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ABBÉ DE SIEYÈS

What Is the Third Estate?

(1789)

Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836) came from a middle-class family in provincial France. Son of a notary, he studied at the Sorbonne, and sought a career in the Church, where his talents caused him to rise rapidly in the Catholic hierarchy. Nevertheless, he found that his modest origins hampered his career. Sieyès saw in the French Revolution an opportunity to end the noble privilege that had blighted his own prospects. He championed the interests of the commoners—the third estate—and achieved considerable fame and political influence as a result. He was elected to the National Assembly and voted for the execution of the king. Sieyès's political effectiveness dwindled, however, because of his quarrelsome personality. He did remain at the center of the turbulent events of the 1790s and was instrumental in planning the coup that brought Napoleon Bonaparte to power in 1799. Ironically, Napoleon rewarded him with a title of nobility, and thereafter Sieyès faded into the background. Exiled from France for 15 years after Napoleon's fall, Sieyès did not return to Paris until he was near the end of his days.

What Is the Third Estate?, a pamphlet published in January 1789, posed one of the central questions of the Revolution. In it, Sieyès argued that only the underprivileged majority of the nation had the right to reform the French constitution. Government did not belong to the king—it was the prerogative of the people.

The plan of this pamphlet is very simple. We have three questions to ask:

1st. What is the third estate? Everything.

2nd. What has it been heretofore in the political order? Nothing.

3rd. What does it demand? To become something therein.

We shall see if the answers are correct. Then we shall examine the measures that have been tried and those which must be taken in order that the third estate may in fact become *something*. Thus we shall state:

4th. What the ministers have *attempted*, and what the privileged classes themselves *propose* in it favor.

5th. What *ought* to have been done.

6th. Finally, what *remains* to be done in order that the third estate may take its rightful place.

The Third Estate Is a Complete Nation

What are the essentials of national existence and prosperity? *Private* enterprise and *public* functions.

Private enterprise may be divided into four classes: 1st. Since earth and water furnish the raw material for man's needs, the first class will comprise all families engaged in agricultural pursuits. 2nd. Between the original sale of materials and their consumption or use, further

workmanship, more or less manifold, adds to these materials a second value, more or less compounded. Human industry thus succeeds in perfecting the benefits of nature and in increasing the gross produce twofold, tenfold, one hundredfold in value. Such is the work of the second class. 3rd. Between production and consumption, as well as among the different degrees of production, a group of intermediate agents, useful to producers as well as to consumers, comes into being; these are the dealers and merchants. . . . 4th. In addition to these three classes of industrious and useful citizens concerned with goods for consumption and use, a society needs many private undertakings and endeavors which are *directly* useful or agreeable to the *individual*. The fourth class includes from the most distinguished scientific and liberal professions to the least esteemed domestic services. Such are the labors which sustain society. Who performs them? The third estate.

Public functions likewise under present circumstances may be classified under four well known headings: the Sword, the Robe, the Church, and the Administration. It is unnecessary to discuss them in detail in order to demonstrate that the third estate everywhere constitutes nineteen-twentieths of them, except that it is burdened with all that is really arduous, with all the tasks that the privileged order refuses to perform. Only the lucrative and honorary positions are held by members of the privileged order. . . . nevertheless they have dared lay the order of the third estate under an interdict. They have said to it: "Whatever be your services, whatever your talents, you shall go thus far and no farther. It is not fitting that you be honored." . . .

It suffices here to have revealed that the alleged utility of a privileged order to public service is only a chimera; that without it, all that is arduous in such service is performed by the third estate; that without it, the higher positions would be infinitely better filled; that they naturally ought to be the lot of and reward for talents

and recognized services; and that if the privileged classes have succeeded in usurping all the lucrative and honorary positions, it is both an odious injustice to the majority of citizens and a treason to the commonwealth.

Who, then, would dare to say that the third estate has not within itself all that is necessary to constitute a complete nation? It is the strong and robust man whose one arm remains enchained, If the privileged order were abolished, the nation would not be something less but something more. Thus, what is the third estate? Everything; but an everything shackled and oppressed. What would it be without the privileged order? Everything; but an everything free and flourishing. Nothing can progress without it; everything would proceed infinitely better without the others. It is not sufficient to have demonstrated that the privileged classes, far from being useful to the nation, can only enfeeble and injure it; it is necessary, moreover, to prove that the nobility does not belong to the social organization at all; that, indeed, it may be a *burden* upon the nation, but that it would not know how to constitute a part thereof.

