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Revolution, Reform and the Political Thought of Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès

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The plan of this work is quite simple. There are three questions that we have to ask of ourselves.

1° *What is the Third Estate?* – **Everything.**

2° *What, until now, has it been in the existing political order?* – **Nothing.**

3° *What does it want to be?* – **Something.**

These are the opening words of the single most famous pamphlet of the French Revolution: Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès' *What Is the Third Estate?* or *Qu'est-ce qu'est le tiers état?* as the pamphlet was originally entitled when it appeared in Paris late in January 1789.¹ The three questions that Sieyès used to frame the pamphlet's argument were, substantively, questions about the subjects of reform and revolution, not only because of the relevance of these subjects to conditions in late eighteenth-century France, but also because they had already arisen in the context of a number of earlier political conflicts in Europe and the Americas during the two previous decades. The best known now is the American Revolution of 1776, with its outcome in the ratification of the Constitution of the United States of America, a process that took place at almost the same time as the French Revolution began. But the subjects of reform and revolution were also central to several other political conflicts that occurred in the decade before 1789, notably in the Swiss republic of Geneva, in the United Provinces of the Netherlands and in the Holy Roman Empire, as well as in the movement for electoral reform that arose in Britain during and after the American war. From this perspective, Sieyès' pamphlet was not only an intervention in French politics, but also an outcome of an older, European-wide discussion of established political regimes and how they could be changed. In this context,

the political thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau had a particular salience, both because of Rousseau's frequently repeated prediction that, as he put it in his novel *Emile* in 1762, 'we are approaching the state of crisis and the century of revolutions' and because of his unusually acute precision in identifying what, whether individually, morally or institutionally, was likely to be required to turn intense political conflict into peaceful political change.²

Sieyès' pamphlet registered both these aspects of Rousseau's thought. It was designed to be the means to establish what Sieyès was later to call a monarchical republic, meaning a political system in which sovereignty was democratic, or came from below, but where the government had the same pyramidal shape as the government of a monarchy, with a large electoral base and a single elected head. Sieyès was careful to distinguish this type of political system from what he called a republican monarchy, meaning a political system with a popular government and a single, royal sovereign. *What is the Third Estate?*, Sieyès later observed, was written to turn the inverted triangle of absolute government right side up. Its immediate purpose, however, was to address the two major problems thrown up by the political argument that began in France in the spring of 1786. These problems were a product of growing disagreement over the range of possible measures required to fund the French royal deficit. The first problem was about political legitimacy and political decision-making. Here, what mattered was the question of identifying who had the right to decide what to do about the deficit. The second was a problem about political implementation and political coordination. Here, what mattered was the question of identifying an agent and a sequence of steps able to deliver an outcome compatible with the answer to the first question. Sieyès' pamphlet was designed to answer both questions.

It is important, however, to see that the answers to the two questions pulled against one another very strongly. The answer to the first question, Sieyès emphasized, could not be France's king, Louis XVI, even though the French monarchy was, formally, absolute and, accordingly, could not be subject to a higher power. Although its unitary nature made it well equipped to deal with the second question, the same quality ruled it out as an answer to the first. But restoring the old French Estates-General, with its separate assemblies made up of representatives of the clergy, the nobility and the third estate (meaning the mass of people, from peasants and labourers to lawyers and bankers, who did not belong to the church or the nobility) was equally impossible. The number of separate agencies involved in this form of decision-making meant that reviving an assembly of the Estates-General to deal with the two questions was likely to produce many answers but no action. Instead, Sieyès argued, the

right to decide what to do about the deficit had to belong to the whole French nation. In itself, the claim was not unusual. Many of the hundreds of pamphlets published before 1789 made something like the same claim, frequently insisting on the nation's right to call the royal ministry to account for its financial management and demanding that all three estates share equitably in the fiscal and financial sacrifices that were likely to be required to fund the deficit. Sieyès, however, made a further move, centred on the nature and power of the third estate. The third estate, he asserted at the very beginning of his pamphlet, was 'a complete nation'. This was the move that made his reputation. It explained why the answer to the question *What Is the Third Estate?* had to be 'everything' and why, by extension, the answer to the question of who had the right to decide what to do about the deficit turned out, daringly, to be simply the third estate. A nation, Sieyès explained, needed a range of private occupations and a number of public services to be a nation. The private occupations in question would encompass agriculture, industry, trade and the various professions, while the public services would include the army, the legal system, the church and the administration. Together, the combination of private occupations and public services amounted to what Sieyès called a representative system. All the activities required to make this system work were, he claimed, carried out by the members of the third estate, even if the members of the two privileged orders, the clergy and the nobility, were still nominally at the head of parts of the royal government. It followed that, since the members of the third estate were responsible for doing all the things that a nation needed to do in order to be itself, the third estate was a self-sufficient, independent nation and, like any 'complete nation', could not be subject to a higher power (94, 98). It was, in fact, just like a state.

