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# Coming to consciousness : Eugene Debs, American Socialism and the "Negro Question"

Josh Honn  
*Lehigh University*

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Consciousness:  
Eugene Debs,  
American  
Socialism and the  
'Negro Question'

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**Coming to Consciousness: Eugene Debs, American Socialism and the 'Negro Question'**

by

**Josh Homn**

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Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Adviser

\_\_\_\_\_  
Co-Adviser

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chairperson of Department

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## **Abstract**

During the years of 1897 to 1926, labor activist Eugene V. Debs was America's most popular Socialist leader, an influential figure in the workers' movement and many presidential elections. Yet, Debs and incipient American socialism have received only cursory treatment in histories of the early 20th century. Nowhere is this more evident than in the historiography of the "Negro question" in post-Reconstruction America. Scholarship of the period has tended to overlook American socialism's influence on white workers' confrontation with the perplexing question of whether or not to absorb recently emancipated blacks into the labor movement. As such, historians often misrepresent the true range of political discourse on the "Negro question" at the turn of the nineteenth century, neglecting some of the more radical views on the issue of black inclusion.

This study seeks to detail Eugene Debs' "coming to consciousness" on the "Negro question," a many pronged dialectical process that began with Debs embodying the popular racist ideologies of his day and ended with the socialist leader representing one of the most progressive radical voices on race in the country. Debs' changing consciousness was shaped by a sharpened awareness of the problem of white racism in America and the impact of European Marxism and black and white radicals of the World War I era.

Through a study of the theoretical and material trends of the early American socialist movement, this study hopes to shed new light on Eugene Debs' thought on the black working class, which has often been treated ahistorically, only encompassing his early views on the "Negro question." Yet, Debs made great ideological strides as a socialist and consummated his life with a highly advanced view on the "Negro question." One can better understand through Debs' career why the labor movement of the early 20th century failed to embrace black workers and how its failure spawned burgeoning

cultures of black radicalism that laid the groundwork for the black nationalist sentiments reflected in the Marcus Garvey movement, other contemporary "race first" ideologies, and eventually black power thought in the 1960s and 70s.



## **Preface**

The historiography of America's best known socialist, Eugene V. Debs, is voluminous yet incomplete. Scholarship on Debs' thought and impact is rare or merely presented in a radical-romantic fashion, glossing over his shortcomings and theoretical contradictions. Many historians have accepted the Socialist Party "failure thesis" which treats the history of American socialism monolithically, lumping Debs in with all of the failures socialism experienced in America while neglecting the major differences between him and most American socialists. But, even though the Socialist Party did not succeed in accomplishing a proletarian revolution in the United States, its minimal successes, and even its major failures, spawned new radical cultures. Specifically, the Socialist Party's inability to incorporate blacks in the radical labor movement and its subsequent neglect of the black socialist presence, led many blacks to take on "race first" ideologies which broke from the Eurocentric radicalism of the American socialism.

Labor historian Philip S. Foner has taken particular interest in early American socialism and blacks. Foner delves into the Socialist Party and the "Negro question" in order to illuminate the global-historical black struggle. While many histories deal with black radical movements from the 1930s on, Foner notes that the World War I-era was never void of black agency, radicalism or hope, and many blacks found expression in the socialist movement. While the failure of American socialism and black workers may be tragic it nevertheless laid the groundwork for future successful black movements. After all, it is consciousness, as Marx stated, that needed to come first in order to engage in the concrete acts of revolution. The history of Eugene V. Debs, American socialism and the "Negro question" represents this very important process of coming to consciousness.

Debs' career was filled with many contradictions and changes as his thought

evolved with age and experience. Regarding his take on the black masses, most historians have settled for an ahistorical account, citing his early works on the “Negro question” and using them to make generalizations about his entire career. Up until 1916, Debs aligned recently emancipated blacks explicitly with the white working class, simply perceiving both as part of the general labor problem. Debs was unable, at this stage in his career, to realize and thus fully comprehend the special oppression blacks faced outside of capitalist economic exploitation.

Debs lived and worked well past these base-economic pronouncements and, regarding the “Negro question,” eventually achieved a “coming to consciousness” on the issue. Through the dialectical process of his interaction with black socialists, racist radicals and America culture, Debs’ views were constantly evolving. His ability to transcend the racism of the Socialist Party created a positive and reciprocal relationship with early black socialists. The experience of both Debs and black socialists *informed* and *transformed* each other and created a radical solidarity not evident in the greater American socialist movement. It was this empowering process which alerted Debs to the plight of the black masses and also forced many black radicals to adopt “race first” ideologies within the socialist tradition.

Early black socialists were the ultimate (re: radical) expression of black agency and consciousness in post-Reconstruction America. Debs and his black comrades represented a true departure from the capitalist alienation and manipulation of both major political parties and also from major black leaders of the time, such as the accommodationist-uplift ideologue Booker T. Washington. Through the examination of Eugene Debs and the “Negro question” one can better understand all of the contradictions, failures and victories of early socialism within American culture. More importantly, one can also find powerful

yet embryonic expressions of black radicalism which, more and more, forced itself upon the national consciousness throughout the remainder of the 20th century. The story begins, however, in the midst of the race stratified working class movement of the late 19th century with Eugene V. Debs beginning his career in labor organizing and America's first black socialist agitating for workers' rights.

## **Subservient Beginnings**

During the great railroad strike of 1877, which saw intense levels of riotous violence throughout Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Maryland and elsewhere throughout America, one of the country's great future radicals, Eugene V. Debs, stayed home. As a leading member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF), based in Terre Haute, Indiana, Debs strictly adhered to the union's motto: "Benevolence, Sobriety and Industry." Still far from the more revolutionary unions he would soon lead, Debs was first a Democrat and a steadfast believer in the harmony of interests between the worker and the owner.<sup>1</sup> The accommodating and capitalist-friendly BLF was, as Debs' most recent biographer has pointed out, less a "labor organization agitating for justice than ... a sifter of personnel for the railroad corporation."<sup>2</sup> Because of the union's stance, Debs and other loyal members of the BLF had little choice but to oppose the strike of 1877. Any solidarity with the striking railroad workers would expose contradictions in the theoretical premise that workers and owners held the same interests which the "union" was built on. Thus, Debs and his "brothers" were left in a peculiar position within the rising tide of working class radicalism sweeping postbellum America.

Debs' time with the BLF holds a peculiar position itself within the historiography of the socialist labor leader, a body of literature which has been heavily influenced by a radical romanticism that tended to read his later actions back into his early life. Let there be no mistake though. Debs was not born a revolutionary, a socialist, or even a worker with a working class consciousness. His often illusory and hyperbolic representations of his actions and his past have since effected the many biographies written about him. For example, H. Wayne Morgan's *Eugene V. Debs: Socialist for President* spends only a few pages on Debs' life before his first campaign on the socialist ticket for president in 1900,

quickly glossing over his many early political and theoretical inconsistencies.<sup>3</sup> Other biographies spend more time developing the intricate and, at times, ambiguous roots of Debs' radicalism.<sup>4</sup> His authorized biography, by friend David Karsner, completely omits Debs' inaction of 1877 and his early pro-capitalist stances as an officer of the BLF, editor of the BLF's magazine, and later as a Democratic member of Indiana's state assembly.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of understanding the pre-socialist period of Eugene Debs's life involves more than matters of historical correctness or academic accuracy. To understand any historical figure one must understand the historical conditions that created him. Assuming Debs' radicalism underestimates the impact of the budding industrial capitalist age on the working class and labor leaders in post-Civil War America. Furthermore, it fails to closely examine the historical and social *creation* of the radical. If Debs was indeed born a radical as many scholars would have us believe, then as Engels once said of such men, he "might just as well have been born 500 years earlier, and might then have spared humanity 500 years of error, strife and suffering."<sup>6</sup>

While Debs and the BLF shielded their eyes from the sparks radiating from the clash of American class warfare, another man stood closer to the fire. This was Peter H. Clark, a black principal at the Colored High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. When the great railroad strike of 1877 erupted Clark had already begun to turn to socialism. Now viewed by historians as the first public black socialist in American history, Clark used his intellect and local stature to spread the word to the workers that, in his view, "the miserable condition into which society has fallen has but one remedy ... socialism."<sup>7</sup> Debs and the all-white members of the BLF, on the other hand, were working for the cause of class harmony *under* capitalism at the same time publishing and partaking in Negro dialect jokes.<sup>8</sup>

Clark, a class conscious African-American, was in large measure at the forefront of socialist thought in the United States. It was he who was speaking to crowds on street corners, union meetings and strike rallies to predominantly white workers and, as Herbert G. Gutman has said, was “bitterly denounc[ing] the notion that the interests of capital and labor were the same.”<sup>9</sup> In the uproar of the nationwide railroad strike it was Clark’s voice that was most outspoken on working class unity across racial lines. He joined the Workingmen’s Party and became a nationally known figure for his erudite oratory and biting missives against the railway corporations. The official paper of the Workingmen’s Party, *The Emancipator*, supported and encouraged Clark, making this the first time any American socialist paper had recognized “the contribution of blacks to the building of American society.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite his notoriety as a black socialist orator, Clark became disillusioned not so much with socialism, but with the socialist parties of America. Reflecting a dominant and recurring theme within American socialism, the Workingmen’s Party was plagued by factionalism in the years directly following the great railroad strike. Despite reorganizing as the Socialist Labor Party, inner party politics overshadowed any effort to organize blacks or address their grievances. The effect was Clark’s enthusiasm for the SLP waned. He left the party in July, 1879 despite his continuing belief that socialism was the remedy to what ailed black America and America as a whole.<sup>11</sup> The history of American socialism would be haunted by Clark’s disaffection. The first victims of factionalism and crisis in the American socialist parties would thereafter almost always be blacks. As Clark and many other black Americans would later find out, when it came to American socialism’s position on the “Negro question,” as Philip S. Foner put it in his trailblazing book *American Socialism and Black Americans*, “deeds rarely followed words.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1892, in Clark's hometown of Cincinnati, Eugene Debs announced his departure from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen as he began to look toward a more liberal solution to the "labor question" than the conservative majority of the brotherhood. He next turned to building the American Railway Union, which would include a broad spectrum of workers' locals as opposed to the brotherhoods, like the BLF, which was organized around a single trade. Debs' eventual control of the ARU, even as its president, was very limited and all laws and regulations of the ARU were decided at conventions by delegates from the locals. Wrongly, the exclusion of blacks by the ARU has often times been aligned directly with the philosophies and wishes of Debs himself, especially since during his association with the BLF Debs never ran "counter to the membership's anti-black feelings."<sup>13</sup> Yet, it was he who now proposed that blacks be admitted on equal terms into the new union. According to Eric Arnesen, historian and author of *Brotherhoods of Color*, Debs "objected to the constitutional narrowing of the ARU's base on the grounds of race."<sup>14</sup> Speaking before the ARU's first annual convention Debs spoke up, saying, "I am not here to advocate association with the Negro, but I am ready to stand side by side with him, to take his hand in mine and help him whenever is in my power."<sup>15</sup>

The referendum was voted down by a narrow vote of 112 to 100. It was the "one great error of the ARU constitution," according to Debs biographer Ray Ginger.<sup>16</sup> It was also always Debs' contention that the failure of the great Pullman Strike of 1894, which led to the decline of the ARU, was due to the racism of the all-white labor unions and its workers. Although there were many other factors, such as government intervention and coercion, Debs nevertheless maintained this belief after Pullman, and in 1923 stated that the white workers "expected the colored porters and waiters to stand by them. If they

had only admitted those porters and waiters to membership in the American Railway Union there would have been a different story of that strike, for it would certainly have had a different result.”<sup>17</sup> Debs consistently overinflated his own participation in these early strike efforts and, in fact, mostly overlooked the “Negro question” during the Pullman Strike. Despite being late, his assessment held certain theoretical truths. The growing race violence in St. Louis, Chicago and in other American cities had very much to do with the problem of the race (dis)unity of the working class.<sup>18</sup> In many ways, what destroyed Debs’ union helped build a semblance of unity in his view on the “Negro question.”

