

Situating Eugene V. Debs Within the Criminological Canon*

Kenneth D. Tunnell

*This essay contains preliminary information learned while conducting research supported by a College of Justice & Safety grant. The interpretations are the sole responsibility of the author.

The American Socialist, Eugene V. Debs, made a profound impact on American politics during the first half of the twentieth century. Although Socialism and the public's knowledge of Debs have waned since then, I briefly describe that Debs, his writings and his life's work have something to offer criminology and particularly critical criminology. I describe Debs' biography and politics. I also document his first-hand experiences with the legal system (including a prison term), his consistent critiques of capitalism and his written and spoken texts that empirically link American (and global, to some extent) capitalism and its captives to American politics and policies of social control.

Debs' life and work are inseparable. His biography determined his commitment to social justice, his political ideology and activism and his writings and many public speeches of the broad issues of crime and justice. In fact, Debs may be the preeminent representation of the popular phrase – the personal is political -- as his biography and his life's work and writings have a particular relevance to a sociology of crime and justice.

Politics

Perhaps the single most widely known fact about Eugene Debs is that on five different occasions, as the Socialist Party's nominee, he ran for the office of President of the US. In 1900, Debs and his party won 100,000 popular votes. He again ran for President under the banner of the Socialist Party in 1904 and 1908, winning about 400,000 votes during each election. During the election of 1912 – the best showing to date for the Socialist Party in the US – Debs won 900,000 votes or about six percent of the electorate. During the election of 1916, the Party's

nominee was Allan L. Benson who polled 585,000 votes while Debs was the Party's nominee for Congress from his home district. Although defeating the democratic nominee in the general election, Debs lost to the Republican. The following Presidential campaign of 1920, Debs, campaigning from within the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta, won 919,000 votes or 3.5 percent of the electorate. Debs never again stood for elected office and died six years later. During his storied and highly politicized life, he had much to say about politics, workers' rights and struggles, militarism, and crime and punishment.



Labor Struggles and First Incarceration

During his adult life, Debs was incarcerated twice, the first time in 1895 when he was 40 years old – an age that we recognize as highly unusual for a first-timer. Two years earlier, Debs had been elected President of the American Railway Union. Workers, in large number, joined the union in late 1893 and 1894 and their first test came when workers on the Great Northern Railroad struck after wage cuts (cuts the company claimed resulted from the depression of the 1890s). When the Great Northern came to a stand still, workers won nearly all of their demands. Then, a year later, came the great Pullman strike resulting from wage cuts, lay offs and poor working conditions. But, the final issue for Pullman workers was the horrendous living conditions in the company town of Pullman, Illinois (like many company towns of old, Pullman

no longer exists). As was well known at the time, George Pullman was adamantly opposed to organized labor and had made it clear that during hard times workers should be those who suffer since they contribute nothing to the successful business enterprise (Radosh 1971: 1). In June 1894, members of the new American Railway Union voted to strike in support of the Pullman workers. Then something unimaginable in contemporary America happened: when more than 100,000 workers struck, railroad service west of Chicago came to a standstill. The Federal District Court in Chicago issued an injunction against the union for engaging in a sympathetic strike when it joined the Pullman workers' strike. The union defied the injunction. Then President Cleveland ordered federal troops to Chicago preceded by hundreds of federal special deputy marshals -- new recruits whose employment was temporary and whose ranks included spies and thugs. Violence erupted. After several deaths, many injuries and hundreds of railroad boxcars burned, the troops crushed the strike. Debs and other leaders were arrested and charged with conspiracy to obstruct a mail train and violation of the federal injunction.

Despite being represented by the already well-known Chicago attorney Clarence Darrow, Debs was convicted of contempt and sentenced to six months in jail. After an unfavorable ruling from his appeal to the US Supreme Court, Debs was imprisoned at the McHenry County Jail in Woodstock, Illinois, where during six months of confinement, he gave serious consideration to socialism (Currie 1976). He also, during those months, received a steady stream of visitors and regular correspondence (Morgan 1962). Debs described that time and his ideological shift as “socialism gradually laid hold of me in its own irresistible fashion.” He also described the many books sent to him by socialists and his dissecting the “anatomy of a system in which workingmen, however organized, could be shattered and battered and splintered at a single stroke” (Debs 1902).

