

***Clio's Psyche* 22, 1-2 (June-September 2015): 110-115.**

My Mentor Eli Sagan (1927-2015): In Memoriam

Don Carveth—York University (Toronto)

For over a decade, Eli Sagan's classic, *Freud, Women, and Morality: The Psychology of Good and Evil* (1988), sat on my shelf unread. When I finally picked it up, I was stunned. Here were answers to many of the central problems in psychoanalytic theory that had troubled me for years, expounded with both scholarly erudition and rare lucidity. I began teaching it. One day a student asked, "So who is this guy Sagan anyway?" I confessed I really didn't know, but returned to my office determined to find out. I could find next to nothing about him on the net but finally came up with an address in New Jersey. I wrote him a fan letter.

A few weeks later I was sitting in my college office when the phone rang and a raspy voice said, "Hello, Carveth, this is Eli Sagan!"—and so, already in my sixties, I found a mentor. No wonder I couldn't find him on the net: Eli didn't have e-mail; didn't own a computer; didn't use a typewriter. Each of his many large books had been composed by pen and paper. He was an "old-school" scholar in every sense.

Every other Sunday morning and then at least once a month for the next few years, Eli and I enjoyed our telephone dialogue as I read through each of his books and discussed them with him one by one. Somewhat later we began to discuss my own work, often going over it critically line by line. Psychoanalysts know something of the role of transference in creativity; my recent book is the product of my idealizing transference to Eli Sagan which has been, in many ways, healing for me. Somehow in order to go beyond my life-long pattern of writing journal articles and acquire the audacity to publish a full length book, I needed to put

myself under the authority of a father-figure and obtain his permission to do so. Naturally, my book is dedicated to Eli.

We met face-to-face for the first time in New York, just prior to the time when Eli and Frimi—his charming, talented and devoted wife for 65 years—moved from their long-time residence in Englewood, New Jersey, to a retirement community outside Boston to be near some of their children and grandchildren. Eli and Frimi did me the honor of attending a lecture I gave at a conference at Boston University on evolutionary sociology that addressed his work in that field along with that of Talcott Parsons and Eli's friend Robert Bellah. The following evening they attended a presentation I made to the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis where I introduced Eli and he addressed the group. The following September I arranged for Eli and Frimi to come to Toronto where we together delivered a well-received talk entitled "Modernity Psychosis: The Evolutionary Psychoanalytic Sociology of Eli Sagan" to the Toronto Psychoanalytic Society.

Tragically, a few weeks after his return to Boston, Eli suffered a stroke from which he struggled hard over the following months and years to recover. At first he appeared to be making progress in reacquiring his capacity for speech, but he ultimately hit a plateau and conversation remained very difficult for him. This impediment was all the more painful for a brilliant man who in addition to loving life itself, was especially devoted to language and the life of the mind.

I will not review here the series of major contributions Eli made to psychoanalytic sociology, psychohistory, and psychoanalytic theory. Paul Elovitz's interview, "Eli Sagan: Scholar of Aggression and Sociologist," in the June 2001 issue of *Clio's Psyche* (Vol. 8, No. 1: 31-38) provides an excellent overview. I have already written in this journal about "The Psychoanalytic Sociology of Eli Sagan," in *Clio's Psyche* December 2011 issue (Vol. 18, 3: 357-

361). At the time of his interview with Paul, Eli was working on his last book, *Citizens and Cannibals: The French Revolution, the Struggle for Modernity, and the Origins of Ideological Terror* (2001) which, at the time, he felt might turn out to be his best book.

Although I have personally been most influenced by *Freud, Women and Morality*, from a psychohistorical standpoint I think Eli was right. This book is by no means only about the French revolution; it is also about modern culture and what Eli called the “modernity psychosis” that bedevils it. In a sense Eli’s last book is continuous with his first, *Cannibalism: Human Aggression and Cultural Form* (1974), one of the very few psychohistorical studies of the currently neglected concept of sublimation. In it he describes the progressive cultural development from cannibalism (oral devouring), to head-hunting (anal collecting), human sacrifice, and on to slavery and other forms of (phallic) domination (classism, racism, sexism).

I was thinking of Eli the other night as I watched the recent historical drama *Selma* (2014) about the 1965 Selma to Montgomery voting rights marches. Despite profound and brutal resistance, the movement was eventually successful in pressing President Lyndon B. Johnson to sign the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Eli and I often discussed the subsequent stalling of the forward evolutionary move toward democracy, equality, and justice with the failure of Johnson’s “war on poverty” and his program for a “Great Society.” Eli was struck by the “failure of nerve” of liberal-minded people (President Obama included) and their retreat from carrying the goal of liberation to its logical conclusion in economic in addition to racial, gender, and all other forms of equality.

