

A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: Analyzing Abbé Sieyès and the Political Foundations of Modern France

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The French Revolution remains the most significant political event of the modern era, acting as the crucible in which the concepts of citizenship, national sovereignty, and civil rights were forged. At the heart of this transformation was a single document, a pamphlet titled **What Is the Third Estate?** (*Qu'est-ce que le tiers-état?*), penned by the Abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès in early 1789. While historical narratives often focus on the storming of the Bastille or the guillotine, William H. Sewell Jr.'s seminal work, **A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution**, invites a deeper technical analysis of the linguistic and conceptual shifts that made the Revolution possible. To understand the bourgeois revolution is not merely to study a change in government, but to analyze the radical restructuring of social ontology through rhetoric and political theory.

The Historical and Intellectual Context of 1789

The year 1789 opened with France in a state of systemic paralysis. The monarchy was bankrupt, the harvest had failed, and the traditional social hierarchy—the **Ancien Régime**—was unable to resolve the crisis. The King, Louis XVI, was forced to summon the Estates-General, an ancient representative body that had not met since 1614. This body was divided into three orders: the First Estate (the Clergy), the Second Estate (the Nobility), and the Third Estate (everyone else, from wealthy merchants to peasants).

The technical problem facing the Third Estate was the voting procedure. Traditionally, each estate voted as a single block, meaning the First and Second Estates (the privileged orders) could always outvote the Third Estate 2-to-1. Sieyès intervened in this deadlock not with a plea for mercy, but with a revolutionary logic that redefined the very nature of political society. His rhetoric provided the bourgeois leadership with the intellectual tools to declare themselves the **National Assembly**, effectively stripping the nobility of their political monopoly.

The Sewell Thesis: Rhetoric as Social Force

William H. Sewell Jr. argues that Sieyès did not just reflect existing social tensions; he actively constructed a new political reality through his use of language. Sewell's analysis, **A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution**, suggests that the pamphlet functioned as a "script" for the Revolution. By applying the methods of structuralism and cultural history, Sewell demonstrates how Sieyès synthesized Enlightenment philosophy into a potent, actionable ideology. This was not "rhetoric" in the sense of empty flourishes, but rhetoric as a technical apparatus designed to dismantle a thousand-year-old social system.

Core Concepts: The Social Ontology of the Third Estate

To grasp the technical depth of Sieyès' argument, one must examine the core definitions he established. He began with three famous questions: 1. What is the Third Estate? **Everything**. 2. What has it been until now in the political order? **Nothing**. 3. What does it ask? **To become something**.

1. The Concept of the Productive Nation

Sieyès redefined the "Nation" based on utility and labor. He argued that a nation requires two things to survive: private activities (agriculture, industry, trade, services) and public functions (administration, military, church). He

then demonstrated that the Third Estate performed 99% of these tasks, while the nobility occupied only the high-status positions without contributing real value. In Sieyès' logic, the nobility was a "parasitic" growth on the body of the nation. If the Third Estate were removed, the nation would cease to exist; if the nobility were removed, the nation would actually be stronger.

2. The Logic of Exclusion and Inclusion

Sieyès' rhetoric utilized a binary logic that excluded the aristocracy from the social contract. By defining the nation as a body of associates living under a common law and represented by the same legislature, he argued that the nobility's **privileges**(private laws) made them legally alien to the nation. This was a radical technical shift: it moved the definition of a citizen from someone who serves the King to someone who contributes to the productive capacity of the state.

Technical Analysis of Political Mechanisms

The transition from a society of "orders" to a society of "citizens" required a sophisticated understanding of political mechanisms. Sieyès introduced several technical distinctions that would define modern constitutionalism.

Constituent Power vs. Constituted Power

One of Sieyès' most enduring contributions to political science is the distinction between **Pouvoir Constituant** (Constituent Power) and **Pouvoir Constitué**(Constituted Power). This framework is essential for understanding how a revolution can legally justify itself.

- **Constituent Power:** The primordial power of the "Nation" to create a constitution. It is unlimited and resides solely in the people. It exists prior to any law.
- **Constituted Power:** The branches of government (legislative, executive, judicial) created by the constitution. These powers are limited and must operate according to the rules set by the constituent power.

By establishing this distinction, Sieyès provided a legal justification for the Third Estate to act outside the existing laws of the Estates-General. They were not merely "reforming" the government; they were exercising the Nation's constituent power to create an entirely new legal order.

Proportional Representation and the 'Doubling of the Third'

Before the Estates-General met, Sieyès and other reformers campaigned for the "doubling of the Third," demanding that the Third Estate have twice as many representatives as the other two. However, doubling the numbers was useless without **voting by head** rather than by order. The technical struggle over these procedural rules was the catalyst for the formation of the National Assembly. Sieyès argued that since the Third Estate represented 25 million people and the nobility only 200,000, any vote that did not account for population was mathematically and morally invalid.

Comparison & Evaluation: The Shift in Social Structure

The following table illustrates the radical transformation in social and political structure proposed by Sieyès compared to the traditional Ancien Régime model.

