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Eugene Debs and the Politics of Parrhesia

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EUGENE DEBS AND THE POLITICS OF PARRHESIA

by

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Bachelor of Arts
Coker College, 2011

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DEDICATION

For Kyria

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I first became acquainted with the concept of parrhesia while reading for Pat Gehrke's Classical Rhetoric graduate seminar. It appealed to me, and I wrote on parrhesia twice before this thesis. So, first, I am deeply indebted to Prof. Gehrke for introducing me to the concept, providing feedback on my previous seminar papers on parrhesia, and for lending his time to direct this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

The general public often views the practice of politics to be incompatible with truth telling. Despite this perspective, I argue these two concepts coexisted in the 1912 campaign of Eugene V. Debs. Using Michel Foucault's unfinished work on parrhesia, or frank speaking, I argue that Debs functioned as a parrhesiast. To make this argument, I analyze Debs's discourse against what Foucault's work suggests are the three essential elements of parrhesia: compulsion, risk, and authenticity. Because Debs's parrhesiastic sensibilities become more obvious when compared with his opponents in the 1912 election, I analyze Debs's discourse in relation to William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Theodore Roosevelt. Although a small minority in rhetorical studies have explored Debs's ethos as a rhetorical strength, none have situated Debs in relation to parrhesia, but to do so is appropriate and beneficial. Because of Debs's success in garnering six percent of the popular vote as a third-party candidate in 1912, his evocation of parrhesia in politics reveals advantages and possibilities for reconciling the practices of truth telling and politics.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2 COMPULSION, TAFT, AND THE PROPHET	12
CHAPTER 3 RISK, WILSON, AND COURAGE	32
CHAPTER 4 AUTHENTICITY, ROOSEVELT, AND THE PARRHESIAST PRETENDER	52
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION	74
WORKS CITED.....	85

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The acts of truth telling and politics often appear to be irreconcilable; yet, both seem to coexist in the 1912 campaign speeches of Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs. This truth telling act, which Michel Foucault identifies as parrhesia, manifested throughout Debs's rhetoric as he vied to be President of the United States. This thesis explores the concept of parrhesia in relation to Eugene Debs and the rhetorical situation of the 1912 presidential election.

In the context of the 1912 election, I will argue that Debs functions as a parrhesiast in contrast to his fellow candidates: Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and William Howard Taft. Importantly, in confronting his fellow candidates, Debs makes the central critique of his opponents not their political or economic ideology, as would be expected in any political debate, but their insincerity to the American voters. Thus, the issue for Debs as parrhesiast is that Americans deserve honest campaign presentations from their politicians. Characterizing Debs as parrhesiast allows me to closely explore the elements of parrhesia and compare these qualities with the practices of campaign politics. This thesis shows the fundamental distinction between politics and parrhesia is the opposition between the *ethos* of the politician and the parrhesiast. As opposed to the former, the latter is characterized as one compelled to perform an ethical act of speaking out for the benefit of a community. One of the central questions of this thesis is the

possibilities for parrhesia in politics, and a study of Eugene Debs illustrates these potentialities.

What exactly is parrhesia? Although defining this concept should be an easy task and seemingly an essential component of any such study, any particular definition of parrhesia must be contextualized. Whether spelled parrhesia, *parrēsia* or *parrhēsia*, this concept of truth telling has not had a singular meaning or a linear trajectory. Through its early establishment in the plays of Euripides to its somewhat formalization in Philodemus's *On Frank Criticism* to Michel Foucault's final lectures on parrhesia as an ethical framework, it has been modified for various purposes to fit any given rhetorical moment or philosophical investigation. Despite these changes, parrhesia, as Foucault notes, fundamentally deals with the "old, traditional question, which is at the very heart of Western philosophy, of the relations between the subject and truth, [...]" (*Courage of Truth* 3). In *Courage of Truth*, Michel Foucault further states, "But we should immediately add the clarification that this word *parrhēsia* may be employed with two values" (9). Foucault traces both a positive and negative aspect of parrhesia (Lévy 313). The "negative" aspect stems from Philodemus's usage of parrhesia as a technique of rhetoric.

Although *Frank Criticism* argues for the importance of parrhesia as a means of displaying "personal candor" and as the essence of "moral education," Philodemus writes, "In short, a wise man will employ frankness toward his friends [...]" (fr. 15), which suggests parrhesia in this sense is a neutral, tactical device to be deployed in a rhetorical situation. However, parrhesia, to Foucault, is "a passion, since it entails an emotional investment, and a virtue, insofar as it is still linked to courage" (Lévy 314). To

Foucault, parrhesia is “a modality of truth-telling, [...]” (*Courage of Truth* 14). Indeed, the rhetor must understand the risks of speaking, including “the risk of not being heard by the other party or parties or of being silenced entirely, [...]” (Walzer 4-5). Thus, parrhesia “involves some form of courage, the minimal form of which consists in the parrhesiast taking the risk of breaking and ending the relationship to the other person which was precisely what made his discourse possible” (Foucault, *Courage of Truth* 11). Despite its tie to the subject, Philodemus’s *On Frank Criticism* argues, “It is indeed possible to [dist]inguish [the nature] of one who practices frankness from a polite disposition and that of one who {does so} from a base one” (Col. Ib). Thus, it is appropriate and, as Philodemus suggests, possible to identify Debs’s sense of parrhesia and its usage during the 1912 election against his fellow interlocutors.

Recent translations of Foucault’s final lectures have caused some rhetorical scholars to turn their attention to parrhesia. One such study is that of Carlos Lévy, who focuses on Foucault’s two principle senses of parrhesia, as outlined in *Courage of Truth*. Lévy seems to be interested in the way in which parrhesia is separated from rhetoric in Foucault, who divides parrhesia in terms of passion, associated with rhetoric, and virtue, which is associated with philosophy (314). Lévy wants illustrate the presence of passion in “good” parrhesia and, thus, link parrhesia with rhetoric (315). He reinterprets Foucault’s readings of Pericles, Socrates, and Philo to present an alternate, more ambiguous parrhesia than is found Foucault’s articulation in his lectures. Noting parrhesia’s absence in histories of antiquity, Lévy suggests, parrhesia might have been considered “a useless concept for a historian wanting to explain events, speeches, and

actions with accuracy” (324). However, I argue parrhesia does provide a new lens through which to understand historical acts.

One notable study is Arthur Walzer’s “Parrēsia, Foucault, and the Classical Rhetorical Tradition.” Walzer’s work seeks to further complicate Foucault’s conceptualization of parrhesia by essentially questioning our ability to ever detect sincere parrhesia (Walzer 3). He does so when he writes, “[F]rom a rhetorical point of view what in Foucault is seen as sincere parrēsia might be feigned and what he reads as rhetorically artless is often highly rhetorical” (Walzer 18). His argument seeks to oppose Foucault’s conception of parrhesia as diametrically opposed to rhetoric and “right the imbalance” (Walzer 18). Despite his approach to form a counter-history of parrhesia, Walzer’s contribution might be to have begun a conversation on the hazards of dealing with parrhesia as a stable concept.

This became apparent in the pages of a *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* forum. In this forum, Pat Gehrke, Susan Jarratt, and Bradford Vivian each productively respond to some of the implications and assumptions made by Walzer’s argument. Each illustrates the elusive nature of parrhesia that makes a rhetorical study of the concept fraught with challenges. Jarratt’s concern seems to be with the orientation of any corrective project, which risks unnecessary divisions, such as between “‘old history’ and ‘new theory,’ or in older terms, rhetoric from philosophy” (363). Vivian’s response argues that neither the counter-history of Walzer or the subject/truth history of Foucault can be reconciled because of the reductions both take in their definitions of either rhetoric or parrhesia (372). Similarly, for Gehrke, the problem for any project lies in the irreducibility of the concept when considered over the entire span of antiquity. Gehrke writes, “[N]either

parrēsia nor rhetoric is reducible to a single form or tradition over the ancient period. Certainly Foucault did not hold this to be the case and neither should we” (361). Walzer, Jarratt, Vivian, and Gehrke also provide salient points to consider for any study of parrhesia.

Although for the sake of analysis this study uses Foucault’s definition of parrhesia as a useful analytic, it is also an attempt to locate the boundaries of parrhesia in relation to political rhetoric. This thesis is not an attempt to reach back to antiquity to correct or clarify; it is an attempt to bring forward antiquity’s concept of parrhesia to see its instantiation in more recent history, the election of 1912, to see its possibilities for histories yet written.

One would search in vain through the archives of the 1912 presidential election to find a specific articulation of the word “parrhesia,” but one can, however, find the evocation of the concept of parrhesia. For my usage of parrhesia as a means to analyze the rhetoric of Debs, following Foucault’s direction, I will draw on several essential characteristics of parrhesia as a means to illustrate Debs’s ethical style. In order for there to be parrhesia, I argue, these three essential elements must be present: the rhetor must display motivations of offering frank criticism as compulsive, the rhetor must risk something by speaking frankly, and the rhetor must demonstrate an *ethos* of authentically speaking to benefit the citizenry.

In general, the 1912 campaign represents an interesting moment in the history of American politics and an appropriate moment for an analysis of parrhesia because of the abnormality of the campaign itself, which featured four major contenders seeking the presidency. Two of these contenders, of course, were operating outside of the two-party

political establishment. Although neither Roosevelt nor Debs captured enough votes to secure the country's highest office, each garnered a significant response from the population. Surprisingly, when the votes were counted, six percent of voters cast their ballot for Debs (Broderick 207). This was clearly not a majority of Americans aligned with Debs but was significantly more than the 100,000 Americans registered in the Socialist Party (Flehinger 17). Perhaps the key to understanding this unique moment for Socialist dissent in America is through exploring the *ethos* of its leader. Of the various components of Debs's *ethos* as rhetor, his chief virtue lies in his effective utilization of parrhesia or frank speaking. Although Debs's campaign did not secure him the presidency, the movement itself can be viewed as a success, particularly considering the skepticism surrounding Socialism within the United States. One of the research questions of this study is why such a subset of the population supported third-party candidates, especially a Socialist leader. One plausible answer and one of the assumptions of this study is that Debs's successful evocation of himself as parrhesiast rather than politician contributed to his appeal to voters. If we can explore the ways in which Debs made his ideology more palatable to American voters, perhaps others may employ these mechanisms to work toward an ideology of inclusion rather than the exclusionary practice that defines the current political environment.

In rhetorical studies, an analysis of the impact of Debs's presentation of parrhesia is useful to those exploring movements and ways of dissension in the American political landscape. Although scholars have remarked on Debs's *ethos*, none have connected this ethical appeal to parrhesia, though to do so seems extremely appropriate. By looking at the elements that contribute to his *ethos*, crucially among these is parrhesia, one can

perhaps gain a fuller understanding of what gives Debs's ethical appeal such legitimacy. Thus, I hope to connect Debs's success in 1912 with his presentation of himself as one who is compelled to speak the truth. Such a study builds on the work of a few rhetorical scholars who have focused on Debs.

Although he has not explored Debs in relation to parrhesia, James Darsey is by far the rhetorical scholar most interested in Debs's ethos. His "The Legend of Eugene Debs: Prophetic *Ethos* as Radical Argument" argues Debs rhetorically constructed himself in the image of the prophet, martyr, and *vir bonus* to strengthen his ethos. Darsey examines Debs's speeches and the elements that align with the characteristics of the prophet and martyr: charisma, conversion, sacrifice, and compulsion. He also analyses the prophetic nature of Debs's discourse, which ultimately did secure his position as prophet and martyr in public memory. Darsey's article is the first to explore Debs in relation to public memory, particularly the way in which Debs's ideology is increasingly moderated into the American ideal of classical liberalism.

Further attempting to locate Debs within rhetorical scholarship, Darsey finds the opportunity in his brief contribution to demagoguery studies. In "Patricia Roberts-Miller, Demagoguery, and the Troublesome Case of Eugene Debs," Darsey responds to Roberts-Miller's formalization of the qualities of demagoguery. From their backgrounds to their use of in-group/out-group rhetoric, simplification, and Burkean identification, Darsey concludes that Debs is strikingly similar to Joseph McCarthy, Roberts-Miller's ideal demagogue. However, Darsey finds that Debs cannot even be placed in the same category of demagogue because of significant ethical differences, where Debs represents "an essentially generous and humane ethos, [...]" ("Patricia Robert-Miller" 465).

Although he does mention parrhesia, Darsey finds Debs's compulsion to speak the truth as one of his distinguishing qualities. Darsey illustrates, once again, it is Debs's ethic that seems to shield him from the criticism directed at most politicians. I explore Darsey's conception of Debs further in chapter two in relation to William Howard Taft.

Taking their direction from Darsey's work, in "A Story of Rhetorical-Ideological Transformation: Eugene V. Debs as Liberal Hero," Ronald Lee and James Andrews argue that the transformation of Debs from an American deviant to hero depends on the moderation of his ideology in public memory. The authors examine historical biographies of Debs's life and compare them to contemporary conceptions. Lee and Andrews argue that the historical construction of Debs as an exemplary American depends on the importance of Debs's perceived virtue and the progressive view of history, which amplifies this virtue and extends it to his ideology. For example, they write, "Thus, the ethical appeal in Debs' discourse is changed by the passage of time and the changed apprehension of the meaning of the labor movement in American history" (Lee and Andrews 35). In chapter three, I connect Lee and Andrews's commentary on Debs and public memory in relation to Woodrow Wilson as a suggestion on how parrhesia might prove effective in the long term.

Another rhetorical scholar exploring Debs as an idealization is Robert Ivie. Ivie's "Toward a Humanizing Style of Democratic Dissent," which does not solely focus on Debs, argues the need for cultivating a rhetoric of dissent that is free from demonization of the other. Interestingly, when considering Ivie's comments on the current state of American politics, Debs's opponents never resort to a "demonization of Debs and his followers" (Flelinger 18). Ivie critiques a rhetoric based on showmanship, which he

argues republicanism is prone to. He advocates an egalitarian discourse that situates the audience and speaker as equals. The ideal of this style of speaking to Ivie is Eugene Debs. Ivie writes, “[Debs] articulated this very democratic sensibility in his socialist stand against capitalism by locating himself within the ranks of the working masses rather than posing as a leader or representative of the people” (456). In this way, Debs becomes almost an ideal for Ivie and others in rhetorical studies. In relation to Ivie, my project explores why Debs should be considered to be a particular ideal: a parrhesiast. To do so, I highlight the qualities in Debs that warrant idealization by a comparison to others who do garner idealization.

To understand Debs’s use of parrhesia in 1912 is to move beyond an exploration of “[h]istory’s sanctification of Eugene Debs [...]” and toward an understanding of what makes Debs effective within his own times (Lee and Andrews 20). To identify how parrhesia manifests and functions in this period, this thesis will be organized to highlight the qualities of a parrhesiast that Debs possesses. In addition to a focus on Debs, each chapter will focus on one other candidate and one primary quality of parrhesia to illustrate Debs’s differing approach as parrhesiast. For primary texts, each chapter will utilize speeches from the four candidates. The thesis will be structured as follows:

Chapter two will focus on the comparison of Eugene Debs and William Howard Taft during the 1912 election. Of all the candidates, Taft stands in stark contrast to Debs. In terms of parrhesia, I will argue that the fundamental difference between Debs and Taft is Debs’s presentation of having a compulsion to speak. Taft’s campaign is marked by his reluctance to engage in the typical campaign activities and his hesitation to commit to Progressivism. Instead, he focused on political maneuvering rather than an appeal to the

electorate. For this reason, he is clearly engaging in a different practice from Debs, who demonstrates in his speeches a compulsion to offer frank criticism. The argument will be that Taft engaged in the 1912 election as a traditional candidate, but Debs participated as a parrhesiast compelled to speak out. This chapter will also include a response to James Darsey's classification of Debs's ethos as prophetic. I argue that labeling Debs as parrhesiast rather than prophet, as Darsey does, is more appropriate and consistent with his role as rhetor.

