

WHO WERE THE SANS-CULOTTES?

RUTH SCURR

Department of Politics and International Studies, Cambridge University

Email: rs10032@cam.ac.uk

Who were the sans-culottes? What were their concerns and purposes? And what role did they play in the unfolding of events collectively known as the French Revolution? Michael Sonenscher first engaged directly with these questions in the 1980s (in an article for *Social History* 9 (1984), 303) when social historians were experimenting with the possibilities opened up by discourse analysis, and when the traditions of eighteenth-century civic, or republican, language seemed particularly exciting:

The social history of the French Revolution owes much to the deepening insistence with which the discourse of the Revolution itself referred to, and postulated, necessary connections between everyday circumstances and public life. From Sieyes' equation of aristocratic privilege with unproductive parasitism in 1788 to the Thermidorian caricature of the architects of the Terror as the dregs of society, the Revolution produced its own "social interpretation."

Sonenscher argued that while the identification of the figure of the sans-culotte with that of the artisan was "the achievement of the generation of historians—Richard Cobb, George Rudé and Albert Soboul—who reintroduced the popular movement into the historiography of the French Revolution", there was always something problematic (or circular) in the underlying assumption that it was possible to equate the representation of artisan production found in the political language of the sans-culottes during the Revolution with what actually existed in the workshops of Paris or other towns of eighteenth-century France. Back in the 1980s what Sonenscher hoped was that a more accurate understanding of the actual dynamics of workshop production would produce "a better explanation of the meaning of the language of the sans-culottes". His own expectation, as a social historian, was that the causality, in both explanatory and historical terms, would run from the social to the political sphere.

Over the last twenty-five years, the most exciting work on the French Revolution has arisen from revisiting the relation between society and politics, and mapping—through discourse or otherwise—the specifically political causes

of events. Furet, famously and decisively, signaled this change of direction in *Penser la révolution française* (1978), but others have continued, complicated and revised his work. As someone who has transformed himself during this period from a distinguished social historian to a leading expert on eighteenth-century political thought, Sonenscher's professional career mirrors the trajectory scholarship of the Revolution has taken in his lifetime. In his new book on the sans-culottes, he says that one of the things he hopes to do is to redress "some of the gaps or mistakes" in his earlier work. In fact, the new book is the result of twenty-five years' patient advancing of what it is possible to know about the French Revolution and, at its heart, the elusive sans-culottes.

In his 1984 article, Sonenscher quoted at length a definition provided by the sans-culotte Vingternier, in May 1793, on the eve of the *journée* that purged the Convention and brought the Jacobins to power. The document can be found among those collected by Soboul and Walter Markov in *Die Sansculotten von Paris* (Berlin, 1957, 306):

A sans-culotte, you rogues? He is someone who always goes about on foot, who has not got the millions you would all like to have, who has no châteaux, no valets to wait on him, and who lives simply with his wife and children, if he has any, on the fourth or fifth storey. He is useful because he knows how to till a field, to forge iron, to use a saw, to roof a house, to make shoes, and to spill his blood to the last drop for the safety of the Republic. And because he is a worker, you are sure not to meet his person in the Café de Chartres, nor in the gaming houses where others plot and wager, nor in the National Theatre, where *L'Ami des Lois* is performed, nor in the Vaudeville Theatre at a performance of Chaste Susanne, nor in the literary clubs where for two sous, which are so precious to him, you are offered Gorsas's muck, with the *Chronique* and the *Patriot Français*. In the evening he goes to the assembly of his Section, not powdered and perfumed and nattily booted, in the hope of being noticed by the citizenesses in the galleries, but ready to support sound proposals with all his might and ready to pulverise those which come from the despised faction of politicians.

Towards the end of his new book (361), Sonenscher revisits this quotation, setting it alongside the satirist Antoine-Joseph Gorsas's own definition of a sans-culotte, from a poster of early 1793:

A sans-culottes, a *sans-culottes*, well, since I have to tell you, today's *sans-culottes* is a *sans-culottes* who has fine breeches, but who still wants to get hold of the breeches of those who do not have breeches, so as not to give a thread or a penny, or even any breeches, to those poor devils who have no breeches, the *sans-culottes*.¹

¹ Michael Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Gorsas's point, Sonenscher explains, was that, whatever the sans-culotte had been earlier in the Revolution, by 1793 a sans-culotte was a fake sans-culotte, "whose demagogic rise to revolutionary prominence was likely to hide a very shady past". And worse still, whereas Gorsas had previously waged a coherent campaign to turn an old salon joke about trousers and patronage into a weighty political weapon, by 1793 he was by no means the only judge of what a sans-culotte was. From Vingtier's definition, it might have seemed obvious who the sans-culottes were, but Gorsas's convoluted, obscure and trenchantly politicized account is closer to the truth that Sonenscher's book uncovers.

