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The End of Capitalism: Eugene V. Debs and the Argument for Socialism in America

William E. Cain [1]

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Abstract
We are in the midst in the United States, the world's foremost capitalist country, of a surge of interest in Socialism. Many Americans contend, or at least have begun to imagine, that Socialism might remedy income inequality, limited or flawed healthcare, poverty, hunger, and other ongoing social and economic problems. Yet few Americans know much about the history of Socialism, and about its major U. S. advocates and campaigners, above all Eugene V. Debs (1855-1926). Born in Terre Haute, Indiana, Debs was a socialist, political activist, charismatic speaker and writer, radical trade-unionist, one of the founding members of the Industrial Workers of the World, five times the candidate of the Socialist Party of America for President of the United States, and a passionate fighter for free speech and the right to dissent. He is a powerful source of inspiration and enlightenment for those drawn to the theory and practice of socialism, and for those who believe in the possibility of a new American revolution.

Keywords Eugene V. Debs · Socialism · World War I · Unions · Railroads · Capitalism · Dissent · Democratic Socialists of America · Income inequality · Karl Marx · Wealth · Poverty · Communism · Espionage act · Hunger · Labor · Working class · Soviet Union · Obama · Trump · Revolution

One of the oddities about the current keen interest in Socialism is that few Americans know much about its history. How many can name a Socialist? Eugene V. Debs: how many people know who he is and what he believed in and fought for?

In high-school and college courses and textbooks, Debs has been for many decades—and for the most part he remains—a name noted only in passing. Students have been handed one or two key facts about him, that he was a Socialist who ran for president five times, receiving in his best year, 1912, 6% of the vote. His arrest, trial, and imprisonment for anti-war speech during World War I—sometimes this is commented on too. But Deb's commitment to Socialism—how he came to embrace this position, what it meant to him, which persons and groups he was allied to, what are his legacies and lessons: not much has been said or is said about any of this.

Socialism in the United States has a history, and Debs is a very important, charismatic, and robust figure in it, a major presence in American radical theory and practice. He is a figure we should know about, respond to, interrogate, and—analytically and politically—seek to understand.

"As much as anyone else, perhaps more," the historian Wayne H. Morgan has stated, Debs was "the evangelist of socialism." He is, says writer-activist Danny Katch, "the greatest Socialist in U.S. history." In the words of the journalist and film-maker Andrew Stewart, Debs is "a great political figure whose example has remained inspirational for decades despite a Cold War that did so much to discredit his cause. Unlike Lenin, Trotsky, Che, Mao, Castro, or most recently Hugo Chavez, Debs has withstood the test of time. He remains a viable hero for all Americans."

Debs was renowned as a speaker, a thrilling, energizing voice on behalf of the Socialist cause from coast to coast, in all manner of venues. He captivated audiences of workers even when they knew little to no English. Someone who heard him said, "he talks to us with his hands, out of his heart, and we all understood everything." When Yiddish-speaking comrades came to his speeches, they would chant, "Deps, Deps," as he brought them to tears: they respected him, they were grateful to him, they loved him.

✉ William E. Cain
wcain@wellesley.edu

[1] Department of English, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA 02481, USA

A contemporary, Stephen M. Reynolds, gave this description of Debs in his prime, in 1908, age fifty-three:

> He is tall, six feet, two inches; is slim, powerfully built; a fine head, proudly set above broad shoulders; long, full neck; face clear, finely cut, smoothly shaven; blue, deep, searching, inquiring, frank, open eyes; a smile, childlike and sweet, usually upon his face; sometimes sad, as sad as Lincoln's. He is plain, dresses plainly, neatly always; is rational, logical, epigrammatic; quick words fit his thoughts; incisive and unambiguous, they seem to flow to him from a vast, well-filled vocabulary. He quotes from the great writers and poets, is intimate with them all; speaks fluently, never hesitates, draws faultless word-pictures, makes epigrams, plain, pointed, and easily remembered; gestures almost only with the right hand, steps quietly, leans forward to his audience, poised and when speaking his eyes seem like the eyes of a painting — to look at each one everywhere in his audience.

Also in 1908, the journalist Lincoln Steffens met Debs for the first time at a Socialist gathering in Milwaukee. Skeptical beforehand, Steffens was immediately moved by Debs's kindness and empathy:

> As he came toward me with his two hands out, I felt, through all my prejudice, that those hands held as warm a heart as ever beat. Warm for me, you understand, a stranger; and not alone for me: those two warm hands went out to all in the same way: the workers, their wives, their children; especially the children, who spring at sight right into Debs's arms. It's wonderful, really.

Steffens reported that Debs addressed the crowd with emotional intensity, and that it was more than the content, for many in the audience knew only their own "foreign tongues." "It was," Steffens said, "the feeling Debs conveys that he feels for his fellow men; as he does, desperately."

What were the ideas and emotions through which Debs electrified audiences, empowering them and giving them hope that their lives could and would be transformed? In 1904, Debs declared:

> For the great body of wage-workers there is no escape; they cannot rise above the level of their class. The few who do are the exceptions that prove the rule.
>
> And yet there are those who have the effrontery to warn these wage-slaves that if they turn to Socialism they will lose all incentive to work, and their individuality will fade away.
>
> Incentive and individuality forsooth ! Where are they now?
>
> Translated into plain terms, this warning means that a slave who is robbed of all he produces, except enough to keep him in producing condition, as in the present system, has great incentive to work and is highly individualized, but if he breaks his fetters and frees himself and becomes his own master and gets all his labor produces, as he will in Socialism, then all incentive to work vanishes, and his individuality, so used to chains and dungeons, unable to stand the air of freedom, withers away and is lost forever.
>
> Here is Debs in 1908:
>
> This vast and resourceful country should be free from the scourge of poverty and the blight of ignorance; but it never will be until the private ownership of the means of sustaining life is abolished and society is organized on the basis of social ownership of the social means of wealth production and the inalienable right of all to work and to produce freely to satisfy their physical needs and material wants.
>
> It is for this great organic change, this world-wide social revolution, that the Socialists of all countries are organizing, that it may be intelligently guided, and come, if possible, in peace and order when the people and conditions have been prepared for it.

But that was then. What about now? Why does Debs matter—if he does matter—in the present? What are the reasons for the attention being paid to Socialism, two decades into the twenty-first century? Isn't Capitalism the social, political, and economic system that is and should stay firmly in place?

Many on the right and the left, conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, have laid out programs and policies for making capitalism function more effectively. Nearly all of them agree, or at least until recently they have agreed, that Capitalism is the dominant system and always will be. In 1932, the classical liberal economist Ludwig von Mises asserted: "Capitalism is the only conceivable form of social economy which is appropriate to the fulfillment of the demands which society makes of any economic organization" (*Socialism*, pt. II, ch. 11). As many on the left have ruefully remarked, often it seems easier to envision the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

The buzz and hype, then, the excitement about Socialism: this has surprised, even shocked many people. According to one poll, 40% of Americans say that they would prefer to live in a socialist country. Among millennials, the figure is 49.6% (*The National Interest*, July 16, 2019). What do they mean by

this preference? The results of this poll suggest that Socialism, to them, includes extensive socio-economic benefits: for instance, universal healthcare—76% agree about this; tuition-free education—72%; and a living-wage—68% (*The Guardian*, June 10, 2019).

These Americans believe that Socialism means providing for all persons' basic needs. In their view, Capitalism has not done this—that it has not and never will. They reject both Republican and Democratic policy-makers for failing to take seriously—and to do something serious about—improving life for the majority. Americans in the 18–29 age-bracket especially are enamored with Socialism: 51% view it positively. Among all Democrats, the figure is 57%.

Bhaskar Sunkara, the founder and editor of the Democratic Socialist journal *Jacobin* (2011–), says this in *The Socialist Manifesto* (2019):

> Our politics don't seem to offer much of a future at all. The choice before us appears to be between, on the one hand, a technocratic neoliberalism that embraces the rhetoric of social inclusion but not equality and, on the other, a right-wing populism channeling anger into the worst directions. To be a socialist today is to believe that more, not less, democracy will help solve social ills—and to believe that ordinary people can shape the systems that shape their lives.

