Historians have written thousands of books and articles speculating about the causes of the French Revolution of 1789. Most of them probably include some reference to Abbé Sieyes’ well-read pamphlet, *What Is the Third Estate?* In its basic form, this pamphlet asserts that the Third Estate in France (that is, everyone who was not nobility or a member of the clergy), is “everything.” This pamphlet became a rallying point for the Third Estate, who wanted better representation in the Estates General, the French legislative body, and is largely cited as the text that caused the Revolution.

In his book, *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution*, William Sewell examines the language of this pamphlet and of Sieyes’ other writings to determine why this text had such an influence on the greater French population. Through a process of close-reading and wider political, social, and economic interpretations, Sewell analyzes Sieyes’ contributions to the revolutionary philosophy within the context of the later 1790s. Sewell claims, and other historians agree, that Sieyes’ influence stopped after the 4th of August, 1789. It was on this fateful night that the newly formed National Assembly declared the Old Regime to be over and did away with the privileges of the aristocracy and the clerics. Henceforth, the ideas of Sieyes were widely ignored and the revolution’s motives became more radical.

Sewell divides his book into two main sections: the first dealing with the political denotations found in the 127 page pamphlet, and the second examining various inconsistencies that Sewell found while reading Sieyes.

In the first half of this book, Sewell analyzes the language and argumentative strategies of the Abbé Sieyes. Sewell effectively shows that the “distinctive figurative language” and “appeals to the emotions of the readers” was what made this pamphlet so effective and accepted among the Third Estate (41). Sieyes presents his argument in six logical points, outlining the issues and oppression facing the “everything” Third Estate, what has been done to help the Third Estate, and finally, what remained to be done to give the Third Estate the sway it deserved (41-2). Sewell ties Sieyes’ arguments to his theory of political economy, a system in which those who produce the money should have the power. In a great elaboration of a “utopian” society, Sieyes divides the population into two, three, and then four classes in an attempt to show how power should be distributed. In all of these schemes, the class in control was the equivalent of the current Third Estate. Sewell claims that, by producing many different scenarios in which the Third Estate always triumphs, Sieyes’ has convinced the reader of his political economy theory. In these few chapters, Sewell does little to differentiate between Sieyes’ combined political writings and the singular *What Is the Third Estate* pamphlet, at times making it difficult to discern Sewell’s argument.

The author believes, “Texts should be seen as social products that have social consequences,” therefore, in the second half of this book, Sewell carries out what he calls a “deconstruction” of the pamphlet in an attempt to discover what Sieyes truly meant when he wrote it, not merely how the French reacted to it (36-7). The last half of the book holds the author’s successful attempt to uncover the political content of *What Is the Third Estate?* buried within the social context. In his close-reading, the author largely focuses on the contradictions found within Sieyes’ texts, putting more emphasis on the minor inconsistencies that spatter the pamphlet than on the overarching themes of the booklet. For example, one of Sieyes’ main points is to define what it means to be a representative of the French people. Sewell notes that Sieyes’ definition of a proper representative is no more than an aristocrat in a Third Estatesman’s clothing. Sewell then goes on to pick apart other facets
of Sieyes’ argument in his close-reading rather than to explore the implications of Sieyes’ proposed political philosophy to its fruition. Despite these small tangents within the book, Sewell does show what he believes to be Sieyes’ philosophy, unbiased by any social connotations.

Overall, this book was a highly informative and entertaining read, shedding new light on a topic not often examined in this degree of detail. However, this book does require large background knowledge of the French Revolution, Enlightenment economic ideas, and the prevailing political attitudes of the late eighteenth century. For a scholar interested in evolving monetary theory and the notions of citizenship at the dawn of the Age of Revolution, this book makes for a wonderful read and I would recommend it to any French historian.

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