The third estate, then, comprises everything appertaining to the nation; and whatever is not the third estate may not be regarded as being of the nation. What is the third estate? Everything!

What Has the Third Estate Been Heretofore?

Nothing

We shall examine neither the state of servitude in which the people has suffered so long, nor that of constraint and humiliation in which it is still confined. Its civil status has changed; it must change still more; it is indeed impossible that the nation as a whole, or that even any order in particular, may become free if the third estate is not. Freedom is not the consequence of privileges, but of the rights appertaining to all. The third estate must be understood to mean the mass of the citizens belonging to the common

order. Legalized privilege in any form deviates from the common order, constitutes an exception to the common law, and, consequently, does not appertain to the third estate at all. We repeat, a common law and a common representation are what constitute *one nation*. It is only too true that one is *nothing* in France when one has only the protection of the common law; if one does not possess some privilege, one must resign oneself to enduring contempt, injury, and vexations of every sort. . . .

But here we have to consider the order of the third estate less in its civil status than in its relation with the constitution. Let us examine its position in the Estates General.

Who have been its so-called representatives? The ennobled or those privileged for a period of years. These false deputies have not even been always freely elected by the people. Sometimes in the Estates General, and almost always in the provincial Estates, the representation of the people has been regarded as a perquisite of certain posts of offices. Add to this appalling truth that, in one manner or another, all branches of the executive power also have fallen to the caste which furnishes the Church, the Robe, and the Sword. A sort of spirit of brotherhood causes the nobles to prefer themselves . . . to the rest of the nation. Usurpation is complete; in truth, they reign.

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. . . [I]t is a great error to believe that France is subject to a monarchical régime.

. . . It is the court, and not the monarch, that has reigned. It is the court that makes and unmakes, appoints and discharges ministers, creates and dispenses positions, etc. And what is the court if not the head of this immense aristocracy which overruns all parts of France; which through its members attains all and everywhere does whatever is essential in all parts of the commonwealth? . . .

Let us sum up: the third estate has not heretofore had real representatives in the Estates General. Thus its political rights are null.

What Does the Third Estate Demand? To Become Something

. . . The true petitions of this order may be appreciated only through the authentic claims directed to the government by the large municipalities of the kingdom. What is indicated therein? That the people wishes to be *something*, and, in truth, the very least that is possible. It wishes to have real representatives in the Estates General, that is to say, deputies *drawn from its order*, who are competent to be interpreters of its will and defenders of its interests. But what will it avail it to be present at the Estates General if the predominating interest there is contrary to its own! Its presence would only consecrate the oppression of which it would be the eternal victim. Thus, it is indeed certain that it cannot come to vote at the Estates General unless it is to have in that body *an influence at least equal to that of the privileged classes*; and it demands a number of representatives equal to that of the first two orders together. Finally, this equality of representation would become completely illusory if every chamber voted separately. The third estate demands, then, that votes be taken *by head and not by order*. This is the essence of those claims so alarming to the privileged classes, because they believed that thereby the reform of abuses would become inevitable. The real intention of the third estate is to have an influence in the Estates General equal to that of the privileged classes. I repeat, can it ask less? And is it not clear that if its influence therein is less than equality, it cannot be expected to emerge from its political nullity and become *something*?

But what is indeed unfortunate is that the three articles constituting the demand of the third estate are insufficient to give it this equality of influence which it cannot, in reality, do without. In vain will it obtain an equal number of representatives drawn from its order; the influence of the privileged classes will establish itself

and dominate even in the sanctuary of the third estate. . . .

Besides the influence of the aristocracy . . . there is the influence of property. This is natural. I do not proscribe it at all; but one must agree that it is still all to the advantage of the privileged classes. . . . The more one considers this matter, the more obvious the insufficiency of the three demands of the third estate becomes. But finally, such as they are, they have been vigorously attacked. Let us examine the pretexts for this hostility.

[*Sieyès then proceeds to this examination by analyzing the three demands under these headings: 1. That the representation of the third estate be chosen only among citizens who really belong to the third estate; 2. That its deputies be equal in number to those of the two privileged orders; 3. That the Estates General vote not by order, but by head. In discussing the third demand he makes the following comment.*]

I have only one observation to make. Obviously there are abuses in France; these abuses are profitable to someone; they are scarcely advantageous to the third estate—indeed, they are injurious to it in particular. Now I ask if, in this state of affairs, it is possible to destroy any abuse so long as those who profit therefrom control the *veto*? All justice would be powerless; it would be necessary to rely entirely on the sheer generosity of the privileged classes. Would that be your idea of what constitutes the social order?

