

MARX, ENGELS AND THE DEMOCRATIC COMMUNIST TRADITION

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Abstract: Marx's and Engels' commitment to democracy is often doubted. This article argues that support for democratic political processes was integral to the political tradition with which they identified themselves: broadly speaking, that of support for the French Revolution, and more specifically, for the kind of democratic communism advocated during the Revolution by Gracchus Babeuf and his followers. The Babeuvistes aimed primarily at the reinstatement of the democratic Constitution of 1793, and expected any future communist society to be run on wholly democratic lines; Marx and Engels held similar beliefs.

The twentieth century was not an easy time to interpret the political commitments of Marx and Engels. Multiple "communist" revolutions made it difficult to conceive of communism as its nineteenth-century supporters had imagined it, while limited access to their writings obscured their views and the Cold War raised the stakes.¹ Moreover, as is often noted, the pair left behind no 'blueprints,' and deliberately distanced themselves from 'ready-made utopias.'² As a result, the nature of their political convictions has remained unclear, particularly in relation to democracy. Was there room, in the communist society to which they aspired, for universal suffrage, free and fair elections, majoritarianism, the rule of law, and freedom of speech and of the press, for example--or did they expect communism to obviate the need for such things?

This article suggests that Marx and Engels took it for granted that any future communist society would be run on democratic lines. This is indicated above all by their

¹ Many of Marx's and Engels' most instructive writings remained in manuscript form well into the twentieth century, e.g. the 1844 'Paris Manuscripts,' first published in 1932, and the 'Grundrisse,' first published 1953. The first definitive edition of the works of Marx and Engels, the *Marx-Engels Werke* (Berlin, 1957-1968; 43 vols.) was completed only in 1968; the first in English, the *Marx-Engels Collected Works* (New York, 1975-2005; 50 vols.; hereafter *MECW*), in 2005. The fullest available edition, the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin, 1975-; 114 vols. expected) should be completed in 2025.

² *MECW* 3:143, 22:335

commitment to renewing and extending the gains of the French Revolution, which formed the basis of their political identities. In particular, I shall argue, they associated themselves with the kind of democratic communism advocated during the Revolution by Gracchus Babeuf and other members of the 1796 Conspiracy of the Equals. The Equals' first priority had been to reinstate the Constitution of 1793, which had established universal (male) suffrage, national and local elections, majority rule, a uniform civil and criminal legal code, unlimited freedom of the press, speech and assembly, and other key democratic rights; and there is no reason to think that Marx and Engels, in their turn, ever abandoned these goals.

The article proceeds in two parts. The first part sketches the significance of the French Revolution as the foundation of Marx's and Engels' political commitments. Drawing on both historical and biographical material, I show how large the Revolution loomed in the life of the young Marx, and discuss what support for it entailed. This period of Marx's life is usually interpreted through the lens of his Hegelianism, but I argue that it was rather Marx's engagement with the Revolution and its legacy that drove his interest in Hegel's philosophy. This engagement culminated in the pre-eminent role played by the Revolution in Marx's and Engels's analyses of the 1848 revolutions, which illustrate how far the two men consciously identified themselves as the bearers of the French revolutionary tradition, personally responsible to its preservation and renewal.

In the second part of the article, I present the particular strand of French revolutionary ideology with which Marx and Engels identified most strongly: that of Gracchus Babeuf, the 'first revolutionary communist,' self-styled '*tribun du peuple*,' and celebrated martyr for democracy.³ Taking issue with the leading authority on the democratic commitments of Marx

³ See R. B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (Stanford, CA, 1978). On Babeuf's long-term significance see also John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (New York, 2005).

and Engels, the historian Richard Hunt, I suggest that Marx and Engels regarded their communism as a direct descendant of Babeuf's, in which democratic political practices were indispensable.

The major aim of this paper is thus to illuminate the connections between Marx, Engels and the Babeuviste tradition: a tradition in which democracy and communism were assumed to be inherently connected. A full account of Marx's and Engels' democratic commitments would include their writings on the Paris Commune of 1871; nonetheless, the evidence presented here should suffice to show that support for democratic processes was integral to the political tradition to which Marx and Engels felt they belonged.

The Long Shadow of the French Revolution

ii.

The French Revolution loomed overwhelmingly large in the world of Marx's and Engels' youth.⁴ Indeed, the two only narrowly escaped being born citizens of France themselves. The Rhineland, their home region, had been invaded by France in 1792 and passed fully under French control in 1794. Not until 1814 was the area handed over to Prussia, as part of the Treaty of Paris--a mere four years before Marx was born, in the historic city of Trier eighteen miles from the French border, and six years before the birth of Engels, in the small industrial town of Barmen on the other side of the Rhine.

⁴ See also Jean Bruhat, 'La Révolution française et le formation de la pensée de Marx,' *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 184 (1966); François Furet, *Marx and the French Revolution* (Chicago and London, 1988); Alan Gilbert, *Marx's Politics: Communists and Citizens* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1981); *Karl Marx: Oeuvres* ed. Maximilien Rubel (Paris, 1965-1994), introduction and notes.

The Revolution's impact on Europe is, of course, familiar, but its effects were especially electrifying in the German lands, and in the Rhineland in particular.⁵ Writing in English for the Chartist newspaper *The Northern Star* in 1845, at the age of twenty-seven, Engels vividly emphasised this point. If his English audience was to understand the present state of his native land, he explained, he would have to 'trace with a few words the history of Germany from the event which shook the modern world to its very foundation--I mean to say, the French Revolution.'⁶ 'Old Germany,' he suggested, had been a mess of tiny dukedoms and principalities, whose imperial Diet had concerned itself with only 'the most futile questions of ceremony' and 'hundreds of thousands of little privileges' deemed points of honour by their holders; it was a 'living mass of putrefaction and repulsive decay' with 'no education, no means of operating upon the minds of the masses, no free press, no public spirit, not even an extended commerce with other countries.'

