

---

H-France Forum, Volume 4, Issue 2 (Spring 2009), No. 3

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 Charles Walton, Yale University.

Michael Sonenscher begins, “This is a book about the sans-culottes and the part that they played in the French Revolution” (p. 1). Actually, there are no revolutionary sans-culottes in the study. A more accurate summary of its content is conveyed by the subtitle: “An Eighteenth-century Emblem in the French Revolution.” Tracing the origins of the “sans-culottes” emblem, Sonenscher takes seriously Robert Darnton’s call to “get the joke” as a way to understand the past.<sup>[1]</sup> He explores the intellectual context in which a derisive epithet for writers without breeches (“*sans culottes*”), which meant writers without the patronage of *salonnières*, went from being a joke among elites into being the honorable name for a popular political movement during the Revolution.

*Sans-culottes* treats the intellectual context of jokes about the epithet much more than it does either salons or even revolutionary sans-culottes. The story about the joke functions as a conceit: it provides a narrative framework for telling a larger, more important story: how eighteenth-century thinkers imagined making property generally available. In exploring how they did so, Sonenscher discovers new patterns of coherence in early modern ideas about morality, society, politics, and the economy. He shows how ancient thought, particularly Cynical and Ciceronian philosophy, was brought to bear on the problems of property and inequality. He then examines how Enlightenment ideas on these matters figured in the Revolution.

*Sans-Culottes* is a challenging read, not least because of its style and structure. Sonenscher juggles a dizzying array of primary sources (roughly six hundred titles in the bibliography). In the span of a few pages, he can zigzag across centuries, connecting ideas from ancient Greece to the Napoleonic Empire. Given the great number of topics treated and the sophisticated ways ideas are conceptually aligned, a succinct road map and more signposting would have been helpful (the introduction is fifty-six pages, while chapters run about seventy to eighty pages). Whereas most historical monographs identify the threads of analysis in an introductory chapter before weaving them together throughout the rest of the book, the first 282 pages of Sonenscher’s study are devoted to identifying threads. They are marvelously woven together in chapter five, “The Entitlements of Merit” (more below), but in the subsequent “Conclusion,” which runs to some sixty-two pages, Sonenscher returns to identifying threads. Nor does the joke about sans-culottes give the reader something solid on which to hold. It is discussed only intermittently and, in any case, is not capacious enough to carry the freight of Sonenscher’s extensive analysis of Enlightenment thought.

That said, the payoffs to reading this book are tremendous. First, Sonenscher offers a reassessment of Rousseau’s place in the Enlightenment and a compelling account of how

eighteenth-century thinkers – Rousseau’s predecessors as well as his adversaries and admirers – grappled with the problems of property, inequality, and merit. Second, he shows how these ideas figured in Old Regime economic reforms, from John Law’s financial experiments during the Regency, to mid-century experiments with Physiocracy, to the royal and revolutionary reforms of the 1780s. Finally, he provides a novel interpretation of revolutionary politics, showing how various approaches to using public debt to reduce inequality after 1789 led to political breakdown and, eventually, the rise of the sans-culottes.

First, Rousseau. Like many scholars of the Enlightenment, Sonenscher sees the “citizen of Geneva” as a pivotal figure. He contextualizes Rousseau’s republican/democratic thought, uncovering surprising similarities with the republican/monarchical ideas of Fénelon, the quietist tutor of Louis XIV’s grandson and the author of *Télémaque*. Sonenscher shows that, for all their apparent differences (Rousseau the architect of democracy; Fénelon of virtuous absolutism), both were inspired by the same republican concerns: political morality and distributive justice (the “just” way society regulates property and resources). According to Sonenscher, Rousseau was more convincing to contemporaries as a modern day Diogenes – as a skeptical Cynic relentlessly suspicious of the arts, sciences, and power – than he was in his role as Plato, laying down the moral foundations of society. The contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities of *The Social Contract* made it a poor guide to politics. It was Rousseau’s profound pessimism that contemporaries found at once compelling and troubling: “All roads, Rousseau argued, led either to despotism or to social breakdown” (p. 368). Unsatisfied with such predictions (or spurred by them), contemporaries looked for morality in other places. Sonenscher discusses these moral alternatives: primitivism (the replacement of artificial passions with natural ones), fashion (it neutralized the passions that property unleashed), vitalism (physical bodies could be read as reflections of the soul), enthusiasm (the arts spring from the natural passions), sensibility and the emotions (ways to re-naturalize the arts, especially music, dance, poetry, and language and marshal them toward moral ends), providence (interpretable through proper language acquisition), religion (Jesuit and Jansenist variants), and state constitutionalism.<sup>[2]</sup> Whatever source of morality Enlightenment thinkers identified, the key task, as they saw it, was to find a path toward political and social justice that avoided despotism, revolution, and social dissolution. And although they were bent on reducing extreme inequality, they nevertheless sought to define “merit” in ways that would justify the inequalities that could not, or should not, be eradicated.