The Democratic Socialists of America, with which Sunkara is affiliated, has more than 60,000 members—from just 5000 several years ago. About *Jacobin*, a recent report has noted: "'the print magazine, with a circulation of 40,000, now stands at the center of an expanding enterprise that includes a book imprint, podcasts, an academic journal called *Catalyst*, and a website with over a million monthly visitors." The goal of this political project is not "social democracy," not a democratic welfare state that incorporates capitalist and socialist practices. It is, in Sunkara's words, "the radical dream of replacing capitalism with a socialist economy operating for the common good."

A number of factors explain this surge of interest in, and attraction to, Socialism: the financial crisis of 2008 and its lingering effects—Americans lost $9.8 trillion in wealth as their home values fell and their retirement accounts disappeared; the massive bailout of the big banks–$500+ billion; the Occupy Wall Street rally and civil disobedience; the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, an avowed Socialist, for the presidency; political activism, among young people in particular, on behalf of liberal, progressive, and left causes, including climate change and LGBTQ rights; ongoing deep unease about the soaring student-loan debt, which is now $1.52 trillion, affecting 44.7 million people—as of 2018, 7 million of them were in default; and Black Lives Matter, the national and international movement, originating in the African-American community, that has condemned anti-black violence and racism.

In 2016, Socialist candidates were elected to public office on the local, state, and national levels, most prominently the 29-year-old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC, as she has been dubbed), member of Congress from New York City. As AOC has said, "So when millennials talk about concepts like democratic socialism, we're not talking about 'Red Scare' boogeymen. We're talking about countries and systems that already exist that have already been proven to be successful in the modern world"—health-care systems, she explains, like those in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Scandinavian countries.

More than any other force or factor, however, it is income inequality that accounts for the heightened response to Socialism as an idea, ideal, and movement for change. The philanthropist Nick Hanauer has pointed out:

> In 1970, when the golden age of the American middle class was nearing its peak and inequality was at its nadir, only about half of Americans ages 25 and older had a high-school diploma or the equivalent. Today, 90 percent do. Meanwhile, the proportion of Americans attaining a college degree has more than tripled since 1970. But while the American people have never been more highly educated, only the wealthiest have seen large gains in real wages. From 1979 to 2017, as the average real annual wages of the top 1 percent of Americans rose 156 percent (and the top .01 percent's wages rose by a stunning 343 percent), the purchasing power of the average American's paycheck did not increase. (*The Atlantic Monthly*, July 2019)

Furthermore, says Hanauer, "adjusted for inflation, average hourly wages for recent college graduates have barely budged since 2000, while the bottom 60 percent of college graduates earn less than that group did in 2000. A college diploma is no longer a guaranteed passport into the middle class."

The rich have gotten richer, Hanauer concludes:

> Nearly all the benefits of economic growth have been captured by large corporations and their shareholders. After-tax corporate profits have doubled from about 5 percent of GDP in 1970 to about 10 percent, even as wages as a share of GDP have fallen by roughly 8 percent. And the wealthiest 1 percent's share of pre-tax income has more than doubled, from 9 percent in 1973 to 21 percent today. Taken together, these two trends amount to a shift of more than $2 trillion a year from the middle class to corporations and the super-rich.

Matt Bruenig of the People's Policy Project, examining Federal Reserve data, reinforces Hanauer's observations: since 1990, "America's superrich have grown about 21 trillion dollars richer, while those in the bottom half of the wealth distribution have grown 900 billion dollars poorer."

Income inequality also has become a major topic among Capitalists. There have been numerous articles about it—and its jeopardized future—in business magazines and journals, and in company and corporation news programs, www sites, and podcasts. The Capitalist class is aware of the facts and figures, and they read and hear the proposals that Socialists are advocating—and that people are responding to favorably.

Ray Dalio, founder of the $160 billion hedge-fund Bridgewater Associates, said in an April 2019 interview: "If I was the president of the United States, what I would do is recognize that this is a national emergency… The American dream is lost."

"Income inequality is harming the economy," contends a scholar writing in *Barron's* (April 18, 2019). Another financial journalist, in *Forbes* (May 17, 2019), criticizing President Trump, says that the core issue for resolute believers in Capitalism is income inequality and its impact on workers and families: "If Trump or anyone else wants to find what's keeping so many workers, including many in the middle class, pinned down, they don't have to put up a wall and scrutinize immigrants. They just have to look at the size of paychecks and what we pretend people can exist on."

"Gilded Age 2.0: U.S. Income Inequality Increases to Pre-Great Depression Levels" is the title of an article in *Fortune* (February 13, 2019). The conclusion: "Income inequality in the U.S., which has steadily been increasing since the 1980s, has reached levels last seen in the years just before the Great Depression." The data "could be even worse in reality because the recent decades of financial globalization have made it harder to measure the wealth of the richest people."

As an economist cited in the article says, "It is not enough to study wealth concentration using self-reported survey data or even tax return data. Because the wealthy have access to many opportunities for tax avoidance and tax evasion—and because the available evidence suggests that the tax planning industry has grown since the 1980s as it became globalized—traditional data sources may under-estimate inequality."

We hear much about the consequences of income inequality for middle-class and working-class families. What we hear about less often, are the consequences for the poor. Like Debs before them, Socialists are demanding redress for these Americans too. A recent study has noted:

> The U.S. monitors poverty through the official poverty measure. This compares a family's pre-tax income to a threshold. In 2017, a family of four was considered poor if their pre-tax income fell below about US $26,000. Using this measure, in 2017, 12.3% of the U.S. population, or 39.7 million people, were in poverty.

By a related measure, which includes additional expenses that a family might face, "such as medical out-of-pocket and childcare expenses," in 2017 "13.9% of the population, or 44.9 million people, were poor" (*The Conversation*, June 24, 2019).

In some regions, poverty statistics have improved in recent years with the increase nationally in employment. But other regions have not improved, and, overall, the figures remain high. In Missouri, for instance, 14% of the population live at or below the federal poverty level, and among children in the state the number rises to 19%.

These are not numbers but human beings: for them, being poor means not having enough money for food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and other basic needs.

In May 2018, the United Nations published a report on poverty in the United States. Among its conclusions:

- Forty million Americans live in poverty, 18.5 million in extreme poverty, and 5.3 million in "Third World conditions of absolute poverty."
- In 2016, 18% of children (13.3 million) were living in poverty; 32.6% of all people in poverty were children.
- The United States has the highest youth-poverty rate and the highest infant-mortality rate among advanced nations.
- "On a given night in 2017, about 21 per cent of homeless individuals were children."

Americans across the political spectrum ask: What kind of country are we living in when many children do not have enough to eat? That's a question that many people drawn to Socialism have been asking—and asking all the more fervently because, in their judgment, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, have not confronted it and never will.

According to a May 2019 study, *Map the Meal Gap*:

> Children are more likely to struggle with hunger than the general population in just about every state, county and congressional district across the country…. Children nationwide are more likely to face hunger than the rest of the population, with the percentage of children estimated to struggle with hunger at the state level ranging from 10% in North Dakota to 24% in New Mexico…. Rural and Southern communities are disproportionately impacted. Eight of the top ten states with the highest percentage of child food-insecurity are located in the South. Additionally, 84% of the counties with high child food insecurity rates are rural. East Carroll Parish in Louisiana has the highest rate of child food-insecurity at nearly 40%. Jefferson County, Mississippi has the highest county food-insecurity rate and the fourth highest child food-insecurity rate. Both counties are rural and in the South.

Perhaps, then, it is not a revelation that in 2018, "a record 16 percent of Americans said they wanted to move out of the

country" (*The Daily Mail,* January 7, 2019). In 2003, according to a Gallup Poll, 70% of Americans said that they were "extremely proud of their country"; in mid-2018, the figure had fallen to 47%, the lowest it has been in the two decades that this poll has been conducted.

