

---

H-France Forum, Volume 4, Issue 2 (Spring 2009), No. 5

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.

Response Essay by Michael Sonenscher, King's College Cambridge, to the review essays of his book by John Hardman, Thomas E. Kaiser, Charles Walton and Johnson Kent Wright.

Perhaps the easiest way to begin a reply to this array of thought-provoking comments is to start with the two factual questions raised by John Hardman. The first concerns the comte d'Angiviller, while the second concerns Charles-Alexandre de Calonne. Answering them is a good way into the questions set out by Thomas E. Kaiser and Charles Walton about the relationship of the sans-culottes to Robespierre, Saint-Just and the Jacobin leadership in 1793 and 1794 and, more broadly, about the similarities and differences in their respective moral values, economic priorities and political visions. Answering their questions is, in turn, a helpful entry point to the questions about eighteenth-century versions of ancient moral and political thought and about the politics of the ancient constitution raised by Johnson Kent Wright.

John Hardman asked whether I had any evidence that the comte d'Angiviller was, as I put it, "a strong advocate of a patriotic coup against the nation's creditors in 1787 and 1788" (p. 378). I made the claim on the basis of a remark by d'Angiviller in the autobiographical fragment entitled *Episodes de ma vie* that was published posthumously in 1906. There, in the context of a more wide-ranging diatribe against Jacques Necker and Necker's daughter Germaine de Staël, and after an endorsement of Jean-Baptiste Colbert's views on the dangers of government borrowing (thus making a very different evaluation of Colbert from Necker's own *Eloge de Colbert*), d'Angiviller wrote that if, instead of "the flaccid sensibility of a sister of charity (*soeur grise*)", it had been decided to employ "the firm and courageous sensibility of the surgeon", then, "if blood would have flowed, and there is no doubt that blood would have flowed, the purest would not have been spilt."<sup>[1]</sup> The remark is certainly retrospective, and there is also no reason to assume that d'Angiviller was thinking about applying the surgeon's knife solely to the royal government's creditors rather than to its political opponents as a whole, but, as Hardman himself points out in relation to the Terray-Maupeou dominated events of 1770-71, the two courses of action were not mutually exclusive. The phrase "patriotic coup" was designed to cover both eventualities.

Hardman also writes that I argue 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'." This is a rather odd rendition of my summary of Calonne's advice to the poet Pons-Ecouchard (or "Pindar") Lebrun about what to say in an ode about the forthcoming assembly of notables in 1787. Calonne's advice was advice about rhetoric, not a disclosure of his own moral or political views, and my purpose was simply to describe the content of that advice, not to claim any knowledge of Calonne's own opinions, still less to make an argument about whether or not he might have been "an advanced patriot". Rhetoric was not new in 1787, and it is usually possible to distinguish its content from the opinions of the rhetorician, as was the case here. Keeping the

focus on rhetoric also makes it easier to see why, whatever his allegiances might have been at the time of the Maupeou coup, it was not as unlikely as Hardman seems to think for Calonne to have suggested that presenting Louis XVI as a patriot king would have entailed making some critical comments about Louis XIV and Louis XV, which was what “Pindar” Lebrun proceeded to do.