Framing the problem like this allows Sonenscher to shed new light on the economic reforms of the Old Regime. It allows him to draw connections between John Law’s banking and speculation scheme (1716-20), Physiocratic free-trade policies (1760s-1770s), and efforts to bring about fiscal and constitutional reforms in the 1780s and 1790s. All these reform efforts were intended, he shows, to reduce state debt while expanding the economy and reducing wealth disparities. His descriptions of these reforms are cogent, and the connections he draws between them compelling. According to him, the Physiocrats shared much of John Law’s moral concerns and economic thinking. But rather than using foreign trade as the inflated asset that would reduce the weight of state debt (as Law had), the Physiocrats sought to raise the value of land by freeing up domestic grain markets, using land as the inflated asset to offset state debt. Both schemes were expected to increase wealth and spread it equitably. But since they both relied upon a strong central government, their failure gave impetus to more democratic notions of republicanism, which were seen as antidotes to despotism.

The failure of Turgot’s free-trade policy in the mid 1770s prompted a return to focusing on public credit in the 1780s, but putting public credit on solid ground required political action. What kind of action? Some continued to believe that royal reform through a Fénelonian patriotic king might suffice. Others sought to redefine aristocratic merit in ways that would

thwart the corrupting, iniquitous power of new money. But as royal reformers failed to get “the peacocks to pay” (p. 296), that is, to get the nobles to renounce their tax privileges, the idea of political representation – a more democratic version of republicanism – came to the fore. “The political history of the French Revolution,” Sonenscher writes, “began with the realization that Louis XVI could not be a [Fénelonian] patriot king” (p. 327).

But representation did not mean popular democracy, at least not at the Revolution’s outset. The trick after the summer of 1789 was to structure representation in a way that favored a wider distribution of property (to reduce inequalities) while limiting political power to those who truly merited it (to prevent chronic revolution and social disintegration). Sonenscher shows how Sieyès in *What is the Third Estate?* grappled with all of these issues. But Sieyès complicated, multi-tiered solution of elective aristocracy was rejected as too oligarchic. Rejected as well was the Montesquiean/Anglo-American system of checks and balances, for the simple reason that the incredible amount of unity needed to transfer sovereignty from the king to the nation peacefully ran counter to the establishment of rival institutions. Revolutionaries therefore began pursuing ways of using public debt to achieve political stability and socio-economic justice. However divided they may have been about the need to declare Catholicism the national cult, they largely agreed on using church property as a source of public credit. But sharp divisions over how to do so soon surfaced. These divisions were exacerbated by the flight of wealthy *émigrés* and troubles in Saint-Domingue, which eroded the tax base. In the course of debates on public finances (especially, *biens nationaux* and the new currency, the *assignats*), the latent tensions in Enlightenment ideas began generating factions. The founding of the Feuillant Club after the flight of the king in summer 1791, Sonenscher shows, grew out of disputes within the Jacobin Club about public credit. While the Feuillants worried about ongoing emigration and the loss of colonial commerce (hence, their efforts to cozy up to the king and forestall the abolition of slavery), the Jacobins thought that emigration got rid of economic dead weight, thereby freeing up resources that could be used to expand the economy along more equitable lines (hence, their alliance with radicals). It was at this time, the fall, winter, and spring of 1791-1792, that the Jacobin writer Antoine-Joseph Gorsas turned the old epithet “sans-culottes” into an honorable label for the radical movement in Paris. This was a demagogic move, to be sure, but an effective one, since it had deep roots in Enlightenment moral philosophy and popular Cynical satire, as Sonenscher explains.

