


# Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès

| Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès                                                            |                                         |
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| Sieyès in 1817, painted by Jacques-Louis David                                    |                                         |
| <b>Born</b>                                                                       | 3 May 1748<br>Fréjus, France            |
| <b>Died</b>                                                                       | 20 June 1836 (aged 88)<br>Paris, France |
| <b>Nationality</b>                                                                | French                                  |
| <b>Occupation</b>                                                                 | Author, clergyman, and politician       |

**Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès**<sup>[1]</sup> (3 May 1748 – 20 June 1836), most commonly known as the **Abbé Sieyès** (French: [sjɛjɛs]), was a French Roman Catholic *abbé*, clergyman and political writer. He was one of the chief political theorists of the French Revolution, and also played a prominent role in the French Consulate and First French Empire. His 1789 pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?* became the *de facto* manifesto of the Revolution, helping to transform the Estates-General into the National Assembly in June 1789. In 1799, he was among the instigators of the *coup d'état* of 18 Brumaire (9 November), which brought Napoleon Bonaparte to power. He also coined the term "*sociologie*" in an unpublished manuscript, and made significant theoretical contributions to the nascent social sciences.<sup>[2]</sup>

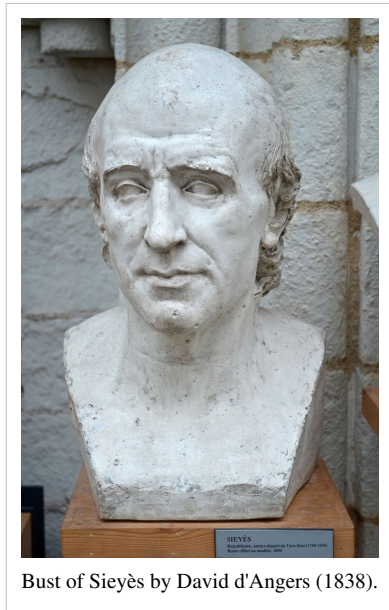
## Early life

Sieyès was born on 3 May 1748 as the fifth child of Honoré and Annabelle Sieyès in the town of Fréjus in southern France.<sup>[3]</sup> Sieyès' father was a local tax collector who made a humble income, and while the family had some noble blood, they were commoners. Sieyès' first education came by way of tutors and of the Jesuits. He also spent some time at the *collège* of the *Doctrinaires* of Draguignan. Sieyès originally wanted to join the military and become a soldier, but his frail health, combined with his parents' piety, led him instead to a religious career path. The vicar-general of Fréjus offered aid to Sieyès, because he felt he was obliged to his father.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Education

Sieyès spent ten years at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. There, he studied theology and engineering to prepare himself to enter the priesthood. He quickly gained a reputation at the school for his aptitude and interest in the sciences, combined with his obsession over the "new philosophic principles" and dislike for conventional theology. Sieyès was educated for priesthood in the Catholic Church at the Sorbonne. While there, he became influenced by the teachings of John Locke, Condillac, Quesnay, Mirabeau, Turgot, the Encyclopédistes, and other Enlightenment political thinkers, all in preference to theology. In 1770, he obtained his first theology diploma, ranking at the bottom of the list of passing candidates – a reflection of his antipathy toward his religious education. In 1772, he was ordained as a priest, and two years later he obtained his theology license.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Religious career



Bust of Sieyès by David d'Angers (1838).

Despite Sieyès' embrace of Enlightenment thinking, he was ordained to the priesthood in 1773. In spite of this, he was not hired immediately. He spent this time researching philosophy and developing music until about a year later in October 1774 when, as the result of demands by powerful friends, he was promised a canonry in Brittany.<sup>[6]</sup> Unfortunately for Sieyès, this canonry went into effect only when the preceding holder died. At the end of 1775, Sieyès acquired his first real position as secretary to the bishop of Tréguier where he spent two years as deputy of the diocese. It is here that he sat in the Estates of Brittany and became disgusted with the immense power the privileged classes held. In 1780, the bishop of Tréguier was transferred to the bishopric of Chartres. He became aware of how easy it was for nobles to advance in ecclesiastical offices compared to commoners. Sieyès was an ambitious man; therefore, he resented the privileges granted to the nobles within the Church system and thought the patronage system was a humiliation for commoners.<sup>[7]</sup> Sieyès accompanied him there as his vicar general where he eventually became a canon of the cathedral and chancellor of the diocese of Chartres.

