

Michael Sprinker Remembered

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Michael Sprinker

It's difficult to know how to mourn the death of Michael Sprinker, because mourning is an activity of which Michael almost surely would have disapproved. It still seems unthinkable that I won't eventually hear him gently chiding me with his uniquely pointed form of materialism for losing sight of the larger, political questions that really matter to us all, during and after our lifetimes.

But here is one remembrance of him that I think he would have tolerated with relative patience. It concerns a long afternoon we spent, I think in 1994 or 95, in the Café Algiers in Harvard Square. I had given Michael a long essay of mine on Althusser, aggressively critical of the latter. He had read it and suggested we meet to talk it over further. At this point my friendship with Michael was still relatively new, and I walked over to Café Algiers with the sense that I was the proverbial hen that had invited the fox over for dinner, i.e., in for the polemic of my life.

I was not disappointed. However, what resulted after four hours or so of friendly but relentless argument was unexpected: we found that between ourselves we agreed on

virtually everything EXCEPT whether Althusser himself could properly claim to be in agreement with US. I still think not, and I know that Michael was always ready at a moment's notice to argue otherwise.

I reflect back on this, not only because it proves that I could withstand the ultimate acid test of Michael Sprinker's critical intelligence and come out still feeling as though I had half a wit or two, but because of how it reflects, more accurately, on Michael's almost legendary combativeness. Michael WAS combative--and thank goodness for it. But the fighting spirit was in strict, beautifully dialectical union with generosity and with what might almost be called a faculty of intellectual affection.

If one needed any proof of these qualities, I could provide it many times over. Pace Althusser, Michael helped me in innumerable ways in the following years -- to write, to publish, to think, and to deal with my own minor brush with serious illness. He had become, for me, an implicit reader and interlocutor long before I -- before we -- were to lose the unmistakable sound of his voice. And so he is now too -- unmistakably, and unforgettably.