

TWO

Socialist Ideals and Imaginings, 1789–1830

On the morning of May 27, 1797, French officials in the small town of Vendôme, about 150 miles southwest of Paris, escorted the freshly convicted traitors François-Noël “Gracchus” Babeuf (b. 1760) and Augustin Darthé (b. 1769) to the Place des Armes and guillotined them. Both men were grievously wounded after failing to commit suicide by stabbing themselves in the courtroom immediately after being sentenced. Their three-month trial, which had been transferred from Paris for security reasons, had been a momentous one. Along with sixty-two associates in their Society of Equals, Babeuf and Darthé were accused of conspiring to overthrow the government and to restore the democratic Constitution of 1793, which the French state had earlier abrogated. Both men, aware of the symbolic power of a martyr’s death, hoped that, by dying heroically, they would rally support to their cause. Their hopes came to naught as conservative forces crushed their movement. In the long run, however, generations of revolutionaries would look back at Babeuf’s moment as an inspirational and defining one in the history of socialism.

BABEUF AND THE CRITIQUE OF PRIVATE PROPERTY

The mid-1790s were years rife with conspiracy as the corrupt and unpopular French government, the Directory, clung to power. Among the broad array of the Directory’s opponents, what set Babeuf and his compatriots apart was their radical politics, which went beyond the Jacobin call for a return to the Constitution of 1793 with its promise of universal male suffrage regardless of wealth. Babeuf and disciples such as Philippe-Michel Buonarroti (1761–1837) and Sylvain Maréchal (1750–1803) also concluded that the only way to achieve true social justice was to abolish private property. “By its origins,” Babeuf argued to the court, “the land belongs to no one and its fruits are for everyone.” The introduction of private property was “a surprise foisted upon the mass of simple and

honest souls. The laws of this institution must necessarily bring about the existence of the fortunate and the unfortunate, of masters and slaves."¹ Thus, Babeuf threw down the gauntlet to those who saw the legal equality proclaimed by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) as the French Revolution's penultimate achievement. Without material equality, equality before the law meant little.

The circumstances that led Babeuf to reach this conclusion are instructive. With the onset of the industrial revolution in Britain and the democratic revolutions of the United States, France, and Haiti, Europeans experienced enormous social and political changes that transformed the ways in which people thought, lived, and governed themselves. Babeuf was swept up in this maelstrom in which he, like many others, also became an agent of change.

Born in the small town of Saint-Quentin in Picardy, Babeuf was the son of a poor tax collector. Although he received no formal education, he learned to read and write and eventually became a *feudiste*, an official who managed the archives of feudal estates and provided aristocrats with the legal grounds for the dues and taxes they exacted from peasants living on their lands. This profession became increasingly important as rising commercial pressures and social expectations led the nobility to seek means of increasing their income. As a professional, Babeuf gained a degree of status, and access to estate libraries allowed him to further his self-education by reading Voltaire, Plato, Aristotle, and Rousseau, among others. By 1787, he was a regular correspondent with the secretary of the Arras Academy, Ferdinand Dubois de Fosseux. Nevertheless, his opportunities remained limited, and he chafed at the condescension of his aristocratic clients and at being denied honorary membership in the Academy.

Babeuf's job revealed to him the ruthlessness with which the nobility and clergy exploited their tenants, and the injustice disturbed him. He made his discomfort explicit in July 1787 in a letter to Dubois commenting on two reform projects that the secretary had recently described to him. One dealt with the establishment of a communist utopia, while the other addressed the establishment of a uniform civil code. The liberal Dubois took the latter project seriously but poked fun at the former and referred to its author as "the reformer of the whole world." Babeuf, on the other hand, asserted that reforming the civil code so that "men of all classes . . . would be accorded the same rights in the order of succession to property . . . *would be very good* . . . [but] obtain[ing] for all individuals, without distinction, an absolutely equal portion of all the goods and advantages that can be enjoyed in this mean world . . . *would be even better*."²

Babeuf pointed out that the nobility had established its rule by force and maintained it by using law to legitimize the pillage of wealth that

belonged to others. While agreeing with Rousseau's contention that the first man to enclose a plot of land and declare "this is mine" was the initial author of all the evils that afflicted humanity,³ he also believed that "the reformer of the whole world" had a much more workable solution to the problem than that of the noble Jean-Jacques, who, in the end, accepted private property. Ten years later, Babeuf would find himself defending the reformer's solution before the tribunal; only then, it was no longer an academic question.

The abolition of feudalism ended Babeuf's career as a *feudiste*. Quickly joining the revolutionaries in Picardy, he attempted to earn his living as a journalist and pamphleteer, but by casting himself in the role of a popular tribune on the issues of unjust taxation and arbitrary government, he ran afoul of the old local elite straining to hold on to its authority. Arrested as an incendiary in May 1790, support from patriots in high places secured his release. Then, after being appointed to a minor post in charge of selling off national properties, in August 1793 he was convicted of fraud and sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment. He escaped to Paris just as the Terror moved into high gear and, with the help of his friend Maréchal, found a post in the bureaucracy charged with provisioning the capital. In November, however, the provincial authorities tracked him down. After eight miserable months in prison, the efforts of Maréchal and a sympathetic judge, a Jacobin from his hometown, finally won his release in July 1794.

