

PREFACE

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED *WHAT IS THE THIRD ESTATE?* IN 1969, when I taught the History of Western Civilization course at the University of Chicago. There, as at many other colleges and universities, we read selections from this famous pamphlet by the abbé Sieyès in the section of the course devoted to the French Revolution. I found the pamphlet exceptionally easy to teach: Sieyès's political passions touched a responsive chord among undergraduates in that now remote revolutionary age. But even as undergraduate sympathy for revolution began to flag in the 1970s, *What Is the Third Estate?* lost little of its appeal, for either the students or their teacher. It seemed that a new dimension of Sieyès's argument unfolded each time I reread the text or discussed it in class. With the help of my students, I slowly excavated the pamphlet's many-layered rhetorical structure. I began to feel that even my fellow historians of the French Revolution did not fully understand the significance of this extraordinary work of political propaganda. They usually read *What Is the Third Estate?* as a typical and readily understandable response to the burdensome inequalities of Old Regime society, as representing the common sense of the unprivileged classes of French society. I was beginning to see the pamphlet less as a passive reflection of an already existing common sense than as an astoundingly successful attempt to transform common sense, to make its readers see a familiar social and political order with new eyes. I began to see *What Is the Third Estate?* not as an illustration of the ideas and feelings that made the French

Revolution possible, but as a powerful political intervention that helped determine the revolution's shape.

My first public discussion of the pamphlet came in my book *Work and Revolution in France*, where I spent some six pages on its arguments in a chapter on the French Revolution's abolition of privilege.¹ But I knew that much more remained to be said. In 1984, I was invited to give a keynote address to the Consortium for Revolutionary History, a gathering of historians of the revolutionary era that takes place every year in the southeastern United States. This seemed the perfect occasion to spell out my ideas about *What Is the Third Estate?*² to a sympathetic, knowledgeable, and critical audience. My lecture attempted to anatomize in some detail the pamphlet's masterful rhetoric and to show how Sieyès used it to mobilize the elite of the Third Estate to support his political program. The scholars assembled at Duke University listened to the talk attentively and engaged me in a stimulating postlecture discussion, making me feel that I had at last said my piece on the abbé Sieyès.²

But after the session Linda Orr, a professor of French at Duke and an expert on nineteenth-century historical writing on the French Revolution, punctured my self-satisfaction.³ After telling me how much she appreciated my talk, she remarked that I had made it seem as if Sieyès had succeeded in the impossible: consciously inventing a political rhetoric that actually mastered the French Revolution. She expressed some polite poststructuralist literary-critical doubts: Was it really possible for anyone to master fully the language of any text, let alone to prescribe the rhetoric of a revolution? Was *What Is the Third Estate?* really as seamless as I had portrayed it? Wasn't the text replete with gaps, fissures, and contradictions that subtly subverted Sieyès's arguments?

Linda Orr's suggestions launched me on the project that has become this book. I found that her questions made me look at the

1. William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 78–84.

2. This lecture was published as William H. Sewell, Jr., "The Abbé Sieyès and the Rhetoric of Revolution," *The Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, Proceedings*, 1984 (Athens, Ga., 1986), pp. 1–14.

3. Linda Orr, *Jules Michelet: Nature, History, Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); and Orr, *Headless History: Nineteenth-Century French Historiography of the Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

text in a very different way. I began to think back to quandaries that had arisen in class discussions of *What Is the Third Estate?* and especially to passages that raised doubts about two central propositions of Sieyès's argument: his apparently total opposition to privilege and his seeming espousal of political equality among all members of the Third Estate. Sieyès had equivocated about the question of the privileges of the clergy in one of his footnotes, and in one brief passage he had seemed to imply that the nation should be governed by precisely those members of the Third Estate who most closely resembled the hated nobility. Rereading the text, I began to see that these passages were more than mere slips of the pen, that they were only the most blatant signs of deep ambivalences that also emerged at other scattered points in the pamphlet. Orr's questions and my consequently deepening reading of *What Is the Third Estate?* pushed me toward a more sustained encounter with literary theory and techniques. I eventually decided to write a new and far more critical article that would simultaneously anatomize Sieyès's remarkable rhetorical achievements and ferret out the multiple contradictions that laced even this exceptionally well-made text.

