What the Matter Is In America and What to Do About It: An Interview with Debs by Lincoln Steffens (July 12, 1908)

All radicals have programs. They differ radically among themselves. They cannot, therefore, all have "the" program of God and man which each one thinks his is. Not one of them may be sound, reasonable, desirable, or right. They may all be impossible. But, at least, they are programs, riot merely platforms. Therefore they concern us.

For we want to know what the causes are of our American corruption, and the cure.

We have asked the leaders of the two old parties, and, excepting LaFollette,[1] they said, or they showed, that they didn't really know. Socialists, with other radicals, are sure they do know. So we will let them tell us what they think the matter is and what they think we ought to do about it.

The President, Taft, and John Johnson[2] don't believe there is any "it;" they set aside the suggestion that most of our greater evils are traceable to a few fundamental, removable causes. There's the money question and the tariff issue; the regulation of railroads, trusts, and criminals. They recognize seriously, though separately, these problems of business and money. Not so the problems of men and women: labor, poverty, crime. As the old political parties of Europe did so long, ours deny or ignore the social problem. The socialists (whence the name) not only recognize, they offer a solution for it. Therefore socialism grows.

For there is a social problem, and men find it out. The schools don't teach it; the churches don't preach it; the press won't mention it; and, brought up, as we are, to mind our own business, we become too absorbed in that to pay much attention to our public business. But when the railroad magnate discovers that, to make his property pay, he must corrupt politics, and that, having done so, he is first honored, then disgraced, he learns that there is something wrong somewhere. And when the willing worker out of work sees the market glutted with goods he and his family need but cannot buy, he, also, realizes that there are problems of humanity, els well as of money, in a money panic. The "bum," who is often an ex-child laborer, and the shop-girl who ekes out a living by taking a "gentleman friend" —

they feel it vaguely. And I, going about from city to city and from state to state, and finding everywhere much the same conditions, due to essentially the same forces, operated by all sorts of men using similar methods for one everlasting purpose and to one identical end, I, slowly, reluctantly, am convinced that we all are facing some one great common problem.

And we are. There is some relation between the unhappy capitalist facing the prison bars and the miserable workman staring into the shop window. There is some causal connection between the man and the money that are out of employment. And the trust, the railroad rebate, the bribed legislator, the red-light dive, and the working girl gone wrong form a living chain that can, and shall, be broken.

This is the problem of society as a whole, and as men find it out in fear and doubt, they look first to their old leaders; not for a final solution; all they ask is some recognition of it, some word of interest, comfort, hope. But when, seeing Congress passing an emergency currency bill to help money in distress, the unemployed assemble to exhibit their needs and "are given the stick;" when, watching Capital forming trusts and combines, Labor organizes unions and, asking relief from a power the courts have abused, gets an ambiguous anti-injunction plank; when, asking where they can find work, men hear that "God knows;" then, slowly, reluctantly, but naturally, they turn to the agitator on the street comer. He says he knows, and he makes it all plain; too plain, perhaps; but at least he understands the troubles of all those that are weary and heavy-laden, and he says he will give them rest. Is it any wonder they go to him, as they do?

The Socialists more than double their number every four years in the United States, and in Europe they did so till now they have in every parliament a strong, disciplined, uncompromising minority which seeks reform, not office; the socialist leaders that have accepted seats in cabinets have been read out of their party. No, this remarkable international organization stands there compact and keen, demanding, amending, debating, and reporting back to the people. And that counts. The Socialist Party is dictating policies to all the first-class governments abroad. Holding up its own menacing program in one hand and pointing with the other at its ever-growing vote, it is compelling the old parties to attempt social, not alone financial and political, reforms.

"We had to take up social reforms," said the prime minister of England, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman,[3] just before he died, to an American friend of mine. "Germany was driven to them long ago; France, Italy,

Austria, Holland, Belgium, and, finally, we English, all had to follow. And you, in the States, you cannot continue to ignore the demand. It becomes more and more pressing all the time, you know, and the radicals take advantage of every denial of it."

Of course they do. The radicals are themselves evidences of the growing consciousness of a common, as well as an individual, problem of civilized living; and, as between the leadership that denies and that which acknowledges it, the majority of men (with the suffrage, now, remember) are bound either to sink into animal contentment or to follow radicals, like the socialists, who not only recognize, but rejoice in, the work to be done; and, burning with their faith, offer not only hope, but something for every man to do; and not only a way out, but — a heaven on earth. Absurd? Maybe it is, but don't I illustrate my own point? I'm looking for light, and I don't care where I get it. If I don't find it in one place, I'll try another; if the Republicans and the Democrats shed only gloom, I'll apply to the Socialists; if my old leaders say there is no light — why, then, I'll have to ask Debs.

Yes, Eugene V. Debs is the keeper of the socialist heaven. Locomotive fireman, labor agitator, strike leader — he was jailed once and the Socialists, who take advantage of the misery of men to win them over, converted Debs in his cell at Woodstock. And now he is the leader of the Socialist Party. I must confess that I didn't want to take my socialism from Debs. Having use only for the truth, not the excesses and fallacies, of socialism, I desired to get the best possible view of it, so I had picked out another man to interview, a hard-headed, intellectual student. But if the Socialists preferred Debs, the "undesirable citizen," "the incendiary," who wrote: "Arouse, Ye Slaves!" and called for a mob to follow him to Idaho,[4] why, I felt that in a sense it was their party, not mine. And so, when they nominated him (the third time) for president of the United States, I saw Debs.

