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Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution

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In 1722 a German travel-writer and political economist named Ernst Ludwig Carl published a three-volume *Traité de la richesse des princes et de leurs états: et des moyens simples et naturels pour y parvenir*. The book revealed the ?secret? of charging high prices for fashionable goods at the beginning of a product cycle and of cutting prices as soon as new products replaced them as the height of fashion. The secret was not originally French, being a major cause of the high living standards to be found in Holland and in England, but was increasingly associated with France and the growth of French economic power, exemplified by the Lyon silk trade, but more generally associated with an ever-increasing list of *marchandises de Paris*. The policy was seen to have derived from specialization within so much of French industry, not just in the production of goods but also in their distribution. In the case of textiles, fashion dolls appeared everywhere once new styles had been determined upon. Although the resulting goods that arrived in Amsterdam, for example, might have become the desires of yesteryear at Paris, they were nevertheless prized and purchased wherever they were newly introduced. The benefits of this economic process were extensive. Significantly, they were deemed as much moral and political as economic.

Fashion directly produced wealth. It lessened social concern about the negative consequences of goods for luxury as opposed to the positive benefits of goods for necessity. At the end of each product cycle, the

former were transmuted into the latter as prices fell, spreading wealth to the lower orders in the process. Fashion linked the industrious of the nation together in interdependent productive networks. These networks relied upon civility and politeness in order to function successfully. In international markets, fashion created similar bonds of interest, and accordingly fostered peace and toleration between nations. In the case of France, the belief was widespread that the higher profits generated in the growing luxury-product sector of the economy led to greater expenditure on the necessities of life, increasing agricultural prices in consequence and leading to the further development of the manufacturing sector that supported farms and farming. The only danger perceptible to non-French observers was that France might use its increasing resources to become the dominant state in European politics. The warning was uttered that if France took an imperial step it would ultimately be at the expense of its own economic success.

The 18th-century justification of a commercial society that was a product of the development of fashion and the accompanying polite arts such as music, dance and poetry ? deemed the original and potentially most pure bonds of human association ? is the starting point and central theme of Michael Sonenscher?s *Sans-Culottes*. The book is the richest and widest-ranging intellectual history undertaken of the early years of the French Revolution. Sonenscher?s book is unlike all others on the subject, eschewing Albert Soboul on the montagnards, for example. It is path-breaking in seeking to relate the ideas of the supporters of the *sans-culottes* to 18th-century arguments about politics, political economy, religion and philosophy. Unlike almost every study to date, it seeks to refute those who perceive a necessary link between the *sans-culottes* and modern democracy, statehood or nationalism. Rather, it situates the creation of the enduring republican emblem in arguments about the changing nature and likely future of France, and about the relationship between justice and politics in a world where public credit had altered the majority of political and economic relationships. The peculiar fact, Sonenscher claims, is that the aim of restoring the ideals of ancient republicanism that the *sans-culottes* represented came about as a consequence of speculation about the economics of public credit.

The first claim of the book is accordingly that in order to understand the meaning of the term *sans-culottes* during the French Revolution, we have to reconstruct the intellectual languages of the time, and eschew the 19th-century philosophies of history that pigeonholed the *sans-culottes* within a story of emerging modernity, in doing so misunderstanding the ideas that lay behind many of the most significant events of the 1790s and beyond. The first response of any reader to this book has to be that every one of its various arguments is complicated (the latter term will be used several times in this review), because Sonenscher speculates not only about the meaning of a text for its author, but also the very different uses to which texts and phrases were put by various interested political constituencies and commentators. The term ?sans-culottes? began as a salon joke: those without breeches were men of letters who had failed to be given *culottes* as an annual present on New Years Day by the society hostess Madame de Tencin during and after the Regency. Many early *sans-culottes* were cynics, and attacked the female-dominated salons as representative of the dominion of a corrupt and useless court over all virtue and justice. During the French Revolution they became republicans because of the belief that a just society could be created that was based on merit and industry rather than privilege and property. Sonenscher?s book, like Gibbon?s *Decline and Fall* , puts a premium on the operation of unintended consequences.

