

Emmanuel Sièyes, What Is the Third Estate?*

* Emmanuel Sièyes, *Qu' est-ce que le tiers état?*, ed. Roberto Zapperi (Genève: Libraire Droz, 1970), pp. 119-35. Trans. Philip Dawson.

Emmanuel Sièyes (1748-1836) came from modest origins in the small town of Fréjus on the Mediterranean coast, about sixty miles east of Toulon. His father was a collector of royal taxes and master of the postal relay station, one of thousands of petty officials in the bourgeoisie. The family name is pronounced “see-ez” or “see-ess.” Sièyes planned an administrative career in the Catholic clergy.

Though of humble origins, Sièyes eventually to enter the priesthood, which elevated him into the First Estate, this being the French clergy, numbering about 0.5% of the population. The Second Estate was the French nobility, constituting 2% of the population: “noblesse de robe” administered the law, while “noblesse d’épée” led the military and an unofficial “noblesse commerçante” engaged in mercantile activities. Defining the 97.5%, or the Third Estate, is the purpose of this pamphlet.

Sièyes would go on to decry the privileges of priests as well as nobles. His surviving manuscripts show indifference to religious feeling but a wide interest in Enlightenment writings on politics and economics. By 1788, at the age of forty, he had become a vicar-general of the diocese of Chartres and a judge in the high ecclesiastical court in Paris. At a few critical points in the French Revolution, he played a very important part. In the summer of 1789, for instance, he was the political theorist of the Third Estate in its struggle to establish a national representative assembly, and in 1799 he was a leading figure in the coup d’état that put Bonaparte in power. At the beginning of 1789, during the elections, his pamphlet What Is the Third Estate? was read and discussed all over the kingdom.

This made Sièyes, in effect, the Tom Paine of France. Always a political moderate, he survived the Reign of Terror by skillfully appeasing the more extreme revolutionaries. Beyond its immediate relevance to the time and place, Sièyes’s argument here has a lasting influence on modern thought: that “nations” are the core of political existence—that everyone must belong to a nation, or else be nothing—and that the nation constitutes the whole body of the people are now commonly assumed to be true. The term “sociology” was first coined by Sièyes, which would be a good way of classifying his attempt to produce a total theory of society.

The plan of this pamphlet is simple. We have three questions to consider.

1. What is the Third Estate? Everything.
2. What has it been until now in the political order? Nothing.
3. What does it ask? To become something.

The reader will see whether these replies are just. Until then, it would be wrong to describe as exaggerated, truths for which the evidence has not yet been seen. Afterward we shall examine the means that have been tried, and those that ought to be taken, in order that the Third Estate become, in fact, something. So we shall say:

4. What the ministers have attempted and what the privileged orders themselves propose in its favor.
5. What ought to have been done.
6. Finally, what remains for the Third to do in order to take the place which it should have.

Chapter 1. The Third Estate Is a Complete Nation

What is needed for a nation to subsist and prosper? Individuals' work and public functions.

One can divide all the work of individuals among four classes:

1. As the land and the water supply the raw material for the needs of man, the first class, in logical order, will be that of all the families involved in rural work.
2. From the first sale of materials until their consumption or use, another more or less numerous labor force adds to these materials an additional, more or less enhanced, value. Human industry thus succeeds in perfecting the benefits of nature, and the net product is multiplied by two, by ten, by a hundred in value. Such is the work of the second class.
3. Between production and consumption, as between the different stages of production, there are many intermediary agents, useful to the producers as well as to the consumers. These are the merchants and the brokers; the brokers who, ceaselessly comparing demand at different times and in different places, speculate on the profit of storage and transport; the merchants who ultimately carry out the sale, either at wholesale or retail. This kind of usefulness characterizes the third class.
4. Besides these three classes of hard-working and useful citizens who occupy themselves with the objects of use and consumption, a society also needs many varieties of personal services. This fourth class includes everything from the most distinguished scientific and liberal professions to the least esteemed domestic services.

Such are the kinds of work that sustain society. Who does them? The Third Estate.