I don't know how to give you my impression of this man; I suppose I can't; I can hardly credit it myself, and I wouldn't, I guess, if I hadn't discovered so often before that the world (in the French phrase, "all the world") hates a lover of the world. And that's what Gene Debs is: the kindest, foolishest, most courageous lover of man in the world. Nor am I the only one that thinks so. Horace Traubel[5] says:

> Debs has ten hopes to your one hope. He has ten loves to your one love. You think he is a preacher of hate. He is only a preacher of men. When Debs speaks a harsh word it is wet with tears.

And there's James Whitcomb Riley, the Hoosier poet, he sez:

> And there's 'Gene Debs — a man 'at stands
> And jest holds out in his two hands
> As warm a heart as ever beat
> Betwixt here and the Jedgment Seat.

That's a true, and an essential, description. I met Debs at a Milwaukee socialist picnic (25,000 paid admissions)[6] where he was to speak,[7] and, as he came toward me with his two hands out, I felt, through all my prejudice, that those hands held as warm a heart as ever beat. Warm for me, you understand, a stranger; and not alone for me: those two warm hands went out to all in the same way: the workers, their wives, their children; especially the children, who spring at sight right into Debs's arms. It's wonderful, really. And when, piloted, plucked at, through the jammed mass of waiting humanity, he went upon the platform to speak, he held out his handfuls of affection to the crowd. He scolded them. "Men are beginning to have minds," he said; "some of you don't know it." There was nothing demagogic about that speech. It was impassioned, but orderly; radical, but (granting the premises) logically reasoned. It was an analysis of the platforms and performances of the two old parties to show that they would do for Business as much as they dared and for Labor as little; and the conclusion was an appeal to the workers — not to vote for Debs;

"I don't ask that," he said, and sincerely, too. "All I ask is that you think, organize, and go into politics for yourselves."

Delivered from a crouching attitude, with reaching hands and the sweat dripping from head and face, the speech fairly flew, smooth, correct, and truly eloquent. Debs is an orator.

"If Debs were a priest," wrote Eugene Field, "the world would listen to his eloquence, and that gentle, musical voice and sad, sweet smile of his would soften the hardest heart."

Half the world does listen to Debs, and his eloquence does soften its heart. But it wasn't art that kept that Milwaukee crowd steaming out there in the sun and, at the close, drew it crushing down upon the orator. And it wasn't what he said, either; too much of the gratitude was expressed in

foreign tongues. It was the feeling he conveys that he feels for his fellow men; as he does, desperately.

Debs is dangerous; it is instinct that makes one half of the world hate him; but don't. He loves mankind too much to, be hurt of men; and that's the power in him; and that's the danger. The trouble with Debs is that he puts the happiness of the race above everything else: business, prosperity, property. Remarking this to him, I said lightly that he was, therefore, unfit to be president.

"Yes," he answered seriously, "I am not fitted either by temperament or by taste for the office, and if there were any chance of my election I wouldn't run. The party wouldn't let me. We socialists don't consider individuals, you know; only the good of all. But we aren't playing to win; not yet. We want a majority of socialists, not of votes. There would be no use getting into power with a people that did not understand; with a lot of office-holders undisciplined by service in the party; unpurged, by personal sacrifice, of the selfish spirit of the present system. We shall be a minority party first, and the cooperative commonwealth can come only when the people know enough to want to work together, and when, by working together to win, they have developed a common sense of common service, and a drilled-in capacity for mutual living and cooperative labor. I am running for president to serve a very humble purpose: to teach social consciousness and to ask men to sacrifice the present for the future, to 'throw away their votes' to mark the rising tide of protest and build up a party that will represent them. When Socialism is on the verge of success, the party will nominate an able executive and a clear-headed administrator; not — not Debs."

It may be deemed expedient to hang Debs some day, and that wouldn't be so bad; but don't try to hurt him. In the first place, it's no use. Nature has provided for him, as she provides for other sensitive things, a guard; she has surrounded Debs with a circle of friends who go everywhere with him, shielding, caring for, adoring him. They sat all through my interview, ready to accept what I might reject. So he gets back the affection he gives, and no strange hate can hurt him. It can hurt only the haters. And as for the hanging, he half expects that.

"How could you," I asked, "thinking as you do that Socialists must learn by party service and personal sacrifice to deserve power, how could you have put out that call for a mob to rescue Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone?"

"Oh, that," he answered. "The 'Arouse, Ye Slaves!'? Why, my God, man, that was only a cry. That was pain. You know Colorado—"

Yes, I know Colorado. I know that there was, that there is now, and that it is planned that there shall be, no justice in that state; know it, too, from the unjust themselves. "But," I urged, "the folly of mob force."

"True," said Debs, hanging his head. " It was folly, but," he added, looking up as if frightened, "do you know, I sometimes think I am destined to do some wild and foolish, useless thing like that and — so go."

Debs has written much about John Brown. Socialists see the repetitions of history, they read it in parallels, and they have found in it heroes of their own. Debs's hero is John Brown.

"The most picturesque character, the bravest man, the most self-sacrificing soul in American history was hanged at Charlestown, Virginia, December 2, 1859." Thus Debs begins an article which fairly worships John Brown's "moral courage and single- hearted devotion to an ideal for all men and for all ages. He resolved," says Debs, "to lay his life on Freedom's altar and to face the world alone. How perfectly sublime!"