Some readers will be put off by a seeming lack of clarity. One review to date praises the fact that Sonenscher knows ?how much of the moral and political thought of the period before 1789 was blotted out by the events of the French Revolution?, but comments critically that when Sonenscher uses the terms ?politics and economics?, ?he mostly means texts about those subjects, not political events and economic policies?.(1) I?m not sure how it might be possible to envisage political events and economic policies without reference to texts, but the review goes on to state that focus upon ?thought? prevents Sonenscher from telling us ?what replaced [the French Revolution] or why the revolution permanently recast the terms of such debates. For that, the philosophies of history conceived in the French Revolution's wake remain invaluable?. In fact Sonenscher has done exactly the opposite. By bringing 18th-century ideas to the fore ? the ideas that inspired the events of the time ? he convincingly refutes interpretations that relate events to social class, social status or presumed social antagonisms, purportedly timeless issues of liberty and justice, the logic of particular

constitutions in politics, or the necessary process of societal evolution. 18th-century thought fascinates because the categories employed are largely recognisable, while many of its authors questioned the new worlds of commerce and public credit that they faced, without any of the simplistic assumptions and superficial analysis that characterize so much of our own public sphere. Sonenscher restores the seriousness of French revolutionary argument, if in doing so he makes the Revolution difficult to define as a single event or series of events of world-historic significance.

If *Sans-Culottes* is a book about the development and likely consequences of commercial society in the 18th century, the observant reader might ask whether we?ve not been here before? Only two years ago Michael Sonenscher published the widely applauded *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution*.(2) *Before the Deluge* detailed the range of controversies that resulted in the crisis of 1789, and precisely delineated the intellectual world of the Abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyes, who persuaded the French to embrace his version of national sovereignty rather than variants upon North American federalism or British constitutionalism. Sonenscher also dealt in *Before the Deluge* with the consequences of this vision of national sovereignty, after Sieyes ceased be responsible for it, for Europe?s state system, and the complicated legacy of the global wars that raged almost uninterrupted, from 1792 until 1815. In his version of the representative system Sieyes followed Hobbes and Rousseau in arguing that political constitutions had to be erected on the assumption of unsocial sociability: the worst men were devils, the most virtuous man behaved amorally in certain circumstances, and this perspective upon human nature had to be basis of all politics. Nature was unlikely to be improved upon. Alternative schemes for progress, entailing domestic reform and sometimes promising international peace, derived by contrast from the presumption that humans could be moral, polite and sociable in particular circumstances, and especially where certain cultural forces could be found. The argument of the protagonists in *Before the Deluge*, such as Sieyes himself and influential acolytes like Pierre-Louis Roederer, was that those who erected reform projects upon strong forms of sociability were doomed to create the very evils they intended to avoid. They placed their faith in the erection of a representative system based on graduated elections, which was possible in France because of the bankruptcy faced by the existing absolute government.

The intellectual history sketched out in *Sans-Culottes* is altogether different from *Before the Deluge*, and Sonenscher describes it as the reverse of the medal. If 1789 for actors like Sieyes was about creating a constitution and society that was capable of dealing with the dark side of human nature, and of restoring French greatness in the process, different visions of reform had come to the fore by the time that the National Assembly was persuaded to abolish titles, feudal dues, and tithes. Sieyes and his ilk were criticized on the grounds that it would take at least a decade to establish the tried and tested representatives of the people who were the product of a graduated electoral system. Sieyes? opponents in the Autumn of 1789 shared the view that the patriotism of the French people, in circumstances where debt-finance stimulated the economy and put an end to the financial crisis, was sufficient to found a new politics in France.