* * *

There are two main levels of analysis. The first is tightly framed within the years 1791 to 1793 and focused on the process by which the term "sans-culotte" became prominent in Revolutionary discourse and politics. The second is broadly framed within the development of eighteenth-century political thought in France, with particular emphasis on the contribution of Rousseau and the complex reception of his texts. Sonenscher's book is structured to begin and end with the first level of tight causal explanation, with intervening chapters assembling the evidence for the intellectual resources that were available to political actors and commentators in 1789 and afterwards. Only a historian of ambition and scholarly fastidiousness would attempt to combine two such disparate modes of analysis in the same book. There is inevitably some tension between them at a textual level. Some of the material Sonenscher assembles to make his overarching argument is so dense and difficult to make sense of that the reader intermittently loses his or her grip on the point that is being made. But this is a book that repays rereading, and the point of running the causal explanation alongside the panorama of intellectual resources is a very serious one. Ultimately, Sonenscher aims to get behind the nineteenth-century philosophies of history and the "master concepts" of class or sovereignty that have dominated French Revolutionary historiography. His proposals for what might take their place are subtle but not tentative:

Pushing nineteenth-century philosophies of history out of the historiography of the French Revolution does not mean that there were simply no philosophies of history available before or after 1789. Here, the themes of progress and corruption, decline and fall, ruin and recovery, or barbarism and civilization could be fitted into as rich and varied a range of conceptual matrices as anything that the nineteenth century was able later to supply. (363).

Gorsas is a key figure in the causal explanation Sonenscher offers of the elevation of a joke about trousers to an emblem of Revolutionary consequence. This transformation occurred during the autumn and winter of 1791–2, in the

aftermath of Louis XVI's flight to Varennes, the split in the Parisian Jacobin club that it precipitated, and the subsequent massacre on the Champ-de-Mars. The transformation was the work of Jacques-Pierre Brissot and his Girondin, or Brissotin, political allies. Gorsas was among these allies: a journalist, man of letters and art critic who was well versed in the Cynic school of satire before the Revolution. He brought to the electoral campaigns at the end of 1791 (the elections in question were to the first Legislative Assembly under the new Constitutional Monarchy, and to posts in departmental administration) a strong strain of moral disapproval directed against the Feuillant candidates, who were suspected of being in sympathy with the court and representative of the rich and propertied. Gorsas presented the alternative to the Feuillant as being genuinely popular candidates: the sans-culottes. Sonenscher suggests that by 1792 "Gorsas had begun to turn the word *sans-culotte* into a synonym for the ordinary people of Paris" (355). But economic causes also had a part to play: the shortages of sugar and other products arising from the slave insurrection in San-Domingo and price-fixing riots in Paris early in 1792. By the spring of 1792, the "new buzzword *sans-culotte*" was the name of one side of an economic and political divide: the poor or indigent and propertyless against the comfortable and advantaged, the Brissotins against the Feuillants. Sonenscher's central point is that the term "sans-culotte" acquired its connotations, which are usually associated with the politics of the Year II and the first French Republic, much earlier (in Revolutionary, if not in temporal, terms).

The connection between Robespierre and the sans-culotte is obviously important in any narrative of the Revolution, but notoriously difficult to pin down. Sonenscher's contribution in this regard is important, but hard to unravel. The starting point is a textual variant in the reports of a speech Robespierre made to the Convention on 10 April 1793, attacking Brissot's faction. In the version published in Robespierre's own publication, *Lettres à ses commettants*, he accused the Brissotins of hiding their ambition under the mask of moderation: "They separated the interests of the rich from those of the poor; they presented themselves to the former as their protectors against the sans-culottes; they attracted all the enemies of equality to their party".

Sonenscher explains that the implication here was that Robespierre and his Jacobin allies were the true protectors of the sans-culotte, while Brissot and his allies were the protectors of the rich. However, there is another version of this speech in the *Logotachigraphe* (which was meant to be a verbatim record of what was said in the Convention) where Robespierre is reported to have said the exact opposite: "namely, that Brissot and his supporters had presented themselves not as the protectors of the rich against the sans-culottes, but as the 'protectors of the sans-culottes' against the rich" (283). Sonenscher reads this textual discrepancy (which is of a kind that occurs very frequently in the

reports of Convention speeches) as “a clue to the real sequence of events that lay behind the transformation of the salon joke from an emblem of urbanity into an emblem of virtue” (283). What he means by this is that Robespierre, contra what appeared in his own journal, might actually have said in the Convention that the transformation of the joke about breeches into a political emblem was largely the work of Brissot and his Girondin, or Brissotin, political allies. This would make better sense of the fact that the ministry dismissed by Louis XVI in June 1792, which was composed of Brissot’s friends and allies, was known as the *ministère sans-culottes*. It would also explain why, during the Parisian insurrection that followed the dismissal of that ministry, banners bearing the words *libres et sans-culottes* were first displayed.

