In Memoriam

JOHN L. STANLEY
1937-1998
Department of Political Science

With the death of John Langley Stanley in February of 1998, U.C. Riverside and the entire scholarly world lost a brilliant teacher of political philosophy and an internationally respected scholar. To his wife, Charlotte, and their three children, Andrea, John (Jay) and Margo, the loss of the deeply loving and equally beloved father and husband cannot be measured. In an important way John Stanley lived deep within his family and they with him.

John’s students delivered their own message about the loss of this superb teacher in the form of a surprising number of letters and telephone and e-mail messages to the Political Science department. The gist of the collective expression was that John was one of the best or the best teacher any of them had ever encountered. But those of us in Political Science already knew that as we had been hearing it from students for three decades in both face to face encounters and in the mass from their “comments” on the course evaluation forms. In the corridors of Watkins Hall, Stanley was a striking and unforgettable physical presence for three decades and more. Partly this was due to his restless vitality but mostly due to his resonant voice articulating a flawless American English. For many of us it is hard to live with the thought of not hearing him again in the corridors or at meetings.

John L. Stanley was born in Boston, Massachusetts in November, 1937 and spent his early years in Newton, Mass. His family moved to Rye, N.Y. where he was educated in the public schools. He matriculated at Kenyon College in Ohio in 1956 and graduated with honors in Political Science four years later. Stanley enjoyed a year at Selwyn College, Cambridge, where he studied modern European history. In 1961 he enrolled in the doctoral program of the Government Department at Cornell University, after being awarded a prestigious Woodrow Wilson Fellowship. There he concentrated on political theory, particularly the intellectual contributions of Georges Sorel.

In the fifties and sixties, Sorel’s reputation was at its nadir. Cursed as an apostle of violence or a precursor of fascism (Sartre labeled his works “fascist utterances”), or as an advocate of elitism as well as having been dismissed by Lenin as a “professor of confusion,” Sorel appeared to be ready for the dustbin of history. John Stanley saved him from this fate. While still in graduate school and before arriving at UCR in 1965, Stanley, with the collaboration of his wife, Charlotte, began a translation of Sorel’s The Illusions of Progress. That translation was published in 1969 to a warm critical welcome. The work included an extended introduction by John and with that publication we can say that the modern study of Sorel began. John’s project was not to rehabilitate Sorel, although some rehabilitation was accomplished by the time he had finished writing about Sorel. Rather, John wanted to make a thorough and analytical investigation of the corpus of Sorel’s works.
He showed Sorel’s work to be nuanced and learned, though not popular in an age in love with the doctrine of progress. In *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy*, (a compilation of selections of Sorel’s works) translated by John and Charlotte with an introduction by John, he continued his serious close examination of Sorel and along the way convincingly shattered the notion that Sorel was a “precursor” of fascism or a reactionary authoritarian. His masterwork on Sorel was, *The Sociology of Virtue: The Political and Social Theories of Georges Sorel*, published in 1981. That established John’s reputation as arguably the world’s leading authority on Sorel. Two other translations followed, including a work that Sorel wrote in Italian, and to accomplish this John learned Italian. His last Sorel book, published in 1990, was *From Georges Sorel vol. 2: Hermeneutics and the Sciences* in which he presented and analyzed Sorel’s writings on interpretive problems in religion, art, science and political theory.

There are few testable hypotheses in political theory, yet John was always alert to the possibility of finding counter-examples to his own beliefs as well as the assertions of others. A memorable example was his response to Hannah Arendt, who had proposed that totalitarianism was an invention of the twentieth century. In an article (1987) in *The Review of Politics* John pointed out features of Shaka’s rule of the Zulu empire in the early nineteenth century that corresponded to Arendt’s definition of totalitarianism. To look beyond the traditional domains of Europe and Asia was typical of the originality and compass of John’s thought.

With the same intellectual courage and insight that led him to Sorel, John, acting on Hegel’s dictum that “the owl of Minerva rises at dusk,” turned his attention to Marx, specifically challenging the stance of a group of “Western Marxists” who were attempting to present “Marxism with a human face,” dissociating him from Engels and “scientific determinism.” John would have none of this, and proceeded, in a series of five articles in scholarly journals, to delve into the early Marx, Marx’s critique of Hegel and his relation to Engels’ dialectics of nature. Along the way he demonstrated his originality and changed the views on Marx of more than a few scholars. He was well into writing a comprehensive work on “Marx’s View of Nature” when, alas for the world of Marx scholarship, as well as for all of us who knew him, his last illness took him with shocking suddenness.

Turning to his teaching, John had a larger than life persona in the classroom. He was a blithe spirit, full of buoyancy and vitality. He had a fine speaking voice that he inherited from his father, who had migrated to this country from England and become a successful radio actor, succeeding Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes on the Mutual Broadcasting Network. John was a man of multiple gifts, and the most striking was his skill as a lecturer. He was an exemplary lecturer in political philosophy and theory, classes that drew large crowds. His lectures combined wit, vast learning in classical, medieval and modern political theory, love of his subject and theatricality. He was able to hold student interest while discussing abstruse and unfamiliar themes. Young Americans live and breathe individualism, and John had to introduce them to cultures where individualism scarcely existed as a concept. His students frequently commented on the difficulty of the subject as they were taken through theory “from Plato to NATO,” as he called his year-long series of political theory courses. He drew large crowds despite the difficulty students had understanding Hegel and Marx and despite John’s fairly tough grading.
He was as much at home in the graduate seminar as in the lecture hall. Again the subject matter was difficult, but many were so attached to John that they went on to do their dissertations under his direction. He was invariably generous with his time and attention. Those of us who shared the hallway with him over the years had the common experience of knocking on his door long after five PM, hoping for a brief word and finding him deep in discussion with a thesis student. “Later, dear boy!” he would call and turn again to the student. He enjoyed being a dissertation director. He would survey language, grammar, punctuation and figures of speech, as well as substance and statistics. However, he was not a controller, even if the student wanted him to be one. His students wrote about Arendt, Ellul, Aron and Sartre among others.

In this age of grade inflation, John Stanley was a pillar of tradition and rectitude. It was extremely difficult to get an “A” in his courses. The “D” and “F” were not dead letters in his grading system. He always assigned term papers, even in the larger courses and never gave “objective” exams. His rule was that he would read something by every student, no matter how many T.A.’s there were to assist him and every student was required to speak to him personally about the choice of a subject for the paper. He had learned the importance of a direct relationship with students at Cornell, where he studied with Mario Einaudi and Andrew Hacker. Both were great teachers renowned for the amount of time they gave to their students’ work. John hoped that word of his success would filter back to Ithaca, and some of us who knew them made sure they were aware of John’s accomplishments as a teacher and scholar. They were not surprised.

John’s breadth and charm inspired enduring friendships across the spectrum of the campus, from his colleagues in Mathematics and the sciences to those in the fine arts. He was an academic type who, alas, is becoming an endangered species in the Humanities and Social Sciences: a “triple threat.” He could teach brilliantly, publish frequently and do service for the campus enthusiastically; and all at the same time. His speeches at Senate meetings were memorable for their wit and substance. He served on CAP (as chair during his third year) on which his high but fair standards, no doubt, found a receptive audience. The last two years of his life were spent representing the University of California as its associate director of the British study center in London. Here, he showed a fourth talent; one that few would have predicted - as an administrator. He brought light, wit, and an evergreen charm to our lives. We miss him.

Francis Carney
Kenneth Barkin
Thomas Morton