After witnessing several failed strikes, unfulfilled Democratic promises and the continual force with which the government and owners used to defeat workers’ rights, Debs publicly embraced socialism on January 1, 1897. Though still far from fully grasping the theoretical principles of socialism, Debs had seen, first hand, that the class harmony he espoused with the BLF was an impossibility. He was becoming aware of the deep class *antagonisms* which existed in America. With the fall of the ARU, railroad workers went back with the brotherhoods where “the drive to oust blacks from railroad jobs was resumed.”<sup>19</sup> In the end, the racist policies of the brotherhoods usually meant their own defeat. Unions would refuse to admit blacks, strike and then decry those same blacks who took over white union jobs as scabs. Instead of aligning with all workers, the *white* American proletariat redirected their anger against the *black* working class. The failure of workers’ strikes were almost always certain even before the government intervened because the path to working class unity was continually blocked by the issue of race. Yet, despite Marx’s dictum that “labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded,” American unions and socialists continued to



disregard the black working class and believe that socialism could somehow come about with or without their inclusion in the revolutionary proletarian movement.<sup>20</sup> In any event, at the beginning of the 20th century, American socialists would pay a great deal of attention to black America (at least in the press) and while Debs would eventually become the Socialist Party's foremost activist on the "Negro *question*," many of his colleagues could only see a "Negro *problem*."

## **Radical Racism**

When the Socialist Party was founded in 1900, members had the opportunity to include in their revolutionary program the involvement of the country's black population, roughly 10 million strong and mainly working class. As the white Southern anti-racist orator George Washington Cable said in 1887, the "Negro question" was, at the turn of the century, still "the gravest in American affairs."<sup>21</sup> But, what exactly was the "Negro question?" To Cable, the query was whether black Americans, both North and South, would be able to participate in American society as equal citizens. Yet, to many, and arguably most, it was a question which was best left unanswered thus allowing for the continuing, profitable exploitation of the Negro masses. Only a cursory look at the economic, social and political climate of the time is necessary to realize just how little input and influence blacks themselves bore on this question.

The turn of the century brought with it the reinstatement of white supremacy in America. The emergence of Jim Crow laws and practices now virtually swamped the possibility of Southern black agency. Nationwide, blacks who could vote supported *both* parties in an opportunistic yet self-defeating strategy to gain some voice in the major political parties. As the black vote was rescinded by the lily white factions of each party, black leaders looked towards social and economic programs of uplift, most notably through the Tuskegee Institute and the accommodationist mantra of Booker T. Washington. The popularity, at least in white circles, of Washington's ideology that economic success would gain blacks a suitable, if not equal, place in society displayed just how commanding the capitalist influence over black life was. With the growing opposition of black intellectuals along with the pragmatic silence of the disillusioned black working class, the Socialist Party, founded on the Marxist belief that to free humanity one must

free society from capitalism, had the perfect chance to establish a presence in the movement for black liberation and the equality of all men.

In order to include blacks, the Socialist Party would also have to confront their own embrace of popular American racist ideology as well. Aside from the issues of economic survival, blacks were facing new waves of racial oppression, both subtle and overt. The restoration of white supremacy in the South led to black disfranchisement and segregation. New levels of lynching, "white justice" and the popularity of the Ku Klux Klan also made sure any black protest would be squelched. But, anti-black racism was also alive within the radical and working class labor movements, as seen in the exclusionist policies of the American Federation of Labor, the railroad brotherhoods, and almost all of the Northern industrial unions.<sup>22</sup> Working class whites and openly racist labor leaders disfranchised black workers by excluding them from union membership and when black protest erupted, in the form of scabbing or all-black unions, the white response was often violent. It was against this backdrop of racist behavior that the Socialist Party debated a resolution on the "Negro question" during its founding convention of 1901 in Indianapolis.

Debate of the proposed Negro resolution on the convention floor in Indianapolis was heated. There were only three black delegates, two of whom were from Debs' home state of Indiana.<sup>23</sup> One of them, William Costley, argued that the Negro held a peculiar position within the working class and, thus, warranted the special attention of the Socialist Party. The original wording of the resolution made direct reference to the economic, social and political oppression facing black Americans: lower wages, racial terrorism, lynching, and disfranchisement. The two remaining black delegates reluctantly accepted Costley's wording although made it clear that they agreed with the majority of

the delegates that the Negro should be offered no special favor. The resolution eventually passed without Costley's references to the grim realities of Negro life and prefigured all of the contradictions embedded in the Socialist Party's position on the "Negro question" to come. Suffice it to say, while it may seem surprising that the party even passed a resolution regarding black Americans at its founding in 1901, the debate did not end there and the Negro resolution was soon rescinded and never reaffirmed by another national convention.<sup>24</sup>

The man most vocal and arguably most responsible for the change of tone in the original Negro resolution was Algie M. Simons, editor of the popular socialist journal *International Socialist Review*. While Simons condemned the "capitalist parties" for their avoidance of the Negro question, he and his comrades had their own theoretical means of evading the issue.<sup>25</sup> The majority of socialist organs did not regularly or with any particular fervor deal with the "Negro question," yet a few popular ones, such as *Appeal To Reason* and the *International Socialist Review*, did. From 1900-1904, the socialist stances on the Negro question varied greatly and were all mired in deep theoretical and practical contradictions. Within the pages of the *International Socialist Review*, many writers chimed in on the issue, offering up spectrum of views though very few, if any, escaped dominant stereotypes of black inferiority and immorality. Putting it more bluntly than most, Charles Dobbs, whose aim was the repeal of the Negro resolution at the 1904 national convention, wrote that "as a race the negro worker of the South lacks the brain and the backbone necessary to make a Socialist."<sup>26</sup> With that said, it is no wonder most of these socialist writers chose to address the perceived Negro *problem* and not the Negro *question* proper.

It should also be no surprise then that Simons was one of the first to spout the

fundamental party line. Even before the founding convention, he stated: “the negro question has completed its evolution into the ‘labor problem.’”<sup>27</sup> For Simons and other socialists, the Negro had been freed from chattel slavery only to become a wage slave like “his fellow white laborers.” The question then was, why was it that the black and white working *classes* had not assumed their singular and unified position as a revolutionary working *class*? The blame for the racial division impairing the working class movement, as far as most American socialists were concerned, lay at the steps of the capitalist class. Simons charged that Negro scabs were used by capitalist interests to “embitter [the white working class] natural hatred.”<sup>28</sup> But, the blame did not stop there as *blacks themselves* were also responsible. Even those most sympathetic to the cause of the Negro, such as Clarence Darrow, the famous “Scopes Trial” lawyer and defender of Negro rights, placed some of the blame on the black working class, deriding them for their scabbing. For Darrow, race hatred was a “feeling,” not an economic fact, yet if, he thought, blacks took positions as scabs it was only because they had yet to be taught their “own integrity and worth.”<sup>29</sup>

In Darrow’s 1901 article, one will find the terribly deep contradiction, between theory and practice (word and deed), that riddled the American socialist movement on the “Negro question.” Darrow and the socialists wanted blacks to “fight this battle themselves” yet they never made any effort of their own to gain acceptance for blacks, even at the most elementary level, into the industrial unions. Darrow wanted blacks to “join in the common cause with all the weak, poor and oppressed” with the admittedly racist labor unions yet he also made it known that blacks themselves would have to “knock at [the unions’] doors” and join hands with their white brethren whenever they could.<sup>30</sup> Theoretically, talk of race unity could have supplied an empowering sense of

hope, yet in practice the union doors did not need to be *knocked on* by class conscious blacks, they would need to be *kicked in*. While Darrow maintained that black-white working class unity was “inevitable,” the vehement and violent racism of the Northern unions suggested that this *inevitable future* was, in fact, also a very *distant* one.

The presumed inevitability of interracial unity was grounded in many early American socialists’ basic theoretical misunderstanding of Marxism; one deemed earlier by Marx but also, and most vociferously, Lenin (not referring specifically to America) as “vulgar materialism” or “economism.”<sup>31</sup> The latter, often called economic determinism, is the belief that the natural laws of capitalism will create a revolutionary class consciousness within the working class. Through alienation, exploitation and oppression, working class men and women will realize the necessity of overthrowing the capitalist system. Faith in economic determinism, or *economism*, allowed subscribing socialists to believe in the inevitability of their movement’s success. Thus, direct and practical action was not always required to raise class consciousness, combat capitalism or conduct revolutionary acts. American socialism was beleaguered by economic determinism for a number of reasons, one of which was the fact that Marx’s early humanist writings (for instance, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and *The German Ideology*) were not published in his, or Engels’, lifetime. Also, his works on political economy had since been popularly misread as determinist in nature. While still evident in his popular works, American socialists would have more easily realized how little determinism truly played in his theoretical framework with access to his early writings. Marx argued throughout his career against mechanical materialism, insisting that change and self-change came through “revolutionary praxis.”<sup>32</sup>

Despite the obvious theoretical flaws of economic determinism, the idea enabled

American socialists to avoid their own deep race prejudices and general aversion to embracing black workers as equals. Furthermore, most early American socialists were not reared on Marx and thus were poorly informed on his brand of active (re: non-determinist) materialist theory. Thus, most, including Eugene Debs, were influenced by Utopianists such as Robert Owen and to a greater extent those to which economic determinism owed its popularity: contemporary post-Marx Marxists. Some, such as the popular Milwaukee labor leader Victor Berger, were familiar with Marx yet Berger was one of American socialism's most "blatant racists."<sup>33</sup> Although Berger once gave Debs a copy of Marx's *Capital*, there is no proof that Debs ever read the great tome.<sup>34</sup> Debs himself was an ardent admirer of the Russian Marxist Karl Kautsky, whose blatant economism led Lenin to later dub Kautsky a "renegade" as opposed to a respected comrade.<sup>35</sup> Kautsky was perhaps the early 20th century's greatest popularizer of Marx, but he was also one of his greatest vulgarizers. The editor of the early American socialist organ *The People*, and future co-founder of the non-racist union the International Workers of the World, Daniel De Leon was probably one of Marx's most fervent admirers. He may have also been the first socialist to address the "Negro question" after the Civil War but his views never escaped the popular economism of the day.<sup>36</sup> In the end, early American socialism had little grasp of the culturalist and humanist aspects of Marxist theory. Its ignorance and adherence to economic determinism insured that the Party's own racist views were never really challenged.

Despite the racism that underscored every article on blacks in the *International Socialist Review* from 1900-1904, some challenged the Socialist Party to invoke new theoretical and practical strategies on the "Negro question." In February 1901, Charles H. Vail, a minister and the first permanent organizer of the Socialist Party, called his party

“the only political organization that has anything to offer the colored race.” Yet, Vail failed to offer anything to blacks in his article other than a parting wish that “the Negro wage slave become enlightened.”<sup>37</sup> Other socialists, like Clarence Meily, though, were sufficiently inspired to question the white role in resolving the “Negro question.” He challenged whites to reject their race prejudice. Denouncing the popular proposal of segregated unions and white violence against black workers, Meily challenged discrimination in the American socialist movement, writing, “how can socialism, the champion of the proletariat, which by classic inclusion embraces not merely the workers, but the criminals, and all the despised and rejected of the earth, recognize any distinction of race, or color, or birth, or faith amongst its children?” Meily was not interested in “enlightening” blacks but specifically attacked the ignorance of the white working classes, calling their racism “a base and ignoble thing” which denied their own true class consciousness. After posing the question above, and possibly referring specifically to the Negro question, Meily ended his article with a spurt of sharp wit: “To ask the question should be to answer it.”<sup>38</sup>

A few socialists, like William Noyes, believed the Socialist Party should take an interest in the education of blacks. Noyes, after expressing many of the period’s popular racist stereotypes, said that “race prejudice is deeper in the blood than economic standing” yet went on to conclude that economic necessity would overcome racism.<sup>39</sup> Despite his own racism and contradictory reasoning, Noyes at least endorsed *some* sort of active role in black affairs even if it constituted a type of “white man’s burden.” Oscar Edgar, in a 1904 piece in the *International Socialist Review*, continued this theme and called for socialist propaganda to take up the issue of white racism within the working class movement. Referring to an earlier article by Debs on the issue of “ignorant” white



workers, Edgar argued that any socialist organizing effort must contend with the reality that a majority of white workers and labor unions held a great deal of race prejudice. Remaining blind to the problem of white racism, Edgar contended, would prove the movement “impracticable and illogical.”<sup>40</sup>

American socialists like Edgar and Meily, no matter what their perception of the Negro’s innate character, were actively engaged in the cultural and social realities of the era while the majority of their radical colleagues regurgitated a hopeless and self-defeating economic determinism. As Marx said in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, and was true of most early American socialist theorists on the Negro question, “the educator must himself be educated.”<sup>41</sup> After all, some members in the socialist ranks looked at the successes of integrated Southern unions and came to the realization that the Negro was the most class conscious segment of the working class.<sup>42</sup>

For whatever hope some of these essays offered, very little was done materially for or, more importantly, *with* blacks by the Socialist Party, and in 1903 the party would erase what little official progress had been made on the Negro question by repealing the original Negro resolution of 1901. And, even though Reverend Vail proclaimed that the Negro *must* vote the Socialist Party ticket, the SP’s 1904 presidential candidate, Eugene V. Debs, offered blacks no real motive to do so.

