor resist wagging his finger at Debs:

> Too often, Debs seemed to assume that if he denounced Samuel Gompers stridently enough, new industrial unions would magically appear. Too often he seemed to assume that all AFL

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> leaders were bought and paid for, while the rank and file were an epiphany away from joining his side in the revolution. As he remarked amid the wave of strikes, “It is in the name of the rank and file that I write. I care nothing about the leaders. About all they are good for is to keep the workers divided.” (207)

Gude later used the same language to once again scold Debs: “Too often he lacked the rhetorical deftness to challenge would-be allies without alienating them or the tactical dexterity to distinguish between a sell-out and a compromise.” Gude concludes that Debs mistakenly assumed “that what was right must be effective.” (332)

To Gude, Debs was too strident, too hostile to the AFL leadership, too ready to treat compromise as betrayal, and too unwilling to court “would-be allies.” This is precisely the case Berger and Hillquit made against Debs in their own day. In other words, in the central conflict of Debs’ political life, his biographer takes the side of his opponents. That is the precondition for Gude’s epilogue, because only a Debs duly corrected by Berger and Hillquit can be handed down to the DSA.

Of course, Gude’s “tactical dexterity” is hardly in short supply at *Jacobin*, where the art of distinguishing a compromise from a sellout has been refined to the point of abolishing the distinction altogether! As, for example, when it gave DSA leader Ocasio-Cortez a platform to defend her vote in Congress to impose a contract and block the 2022 nationwide railroad strike as a “difference in strategy.” Gude was then still listed as a *Jacobin* “senior editor.”

What Gude treats as “rhetorical deftness,” Debs recognized as a danger to the class character of the socialist movement. As the Socialist Party’s vote grew, so did his fear that winning office would become an end in itself. Such a party would court middle-class respectability and the trade union bureaucracy, and once in power would end up administering capitalism rather than fighting it, as it was in Berger’s Milwaukee—and as it is now in Mamdani’s New York.

After Berger’s election to Congress in November 1910 and a wave of Socialist municipal victories, Debs sounded the alarm in “Danger Ahead,” published in the *International Socialist Review* in January 1911. The party, he warned, was “apt to attract elements which it cannot assimilate,” and might “become permeated and corrupted with the spirit of bourgeois reform to an extent that will practically destroy its virility and efficiency as a revolutionary organization.”

“To my mind,” he went on, “the working class character and the revolutionary integrity of the Socialist party are of first importance. All the votes of the people would do us no good if our party ceased to be a revolutionary party.” Votes without organization were hollow. “Voting for socialism is not socialism any more than a menu is a meal,” Debs wrote. “Socialism must be organized, drilled, equipped and the place to begin is in the industries where the workers are employed.” Without that organization, “the fruit of any political victories the workers may achieve will turn to ashes on their lips.”

Debs on the trade union question

The dispute over electoral politics was inseparable from another vexing question: how should socialists approach the existing trade unions? Berger and Hillquit sought to win the AFL’s support by accommodating its leaders and advancing socialists into union office.

Debs rejected this course. In a December 1909 letter to William English Walling, published the following month in the *International Socialist Review*, he wrote:

> The Socialist Party has already catered far too much to the American Federation of Labor, and there is no doubt that a halt will have to be called. The revolutionary character of our party and our movement must be preserved in all its integrity at all cost, for if that be compromised, it had better cease to exist.

Debs waged an unrelenting war against the AFL, the “strident” denunciations of Gompers that Gude finds so ill-advised. Gompers’ federation divided workers by craft and bound them to capitalism. Debs sought not to reform it or capture its offices but to supplant it with an industrial union of the whole working class, guided by socialism. His hostility to its leadership went hand in hand with his determination to win its members. “Of course we want the support of trade-unionists,” he wrote, “but only of those who believe in socialism and are ready to vote and work with us for the overthrow of capitalism.”