Although Hardman does not mention it, the object of this rhetorical exercise was to describe Louis XVI as a reincarnation of Henri IV, the standard French model of a patriot king, as part of the royal government’s efforts to persuade the notables to endorse Calonne’s reform proposals. As an exercise in persuasion, this was not an obscure or surprising undertaking (Robespierre tried to do something similar in 1789, even if he gave the idea of a patriot king a rather different content).<sup>[2]</sup> The fact that Louis XVI did not - or could not - act as a patriot king (either for reasons arising from the Dutch revolt in 1787 or, a year or so later, from the disaffection in the upper reaches of the army) does not make the idea historically irrelevant either to the events of 1787-89 or to the longer sequence of events involved in Napoleon Bonaparte’s rise to power (one example of its continuing relevance was a pamphlet entitled *La voix du citoyen* published in 1789 by another Lebrun, this time Charles-François, that was reissued in 1814 to underline the prescience of its predictions).<sup>[3]</sup> It is not hard to find evidence connecting the idea of a patriot king to a royal debt default, most obviously in the works of the writer who gave the phrase ‘patriot king’ its eponymous quality in the eighteenth century, Henry St John, viscount Bolingbroke (his French translator, the comte de Grimoard, was also part of Louis XVI’s circle). As Hardman says, defaulting on a debt did not have to entail cancelling all interest payments (apocalyptic political speculators like the marquis de Mirabeau or the comte de Guibert might have thought that it did, but more realistic commentators, like Arthur Young, were fully aware of the political potential of a partial debt default). Nor, of course, was it likely to have been the most immediate political option (hence Calonne’s initial appeal to patriotism), but it was still a course of action that was readily associated with the idea of a patriot king.<sup>[4]</sup>

Part of the point of *Sans-Culottes* was to show that many of the egalitarian and meritocratic concerns usually associated with the sans-culottes were once associated with the idea of a patriot king. But Brissot, Mercier and their political allies did not, of course, favour a royal debt default. Instead, they argued that the deficit itself could be the means to reach something like the same egalitarian objectives as those associated with the idea of a patriot king. This, it has to be emphasized, does not mean, as Thomas Kaiser seems to suggest, that the book’s argument is a kind of mirror-image of the more familiar argument about the relationship between the Enlightenment and the Terror but with, say, Fénelon, Law, and Mably, rather than, say, Voltaire and Rousseau starring in the putatively visionary roles. Instead, one of the aims of the book was to try to avoid that sort of circularity by showing that many of the things that came to be associated with the sans-culottes were initially associated with a range of subjects - like eighteenth-century discussions of the nature and properties of fashion, the relationship between the ancients and the moderns, the properties of public credit, the legacy of John Law’s system, the origins and nature of the so-called English constitution, or the idea of a patriot king itself - that cannot be found in the causally streamlined and strongly outcome-oriented starting points of the established historiography of the French Revolution, whether marxist or revisionist. By highlighting the radical lack of fit between subjects like these and the political force that the sans-culottes became, my aim was to open up more room for the historical explanation that I tried to set out in the fifth chapter of the book.

Part of that explanation, and part of the answer to the questions raised by Kaiser and Walton, was simply chronological. Established historiography has usually associated the sans-culottes with the expulsion of the Girondins from the Convention in May-June 1793, the campaign to

establish the Parisian and provincial *armées révolutionnaires*, popular demands for the imposition of a maximum on prices and, more broadly, with the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution in 1793-94. As I tried to show, the chronology was rather different. This was why the most immediate point of describing how the sans-culottes got their name was to explain why it made sense for the ministry formed by Jacques-Pierre Brissot's political allies in the spring of 1792 to be called, as it sometimes was in the early nineteenth century, the sans-culotte ministry. The chronological point was, however, part of a broader argument. This, firstly, was that Robespierre and the Jacobins of 1793-94 took over, hijacked, or simply picked up the pieces from, something that was already in existence well before the existence of the first French republic and, secondly, that they also gave it a content that was rather different from anything envisaged by Mercier, Gorsas or Brissot. It is certainly worth asking, as both Kaiser and Walton have asked, which of the three verbs is the right one, and it may well be the case that another verb altogether is more appropriate. But before deciding on which verb fits best it is still necessary to know what, to begin with, the sans-culottes were.