Into 'this chaos called Germany,' Engels wrote, 'all at once, like a thunderbolt, the French Revolution struck...The effect was tremendous.' The middle classes and the better part of the nobility 'gave one shout of joyous assent to the national assembly and the people of France. Not one of the hundreds of thousands of existing German poets failed to sing the glory of the French people.' As 1789 turned into 1793 this original enthusiasm, as elsewhere in Europe, changed into a 'fanatical hatred' of the Revolution; but it was too late for the Holy Roman Empire. In 1794,

the French revolutionary armies walked straight into the very heart of
Germany, made the Rhine the frontier of France, and preached liberty and

⁵ Compare e.g. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York, 1956), Part III

⁶ Engels, 'The State of Germany: Letter One,' *The Northern Star* no. 415, October 25, 1845; *MECW* 6:15-21, 15

equality everywhere. They drove away by shoals noblemen, bishops, and abbots, and all those little princes that for so long had played in history the part of dolls. They effected a clearing, as if they were settlers advancing in the backwoods of the American Far West; the antediluvian forest of “Christian-Germanic” society disappeared before their victorious course, like clouds before the rising sun.⁷

The most significant feature of French rule in Germany, as elsewhere, was the attack on the system of feudal laws and differential privileges belonging to the dominant classes in the German states. Yet only in the Rhineland was this attack judged a complete success. In an article of 1851 in the *New York Daily Tribune*, Engels described how the political and social structure of most of Germany just prior to the 1848 revolutions remained ‘complicated’: the feudal nobility ‘retained a great portion of their ancient privileges’. Serfdom, the legal privileges of the nobility and clergy, and the vast church estates had been permanently abolished only on the left bank of the Rhine.⁸ Moreover, the people of the Rhineland remained grateful to France for this. According to a private letter of 1836 from the president of the Rhine province to the Prussian interior minister, ‘the immense majority of the inhabitants of this province who are interested in politics consider the social consequences of the French Revolution--the abolition of feudal rights and privileges of all sorts, the proclamation of the principle of the equality of all classes--to have been a huge benefit, and

⁷ *ibid.*, pp.17, 19

⁸ Engels, ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany: 1. Germany at the Outbreak of the Revolution,’ *The New York Daily Tribune*, October 25, 1851; *MECW* 11:5-13, 7, 11

look upon every act of government which would tend to the re-establishment of the former state of things with an infinite mistrust.⁹

If the impact of French rule was greater in the Rhineland than anywhere else on the continent, its impact in Trier, Marx's hometown, was greater than anywhere else in the Rhineland. Renamed Trèves, Trier had speedily been established as the capital of the French *département* of La Sarre, its centuries-old ecclesiastical government dismantled and an effective bureaucracy put in its place. Significantly for the Marx family, the arrival of the French also brought about the legal emancipation of Jews, as well as freedom of the press and other liberties; and judging by the number of pro-French literary and political associations that sprang up in the early years of French rule--the most eminent of which, the Casino Club, had included both Karl's father and headmaster among its founding members--Trier's citizens were quick to take advantage of these new freedoms. By 1814, as Marx's biographer David McLellan remarks, the inhabitants of Trier had become so 'imbued' with 'a taste for freedom of speech and constitutional liberty uncharacteristic of the rest of Germany' that the transfer to Prussian rule provoked 'considerable dissent.'¹⁰

Marx's family had special reason to be disappointed by the handover to Prussia. Karl's father, Heinrich Marx, had until that point spent his entire professional career under the governance of the Code Napoléon, which had rendered his Jewishness effectively irrelevant (in that domain at least), notwithstanding the withdrawal of some of the original gains of emancipation under Napoleon's Decree of March 1808. Under Prussian law, however, Jews were not allowed to hold any position in the service of the state without

⁹ Quoted by Jacques Droz, *Le Libéralisme rhénan, 1815-1848* (Paris, 1940), p. 103; translation mine.

¹⁰ On our suppositions concerning Engels's early life, see Hunt, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, pp. 93-95. On Trier's transition to Prussian rule, see David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (New York, 1973), p. 2

special royal dispensation, so Heinrich was obliged to convert to Christianity in order to continue in his post at Trier's Higher Court of Appeal.

Karl's exposure to the political effects of the Revolution went beyond his father's compromised position, however. As he grew up, almost every figure of moral authority in his life was engaged in an effort to reinstate at least some of the rights and reforms that had first been established as part of the Revolution, and then lost in the reaction against it.

This was particularly evident in the aftermath of the 1830 revolution in France. The toppling of a second Bourbon monarch from the French throne had acted, as Jacques Droz has written, as 'a sort of springboard which revived among the Rhinelanders the memory of the Revolution,' and this led to an increase in demands for political reform all over the region--and a concomitant crackdown by the Prussian authorities.¹¹ In 1832, Karl's own high school became the site of political confrontation when his headmaster, the Kant scholar Hugo Wytttenbach (also Karl's history teacher and a close family friend), was detained following his involvement in a demonstration in Hambach calling for a free press. Wytttenbach was put under police observation and the whole school searched, revealing copies of speeches made at the demonstration and various pieces of anti-government satire to be in the possession of pupils. For the time being Wytttenbach kept his position, but he was eventually forced to share it with a second, more conservative headmaster, Lörs, sent in to clamp down on the unorthodox goings-on at the school: a humiliating experience for Wytttenbach which distressed his friend Heinrich Marx and provided the occasion for an act of defiance on Karl's part when he neglected to pay Lörs the customary leave-taking visit upon graduating from high school in 1835.¹²

¹¹ Droz, *Le Libéralisme rhénan*, pp. 195-199, translation mine

¹² Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx, 18-29 November 1835, *MECW* 1:646-649

A second example of the way in which the memory of the Revolution was kept alive in the Marx circle relates to an incident a couple of years later, when Karl was fifteen years old. The occasion was a banquet of 12 January, 1834, held as part of a series taking place across the German lands in support of more representative constitutions, and specifically to honour Trier's liberal deputies to the Rhenish Landtag at a time when many conservatives were calling for the abolition of the provincial assemblies. The banquet--the only one of its kind to be put on in Prussia--was organised and hosted by the Casino Club, and featured Heinrich Marx as its keynote speaker. According to the police spy who was present, it was a markedly 'French' affair, and included the performance of several 'revolutionary songs'. On its own this might not have prompted the police to take action, but when on the occasion of the anniversary of the Club's founding, the following week, some 'wine-emboldened' members paraded up and down with an old Tricolore, singing the Marseillaise, this triggered a police crackdown.¹³ The ringleaders of the latter incident were tried for high treason and the entire membership was placed under surveillance. Heinrich Marx had maintained a respectful tone towards the king in his speech and nothing further came of his involvement, but both Karl's Hebrew and mathematics teachers, were arrested, accused of 'singing revolutionary songs,' and 'materialism and atheism' respectively.¹⁴

A third point of contact between the young Marx and the Revolution was the political education he received at home, from both his father and his future father-in-law, the Baron Ludwig von Westphalen. According to his grand-daughter Eleanor Marx, Heinrich Marx was 'steeped in the free French ideas of the eighteenth century on politics, religion, life and art;' he was 'a real Frenchman of the eighteenth century who knew his Voltaire and Rousseau by

