
Abbé Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*, 1789

The plan of this work is quite simple. We have three questions to ask ourselves.

1. What is the Third Estate? – *Everything*.
2. What has it been so far in the political order? – *Nothing*.
3. What does it ask to be? – *Something*.

We shall see if these are the right answers. Meanwhile, it would be wrong to say that these truths have been exaggerated when you have not yet seen the supporting evidence. Next we shall examine the measures that

have been tried, and those that must [still] be taken, for the Third Estate to actually become *something*. Thus we shall state:

4. What ministers have tried to do in the interests of the Third Estate, and what the privileged themselves propose to do for it;
5. What should have been done;
6. And finally, what remains to be done for the Third Estate so that it can take up the place that is its due [. . .]

What is a nation? A body of people who join together to live under *common* laws and be represented by the same *legislative assembly*. It is only too clear, isn't it, that the nobility has privileges and exemptions it dares to call its rights that are separate from the rights of the main body of citizens. As a consequence of these special rights, it does not belong to the common order, [nor is it subject to] the common law. Thus its private rights already make the nobility into a separate people, a nation within a nation. [. . .]

With regard to its *political* rights, these also it exercises separately. It has its own representatives without any mandate from the people. Its corps of deputies sits separately, and even if it should sit in the same chamber as the deputies of ordinary citizens, its representative function would still be fundamentally distinct and separate. The nobility is alien to the nation, firstly from the standpoint of *principle*, since it does not derive its powers from the people; secondly from the standpoint of its objectives since these involve defending, not the general interest, but the private one.

The Third Estate thus contains everything proper to the nation; and those who do not belong to the Third Estate cannot be seen as part of the nation. What is the Third Estate? *Everything*. [*What is the third estate?* 1: 'The Third Estate is the complete nation']

We shall examine neither the servitude in which the people have suffered for so long, nor the restrictions and humiliations which still constrain it. Its civil status has changed; it must change still more. It is absolutely impossible for the nation as a whole, or even for any separate order, to be free, if the Third Estate is not. We do not get our freedom from privileges, but from our rights as citizens, rights which belong to everyone.

If the aristocrats seek to keep the people in a state of oppression at the expense of that very freedom of which they have proved themselves to be unworthy, the people may well ask on what grounds. If the answer is 'by right of conquest', you will agree that this means going back in time a bit. [. . .]

Sometimes, people seem surprised to hear complaints about the triple *aristocracy* of Church, Army and Law. They like to think that this is just a manner of speaking; but the phrase must be taken literally. If the Estates-General is the interpreter of the general will, and has legislative power in that capacity, then surely it is precisely this that makes the Estates-General, in as much as it is just a *clerical-noble-judicial* assembly, into a true aristocracy.

Add to this awful truth the fact that, in one way or another, every branch of the executive has fallen into the hands of the caste that supplies the Church, the Law and the Army with their members. Feelings of brotherhood or *comradeship* of some sort make nobles always prefer each other to the rest of the nation. The usurpation is total; they reign over us in every sense.

Read your history to check whether or not this statement fits the facts, and you will see, as I have seen, that it is a great mistake to think that France is governed as a monarchy. In the annals of our history, if you make an exception for a few years during the reign of Louis XI,¹ and of Richelieu,² and a few moments during Louis XIV's reign,³ when it was a matter of despotism pure and simple, you will think you are reading the history of a *palace* autocracy. It is the court that reigns, not the monarch. The court has made and the court has unmade, has appointed ministers and dismissed them, has created posts and filled them, and so on. And what is the court but the head of this vast aristocracy overrunning the whole of France, which through its members seizes on everything and exercises total control over every essential aspect of public life. So in their muted complaints, the people has become used to distinguishing the monarch from those who exercise power. It has always looked upon the King as a man so thoroughly deceived and so defenceless in the midst of an active, all-powerful court that it has never thought of blaming him for all the evil that is done in his name. Finally, is it not enough to open people's eyes to what is happening around us at this very moment? What do you see? The aristocracy, isolated, fighting simultaneously against reason, justice, the people, the minister and the King. The outcome of this terrible struggle is still unclear; and to think that people say the aristocracy is just an illusion!

To sum up, so far the Third Estate has not had any true representatives in the Estates-General. Thus its political rights have been non-existent. [*What is the third estate?* 2: 'What has the Third Estate been until now? Nothing']

¹ Louis XI, reigned 1461–83.

² Richelieu governed France 1624–42.

³ Louis XIV's reign 1643–1715.

The demands of the Third Estate must not be judged from the isolated observations of certain writers with some inklings of the rights of man. The Third Estate is still very backward in this respect, not only, I would say, by comparison with the enlightened views of students of the social order, but also with that mass of common ideas that forms public opinion. You can only make a judgment on the authentic petitions of the Third Estate through the formal demands which the great municipalities of the kingdom have addressed to the government. What do we see in these demands? That the people want to be *something* – to be honest, the least thing possible. First, it wants to have genuine representatives in the Estates-General, that is to say deputies *drawn from its own order*, able to interpret its wishes and defend its interests. But what would be the use of [the Third Estate] participating in the Estates-General if interests hostile to its own were to predominate? All it would do is sanction by its presence an oppression of which it would be the eternal victim. So it certainly cannot go and cast its vote in the Estates-General unless it exerted *an influence at least equal to that of the privileged orders*. Secondly, it demands that the number of its representatives be equal to that of the two other orders put together. However, this equality of representation would become a complete illusion if each chamber had its own separate vote. The Third Estate demands thirdly therefore that votes be counted *by heads and not by orders*. This is what these demands that have apparently set off alarm bells among the privileged orders boil down to. They thought that for this reason alone the reform of abuses was becoming indispensable.

