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*Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*. By Nick Salvatore. Urbana. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1982. Pp. 345. Notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00

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well as the status of women, need more research. Third, the study is hopefully a portent of things to come as records become more easily available to Western scholars in post-Mao China.

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*Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist.* By NICK SALVATORE. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1982. Pp. 345. Notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00

The great strength of Nick Salvatore's perceptive biography is that he makes Eugene V. Debs come alive in his personal life and as a public figure who symbolized American socialism's finest hour. The Debs who lives in these pages is no idealized hero, but a human being with all his flaws, weaknesses and indomitable spirit.

Combining an interpretation of evangelical Protestantism, in which Jesus is portrayed as "the inspired evangel of the downtrodden masses, the world's supreme revolutionary leader," and a radical message steeped in American revolutionary traditions, Debs gained a respected hearing among the workers. As Salvatore observes, he "embodied their experience, their social protest." Debs "brought an understanding of class into the center of American political discourse. Unlike many radicals then and since, Debs rejected a concept of class or a vision of Socialism based on determinism." (p. 343-4) He maintained a belief in the role of the individual in the class struggle.

As the Socialist Party's presidential candidate five times after 1900, Debs came to see that two fundamental developments would prepare the way for the new system: a continuous, long-range educational program of the masses, and their actual experience in the day-to-day class struggle. Their level of understanding, he thought, would be raised to such a point that they would see the need to use the ballot box as their major means for the revolutionary transformation of society-- a transformation that would restore human dignity and economic and political democracy.

What Debs failed to grasp about capitalism in the early-twentieth century was its flexibility in meeting unexpected crises. This lack of rigidity reflected the pragmatic temper of the rising economic elite which was in the process of consolidating its power. The marriage of liberal democracy and capitalism satisfied the political and economic needs of most Americans. It was the astonishing resiliency of capitalism to survive any and all critical situations that undid Debs and the socialists at the

polls. This resiliency buried all notions of an alternative socialist challenge to capitalism.

Salvatore addresses Debs' underestimation of the flexibility of capitalism, but he only touches briefly on a fascinating question that deserves greater attention. Why was Debs so widely admired and loved, when he espoused a socialist ideology rejected by most Americans? A systematic investigation of this seeming inconsistency would help illuminate the historical concern of understanding the dynamics of the relationship between leaders and their publics.

The image of a historical figure in the public mind is shaped by the needs of that public. The authenticity of a historical image may be an issue for scholars, but it is never one for a public which draws its emotional and psychological sustenance from symbolic leaders. Eugene Debs, the socialist leader, did not meet the special needs of his time, but Eugene Debs, the Christ-like "Good Shepherd" tending his flock in a time of great stress and change, was a comforting symbol that met a felt need. The mystique that enveloped Debs was rooted in these special qualities--qualities that made his public, in a "mutual exchange," pay back Debs with what he most desired: tokens of esteem and appreciation. Debs was thus perceived as the "kindest, foolishest, most courageous lover of man in the world,"<sup>1</sup> as a "man with a Calvary heart," and as the "living link between God and man."<sup>2</sup>

The popular image of Debs tells us much about the values and ideals of the age, its hopes and dreams and limitations. Debs became a symbol of defiance to the new capitalism of the Carnegies, the Rockefellers, and the Morgans. Like the hero of Frank Norris' *The Octopus*, who had fought the good fight against the railroad tycoons and lost, Debs also waged a war against the profit system and lost.

A man's life should point to something beyond himself, but few can meet the challenge of sustaining this kind of authenticity. Debs, to his credit, did, and working people responded not so much to his political leadership, but to the self-transcending charisma and symbolism of his seeming selfless dedication to others. Salvatore's biography deepens our understanding of a turbulent age in American history, and one of its significant actors.

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<sup>1</sup> Lincoln Steffens, "Eugene V. Debs", *Everybody's Magazine*, Oct., 1908. 457.

<sup>2</sup> Editorial from *Current Literature*, July, 1908. 35.