

The Threat of Starvation in Gracchus Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals:
Starvation's Effects and Babeuf's Exploitation

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Abstract

François-Noel "Gracchus" Babeuf was a journalist and social activist in the French Revolution. Though his earlier journals had not been widely accepted, he was able to amass a large following during the winter/spring of 1795-6. The following he was able to garner can be understood through an explanation of the role starvation played in factors of the society he targeted. This research looks at exactly how Babeuf and his "Conspiracy of Equals"—the organizational group of agents working to help Babeuf spread his propaganda—capitalized on the social struggle of starvation; this capitalization, in particular, largely accounts for Babeuf's rise to prominence, thus providing a better understanding of the social climate in France at the time and contributing to the sociological interpretation of the French Revolution.

Key words: Babeuf, starvation, conspiracy, Communism, revolution, France

François-Noel "Gracchus" Babeuf was a journalist and social activist in the French Revolution who amassed a large following in Paris during the winter-spring of 1795-6. Despite the widespread and continuous debate over the origins and interpretations of the French Revolution, there are few historical debates about Gracchus Babeuf. Historians of the French Revolution such as François Furet only give Babeuf a cursory glance; indeed, as Babeuf's most active years fall between the decline of the Jacobin Terror and the rise of Napoleon, the years of 1795-6 and the character of Babeuf tend to get lost in the history of the French Revolution.¹ In fact, there are only four full-length books in English written

¹ François Furet, *Revolutionary France 1770-1800*. Trans. Antonia Nevill. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Denis Woronoff, *The Thermidorian Regime and the Directory: 1794-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): xix.

about him.² Furthermore, the mention of him in scholarly articles tends to focus only on his ideology.³ Moreover, his journals are neglected in research about French Rev-

² Ernest B. Bax, *The Last Episode of the French Revolution Being a History of Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of the Equals* (1911); Ian H. Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997); R.B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978); David Thompson, *The Babeuf Plot: the making of a Republican Legend* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1947). There is a larger amount of Babeuf scholarship in French and Russian.

³ Ulysses G. Weatherly, "Babeuf's Place in the History of Socialism," *Publications of the American Economic Association* 8, no. 1 (February 1907): 113-24; K. D. Tönnesson, "The Babouvists: From Utopian to Practical Socialism," *Past & Present*, No. 22 (Jul., 1962), pp. 60-76; Patrice L.-R. Higonnet, "Babeuf: Communist or Proto-Communist?" *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Dec., 1979), pp. 773-781.

olutionary journalism.⁴ And yet, his rise to prominence through journalism and activism in Directorial France can offer a better understanding of the social climate in France at the time.

Indeed, a recent trend in historiography is to over-emphasize cultural history—that is, the history of the individuals marginalized by race, gender, and sex—while disregarding the social history of the majority as “no longer worthy of ‘privileged’ attention.”⁵ A consequence of this trend is the loss of what Paula Fass describes as a “ballast” for research and historical understanding; by offering conclusions about individuals and a marginalized group without placing them in the wider context offered by social history, “the individual culturally resonant case cannot be made historically meaningful.”⁶ A close examination of Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals, then, cannot be historically relevant and significant without systematically connecting the character to the social context in which he acted. Indeed, the reactions of the people of the former *sans-culottes* to Babeuf’s propaganda and the importance of the details that he included in his journals can be used as parameters through which to understand the issues and concerns of the social majority of the lower classes within Paris during the Directorial period, thus informing the sociological interpretation of the French Revolution and contributing to what currently is a lack of scholarship on Babeuf.

Babeuf scholars such as R.B. Rose and David Thompson have attributed Babeuf’s rise to prominence to his socialist ideology.⁷ While an ideological interpretation of Babeuf offers a viable explanation for why his ideas have survived and been referenced by such revolutionaries as Marx and Lenin, that alone cannot account for

why he became popular in the winter-spring of 1795-6.⁸

To understand this rise to prominence sociologically requires examining how Babeuf and his “Conspiracy of Equals”—the organizational group of agents working to spread Babeuf’s propaganda—capitalized on the social struggle of starvation. Specifically, the psychological/sociological effects of hunger combined with Babeuf’s appeal to the people’s suffering can largely account for his rise to prominence at that time. In order to evaluate starvation as a primary factor in Babeuf’s rise to prominence, the sociological phenomenon will be examined qualitatively “from the bottom” by looking at the historical famine, the psychological effects of hunger, Babeuf’s appeals to it, why these appeals worked, and the sociological implications of Babeuf’s tactics.⁹