Eli had a profound sense of the “backlash” that arises when existing forms of domination are threatened. He believed we cannot understand or confront the

madness in society unless we have confronted and worked through the madness in ourselves. In his interview with Paul he said: “If you don’t have a connection with the Nazi within yourself you’ll never understand Nazism. If you don’t understand the cannibal within yourself you will never understand cannibals. People who do not have a sense of their own aggression will never understand the aggression of others” (32). Eli spent 22 years himself on the psychoanalytic couch, motivated no doubt by his own neurotic retreat from the academic career he desired and for which he was brilliantly suited under pressure from his father to enter and eventually run the family business. On his retirement at age 47 he liberated his repressed oedipal aggression and threw himself into reparative mode, authoring a series of first-rate scholarly studies in psychohistory and psychoanalytic sociology that, despite his lack of advanced degrees, won him teaching posts at the University of California at Berkeley, Brandeis, and the New School for Social Research.

Eli had his finger on the pulse of the “failure of nerve” that leads human beings to fear their own aggression, to refrain from self-assertion, and to have to cap their success at a certain level by retreating from challenging the *status quo* and the “powers that be.” There is a moving scene in *Selma* when days after having been attacked and beaten by the National Guard, and now joined by supporters from the north, the marchers are surprised by the sudden apparent retreat on the part of their oppressors who move aside and open a path in front of them. Martin Luther King brings the march to a stop; everyone kneels to pray; and then he does an about-face and leads them back rather than forward. In the film, it is only after an impassioned private plea by John Lewis that King appears to find the courage to carry on.

Shakespeare wrote “Conscience doth make cowards of us all.” If we substitute superego for conscience, I think that pretty much captures it. The mixture of love, hate, fear of and loyalty to the inner authority figure, the aggressor whom we have internalized, with whom we identify, and to whom we are inclined to submit prevents us from carrying out the sublimated or symbolic murder that is necessary for us to grow up and carry the emancipatory project to its conclusion. Freud’s concept of the normal oedipal resolution as renunciation of incestuous and parricidal desires out of fear of castration, leading to the turning of aggression toward the oedipal rivals against the self, resulting in the superego as identification with the aggressor, is a description not of health but of widespread (normotic) pathology. Sagan points out that although Freud does not allow the data to cause him to revise his view that “The Oedipus complex ... in boys ... is not simply repressed, it is literally smashed to pieces by the shock of threatened castration” (“Some psychological consequences of the anatomical distinction between the sexes.” *S.E.*, 19 [1925]: 257), his own case study of “Little Hans” (“Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy.” *S.E.*, 10 [1909]) indicates that the true oedipal resolution is not *renunciation* out of fear of castration, but *sublimation* or symbolic *fulfilment* of oedipal desire. Sagan writes:

Near the end of the treatment Hans had two significant dreams. The first was a thinly disguised situation where he had managed to marry his mother and have many children with her. The second brought Hans a penis as large as his father’s. ... So successful was this imaginative fulfillment of oedipal strivings that it immediately produced remarkable changes. “In the course of the next few days,” Freud writes, “Hans’ mother wrote to me more than once to express her joy at the little boy’s recovery” (*Freud, Women and Morality*, [1988], 82-83).

Hans Loewald (“The Waning of the Oedipus Complex.” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association.*, 27 [1979]) writes that “it is no exaggeration to say that the assumption of responsibility for one's own life and its conduct is in psychic reality tantamount to the murder of the parents, to the crime of parricide” (756-757). Will we ever be able to finally grow up and accomplish this, or will we merely continue to compromise with the superego and the forces of repression and oppression?

Eli's departure from the academic life after taking his BA at Harvard and late and only partial return to academia took a toll. Yet his marginal status with respect to both the university and organized psychoanalysis at the same time liberated him to think and write with a degree of independence and creativity that are difficult to achieve while living under the superego pressures and constraints of these institutions. Eli Sagan was one of a kind. He was a deep and clear thinker, a lucid writer, and a great teacher. His books are well worth revisiting.

When I think of Eli I think of Irving Stone's popular biography of Freud, the title of which, *The Passions of the Mind* (1971), seems somewhat more fitting for Eli than for Freud himself, given the latter's more dispassionate, skeptical, and ironic stance. Freud was a rationalist who thought whatever little salvation might be possible for human beings had much to do with reason and the capacity to think: he called for a “dictatorship of the intellect” over the other functions of the personality. Eli, though also a highly rational man, knew that humane values come not from reason but from feelings, not from the head but the heart—from what Jean-Jacques Rousseau call “pity” or fellow-feeling. Eli was a passionate, deeply morally and politically engaged intellectual. He served as Finance Chair for the George McGovern for President Committee in 1972 and Treasurer of the Council for

A Livable World. One of the achievements he was most proud of was having been listed twice on Nixon's Enemies List. He is sorely missed.

***Don Carveth, PhD**, is Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Social & Political Thought at York University, current Director of the Toronto Institute of Psychoanalysis, and author of The Still Small Voice: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Guilt and Conscience (2013). He may be found on the web at: www.yorku.ca/dcarveth. □*