While remaining in ecclesiastical offices, Sieyès maintained a religious cynicism at odds with his position. By the time he took his orders to enter priesthood, Sieyès had "freed himself from all superstitious sentiments and ideas."<sup>[8]</sup> Even when corresponding with his deeply religious father, Sieyès showed a severe lack of piety for the man in charge of the diocese of Chartres. It is theorised that Sieyès accepted a religious career not because he had any sort of strong religious inclination, but because he considered it the only means to advance his career as a political writer.<sup>[9]</sup>

## What Is the Third Estate?

In 1788, Louis XVI of France proposed convocation of the Estates-General of France after the interval of more than a century and a half, and the invitation of Jacques Necker to writers to state their views as to the organization of the Estates, enabled Sieyès to publish his celebrated January 1789 pamphlet, *Qu'est-ce que le tiers-état?* ("What Is the Third Estate?") He begins his answer:

*"What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been hitherto in the political order? Nothing. What does it desire to be? Something."*

This phrase, which was to remain famous, is said to have been inspired by Nicolas Chamfort. The pamphlet was very successful, and its author, despite his clerical vocation (which made him part of the First Estate), was elected as the last (the twentieth) of the deputies to the Third Estate from Paris to the Estates-General. He played his main role in the opening years of the Revolution, drafting the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, expanding on

the theory of national sovereignty, popular sovereignty, and representation implied in his pamphlet, with a distinction between active and passive citizens that justified suffrage limited to male owners of property.

Sieyès's pamphlet incited a radical reaction from its audience because it involved the "political issues of the day and twisted them in a more revolutionary direction".<sup>[10]</sup> In the third chapter of the pamphlet, Sieyès proposed that the Third Estate wanted to be 'something'. But he also stated that, in allowing the privileged orders to exist, they are asking to become 'the least thing possible'. The usage of such rhetoric in his pamphlet appealed to common causes to unite the audience. At the same time it influenced them to move beyond simple demands and take a more radical position on the nature of government. In this case, the radical position taken by the Third Estate created a sense of awareness that the problems of France were not simply a matter of addressing "royal tyranny," but that unequal privileges under the law had divided the nation. It was from this point that the Revolution's struggle for fair distribution of power and equal rights began in earnest.

### **Impact on the Revolution**

Sieyès's pamphlet played a key role in shaping the currents of revolutionary thought that propelled France towards the French Revolution. In his pamphlet, he outlined the desires and frustrations of the alienated class of people that made up the third estate. He attacked the foundations of the French *Ancien Régime* by arguing the nobility to be a fraudulent institution, preying on an overburdened and despondent bourgeoisie. The pamphlet voiced concerns that were to become crucial matters of debate during the convocation of the Estates-General of 1789.

Whereas the aristocracy defined themselves as an élite ruling class charged with maintaining the social order in France, Sieyès saw the third estate as the primary mechanism of public service. Expression of radical thought at its best, the pamphlet placed sovereignty not in the hands of aristocrats but instead defined the nation of France by its productive orders composed of those who would generate services and produce goods for the benefit of the entire society. These included not only those involved in agricultural labor and craftsmanship, but also merchants, brokers, lawyers, financiers and others providing services. Sieyès challenged the hierarchical order of society by redefining who represented the nation. In his pamphlet, he condemns the privileged orders by saying their members were enjoying the best products of society without contributing to their production.

In perhaps the most daunting of his rhetorical repertoire, Sieyès essentially argued from the nobility's privileges that to establish the aristocracy as an alien body acting outside of the nation of France and deemed noble privilege "treason to the commonwealth". As a consequence, the resulting conflict between the orders inspired the proper political sphere from which the revolution grew. The French Revolution could not have been what it was without this patriotic and radical message which was so eagerly distributed through a developing language of revolutionary politics within the third estate.