Before the winter 1795, the people of France had already suffered famine—notably, just before the overthrow of the Old Regime in 1789 and during the Jacobin Reign of Terror from 1793-1794.¹⁰ The starvation during the Old Regime contributed to the early revolution, but during the Jacobin years there was a stronger central government that handled rationing and food distribution well and put down uprisings with promises of swift “measures against the famine.”¹¹ When the Jacobin government fell, however, and the Directory rose to power, the new government inherited a terrible economic and social situation, which was further exacerbated by its increasingly slow-moving government.

Likewise, due partially to foreign wars and fiscal mismanagement, the new paper currency of France—the *assignat*—devaluated rapidly. To offset this, the Directory printed more money and implemented and rejected the maximum three times, which controlled prices of goods, specifically bread, thus allowing prices

⁴ Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France 1789-1799*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche, *Revolution in Print: the press in France 1775-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

⁵ Paula Fass, “Cultural History/Social History: Some Reflections on a Continuing Dialogue,” *Journal of Social History* 37 (2003): 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 39, 45.

⁷ R.B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978); David Thompson, *The Babeuf Plot: the making of a Republican Legend* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1947).

⁸ Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto” (1848), in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers: 1969); Marx, “The Holy Family” (1845), *Marxists.org*; Vladimir Lenin, *Collected Works of V.L. Lenin*, (New York: International Publishers, 1927).

⁹ “From the perspective of the lower classes.”

¹⁰ Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution: 1789-1799* (London: NLB, 1974): 123; 321-3; 330-1; 369-71.

¹¹ Soboul, 330-5; Woronoff, 18.

to skyrocket.¹² The maximum and foreign trade controls led to hyperinflation and the devaluation of the *assignat*. Indeed, while in late 1789, the cash value of the *assignat* in exchange for 100 francs was 98, in December 1795, the exchange rate was 0.7 *assignats* for every 100 francs; and by March 1796, the exchange fell to 0.3 for every 100.¹³

Poor climate and harvest contributed to the deprivation of the people by worsening the famine. Statistics show that the hail- and rain-filled year of 1795 led to a “poor” harvest; moreover, the “appalling winters of 1794-5 and 1795-6” contributed to “virtual famine conditions in many parts of France, worsened by agricultural under-production, *assignat* depreciation, post-Year II deregulation of the economy, etc.”¹⁴ The free markets of Paris had some food, but at enormous prices.¹⁵ In response to the limited free markets, black markets emerged throughout Directorial Paris, but, likewise, “the rise in the prices of essential items considerably exceeded the rate of currency devaluation; taking 1790 as the base, the price index of foodstuffs stood at 819 in April 1795 and the *assignat* at 581.”¹⁶

In response to the food crisis, the Directory attempted to collect taxes in grain. However, many farmers had already sold whatever harvest they had to the highest bidder before the Directory implemented this taxation strategy.¹⁷ Likewise, the attempts by the Directory to import grain were hindered by winter weather, so none of the shipments arrived until spring.¹⁸ However, by spring, Paris was clogged with refugees, making the already meager bread rations drop from one and a half pounds to one pound to half a pound per person per day.¹⁹

Such meager rations combined with the food crisis and hyperinflation led the desperate people to eat moldy bread and rotten vegetables; consequently, malnutrition diseases developed and between 1795-1796 there were over 1.57 million deaths in Paris.²⁰ The urban upper classes, on the contrary, did not experience such starvation. Instead, they financially benefitted from the dissolved hierarchy, nationalization of property, and social fluidity following the revolution, quickly attaining small fortunes.²¹ As described by Denis Woronoff, “Rarely had the division between ‘the fat and the thin’...been more manifest; rarely, also, had the bitterness of social antagonism aroused such hatreds on one side and such fear on the other.”²² The hatred of the lower classes towards the elite festered, especially after the Directory (to save money) cut state welfare, poor relief, and suspended private charitable societies. The closing of brothels and hostels forced refugees out onto the cold streets, and the clogged hospitals, with little charitable support, experienced “high morbidity and mortality.”²³