It followed, Sieyès emphasized, that when, as the king had announced, an assembly of the three estates of the kingdom began to meet, the representatives of the third estate were entitled to take sole responsibility for deciding not only what to do about the deficit, but also to draft a constitution compatible with the sovereignty of the French nation. A constitution, Sieyès pointed out, consisted of an array of constituted powers, like a legislature, an executive and a judiciary, along with a body of rules and procedures to guide them. But these constituted powers also required a constituting power to give them life and legitimacy. This was the power that belonged solely to the nation and, since the third estate was a complete nation, the third estate alone was entitled to use its constituting power to establish a new system of government that would be designed to establish and maintain public and private liberty.

On these terms, the answer to the question of who had the right to decide what to do about the deficit was, therefore, the third estate. The members of the other two orders of the old French Estates-General, the clergy and the nobility, had no right or power to decide or act independently. They could, Sieyès emphasized, certainly abandon their separate status and distinctive privileges and join the nation formed by the members of the third estate. But there could not be two additional nations within the nation. France, Sieyès insisted, was a single nation and the third estate alone supplied all that it needed to be what it was. In this respect, too, the nation was just like a state.

The inclusive answer that Sieyès gave to the first question pulled, however, against the sequential practicalities raised by the second question. If the nation, or the third estate, or even the representatives of the third estate, had a sovereign right to decide what to do about the deficit, including a right to use the nation's constituting power to draft a constitution for a new system of government, it was still not clear how the nation, or the third estate, or even the representatives of the third estate, would go about making their decisions or how these decisions would then be implemented. Here, the difficulties involved in finding a way to deal with the collective-action problem were magnified by the problem of the deficit itself.³ Funding the deficit meant raising taxes to pay interest and, by doing so, transferring resources from all or part of the nation to some or all of the nation's creditors. As it stood, the nation itself contained many different types of social, legal or regional privilege, many varieties of economic activity and many different forms of public and private property. In themselves, the range and variety of interests that the nation housed were a substantial obstacle to effective decision-making and coordinated collective action. Adding the further divisions of interest involved in raising taxes to fund the deficit amounted to magnifying the already considerable economic and social difficulties involved in using the nation's constituting power to give its government a stable constitution.

Sieyès was well aware of the dilemma. The more it could be argued that only the nation could deal with the problem of the deficit, the more difficult it was to see how the nation itself could actually act. He had, in fact, drafted a pamphlet designed to deal with the dilemma some six months before he published *What Is the Third Estate?* The pamphlet in question was written in July or August 1788 and was published to coincide with the meeting of the French Estates-General in May 1789 under the title of *Vues sur les moyens d'exécution dont les représentants de la France pourront disposer en 1789*. The near-contemporary English title of the work, *Views of the Executive Means, which are at the disposal of the*

Representatives of France, in 1789, captures its aim quite well.⁴ It was designed to show how, given its right to deal with the problem of the deficit, the nation would be able to act. In it, Sieyès went to some lengths to explain why the action itself had to be limited in nature and sequential in character. Both qualities were required to reconcile political effectiveness with political legitimacy. The deficit, Sieyès argued, was either a threat or an opportunity. Under the existing system of government it would be a threat, not only because of the often unaccountable character of government expenditure, but also because of the unaccountable character of absolute government itself. At the limit, he warned, an absolute government could simply default on its debt or, worse, might even persuade an assembly of the French Estates-General to sanction a debt default if the measure was accompanied by a programme of patriotic fiscal reform designed to reduce the already heavy tax burden on the poor. If this were to happen, the deficit would certainly disappear, but so too would the opportunity to establish civil and political liberty in France. This, Sieyès argued, was why the way to avoid the threat was to grasp the opportunity and why treating the constitutional problem had to take precedence over treating the financial problem.

The way to manage the sequence was to establish a special assembly entrusted with the task of drafting a constitution. Unlike the old Estates-General, with its separate representatives of the clergy, nobility and the third estate, this assembly, Sieyès wrote, would be a single body with a single assignment, namely to draft a constitution for a new system of government. It would be a scaled-up version of an already partially established network of provincial assemblies, with no distinction between the three estates in how its members were to be elected or in how they would deliberate and decide. Importantly, it would also have no legislative power, but would simply present the results of its constitutional deliberations for ratification by the nation in a way that was similar to the concurrent process of constitutional ratification taking place in the United States of America. Once ratified, absolute government would give way to constitutional government and, once a constitutional government had been established, it would then be possible to deal with the deficit. This was the plan that Sieyès envisaged in the later summer of 1788. It followed the logic of the distinction between sovereignty and government made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (and, earlier, by Montesquieu) and relied on a temporary, non-governmental agency to manage the process of political reform. The government itself would not be involved in the political transition, just as the sovereign nation would not be required to play a part in government. Although the plan asserted the sovereignty of the nation, it did not yet assert the sovereignty of the third estate.