In his 1904 pamphlet *Unionism and Socialism*, Debs argued that “the workers must unite and fight together as one on both economic and political fields.” The following year he stood alongside William “Big Bill” Haywood, leader of the Western hard-rock miners, at the founding convention of the Industrial Workers of the World—the gathering Haywood called “the Continental Congress of the Working Class.” Its call to unite workers regardless of skill, nationality, race or sex gave organizational expression to the struggle against Gompers’ federation.

Yet Debs’ support for political struggle also set him against the syndicalism that came to dominate the IWW. The conservative reformism practiced in the name of socialist politics made syndicalism attractive to militant workers. Haywood and his followers had good reason to distrust the party’s self-styled “experts on Marx.” Berger was at best the cheap American edition of Eduard Bernstein, whose revisionism Rosa Luxemburg had demolished in *Reform or Revolution?* (1899).

But Debs did not share the Wobblies’ conclusion that political struggle itself should be abandoned. What Debs took from Marxism confirmed what he had learned with the ARU at Great Northern and Pullman: industrial organization had awesome power, but it remained vulnerable before the capitalist state without an independent political movement of the working class. Industry was the foundation of a struggle for power, not a substitute for one.

So when the IWW removed the political clause from its preamble in 1908, Debs quietly let his membership lapse. He continued, however, to seek the forces that could break the AFL’s hold. The Western Federation of Miners, forged in the brutal mining wars of the Rocky Mountain West, had embraced socialism in 1902. In 1914 he looked to its prospective merger with the United Mine Workers as the foundation for a broader industrial movement, predicting that their struggles would drive them into “one great industrial organization” and out of Gompers’ federation.

Debs’ differences with the syndicalists, a source of personal sorrow for him, did not make him an ally of the reformist leadership against them. The militant workers drawn to the IWW formed the party’s left wing, and they were Debs’ own base within it. At the 1912 convention, the party’s right pushed through a ban on advocating “sabotage,” aimed squarely at Haywood, and early in 1913 a membership referendum, opposed by Debs, recalled Haywood from the National Executive Committee. Haywood left the party, and much of its militant left followed. Their departure removed the main counterweight to Berger and the reformists and left Debs isolated in the party he had done more than anyone to build. Gude recounts the split but gives insufficient weight to its consequences for the balance of forces within the Socialist Party.

Debs on “the race question”

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Debs' opposition to racism and anti-immigrant bigotry aligned with the IWW and set him against entrenched prejudices within the AFL and the reformists of the Socialist Party.

Touring the South in 1900, Debs refused to address segregated audiences. In Montgomery, Alabama, he compelled the hall manager to admit black workers. In Columbus, Macon, Savannah and Atlanta, Georgia, and in Birmingham, Alabama, he demanded either their admission or an end to segregated seating. Recalling Montgomery years later, Debs summed up his stand: "if you are excluded, so will I be excluded; if you cannot be admitted, I will not speak." He also upbraided the white unionists who had organized these meetings for barring black workers from their unions.

Debs' critics, who claim he postponed the fight against racism until socialism, often cite a line from an article he wrote in 1903: "We have nothing special to offer the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races." Yet there he also called black Americans' history "a crime without parallel" and urged socialists to "proclaim their sympathy with and fealty to the black race."

Gude goes farther than Ginger or Salvatore in documenting the esteem in which Debs was held among contemporary black radicals. The African American weekly *Chicago Broad Ax* called him "one of the greatest champions of the civil and political rights of the Afro-American." When he condemned *The Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith's wildly popular film celebration of the Ku Klux Klan, anti-lynching journalist Ida B. Wells called him "the only one I know… of all the millions of white men of this country… that has had the courage to speak out against this diabolical production." With capitalist parties offering nothing on race and historians recasting Reconstruction as a tragedy of black misrule, Wells was hardly exaggerating. Debs befriended young black socialists, including A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen.