These statistics and poll numbers—and they could be multiplied many times over—are unnerving yet also, in a way, misleading. They are too recent, too immediate. We need to step back: to know and think about what has been building, what has been there, for a long time. For income inequality has been a constant in American history and political discourse. As the historian Sean Wilentz has said: "The struggle against economic inequality has been a great subterranean river in our political past, sometimes breaking through the surface, sometimes returning underground…. The issue of economic equality has been the great perennial question in American political history" (2016; *The Hidden History of American Politics*).

Debs raised this question vividly, dramatically, and repeatedly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So did William Jennings Bryan in the 1890s. So did Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s, and Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s. A vivid example, pertinent to the current scene, is Mario Cuomo's keynote speech at the July 1984 Democratic Convention in San Francisco, titled "A Tale of Two Cities."

Criticizing President Reagan's emphasis (via John Winthrop, 1630), on America as "a shining city on a hill," Cuomo replied:

> A shining city is perhaps all the President sees from the portico of the White House and the veranda of his ranch, where everyone seems to be doing well. But there's another city; there's another part to the shining city; the part where some people can't pay their mortgages, and most young people can't afford one; where students can't afford the education they need, and middle-class parents watch the dreams they hold for their children evaporate.
>
> In this part of the city there are more poor than ever, more families in trouble, more and more people who need help but can't find it. Even worse: there are elderly people who tremble in the basements of the houses there. And there are people who sleep in the city streets, in the gutter, where the glitter doesn't show. There are ghettos where thousands of young people, without a job or an education, give their lives away to drug dealers every day.

In December 2013, President Barack Obama presented a speech to representatives from anti-poverty groups and nonprofits at a gathering in Washington DC. He said to them that "a dangerous and growing inequality and lack of upward mobility has jeopardized middle-class America's basic bargain—that if you work hard, you have a chance to get ahead. He added: "I believe this is the defining challenge of our time: making sure our economy works for every working American. It's why I ran for president. It drives everything I do in this office."

This speech took place in the Anacostia neighborhood of the nation's capital. Three years later, as President Obama's term neared its end, the poverty rate in Anacostia was 33%—it had increased by 6% during his presidency. In Washington DC, 27% of children today live in poverty; in one section of Anacostia, the figure is nearly 100%.

I have been referring to and quoting Democrats, but some Republicans and conservatives have been (and are) emphasizing the same facts. Mitt Romney, whom Barack Obama defeated in 2012, stated in a speech at Mississippi State University, January 2015, that the economy in the short term has been doing well, but that income inequality has worsened. He said that during his presidential campaign and afterwards, he had "met folks who had been in poverty from generation to generation. These we have to help escape the tragedy and the trap of chronic generational poverty. Restoring American opportunity for all Americans is key to the future of this great land, and it must be done." Mississippi was a fitting location for Romney's words. From year to year, it is ranked the poorest or the second poorest state. Twenty percent live in poverty—the highest percentage in the nation.

In an interview in February 2018, the conservative Tucker Carlson, acknowledging first his own good fortune and privilege, then turned to American decline in many neighborhoods that once were prosperous and secure:

> The sense of community in America has been utterly destroyed in these small towns. Jobs have vanished. The standard of living has gone down. Even the life expectancy of people in these areas of America is going down. And this is the terrible part: No one in Washington cares. The middle class in this country is collapsing and the people who live where I live—who are part of permanent Washington and make policy—don't even care. My neighbors never have to deal with the problems caused by the policies they set for the rest of America.

Carlson continued:

> The hard left is correct. The biggest problem this country faces is income inequality, and neither the liberals nor the conservatives see it. There is a great social volatility that goes with inequality like we have now. Inequality will work under a dictatorship, maybe, but it does not work in a democracy. It is dangerous in a democracy. In a democracy, when there is inequality like this, the people will rise up and punish their elected representatives.

Someone could object: surely not all is bad. What about the many decades of good news? It is true that there have been developments for the better, both when Republicans and

Democrats have been in power. At the time I am writing, we are being told that the economy is doing well, that employment is up, and that this rosy reality is evident in the performance of the stock market, which is setting record highs.

On the other hand: "most Americans aren't benefiting from the stock market boom." Only 20% of Americans directly own stocks—i.e., 80% do not. While 50% of Americans participate in employer-sponsored retirement plans linked to the stock market, the other 50% do not, and, furthermore, "access to these plans skews towards higher-income people" (CNN Business, December 18, 2017).

Senior citizens benefit from government programs—there's good news, so it appears. The Henry J. Kaiser Foundation noted in a November 2018 report, "payments from Social Security and Supplemental Security Income have played a critical role in enhancing economic security and reducing poverty rates among people ages 65 and older." However, in this same report, the authors state that many older adults have limited incomes and very modest savings. In 2016, half of all people on Medicare had incomes less than $26,200. By one measurement, 4.7 million adults ages 65 or older have incomes below the poverty line; by another measurement, which factors in out-of-pocket medical spending and other expenses, the figure rises to 7.2 million.

If you live in a metro or urban area, you might be doing very well. According to a report published in September 2018, *The Geography of Prosperity*, East Coast metropolitan areas and their suburbs, many West Coast cities, and the upper Midwest and Plains regions are thriving. But in rural and non-metro areas, the situation is different. As this study and other studies have demonstrated, this is the result of America's spatial—that is, geographic—inequality:

> People living in poverty tend to be clustered in certain regions, counties, and neighborhoods rather than being spread evenly across the Nation. Research has shown that the poor living in areas where poverty is prevalent face impediments beyond those of their individual circumstances. Concentrated poverty contributes to poor housing and health conditions, higher crime and school dropout rates, and employment dislocations. As a result, economic conditions in very poor areas can create limited opportunities for poor residents that become self-perpetuating.

Poverty exists in rural counties across the nation, but, again, it is most severe in the South, in Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta. Children suffer the effects:

> In 2017, 22.8 percent of rural children in the United States were poor, compared to 17.7 percent of urban children. At the county level, on average over 2013-17, there were 43 counties in the United States with child poverty rates of 50 percent or higher, 40 of which were rural (nonmetro) counties heavily clustered in the South (30 of these counties). The rural counties with the highest child poverty rates were East Carroll Parish, LA (76.5 percent), Issaquena County, MS (69.6 percent), and Greene County, AL (67.8 percent). (*Rural Poverty & Well-Being*, United States Department of Agriculture, 2018)

"America's Working Families Lost Two Decades Of Economic Security," according to an article in *Forbes* (July 8, 2019):

> All families in the bottom half of the wealth distribution owned 1.3% of all wealth by the end of 2019 (see figure below). This was also their share at the end of 2007. It declined during the Great Recession so much that it actually became negative by the middle of 2010. Working-class families owed more money than their savings were worth, mainly because they still owed a lot of debt but the value of their houses had dramatically dropped. It took another nine years for the share of wealth belonging to working-class families to just get back to where it was in late 2007.

On the other side of the ledger:

> Contrast this to what happened to the wealth of the top 10% of households. By the end of 2007, they owned 68.1% of all wealth. During the Great Recession, their wealth share barely declined to 67.9% before it quickly increased again. Since 2017, the wealthiest 10% of household owned 70% or more of the country's total wealth.

As John Nichols has written in his history of American Socialism (2011; rev. 2015), Americans may lack full knowledge about this term and concept, and about its advocates in America's past, but on a local level they have an acute and astute understanding of and feeling for Capitalism—that it is not working, not for them. Debs made exactly the same point, forcefully. He told workers that they were right to feel that something was terribly wrong—that a few were profiting enormously, at their expense.

Critics of Socialism stress that we should warn Americans about the fearful realities of Socialism gone nightmarishly awry, as applied in Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's People's Republic of China: there are vehement reminders about this grim history in a special issue of *National Review*, titled *Against Socialism* (June 3, 2019). But this does not make Americans more content with Capitalism: it does not make them less hungry, less poor. What the new Socialists in American insist on, the journalist Harold Myerson has said, "is that the fundamental problem is capitalism."