By the winter of 1788 the situation had changed. Faced with objections by members of the clergy and the nobility to any modification to the established forms and procedures of the old Estates-General, the royal government backed down. It agreed to double the number of representatives of the third estate to the forthcoming assembly but allowed the clergy and nobility to continue to elect their own representatives and left open the question of whether these representatives were to deliberate and decide separately or as a single body when the Estates-General began to meet in May 1789. This was the context in which, late in January 1789, Sieyès published *What Is the Third Estate?* As he indicated in the rather rueful title of the fifth chapter of his pamphlet – ‘What should have been done: first principles on this matter’ – the putative process of constitutional reform had turned into a trial of strength (133). Here, the royal government appeared to have the trump card because it had the power (and, some argued, the right) to opt, *in extremis*, for a unilateral debt default. But Sieyès, in his *Views of the Executive Means*, had already shown that the nation had an equally deadly reply. It had the right and the power to seize control of the fiscal system and could start the process by issuing a unilateral proclamation announcing that all taxes would be paid provisionally until a properly constituted government had been established. *What Is the Third Estate?* simply showed that the threat could be readily transferred to the representatives of the third estate alone.

The spectre of mutually assured financial destruction raised by the residual power of the royal government on the one side and the fiscal leverage of the third estate on the other makes it easier to explain the anxiety, suspicion and fear that began to develop when the Estates-General assembled at Versailles in May 1789. On 17 June 1789, the representatives of the third estate adopted the title that Sieyès had suggested and unilaterally proclaimed themselves to be a national assembly. Three weeks later, the dismissal of the popular finance minister Jacques Necker brought the collision between the desperation of the royal government and the intransigence of the third estate to a head and ignited the insurrection that culminated in the fall of the Bastille on 14 July 1789. As Paris reacted to the news of Necker’s dismissal, the assembly at Versailles issued a proclamation placing the deficit under the safeguard of the nation. The royal debt became the nation’s debt.

Sieyès’ relationship to the revolution that began in France when the Bastille fell was similar both to Rousseau’s relationship to the intermittent political conflicts that had occurred in Geneva a generation earlier and to Immanuel Kant’s relationship to the many expressions of support for events in France voiced all over the German-speaking parts of Europe after 1789. *What Is the*

Third Estate? was an assertion of political sovereignty. But like Rousseau earlier, and Kant later, Sieyès's prime concern was to secure and maintain a clear distinction between sovereignty and government. Governments would come and go, in keeping with the constitutional provisions supplied by the sovereign's constituting power. But adding sovereignty to government increased the risks of either a frozen political system or one whose divisions could become a real threat to political and social survival. Either possibility was part of the politics of reform because real reforms – whether electoral, financial, moral, legal, educational or religious – were usually likely to bring sovereignty into play. This was why the line separating reform from revolution was so hard to maintain and why, in the light of the danger of either political paralysis or political disintegration, Sieyès went to such lengths to keep sovereignty and government, or the constituting and constituted powers, as separate as possible. In this respect, his political thought also paralleled the thought of Immanuel Kant. Sovereignty, Kant wrote, could be autocratic, aristocratic or democratic, but government itself was simply republican or despotic. Paradoxically, however, the less inclusive forms of sovereignty lent themselves more readily to republican forms of government than their democratic counterpart, if only because in autocratic or aristocratic regimes the different numerical sizes of the sovereign and the government favoured a clear distinction between the legislature and the executive. The opposite was the case with democratic sovereignty. There, the sovereign was, numerically, also the government, making the legislature and the executive indistinguishable and requiring a high level of civic awareness and self-sacrifice to keep public and private interests aligned. This, Rousseau had pointed out, was why democracy was a political system that was suitable only for gods.

Sieyès' solution to the problem of finding a form of government able to coexist with a democratic form of sovereignty echoed Rousseau's. The constitution that he envisaged was similar in character to the one proposed by Rousseau in his posthumously published *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, with its emphasis on what contemporaries called a system of 'gradationed promotion', or a pyramid-shaped, multi-tiered, electoral process, with those elected from the level below forming a new electorate to elect the level above. The upper level of the pyramid would house a senate and a life-peerage made up of men (and, Sieyès speculated, women) who had been ennobled for distinguished public service and were, therefore, equipped with the moral authority to endorse or criticize plans for future reform. At its apex there would be an elected head of state, with all of the splendour, but none of the power, of an old style French

monarch. Ordinary political power would be in the hands of a collectively responsible ministry, but there would still be room for a single decision-maker if there was a need for emergency power. The small size and collectively responsible character of the government would give it the power to implement reform, while its national electoral origins would give it the authority to do so. Sieyès, as has been said, described the whole system as a monarchical republic, as against the more recognizable idea of a republican monarchy. *What Is the Third Estate?* was designed both to bring this system about and to block its royal opposite. In this sense, establishing the right relationship between the adjective and the noun, in France, in 1789, was not just a textual moment.

Further Reading

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