



An Analysis of the Early Communist Nature of Political Movements Through the Equals Movement

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Abstract. With the advent of the European Industrial Revolution, the bourgeoisie experienced unprecedented growth, proclaiming themselves representatives of the laboring masses while ruthlessly exploiting the proletariat. In France, alongside the bourgeois revolution, the proletariat gradually awakened, recognizing the reactionary nature of the bourgeoisie and initiating organized resistance movements. It is against this backdrop that the Equals Movement emerged, hailed by Marx as the "first truly active Communist party."

Keywords: Equals, Babeufism, French Revolution.

1 Introduction

Socialism and capitalism are like twins; the growth and development of the bourgeoisie inevitably lead to the awakening and resistance of the proletariat. In modern Europe, the emergence of socialist thought coincided with the rise of socialist movements. Utopian socialism, a product of early communist thought, although lacking scientific rigor, provided important ideological guidance for proletarian revolutions. Examples include Müntzer's leadership of the largest peasant uprising during the German Reformation, Winstanley's Digger movement during the English Revolution, and the Equals Movement led by Babeuf during the French Revolution, which this paper examines.

2 Development of the Proletariat Against the Backdrop of the French Revolution

2.1 The Development of French Capitalism

In the late 18th century, during the French Revolution, France's capitalist development was in the stage of manufacturing industries, still in the early phase of capitalist industrial economy. Large-scale machine production was nascent, with handicraft workshops scattered widely. Paris, with its concentrated handicraft workshops, became an industrial and economic center. Despite this, prior to the French Revolution, France's capitalist development was limited; the industrial bourgeoisie was weak, and petit-bourgeois egalitarianism dominated the populace. Additionally, as a traditional agricultural empire, France's economy was heavily agrarian, with widespread peasantry. The legacy of royal rule, with its heavy taxes, further hindered capitalist economic development. These conditions restricted France's capitalist growth and made the revolution arduous, yet it also spurred unprecedented capitalist development.

During this period, the French People's taxes became more and more heavy because of the financial deficit caused by many foreign wars; various social contradictions and social problems broke out because of economic discontent, the weakening of the government's ability of social control aggravated the severity of the social problems; the Enlightenment thinkers constructed a blueprint for a better life for the people in dire straits, a revolution is at hand.

On 10 August 1792, the Parisian sans-culottes overthrew the monarchy and helped to found a Republic. What might otherwise have taken centuries to achieve appeared to materialize within hours.[10] The trouser-less men began to develop the belief that demonstrations of collective violence could enable France to circumvent the general laws of history and thus achieve the ideal of revolutionary revival in an instant.

The events of the summer of 1789 in France that led to a change in the nature of government from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy prompted a review of the status and practice of the fine arts in terms of the rhetoric of liberty and equality that consumed society.[11] The concept of freedom and equality has gradually been integrated into the French art circle, which has further promoted the wide spread of the concept of equality in French society, making it easier for the concept of equality to penetrate into people's daily life, it transformed French society on the cultural level and promoted the progress of French Revolution.

2.2 Revival and Development of Utopian Socialism

French utopian socialism traces back to Denis Vairasse's "History of the Sevarambians." With the progression of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, French utopian socialism experienced a revival. In 1789, Bonneville and Fouché founded the Social Club, which espoused primitive communist ideas. Their publication, "Le Bouche de Fer," advocated the abolition of private property and oppressive rulers, promoting political equality and the redistribution of wealth[1]. Despite the political revolution achieving liberty, the social revolution for equality failed, ne-

glecting the demands of the lower and middle classes. In this context, Babeuf's utopian socialism emerged, condemning the feudal aristocracy's oppression of peasants and proposing public ownership, collective farms, and tax reductions.[2]

2.3 Development of the Proletariat

The proletariat typically arises alongside the industrial bourgeoisie. France's underdeveloped capitalist economy and politics limited proletarian growth. During the French Revolution, many French workers did not yet recognize themselves as a distinct social class.[3] Workers, dispersed across small workshops, lacked ideological and organizational unity, seeing themselves as part of the urban populace rather than a cohesive proletarian force. However, pre-revolution unemployment, rising prices, arduous work conditions, and low wages forced workers to unite in strikes and protests. Some workers awakened to their plight, beginning the struggle for their rights.

2.4 The awakening of class consciousness lays the ideological foundation for the proletariat to unite

Class consciousness or class consciousness refers to the understanding and understanding of self-existence, group belonging, social status and historical mission of class members as a whole, as well as the awareness to organize common actions. The common production practices and life experiences of the proletariat are the realistic basis and logical starting point for the awakening of the proletarian class consciousness. The proletarians who suffered both physical and mental torture began to resist the exploitation of the bourgeoisie. "At first it was an individual worker, then a worker in a certain factory, and then a worker in a certain labor department in a certain place, with the individual workers who directly exploited them. The bourgeoisie fights". In the process of continuous struggle, the proletarians are constantly awakening to their identity consciousness of belonging to the same class, and the conflict between workers and capitalists gradually takes on the nature of a class conflict. The proletariat continues to increase in number and strength, and "feels more and more of its own power". The class consciousness of the proletarians began to awaken and gradually grew into a large-scale and highly organized political force. Before the awakening of class consciousness, the proletariat was only a class "in itself" and its struggle against the bourgeoisie was spontaneous and decentralized. With the formation of class consciousness, the proletariat gradually rose to become a "self-made" class, the power of the proletariat was aroused, and its struggle against the bourgeoisie became increasingly more conscious and organized.

