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## Community Scholarship

Vijay Prashad

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## Community Scholarship

*Vijay Prashad*

The only way to live on this planet  
With any human dignity at the moment  
Is to struggle  
—Asian Dub Foundation, “Committed to Life”

For me, it started with the Soviets. Each year two of them would come to my school and sell books at a very low price. When I was in Class 10, I bought Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, and it put paid to my liberalism: never again would pity for Calcutta’s poor suffice. The next year, one of the Progress Publishers’ agents sold me some Marx at a cut price, and I was hooked. The Soviets interested my friends and me, for they were the only consulate officials who drove themselves everywhere (no hired Indian drivers) and they showed the best movies at their cultural center, Gorky Sadan. Besides, the Reds in India are held in high esteem, both by the intellectuals and even by those who are not too keen on politics (“at least the communists are honest, even if misguided,” that sort of thing). So it was Tolstoy, and then Marx, that first got me on the road to rad-

icalism—their books, but not in isolation, for one can hardly be unaffected by Calcutta's starkness of life and its political struggles. In the eighteenth century, officials of the English East India Company fabricated what Marx called a “sham scandal” (the “Black Hole”) to justify their own barbarity; in our own times, the sham scandal of the helpless poor hides capitalism's hand in the production of such grief.<sup>1</sup> Being raised in Calcutta, surrounded by the sharp and creative struggles against poverty and injustice from the Indian left, was pedagogy enough for radical hope.

Unlike so many of my colleagues who, like some sort of red Judases, deny knowledge of what is a theoretical and political force, I feel that it's important to pay tribute to the Soviets, for all their failings. And too many of us make much of those failures far more than we acknowledge the merits of the experiment, or that the experiment is alive and well.<sup>2</sup> Cuba, Vietnam, West Bengal, Kerala—in the realm of necessity, people struggle to produce some form of social justice, while we, here in the realm of freedom, unctuously suck up to the powers that be with our post-Marxisms and other fallacies. Many years ago Perry Anderson wrote that “the hidden hallmark of Western Marxism as a whole is thus that it is a politics of *defeat*.”<sup>3</sup> Detached from workers' struggles and encumbered with an unadulterated belief in socialist progress, how could a generation (or two) of European and U.S. Marxists not be crushed by the collapse of the USSR? In West Bengal, as in Nepal or in South Africa, Marxism was never restricted to what happened in the USSR, for the terrain of struggle was quite different, and many of the movements in these countries lived with the certainty of a polycentrist universe.<sup>4</sup> Several brands of Indian Marxism make the discussion fertile, not arid. This was my theoretical universe and it was not entirely put into crisis during the 1990s: *My radical is red, so there!*<sup>5</sup>

I came to history like I came into the academy, to escape the ravages of the neoliberal world being produced by Reagan and his confederates. It was a defensive and partly cowardly gesture—to flee other careers for the place of the mind, where academic freedom allows for much more flexibility than in any other occupation. Conveniently, the profession of history provides one of the media for radical political activity: ideology critique. To be a radical historian, then, is by definition to be a public intellectual, someone who takes it as axiomatic that our work is related to popular struggles. A populist account would hold that we must write for the broadest audience about things that are already within the ambit of our readers. Although it comes from fine instincts, the upshot of this populism is that it condescends to those whom it attempts to reach.<sup>6</sup> The task of a radical historian, following from the lineage of Marxism in which I live, is to engage with “public” structures (law, religion, state, etc.) and ideologies (which are structured into practice by the “public” institutions). The “public” is not just an agglomeration of individuals, but it is also those structures (and structured ideologies) whose complexity we can record, without being too reductive, toward political practice of some kind. To be a “public”

intellectual, then, is not just to chat away on CNN, but it also means to delve into the way our “public” spaces are demolished as we, within the jet-stream of political struggle, constitute the “public” of our future.