Chapter three focuses on the contrasts between Woodrow Wilson and Eugene Debs, focusing on the quality of risk as the dividing factor between the two. Parrhesia requires the threat of detrimental consequence, a risk of some kind for offering frank criticism. Unlike Wilson, who had the backing of the Democratic Party and the political expertise of Tammany Hall Democrats, Debs had a considerably less organized political conglomerate. Unlike Wilson, Debs is less limited in his speech by the established party positions on issues. However, this freedom also comes with a risk for Debs. As an outside candidate, Debs runs the risk of angering one of his fellow candidates, who will no doubt be president. Of course, this is the case between the three other men as well. However, Debs does not have a party establishment to protect him, as Taft and Wilson do. He also does not have the authority that comes with being a past president, as Theodore Roosevelt does. Despite these risks, Debs does perform the role of parrhesiast in offering frank criticism for the benefit of the country. This chapter will also illustrate parrhesia's ability to connect with public memory.

Chapter four focuses on the comparison of the campaign rhetoric of Theodore Roosevelt and Eugene Debs. As dissenters, both Roosevelt and Debs are in the unique

position to comment on issues and larger American political and economic structures; however, only Debs maintains a sense of parrhesia in his speeches for the benefit of the polis. Like Wilson, Debs accused Roosevelt of deliberately spreading falsehoods—the ultimate crime against Debs’s virtue of parrhesia. More than any other candidate, Debs presents an image of Roosevelt as an ideological thief of Socialist principles to mask Roosevelt’s opportunistic intentions. Of his presidential record, Debs found the lapses in truth for the sake of ambition the most reprehensible quality of the man. This position, of course, makes Roosevelt the opposite of the parrhesiast and incapable of trust. Thus, this chapter will connect the differences between the two to the essential principle of authenticity. This chapter will argue that Debs was able to perform the role of parrhesiast, while Roosevelt was challenged in his ability to convey authenticity rather than ambition.

Finally, the concluding chapter reviews the results of the 1912 campaign and how to situate Debs’s achievement. The conclusion will position the distinguishing factor of Debs’s campaign is a focus on parrhesia rather than politics. Finally, the chapter extrapolates the implications for the use of parrhesia in politics. Although parrhesia might not have served to elect Eugene Debs as President of the United States, it garnered him respect from his opponents and a sympathetic space in public memory.

CHAPTER 2

COMPULSION, TAFT, AND THE PROPHET

Entering the large-scale political stage of a presidential election requires a certain tolerance for public scrutiny that some cannot withstand. Through countless speeches, appearances, and photo opportunities, candidates must engage with the public to garner the votes necessary for victory. Because of technological limitations in 1912, candidates had to dedicate considerable time and energy not just into their public performances but also into the extensive travel to and from campaign locations spanning the expanse of the American continent. With this reality, we might ask: what motivates these candidates to sacrifice their personal lives for the very public life of campaign politics?

William Howard Taft's answer would look very different from that of Eugene Victor Debs, and this fundamental difference can be further explained in terms of parrhesia. One characteristic of parrhesia, as Michel Foucault conceptualizes it, speaks to this chapter's central question. This characteristic might be called duty or compulsion. As will become apparent from an analysis of the compulsive quality of a parrhesiast, Taft and Debs stand at opposite ends of the spectrum. For Debs, the answer as to why he would enter the 1912 campaign is a matter of compulsion. He simply feels he must do so. It follows that his campaign rhetoric complements his conviction to offer frank criticism as a compulsive act. This almost extemporaneous effusion contrasts with Taft's measured establishment approach to his campaign. From the beginning, Taft lacked the compulsive drive of the parrhesiast

Taft's campaign is marked by his reluctance to engage in the typical campaign activities and his hesitation to commit to Progressivism. Instead, he focused on political maneuvering rather than a direct appeal to the electorate. For this reason, he is clearly engaging in a different practice from Debs, who demonstrates in his speeches a compulsion to offer frank criticism. This chapter will survey the political speeches of both men to highlight their differences to argue that Taft engaged in the 1912 election as a traditional candidate, but Debs participated as a parrhesiast compelled to speak out. To illustrate how this quality functions at the particular rhetorical moment of the 1912 election, we should first explore the quality of compulsion in relation to parrhesia.

Much like finding the particular word "parrhesia" in the 1912 campaign speeches, it is a challenging task to locate the particular word "compulsion" in Michel Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France. This quality is generally translated as duty, as it is in *Fearless Speech*. However, it is important to keep in mind that Foucault's lectures were far from definitive. Instead, they were a means for him to publically work through some of the ideas and direction for his next project. Foucault even notes the fluctuating nature of the lectures himself in response to an audience member's comment. "[Y]ou know I never really know what I will be doing from one week to the next," Foucault says (*Courage of Truth* 31). Thus, modifying some of Foucault's minor phrasings, such as "compulsion" for "duty," might allow for us to move toward a closer meaning to a more holistic conception of parrhesia, avoid some unintended connotations of the term "duty," and, if nothing else, provide at least a productive analysis of this particular context.

Foucault speaks directly to the necessity of compulsion as the motivation for a rhetor to be considered a parrhesiast. Foucault argues, "Not only must this truth really be

the personal opinion of the person who is speaking, but he must say it as being what he thinks, [and not] reluctantly—and this is what makes him a parrhesiast” (*Courage of Truth* 11). The parrhesiast, then, is one who displays no reluctance in speaking the truth, as he or she understands it. To Foucault, reluctance when one is speaking is absurd because the choice to speak involves an acknowledgement of the freedom to be silent. Foucault states, “The orator who speaks the truth to those who cannot accept his truth, for instance, and who may be exiled, or punished in some way, is *free* to keep silent. No one forces him to speak, but he feels that it is his duty to do so” (*Fearless Speech* 19). In this sense, duty involves a compulsion to oneself. One recognizes the truth and sees the need to speak out as a compulsive act toward oneself. Motivation must come from within. In this way, this facet of parrhesia is purely focused on interiority.

Motivation for speaking that is spurred solely from some external source, Foucault argues, cannot be parrhesia. He makes this point clearly when he argues:

When, on the other hand, someone is compelled to tell the truth (as, for example, under duress of torture), then his discourse is not a parrhesiastic utterance. A criminal who is forced by his judges to confess his crime does not use *parrhesia*. But, if he voluntarily confesses his crime to someone else out of a sense of moral obligation, then he performs a parrhesiastic act. To criticize a friend or a sovereign is an act of *parrhesia* insofar as it is a duty to help a friend who does not recognize his wrongdoing, or insofar as it is a duty towards the city to help the king to better himself as a sovereign. *Parrhesia* is thus related to freedom and duty. (Foucault, *Fearless Speech* 19)

This passage illustrates the relationship between compulsion in relation to the interior and the exterior. The parrhesiast is one who is motivated by an internal compulsive desire to speak out, and in speaking out one's discourse must be motivated not by a desire to improve one's own material condition but to improve something external to oneself, such as the city or a friend. This is the strange internal/external relationship that underpins the compulsive quality of parrhesia.

In discussing the compulsive quality of parrhesia, it is almost inevitable to compare the prophet and the parrhesiast. Indeed, the compulsion to speak for the divine is a quality generally attributed to a prophet. These comparisons are especially appropriate when considering Debs, parrhesia, and, ultimately, Taft.

Though not dealing explicitly with Debs's parrhesia, James Darsey's work on Debs illustrates the link between Debs's rhetorical effectiveness and his ethos. Darsey argues Debs rhetorically constructed himself in the image of the prophet, martyr, and *vir bonus* to strengthen his ethos. He writes, "What persists when the pragmatic, the formal, and the aesthetic have been stripped away is Debs the man, an ethical presence productive of and reflected and preserved in his speeches. Debs is Quintilian's *vir bonus*" (Darsey, "The Legend of Eugene Debs" 435). Darsey goes on to examine Debs's speeches and the elements that align with the characteristics of the prophet and martyr: charisma, conversion, sacrifice, and compulsion.

Debs as a virtuous man compelled to offer frank criticism is explicit in Darsey's response to Patricia Roberts-Miller's theory of the demagogue. Of the qualities essential to label Debs Foucault's ideal of parrhesiast is the compulsion to speak the truth, and Darsey finds this quality throughout Debs's work. He writes, "While a demand for

personal allegiance would have been inconsistent with Debs's prophetic ethos, an ethos that depended on Debs's cultivation of a selfless persona, much of Debs's rhetoric is, nonetheless, compulsory. There is much talk of 'duty,' and 'must' is one of Debs's favorite verbs" (Darsey, "Patricia Robert-Miller" 468). Elsewhere, Darsey illustrates to what end Debs as prophet deployed this association. Darsey convincingly asserts:

Duty is the inescapable refrain of Debs's rhetoric. Like Martin Luther, Debs agitated. He could do no other. His agitation was an example of manly self-assertion. Debs tried to ensure that every time the working man closed his eyes to his duty, he would see the image of Debs bearing the cross of labor. As a suffering servant Debs transcended the role of the individual speaker. He became universal, symbolic. ("The Legend of Eugene Debs" 446)

The goal of this association, Darsey argues, was for Debs "represent himself as a participant in the divine, a bearer of *charism*" ("The Legend of Eugene Debs" 441).

Darsey brings us to crucial question in considering Debs and parrhesiast: Can Debs be both parrhesiast and prophet? To phrase the question even more universally: Can one be a parrhesiast and prophet? Accordingly to Foucault, the answer is an unequivocal "no." The reason being that parrhesia entails speaking one's truth, not another's. He argues, "We can say then, very schematically, that the parrhesiast is not the prophet who speaks the truth when he reveals fate enigmatically in the name of someone else" (Foucault, *Courage of Truth* 25). The prophet is merely a channel for another's truth. Thus, the religious labeling of a prophet as "God's mouthpiece" removes agency from the prophet, who is reduced to a medium through which the divine message is transmitted.

This is quite opposed to the function of parrhesiast, who speaks truth as he or she understands it. The parrhesiast, therefore, is the sole active interpreter and transmitter of the message. Likewise, the compulsion of speaking on behalf of another as prophet effectively functions as duress, since the speaker is forced to speak by an external force. Because this speech is a kind of duress, this fact disqualifies the prophet's discourse as parrhesia. Though in this case the external force may be metaphysical and possibly delusional, the conclusion drawn from the principle of parrhesia remains the same: The prophet is compelled to speak by something other than a duty to oneself; therefore, the prophet's speech is not parrhesia. As this chapter's analysis will demonstrate, Debs was acting not as a prophet, as Darsey would argue, speaking for another entity. Instead, Debs acted as a parrhesiast speaking out of a compulsion to tell the truth.

In contrast to Debs, it is quite an interesting thought to consider William Howard Taft as anything approaching a parrhesiast. His predilection from the early stages of his life was for measured contemplation. As James Chace writes, "The law, not politics, was [Taft's] passion. This had been true ever since he was a very young man growing up in Cincinnati as the son of a judge who was also a member of President Grant's cabinet and a minister to Vienna and Saint Petersburg" (23). Despite this temperament for civil service rather than electoral politics, Taft found himself thrust into the presidency in what might be considered a form of gentle duress from a close friend.

Caught in the frenzy of a campaign victory in 1904, Theodore Roosevelt made what historians consider his biggest political error. Roosevelt vowed on election night to not run for a third term (Chace 23). Following his inauguration, Roosevelt's thoughts turned to naming his successor, which ultimately was Taft. In a letter to Senator Henry

Cabot Lodge, Roosevelt outlined why he considered Taft a worthy successor to his presidency. Roosevelt writes, “I do not believe a man so well fitted to be President. He is not only absolutely fearless, absolutely disinterested and upright, but he has the widest acquaintance with the nation’s needs [...]” (qtd. in Broderick 30). Roosevelt’s idealized characterization of Taft might speak to his appropriateness as a parrhesiast. To Roosevelt, he is fearless.

Ironically, Taft directly opposes this conception of himself by writing of his own fearful hatred of political campaign speaking. In 1904, he writes to Roosevelt: “I would not run for president if you guaranteed the office. It is awful to be made afraid of one’s own shadow” (qtd. in Broderick 29). One might have expected this attitude to change during his own election in 1908, but Taft remained reluctant to enter the presidency and even more reluctant to engage with the public. Francis L. Broderick writes of the dynamic between Taft and Roosevelt: “[Taft] had no taste for canvassing for votes himself. Begging itself made the beggar unworthy of the gift. Roosevelt had no such qualms, and he sought to rub his lust for battle into his lethargic aide. Taft, alternatively grateful and resistant, essentially went his own way” (30). In his ambivalence toward the presidency, it is clear that Taft was almost impressed into running for office. His compulsion for running was the result of deference to Roosevelt and Taft’s wife Nellie, who craved the presidency for her husband in spite of his dreams of serving as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (Chace 26). This initial and ultimately successful presidential bid illustrates the chief characteristic that prevents Taft from being considered a parrhesiast: a lack of compulsion.

With the opportunity provided by Roosevelt's support, Taft missed the opportunity for the type of parrhesia that exists among friends. Foucault writes of such a situation: "We also find the obligation to be frank with one's friends and to say everything one has on one's mind" (*Hermeneutics of the Subject* 365). Yet, even in his microcosm, Taft does not enact parrhesia by disclosing his aversion to electoral politics. He finds no compulsion to frankly speak with his friend, or, as Foucault might phrase the situation, he does not display a duty to himself to speak. Instead, Taft's foray into political campaigning is the result of passivity rather than the active stance required of a parrhesiast and, one might suggest, a good president.

Once the office was his, Taft's administration continued to be defined by his reluctance. Broderick writes, "Though an active man who rode horseback and who played golf before golf carts reduced the game to sedentary socializing, he did not push himself to work until he had to, only at the last meeting a deadline with a kinetic spurt of energy" (31). Likewise, Taft viewed his obligation to his electorate as a mere formality. He remained detached in his presidential addresses speaking "as president, which he was, but not as politician, which he also was despite the dignity of his office" (Broderick 35). In this respect, Taft's reluctant discourse functions as a mere reflection of his administrative position. He lacks the close proximity between his speech and the personal reflection that it contains. Despite being the president, it is as if Taft's discourse reflects the office itself rather than the man. Of this detachment, Broderick writes, "Taft took grim satisfaction that: no one would sing his praises; both sides would blame him. The path of duty was more attractive than praise" (33). This maxim sounds eerily familiar to

qualities Foucault discusses in *The Courage of Truth*. Indeed, Taft's discourse might not be considered that of a parrhesiast but a prophet.