¹³ Hunt, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, pp. 20-21

¹⁴ McLellan, *Marx*, pp. 8-10

heart.¹⁵ To be sure, as illustrated by a letter to his son of 2 March, 1837, Heinrich had despised Napoleon, and even encouraged Karl to write an ode in commemoration of the battle of Waterloo. Yet this was for entirely progressive reasons. The emperor's late oppressive policies had alienated many of his initial supporters, and Heinrich complained that his dictatorship, had it continued, would have 'imposed eternal fetters on mankind and especially on the human mind'; 'not a single person would have dared to think aloud what is being written daily and without interference throughout Germany, and especially in Prussia.'¹⁶ This emphasis on the freedom of the press was typical of Heinrich: his political ideals were the classic liberal constellation of freedom of expression, equality before the law, and a constitutional monarchy sharing power with a legislature elected by (at least) the propertied and educated classes. Marx, obviously, was more radical, and there is some evidence that Heinrich himself recognised this even before his son turned eighteen.¹⁷ Nevertheless, as Richard Hunt has emphasised, Marx never abandoned his father's deepest political values: 'belief in the fundamental equality of man and in his perfectibility, in the progress of human institutions through history, in reason and science as the keys to the enigma of man's destiny, and in the ethical imperative to commit one's life to the betterment of mankind.'¹⁸

These values were reinforced by Heinrich's neighbour Ludwig von Westphalen, a well-educated aristocrat who was Karl's mentor and later father-in-law. Born in 1770, von Westphalen had begun his career in the civil service in Brunswick, but transferred his

¹⁵ Eleanor Marx, *Die Neue Zeit* 1883, p. 441, cited McLellan, *Marx*, p. 6; Eleanor Marx to Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels* (Moscow n.d.) p. 130

¹⁶ Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx, 2 March 1837, *MECW* 1:673

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Hunt, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, p. 22

allegiance to Napoleon (against the wishes of his family) after Prussia's defeat to France in 1806. He later transferred to Saxony and then to the Rhineland in 1816, where he was tasked with integrating the region into the Prussian governmental system.¹⁹ Ludwig and Karl discussed Homer, Shakespeare and the ideas of Saint-Simon; but what Karl, later, celebrated above all was his continuing commitment to the political convictions of his youth. Dedicating his doctoral dissertation to him in 1841, Marx singled out von Westphalen's support for the ideals of the Revolution as the special grounds of his affection. Far from 'retreating before the reactionary ghosts and the often dark sky of our time,' this 'dear fatherly friend' had 'kept his youthful impulses' and 'with wise enthusiasm for the truth, welcomes all progress.'²⁰ This lightly veiled reference to the Revolution needed no elaboration: it would have been obvious what Marx was suggesting.

Finally, if attitudes to the Revolution dominated the political landscape in Trier, Marx's sense of its centrality can only have only deepened when he went to university, first at Bonn and then, in autumn 1836, in Berlin. There, the intellectual battle of the day was between Eduard Gans, the liberal Hegelian around whom, as Jean Bruhat puts it, there had built up a 'real cult of revolutionary France,' and Karl von Savigny, the conservative leading exponent of the 'Historical School of Law'.²¹ Marx attended both men's lecture courses in his first term, and in the former's focus on the development of reason in history, and the latter's on custom and tradition, he would have been perfectly able to discern the clash of responses to the great Revolution.²²

¹⁹ McLellan, *Marx*, p. 15; Hunt, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, p. 22

²⁰ Marx, 'Dedication to Doctoral Dissertation,' *MECW* 1:29, translation modified

²¹ Bruhat, 'La Révolution française,' p. 133, translation mine

²² As David McLellan observes, lecture halls were the only place in Prussia where such disputes could be conducted: McLellan, *Marx*, p. 26.

Marx, unsurprisingly, was particularly struck by Gans: his university leaving certificate described him as ‘exceptionally diligent’ in his course, and five years later, when von Savigny was brought into the Prussian cabinet, Marx launched an attack on the new minister and his teacher Gustav Hugo in along lines that Gans had initially made familiar.²³ In a world divided by attitudes to the Revolution, there is no doubt which side Marx was on.

ii.

Hence, there is evidence to suggest that support for the Revolution helped to shape Marx’s political imagination from an early age. To the question of which aspects or moments of Revolutionary France he was most committed to--1789, 1792, 1793 or 1796, for example-- it may first be observed that in such ideologically polarised times, aligning oneself with the Revolution at all, notwithstanding the memory of the Terror, was in itself a significant step. That said, as Marx began to forge an independent life in his mid-twenties, the need to clarify his relation to the Revolution was evidently on his mind, as can be seen from the tasks to which he turned after completing his doctoral dissertation.

At twenty-four, Marx’s commitment to a political life was already apparent. Certain that he would be unable to secure a university appointment owing to his connections with ‘*Die Freien*,’ the left-wing Hegelian group whose most senior figure, Bruno Bauer, had recently had his teaching license revoked on political grounds, Marx turned his ambitions in the only direction which remained open to him, joining the staff of the liberal newspaper *Die Rheinische Zeitung* in April 1842. In October he became its editor, and he remained at the paper until increasing censorship forced his resignation in March 1843. His staunch support for the Revolution was visible in the articles that he wrote during this time: he repeatedly

²³ ‘Marx’s Leaving Certificate from Berlin University,’ *MECW* 1:702-703; ‘The Philosophical Manifesto of the Historical School of Law,’ *MECW* 1:203-210

attacked the worsening censorship, demanded full coverage of debates held in the provincial assemblies, criticised the reactionary romanticism that was at that time prevailing in the Prussian cabinet (epitomised by von Savigny's appointment), and allied himself openly with the Revolution in a defence of positive law.²⁴ Over half his articles were on the importance of freedom of the press--an issue obviously close to the heart of a newspaperman. Yet the Revolution and its legacy were even more present to his mind in the independent work that he produced the following spring. As soon as the opportunity arose, following the closure of the newspaper, Marx began an intensive study of the modern state, the 'genesis' of which he identified as the Revolution itself.²⁵

Marx's notebooks from the summer of 1843--when, newly married and living at his mother-in-law's house in Kreuznach, he was able to do whatever he pleased--provide valuable evidence of the depth and seriousness of his engagement with the Revolution. His research that summer fell into two categories, which he pursued simultaneously using at least five notebooks, indexed and titled for future use. First, he examined the history of several modern states, including Venice, Poland, Sweden and the United States, but principally England, Germany, and above all France. He paid some attention to political developments in the Middle Ages, but what really interested him was political and social change in the modern era, and the English and French Revolutions most of all; and he made long lists of further works on France that he wished to consult (at least some of which, as shown by the writings

²⁴ 'On the Freedom of the Press,' *MECW* 1:132-181; 'The Philosophical Manifesto of the Historical School of Law,' *MECW* 1:203-210; letter from Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, 30 November 1842, *MECW* 1:394. Marx regularly complained about the increasing censorship in his private correspondence. To Arnold Ruge he wrote: 'Incidentally, do not imagine that we on the Rhine live in a political Eldorado. The most unswerving persistence is required to push through a newspaper like the *Rheinische Zeitung*. My second article on the Provincial Assembly, dealing with the question of clerical discord, was deleted by the censor.' Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, July 9, 1842, *MECW* 1:389-91.