The causal argument is deepened by Sonenscher’s suggestion that the Brissotin alliance, which originally gave the term “sans-culottes” its political meaning, rested on a broad consensus about the ways in which public finance might be used to stabilize a form of republican government in France. This involved a level of agreement between Brissot and others about the desirability of making property generally available to reflect deserved social distinction inside a meritocracy, and of using the power of modern finance to promote equality. Sonenscher locates the original foil for this consensus back in 1789, where there were two main alternatives against which the consensus took shape: one associated with Mounier and the Monarchiens, the other with the abbé Sieyès and his dwindling political allies. In this respect, Sonenscher’s book on the sans-culottes needs to be read as a companion to his earlier book, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (2007). What the new book emphasizes is that the consensus associated with Brissot—the vision of a modern republic secured by modern finance—fell to pieces in the maelstrom of the Revolution, and into the space left behind stepped Robespierre with a different vision of the republic and a new understanding of who, or what, the sans-culottes really were. The big question, of course, is why did the consensus fall apart? Here what Sonenscher offers is a combination of the conventional explanation (war and circumstance) and an original contribution: part of the collapse can be explained through “the array of historical and political investigations that Rousseau’s conjectures helped to ignite” (363). It is not news that Rousseau’s thought had a role to play in the French Revolution, but Sonenscher’s detailed tracking of that role, and his painstaking reconstruction of the intellectual resources Rousseau (and critics of Rousseau) provided for the revolutionaries, is novel and important.

* * *

Sonenscher directs much energy and many pages to disentangling Rousseau’s ideas from those of his critics, but not so as to argue that these were two

independent strains of intellectual resource. This move strengthens his particular argument, and the general case for taking ideas seriously in explaining the Revolution, because it deals with the powerful objection that is often directed against such arguments: namely, given that Rousseau is so hard to understand, how many of the participants in the Revolution were really in a position to draw meaningfully on what he had had to say earlier in the eighteenth century? Did even Robespierre really understand the *Social Contract*? Sonenscher emphasizes the extent to which Rousseau was understood by his readers—both appreciative and critical—to be exemplifying Cynic moral and political independence, and therefore drawing on the ancient model of the Cynic way of life. Confusingly, what Sonenscher calls “the Cynic label” was also frequently applied to Rousseau’s critics, especially Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Louis-Bertrand Castel, the Anglican moralist John Brown, and Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, among others. All, Sonenscher shows, were Cynics in so far as they could be loosely described as “enthusiasts of virtue”, though there were myriad subtle differences. Without glossing those differences, Sonenscher assembles evidence for his overall argument which is most clearly stated in these terms: “In a remote yet still a real sense, the sans-culottes could be described as the product of Cynic criticism of Ciceronian moral philosophy, as both were construed in the eighteenth century” (26). We are reminded that Kant called Rousseau “that subtle Diogenes”, and that Rousseau needs to be understood against the strand of eighteenth-century thought that was originally called “naturalism” and afterwards became “primitivism”. Jacobin ideology was constructed against this backdrop of political satire and moral politics, a backdrop that has largely disappeared from the historiography of the Revolution. Sonenscher connects Rousseau’s interest in the relations between nonpolitical institutions (like festivals), public opinion and the power of legitimate government with a much older interest in singing, dancing, morality and government. Here Cynic philosophy was useful for uncovering “those naturally human moral capacities that the unequal distribution of wealth and power had come to obscure”.

Sonenscher draws out the connections between these moral preoccupations and Physiocracy (the group of French early economic thinkers who tried to model a way of having modernity’s wealth, culture and moral potential without the accompanying inequality, injustice and warfare.) He argues that in the wake of the practical failure of Physiocratic-inspired policies in the 1770s, Physiocrats persisted with their moral concerns by searching for new ways to engineer reform without relying directly on government power or intervention. He goes on to argue that the ideological origins of the French Revolution “had as much to do with long-standing visions of royal reform as with opposition to absolute government, since the first were not necessarily at odds with the second” (213).

This line of enquiry gives rise to a cumulative sense of how little purchase the analytical distinction between monarchies and republics had in the debates that surrounded the question of reform on the eve of the Revolution. Earlier in the century, Fénelon had subsumed both the terms “monarchy” and “republic” under the broader genus *res publica*, and this practice continued well beyond 1789 (examples can be found in the writings of both Sieyès and Robespierre). Sonenscher’s reconstruction of the moral debates that took place in the decade following Rousseau’s death and Physiocracy’s failure in the 1770s opens up the possibility of a more accurate understanding of the conception of the first republic than there has ever been before. Here the relation between nature, morality and politics remains central, but what is newly foregrounded is the established use of moral criticism and moral understanding as a means of achieving social stability and justice independently of the formal configuration of government power.

