

Committed to the End Michael Sprinker: 1950-1999

By Alan Wald



Michael Sprinker

The sad and premature death of our beloved friend and comrade Michael Sprinker leaves a haunting vacuum in U.S. left-wing intellectual life. Anyone involved in Marxist literary circles during the 1980's and 1990's would have encountered this indefatigable powerhouse of crisp, incisive thinking and unshakeable commitment to the advancement of socialist culture.

In my own case, I was fortunate enough to develop a relationship with Michael around political and publishing projects in 1986, which was unbroken through the last time I saw him, at the Marxist Literary Group Institute in Chicago in June of 1999.

John Michael Sprinker was born February 8, 1950 to a conservative Catholic family in Elgin, Illinois, a small town in the center of the state. His father worked as a bill collector, and Michael's siblings included three sisters and a severely retarded brother.

Emerging from this politically backward and racist milieu, Michael attended Northwestern University, where he graduated with a BA in Philosophy in 1972. He next went to Princeton University where he received a PH.D. in English in 1975, an astonishing rate of progress.

That same year he began teaching at Oregon State University in Corvallis, where he was tenured after only four years. His first book, *"Counterpoint of Dissonance" The Aesthetics and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1980, and in 1984 he was hired by the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Shortly after the publication of *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism* (Verso 1987), Michael was promoted to full professor, and a few years later became Director of Graduate Studies in Comparative Literature. His last published book was *History and Ideology in Proust: "A la recherché du temps perdu" and the Third French Republic* (Cambridge 1994).

While a Princeton graduate student, Michael was enamored of Deconstructionist literary theory, associated with the French scholars Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. By the time he began teaching in Oregon, however, he also regarded himself as an "armchair anarchist."

Then in the early 1980's he was propelled into action by the Reagan administration's reactionary policies. Michael and his close friend Fred Pfeil (himself an astute critic of mass culture and a fine short story writer) became young faculty activists in the New American Movement, a socialist-feminist group that traced its roots back to SDS but later merged with Democratic Socialists of America.

Michael would sometimes say that he became a Marxist by reading Marx, but Fred also remembers a constant flurry of demonstrations, study groups, posterings, leaflettings, and coalition-building. Moreover, as a teenager working his way through high school and college, Michael was employed in factories and held other jobs that fueled his resentment against the elite.

In particular, he had served as a caddy at a local country club, and in revolt against his observations of class discrimination, singlemindedly learned to play the game in order to beat the rich kids.

At the same time as Michael's political commitment crystallized, he also launched his career in publishing and editing, starting with his coeditorship of the Marxist journal *minnesota review*. In 1982-83 he took a research leave in England to spend time at the British Museum reading Marx and Marxist theory.

In Oregon he had already begun to purchase titles from New Left Books, and now he took advantage of his situation to make connections with the editors of the publishing house and *New Left Review*. When he started teaching at Stony Brook in January 1984,

he also started a part-time job at NLB/Verso and would take the train into New York City every Friday to carry out his duties.

Scholar and Activist

By the mid-1980's Michael was established as one of the foremost Althusserian Marxists in the United States. He wrote on an enormous range of topics. This included figures like Paul de Man, Theodor Adorno, V.S. Naipaul, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jurgen Habermas, Roy Bhaskar, Ernst Bloch, Richard Rorty and Perry Anderson; and problems such as "The National Question," "The Legacies of Althusser," "History and Ideology," "The Commitment to Socialism," "Deconstruction in America," and "The Use and Abuse of Foucault."

Michael's essays and reviews appeared in the leading mainstream as well as radical scholarly journals. The former included *Studies in Romanticism*, *Diacritics*, *boundary 2*, *Humanities in Society*, *Salmagundi*, *Comparative Literature*, *Yale French Studies*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Victorian Studies*, and *Poetics Today*; the latter were most frequently *New Left Review*, *minnesota review*, *Radical History Review*, *Social Text*, and *Against the Current*.

Occasionally he reached a greater public through articles in the *London Times Literary Supplement* and the *New Statesman*.

Michael, however, was something of a rarity for his generation in that he responded to the new wave of post-Marxist thinking in the 1980's and later, out right political disillusionment of many radical academics after the collapse of the USSR in 1989, by more strongly affirming his revolutionary socialist identity and committing himself to the project of collective self-emancipation.