## Early Contradictions

Throughout 1903, Debs toured the South, organizing and agitating for the Socialist Party of America along with friend and Party secretary William Mailly.<sup>43</sup> What he saw of the Negro's treatment in the Southern states "aroused his anger at inequality and cruelty."<sup>44</sup> Debs' personal confrontations with racist Southerners and class conscious blacks shaped much of his distinctly *emotional* position on the "Negro question" although his feelings of outrage did not alter his theoretical stance which was still simply the party line. In his first published article on the "Negro question" Debs stated unequivocally that there was "no 'Negro problem' apart from the general labor problem."<sup>45</sup> Echoing the sentiments of fellow American socialist stalwarts like Simons, Debs wrote that the black worker "was not one whit worse off than thousands of white slaves who throng the same labor market."

These remarks were written following a request of Gurley Brewer, editor of the Negro organ the *Indianapolis World*. Brewer had raised a series of questions regarding the labor unions' stance on Booker T. Washington and industrial education. Not content with the subservient and accommodationist response of D.M. Perry of the National Association of Manufacturers, Debs had been adamant in his reply but his article actually offered now new hope for blacks. Debs' article for the *Indianapolis World* was widely reprinted across the country in many socialist and black organs and it is also this article which has historically been the most widely quoted of any of Debs' work on the "Negro question."<sup>46</sup> Thus, it is from this piece that any ahistorical conclusion on Debs' thoughts on the black working class, *vis a vis* socialism, is likely to have come from.

Debs began his rejoinder to the *Indianapolis World* with a short preface claiming his own lack of racial prejudice: "first, let me say that all my life I have opposed

discrimination, political, economic, or social, against any human being, on account of color or sex, regarding all such as relics of the ignorant, cruel and barbarous past.”<sup>47</sup> This statement says much about Debs. First, he falsely states that he had his whole life opposed racism. Obviously, before his turn to socialism this was not the case. Debs’ penchant for dialect jokes along with his early belief, as a Democrat, in Negro inferiority and white imperialist expansionism constituted racial bigotry. Secondly, and most importantly, Debs called racism a relic of the past, suggesting that existent racism was less harmful or potent, that racism was slowly, but surely, eroding away into a color-blind future.

This second point represents the quintessence of Debs’ contradictions on the “Negro question” in this stage of his life. Debs had experienced racism first hand during his recent tours of the South. In Texas, Debs was carrying two grips as he passed three white Southern workers who told him “there’s a nigger that’ll carry your grips ... that’s what he’s here for.” Debs was appalled by this incident, sarcastically calling it “a savory bouquet of white supremacy.” He then went on to chide the three white men, calling them “ignorant, lazy, unclean, totally void of ambition, themselves the product of the capitalist system.” Debs’ tour of the South made him realize that “the white heel is still upon the black neck.”<sup>48</sup> This acknowledgement implies that Debs grasped the special plight black Americans faced. Yet, still he concluded, in one of his more popular pieces titled “The Negro in the Class Struggle,” that “the real issue” wasn’t “social equality but *economic freedom*.” Despite all of what his personal experience told him, Debs could not conceive of a “Negro question outside of the labor question.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, so contradictory and inconsistent was Debs’ position on the “Negro question” that in 1903 he would often quote the Socialist Party’s Negro resolution in his articles yet that same year he was also

one of the first to call for its official repeal at the national convention in St. Louis.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, Debs was far ahead of the rest of the Party on the “Negro question,” especially when it came to race unity and segregation.

Historian Nick Salvatore put it perfectly when he said that “Debs did not simply confirm his audiences preconceptions but rather, as on the question of racial prejudice, frequently challenged their basic assumptions.”<sup>51</sup> One of the more astounding ways in which Debs openly confronted and defied the racial climate of the time was by refusing to speak to segregated audiences.<sup>52</sup> This “progressive” stance caused near riots during his tours of the South as Debs often relayed to his reading audience. In his *Indianapolis World* article Debs spoke of a meeting in Montgomery, Alabama where “a riot was almost precipitated” because of his demand that the proprietor of the hall admit Negroes. The labor union hosting the event had proposed the admission of blacks but the hall’s owner refused declaring that his “house should be burned to the ground before any ‘damned niggers’ should have access to it.”<sup>53</sup> In the end, Debs won out; black workers were admitted and the opera house was not burned down. Throughout 1900, Debs “either demanded that Afro-Americans be allowed in or insisted on an end to segregated seating within the hall[s]” he spoke at in other Southern cities such as Columbus, Macon, Savannah, and Atlanta.<sup>54</sup> Debs’ dedication to anti-segregation was not only directed at the owners of opera houses and dining halls but also at white workers and their racist labor unions. He fiercely and poignantly announced that “the ignorant members of labor unions, and there are many such ... who still oppose the Negro, unconsciously echo the interests of their industrial masters, while those who know better and fight the black man are spies and traitors in the service of the the same masters.”<sup>55</sup> Debs was thus acutely aware of the levels of racism within the party and often took the opportunity to blast the white

supremacism of his socialist and labor union “brethren.” Yet despite obvious racism within the party and among union members Debs, perhaps aware of his black audience, announced in his *Indianapolis World* article that “the Socialist Party ... is absolutely free from color prejudice, and the labor union[s] ... [are] rapidly becoming so.”<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, this statement could not have been further from the truth. Debs’ campaign for president in 1904 proved the falsity of his claims.

In November of 1903, in the *International Socialist Review*, Debs made his stance on the Negro question patently clear: “[The Socialist Party and I] have nothing special to offer the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races.”<sup>57</sup> This is what the Socialist Party’s candidate for the office of the President of the United States of America had to offer the black working class he wished to organize and rally around the socialist cause: *nothing special*. Even so, the party had a positive impact in some black circles.

Despite the failure of the Socialist Party to make a direct appeal to black workers, that “disillusionment with the Republican party was becoming so strong in Negro circles,” as Philip S. Foner writes, “that the socialist ticket commanded more attention than it had in any other previous presidential campaign.”<sup>58</sup> Black news organs such as *The Broadax* (Chicago), *The Bee* (Washington, D.C.) and *The Voice of the Negro* (Atlanta) publicly supported Debs and urged all blacks to “cast their votes for the socialist ticket.”<sup>59</sup> Gaining only three percent of the vote in 1904 (double the party’s 1900 returns), Debs lost the presidential election to Theodore Roosevelt and the Republican Party.

Eugene Debs and his party, however, continued to hold a strong belief in political action and that the working class could vote socialism into existence. But in 1904 voting was not even a reality for many black Americans as white supremacists used tactics like

the grandfather clause to thwart black political agency. And when Debs ran again in 1908, he sabotaged his position among black voters in a question posed by Rev. J. Milton Waldron, president of the Negroes National League. Waldron and the NNL had just broken from the Republican Party and wanted Debs to state the Socialist Party's stance on the Negro. Debs' response must have surely offended many politically conscious blacks, especially those with some interest in the party, as he reiterated the old party line that "there is no negro question apart of the class question" and also that "when negroes ... develop sufficient intelligence to understand their true economic and political interests they will join and support the Socialist [P]arty."<sup>60</sup> Despite Debs' less than motivating pronouncement, many blacks still continued to support the Socialist Party's presidential candidate. Specifically, W.W. Passage, a black socialist, produced a Socialist Party pamphlet titled *Eugene V. Debs on "The Color Question"* reprinting much of Debs' writings on the Negro question.<sup>61</sup> The pamphlet also contained letters from Passage and other black leaders and newspapers who were appealing to black Americans to vote Debs into office. The existence of this pamphlet alone proved that blacks were interested in Debs and the Socialist Party even if the American socialists were not truly interested in them.

Signs of black interest in the Socialist Party and the labor movement should have led American socialists to "develop sufficient intelligence to understand" that the defeat of racism was required overthrow the system that perpetuated it. Yet, Debs and the SP largely ignored the "Negro question" and offered little reason (besides words) for blacks to embrace socialist politics. Even though his eyes were focused on a socialist future, Debs overlooked the particular horrors capitalism posed for black workers under white-capitalist supremacy.

Debs' train, the famous "Red Special," stopped at Harpers Ferry in 1908 to visit the monument of one of his greatest heroes: John Brown, the anti-slavery insurrectionist. Before a crowd of black Americans, Debs called for their support for socialism and proclaimed that "the Socialist Party [was] carrying on the work begun by John Brown."<sup>62</sup> It must have been obvious to anyone, though, that the Socialist Party was no collective manifestation of John Brown. Debs could invoke Brown's name all he wanted but the Socialist Party had yet to produce any program or direct action for or with blacks. In theory the shoe fit, yet in practice Debs and the Socialist Party failed to measure up to the task.

## **Utopian Determinism**

In the 1880s, Frederick Engels was highly critical of German-American socialists who had failed to adapt Marxism to conditions in the United States. They refused to even learn English yet wanted to mount a revolutionary movement in an English speaking country. Engels informed them that “our theory” is not “a credo” but “a guide for action.”<sup>63</sup> Engels’ point on socialist theory applied as well to Eugene Debs and the Socialist Party of America. No other problem exposed the inanity of American socialist theory than the “Negro question.” Unwilling to grasp the special circumstances of their black working class brothers, American socialists offered only idealistic predictions of a utopian future as a cure-all to the ills capitalism had caused. Many were blinded by the vulgar economism associated with a transplanted European Marxist theory that had limited relevance and validity in a distinctly different social context. Stripped of its Hegelian qualities of dialectical transcendence and adaptation, Marxism ceased to be a living and active theory, indeed, it was almost dead.<sup>64</sup>

Debs’ own theory was heavily shaped by economic determinism but it possessed other characteristics. His constant references to a utopic socialist future constituted a kind of emotional idealism that set its sights over material reality. Using personal tales and impassioned oratory, Debs articulated economism while appealing to utopianism. His speeches and writings lacked the bleak pronouncements of workers having to face the harsh conditions of capitalism until they became aware of their revolutionary historical mission but, instead, Debs appealed to the American tradition of political agency in much the same way of a Lincoln or a Jefferson.<sup>65</sup> In that way, Debs had yet to shake his belief in ideals such as the importance of manhood, change through the ballot and social democracy. While his ends were similar to that of European Marxism, his means were



distinctly American: passive and naive.

More a historical fortune teller than a revolutionary, Debs' early stance on the Negro question exuded a *utopian determinism*: the belief that a new society existed in the future, therefore negating the necessity of human agency to bring it about. Debs' utopian determinism was essentially like a blind navigator on the roads of revolution: driving with a destination in mind but without the means to get to there. Full understanding of the forms of Debs' determinism, both economic and utopian, can be found in the history of his early formative years as a socialist when, as Salvatore has pointed out, Debs was "confused and rootless" regarding socialist ideology and politics.

What possibly made Debs different was his failure to act as a dispassionate agent of change. In fact, Debs was one of very few Socialists who was broadly liked. As Salvatore had pointed out, this was possibly due to Debs' early grooming in the BLF which preached the importance of manhood, conformity to American culture, and a belief in the coming abundance of the industrial age: "Benevolence, Sobriety and Industry." Also, as his many biographers have often repeated, Debs' "anger was personal and humanitarian" and, thus, he often assumed his audience was instilled with the same empathy and sympathy.<sup>66</sup> This was especially dangerous when dealing with a racist white working class on the "Negro question" for, ultimately, it was of little consequence if Debs refused to speak to segregated audiences if the majority of the people he represented and organized embraced segregation like a religion.

During the late 1890s, Debs was evolving his own brand of American socialism, one that was now *resistant to yet still entrenched in* the American culture and political tradition.<sup>67</sup> Beneath all of his rhetoric, Debs retained a profound belief in the sanctity of individualism which informed his anti-collectivist spirit and early ambivalence towards

workers strikes. Debs' defense of manhood and individual American liberties were at times theoretically antithetical to the socialist tradition of mass action. As Salvatore has noted, "embedded in Debs' analysis lay a quite negative estimation of people's ability to struggle against corporate power ... [and he] ... did not discern sources of resistance or even modes of survival in either the trade union, family or ethnic ties, religious identity or cultural activities."<sup>68</sup> By confining himself to a political outlook within the history of American culture Debs' early radicalism had yet to take on a class character familiar to international socialist theory. His belief in the power and plenty of American capitalism also led him to believe that the growing corporate predominance in America was plowing the way for a socialist future and his belief in the inevitability of socialism, which was so popular at the time, reinforced this notion. Hence, the industrial age embodied Debs' utopian determinism, for it was this new era of capitalism which would bring about the future socialist utopia. Thus, the only action Debs often supported was political action. Since he retained a belief in the ubiquitous and American "power of the people," his belief in how workers could take control "relied exclusively on victory at the ballot box."<sup>69</sup> It was precisely this belief in the power of the ballot that alienated many blacks.