For the comprehensive changes that America needs in education, income equality, climate, and more, it is time—so some left-leaning Democrats as well as Socialists maintain—for massive new investments, transformative programs: a Green New Deal; College Affordability—e.g., free public universities; Medicare for All; Reparations for Slavery; Tax the Rich; Universal Basic Income; Affordable Housing. *Rolling Stone* magazine (June 30, 2019) refers to these as "revolutionary policies."

Do such policies, positions, and ideas mean that the nation is ready, willing, and eager to embrace a full-scale left-wing agenda? That they might, even more, welcome Socialism—a second American Revolution? Financial columnist David Leonhardt is not sure. "But," he adds, "I do know this: American capitalism isn't working right now" (*New York Times*, December 2, 2018).

This was the claim and contention that Debs made. It is why he believed that Capitalism could not be modified, tinkered with, reformed. It had to be smashed, conquered, and the better system installed in its place—a seizure of power by the exploited and oppressed, by workers, by the poor.

There have been other significant Socialists in American history. Some older Americans still have memories of Norman Thomas (1884–1968), Princeton graduate, Presbyterian minister, a Socialist and pacifist and six-time presidential candidate for the Socialist Party of America. There is also Michael Harrington, best known for his landmark book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, published in 1962.

But if we want to know who was (and is) Socialism's leading light, the greatest champion of the Socialist cause, the figure who fought hardest for the Socialist revolution, the energizing inspiration for Thomas and Harrington and Sanders, we must turn to Eugene Victor Debs. He is, says the historian Eric Foner, "the greatest American socialist." Bhaskar Sunkara says the same: "our greatest American Socialist."

Debs was born on November 5, 1855, at No. 447 North 4th Street, in Terre Haute ("High Ground"), Indiana. He was named for the French writers Eugène Sue, author of *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–43) and Victor Hugo, author of *Les Misérables* (1862), both of whom devoted detailed sympathetic notice to the lives of the poor and disadvantaged; as Hugo says in his Preface, his concern is with "the three problems of the age—the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of women by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night."

Debs grew up in a household full of discussion about great authors, frequently of a radical kind. "The first book my father ever gave me," Debs recalled, "was a copy of Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, which has been assiduously consulted since and still has its place of honor on the book shelves of our home." He esteemed Thomas Paine more than any other Revolutionary-era leader: Paine "towered above them all. A thousand times since then I have found inspiration and strength in the stirring words, 'These are the times that try men's souls'."

Debs also honored the words and deeds of the abolitionist John Brown, executed in December 1859 for inciting a slave insurrection in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Debs said about him, November 1907: "The most picturesque character, the bravest man and most self- sacrificing soul in American history…. History may be searched in vain for an example of noble heroism and sublime self-sacrifice equal to that of Old John Brown."

For Debs, however, there was always something transcendent about Hugo's panoramic masterpiece. He re-read and consulted it, quoted from it, and cherished the working-class mother, Fantine, stating, March 1916: "Jean Valjean, noblest of heroes, was possible only because of Fantine, sublimest of martyrs… Fantine is the greatest character in fiction and the highest type of social martyrdom. The face of Fantine, in which we behold 'the horror of old age in the countenance of a child', is the mirror which reflects society's own sin and shame."

Debs's parents were Jean Daniel (1820–1906) & Marguerite Marie (Bettrich) Debs (1822–1906). They had come to the United States from Colmar, a city in Alsace, France, in 1849; his father in January, and his mother in September—they married as soon as she arrived. In 1851, they settled in Terre Haute. Jean Daniel worked at a series of jobs, and they saved enough to open a small grocery store in the front room of their two-story house.

In 1850, the population of Terre Haute was 4650. As the scholar John J. Schlicher has noted, there were nine churches but no schools supported by taxpayer money. Anyone who wanted to, could propose to teach and could rent space in a building for a classroom. Among the occupations in town were boat builder, brass founder, cooper, dealer in cooper's tools, coppersmith, fur and skin dealer, gunsmith, rope maker, soap and candle manufacturer, and work in a woolen factory. The "most extensive business in 1850 was pork-packing, not only in Terre Haute, but at all the towns, large and small, up and down the Wabash river."

With its river location, Terre Haute was a site for transport, part of the regional and national process of industrialization and the market revolution, but it was still a frontier town, a tight-knit community of neighborhoods and small businesses. Debs emerged from this simpler world, and he often spoke about it lovingly and longingly. This was a place where, in an amusing detail that Schlicher calls attention to, one of the new city ordinances in 1850 "provided that hereafter no person or persons shall be permitted to feed horses, cows, hogs and other domestic animals upon any of the sidewalks of the town of Terre Haute, under a penalty of one dollar with costs of suit for each and every offense."

Debs's father was Protestant and his mother was Catholic, but the household was free-thinking, not devoutly religious. They spoke French and German—Debs learned both—and

Debs's father bought books in these languages and placed busts of Rousseau and Voltaire on the mantel. Of the couple's ten children, Eugene was the fifth-born, the first son, and the third to survive into adulthood. The family was tight-knit, affectionate. Debs was close throughout his life to his brother Theodore, nine years younger, who served during his elder brother's political career as an adviser, manager, and confidant.

Debs was five years old when the Civil War erupted; he remembered the soldiers and troop trains. At age thirteen, he received a Bible for winning a spelling contest at school. The teacher wrote in it: "Read and obey." The subversive Debs remembered, "I never did either." But there are references and allusions to the Bible in his speeches and writings, and—as a man who suffered for his beliefs—he identified with the maltreated Jesus.

An educational system had finally been established in Terre Haute in 1860, and young Debs was a good student, but after completing ninth grade in May 1870, he stopped attending school. Against the wishes of his parents, he began work for the Terre Haute & Indianapolis Railway, cleaning grease and paint from the wheels of freight engines and locomotives, many hours of labor for fifty cents per day—he retained the tool that he used at work his entire life.

Debs shifted to the job of fireman, loading coal into the locomotive, and then to painting and lettering freight cars. He recalled, "I learned of the hardships of the rail in snow, sleet, and hail, of the ceaseless danger that lurks along the iron highway, the uncertainty of employment, scant wages and altogether trying lot of the workingman, so that from my very boyhood I was made to feel the wrongs of labor."

In 1874, Debs was laid off. He travelled to East St. Louis to find work, and had his first exposure there to deep-seated poverty, which had been made worse by the financial panic of 1873 and the years of economic downturn that followed from it. He was disturbed to see "men, women, and children begging for something to eat."

Debs returned to Terre Haute, where he took a job as a billing clerk at Hulman & Cox, a wholesale grocery firm; he was associated with this firm for five years. But he remained active among railway workers, joining them in February 1875 in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and serving as its secretary. The Brotherhood was not a trade union, but a fraternal lodge that also functioned as an insurance company. It promoted amiable relations between employers and employees and fostered good conduct and personal responsibility. Debs did much to build it up, working as many as eighteen hours a day, adding lodges, and eliminating a sizable debt. He also participated in the Occidental Literary Club, which met weekly and invited Wendell Phillips, Robert Ingersoll, Susan B. Anthony, and other notable figures to give lectures.

In the summer of 1877, there was a major railroad-strike across the country—the first national strike in the history of the United States. Yet in Terre Haute, the response of workers to wage cuts was relatively modest and tame: they perceived a common interest between themselves and their immediate employer, William Riley McKeen, a businessman and builder of the Terre Haute & Indianapolis Railroad. McKeen was esteemed in Terre Haute; he was, said a fellow citizen, "a man without pretense, without any of that superciliousness which wealth too often assumes when brought into contact with poverty…, a representative of industry and enterprise and a gentleman of spotless integrity of character."

In September 1878, at the annual convention of the Brotherhood, Debs asked: "Does the Brotherhood encourage strikers? To this question we most emphatically answer, No, Brothers. To disregard the laws which govern the land? To destroy the last vestige of order? We again say No, a thousand times No." As Ray Ginger, one of Debs's biographers, has observed, Debs at this time was "a leading spokesman for conservative policies." "Some have gone so far as to say," Debs said, "that there is a natural, a necessary conflict between labor and capital. These are very shallow thinkers, or else very great demagogues."