All of this combined suffering made the people of the formerly radical Jacobin Parisian sans-culottes—the artisans, small property owners, “wage-earners, journeymen, laborers, apprentices, former servants, and shop boys”—desire days of greater freedom, equality, and a better lifestyle.²⁴ Many members of this sans-culotte class remembered the allure and excitement surrounding the Jacobin government, the short-lived Constitution of 1793, and *Declaration of the Rights of Man*—which promised that the “aim of society is the ‘common welfare’.”²⁵ Despite harsh and violent memories of the Jacobin Terror, suffering citizens in the mid-1790’s recalled the

¹² Soboul, 436-8; 482-487.

¹³ Colin Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution* (London: Longman, 1988): 237.

¹⁴ Colin Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution* (London: Longman, 1988): 284.

¹⁵ Denis Woronoff, *The Thermidorian Regime and the Directory: 1794-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 12.

¹⁶ Woronoff, 10; Soboul, 436.

¹⁷ Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: from 1793 to 1799*, vol. II. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963): 268.

¹⁸ Woronoff, 11-12.

¹⁹ Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: from 1793 to 1799*, 268; Woronoff, 12.

²⁰ Woronoff, 13; Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution*, 287-88; Babeuf himself lost five children to starvation, malnutrition, or starvation-induced diseases. While Babeuf was in prison for the first time, in early 1795, his daughter, Sophie, “died of starvation following the reduction of the bread ration.” *The Defense of Gracchus Babeuf*, footnote 2.

²¹ Martyn Lyons, *France under the Directory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975): 52-53.

²² Woronoff, 12-13.

²³ Woronoff, 11; Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution*, 308.

²⁴ R.B. Rose, *The Making of the Sans-Culottes: Democratic ideas and institutions in Paris, 1789-92*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983): 181.

²⁵ Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution*, 70-71.

practical measures taken by the utopian government to provide for “the common happiness.”²⁶ Such a sentiment is found in a carpenter’s declaration in 1794: “Under Robespierre, blood flowed and we had bread. Now the blood has ceased to flow, and we have no bread. Blood must flow in order for us to have bread.”²⁷

Such a social climate arguably affected the psychological state of individual Parisian citizens. With the reality of suffering, utopian ideals, though still prevalent, could not offer the common man what he needed: food.²⁸ The psychological effects of natural starvation, while widespread, “[are] as much a psychology of fear and desperation as a psychology of hunger and food deprivation.”²⁹ The desperation and paranoia inherent in the starving masses created an ideal situation from which a new ideology could arise. However, with hunger-induced desperation and a short-term need-based motive for action, those hoping to rally the people could not simply muse about the possibilities of a greater, utopian world “one day;” they also had to combine these utopian ideals with practical solutions to the immediate problems facing the people.³⁰

Gracchus Babeuf, a revolutionary, socialist journalist and agitator, appealed and offered a solution to the mass suffering and rose to prominence during the harsh winter of 1795-6. His notoriety can be assessed by four distinct factors: subscription, recruitment, name-recognition, and public reaction to his arrest. His journal, *Le Tribun du Peuple*, had a subscription circulation of about 2,000-3,000; while not as substantial as the 200,000 cir-

ulation of Loustalot’s *Les revolutions de Paris*, the journal itself was printed for public readings, not private perusal.³¹ While it is difficult to exactly quantify Babeuf’s audience, his son Emilé reported that upon distribution shopkeepers “took six or a dozen papers, paid for their own and one for a friend and promised to pass on the rest to soldiers,” and that inn-keepers and café owners kept copies around for public consumption.³² While the quantified circulation of *Le Tribun du Peuple* seems meager, the 17,000 Parisian people willing to assist Babeuf and the “Conspiracy of Equals” in a *coup d’etat* shows a more vivid picture of the size of his audience.³³ With such a large following, Babeuf achieved name-recognition, as shown through an anecdote printed in *Le Tribun* thanking those involved for their assistance. In December 1795, a policeman attempted to arrest Babeuf, who resisted and fled through the streets. When “a group of market porters...heard his name,” they came to his defense, hurling “mud and refuse at the pursuing policeman.”³⁴ Furthermore, when Babeuf was arrested and on trial, there were many interruptions as people cheered during his defense, chanted his name, and sang revolutionary songs.³⁵

How did Babeuf attain such a following? Some have argued that Babeuf’s notoriety can be attributed to his “communist” ideology.³⁶ However, the political messianism that Babeuf offered—in which the new egalitarian government would provide the solution to all of society’s problems—was able to gain traction in the society because it appealed directly to the imminent threat of

²⁶ Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution*, 70-75. The Jacobin Constitution of 1793 differed from the Directory’s Constitution of 1795 in direct democracy, the overall rights of the people, and the emphasis on equality. Because the Directory’s constitution had separate rather than concentrated powers, government action moved slowly and the people translated this as inefficient.