Perhaps most significant was the influence of Sieyès's pamphlet on the structural concerns that arose surrounding the convocation of the Estates general. Specifically, the third estate demanded that the number of deputies for their order be equal to that of the two privileged orders combined, and most controversially "that the States General Vote, Not by Orders, but by Heads". The pamphlet took these issues to the masses and their partial appeasement was met with revolutionary reaction. By addressing the issues of representation directly, Sieyès inspired resentment and agitation that united the third estate against the feudalistic traditions of the *Ancien Régime*. As a result, the Third Estate demanded the reorganization of the Estates General, but the two other orders proved unable or unwilling to provide a solution. Sieyès proposed that the members of the First and Second order join the Third Estate and become a united body to represent the nation as a whole. He not only suggested an invitation, however, but also stated that the Third Estate had the right to consider those who denied this invitation to be in default of their national responsibility.<sup>[11]</sup> The Third Estate adopted this measure on 5 June 1789; by doing so, they assumed the authority to represent the nation. This radical action was confirmed when they decided to change the name of the Estates General to the National Assembly, indicating that the separation of orders no longer existed.

## Assemblies, Convention, and the Terror

Although not noted as a public speaker (he spoke rarely and briefly), Sieyès held major political influence, and he recommended the decision of the Estates to reunite its chamber as the National Assembly, although he opposed the abolition of tithes and the confiscation of Church lands. His opposition to the abolition of tithes discredited him in the National Assembly, and he was never able to regain his authority.<sup>[12]</sup> Elected to the special committee on the constitution, he opposed the right of "*absolute veto*" for the King of France, which Honoré Mirabeau unsuccessfully supported. He had considerable influence on the framing of the departmental system, but, after the spring of 1790, he was eclipsed by other politicians, and was elected only once to the post of fortnightly president of the Constituent Assembly.

Like all other members of the Constituent Assembly, he was excluded from the Legislative Assembly by the ordinance, initially proposed by Maximilien Robespierre, that decreed that none of its members should be eligible for the next legislature. He reappeared in the third national Assembly, known as the National Convention of the French Republic (September 1792 – September 1795). He voted for the death of Louis XVI, but not in the contemptuous terms sometimes ascribed to him.<sup>[13]</sup> He participated to the Constitution Committee that drafted the Girondin constitutional project. Menaced by the Reign of Terror and offended by its character, Sieyès even abjured his faith at the time of the installation of the Cult of Reason; afterwards, when asked what he had done during the Terror, he famously replied, "*J'ai vécu*" ("I lived").

Ultimately, Sieyès failed to establish the kind of bourgeois revolution he had hoped for, one of representative order "devoted to the peaceful pursuit of material comfort."<sup>[14]</sup> His initial purpose was to instigate change in a more passive way, and to establish a constitutional monarchy. According to William Sewell, Sieyès' pamphlet set "the tone and direction of The French Revolution...but its author could hardly control the Revolution's course over the long run".<sup>[15]</sup> Even after 1791, when the monarchy seemed to many to be doomed, Sieyès "continued to assert his belief in the monarchy", which indicated he did not intend for the Revolution to take the course it did.<sup>[16]</sup> During the period he served in the National Assembly, Sieyès wanted to establish a constitution that would guarantee the rights of French men and would uphold equality under the law as the social goal of the Revolution; he was ultimately unable to accomplish his goal.

## Directory

After the execution of Robespierre in 1794, Sieyès reemerged as an important political player during the constitutional debates that followed.<sup>[17]</sup> In 1795, he went on a diplomatic mission to The Hague, and was instrumental in drawing up a treaty between the French and Batavian republics. He resented the constitution of 1795 enacted by the Directory, and refused to serve as a Director of the Republic. In May 1798, he went as the plenipotentiary of France to the court of Berlin, in order to try to induce Prussia to ally with France against the Second Coalition; this effort ultimately failed. His prestige grew nonetheless, and he was made Director of France in place of Jean-François Rewbell in May 1799.

Nevertheless, Sieyès considered ways to overthrow the Directory, and is said to have taken in view the replacement of the government with unlikely rulers such as Archduke Charles of Austria and Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand of Brunswick (a major enemy of the Revolution). He attempted to undermine the constitution, and thus caused the revived Jacobin Club to be closed while making offers to General Joubert for a *coup d'état*.

## Second Consul of France

The death of Joubert at the Battle of Novi and the return of Napoleon Bonaparte from the Egypt campaign put an end to this project, but Sieyès regained influence by reaching a new understanding with Bonaparte. In the coup of 18 Brumaire, Sieyès and his allies dissolved the Directory, allowing Napoleon to seize power. Thereafter, Sieyès produced the constitution which he had long been planning, only to have it completely remodelled by Bonaparte, who thereby achieved a coup within a coup – Bonaparte's *Constitution of the Year VIII* became the basis of the French Consulate.