Public functions, at present, can likewise be listed under four familiar headings, the Sword [military], the Robe [judiciary], the Church, and the Administration. It would be superfluous to go over these in detail to show that the Third Estate makes up 95 per cent of them but is assigned everything really unpleasant, all the burdens that the privileged

order refuses to carry. Only the lucrative and honorific positions are occupied by members of the privileged order. Shall we admire them for this? To justify doing so, it would have to be true that the Third Estate refused to fill these positions, or that it were less able to exercise the functions. The facts of the matter are no secret. Yet there is discrimination against the Third Estate. It has been told: “Whatever your services, whatever your talents, you shall go only so far; you shall not go further. It is not good that you be honored.”: Rare exceptions, intended and felt as such, are only a form of derision, and the language that is used on these occasions is yet another insult.

If this exclusion is a social crime against the Third Estate, if it is a real act of hostility, might one at least say that it is useful to the public good? Aren't the effects of monopoly well known? While it discourages those whom it excludes, isn't it well known that it renders less capable those whom it favors? Isn't it well known that all work from which free competition is excluded will be done worse and at higher cost?

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It suffices here to have shown that the alleged usefulness of a privileged order for public service is only a phantom; that without it everything unpleasant in that service is done by the Third Estate; that without it the higher positions would be immeasurably better filled; that those places would naturally be the fair share and the reward for talents and recognized services; and that if the privileged men have succeeded in usurping all the lucrative and honorific positions this is both an odious injustice for the citizens in general and a betrayal of the public good.

Who then would dare to say that the Third Estate does not have within itself all that is needed to form a complete nation? It is the strong and robust man with one arm still in chains. If the privileged order were removed, the nation would not be lesser, but greater. What is the Third? The whole, but a whole held back and oppressed. What would it be without the privileged order? The whole, but a whole free and flourishing. Nothing can go without it; everything would go infinitely better without the others.

It is not enough to have shown that the privileged, far from being useful to the nation, can only weaken and harm it; we must also prove that the noble order¹ is not in the social organization; that it can indeed be a burden for the nation but that it cannot be part of it.

First, among all the elements which make up a nation, it is impossible to know where to place the caste² of nobles. I know that there are individuals, in too great numbers, whom infirmities, incapacity, incurable laziness or the force of evil ways exclude from the work of society. Exceptions and abuses are outside the rules everywhere and especially in a vast empire. But it will be agreed that the fewer these abuses, the better ordered the state. The worst ordered of all would be that in which not only isolated individuals but a whole class of citizens derived its glory from remaining idle amidst the general activity and could consume the greater part of what is produced without having joined in any way in creating it. Such a class is certainly foreign to the nation through its inactivity.

The noble order is no less foreign among us by reason of its civil and military prerogatives.

What is a nation? A body of associates living under a common law and represented by the same legislature, etc.

Isn't it only too certain that the noble order has privileges and dispensations, which it dares to call its rights, separated from the rights of the great body of citizens? Thereby it moves outside the common order, the common law. Thus its civil rights already make it a people apart in the great nation. It is truly *imperium in imperio* [a state within a state].

With regard to its political rights, these also it exercises by itself. It has its own representatives, who are in no way empowered to act for the people. The body of its deputies sits apart; and when they assemble in the same chamber with the deputies of simple citizens, it is nonetheless true that its representation is essentially distinct and separate; it is foreign to the nation, first by its origin since its mission does not come from the people; and then by its purpose, since this does not consist in defending the general interest but a special interest.

The Third therefore includes everyone who belongs to the nation; and everyone who is not in the Third cannot regard himself as being of the nation. What is the Third? EVERYTHING.

Chapter 2. What Has the Third Estate Been Until Now? Nothing.

We shall not examine the state of servitude in which the people have suffered so long, nor the state of constraint and humiliation in which they are still kept. Their civil condition has changed; it must change further. It is impossible for the nation as a body, or even for any order in particular, to become free, if the Third Estate is not free. One is not free by reason of privileges, but by reason of the right of citizens, rights which belong to all.

If the aristocrats undertake to keep the people in a state of oppression and in exchange enjoy that very freedom of which they would thereby show themselves to be unworthy, one may ask by what right. If the answer is, by right of conquest, then it must be agreed that this is to go back rather far. But the Third ought not to fear going back to the remote past. It will go back to the year preceding the conquest; and since today it is strong enough not to let itself be conquered, its resistance will certainly be more effective. Why does it not send back to the forests of Franconia all those families which maintain the insane pretension that they are descendants from a race of conquerors and have succeeded to the rights of conquest?