To consider Taft a prophet of in the religious sense would be absurd. After all, he turned down the presidency of Yale in 1899 because he did not believe "in the Divinity of Christ" (Chace 24). Taft's discourse, however, might be said to function in the prophetic sense because of its tendency to use the man as vessel for praise of the intangible. Foucault explains, "You can see then that the parrhesiast is the opposite of the prophet in that the prophet does not speak for himself, but in the name of someone else, and he articulates a voice which is not his own" (*Courage of Truth* 15). Taft speaks in a voice not his own, but in the name of the President of the United States, an office he never honestly sought in the first place. Like a prophet, Taft is speaking under a kind of duress: an obligation first to his wife, his friend in the campaign of 1908, and to the office of the presidency in 1912.

In contrast to a parrhesiast, Taft seemingly saw no obligation to speak for the benefit of the citizens. The reason for this, Lewis L. Gould speculates, is that "[Taft] had likely given up any realistic hope for reelection in 1912 but was determined to gain a renomination and frustrate Roosevelt" (46). The result was that Taft placed considerably less importance on engaging with the electorate and instead focused on "exploiting the rules that favored an incumbent president to maximum effect" (Gould 46). By focusing on private political maneuverings rather than appeals to the American voters, Taft's campaign stands in stark contrast to the campaigns of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and especially Eugene Debs. In terms of parrhesia, the fundamental difference between Debs and Taft is the presentation of a compulsion to speak. By comparing the

two men, Foucault's conception of the compulsive quality of parrhesia becomes apparent in Debs and lacking in Taft.

Compare Taft's reluctant start in presidential politics with Debs's. In 1900, the Socialist party nominated Debs, already an important figure in Socialism, for President of the United States. Taft's reluctance during his first foray into electoral politics came from the reluctance to speak to the citizens. Debs's initial hesitation was due to his health. He had proven throughout his outspoken life that speaking to the people was not an act he regarded as improper. Instead, his refusal was due to the sheer physical strain a campaign would place on an already ill man. Chace writes, "At first, Debs refused the nomination because of his health, but during the night he received delegations that begged him to reconsider. Finally, Berger wrested from him a reversal and so added to the legend that Debs had sacrificed his personal desire for repose for the good of the cause" (86). Thus, Debs's entry into presidential politics starkly differs from Taft's. Despite his health, Debs mounted a robust campaign in 1900, 1904, and 1908. In each of these campaigns, his health continued to be an issue. His doctors could only prescribe "[r]est and occasionally a special diet [...]" (Chace 88). By 1912, his condition remained precarious.

At fifty-six years old, Debs wrote to his brother Theodore of his health: "This is first day's work I've done for 2 weeks & I'm tired. Easter 2 a m was seized with spasm of lumbago—fell on floor & was helpless & suffered all the tortures of damnation until 2 or 3 days ago. Thought I was done for" (Debs, *Letters of Eugene Debs* 472-3). Clearly, Debs's health was a formidable consideration when making the decision to enter the 1912 election. Several conditions at the macro level of the United States but also at the micro level of the Socialist movement may have given Debs cause to see the platform of the

presidential campaign as a means to offer frank criticism for the benefit of everyone. Within the Socialist movement, William “Big Bill” Haywood, a socialist leader and co-founder of the Industrial Workers of the World, used his speech making to link together various conceptions of working-class and resistance strategies to create a class unity. Unfortunately, Haywood encouraged violence to affect a Socialist revolution, which Debs felt compelled to speak out against in the press and urged the national convention to adopt a platform against “sabotage and terrorism but not to do so in a manner that further split the party” (Gould 113). Here, Debs’s motivation speaks to his inward duty to himself to offer parrhesia to those in his movement and beyond. Importantly, he enters the political arena for the campaign of 1912 not under duress but freely.

Likewise, in contrast to Taft’s reluctance to campaign and speak to the people of the United States, Debs entered the campaign as an ailing man compelled to speak out, but not just for votes. Gould writes, “Holding office as an end in itself never appealed to him. He believed with passionate intensity that capitalism as a political and social system was doomed. If he could only convince his listeners of that simple proposition, he knew that the Socialist commonwealth would soon arrive” (106). One might question the naiveté of launching a national campaign and taxing one’s body through arduous public performances, but this misses the point of Debs’s conviction in the truth he was speaking and the importance of his speaking it. Understanding this action as a personal compulsion—the compulsive act of a parrhesiast—explains Debs’s decision to engage in a political campaign with little hope of actually being elected. In a metaphoric description that recalls Socrates, who Foucault considers another parrhesiast, Gould calls Debs “a gadfly who could irate and provoke his rivals in the political system” (121). This

provocation is one of the functions of the parrhesiast as Foucault conceptualizes it. The parrhesiast is in a constant act of “speaking the truth in order to direct the city, in a position of superiority in which one is perpetually jousting with others” (*Government of Self* 157). Debs’s jousting with his fellow candidates certainly exemplifies this act.

This personal commitment to parrhesia as found in Debs’s campaign once again differs from Taft’s approach, which is characterized by a lack of compulsion. In his campaign, Taft’s style appears remote. Because of his lack of compulsion to engage in campaign speeches, Taft becomes a spectator rather than a participant in the election process (Broderick 163). Broderick writes, “The President himself, having no taste for tilting at the inexorable, would observe the formalities of candidacy, but basically, he would remain a spectator, unabashedly presidential” (163). Again, like the prophet rather than parrhesiast, Taft’s distancing allowed him to speak ex-cathedra as President of the United States but certainly not as a speaker offering frank criticism. When challenged to a debate with Debs, the reply from Taft’s office articulates Taft’s removal from public engagement: “President regrets that he cannot accept invitation extended, as he is taking no active part in the campaign” (qtd. in Broderick 179). Instead of seeing the campaign as an opportunity to connect with his electorate and speak for their benefit, Taft only spoke through the Office of the President, just as the prophet’s speech speaks for the intangible.

Unlike Debs, Taft was not compelled to speak as himself for others. Because of Taft’s reluctance to engage in campaign politics, there are few open engagements between Taft and Debs. Indeed, Debs had already written Taft “out of the race” because of his refusal to participate in traditional campaigning (qtd. in Broderick 179). However, an analysis of the acceptance speeches from both men from their respective parties

illustrates how Debs's compulsive, parrhesiastic approach contrasts with Taft's reluctant, regal discourse.

Taft's acceptance speech begins by noting the extreme circumstances in which the Republican National Convention took place. During the convention, Taft and Roosevelt squared off for the nomination, resulting in Roosevelt and breakaway Republicans forming the Progressive Party, also known as the Bull Moose Party. Roosevelt's candidacy, which would have been the first third term sought by a president, earned him Taft's ire. His anger is somewhat surprising considering Taft's disdain for the responsibilities that being the President of the United States entails. One might think that Taft would happily have cast off the burden of President, but Taft's acceptance speech illustrates his motivation. Early in his speech, Taft announces, "A faction sought to force the party to violate a valuable and time-honored national tradition by intrusting [sic] the power of the Presidency for more than two terms to one man, [...]" (5). It is clear from his opening remarks that Taft sees his great battle not as one directed toward the people of the United States but focused on the preservation of the Republican Party from Roosevelt's ambitions. Thus, we can see that Taft's motivation for the 1912 campaign was not to speak for the sake of benefiting the citizenry as a parrhesiast. Once again, Roosevelt serves as the main driver for Taft's entry.

By attaining the mantle of Republican Presidential Nominee, of course, Taft was by no means guaranteed a second term in office, but, as this chapter has shown, he approached the latter stage of the campaign—the stage of the campaign that involves public engagement—at best without earnest. Yet, Taft's acceptance speech sounds as if it were announcing the final victory. For Taft, it did serve that purpose. Referring again to

Roosevelt's ouster from the Republican Party, Taft declares, "This occasion is appropriate for the expression of profound gratitude at the victory for the fight which was won in Chicago. By that victory the Republican Party was saved for future usefulness" (5). This language suggests how Taft viewed his mission in 1912. Quite clearly, the "profound victory" Taft envisioned was the prevention of Theodore Roosevelt from being nominated as President by the Republican Party. With his mission complete, one might understand Taft's lackadaisical attitude toward the latter and crucial stage of the campaign as his lack of compulsion for parrhesia.

The stage at which Taft seemed to see his mission was in outmaneuvering Roosevelt for the nomination. To achieve this victory required quiet, contemplative, and calculating tactics, which was in Taft's nature. This differs from the compulsive drive for public performance that defines a parrhesiast. Public engagement was far from Taft's campaign direction. As Broderick writes, "Official remarks now and again would show that his party still lived, but he had no intention of romping around" (183). Instead, Taft preferred "moseying on the golf course of Massachusetts with an occasional side trip into neighboring states, the certainty of defeat and the obligation of presidential dignity shaped his conduct" (Broderick 183). Taft's acceptance speech foreshadows his campaign tactics.

If Taft's private writings did not make his disdain for public performance apparent, his acceptance speech makes his feelings obvious. He hopes "the great majority of voters will be able to distinguish between the substance of performance and the fustian of promise [...]" (Taft 20). As would be expected for any electoral campaign, Taft's opponents do find public performance to substantive and, indeed, necessary. Yet, Taft

finds these tactics as a means to leave the public “confused and misled and diverted from the truth [...] [by] bubbles of demagogic promise which the discussions of a campaign ma[k]e possible, [...]” (Taft 21). Again, it is clear that Taft despises the active politics of speechifying. Of course, without speech there cannot be parrhesia.

Finally, Taft’s acceptance speech conveys the central essence that prevents him from assuming the mantle of parrhesiast: his reluctance. Taft’s philosophy of careful consideration over compulsive action comes through in his answer to Socialism. Responding to the increasing wealth inequality, Taft concedes the wealthy concentration of capital as “one incidental evil of a great expansive movement in the material progress of the world [...]” (9). What should one do in response to this identified “evil”? What action is the government doing to mitigate what its executive officer identifies as “evil”? Taft responds, “It is far better to await the diminution of this evil by natural causes [...]” (9). This passivity is the typical of Taft’s personality. It should, therefore, be no surprise that he displays no compulsion to speak out for the benefit of his citizens. Compulsion demands action.

Unlike Taft’s passivity, Debs’s acceptance speech defines his motivation in accepting the nomination and situates the conduct of his party in terms of action. In terms of parrhesia, Debs’s speech opens by evoking the complex balance of internal/external that Foucault mentions as the motivating force for a parrhesiast to speak. Debs announces:

It is with a full sense of the responsibility it imposes and the service it exacts that I accept the nomination for president tendered to me by the Socialist Party of the United States. Personally I did not wish the

nomination. It came to me unsought. It came as summons to service and not as a personal honor. Every true member of the Socialist Party is at the party's service. ("Speech of Acceptance" 361)

In these introductory statements, we can see Debs recalling the parrhesiast's internal/external balance. Debs positions himself as motivated by an internal compulsive desire to act, what he calls a "summons to service." It is a service he considers no different from the various services a "true member of the Socialist Party" should render. This sensibility is similar to that of the parrhesiast, according to Foucault, who takes a leadership position temporarily in order to speak out for the benefit of the citizenry (*Government of Self* 157). In choosing to speak, the parrhesiast's discourse must be motivated not by a desire to improve one's own material condition. This can certainly be the case with Debs, whose speech argues he is accepting the nomination for reasons other than "personal honor." Instead, as a parrhesiast should, he announces his intent to improve something external to himself: Debs articulates that he is for "the emancipation of the working class from wage-slavery, for the equal rights and opportunities [for] all men and all women, for the abolition of child labor and the conservation of all childhood, for social self-rule and the equal freedom of all, [...]" (Debs, "Speech of Acceptance" 366). In essence, Debs's audience is not just his party but the majority of Americans, which for him is encapsulated in the phrase "the people."

In this way, this practice of parrhesia aligns with democratic dissent, as conceptualized by Robert Ivie. Ivie writes, "As a leveling rather than leadership style, a democratic rhetoric is quintessentially a discourse of dissent rather than a discourse of governance [...]. Rather than governing in a traditional sense, democracy exists in the

‘fugitive’ status of a practice of resistance” (456). Complementarily, Foucault argues, “democracy in general is characterized or specified only by these two elements or options (*isēgoria* and *parrēsia*)” (*Government of Self* 150). Debs’s participation within the American democratic framework might be read by some as contradictory to his radical call for change, but, as Foucault demonstrates, “For there to be democracy there must be *parrēsia*; for there to be *parrēsia* there must be a democracy” (*Government of Self* 155). Thus, these two seemingly contradictory practices (democratic dissent and *parrhesia*) align perfectly with Debs’s candidacy in 1912. After all, Debs makes instilling a more perfect democracy his party’s mission when he declares, “The Socialist Party’s mission is not only to destroy capitalist despotism but to establish industrial and social democracy” (“Speech of Acceptance” 366). These practices can be reconciled despite the irony of a definite leader within the Socialist Party running for the Presidency within a system of government that the party despises.

Perhaps the most interesting comparison between the two men is in how they react to the growing economic disparity in America. Taft labels this “evil” but resigns to letting it passively die of “natural causes.” Debs, however, intends not to promote acquiescence but to motivate active change. Debs declares his mission is to “abolish this monstrous system and the misery and crime which flow from it in a direful and threatening stream [...]” (“Speech of Acceptance” 365). Importantly for his role as *parrhesiast*, Debs articulates that this action will be accomplished by “appeal[ing] to the intelligence and conscience of the people” (“Speech of Acceptance” 365-6). Thus, by offering *parrhesia*, Debs hopes to “speak[...] the truth in order to direct the city,” as Foucault says in *The Government of Self and Others*, to action (157). Conversely, Taft’s

speech seems only to serve as a direction of inaction.

Foucault's last lectures attempt to articulate a way of thinking about the act of telling the truth through what he calls four "fundamental modes of truth-telling" (*Courage of Truth* 27). The modes are comprised of the prophet, sage, technician, or parrhesiast (Foucault, *Courage of Truth* 28). What Foucault does not specify through these modes is what role modality of truth does the politician use to operate? Perhaps Foucault might have argued that the political is always already caught up in the work of the parrhesiast. Yet, Foucault seems to suggest that parrhesia may have disappeared from modern life (*Courage of Truth* 30). However, had Foucault considered Eugene Debs he might have tentatively recognized Debs's practices in 1912 as those of a modern-day parrhesiast. As a comparison with Taft reveals, one important bridge between the politician and parrhesiast is motivation.

This leads circuitously back to the question that opened this chapter: What motivates these candidates to sacrifice their personal lives for the very public life of campaign politics? Arriving at an answer need not require psychological examination of Taft, Roosevelt, Wilson, and Debs. Although not a traditional politician, Debs's greatest lesson might be that parrhesia need not be considered anathema to politics. Indeed, it can be a spur to political action.

Compulsion, as this chapter has shown, can lead to positive political action, as in the case of Debs, and when it is lacking, as demonstrated with Taft, it leads to a negative experience for both the politician and the public. Therefore, parrhesiastic compulsion can be beneficial as a force for motivation. Parrhesiastic compulsion can account for:

motivation to begin an engagement, motivation for action during an engagement, and motivation to continue the engagement to its conclusion.

In terms of motivation to begin an engagement, Debs's compulsion for parrhesia seems to give him an advantage. Because of the internal duty to himself and the external duty to others, Debs seemingly overcame his health-related limitations to such a degree that he performed in a comprehensive and energetic set of speaking engagements throughout the campaign of 1912. It is not difficult to imagine another politician existing with very similar political theories and social reimaginings as Debs but lacking the sense of compulsion to articulate them recurrently and publically on the national stage of electoral politics.