What Ought to Have Been Done— Basic Principles

In every free nation—and every nation ought to be free—there is only one way to terminate differences which arise over the constitution. Recourse must be had not to the notables, but to the nation itself. If we lack a constitution we must make one; the nation alone has that right. If we have a constitution, as some persist in maintaining, and if, according thereto, the

national assembly is divided, as they claim, into three deputations of three orders of citizens, one cannot, at all events, avoid seeing that one of these orders possesses so strong a claim that further progress cannot be made without giving it consideration. But who has the right to settle such disputes?

Ist, Where shall we find the nation? Where it is; in the 40,000 parishes which comprise all the territory, all the inhabitants, and all the tributaries of the commonwealth; there, without a doubt, is the nation. A territorial division should have been indicated to facilitate the means of resolving itself into *arrondissements* of from twenty to thirty parishes for the first deputies. According to a similar plan, the *arrondissements* would have formed provinces, and these would have sent real, special representatives to the capital, with special power to decide on the constitution of the Estates General.

But, you will say, if the majority of citizens had named special representatives, what would have become of the distinction of the three orders? What would have become of privileges? They would have become what they deserve to be. . . .

As we see it, the privileged classes have good reasons for confounding ideas and principles in this matter. Today they will support with intrepidity the contrary of what they advocated six months ago. Then there was only one cry in France: we had no constitution at all and we were demanding the formation of one.

Today not only do we have a constitution, but, if one believes the privileged classes, it comprises two excellent and unassailable provisions.

The first [of these] is the division of citizens by order; the second is equality of influence for each and every order in the formation of the national will. Already we have sufficiently proved that even if all these things composed our constitution, the nation could always alter them. The nature of this *equality* of influence on the national will, which would be attributed to each

er, remains to be examined more particularly. We shall see that no idea could be more absurd, and that no nation can show anything similar in its constitution. . . .

If, then, the French constitution supposedly provides that 200,000 or 300,000 individuals out of 26,000,000 citizens constitute two-thirds of the common will, what to reply if not to affirm that two and two make five?

Individual wills are the sole elements of the general will. The majority may not be deprived of the right to concur in it, nor may ten wills be decreed worth only one against ten others that are worth thirty. These are contradictions in terms, veritable absurdities.

It is useless to talk reason if, for a single instant, this first principle, that the general will is the opinion of the majority and not of the minority, is abandoned. By the same token, it may be decided that the will of one alone will be called the majority, and there is no longer need

either Estates General or national will, etc. . . . for if one will can equal ten, why should it not be worth one hundred, one million, twenty-six millions?

What Remains to Be Done. Development of Some Principles

The time is past when the three orders, thinking only of defending themselves from ministerial despotism, were ready to unite against the common enemy. . . .

The third estate awaits, to no purpose, the meeting of all classes, the restitution of its political rights, and the plenitude of its civil rights;

the fear of seeing abuses reformed alarms the first two orders far more than the desire for liberty inspires them. Between liberty and some odious privileges, they have chosen the latter. Their soul is identified with the favors of servitude. Today they dread this Estates General which but lately they invoked so ardently. All is well with them; they no longer complain, except of the spirit of innovation. They no longer lack anything; fear has given them a constitution.

The third estate must perceive in the trend of opinions and circumstances that it can hope for nothing except from its own enlightenment and courage. Reason and justice are in its favor; . . . there is no longer time to work for the conciliation of parties. What accord can be anticipated between the energy of the oppressed and the rage of the oppressors?

They have dared pronounce the word secession. They have menaced the King and the people. Well! Good God! How fortunate for the nation if this so desirable secession might be made permanently! How easy it would be to dispense with the privileged classes! How difficult to induce them to be citizens!

It is certain, then, that only nonprivileged members are capable of being electors and deputies to the national assembly. The wishes of the third estate will always be good for the majority of citizens, those of the privileged classes would always be bad. . . . The third estate, therefore, is sufficient for whatever one may expect from a national assembly; it alone, then, is capable of procuring all the advantages that may reasonably be expected from the Estates General.

QUESTIONS

1. Sieyès wrote to persuade readers of the justice of his cause. How effective is his work? What must such a work accomplish to succeed?
2. What is the position of the third estate under the old régime?