The initial claim of the book was, therefore, that whatever the sans-culottes were supposed to be or do was already in existence in 1792, independently of Robespierre, Saint-Just and the Jacobin leadership of 1793-94. It may be understandable, but it is still not quite right to say, *pace* Charles Walton, that "there are no revolutionary sans-culottes in the study" because the historical point of *Sans-Culottes* was to suggest that there was in fact rather more to the phrase 'revolutionary sans-culottes' than modern historiography has assumed. One of the aims of the book was to describe the mixture of vitalist natural philosophy, Cynic satire, Christian morality and Fénelonian political economy that can be pieced together from the works of Mercier, Gorsas or Brissot and, at the same time, to show how much of it arose in reply to the moral and political problems raised by the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.[5] One of the several possible subtitles of the book that I considered was "the revolution against the state" because it helped to highlight the concern with culture without politics that, I wanted to show, was the hallmark of sans-culottisme in its original guise, and which is still part of modern moral and political (or anti-political) thought. Finally, however, the connection to Mme de Tencin and eighteenth-century salons tilted the balance in favour of the title I chose. It did so too because shifting the chronology backwards to bring the events and the explanation into historical alignment made it easier to explain the emergence of the sans-culottes without having to refer either to the circumstances of artisans and small shopkeepers (*pace* Soboul) or to the way that a culture of democratic political sociability filled the void left by the demise of absolute royal sovereignty (*pace* Furet). There may in short still have been "revolutionary sans-culottes" in the French Revolution, but they may not have been who or what we thought they were.

The argument of *Sans-Culottes* was, therefore, that the political force that came to be called the sans-culottes emerged for more contingent historical and political reasons than either marxist or revisionist historiographical approaches have been able to accommodate (I have argued elsewhere that the two approaches actually have rather more in common than polemical appearances suggest).[6] These reasons, I tried to show, arose from the gradual disintegration of a broad patriot consensus in favour of using the assignat and deficit finance to promote a mixture of political stability and social equality, against the inegalitarianism imputed both to Mounier and the Monarchiens on the one side and to Sieyès and Mirabeau on the other (as Tom Paine argued, the American continental currency was a precedent). As it disintegrated in 1791, especially after the flight to Varennes, the massacre of the champs de Mars and the sequence of hotly disputed elections of the later summer and autumn of 1791, one (Brissotin) side of that earlier consensus began to argue that, without the availability of the tax revenue supplied by either the empire or the émigrés, the one remaining pillar of the new regime had to be the people. This, as I tried to show, was the political context in which the sans-culottes got their name and, if this is right, asking questions about the relationship between the sans-culottes and

the Jacobins (here meaning Robespierre and his political allies) amounts to beginning in midstream.

In trying, however, to deal with that question in chapter six of the book, I took my cue largely from contemporary conceptual vocabulary, with its many, often historiographically unacknowledged, echoes of the system of emergency government of republican Rome. The committee of public safety, for example, was simply the name of the committee established by the French Convention to enforce the old Roman republican maxim, *salus populi suprema lex esto* (the safety of the people should be the supreme law) because, as the other Roman maxim put it, *necessitas non habet legem* (necessity has no law). I was particularly concerned, however, to emphasise the state of affairs that arose after the revolution of 10 August 1792, when there was, *de facto*, a republic, but no constitutionally specified system of republican government. Instead of claiming (pace Furet) that this state of affairs was a product of a putative culture of democratic sociability, I argued that it was, instead, something that contemporaries described as a *de facto* democracy because this, according to Rousseau, was what a government would be before the sovereign established a constitutionally elected government (Rousseau, to avoid confusion, was not a democrat). In this conception of democracy, the emphasis fell not so much on the relationship between rulers and ruled (and the attendant problem of mandated versus representative political decision-making) as on that between citizens and magistrates and, specifically, on the overlap between the two roles. Taking my cue again from contemporary conceptual vocabulary, I simply repeated Saint-Just's argument that, in conditions in which every citizen was potentially a magistrate and in which, because of the maximum and wartime requisitioning, every magistrate had considerable economic and political power, it was essential to maintain the integrity of the magistracy. In this sense, I tried to argue, the Terror was aimed in the first instance at the magistracy and was designed, by way of the panoply of measures adopted by the Convention, to ensure that they used their economic and political power in ways that were compatible with the *salus populi*. Here, I also tried to argue, if Rousseau's characterisation of a sovereign without a government as a *de facto* democracy supplied the starting point, Mably's harsh characterisation of the politics of necessity under what he described as conditions of luxury supplied the strategy. On this basis, I took the Terror to be rather less of a "ram-shackle affair" than Kaiser suggests.

