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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 John Hardman.

I little thought, when I was asked to review Michael Sonenscher's *Sans-Culottes*, that the "real sequence of events that lay behind the transformation of the salon society joke from an emblem of urbanity into an emblem of virtue ...began" (pp. 285-86) with an event to which I have just devoted a book, Calonne's Assembly of Notables. The 'salon joke' concerned the practice of salon hostesses in the early eighteenth century of giving New Year presents of velvet from which their tame literary lions could make breeches (*culottes*)—hence the expression *sans culottes* to denote a writer without a *patronne*. The *Sans-culottes* (transformed from an adjective to a noun by the addition of a hyphen) were of course the politicized artisans who came to prominence in the year II (1793-94) of the Republic. Sonenscher, however, demonstrates that the term was first used in its transformed sense somewhat earlier, in the winter of 1791-92 by the Girondin Antoine-Joseph Gorsas as part of an attack on the constitutional monarchists known as the Feuillants. The Girondins were subsequently pursued, Acteon—like, by the newly christened *sans-culottes* during the insurrection of 31 May- 2 June 1793 when twenty-nine of their number were placed under house-arrest. To my mind Sonenscher does not convincingly demonstrate the relevance of the old joke about the breeches (as threadbare in 1791 as the articles in question) to Gorsas' strategy, let alone to Calonne's. But that is an obvious point which I leave to others to labour. The fact that Sonenscher devotes less than 5 per cent of his text to the *sans-culottes*—there are three inches of index reference to them as opposed to eleven to Rousseau and five to Mably—will irritate those who looked for an update on the work of Soboul *et al.* Rather, my purpose is to assuage such anger lest it blind readers to the rich seams of ore contained in this book. These seams are reached by shafts placed at unusual angles; the descent is difficult and at times well-nigh impossible. But the embedded nuggets of gold are worth the search.

These points can be made by a return to our and Sonenscher's *point de départ*, Calonne. I do not personally believe that there is much connection between Calonne and the *sans-culottes*, but, via a letter Calonne wrote to the poet Ecouchard Lebrun, providing material for an ode on the Assembly of Notables, Sonenscher argues that Calonne was an advanced patriot with a hatred of despotism, a man who believed that patriotism could not even exist "unless a nation also exists". Sonenscher is surely wrong, however, in claiming that Calonne argued that "Louis XIV's 'fatal ambition' had necessarily produced 'despotism as its offspring' during the reign of Louis XV" (rather than that of Louis XIV)—Calonne would hardly go so far as to forget his own antecedents and to characterize acts with which he had been so intimately connected as 'despotic'.[1]

Calonne's patriotism forms part of Sonenscher's general argument that for many *ancien régime* writers social equality could as easily be achieved under a monarchy as under a republic. Indeed

the recognition—which Mirabeau pointed out to Louis XVI—that equality would actually strengthen the power of the state first informed the opposition of the Notables to Calonne and, then, if I read Sonenscher correctly, persuaded the National Assembly that the diminution of the king’s prerogatives must precede the creation of a more equal society.[2] That there is no necessary link between republicanism and equality, which should be a truism, has so far been forgotten not only by modern historians, but also by the Revolutionary actors themselves that it now has to be presented as a paradox.

The heart of Sonenscher’s book is indeed a sort of anti-Whig version of the French Revolution. But it is not just a condemnation of winners’ history but the assertion that the winners themselves have assimilated far more from the losers than they would care to admit. As T.S. Elliot put it, referring to the English Civil War:

Whatever we inherit from the fortunate  
We have taken from the defeated  
What they had to leave us –a symbol.[3]

In this case, perhaps the symbol was a pair of embroidered *culottes* rather than the leather jerkin worn by the New Model Army, though the coinage of the Commonwealth was dubbed ‘breeches money’ because it depicted the *accolé* arms of England and Ireland in *culotte*-shaped shields.[4] (A corollary of this is that historians are not obliged to decide whether the violence of the later phase of the French Revolution was inevitable or circumstantial: the subterranean springs which fed the great river of blood could have been diverted or absorbed into gentler streams.)