But while Gude brings this record into sharper focus, he leaves the class roots of racism within the labor movement unexplored. Here, too, the reformists' accommodation to the AFL was decisive. Many of its craft unions barred black workers formally or informally, while the federation campaigned to restrict immigration. The privileges of "the labor aristocracy," a phrase Debs frequently used, rested on excluding unskilled, immigrant and black workers and sharing in American imperialism's spoils. These unions gave the chauvinist prejudices of the American middle class a material footing and organizational conduit aimed at undermining the class solidarity of workers—a role the AFL-CIO in fact still plays.

Gude briefly acknowledges Berger's racism, but his passing treatment scarcely conveys the virulence of the racial ideology embraced by leading reformists in the Socialist Party. Drawing on the fashionable pseudoscience of racial evolution, Berger declared in 1902 that "there can be no doubt that the negroes and mulattoes constitute a lower race—that the Caucasian and even the Mongolian have the start on them in civilization by many thousand years." By 1907 he was warning that without immigration restrictions, America was "absolutely sure to become a black-and-yellow country within a few generations." At the Socialist Party's 1908 convention, he cast Asian immigration as "a war of extermination, on economic lines. The white race could not propagate, could not exist in a competition of that kind with the yellow race."

At the party's 1910 congress, Berger backed the immigration committee's majority report, which called for unconditional exclusion. Hillquit engineered a substitute dropping explicit racial language but retaining restrictions on supposedly wage-depressing immigration. Debs, who was not present at the congress, rejected the entire premise, denouncing the committee's report in that July's *International Socialist Review* as "utterly unsocialistic, reactionary and in truth outrageous..."

"These poor slaves have just as good a right to enter here as even the authors of this report who now seek to exclude them," Debs thundered. "If Socialism, international, revolutionary Socialism, does not stand staunchly, unflinchingly, and uncompromisingly for the working class and for the exploited and oppressed masses of all lands, then it stands for none."

Hillquit's anti-Marxist argument that immigrants drive down wages has outlived him. Bernie Sanders, the man Gude credits with reviving Debs' tradition, warns that open borders "would make everybody in America poorer."

Political lessons

The political problem Gude never adequately confronts is why Debs, for all his authority among workers, could not prevent the reformists from dominating the party he had helped build.

Berger commanded his Milwaukee electoral machine. Hillquit, whom Trotsky memorably called "the ideal Socialist leader for successful dentists," sat on the National Executive Committee and represented the party in the Second International. Their power was rooted in public officeholders, union officials and what Cannon described as a layer of "slick lawyers, professional writers and unctuous doctors of divinity" whose careers depended on the party's "respectability."

Debs' authority, in contrast, came from the working class. It was often said that Debs knew the working class. There was a literal element to this. He personally knew many thousands of workers across the country, knew their struggles and even their children, whom he would stop political work to dote on whenever he could. Years after Pullman, Ginger recounts, old strikers would push through the crowds at his meetings calling out, "Gene." "Striking workers in trouble could always depend on Gene," Cannon wrote. "He responded to every call, and wherever there was action he was apt to turn up in the thick of it."

This intimacy let Debs see the gulf between the workers' fight for socialism and the calculations of the party leaders. He sensed when workers were being double-crossed. In response, Debs fulminated against Berger in private letters, in which he often threatened a split. He occasionally directly attacked reformist positions in the socialist publications. And he never tempered his own revolutionary agitation.

But Debs' boundless confidence in the workers and their revolutionary destiny also proved the source of his most costly error. Debs had, in Cannon's words, "an almost mystic faith in the rank and file." The workers would set things right in the Socialist Party, Debs believed. At the same time, Debs was inclined to equate party leadership with bureaucracy. The result was that at every decisive moment he stated his position and then stepped aside. Debs never accepted nomination to the National Committee leadership of the Socialist Party. Gude faults Debs for alienating would-be allies. The more consequential failure was that he never organized the allies he had into a force capable of challenging Berger and Hillquit for the leadership of the party.

For profound objective reasons, rooted in the development of the American working class, Debs could not grasp what Lenin did: that the party was not simply the instrument of the class but a laboratory of the class struggle. Conflicting social interests found expression in its competing political positions, and workers learned to tell those positions apart only through an organized fight over policy and leadership. Indeed, workers' capacity to direct the party could only be developed in that fight.