Having unleashed the sans-culottes as a political force, the *Brissotin* faction of the Jacobin Club soon lost control over them. (Several *Brissotins* were expelled from the club in late 1792.) Here, public credit drops out of the picture. It does not figure in Sonenscher’s explanation of the subsequent division between the *Brissotins* (or Girondins) and Robespierist Jacobins in late 1792 and 1793. He explains this rift in terms of Robespierre’s Rousseauian suspicion of wealth and his Mably-esque justification of dictatorship as a means to restore “strong democracy.” (There is a whiff of Carl Schmitt in Sonenscher’s reading of Mably). As for the sans-culottes themselves, they never make it into the picture in the first place, which is odd given that they were responsible for attacking Gorsas’s *Brissotin* presses in March 1793 (Terror was subsequently declared “the order of the day”) and for pressuring the National Convention into purging the *Brissotin*/Girondin deputies in June.

There are a few issues raised by the book that I would like to draw attention to, in the hope that Professor Sonenscher might elaborate on them. First, it might be worth clarifying the role of free trade in the Revolution. In his broad narrative, the failure of Physiocratic free-trade policies in the 1770s led to a renewed focus on using public debt to reduce property imbalances. But free-market principles persisted through the 1780s, expressed in the free-trade agreement with Britain in 1786, which Sonenscher says nothing about. Shortly after passing the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen in August 1789, the National Assembly passed

one of the most liberal trade measures to date, and the merits of free trade continued to be debated throughout the Revolution.<sup>[3]</sup> Yet, in his discussion of Feuillant-Jacobin wrangling in 1791-92, Sonenscher depicts the Feuillants as the stalwart defenders of pure free trade (p. 358). In fact, though, the *Brissotins* defended it as well, especially Clavière, whose ideas about public finance are otherwise discussed. The sans-culottes themselves were generally opposed to free trade, and the issue divided the *Brissotins* and the *Robespierrists* in 1793. Since free trade touches on the central philosophical concern Sonenscher deals with – namely, how to make property generally available – he might say more about how it fitted in with struggles over public debt and public assistance.

A second matter for discussion has to do with whether the legacy of Enlightenment ideas sufficiently explains the Revolution's radicalization. I suspect that Professor Sonenscher would say "no," given the judicious degree to which he incorporates contingency into his interpretation. For him, contingent circumstances (particularly the king's flight and the outbreak of war) drew out the latent tensions in Enlightenment thought. However, his overall approach, which prioritizes ideas about interests, leaves little room for exploring how interests inflected ideas, not to mention politics.

Third, it would be helpful if Professor Sonenscher would clarify why he so roundly dismisses class and sovereignty as keys to interpreting the French Revolution. "In the last analysis," he writes, "the concepts of class or sovereignty... seem to have little purchase on the events of the French Revolution" (p. 363). Yet his evidence strikes me as pointing to the opposition conclusion. Notwithstanding Albert Soboul's claim that the sans-culottes lacked class consciousness and Sarah Maza's more recent claim that the bourgeoisie did as well, Sonenscher identifies revolutionaries who were well aware that society was composed of classes with competing interests and competing political programs to secure them.<sup>[4]</sup> As for sovereignty, his study shows that the issue of determining who, specifically, would decide how property should be distributed was a central concern throughout the eighteenth century. Should this power be in the hands of a patriot king, an elective aristocracy, or the people? The great strength of Sonenscher's book, as I read it, is its comprehensive analysis of how contemporaries grappled with class (in the loose sense of the term) and sovereignty in thinking about how to make property generally available while allowing for, and justifying, a certain degree of inequality.

Finally, I would like to raise the question of whether Sonenscher's approach differs fundamentally from that of François Furet and Patrice Gueniffey, as he claims at the study's outset. They portrayed sans-culottes as "largely unwitting instruments of Jacobin dominated politics," (p. 1). Sonenscher says that he will tell a different story, but, in the end, it is much the same: revolutionary politics are shown to have been driven by ideas and categories produced at the top of society, not the bottom. Indeed, whatever else this book is about – and it is about many things, perhaps too many – it is not about the sans-culottes and the role *they* played in the French Revolution.

## NOTES

[1] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).

[2] Sonenscher provides useful descriptions of each of these alternative sources of morality. In discussing how contemporaries linked morality to language, he might have drawn on the work of Sophia Rosenfeld, which deals extensively with the subject, *A Revolution in Language: the problem of signs in late eighteenth-century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[3] On this topic, see Judith Miller, *Mastering the Market: The State and the Grain Trade in Northern France, 1700-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[4] Albert Soboul, *The Parisian Sans-culottes and the French Revolution, 1793-94*, trans. by Gwynne Lewis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964); and Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Charles Walton  
Yale University  
charles.walton@yale.edu

Copyright © 2009 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum, Volume 4, Issue 2 (Spring 2009), No. 3