That's Debs, I suspect. His adoration of John Brown is a view into himself. It gives us the ideal and the dread; the use and the danger; the strength and the weakness of the man. One must allow for personality in an interview, and in this case we should not for¬ get for one moment that we are dealing with a man who speaks and acts from his heart, not his head; who honestly believes that there is something wrong in the world — some one big, removable "it," which meanwhile works terrible injustice to his kind of people, and who, therefore, feels that he may do "some wild and foolish, useless thing like"— John Brown.

I had a foil for Debs, however. The interview proper was at the house of Victor L. Berger, "the bear" — leader of the Wisconsin Socialist Party,[8] which has forceful minorities in the state legislature and the Milwaukee city council. Berger is the man that made a socialist of Debs, [9]and the teacher, a most aggressive personality, took a most aggressive part in his pupil's interview, which was fortunate. For Socialism seems to be a science. It is an interpretation of history; a theory of the evolution of society; no mere, man-dreamed Utopia, as I have thought, but a faith, a calculation that, since the economic forces which have brought man from savagery up to the present state of civilization are continuous, we can foresee the next inevitable step. But it takes no little study of economics and much reading in the mass of socialist literature to speak with authority on the subject,

and Berger—with a library coveted by the University of Wisconsin[10] — is an acknowledged authority.

"We believe," said Debs (for example), "that socialism would come without the socialists."

"Ach," said Berger, with his strong German roll, "we know it. Can't we see it?"

"Yes," said Debs. "The trusts are wiping out the competitive system. They are a stage in the process of evolution: the individual; the firm; the corporation; the trust; and so, finally, the commonwealth. By killing competition and training men to work together, trusts are preparing for the co-operative stage of industry: socialism."

"Then you would keep the trusts we have and welcome others?" I asked.

"Of course," he answered, and Berger nodded approval.

"They do harm now," I suggested.

"Yes," said Debs, but Berger boomed: "No; not the trusts. Private owners of the trusts do harm, yes; but not the trusts."

"Well, but how would you deal with the harm?"

"Remove 'em," snapped Berger, and Debs explained: "We would have the government take the trusts and remove the men who own or control them: the Morgans and Rockefellers, who exploit; and the stockholders who draw unearned dividends from them."

"Would you pay for or just take them?"

Berger seemed to have anticipated this question. He was on his feet, and he uttered a warning for Debs — in vain.

"Take them," Debs answered.

"No," cried Berger, and, running around to Debs, he stood menacingly over him. "No, you wouldn't," he declared. "Not if I was there. And you shall not say it for the party. It is my party as much as it is your party, and I answer that we would offer to pay."

It was a tense but an illuminating moment. The difference is typical and temperamental; and not only as between these two opposite individualities, but among socialists generally. Debs, the revolutionist, argued gently that, since the system under which private monopolies had grown up was unjust, there should be no compromise with it. Berger, the evolutionist, replied angrily that it was not alone a matter of justice, but of "tactic;" and that tactics were settled by authority of the party.

"We (socialists) are the inheritors of a civilization," he proclaimed, "and all that is good in it — art, music, institutions, buildings, public works, character, the sense of right and wrong — not one of these shall be lost. And violence, like that, would lose us much." Berger cited the Civil War: "All men can see now that it was coming years before 1861. Some tried to avert it then by proposing to pay for the slaves. The fanatics on both sides refused. We all know the result: slavery was abolished. But how?

Instead of a peaceful evolution and an outlay of, say, a billion, it was abolished by a war which cost us nearly ten billion dollars and a million lives.[11] We ought to learn from history, so I say we will offer compensation; because it seems just to present-day thought and will prove the easiest, cheapest way in the end.

And anyhow," he concluded, "and besites, the party, it has decited that we shall offer to pay."

And Berger was orthodox.

Looking up the point afterward, I found that the "authorities" are on his side; the party will offer compensation for property taken by eminent domain.

"Deps?" said Berger. "Deps, with the soft heart — Deps is the orator." And he meant "only" an orator. Berger loves his pupil's "soft heart," but he loves socialism more, and so during the interview, while Debs was trying to convert me, "the bear" was intent upon the orthodoxy of my report; and while Debs's other friends sat close up around him, under the light of the lamp, to protect the man, Berger hovered about in the shadow, anxious, on guard, to protect — "the cause."[12]

"To begin with," said Debs, without waiting for questions, "we socialists know what the matter is: it's capitalism; and we know what the cure is: it's socialism."

"Words," I muttered.

"No," said he, drawing near and reaching out his hands. "Capitalism is a thing, a system; it's the organization of society under which we all live. And it's wrong, fundamentally wrong. It is a system of competition for wealth, for the necessities of human life, and, a survival of the old struggle of the jungle, it forces the individual to . be selfish, and rewards him for beating and abusing his fellow man. Profit is made the aim of all human effort, not use, not service. The competitive system sets man against man, class against class; it puts a premium upon hate; and love—

the love of a man for his neighbor — is abnormal and all but impossible. The system crucifies the prophets and servants of mankind. It pays greed the most, honors highest the ruthless, and advances swiftest the unscrupulous. These are the fit to survive."

Debs seized my arm. "It's wrong, isn't it? It's inherently unjust, inhuman, unintelligent, and — it cannot last. The particular evils you write about, graft and corruption,[13] and the others about which I speak, the poverty, crime, and cruelty, they are evidences of its weakness and failure; the signs that it is breaking down."

"Why not wait, then, for it to break down?"

Debs drew back, rebuffed. "Because we have minds," he said. "Man can understand, and he can ride, the economic forces which now toss him so helplessly about, as well as he can the sea. And, having intelligence, he should. For human intelligence also is a force of nature. It could assist the process of evolution by searching diligently for the root of all evils as they arise."