Following his release from the Woodstock jail, he continued reading about socialism and listening to some of the leading socialists of the day, most notably Victor Berger. Two years later, in a published editorial in the *Railway Times*, he announced his conversion to socialism (Morgan 1962).

Ongoing Political Struggles

In 1904, Debs and other activists founded what became the single most radical American labor organization to date – the Industrial Workers of the World or Wobblies – which lashed out at American trade unions and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) as being too cozy with capitalists. But, the Socialists, as a group, never saw eye-to-eye with the Wobblies and Debs, soon disenchanted, left the organization in 1906, after the Wobblies engaged in violence.

Debs constantly preached revolution but was an ardent supporter of change with the ballot rather than bullet. In a 1912 essay he supported the center and conservative branches of the Socialist party in their endorsement of amending their constitution to ban criminal acts and sabotage. A declared revolutionary, Debs criticized “the tactics of anarchist individualists” and instead called for greater class consciousness among the working class (Debs 1912; Radosh 1971: 37). Although adamantly anti-violent, he dismissed any notion of so-called capitalist reform (Morgan 1962). In a published essay, he said:

Every hint at public ownership is now called socialism, without regard to the fact that there can be no socialism, and that public ownership means practically nothing, so long as the capitalist class is in control of the national government. Government ownership of public utilities means nothing for labor under capitalist ownership of the government (Debs 1905).

But, in 1914, only two years after supporting the conservative effort at amending the party’s constitution, Debs publicly called for arming coal miners against company gun thugs. “The Rockefellers have not one particle more lawful right to maintain a private army to murder you

union men than you union men would have to maintain a private army to murder the Rockefellers.” Debs saw that the government had failed to protect workers against privately hired armies and reminded the union men that they had every right to defend themselves. He suggested that the mineworkers union establish a new fund – The Gunmen Defense Fund – that would provide “each member with the latest high-power rifle, the same used by the corporation gunmen, and 500 rounds of cartridges” (Debs 1914; Radosh 1971: 44). Notice that Debs was not advocating criminal acts or sabotage but rather self-defense in the absence of impartial governmental intervention.

Debs, and socialists of his time, argued that although capitalism had industrialized America and enriched a few, “a commonwealth at home could not be attained . . . on the foundation of a system based on private ownership of the means of production” (Radosh 1971: 2). But Debs, unlike staunch Marxists of his day, believed that socialism was the means by which to move toward greater liberation from all manner of oppression and not simply a dictatorship of the proletariat. As a result, he publicly supported civil rights for women and people of color during a time when such positions had little public support. Debs advocated for civil liberties and, in fact, viewed them as a way of including women and racial minorities into the common struggle for working people everywhere.

In a 1903 essay, Debs not only welcomed people of color into the socialist party, but welcomed them as equals when he wrote, “as a social party we receive the Negro and all other races upon absolutely equal terms.” Harkening to Marx’s admonishment that workingmen of all countries unite, Debs made clear that the socialist party, unlike the framers of the US Constitution, endorses a color-blind class-based solidarity. “The class struggle is colorless,” he wrote in the essay, and “the capitalists, white, black, and other shades, are on one side and the

workers, white, black, and all other colors, on the other side” (Debs 1903; Radosh 1971: 62).

And, in 1910, he published an adamant support for women:

Woman must have an equal part with man. If the revolutionary movement of the workers stands for anything it stands for the absolute equality of the sexes and when this fact is fully realized and the working woman takes her place side by side with the working man all along the battlefield the great struggle will soon be crowned with victory (Deb 1910).

Debs wrote that he was happy to be a member of a party that supports absolute equality between the sexes. We see from these positions that social justice was a powerful plank in his version of American socialism.