In the early 1900s voting was not a form of activism many blacks could often partake in the way white Americans like Debs could. In fact, so naive was Debs that he was appealing in his campaign to a sense of duty to which all Americans were indebted, the right to vote, yet black America had been excluded from this tradition. Still a long ways from the civil rights era, Debs wanted to create change peacefully and traditionally. As Ginger pointed out, Debs failed to see that "special measures were sometimes needed" to reach his ends.<sup>70</sup> For black Americans, particularly in the South, special measures had to be included in any radical movement that wished for their support. Southern blacks,

between 1890 and 1915, were facing formidable barriers to their voting rights. This was due to new waves of white supremacist measures such as literacy and property requirements, the grandfather clause, poll taxes, educational or understanding tests, residency requirements and, of course, white violence.<sup>71</sup> So, when Debs stated that the Socialist Party would “receive the Negro and all other races on absolutely equal terms” but the party would “not suffer [themselves] to be divided by any specious appeal to race prejudice,” he was essentially, even if unknowingly, stating complicity with white supremacist policies that barred blacks from voting.<sup>72</sup> Essentially, Debs wanted blacks to vote for him for president though he was not at all concerned whether or not such actions were actually even feasible. The socialist movement could not afford, in his words, to “be coaxed or driven from the straight road.” Little did Debs realize that it was exactly this dogmatic and vulgar approach to socialist theory that was keeping the car in neutral.

Ultimately, since Debs and other American socialists saw the Negro question as simply part of the labor question, no white man could help the struggle for black equality. Debs said as much in response to a racist Southern socialist who was appalled that Debs was appealing to the black vote. Debs replied, “in the first place you don’t get equality for the Negro, you haven’t got it yourself” because “in the present social scale there is no difference between you and the Negro.” He ended by saying “nor shall my door or my heart be ever closed against any human being on account of the color of his skin.”<sup>73</sup> The unfortunate reality was that many doors in society were shut including some of the most important ones like the courthouse door, the polling place door, and the union door. Debs’ idealism, mixed with his belief in an inevitable utopian future severely hampered any positive progress which could have been made those years on the Negro question. As many interested blacks looked to socialism they were turned away due to empty

prognostications so naive to the realities of life under white supremacy and so void of any engagement in real and substantial material actions for change.

Until 1916, Debs would remain silent on the "Negro question." His tours of the South ceased and even though he continued to champion social issues such as women's suffrage, immigration and American imperialism and also continued to run for the presidency on the Socialist Party ticket (1908, 1912), he seemed comfortable with his own theoretical conclusions and public rhetoric on the "Negro question." Ironically, the peculiar racism which blacks had been facing in America would ultimately prove too strong to ignore and one particular cultural event would force Debs from his high and contented position on economic determinist theory.

## **Superstructural Oppression**

Debs' long silence on the "Negro question" (1908-1916) was paralleled in organs like the *International Socialist Review* which produced fewer articles on the subject. In fact, from February 1908 to June 1910 the *International Socialist* review relied solely on I.M. Robbins' sixteen part series titled "The Economic Aspects of the Negro Problem." Not one other article regarding black Americans and socialism was printed in the journal from March 1905 to August 1911.

I.M. Robbins, whose real name was Isaac Max Rubinow, was described by Foner as "an outstanding socialist economist and statistician whose approach to the Negro question ... was far in advance of that of most party members."<sup>74</sup> Rubinow's series debuted by quoting one of W.E.B DuBois' more famous phrases from his book *Souls of Black Folk*: "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." A year before publication of the series, Rubinow tried to persuade Du Bois to join the Socialist Party, though the black leader of the Niagara Movement sympathetically and politely declined.<sup>75</sup> Rubinow's series continued and laid out the history of the Negro from slavery in colonial America all the way to the present. Each article "emphasize[d] the importance of historical conditions in shaping the present negro problem." Rubinow stated he wished to muddy the waters of the "rigid, cast-iron conception of the great doctrine of Economic interpretation," and his final conclusions on the Negro question began to make great strides towards transcending the popular determinism that plagued the Socialist Party.<sup>76</sup> Even if Rubinow's series ran alone for over six years, single handedly framing the discourse on the Negro question in the pages of the *International Socialist Review*, it also widened the theoretical scope of the debate and proposed new, real solutions.<sup>77</sup>

The final two installments of Rubinow's series proposed a solution to the Negro problem which, according to the author, included "a prophecy and a remedy." Rubinow thought a solution must involve three things: "an ideal that is practical ... a remedy that should be useful ... [and] a prophecy that should be acceptable to our sense of justice." Ultimately, Rubinow hypothesized, the only real solution to the problem would be the "equalization of the negro status with that of the white man." It was here that Rubinow began to theorize outside of the determinist box. Arguing against the older rationale of Charles H. Vail, he noted that the existence of socialism would not necessarily be the cure-all of racial prejudice and its social complications. For Rubinow, social equality for blacks would have to come first if American radicals wanted to truly work towards a socialist future because "the connection between race justice and socialism [was] not self evident." This comment flew in the face of Debs' utopian determinism. The latter prescribed socialism as a complete remedy for all ills, without admitting the historical obstacle (anti-black racism) which American socialism needed to overcome before founding their great cooperative community. Rubinow seemed to be the first socialist to come out and admit the illusory and illogical quality of the socialist stance on the Negro question by denouncing the Socialist Party's passive theoretical actions and calling for real, material methods for change.<sup>78</sup>

In his series, Rubinow took on Eugene Debs himself. He first attacked Debs' 1903 call for the repeal of the Negro resolution. To Rubinow, the Negro resolution was essential to the American movement. He denounced its repeal as a misguided action by the Eurocentric-inspired brand of American Marxism so prevalent amongst his colleagues. The Socialist Party of America, he added, "did not make the platform for the Socialist movement of the world but for the United States, and in these United States, there *is* a

negro problem.” He also assaulted Debs’ early stance that the Negro question was simply part of the labor problem. Rubinow stressed, in opposition to Debs and the party line, that “a special appeal to the negro [was] *necessary*.” The reason Rubinow could make this claim was because he was among the first to realize, or at least publicly admit, that American socialism’s vulgar economism “unfortunately contradicted the facts of every day experience.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, racial prejudice could not be understood only in terms of economics. It was a barrier blacks faced in the social, political and cultural spheres of American society. Also, Rubinow possessed a deeper understanding of historical materialism and the Marxist theory of history. Debs was attempting to skip over historical problems by treating the realities of black working class life as the same as the realities of the white working class. Rubinow’ noted that black workers were denied their social and political equality and that until these were realized they were not simply a part of the general labor problem. Not until equality for blacks was reached could socialism begin the class conscious revolution against capitalism because until then there were *two* classes of working men; black and white. Rubinow had truly grasped Marx’s maxim, “labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded.”

Because of their inspiring and radically refreshing tone, but also because of the significant shift they represented in American socialist thought on the Negro question, some of Rubinow’s final remarks are worth quoting at length:

The attitude of the Socialist movement on this all important problem must not only be passively correct and decent, but *actively aggressive*. Armed with the *true Marxian explanation* of the negro’s [sic] economic, political and legal status, and the thorough understanding of the only satisfactory, inevitable and necessary solution, *the Socialist party has a sacred duty before it ... it must make a still more earnest and energetic effort to convince the American labor movement, as expressed in labor and trade unions, that in resisting the economic and civic growth of the negro it is simply building obstructions in its way ... the Socialist movement viewing the labor problem in its entirety, not in any utopian or phantastic way, but practically, and yet seeing much further than the immediate narrow interests of this or that little group for higher wages or a privileged position - the Socialist movement must make the one practical effort to*

direct the negro problem into the narrow channel towards its true solution. *Will we be wise enough to do it?*<sup>80</sup>

It seems that Eugene Debs and the Socialist party were, in fact, not wise enough to work towards any solution on the "Negro question" until black socialists, more active in the socialist movement, forced the issue upon them, especially in the cosmopolitan socialist local of New York City.<sup>81</sup> But, more importantly to Debs, it was the release of a piece of the same racist culture Rubinow stated the Negro faced each day in an America under the rule of white supremacy that would begin to force him and his comrades to make changes in how they approached the "Negro question."

The "true Marxian" approach that Rubinow was trying to turn American socialism toward was Marx and Engels' theory of "base and superstructure." Simply put, the base of any society, to Marx, was found in the material and social relations of production or, basically, its economic structure. Thus, any theory of economic determinism would relegate itself to only understanding the base of what it probed, neglecting the superstructure or the political, cultural, religious and ideological realms of society (i.e. the state and consciousness). While superstructural elements arose from an economic base, they also often evolved to hold a semblance of autonomy and could, conversely, effect the base. Marx spent most of his life dealing with issues of political economy, thus never giving the idea of superstructure the full attention that Engels later noted it deserved.<sup>82</sup> That Rubinow had such an insightful grasp of the theory of "base and superstructure" was quite astounding considering the vulgarity of most of the Marxism of his day. Racism, he noted, existed in the superstructure and, even though it arose from the social relations of capitalism, often took on a non-economic form. American socialism, then, would have to respond to white supremacy correspondingly: fighting fire with fire. In 1916, Eugene Debs came to a new form of theoretical consciousness, which Rubinow



had already achieved, when he was confronted with the release of the film *The Birth of A Nation*.

*The Birth of A Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith, was released in theaters throughout the country in 1915. The film was the brainchild of Thomas Dixon, a vehemently racist Southern author who in the early 1900s released a trilogy of novels: *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* (1902); *The Clansmen: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905); and *The Traitor: A Story of the Fall of the Invisible Empire* (1907). These works have been described by C. Vann Woodward as "the perfect literary accompaniment of the white-supremacy and disenfranchisement campaign."<sup>83</sup> It was Dixon's second novel, *The Clansmen*, that would eventually be adapted to the big screen a decade later and, as Leon F. Litwack has said, take "the country by storm in 1915."<sup>84</sup> In many ways, the popularity of the film seemed assured, even before its premiere, because of the strong culture of white supremacy which would both create and support it. Joel Williams laid out the basic plot of *The Birth of the Nation*, in his work *A Rage for Order*, saying, "somehow the Negro had caused the Civil War, and the failure of the North during Reconstruction to recognize the rising reversion of free blacks to bestiality had continued to divide the nation."<sup>85</sup> Combining to fight the degenerate Negro race, Dixon details how the "material genius of the North and the spiritual genius of the South," were combining to once again elevate white Americans as God's chosen people.<sup>86</sup> The film relies heavily on certain popular ideological tendencies of white America such as the warped race based versions of social Darwinism and what George M. Frederickson has called the "theory of degeneracy."<sup>87</sup>

The theory of degeneracy stated that once freed from slavery blacks, who were best when controlled by white authority, would "fall back" back to their true immoral,

childish and savage nature. Thus, the film aligns blacks with everything from laziness to stupidity to bestiality. The main theme rested on the black man's supposedly natural, evil and unquenchable thirst for white women which manifested itself in scenes of vicious rape. The film also praised the Ku Klux Klan as the staunch and heroic defender of the Southern woman's "purity" and Southern (re: white) "civilization" as the Ku Klux Klan were repeatedly shown sweeping in to defend the white race, America and God. To get an idea of just how popular *The Birth of A Nation* became and just how ingrained its racist ideas were in the America consciousness around 1915, one need only look at President Wilson who was treated to a private showing of the film by Dixon himself. After viewing the film in the East Room of the White House, Wilson concluded that what Dixon portrayed was "all so terribly true."<sup>88</sup>

Since the film elicited such strong public responses, it seems no surprise, then, that Eugene Debs would step forth to express his views on *The Birth of A Nation*. Confronted with a blatant, powerful and widely successful example of superstructural racism, Debs had no choice but to confront the film and at the same time reject his old determinist theory of the "Negro question." In its place, Debs would erect a theoretical program which realized the power of propaganda and ideology in both its positive and negative forms. It was the cultural spectacle of white supremacy, in the form of *The Birth of A Nation*, which began to force Debs' coming to consciousness. No longer could Debs seek comfort in economic determinism. *The Birth of a Nation*, though contrary to its author's intention, made the social and cultural oppression which blacks faced all too clear and American socialism could no longer afford to ignore it. In recent years, Debs had become aware of the superstructure as one of the leading proponents of the new cultural forms of socialist propaganda such as novels, poetry and films. Debs publicly endorsed

everything from the fiction of Jack London to the films of Frank E. Wolfe.<sup>89</sup> As Debs dropped his determinism and applied himself actively in the struggle for a radical working class consciousness, he realized that there always and at all times existed a cultural battleground for ideological hegemony. Thus, Debs discerned that the Socialist Party would have to criticize and combat the dominant capitalist culture in order to achieve the radical working class consciousness that was fundamental to any socialist movement. Class warfare, American socialists like Debs were coming to find out, was not simply a black-and-white economic issue but a complex social, cultural, ethnic and ideological conflict which could only be resolved with the radical engagement with and material practice against American capitalist hegemony .