²⁵ Marx, 'Draft Plan for a Work on the Modern State,' *MECW* 5:666

he produced the following autumn, he subsequently did).²⁶ Second, he read classic authors on the theory of the state: Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Constant (whose work on religion Marx had already examined in Bonn the previous year, but whose *De l'esprit de conquête* [1814] he now came across in Wilhelm Wachsmuth's work on revolutionary France) and most importantly Hegel, to whose *Philosophy of Right* (1820) he devoted many hours that summer.²⁷

Here it is necessary to make an intervention in the historiography of Marx's thought on which it would be possible to dwell at some length, but which may be stated concisely.

²⁶ See e.g. his use of Buchez and Roux's *Histoire parlementaire de la révolution française* (Paris, 1834-38) in 'On the Jewish Question,' *MECW* 3:147-174

²⁷ The following works appear in the five extant Kreuznach notebooks. C. G. Heinrich, *Geschichte von Frankreich* (Leipzig, 1802); C. F. E. Ludwig, *Geschichte der letzten fünfzig Jahre* (Altona, 1834); Pierre Daru, *Histoire de la république de Venise* (Stuttgart, 1828); Charles Lacretelle, *Histoire de France, depuis la restauration* (Paris, 1829-1835); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social* (London, 1782); Jacques Charles Bailleul, *Examen critique de l'ouvrage posthume de Mme de Staël, ayant pour titre: Considérations sur les principaux événements de la révolution française* (Paris, 1818); Henry Brougham, *Polen* (Brüssel, 1831); Charles Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des loix* (Amsterdam, 1788); John Russell, *Geschichte der englischen Regierung und Verfassung* (Leipzig, 1825); J. M. Lappenberg, *Geschichte von England* vol. I (Hamburg, 1834); E. A. Schmidt, *Geschichte von Frankreich* (Hamburg, 1835); François-René de Chateaubriand, *Ansichten über Frankreich seit dem Juli 1830* (Leipzig, 1831); François-René de Chateaubriand, *Die neue Proposition in Bezug auf die Verbannung Karls X und seiner Familie* (Leipzig, 1831); Karl Wilhelm von Lancizolle, *Über Ursachen, Charakter und Folge der Julitage* (Berlin, 1831); Wilhelm Wachsmuth, *Geschichte Frankreichs im Revolutionszeitalter*, vols. I and II (Hamburg, 1840); Leopold Ranke, *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation*, vol. II (Berlin, 1842); Leopold Ranke, *Historisch-Politische Zeitschrift* (Hamburg, 1832); John Lingard, *Geschichte von England seit dem ersten Einfall der Römer* (Frankfurt, 1828); Erik Geijer, *Geschichte Schwedens* (Hamburg, 1832); J. C. Pfister, *Geschichte der Teutschen* (Hamburg, 1829); Justus Möser, *Patriotische Phantasien* (Berlin, 1820), C. G. Jouffroy, *Das Princip der Erblichkeit und die französische und englische Pairie* (Berlin, 1832); Thomas Hamilton, *Die Menschen und die Sitten in den vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika* (Mannheim, 1834); Nicolo Machiavelli, *Vom Staat oder Betrachtungen über die ersten 10 Bücher des Livius, in his Sämtliche Werke* (Karlsruhe, 1832). For full details see *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin, 1975-) [hereafter *MEGA*], IV.2. The dating of Marx's manuscript critiquing sections §261-313 of Hegel's *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Recht* (1820) is not quite certain, but it is generally believed to have been written during late spring-summer 1843.

The conventional account of the young Marx makes much of his engagement with Hegel in this period: ever since the discovery and publication, between 1927 and 1932, of Marx's manuscripts of 1843-1845, it has been common to counter the orthodox Soviet depiction of Marx as a strictly 'scientific' socialist, exclusively concerned with uncovering the iron laws of capitalist development in order to verify the inevitable victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, by pointing above all to Marx's Hegelianism, which is most prominent in these early writings.²⁸ Marx's production of a lengthy manuscript subjecting Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* to a painstaking line-by-line critique in the summer of 1843, in which he could be seen attacking Hegel's idealism (described as the 'inversion of subject and predicate') in favour of the approach that Engels later called 'historical materialism' (or turning Hegel 'right side up again,' as Marx put it in 1873), has thus been taken as a sign of Marx's abiding interest in Hegel, and of the profound significance for him of this particular philosophical terrain--that is, the conflict between idealism and materialism.²⁹

There is something to be said for this interpretation. Marx was indeed highly attuned to what he considered to be the folly of idealist approaches to history in a world that, as he saw it, was produced essentially by the 'material' activity of human beings. However, proponents of the standard view attach too little significance to the context in which Marx's engagement with Hegel occurred. Marx did not spend a significant amount of time critiquing

²⁸ Marx's early Hegelianism has been emphasised both by scholars convinced that a full-blown '*coupure épistémologique*' may be discerned in Marx's work around the late 1840s (e.g. Althusser, *Reading Capital*, pp. 309-310; Furet also follows this interpretation in *Marx and the French Revolution*) and those who would suggest that Marx remained in essential respects a 'humanist' throughout his life. A recent example of the tendency to approach Marx's early work through the lens of his engagement with Hegelianism is Andrew Chitty, 'The Basis of the State in the Marx of 1842' in Douglas Moggach ed., *The New Hegelians* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 220-241.

²⁹ Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law,' *MECW* 3: 4-129, esp. pp.10-11; Marx, 'Afterword to the second German edition of *Das Kapital*,' *MECW* check.