"Panics and graft?" I suggested. "War, child-labor, crime, poverty?"

"All," he declared, "all are traceable to one cause. Take the panic, for example. Men lie about it, cover it up. Why not look it in the face? It's the proof that capitalists cannot handle industry, business, no, nor even money. And how can they when they are thinking, not of perfecting the machinery of life, but only of making profits out of it! So they don't understand the panic. We socialists do. The capitalists attribute it to a variety of causes, all but the right one: capitalism, profits.

"No, wait," said Debs, waving me back. "They produce more than they want themselves, don't they? Of course. They make goods to sell; not for use, primarily, but to make a profit. That's their god; and that's the devil, really. For see: Reduce our eighty millions to one hundred and our great continent to an island. The hundred all are workers at first. Each produces all that he wants. That's a low order of society. By and by they improve the tools, specialize their labor, and produce more. Steam, for example, applied to big, invented tools, does the work of a hundred small tools. Each man multiplies his productive capacity a thousand times. Should not the hundred on the island have all that they need?"

"Unless the population has increased."

"The more men, the more they produce. Every worker that can get at a machine can produce more than he needs himself. No, the hundred and the children of the hundred should have all that they want. But they don't.

And one reason is that some have much more than they need: in profits; capital; new capital, upon which, you understand, labor must earn interest and a profit, for profits come first under capitalism, and necessarily, or capital vanishes. But let's go on.

"Ten of the hundred own all the big new machines; twenty struggle along with the little old tools; and seventy have no tools at all of their own. The biggest, best tools are the trusts, and the ten who have them are the trust magnates, full-fledged capitalists. The twenty are beaten, but they don't understand that yet; they are crying out against the trusts just as Labor used to mob machinery. Bryan represents them; he wants to return to the competitive system with its anarchy, waste, and wars. Taft represents the trust magnates, opposing only their necessary crimes. We socialists represent the seventy, who are the bulk of the population and the key to the situation. Consumers, as well as producers, they are the market, and when 'too much' is produced they must buy the surplus. But they can't. Having no tools of their own, and prevented from organizing effectively, they compete for the chance to get at the tools and sell their labor. That puts wages down. Receiving only a pittance of what they produce, they can buy back only a pittance. The surplus grows, a load on the market, till the crash comes, production halts, men are discharged, prices fall, and — there's your panic."

"And the need of foreign markets," I suggested. "Why wouldn't the other islands meet the need?"

"They would, temporarily," said Debs. "If there were enough islands, Capitalism and wage-slavery might go on forever. But there aren't enough and—the other islands have the same system."

"And the same panics," Berger grunted, "thank God."

Debs winced, and I, thinking (also, I guess) of the misery, exclaimed: "Why thank God?"

Debs answered: "Berger sees there the chance for a higher civilization."

"Where?" I asked.

What Causes Panics?

"Oh, don't you see?" Debs pleaded. "The limitations of the world's market and the panics will force us some day to unite and solve our problem. And what is it? It's the problem of distribution. That of production is

in the way of solution already. With machinery constantly increasing the productive power of the worker, and the trusts cutting out the waste and disorder of duplicated plants, man can produce enough. The capitalists themselves say so when they ascribe their panic to 'overproduction.' They are wrong there, of course. The panic is due, not to overproduction, but to underconsumption. No, the supply is there and so is the demand. The masses haven't all they need, and yet there's an abundance, a surplus. The hitch is in distribution. The capitalist, producing, not to supply the demand, but to get his profit, seeks to make the Hindu buy shoes he doesn't want, while the American at home goes about ill-shod because, don't you see, his wages, fixed by competition, won't enable him and his kind to buy all they need. Profits, not losses, make panics: and panics make losses. The losses drive more small capitalists into the trusts or back to labor, and the suffering of all opens people's eyes, spreads discontent, and stimulates action. Panics compel progress."

"And panics," said Berger, from somewhere in the dark, "panics are periodic."

"Business men are becoming more intelligent," I observed. "They are forming associations, combines, pools, and, as you've said, trusts. They may govern production and distribution, too."

"They can't govern themselves," said Berger. "They can't control prices, because they can't control their own human nature, which, bred under the sordid profit system, gets too strong for them. If they had one absolute trust, they might limit the output, but—"

The Problem of Distribution

"But why," cried Debs, seizing my coat sleeve, "why limit production while men are in need?"

"Well, then, they can raise wages."

"Ah," said Debs, "that would postpone the panic, and the crisis, for a while, if it were feasible. But it isn't feasible. In the first place, no one employer can raise-wages. He must act with his competitors, and the meanest sets the pace. That's why organized labor must raise its own wages. Capital can't do it.

"And there, by the way, you have the cause of child-labor. Many a well-meaning manufacturer would like to spare the children, but he can't.

If one glass manufacturer employs boys and girls, the others must do the same. No, capitalists, too, are victims of the competitive system."

"But a trust?"

"A monopoly," Debs answered, "has potential competition to look out for. If it were too generous with wages, new competitors would seize the chance, by paying a living wage, to undersell the trust and buy it out. The system is ruthless, you see. The conflict between wages and profits is absolutely unavoidable. Capital and Labor cannot get together for long. For assume now that there is one universal trust, privately run for profit, and no possibility of competition; even then Capital couldn't raise wages high enough to make possible complete consumption of the surplus, without wiping out what Capital calls 'legitimate profits.' And the moment Capital does that, it abdicates."