Sonenscher is brilliant on the political thought of the Feuillants, led by Barnave, Duport and the Lameth brothers, who were so successful in getting rid of feudalism, in preventing a royal veto, in nationalizing the property of the church, and in establishing a land-based paper currency. He is equally path-breaking in his portrayal of Etienne Clavière?s attempts to use credit to create a moralized society, a project which lay behind the political thought of the Brissotins. In the fifth chapter of *Sans-Culottes* Sonenscher provides the most convincing account of the nature of the ideological divisions of 1789?91, and reveals in the process how substantial but stark the options were for those who had accepted the necessity of transforming a monarchy, had seen the patriotic king option fail, and now sought to create a bedrock for future politics based on the financial transformation of the state. In traditional histories the most important kind of sociability capable of generating patriotism is usually described as the direct involvement of the people in politics. The vision of elected leaders of the people making laws before sovereign citizens, present *en masse* in the galleries of the Legislative Assembly, was called democracy by contemporaries, and has remained integral to any definition of the French Revolution. Sonenscher?s great achievement is to show that the turn to popular politics was forced upon the Brissotins, whose first ministry was known as the ?sans-culotte ministry?, by the collapse of tax revenues in the wake of emigration, the collapse of France?s colonial

empire, and the fall in the value of the *assignat*. The unintended consequences of the politics of necessity show how radical republican and democratic ideas came to be dominant in a state that was derided as among the most autocratic in Europe, and which had attempted an explicitly anti-democratic revolution in 1789. The sheer scale of the problems faced, the extent of the clash of patriotic visions, and the sense of continually being forced to find support for a new kind of state that had been so secure an absolute monarchy, in turn explains why the predictions of Hobbes and his disciples, including Sieyes, proved to be so accurate: that a democratic state would quickly succumb to anarchy and civil war.

Simplistic histories have followed the view of those contemporaries who considered the French Revolution to be an apocalyptic event, and considered it to have been inspired by the arch-enemy of contemporary Christianity and of Christian polities, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is certainly the case that numerous major and minor historians have identified the Jacobins and the Girondins as authentic Rousseauistes, on the reasonable grounds that they venerated the person, moral example and writings of Jean-Jacques. Sonenscher shows that none of the historians who straightforwardly link Rousseau and revolution can have read Rousseau?s writings, the general tenor of which was at odds both with what occurred in 1789 and in 1792?93. Modern commentators have failed to understand in consequence that the republican cosmopolitans of the early years of the French Revolution had a singularly complicated relationship with Rousseau. The basic point, which was self-evident to intelligent 18th-century readers of Rousseau, was that the leaders of the popular turn of events in France self-consciously were seeking to refute and to move beyond Rousseau?s view of Europe?s states, and his view of France more especially.

Rousseau made the claim, most famously in the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les homes*, that commercial society was an oxymoron. Elsewhere, but most baldly in *Emile*, he predicted the collapse of the supposedly civilized but actually corrupt and despotic commercial societies of Europe. Led by France but followed by Britain, the resulting deluge would cause the continent to experience anew barbarian invasions from the east. The only reform strategy that had any likelihood of success was to turn the great states of Europe into small patriotic republics, in which more basic forms of commerce might thrive, and which, when confederated, would have the military prowess to throw back the imperial surges of the oriental despots. Sonenscher claims that all of our histories to date have failed to reconstruct the intellectual world of the leaders of the revolution in 1792 and 1793, those who accepted Rousseau?s diagnosis of the ills of states like France, but rejected in absolute terms his prognosis for the future.

Sonenscher is the kind of intellectual historian who believes that descriptions of the ideological context of political argument best reveal the intentions behind particular writings about politics. He is equally of the opinion that 21st-century categorization of the subjects of historical enquiry, by separating the political, the economic, the religious and the philosophical, serve to obscure our vision of 18th-century intellectual landscapes. In the 18th century an argument about politics entailed, in order to convince, engagement with its likely consequences for devotion and the life to come, for morals, for wealth, and sometimes for happiness. Sonenscher?s remarkable achievement has been to reconstruct all of these arguments and their interrelationships. The aspiration is to construct an intelligible image of the late 18th-century French mind. This has echoes of Paul Hazard?s *La Crise de la conscience européenne* (1935), but Sonenscher?s notion of context is infinitely thicker than Hazard?s. In many respects it is infinitely richer too. To get a sense of what is meant by this it is useful to give an example of Sonenscher?s style of writing and analysis. This brings us back to Ernst Ludwig Carl?s *Traité de la richesse des princes*.