## Napoleonic era and final years

Sieyès soon retired from the post of provisional Consul, which he had accepted after 18 Brumaire, and became one of the first members of the Sénat conservateur (acting as its president in 1799); this concession was attributed to the large estate at Crosne that he received from Napoleon.<sup>[18]</sup> After the plot of the Rue Saint-Nicaise in late December 1800, Sieyès defended the arbitrary and illegal proceedings whereby Napoleon rid himself of the leading Jacobins.

During the era of the First Empire (1804–1814), Sieyès rarely emerged from his retirement. When Napoleon briefly returned to power in 1815, Sieyès was named to the Chamber of Peers. In 1816, after the Second Restoration, Sieyès was expelled from the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences by Louis XVIII. He then moved to Brussels, but returned to France after the July Revolution of 1830. He died in Paris in 1836 at the age of 88.

## Social sciences

In 1795, Sieyès became one of the first members of what would become the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences of the Institute of France. When the Académie Française was reorganized in 1803, he was elected in the second class, replacing, in chair 31, Jean Sylvain Bailly, who had been guillotined on 12 November 1793 during the Reign of Terror. However, after the second Restoration in 1815, Sieyès was expelled for his role in the execution of King Louis XVI, and was replaced by the Marquis of Lally-Tollendal, who was named to the Academy by a royal decree.

In 1780, Sieyès coined the term *sociologie*. The term was used again fifty years later by the philosopher Auguste Comte to refer to the science of society, which is known in English as sociology.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Footnotes

- [1] Sometimes hyphenated to Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès.
- [2] Jean-Claude Guilhaumou (2006). « Sieyès et le non-dit de la sociologie : du mot à la chose » ([http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/15/43/35/PDF/Rhsh\\_15\\_-\\_Guilhaumou\\_-\\_pages.pdf](http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/15/43/35/PDF/Rhsh_15_-_Guilhaumou_-_pages.pdf)). *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines*. No.15.
- [3] Van Deusen, Glyndon G., p. 11
- [4] Van Deusen, Glyndon G., p. 12
- [5] William H. Sewell Jr. (1994). *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbe Sieyes and What is the Third Estate?*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. p.9.
- [6] Van Deusen, Glyndon G., p. 13
- [7] William H. Sewell Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution The Abbe Sieyes and What is the Third Estate?* 14.
- [8] Van Deusen, Glyndon G., p. 15
- [9] William H. Sewell Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution The Abbé Sieyès and What is the Third Estate?*9.
- [10] William H. Sewell Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyes and What is The Third Estate?* 43.
- [11] William H. Sewell Jr. *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and What is the Third Estate?* 16.
- [12] John J. Meng, Review of *Sieyes: His Life and His Nationalism* by Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *The Catholic Historical Review Vol. 19 No. 2* (July, 1933),221. JSTOR (11, February 2010).
- [13] "La Mort, sans phrases" ("Death, without rhetoric") being his supposed words during the debate on Louis' fate
- [14] Sewell Jr., William H., p. 198
- [15] William H. Sewell Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbe Sieyes and What is The Third Estate?* 185.
- [16] Christopher Hibbert, *The Days of The French Revolution*, 133.
- [17] Sewell Jr., William H., p. 19.

- [18] Crosne, Essonne, had belonged to the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, with a *seigneurie* that descended in the family of Brancas; both came to the French state with the Revolution.
- [19] *Des Manuscrits de Sieyès. 1773-1799* (Volumes I and II). Published by Christine Fauré, Jacques Guilhaumou, Jacques Vallier and Françoise Weil. Paris: Champion (1999, 2007).

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## External links

- Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=7811>) at *Find a Grave*
- Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?* (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sieyès.html>) (Excerpts)

| <i>Directeurs</i>      |                                                                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| May–17 June 1799:      | Barras   La Révellière-Lépeaux   Merlin de Douai   Treilhard   Sieyès |
| 17–18 June 1799:       | Barras   La Révellière-Lépeaux   Merlin de Douai   Sieyès   Gohier    |
| 18–19 June 1799:       | Barras   Sieyès   Gohier                                              |
| 19–20 June 1799:       | Barras   Sieyès   Gohier   Ducos                                      |
| 20 June–November 1799: | Barras   Sieyès   Gohier   Ducos   Moulin                             |

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