²⁷ Jeffrey Kaplow, “Introduction,” in *New Perspectives on the French Revolution: readings in historical sociology*, edited by Jeffrey Kaplow (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 1965): 19.

²⁸ A. Keys, et al., *The Biology of Human Starvation, Vol II*. (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1980): 822-823.

²⁹ Keys, et al., *The Biology of Human Starvation*, 776; citing J. Stavel, *Hunger: A contribution to the analysis of instincts*. (1936), p. 140.

³⁰ Keys, et al., *The Biology of Human Starvation*, 859.

³¹ Ian H. Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997): 61-2; Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf*, 61; citing A. Maillard, C. Mazauric & E. Walter (eds), *Présence de Babeuf* (Paris, 1994): 219. [Papers from the conference on Babeuf held in Amiens in December 1989.]

³² Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf*, 61; citing Haute Cour de Justice, *Copie des pièces saisies dans le local que Baboeuf occupoit lors de son arrestation* (Paris, 1796-7): 8/6; Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf*, 61; *Présence*, 219.

³³ Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf*, 66; Bounarroti, *Conspiracy of Equals*, 139.

³⁴ Babeuf, *Le Tribun de Peuple* no 36.

³⁵ Thompson, *The Babeuf Plot*, 55-58; Bax, *The Last Episode of the French Revolution Being a History of Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of the Equals* (1911), ch. 8.

³⁶ Soboul, 490; Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 29, 42, 178, 183-205, 332; Thompson, *The Babeuf Plot*, 46.

starvation facing the people.³⁷ Even though Babeuf had been writing since 1789, his journals at that time were not directed at the Parisian people but were instead littered with general utopian musings and radical anti-establishment accusations; however, in his publications from 1795-6, specifically issues 34-45 of *Le Tribun du Peuple*, Babeuf married “the immediate day-to-day struggle to the long-term aim.”³⁸ In *The Manifesto of the Equals*, the declaration of the Conspiracy's purpose and political goals, Babeuf wrote:

Let disappear at last, revolting distinctions between rich and poor, great and small, masters and servants, rulers and ruled. Let there no longer be any difference between people than that of age and sex. Since all have the same faculties and the same needs, let there then be for them but one education, but one food. They are satisfied with one sun and one air for all: why then would the same portion and the same quality of food not suffice for each of them?³⁹

This idea of an equal separation of goods and dissolution of economic and social disparity all contributed to what Babeuf called *le bonheur commun*, or the common happiness. The ideal of the “common happiness” is an early form of socialism leading towards utopian communism and sharply contrasted with the depravity of 1795-6 Paris.⁴⁰ However, Babeuf could not merely advocate for *le bonheur commun* without making such an ideal relevant to the public opinion of the suffering Parisian lower-class citizens.

Babeuf emphasized the importance of public opinion to his fellow conspirators, stating, “everything can be done by public opinion, and when you succeed in directing it towards a particular system, you are sure of making this system prevail.... It is through opinion that everything can be moved.”⁴¹ In order to understand public opinion and so be positioned to sway it, Babeuf and his

“Conspiracy of Equals” assigned agents to sections of Paris to “take note of the daily thermometer of public opinion” and “to foster and direct the public mind in those unions by the reading of popular journals, and by discussions on the rights of the people, and respecting its present situation.”⁴²

