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Michael Sonenscher, Ed., *Sieyès: Political Writings, Including the Debate between Sieyès and Tom Paine in 1791*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 2003. lxiv + 190 pp. Bibliography and index. \$12.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-87220-430-8.

Review by Paul Cheney, University of Chicago.

Michael Sonenscher's edition of Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès's political writings is, in effect, two substantial works in one. First, Sonenscher provides readers with a sorely needed English-language edition of Sieyès's work that goes beyond the frequently anthologized, but almost inevitably excerpted, "What is the Third Estate?" With the addition of two contemporaneous pamphlets ("Views of the Executive Means Available to the Representatives of France in 1789" and "An Essay on Privileges") as well as Sieyès's 1791 debate with Tom Paine, Sonenscher has crafted a scholarly resource that will remain a point of reference for some time.

Second, by way of an introduction to this well-translated and annotated edition, Sonenscher offers a lengthy, ambitious essay that, drawing on manuscript sources, gives a fresh and equally overdue perspective on Sieyès's political thought. Though this essay is probably beyond the reach of the average undergraduate who might be assigned Sieyès's texts, specialists in the field will find it stimulating and often surprising. With this edition of Sieyès's works, Hackett has proven once again that it is much more than a niche publisher of staid and inexpensive classroom editions of the classics in politics and philosophy. As readers of Hackett's editions of Bernard Mandeville (ed. E. J. Hundert), Edmund Burke (ed. J. G. A. Pocock), Niccolò Machiavelli (ed. David Wootton) and Charles-Louis Montesquieu (ed. Melvin Richter)--to name just a few--already know, Hackett is no country cousin to the higher profile series, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, but is also reshaping and reinvigorating the discipline of the history of political thought. Sonenscher's edition of Sieyès's political writings is no exception.

For obvious reasons, historians have sought to present Sieyès and his writings within the context of the French Revolution, and while Sonenscher does not ignore this dimension, he, like Pasquale Pasquino, sets Sieyès's thought within a larger, and still unfolding, history of liberalism.[1] While Pasquino finds in Sieyès the theorist of constitutional jurisdiction, a mechanism of power-sharing that has found broad application, particularly in the post-war European order, Sonenscher emphasizes Sieyès's search for a form of representative government suitable to advanced societies organized around the division of labor. Since the evolution of modern market society and the forms of government appropriate to it have a chronological scope and range of theoretical reference much broader than Sieyès's own career, which was confined to the French Revolution and its prodromes, Sonenscher rightly expands the scope of his own essay in order to capture this broader context and reflect it back onto the Revolution. The result, which draws on thinkers from Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes to Charles-Louis Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, and Jacques Necker, is a compelling synthesis that underlines, as so much of Sonenscher's recent work has tended to do, how inseparable the contextual history of political ideas has become from the economic thought of the period.

The centerpiece of Sonenscher's introduction is a discussion of the problem of representation. The outline of Sieyès's brief against France's political establishment is as well-known as his solution was radical and influential. France, a nation of people bound together--and, crucially, defined--by the material relations of work and exchange, was politically dominated and economically exploited by an alien elite enjoying noble privileges. Sieyès called for sovereignty to be transferred to the representatives of the true nation, the Third Estate, in the Estates General, which would then enjoy constituent power as the national assembly (p. 162). Subsequent events made Sieyès's decisive attack on noble privilege seem all the more prescient, but this success has left many commentators the task of explaining what appears to be the anti-democratic drift of Sieyès's later constitutional schemes, which were "designed to function as an immense filtering mechanism" (p. xxxi) replete with property qualifications, indirect election, and election from above. His participation in the Napoleonic coup of 18 Brumaire seems to complete the picture of a "man who both opened and closed the French Revolution" (p. xxxiv).

However, as Sonenscher argues, not only did Sieyès pass up earlier opportunities to collaborate against the Revolution, but his underlying views remain consistent throughout his career. From 1788 to 1799, on this account, Sieyès did not elaborate his complex ideas on representation in reaction to the excesses of Jacobin egalitarianism. Rather, from a very early point, Sieyès had in view a phenomenon that concerned all advanced commercial societies, which risked falling prey to the sort of despotism that could arise in both monarchies and republics from the growth of the fiscal military state, and the ballooning of the national debt. As David Hume famously observed in the mid-eighteenth century, the hypertrophy of governmental power through centralized control of taxation, borrowing, and spending threatened to “euthanize” political liberty even (or especially) under mixed constitutions. Sieyès’s solution was to install a series of checks that would limit the reach of legislative and executive power and submit their actions to the review of a constitutional jury. Of equal importance, given the need to provide a structural barrier against the despotic drift of modern fiscalism, he also envisioned distributing all fiscal functions among the several layers of representation in France’s new constitutional system. Otherwise, by funneling toward the state the growing wealth generated by an advancing division of labor, private citizens risked undermining both their social and political freedoms. Sieyès’s “science of the social art” sought to move beyond a purely political conception of the state in order to balance the unique claims of the public and private, the political and social, against one another.