Hegel at this point in his life because he was so entranced by Hegel's philosophy itself. His moment of enchantment with Hegel had come earlier, in his first term in Berlin in 1837, and he had since then largely broken off relations with the Young Hegelian circle that had helped to sustain this interest--so much so that it was Engels's association with this group that led Marx to treat him dismissively at their first meeting in Cologne in 1842.³⁰ Rather, the reason that Marx turned to the intensive study of Hegel at this stage was specifically to lock horns with him over the French Revolution. The sections of the *Philosophy of Right* that Marx scrutinised were exclusively those dealing with the genesis and internal structure of Hegel's ideal modern (that is, post-Revolutionary) state, and insofar as Hegel identified the Revolution as the original generator of the political features he described, he and Marx were on common ground. Indeed, Hegel himself was far less hostile to the Revolution than is sometimes supposed; right up to his death in 1831, in his lectures on the philosophy of history, he continued to describe it as a 'glorious mental dawn,' a necessary antidote to the 'utterly irrational state of things' that had characterised the *ancien régime*.³¹ Where Marx and Hegel parted ways was on the question of whether the Revolution's ultimate ends had been achieved in the post-Napoleonic status quo of Marx's time--by which point the forces of reaction, epitomised by Prussia's new pre-eminence on the continent, had clearly gained the upper hand--or whether those democrats who saw the Revolution as an uncompleted project were justified in continuing the fight for what they took to be its real aims. As a letter to

³⁰ See Hunt, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, p. 105

³¹ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 447-448. The view of the French liberal Victor Cousin is also suggestive (written thirty-six years after Hegel's death): 'In politics, M. Hegel is the only man from Germany with whom I was always on the best of terms. He was, like me, infused with the new spirit; he considered the French Revolution to be the greatest step forward taken by humanity since Christianity and he never ceased questioning me about the issues and men of this great epoch.' 'Souvenirs d'Allemagne,' *Revue des deux mondes*, August 1866; quoted in Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* ed. and trans. Allan Wood (Cambridge, 1991), p. 386

Arnold Ruge of May 1843 illustrates, Marx aligned himself with ‘the idealists who want only the consequences of the French Revolution and therefore, in the final count, always a republic and an organisation of free human beings instead of the system of dead objects’--a project which, as he stated, he took to signify ‘the abandonment of the social basis of this world and the transition to the human world of democracy.’³² Rather than a democratic republic, however, Hegel had in the *Philosophy of Right* advocated a constitutional monarchy with limited political representation established through a system of Estates. Marx and Hegel had thus arrived at very different conclusions on the basis of analyses of the Revolution that were otherwise very similar; and *this* was the problem that led Marx to pick his way so carefully through Hegel’s reasoning in the summer of 1843, exposing the philosophical errors which he believed to have been responsible for leading Hegel astray: a process from which, almost as a by-product, an alternative way of understanding human history could be distilled.

The whole of Marx’s manuscript dealing with the *Philosophy of Right* (titled ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law’ by its first English editors) might be taken as evidence for this interpretation, but a passage from the contemporaneous Kreuznach notebooks offers a particularly effective illustration of the way in which Marx’s analysis of Hegel’s philosophical missteps derived from, and contributed to, his interest in the ramifications of the French Revolution as the central problem in modern politics. The passage occurs in connection with Leopold Ranke’s 1832 article ‘*Über die Restauration in Frankreich*’ (‘On the Restoration in France’), and it begins by analysing the difference between the 1814 Constitutional Charter of France, which declared itself to be established ‘by grace of the king,’ with the Constitutional Charter of 1830, by which, conversely, the new king Louis Philippe was declared to be established. What is interesting is that this analysis

³² Marx to Ruge, May 1843, *MECW* 3:140, 139

unfolds in the very terms of the inversion of subject and predicate that are more familiar to us today from Marx's critique of Hegel. The bald, un-mystified relation of the power of the agent to the thing achieved, or (in Marx's terms) the relation of subject to predicate, could easily be seen in the actions of the 'old monarchy,' Marx argued: there, 'the king made the law.' In the 'new monarchy,' however, the case was reversed. What had previously been the real subject, the possessor of agency (the king), was now presented as the predicate or thing achieved, while the former predicate (the constitutional charter) became the subject or apparent possessor of agency: after 1830, that is to say, 'the law made the king.' Marx wrote that this 'exchange of that which determines for that which is determined is always the most immediate revolution.'³³ That is, the general dynamic of revolution, whether progressive or reactionary, was in Marx's view always the same: to adopt the language he used in the letter to Ruge cited above, a revolution was precisely that moment when a thing that had previously seemed to be a 'dead object' rose up and pronounced itself to be a 'free human being.'³⁴ The difference between a progressive revolution and a reactionary one was simply that in a progressive revolution, the new agent, the free human being, really was a free human being, while in a reactionary revolution it was the free human being who was again made into a dead object.

It was because this dynamic really was manifest in modern political developments, Marx went on, that Hegel turned out to be an especially useful resource for understanding the modern state. 'Owing to the fact...that Hegel makes the elements of the state idea the subject, and the old forms of existence of the state the predicate,' Marx wrote, 'whereas in historical reality the reverse is the case, he expresses only the general character of the period, its

³³ Marx, 'A Passage from the Kreuznach Notebooks,' *MECW* 3:130

³⁴ Marx to Ruge, May 1843, *MECW* 3:139

political teleology.³⁵ That is, because in Hegel's presentation it was the idea of the state that made demands on the real, historical state and brought the real, historical state into new modes of being, rather than ideas about the state that were brought into being by the experience of living in a real historical state (as Marx believed had to be the case), Hegel could be regarded as the perfect mouthpiece of the spirit of the age. In just the same way, then, that Marx thought that 'the King of Prussia will remain the man of his time so long as the topsy-turvy world is the real world,' and that 'this state, this society, produce religion, which is an inverted world-consciousness, because they are an inverted world,' he regarded Hegel's upside-down logic as, in the first instance, part and parcel of the real historical conditions that he was trying to understand. Marx's interest in the world in which Hegel's philosophy formed a part was thus not a side effect of his interest in Hegel. On the contrary, it was his interest in Hegel's world--his own world--that spurred his critique of Hegel's depiction of it.

