

The Essentials of Socialist Writing

AN INTERVIEW WITH

VIJAY PRASHAD

Socialist writing is less about the genius of the author and more about the community they're speaking with.

INTERVIEW BY

Mark Nowak

Left-wing writing is often caricatured one of two ways: as impenetrable jargon, weighted with Marxist lingo no-one has the time to look up, or as oversimplified propaganda.

Of course one's politics never precludes one from being an incomprehensible, lazy, or just plain bad writer. But the Left's history is full of authors who took to the pen because they had an important message to convey, and who worked hard to make sure that message was understood as broadly and deeply as possible.

Moreover, it is rarely discussed how the goals of a socialist writer, and the methods required to reach such goals, differ from the capitalist or apolitical writer. To find out, Mark Nowak for *Jacobin* spoke to author and LeftWord Books chief editor Vijay Prashad about the role of writing in socialist politics.

As you know, I've been working on a new book tentatively titled *Social Poetics*. So when I heard about your recent workshop at the May Day Bookstore Café in New Delhi, and your discussion of the differences between capitalist writing and socialist writing, of course I wanted to hear more. What, to you, are the central differences between capitalist writing and socialist writing?

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VP | My colleague at LeftWord Books — Sudhanva Deshpande — suggested I do a workshop on nonfiction writing. It was the first time I did such a workshop. Had no idea really how to structure it. There were some general themes, such as how to put a story together, the importance of outlines, the absolute cardinal rule to write by hand, that there is no bad writing only incomplete thinking, and so on. But I did think that there was something a little other than what might get from a typical workshop — a conversation about politics and writing.

Antonio Gramsci in his prison notebooks has a theory of elaboration, which I think is very important. Gramsci argued that people in a capitalist system absorb ideas from a variety of sources — family, education, media, workplaces — and that the totality of these notions forms what he calls “common sense.” Now this common sense is useful because it explains a great deal about the world as it is — and how it appears. But there are fundamental elements of the world that remain difficult to fully understand. There are contradictions that make no sense.

Gramsci says that the mass of the people experience reality through a contradictory consciousness. Gramsci argues that the communist or the socialist goes among the people, interacts with them, and listens intently to their common sense. Then the communist activist or journalist critically *elaborates* upon their common sense, takes this contradictory common sense and elaborates it into “good sense” or philosophy. Good socialist nonfiction writing does not assume that it emerges from the genius of the writer or an inspiration — but it comes from being absorbed by the common sense around us, and by being honest about elaborating it into philosophy of good sense.

To come at this from another level: socialist writing is about democracy, about seeing readers as part of our process and not as consumers who must buy the commodities we produce. Socialist writing should be a conversation.

Of course in a capitalist system a writer has to sell one's writing to survive. But our products are ideas developed in our interactions with the world and produced to ensure more such interactions. Ideally, in the context where there is active socialist politics, our interactions should go through towards activity, practice — which is why Gramsci, for instance, called Marxism the “philosophy of praxis” (to evade the prison censor no doubt but also because he meant it!).

I'd like to be clear here. Socialist writing is not merely propaganda towards action by a party. That is a caricature.

Art cannot by itself change the world. It can provide insight and perhaps an epiphany — but it does not change the relations of power in the world. For that, one needs organizational power and struggle.

But art at the same time must be free to engage with contradictory consciousness without a predetermined end — the ends of politics, for instance. If a political line drives the process of elaboration, then we would know the answer to our question before we began our studies among the people. In order to best understand social relations, socialist writing and art must have freedom to come as close as possible to the contradictory common sense and produce — again in conversation with the people, with one's comrades — the good sense of our times.

I'm so glad to hear you bring Gramsci into this conversation. In my Worker Writers School, we're very committed to the Gramscian notion of "organic intellectuals," or as he wrote in his notebooks, that "every human being is an intellectual." Could socialist writing also be a framework for how writers can emerge directly from "the people"? Should one of the goals of socialist writing be to narrow (or even eradicate) the division between the writer and the people?

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VP | You make a good point, Mark. Sure, one goal of a socialist movement — and Gramsci was part of such a movement — is to close the gap between the intellectual and the people. This is precisely what I saw at your Worker Writers School, but this is also what I have seen over the past decades in the party schools of the communist movement in India.