Debs rose in the ranks to become national secretary and treasurer of the Brotherhood and the editor of its monthly, the *Fireman's Magazine*. From 1879 to 1883, as a Democrat, he served as city clerk, and, in fall 1884, he was elected to the Indiana state assembly, with backing from workers and members of the business community. According to a local newspaper, Debs was "the blue-eyed boy of destiny."

Some months earlier, in June, Debs had married Katherine Metzel, an attractive woman, two years younger, from a prominent family. When she inherited some money, she moved forward in 1889 on her plan for a large gabled and towered house on a fashionable Terre Haute street. Ray Ginger remarks: "Kate was delighted with its pretentious size and furnishing" (76). But Kate also was involved in her husband's work; among other things, the two of them spent much time together honing and practicing his speech-making. She also had to endure his many long absences from home when he travelled country-wide for the Brotherhood and later on for Socialism. Debs was fond of children, but the couple had no children of their own.

Debs enjoyed his home and visiting with friends and neighbors in Terre Haute. He also enjoyed drinking, he went to brothels, and, sometime in 1916, even as he penned love notes and poems to Kate, he conducted a lengthy affair with a neighbor, Mabel Curry, who was married to a literature professor at Indiana State Normal College and was the mother of three daughters. Mabel Curry sometimes travelled on the same train with Debs, and they met secretly in cities he visited.

During the 1880s, Debs remained skeptical about strikes and direct confrontations with employers. "Strikes are the knives," he wrote in 1883, "with which laborers cut their throats…. Labor and capital are brothers." He touted the American Dream, affirming in 1883:

> America is preeminently the land of great possibilities, of great opportunities, and of no less great probabilities. Look around us, no matter what our position may be, we all stand on the great field of renown, with a free and equal chance to go to the supreme height of all that can be desired of earthly grandeur. We all have a fair chance and an open field. Long may it so remain. The time, the occasion is auspicious. Nothing like it was ever known before.

Here, the biographer Nick Salvatore is illuminating:

> Debs understood his culture's history as the progress of God's chosen people…. Debs and many Americans found it inconceivable that the will of God could be thwarted except by the malicious design of a few powerful individuals. This conviction grew from the belief that the resources of American society were plentiful enough for all its members to live in dignity and even comfort.

By the late 1880s, Debs had boosted BLF membership from 2000 to 20,000, and he had done a superb job as editor of its magazine—its number of subscribers had jumped from 3500 to 28,000.

In 1888, Debs watched and reflected on a failed year-long strike of Brotherhood workers against the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy railroad. The company refused to take part in negotiations; and the Brotherhood and the Knights of Labor (led by Terence V. Powderly) were in a tense, sometimes hostile relationship that limited and disserved both organizations; and the result was that the strikers were defeated. Debs was coming to believe that for workers to improve their lives, they would have to unite in unyielding class struggle. Formerly, he had termed strikes a sign of "anarchy and revolution"; now, they were "the weapon of the oppressed."

This was a tumultuous period in American social and economic history: the labor protest and bombing in 1886 in Haymarket Square, Chicago; the Homestead, Pennsylvania, steel strike, lockout, and bloody battle, 1892, between workers and private-security agents; the panic of 1893 and the effects that ensued from it—hundreds of banks closed, thousands of businesses failed, and unemployment jumped as high as 35% in New York and 43% in Michigan. Companies across the land cut jobs and cut wages.

Income inequality was stark. It is estimated that by 1900, the wealthiest 2% of American families owned 33+ percent of the nation's wealth; the top 10% owned 75+ percent. Lower down, the bottom 40% had no wealth. The notion of happy harmony between employer and employee, fellowship among owners and workers: this was at best a fading memory.

In June 1893, Debs was one of the founders of the American Railway Union (ARU) and was chosen to be its president:

> I do this because it pleases me, and there is nothing I would not do, so far as human effort goes, to advance any movement designed to reach and rescue perishing humanity. I have a heart for others and that is why I am in this work. When I see suffering about me, I myself suffer, and so when I put forth my efforts to relieve others, I am simply working for myself. I do not consider that I have made any sacrifice whatever; no man does, unless he violates his conscience.

The ARU was not based on craft- or skill-level—a point of contention between Debs and Samuel Gompers, founder and first president of the American Federation of Labor, a federation of autonomous unions that admitted only members of specific crafts (carpenters, cigar-makers, and so on) and made no provision for the unskilled. The ARU reached out to all railroad workers in "a spirit of fraternity" that Debs maintained was "abroad in the land."

Debs invoked "fraternity," but African-Americans were not invited to join. At the June 1894 convention in Chicago, 400 ARU delegates voted to make the ARU for whites only—they expressed "sympathy and support" for Negro workers who sought to establish their own separate organizations. "All of the railroad Brotherhoods," notes Ray Ginger, "denied membership to Negroes and tried constantly to drive them out of the railroad service."

Debs was more moderate and fair-minded than most. In a June 1892 essay, he praised the stalwart abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison as a "moral crusader," and later he refused, when in the South, to speak to segregated audiences. But he was slow to perceive the hard oppression and bigotry that African-Americans, and also immigrants to America, experienced. Debs enjoyed "Negro dialect" stories, and he fell all too easily into stereotypes about Italians and Chinese.

For Debs, it was class, not race, not ethnicity, that was crucial. As he said in the Garrison essay and elsewhere, it was no longer "African slavery" that loomed large, but "wage slavery," the enslavement of all workers. In "The Negro in the Class Struggle," 1903, he maintained:

> I have said and say again that, properly speaking, there is no Negro question outside of the labor question—the working-class struggle. Our position as Socialists and as a party is perfectly plain. We have simply to say: "The class struggle is colorless." 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's first major ARU action began in April 1894, when the ARU went on strike, after two wage-cuts, against the Great Northern Railway, which had been created in September 1889, primarily by James Jerome Hill, known as the "Empire Builder." By early May, the Union had won most of its

demands. Debs recalled: "The greatest tribute that was ever paid to me was that of the section men after the Great Northern strike. As my train pulled out of St. Paul, Minnesota [on its way to Terre Haute], those men with shovels in hand and happiness fairly radiating from their faces, yet with tears in their eyes—those section men stood at attention. That tribute was more precious to me than all of the banquets in the world."

A crowd of some 4000 people, with festive music playing, cheered Debs when his train arrived in Terre Haute. Membership in the ARU spiked to 150,000, and Debs was optimistic about the future.

Very soon, however, Debs came to a dramatically different conclusion. During the winter of 1893–94, the Pullman Palace Car Company, in Chicago, had severely cut the wages of its workers. The Company rejected arbitration: there was "nothing to arbitrate." The workers went on strike in May, and by June, the strike had spread to twenty-seven states and territories. It involved more than 100,000 workers, who shut down the operations of twenty railroads. To show support, the ARU boycotted Pullman cars on all of the railroads that it served.

Angered by the Company's intransigence, Debs jettisoned all talk of harmony and he escalated his rhetoric. He said to the workers: "The paternalism of Pullman is the same as the self-interest of a slave-holder in his human chattels. You are striking to avert slavery and degradation." A judge ordered an injunction against the strikers, and President Grover Cleveland—whom Debs had supported in the 1892 election—sent in federal troops, 12,000 in total, on the pretext that the strike had disrupted the mail.

Violence broke out between workers and troops, men were killed, and property was destroyed. The strike fell apart, and, in July, Debs and others were indicted by a grand jury on the charge of collaborating in a conspiracy to obstruct the mails. Debs was arrested, put on trial in February 1895, was found guilty, and was given a sentence of six months in the McHenry County Jail in Woodstock, Illinois.

Fortunately for Debs, his imprisonment was not onerous. The jail was a suite of rooms in the home of the county sheriff, who each night invited the inmates to join him for dinner. The inmates wore business suits; each morning, "Debs placed a fresh carnation in his buttonhole." He wrote essays and agreed to interviews; he did his union work; and, on the honor code, he could leave the building. He and other prisoners exercised, and they studied history and economics. Debs read Karl Marx's *Capital*. He also was influenced by Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879), the Danish-born American lawyer and writer Laurence Gronlund's *The Cooperative Commonwealth* (1884), and Edward Bellamy's best-selling utopian novel *Looking Backward: 2000 to 1887* (1888).