And so Calonne’s reforms were assimilated into the Revolution, even as their exiled author was execrated. Sonenscher, however, has a singular take on the connection. Revolution rather than reform—*Revolution or Reform* would have made a more descriptive title for his book—indeed occurred in 1789 because in that year the king failed to live up to his patriotic promise of 1787. As Sonenscher describes matters:

The failure of the royal government to carry through the type of reform programme that ... Lebrun was instructed [by Calonne] to extol left the French National Assembly with the problem of finding a way to implement a programme of patriotic reforms without a patriot king. (p.288)

That programme was concerned with the creation of a meritocratic society. However the main patriotic act which Sonenscher requires of Louis was the declaration of a ‘virtuous bankruptcy’. And the opportunity to effect this occurred not with the opening of the Estates General in May but with the fall of the Bastille (which one would have thought ended the king’s chances of effecting anything). This failure to effect a bankruptcy “had something to do with Louis XVI’s character together with ministerial infighting” and fears for the reliability of the troops (pp. 285-86).

Sonenscher tends to translate *la banqueroute* as ‘bankruptcy’ *simpliciter* whereas it usually means a forced conversion (of the rates of interest on royal loans) such as the Bank of England perpetrated in 1931 and Terray in 1770. I agree that either form of bankruptcy would have been desirable—since the king was paying default rates of interest, why not default? But I have found no evidence that anyone within government circles contemplated it. Calonne characterized bankruptcy as ‘*meurtrière*,’ and Louis thought it immoral. As Munro Price as shown, the efforts of the Breteuil ministry, in office at the time of the fall of the Bastille, were directed not at mulcting the financiers but in persuading them to lend to the king.[5] Sonenscher, however, asserts (p. 378) that d’Angiviller, director of royal buildings, was “a

strong advocate of a patriotic coup against the nation's creditors in 1787 and 1788". If so—and I invite Sonenscher in his reply to provide the evidence for this—it is of the highest importance, since d'Angiviller was the intimate friend both of Calonne and the king and a vital link between the two.

These are the related themes which particularly engage this reviewer. Others I have found attractive are the most lucid exposition of the principles of the Physiocrats I have encountered and an illuminating discussion of why an English-style form of government was not adopted in France in 1789, and this despite strong advocacy by Mounier and the Monarchiens and, in particular, by the *de facto* prime minister, Necker. Necker had been secretly working for the adoption of the English model all his political life and in his speech at the opening of the Estates General let slip his preference for a bicameral solution to the struggle between the three orders.

Sonenscher attributes this failure to adopt the English model to the conflicting ideas of what the English system entailed—one only has to reflect on De Lolme's and Montesquieu's misconceptions concerning it. Another reason was what Rousseau characterized as the lack of social cohesion in France which could end up by strengthening the power of the state—presumably through the king's ability to play the discordant factions against each other—something of which Louis XVI was accused at the time and subsequently by historians. Or, as the future King Louis-Philippe put it, it was no accident that the French did not have an equivalent for the English word 'forbearance', that is not doing to another all that it is in your power to do. Short-term advantage took precedence over long-term solutions.

*Sans-culottes* covers a far wider range of themes than I am fully competent to discuss, being as it is a fusion between political (empirical rather than cultural) and intellectual history, in particular political thought. But I would direct readers to the central argument (outlined in the preface, p. x) and advise them to hold tight to it during the various perambulations on which they will be conducted: "The *sans-culottes* emerged ... when the long-standing antithesis between Gothic government and absolute government no longer made sense". Hitherto, say before 1787, absolute government was seen as the cause of progress. Calonne, for example, is full of contempt for the medieval detritus which clogged up the system. This assumption, however, began to be replaced by an older (classical Greek, specifically Cynic) "vision of a more republican an ultimately democratic set of social and institutional arrangements".

## NOTES

[1] My italics. Calonne simply says that ambition 'necessarily begets despotism' and must naturally be taken to refer to the reign of Louis XIV. Calonne to Lebrun, early 1787, in P.-D. Ecouchard Lebrun, *Oeuvres*, (4 vols, Paris, 1811), IV, 276.

[2] Mirabeau, 8<sup>th</sup> note for the court, 3 July 1790 in *Correspondance entre le comte de Mirabeau et le comte de La Marck*, ed. A. de Bacourt, (3 vols., Paris, 1851), I, 355.

[3] "Little Gidding," T.S. Elliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, (London, 2002), p.207.

[4] Whilst on the subject of the Civil War, Viscount Falkland was not Lewis Clary (p. 295) but Lucius Cary, an error perhaps stemming from two-way translation.

[5] M. Price, 'The "Ministry of the Hundred Hours": A Reappraisal', *French History* 4: 3 (1990): 318-339.

John Hardman  
john@hardman3911.freereserve.co.uk

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