But I want to caution against a simple populism. If you look at this from an individual standpoint, we can see that people from the working class move into educational institutions and then find that their mooring in the working class is not organically held. The institutions of capital and the state break the linkages through various methods. One's new class position often produces new class instincts.

Gramsci, in his work, wrote of two kinds of intellectuals. Firstly, traditional intellectuals like clerics and professors, whose social location identifies them as intellectuals regardless of the quality of their own work. Secondly, organic intellectuals like engineers for factories and learned

peasants for the countryside, who come out of their own class activity to become the ones who can help provide information to keep things running and speculations on how to better develop things. Neither traditional nor organic intellectuals are inherently conservative or radical.

What Gramsci also wrote about — and which gets much less consideration in the reading of his texts — is the idea of the “new intellectuals.” These are intellectuals — college professors and peasant leaders both — who are against the order of reality, and who are rooted in mass struggles and in a mass political party, which provides them with a compass to orient their thought. These new intellectuals, Gramsci noted, are those who throw themselves into “active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, permanent persuader.” I particularly like the idea of permanent persuader. Perhaps this is the leitmotif of socialist writing?

I was also intrigued, in a post you made on your May Day Bookstore workshop, about the importance of what you called “detonator sentences.” Could you explain when you mean by this, especially within the context of socialist writing versus capitalist writing?

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VP | When Marx finished the first volume of *Capital*, Engels was worried. Would the book require a great deal of learning to comprehend it? In a letter to Marx after he read it, Engels wrote that the people and “even the scholars” are just “no longer at all accustomed to this way of thinking.” He wanted Marx to make the text “as easy for them as one possibly can.” Marx was not bothered. He had uncovered the guts of the capitalist system. He had written it as clearly as possible. Later, Engels would complain about the English translation. He would say that the translators did not understand that Marx was a clear and vigorous stylist.

What Engels said is very interesting to me. He said that Marx’s argument appeared difficult because people were “no longer at all accustomed to this way of thinking” — namely dialectics. In other words, it was not merely the *language* that was nettlesome but the form of thought, the very manner of thinking. The debate over jargon and clarity that has continued for decades misses the point.

The point is that if you are writing along the grain of common sense, then it is easy to understand what you are saying. Every cultural institution validates your argument — the television, the school books, the Internet. If you are askance common sense, if you are making claims that draw

from thinking that is not commonplace, then you are in trouble. It is hard to be understood. You have to work on your writing to be as clear and vigorous as possible.

I've worked as a journalist for over twenty years, just about as long as I've had a PhD and had an academic career. There are obviously many forms of writing. These various forms have their own audiences and their own cultural codes. There is socialist writing that is highly technical — namely *Capital* — and socialist writing that is emotive — namely pamphlets and slogans to inform and inspire. Each has its register. Neither is more important. They all play a role.

I am interested in a form of writing that bridges the theoretical text and the pamphlet.

I want to draw insights from the theories that I find compelling and to draw the emotional register from political slogans and then to tell a story that is — I hope — both informative and inspirational.

But what do I get from the slogans? That's where the detonator sentence comes from. Early in a text, there should be a sentence that captures the essence of your argument — not every part of your argument, but its kernel.

W. E. B Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk* asked a question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” This was his detonator sentence. It carried the entire book with it. People of African descent in the United States had been made — through slavery and Jim Crow codes — to experience a subdued dignity. That was Du Bois's point.

I came at it from a different place. In my second book, *Karma of Brown Folk*, I developed an argument about race in the United States, and why certain races stood for success while others stood for failure. This hierarchy of races allows white supremacy to make the claim that it is not after all racist.

South Asians in particular, but other Asian Americans as well, entered the United States after 1965 with advanced degrees. Their success story was written by immigration law, so that their “genius” was not through *natural selection* but by *state selection*. Nonetheless, South Asians were being positioned, against African Americans, as a success story. Drawing from Du Bois's detonator sentence, I asked, “How does it feel to be a solution?” That question grounded the book.

One of my other books — *The Darker Nations* — is about the Third World Project, the political movement of the formerly colonized states on the world stage. The term “Third World” had become resonant with disparagement — state failure, corruption, violence. But this was a phenomenon of the 1980s, when the Third World Project had been, as I wrote, assassinated. From

the 1920s to the 1980s, the term referred to that immense struggle to produce an alternative interstate system. So the detonator sentence for that book — in fact the first sentence — ran, “The Third World is not a place, but a project.” In other words, the disparagement — which is about places in the world that had been reduced to penury and hopelessness — could not account for the political struggle — the project.

