Introduction to Sieyès’s Political Theory

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Throughout his lifetime, Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès¹ never had the leisure to systematize a coherent political theory. Working in the medium of pamphlets and speeches, he learned how to harmonize dispassionate analysis with fervent polemics. Sieyès’s body of work consists of a bundle of such papers, the results of a long education in political thought and philosophy. The most important of these papers are presented in this volume, along with a preface introducing the reader to Sieyès’s life, political theory, and the context of his writings.

Some Notes on Sieyès’s Political Biography

Both the beginning and the end of the French Revolution are linked to Sieyès. His passionate rallying of the Third Estate and his calculated appeal for the Estates-General to transform itself into a National Assembly are as well known as his conspiracy with Napoleon, whom he saw as the guardian of the Revolution, yet whose ‘will to power’ he underestimated. His political fate was interwoven with that of the Revolution. Before 1789, and after 1799, he was a political nobody, leading the life of a reclusive hermit, absorbed in philosophical studies that were not meant for the outside world; his was a contemplative rather than political existence. Unlike other prominent revolutionary campaigners who promoted the Enlightenment prior to the Revolution (such as the Marquis de Condorcet, who belonged to the circle of encyclopædists and held leading positions at the Académie des sciences and the Académie française) or who guarded the legacy of the Revolution during the Restoration (such as Benjamin Constant, one of the leading liberals of the French Vormärz), Sieyès’s political influence was singularly limited to the decade of the Revolution.

His life prior to the Revolution was marked by resignation in the face of social immobility in a corporatist, estate-based society. His youthful hopes for

an ascent in the church hierarchy, which had moved his father to allow the
talented pupil to pursue a religious career, proved to be illusory. In a letter to his
father dated June 1773, Sieyès openly expressed his disgust at the spoils system:
“I give as little credence to the promises of all those people as to the prophecies
of the almanac. But because I cannot do otherwise, I act as though I believe
them.” He offered a retrospective on the social confinement of his youth in an
autobiography that he wrote in the third person and published anonymously
in 1795:

It is not surprising that in this situation, which disagreed with his tem-
perament, he was stricken with a deep melancholy, accompanied by
a great, almost stoic indifference with respect to his own person and
future.

For Sieyès, the Revolution promised personal liberation from a life determined
by outside forces. His deep hatred for the aristocracy, which can be seen in
his polemical Essay on Privileges and What Is the Third Estate? (see text 1 of
this compilation), compelled him to advocate for the disenfranchised. When a
newly revised version of the Third Estate was published under his name for the
first time in May 1789—the text had been distributed as early as January, and
had been reprinted multiple times—, the bourgeois Estate in Paris selected
Sieyès as a representative to the Estates-General, an office that the clergy of
the commune Montfort-l’Amaury had denied him the previous March. The
sweeping success of Sieyès’s polemics, which stood out in a torrential flood
of late-1780s political pamphlets, stemmed from his unique zeal: the church-
man became an undisputed spokesman for the bourgeoisie even before the
session began. Like no other writer of his day, Sieyès united the visionary force
of a philosopher-legislator with the practical expertise of an administrative spe-
cialist. At once législateur and administrateur, Sieyès articulated a widespread
anger against the old elites that, like a magnifying glass, focused inchoate pop-
ular ressentiment into a conflagration that consumed the ancien régime in the
summer of 1789.

2 Octave Teissier (ed.), La jeunesse de l’abbé Sieyès. Documents inédits (Marseille, 1897), p. 8.—
Unless otherwise indicated, all French and German citations have been translated by the
editors.

3 Sieyès, Œuvres III, no. 36, p. 7 (‘Notice sur la vie de Sieyès, membre de la première Assemblée
nationale et de la Convention’).

4 Sieyès, Œuvres I, no. 1 (‘Essai sur les privilèges’).