"How would socialism do it?"

"By abolishing profits," said Debs. "Socialism will be an entirely different system. It will produce for use, not profit; and production for use is practically unlimited. Socialist society could produce ten times as much as we do now, because a cultured civilization would have ten times as many wants as we have. But if we found we were making more of one kind of goods than people could use, we would decrease the attractiveness of labor in that branch and increase it in another; and with workers schooled as we would school them (and as Germany is training them now) Labor would go much more easily from one machine to another."

"You think that is possible?"

"Why," said Debs, "we've just seen that capitalism does it in its brutal way. It drives men from one place to another by the blind force of panics and starvation. Under socialism, all industry would be intelligently managed as a trust manages it now on a small scale. And, freed from the brutalizing temptation of profits, it would apply civilized remedies in a civilized spirit."

The Root of the Evil

"Then it's profits you want to abolish."

"That's it," said Debs. "We want the producers to get all they produce."

"Who are producers?"

"All who labor in any productive way, mentally or physically. We would get rid only of the capitalists, stockholders, and financiers, who rake off fortunes for themselves and leave property in machinery and wage-slaves to keep their children in idleness, folly, or vice, a curse to themselves and a burden on the race for ever and ever and ever."

"Who would stand the losses?"

"Those who stand them finally now, the masses. For capitalists may rise and capitalists may fail, but capital grows on forever."

"But if you took away the chance of profits, wouldn't you take away all incentive—"

Berger sprang up, groaning, and just as Debs answered "No," the bear said: "Yes." We looked at Berger. "Yes, I say," he thundered. " We take away all incentive to steal and graft and finance and overproduce and shut up the shop sudden. But—" and he came around and stood over me, "you," he said, "you wouldn't write except to get paid? And you wouldn't come here and talk with us, except for profit? I get wages, good wages, but no more. Won't I run my paper except for profit, and help in politics except for graft? Bah! I love my work."

As To Incentives

"Berger's right," said Debs. "We all would do our work, as most of us do it now, without the incentive of a fortune in pros¬ pect. Wage workers haven't that. John Wanamaker,[14] with all his millions, was proud to accept a job at $8,000 to run the post office. Jefferson didn't write the Declaration of Independence for pay. Wouldn't a fireman save a child's life if he didn't get sixty dollars a month? And Harriman — wouldn't he operate railroads for a salary? Of course he would."

"But," said Berger, "he wouldn't finance 'em except for the incentive of millions of profit."

"Ah, no," said Debs, pleading, "men are better than you think; they are nobler now, and less selfish than your 'economic man.' We have heroes of altruism under the present system."

"True," I said, "but we haven't enough of them to build a society on. Self-interest is safer than altruism."

"Socialists don't propose to substitute altruism for self-interest."

"But you'd level men down and destroy individuality."

"Haven't I got individuality," called Berger, "and Deps?"

"Yes," I laughed, "too much, and so have most Socialists; but you all are products of the capitalist system."

"But the capitalist system," Berger retorted, "doesn't it level most men down now? Yes, it takes all the individuality, all the courage, self-respect, liberty, and beauty out of the great mass of men to produce a few—"

"And look at those few," said Debs. "I'll leave your civilization to that test alone, the test of its most successful men: Harriman, Rockefeller, Morgan. They are the flowers of the system; not the roots, remember. No, the monstrous specimens we produce today of individual greed, cruelty, selfishness, arrogance, and charity — not love, and not justice, but degrading, corrupting, organized charity — these are one of the results of the struggle for life and riches, and the other is that beast — the mob."

Debs paused; then, more quietly: "There would be emulation after competition is abolished. Men would vie in skill and service, and that would produce individuality and character, though of a different sort. A society where all men were safe would produce more such real men and women as you find in the well-to-do class now. We would level up, not down. We would let human nature develop naturally. And — this you must believe — if we took away the fear of starvation on the one hand and on the other the tremendous rewards for crookedness and exploitation; removed all incentives to base self-seeking, and arranged things so that the good of the individual ran, not counter to, as at present, but parallel with, the good of society, why, then, at last, human nature would stand erect, manlike, frank, free, affectionate, and happy."

"But we are off on the cure," I said. "Let's get back to what the matter is."

"It's this," said Debs. "Some men live off other men."

"But how does that account for war, for example, and graft; political corruption, ignorance, child labor, crime, and poverty?"

Wage Slaves

"We've accounted for poverty," said Debs. "We see the mass of men working for the few. That's what we call wage- slavery, and it is slavery. You say they might quit work; that the boss will let them go. But I tell you the fear of starvation is the boss's slave-driver. They don't dare quit. You can't leave a trust and get back, and maybe the trust controls the work in your trade. And then there's the black list. Well, the wage-slaves work in

competition, and they produce goods that they need but haven't enough money to buy. That's poverty. And the measure thereof is the riches of the exploiters of labor, industry, and finance, and of their children till vice exhausts, the family and returns the grafted wealth through the dives and divorce courts back to society. And there's one cause of capitalistic vice accounted for, as well as of poverty. And the other cause of poverty is the waste of competition and the artificial halt of production — to keep up prices and profits."

"And crime?"

"Petty and professional crime," said Debs, "are a result of poverty; high crime springs from wealth-seeking."

"But vice, intemperance?"

"Frances Willard began her career telling working people that they wouldn't be so poor if they weren't so intemperate. She closed saying that the poor weren't poor because they drank; they drank because they were poor."

