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Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. x + 415 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. ISBN-13: 978-0-691-12499-5 (hb).

Review by Henry C. Clark, Canisius College.

The subtitle of Michael Sonenscher's book calls to mind at least two different, and separate, historical problems. First, there is the vexing question of the fiscal crisis of the 1780s: its origins and structural features, and its effect in triggering the convocation of an Estates-General in 1789.<sup>[1]</sup> Second, there is the problem of pinpointing with precision the relationship between the Enlightenment ideas circulating through the eighteenth century and the programs of social and political action that suddenly burst forth in 1789.<sup>[2]</sup>

In fact, however, *Before the Deluge* has little to do with either of these strands of scholarly investigation. Instead, the work is virtually pure Cambridge-school—which is to say, it is serious in intent, sophisticated in conception, and energetic in its coverage of a multitude of secondary literatures and its pursuit of the often unfamiliar byways and swirling cross-currents of financial, political, social and moral debate in eighteenth-century France. At its best, the book is a tour de force of state-of-the-art intellectual history.

Sonenscher accepts the proposition of revisionists such as François Furet and Ran Halévi that political discourse in France was already remarkably radical in 1789,<sup>[3]</sup> and one of his main purposes in the book is to explain why this was the case (p. 10). His answer hinges on the overlooked place of public debt in commentators' expectations about Europe's, and France's, probable future.

In Sonenscher's view, the age of reason was caught in the grip of a very distinctive passion—the fear of systemic collapse in the ramshackle structure of the modern commercial economy and debt-based, war-making state, a structure whose novelty he thinks has been underestimated by later commentators. In reflecting upon the relationship between these economic and political-strategic elements, eighteenth-century observers tended to engage in thought-experiments, or forward-looking projections of the probable consequences of maintaining the system as a whole. Sonenscher argues that the extended conversation and debate involving figures such as David Hume, James Steuart, Mirabeau, Montesquieu, and Sieyès did much to shape the political imagination of the generation of 1789. In these foreshadowings, he finds, “the terror came first” (p. 26), a fact that has been obscured by the royalist, counterrevolutionary appropriation of these sorts of dire forebodings in the early nineteenth century.

The English incarnation of this debate, centered on a remarkably alarmist essay by Hume and the more sanguine intervention a few years later by Steuart, is familiar to scholars mostly through an essay by Sonenscher's Cambridge colleague Istvan Hont, frequently referred to in this book.<sup>[4]</sup> Part of Sonenscher's achievement is to report on what turns out to have been a quite lively and extensive exchange in France on the broad ramifications of a modern, credit-based regime. Pursuing this thread leads him to offer fresh insights on a range of topics, such as: that Montesquieu's definition of monarchy is designed as a response to Law's attempt to found prosperity upon state credit (p. 120); that while

some commentators, such as Hume, saw modern state credit as leading to despotism through its effective ownership of all subjects' property (p. 7 and *passim*), others such as Chastellux and Necker in the 1770s, Paine and David Williams in the 1780s, saw that system in more hopeful terms as a better method than ancient agrarian laws of addressing systemic problems such as inequality (pp. 256-57, 299, 302); that the well-known dispute over the grain trade between Necker and Turgot in the 1770s was at bottom a dispute over the debt question (p. 308); and many others.

One of the avenues by which the concern over state debt shaped the fears and expectations of the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary generations was through its effect on constitutional discussion, especially concerning the French monarchy. Here, Sonenscher claims that because the debate over that monarchy (especially after Montesquieu) included a debate over the role of private property and inherited privilege in the evolution of modern institutions, and because the debate over public debt included disagreement over the probable fate of property in a regime ever more dependent upon extensive lines of credit, the constitutional debate was more closely connected with the fears arising out of public debt than has been recognized by most historians. Here, the author reconsiders the constitutional arguments of Fénelon, the Jansenists, Voltaire, and especially Montesquieu and his readers. (pp. 3, 119, 130-31, 146, 149, 159, and *passim*). The arguments Sonenscher makes along this thread will sometimes be familiar to readers of his recent articles.<sup>[5]</sup> They include a lengthy and illuminating consideration of the implications of monarchical foundations for the concept of representation, which turns out to be considerably more complex than normally assumed.

The third prong of Sonenscher's enterprise is inequality. Here, his purpose is to offer an account of the eighteenth-century pre-revolutionary and revolutionary debates different from the familiar one that hinges on the cyclical process of empire, luxury, inequality, corruption and fall. Instead, he suggests, an overlooked "threat to power and prosperity" was posed by "the new financial instruments and fiscal resources that had accompanied the transformation of warfare during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (p. 6). Instead of the familiar Rousseauian critique of modern inequality, Sonenscher focuses on the variety of ways that contemporary observers after Montesquieu agreed with his general acquiescence in the inevitability of inequality in a modern society, while experimenting with different ways of shaping, channeling and combining the inescapable hierarchies with the new fiscal and constitutional demands of the modern state.