Debs and War

Debs and other Socialists of his time were often confronted with the realities of their limited freedom of expression – in speech and press – that we today easily take for granted. With the election of Woodrow Wilson came further restrictions on free speech and free press. Wilson, an advocate of the US entering what would become World War I (and defined at the time as “the war to end all wars”), shepherded legislation through Congress that “destroyed the fabric of American civil liberties . . .” (Radosh 1971: 5). Two months after the declaration of war, Congress legislated conscription in the armed services, the creation of an official propaganda agency and the suppression of opposition and dissent. Passed in June of 1917, the Espionage Act “prohibited criticism of the armed forces and interference with recruitment of troops” allowing easier prosecution of people espousing anti-war criticism of government policy and practices. This Act was soon superseded by the Sedition Act (of May 1918), which made “any criticism of the government during wartime a criminal offense” (Radosh 1971: 5).

Debs’ anti-imperialist and anti-war positions and his many speeches about such issues sprang from his conversion to Socialism. He considered a standing army dangerous and defined the US military as a useless burden yet one ready to respond to labor unrest. In 1915, his

published work called for the capitalist class to fight its own wars and defend its own war profits. Defining the US as a plutocracy, and 40 years before out-going US President Dwight Eisenhower warned of a “military-industrial complex,” he saw the military program and defense budgets interlinked with Wall Street. During a 1918 Canton, Ohio speech, criticizing the notion of representative government (see below), he said, “They tell us that we live in a great free republic; that our institutions are democratic; that we are a free and self-governing people. This is too much, even for a joke” (Debs 1918: 12).

Between 1914 and 1918 Debs railed against the US involvement in World War I, persistently calling for neutrality in the European conflict. During 1915 and 1916 he wrote passionately against the US preparedness campaigns for entering the war. When the US finally issued its declaration of war in April 1917, Debs called for a general strike. Through his writing and his many lectures, Debs denounced the war as little more than the international working class dying for their capitalist masters. Shortly after declaring war, the US government was openly targeting socialists and radicals of all stripes.

According to his biographer, it was during this assault on radicals that Debs decided to up the ante by further taunting the government (Currie 1976). Mostly ignored, he continued delivering his fiery speeches. Then, on Sunday, June 16, 1918, during a lecture delivered at Nimisilla Park in Canton, Ohio, Debs, for yet unknown reasons, finally captured the government’s attention.



During that Canton speech, Debs railed against American style capitalism or, plutocracy. “In every age it has been the tyrant, the oppressor and the exploiter who has wrapped himself in the cloak of patriotism, or religion, or both to deceive and overawe the people” (Debs 1918: 13). He criticized the US Supreme Court, “a body of corporation lawyers,” who had just ruled unconstitutional Congress’ ability to regulate child labor through controls on interstate commerce (Debs 1918: 15; Keating-Owen Act 1916; *Hammer v Dagenhart* 1918). He described the two party political system as run by intellectuals “and the rank and file are sheep that follow the bellwether to the shambles” (Debs 1918: 26).

Although there was little in this speech that he had not said publicly many times before, and although he mentioned war only once – “wars throughout history have been waged for conquest and plunder” (Debs 1918: 19) and never mentioned the involvement of the US in the war, Debs was arrested in late June and charged with 10 counts of violating the Sedition Act.

Sentenced to 10 years in Federal prison, in April 1919, he was sent to the federal prison at Moundsville, West Virginia and a few months later, transferred to the federal prison in Atlanta.

Federal Prison

While in prison, Debs worked in the laundry room, had occasional guests (including prominent socialist writers and thinkers of the day) and did his time all the while knowing that a reprieve from President Wilson would not come. In 1920, while in prison, Debs was nominated as the Socialist Party's presidential candidate -- the first time anyone had been nominated to run for president from a prison cell.

When Warren G. Harding was inaugurated president in March 1921, Debs and his supporters became hopeful that a presidential commutation would not be far in the offing. After being presented with a petition drive signed by 30,000 Terre Haute citizens and organized by Bertha Hale White, Director of an amnesty campaign in Washington, Harding freed Debs and 23 other political prisoners in December. After serving nearly three years in prison and released on Christmas day, Debs visited President Harding in the White House. When he returned to Terre Haute, he was greeted by 25,000 locals welcoming him home (Currie 1976).