Debs's refusal to wage such a struggle did not keep the party above faction. It handed the field to its petty bourgeois leaders, who had no scruples against clique intrigue, let alone open factional activity. But it was not just that Berger and Hillquit connived against Debs. They used his

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revolutionary standing among workers to sustain a party whose practical direction remained in their hands. Debs supplied the appeal to class struggle, and the reformist leaders managed the party's accommodation to electoral politics and the AFL bureaucracy.

Trotsky, who spent ten weeks in New York in early 1917 before returning to Russia to lead the October Revolution with Lenin, quickly grasped the dynamic:

> Old Eugene Debs stood out prominently among the older generation because of the quenchless inner flame of his socialist idealism. Although he was a romantic and a preacher, and not at all a politician or a leader, he was a sincere revolutionary; yet he succumbed to the influence of people who were in every respect his inferiors. Hillquit's art lay in keeping Debs on his left flank while he maintained a business friendship with Gompers. Debs had a captivating personality…When the Babbitts proclaimed a blockade against me, Debs took no part in it; he simply drew aside, sorrowfully.

Trotsky put his finger on a relationship that Gude only partially describes and never fully explains.

Debs' final years and legacy

Berger and Hillquit repeatedly used the party machinery against Debs—a struggle well documented by Salvatore but that Gude largely passes over. In 1912, their attempt to deny him the presidential nomination foundered on rank-and-file opposition. They then imposed Berger's ally J. Mahlon Barnes as his campaign manager over Debs' objections.

By 1916, the Socialist Party was a seriously diminished organization. The purge of Haywood and the departure of the IWW militants had cost it thousands of members and sapped the strength of its revolutionary, working-class wing. Years of factional conflict had taken their toll on Debs as well. Exhausted by the 1912 campaign and in declining health, he turned down consideration for the 1916 presidential nomination, saying only that "there are thousands of comrades who are at least as well qualified as I am." He ran instead for Congress in his home district in Indiana. The nomination went to Allan Benson, an *Appeal to Reason* columnist who would quit the party two years later to support Wilson's "War for Democracy."

Then the great imperialist struggle of World War I transformed the situation. The munitions boom tightened labor markets while rising prices ate into wages, and beginning in 1916 workers launched into the largest strike wave in American history to that point. Many walkouts were waged under the banner of the IWW, even after the US entered the war in April 1917 and the government jailed much of its leadership. Then came the Russian Revolution. Radicalized workers poured into the Socialist Party, above all into its Foreign Language Federations, which became the centers of a rapidly growing revolutionary left. The strike wave crested in 1919, when more than 4 million workers walked out, from the Seattle general strike to the Great Steel Strike.

The workers might have once again turned to Eugene Debs. He took a principled revolutionary stand against the war from the start. In early 1917, as Wilson moved toward intervention, Debs toured the Northeast speaking for peace. In New York he invited Trotsky to share the stage with him at Cooper Union, where in 1860 Abraham Lincoln had urged his listeners to "have faith that right makes might, and in that faith… dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Debs would soon do just that. At Canton, Ohio, in June 1918, he denounced the war before a crowd of workers: "The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles." Wilson's Justice Department had him arrested under the Espionage Act, and he was sentenced to ten years in prison. But far from retreating, Debs identified himself ever more openly with the Russian Revolution. In February 1919, two months before he entered prison, he declared: "From the crown of my head to the soles of my feet I am Bolshevik, and proud of it."

The sympathy was mutual. Months earlier, in his "Letter to American Workingmen" of August 1918, Lenin had singled him out "as one of the most beloved leaders of the American proletariat." He recalled Debs's declaration that he would rather be shot than vote credits for the imperialist war, and that he recognized only one holy war: the struggle against the capitalists to free mankind from wage slavery. Condemning Wilson's persecution of Debs, Lenin declared: "Let the bourgeoisie be brutal to the true internationalists, to the true representatives of the revolutionary proletariat!" Gude does not mention Lenin's letter.