"But the rich drink," I protested.

"Idly," said Debs. "What else have they to do? Among busy businessmen, intemperance is rare, and when it occurs is inherited or due to the abnormal tension of the gamble which much business is now; an abnormal vice itself.

The Cruelty of Capitalism

"Child labor we have touched on before," Debs continued. "It is simply the meanest form of the exploitation of human beings by human beings, and, as I showed, is due, not to any inherent cruelty in the employer, but to the system of which he also is a victim — the capitalistic system which puts profits first and children—"

"How does your theory account for political corruption?" I asked.

"Why," said Debs, "you know about that. That's the capitalist class corrupting government to maintain them and their system of labor exploitation."

"I don't know that at all," I objected. "Not all business men take part in the corruption of politics. Only those do that have privileges from the government, franchises, and the like."

"Oh," said Debs, "you are thinking only, of the big businesses, the railroads, public utilities, and so forth, which attend to the corruption of politics directly. But they do it for the rest of their class."

"No, they don't," I contradicted. "They do it for themselves. They don't know they belong to a class."

"I don't charge all of them with class consciousness," Debs answered. "Some of them do understand, but, whether they are intelligent or not, in that way they do make the government represent the business class. And, as for the smaller business men, they get the benefit. They contribute to campaign funds, and that's the big source of corruption, or, at any rate, they vote for one or the other of the two parties which the big fellows have corrupted and control, both of them."

"For privileges," I insisted. "Why isn't that the root of the evil?"

Debs shook his head, and, taking my arm in both his hands, he said: "No, it's deeper than that. It's profits. The big fellows corrupt and rob railroads, insurance companies, banks; they finance and exploit the corporations and trusts. What governmental privilege is there in these businesses to explain the corruption of them?"

I'll have to let the single-taxers answer that. I can't. It's crucial, but I was stumped, and Debs went on:

"Privilege won't account for it all. Profit, gain, private property, in land and natural resources, machinery, and all means of production, that is at the bottom of it. And if you call these privileges, why, very well, I'll go along with you. For I believe myself that wage slavery, the power to exploit labor and live off one's fellow men, is a privilege; the greatest privilege left since chattel slavery."

"How do profits account for war?" I said.

"We saw the cause of wars," he answered, "when we looked around for foreign markets."

"And bad workmanship," I proceeded, "one of the worst evils of the day?"

Profits and Bad Work

"We remarked," said Debs, "that captains of industry were turned from productive effort to finance. Capitalism will take a man who is a natural born operator, say, of a railroad, make him president, and pay him salary enough to make him want more profits. He gambles. He is taken

into Wall Street; he sees how easy it is to exploit and finance. He is fascinated; he neglects operation; the railroad suffers; people are killed. Bad work that — for profits, for fascinating unearned profits.

"So with the worker," Debs added. "Do you teach him, by example and precept, to love to turn a piece of wood to fit a place? No. He doesn't know where the piece is to go. He works without interest, to live; he must; he works for wages. He sees the exploiters making their money easily; he hears industrial leaders, dishonest and self-indulgent themselves, insisting upon his honesty and industry. He understands; if he does more and better work his employer gets the benefit, not he. He rebels; he catches the capitalistic spirit. His boss robs him and the public; so he loafs, skimps, and robs the boss. All he is after is all the boss is after — money. That's the system."

"Now for your remedy: socialism," I said. "What is it?"

What Is Socialism?

"You know the old stock definition," Debs answered. "'The cooperative control and the democratic management of the means of production.' I'll try another: Socialism is the next natural stage in the evolution of human society; an organization of all men into an ordered, cooperative commonwealth in which they work together, consciously, for a common purpose: the good of all, not of the few, not of the majority, but of all."

"How would that induce the worker to do good work?"

"Well, if there were no inspiration in the idea of a common good there would be the assurance of a full return for the product of his labor."

"But how could such a complicated system give any such assurance?"

"By abolishing capitalists and all non-producers."

"But managers — organizers?"

"They would be well paid. Men would be paid according to their social use; skill and ability would count, but so would the disagreeableness of a job; to get it done, society would have to make it attractive somehow — with short hours or big pay. For men. would be free, you understand; much freer than now, and not only industrially, but politically, intellectually, religiously — every way. We would have no churches that didn't dare preach Christianity. But the point is that nobody would get such pay as Rockefeller gets now."

"Not even if he corrupted business and government and churches and colleges and men," said Berger.

"But Rockefeller did a service, you say yourselves," I retorted, "when he socialized the oil industry."

"Yes," said Debs, "but hasn't he been paid enough? A billion, they say. That's too much; but let him have it. All we socialists say is that he should not be allowed to buy up railroads and mines and natural resources, and neither should oil consumers go on paying his children fortunes for generations. No, we must get rid of the Rockefellers, and keep only the organization they build up."

"But," I challenged, "if you took away Rockefeller's trust, wouldn't the other trust builders stop work?"

"Men don't organize trusts because they want to," said Debs, "but because they must. Competition drives them to it, that and their instinct for organization. Trust building can't be stopped; you might as well try to stop an ocean current."

Would Men Work Under Socialism?

"But how would Socialism secure the services of eminent talent like that of the great organizers, instinctive operators, and natural managers?"

"The words you use to describe them, 'instinctive,' 'natural,' show that you think of them as born to a kind of work," said Debs. "They would want to do that kind of work. They couldn't help falling into it, and socialism would offer such men greater incentives and more opportunities than they have now: pay according to service, public appreciation, and the chance they yearn for: to do good work unfretted (and uncorrupted) by grafting high financiers who are keen, not for excellence (look at our railroads), but for profits. We would release the art instinct of the race."

