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Michael Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008. x + 493 pp. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0691124988.

Review essay by Thomas E. Kaiser, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

Like the author's recent *Before the Deluge*,<sup>[1]</sup> to which it is a sequel, this book is difficult to read and decidedly not for the faint of heart or brain. Part of the difficulty derives from the way in which the author swoops from topic to topic within paragraphs, alighting upon a succession of authors who wrote at different times and in different contexts, in order to establish the sometimes obscure ideological relationships among them. Another source of the difficulty is the obscurity of the book's central objective. Readers who take at face value the author's opening statement that "this is a book about the *sans-culottes* and the part they played in the French Revolution" (p. 1) may be surprised to encounter in it neither a single *sans-culotte* (as traditionally understood), nor, until the last hundred pages, much about the French Revolution. Elsewhere, the author says that the book explores the meaning and contemporary appreciation of Rousseau, the world of the salons, the origins and nature of late eighteenth-century republicanism, public debt, property, Ciceronian and Cynical views of fashion, and eighteenth-century notions of history. This is almost too many clues for the book's purpose to stand out boldly, so it may be fair to ask whether there is any unity to be found, and, if so, what that unity could be, and whether, in light of the rough sailing ahead, *il vaut le voyage*? This reviewer shall argue that the answer to the first and third questions is a qualified "yes." The answer to the second question can obviously not be stated so simply.

At one level, what unites this book is a joke that evolved into an emblem of republican politics during the French Revolution. As the title suggests, the emblem is the term *sans-culottes*, which originated in the *salon* practice of distributing to regular members on New Year's Day pieces of fine cloth to be tailored into breeches. Because the donor was almost always female and the recipient male, the practice gave rise to some risqué sexual humor, but it also generated a social marker distinguishing writers who enjoyed patronage from those who did not (that is, writers who were *sans-culottes*). The term acquired its more (in)famous meaning in late 1791 and early 1792, when the Jacobins began to apply it to the common people of Paris, who were their political allies, in opposition to their "aristocratic," allegedly counter-Revolutionary Feuillant rivals. From that point forward, it acquired a decidedly proletarian connotation that reinforced a growing association between low socio-economic status and patriotic devotion in republican discourse on the eve of the Terror.

What is the purpose of this no doubt intriguing, but not obviously paradigm-shifting etymology? The answer is that it allows Sonenscher to weave a multi-layered meta-narrative about the course of republicanism in eighteenth-century France and its fate in the French Revolution. No brief account can possibly follow this meta-narrative through all its baroque twists and turns; most readers who manage to stay the course are likely to concede at least one of the author's main points, namely, "that there is actually nothing at all straightforward about

republicanism” (p. 406). In the face of such complexity, the best that this reviewer can do is to render this meta-narrative as follows.

Until the Revolution, fears that the expansion of commerce, the rise of public credit, and the allures of civilization (notably, luxury and fashion) would undermine virtue and liberty co-existed uneasily with the recognition that all three were required for French success in the international arena. The great republican hope was that in the end stability was reconcilable with development and patriotism with national power. The key to this compatibility was modern public finance, which “appeared to offer the prospect of reviving the ancient virtues, but without the violence of ancient politics” as well as the “key to establishing a world made up of nations” (p. 3). Although not rigorously egalitarian in its effects, a state funded through modern finance was thought to be at least socially progressive insofar as it reinstated “merit, talent and individual ability as the only legitimate criteria of social distinction” (p. 3). Rousseau’s thought might appear to be an exception in this regard, but as Sonenscher’s particularly enlightening analysis reveals, it can be placed well within the republican mainstream as Sonenscher construes it. To be sure, Rousseau was not a believer in the natural sociability of humankind, and he could well imagine how modern civilization might terminate in a terrible twilight of “despotism,” when “all would be consumed by the monster.”[2] Yet Rousseau did not abandon all hope of creating a virtuous society in a post-lapsarian world, and even if he did not provide his readers with much help in this effort, most of them found ways of blending his harsh strictures on the evils of contemporary civilization with his utopian prescriptions to project a reasonably optimistic future. If, therefore, Rousseau’s work provides a master text to the approaching Revolution—a major premise of François Furet’s interpretation of that great event—it had no intrinsic affinity, as Sonenscher points out, with the policies of any particular Revolutionary faction, but instead prepared the ideological groundwork for them all.

So ideologically elastic was French republicanism and so critical did public finance appear to the stability and success of the new Revolutionary regime that even John Law, whom Montesquieu and other “republicans” had regarded as a promoter of “despotism” in all its guises,[3] could be rehabilitated at the onset of the Revolution by Brissot and Clavière. Despite its failure, Law’s “System,” they believed, had incorporated principles and techniques of public finance—e.g., the stimulation of the economy through the substitution of paper money for specie—that the Revolutionary regime could build upon. Indeed, Clavière went so far as to embrace Law’s notion that “despotic power” provided the best support for a paper currency inasmuch as—to cite Clavière—“a despotic will can be more reassuring than the practices of liberty” (p. 322).

It stands to reason that the Revolutionaries’ willingness to take lessons on the advantages of “despotic power” from the likes of John Law put the republican synthesis under terrific internal strain, and indeed in the story Sonenscher relates, the Revolution became its undoing. The sale of *biens nationaux*, so critical to fulfilling the National Assembly’s pledge to honor the debts incurred by the monarchy, also had the effect of thwarting efforts to realize social “justice.” At least in the short run, it enhanced rather than moderated economic inequalities, even if in the long run it provided one way of avoiding ruinous rates of taxation. Printing and sustaining the value of the *assignats*, likewise dependent upon the sale of *biens nationaux*, was essential for the stabilization of the new regime’s finances, but this policy also placed ominously broad powers in the hands of the executive branch. Slavery in the colonies may have been necessary to maintain the new regime’s tax base in the face of international competition, but it was clearly an affront to human dignity and a violation of the rights of man.