By 1986 I had completed a draft of my article, but it was already dangerously long. I began to read some of Sieyès's other speeches and pamphlets, and I encountered Roberto Zapperi's newly published transcriptions of Sieyès's intriguing manuscript notes on political economy.⁴ My article was growing into a book. In 1988, I taught at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris and took advantage of this opportunity by giving a seminar on the abbé Sieyès and *What Is the Third Estate?* The bulk of the archival and library research on which this book is based was completed in the gaps between my biweekly lectures, which I wrote up longhand in my rather sorry approximation of French academic style. In the years since, I have tried to wrest enough time from a busy university schedule of teaching, research, and administration to turn the awkward French into acceptable English and to revise, refine, and extend the sometimes hurried arguments of my lectures. It is a comment on the deliberate pace of academic research that in five years, the same

4. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Ecrits politiques*, ed. Roberto Zapperi (Paris: Editions des Archives Contemporaines, 1985).

period of time that has elapsed between the preparation of my lectures and the completion of this book, the French Revolution accomplished an entire political cycle, from the liberal revolution of the summer of 1789, through the Terror of 1792 and 1793, to the thermidorian reaction in 1794.

No scholarly work is possible without the assistance of many other people and institutions. I carried out much of the research in the magnificent collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Archives Nationales in Paris. I would like to thank the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and the University of Michigan, under whose joint auspices I accomplished much of my research and writing in 1988. I devoted several months to this study during the academic year 1990–91, which I spent at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California. There I was supported by a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, by National Science Foundation grant BNS-870064, and by the University of Chicago. My research has also been aided by the University of Chicago's Social Science Divisional Research Fund. I have had the privilege of discussing portions of the argument of this book with audiences at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, at history department seminars at the universities of Michigan and Virginia, at an interdisciplinary seminar of the History and Society Program at the University of Minnesota, at seminars of the Workshop on the History of Political Theory and the Committee on Critical Practice at the University of Chicago, and at meetings of the Consortium for Revolutionary History, the Society for French Historical Studies, and the Bay Area French Historians' Group. I have received valuable comments on various drafts of the book by David Bien, Jim Chandler, Matt Ismail, Bernard Manin, Mary Ong, Ellen Sewell, John Shovlin, and Dror Wahrman.

I owe a particular debt to Linda Orr, whose interdisciplinary provocation pushed me in the right direction at the right time and who gave me a wonderfully detailed reading of the manuscript once it was finished. Carlos Forment "pretested" this book by assigning the penultimate draft to an undergraduate seminar at Princeton University and sending me copies of the brief papers that the students prepared in response to the book. I am grateful both to Carlos and to his students for this unusual and enlightening practical application of

reader response theory. Steve Kaplan read the manuscript with characteristic thoroughness, speed, and zest, saving me from various errors of fact and interpretation and relentlessly pushing me to greater clarity. François Furet encouraged me to prepare the lectures that eventuated in this book for a seminar under his auspices and responded to my presentations with astute and helpful suggestions. Keith Baker read the manuscript carefully and offered valuable comments. He and I have been comparing notes and arguing about the French Revolution since we jointly taught a course on that subject at the University of Chicago in 1974. He knows how much I owe to his suggestions, critiques, and comradeship over the intervening years. In this book I take issue with some of the ideas of both Furet and Baker. I hope they will recognize that my critique is the sincerest form of homage to their pathbreaking and field-shaping work.

This book is dedicated to my mother. Through the years, her example has taught me the value of sympathetic listening, craftsmanship, and patience. I hope that some of these qualities come through in the pages that follow.