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Let us pursue our purpose. We must understand the Third Estate to be the entirety of the citizens who belong to the common order. Everyone who is privileged by law, in any

way, stands outside the common order, is an exception to the common law, and consequently does not belong to the Third Estate. We have said: a common law and a common representation, that is what makes up one nation. It is only too true, certainly, that a person is nothing in France when he has only the protection of the common law. If he does not have some privilege, he must resolve to endure scorn, insults, and vexations of every kind. To prevent himself from being altogether overwhelmed, what remains for the unfortunate non-privileged person? The expedient of attaching himself by every kind of servility to a great noble; he buys, at the price of his morality and his human dignity, the possibility, on occasion, of depending upon someone important.

But it is less in its civil condition than in its relations with the constitution that we have to consider the order of the Third. Let us see what it is in the Estates-General.

Who have been its alleged representatives? Newly ennobled men or those with noble status for their lifetimes. These false deputies have not always even been chosen in free elections by the people. Sometimes in the Estates-General, and nearly everywhere in the provincial estates, representing the people is regarded as a right attached to certain positions or offices.

The nobility of old descent cannot tolerate the new nobles; it does not permit them to sit with it until they can prove noble status for four generations and for a hundred years. Thus it pushes them back into the order of the Third Estate, to which they obviously no longer belong.

In the eyes of the law, however, all nobles are equal, those ennobled yesterday as well as those who succeed more or less well in hiding their origin or their usurpation. All have the same privileges. Only public opinion distinguishes among them. But if the Third Estate is forced to submit to a prejudice consecrated by law, there is no reason for it to submit to a prejudice contrary to the text of the law.

Let them do whatever they want with the new nobles; it is certain that as soon as a citizen acquires privileges contrary to the common law, he is no longer in the common order. His new interest is opposed to the general interest; he is incapacitated to vote for the people.

This undebatable principle similarly excludes from representing the Third those who have lifetime status as nobles. Their interest is also more or less antagonistic to the common interest; and although public opinion puts them in the Third Estate and the law is silent with regard to them, the nature of things, stronger than public opinion and the law, unquestionably places them outside the common order.

Will separating from the Third Estate, not only those with hereditary privileges but also those who enjoy privileges merely for their lifetimes, weaken that order by depriving it of its most enlightened, most courageous, and most esteemed members?

It is far from true that I want to diminish the strength or dignity of the Third Estate, since in my mind it is always merged with the idea of a nation. But whatever the motive which

guides us, can we change truth into untruth? Because an army has had the misfortune to lose its best troops through desertion, must it still trust them to defend its camp? Every privilege is opposed to the common law: this cannot be too often repeated. Therefore all the privileged, without exception, form a class different from and opposed to the Third Estate....

Thus, either in the complete absence of elections, or in not having been elected by the general membership of the Third in the towns and countryside who had the right to be represented, or because as privileged men they should not have been considered eligible, the alleged deputies of the Third who have appeared up to the present in the Estates-General were not truly empowered by the people.

Sometimes surprise is expressed at the complaint that there is a triple aristocracy of Church, Sword, and Robe. It is thought that this is only a manner of speaking; but the expression ought to be taken at its face value. If the Estates-General is the interpreter of the general will and has, by this title, the legislative power, is it not certain that a real aristocracy exists where the Estates-General is nothing but a clerico-nobili-judicial assembly?

Add to this frightful truth that, in one way or another, all the branches of the executive power have also fallen to the caste which fills the Church, the Robe, and the Sword. A sort of spirit of confraternity or connivance brings it about that, in everything, the nobles prefer other nobles to the rest of the nation. The usurpation is complete; they truly reign.

Read history with the intention of examining whether the facts are in conformity or contradiction to that statement, as I have tried doing, and you will be sure that it is a very great error to think that France is under a monarchical regime. Remove from our annals a few years of Louis XI, of Richelieu, and a few moments of Louis XIV, when one sees only pure despotism, and you will think you are reading the history of an aulic [German court] aristocracy. It is the court which has reigned and not the monarch. It is the court which makes and unmakes, which appoints and dismisses ministers, which creates and distributes positions, etc. And what is the court but the head of that immense aristocracy which covers all parts of France, which through its members reaches everything and controls everywhere whatever is essential in all parts of the public business? And so the people are accustomed in their complaints to separate the monarch from those who wield power. They have always regarded the king as a man so surely deceived and so defenseless in the midst of an active and all-powerful court, that they have never thought of blaming him for all the evil that is done in his name. Finally, isn't it enough to open one's eyes to what is happening at this moment around us? What does one see? The aristocracy, alone, combating reason, justice, the people, the minister, and the king, all at once. The outcome of this terrible struggle is still uncertain; let the reader say whether the aristocracy is a phantom!