At the beginning of the revolution, Babeuf had associated himself with the radical Jacobins based on his reading of Rousseau. Although he had argued for the abolition of property in his correspondence with Dubois, it took time before he came to see communism as the single practicable solution to injustice. In his early revolutionary writings, Babeuf expressed sentiments similar to those of the Jacobin firebrand St. Just (1767–1795). Babeuf asserted that every household had the right to an equal portion of France's productive land, and he proposed other redistributive policies to create a minimum standard of living for all and give everyone access to a range of government services. Such a model of reform had little to do with "communism" but was, rather, a call for expanded small peasant proprietorship. Babeuf, like St. Just, wanted to create a republic of virtue by reforming institutions. That goal meant purging the aristocracy and the clergy and using the state as an instrument to redistribute, not eliminate, property. To bring the recalcitrant into line with the "General Will," he was willing to use force. This was a radical approach, but it was not communism.

Babeuf changed his mind as the revolution unfolded. He was in Paris at the apotheosis of Jacobinism in 1793, when, under popular pressure, the Convention created a radical democratic constitution and empowered

the Committee of Public Safety to root out counterrevolution at home and mobilize the nation's resources to defeat France's enemies abroad. Led by Maximilian Robespierre (1758–1794), the committee pursued justice via the use of mass terror, but it also sought to minimize the suffering of the poor by controlling prices, requisitioning needed products, and imposing rationing. Babeuf helped implement the latter and became convinced that it was possible for the state to redistribute commodities as a means of achieving absolute equality.

The overthrow of Robespierre's faction in July 1794 was followed by the conservative "Thermidorian" Reaction. The Convention ended the terror and established the Directory, which limited the franchise, suppressed its opponents, and, despite severe economic misery, reversed economic and social policies protecting the poor. Babeuf, calling himself "Gracchus" (after the Gracchi brothers, who died fighting for radical land redistribution in ancient Rome), vehemently opposed this counterrevolutionary turn and sought to rally outcast Jacobins and radical egalitarian supporters against it. In his *People's Tribune*, he called for a return to the Constitution of 1793 and elaborated a new economic model that would lead to true equality. In a "Manifesto of the Plebeians," he advocated the creation of a state that would suppress private property and put all men to work according to talent or trade. The products produced by individuals would be kept in a "common storehouse" to be rationed by the state administration "according to the most scrupulous equality."⁴ Here we see the core of Babeuf's new program, which had gone beyond the radical redistribution of private property and now called for the latter's elimination.

As a first step toward this goal, Babeuf organized a conspiracy to seize power and restore the Constitution of 1793. Control and planning for action was in the hands of a small central committee, whose agents were to carry out propaganda among civilians and soldiers, organize insurgent cells, and gather arms. In April, the committee published a radical manifesto summarizing its egalitarian program. At its peak, it may have had a few thousand active supporters, drawn largely from among discontented artisans and shopkeepers, some of whom adhered mainly to the Jacobin ideals of 1793, while others enthused over Babeuf's radical egalitarianism. In early May, as the "Conspiracy of Equals" prepared for action, the police, having infiltrated its ranks, arrested its leadership and effectively smothered the movement in its cradle.⁵

Babeuf's life and political activities are important for many reasons. Born into a society experiencing rapid change, during the Revolution he used his talents and energy to take advantage of new opportunities that gave him substantial influence. However, when he carried the ideological principle of equality from the political into the economic and social

realms, the effort conflicted with a new order in which equality before the law rested on the basis of an economic system predicated on inequality.

Babeuf's economic model had little in common with those of most nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialists or communists. He provided no systematic analysis of social development, and his recognition of private property as the key determinant of who ate well and who did not was in keeping with the views of other preindustrial champions of equality. Unlike later socialists, who saw the potential for liberation brought about by the machine age, his ascetic and static communism was based on what he knew: the artisanal and peasant production of the past.

More modern were the techniques that the Babouvists employed to organize their conspiracy under a political regime intent on destroying them. Such methods stressing secrecy, centralized decision making, discipline, and the preparation of revolutionary activists, reappeared repeatedly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under such leaders as Auguste Blanqui (1805–1881) in France and V. I. Lenin (1870–1924) in Russia. From the beginning, they also raised questions about the nature of the postrevolutionary order. Babeuf believed that it was the duty of leaders to keep an eye on those in power and to rouse the people against injustice and tyranny. He, too optimistically, thought that his efforts would culminate in a mass insurrection and that, once in power, the people would serve as a check on those seeking to dominate others. Like the Jacobins, he was not averse to the use of terror if it were necessary to realize the General Will and set the hesitant on the road to happiness, though he hoped that the radical transition could be brought about through peaceful persuasion. The tensions in this line of thinking would be a constant presence among the revolutionaries who followed him.

PAINE, CONDORCET, AND THE SEARCH FOR SOCIAL SECURITY

Babouvism was a revolutionary response to the political and social contradictions that resulted from the establishment of a new republican order based on equality before the law, private property, and commercial competition. In a society in which most people either were or aspired to become independent artisans, shopkeepers, or small farmers, Babeuf's attack on private property, despite the existence of widespread social misery and political unrest, did not resonate widely. Yet he certainly was not alone in his feeling that the moment had come for society to address the problem of socially created poverty. Other intellectuals, such as English journalist Thomas Paine (1733–1809) and the French mathematician Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet (1743–1794), also believed that economic

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William Smaldone

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