Finally, my most recent book — *The Death of the Nation and the Future of the Arab Revolution* — tells the story of Western intervention in West Asia and North Africa to shore up the West’s allies, such as Saudi Arabia, and to target its adversaries, such as secular nationalism (the Third World Project) and communism.

This use of massive violence by the West and its allies since Iraq in 1991 has destroyed states and seriously compromised Arab nationalism. A range of countries have been devastated — Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. The detonator sentence in that book is this — “It takes a hundred years to build a state; it can be destroyed in an afternoon.” I wanted the sentence to capture the massive violence as well as the cavalier destruction wrought to decades of social wealth.

This definition of the detonator sentence is so great because it brings an apolitical term from capitalist writing (the thesis statement) and politicizes it. This makes me wonder if one part of a socialist writing praxis could be about the creation of a new vocabulary, new keywords such as “detonator sentence.” And perhaps this ties in to what you’ve called “the problem with adjectives”?

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VP | As you know, Mark, writing instructors seem to have an allergy to adjectives. They say, with merit, that adjectives are clunky — they slow down the pace of the narrative.

But I make a different point with the adjective. I am interested in the words that have been emptied of their meaning. I asked the participants in the workshop to make lists of words that mean nothing. They came up with words like “sustainable,” “development,” and other such bureaucratic words — some adjectives (sustainable) and some nouns (development). These words — in the context of austerity — stand in for actual analysis and the creation of pathways to a future.

There are sentence generators on the web for “academic sentences” and “postcolonial sentences.” These are funny. We could equally have “NGO sentences” and “UN report sentences.” Such texts

are boring not because of their content but because of how they are written. The style of these texts is almost intended to prevent the reader from getting anything out of them. It's believed that just by publishing these manuals and reports they meet a certain standard of democracy. But what this kind of writing does is to turn people away from reading. Such writing is, therefore, antidemocratic.

Writing should be crisp, not for itself — because there is a new aestheticization of writing, a kind of writing for its own sake. I have many friends who say that V. S. Naipaul — forget his politics — is a great writer. I'm not keen on this kind of attitude.

Writing is a form of communication. The point of writing is to reach someone, to say something. What you say is relevant, of course. But I don't want to get dogmatic. I like to read people I might not agree with, certainly, and I can judge them by the basis of their ability to tell me what they think. This is not clarity, but precision. Is the writing precise? Why should writing be spare or precise? Because it must be able to evoke something in a reader. The reader should not have to run for cover because the author has fired off clichés — a fusillade of dead words. Writers must pay special attention to evoking something in the reader. Even texts on development should attempt to reach the heart of the readers — not to manipulate them, but to interest them.

It also means getting to the root of things. I've read many manuals on things like smokeless chimneys and waterless toilets. These manuals are written in earnest tones — beseeching the reader to understand that these are antidotes of the epidemic of women dying of lung diseases and the slumland dwellers dying of dysentery.

So burdened by the tone of earnestness, these texts don't ask the fundamental question — if you already have these devices, why are they not in houses around the world? Why not in Nepal, where women die of alarming rates from lung diseases? The answer would enliven the manuals — because these ideas, however meaningful, are not backed by power. They are powerless inventions. They are intended for the poor, who have no power. Texts of do-gooders, the world of development, are dull because they hide behind dead prose to deny the fundamental realities of the world.

That's my main point about the mode of writing — not a jeremiad against adjectives, as such, but more centrally, an assault on dead language to deaden ethics.

We've been talking a lot about socialist writing, but might there be a similar classification of socialist reading? Or perhaps there's also an area of socialist

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publishing?

VP | I don't really have a sense of the contours of socialist reading. But I have given a great deal of thought to socialist publishing. For almost two years, I've worked as the chief editor at LeftWord Books, based in New Delhi and formed in 1999.

One of the reasons for its emergence was the demise of Soviet book publishing. We had relied upon publishing houses such as Progress Publishers and Foreign Language Press (Beijing). The former, of course, closed down with the breakup of the Soviet Union, while the latter has slowed down on its publication of the kinds of books needed in India.