In the face of these and other contradictions and in the push to establish a ministry of their own in early 1792, Sonenscher argues, the Jacobins engineered a politics that in embracing a new incarnation of the *sans-culottes* as the epitome of the virtuous, patriotic citizen to the exclusion of

the bourgeois “aristocrat,” marked the end of a broadly inclusive republicanism that had seen itself as compatible with a broad range of regimes, including monarchy. Not only did popular democracy become the *sine qua non* of republican politics, but as Sonenscher puts it, “what was left of the broad early consensus in favour of the compatibility between public debt and political unity collapsed completely” (p. 51). Forced by circumstances to contend with problems that republicanism had hitherto never been forced to solve on its own, the Jacobins gravitated toward “revolutionary government,” which bore a striking resemblance to the absolute monarchy they had helped to overthrow. Indeed, concludes Sonenscher, “it was not difficult for Robespierre’s enemies to claim that this, indeed, might be its final goal” (p. 52). Republicanism, in a twist of Tocquevillian irony, had turned into its historic enemy.

As a meditation on the meaning and fate of republicanism in eighteenth-century France, this book—in combination with *Before the Deluge*—is not likely to be surpassed either in the vast erudition that lies behind it or in the pyrotechnical brilliance shown in tracking the ambivalences of republicanism through the different registers of eighteenth-century political culture. Although its insights are not easily digestible because of its highly allusive style, this book is a tour de force that can take readers patient and willing enough to leave the beaten track to places few of them will have gone before or even knew existed. Demonstrating the centrality of public debt and political economy to eighteenth-century political thought is by itself a major contribution. To be sure, Sonenscher, a member of the Cambridge School of political thought, is not the first historian to advance this kind of argument. It was sketched out a generation ago by J.G.A. Pocock in his epochal *Machiavellian Moment*, and other historians have followed in his wake.[4] Nor is Sonenscher the first historian to view the Revolution as the product of a pre-Revolutionary enlightened ideology whose contradictions became progressively more unmanageable.[5] Still, all things considered, this is clearly a stimulating text that historians of eighteenth-century political thought will have to wrestle with and return to for many years to come.

But whether this meta-narrative provides a fully satisfying account of French republicanism and its fate during the Revolution remains open to question. For one thing, amidst all his explorations of the polarities within republican thought, Sonenscher does not help resolve the question of whether French republicanism was a distinct ideology, or whether it was so inclusive as to be virtually synonymous with French eighteenth-century political thought as a whole. For another, although Sonenscher effectively shows how the Revolution aggravated the contradictions within the republican consensus, he does not, in the judgment of this reviewer, sufficiently elaborate upon what happened to republicanism as these contradictions played themselves out at the very moment when the *sans-culotte* morphed from a salon *refusé* into a man of the people. Is it really true that “what was left of the broad early consensus in favour of the compatibility between public debt and political unity collapsed completely”? Instead of the return to Rousseau’s and Mably’s thought and a disquisition on the obscure Swiss poet Salchi that Sonenscher provides in the form of a coda, one could have hoped for at least some analysis of the political economy of the Revolutionary regime before and during the Terror. In particular, one might have expected some consideration of the debates over the *assignats*, the *maximum*, and the financing of the war, all of which raised broad questions of equity, social justice, and the legitimacy of French imperial ambitions. The coming and conduct of the Terror itself could have benefitted from further analysis. If, as some recent historians, notably Jean-Clément Martin, have insisted, the Terror was not a systematic policy of government but rather a ram-shackle affair that emerged piecemeal from a vacuum of power created by multiple parties employing violence against one another in various locales,[6] it would have been useful for the author to have shown how the parties of the left justified this violence as a function of their republican vows. Examination of the political culture of the latter-day *sans-culottes* might have provided some useful insights into what republicanism meant at the ground level and revealed

how the Jacobins exploited and repressed such deviations from their own ideology. Moreover, by making it clearer what republicanism became under the Terror, the author almost certainly could have shed some more light on what it became in the post-Thermidorean period. In sum, extraordinary as it surely is in so many other respects, this book, which purports to be “about the *sans-culottes* and the part they played in the French Revolution,” cannot be said to have entirely fulfilled its jocular mission.

#### NOTES

[1] Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[2] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 134.

[3] Thomas E. Kaiser, "Money, Despotism, and Public Opinion: John Law and the Debate on Royal Credit," *Journal of Modern History* 63 (1991):1-28. Article not cited by the author. See also Rebecca L. Spang, "The Ghost of Law: Speculating on Money, Memory and Mississippi in the French Constituent Assembly," *Historical Reflections* 31 (2005): 3-35.

[4] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), chapters thirteen and fourteen. One author to whom Sonenscher is clearly indebted is Istvan Hont. See Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). For a useful appreciation of the Cambridge School and Michael Sonenscher's place in it, see B. W. Young, "Enlightenment Political Thought and the Cambridge School," *The Historical Journal* 52 (2009): 235-51.

[5] Notably, Patrice Higonnet, *Class, Ideology, and the Rights of Nobles during the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). Higonnet's preferred term for the reigning ideology is "bourgeois universalism."

[6] Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et révolution: Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006).

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