In 1916, Debs took the first step in this direction when he publicly attacked Dixon's film in the popular socialist organ *National Rip Saw*.<sup>90</sup> Debs' opening contention was with the film's portrayals of rape and history: "If it be absolutely essential to present those harrowing rape-scenes, then why not round them out in their historic completeness, and show the dissolute son of the plantation owner ravishing the black daughter before her parents' eyes?" Debs was not *denying* the existence of black rapists in the South but he was opposed to its depiction as black *nature*. Secondly, he blasted *the* film's interpretation of American history. Debs noted propaganda was influential not always because it produced outright lies but because it used abstraction and half-truths to delude the public. Debs, reluctant to call Dixon or the whites who supported the film "gentlemen,"<sup>91</sup> went on:

"For every white woman raped in the south by a black fiend, a thousand black women have been seduced and outraged by white gentlemen (?) but no hint of this is given in the series of pictures composing 'The Birth of a Nation.' It is only the black brute that is guilty according to this and all other stories written about the Negro by Thomas Dixon, the author who also calls himself a minister of Christ."

Debs understood that Dixon's emphasis on white purity was "calculated to subject the

Negro to ridicule and contempt.” He was now coming to his own form of consciousness: the understanding that something in addition to the general economic oppression of the working class negatively affected the lives of blacks. Debs was shaken, just as he had been earlier in his life when he experienced white racism while touring the South. He shuttered when he sat in the theater and listened to the audience applauding “madly” during the overly romantic, heroic and contrived version of the Ku Klux Klan’s “dash to the rescue of some imaginary white victim.” Debs ended his critique by offering a version of what it would be like “if the black people today could tell their story about ‘The Birth of a Nation.’” It would, Debs wrote, start in Africa where white men stole Africans and enslaved them, and end in the early 20th century where “scenes infinitely more cruel and damning than those based on Dixon’s novel” which “concealed[ed] the white man’s crimes behind the Negro’s misfortune” would be “flashed” across the screen. To what extent Debs’ experience with *The Birth of a Nation* actually altered his theoretical outlook is up for debate, but it did show substantive change. Debs was removing the blinders of economic determinism and beginning to address the larger socio-cultural issues of the “Negro question.” One way to gauge Debs’ usefulness and effectiveness at this point is to read the outpouring of letters of appreciation he received for his criticism of the film from blacks all over America.<sup>92</sup>

Deb’s lengthy public criticism of *The Birth of A Nation* was originally published on January 13, 1916 in his hometown paper the *Terre Haute Post*. The article would be reprinted in black and socialist organs throughout America culminating in responses to Debs from rural Indiana all the way west to Los Angeles.<sup>93</sup> Most of the letters were from educated black radicals but to discount their responses as not being representative of the black working class would be wrong. It seems that almost all of Debs’ correspondence

was received from blacks who were very active in community organizing, radical politics or interested in the socialist and labor movements. One of the first was written January 16, 1916 by the black physician Dennis Anderson Bethea only three days after the appearance of Debs' article in the *Terre Haute Post*. Dr. Bethea thanked Debs for his "Masterly Article" and said it would "do much good to Set people right on the Race question." But, more importantly, the letter signified strong national black agency, solidarity and purpose. Dr. Bethea "sent marked copies to Colored Newspapers in New York, Chicago and Indianapolis."<sup>94</sup> This kind of agency against *The Birth of A Nation* and the racist culture it represented emerged in many black, and some white, communities despite great odds and helped prevent the further release and screening of the film in many towns and cities.

Charles A. Bailey echoed the sentiments of Dr. Bethea, telling Debs he wished he would publish the article "in pamphlet form [so] the twelve million Negroes in the United States could see for themselves a true and tried friend of the oppressed race of the United States."<sup>95</sup> Bailey was a banker and head of a loan company that served blacks in Cornersville, Indiana and, while he was not a radical, the same day he penned his letter he also subscribed to the socialist journal *Appeal To Reason*, of which Debs was an editor.<sup>96</sup> Later that year in June, Debs received a letter from Mrs. Beatrice S. Thompson who "was a leader in the Los Angeles black community, secretary of the city's NAACP chapter, and an outspoken woman-suffrage advocate."<sup>97</sup> Writing on behalf the Women's Civic and Protective League she commended Debs for "the fearless stand [he] took against 'The Clansmen.'" She described Dixon's novel, which *The Birth of A Nation* was based on, as "that gigantic thief of a race's prerogative to the right pursuit of happiness, and the maligner of a noble patriotism whose devotees died that all might share Freedom, the

inalienable right of mankind.”<sup>98</sup> It is obvious just from Mrs. Thompson’s fierce and eloquent prose alone that Debs was not creating something in blacks that was not already there, for it was, as indicated by the titles, organizations and causes to which these writers were already working for, but supporting them in a way which many major black leaders could not or were not doing at the time.

Debs, largely because of his color, was in a position to reach a wider audience than many national black leaders who often had no choice but to work through the black press. He also, because of his radical and humanist socialism, offered blacks a new alternative beyond the rhetoric of many of their own leaders like Booker T. Washington and his adherents, who asked blacks to embrace capitalist individualism to gain white acceptance much the same way Debs had in his early career with the BLF. As many of the letters show, some black community leaders had already begun to embrace a more radical spirit and turn to socialists like Debs. These socialists, like Debs and Rubinow, not only had nothing to lose by critiquing Dixon and white supremacy but because of their new theoretical realizations *had* to fight for black equality in order to succeed in then freeing all working class Americans from capitalism. It is no slight on black agency to say that many blacks realized the special importance that came from a popular white figure who denounced his own race’s culture of bigotry, hatred and violence. One of the most active black radicals in America wrote to Eugene Debs herself from Chicago, Illinois on January 17, 1916 commenting on that point. As president of the Negro Fellowship League, “the feminist and anti-lynching spokeswoman”<sup>99</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett acknowledged Debs’ special place in the black struggle writing, “of all the millions of white men of this country, you are the only one I know that has had the courage to speak out against this diabolical production as it deserves.”<sup>100</sup>

Letters like Wells-Barnett's helped to rekindle Debs' interest in the "Negro question" and at the same time hint at something new, something he had never grasped about the racism of America. In all of his earlier writings on the Negro question Debs had never received anything remotely resembling the outpouring of interests, support and praise that he did by denouncing *The Birth of A Nation*. It was these letters and the subsequent turn to socialism by many black Americans that would reinforce Debs' theoretical changes on the Negro question and prove them valid and worth continuing. One specific figure, virtually unknown to historians, would play this role for Debs more than any other and embody the spirit of a rising black agency across America that was distinctly vibrant, artistic, radical and most of all socialist.

## **Black Socialism**

In W.E.B. DuBois' 1915 work *The Negro*, he wrote that "a belief in humanity means a belief in colored men. The future world will, in all reasonable probability, be what colored men make it."<sup>101</sup> No black Americans embodied this spirit more or worked harder to make DuBois' words manifest than the "New Harlem Radicals."<sup>102</sup> During the times of World War I, cosmopolitan black radical leaders such as A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen made great strides for socialism on the Negro question.

Originally from the South, both Randolph and Owen found comfort in the growing black intellectual community in New York City during World War I. Already active in community organizing, they joined the Socialist Party in 1916 believing that socialism held the key to social equality and justice for blacks. Chandler and Owen immediately began agitating for the socialist cause throughout Harlem by sponsoring lectures and debates in local black churches and organizing black communities. In part because the "great migration" of blacks from the South was so intense during these years, the Socialist Party began to look towards blacks like Chandler and Owen to organize the growing numbers of Northern black workers.

The influx of thousands of black Southern workers and their families intensified the white racial hatred which already existed within the socialist and labor movements. In this period, the "Negro question" was once again often answered by working class whites with violence. And, despite the passage of the fifteen years since the Socialist Party first convened and adopted its Negro resolution, they were not much closer to embracing black workers as equals, though many blacks had come to the party and began organizing fellow blacks, especially in New York. The white working class and the mostly exclusionist industrial unions mainly interpreted the "great migration" as an increase in the economic



competition of black laborers. Thus, whites worked against their new fellow Northerners, even to the point of trying to eliminate the “competition.”

In 1917, a bloody working class race riot broke out in East St. Louis, Illinois where indiscriminate violence against blacks led to at least 48 deaths, hundreds of injuries and the “permanent exodus of ten thousand Afro-Americans from the city.”<sup>103</sup> That same year the number of lynchings rose dramatically nationwide and again, in 1919, another substantial and appalling race riot broke out in Chicago which left 38 dead, 537 injured and more than 1,000 homeless.<sup>104</sup>

Randolph and Owen, despite these troubling events, were inspired by the works of V.I. Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia which espoused a strong program of social equality for all nationalities. Lenin believed as Foner has noted, that the socialist state would have to assure that “each nationality would have a chance to develop and cultivate its national life within a working-class internationalism, and none would have any privileges not available to the others.”<sup>105</sup> Hoping to apply Lenin’s theory to the American socialist movement and to attune black consciousness towards socialism, Randolph and Owen created *The Messenger*, a black socialist journal. *The Messenger*, at the height of its popularity in 1918 published somewhere between 26,000 and 43,000 copies a month. It opposed both national parties; denounced the “bourgeois methods” of black organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League; supported Socialist Party members for local, state and national offices; and helped further Randolph and Owen’s “educational program” in the black communities of New York City, which included, among other things, a pamphlet series on important black issues.<sup>106</sup> Yet, there was one thing *The Messenger*, ironically, did not espouse or attempt to change: the Socialist Party itself.

Throughout the *The Messenger's* existence during the war years, only once did it challenge the Socialist Party's stance on the "Negro question."<sup>107</sup> Even when, in 1918, Eugene Debs personally attacked the racism of many American socialists and black oppression in general, *The Messenger* did not reprint his articles. Thus, Debs remained one of the only voices, and certainly the most popular, who publicly challenged American socialism and its party's rabid racism. While Debs was aggressive on this issue, *The Messenger's* editors felt that "airing the movement's weaknesses on the Negro question was not likely to encourage blacks to join."<sup>108</sup> But it was precisely American socialism's weaknesses on the "Negro question" that forced the country's first black socialist, Peter H. Clark, to withdraw from it despite his continuing confidence in the promise of socialist theory. Half a decade later history repeated itself as an original black Harlem radical, Hubert H. Harrison, was literally driven from the Socialist Party after only a few years as an active member.<sup>109</sup> Black radicals would have to face profound questions when they considered socialist politics. In the end, it came down to the issue of choosing one of two forms of consciousness: race or class.

In 1911, white socialist John P. Burke asked the readers of the *International Socialist Review* this precise question in his article titled "Race or Class Consciousness: Which?" Burke observed that "in this country, the vast working class is composed of nearly every race under the sun." Here was another common tactic, much like economic determinism, which allowed white socialists like Burke to avoid the "Negro question." Simply put, since so many races lived in America, the Socialist Party would have to make special concessions to each one. This it could never feasibly do. By taking this route, Burke was denying that the black American experience was different from, say, any European immigrants' by dismissing the hundreds of years of black enslavement, rape,

torture, lynching and oppression by whites. For Burke and many socialists, race consciousness was “admirable” but must play a subordinate role to class consciousness. Race consciousness was merely another tool of the capitalist class which would keep the working class “divided upon both the industrial and the political field.” Ultimately, Burke stated, “the lesson that the working class of the United States must learn is, substitute class action for race action.”<sup>110</sup>

Unlike Rubinow and, soon, also Debs, Burke could not conceive of a positive race consciousness nor could he understand its necessity for the working class movement. In many ways, it was akin to Debs’ simplistic and idealistic utopian determinism. Burke wished to make rhetorical appeals to workers that class consciousness would help them overcome their racism, yet in reality there existed no material way for it to happen. Wishes were not going to ignite class revolution. But, maybe most white socialists had no concrete way to comprehend race consciousness. And, maybe it was only through intimate contact with the black experience, through the theoretical and material activism of black socialists, that a positive conception of race consciousness could occur. Indeed, this turned out to be the case but, haunted by Rubinow’s question, would white American socialists listen to what the black radical experience had to say?