In the old Progress books, there used to be a note that I used to find most encouraging. It was called 'Request to Readers' and it asked if the readers had any opinions on the book itself, its translation, and its design. If you had comments, it asked for you to write to them at their fabled address on Zubovsky Boulevard. This was the same road that had the press union, the ministry of foreign affairs, and so on. This was an invitation to its readers. What I understood from this invitation, is that Progress Publishers wanted to build a community of readers. It did not take its community for granted, and viewed it as an active readership rather than the market-produced community buying books as commodities.

We want LeftWord to be a socialist publisher like that — building our community, hearing from our community, responding to our community by producing books that our community thinks would be useful as we struggle together to change the world.

For instance, we are publishing the history of communism and radicalism. This is a political decision. We believe that bourgeois historiography is writing out the communists and the radicals from its history books. This has two impacts: first, it is false, because it denies the role played by communists and undermines the tradition to which we belong today; second, because it puts out the view that struggle in the past took place merely spontaneously, so that there is no need to prepare for the struggle. This erasure of communism is being contested by us by publication of histories of communist struggles, by our edited series *Communist Histories* (part one is out) and by our project for the *Encyclopedia of Indian Communism*.

Third, we are interested in publishing interventions in Indian and world politics. These are short books that a reader could tackle in a day. Fourthly, we publish a few weighty books a year, books that our readers would like to sit with over time, discuss with their friends, build reading groups

around. Our readers want to build their own communities around books. We want to give them the opportunity to do so.

I have one final question. This week, I'm teaching George Orwell's "Why I Write." To answer this "why" question, Orwell divides the motivation into four categories: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose.

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And while I like those, I also like the categories mentioned by Arundhati Roy in her Occupy speech ("Speech to a People's University"), which has recently reprinted in *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*. Roy tells the Occupy movement that Occupy has done three important things: introduced "a new imagination," introduced "a new political language into the heart of empire," and re-introduced "the right to dream into a system that tried to turn everyone into zombies." What to you might be similar categories to those of Orwell and Roy for socialist writing?

VP | To be honest with you, I haven't read Orwell's essay. I have, on the other hand, read Arundhati's speech. It is very powerful, as are her other essays.

I think socialist writing has an important and very difficult challenge. One of the things that has become clear to me is that once human beings surrender to the present, the idea of the future wears thin. There is only a present. The present stretches on into infinity. When we say tomorrow, we mean only tomorrow in time, but not in epochal terms. Tomorrow will look like today. The sensation of an endless present greets us each day. Change is never going to come.

That feeling — of futility — is the greatest detriment to the socialist imagination. Socialist writing, to my mind, has to help break that fatalism and create what Arundhati Roy calls "a new imagination" — an imagination of a different kind of world, with different priorities and different sensibilities.

How to produce this kind of writing is not easy. Not easy in particular in our times. There are struggles all around us but there is a sense — underneath them all — of great despair.

In 1966, Che Guevara quoted José Martí — "Now is the time of furnaces and only light should be seen." It is a beautiful, lyrical line. But what does it mean? Does it mean this is the time of action? Or does it mean that the heat of action is one thing, but the light of clarity is another? That in this hour of action, only the clearest thoughts should be propagated? I believe that he meant the latter.

In our times, action occurs — over a hundred million workers go on strike in India on September 2, 2016, while millions of students from South Africa to Chile fight against fee hikes. There is struggle, which a socialist must write about. There is also the reason why these struggles cannot easily produce a better future, and it is these tentacles of power that a socialist must illuminate. There is also, further, the police and war, the repression that holds down the despair and the protests, and it is this too what the socialist must write about.

But more than anything else, the socialist should not write in a register of anguish or even merely anger. For gloom and doom does not help clarify the future, the possibility of the future.

I've been saying that the time of the present is over, and that the time of the future is at hand. What this means is not that we are on the threshold of a breakthrough, but that the managers of our world order are not capable of solving our problems. That means that the present has no solutions for us. We need to seek our solutions from the future, from a different way of ordering our needs and our luxuries, our excesses and our scarcities.

We don't need texts of frustration and rage, but texts that suggest inevitability, the idea that we have in our marrow that this present of ours is simply not able to deal with our problems of inequality, climate catastrophes, war and so on, and that we not only need an alternative but that in our struggles an alternative is at hand. In other words, the time of the future exists in our struggles. Our writing has to capture that sensation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vijay Prashad's *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* is now out in paperback from Verso Books.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

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