Likewise, the motivation for action during an engagement is evident in Debs's conduct throughout the campaign. Not only does he travel the country to speak to large crowds, but the messages of his speeches are those calling others to action, as is the case in Debs's "Speech of Acceptance." For a parrhesiast, this makes sense because one is compelled to act in offering frank criticism and, almost inevitably, the drive for action would seep into one's discourse. This presents an advantage to a parrhesiast engaging in an elective campaign because of the tendency for voters to prefer messages of action and change to messages of passivity and stasis.

Motivation to continue the engagement to its conclusion, or simply perseverance, the compulsive duty to oneself and others could offer an advantage in an election. This duty to oneself and others could serve as an inducement for continued campaigning. One might argue a lack of perseverance was a major contributor to Taft's failure in 1912. As his acceptance speech makes clear, his victory ended before the general campaign began.

This was not a problem shared by Eugene Debs, and it should not be a hindrance for any parrhesiast. After all, a parrhesiast is motivated by a desire for action: speaking what one considers truth for the benefit of a group, whether it is a city in antiquity or a country in modernity. If understood as a compulsive duty, this mission is almost never-ending.

In these three senses, the compulsion of parrhesia might partially explain how Debs came to rise to the top in his party and even appeal to voters beyond the party in 1912. Compulsion, or what he called duty, is one of the essential qualities necessary to distinguish a parrhesiast from just an orator. Using this measure, through his discourse and actions, Eugene Debs functioned as a parrhesiast during the 1912 campaign. This conclusion only becomes more apparent when Debs is weighed against Taft on the scale of parrhesia, one of the few times Taft can be said to be outweighed.

CHAPTER 3

RISK, WILSON, AND COURAGE

Risk is an inevitable element in any activity, and certainly an electoral campaign. A variety of risks must have factored into campaigners' minds during the election of 1912: the risk of acquiring the necessary funds to finance a large-scale campaign, the risk of public humiliation, and perhaps the most concerning risk: failure. All of these risks are not uncommon. However, this chapter will not focus on these ordinary political risks because Eugene Debs must be considered only secondarily a politician. Instead, I will focus on the unique risks that Debs faces as a parrhesiast. These parrhesiastic risks become all the more apparent when comparing Debs to the Democratic Presidential Nominee Woodrow Wilson.

Michel Foucault considers the component of risk to be an essential element of a parrhesiast. Risk is essential not in and of itself, but because it is a condition for courage. Foucault is explicit in his explanation of the essentialness of risk when he states: "For there to be *parrhēsia*, [...] the subject must be taking some kind of risk [in speaking] this truth which he signs as his opinion, his thought, his belief, [...]" (*Courage of Truth* 11). In this way, courage and risk become almost inseparable.

Parrhesia involves two principal risks: the risk of harm against the speaker for the content of his or her speech and the risk of rupturing the relationship between the speaker and his or her audience, which can consist of a single individual or a group. Thus, these two consequences can perhaps be simplified and combined into a single risk for the

parrhesiast: the risk of offense. Of course, offense is subjective and unpredictable, and any speech might give offense unintentionally. However, this is different in the case of the parrhesiast. Like the parrhesiastic element of compulsion, which was the focus of the previous chapter, the speaker offering frank criticism must be cognizant of the particular risk of his or her parrhesia. Otherwise, the act of speaking could not be considered particularly courageous, as Foucault conceptualizes of parrhesia.

Parrhesia, as conceptualized by Foucault, cannot be blindness to the consequences of the utterance. Indeed, the rhetor must understand the risks of speaking, including “the risk of not being heard by the other party or parties or of being silenced entirely, [...]” (Walzer 4-5). Thus, parrhesia “involves some form of courage, the minimal form of which consists in the parrhesiast taking the risk of breaking and ending the relationship to the other person which was precisely what made his discourse possible” (Foucault, *Courage of Truth* 11). These intermingled concepts of risk and courage became so crucial for Foucault that he devoted his final lecture at the Collège de France to “the courage of truth.” It is this concept of courage in speaking that nearly comes to define parrhesia for Foucault. This is evident when he argues: “So, in two words, *parrhēsia* is the courage of truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth that he thinks, but it is also the interlocutor’s courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears” (Foucault, *Courage of Truth* 13). Foucault’s parrhesia is “a passion, since it entails an emotional investment, and a virtue, insofar as it is still linked to courage” (Lévy 314).

This difference is understandable in terms of the function of the parrhesiast. The parrhesiast must not censor or even moderate his or her speech depending on the

audience he or she is addressing, which is clearly the opposite of traditional electoral political strategy. Indeed, parrhesia is almost the opposite of strategic communication or what Foucault unfortunately labels “rhetoric” (*Courage of Truth* 13-4). Parrhesia might be considered an almost visceral response. Foucault makes this point clear when he argues that “in *parrhēsia* there is no question of saying anything other than what one thinks” (*Courage of Truth* 13). This visceral response almost always takes place because of a reaction to a condition in need of rectification. In this way, the parrhesiast is always an agent for change. Through his or her speech, the parrhesiast acts as a gadfly for action. Because of this, the parrhesiast always incurs risk on a different level from any speaker who might haphazardly provoke a negative consequence from speaking.

Because of the relationship between parrhesia and disrupting the status quo, the act of frank speaking naturally incurs a particular kind of risk because of the power dynamics that are inherent in parrhesia. As Bradford Vivian writes, “The fearless speaker is a figure, a form, of ethical practice: a subject compelled to speak what he or she understands as true irrespective of majority opinion—to speak it, in the relevant episteme, without adapting words for the sake of hearers, propriety, or situation [...] The *parrēsia* requires the prime virtue of courage, not technique” (370). In speaking in order to change a condition, the parrhesiast comes into direct conflict with the very powers that benefit from the status quo, which can have serious consequences. Of parrhesia’s potentially deadly consequences, Foucault declares, “*Parrhēsia* therefore not only puts the relationship between the person who speaks and the person to whom he addresses the truth at risk, but it may go so far as to put the very life of the person who speaks at risk, at least if his interlocutor has power over him and cannot bear being told the truth”

(*Courage of Truth* 12). By seeking to alter the structure of authority by shifting the status quo, the parrhesiast must acknowledge that in speaking he or she is making enemies from powerful entities, which may be individuals or institutions or perhaps both. Therein lies the element of courage that Foucault finds so essential to parrhesia. As an example, Foucault cites Plato's frank criticism of Dionysius. Foucault states:

[W]hen a philosopher addresses himself to a sovereign, to a tyrant, and tells him that his tyranny is disturbing and unpleasant because tyranny is incompatible with justice, then the philosopher speaks the truth, believes he is speaking the truth, and, more than that, also takes a *risk* (since the tyrant may become angry, may punish him, may exile him, may kill him).

(*Fearless Truth* 16)

However, the risk of parrhesia is not limited to the singular transmittal of advice to another.

In the political arena, parrhesia carries another set of risks beyond one's identified interlocutor. As Foucault argues, "If, in a political debate, an orator risks losing his popularity because his opinions are contrary to the majority's opinion, or his opinions may usher in a political scandal, he uses *parrhesia*" (*Fearless Truth* 16). Importantly for a discussion of electoral politics, one must consider risks beyond offending one's political opponent. The risk of speaking also involves the potential for alienating members of the audience. This pressure to be all things to many is one that any electoral politician understands. The response to this pressure is what divides Woodrow Wilson and Eugene Debs.

Unlike Wilson, who had the backing of the Democratic Party and the political expertise of Democratic political bosses at his disposal, Debs had a considerably less organized political conglomerate. Unlike Wilson, Debs is less limited in his speech by the established party positions on issues. However, this freedom also comes with a risk for Debs. As an outside candidate, Debs runs the risk of angering one of his fellow candidates, who will no doubt be president. Unlike Taft and Wilson, Debs does not have a party establishment to protect him, and he also does not have the authority that comes with being a past president, as Theodore Roosevelt does. Despite these risks, Debs performs the role of parrhesiast in offering frank criticism for the benefit of the country.

Wilson's avoidance of frank speaking due to risk makes sense considering the political situation of the 1912 election, but it is also understandable because of Wilson's close ties to political bosses. This association began during his 1907 run for Governor of New Jersey. Likely chosen due to his status as a conservative Democrat, Wilson was lured by party bosses from the presidency of Princeton because of his appeal as a safe choice (Broderick 62). Bosses regarded Wilson "as a man of national structure who, all the while, offered no threat to the interests that made the nation prosperous" (Broderick 63). In short, Wilson was seen as a palatable choice for big business and the constituents in the boss system of American politics. Indeed, Wilson crafted a political credo that "the most conservative paper in the United States," *The New York Sun*, approved (Chace 51). These established ties would serve Wilson well financially during the 1912 election. As Lewis Gould writes, "Wilson was the Democratic hopeful with the closest claim to national organization, funded by his wealthy friends [...] Thanks to Wilson's well-heeled backers his presidential campaign could count on some timely financial support [...]"

(80). However, Wilson could not afford to stand on these platforms while running a national race. He had to balance the risk of offending his wealthy allies with the average American voter.

Wilson maintained this balance by cultivating a discourse adaptable to any occasion, the opposite of parrhesia. When questioned about a history text he wrote that decried Eastern European immigrants, Wilson argued he was being misunderstood. He wrote of his tactic to Nicholas L. Piotrowski as “grazing the truth” (qtd. in Gould 84). In another example of this tactic, prior to the campaign, Wilson spoke out against William Jennings Bryan’s radical advocating for a silver-based currency, “which horrified the banking and industrial interests of the East” (Chace 40). However, during the campaign, Wilson recognized Bryan as essential to attaining the Democratic nomination, Wilson abruptly publically spoke of “the character and the devotion and the preaching of William Jennings Bryan” as a “fixed point in the history of the Democratic party” (qtd. in Gould 85). In one speech before Democratic workers, Wilson argues, “We, gentleman, [...] are free to serve the people of the United States, and in my opinion it was Mr. Bryan that set us free” (343). Likewise, his previous views on organized labor could not stand the trial of national politics, and Wilson had “to repudiate almost everything he had said previously about the ills of labor unions” (Chace 52). However, this did not mean that Wilson reconsidered his prior views in favor of labor over business.

Instead, Wilson saw that “a Democratic presidential candidate could not identify himself with anything like the activism that Roosevelt embraces. [...] [Wilson’s] reform impulse was cautious and limited” (Gould 163). One of the results of this was a compromise that avoids the risk of alienating average American workers and the business

interests to which Wilson and the party were indebted. He achieved this through a rhetorical separation of big business, which he viewed as a positive force for America, and trusts, which were a negative consequence of a market not organized for optimal competition (Broderick 141). Gould writes, “He promised that, if elected, the Democrats would move slowly in revising custom duties downward so that business interests would not be disturbed” (81). Certainly, this is the work of a skilled politician and strategic rhetor. However, because this strategy relies on significantly altering one’s position to avoid offense, it cannot be considered parrhesia.

Debs’s position could not be more different than Woodrow Wilson’s. As a result of his successful strikes in the 1890s, he did not have the respect of large institutions, such as the Great Northern Railroad (Chace 76). For his role in the Pullman strike, Debs earned the ire of President Grover Cleveland, who signed an injunction preventing strike leaders from aiding an ongoing boycott. Cleveland admitted that the injunction was “aimed against Eugene V. Debs” (Chace 78). As a result, Debs faced court cases and appeals leading to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled Debs and other strike leaders violated the injunction (Chace 80). Thus, Debs was forced to continue to serve his six-month sentence at the McHenry County Jail in Woodstock, Illinois. The experience awakened him to the ideology of Socialism and brought him the scorn of powerful figures and institutions, including the President of the United States and the United States Supreme Court. By the time he considered running in 1912 for the presidency, Debs’s background as activist and convict left him vulnerable to considerable risk.

Unlike Wilson, Debs did not have close ties to financial forces, making his success in the 1912 election all the more remarkable considering his “little money and

less political machinery” (Broderick 184). Morgan speculates, “Perhaps the answer is that there is a tradition of American radicalism and that Eugene Debs conformed to that tradition as much as any American radical” (120). Although Debs was certainly engaged in radical politics, he somehow made this palatable to a larger population of citizens within the American mode of dissent. Debs characterized Wilson in an editorial as “a mild-mannered gentleman, ladylike in his utterances, and I have nothing to say against him personally, and politically he had nothing to say for himself. He is the kid glove on the paw of the Tammany tiger” (qtd. in Broderick 180). Here, Debs utilizes Wilson’s connections with the party bosses of Tammany Hall, distancing him from the common American.

This characterization, of course, runs counter to Wilson’s presentation of himself. Wilson writes, “For most of us are average men; very few of us rise, except by fortunate accident, above the general level of the community about us, and therefore the man who thinks the common thoughts, the man who has had the common experiences, is most always the man who interprets America aright” (448). Wilson goes to great lengths to use the unifying pronoun of “us,” creating the impression that he is an average man, and even downplaying his educational status by saying, “I haven’t any education to boast of, [...]” (448). However, by virtue of his connections with the powerful institutions that undermine the collective power of the common voters, Debs positions Wilson as incapable of objectively representing the great mass of American workers. He is instead indebted to the political and business leaders that authorize his candidacy and finance his campaign. Debs states, “[Wilson] was seized upon as a ‘progressive’; as a man who would appeal to the common people, but he never could have been nominated without the

votes controlled by Tammany and the 'predatory interests' so fiercely denounced in the convention by William Jennings Bryan" ("The Fight for Freedom" 308-309). Debs makes the credibility of Wilson's character the central critique of his candidacy.

Debs even goes as far as to label Wilson's appeal to the working class as one based on expediency rather than honesty; in short, an avoidance of risk. Debs argues, "Mr. Wilson is no more the candidate of the working class than is Mr. Taft or Mr. Roosevelt. Neither one of them has ever been identified with the working class, has ever associated with the working class, except when their votes were wanted, or would dare to avow himself the candidate of the working class" ("The Fight for Freedom" 310). Here, Debs as parreshiast separates himself from Wilson, who, he argues, is falsely presenting himself as a member of the working class.

This depiction of Wilson stands in contrast to Debs's presentation of himself as a man rising with his people. Importantly for Debs's presentation as a parreshiast, he questions Wilson's sincerity. Debs notes, "Wilson is entering the campaign as a 'progressive,' a great friend of the workers. He has a rotten labor record as any man possibly could have" (qtd. in Broderick 173). Thus, Debs attempts to undermine Wilson's ethos by challenging his honesty, which Debs's uses to demonstrate how any member of the capitalist class cannot be expected to honestly represent the average American worker. He argues, "Intelligent workingmen are no longer deceived. They know that the struggle in which the world is engaged today is a class struggle and that in this struggle the workers can never win by giving their votes to capitalist parties" (Debs, "Speech of Acceptance" 364). Debs further illustrates the coalition of capitalistic parties by presenting cohesion between Wilson's reformist Democratic Party and Taft's

conservative Republican Party, reinforcing Debs's characterization of Wilson candidacy as deception.