All three of these roads lead eventually back to the constitutional proposals of Abbé Sieyès. "Much of the content of this book," the author tells us, is dedicated to fleshing out, and reconstructing the prehistory of, Sieyès' own representative scheme of government—and to suggesting that its overlooked proposal for parallel and graduated hierarchies is designed to solve the amalgamated fiscal and constitutional problems of modernity diagnosed before him (p. 17). Against a tendency to dismiss the worldly *abbé* as a bourgeois ideologue, Sonenscher makes a sustained and persuasive case that Sieyès' complex and ongoing constitutional enterprise was a serious attempt to address previous treatments of social, constitutional and financial problems, such as Montesquieu's elaborate definition of monarchy or Rousseau's constitutional proposal for Poland, among many others (pp. 15, 17, 76, 89 and *passim*). The discussion of Pierre-Louis Roederer as a kind of interpreter of Sieyès' place in this longer tradition for the revolutionary generation is one of the contributions Sonenscher makes along these lines (pp. 71-73, 333 and *passim*). And after the Revolution, the political economist Jean-Baptiste Say's argument that sustained productivity improvements in a widely diversified economy without privileged sectors (such as agriculture in the Physiocrats' scheme) emerges in a new light as a partial answer to the array of constitutional and fiscal questions left over from his predecessors—a reflection that reminds one of Angus Maddison's finding that real per capita GDP in Western Europe has grown by a factor of fifteen or so since 1800.<sup>[6]</sup>

The overall aim of Sonenscher's analysis is to combine the "political" and the "social" interpretations of the Revolution itself in a way that has not been done before (p. 20). Whatever readers may end up

thinking about this claim, it is at least clear that the book offers myriad connections and surprising discoveries to which a short review can scarcely begin to do justice.

It must be said that Sonenscher is not always his own best advocate. His chapters are few and very long. The connections within and between them are not always obvious. The principle of organization, which is not chronological, is not entirely clear. His many novel suggestions are sometimes muffled by a reluctance to frame them in an optimally illuminating context, or to elaborate them in a way designed to carry conviction. One example is his claim that “Although Physiocracy is often associated with a strong bias towards agricultural development, it is actually more appropriate to apply the association to Forbonnais and the Gournay group” [i.e., Vincent de Gournay, Intendant de Commerce, 1752-59] (p. 181). This is an intriguing suggestion but is nonetheless too undeveloped to be persuasive. In his commendable attempt at breadth of coverage, too, Sonenscher provides more of a European and less of a distinctively French version of the fear of systemic breakdown than he could have.[7] And by basing his book on the optimistic assumption that the ability of the modern democratic state, with its stable stream of deficit financing, to commit itself indefinitely to a robust regime of both guns and butter is a more or less settled achievement (pp. 17, 93, 371)—rather than, say, pointing to the anxiety felt in many modern states about their mountains of long-term entitlement liabilities—Sonenscher needlessly divests his book of a measure of current resonance that it might otherwise have had.

But in the broad sweep of such a remarkable book, these demurrals, some of which will be familiar to readers of Sonenscher’s earlier and justly influential works, [8] are mostly quibbles. *Before the Deluge* is at bottom a supremely learned and forcefully engaged contribution to topics of vital interest to a wide audience of eighteenth-century French specialists, and one whose analyses and arguments consistently take place at a very high level of sophistication. Even in an age of praise inflation, it is not excessive to call this one essential reading.

## NOTES

[1] A few of the markers in this literature are Marcel Marion, *L’Histoire financière de la France depuis 1715*, 6 vols. (Paris: A. Rousseau, 1914-28); John Bosher, *French Finances: From Business to Bureaucracy, 1770-95* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); James C. Riley, *The Seven Years War and the old regime in France: the and financial toll* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985); Gail Bossenga, “The Patrimonial State, Markets and the Origins of the French Revolution,” in Kevin L. Cope, ed., *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: AMS Press, 2005).

[2] Some of the key sources are Daniel Mornet, *Les Origines intellectuelles de la révolution française (1715-1787)* (Paris: A. Colin, 1934); Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

[3] See François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elbord Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981 [1978]), and François Furet and Ran Halévi, eds., *Orateurs de la révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

[4] Hume’s “Of Public Credit” first appeared in 1752, and Steuart’s *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy* in 1767; see Istvan Hont, “The Rhapsody of Public Debt: David Hume and Voluntary State Bankruptcy,” in Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 321-48, repr. in Hont’s *Jealousy of Trade* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 325-53.

[5] See especially “Republicanism, State Finances and the Emergence of Commercial Society in Eighteenth-Century France—or from Royal to Ancient Republicanism and Back,” in Martin Van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2:275-91, and his long introduction to *Sieyès: Political Writings* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2003).

[6] Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective* (Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001), 264, Table B-21; see also Maddison, *The World Economy: Historical Statistics* (Paris: Development Centre of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003).

[7] For an exception, see p. 300 on Chastellux’s view that the transition from civilian to military occupations was “particularly acute in France;” more typical, it seems to me, is his treatment of Fénelon on p. 255 as a commentator on “modern political societies” rather than on the court of Versailles with which he was so intimately familiar.

[8] See especially *The Hatters of Eighteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and *Work and Wages: Natural Law, Politics, and the Eighteenth-Century French Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

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