In an essay titled "How I Became a Socialist," April 1902, Debs described the conversion experience that transpired in him after the Pullman strike and his trial and imprisonment: "In the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle *the class struggle was revealed*. This was my first practical lesson in Socialism, though wholly unaware that it was called by that name."

Invoking the example of Saul on the road to Damascus, Debs announced that he was now committed to Socialism, and he placed a picture of Karl Marx above his desk. No longer, for him, would strong unions be sufficient to fight against corporate power. Real change, that is, revolution, would require a dedicated political movement and an unflinching radical program, for, as the Pullman strike demonstrated, the government and the wealthy were in adamant opposition to the working class. A strong union—this was important, but it needed to be linked to the political and economic transformation of the United States, indeed of the world.

In March 1899, in a speech in New York City, Debs declared:

> I wish to be candid with the gentlemen present. I am a Socialist. I am one who believes in the co-operative ownership, not only of the means of production and distribution, but of this planet…. I have tried the step at a time policy, I have been an opportunist, but after years of experience and work and agitation, gentlemen, I have finally landed on the bedrock of Socialism and from that I will not move.

Debs at this juncture gave serious thought to a colonization project, based on Gronlund's description of a "cooperative commonwealth," to be located somewhere in the West. Socialists would establish roots there and would take control of the state government. This tantalizing idea failed to materialize, and, with the ARU in near-collapse because of the Pullman strike, Debs devoted his energies to a new political party, the Social Democratic Party of America. After much argument, intrigue, and maneuvering among various leaders and factions, it evolved in 1901 into the Socialist Party of America. Later, in 1905, Debs also was one of the founders, along with William D. (Big Bill) Haywood, Daniel De Leon, and Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

This, below, is the course of action and the future that Debs envisioned for the Socialist Party and the IWW:

> This great body will sweep into power and seize the reins of government; take possession of industry in the name of the working class, and it can be easily done. All that will be required will be to transfer the title deeds from the parasites to the producers; and then the working class, in control of industry, will operate it for the benefit of all. The work day will be reduced in proportion to the progress of invention. Every man will work, or at least have a chance to work, and get the full equivalent of what he produces. He will work, not as a slave, but as a free man, and he will express himself in his

> work and work with joy. Then the badge of labor will be the only badge of aristocracy. The industrial dungeon will become a temple of science. The working class will be free, and all humanity disenthralled.

The Social Democratic Party chose Debs as its nominee for president in 1900. He received only 96,116 votes. Not deterred, he said: "The next four years will witness the development of socialism to continental power and proportion." He was nominated again in 1904, and his vote total increased to 402,321. Socialist candidates were victorious in state and local elections, and there was enthusiasm in the Party and among workers about the prospects for radical change in the years ahead.

In 1908, Debs once more ran for president, touring the country from coast to coast, visiting thirty-three states, traveling 15,000 miles, in a train named "The Red Special." In a stretch of 68 days, covering 9000 miles, he gave 560 speeches, often to big crowds. In letters, he said: "It's my lot to fight & by God I'm putting in full time…. I'll make history before I get through…. I cannot speak worth a minute's listening if I do not speak with all the intensity of my nature. The result is that when I am through, I am drenched with perspiration and there is hardly a dry thread in my clothes."

Debs's vote total in 1908, however, was a disappointing 420,973. The two-party system was entrenched, and many who lionized Debs hesitated to cast their ballots for him. Still, in 1910, 100 Socialists triumphed in state and local elections, and the Milwaukee socialist Victor L. Berger was elected to Congress. In 1912, in a split election won by Woodrow Wilson, who defeated Progressive Party candidate Theodore Roosevelt and the Republican candidate William Howard Taft, the vote total for Debs soared to 901,062, 6% of the total. By 1911–12, there were more than 1000 Socialists in public office, in 160 cities and 33 states.

Debs shunned violence—which is one of the reasons he detached himself from the IWW when it came to favor sabotage and direct violent action. Debs said that he was not in principle against violence and law-breaking. His skepticism was instead a matter, he insisted, of common sense, a recognition of the formidable power of capitalism, and its menacing alliance of big business, law enforcement and the military, and government. He stated in 1912: "If I had the force to overthrow these despotic laws I would use it without an instant's hesitation or delay, but I haven't got it, and so I am law-abiding under protest—not from scruple—and bide my time."

In poor health, exhausted from work and travel, Debs chose not to be a candidate in 1916 for the presidency. He did run for Congress, for the seat in Indiana's fifth district, but he was decisively defeated by the Republican candidate. Woodrow Wilson was re-elected president, and the Socialist candidate, Allan L. Benson, received only 590,524 votes.

For Debs, the over-riding issue of these years was World War I. He scorned it as a capitalist war, and he argued vociferously that the United States should not be dragged into it—a war promoted by wealth and state power, a war that already had cost, and would cost even more, millions of lives of workers-turned-soldiers. "I have not the least fear of invasion or attack from without," Debs said in a letter, January 1916, to the novelist Upton Sinclair: "The invasion and attack I want the workers to prepare to resist and put an end to comes from within, from our own predatory plutocracy right here at home…. The workers have no country to fight for. It belongs to the capitalists and plutocrats."

Socialists, members of the IWW, anarchists, and others opposed to the war met with an enraged reaction. Amid virulent pro-war propaganda and patriotic high-fever, many were arrested and their periodicals were shut down.

On June 16, 1918, in Canton, Ohio, Debs attacked the administration for its prosecution of Americans charged with sedition under the terms of the Espionage Act of 1917. Debs was indicted for endangering the nation at war, and he was tried and found guilty. Speaking directly to the Judge, before receiving sentence, Debs said:

> Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.

Age sixty-three, Debs was sentenced to imprisonment for ten years. He began his sentence in the state prison, Moundsville, West Virginia. When he was transferred to the federal penitentiary in Atlanta, Georgia, the Moundsville warden wrote to his counterpart in Atlanta: "I never in my life met a kinder man. He is forever thinking of others, trying to serve them, and never thinking of himself."

Entering prison, Debs declared: "I enter the prison doors a flaming revolutionist—my head erect, my spirit untamed, and my soul unconquerable." He was inmate 9653 in a prison where conditions were harsh, in a cell with five other inmates, in this cell most of the day, and allowed only twenty minutes of exercise per day. On the wall, Debs pinned a picture of Jesus, suffering under the crown of thorns. Debs was viewed by his supporters as a noble victim, a martyr, and he conceived of himself in these same terms.

President Wilson refused to release Debs even when the war was won; he said that freedom for Debs would be an insult to American soldiers killed in the war. As for the imprisoned Debs, he accepted the Socialist Party's nomination for president in 1920. Not able to be at the convention in person, his portrait there was bedecked with red roses while those in attendance sang the "Marseillaise" and the "Internationale."

"There are no bars," Debs said, "and no walls for the man who in his heart is free, and there is no freedom for the man who in his heart is a slave." His partisans and allies wore buttons that proclaimed VOTE FOR PRISONER 9653. He received 919,799 votes, 3.5% of the total.

Late in 1921, the new president, Warren G. Harding, commuted Debs's sentence, and Debs was freed from prison on December 25th, honored with applause and hurrahs from the hundreds of inmates who revered him. He raised his hat in one hand and his cane in the other and saluted them. Gaunt, worn down, Debs bid farewell to the friends he had made.

Debs was free but imprisonment had damaged his health, and he was disheartened by the failure of Socialism to win broad support. He took some solace from the success of the Russian Revolution of 1917. In his June 1918 speech in Canton, Ohio, he had declared to his audience: "Here, in this alert and inspiring assemblage our hearts are with the Bolsheviki of Russia. Those heroic men and women, those unconquerable comrades have by their incomparable valor and sacrifice added fresh luster to the fame of the international movement." He reiterated this tribute to the Russian Revolution often. But he also criticized the brutal, merciless denial of rights that Lenin had instigated—"the terror which the Bolsheviks imposed to wrest and hold power." In a letter, January 1926, he wrote: "I realize of course the absolute necessity of protecting the government and its institutions against counter-revolution in all its forms but there is a sharp line which may be readily recognized between a counter-revolutionist and an honest dissenter or opponent." This was a crucial distinction for Debs, but it was one that Lenin did not respect.