The most influential black socialist in American history is also one of the least known. Hubert Harrison was born island of St. Croix in the Danish West Indies’ in 1883, but would spend most of his life in New York City as a radical street orator, educator, agitator, poet, literary critic, leader and revolutionary. Harrison had an uncanny grasp of socialist theory which, according to Harrison biographer and scholar Jeffrey B. Perry, “combined class consciousness and (anti-white supremacist) race consciousness in a coherent political radicalism.”<sup>111</sup> Indeed, Harrison was, Perry continued, “the most class

conscious of the race radicals, and the most race conscious of the class radicals.” Harrison often straddled the seemingly unbridgeable gap between American socialism and the popular black leadership. He was openly critical of the Socialist Party, even while a member, for not developing a special appeal to blacks. He also challenged Booker T. Washington’s accommodationism, the NAACP’s reliance on whites, and W.E.B. DuBois’ elitist program of the “Talented Tenth” as well as his anti-radical intelligence work for the U.S. government.<sup>112</sup> Against such popular views promoted by the nation’s preeminent black leaders, Harrison emphasized programs directly associated with the working class masses. As Perry said of him, “Harrison made his mark by struggling against class and racial oppression, by participating in and helping create a remarkably rich and vibrant intellectual life, and by working for the enlightened development of the lives of ‘the common people.’”<sup>113</sup> Armed with such a critical perspective and a real connection to working class black America, Harrison added something entirely new to American socialism’s debate on the “Negro question:” himself.

Hubert Harrison’s presence in the American socialist movement was itself a potential answer to many problems. Any radical action on the “Negro question” had for too long been debated and then abandoned by white socialists, without any true comprehension of the experiences of black life. Harrison drove this point home many times, blasting socialists for ignoring the black portion of the working class. To Harrison, there were “ten million Americans, all proletarians, hanging on the ragged edge of the impending class conflict” and they seemed “prepared to listen to a new doctrine.”<sup>114</sup> Harrison espoused and took on projects of mass education within black Northern communities and also tried to get the Socialist Party to create works of propaganda geared toward a black audience. The blueprints which Harrison proposed were completely free

of elitism and were not interested in further educating specific bourgeois blacks as Du Bois called for but in concrete action with the black masses. Harrison took his experience as a working class black and applied it to the communities where he lived, worked, and wanted to see free. In many ways, Harrison was an astounding manifestation of what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci would later call the “organic intellectual.”

For Gramsci, writing in his “prison notebooks” between 1929 and 1935, the progress of a working class movement could be accelerated by the presence of theoretical thinkers who directly arose from the conditions of the masses.<sup>115</sup> Gramsci noted that the “active man-in-the-mass” has two forms of consciousness: “one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed.”<sup>116</sup> Thus, the working class generally assumed a singular contradictory consciousness. The first step towards a progressive or radical self-consciousness, then, was realizing that the “man-in-the-mass,” as a worker, was a “part of a particular hegemonic force.” This is what Harrison was arguing for: a black informed campaign aimed at educating and organizing the black working class from within. Harrison understood his role as a black socialist organizing for change and he used his education and sharp theoretical mind to raise the class and race consciousness of black Americans. But, while many may dismiss Harrison, Randolph, Owen and the coming movements of the Harlem radicals as progressive cosmopolitan aberrations, one man in rural Indiana was carrying out the same mission, even if on a smaller stage.

Just 140 miles northeast of Debs’ hometown of Terre Haute resided a black socialist named Ross D. Brown in the town of Muncie, Indiana. In fact, the young Brown was inspired by several encounters with his fellow Indiana native to join the Socialist

Party and eventually became a radical orator and organizer. Unfortunately, though, historians remain ignorant of Ross D. Brown. There is no anthology of his writings and no book or even an article length biography. Only Philip S. Foner has mentioned his role in socialist politics. Yet, Ross D. Brown is not an insignificant figure. Through Brown, a sense can be gained of the black radical spirit at the start of World War I and achieve a better understanding of the place of socialist radicalism in black thought. Also, Brown's brand of socialism, shaped by his experience as a working class black man in the Ku Klux Klan infested state of Indiana, expresses the failure of the Socialist Party to listen to the black socialist experience.

In 1916, Ross D. Brown wrote to Debs adding to the volume of incoming mail he had received for his condemnation of *The Birth of a Nation*. What was particularly interesting about Brown's letter was the actual document itself. The letterhead on which Brown penned his missive displayed his fiercely brave and radical outlook. The masthead states: "Ross D. Brown: The Unbleached Orator. Graduate from the University of Adversity."<sup>117</sup> To the left and right of the masthead are references to two works of Brown's. The first denotes that he was the inventor of the "Brown Automatic Glass Gathering Machine," which he had first patented in 1906. The other states that he was the author of the work "Gems of the Class Struggle."<sup>118</sup>

Intellectually gifted, Brown wrote eloquent literature and political propaganda. In fact, from 1915-1916, Brown released at least five pamphlets of socio-politically minded poetry and essays. Also an able public speaker, in 1914 he had been recruited by the Socialist Party to organize in the black communities of Huntington, West Virginia where it was reported he had made such "fine results" that a greater attempt would now be pursued nationwide by the party.<sup>119</sup> As he campaigned for the socialist cause in 1916,

Brown released a pamphlet of poetry titled *Rhymes of Reason*. None other than Eugene V. Debs supplied the collection's introduction. Debs noticed the special qualities Brown possessed as an intellectual from and for the working class. According to Debs, he was "no graduate of a college where 'pebbles are polished and diamonds are dimmed' (one of Brown's phrases)" yet in Brown black Americans had an "eloquent young comrade, a champion worthy of their cause, and the same is true of the working class."<sup>120</sup> At first glance Debs' commendation seems simply like more praise for a work of socialist propaganda. But, Debs was actually saying something he had never before said and it noted progress within the socialist movement on the "Negro question." When Debs spoke of Brown as having "loyalty to his race and to his class," for the first time he was putting one before the other: *race before class*.

As Foner has observed, the years between 1913 and 1916 saw several "changes in the Socialist Party approach to the Negro question."<sup>121</sup> But, since Debs was already ahead of the party on this question, it is more likely that something personal gave rise to his "race first" statement. Brown had met Debs several times in Terre Haute and Indianapolis as early as 1912 and after his article on the *The Birth of A Nation*, Debs began to support Brown's literary aspirations and organizing efforts. Debs must have been as positively effected as he was during his tours of the South back in 1903 by the black socialist's candor, intelligence and strength. While Debs remained in the far left faction of the party, and one of the very few who supported black socialist agency and organizing, he could only have been that much more strengthened in his stance on the "Negro question" through his relationship with Ross D. Brown. As Brown himself said in his letter to the nation's leading white socialist, he knew Debs "felt the pulsations of the Negro heart."<sup>122</sup>

Ross Brown had a unique mix of radical consciousness and tenacious activism. In

the preface to his 1915 pamphlet, *Chips of Thought*, he stated that “the truth must be told” and, speaking directly to the black masses facing the severe racial oppression of the times, said: “you may not be in a position where you cannot afford to speak your honest thoughts, your back may be to the wall. Thus, I will speak for you and say some of the things that you may have said.”<sup>123</sup> While nothing is known of Brown’s education, he undoubtedly possessed a very advanced understanding of socialist-materialist theory. Like many of the black socialists of his time, his views were much more advanced than the majority of white socialists who avoided issues of race, culture and art. After all, Brown, even more so than Harrison, was a brilliant poet and *Chips of Thought* is indeed an extraordinary document.

The pamphlet of twenty beautiful prose essays and a page of sharp witted phrases titled “Laconics” is a study of spirited radical criticism. It takes on a wide range of topics such as wordsmanship, the law of retribution, socialist feminism, the socialist-humanist preacher John Haynes Holmes, Wendell Phillips, science and superstition, the art of invention, criminology, the power and importance of books, war and imperialism, the class struggle, Frederick Douglass, and more. But the most important of all of the essays is one entitled “If I Were White” in which a strong sentiment of race pride is espoused.

It is from this essay that one can begin to unravel the distinctive traits of black American socialism. Brown says he is not ashamed of his color and that it was God, his mother and his father who “inculcated in [him] to love the oppressed and fight against all forms of oppression.” Most white socialists could not understand racial oppression because they had no experience with the realities of black life under white supremacy. Many socialist emigres would argue with that statement, but no immigrant group in the



history of the United States ever faced the history of hatred, alienation, objectification and violence that black Americans did and continued to be affected by. Brown understood this well, writing, “if I had been born white I might have been born almost blind, cold-blooded and heartless.” Like Gramsci stated, understanding the *formation* of the intellectual is as important as *what* he actually learns.

No one embodied this more than Debs and his white comrades who for years admitted to the racism present in America though never truly grasped its scope and power. They failed because they never *felt* the “Negro question.” Essentially, they were outsiders looking to answer a question they never *had* to wrestle with personally. As Brown concluded, “I am a Negro. I believe in Justice, Equality and Liberty. I might have been less fortunate if I were white.”<sup>124</sup> Eugene Debs was coming to consciousness on the Negro question, and it was very much due to the emotional and sincere empathy he felt for the black working class. Debs began to attack every kind of oppression which existed inside and outside the expanding American empire as he was able to, unlike most, “feel the pulsations” of the oppressed. In his poem titled “Gene Debs,” Ross D. Brown poetically placed Debs’ humanism on the page:

With the oppressed in peace and strife,  
A big-hearted Rebel, though and through,  
The smaller chance you have in life  
The more his heart goes out to you.<sup>125</sup>

Unfortunately, for many black socialists the fact of the matter was that Eugene Debs was part of a very small left-wing faction of the Socialist Party. Just as the rise of figures like Brown, Harrison, Randolph, Owen and others had begun to have some impact on American socialism and black working class consciousness, inter-party factionalism threatened to tear it all down, just as it had with Peter H. Clark and the Workingmen’s

Party back in 1879. What it came down to for many black radicals was that the Socialist Party always called for “class before race” yet, as Hubert Harrison noted many times, it also always put the *white* race first before anything else.<sup>126</sup> By 1920 the Socialist Party had begun its storied split and Randolph and Owen left the Socialist Party, Harrison had been evicted and Ross D. Brown had become an obscure historical figure. Harrison, though, never wavered from his radicalism but turned to a program which explicitly placed race before class culminating in a unique socialist alternative to dogmatic American socialism. Harrison also helped form the young, radical and race-conscious “New Negro” movement and Marcus Garvey would soon reappropriate Harrison’s core philosophy for his brand of race consciousness.<sup>127</sup> Truly, the “black man’s burden” was becoming too much for black socialists as they began to refuse to wait around for their white “comrades” to come to consciousness on the “Negro question.” Frustrated yet empowered, Harrison declared as much in 1920, concluding, in his article titled “Race First Versus Class First,” that “the writer of these lines is also a Socialist; but he refuses in this crisis of the world’s history to put either Socialism or your party above the call of his race ... because he is not a fool.”<sup>128</sup>

The coming years for the Socialist Party would also be, in reality, its final years as a substantial force in shaping and informing the American consciousness. Inter-party factionalism created a divisive movement and by 1919 the Socialist Party had split, giving rise to several new communist parties. Yet Eugene Debs, still with the party’s radical left, remained consistent on the “Negro question” since his realizations of 1916 and more than ever spoke out on the subject, focusing especially on the black working class as he seemed to have learned much from his early encounters with the black socialists of the Word War I-era.

## **Activist Endings**

Debs continued his active presence in the debates surrounding black oppression and the Negro question in 1918. In January of that year he was inspired by an article written by W.E.B. DuBois in the *Intercollegiate Socialist*, entitled "The Problem of Problems." Inspired by DuBois' confrontation of the "Negro question" as a black radical, Debs promptly wrote an article. He responded to and expanded on the themes DuBois' work originally raised. The article, "The Negro: His Present Status and Outlook," would end up as Debs' most advanced and comprehensive work on the "Negro question." He began by praising DuBois for presenting "the negro question to the American people from the standpoint of the negro himself and as an issue of commanding importance which the nation can no longer ignore." The socialist leader also made one of his trademark emotional pleas to blacks, writing, "never do I see a negro but my heart goes out to him and I feel like apologizing to my black brother for the crime and outrages perpetrated upon his race by the race to which I belong."<sup>129</sup> If there was any consistency in Debs' stance on the "Negro question" it could be found in his unending feelings of shame for the persecution of the black race in Africa and in America. Debs may have never had many solutions or answers but his sincere empathy and willingness to apologize for white America, when not too many others would, were a few of the major reasons many blacks held such endearing respect and adoration for the man.