Wilson initially maintained a friendly response to Debs's party. Before a Democratic meeting in Buffalo, Wilson declares, "I have a great respect for the Socialist party, because I know how many honest and serious men are in it" (90). However, because of the conservative perception of the incumbent party under Taft, he is quick to differentiate the Democratic Party from Taft's Republicans. Importantly for a discussion of parrhesia, like Debs, Wilson links the Republican Party with untrustworthiness and makes its credibility a central issue. He accuses, "If it [the Republican Party] has not been able to keep those things from happening which have wrought a deep evil upon us, it has proved its impotence; whereas, if it deliberately did these things, it has proved its untrustworthiness" (Wilson 91). Crucial to Wilson's rhetorical strategy is creating a binary between the Republican and Democratic agenda, with the Democrats being the party of reform and the Republicans being the party of the status quo. However, Debs's strategy is to inextricably link the Democratic Party with the Republicans to damage their credibility and increase the Socialist Party's parrhesia. In contrast to Wilson's message of differentiation, Debs asserts:

The Democratic party, like its Republican ally, is a capitalist party, the only difference being that it represents the minor divisions of the capitalist class. [...] The Democratic party, like the Republican party, is financed by the capitalist class. [...] Both the Republican and Democratic parties reek with corruption in their servility to the capitalist class, and both are torn

with strife in their mad scramble for the spoils of office. (“The Fight for Freedom” 307-308; 311)

He goes on to appropriate Wilson’s own charge of impotency toward the Republican Party against the Democrats. Debs argues, “The Democratic party has had little excuse for existence since the Civil War, and its utter impotency to deal with present conditions was made glaringly manifest during its brief lease of power under the Cleveland administration” (“The Fight for Freedom” 311-312). Thus, by utilizing the same accusations Wilson leveled against his Republican opponent, Debs, through multiple ethical accusations, binds the Democratic platform with that of the Republican Party. Wilson’s characterization of the Democrats as a distinct entity from the Republicans is, to Debs, a deliberate falsity clearly motivated by political expediency rather than authenticity. More importantly, Wilson’s identification with the working class is political opportunism, which to Debs, as parrhesiast, is inexcusable. Debs must, as parrhesiast, speak out against these falsehoods and, in doing so, risk the wrath of these powerful institutions and men.

In terms of risk, Wilson’s discourse is much more moderated, as one would expect from a candidate with close ties to political establishments. His “Government for the Average Man” speech is illustrative of his attempt to broaden his rhetoric to largest possible audience while maintaining a conciliatory tone with special interest organizations. Wilson’s argument is that the men who are not “deliberately doing a wrong to their fellow citizens, [...]” but that were merely ignorant of the needs of the common American citizen (447). Wilson articulates his political philosophy with a spirit of understanding. However, this is obviously a philosophy that attempts to strategically

avoid all risk by moderating one's speech. Wilson declares, "There are many things to be said which would explain their power without condemning the men who have been associated with that power. I do think we ought to approach our politics and our political problems in the spirit of condemnation, but merely in the spirit of those who see the facts" (447). The facts for Wilson are seemingly mutable to a given situation.

This is particularly apparent later in the speech when Wilson addresses the criticisms of his professorial nature as incompatible with national politics. Wilson says, "Now, I am supposed to be an educated man, though I must admit to you that I haven't any education to boast of, [...]" (448). This statement is quite interesting in its illustration of the mutability of the facts of Wilson's life. He remains the only President of the United States to hold a Ph.D. Wilson attended Davidson College, completed his undergraduate degree at Princeton University, briefly attended the University Of Virginia School Of Law, and earned a Doctorate of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. By any standard, he arguably had an education "to boast of." Wilson goes to great length to increase his identification from the average voter. In this way, Wilson avoids the risk that comes from speaking too harshly and drawing offense, and he certainly fulfills the role of a skilled rhetor. However, because of his fluidity, he would not qualify for a parrhesiast. Wilson is too interested in projecting a desire for inclusivity, and a parrhesiast typically operates from a position outside of the mainstream.

Foucault discusses the outsider status of parrhesia in several of the lectures contained in *Government of the Self and Others* through his focus on Euripides's *Ion*, which offered "some elements concerning the theoretical content of the notion of *parrēsia*" (151). As a character, Ion "does not belong to any of the major mythical sets of

Greek heritage and who does not have a place in any of the known cultic practices” (Foucault, *Government of Self* 76). He is thus occupying a similar position to Debs as a political outsider. In Ion’s choice to speak out against tyrannical rule, Foucault argues:

We see a second practice, which is connected to situations of injustice, and which far from the right exercised by the powerful over his fellow citizens in order to guide them, is instead the cry of the powerless against someone who misuses his own strength. This, which is not [designated as] *parrēsia* in the text, but will be later, is what could be called judicial *parrēsia*. (*Government of Self* 154)

Ion’s practice of speaking on behalf of an oppressed citizenry parallels with Debs’s presentation of judicial *parrēsia* speaking on behalf of oppressed American workers. Through this practice, Debs seeks to help Americans realize their right to speak out similarly. Debs makes his role of educator explicit when he says:

Comrades and friends, the campaign before us gives us our supreme opportunity to reach the American people. They have but to know the true meaning of Socialism to accept its philosophy and the true mission of the Socialist party to give it their support. Let us all unite as we never have before to place the issue of Socialism squarely before the masses. For years they have been deceived, misled and betrayed, and they are now hungering for the true gospel of relief and the true message of emancipation. (“Political Appeal” 296)

This passage illustrates many of the familiar themes for Debs as *parrhesiast*. Debs points again to the importance of educating the larger public on certain crucial truths: the truth

of Socialist philosophy, the truth of the party, and the true means of citizens gaining their fundamental rights. Importantly, he does not ask for others to blindly follow him as their leader, which would violate his role as parrhesiast.

In another campaign speech, Debs implores his audience to educate themselves on the truth. He says, “I am not asking you to give your votes to this party but only that you read its platform, study its program, and satisfy yourself as to what its principles are, what it stands for, and what it expects to accomplish” (Debs, “The Fight for Freedom” 317-318). Yet, in keeping with his role as parrhesiast, Debs does believe the party is “the only party which honestly represents the working class and the only party that has a moral right to appeal to the allegiance and support of the workers and producers of the nation” (“The Fight for Freedom” 317). Through these two moves of parrhesia, Debs argues that the Socialist party has the sole moral right to represent Americans.

More importantly, Debs risks his own position by speaking another compulsory truth when he encourages his audience to conduct their own research rather than rely on his. By drawing attention to the decision making power of the audience, Debs again practices parrhesia. It is this self-reflexivity and the encouragement of skepticism that defines Debs as parrhesiast and may explain why many cast their votes for a message of self-empowerment rather than a belief in the power of exemplary individuals to affect change for the masses.

Importantly, for Debs to be parrhesiast, his frank speaking must involve “risk that this truth may disrupt the bond between the speaker and the addressee, usually at peril to the speaker” (Gehrke 356). To Debs, these risks involve potentially alienating those within his movement who potentially see his leadership as political grandstanding and to

those more radical members who see his choice to participate within the democratic electoral process as catering to the very system they despise. Aware of these risks, one would expect Debs not to highlight these challenges. However, this would violate one of the components of parrhesiast: a compulsion for speaking the truth in full knowledge of the risks in so doing. As Bradford Vivian writes, “The fearless speaker is a figure, a form, of ethical practice: a subject compelled to speak what he or she understands as true irrespective of majority opinion—to speak it, in the relevant episteme, without adapting words for the sake of hearers, propriety, or situation [...] The parrēsia requires the prime virtue of courage, not technique” (370). Vivian’s argument for courage over technique further illustrates Debs as parreshiast.

True to his compulsion for free speaking, Debs draws immediate skepticism for leaders in his speech “This is Our Year.” He argues:

The workers now realize that they have got to *build their organization themselves*, that it has got to be built from the bottom up, and that it must include them all. This knowledge had to come to them through painful and costly experience, but they have it and it is of priceless value to them. In proportion as they have lost faith in their former ‘leaders’ they have acquired faith in themselves. (Debs, “This is Our Year” 358)

In these short introductory statements, Debs’s words reflect the parrhesiast in two essential ways. First, to him, knowledge—or we might say truth—is of the utmost importance. After all, it is “of priceless value.” This, of course, is of extreme significance to any argument labeling Debs as parrhesiast. Secondly, Debs draws attention to the fickle quality of leadership directly. Of course, this implicitly draws attention to his own

position as candidate for the presidency and other leaders of the Socialist party. The quotation mark around the term “leaders” suggests the possible manner of delivery Debs gave to the word.

With such skepticism surrounding leaders, why should Debs risk distancing himself from his audience? The answer involves perhaps his own dissonance with the mantle of leader, and, importantly for a discussion of parrhesia, a compulsion that the truth, as he understands it, be known even at the expense of his authority. In fact, it is from this position as truth teller that Debs derives his authority. However, critics may suggest in this instance that Debs deploys a mock humility to feign parrhesia. However, by openly inviting suspicion toward leaders, Debs invites the audience to judge his sincerity for themselves. In so doing, Debs splits himself as parrhesiast from his role as leader and rhetor. Similarly, Gehrke notes, “When speaking as rhetor one would always be suspected of bearing no actual parrēsia but only feigned parrēsia, which is not parrēsia at all. To speak as parrēsiates would mean that, at least at that moment, one spoke not as rhetor or, [...] one would have to split the role of rhetor in two: the ‘run of the mill’ politicians versus the ‘revered leaders’ of the city, [...]” (358). Debs is the latter as one who places himself amongst his party members, recognizing his temporary position as leader. Debs announces, “Every true member of the Socialist Party is at the party’s service. The confidence of his comrades is to him a sacred trust and their collective will the party’s law. My chief concern as a presidential candidate is that I shall serve well the party, and the class and the cause the party represents” (“Speech of Acceptance” 361). If Debs will offer frank criticism of himself to his own constituents, then Debs draws his

authority from an ethic that is applicable in all cases and despite all risks, even to himself. However, it is from this ethos that Debs draws his rhetorical strength.

Considering Debs and the element of risk might help us to illustrate an important observation of parrhesia that Foucault seems to omit from his lectures. Because parrhesia is constituted by an element of risk, which carries with it the possibility of negative consequences, one might conclude that parrhesia in any practical sense is a liability. Using Debs as an example, one might posit an argument that his inability to triumph in the 1912 election was a failure. As a parrhesiast, Debs was at a distinct disadvantage because he did not adapt his speeches and moderate his platforms to a general audience of American voters, as any savvy politician would. Perhaps, in this respect, parrhesia might be a hindrance for political action. However, there is another aspect of Debs's position in American politics that might not be explained except by his relationship with parrhesia: his positive place in collective memory, which is perhaps a different kind of victory.

This victory of posterity might be all the more surprising when considering just how far from the political mainstream Debs's ideas were in 1912. These ideas were provocative enough for Theodore Roosevelt to condemn him and Woodrow Wilson to label him a traitor. Others would have surely balked when looking above Debs's desk and seeing a picture of Karl Marx (Lee and Andrews 21). Ronald Lee and James R. Andrews might best articulate the transformation of Debs from an American deviant to hero in collective memory. They argue that four factors impacted the transformation of Debs from an American dissident to hero:

First, character and ideology interacted to create a favorable portrait of Debs. Second, the tradition of American populism at the end of the last century provided a framework for reinterpreting Debs' radicalism. Third, a liberal society's commitment to free speech and political protest provided a sympathetic climax to the life work of 'comrade' Debs. Fourth, liberal history's comic voice provided a narrative frame of reconciliation. (Lee and Andrews 22)

Thus, Debs's radicalism becomes transformed "into respectable liberalism" in the subsequent years (Lee and Andrews 21). The historical construction of Debs as an exemplary American depends on the importance of Debs's perceived virtue. This also depends, Lee and Andrews believe, on the progressive view of American history.

Viewing American history as progressive is understandable when considering Michael Kammen's view of collective or public memory. Kammen argues, "Public memory, which contains a slowly shifting configuration of traditions, is ideologically important because it shapes a nation's ethos and sense of identity. That explains [...] why memory is always selective and is so often contested" (qtd. in Browne 242). In essence, the shifting story of America as a land of the free must contend with the facts of slavery, inequality of the sexes, and a variety of injustices inconsistent with modern American values. Like the ability to reconcile all of these troubled aspects, Debs and even his ideology, which was far from mainstream in 1912, becomes acceptable and even worthy of admiration in contemporary America. The extent to which Debs's appeal has become coalesced into the story of America, Lee and Andrews find, culminates in 1967 when the Secretary of the Interior declares that "many of the 'radical' social reforms Eugene Debs

advocated during his five losing campaigns for the Presidency have long since been adopted” (qtd. in Lee and Andrews 21). Lee and Andrews are quick to connect this ability for Debs to be transformed with his ethos.

Like Lee and Andrews, James Darsey also explores Debs’s complex position in American collective memory. For Darsey, the reason for Debs’s continued appeal might be explained by this ethos. Darsey argues, “[Debs’s] passionately held stands and his rigidity in holding them exclude him from the ranks of those reasonable, moderate men and women who compromise in an effort to find common ground with their opponents and are held to represent the ideal in the rhetorical tradition” (“Legend of Eugene Debs” 434). Despite—or perhaps because of—Debs’s reluctance to moderate his views in order to achieve compromise and avoid risk, he joins a string of rhetors celebrated as coming before their time and viewed as models for contemporary figures. Darsey writes, “It is because of their failure on behalf of noble principles that they continue to be celebrated and to rally those who must carry forward a principle against hopeless odds. They are less voices to us than ethical presences. It is in this continuing influence that they have achieved their greatest success” (“Legend of Eugene Debs” 435). This rhetoric Darsey calls prophetic. However, the power of the rhetoric is not its appropriation from past to present, as is the case with all collective memory, but the essence that makes such a connection able to be made.

If Debs’s rhetoric were not parrhesiastic and therefore courageous, it would not have fit into the progressive view of history in which American politics views itself. In this way, the risk of parrhesia enables the reward of one’s discourse being regarded as courageous and, thus, appealing. This is not to say Woodrow Wilson does not occupy a

favorable position in American collective memory. However, according to Gallup poll, he tends to be ranked higher by academics rather than the American public (Saad). Perhaps the reason for this decline might be Wilson's politics from a contemporary perspective might be considered conservative, as would certainly be the case with his racial policies.

In light of Debs's victory in the national collective memory, Foucault's fascination with the risk and courage inherent in parrhesia is certainly understandable. Parrhesia entails certain unavoidable risks. However, without these risks, the parrhesiast could not be respected as a courageous orator speaking for the benefit of others. Though such a position might hinder a candidate functioning as parrhesiast, the courage of frankly speaking can offer a reward reaching beyond the immediate concerns of electoral victory. This image of parrhesiast carries with it the consequences and risks of ruin from speaking the truth. Eugene Debs certainly understood the risks in speaking out against powerful men and institutions during the 1912 elections. Despite ending the election with six percent of the popular vote, six years later Debs would have his freedom taken away for his devotion to parrhesia by Woodrow Wilson, a powerful enemy made during the 1912 election. Thus, Debs's commitment to frank speech was not based on political expediency but a lifelong commitment worth the risks for the sake of parrhesia.

CHAPTER 4
AUTHENTICITY, ROOSEVELT, AND THE PARRHESIAST
PRETENDER

Although not made explicit by Foucault, the element of authenticity might be the overarching component of parrhesia. Authenticity, to Foucault, relates to the idea that what one speaks should be true. By arguing that a speech should be true, Foucault suggests that the speech should not necessarily be true in any transcendental sense, perhaps not even in an empirically objective sense either. Instead, the truth spoken by a parrhesiast should be believed by the speaker to be true. Admittedly, analyzing the subjective nature of what another believes to be true is a risky endeavor. Despite this, in a way, this is the task that this chapter sets out to accomplish by an analysis of Eugene Debs and Theodore Roosevelt.