In the U.S., the Communist Workers Party, founded in mid-1919, and a splinter group, the Proletarian Party, claimed 50,000 to 60,000 members, and their appeal to many radicals further weakened the Socialist Party, already riven by factionalism and wartime repression. Debs continued, nevertheless, to be active, embarking on a speaking-tour in 1923, and doing a great deal of writing, including articles on prison conditions, which, in expanded form, were published as *Walls and Bars* (1927). He did not run for president in the election of 1924; he and the remnants of the Socialist Party backed Wisconsin senator Robert W. La Follette, candidate of a new organization, the Conference for Progressive Political Action. Calvin Coolidge won in a landslide.

Debs took to the road yet again, giving lectures and speaking at rallies, hoping to revive the Socialist Party. But in 1925, he admitted, after a poorly organized and thinly attended Party convention in Cleveland, that the Socialist Party was "as near a corpse as a thing can be and still show signs of life."

Debs passed away on October 20, 1926, in Elmhurst, Illinois. His funeral, three days later was attended by 10,000 people—Norman Thomas delivered the eulogy —and he was buried in Terre Haute.

Debs's Socialist career in certain respects feels distant, in, for example, his—to us—limited conception of the working class as men in factories and heavy industries. But what is immediate and compelling in Debs is his graphic insistence on the exorbitant privilege enjoyed by the few and the suffering experienced by the many. In his speech to the court, September 1918, he said: "I am opposing a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence."

As I completed my reading for this essay, I came across a story in the *Los Angeles Times*. Really it was two stories, same day, July 2, 2019. The first: "The Manor, a 56,500-square-foot chateau in Holmby Hills, has sold for $119.75 million—the highest home price in Los Angeles County history." The second: "Los Angeles now has 59,000+ homeless people."

In letters to the editor, readers referred (in the words of one) to the "bitter irony" of this juxtaposition. Responses included: "Something is very wrong when some people have so much wealth that they can afford frivolous luxury while others can't afford a place to live": and "Something is wrong when someone has the money to buy a 56,500-square-foot house while 59,000 people are homeless in Los Angeles County, many of them in tents on the streets."

The wealthiest three billionaires in the United States—Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett—"now have as much wealth as the bottom half of the U.S. population." The three wealthiest U.S. families are the Waltons of Walmart, the Marscandy family, and the Koch brothers: "their combined fortune is $348.7 billion, "which is four million times the median wealth of a U.S. family." Since 1982, "these three families have seen their wealth increase nearly 6,000 percent, while median household wealth declined by 3 percent over the same period" (Inequality.org, July 1, 2019).

Debs denounced the gap between the two Americas that is even more glaringly obvious now. In June 1898, he spoke in Terre Haute, on "The Coming Nation." He blasted the Capitalist system and the inequalities it generated:

> There were 3.2 million men who had no work at some time during the year, and 2.8 million who had no work at all. Something is wrong if this is true—something appears wrong to the true and patriotic citizen. Years ago there was not a single millionaire in this country and not a single tramp. Now there are 4,000 millionaires and 4 million tramps.

Yes, something was wrong, something is wrong. In 2019, 25% of workers in America make less than $10 an hour, which means that they fall below the federal poverty level. "Most of these low-wage workers receive no health insurance, sick

days, or pension plans from their employers. They cannot get ill and have no hope of retiring" (*The Balance*, www, June 25, 2019). In 2018, meanwhile, the CEO of Flettcor Technologies received a salary of $53 million; the median employee salary of his company was $34,700 (*Forbes*, February 25, 2019).

It is not just a matter of income. It is also the case that many people dislike the work they do, which they feel is not needed, is irrelevant, meaningless. David Graeber, in his study (2018) of "bullshit jobs," has shown that nearly 40% of workers see no point to their work. These "are jobs that are primarily or entirely made up of tasks that the person doing that job considers to be pointless, unnecessary, or even pernicious. Jobs that, were they to disappear, would make no difference whatsoever." This is not Graeber's judgment of such jobs, but, rather, the judgment of the people doing them: "these are jobs that the holders themselves feel should not exist."

In addition, many Americans feel persecuted by their jobs—overwhelmed, harassed, exhausted. According to a recent study, done in 2017, "as our jobs become all-consuming, with employees answering e-mails around the clock and companies trying to squeeze higher profits out of fewer people, more attention is being paid to the effect all of this is having on workers' psyches."

A related survey of more than 2000 millennials indicates that "96 percent of respondents said burnout affected their everyday life. The majority felt pressure to find the 'perfect' job, work long hours, and always be accessible through Slack or e-mail." Nearly 70% agreed that "they identified themselves only through their jobs. And this makes professional struggles even more profound. If things don't go well at work, then who are you?" (*Boston Globe*, July 8, 2019).

Recently the Center for Disease Control reported that, in 2017, deaths from alcohol, drugs, and suicide—the so-called "deaths of despair"— hit the highest rate since CDC researchers began collecting data on such deaths in 1999. "Drug-overdose deaths accounted for the largest national increase at 115 percent, with the sharpest jump beginning around 2013, mainly from opioid overdoses" (*Pain in the Nation Update,* Trust for America's Health, 2019). The rate of suicide has increased by 33%, from an all-time low in 1999 to a rate as high as any since the Great Depression decade of the 1930s.

Studies also have shown an upward trend in deaths of despair among millennials: "Drug, alcohol, and suicide deaths have risen in nearly every age group over the last decade, but the increase has been especially pronounced for younger Americans. Between 2007 and 2017, drug-related deaths increased by 108 percent among adults ages 18 to 34, while alcohol-related deaths increased by 69 percent and suicides increased by 35 percent… 36,000 millennials died deaths of despair in 2017, with fatal drug overdoses being the biggest driver" (*Time* magazine, June 13, 2019). Suicide claimed the lives of 47,000 people in 2017. It "was the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 10 and 34, and the fourth leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 35 and 54" (National Institute of Mental Health).

Where might America's workers, the poor, families, and young people find leadership, inspiration, guidance, hope?

In October 2015, it was reported that Bill and Hillary Clinton, since leaving the White House, had made $240 million (*Forbes*, November 8, 2016). In early March 2017, a month after leaving the White House, Barack Obama and Michelle Obama signed a book deal for an advance of $65 million.

Consider this, from mid-July 2019:

> It's been a busy few months for Michelle Obama. She started out at the end of June with a relaxing, über luxurious trip to Provence, where she and Barack Obama spent a family vacation with their daughters, Sasha and Malia, at a fancy villa in Avignon. The former first family then headed to Lake Como, where they went on the ultimate double date getaway with George and Amal Clooney, and now they're back stateside…. She then she rented a glitzy new-construction mansion for her short trip on the West Coast, which was first reported by TMZ. She stayed in a palatial seven-bedroom, 12-bathroom abode in Hollywood Hills, which is currently on the market for a hefty $22.9 million. (*Observer*, July 11, 2019)

In 2016, Joe Biden completed his service as vice-president; for the next two years, his and his wife Jill's income was $15.6 million.

The most visible Democrat in the country is Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House. Her and her husband Paul's net worth has been estimated at anywhere from $30 million to $50–60 million, perhaps as high as $100 million; they own seven properties, including a Napa Valley vineyard.

Meanwhile, a Federal Reserve report tells us: "Almost a quarter of adults in the U.S. have no retirement savings or pension at all…, and just 36 percent of non-retired adults think that their retirement saving is on track. The report also found that a third of middle-class adults can't afford to cover a $400 emergency" (*Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households*, 2018). African Americans have seen gains in employment, but the increase in their pay has been sluggish; home ownership among some groups has risen, but among African Americans it has fallen to an all-time low (*Wall Street Journal*, April 16 and July 15, 2019).

