In the late 1780s, France was in the midst of a financial crisis. In order to attempt to deal with this crisis King Louis XVI convened a meeting of the Estates-General to get input from the Three Estates. Prior to this meeting, France’s financial minister Jacques Necker asked for opinions on how the Estates-General should be organized. In response, Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès or the Abbé Sieyès (an abbé is a French Catholic clergyman), wrote the pamphlet called, “What is the Third Estate?” in which he criticized the privileges of the clergy and nobility. The pamphlet became very popular in France amongst the people hoping for reform (change).

Directions: Read / highlight / underline / annotate the excerpts below and then answer the questions that follow.

Excerpts from *What is the Third Estate* by Abbé Sieyès (January 1789)

The outline of this essay is quite simple. We must ask ourselves three questions:

1. What is the Third Estate? Everything
2. What has it been hitherto in politics? Nothing
3. What does it ask? To become something....

*The Third Estate Is a Complete Nation.*

What are the essentials of national existence and prosperity? Private enterprise and public functions.

**Private enterprise** may be divided into four classes: 1) ... agriculture. 2) ... manufacture.... 3) ... merchants and traders.... 4) ... special services.... This fourth category includes everything from the most liberal and scientific professions down to the least respected of domestic services.

**Public functions** likewise under present circumstances may be classified under four well known headings: the Sword, the Robe, the Church and the Administration.... Only the lucrative and honorary positions are held by members of the privileged order.... [But] everything arduous in this service is carried out by the Third Estate;...

Who then would dare to say that the Third Estate does not include everything necessary to the formation of a complete nation?... If the privileged order were abolished, the nation would not be anything less than it is, but rather something more. Thus, what is the Third Estate? Everything, but a hobbled and oppressed everything. What would it be without the privileged classes? Everything -- but a free and flourishing everything. Nothing can function without the Third Estate; everything would work infinitely better without the other estates....

*What is a nation? A body of associates living under a common law and represented by the same legislature.* Is it not all too clear that the noble class has its privileges, dispensations, even separate rights distinct from those of the main body of citizens? It is thus outside the common order, the common law. So its civil rights already make of it a people separate from the nation....

Concerning its public rights, these too are exercised separately. It has its own representatives, who are in no respect representatives of the people. The body of its deputies sits apart; and even if it should gather in the same hall with the deputies of simple citizens, it is no less true that its representation is essentially distinct and separate; ...

The Third Estate therefore includes all that which belongs to the nation; and all that which is not the Third Estate cannot consider itself as being of the nation. What is the Third Estate? Everything.

*What has the Third Estate been hitherto? Nothing*

... People sometimes seem astonished at hearing complaints of a triple aristocracy, the Church, the Sword and the Robe.... If the Estates General is the interpreter of the General Will and consequently has legislative powers, and if it is only a clerical-noble-judicial assembly, is it not certain that we have a veritable aristocracy? ... Add to this frightful truth the fact that in one way or another, all the branches of the executive power have also fallen into the hands of the caste which constitutes the Church, the Robe and the Sword. A kind of spirit of confraternity makes the nobles prefer one another to the rest of the nation. The usurpation is complete; veritably they reign. ... It is a grave error to believe that France is subject to a monarchical regime.

... It is the court, and not the monarch, that has reigned. It is the court that makes and unmakes, appoints and discharges ministers, creates and dispenses positions, etc. And what is the court if not the head of this immense aristocracy which overruns all parts of France...

Let us sum up: The Third Estate has not, hitherto, had real representation in the Estates General. Thus its political rights are nil.

*What Does the Third Estate Demand? To Become Something.*
Questions: Answer in COMPLETE sentences

1. What are the four classes of “private enterprise” according to Sieyès?

2. What are the four headings of “public functions”?

3. When Sieyès is referring to the “sword” and the “robe” what group of people or estate is he talking about?

4. a) As Sieyès is writing this, what did he say the Third Estate was?

   b) What did he think it could be without the privileged estates?

5. a) How did Sieyès define the word “nation”?

   b) Why does he think the nobility does not actually belong to the “nation”? Give at least 2 supporting details.


7. Explain what you think Sieyès is trying to get across about the Third Estate. Use your own words, but also make sure to use evidence from the reading to support your interpretation.