Through such a system of organized conspiracy, Babeuf was able to know exactly what the lower-classes were grumbling about and thus appeal directly to their grievances. Specifically, Babeuf appealed to the interest of the people—their starvation—by giving them someone to blame, expressing their desires in memorable slogans and songs, and promising them immediate results fused with a communal utopia through his insurrectionist agenda. In Babeuf's article, “The Truth to the People by the Patriots of '89,” he related the Directory and governing elite to the Old Regime of France. He utilized the hunger and distress of the lower classes as opposed to the privileged to remind the people of how they rose up against tyranny in 1789, when bread riots and inflated prices evolved into social and political reformatory action.⁴³ Due to the economic climate, the gap between the rich and poor was becoming more conspicuous, and Babeuf used this to his advantage. He blamed all the sufferings of the lower-classes on the greed of the rich and governing elite; indeed, in *Le Tribun de Peuple*, he accused the Directory of “organized famine, massacre, the discrediting of the *assignats*, the monopoly and forestalling of merchandize” and painted them as “men who have never ceased to assassinate, starve, and load you with chains.”⁴⁴ Such appeals to the people's misery—placing the blame on the Directory—arguably stimulated the people's existing resentment and distrust of the Directory, inspiring support for Babeuf's revolutionary ideology.

In *Le Tribun*, Babeuf expressed the Directory's mismanagement in material conditionals (“if” they did this, “then” suffering would cease). The statement, “if

³⁷ J.L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy: Political Theory and Practice During the French Revolution and Beyond*, (Bungay, Suffolk, United Kingdom: Penguin Books (The Chaucer Press), 1952): 1-11; 167-72.

³⁸ Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf*, 54.

³⁹ Babeuf and Sylvain Marechal, “The Manifesto of the Equals,” <<https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/conspiracy-equals/1796/manifesto.htm>>.

⁴⁰ Soboul, 490.

⁴¹ Babeuf, *Journal de la Liberte de la Presse* no 18, 1-2; *Le Tribun de Peuple* no 38; quoted in Birchall, *Spectre*, 151.

⁴² The “Conspiracy of Equals” is also referred to as the Secret Directory or the Insurrectional Committee; Buonarroti, *Conspiracy of Equals*, 303-304.

⁴³ David Thompson, *The Babeuf Plot: the making of a Republican Legend* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1947): 11.

⁴⁴ Babeuf, “The Truth to the People by the Patriots of '89,” in Buonarroti's *Conspiracy of Equals*, 293-4; Babeuf, “A Pressing Word to the Patriots,” in *Conspiracy of Equals*, 382.

they will take vigorous means to supply the markets abundantly so as to lower the price of provisions,” is the only grievance in italics, drawing the eye directly to it. It is followed by a call to arms in powerful, moving language (*arm yourselves with avenging thunder; crush those modern Titans who dare to invade your sovereignty...*).⁴⁵ Not only did the content of *Le Tribun du Peuple* exploit the starvation of the people for the purpose of blaming the Directory for their misery, stylistically the last three *Tribun* issues were shorter, printed in larger type-face, and were a “direct appeal to patriots and soldiers rather than the more philosophical discussion that had characterized earlier issues.”⁴⁶ Such a design choice would have appealed to the short attention span and need-based mindset of the starving masses.

In relation to his political messianism, Babeuf claimed that, “only the triumph of a society where absolute political and social equality prevail, can put an end to the misery.”⁴⁷ As such, the social salvation Babeuf offered could only come from the implementation of a proper form of egalitarian society and government, as opposed to the Directory. Unlike many utopian ideologies at the time, the way to achieve Babeuf’s egalitarian community was described in detail, as was the exact revolutionary agenda for the downfall of the Directory, both of which, though too extensive to describe in detail, included thorough programs for the feeding of the people.⁴⁸ One such proposal suggested that “everything produced on the land or in industry be kept in general storehouses for equitable distribution among citizens under

the supervision of the appropriate officials.”⁴⁹ Likewise, the officials, along with all other members of the community, would gather for “public meals,” so as to ensure that all men received an equal share of food.⁵⁰

One of Babeuf’s primary stipulations was equality of outcome, evidenced when he argued, “For the social state to be perfected, it is necessary that everyone has enough, and none has abundance.”⁵¹ In his reply to Citizen M.V., Babeuf contrasted the savage, who hunts, fishes, and is happy by keeping the fruits of his labor, with the modern French peasant, who is “obliged to surrender nearly all to greedy and worthless proprietors, and to a certainty, suffer hunger, thirst, and the inclemency of the seasons.”⁵² As a solution, Babeuf provided the tempting promise of each to “work for the great social family,” and to “let each receive in turn the means of living and his fair share of the general pleasure and happiness.”⁵³ Babeuf aptly applied this utopian idea of “sharing the general happiness” to the *coup d’etat’s* immediate agenda: capture the food storehouses, send flour to the bakers, and requisition them “to bake bread, which would be distributed free to the people.”⁵⁴ Such a direct appeal and potential solution to the food crisis combined with the utopian promise of *le bonheur commun* surely would have been attractive to the starving masses.