"Geniuses might respond," I said, "but how about ordinary men?"

"All able-bodied persons of age would have to work," said Debs, "but they want to. I've heard convicts beg to be allowed to break stone. Man must be active, and a society that produced for use and not for profits would have plenty of work to have done, and all would have to help do it, excepting only the incapable. For them society must provide, as it does now, only better; more regularly, with justice, not charity. The first thing the socialists abroad went after was the old-age pension, which gives

worn-out workers the right to draw on society for sustenance. We want to remove from the earth the fear of starvation."

"How, then, will you deal with loafers and vicious persons?"

"They are abnormal," said Debs, "and, by removing the cause, poverty and riches, we should soon have no more of them. The idle children of the present rich would be without their graft, but they would foresee their predicament, and the best of them would go to work. Some of them seem to inherit from their parents talents which capitalistic society now gives them every incentive to neglect. Under Socialism — an inspiration, you realize, as well as an organization — they would probably exercise their abilities for the common good and their own greater satisfaction."

"Good," I said; "but the idle poor?"

"They are made what they are just as the idle rich are," said Debs. "Take a willing worker, overwork and underpay him, keep him on the verge, and then when he and his kind cannot consume what they produce, discharge him. He leaves his family to hunt a job, and, finding none, tramps or commits a crime. His children suffer, go young to work; they learn that their father is a bum or a crook. They are discouraged. The father drinks; they drink. Their children are, the best of them, perhaps, criminals, and the others, vagrants. This you see, and you ask me what socialism will do with them? I'll tell you: we will treat, with physicians, as sick, the children that have inherited weak or wicked tendencies from parents and grandparents who lived under capitalism." Debs paused to restrain himself, then he concluded: "And we will stop making more by abolishing the cause — poverty and riches."

Socialism and Art

"If there is no rich, leisure class, what will become of art and culture and manners?"

"They will become common," said Berger, and Debs said: "All men will have some leisure. They will come strong and well paid from their work, ready to enjoy healthily all the good things of the earth. There will be no ignorance. Education will be free, not only in the money sense, but intellectually. The schools will teach liberty and the trades, justice and democracy and work, beauty, truth, and the glory of labor, efficient and honorable. The arts will thrive, as they always have thriven, in a free, cultivated democracy."

"Who will do the dirty work?"

"Machines," said Berger, "which clean my house now."

"Yes," said Debs; "only machines that increase profits are introduced now. Apparatus of great utility exists, but is suppressed by capital because human strength is cheaper, and improvements reduce profits. You doubt that? Ask the telephone and telegraph monopolies about the patents they own and don't use. But let me answer the question fully. There always will be some work less attractive than other kinds, and we should have to offer more pay or shorter hours to induce men to do it; men who want time to do unproductive things."

"If some men would get more pay than others," I asked, "why, then, couldn't they accumulate property?"

Socialism for Private Property

"They could," he answered. "Socialism does not abolish private property, except in the means of production. We want all men to have all they produce, all; we are for private property; it is Capitalism that is against it. Under Capitalism only the few can have property. And so with the home; and love. Capitalism is against homes. It makes it inexpedient for young workers to marry; that makes for prostitution, which is against the home. And so is the tenement system of housing, which is good for profits and rents, but bad for homes and — love. And so is marriage for money against love."

"But, Debs, you must admit that you socialists preach class war, and that engenders hate."

"No, no," he answered, rising all his great height over me, "we do not preach hate; we preach love. We do not teach classes; we are opposed to classes. That is capitalism again. There are classes now, and we say so. Why not? It's true, terribly true. But it's exactly that we are trying to beat. The struggle of the best men now is to rise from the working into the exploiting class. We teach the worker not to strive to rise out of his class; not to want to be an employer, but to stay with his fellow workers, and by striving all together, industrially, financially, politically, learn to cooperate for the common good of the working class to the end that some day we may abolish classes and have only workers — all kinds of workers, but all producers. Then we should have no class at all, should we? Only men and women and children."

"How are you socialists going to get all this?"

We socialists aren't going to get it," said Debs. "It's coming out of the natural evolution of society, and the trusts are doing more toward it than we. Socialists are only preparing the minds of men for it, like the labor unions. They are taking the egotism out of men; subordinating the good of the individual to that of the union; and teaching self-sacrifice and service.

"So with us. The party is the thing. It is governed by its members, who must pay to belong to it, and all perform services besides. They work, write, speak — what they can. But it's theirs, our party is. They elect officers, and delegates; they nominate tickets; and they are taught to vote a straight party vote, no matter how hopeless the contest. That's often a sacrifice of the present for the future, of the individual for society. But isn't that good? That's discipline. It's an education in cooperation. Their reward will come when, by and by, we shall have everywhere, as we have here in Wisconsin now, a minority in office of representatives trained in that school, enlightened as to general economic and moral principles, and inspired with an ideal that is as fine as any religion in the world ever had — the good of all."

"That's slow," I said, "and you, Debs, are impatient."

Foundation Love of Man for Man

"Yes," he said, "I am in a hurry, but socialism isn't. Socialism is the most patient of reforms, but also it is the surest, and the truest. For we believe in man and in the possibility of the love of man for man. We know that economic conditions determine man's conduct toward man, and that so long as he must fight him for a job or a fortune, he cannot love his neighbor. Christianity is impossible under capitalism. Under socialism it will be natural. For a human being loves love and he loves to love. It is hate that is unnatural. Love is implanted deep in our hearts, and when things are rearranged so that I can help my fellow man best by helping myself, by developing all my skill and strength and character to the full, why, then, I shall love him more than ever; and if we compete it will be as artists do, and all good men, in skill, productiveness, and good works."