Unsurprisingly, property was a central preoccupation in the pre-Revolutionary debates about social stability. Rousseau, famously, had stated in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say this is mine, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society”. His argument was that there could be no stability in a society based on an already existing system of private property, which could only serve to turn the strong and the weak into the rich and the poor. Legitimate ownership could only be state-based, not the result of spontaneously occurring systems of ownership. Sonenscher shows how problematic this proved to Rousseau’s readers and critics, and how many fell back on natural rather than contractual explanations of the origin of private property. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, for example, drew on the vitalist explanations of natural society to be found in Charles Bonnet and Johann Caspar Lavater’s work. Catholicism provided further alternatives with its rich traditions of theological explanation for the institution of private property. Mably, on the other hand, disagreed with Rousseau’s dismissal of natural sociability, insisting that humans were equipped with a mixture of intelligence and emotions that made society their natural habitat. Such natural endowments had been the basis for a real system of common property, before the corruption of magistrates or the problem of free-riders started to break it down. For Mably, the only solution was a well-constituted republican government to neutralize the passions private property had unleashed. Sonenscher points out the superficial similarity between Rousseau and Mably in this recourse to an emotionally austere solution to the problem of private property, but also two significant differences: Mably’s way of neutralizing the passions was much more drastic than Rousseau’s, and Rousseau did not share Mably’s conviction that such measures would produce a stable political outcome. Thinking forwards to the Terror, it is clear that these differences turned out to be crucial. With a view to understanding how and

why the revolutionaries drew on the thought of Rousseau and of Mably, it is extremely helpful to have their ideas situated in the broad sweep of French eighteenth-century moral thought that Sonenscher has assembled.

* * *

Beyond noticing that *Sans-Culottes* is a companion book to Sonenscher's earlier *Before the Deluge*, it is worth asking where, taken together, these two substantial volumes leave us now. Such a question cannot be properly addressed in the confines of a review essay, but there seem to me to be three main points that can be made. First (and most importantly), Sonenscher's books have transformed the terrain of scholarship in French eighteenth-century political thought. The single most striking transformation in *Sans-Culottes* is the emphasis placed on Cynic philosophy and the role it played in the development and interpretation of Rousseau's ideas. This is a line of enquiry that will have as many resonances for scholars in the field as Sonenscher's painstaking reconstruction in *Before the Deluge* of the eighteenth century's intellectual resources for addressing the problem of the public debt. Laid side by side, Sonenscher's books provide the most comprehensive account to date of the development of republicanism in late eighteenth-century France. They are a major resource for all interested in explaining the historical fact that when the Revolution began in 1789 no one in the National Assembly was aiming to establish a republic in France, but by 1792 there was no alternative. What Sonenscher offers is a panoramic view of the backdrop of political, social and moral ideas against which that radical regime change took place.

Second, there is the challenge, and potential reward, of integrating the achievement of both books. At the most general or abstract level, the relation between the two books can be captured in terms of the problem of inequality: *Before the Deluge* mapped the ideas of Mounier and the Monarchiens, on the one hand, and those of the abbé Sieyès and his dwindling political allies on the other. *Sans-Culottes* completes the picture by exploring the alternative to both: the broad patriot consensus in favour of using the *assignat* and deficit finance to promote a mixture of political stability and social equality. There is much work to be done now in combining the insights into Rousseau's political thought that emerge from both books. The same is true of Physiocracy. It is likely that future work by Sonenscher and others building on his achievement will find unexpected connections and conflicts in simply drawing together the new material both books have unearthed.

Third, there is the question of what kind of causal narrative of the French Revolution is compatible with the intellectual and imaginative thought

framework that Sonenscher has reconstructed. This is the hardest question of all, touching as it does on the relevance of political thought to what actually happened in the French Revolution. Other reviewers of *Sans-Culottes* have warned readers that they will be sorely disappointed if they think they are going to be encountering even a single example of a *sans-culotte*, traditionally understood as a pike-bearing man of the street. The *sans-culottes* of Soboul's work are seemingly nowhere to be found in Sonenscher's book. The oddity of this can be understood as an index of the new ground that has been broken. The *sans-culottes* are offstage, rather than absent, because the point of Sonenscher's book is to show that that they might not have been who or what we have hitherto assumed they were. But on this way of looking at things, Sonenscher still has everything in play. He has shown that there is a vista between the Marxist and revisionist historiographical approaches to the Revolution, and the history of late eighteenth-century political thought in France. Now the question is: can he work his way back from the detailed tapestry of ideas and arguments he has uncovered to a narrative that makes sense of 1789, the Terror and what happened in between? That is an awful lot to ask of anyone, and the mere fact that the question arises is a reflection of the depth of Sonenscher's achievement so far.