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Oliver W. Lembcke and Florian Weber, eds. *Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès: The Essential Political Writings*. Leiden and Boston: Brill Studies in the History of Political Thought, 2014. xiii + 204 pp. 99€ (cl). ISBN 978-90-04-27399-3.

Review by Richard Whatmore, University of St. Andrews.

Justice and freedom on earth appeared to be within touching distance at the beginning of the 1790s. Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès had joined the clamor for political reform in France with the publication of his *Views of the executive means available to the representatives of France in 1789* (*Vues sur les moyens d'exécution dont les Représentants de la France pourront disposer en 1789*) and his *Essay on privileges* (*Essai sur les privilèges*), both of which were published at the end of 1788. His greatest work, *What is the Third Estate?* (*Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat?*) followed in January 1789. It was among the most influential pamphlets in history, and akin to Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) in its consequences. Sieyès' plan for revolution was largely followed in the first half of 1789. In defining the nation as a union of productive elements of society, Sieyès had assembled an argumentative armory that justified the uniting of the three orders gathered in the Estates General, that demanded the creation of a political system expressing the interests of those who labored, that redefined the role of the monarch and outlawed aristocracy. As such, Sieyès is rightly considered the chief architect of the first French Revolution.

Sieyès, those close to him recognized, truly was a revolutionary. He had a vision of an altogether altered world. When Etienne Dumont met him at Paris, he knew that he was encountering genius, someone who "led the leaders." [1] Dumont saw immediately that Sieyès' doctrine of national sovereignty was something new in politics ("so bold a step has no example in history"). But he was also afraid of the man. This was not because he was an ogre or a bully; rather, the opposite. Sieyès was timid, lacked a powerful voice, and was overwhelmed by other people in debate. His failure to carry his ideas through to their logical conclusions was what really scared Dumont. Rather than acknowledging that his ideas were republican in their assault upon monarchy, Sieyès presented himself as an opponent of republican doctrines as they developed after the summer of 1791. Sieyès believed in mixed monarchy, but did not think that he had anything to learn from the British. This made no sense at all to the Anglophile Dumont. He felt that Sieyès was too arrogant in imagining a new form of government without properly reflecting upon the only free state in the Europe of the time. As Dumont lamented in his posthumously published *Souvenirs sur Mirabeau*, "I believed that this friend of liberty must certainly love the English, and in this I felt on my own ground. I was surprised, however, to find that he saw all the parts of England's constitution as fakery designed to be imposed upon the people. It appeared to me that he listened with pity when I described the elements of this constitution, the mutually-supporting balances, the veiled limits [upon power], and the masked but clear dependency upon one another of each of the parties that contributed to law-making. The influence of the throne was to his eyes only venality, and all the opposition merely a branch of the court. The only element of English practice that he admired was the jury system, but he did not understand it, and like all the French had come to false conclusions. It was manifest that he considered the English to be children in the matter of constitution-building, and was sure that he could give a much superior constitution to France." Dumont blamed Sieyès for the constitution of 1791. It was "...a genuine monster, being too much of a republic for a monarchy, and too

much of a monarchy for a republic. The King was an *hors-d'oeuvre*; he appeared everywhere, but had no real power.”[2] In consequence, Dumont also blamed Sieyès for the Terror.

There has been an upsurge of interest in Sieyès' political thought in recent years. Part of this is due to the publication of many of Sieyès' manuscripts in outstanding editions by Christine Fauré, Jacques Guilhaumou and Jacques Valier.[3] It is also because of the work of Michael Sonenscher, whose various writings on Sieyès, especially in his monographs *Before the Deluge* and *Sans Culottes*, are better than anything else we have had to date.[4] The editors of this nicely presented volume in the well-known Brill series, Oliver Lembcke and Florian Weber, justify the contents of another English edition by presenting a wide range of Sieyès' writings through the 1790s, from *What is the Third Estate?* to the debate with Paine about the idea of a republic to the final *Constitutional Observations* of 1799. The latter presented the idea of a monarchical republic with a grand elector who resolved disputes and appointed executive consuls. This was a fitting culmination to a decade of innovative ideas conceived to prevent the excesses of dictatorship or democracy. Some of Sieyès' political thoughts were straightforwardly remarkable. One was the proposal that only those who had served in a political office could stand for a higher office, establishing a hierarchy of elected officials, and in theory ensuring that only those who were capable of serving and dedicated to the public good would end up in the highest offices, including that of the elected monarch. We get a sense of Sieyès' singular political imagination at work against a background of revolutionary turmoil.