Both Roosevelt and Debs depend on the ethos of authenticity during the 1912 election. Thus, it seems appropriate to evaluate both by their presentation of authenticity. Throughout his campaign speeches, Debs makes a commitment to a presentation of parrhesia his chief objective. Importantly, in confronting his fellow candidates, Debs makes the central critique of his opponents not their political or economic ideology, but their insincerity to the American voters. Thus, the issue for Debs as parrhesiast is that Americans deserve honest campaign presentations from their politicians. As dissenters, both Roosevelt and Debs are in the unique position to comment on issues and larger

American political and economic structures; however, only Debs maintains a sense of parrhesia in his speeches for the benefit of the polis. Like Wilson, Debs accused Roosevelt of deliberately spreading falsehoods—the ultimate crime against Debs’s virtue of parrhesia. More than any other candidate, Debs presents an image of Roosevelt as an opportunist and an ideological thief of Socialist principles. Of his presidential record, Debs found the lapses in truth for the sake of ambition the most reprehensible quality of the man. This position, of course, makes Roosevelt the opposite of the parrhesiast and incapable of being trusted. Thus, this chapter will connect the differences between the two to the essential principle of authenticity. Through an analysis of Debs’s and Roosevelt’s speeches, this chapter will argue that Debs was able to perform the role of parrhesiast, while Roosevelt was challenged in his ability to convey authenticity rather than ambition.

Foucault stresses the importance of authenticity from his first explorations of parrhesia in his *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures. Foucault articulates the significance of a speaking subject’s relation to truth as “the subject’s obligation to tell the truth about himself, or this fundamental principle that we must be able to say the truth about ourselves in order to be able to establish a relationship to truth in general in which we will be able to find our salvation, [...]” (*Hermeneutics of the Subject* 364). It seems obvious that the fundamental aspect of parrhesia should be the notion that what a rhetor says should be internalized as truth. In this way, parrhesia qua parrhesia must not be feigned as a rhetorical tool. Instead, the parrhesiast must be authentic.

In this way, parrhesia could almost be considered a calling rather than a contrivance. Foucault articulates a similar notion when he says, “*parrēsia* cannot be

inherited as a violent, tyrannical power, and no more is it simply entailed purely by the status of the citizen; it must be reserved only for some and cannot be obtained as a matter of course” (*Government of Self and Others* 106). Although the ability for parrhesia is left to a few with the fundamental conviction to speak what they regard as a beneficial truth, the appearance of parrhesia can easily be feigned, and Foucault was aware of the potential for the appearance of parrhesia in those who are not true parrhesiasts. He explores this concept in relation to rhetoric, which he argues is the binary to parrhesia. Though “rhetoric” may be an unfortunate choice of word, by it Foucault seems to mean simply oratorical technique. In opposition to parrhesia, rhetoric or oratory technique, “does not entail any bond between the person speaking and what is said, but aims to establish a constraining bond, a bond of power between what is said and the person to whom it is said” (Foucault, *Courage of Truth* 14). With so many parrhesiastic pretenders, it might seem that finding an authentic parrhesiast is an impossible task. Though problematic, the task is achievable.

Locating a parrhesiast’s authenticity requires a sustained analysis of that person’s actions over an extended period of time and in spite of significant trial. In this way, the ordeal of the parrhesiast is a continued obligation to the truth, as one understands it.

Foucault argues:

Not only must this truth really be the personal opinion of the person who is speaking but he must say it as being what he thinks, [and not] reluctantly—and this is what makes him a parrhesiast. The parrhesiast gives his opinion, he says what he thinks, he personally signs, as it were,

the truth he states, he binds himself to this truth, and he is consequently bound to it and by it (*Courage of Truth* 11).

Thus, the parrhesiast is a figure exuding authenticity through continued actions of frank speaking. Foucault's language in this passage articulates the commitment to parrhesia as an overwhelming obligation, an inescapable binding.

Certainly, parrhesia entails a radical commitment to authenticity. It outright denounces the complete lie as the ultimate crime against truth telling. Even when confronted with the operation of telling what might be called half-truths, something definitely not uncommon in electoral politics, parrhesia is opposed to any concealment of the truth. This is understandable when viewing parrhesia from a Foucauldian perspective, where the act of parrhesia is inseparable from the ethics of speaking. In this way, parrhesia "consists in telling the truth without concealment, reserve, empty manner of speech, or rhetorical ornament which might encode or hide it. 'Telling all' is then: telling the truth without hiding any part of it, without hiding it behind anything" (Foucault, *Courage of Truth* 10). Parrhesia is an all or nothing game. It begins from the internal cognitive stage to the external mechanical act of speech. As Foucault asserts, "In short, *parrhesia*, the act of truth requires: first, the manifestation of a fundamental bond between the truth spoken and the thought of the person who spoke it; [...]" (*Courage of Truth* 11). When the thought is in harmony with the speech, the act can be considered parrhesia.

From this, it is clear that parrhesia is thoroughly subjective, but it also symptomatic because its signs can be discerned by close examination of consistent action over a prolonged time, simply a speaker's seeming continued commitment to

authenticity. Foucault says as much when he discusses the Cynic ideal of “being witness to the truth” as an example of parrhesia. Foucault summarizes, “Martyr of the truth understood as ‘witness to truth’: testimony given, manifested, and authenticated by an existence, a form of life in the most concrete and material sense of the word; bearing witness to the truth by and in one’s body, dress, mode of comportment, way of acting, reacting, and conducting oneself. The very body of the truth is made visible, and laughable, in a certain style of life” (*Courage of Truth* 173). Thus, the parrhesiast can be detected by a track record of a manner of living consistent with a commitment to truth, as one understands it.

By this standard, the crucible of a presidential campaign certainly serves an appropriate occasion to test the authenticity of Theodore Roosevelt and Eugene Debs. From his actions in 1893 as a part of the American Railway Union to his conviction of sedition in 1918 for speaking out against World War I, Eugene Debs certainly had a long and established record of speaking the truth in the face of considerable risk. However, Roosevelt’s peculiar foray into the presidential election of 1912 casts some questions as to his relationship to parrhesia. From his past connections to significant political and financial institutions, Debs had reason to be skeptical of Roosevelt. Yet, it is Roosevelt’s presentation of frankness that seemed to be Debs’s chief concern with the former President of the United States.

Any analysis of Theodore Roosevelt’s inconsistency would have to include the glaring contradiction that led to his participation in the 1912 election in the first place. At the zenith of his political powers in 1904, Roosevelt enthusiastically decreed on election night he would not run for a third term for President of the United States. Thus, honoring

the example of an informal two-term limit set by George Washington. Because of the assassination of President William McKinley, Roosevelt had served nearly two complete terms as President. Before a gathering in 1904, Roosevelt definitively announced, “The wise custom which limits the President to two terms regards the substance and not the form. Under no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination” (qtd. in Gould 43). His statement could not have been clearer, and he would find “no way to undo the strong words he had uttered in November 1904” (Gould 43). However, eventually Roosevelt would attempt to do just that.

In 1908, Roosevelt steadfastly adhered to his 1904 pledge and supported Taft as the successor to his presidency and, as Roosevelt hoped, his Progressive legacy. Though he began to see Taft as a traitor to his Progressive agenda, even as late as 1911, Roosevelt claimed no intention to enter the campaign (Broderick 40). However, he gave indications of wrestling to reconcile his break with his 1904 promise by telling his friends that should he enter the campaign in 1912 it would not be to gain a third consecutive term. Thus, as Gould writes of Roosevelt’s reasoning, “Without the clout of incumbency to dole out patronage and sway party conventions, he should not be evaluated in the same light as a sitting president trying for a third nomination” (43). At only fifty when he left the Presidency, Roosevelt’s “being needed politics as it needed air; and the need was personal, not programmatic” (Broderick 41). Interpreting Taft’s careful actions as president as undoing his predecessor’s hard-fought reforms, Roosevelt may well have felt that his entering the campaign was a duty to the American citizens. This is the approach he takes in a letter to a newspaper publisher in 1912. Roosevelt writes:

I have all along felt that even if there should be a strong popular demand for me (as to which I can pass no judgment) yet that unless this demand were literally overwhelming it could hardly make itself effective. But it seems to me that it is better that it should not make itself effective rather than that by any action of mine I should make it seem that I desire the Presidency for my own sake, or am willing to accept it unless it comes to me as the result of a real popular movement, giving expression to a demand from at least a substantial portion of the plain people that I should undertake a given task in the interest of the people as a whole. Before I speak there should be some tangible evidence that such is the case. (qtd. in Broderick 42)

Despite the demands to know empirically whether or not “the plain people” demand him to vie for the presidency, Roosevelt, always a man of action, declined to wait passively for his summons. Instead, he wrote to governors in Republican states asking for them to write to inform him that their citizens were demanding him to run (Broderick 43). From this action alone, it seems reasonable to interpret Roosevelt’s entry into the 1912 election and his broken promise in 1904 as being guided by ambition. Likewise, this instance is telling of Roosevelt’s relationship to truth. Unlike a parrhesiast, he seems to view truths spoken as mutable and adjustable to the given situation. It is a valuable technique for a successful politician, but it runs in contrast to the ethics of a parrhesiast, who must display a commitment to authenticity.

Debs turned his ire toward Theodore Roosevelt once he entered the campaign as the fourth large-scale contender for the presidency. Debs argued against Roosevelt’s

sincerity, responding to Roosevelt's call that the Progressive "movement is an effort to bring the government back to the people. Most men will agree that the people ought to be governed but they are not so ready to say that the government should be by the people and for the people" (Roosevelt 51). However, Debs points to the logical absurdity of this position from the institutionally financed Roosevelt. He argues, "When the owners of the trusts finance a party to put themselves out of business; when they turn over their wealth to the people from whom they stole it and go to work for a living, it will be time enough to consider the merits of the Roosevelt Progressive Party" (Debs, "Speech of Acceptance" 364).

To Debs, Roosevelt's vision of a government by the people was drawn from Socialist ideology and masked by Roosevelt's presentation of himself "as the best agent of the middle class to stave off violent societal revolution" (Gould 158). Indeed, in one speech Roosevelt positions himself explicitly in such a way when he declares, "I am preaching neither anarchy or socialism; I am preaching the curative to socialism and the antidote to anarchy. I am preaching and trying to practice the policy of a square deal for every man and woman in this republic" (Roosevelt 28). Thus, more than any other candidate, Debs presents an image of Roosevelt as an ideological thief of Socialist principles to mask Roosevelt's real ambitious intentions. This theft Debs's campaign saw as evident from Roosevelt's acceptance speech for the Progressive Party. In a letter to Debs, Fred Warren, who attended the Progressive Party Convention, observes:

I am impressed with the importance of the 3rd party move. There is something strikingly significant in the gathering together of 14,000 men and women from all part of the nation to declare that they no longer were

republicans, thus severing the political ties of a life time. I sat within twenty feet of Roosevelt and there were times when I could have shut my eyes and readily believed that I was listening to Socialist soap boxer! In the decorations, red predominated and the red bandana was very much in evidence. (Debs, *Letters of Eugene Debs* 535)

Clearly, Warren shows some admiration for Roosevelt's ability to mobilize such a large crowd at a third party convention. However, Warren foresees the problem of Roosevelt appropriating Socialist stances in his campaign discourse. Warren writes further of his concerns: "His slogan will be that the nation must elect him in order to save the people from Socialism on one hand and predatory wealth on the other. Many of our half baked converts will join in the hue and cry that it is better to have half loaf than none at all and they will be fooled by his false promises" (Debs, *Letters of Eugene Debs* 535). Indeed, it is understandable why Warren would have been so troubled by Roosevelt at the convention. Roosevelt's speeches during the election of 1912 do strikingly recall Debs's rhetoric against the political conglomerates of the Democratic and Republican Parties.

In thinking about his opponents in the election, Debs's speeches present a consolidation of Wilson, Taft, and even Roosevelt into a single, monstrous entity, a force bent on preserving the institutions and systems of capitalistic oppression that Debs despises. The most obvious rhetorical choice would be to position these men as representatives of an ideology of oppression, manipulation, and coercion, which to a certain extent does factor into the periphery of Debs's discourse. Yet, true to the image of parrhesiast, Debs makes the chief crime of these men their insincerity. They become the opposite of the parrhesiast: liars. They present an ideology of reform and Progressivism,

but, as Debs argues, they improperly appropriate concepts of Socialism in order to preserve a system fundamentally unsalvageable and incompatible with equality. Throughout his 1912 campaign speeches, Debs classifies these men as, at worst, liars and, at best, unknowingly ignorant, and, thereby, reinforces his ethos as parrhesiast speaking truth to wholly and sincerely reform the American economic and social culture for the benefit of its people.

Despite some of his opponents' remarks to the contrary, Debs realized the 1912 election was only operating within the boundaries of a preservation of American capitalist ideology (Flehinger 56). Therefore, part of his message of education was to unmask the four choices of candidates were really only a choice between Socialism and Capitalism. Yet, all of these opponents to socialist ideology were not equal in terms of their appeal to voters. Their difference, according to Debs, was not so much ideological. If that were the case, Debs's should have focused his criticism intensely on Taft, as he was the most conservative of the three other candidates. The difference was in terms of the presentation of truth. Thus, for Debs the inauthentic candidate was his principle adversary.

In one of his early speeches, Roosevelt mirrors Debs's assemblage of both Democrat and Republican corruption. Roosevelt declares, "The success of the Democratic National ticket means enthroning in power one set of bosses; the success of the Republican National ticket means enthroning in power the other set of bosses. [...] In their essence the Democratic and the Republican machines are alike. Both are controlled by the like powerful beneficiaries of privilege: privileged political and privileged

financial” (12). This is essentially the same association Debs makes to link the three parties when he announces:

The infallible test of a political party is the private ownership of the sources of wealth and the means of life. Apply that test to the Republican, Democratic and Progressive parties and upon that basic, fundamental issue you will find them essentially one and the same. They differ according to the conflicting interests of the privileged classes, but at the bottom they are alike and stand for capitalist class rule and working class slavery.

(“Speech of Acceptance” 363)

Both Roosevelt and Debs are arguing against the corruptive party bureaucracy of both major parties, and both argue against the concentration of the wealth through rules and regulations in the hands of a privileged few. Both men present an argument that a vote for either major party is in reality not a choice for different policies but merely of figureheads. This might not be so surprising for American third party candidates, whose formation is generally the result of dissatisfaction with both parties to represent their ideology. In their struggle to coordinate a national campaign, these candidates would naturally resent the financial and organizational resources of thoroughly established political institutions.