Perhaps even more notable than pure doctrine, however, are the slogans and songs Babeuf utilized to circulate his ideological propaganda. The journalism of the Jacobin period fostered the spread of ideas, ideological treatises, and utopianism among the common man.⁵⁵

⁴⁵ Babeuf, “The Truth to the People by the Patriots of ’89,” in *Conspiracy of Equals*, 300.

⁴⁶ Birchall, *Spectre*, 61.

⁴⁷ *The Defense of Babeuf before the high Court of Vendôme (Feb-May 1797)*, Trans. Scott, John Anthony. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967): footnote 9; citing Albert Thomas “La pensee socialiste Babeuf avant la conspiration des Equaz,” *La Revue socialiste*, XI (1904), 236; V.M. Dalin, “Babeuf’s Social Ideas on the Eve of Revolution,” *Novaia i noveisha istoriia* (1961), translated in *Soviet Studies in History* (Winter 1962/63), 57-72.

⁴⁸ Bounarroti, *Conspiracy of Equals*, 369, 388, 411, 421, 422.

⁴⁹ Ernest B. Bax, *The Last Episode of the French Revolution Being a History of Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of the Equals*, (London: Grant Richards Ltd., 1911): ch. 5. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bax/1911/babeuf/index.htm>.

⁵⁰ Ernest B. Bax, *The Last Episode of the French Revolution Being a History of Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of the Equals*, (London: Grant Richards Ltd., 1911): ch. 5.

⁵¹ Babeuf, *Le Tribunde Peupleno*. 35, cited in Thompson, 46.

⁵² Bounarroti, *Conspiracy of Equals*, 366-367.

⁵³ Bounarroti, *Conspiracy of Equals*, 367.

⁵⁴ Babeuf, “The Insurrectional Committee of Public Safety to the People. Act of Insurrection,” in *Conspiracy of Equals*, 388; Thompson, 37.

⁵⁵ Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France 1789-1799*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990): 34, 57, 81.

However, the urgency of a solution to starvation in the Directorial period slowly overshadowed the dominant role of ideological musings within society, as the common man was more concerned with what was on the table than with what was in the paper. On the other hand, the demand for food also accentuated the utopian sociability innate within the suffering society, where a communal longing for a better life was interdependent with the growing desire for food.

In order to meet this demand, Babeuf associated his ideas with the already existing slogan: "Bread and the Constitution of 1793" (from the *Prairial* and *Germinal* revolts of 1795).⁵⁶ In the *coup* that Babeuf anticipated, such a slogan would be bannered across Paris and carried with the advancing masses, detailing the economic and political demands of the people.⁵⁷ Though the Constitution of 1793 did not perfectly reflect Babeuf's radical egalitarian theories (it advocated private property), the sympathy that the former sans-culottes had for its failed utopian ideas and recognition of what those ideals represented made its incorporation useful in Babeuf's own agenda. By fusing his own agenda with the extant concepts of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" and "the common welfare," Babeuf conveyed that his aim was to fulfill what the Jacobin government could not: a utopian egalitarian society.⁵⁸

Babeuf not only communicated his ideals through journals and slogans, but also through songs, which, due to widespread poverty, resonated with his doctrine for those unable to purchase subscriptions of *Le Tribune du Peuple*. Indeed, his song "*Mourant de faim, mourant de froid*" ("Dying of Hunger, Dying of Cold") transferred his exposition of the people's despair and a call for action into a memorable tune.⁵⁹ The first line alone hints at Babeuf's exploitation of starvation to propagate his