He was a founding member of Solidarity in 1986, and aggressively identified himself with the organization for the rest of his life. His most noteworthy political achievements, however, were connected with Verso publishers and its Haymarket series, which he brilliantly co-edited with Mike Davis. With Davis he assembled two fine collections, *Reshaping the U.S. Left* (1998) and *The Fire in the Hearth* (1990), and issued extraordinary contributions to U.S. Left history and culture such as *The Wages of Whiteness*, *The Invention of Whiteness*, *The Cultural Front*, and *They Must be Represented*.

Sprinker additionally had an interest in debates about postcolonial theory, especially in regard to South Asia; he personally brought out important books by Benita Parry and Aijaz Ahmad. With his colleague E. Ann Kaplan, he issued the collections *Crosscurrents* (Verso, 1990) *The Althusserian Legacy* (Verso, 1993), and *Late Imperial Culture* (Verso, 1995).

Other anthologies that he assembled were *Edward Said: A Critical Reader* (Blackwell, 1993) and *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's "Spectres of Marx"*

(Verso, 1999).

Beyond this, there was Michael's "personality aura." Thoroughly steeped in classical Marxism, he nevertheless remained an astute critic from a contemporary Althusserian point of view (and with residual sympathies for aspects of Deconstruction theory). Anyone who attended meetings of the Marxist Literary Group Institute will recall that Michael was simply unparalleled in his ability to intervene in the most recondite debates by using crystal-clear arguments and razor-sharp insights.

A literary scholar of impeccable credentials, Michael also followed a wide range of discussions in economics, philosophy, history, and political theory. He could always be counted on to liven up a discussion no matter who the speaker might be, or how remote the topic from his own primary areas of publication.

It is true that in discussions, following public lectures, Michael would often give the speaker, including genuine comrades, what he freely acknowledged was "a hard time." But it would only take two minutes of talking to Mike afterwards to realize that it was all meant in good spirit, in the interest of a lively exchange, and that there was not the slightest malice, spite or envy involved.

In the fall of 1991, Michael was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. At that point he became determined to wage war against the disease. While he no doubt had to give up some of his activities, it was difficult to tell this from the outside.

With his devoted companion, post-colonial scholar Modhumita Roy, he remained a fixture at Marxist Literary Group gatherings, most recently teaching well-attended classes on key texts from Marx, and making plans to strengthen the organization for the future.

In recent months he was completing another treatise on Marxist aesthetic, a section of which will appear in *New left Review*.

Moreover, Michael, continued to "fight the good fight" against racism, Eurocentrism, and union busting in academe, which frequently put him at odds with some of the Stony Brook faculty and administration, who took their revenge on him by withdrawing their job offer to Dr. Roy during the last months of Michael's life.

This ugly controversy, which caused Michael to make a public announcement of his intention to resign from the department, was reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in the spring of 1999, with the result that letters of outrage in regard to the treatment of Dr. Roy poured in from around the country.

Moreover, when it was discovered that Michael had won the "President's Award in Teaching" for 1998-99 from Stony Brook, he refused to accept it as a demonstration of his disgust with the unethical behavior of the President in rescinding (and subsequently making deceptive statements about) the job offer to Dr. Roy. (Michael also received a second "Excellence in Teaching" award, from the Chancellor, which he accepted.)

Then, on August 12, Michael, age forty-nine, died of a massive coronary. Indeed, in the end, he had fought off the cancer, but the stress on his body and the powerful medications he had to take to mitigate the effects of a bone graft had weakened his heart.

I would guess that in thinking of Michael at this sad moment, many of us will especially recall, with regret, that we never really thanked him enough for the unceasing stream of critical feedback he always gave us in regard to our own work--the incredibly generous support he spontaneously offered to faculty members, graduate students, any and all cultural workers, without making distinctions of "rank" status.

But Michael also bequeathed us a truly precious group of his own books and essays. So I hope that there will come another time, perhaps a year or so from now, when those of us who knew and loved Michael as a fellow revolutionary Marxist will be in a situation to step back from our strong emotions of this terribly painful moment.

Then, perhaps, in the form of a conference, symposium, or some other venue, we might finally give those arduous literary labors of Michael their due from the rigorously scientific perspective that he championed. This would hardly repay all that Michael gave to us, but it would be a gesture toward ensuring that the legacy of this committed Marxist intellectual continues to live.

Editors' note: This essay originally appeared in *Against the Current*, and is reprinted here by permission of the publisher.