

Sol Yurick (1925-2013)

by Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis

Sol Yurick, one of the last great men of the WWII generation of Leftist American writers, is dead. He died on January 5, a few weeks after being diagnosed with lung cancer.

His death is an immense loss for us, as Sol belonged to that rare breed of people whose mind is always in the midst of a creative process, always making connections, discovering meanings, creating worlds. He was also a great political comrade, though he would not have been enthusiastic perhaps about our labeling him so.

We met Sol in 1979 at a time when we were rallying support for CARI, the Committee Against Repression in Italy, which we formed to counter the attack on the extra-parliamentary movement the Italian government launched in April 7, 1979, which led to mass arrests and a series of infamous accusations against people later found completely innocent. Sol had lived through the McCarthy period and he immediately gave support to our campaign, one of a handful among New York radicals who were not impressed by the Communist Party cooperation with the Italian government in the repression. There, in those first meetings, began a friendship and on our side a love and admiration that has continued through the more than thirty years that we have known each other.

It is hard now to imagine that we will not hear any more his voice except through his books and we will not sit at his table as we have done so many times, and engage in one of those conversations that would take us from the Talmud to Chinese history with many digressions into contemporary politics and reminiscences from his personal and political past.

Sol was an incredible reader and, more than anyone we know, not only tried to learn as much as possible about the natural and social universe in which he lived, but tried to make sense of it, tried to see how everything is connected, with a grandiose imagination and at the same time a keen and ironic eye for the complexities of human psychology. It was always a pleasure to see him laugh at the end of a tale unmasking some trick by which humans or gods had managed to get their ways, or demonstrating the continuity between old and new forms of oppression.

His sense of the historical continuity of past and present came to life in a comedy he wrote in the early '90s for a book Silvia edited -*Enduring Western Civilization* (1995)- where he interpreted the Oedipus myth in contemporary terms making it a tale of the manipulations of Delphi's bankers whose behavior is patterned on that of a CIA-type of "covert operation." Also his most famous novel, translated into many languages and turned into a movie that has since become a cult classic -*The Warriors*- mobilizes our historical imagination, patterning the one-night exploits of a NYC street gang on the travails of ancient Greek soldiers in the Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

Born in 1925 in a Jewish working class communist community in the Bronx (NY), Sol was politicized from his childhood, so much so he would say that by 14 he had finished with communism on account of the Hitler Stalin Pact. He had not finished with class politics, however, and as a writer he was able to give voice to some of the most important political issues of his time, in the best tradition of America radical literature.

After giving the New York gangs the dignity of political subjects, in *Fertig* (1966), his second novel, Sol took on the brand of existentialism at the time promoted by the literati of the Cold War, best exemplified by Camus' *The Stranger* of which *Fertig*- the story of a man who kills a hospital's medical personnel who let his child die- is a counterpoint. Again in *Someone Just Like You* (1972) he gave a scathing account of the welfare system in the United States, in which he had worked for several years before becoming a fulltime writer.

But his most politically timely novel was *The Bag* (1968) that has been credited with anticipating the 1968 students' occupation of Columbia University. By this time Yurick was very politically active in the anti-war movement and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and the novel takes us into the world of rising left activism and Puerto Rican mobilization, even imagining a student attack on some of Columbia University's labs. In 1968, Sol was one of the signatories to the "Writers and Editors War Tax Protest" pledge, that announced their refusal to pay taxes in protest against the Vietnam War.

In his later works, always attuned to the changing character of the political struggle, Sol looked instead at the effects and meaning of cyber technology on class rule. *Richard A*, his last published fiction work again anticipated by a number of years the cyber-punk genre, imagining how the class struggle is transformed in a world of computers and speed-of-light information transmission. The use of cyber/electronic technology to consolidate ruling class power is also the topic of *Behold Metatron, the Recording Angel* (1985), a bold, anticipatory vision of a world in which through galactic flows of information the capitalist class seeks to immortalize itself.

At the time of his death Sol was working on a voluminous manuscript that mixed art, politics, science in the attempt to construct a unified, multidimensional vision of our planetary experience, a project he had begun years ago in a yet unpublished work called *Burning the American Bank*.

In acknowledging how Sol has expanded our political imagination and the example he has given us of courage, integrity and commitment to social justice, we deeply mourn his death but celebrate his rich life.

Sol Yurick's works include: *The Warriors* (1965), *Fertig* (1966), *The Bag* (1968), *Someone Just Like You* (1972), *An Island Death* (1976), *Richard A* (1981), *Behold Metatron, the Recording Angel* (1985).