One reason for the distressingly large amount of whirring and clanking that preceded this argument is that I had to go quite a long way upstream to reach what seemed to me to be the appropriate starting point. I can only apologise for this aspect of *Sans-Culottes* and its effect on readers' powers of endurance. As Kaiser rightly says, I am certainly not the first historian to have written about eighteenth-century discussions of public debt. But I think that I have paid rather more attention to the surprisingly large number of positive late eighteenth-century evaluations of John Law and his system than other historians have done, as well as to the rather odd descriptions of Montesquieu as a covert Harringtonian that sometimes accompanied them. Although, apart from Sir James Steuart or Tom Paine, the names of those, like James Rutledge, Frédéric Herrenschand, François-Jean-Philibert Aubert de Vitry, Charles Casaux or William Ogilvie, who made such ambitious claims about the transformative powers of public debt are now known only to a small number of specialists, the content of the claims themselves throws so much new light on so many aspects of moral, political and economic thought after Rousseau that going quite a long way both up and downstream was, in my view, worth the journey.

Part of the journey involved finding out more about eighteenth-century discussions of the relationship between public debt and the so-called "English constitution". For obvious reasons, the subject was discussed more fully and continuously in Britain than in France, but, as I tried to indicate, it spilled over into a French setting in a number of interesting ways with a translation of an anonymous pamphlet entitled an *Essay on the Constitution of England* that was

published in 1764. I was not aware until after the publication of *Sans-Culottes* of the existence of a long and judicious review of the pamphlet that was published in 1765 in the *Gazette littéraire de l'Europe* (edited, intriguingly, by the ubiquitous Jean-Baptiste Suard).<sup>[7]</sup> Its appearance in this journal, together with the reviewer's emphasis on the pamphlet's intellectual debt to James Harrington and David Hume, provides a fuller explanation of what seems to have been a durable French interest in its argument (reinforced, perhaps, by the possibility that its author was the Francophone political economist Isaac de Pinto). The argument of the pamphlet itself may go some way towards answering Kent Wright's question about the part played by the idea of an ancient constitution in the emergence of the sans-culottes, at least as Mercier or Brissot construed the term. Its emphasis on modern public finance, rather than, as with British Old Whigs, the attributes of the ancient constitution as the basis of modern British political stability, makes it easier to see why ancient constitutionalism may not have had much political mileage in the deficit dominated political context that came into being in France after 1789. Where ancient constitutionalism mattered, it did so alongside modern public finance and discussions of its properties and powers. Thus, the type of republican government recommended by Jacques-Pierre Brissot's friend David Williams involved a real mixture of ancient politics (here modelled on the old Saxon system of government) and modern economics (supplied by Sir James Steuart's evaluation of the effects of public debt).

Going upstream to reach what seemed to me to be the appropriate starting point did not, despite the several gestures towards Diogenes and Cynic philosophy, mean going all the way back to the ancient world. Instead, it meant beginning with what Rousseau called "the masterpiece of policy of our century", or the cluster of arrangements and forms of behaviour underpinning the parallel, but still different, conceptions of monarchy that could be found in the works of Voltaire and Montesquieu. This, rather than ancient philosophy as such, was the context in which I suggested that "in a remote yet still a real sense, the sans-culottes could be described as the product of Cynic criticism of Ciceronian moral philosophy, as both were construed in the eighteenth century" (p. 26). As Kent Wright says, we still have a great deal to find out about the uses to which ancient philosophy could be put in the eighteenth century. But it is equally important to remember how little we also know about the many different types of context in which ancient philosophy was used and how many of these were theological rather than historical in a purely secular sense (whatever 'historical in a purely secular sense' means). Here, as well as endorsing Wright's remark about the parallel work of Keith Baker and Marisa Linton, it is worth recording my debt to Robert R. Palmer's very first book on *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* and, more broadly, to a great deal of what was written about both Rousseau and the French Revolution in the United States before and immediately after the Second World War.