As for the economic recovery, overall, that President Obama and then President Trump have taken credit for: "40 percent of Americans have seen paltry or volatile wage growth, rising expenses for housing, health care and education, and increased levels of personal debt. They tend not to own homes or many stocks." There is this too: "Half of U.S.

jobs pay less than $18.58 an hour and more than a third pay less than $15, which makes it difficult to save or invest for a better future" (*Washington Post*, July 4, 2019).

I am not a Trump supporter: I could say a lot that is negative about him and about Republican policies, and I could make arguments (as others have done) why his base should withdraw support from him. But, in the U.S. two-party system, what is the alternative? Where else might disaffected and struggling Americans turn? Many Americans look at the leading Democrats, members of the party that claims to speak for the middle-class, for low-wage workers, and for the poor, and they reach the reasonable conclusion that such people, saturated in extravagant wealth, do not represent them and have no genuine concern for their welfare.

What, then, is to be done? Is change even a possibility?

A gloomy answer comes from Walter Scheidel, in *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century* (2017). He says that there are four ways through which inequality is reversed: war, revolution, state collapse, and deadly pandemics—he terms them "the four horsemen." Redistribution on a grand scale: this, he contends, comes about in the aftermath of "catastrophe." There is a "fundamental reset": much is changed, must be changed, after so much has been destroyed.

In an interview (March 2017), Scheidel noted: "In the US and UK inequality has risen so much that policies which could be implemented would only produce improvements at the margins." He continues: "Inequality can't go up indefinitely. There has to be some kind of limit—we just don't know where it is." The conclusion he reaches in his book is this: "Serious consideration of the means required to mobilize political majorities for implementing any of this advocacy is conspicuous by its absence…. Only all-out thermonuclear war might fundamentally reset the existing distribution of resources."

"All-out thermonuclear war": this scary apocalyptic image conveys the depth and scope of the problems that we confront—or, rather, that we are failing to confront. The sense that something is wrong, that it is not under present conditions going to be made right: this is impelling many people toward the conclusion that both political parties are dead-ends, that Capitalism, ineffectual and punitive, must be taken down, terminated, and that that Socialism might be the best alternative to it.

We are heading toward a crisis: it could lead to Socialism, as Debs believed it would, or to authoritarian rule. In fact, we are in a crisis already.

The budget deficit is nearly $1 trillion; the U.S. debt is $22+ trillion. There are the costs of the Affordable Care Act, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security. Where is the money to come from for all of this? Or, to put it another way, how will we choose—that is, who will choose?—how to spend the money that we do have?

The Socialist response includes, along with taxing the rich, to slash defense spending, and it may be true that the U.S. military could get along with less. According to one estimate, "At European levels of U.S. military spending, America could fund a universal child-care policy, extend health insurance to the approximately 30 million Americans who lack it or provide substantial investments in repairing the nation's infrastructure." This writer adds, however: "But cuts to military spending are unlikely in the foreseeable future…. 'The world is still a very dangerous place', said Raytheon chief executive Thomas Kennedy, whose company recorded $27 billion in sales last year…. 'I know the Democrats and Republicans that I talk to recognize that'" (*Washington Post*, April 19, 2019).

We could dig deeper, as the foreign-policy analyst Jessica Matthews has done (*The New York Review of Books*, July 19, 2019):

> Under the Trump administration, the defense budget soared to $700 billion in fiscal year 2018 and $716 billion this year, with a proposed leap to $750 billion for next year…. Defense spending now accounts for almost 60 percent of the budget: everything else is accommodated in the remaining two fifths. By this measure, defense spending looks anything but easily affordable. Nor, on its projected path of continuing growth, does it look sustainable. What would finally be too much? Two thirds of the total? Seventy percent?

I do not mean to be making a polemical point of my own—that we should hike taxes on the rich and on corporations and should reduce spending for the military. My point is descriptive, and I think unassailable: there is plenty of money, and there could be a lot more. It's all about choices. If we want to understand Capitalism in America, we should follow the money and ask who is making the decisions about who should have it and how it should be used.

If Debs were alive, he would be hammering at the nation's ruinous priorities and the calamitous effects of concentrated economic and political power. He would be advocating revolution. In 1900, he stated:

> The working class must get rid of the whole brood of masters and exploiters, and put themselves in possession and control of the means of production, that they may have steady employment without consulting a capitalist employer, large or small, and that they may get the wealth their labor produces, all of it, and enjoy with their families the fruits of their industry in comfortable and happy homes, abundant and wholesome food, proper clothing and all other things necessary to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It is therefore a question not of "reform," the mask of fraud, but of revolution. The capitalist system must be overthrown, class-rule abolished, and wage-slavery supplanted by the coöperative industry.

In "The Socialist Party's Appeal," 1904, Debs again nailed his colors to the mast:

> The Socialist Party stands for a social order, in which every human being, in the full enjoyment of economic freedom, shall have full opportunity, in the best possible environment, to develop the best there is in him for his own good as well as the good of society at large. When the Socialist Party succeeds to power, as it will as certain as the tides ebb and flow, it will inaugurate these changes and usher in the socialist republic.

We could call this misguided, dangerous, crazy, a delusion that, if implemented would lead to disaster. An essential text is *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (French, 1997; trans. 1999), which documents and describes the genocides, deportations, labor camps, executions, imprisonments, and famines in the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, Cambodia, and other Communist regimes. This is a devastating chronicle of horrors, a warning of the Gehenna to which forms of Socialism has led and could lead. Yet we know that Capitalism too could be the subject of a Black Book—centuries of destruction and death caused by colonialism, industrialization, imperialism, slavery, world war. What has been its death toll?

Again, in saying all of this, I do not have an agenda of my own. I am instead calling attention to facts of life that many Americans have experienced and are experiencing in the midst of the Capitalist system of haves & have-nots that Debs indicted and that, two decades into the twenty-first century, has intensified. What he saw, is now much worse. Facts are sometimes in dispute. But many facts are not.

Debs emphasized the structural flaw in the system, the inability of Capitalism to do what its proponents have said that it would do—and there is ample evidence that he was, and that he is, correct. That's why so many Americans now are saying that Capitalism is not working, that something is wrong. Debs is not saying to us that income inequality is a problem within Capitalism that we need to fix. He is saying that there always will be income inequality—and all that accompanies it—as long as there is Capitalism.

In*The Age of Acquiescence* (2015), the historian Steve Fraser refers to America's "tragic fatalism," which is "a version of our general condition that accepts as natural and inevitable what might have alarmed and agitated past generations. What comes to seem normal is assumed to be not only real but right, or is not noticed at all, or is so frequently noticed its impact becomes negligible." About the future, we tend to see it as inevitable, "the mere extrapolation of the here and now."

One thing that Socialism is, is the opposite of fatalism. It is the idea, belief, insight, hope that life for the many does not have to be the way that it is. We could say that Socialism could never happen and should never happen. But this is a version of claims confidently made in the past about the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, gay marriage, and much more—for that matter, the election of Donald Trump. If someone says to you, "That will never happen," do not believe them.

I can imagine an incident happening one day, simple-seeming in its own right, that somehow and suddenly, abetted and amplified by social media, triggers the widespread sentiment among many in the nation that the conditions that they live under are not any longer to be tolerated. In an instant, people would realize that they want revolutionary change and that the time has come to demand and even fight for it. There could be a fight, a war, a revolution.

Impossible? The revolutions in colonial America, France, Haiti, Russia, China, and elsewhere, and the historical record of epic social and political crises, conflicts, and transformations, bear witness that the utterly impossible is eminently possible. American and world history from Debs's era to our own is replete with astonishing achievements and appalling catastrophes. What we can barely imagine, or not imagine at all, could come into view, could become our reality. Capitalism could be brought down, its failures and contradictions tearing it apart at last. This was Eugene V. Debs's conviction and prophesy, and it is possible he will be proven right.

William E. Cain, Senior Editor of *Society*, is Mary Jewett Gaiser Professor of English at Wellesley College in Wellesley, MA. His publications include (as coeditor) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (3rd ed., 2018).