My book *The Karma of Brown Folk*, for example, was written in the midst of engagement within the South Asian American community, as well as in dialogue with those who persist in using *desis* (South Asian Americans) as a weapon in the war against black Americans.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, and importantly, I wrote the book in the aftermath of the draconian 1996 Immigration Act which was the paragon of fierce anti-immigrant times, and which revealed some of those structural features of political economy otherwise at work in the basement of social existence. *Desis*, in bad faith, accommodate ourselves to a neoliberal racism and xenophobia during these tense years, mainly because it allows us, as immigrants, to duck the barbs directed at migrants of color. I suspect that the book was enabled by the New York taxi strike of 1998, the emergence of radical *desi* organizations in the last decade, and the 1996 Immigration Act (and its systemic sway). I didn’t write the book thinking of the “public” as some sort of market fetish to increase sales; nor did I think of my readership as being other scholars. I wrote the book as part of the struggle for social justice engendered by the political activity of radical *desis*. I didn’t sign up for the academic guild in order to hide our secrets. I only came here because I was too scared (and by dint of my visa, legally unable) to become something like a full-time organizer. All that hooey about being free to do what one wants to do is a bourgeois aesthetization of our work: we are not here for entertainment.

Most of my generation is now set to make the transit into tenure or toward some other kind of accommodation with the exploitative mechanisms of the teaching machine. Many of us are part of the milieu that was some combination of second-generation (in immigrant terms), third-wave (in feminist terms), fourth world (in political terms) people deeply unhappy with the multicultural neoliberal condescension of our times—where diversity may be something of a fetish to flatten our complexities rather than to allow us space to breathe as political animals. Those of us who write history within ethnic studies or women’s studies take the world as our canvas both to make the U.S. experience parochial and to show how our struggles here have been tied to those of the world outside. Such scholarship is impatient with the boundaries of the nation-state, and it writes a planetary history to undermine the exclusions that are endemic to our profession. Few of us stop twice to think about the idea of the “public” or of our responsibility to some larger movement than ourselves: young artists and intellectuals took the lead on 11 September 1999 to create Mumia<sup>9</sup>11 (in defense of Mumia Abu-Jamal); scholars and artists banded together to form SAWSJ in solidarity with workers’ struggles; in the antiracist and antixenophobic circles, intellectuals and scholars bear witness to a long tradition of public engagement. We are not trying to insert ourselves into a “public” long colonized by

the capitalist media; we are trying to create our own “publics,” our own circles of engagement with our own media (either in ‘zines, videos, pamphlets, Internet periodicals, or discussion circles). We are writing in step with a movement, stumbling to keep up with it.

## Notes

Lal Salaam to Lisa Armstrong, agitator of our world and of my mind.

1. The quote from Marx is taken from John Hutnyk, *The Rumour of Calcutta: Tourism, Charity, and the Poverty of Representation* (London: Zed Press, 1996), 91. My views on the image of Calcutta and on the place of Mother Teresa in the international imagination can be gleaned from “Mother Teresa: Mirror of Bourgeois Guilt,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 8–14 November 1997; a shorter version appeared as “Mother Teresa: A Communist View,” *Political Affairs* 76, no. 9 (September 1997).
2. For an introduction to some of the suppleness of this contemporary communism, see *A World to Win: Essays on the Communist Manifesto*, ed. Prakash Karat (New Delhi: Left Word Books, 1999).
3. Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1979), 42.
4. The richness of the left movement across the globe received a fillip from Togliatti’s concept of “polycentrism,” which gave some theoretical clarity to the idea of the “national roads to socialism” (*VIII Congresso del PCI* [Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1956].) I’m reminded of Eric Hobsbawm’s comment that “each communist party was the child of the marriage of two ill-assorted partners, a national left and the October revolution. That marriage was based both on love and convenience” (“Problems of Communist History,” in *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* [New York: Pantheon, 1973]), 3.
5. To clarify what I mean by “left” or radical, see Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (London: Polity Press, 1996). Several of the problems in the book are sorted out in a spirited debate between Bobbio and Perry Anderson in *New Left Review* 231 (September/October 1998): 73–93.
6. Several years ago, I worked at Direct Action for Rights and Equality in Providence, Rhode Island. As our executive director Mark Toney and I cowrote a report on tobacco advertisements in our low-income neighborhood, he was adamant that we use footnotes and not be too reductive in our prose. I owe him much for that piece of advice.
7. Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).