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[1] Robert M. LaFollete, Sr. (1855-1925) was a former congressional representative and governor of Wisconsin elected to the United States senate in 1905. Staunchly pro-labor and an active supporter of a broad array of reform measures, LaFollette was for two decades among the most progressive elected politicians in Washington, despite his status as a member of the Republican Party. In 1924 LaFollette ran an independent campaign for president of the United States, an effort actively backed both by the Socialist Party and Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor, gathering 16.6% of the total vote.

[2] Apparently a reference to John Albert Johnson (1861-1909), Democratic governor of Minnesota.

[3] Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1836-1908), head of the Liberal Party, was prime minister of Great Britain from December 1905 to April 1908. During its brief tenure the Campbell-Bannerman government strengthened the trade union movement by indemnifying unions from being sued for damages by employers as a result of a strike and granting workers the right of compensation if injured in an on-the-job accident.

[4] "Arouse, Ye Slaves!" was first published in the *Appeal to Reason,* March 10, 1906. See this volume.

[5] Horace Traubel (1858-1919), well-know as a biographer of Walt Whitman, was the founder of the literary journal The Conservator. A committed socialist, Traubel was a regular contributor to the New York socialist weekly *The Worker* and its daily successor, the *New York Evening Call.*

[6] Editor Fred Heath of the *Social Democratic Herald* pegged the number at "over 20,000." See: "Eugene V. Debs a Milwaukee Picnic," *Social Democratic Herald,* vol. 11, no. 12, whole no. 520 (July 18, 1908), pp. 3-4.

[7] Debs spoke at the seventh annual picnic of the Social Democratic Party of Wisconsin, held at Pabst Park in Milwaukee during the afternoon of June 12, 1908, with those in attendance paying ten cents for admission. Prominent muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens (1866-1936) conducted this interview with Debs at Victor Berger's home following conclusion of the event. Debs's appearance at the picnic marked his first speech in Milwaukee since November 4, 1904, a campaign event that was followed in April 1905 by a personal break with Berger over the matter of the Industrial Workers of the World. Debs's articles were no longer reprinted and his name only rarely mentioned in the pages of Berger's *Social Democratic Herald* during the months that followed this split, although the two prominent socialist leaders did not polemicize against one another in public and retained a degree of personal affection. This interview by Steffens underestimates the degree of political tension between the two.

[8] The official name of the Wisconsin state affiliate of the Socialist Party of America was the Social Democratic Party of Wisconsin, retaining this historic name even after the merger of the two rival Social Democratic parties in the summer of 1901. This was not unique, in New York the party was forced to appear on the ballot during this period as the Social Democratic Party of New York, while in Minnesota both the words "socialist" and "democratic" were forbidden by statute, being words already used by other parties, with the SPA organization therefore relegated to calling itself the Public Ownership Party.

[9] Although Debs himself originated this myth in a magazine article published in April 1902, this assertion remains highly debatable. Debs and his American Railway Union associates immediately constituted themselves a "cooperative commonwealth of Woodstock Jail" and read books by an array of socialist authors from the time of their first incarceration, with Debs a socialist in all but name for many months or even years prior to that. See *Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs: Volume 2, The Rise and Fall of the American Railway Union,*

1892-1896, passim. Debs's famous "How I Became a Socialist" article appears in the appendix to that volume.

[10] Victor L. Berger's papers did indeed ultimately land with the University of Wisconsin–Madison, home of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

[11] Historians have traditionally accepted a death toll of 620,000 through all causes in the American Civil War. Current scholarship pegs the number at approximately 750,000, compensating for an apparent undercount of Confederate losses.

[12] Steffens completed the writing of this piece on July 31, 1908, and sent an advance copy to *Appeal to Reason* staff writer Debs for correction. This was also reviewed by *Appeal* editor Fred D. Warren. Berger prominent appearance in the interview as a socialist authority was the source of great consternation on the part of Warren, a factional foe of the arrogant Berger, and he petulantly declared that as a result he would no longer promote the issue of *Everybody's Magazine* with the Debs interview to the hundreds of thousands of *Appeal* readers. Steffens took umbrage to Warren's factional temper tantrum, explaining to Debs: "I didn't mean at the time to report Berger did take part, as you know...but as I came to think over my material, I saw that the contrast between his bluff manner and your kindness, his views and yours, added not only to the attractiveness but likewise the clearness of the interview.... If Mr. Warren can't see that, his judgment is worthless as to the presentation of any matter." (See: Steffens to EVD, August 13, 1908, in Constantine (ed.), *Letters of Eugene V. Debs,* vol. 1, pp. 274-275). Debs intervened with Warren and rationality prevailed, the squabble was patched up, and the magazine with the Debs interview as its cover story was ultimately given an appropriate promotional push in the pages of the *Appeal*.

[13] Steffens was well-known for his muckraking journalism and his book *The Shame of the Cities* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1904), which dealt with systemic corruption in civic government in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Minneapolis. In it Steffens wrote that "politics is business" and "a politician is a businessman with a specialty."

[14] John Wanamaker (1838-1922) was a department store magnate from Philadelphia. He served as postmaster general under President Benjamin Harrison from 1889 to 1893.