Let us summarize: up to the present the Third Estate has not had true representatives in the Estates-General. Thus its political rights are zero.

Chapter 3. What Does the Third Estate Ask? To Become Something.

Its demands must not be judged by the isolated observations of a few authors more or less well informed about the rights of man. In this regard, the Third Estate is still very backward, not only compared with the enlightenment of those who have studied the social order, but even compared with that mass of common ideas which forms public opinion. One can only appreciate the real demands of the Third by the authentic petitions that the great municipalities of the kingdom have addressed to the government. What does one see in them? That the people want to be something, and in truth the least that is possible. They want to have: (1) true representatives in the Estates-General, that is, deputies drawn from their own order, who are capable of interpreting their desires and defending their interests. But what would it serve them to attend the Estates-General, if the interest contrary to their own were to predominate there? They would only legitimize by their presence the oppression of which they would be the eternal victim. Thus, it is certain that they cannot come to vote in the Estates-General if they are not to have in it an influence at least equal to that of the privileged, and so they ask for (2) a number of representatives equal to that of the other two orders together. Finally, equality of representation would become perfectly illusory if each order had its separate vote. The Third therefore asks (3) that the votes be counted by head and not by order. That is all they amount to, those demands which seem to have alarmed the privileged; they thought that because of those demands alone the reform of abuses was becoming unavoidable.

The modest intention of the Third Estate is to have in the Estates General an influence equal to that of the privileged. I repeat, can it demand less? And is it not clear that if its influence there is less, one cannot hope that it will emerge from its political nullity and become something?

Notes:

¹I do not speak of the clergy. If you consider it as a body charged with a public service, it belongs to the social organization, since every public service is part of the government.... So, when I maintain that the clergy ought not to be an order, this is not to lower it beneath the nobility. It ought not to be an order because there ought not to be a distinction between orders in a nation. If one could allow them, it would certainly be better to grant this privilege to men who present the title of a sacerdotal election than to men who have only a baptismal record to sustain their pretensions. For one can indeed prevent a man without talent or without probity from entering the clergy; but can you prevent someone from being born?

²This is the right word. It designates a class of men who, with no function and no usefulness and only because they exist, enjoy privileges attached to their persons. From this point of view, which is the true one, there is only one privileged caste, the nobility. They are truly a people apart, but a false people which, lacking useful elements and so being unable to exist by itself, attaches itself to a real nation, like those tumors which cannot live except from the sap of the plants which they exhaust and desiccate.

Robespierre's Justification of the Use of Terror*

* "Robespierre's Speech on the Moral and Political Principles of Domestic Policy," in *The French Revolution*, ed. and trans. Philip Dawson, pp. 132, 134-36. Copyright (©1967 by Prentice-Hall, Inc. Published by Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 07632.

The political career of Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) began with the French Revolution and ended when he was guillotined by order of the National Convention on July 28, 1794. Until 1793 he was a completely consistent exponent of a liberal and democratic philosophy and a critic of those who exercised power. During the last year of his life, he exercised power himself, not alone but as a leader of the twelve-man Committee of Public Safety elected by the National Convention.

The committee formulated policy and directed the administration and the army against those who hoped to restore royal and noble power: the kings and the aristocracies of Austria, Prussia, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Spain and the counter-revolutionaries who waged civil war in the western and southeastern parts of France itself. In this period a critical point of dispute was how severe the revolutionary government should be, and Robespierre referred to this issue in his speech of February 5, 1794, from which excerpts are given here. Those who heard him were aware that in the five months from September, 1793, to February 5, 1794, the revolutionary tribunal in Paris convicted and executed 238 men and 31 women and acquitted 190 persons, and that on February 5 there were 5,434 individuals in the prisons in Paris awaiting trial.

But, to found and consolidate democracy, to achieve the peaceable reign of the constitutional laws, we must end the war of liberty against tyranny and pass safely across the storms of the revolution: such is the aim of the revolutionary system that you have enacted. Your conduct, then, ought also to be regulated by the stormy circumstances in which the republic is placed; and the plan of your administration must result from the spirit of the revolutionary government combined with the general principles of democracy.