Following this period of withdrawal into his study in Kreuznach, Marx and his wife moved to Paris ('the new capital of the new world!' he enthused to Ruge in September 1843).³⁶ Here, for the first time, he was able to acquaint himself personally with members of the French revolutionary tradition, seeking out men such as Louis Blanc and Etienne Cabet alongside a growing contingent of German democrats and communists in exile, and he embarked enthusiastically on the two projects between which he would divide his time for the next seven or eight years: the twin tasks of research and writing, and facilitating contact among republicans, democrats, Chartists, socialists and communists of many stripes in

³⁵ Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique: Introduction,' *MECW* 3:175-187, p. 175

³⁶ Marx to Ruge, September 1843, *MECW* 3:141-143, 141

preparation for the revolutionary opportunity that he and Engels, his close collaborator after 1844, believed (rightly, as it turned out) to be on its way.³⁷

Neither Marx nor Engels saw any conflict between these two activities: as Marx put it, attempting ‘the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age’ necessarily included ‘lining our criticism with a criticism of politics...taking sides in politics...entering into real struggles and identifying ourselves with them.’³⁸ At the same time, his more intellectual interest in the Revolution did not diminish. For many months he planned to put his Kreuznach research to use in a history of the French National Convention.³⁹

The work never materialised, but several of Ruge’s letters from the spring and summer of 1844 make a useful coda to this period of Marx’s life, since they reveal the extent to which his historical, philosophical and political interests were intertwined. In May, Ruge wrote: ‘Marx wants...to write a history of the Convention; to this effect he has accumulated the necessary documentation and he has arrived at some new and very fertile ideas. He has once again abandoned his critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and wants to use his time in Paris to write this book on the Convention, which is exactly right.’ In July: ‘He was planning to write a treatise on politics, which is unfortunately not yet drafted. Then he wanted to write a history of the Convention, and read an enormous amount to that effect. Now he seems to have abandoned that project afresh’. Finally, and perhaps most revealingly, in August Ruge wrote:

³⁷ Engels was so confident about the prospect of imminent regime change in England that in April 1848 he bet his brother-in-law twopence that his friend George Julian Harney, the Chartist leader and editor of *The Northern Star*, would be British Foreign Minister within two months! Hunt, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, pp. 141 and 178 n. 5.

³⁸ Marx to Ruge, September 1843, *MECW* 3:142

³⁹ 20 September 1792-26 October 1795

Marx wanted to critique Hegel's idea of natural right from a communist point of view, then write a history of the Convention, and finally a critique of all the socialists. He always wants to write on whatever he has read last, but keeps on with his reading and making new extracts without stopping. I think it still possible that he may write a really great book, but too abstract, into which he will cram everything he has read.⁴⁰

If he had, of course, the task of analysing Marx's political commitments might be considerably easier. As it is, he wrote so little that was systematic that we must flesh out some of his basic assumptions ourselves.

iii.

The depth of Marx's and Engels's identification with the French Revolution appears most clearly in their analyses of the 1848 revolutions in Belgium, Germany and France. To be sure, the Revolution had played an important role in their earlier writings, appearing both as an archetype of revolution and as the generator of modern political conditions. But their articles of this period are especially significant, because they show how the former characterisation of the Revolution came to eclipse the latter around 1848, prompting in 1852 a fresh reckoning with its contemporary political significance that set the tone of their engagement for the rest of their lives.

⁴⁰ Ruge to Feuerbach, 15 May 1844; Ruge to Fleischer, 9 July 1844; Ruge to Dunker, 28 August 1844. All quoted by Bruhat, 'La Révolution française,' pp. 127-128, translations mine.

On several occasions during the 1840s, Marx had suggested that the political and social situation in Germany lagged embarrassingly far behind that of France in 1789, and that it would, at some point, be necessary to catch up.⁴¹ In 1848 this appeared to be happening, and both men drew on the analogy of the French Revolution to illuminate events. Engels, for example, in an article of 31 May 1848 in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (a new venture, subtitled ‘*Organ der Demokratie*’ and conceived as a venue for all kinds of democratic thought, based in Cologne and edited by Marx⁴²) spelled out what he thought the Constituent National Assembly of Germany ought to have done in its first two weeks--precisely what the French National Assembly had done in theirs: first, ‘to proclaim loudly and publicly this sovereignty of the German people,’ and second, to get on with ‘the drafting of a German Constitution based on the sovereignty of the people.’⁴³ On June 3, similarly, Marx analysed the position of Prussia’s chief minister, Camphausen, by comparing it to Necker’s in France in 1789.⁴⁴ When news broke of the insurrection in Paris on June 26, their sense that they were living through a replay of 1789 increased: the significance of the ‘July revolution’ (of Paris, 1830) and the ‘February revolution’ (of Berlin and Vienna, 1848) rapidly faded, and Marx declared the ‘June revolution’ to be the ‘second act of the French Revolution’ proper.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique: Introduction,’ *MECW* 3:175-187, 175. See also e.g. ‘Report of the speeches made by Marx and Engels at the General Meeting of the Democratic Society in Cologne on August 4, 1848,’ *MECW* 7:556-557

⁴² See Heinrich Bürgers, ‘Prospectus for the Founding of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*,’ *Westphälisches Dampfboot*, 17 May 1848, *MECW* 7:539-541

⁴³ Engels, ‘The Assembly at Frankfurt,’ *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 1 June 1848, *MECW* 7:16-19

⁴⁴ Marx, ‘The Camphausen Government,’ *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 3 June 1848, *MECW* 7:39-40

⁴⁵ Marx, ‘News from Paris,’ *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 26 June 1848, *MECW* 7:128

Yet Marx's and Engels's pleasure at the likenesses between 1848 and 1789 was soon to turn to frustration, as events failed to live up to their hopes. The German revolution was turning out to be 'merely a parody of the French Revolution,' Marx complained in July 1848: 'On August 4, 1789, three weeks after the storming of the Bastille, the French people, in a single day, got the better of the feudal obligations. On July 11, 1848, four months after the March barricades, the feudal obligations got the better of the German people... This is much ado about nothing.'⁴⁶ By December of that year, in his article 'The Bourgeoisie and Counter-Revolution,' Marx was glumly convinced that Germany in 1848, far from picking up where the truly 'European revolutions' of 1648 and 1789 had left off and taking the revolution further, as he and Engels had hoped, had simply managed to 'constitute an anachronism.' What they had witnessed was 'merely a stunted after-effect of a European revolution in a backward country,' its light 'that of the corpse of a society which had long ago decayed.'⁴⁷

The irony that the recent revolutions, conceived from the outset in terms of the great French Revolution, had repeated their predecessor's failures was not lost on Marx, and in his lengthy 1852 piece, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,' he criticised the actors of 1848 for having viewed themselves through the spectacles of 1789--'the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead'--and ruminated with some bitterness on the fact that events had, in fact, so borne out the trajectory of 1789 that by the end of 1851, a second Napoleon had been installed as head of state in France. 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance occur, as it were, twice,' Marx began. 'He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Caussidière for Danton,