A few days prior to his release, he received an invitation from Bell Syndicate to write a series of articles that would be published in newspapers about his experiences as a federal prisoner. Then, in March 1922, a Bell representative visited Debs in his Terre Haute home and negotiated a contract for the articles. On March 19, 1922, David Karsner, Debs' biographer, arrived in Terre Haute to assist Debs in writing the articles. Debs' health was in a state of decline and it was recognized that he needed help with the arduous task of writing his reflections on imprisonment (Karsner 1922).

The joint writing of Debs and Karsner, published as a series of articles, were

posthumously published as *Walls and Bars* (1927). Debs' accounts of prison life are both auto-ethnography and manifesto as he records observations that have resurfaced within criminology over the past several decades. *Walls and Bars* is moralistic, political and historical. Writing as a convict, using a plainspoken *verstehen*, Debs describes the relationship of society to the convict:

A total of almost four years of my life has been spent behind the bars as a common prisoner; but an experience of such a nature cannot be measured in point of years. It is measured by the capacity to see, to feel and to comprehend the social significance and the human import of the prison in its relation to society (Debs 1927/2000: 25).

Debs realized and wrote in his essay that appeared in the published book about the irony of his imprisonment compared to that of the common prisoner. As he made clear, anyone is capable of finding themselves in prison.

Some of us go to prison for breaking the law, and some of us for upholding and abiding by the Constitution to which the law is supposed to adhere. Some go to prison for killing their fellowmen, and others for believing that murder is a violation of one of the Commandments. Some go to prison for stealing, and others for believing that a better system can be provided and maintained than one that makes it necessary for a man to steal in order to live (Debs 1927/2000: 31)

Giving a nod to criminology, determinism and the power of labeling are apparent in his prison writings:

Criminality is often a state of mind created by circumstances or conditions which a person has no power to control or direct; he may be swamped by overwhelming influences that promise but one avenue to peace of mind; in sheer desperation the distressed victim may choose the one way, only to find he has broken the law—and at the end of the tape loom the turrets of the prison. Once a convict always a convict (1927/2000: 33).

As an abolitionist, Debs viewed predatory criminal behavior as in need of something other than society's punitive response, when he wrote:

The time will come when the prison as we now know it will disappear, and the hospital and asylums and farm will take its place. In that day we shall have succeeded in taking the jail out of man as well as taking man out of jail (1927/2000, p. 35).

These ideas, first published by a non-academic and in newspapers, have become mainstream

notions within criminology since their publication.

Social Justice

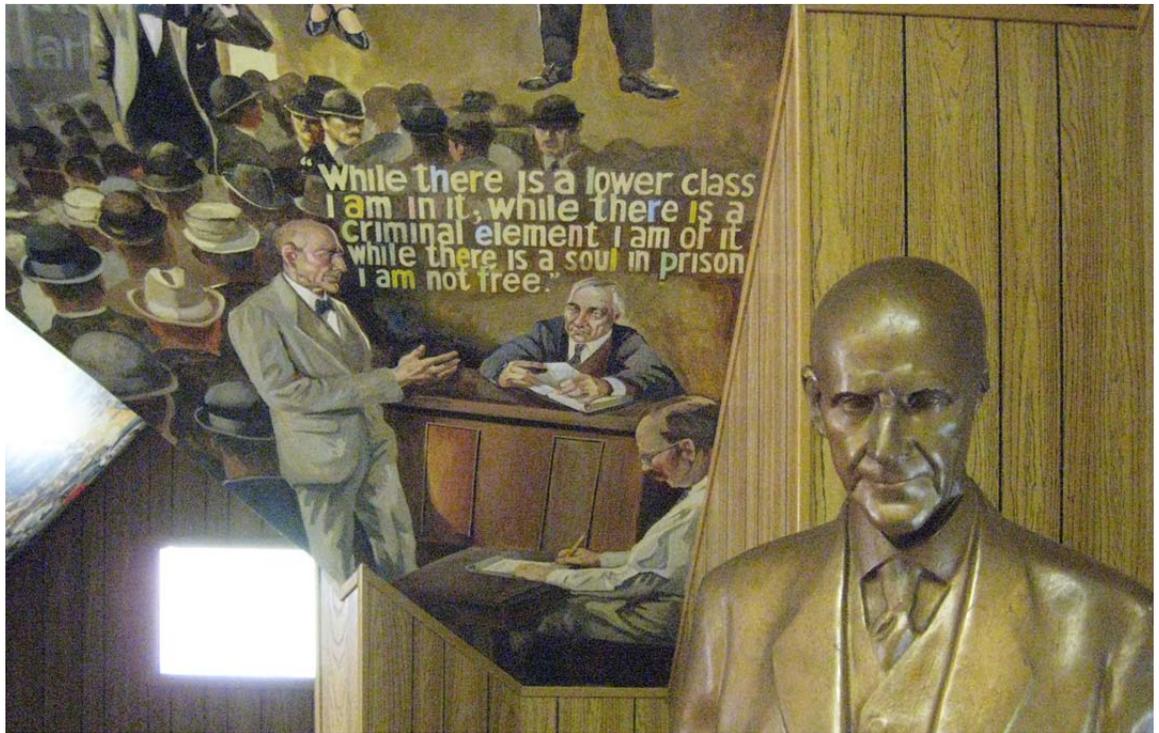
Debs' open support for disenfranchised groups placed him ahead of other activists of his day. His stated sympathy and support for the underdog, the dispossessed and the downtrodden was manifest in his support for women (their position as property and the prohibition on their voting), minorities and convicts. For example, while blazing the campaign trail of 1908 aboard the "Red Special," Debs campaigned for the black vote, urging American blacks to adopt socialism. In Harpers Ferry, Virginia, the Red Special stopped so that Debs could visit the monument to John Brown and proclaimed "the socialist party is carrying on the work begun by John Brown" (Morgan 1962: 113).