But, "The Negro: His Present Status and Outlook" was not written for black America but for the Socialist Party itself. Debs virulently attacked his colleagues' position on the Negro question. "Even among socialists," Debs wrote, "the negro [sic] question is treated with a timidity bordering on cowardice which contrasts painfully with the principles of freedom and equality proclaimed as a cardinal in their movement."<sup>130</sup> In

stark contrast to his early career with the Socialist Party, Debs was no longer comfortable spouting the party line or accepting the rampant racism of American socialism. In 1918 he seemed to be distancing himself from “*their* movement.” Debs was also coming to reject his earlier economic and utopian determinism. It was no longer enough to appeal to a future socialist commonwealth as the remedy for the ills of capitalism. In order for Debs to understand the “Negro question” he had to reach an *opposite consciousness*: a consciousness that completely contradicted his early views, leading him to comprehend his past theoretical shortcomings and to make the proper changes. Debs was not only *coming* to consciousness, but *rejecting* and *transcending* the determinist consciousness of his former self, the consciousness of white American socialism. He now stated the necessity of economic, political, and social equality for the black masses and argued that “until these are fully recognized and freely accorded all our talk about democracy and freedom is a vulgar sham and false pretense.”<sup>131</sup>

The balance of the essay was directed at the racist policies of the American Federation of Labor that, according to Debs, were responsible for the “barbarous massacre at East St. Louis” in 1917.<sup>132</sup> Instead of appealing, in determinist fashion, to the inevitability of working class race unity, Debs was now attacking specific policy and calling out, by name, those who were impeding progress by placing the white race above social equality and liberation from capitalism. No longer a passive theory of ends without means, Debs was unifying his thought with practice by attempting through his criticism to effect change on the “Negro question.”

Possibly inspired by his contact with the rising black socialist movement in New York and elsewhere, Debs started to look for answers to the “Negro question” which he felt could be found in black agency. Debs repeated on many occasions later in his life that

he felt blacks would be wise to organize themselves and begin programs of education. Debs, most likely, was trying to build on the small successes of programs like Randolph and Owens' in Harlem. While some may read this as another attempt to absolve American socialism from acting on the "Negro question," it is more likely that Debs had come to a consciousness in which he also came to admit two important things. First, Debs' final writings on the "Negro question" show a profound sense of frustration with American socialism's continuing racism and a futility in looking for answers or action from his white colleagues. In May of 1918, Debs took on Jim Crow laws in a letter to the editor that appeared in the *Terre Haute Tribune* and was reprinted elsewhere.<sup>133</sup> But, when Debs now took on the general racism of white American culture, critiques of his socialist comrades immediately followed. There was no trace of the naive idealism of his early career that the Socialist Party was making substantial progress on the "Negro question." He was beginning to lump the radical movement with Democrats, Republicans and racist Southerners. Secondly, Debs' call for black agency was not simply a tactic to relieve the burden from the Socialist Party of any responsibility. What good would white racist socialists do in organizing black communities? The question itself was illogical and Debs knew it. If American socialism still harbored such strong levels of race hatred towards blacks, then no Socialist Party program would offer sufficient solutions on the "Negro question." Rather, Debs was arguably predating the movements of Marcus Garvey and others who founded their black nationalist radicalism on the notion that blacks must organize themselves in autonomous associations. Within the violent racist culture of 1918, Debs was not making appeals to blacks to enlighten themselves through socialist thought, he was, it seems, admitting that the only answer may have to come from themselves.

In 1920, Debs had helped Randolph and Owen by agreeing to write an article for

*The Messenger* in hopes to raise awareness and sales of the black socialist journal. Writing for *The Messenger* during his famous prison sentence at Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, Debs stated, "The Socialist Party proposes in accordance with its fundamental principles, that the Negro shall have the same political, economic and civil rights that the white man has to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>134</sup> Again, as the spokesman for the party, Debs was trying to unify the party's principles with a progressive stance on the "Negro question," but from jail he could only do so much. Mostly because of his advanced view on the "Negro question," Randolph, Owen and *The Messenger* supported Eugene Debs for president that year, calling him "greater than Lincoln" who "merely nominally freed the bodies of Negroes ... but Debs would free the bodies and minds of the Negroes."<sup>135</sup> Three years later, in 1923, Debs would be freed and it was with the black masses in mind that he agreed to a request of A. Philip Randolph to speak in the hotbed of black radicalism: Harlem, New York.

When Debs made one of his final speeches before his health deteriorated in 1923, he silenced this new understanding of the "Negro question" and reverted, though not fully, to many of his earlier conclusions. Debs gave a highly attended and widely reprinted speech in Harlem on October 30, 1923 at the Commonwealth Casino titled *Appeal to Negro Workers*. The lengthy presentation was frequently broken up with outbursts of applause by the enthusiastic black crowd. Debs related many personal and emotional experiences from his life in which he had witnessed and usually fought against racism in America. He opened with an apology to the black community admitting that "the one regret of my life is that I have so little to give in return for all that is given me."<sup>136</sup>

The majority of the speech dealt with his reminiscing on his experiences with racism throughout the years: failing to get the ARU to accept blacks; a successful fight to

allow blacks into a labor meeting at an opera house; a labor meeting in Atlanta where Debs spoke and denounced racism in the local union<sup>137</sup>; and the tragic failure of the Pullman Strike. Maybe, though, it was remembering the past which led Debs to revert to his old views as he tried to inspire black workers, but ended up in many ways blaming them:

“I want to speak to you very plainly tonight, especially you colored people, and have you understand that it is not in my power to do anything for you but to take my place side by side with you. That is all I can do. But while I can do nothing for you there is nothing that you cannot do for yourselves. There is one thing that I want to impress upon your minds tonight; it is self-respect. You can compel the respect of other only when you respect yourselves.”<sup>138</sup>

Historians do not all agree on whether or not this speech was consistent with Debs’ new conception of the “Negro question” but Foner, who overall sees Debs positively, views “The Negro Workers” speech as a failure. It is undeniable that Debs dropped the rhetoric of his writings from 1918 when he preached the need to help black Americans achieve equality first, before taking on an entire class revolution. Gone were the words on education and organization as Debs absolved himself of any participation or effort by placing the thrust of the work on the Negro *individual*. Even though Debs had earlier called for black agency, the tone and wording of his Harlem speech were not the same. By calling for blacks to respect themselves he seemed to be talking down to them and instead of talking about communal action, Debs made more specific references to individual manhood. While all of this is true it does need to be said that for Debs there was often a distinct difference in the content and purpose of his writing and that of his speeches.

Debs’ later writings on the “Negro question” were works of social criticism, his way to engage in activism for black social equality and the socialist movement. His speeches, while not void of cultural critique, were mainly motivational. That night in Harlem it is possible that Debs wanted to let black workers know they had the individual and collective power to make change, that they had to make something of themselves and help change the system. At first this looks like blaming but when viewed in the context of

the popularity and prevalence of accommodationist ideologies, Debs' views were still refreshing, radical and positive. He continued to reject the base-class analysis he once held and, most important of all, still put race ahead of class: blacks had to unite first before the working class revolution could succeed. What he was ultimately saying is that class consciousness will come, but race consciousness needed to come first.

Nevertheless, it was obvious that Debs had yet to fully shake all of the contradictions in his theory and obtain an opposite consciousness. At times Debs attacked American socialism and in the next declared it worthy of black support; he would call for special appeals to black workers and, then, place the responsibility for class consciousness squarely on the shoulders of blacks. But, it is undeniable that Debs had made great strides and at the time of his death in 1926 was one of the most advanced white American radical leaders on the "Negro question." The sense of frustration he felt towards the end of his career, as he realized his inability to effect change for blacks or within American socialism, came from years of leading a minority leftist faction of America's greatest radical party of the time. In many ways, Debs *was* only one man as he frequently stated when dealing with the Negro question in his later years. Alienated from his party and many white American socialists, Eugene V. Debs played an important role for black Americans, many of which viewed him as a radical icon for Negro rights.

In 1920, a pamphlet was released titled *Debs and the Poets*, a collection of poems written for and about Debs, published by Upton Sinclair, the leftist author of the influential novel *The Jungle*. The pamphlet itself made strong connections with many radical blacks, especially A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen who received signed copies from him, who both admired Debs and were active in literary circles.<sup>139</sup> Debs' humanism, in fact, was embodied in the literary form of the poem, a form that black



American radicals were using early in the 1910s and would, in the 20s and 30s, make an effective form of political protest. The cold determinism of early American socialism blocked any progress which could have been made in the cultural realm. Debs' emotional humanism combined with his radical spirit helped him, as Ross D. Brown said, "feel the pulsations of the Negro heart." Extremely sick during his last few years, Debs had accepted his mortality and was possibly trying to give a greater confidence to a burgeoning black radicalism that would explode onto the international scene less than a decade after his death. By 1926, though, the Socialist Party had lost its influence in the black community, never able to transcend its own racism and passive theory on the "Negro question."

Both Randolph and Owen left the party the year Debs died. Ironically, Randolph went on to become the chief organizer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in an attempt to represent the Pullman porters. On July 15th, the BSCP wrote Debs telling him how the Pullman Company had "for nearly 59 years ... most brutally exploited" the predominantly Negro worker force.<sup>140</sup> Debs was all too familiar with this exploitation which he confronted during the Pullman Strike of 1894 when he realized that working class racism was responsible for the strike's defeat. Unfortunately, even all these years later, Randolph and the BSCP were forced to organize in secret and in 1926 a "revived and virulent Ku Klux Klan had almost prevented [Debs] from speaking" in Cincinnati, the hometown of America's first black socialist, Peter H. Clark.<sup>141</sup> While black socialists and Eugene Debs had made distinct and lasting impressions on each other's political and social consciousness, the same could still not be said of the labor movement and American culture at large.

## **Better World**

Before Debs died on October 20, 1926 he wrote one more article on the “Negro question,” for the socialist journal *American Appeal*, simply titled “Black Persecution.” This final article discussed several specific cases of racist oppression against black Americans. One case occurred in Kentucky where in fifteen minutes a court tried, convicted and sentenced a black man to the gallows. Debs, for the first time in his life, fully admitted the unparalleled racism which black Americans faced daily. He wrote, “from first to last the white man has every advantage and the Negro is the victim of the most cruel and wicked discrimination and persecution.”<sup>142</sup> In complete contradiction of his early position that “the Negro [was] not one whit worse off than thousands of white slaves who throng the same labor market,” Debs repudiated the standard socialist position on race.<sup>143</sup> His remarks would haunt the Socialist Party after his death, as most black workers and radicals turned towards the Communist (Workers) Party while the Socialist Party slowly, but surely, withered and died.

In 1955, the anti-colonialist radical Aimé Césaire of Martinique said of the “Harlem Renaissance” of the 1930s that black American radicals “created an atmosphere that was indispensable for a very clear coming to consciousness.”<sup>144</sup> Yet, this process was started years earlier with stunning acts of agency by black American socialists like Peter H. Clark, Ross D. Brown, A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, W.W. Passage, George Woodbey, Hubert Harrison, George W. Slater and others. Through the historical funnel of the life of Eugene V. Debs and his thought on the “Negro question” can be found the early foundations of black socialist radicalism and activism which would, again and again, assert itself and contribute to the victories towards social equality throughout the 20th century.

Eugene Debs may not have succeeded in answering the “Negro question.” He

fought hard though and more than anything tried to make the working class, at they very least, *think* about the issues of race and class. He was waging a war for the consciousness of the working class who he believed would one day create a greater world than existed in capitalist America. In the end, it was also the consciousness of Debs that was considerably changed by the words and actions of black American socialists. This dialectical transformation helped move black radicalism and future American Marxist movements towards a greater understanding of the “Negro question.” With this new perception, American radicals, both black and white, could begin to look for answers and create real material change. Ultimately, it was socialist freedom that all race and class conscious radicals were working for, a future that Ross D. Brown, the black socialist orator from Debs’ home state of Indiana, described in his poem “The Better World”:

A world with more justice than charity,  
A world with its thinking cap on,  
A world with more brotherhood in it,  
A world with the brimstone gone.