Now, what is the fundamental principle of the democratic or popular government—that is, the essential spring which makes it move? It is virtue; I am speaking of the public virtue which effected so many prodigies in Greece and Rome and which ought to produce much more surprising ones in republican France; of that virtue which is nothing other than the love of country and of its laws.

But as the essence of the republic or of democracy is equality, it follows that the love of country necessarily includes the love of equality.

It is also true that this sublime sentiment assumes a preference for the public interest over every particular interest; hence the love of country presupposes or produces all the virtues: for what are they other than that spiritual strength which renders one capable of those sacrifices? And how could the slave of avarice or ambition, for example, sacrifice his idol to his country?

Not only is virtue the soul of democracy; it can exist only in that government

Republican virtue can be considered in relation to the people and in relation to the government; it is necessary in both. When only the government lacks virtue, there remains a resource in the people's virtue; but when the people itself is corrupted, liberty is already lost.

Fortunately virtue is natural to the people, notwithstanding aristocratic prejudices. A nation is truly corrupted when, having by degrees lost its character and its liberty, it passes from democracy to aristocracy or to monarchy; that is the decrepitude and death of the body politic....

But when, by prodigious efforts of courage and reason, a people breaks the chains of despotism to make them into trophies of liberty; when by the force of its moral temperament it comes, as it were, out of the arms of the death, to recapture all the vigor of youth; when by turns it is sensitive and proud, intrepid and docile, and can be stopped neither by impregnable ramparts nor by the innumerable armies of the tyrants armed against it, but stops of itself upon confronting the law's image; then if it does not climb rapidly to the summit of its destinies, this can only be the fault of those who govern it.

From all this let us deduce a great truth: the characteristic of popular government is confidence in the people and severity towards itself.

The whole development of our theory would end here if you had only to pilot the vessel of the Republic through calm waters; but the tempest roars, and the revolution imposes on you another task.

This great purity of the French revolution's basis, the very sublimity of its objective, is precisely what causes both our strength and our weakness. Our strength, because it gives to us truth's ascendancy over imposture, and the rights of the public interest over private interests; our weakness, because it rallies all vicious men against us, all those who in their hearts contemplated despoiling the people and all those who intend to let it be despoiled with impunity, both those who have rejected freedom as a personal calamity and those who have embraced the revolution as a career and the Republic as prey. Hence the defection of so many ambitious or greedy men who since the point of departure have abandoned us along the way because they did not begin the journey with the same destination in view. The two opposing spirits that have been represented in a struggle to rule nature might be said to be fighting in this great period of human history to fix

irrevocably the world's destinies, and France is the scene of this fearful combat. Without, all the tyrants encircle you; within, all tyranny's friends conspire; they will conspire until hope is wrested from crime. We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish with it; now in this situation, the first maxim of your policy ought to be to lead the people by reason and the people's enemies by terror.

If the spring of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the springs of popular government in revolution are at once *virtue and terror*: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so much a special principle as it is a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country's most urgent needs.

It has been said that terror is the principle of despotic government. Does your government therefore resemble despotism? Yes, as the sword that gleams in the hands of the heroes of liberty resembles that with which the henchman of tyranny are armed. Let the despot govern by terror his brutalized subjects; he is right, as a despot. Subdue by terror the enemies of liberty, and you will be right as founders of the Republic. The government of the revolution is liberty's despotism against tyranny. Is force made only to protect crime? And is the thunderbolt not destined to strike the heads of the proud?

...Indulgence for the royalists, cry certain men, mercy for the villains! No! Mercy for the innocent, mercy for the weak, mercy for the unfortunate, mercy for humanity.

Society owes protection only to peaceable citizens; the only citizens in the Republic are the republicans. For it, the royalists, the conspirators are only strangers or, rather, enemies. This terrible war waged by liberty against tyranny—is it not indivisible? Are the enemies within not the allies of the enemies without? The assassins who tear our country apart, the intriguers who buy the consciences that hold the people's mandate; the traitors who sell them; the mercenary pamphleteers hired to dishonor the people's cause, to kill public virtue, to stir up the fire of civil discord, and to prepare political counterrevolution by moral counterrevolution—are all those men less guilty or less dangerous than the tyrants whom they serve?

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