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Eli Sagan, *Citizens & Cannibals: The French Revolution, the Struggle for Modernity, and the Origins of Ideological Terror*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. xii + 640 pp. Notes. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7425-0831-5.

Review by Jeff Horn, Manhattan College.

Sagan's basic subject here is "the psychological origins of human evil"—a topic all his six books explore (p. 476).^[1] His fundamental goal is theoretical. Relying heavily on concepts borrowed from "social evolutionary theory" (p. 2), Sagan explains that "the primary 'engine of Modernity' is the deep, powerful, psychological drive toward separation, individuation, autonomy, and a morally transforming individualism" (p. 192). An essential element of the "powerful and compelling moral thrust in the evolution toward Modernity" (p. 64) is the emergence of a "stable democratic society" (p. 77). In this and other works, Sagan argues that the individualism implicit in "Modernity" causes extreme psychological anxiety leading to a "paranoid position" (p. 77). This sort of "borderline" condition can lead to "psychic and social regression" (p. 535) and this regression to "cannibalism" since "human sacrifice was the time-honored ritual in such situations of intense anxiety" (p. 223). For Sagan, the tragic failure of the men who made the French Revolution is that they could not overcome their paranoid positions and psychically regressed to a primitive state where it was possible for them to develop and utilize an "ideological form of Terror" against their perceived and genuine opponents. Thus, in Sagan's developmental framework for social evolution, the French Revolution functions as a negative example of what can happen as societies become "Modern." This example is "worse" than other instances of regression into cannibalism because the situation displayed all the other attributes of modernity and some of the revolutionaries, most notably Maximilien Robespierre, were men of "moral genius."

This complex argument about the "necessary nature of human social action" relies on Sagan's iconoclastic interpretation of the works of social and psychological theorists ranging from contemporaries such as Richard Hofstadter, Robert Bellah, and Otto Kernberg to Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx.^[2] Sagan also makes extensive use of such nineteenth-century commentaries on the French Revolution as those of Edgar Quinet, Georg Hegel, and particularly Alexis de Tocqueville. Sagan's understanding of the era and meaning of the French Revolution is heavily dependent on the revisionist interpretation with special emphasis on François Furet. In preparation for his project, Sagan also personally consulted an impressive roster of historians of France (p. xii). Sagan's selection of theorists and generally English-language secondary sources is important since this lengthy work makes significant use of only one primary source, Robespierre's *Textes choisis*.^[3]

This case study for Sagan's theories is explored in twenty-four chapters divided into four parts. "The Great Struggle for Modernity" sets out some of Sagan's theoretical premises. He devotes two chapters to the triumph of liberalism, three to the possibilities and limitations of democratic citizenship, and four to what could be termed responses to the potential for democracy: capitalism; individualism; nationalism; and rationalization. The second section is entitled "The Possible Outcomes of the Struggle for Modernity." The three chapters of this section are devoted to anarchy, the need for greater public authority and civilian control over the military. A strong undercurrent of these chapters is how the

threat of social unrest hinders the onset of modernity. The third and most theoretically-based part, "Modernity Psychosis: The Great Terror," investigates themes such as paranoia (two chapters), "the Great Promise and the Great Anxiety of Modernity," and the psychological implications of this anxiety (three chapters). The final two chapters of Part III focus on the significance of Terror and how one man—Maximilien Robespierre—embodies both the promise and debacle of modernity. Part IV, "Social Evolution," links the theoretical issues raised and then applied to revolutionary France to the outbreak of other ideological terrors, particularly in the USSR but also in the contemporary world.

Having attempted to set out the main arguments and organization of Sagan's book as objectively as I can, it is time to move to a more critical perspective. This is not fundamentally a work of history. Rather this is a book that uses historical treatments of the era of the French Revolution to illustrate a series of theoretical concepts. In this long and repetitive book, Sagan is as likely to cite examples from Russia/U.S.S.R., characters from Shakespeare, contemporary events in Zaire/Congo, situations from ancient Greece, or his personal experience watching his grandchildren grow up as make a reference to revolutionary France. However, since the reader's ability to evaluate the utility and applicability of these ideas is filtered by Sagan's evocation of the historical past, his methodology, sources, and interpretation require comment.

In historiographical terms, Sagan has adopted the perspective on the inevitability of violence in the French Revolution associated with a line of interpretation stretching from Edmund Burke to J.L. Talmon before reaching its contemporary version with Furet and the revisionists.[4] Indeed, Sagan has enlarged and extended the problematic by arguing that the source of this inevitability was not revolutionary rhetoric or discourse, as most revisionists suggest, but human nature itself. Like Furet, Sagan seems to be quite familiar with the work of Marx and Engels, and particularly in his chapter "Bourgeois Life and Capitalism." But Sagan rejects and in some places distorts their ideas on the nature of social evolution, particularly with regard to the essential link between class position and relationship to the means of production. The determinism that underlies much of Furet's analysis of the Terror is taken to an extreme by Sagan with statements such as "The drive toward individualism has an autonomy, independent of rational real-world considerations" (p. 200). To restate in a more limited form the historiographical point at stake, a conservative dictatorship was not the only possible outcome of the French Revolution. Sagan's attempt to argue for an inevitable and universal human reaction to certain situations ignores the very real possibility that events might have worked out differently.