In Sans-Culottes Sonenscher notes that Ernst Ludwig Carl had been inspired by the prominent contemporary commentators on the rise of French power Pierre de Boisguilbert and the abbé de Saint-Pierre, both of whom were protégés of Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle. Fontenelle was partly responsible for the widespread Cartesianism of the age, in a form that dovetailed with Ciceronian moral philosophy. The message of each with respect to the passions was more optimistic than the contemporary Jansenist Augustinianism that has attracted much historical commentary. Pierre Nicole is often seen as the archetypal Augustinian, and important because of his portrayal of commercial society as being based on the most amoral passions, which were transmuted by self-love into forces for a defensible common interest. Sonenscher?s point is that Nicole moved towards Cartesianism late in life, and this signified a more generous assessment of the possibilities of

grace for all humanity, far greater optimism about the existence of morality in the modern world, and confidence about a commercial future for the states of Europe founded upon the passions associated with the development of the arts. This complicated claim is best put in Sonenscher?s own words, as they characterise the sweep and style of *Sans-Culottes*:

> ? Pierre Nicole, towards the end of his life, had abandoned some of his earlier Augustinianism, mainly because he began to have doubts about whether the concept of ?efficacious grace? that loomed so large in Jansenist soteriology could be reconciled with any idea of human choice and, by extension, with any coherent view of divine justice unless it was matched by some explanation of the human capacity to follow the laws of nature by finding something motivating in what was right and good. Humans, Nicole pointed out (in his *Traité de la grace générale* of 1715), have the physical power to cast out their own eyes or cut off their own noses, but almost never actually do so. Something, therefore, had to explain why they used their physical powers in ways that they found attractive or pleasing. Without an explanation of this more than straightforward physical ability, it was difficult either to explain the justice of divine retribution for human sinfulness or to avoid the conclusion that ?efficacious grace? worked in purely arbitrary ways. Nicole, accordingly, began to move nearer to the kind of aesthetic motivation involved in both Ciceronian and Cartesian moral theory, describing what he took to be the universal human capacity to find something pleasing in what was right and good as a ?universal? or ?general grace? made available by God to all humans. Its existence (exemplified, Nicole argued, by the kind of imperceptible thoughts that occur when one is reading a work of imaginative fiction) made it easier to see why it was not always necessary to know, in any strong sense, in order to love. This, in turn, made it possible to explain why humans were able to observe natural laws without having any fully formed concepts of what they might be, and why their failure to do so was all the more rightly imputable (inversely, however, the idea of general grace seemed to imply that humans were not, naturally, sociable, a view that, according to his horrified Jansenist critics, made Nicole?s revised position look alarmingly like Hobbes, while the stronger emphasis upon human choice involved in the idea of general grace meant, according to the same opponents, that he has also, inadvertently, opened a door to the heresy of Pelagianism) (pp. 96?7).

This paragraph illustrates the extent to which Sonenscher wants to return his audience to what mattered to 18th-century authors, steeped as they were in theology, when they discussed whether commercial society was stable, whether it could be morally justified, what its impact was upon morals and morality, politics and constitutionalism, whether it was a force for peace, what its necessary relationship was with the public credit that so often appeared to sustain politics in commercial states, and whether it was compatible with Christian doctrine? In providing an overview of such studies Sonenscher shows what has been missed by historians of the French Revolution, encompassing, as he puts it, ?Ciceronian decorum, Cynic moralism, Rousseau?s cultural and political criticism, Fénelon?s vision of a flourishing society, Ogilvie?s property theory, Bonnet?s and Lavater?s vitalism, Edward Young?s enthusiasm, John Brown?s civilization theory, [John] Law?s and Leibniz?s intellectual legacies [and] Mably?s disabused moral and political realism.? To this could be added the politics of army reform and the ideas of a thousand important but neglected political theorists and actors, from Gorsas to Garat: a guide to all of whose varied writings can be found in *Sans-Culottes*.

The author is grateful to Richard Whatmore for his fine review, and would like to refer readers to his H-France reply [2] to his reviewers there.

Notes

1. Lynn Hunt, ?All talkers and no trousers??, *Times Higher Education*, 5 February 2009 <Back to (1)

2. Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 2007).Back to (2)

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