But Debs' imprisonment cut him off from the class struggle at a decisive moment. He entered the state penitentiary at Moundsville, West Virginia, in April 1919 and was transferred to the federal prison in Atlanta that June. Already elderly for those years, Debs' health quickly deteriorated. Many assumed he would die behind bars.

Meanwhile the party's suddenly booming revolutionary left had won the spring elections for the National Executive Committee. Rather than surrender control, the outgoing leadership, headed by Adolph Germer and backed by Berger and Hillquit, threw out the election. It suspended seven foreign language federations with more than 30,000 members and expelled the Socialist Party of Michigan without a trial. The state organizations of Massachusetts and Ohio were soon drummed out, as well.

When an emergency convention opened in Chicago at the end of August, Germer had left-wing delegates, John Reed among them, removed from the hall with the help of the police. Within days the expelled left founded the Communist Party of America and the Communist Labor Party. As for the Socialist Party, an organization that had counted 109,000 members at the start of 1919 was left a shrunken rump.

Gude gives this history less than two pages in his nineteenth chapter. Though he acknowledges the purge, he makes nothing of its implications for his claim, in the epilogue, that the DSA is the "institutional descendant" of Debs' Socialist Party. That is because the DSA's lineage runs not through Debs' revolutionary politics but through the reformist leadership that purged the party's militant workers and immigrants while Debs was jailed.

In January 1921, when Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer recommended commuting Debs' sentence, the president scrawled a single word across the application: "Denied." It was left to his successor, Republican Warren G. Harding, to free Debs on Christmas Day 1921. The warden opened every cell block so that more than 2,000 inmates could gather to see him off. Debs was sixty-six, his health broken by nearly three years behind bars.

In his last years he could not reconcile himself to either side of the split that had seemed to shatter his Socialist Party. He was repelled by the purge carried out in his absence and remained a defender of the Russian Revolution. Yet he could not bring himself to join the communist movement that had grown out of the very left wing he had inspired.

The early American Communists did little to win him over. Underground and beset by the ultra-leftism Lenin called an "infantile disorder," they boycotted the 1920 election rather than support Debs' campaign from Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. By 1924 William Z. Foster,

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the seminal figure of American Stalinism, was dismissing the old revolutionary as a “sentimentalist.” But Debs never joined the anti-Bolshevik campaign that had become common among surviving leaders of the Second International.

In his declining years, he enjoyed the companionship of writers including Carl Sandburg and Sinclair Lewis. Sandburg, who had carried Lenin’s “Letter to American Workers” from Scandinavia in 1918, became a close friend, visiting Debs at the sanitarium and welcoming him into his home. Debs had withdrawn from political life, though in 1924 the Socialist Party made him its national chairman, an honorific post that lent the diminished organization the prestige of his name, much as Gude’s epilogue now seeks to lend it to the DSA. He died on October 20, 1926, at a sanitarium outside Chicago, still the most famous member of the party that had expelled its revolutionary wing.

To millions, Debs was the Socialist Party. His name was synonymous with it, and his campaigns gave it whatever mass following it had. Yet he could never be fully equated with it, not in its better days and certainly not after its turn to the right. His authority came not from the party machinery, which was always in other hands, but from the workers who saw in Eugene Debs their own cause. Cannon was right when he said that “Debs was in and of the party, but at the same time he was bigger than the party—bigger and better.”

Above all, Debs stood with the workers, not with the reformists he condemned as “the representatives of middle class interests,” whose influence “the shrewd old politicians of the capitalist parties are not slow to perceive and take advantage of.” The words fit the DSA as well as they did Berger and Hillquit. The organization now claiming Debs descends from the men who fought him for two decades and purged his followers while he sat in prison, and it serves the party of Cleveland and Wilson, which jailed him twice, and from which he urged workers to sever all relations.

Debs belongs to the workers still.

“I have remained in the ranks with the workers, side by side with them,” Debs told lumber workers in Everett, Washington, in 1912, “and there is where I belong and I am going to remain.”



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