⁴⁶ Marx, 'The Bill Proposing the Abolition of Feudal Obligations,' *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 29 July 1848, *MECW* 7:290-295, 294-295

⁴⁷ Marx, 'The Bourgeoisie and Counter-Revolution,' *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 10-29 December 1848, *MECW* 8:154-178, 162

Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the Nephew for the Uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances attending the second edition of the 18th Brumaire!⁴⁸

The double irony here, of course, lay in the fact that Marx and Engels had hoped so earnestly that the 1848 revolutions *would* emulate the events of 1789 and after. Some of the sting behind Marx's remarks in this article surely derived from self-criticism: he and Engels had, after all, been equally guilty of the tendency to 'conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.'⁴⁹ That the 'second round' of the democratic Revolution should go so far as to imitate its own eventual betrayal in the form of a second transition to Empire had not, however, been what they had had in mind. 'The French, so long as they were engaged in revolution, could not get rid of the memory of Napoleon,' Marx wrote dolefully. 'They hankered to return from the perils of revolution to the fleshpots of Egypt, and December 2, 1851 was the answer.'

However, Marx now offered a new, more encouraging account of both revolutions, which explained and superseded the analogical habits of the past. 'Bourgeois revolutions, like those of the eighteenth century, storm swiftly from success to success,' he explained.

But they are short-lived...Proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to what has apparently been accomplished in order to begin it again afresh...they recoil again and again from the indefinite

⁴⁸ Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,' *MECW* 11:99-197, 106, 103

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.104

prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been recreated which makes turning back impossible.

It might appear that the political situation had ‘fallen back behind its point of departure’; but in reality, Marx suggested, the true point of departure had not yet been created. *That*, then, was the task of the present generation: it had to create ‘the situation, the relations, the conditions under which alone modern revolution becomes serious.’⁵⁰

The ‘Eighteenth Brumaire’ thus marked a change in Marx and Engels’ identification with the Revolution. From this point on, it ceased to figure in their writings as an archetype: future revolutionary activity would have to reconstitute the present, not revisit the past. But this did not mean that they disavowed its legacy or rejected its aims. If anything, the strictly historical significance of the Revolution appeared even greater in their writings after this date. The Revolution had ushered in the modern era: it was thus the genuine grandfather of all modern revolutionary movements. In 1855, Marx criticised Chateaubriand for failing to appreciate this sufficiently: he had disparaged the Spanish Revolution of 1820-23 as ‘nothing but a servile parody of the first French Revolution, performed on the Madrid stage, and in Castilian costumes,’ but, Marx rejoined, ‘the struggles of different peoples emerging from the feudal state of society, and moving toward middle class civilisation, cannot be supposed to differ in anything but the peculiar colouring derived from race, nationality, language, stage customs and costumes.’⁵¹

Seen in this light, the Revolution marked the beginning of Marx’s and Engels’s own time and the fountainhead of their own struggles, and this was how they portrayed it from this

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp.106-7 (translation modified)

⁵¹ Marx, ‘Revolutionary Spain (Ninth Article),’ *The New York Tribune*, 23 March 1855; *MECW* 15:621-630, 621

point on. Engels, introducing Marx's essay 'The Civil War in France' in 1891, cited 1789 as the origin of the dynamics from which the Paris Commune of 1871 had emerged, echoing Marx's own depiction of the Revolution in that piece as a 'gigantic broom' that had 'swept away all these relics of bygone times, thus clearing simultaneously the social soil of its last hindrances to the modern State edifice.'⁵² Yet if the Revolution had inaugurated the modern revolutionary tradition, Marx and Engels were its present-day inheritors. Engels illustrated how tightly he and his comrades still clung to this historical role in another of his regular pieces for the *New York Tribune* in 1853. 'The great movement 1789 called into potent activity an antagonist of a formidable nature,' he wrote. 'We mean the European Revolution, the explosive force of democratic ideals and man's native thirst for freedom. Since that epoch their have been in reality but two powers on the continent of Europe--Russia and Absolutism, the Revolution and Democracy. For the moment the Revolution seems to be suppressed, but it lives and is feared as deeply as ever.'⁵³

The Democratic Communist Tradition

The memory and legacy of the French Revolution thus played a large part in the formation of the political ideas of Marx and Engels. I will now show how this perspective can assist our understanding of their political goals, in particular the democratic nature of their communist commitments.

Light can be shed on this issue by examining Marx's and Engels' relation to the tradition of democratic communism represented during the Revolution by François-Noël 'Gracchus' Babeuf, journalist, political agitator and leading member of the 'Equals,' who had

⁵² Engels, *MECW*; Marx, 'The Civil War in France,' *MECW* 22:307-355, 328

⁵³ Engels, 'The Real Issue in Turkey,' *The New York Tribune*, 12 April 1853; *MECW* 12:13-17, p. 17

planned to overthrow the Directorial government in 1796. It is particularly important to establish Babeuf's significance for Marx and Engels because the scholar who has contributed most to our understanding of their democratic commitments, the historian Richard Hunt, actually made their *separation* from the Babeuviste tradition central to his account.⁵⁴ Here, Hunt was drawing on the work of J. L. Talmon (in tandem, to an extent, with that of Stanley Moore), whose depiction of Marx and Engels as members of a 'totalitarian democrat' tradition also consisting of Babeuf, Filippo Buonarrotti and Louis Blanqui Hunt sought to disprove.⁵⁵ In Hunt's view, Marx and Engels were most appropriately described as 'tough-minded' rather than totalitarian democrats, in explicit contradistinction from both 'tender-minded democrats' such as Louis Blanc and Moses Hess on the one hand, and 'tough-minded elitists' such as Babeuf and Blanqui on the other. As far as Marx's and Engels's distinctness from Hess, Blanc and Blanqui is concerned, Hunt's judgement, supported by an impressive mastery of the primary materials (especially those relating to Marx's and Engels' tense relationship with the former members of the Blanquist 'League of the Just' with whom they joined forces to form a renovated Communist League in 1847), seems well founded.⁵⁶ Marx's and Engels's distance from Babeuf, however, which was much less thoroughly researched, was overdrawn, with the result that their relation to the French revolutionary tradition in general, and those aspects relating to the Constitution of 1793 and the Conspiracy of the Equals in particular, were mischaracterised, and various aspects of the relationship between democracy and communism in the first half of the nineteenth century (many of which would

⁵⁴ Richard Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels I: Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, 1818-1850 (London, 1984), esp. pp. 3-16

⁵⁵ J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (New York, 1960). See also Stanley Moore, *Three Tactics: The Background in Marx* (New York, 1963).

