

Ernest Freeberg. *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. Pp. 380. Cloth, \$29.95; ISBN 10: 978-0-02792-3.

Any citizen, student, or teacher seeking to make sense of the post 9/11 world would do well to consult this volume on the imprisonment of perennial Socialist Party Presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs for his dissent to American participation in the First World War. Relying upon extensive archival research and an exhaustive reading of early twentieth-century periodicals, Ernest Freeberg, Associate Professor of History at the University of Tennessee, constructs a well-written narrative of efforts on behalf of civil libertarians and free speech advocates to obtain the release of Debs and other political prisoners.

Parallels with the political climate following 9/11 are evident in American insecurities manifested during the First World War. Concerned that antiwar activists were hindering the government's conscription program, Congress enacted the Espionage Act in June 1917, making speech that could be construed as interfering with U.S. military operations a federal crime punishable by a \$10,000 fine and twenty-year prison term. On 16 June 1918, Debs spoke in Canton, Ohio, criticizing suppression of dissent for a war that he believed benefitted business and capitalism at the expense of the working class. The result was the arrest of Debs for violating the Espionage Act which the Socialist leader perceived as an abridgement of his First Amendment rights. An Ohio jury, however, disagreed, and the frail, sixty-two year old Debs was sentenced to three concurrent ten-year terms for a speech interpreted as intending to obstruct military recruitment. The Supreme Court upheld the conviction, arguing in a unanimous decision that Debs's Canton speech was not protected as it demonstrated "a bad tendency." The court ruled that the majority's right to protection during wartime trumped an individual's free speech rights.

Thus, the conviction of Debs must be placed within the historical context of World War I patriotism and concerns about the Bolshevik Revolution. Fears of German espionage were quickly replaced by anxiety over communism as the postwar period was marked by racial, political, and labor unrest. The ensuing Red Scare was characterized by raids under the authorization of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. Anarchists, socialists, communists, and members of the Industrial Workers of the World were incarcerated in a mass violation of First Amendment rights. But the focus of the Freeberg book is not the assaults upon political discontent, but rather the campaign for civil liberties, crystallizing around the case of Debs, which government suppression of dissent fostered in the post-World War One period and early 1920s.

Due to the overcrowding of federal prisons, Debs was initially dispatched to West Virginia's state penitentiary in Moundsville before being transferred to the federal facility in Atlanta. Although in poor health, Debs refused to request a pardon, maintaining that at Canton he was only exercising his Constitutional prerogatives. Liberals assumed that Debs and other dissidents would be released by President

Woodrow Wilson following the cessation of hostilities in Europe. A disillusioned Wilson, however, remained critical of Debs's loyalty, asserting that freeing the radical would be an affront to the brave young men who sacrificed their lives in the Wilsonian crusade to "make the world safe for democracy." As Wilson turned a deaf ear to pleas that Debs be released, the Socialist Party nominated convict number 9653 as their Presidential candidate for the fourth time. Running his 1920 campaign from a prison cell, Debs captured almost a million votes, although Freeberg attributes much of this support to a symbolic protest against the suppression of free speech by the Wilson administration rather than an endorsement of Socialist principles.

The election of conservative Republican Warren G. Harding, who had promised to restore "normalcy" to the nation, seemingly offered a more favorable environment for the release of wartime dissenters. While communists and socialists continued to wage doctrinal disputes through a protest campaign to free Debs, Freeberg argues that the most effective advocate for the Socialist leader was Lucy Robbins who formed the League for the Amnesty of Political Prisoners and forged alliances with the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Federal of Labor (AFL). The tireless lobbying of Robbins finally culminated in the decision by Harding to commute Debs's sentence, effective 25 December 1921.

Following his release from prison, Debs continued to labor for the freedom of all wartime dissenters whose sentences were finally commuted by Calvin Coolidge in December 1923. Robbins was disappointed that Debs was unable to reconcile with AFL president Samuel Gompers, with whom Debs originally clashed in the 1894 Pullman strike. Instead, Debs devoted his remaining years to a futile effort to revive the fortunes of the Socialist Party which never recovered from government suppression during World War I.

But for Freeberg the story of *Democracy's Prisoner* is less about Debs and socialism than the forging of a civil liberties movement in the United States. Freeberg concludes, "From the congressional debate over the Espionage Act to the final push for amnesty, radical and civil libertarians engaged a national audience in ideas that they had been working out for decades—about the role of free speech in the fight for social justice, the value of dissent as an instrument of progress, and the danger to democracy when the wealthy and powerful control the channels of communication."

Although he does not belabor the point, there are certainly powerful parallels between Freeberg's history of the campaign to free Debs and contemporary concerns regarding the Patriot Act, policies of interrogation and torture, and the state of civil liberties in an era of perpetual war. In addition, Freeberg makes a contribution to contemporary political discourse with his account of a Socialist Party leader who was revered by many Americans. Perhaps socialism is not quite as un-American as some commentators and politicians would have us believe. Freeberg's *Democracy's Prisoner*

is a timely narrative history accessible to the general reader. It should serve as a valuable supplementary text for the history classroom at both the collegiate and secondary levels.

Sandia Preparatory School, Albuquerque, NM

Ron Briley

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. And Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds. *Harlem Renaissance Lives: From the African American National Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 608. Cloth, \$37.34; ISBN 13: 978-0195387957.

With hundreds of accessible entries on the lives of African Americans directly or indirectly associated with this period, *Harlem Renaissance Lives* is an ambitious effort to highlight, and sometimes uncover, the role of African Americans in shaping the United States in the twentieth century. While the entries are brief, the book's strength is its breadth with portraits of not only writers, artists, actors, and musicians but also educators, civil rights and labor activists, entrepreneurs, athletes, clergy, and aviators. Students of history will find familiar figures of the period such as Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker, Duke Ellington, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. However, the real value of the work is in highlighting, however briefly, the lives of hundreds of lesser-known African Americans. Some figures, such as educator Roscoe Bruce, the son of a U.S. Senator, grew up relatively privileged, but many of the biographies involve African-Americans whose unlikely contributions begin with a background that included slavery and sharecropping. Regardless, each entry includes a valuable bibliography and information about relevant primary sources such as an obituary and archival collections.

Although Harlem, as the "Mecca of the New Negro," provides a common thread to the varied biographical portraits, most of the individuals began their lives far from New York. These stories often originate in small towns throughout the South and Midwest and other portraits begin in the Caribbean, Europe, Egypt, and Canada. Thus the biographies, especially taken as a whole, illuminate the history of race, migration, and urbanization in twentieth-century America. The lives of individuals reveal the contours of race and culture within a modernizing American society. For example, Charles Chestnutt, born in Ohio in 1858, forged a career as a writer based in part on his experience with his family's multiracial roots in North Carolina before and after the Civil War. Elsewhere, Laura Bowman, a biracial actress born in Quincy, Illinois, in 1881, struggled to find professional success despite the racism prevalent in American theater and film. Many others found the cultural and intellectual milieu of Harlem a fertile ground for individual growth that eventually spoke to the condition of African Americans throughout the nation.

Unfortunately, the success of *Harlem Renaissance Lives* in illustrating the experiences of individuals is also the book's central weakness. The introduction is less