The modest objective of the Third Estate is to have an influence in the Estates-General equal to that of the privileged orders. I repeat, could it ask for less? And is it not clear that if its influence is less than equal, it has no hope of emerging from its state of political non-existence, and of becoming *something*? [. . .]

SECOND DEMAND OF THE THIRD ESTATE

That the number of its deputies be equal to that of the two privileged orders.

Political rights, like civil rights, must derive from the status of being a citizen. This legal property is the same for everyone regardless of the amount of real property making up the wealth or income enjoyed by each individual. Any citizen fulfilling the conditions prescribed for becoming an elector has the right to be represented, and his representation cannot be a fraction of someone else's representation. This right is indivisible; everyone exercises it equally, just as everyone has equal protection under the law that they have agreed to make. How can you argue

on the one hand that the law is the expression of the general will, that is to say of the plurality, and claim on the other that ten individual wills can cancel out a thousand other individual wills? Do we not then run the risk of having the law made by a minority? This is obviously contrary to the nature of things.

If these principles, certain as they are, seem to be derived too much from common ideas, I bring the reader back to a comparison right in front of his nose. Is it not true that everyone finds it fair for the huge bailiwick of Poitou to have more representatives in the Estates-General than the tiny bailiwick of Gex? Why is that? Because, they say, the population and tax revenue of Poitou are much higher than that of Gex. Thus principles are being accepted which permit you to determine the ratio of representatives. Do you want taxation to be the basis? Although we do not know precisely what the respective tax contribution of the different orders is, the Third Estate obviously bears more than half of the burden [. . .]

As far as population is concerned, the vast [numerical] superiority of the third order over the first two is well known. Like everybody else, I do not know what the real proportion is, but like anybody else I can do my sums [. . .] In total, there are less than two hundred thousand privileged persons in the first two orders. Compare that figure with a twenty-five to twenty-six million total population, and draw your own conclusions.

To get the same answer on the basis of different, but equally incontrovertible, principles, let us take the view that the privileged orders are to the great mass of citizens what exceptions are to the law. Every society must be regulated by common laws and be subject to a common order. If you make exceptions to that, they ought at the very least to be rare ones, and there can never be any question of the exception having the same weight and influence in public life as the norm. It is really insane to treat the interests of these exceptions as somehow balancing out those of the great mass of the people [. . .] In a few years time, when people come to look back on all the obstacles blocking this all too modest demand of the Third Estate, they will be surprised at the lack of substance in the arguments used against it, and even more surprised by the brazen effrontery of those who were bold enough to dig those excuses up.

The very people who invoke the authority of facts against the Third Estate could read in those facts a rule for their own conduct, if they were honest with themselves. The existence of a few loyal cities was enough to form a Chamber of Commons in the Estates-General under Philip the Fair.⁴

Since then, feudal servitude has disappeared, and rural areas have presented us with a large population of *new citizens*. Towns have multiplied

⁴ Philip the Fair, reigned 1285–1314.

and grown. Commerce and the arts have created, as it were, a multitude of new classes with large numbers of prosperous families full of well-educated, public-spirited men. Why has this dual growth, so much greater than that of those loyal cities of earlier times, not encouraged this same authority to create two new chambers in favour of the Third Estate? Justice and sound politics alike require it. [. . .]

But I am using reason against people who can listen only to the voice of their own self-interest. Let us give them something to think about that might touch them more closely. Is it appropriate for today's nobility to hang on to the language and attitudes of the gothic age? Is it appropriate for the Third Estate, at the end of the eighteenth century, to stagnate in the sad, cowardly habits of the old servitude? If the Third Estate recognised and respected itself, then others would surely respect it too! People should note that the old relationship between the orders has been changed simultaneously on both sides. The Third Estate, which had been reduced to nothing, has regained, through its industry, part of what had been stolen from it by the offence [committed] against it by those who were stronger. Instead of demanding its rights back, it has consented to pay for them; they have not been restored to the Third Estate but sold back to it; and it has acquiesced in their purchase. But in the end, in one way or another, it can take possession of them. It must not forget that today it constitutes a reality in the nation, whereas before it was a shadow, [and] that, in the course of this long process of change, the nobility has ceased to be the monstrous feudal power that could oppress with impunity. It is the nobility that is now no more than the shadow of what it was, and this shadow is still trying to terrify a whole nation, but in vain – unless this nation wants to be regarded as the vilest on earth.

THIRD AND FINAL DEMAND OF THE THIRD ESTATE

That the Estates-General should vote, not by orders, but by heads.

[. . .]

The privileged orders fear the third order having equality of influence, and so they declare it to be unconstitutional. This behaviour is all the more remarkable for the fact that until now they have been two against one without finding anything unconstitutional in that unjust advantage. They feel very deeply the need to retain the veto over anything that could be against their interest.

Source: D. Williams (ed.), *The Enlightenment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 494–5, 498–9, 504–6.