However, what makes the situation odd in the case of Roosevelt is that he was a part and indeed the undisputed leader of the party that he now condemns for their ingrained boss politics. Indeed, only a few months earlier, Roosevelt rigorously struggled to once again represent the Republicans on the national electoral stage. This begs the question of what prompted Roosevelt’s sudden shift. Was it simply that he shifted

alliances in an act of political expediency, or did Roosevelt truly believe the party had become corrupted? This is perhaps the central question for Roosevelt in regards to parrhesia. He gives somewhat of an explanation of his reason in a speech at the Boston Common. Roosevelt declares, “[B]ecause you are honest, I try to be honest, yes. Because it’s your fight. Now as I said in the primaries last year I said, ‘Now if the people beat me it is all right, I have nothing to say, but if the people are for me and the politicians beat me out of victory I’ll have a good deal to say.’ [...] And I am saying it now. I’m saying it now” (19). From this speech, Roosevelt seems to suggest that he only discovered the corrupting forces in the Republican Party, which he calls “the politicians,” when they prevented him from attaining the nomination and prevented “the people” from rightfully choosing their nominee.

Whatever Roosevelt’s actual motivation might have been, Debs was quick to react to what he perceived as Roosevelt’s theft of Socialist ideals. Flehinger writes, “Recognizing the similarity between Roosevelt’s ideas and Socialism, Debs accused Roosevelt of stealing and perverting the Socialists’ ideas, [...]” (55). Yet, most upsetting to Debs was the belief that this improper appropriation of Socialist ideas would result in Roosevelt’s “phony promises” (Broderick 174). Gould writes, “Debs attempted to fight back in the mainstream press with letters that pointed out what he believed Roosevelt was doing to steal ideas for the Socialists and how he was deceiving the electorate about his true role. [...] Debs denounced Roosevelt’s new party as a sham and urged his audiences to support the real source of potential change, the Socialists” (158). Thus, Debs again functioned as parrhesiast to reveal what he regarded as the truth of Roosevelt’s Progressive party.

In his speech “The Fight for Freedom,” Debs charges Roosevelt as being the great deceiver of the American people. Like Taft and Wilson, Debs accuses Roosevelt of being financed by capitalist entities. He argues that the logical conclusion of this association is that Roosevelt cannot represent the common citizen. Debs asks, “Is the man not foolish, to the verge of being feeble-minded, who imagines that great trust magnates, [...] are flooding the country with Roosevelt money because he is the champion of progressive principle and the friend of the common people?” (“The Fight for Freedom” 305-306). In speaking out against Roosevelt and his financiers, Debs risks making powerful enemies, as every act of parrhesia requires the incursion of some risk.

Yet, Debs’s ethos as compulsive parrhesiast requires him to engage in frank speaking. Rather than an innovative new political party, Debs argues, “The new Progressive Party is a party of progressive capitalism. It is lavishly financed and shrewdly advertised. But it stands for capitalism all the same” (“Speech of Acceptance” 363). Thus, Debs argues the strength of the party is not its ideology but its surface appearance of actual change reinforced through Roosevelt’s celebrity and generous institutional financial backing.

It was a distinct advantage and disadvantage that Roosevelt did have a record as president, which both Wilson and Debs used to critique various contradictions and failings. Of his presidential record, Debs believed that Roosevelt’s inconsistencies could be explained by his ambition. Debs’s critique in 1912 is not the first time he noted lapses in Roosevelt’s record. Indeed, in an article penned by Debs for the Socialist newspaper *Appeal to Reason* in 1907, he writes of Roosevelt’s shifting position toward organized labor. Debs writes:

The letter of President Roosevelt to the Moyer and Haywood conference of New York is in strange contrast with the one previously addressed by him to the Chicago conference on the same subject. The two letters are so entirely dissimilar in spirit and temper that they seem to have been written by different persons. In the first the President bristles with defiance, in the last he is the pink of politeness. [...] Again has the President vindicated his reputation as one of the smoothest of politicians and one of the most artful and designing of demagogues. (“Roosevelt’s Labor Letters” 247)

Aware of the accusations of his totalizing political ambitions, Roosevelt, in his famous speech after an assassination attempt, asserts his ethical veracity and the seriousness of his devotion to the Progressive Party. Roosevelt argues, “Friends, I ask you now this evening to accept what I am saying as absolutely true, when I tell you I am not thinking of my own success. I am not thinking of my life or of anything connected with me personally” (175). However, Roosevelt’s speech makes a turn from a concern with truthfulness and modesty to a somewhat unsettling display. Roosevelt continues:

I am thinking of the movement, I say this by way of introduction, because I want to say something very serious to our people and especially to the newspapers. I don’t know anything about who the man was who shot me to-night. He was seized once by one of the stenographers in my party, Mr. Martin, and I suppose is now in the hands of the police. He shot to kill. He shot—the shot, the bullet went in here—I will show you. (175-6)

Perhaps Roosevelt might be excused for being unsettled by the attempt on his life.

However, he characterizes his pleas for belief as a mere introduction to what becomes a

display of virility, which takes away from his message. Instead, Roosevelt has seized on the assassination attempt as a means of sensationalism for the newspapers. After all, his speech indicates that he is speaking “especially to the newspapers.”

If Roosevelt might be excused for using the assassination attempt to his own political advantage, his seizing the opportunity for unsubstantiated conjecture and slander to others is certainly ethically problematic. Tellingly, Roosevelt uses the situation to attack his opponents, who he argues might be the cause of the attempted assassination. Roosevelt declares, “Now, friends, of course, I do not know, as I say, anything about him; but it is a very natural thing that weak and vicious minds should be inflamed to acts of violence by the kind of awful mendacity and abuse that have been heaped upon me for the last three months by the papers of not only Mr. Debs but of Mr. Wilson and Mr. Taft” (177). Here, it’s obvious that Roosevelt is attempting to use this incident to its fullest potential by lobbying accusations of conspiracy at his three opponents and leveraging the political capital of the moment. This insatiable desire for showmanship does make one conscious of Roosevelt’s ability to seize the moment for effect, but his zeal for performance for the newspapers seems to betray a desire for ambition rather than to speak truth for the benefit of the American people. If Roosevelt were to blame any politician for the attempt on his life, it might have oddly enough been President William McKinley, who happened to have been eleven years dead in 1912. As the man who shot Roosevelt, John Schrank, explained his reason for targeting Roosevelt was “the ghost of William McKinley had instructed him to kill the Progressive candidate lest there be a third term” (Gould 171). Clearly, Roosevelt’s accusations of his opponents were unfounded, but they did demonstrate his cunning opportunism.

It might be escapades like these that led Debs to point to Roosevelt's pleas for others to believe his truthfulness as the ultimate insincerity from an inauthentic man. Debs argues, "The truth is that if the Bull Moose candidate dared to permit an itemized publication of his campaign contributions in his present mad and disgraceful pursuit of the presidency, [...] it would paralyze him and scandalize the nation" ("The Fight for Freedom" 306). Thus, because of his affiliation with the capitalist institutions that fund his campaign, Roosevelt cannot be expected to truly represent the working American citizenry. Importantly for a discussion of parrhesia, Debs argues Roosevelt should be judged on his record as president and "not upon his empty promises as a ranting demagogue and vote-seeking politician" ("The Fight for Freedom" 306). Because Roosevelt's motivation is based on political opportunism, Debs argues he cannot be trusted in any of his promises. This position, of course, makes Roosevelt the opposite of the parrhesiast and incapable of trust.

On one occasion, Roosevelt did address the similarities between his Progressive Party and the Socialist Party. Roosevelt argues:

You ask about the Socialists. Of course that is a question altogether too big to answer at this time. What I can say is this: in our platform we have grappled with certain of the evils with which the Socialists haven striven to grasp. The difference that we are grappling with those evils in a practical way that will cure them, and the Socialists are chasing will-o'-the-wisps. That is the difference. That is the first difference between us and them. (28)

This remark is particularly cordial in that Roosevelt respectfully articulates the difference between the two movements is that one is pragmatic and the other is not.

Despite their differences, the Socialists, Roosevelt concedes, are somewhat marching toward the same goal and fighting against some of the same “evils.” Yet, Roosevelt was not always so cordial to Debs and Socialism, as Debs documents in his 1907 article. Debs writes, “Has the President ever heard of one Theodore Roosevelt? [...] And one Theodore Roosevelt who in the same year of 1896 said that Altgeld and one Debs should be lined up against a dead wall and shot? Which said Roosevelt never denied until four years later, when he became candidate for Vice President?” (“Roosevelt’s Labor Letters 250). Debs is referring to an incident when John P. Altgeld, the governor of Illinois, questioned the authority of the federal government to send troops into Illinois to stop the Pullman strike.

However, Debs and others no doubt would have marveled at Roosevelt’s stance toward organized labor in the 1912 election. Before one crowd in Michigan, Roosevelt announces, “As Mr. Wilson has seen fit to attack the Progressive platform about labor, and especially about organized labor, I ask you to compare what I urged on Congress and what I succeeded in getting Congress to do, during the time I was President [...] Most of what I advocated then is now embodied as a demand in the social and industrial justice plank of the Progressive platform” (153). Either Roosevelt had moderated his disdain for Debs by 1912 or he saw the need as a third party candidate to align himself somewhat with Socialists in a hope, as Warren feared, to convert them to the Progressive Party by the deadline of the November election.

As a punishment for an ultimate crime against truth, Debs argues for Roosevelt's absolute condemnation. He declares, "For the very reason that the trusts are pouring out their millions to literally buy his nomination and election and force him into the White House for a third term, and if possible for life, the people should rise in their might and repudiate him as they never have repudiated a recreant official who betrayed their trust" (Debs, "The Fight for Freedom" 307). To a man who places an ethical obligation to speak the truth for the benefit of all, the ephemeral commitment to truth is unacceptable. Thus, the compulsion to speak against these candidates for their insincerity reinforces the image of Debs as parrhesiast and may account for his popularity during the 1912 election.

Debs successfully avoided accusations of ambition by projecting an authentic ethos to unite his party behind him and to appeal to voters beyond the Socialist party by rhetorically shifting the power to the audience. It is this usage of parrhesia that surely must have been a factor in making his 1912 leadership position more palatable to those within his party who united behind him despite some misgivings regarding traditional politics and an inherent skepticism of leadership in general. More importantly to understanding how Debs drew such a large percentage of the popular vote in 1912 is Debs's evocation of parrhesia and truth telling as the mission of his candidacy throughout the campaign. Importantly, his mission is not to change things himself. His mission via telling the truth is to awaken others to change things for themselves. The political power rests not within Debs, but with the people he is seeking to explain the truth to. Thus, his mission is essentially one of education. In this way, Debs argues, "We do not plead for votes; the workers give them freely the hour they understand" ("Speech of Acceptance" 362). This strategy of declaring that power rests with the people themselves to effect

change rather than with an exemplary figure may have softened Debs's position to American voters wary of a Socialist candidate. After all, there was nothing to fear from Debs because, as he reiterated, they were the ones with power.

In this way, Debs positions himself as educator. As educator, Debs must inform others to realize their situation. He argues, "But we need to destroy the prejudice that still exists and dispel the darkness that still prevails in the working class world. We need the clear light of sound education and conquering power of economic and political organization" (Debs, "Speech of Acceptance" 363). As rhetor and educator, he does not call for a reanalysis of the situation through a new ideological lens. Rather, his is a call to notice the conditions that are already present. To American voters, this call for education on issues and positions surely must have seemed like a small request to make. It is important to distinguish between Socialist ideology and its connection to truth, for if Debs were to speak in order to move citizens from the Democratic, Republican, or Progressive platform to Socialism, he would be acting only as politician and not parrhesiast; however, Debs insists his audience not blindly embrace Socialism because of political favor but because Socialism, properly understood, advocates truth.

This aligns with Foucault's perspective on the mission of the parrhesiast. Foucault argues in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*: "The objective of *parrhēsia* is to act so that at a given moment the person to whom one is speaking finds himself in a situation in which he no longer needs the other's discourse" (379). It's important to note the transitory nature of the parrhesiast. The parrhesiast is not merely speaking only for the sake of speaking. Instead, the parrhesiast has a purpose. He or she hopes that the parrhesia spoken will result in some action to the person or group spoken to. As Foucault

articulates, the goal is to change the situation so that this particular act of parrhesia is no longer needed. In Debs's case, his act is to speak "the truth in order to direct the city, in a position of superiority in which one is perpetually jousting with others" (*Government of Self* 157). This truth telling act of parrhesia provides the perspective citizens should have in order to make an informed act: the vote for President of the United States.

In comparison to Debs in 1912, an analysis of Roosevelt contributes to an exploration of parrhesia with the question: What is the relationship between truth and change over a given time? If authenticity, defined as consistency, is a condition for parrhesia, this presents problems for the natural state of one's perspective shifting over a given time depending on a particular issue. If this is the means of determining authenticity, is there an acceptable time frame in which one's stance can change and the speaking of this altered view could be considered parrhesia? As this chapter has shown, Roosevelt's statements not only contradict each from 1904 to 1912, but from one month in 1912 to the next. To be fair, Debs own positions also changed during the course of his life, as would be expected. He served as a loyal Democrat in 1884 but later discovered Socialism and recanted his belief in the Democratic Party. My point is not that one must steadfastly hold to something once spoken throughout an entire life. Indeed, were rigorous adherence to a position for the sole reason to avoid contradiction the only consideration for defining a parrhesiast, such a position would clearly not be an ideal model for any politician or rhetor to emulate. However, in stressing a parrhesiast's commitment to telling all, Foucault's writings suggest parrhesia as an ethical framework more than a prescriptive philosophy.

This being the case, parrhesia does involve a bond between the speaker and the audience. This is what Foucault refers to as the parrhesiastic game. Foucault argues, “This kind of pact, between the person who takes the risk of telling the truth and the person who agrees to listen to it, is at the heart of what could be called the parrhesiastic game” (*Courage of Truth* 13). Because of this connection, it might be expected that the speaker should feel this obligation extending to a desire to explain oneself and, therefore, respect the relationship between the two.

For some, as was the case with Debs, this explanation might take the form of a conversion narrative. For others, as was the case with Roosevelt, an explanation might come in the form of rationalizing one’s previous statement so as to avoid contradiction. However, this latter approach implies superiority over one’s audience. By rationalizing away a previous contradictory statement, the speaker is suggesting an audience did not understand the meaning of what was spoken. This approach can appear disingenuous, especially in politics. Once such a descriptor as “disingenuous” is applied, the entire ethos is questionable and the power of one’s parrhesia is severely tainted. Parrhesia then can serve as a guide for appropriate political conduct to avoid these negative consequences. Foucault identifies parrhesia’s role as “what ensures the appropriate game of politics” (*Government of Self* 159). This is the lesson of parrhesia that becomes apparent in the case of Theodore Roosevelt. Whatever his actual motivations were in the 1912 election, his many inconsistencies leave him vulnerable to attacks not only from Debs but from Taft and Wilson. Arguably, his questionable authenticity may have led to his defeat due to his inability to gain the Republican nomination, thus splitting the Republican electorate between Taft and Roosevelt.

Whether it was ambition that guided Roosevelt, an analysis of his actions over time suggests an ethic and a relationship to truth as one understands it that is not consistent with that of a parrhesiast. A comparison of Roosevelt and Debs only further highlights Debs's consistent presentation of authenticity throughout the 1912 campaign. The presentation of authenticity is paramount because parrhesia does not necessarily imply some metaphysical access to transcendental truth; it is a much more local and subjective concern. It involves the speaking of truth as one understands it for the benefit of another. Though determining authenticity is admittedly fraught with problems, it is best attempted by the analysis of one's actions over time. If one's actions do not demonstrate a consistency in presenting truth, then this person is not a parrhesiast, but this person just might be Theodore Roosevelt.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

There never was a President Eugene V. Debs. When the final votes were counted Wilson captured only forty-one percent of the vote, and Debs received 901,551 votes, equaling six percent of the popular vote. However, Debs's inability to seize the presidency need not be viewed as a failure. Indeed, as a third party Socialist candidate for president, Debs's achievement of six percent is a victory worthy of study. As I have argued, Debs's 1912 campaign and the result might be best explained by his positioning himself as a parrhesiast, who speaks truth for the benefit of the citizenry. This perspective is apparent when considering the ways in which parrhesia's three essential elements of compulsion, risk, and authenticity manifest in Debs's campaign discourse.

