

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on October 1, 2019, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Nicolau Sevcenko was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

NICOLAU SEVCENKO

BORN: December 7, 1952

DIED: August 13, 2014

Nicolau Sevcenko, Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures, was one of Brazil's foremost urban and cultural historians. Born in the Brazilian state of São Paulo to Ukrainian refugees in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, by fifteen years of age Nicolau already spoke English fluently (thanks to self-instruction in order to understand the Beatles), signaling the beginning of a cosmopolitan, outward-looking vision that would define his teaching and scholarship. As an adolescent Nicolau loved handball, but a natural aptitude for study and a capacious inquisitiveness brought him into contact with teachers in his university years who would exercise an enormous influence on him before some of those professors were exiled by the military dictatorship. Nicolau shared his learning and his ideas freely with many (for example, he once delivered a talk to gravediggers on the meaning of death throughout history).

Nicolau earned his doctorate at the University of São Paulo in 1981. After teaching at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and Unicamp, he became a professor of history at the University of São Paulo in 1985. Two years earlier he had published *Literatura como missão (Literature as Mission)*. This book is at once a panorama of scientific, cultural, and social transformations during Brazil's First Republic (established in 1889) and a probing study of how two seminal authors envisioned a society capable of confronting the country's legacies of slavery and deeply embedded inequities. That was a vision that Nicolau shared and that shaped his career. In 1984 he published *A revolta da vacina (The Vaccine Rebellion)* on riots in 1904 in Rio de Janeiro, nominally against a vaccination campaign. Rigorously researched and overflowing with compassion, the book showed how the movement was a reaction against a set of authoritarian urban reforms and policy measures that hurt the poor. Written in accessible, vibrant language, it too became a landmark in Brazilian scholarship and continues to find readers far and wide. This popularity mirrored the trajectory of *O Renascimento (The Renaissance, 1984)*, his introduction to the visual arts during the Renaissance, which has also seen dozens of editions.

Sevcenko did postdoctoral work at the University of London where he shared an office with Eric Hobsbawm and worked on *Orfeu extático na metrópole* (*Orpheus Ecstatic in the Metropolis*, 1992). Thanks to this remarkable book, we can better comprehend vanguard movements and their relationships to broader contexts, such as the emergence of new technologies and booming urbanization. These interests would carry over to *A corrida para o século XXI* (*The Race to the 21st Century*, 2001), a lucid and haunting reflection on the impact of accelerating technological innovations, touching on the excitement of new creative possibilities as much as on growing inequalities and the threats of environmental crises. In addition to writing these single-authored books, throughout the 1990s and 2000s Sevcenko edited collections and published illuminating articles and essays on topics from the millenarian traditions of rural Brazil to the iconography of gardens.

From 1992 to 1998, Nicolau was founding editor of *Travesía*, now the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*. During that period, he was a regular visiting professor at King's College London and also held visiting professorships at Georgetown University and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Nicolau began his affiliation with Harvard as Visiting Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures each spring from 2005 to 2008 and joined the faculty permanently in 2009.

Nicolau Sevcenko was both an academic and public intellectual. He wrote articles for such mainstream press outlets as *CartaCapital* and the *Folha de São Paulo* and participated in public debates. His view about the exchange of ideas was radically democratic. During a violent takeover of the Department of History at the University of São Paulo in the mid-1990s, Nicolau was called in as a negotiator since the police would not enter campus. Nicolau's pacifist demeanor and diplomatic skills resolved the crisis amicably and quickly.

Once at Harvard, Nicolau continued to forge deep and lasting intellectual relationships and friendships with his students and colleagues. In the classroom, Nicolau's dazzling erudition was never intimidating and always at the service of opening up lines of inquiry. In his lectures, Nicolau, a masterful storyteller, might open with the social life of ants and end with Alan Turing and cybernetics or lead us from Zoroastrianism to the London punk scene, in the process illuminating a particular artwork. His unorthodox, idiosyncratic style foregrounded the sense of intellectual adventure that can enrich a liberal arts education—and indeed, human experience. Drawing on a powerful imagination and unusual ability to make connections, Sevcenko reminded us of the possibilities that strict specialization sometimes forecloses. Nicolau had high standards, but he rejected a fixation with productivity and an emphasis on criteria relating to clockwork results. Animating his intellectual project was the idea that we deserve better—that we are capable of doing better and should not accept a world rife with injustice, exploitation, and abuse. Nicolau's scholarship acted against the sometimes insular tendencies of Brazilian Studies, opening up horizons—and, moreover, recovering horizons from the past, unbounded by the confines and trappings of nationalism and the modern ideologies of development at any cost. In a

television appearance in 2001, after he provided a dense and intricate response detailing contemporary challenges, the interviewer shot back, “Besides suicide, what do you recommend?” Nicolau laughed and with a warm smile responded, “Just the opposite! [It’s about] acting out of a love of life, love of humans, and trying to fight against processes that try to place other values before humans and nature. . . . That’s what we are born for, to pursue happiness and to live harmoniously with nature. . . . That’s what we all carry with us from the cradle.” Nicolau’s integrity, brilliance, and love of life touched many who crossed his path and remain an inspiration.

Nicolau Sevckenko died on August 13, 2014, in São Paulo, Brazil. He is survived by his wife, Cristina Carletti, and generations of grateful students and colleagues.

Respectfully submitted,

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