agenda ("*Dying of Hunger, Dying of Cold*"). The entire song is laid out like a treatise, first displaying to the people their abject deprivation ("*People! Stripped of all rights / Quietly you despair.... / you laborious people / Eat and Digest if you can / Steel, as does the ostrich*"); pointing the blame to the new rich, mainly the Directory ("*Stuffed with gold, new men / without pain or labor or care / take over the hive.... / Truly, one million wealthy men / Have been for long enough keeping / the people feeding on acorns.... / Five directors.... / nurture and comfort the soldier / while crushing the lover of democracy / That is your republic*"); calling the people to unite and rise up ("*The people, and the soldier as one / knew how to take down / the throne and the Bastille / new tyrants, statesmen / fear the people and the soldier / united as family*"); and to establish equality as law ("*Courageous tribune, you must fight / We await you, write the law / of holy equality*").⁶⁰ The incorporation of a song detailing Babeuf's ideology not only acted as an immediate and palpable medium of his beliefs, but also as a means to unify and empower the people; indeed, according to the conspiratorial agents, "*Mourant de Faim, Mourant de Froid*" was sung regularly in Parisian revolutionary cafés.⁶¹ Such a report suggests that Babeuf succeeded in attaining public support in one of the most sociologically ripe arenas: the café. Indeed, the emotional act of socially singing such explicit verses of suffering would have tapped into the underlying utopian sociability and communality. As such, through the power of song, his combined ideological and practical treatise gained popularity among the amassing crowd.

In his commentary on the revolutionary crowds of the French Revolution, Georges Lefebvre remarks that "throughout the entire revolution, we encounter similar abrupt mutations of a crowd into an offensive assembly,

⁵⁶ Bounarroti, *Conspiracy of Equals*, 27, 41, 253; Lisa DiCaprio, *The Origins of the Welfare State: Women, Work, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007): 189-91; Citing Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 178, 183.

⁵⁷ Babeuf, "The Insurrectional Committee of Public Safety to the People. Act of Insurrection," in *Conspiracy of Equals*, 387.

⁵⁸ Woronoff, 17.

⁵⁹ Bounarroti, *Conspiracy of Equals*, 375-6. Along with "*Mourant de faim, Mourant de froid*" was the song "O Benevolent Mother!" which advocated equality and encouraged the people to reclaim their rights.

⁶⁰ Bounarroti, *Conspiracy of Equals*, 375-6.

⁶¹ Birchall, *Spectre*, 62; *Conspiracy of Equals*, 97.

notably in the marketplace or at the doors of bakeries, during periods of scarcity.”⁶² Babeuf’s assembly began as just that: the social seeds of dissent and insurrection had already been sown as a result of scarcity and starvation. The common need of food in Paris drove the people to form a revolutionary crowd, but because their needs were unmet by the Directory, they latched onto a program that seemed to offer both immediate relief and long-term idealistic promises. Indeed, as David Thompson suggests, the continued legend of Babouvism during the 1840s-50s “thrived on the repeated failure of French governments to deal with the social problems inherent in the spread on industrialism.”⁶³

The appeal to sociological motivations is not unique to the story of Babeuf. Indeed, as political sociologist Jacques Ellul posits, propaganda “succeeds primarily because it corresponds exactly to a need of the masses.”⁶⁴ In order for a new revolutionary ideology to root itself in a society, therefore, there must be sociological and ideological “consonance.”⁶⁵ The influence of sociological factors, specifically starvation, can be found throughout the French Revolution, perhaps most notably with the original 1789 uprising which occurred in the aftermath of the bread riots of the 1780s. Indeed, Thomas Carlyle partially labels the failure of the original 1789 revolutionaries to meet the people’s most basic needs as an explanation for the subsequent *coup d’etats* and social discontent that would litter the remaining 18th century and persist into the 19th century.⁶⁶

As sociologist Randall Collins asserts, “Instead of just seeing ideas *per se*, sociologists of revolution...

ought to see ideas as rallying points for organizations.”⁶⁷ As influential as the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity were at the time, it was the promise of meeting immediate needs and solving endemic problems that radicalized the emotional longing of an egalitarian utopia and arguably motivated the original 1789 dissenters to coalesce into a revolutionary force.⁶⁸ The case could even be made that it was the extant socio-economic struggles that inured and endeared the adoption of Marxist theories to the masses during the Revolutions of 1848. In like fashion, Lenin’s slogan of “land, peace, and bread” garnered support for the Bolshevik Revolution and Lenin’s own ideological agenda several decades later.⁶⁹ While concepts such as liberalism and egalitarianism certainly have been influential in defining the ideological movements of the 18th and 19th centuries (and on into the 20th and 21st), the trends of ideological and political propaganda in appealing and offering solutions to pertinent social struggles suggest the importance of sociological factors in motivating members of the lower classes towards dissent.