Feature	Ancien Régime (Tradition)	Bourgeois Revolution (Sieyès)
Source of Sovereignty	The King (Divine Right)	The Nation (Constituent Power)
Social Categorization	Three Orders/Estates	Unitary Citizenship
Basis of Law	Privilege (Private Law)	Common Law (Equality)
Economic Philosophy	Feudalism/Fixed Status	Productive Labor/Utility
Representation	By Order (1 vote per estate)	By Head (Proportional)
Political Goal	Preservation of Tradition	National Utility & Rights

Quantifying the Social Disparity

To understand the technical necessity of the Revolution, we must look at the demographic data that Sieyès used to fuel his rhetoric. In 1789, the population of France was approximately 26 million. The First Estate (Clergy) numbered around 130,000. The Second Estate (Nobility) numbered between 110,000 and 350,000. The Third Estate comprised roughly 98% of the population. Despite this, the Third Estate owned only about 65% of the land and bore 100% of the tax burden (the *taille*, the *gabelle*, and the *tithe*).

The Practical Implementation: From Pamphlet to National Assembly

The rhetorical strategies found in *What Is the Third Estate?* were put into practice during the summer of 1789. This process followed a specific technical workflow that converted theoretical ideas into constitutional reality.

Step-by-Step Transition to Sovereignty

1. Verification of Credentials: On June 10, 1789, at the suggestion of Sieyès, the Third Estate invited the members of the other two orders to join them in a common verification of powers. They declared that they would proceed with or without the others.
2. The Declaration of the National Assembly: On June 17, the Third Estate, joined by a few parish priests, declared themselves the "National Assembly." This was the moment the rhetoric of the "Nation" became a political fact.
3. The Tennis Court Oath: When locked out of their meeting hall, the Assembly moved to a nearby indoor tennis court and swore not to disperse until they had given France a constitution. This was the exercise of Constituent Power in action.
4. The Night of August 4: In a technical dismantling of the old order, the Assembly voted to abolish feudalism, serfdom, and all class-based privileges, effectively enacting the "common law" Sieyès had championed.

Case Studies: Intellectual Contradictions and Failure Modes

While Sieyès' rhetoric was successful in launching the Revolution, it contained internal contradictions that would lead to future operational challenges. Analyzing these "failure modes" provides insight into the complexity of political engineering.

The Problem of Active vs. Passive Citizens

Despite his rhetoric of equality, Sieyès introduced a technical distinction in the 1791 Constitution between "active" and "passive" citizens. Active citizens were men over 25 who paid a certain amount of taxes; they alone had the

right to vote. Passive citizens enjoyed civil rights but no political power. This contradiction between the universalist rhetoric of the "Nation" and the exclusionary practice of the bourgeoisie created a tension that eventually led to the radicalization of the Revolution under the Jacobins.

The Failure of the Constitutional Jury

Later in his career, particularly during the Thermidorian Reaction and the rise of Napoleon, Sieyès attempted to create a "Constitutional Jury" (*jury constitutionnaire*)—a precursor to a Supreme Court—to protect the constitution from legislative overreach. However, his designs were often too complex and "architectural" for the chaotic reality of French politics. Napoleon famously used Sieyès to gain power in the Coup of 18 Brumaire, only to discard his complex constitutional drafts in favor of a military dictatorship.

Analytical Troubleshooting: Why the Bourgeois Rhetoric Diverged

Researchers often ask why the "Bourgeois Revolution" led to the Terror. The technical answer lies in the shift from **liberal individualism** (Sieyès' focus) to **totalitarian democracy** (Rousseau's "General Will" as interpreted by Robespierre). Sieyès viewed the Nation as a collection of individuals represented through a division of labor, whereas the later radicals viewed the Nation as a mystical, indivisible unit that required the purging of "enemies of the people."

Synthesizing the Legacy of the Bourgeois Rhetoric

The influence of Abbé Sieyès and the analysis provided by William Sewell Jr. extend far beyond the 18th century. By deconstructing the rhetoric of 1789, we uncover the foundational logic of the modern state. The shift from a society of status to a society of contract, the invention of national sovereignty, and the technical distinction between constituent and constituted powers remain the cornerstones of contemporary democratic governance.

Sieyès' pamphlet proved that ideas, when structured with rigorous logic and timed to a moment of systemic crisis, can act as a more powerful force than standing armies. The "Bourgeois Revolution" was not merely a transition of power from land-owning nobles to factory-owning capitalists; it was a conceptual revolution that redefined what it means to be a human being in a political community. Every modern constitution that begins with the phrase "We the People" or defines the nation as the source of all authority owes a direct intellectual debt to the rhetoric formulated by the Abbé Sieyès in the winter of 1789.

In the final analysis, the work of Sewell reminds us that the study of history is the study of language. The technical precision of Sieyès' definitions allowed a fragmented and frustrated populace to see themselves as a unified, sovereign entity. This transformation from "subjects" to "the Nation" remains the most successful act of political rhetoric in human history, providing the blueprint for every democratic movement that followed.

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