Perhaps the most open-ended way of ending this reply is to take Rousseau's assessment of "the masterpiece of policy of our century" at its face value. One of the aims of *Sans-Culottes* was to show how hard Rousseau tried to think his way through to an alternative and how difficult it turned out to be to find one. I tried to describe the connection between the very first sans-culottes and one putative alternative, with its emphasis on culture without competitiveness and reform without centralised state power. In this alternative, the transformative power of modern public finance would eventuate in a world of nations, without states, and in real social distinctions, but without rich and poor. I have tried to suggest that there were many others (*Before the Deluge*, with its focus on Montesquieu and Sieyès, or the idea of a monarchical republic rather than a republican monarchy, dealt with one) and that we are likely to learn a great deal more about the politics and history of the nineteenth century if, as Reinhart Koselleck once suggested, we try to follow the mixture of continuity and discontinuity all the way through the French Revolution to 1848 and beyond. I hope that we can.



## NOTES

[1] The passage runs: “Et cela [referring to Necker’s behaviour on the day of the royal session of the Estates-General on 23 June 1789], je l’ai vu, vu de mes yeux, et si l’on m’en eût cru et qu’au lieu d’une molle sensibilité de sœur grise qui compatit, plaint et console, on eût employé la sensibilité courageuse et ferme du chirurgien qui, sourd aux cris de la douleur, ne voit que le mal, tranche et guérit, si du sang eût coulé, et il en eût coulé sans doute, mais le plus pur n’aurait pas été versé.” Louis Theodor Alfred Bobé (ed.), *Efterladte Papirer fra den Reventlowske Familiekreds I Tidsrummet 1770-1827*, 10 vols. (Copenhagen, 1895-1931), 7: 202-04 (202-03 for the passage cited here).

[2] Michael Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes. An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 281-82.

[3] On Lebrun, see Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 31-32, and the further literature cited there.

[4] For one example, centred on Henri IV’s virtuous minister, Sully, see Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, *Hommes à célébrer, pour avoir, en ces derniers âges, mérité de leur siècle et de l’humanité, relativement à l’instruction politique et économique*, 2 vols. (n. p. 1789). For further examples, see Michael Sonenscher, “The Nation’s Debt and the Birth of the Modern Republic: the French Fiscal Deficit and the Politics of the Revolution of 1789”, *History of Political Thought*, 18 (1997): 64-103, 267-325 (particularly pp. 279-86).

[5] A further example of the affinity (or overlap) between Christian moral realism and eighteenth-century versions of Cynic philosophy can be found in the anonymous *Diogène à Paris* (Paris, 1787). As its epigraph announced, it was intended to present “de rudes censures, des préceptes, des exemples et des éloges d’hommes vertueux”. In substance, however, it amounted to an unusually detailed set of Christian charitable recommendations aimed at a very particular array of Parisian economic and social problems. Right at the outset its author made a point of indicating the book’s similarity to the works of Bailly on Parisian hospitals, Parmentier on Parisian water supply and, more generally, to Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris* as well as his *L’an 2440*.

[6] Michael Sonenscher, “The Cheese and the Rats: Augustin Cochin and the Bicentenary of the French Revolution”, *Economy and Society* 19 (1990): 266-74.

[7] *Gazette littéraire de l’Europe*, 5 (March-May 1765): 242-53, 285-95. On the pamphlet, see Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes*, pp. 308-15.

Michael Sonenscher  
King’s College, Cambridge University  
ms138@cam.ac.uk

Copyright © 2009 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither

bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum, Volume 4, Issue 2 (Spring 2009), No. 5