The reason Babeuf’s political messianism worked in gathering support, then, can be attributed to matching sociological motivations with his political utopian ideals; his appeals to the people’s need-based mentality and fear of starvation is a reflection of Babeuf’s recognition that the power of moving men lies “in their own interest.”⁷⁰ Through this understanding, one can make sense of not only Babeuf’s rise to prominence, but of the nature of social movements, notably within the French Revolution itself. Social struggles and the government’s

⁶² Georges Lefebvre, “Revolutionary Crowds,” in *New Perspectives on the French Revolution: Readings in Historical Sociology*, Edited by Jeffrey Kaplow (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1965): 175.

⁶³ David Thompson, *The Babeuf Plot: the making of a Republican Legend* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1947): 69.

⁶⁴ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*. trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969): 146.

⁶⁵ Ellul, 43.

⁶⁶ Thomas Carlyle. *The French Revolution—A History*. (1837) <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1301/1301-h/1301-h.htm>>.

⁶⁷ Randall Collins, “Weber and the Sociology of Revolution,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 1:71 (2001), 176. <http://www.catedras.fsoc.uba.ar/fidanza/docs/socio_revolution.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Babeuf, *The Defense of Babeuf before the high Court of Vendôme* (Feb-May 1797), Trans. Scott, John Anthony (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967): 8.

⁶⁹ John Rose, “Tony Cliff’s Lenin and the Russian Revolution,” *International Socialism*. 129. (Jan 2011).

⁷⁰ Babeuf, “Prospectus for *Le Tribun du Peuple*” (1795).

inability to address them can lead individual citizens to amalgamate into a revolutionary crowd, bent on invoking change and improvement to their system and, in a dire circumstance such as a famine, supporting any cause that offers them immediate results.

The imminent threat of starvation resulting from the Directory's governmental mismanagement provided the ideal climate in which Babeuf's radical egalitarianism could gain momentum. Indeed, Babeuf's own exploitation of the starvation of the people—through *Le Tribun*, slogans, and songs—appealed to social desperation in such a way that he garnered sufficient support for his insurrectional agenda and proved dangerous enough for the Directory to arrest, try, and behead him.⁷¹ Though the threat of starvation cannot explain all social movements, its influence on the mental outlook of a society combined with other socio-economic factors is important to consider when analyzing the formation of revolutionary crowds. However, while the role of starvation helps us better understand Babeuf's rise to prominence, it also raises certain other questions about the conspiratorial agents, the role of the army, the significance of this particular incident occurring between the Jacobin and Napoleonic eras, and the weight of Babeuf's trial and execution, which require further research.

It is important to note that the revolutionary crowd did not dissolve after Babeuf's death. Although the specific *coup d'état* Babeuf desired did not occur, the society-driven insurrectional culture survived. *Coup* attempts and triumphs occurred at least four times between 1797-1799, at which time the *coup* of Bonaparte established the Consulate.⁷² Likewise, unsuccessful revolutionary uprisings, both urban and rural, littered the remaining years of the 1790s and, though these have been interpreted politically, Babeuf's example of the importance of sociological motivations can offer a counter-explanation for such dissent.⁷³ Indeed, the political interpretations of the leftist *Fructidor* Coup, the rightist *Floreal* Coup, and the dictatorial *Brumaire* Coup can arguably be better understood through an analysis of their contemporary social struggles and climate. Even more broadly, the original revolution of 1789 and the

conclusive revolutions of 1848 can be interpreted not only through the calls for egalitarianism, but also through exploring why these egalitarian ideals were able to develop and fester within society in the first place. As influential as political and ideological treatises can be, the overwhelming majority of political upheavals, revolts, and revolutions begin with a social need that is either not being met or is being exploited and perpetuated. Revolutions cannot simply be explained through ideologies and politics; it is necessary to understand the people who actually took part in them.

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⁷¹ *The Defense of Babeuf before the high Court of Vendôme (Feb-May 1797)*, Trans. Scott, John Anthony (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967).

⁷² Soboul, 541-7.

⁷³ Woronoff, x-xvii.

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