Sagan's analysis is also flawed with regard to his secondary sources. Going beyond my objection to the book's almost complete lack of primary sources, I would argue that Sagan has not read broadly or deeply enough about the period, particularly in French, to make the kind of wide-ranging and significant arguments that he wishes to make. For example, when discussing the relationship between the revolutionary government and the Roman Catholic Church, Sagan does not cite Michel Vovelle's important but contradictory view that illustrates the widespread and long-lasting resistance to all attempts to undermine the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in eighteenth-century France.[5] Even more problematically, Sagan has not read J.G.A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment*, which would provide him with a framework to link republican Rome, the Italian city-states of the Renaissance, and seventeenth century England—all of which loom in this account as important evidence of Sagan's arguments about the evolution of democratic citizenship and modernity and the unique "cannibalistic" aspect of the French case.[6] Sagan even ignores the obvious precursor for an explanation of revolutionary behavior based on an analysis derived from clinical psychology, Crane Brinton's *The Anatomy of Revolution*. [7]

Sagan also does not appear to have read thoroughly the secondary sources on the subjects of interest to him. Two examples stand out. During a discussion of Puritanism, Sagan ignores the devastating consequences of Dale Van Kley's corpus of work on Jansenism for his interpretation of French religious conceptions.[8] The second example is far more egregious and willful. It is vital to Sagan's

psychological argument that Robespierre be understood as a “modern ideological dictator” comparable to “Lenin, Mao and Pol Pot” (p. 492). For Sagan, “Robespierre was no reluctant dictator: he took to it as if destined for that position” (p. 494). Yet this is not the view of historians such as R.R. Palmer and David P. Jordan whom Sagan cites concerning the political and administrative position of Robespierre.[9] The methodology employed in Sagan’s evocation of Robespierre belongs more to a Thermidorian polemic than to a historian.

My final criticism concerns stylistics: this book is sloppy. Without looking very hard, I found dozens of typographical and spelling errors. I also encountered more than thirty glaring errors of historical fact. Sagan’s prose is littered with vague, sweeping, and unsupported claims such as “The third revolution [of May-June 1793] had absolutely no moral or social dimension or meaning” (p. 86) and “It was the moral collapse of revolutionary *political* life that brought on the catastrophes of the period. And yet, the culture of the old regime seemed to be pushing with as much energy toward democratic citizenship as it was toward Liberal mores” (p. 95). When combined with unclear and problematic definitions of key concepts like “Enlightenment” and “liberalism,” this sort of prose does not inspire confidence in Sagan’s far-reaching claims. Even the evocative word “cannibals” in the title remains an amorphous and ill-defined buzz word with limited resonance in the text. Perhaps he expects the reader to have already read his book on the subject.

Eli Sagan is intellectually honest. He writes, “Steve Thomas has vigorously objected to the linkage of nationalism and democracy made in the previous argument. Rightly so. He has convinced me that, in writing specifically about France, I have inaccurately made generalizations to all nationalisms: an erroneous maneuver. One cannot think and theorize about nationalism, in the singular: nationalisms is the true situation” (p. 237). As stated above, Sagan consulted many other savants in the course of his project, but most appear to have disagreed with him (p. xii). It is disappointing that either they or the editors at Rowman and Littlefield did not exercise more influence on the final output. Sagan appears to have a few useful and potentially interesting theoretical insights into the links between human psychological reaction and certain recurring political behaviors. I wish he had made these theoretical points with minimal reference to the history of the French Revolution, since his book is really about Vietnam, the Cold War, revolutionary Russia, classical Greece and the Holocaust as much as it is about revolutionary France. The length, methodology, and execution of *Citizens & Cannibals* means that all promising ideas are drowned in a flood of deterministic and/or unsupported statements that overwhelm the potential of the original theoretical premises.

NOTES

[1] Sagan’s books include *Cannibalism: Human Agression and Cultural Form* (Englewood, N.J.: Fish Drum Press, 1993); *Cultural Diversity and Moral Relativism* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Women’s Studies Program, 1993); *At the Dawn of Tyranny: The Origins of Individualism, Political Oppression and the State* (Englewood, N.J.: Fish Drum Press, 1993); *The Honey and the Hemlock: Democracy and Paranoia in Ancient Athens and Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); and *Freud, Women, and Morality: The Psychology of Good and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Fish Drum Press, 1996).

[2] See, for example, Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966); Robert N. Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and Otto Kernberg, “Borderline Personality Organization,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, XV, no. 3 (July 1967), pp. 641-685.

[3] Maximilien Robespierre, *Textes choisis*, Jean Poperen, ed., 3 vols. (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1956-58).

[4] Jacob L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Encore Editions, 1985 [1952]).

[5] See, among others, Michel Vovelle, *Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIe siècle; les attitudes devant la mort d'après les clauses des testaments* (Paris: Plon, 1973) and especially, *Religion et révolution: la déchristianisation de l'an II* (Paris: Hachette, 1976).

[6] J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[7] Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Vintage, 1965 [1938]).

[8] Sagan does cite Dale Van Kley's monograph, *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the French Old Regime, 1750-1770* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984) but later and concerning something unrelated.

[9] R.R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Committee of Public Safety during the Terror* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 370, and David P. Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (New York: Free Press, 1985), pp. 170-1.

Jeff Horn
Manhattan College
jeff.horn@manhattan.edu

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