After his release from Federal Prison, Debs worked for prison reform and for the release of all political prisoners (Morgan 1962). He considered capital punishment "lawful murder" claiming that "A nation that believes in capital punishment . . . is simply a nation of barbarians, and if such a nation calls itself a Christian nation, the shame is all the deeper and blacker by adding hypocrisy to the atrocious crime" (Currie 1976: 114).

On October 20, 1926, and after a long illness, he died while a patient at Lindlahr Sanitarium in Elmhurst, Illinois where he had gone for a "nature cure." Lindlahr, advertising a regimen of no surgery, no drugs, no serum, had hosted Debs on two other occasions, the first shortly after the completion of the series of articles that ultimately became *Walls and Bars*. Debs' body was cremated and interred at Terre Haute's Highland Lawn Cemetery. His Terre Haute home is today a national historical landmark and museum and is open to visitors.



His most-often quoted statement, first printed in the *New York Call* in 1914, and which he read to the judge as he was sentenced to federal prison, remains resonant today:



References

- Currie, Harold W. 1976. Eugene V. Debs. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
- Debs, Eugene V. 1902. "How I became a socialist." New York Comrade. April. Reprinted in Radosh (1971): 19.
- Debs, Eugene V. 1903. "The Negro in the class struggle." International Socialist Review. November. Reprinted in Radosh (1971): 62.
- Debs, Eugene V. 1905. Appeal to Reason. July 8. Reprinted in Morgan (1962):86.
- Debs, Eugene V. 1910. "Working class politics." International Socialist Review. November. Reprinted in Radosh (1971): 28.
- Debs, Eugene V. 1912. "Sound socialist tactics." International Socialist Review. February. Reprinted in Radosh (1917): 37.
- Debs, Eugene V. 1914. "The gunmen and the miners." International Socialist Review. September. Reprinted in Radosh (1971): 44.
- Debs, Eugene V. 1918. Debs and the War: His Canton Speech and his trial in the Federal Court at Cleveland, September, 1918. Chicago: National Office Socialist Party.
- Debs, Eugene V. 1927/2000. Walls and Bars. Chicago: National Office Socialist Party.
- Hammer v. Dagenhart. 1918. 247 U.S. 251.
- Karsner, David. 1919. Debs: His Authorized Life and Letters. New York: Boni & Liveright.
- Karsner, David. 1922. Talks with Debs in Terre Haute. New York: The New York Call.
- Morgan, H. Wayne. 1962. Eugene V. Debs: Socialist for President. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Radosh, Ronald. 1971. Debs. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.