Any inquiry into Debs's political campaigns centers around how to situate and define his victory. To scholars like Francis Broderick, victory is the attainment of the presidency immediately or in long-term. However, by Debs's own standard, his victory is no less ambitious, but it is certainly of a different orientation. In many of his speeches, Debs is self-deflating of himself and other candidates, thereby granting agency to his audience rather than to any politician. This suggests the sensibility of the parrhesiast. Debs, as parrhesiast, speaks because of a motivation to deliver a message for the benefit of those listening.

Some scholars, such as Broderick, view Debs's campaign as more of an anomaly rather than a significant gain for Debs's particular campaign approach. Broderick writes,

“Debs, having doubled the Socialist vote in four years, appeared to be a winner, but within months after the election, gross internal strains in the party revealed that 1912 was a climax rather than a milestone for the Socialists” (211). For Broderick, the result of Debs’s campaign seems to be related to how far he could move the spectrum of the Socialist party into institutional politics, and the goal might be the establishment of the Socialist party as a serious contender in the next bout with the traditional two parties. However, recreating the Socialist party in the image of the Democratic and Republican organization was never Debs’s goal in 1912, as he repeatedly made clear in numerous declarations. Perhaps the most concise of them being Debs’s remark, “The Socialist Party is fundamentally different from all other parties. It came in the process of evolution and grows with the growth of the forces which created it. Its spirit is militant and its aim revolutionary” (“Speech of Acceptance” 361). Clearly, Debs viewed the Socialist party’s mission as one with an inherently radical agenda, one that stands irreconcilable with the sensibilities of the Democratic and Republican parties. Thus, Broderick’s evaluation of Debs seems inappropriate for the type of politics in which Debs was engaged.

Unlike Broderick, Lewis L. Gould does not so narrowly define victory for Debs as the attainment of the mantle of President of the United States. Overall, Gould views 1912 as a disappointment for Debs and his party stalwarts. To Gould, victory seems to be defined in terms of total percentage of votes cast. Gould writes, “The bigger percentage gains for Debs and his party came in the West in states such as Oklahoma, Montana, Arizona, and Washington. Perhaps the Socialists would have done better by concentrating their efforts in the states where there were more potential voters” (180). To Gould, Debs would have made more of an impression had he went about his campaign

with less zeal and more strategy. Thus, the travels around the entire country were, to Gould, ultimately a waste of time and energy, an evaluation Debs would have thoroughly protested, which Gould acknowledges when he writes, “In any case, Debs was going to campaign nationwide no matter what” (180). Gould seems to suggest that Debs’s advocating for a national campaign had more to do with his pining for celebrity and misplaced belief in the great awakening of class-consciousness.

However, Gould’s assertion is directly contrasted in Debs’s own self-deflating campaign speeches, which invite his audience to question not only the leadership status of Taft, Wilson, and Roosevelt but Debs’s own position. Debs’s rationale for conducting a truly national campaign rather than strategic regional efforts might not make political sense to Gould, but this approach aligns with Debs’s argument that his campaign is as much about education and awareness as any political victory. As I have argued throughout the preceding chapters, the 1912 campaign provided the perfect opportunity for Debs to bring his educational messages to the masses, and in so doing his approach is parrhesiastic. With this expressed goal, it is, therefore, logical for Debs to conduct his campaign in as broad an orientation as possible. The ways in which Debs viewed his campaign’s mission and Gould and Broderick evaluate this campaign could not be more dissimilar in their orientation. To Gould, victory plainly comes down to the numbers. He makes this point clear when he argues, “[1912] was the highest percentage of the popular vote that the Socialist Party ever achieved. But they could have done better. Gene Debs was wrong. It was not their year after all” (Gould 180). However, victory can be defined beyond numerical results.

If a campaign's effectiveness is best evaluated by its utility for subsequent campaigns, then Debs's parrhesiastic campaign technique did prove successful. Although Debs did not run for president in 1916, he did run again for president once more in 1920, while he was serving a sentence in federal prison for sedition (Gould 185). For obvious reasons, Debs was unable to engage in the grueling campaign schedule he maintained in 1912, which makes the fact that he earned 919,000 votes from a prison cell all the more illustrative of his ethical appeal. Though his risk in speaking out might be less than in 1912, after all he was already imprisoned in 1920, overcoming the stigma of a convict's black-and-white garb could not be achieved without the significant ethos Debs had earned from a proven track record of authenticity. Certainly, this result can in part be attributed to the political capital he garnered in 1912 as well as the cultural capital from his famous sedition trial, another example of Debs's parrhesiastic sensibility. Perhaps one of the key indicators of Debs's influence was President Warren Harding officially pardoning him in 1921, just three years after his conviction by Wilson.

American history has demonstrated the transitory influence of a sitting president to direct beneficial and lasting policies. Though winning the presidency does provide temporary authority and entitlement, it does not guarantee the ability to institute positive changes for the citizenry. This presents another type of victory: a victory evaluated in terms of policy impact. When framed in this way, Debs can certainly be considered victorious. As even Broderick concedes, the reforms that seemed unattainable in 1912 eventually become accepted. Broderick writes, "At the other end, the Socialist platform, rather more than Eugene V. Debs himself, had proposed a panoply of reforms deemed radical at the time, many of which are now the law of the land" (218). Though Broderick

seems to diminish Debs's involvement, Debs occupies an interesting space in public memory, as I have argued in chapter two, and he is forever linked with the reforms proposed in 1912. By making these reforms palatable to a wider public, the victory, at least in part, can rightly be attributed to Debs's adept parrhesiastic discourse.

Yet for Debs, parrhesia is not a tool to be dispensed in order to gain votes, but this does not mean that parrhesia did not help him do just that. Indeed, parrhesia in relation to Debs illustrates its continuing potentiality in politics. However, in considering parrhesia's application in campaign politics, the post-mortem of Debs's campaign requires the resolution of two overarching and unresolved questions concerning parrhesia: Is parrhesia even compatible with politics, and, if so, how can parrhesia work in politics?

Foucault considers these types of questions over the course of *The Government of Self and Others* and *The Courage of Truth* lectures. For Foucault, the answer is an affirmation. Indeed, in *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault offers one definition of parrhesia that articulates parrhesia as inseparable from politics. In one instance, Foucault argues, “[P]arrēsia, the truth-telling of the political man, is what ensures the appropriate game of politics” (*Government of Self* 159). The proper game of politics, according to Foucault, centers on the absolute presentation of truth from the politician. In this idealistic sense, political sparring involves one politician's parrhesia weighted against another's. Foucault explains, “*Parrēsia* consists in making use of logos in the polis— logos in the sense of true, reasonable discourse, discourse which persuades, and discourse which may confront other discourse and will triumph only through the weight of its truth and the effectiveness of its persuasion [...]” (*Government of Self* 105). This view of parrhesia might seem like an idealized view of political operation, a variation of

“the truth will out” adage, yet, he states, “the notion of *parrhēsia* was first of all and fundamentally a political notion” (Foucault, *Courage of Truth* 8). It is only with Socrates, Foucault explains, that the life of a parrhesiast and politician become irreconcilable. However, perhaps unknowingly, Socrates proves they can both be joined together.

Foucault interprets Socrates’s decision to not enter traditional politics as a signal of the two concepts’ irreconcilability. What prevents Socrates from a political life is the “daemonic voice” that only prevents certain actions but does not prescribe appropriate actions, which is the task of the politician (Foucault, *Courage of Truth* 77). From this, Foucault extrapolates, “The apparent explanation is the bad functioning of democratic *parrhēsia*, or of political *parrhēsia* more generally; it is the impossibility of performing the parrhesiastic role properly, fully, and thoroughly when one is dealing with political institutions” (*Courage of Truth* 77). However, as Foucault notes, Socrates refutes this impossibility with his example of serving as *epistates*, the equivalent of president, during the trial of the eight Athenian generals after the Battle of Arginusae, where he boldly attempted to prevent a vote for their execution. Socrates’s example presents the “possible figure of the parrhesiast politician who agrees to take the floor, regardless of dangers and threats, because it is in the city’s interest. And, possibly risking death, he speaks the truth” (Foucault, *Courage of Truth* 76). Tellingly, when considering the three essential qualities of a parrhesiast—compulsion, risk, and authenticity—all are present and none are diluted by Socrates’s political participation as *epistates*. After all, Socrates clearly felt some compulsion to speak out despite the opinion of other assemblymen, he took great risk in positioning himself on a sensitive issue, and he demonstrated authenticity by his consistent presentation of his actions as being in the service of his duty. Thus,

although Socrates might have attempted to separate politics from philosophy, which he believed offered the proper forum for parrhesia, his actions demonstrate how politics and parrhesia can coexist.

In a more modern context, Eugene Debs also demonstrates how parrhesia can function in the American politics. Although Debs is an atypical politician because of his consistent practice of parrhesia in electoral politics, he, nevertheless, proves there is a space in politics for a practicing parrhesiast. Importantly for an application in contemporary politics, Debs's actions demonstrate not only that such a marriage between these two concepts is possible, but that it can be effective in garnering votes and productive in terms of attaining overall political and cultural influence through one's ethos. As I have suggested throughout this thesis, his example provides a few principles that offer a possibility for effectively entwining the practice of truth telling with politics. These principles can best be expressed in terms of the three essential elements of parrhesia: compulsion, risk, and authenticity.

As discussed in chapters two and four, primary races for the major political parties can be an exhausting endeavor, leaving some politicians depleted even before the general election begins. What was true in 1912 is no less applicable in contemporary politics. The motivation and perseverance needed to sustain oneself through this onerous process requires a sense of compulsion, which is one of the principle qualities of parrhesia. Debs demonstrated his compulsive motivation to speak out to numerous audiences in various locations across the United States despite fragile health. Debs certainly seems to have been compelled to endure such trials. Perhaps this is where parrhesia provides a competitive advantage to a practicing candidate in that it requires

compulsive devotion to oneself and to others, as I discuss in chapter two an internal/external commitment. Candidates may find the drive from primary candidacy to Election Day from a variety of sources: duress, egotism, or vengeance. Unlike these other sources, parrhesia seems to translate well into campaign messaging. It is somewhat obvious to assume that voters would find messaging related to a candidate's sense of service appealing when voting for public servant. For a parrhesiast, such a stance is natural.

Because parrhesia involves a continuous compulsion to speak frankly, a parrhesiast's mission is never complete. There is always a new rhetorical situation in which to offer parrhesia. This attribute proves especially beneficial to a politician. After all, the ebbs and flows of victory and defeat define the life of a politician, and recovery from a defeat, particularly an electoral defeat, is critical. The parrhesiast is suited to recovery because the compulsive motivation of parrhesia spurs one forward to the next forum. Debs is the perfect example of this sensibility. From failed strikes to failed elections to imprisonment, Debs had his share of defeat. Despite these setbacks, he always persevered and treated each campaign as an opportunity. Because of this perseverance, Debs found ways to remain culturally and politically relevant and even influential.

In any field, risk is not a concept normally viewed as an advantage; it is, rather, an element that should be minimized if at all possible. Yet, risk is essential to parrhesia, as chapter three illustrates, and counterintuitively, risk can hold a long-term advantage even in politics. As the example of Debs illustrates, his influence extended far beyond the particular historical moment of the 1912 election due to his positive remembrance in

public memory. Because Americans tend to view history through a lens of progressivism, as rhetorical scholars have commented, in speaking frankly in 1912, Debs's parrhesia resonated deeply in the years following the election even if the majority of Americans might not have been willing to accept his policy proposals at the moment his actual discourse took place.

Again, the risk of parrhesia affords Debs a different kind of victory, as many of his policy proposals were later adopted and his status radically changed from outlier to a celebrated citizen representing the American ideal of free speech. Without accepting the risks of parrhesia, this transformation would likely not have occurred. Democracy is based on a compromise, but it is also based on assembling the opinions and perspectives of a diverse set of participants. Parrhesia helps these opinions to be shared, and, to be sure, there is risk involved in doing so. Debs may not have won the election, but he influenced it and his influence certainly extends beyond a singular election. The practice of parrhesia may not result in immediate victory, but victory does not require one to win a leadership position in order to be effective. The lesson of parrhesiastic risk, which Debs embraced, is that it may not award short-term goals, but it can result in respect from one's opponents, as was the case for Debs, and the potential for long-term achievement of what might initially appear to be unachievable objectives, as is also the case for Debs. Effectively, the truism "nothing ventured, nothing gained" might most succinctly express the potential of parrhesia, but to concretize this aphorism, the historical victory of Debs best demonstrates the potential benefit of parrhesia's risks.

The final aspect of parrhesia that holds potential in politics is authenticity. By its very nature politics is tied to intense public scrutiny. This was the case in the 1912

election and remains the case in contemporary politics. However, unlike 1912, technological advances have only further pushed the political arena into the public's gaze. From C-SPAN to YouTube, the voting public has unprecedented access to the inner lives of politicians and the ability to crowd source the fact checking of every public or private statement. Thus, it is even more critical in contemporary politics to display an authentic ethos and maintain a public and private consistency from one's speeches to a general public to private small-group conversations, a lesson Mitt Romney, for example, would have done well to remember in the 2012 election.

The result of misalignment is significantly consequential. In the parlance of the day, an inconsistent politician is reduced to a mere "flip-flopper," diminishing the quality of a candidate from a contender to a clog. Here, the parrhesiast politician has a distinct advantage in that parrhesia demands authenticity. Through a compulsive motivation for speaking frankly, a politician offering parrhesia should demonstrate consistent sincerity over time. Inconsistency between the public and private beliefs of a candidate should not exist in a parrhesiast politician. Because no matter the occasion, the practice of parrhesia is an ethical act requiring sincerity, consistency, and the courage to steadfastly maintain and defend one's beliefs. In practice, this is surely idealistic, difficult, and demanding; yet, Eugene Debs demonstrated it is possible even within the field of American politics.

Ultimately, the example of Eugene Debs helps to codify some of the aspects of parrhesia that Michel Foucault's unfinished project leaves to Antiquity. Over its many instantiations, the concept of parrhesia endures, though perhaps it may not be recognized as such. Though the label of parrhesiast might not have been previously applied to Eugene Debs, the sensibilities and qualities of a parrhesiast were certainly present in him

and their traces remain in his surviving rhetoric. As a politician practicing parrhesia, Debs can serve as an example of how parrhesia functions in American electoral politics and how it might effectively continue. At one point in *The Courage of Truth* lectures, Foucault ponders whether the parrhesiastic mode has disappeared from practice in modern society. I believe it was certainly present in 1912 in the candidacy of Eugene Debs, but work remains to be done to locate parrhesia in a more contemporary context. The potential is certainly there. Hopefully, further studies will reveal parrhesia is a concept as essential to the future as it was to the past.

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