3 The Equals Movement Amid the French Revolution

3.1 Babeuf's Early Revolutionary Activities

On July 14, 1789, the Bastille fell, sparking the French Revolution. Babeuf showed unprecedented revolutionary fervor, transitioning from a clerk and surveyor to a champion of the oppressed. He initiated tax resistance in his hometown and a petition movement across France, gathering wide support and leading to his imprisonment. After release, he founded the "Picard Courier," advocating public ownership and the abolition of feudal privileges. Babeuf's early revolutionary activities enhanced his reputation and spurred widespread ideological awakening among the populace.

3.2 The Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory

The Thermidorian Reaction's significance is debated; some scholars view it as the end of the French Revolution, while others see it as its continuation. This reaction significantly impacted the French political landscape, catalyzing the Equals Movement. On July 24, 1794, Thermidorian Reactionaries, representing the bourgeoisie, overthrew the Jacobin rule of Robespierre and ended the Reign of Terror. They implemented measures favoring the bourgeoisie, such as economic deregulation and trade freedom, further exploiting the proletariat and intensifying class conflicts. [4]The Thermidorian rule faced opposition from Babeuf and other revolutionaries. In October 1795, royalist insurrections in Paris were suppressed by Napoleon. The Thermidorians then established the Constitution of the Year III and transitioned to the Directory, a period marked by political turmoil and coups.[5] The Directory's policies, while fostering some social recovery, failed to resolve France's broader issues, paving the way for Napoleon's rise and continued proletarian suffering.

3.3 The Progress of the Equals Movement

Despite the revolution establishing capitalist systems and Enlightenment principles, the proletariat and lower classes remained impoverished. In Paris, widespread hunger and cold led to deaths, including Babeuf's daughter. The bourgeoisie, meanwhile, indulged in excess and persecuted revolutionaries. Workers lamented their sacrifices for the revolution amid worsening conditions.[6] Babeuf's "Free Speech" newspaper denounced the Thermidorian Reaction as a "civil war of the rich against the poor," calling for armed rebellion. Adopting the name Gracchus Babeuf, he emulated the Roman tribunes, expressing his commitment to the people's cause.[7] He advocated for public management and the abolition of private property.

On December 11, 1795, Babeuf declared the need for an uprising to continue the revolution, drawing the Directory's attention and leading to his imprisonment. In prison, Babeuf formed the "Conspiracy of the Equals," planning an armed revolt to overthrow the Directory. The conspirators established strict organizational protocols, clear objectives, and aimed to create an "egalitarian republic" with communal ownership and resource distribution. [8]They widely disseminated propaganda to mobilize

support[9]. Babeuf's deep understanding of class struggle and engagement with workers had significant nationwide impact.

The Equals planned a 15,000-strong uprising for May 11, 1796, but betrayal led to their arrest, thwarting the revolt. At trial, Babeuf passionately called for the people's awakening to establish a truly equal and free nation. On May 27, 1797, he was executed, writing to his family of his sacrifice for the greatest cause.

Piketty describe the historical relationship between national income and the returns on assets, exploring the role of wars, changing land values, and even slavery as mediating factors on his more general finding that wealth grows faster than labor income. For those that are familiar with Marx, it won't come as a surprise that Piketty's use of the concept of "capital" is the object of several critiques in this volume. Recall that Marx did not think capital was a thing, but rather a social relation that generates surplus value appropriated by capitalists in a monetary form at the end of the M-C-M' circuit. It is here that Marx showed how the pursuit of relative surplus value by firms led to increases in productivity and returns to capital, even if in the long run it led also to crises in which firms were forced to jettison portions of that capital. Piketty argues that capital grows faster because it can be put to new uses, but in doing so he ignores the social relations that drive firms to find those new uses in the first place. This volume argues that those are particular to the property and production relations in global capitalism itself.

4 Conclusion

The 18th-century French had a stubborn feudalism, a hierarchy built on a host of special group privileges. It is not easy to produce such a radical egalitarian revolution in such a hierarchical society. Naturally, the egalitarian thought in the French revolution was obviously greatly influenced by the rational and natural right discourse in the Enlightenment, and the egalitarian movement was also derived with the progress of the French Revolution. Babeuf's utopian socialism, emerging as a reaction to bourgeois demands for equality, reflected proletarian dissatisfaction with capitalist democracy. The Equals, born from the struggle between labor and reactionary bourgeois rulers, recognized the people's power and proposed concrete plans for overthrowing bourgeois rule, marking the first proletarian political organization with revolutionary goals. While their focus on agrarian and commercial capitalism overlooked the potential of industrial production, highlighting utopian socialism's limitations, their spirit of mobilizing the people for rebellion remains instructive for proletarian revolutionaries.

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