Sonenscher brings these and other complex aspects of Sieyès’s thought together by moving deftly between unpublished archival material and the more well-known of Sieyès’s eighteenth-century influences. For example, Sonenscher makes subtle use of the infrequently cited later chapters of *De l’esprit des lois*, in which Montesquieu traces the relationship between private and public law in ancient Rome and medieval Europe. Sonenscher maps Montesquieu’s engagement in eighteenth-century debates over venality of office and the putative existence of “fundamental laws” onto the debates in which Sieyès was later enmeshed, and the result reciprocally illuminates both Sieyès and Montesquieu’s writings.

Among these generally successful attempts to trace the underlying logic of—and broader context for—Sieyès’s thought, one of Sonenscher’s claims seems particularly debatable. Throughout his essay, Sonenscher takes aim at historians (notably William Sewall) who detect either ideological fissures within and among Sieyès’s works or broad shifts in his politics over the revolutionary decade. By contrast, Sonenscher seeks to dispel the charge of logical or political inconsistency by taking his thought and career as the expression of a set of ideas he formulated in advance of the Revolution. Sonenscher persuasively demonstrates Sieyès’s precocious concerns over the excesses of the monarchies and republics and how the ideas on representation that resulted from them were adaptable in very different phases of the Revolution. But in so doing, Sonenscher underplays the importance of revolutionary events as a crucible of Sieyès’s political thought.

It is commonly believed, for instance, that Sieyès’s attempts, from the 1795 constitution onward, to restrain popular sovereignty through property qualification, indirect election, and consular tutelage were reactions to the Terror and, later, the instability of the Directory. Not so, on Sonenscher’s reading; well before the Revolution, Cassandra types all over Europe could be heard predicting the “decline and fall, leading to crisis, revolution and a despotic, highly militarized republican regime” (p. xxxvi). Sieyès’s thought was informed less by Jacobinism and the Terror of 1793-1794 than by eighteenth-century intimations of popular revolution: “[t]he Jacobin phase of the French Revolution may well have come after the Revolution of 1789, but in imaginative terms the Terror came first” (p. xxxviii). Even granting Sonenscher’s equation of Jacobinism with the Terror, the most systematic study of the climate of French opinion on the eve of the Revolution fails to substantiate this claim.[2] Indeed, that Sonenscher quotes the prolix Victor Riquetti, comte de Mirabeau (author of *L’Ami des Hommes*) in support of this point is enough to arouse suspicion, since any reader with the fortitude to work through Mirabeau’s oeuvre will find virtually every position and its opposite in triplicate.

What may have weakened Sonenscher’s case for continuity, but strengthened the otherwise comprehensive collection of texts that he presents, is the inclusion of some post-1792 speeches and unpublished fragments. Here, Sieyès registers an increasing fear and hostility toward popular sovereignty, which he sought to “return to its rightful confines.”[3] For Sieyès, the Jacobin Republic was a malignant inversion of monarchical sovereignty that obliterated the distinction between the public and the private. In Sieyès’s terms, the “ré-publique” swallowed the private sphere (ré-privé) and was thus transformed into a “ré-totale” that demolished order in both spheres. To be sure, these distinctions can be spotted in Sieyès’s earlier writings, but only by the lamp of these later, more urgent and clear formulations that were given impetus by the need to find appropriate constitutional machinery for a

revolution at sea. Sieyès had a long and varied revolutionary career that goes largely unmentioned by Sonenscher: first with his almost implausibly successful debut as revolutionary pamphleteer in 1788-89, later as a regicidal member of the National Convention, then diplomat, member of the Directory, and finally Consul under the regime he helped to install on 18 Brumaire. Surely it does not diminish Sieyès to believe that his revolutionary career and the career of the Revolution itself must have modified his views. While Sieyès's "ré-totale" bore some family resemblance to eighteenth-century criticisms of republicanism, the revolutionary *journée* and the dictatorship of virtue were historically novel phenomena that called up new responses.

This was certainly the case for political thinkers of that epoch such as Benjamin Constant and G. W. F. Hegel who, like Sieyès, believed that the events of the Revolution raised fundamental questions about the proper relation between the public and the private sphere, and between individual and collective forms of freedom, in modern commercial societies. Hegel and Constant also drew upon the eighteenth-century concepts and debates that we now know, thanks in no small part to Sonenscher's essay, informed Sieyès's own thought. But, however welcome these insights, the firm grounding in the eighteenth century and opening phases of the Revolution that Sonenscher gives us in his essay (and choice of texts) risks imparting what in my view is a false sense of continuity to Sieyès's thought and the larger history of liberalism to which this edition provides welcome access.

NOTES

- [1]. Pasquale Pasquino, *Sieyès et l'invention de la constitution en France* (Paris, 1998).
- [2]. John Markoff et al, *Revolutionary Demands: a Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (Palo Alto, 1998).
- [3]. Speech of 2 Thermidor, 1795, cited in François Furet, *Revolutionary France, 1770-1880* (London, 1992), 164.

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