Lembcke's and Weber's edition is a highly useful book, and especially for students of political theory interested in the proposals Sieyès presented in order to put an end to the Revolution, and more particularly the idea of a constitutional jury or guardian capable of maintaining order. The editors do an excellent job in providing a highly readable and informative introduction to the book. A summary of Sieyès' political thought is presented that will be invaluable for those coming to this author for the first time. There is also an impressive bibliography of the secondary literature and an overview of the ideological context. The Sieyès who emerges is as he is seen by numerous students today: someone who should be read in a liberal tradition, contrasted with Rousseau and related to Constant, Kant, Mill, Isaiah Berlin, and John Rawls. This leads us to the Sieyès problem. Here was a political theorist as political actor, venerated more by his contemporaries than comparable authorities, and frequently finding himself not just having influence but enjoying power. Sieyès was not just the author of the first Revolution itself, he was involved in the Directory and in the attempts to save it, splendidly summarised in the speeches included in this collection. He was also the author of the consular constitution that brought Bonaparte to power.

The problem is that Sieyès always turned his back on politics when people disagreed with him or refused to put his projects precisely into practice. He did this initially in the autumn of 1789, angered by the civil constitution of the clergy. He did it for good reason just before the Terror in order to avoid arrest and likely execution. The same thing happened when he was appointed director and refused to take up the post. Finally, he allowed Bonaparte to pay him off. The great opponent of aristocracy was made a baron under the empire and a member of *légion d'honneur*. Granted extensive lands by Bonaparte, he retired to the country, moving in turn to Belgium in 1815 because of fears that he would be prosecuted for regicide. Throughout these times he did not take up his pen again or address the public. Sieyès is the only political theorist who stopped writing for the final thirty-six years of his life.

Does this matter? Can Sieyès be blamed for the failure of the French Revolution? It is important to be reminded of the tenor of the times. Bitter disillusionment followed the outbreak of terror. Many contemporaries who had dedicated themselves to the revolutionary project and aspired to create a better world wanted nothing more than to have their faith restored. The success of the French Revolution was the hope of humanity for a world based on morality and universal rights. The elongated transition to complete disillusionment is nowhere better illustrated than in the 1805 text of William Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Wordsworth worked on the poem of the development of his own mind from 1798 until his

death. It was posthumously published in 1850, and included an account of his residence in France from 1791 until just before the September massacres. Wordsworth had wholeheartedly embraced the Revolution. His description of the bliss he felt “at that dawn to be alive” became famous after it appeared in 1809 as *The French Revolution, as it Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement*. By 1804, however, Wordsworth had changed his mind. As he later put it, after “Bonaparte had violated the independence of Switzerland my heart turned against him.” The French had evidently “abandoned the struggle for liberty, gave themselves up to tyranny, and endeavoured to enslave the world.” In the tenth book of the *Prelude*, he described his revulsion at the outbreak of war between Britain and France. His revolutionary ardor initially placed him on the French side, which he was certain was that of humanity. Like Thomas Paine, Jacques-Pierre Brissot and so many others, he blamed the British ministers for exacerbating extremism at Paris. War meant that “Tyrants, strong before/In devilish pleas were ten times stronger now/And thus beset with Foes on every side/The goaded Land wax’d mad; the crimes of few/Spread into madness of the many, blasts/From hell came sanctified like airs from heaven.” He admitted to being elated at French victories when “The Herculean Commonwealth had put forth her arms/ And throttled with an infant Godhead’s might/The snakes about her cradle.”

Wordsworth’s ultimate response to the problem of the French Revolution was a gradual turn to Toryism, entailing the veneration of Edmund Burke, a fear of reform and ideas about rights, a general opposition to popular movements, and outright rejection of any kind of democratic upheaval. The response of Sieyès was silence. Dumont could not forgive him. Sieyès had had the capacity to shape the Revolution, but always gave up. For Dumont, this was because Sieyès was a genius at political theory rather than political practice. His ideas could be discussed and debated, but they were ultimately a species of political utopia, and proven as such by the history of their non-adoption during the revolutionary decade. Sieyès’ writings, remarkable as they are, are instructive as an education in the history of political failure rather than as a contribution to the on-going attempt to create a liberal polity.

## NOTES

[1] Dumont to Samuel Romilly, 1 June 1789, J.-M. Paris, “Lettre inédite d’Étienne Dumont sur quelques séances du Tiers État (May 1789),” *Mémoires de la Société d’Histoire et d’Archéologie de Genève* XIX (1877), p. 16.

[2] Étienne Dumont, *Souvenirs sur Mirabeau et sur les deux premières assemblées législatives*, ed., J.L. Duval (Paris: Charles Gosselin, 1832), 62-64, 339-340.

[3] Christine Fauré, with the help of Jacques Guilhaumou and Jacques Valier, *Des manuscrits de Sieyès: 1773-1799* (Paris: Honore Champion, 1999); Christine Fauré, with the assistance of Violaine Challéat, Jacques Guilhaumou, and Françoise Weil, *Des Manuscrits de Sieyès, tome II, 1770-1815* (Paris, Honoré Champion, 2007).

[4] Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Sonenscher, *Sans-culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

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