A world without the penniless widow  
Weeping on a fresh-made grave;  
Without the millionaire and the beggar,  
A world without master and slave.<sup>145</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 28. This work is easily the most informed and complete of all of Debs' biographies, dealing extensively with the neglected early, formative years of his life.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>3</sup> H. Wayne Morgan, *Eugene Debs: Socialist for President* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1962).
- <sup>4</sup> Harold W. Currie, *Eugene V. Debs* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976); Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1949).
- <sup>5</sup> David Karsner, *Debs: His Authorized Life and Letters* (New York: Boni and Liverlight Publishers, 1919).
- <sup>6</sup> Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition. Edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 685.
- <sup>7</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, "Peter H. Clark: Pioneer Negro Socialist, 1877." *Journal of Negro Education* 34, no. 4 (1965): 416.
- <sup>8</sup> Currie, 19; Ginger, 63.
- <sup>9</sup> Gutman, 414.
- <sup>10</sup> Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), 51. The idea, inspiration and existence of this paper owes a great debt to the trailblazing work of Philip S. Foner who has written a wonderfully extensive body of work on socialism and blacks. Aside from his collections of primary material, essays and books there exists little academic work published on the subject.
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 58-59.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Salvatore, 103.
- <sup>14</sup> Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 29.
- <sup>15</sup> Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* (New York: International Publishers, 1981), 104.
- <sup>16</sup> Ginger, 93.
- <sup>17</sup> Eugene V. Debs, *The Negro Workers*. New York City, 1923.
- <sup>18</sup> For a detailed discussions on this topic see Milton Cantor (ed.), *Black Labor in America* (Westport, Conn.: Negro University Press, 1969), 86-110; Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931); Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present*, 6 vols, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
- <sup>19</sup> Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, 105.
- <sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1. (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 301.
- <sup>21</sup> George W. Cable, *The Negro Question: A Selection of Writing on Civil Rights in the South* (New York: Norton, 1958), 120.
- <sup>22</sup> Arnesen, 39-41.
- <sup>23</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 94-95.
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 99.
- <sup>25</sup> A.M. Simons, "The Negro Question." "The Negro Question." *International Socialist Review* 1, no. 2 (1900).
- <sup>26</sup> Charles Dobbs, "The Farmer and the Negro." "The Farmer and the Negro." *International Socialist Review* 4, no. 10 (1904).
- <sup>27</sup> A.M. Simons, "The Negro Problem." *International Socialist Review* 1, no. 4 (1900).
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> C.S. Darrow, "The Problem of the Negro." *International Socialist Review* 2, no. 5 (1901).
- <sup>30</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> V.I. Lenin, "Dogmatism and 'Freedom of Criticism,'" in *What Is To Be Done?* (New York: International Publishers, 1969).
- <sup>32</sup> Karl Marx, *Collected Works*, vol. 5. (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 4.
- <sup>33</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 104-105; Ginger, 259.
- <sup>34</sup> Salvatore comes to this conclusion in his book and I was afforded the opportunity to view the copy of *Capital* Debs received from Berger. There were no markings and the pages were in pristine condition thus offering no convincing evidence that Debs had read Marx's most famous work.

- <sup>35</sup> Marx and Engels, while friends with Kautsky, both often criticized his work but Lenin would become his biggest critic in the 1910s, constantly attacking Kautsky in most of his works.
- <sup>36</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 71-73.
- <sup>37</sup> Charles H. Vail, "The Negro Problem." *International Socialist Review* 1, no. 8 (1901).
- <sup>38</sup> Clarence Meily, "Socialism and the Negro Problem." *International Socialist Review* 4, no. 5 (1903).
- <sup>39</sup> William Noyes, "Some Proposed Solutions of the Negro Problem." *International Socialist Review* 2, no. 6 (1901).
- <sup>40</sup> Oscar Edgar, "A Study of Race Prejudice" *International Socialist Review* 4, no. 8 (1904).
- <sup>41</sup> Karl Marx, *Collected Works*, 4.
- <sup>42</sup> A.T. Cuzner, "The Negro or the Race Problem." *International Socialist Review* 4, no. 5 (1903).
- <sup>43</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 129.
- <sup>44</sup> Morgan, 78.
- <sup>45</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "Debs on the Race Question." *New York Worker*, 28 June 1903; Ginger, 260.
- <sup>46</sup> "Eugene V. Debs, "Debs on the Color Question." *Appeal to Reason*, 4 July 1903; Eugene V. Debs, "The Negro Question." *Social Democratic Herald*, 25 July 1903.
- <sup>47</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "The Negro in the Class Struggle." *International Socialist Review* 4, no. 5 (1903).
- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>50</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "The Negro and His Nemesis." *International Socialist Review* 4, no. 7 (1904).
- <sup>51</sup> Salvatore, 225.
- <sup>52</sup> Ginger, 259.
- <sup>53</sup> Debs, "Debs on the Color Question."
- <sup>54</sup> Salvatore, 227.
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- <sup>56</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> Debs, "The Negro in the Class Struggle."
- <sup>58</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 140.
- <sup>59</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>60</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "Not Racial, But Class Distinction." *New York Call*, 27 August 1908.
- <sup>61</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 138.
- <sup>62</sup> Morgan, 113.
- <sup>63</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 60.
- <sup>64</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>65</sup> Salvatore, 153.
- <sup>66</sup> Morgan, 76.
- <sup>67</sup> Salvatore, 167.
- <sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 170.
- <sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, 194.
- <sup>70</sup> Ginger, 261.
- <sup>71</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 225-226.
- <sup>72</sup> Debs, "The Negro in the Class Struggle."
- <sup>73</sup> Debs, "The Negro and His Nemesis."
- <sup>74</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 194.
- <sup>75</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>76</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>77</sup> I.M. Robbins, "Economic Aspects of the Negro Problem." Parts 1-16. *International Socialist Review* 8, (1908): 480-488, 548-554, 614-621, 691-700, 765-777; 9 (1908-1909): 161-171, 282-292, 309-314, 499-510, 690-702, 985-994; 10 (1909-1910): 50-59, 253-265, 527-541, 1010-1020, 1106-1117.
- <sup>78</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>79</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>80</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>81</sup> Philip S. Foner, "Local New York, the Colored Socialist Club, Hubert H. Harrison and W.E.B. DuBois," chap. 9 in *American Socialism and Black Americans*.

- <sup>82</sup> “According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure: political forms of the class struggle and its results ... juridical forms, and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas, also exercise their influence upon the course of historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*.” Frederick Engels to Joseph Block. September 21-22, 1890 in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 760.
- <sup>83</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 94.
- <sup>84</sup> Litwack, 443.
- <sup>85</sup> Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 99.
- <sup>86</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>87</sup> George M. Frederickson, “Southern Negrophobia,” chap. 9 in *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University, 1987).
- <sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, 115. On the same page, Williamson writes that the next day Dixon held a private screening for the Supreme Court and members of Congress. In the end, he writes, *The Birth of A Nation* “was not surpassed” in attendance “until the film *Gone with the Wind* appeared in 1939.”
- <sup>89</sup> “What Debs Says About Our Three New Propaganda Books.” *International Socialist Review*, June 1912; “On Motion Pictures as a Socialist Propaganda.” *Party Builder*, 21 March 1914.
- <sup>90</sup> The *National Rip-Saw* was published out of Girard, Kansas and was one of the more popular socialist journals of the time. It was founded by Kate Richards O’Hare and her husband. Mrs. Richards, as the associate editor, released a pamphlet in 1900 called “Nigger Equality.” In this pamphlet she announced that blacks should vote for socialism yet stated firmly that segregation was the only answer to the “Negro question” and even under socialism whites would never associate with blacks or allow them their social equality. Kate Richards O’Hare, *‘Nigger’ Equality*. Kansas City, 1900.
- <sup>91</sup> Debs would often include (!) or (?) after the word “gentlemen” when referring to white Southern capitalists or white Southern racists.
- <sup>92</sup> Eugene V. Debs, “On *Birth of a Nation*.” *National Rip-Saw*, March 1916.
- <sup>93</sup> Eugene V. Debs, *The Letters of Eugene Debs*, vol. 1. Edited by J. Robert Constantine. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 1990), 229.
- <sup>94</sup> D.A. Bethea, M.D. to Eugene V. Debs. 16, January 1916, Debs Collection, Cunningham Memorial Library, Indiana State University (hereafter cited as Debs Collection ISU).
- <sup>95</sup> Charles A. Bailey to Eugene V. Debs. 16 January, 1916, Debs Collection ISU.
- <sup>96</sup> Constantine, 229.
- <sup>97</sup> Beatrice S. Thompson to Eugene V. Debs. 15 June 1916, Debs Collection ISU.
- <sup>98</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>99</sup> Thomas C. Holt, “The Lonely Warrior: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the Struggle for Black Leadership” in John Hope Franklin and August Meier (eds.), *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 39.
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- <sup>101</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Negro* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 242.
- <sup>102</sup> Philip S. Foner, “The New Harlem Radicals and *The Messenger*,” chap. 13 in *American Socialism and Black Americans*.
- <sup>103</sup> Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present, Volume V* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 284.
- <sup>104</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>105</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 275.
- <sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, 275-276.
- <sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, 286.
- <sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, 287.
- <sup>109</sup> “SP leaders soon moved to restrict his speaking however, and as their attacks on both his political views and his principal means of livelihood intensified, his disenchantment grew, he was suspended, and finally he left the party.” Hubert Harrison, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*. Edited by Jeffrey B. Ross (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 4.

- <sup>110</sup> John P. Burke, "Race or Class Consciousness: Which?" *International Socialist Review* 12, no. 2 (1911).
- <sup>111</sup> Harrison, 2.
- <sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, 8. Booker T. Washington's "Tuskegee Machine" actually had Hubert Harrison removed from his postal position in New York City after Harrison's stinging series of articles critical of BTW. Perry also states that Harrison's anti-lynching campaign of 1918 was also undermined by the "U.S. Army's anti-radical Military Intelligence Bureau (MIB) in a campaign that was spearheaded by the NAACP board chairman Joel E. Spingarn and involved DuBois."
- <sup>113</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, 73, 60.
- <sup>115</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1999), 330.
- <sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, 333.
- <sup>117</sup> Ross D. Brown to Eugene V. Debs. 16 January 1916, Debs Collection ISU.
- <sup>118</sup> I was unable to locate this work.
- <sup>119</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 255
- <sup>120</sup> Ross D. Brown, *Rhymes of Reason* (Muncie, Ind.: 1916).
- <sup>121</sup> Philip S. Foner, "Some Changes in the Socialist Party Approach to the Negro Question, 1913-1916," chap. 12 in *American Socialism and Black Americans*.
- <sup>122</sup> Ross D. Brown to Eugene V. Debs. 16 January 1916, Debs Collection ISU.
- <sup>123</sup> Ross D Brown, *Chips of Thought* (Muncie, Ind., 1915).
- <sup>124</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>125</sup> Brown, *Labor Among the Lowly and Other Poems* (Muncie, Ind., 1916); *Rhymes of Reason* (Muncie, Ind., 1916); *Wrinkled Clay and Other Rhymes* (Muncie, Ind., 1916). Each pamphlet contains different versions of the poem titled "Gene Debs."
- <sup>126</sup> Perry, 4.
- <sup>127</sup> *ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>128</sup> Hubert H. Harrison, "Race First versus Class First." *Negro World*, 27 March 1920 in *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, 109.
- <sup>129</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "The Negro: His Present Status and Outlook." *Intercollegiate Socialist* (April-May 1918).
- <sup>130</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>131</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>132</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>133</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "Debs and the Negro." *Eye-Opener*, 11 May 1918.
- <sup>134</sup> Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*, 317.
- <sup>135</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>136</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "The Negro Workers." Speech at the Commonwealth Casino in Harlem, NY: 30 October 1923; Debs, *The Negro Workers*.
- <sup>137</sup> When the only applause, at this meeting, was from above him where the black workers were forced to sit in the loft, Debs said to the entire crowd (and he thought he'd be lynched for it) "the intelligence of this audience is in the gallery." Debs, *The Negro Workers*.
- <sup>138</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>139</sup> Eugene V. Debs to Theodore Debs. 2 August 1924, Debs Collection ISU.
- <sup>140</sup> Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to Eugene V. Debs. 15 July 1926, Debs Collection ISU.
- <sup>141</sup> Salvatore, 337.
- <sup>142</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "Black Persecution." *American Appeal*, 20 February 1926.
- <sup>143</sup> Debs, "Debs on the Race Question."
- <sup>144</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 87.
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## **Vita**

Josh Honn was born on May 18, 1979 and raised in the south suburbs of Chicago. He received his B.A. from Valparaiso University in Graphic Design and Journalism. Honn was awarded a graduate fellowship from Lehigh University's American Studies Program where he received his M.A. In the past he has won awards for his graphic design and poetry. Honn is presently working on several articles, a future book project and his continuing studies in Marxist theory, cultural criticism, black radical movements, political economy and philosophy, postcolonialism and more.

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