⁵⁶ Hunt, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, ch. 5

actually have helped Hunt's overall thesis) were missed. Here, I will draw on both primary and more recent secondary materials to argue that Babeuf, too, is best characterised as a 'tough-minded democrat' in whom communist and democratic commitments were conjoined; and that this conjunction was typical of many on the left in the decades following the French Revolution, including Marx and Engels.

Hunt accepted that Marx and Engels were 'definitely familiar' with Buonarroti's *Conspiration pour l'égalité dite de Babeuf* (1828), the work that brought to the attention of a new generation the failed 1796 Conspiracy of the Equals that had aimed to topple the post-Thermidorian Directorial government, and for their involvement in which Babeuf and one other, Darthe, had been executed, and Buonarroti and others sentenced to lengthy imprisonment.⁵⁷ He emphasised, however, that nowhere did Marx and Engels discuss this work at length. In fact, as he pointed out, they mentioned Babeuf only fourteen times in their writings up to 1850 (and Buonarroti only four): most often (in Hunt's view) in passing, but twice, once in an article by Engels of 1843, and again in the *Manifesto of the Communist*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 3-16

Party (1848), in what he took to be more serious and ‘unambiguously negative’ tones.⁵⁸ Perhaps most importantly, since Hunt accepted Talmon’s characterisation of Babeuf’s central political ideas as ‘the need for a vanguard party, a minority revolution, an educational dictatorship by an elite possessing a monopoly of the means of communication and coercion, wholesale terror, and mass politicisation,’ he also accepted the use of the label ‘totalitarian democrat’ to describe him; a label which he absolutely withheld from Marx and Engels, who (as his book convincingly showed), far from wanting to work towards the realisation of these aims themselves, were consistently critical of those who did.⁵⁹

Against this assessment of Marx’s and Engels’s relationship to the Babeuviste tradition, I argue that Babeuf did, in fact, hold a special position for Marx and Engels in the pantheon of democrats, socialists and communists who had preceded them. First, it is worth noticing the way that Babeuf featured in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, not only

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 15. On the 1843 article, ‘Progress of Social Reform on the Continent’ (published in the *The New Moral World*, November 4, 1843), Hunt wrote: ‘Engels had kind words for almost all the leading schools [of socialism on the Continent] but dismissed Babeuf’s conspiracy in one sentence: “The Communist plot did not succeed, because the then Communism itself was of a very rough and superficial kind, and because, on the other hand, the public mind was not yet far enough advanced.”’ In context, however, Engels’s comment would seem rather more supportive than ‘dismissive’: ‘[Merely] political liberty is sham-liberty, the worst possible slavery; the appearance of liberty, and therefore the reality of servitude. Political equality is the same...the contradiction hidden in it must come out; we must have either a regular slavery--that is, an undisguised despotism, or real liberty, and real equality--that is, Communism. Both these consequences were brought out in the French Revolution; Napoleon established the first, and Babeuf the second. I think I may be short upon the subject of Babeuvism, as the history of the conspiracy, by Buonarroti, has been translated into the English language’ (*MECW* 3:393). On the mention of Babeuf in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Hunt makes much of the fact that Marx and Engels described the revolutionary literature that accompanied the movements of the proletariat during the French Revolution as having ‘necessarily a reactionary character,’ which ‘inculcated universal asceticism and social levelling in its crudest form.’ For what may be said against drawing from this comment the conclusion that Marx and Engels did not identify themselves with Babeuf’s characteristic mix of democracy and communism, see below.

⁵⁹ Hunt, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, pp. 13-15

because it demonstrates how Marx and Engels treated Babeuf differently from others among their forebears, but also because it differs, interestingly, from how Babeuf first appeared in the draft plan of the *Manifesto* that Marx produced at the end of 1847. In that plan, under the heading ‘Critical utopian systems of literature,’ Marx had listed for discussion Robert Owen, Etienne Cabet, Wilhelm Weitling, Charles Fourier, Saint-Simon, and finally Babeuf, apparently as one coherent group. The opening line of this section in the final version of the *Manifesto*, however, now re-titled ‘Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism,’ saw Babeuf singled out in contradistinction from the others, and particularly from Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen. The Communist League’s eventual pronouncement on the ‘critical-utopian’ tradition began by explicitly denying the applicability of the criticisms they were about to make to Babeuf: ‘We do not here refer to that literature which, in every great modern revolution, has always given voice to the demands of the proletariat, such as the writings of Babeuf and others.’⁶⁰

Now, as Hunt argued (albeit in a different context), it is necessary to be cautious in interpreting the *Manifesto*, which although written chiefly by Marx and Engels was a compromise document agreed by each of the different groups which made up the Communist League, and which differed in significant ways from writings of Marx and Engels published under their own names.⁶¹ However, this singling out of Babeuf for special treatment, and particularly his depiction as an example of the authentic voice of the proletariat, was repeated in other writings of theirs. Engels, for instance, characterised Babeuf as a representative of the ‘insurgent proletariat’ of the Revolution in an article of 1845, ‘The Festival of Nations in London’ (an important piece to which we shall later return). Engels had in fact suggested that

⁶⁰ Marx, ‘Draft Plan for Section III of the Manifesto of the Communist Party,’ *MECW* 6:576; *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, *MECW* 6:476-519

⁶¹ Hunt, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, ch. 5

Babeuf was responsible for bringing to light the demand for ‘real liberty, and real equality’ as early as 1843 (in the article ‘Progress of Moral Reform on the Continent,’ published in the Owenite journal the *New Moral World*), and he continued to hold this position this right down to 1889, when in a letter to Karl Kautsky he credited Babeuf with having been the first to give the vague ‘*plebeian fraternité*’ of the Revolution ‘definite shape.’ Marx also presented Babeuf in a distinctive light when in ‘Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality’ (1847), he accorded to Babeuf and Buonarroti the honour of being the first ‘consistent republicans’ in France, by which he meant that they had been the first to understand that ‘the political relationships of men are of course also social, societal relationships, like all relations between men and men.’ Marx’s and Engels’s interest in Babeuf was also indicated by their ‘Plan for a Library of the Best Foreign Socialist Writers,’ drafted in 1845. Interestingly, they specifically intended to devote a volume in this series to each of Babeuf and Buonarroti separately, rather than merely append a selection of Babeuf’s writings to Buonarroti’s book, as was usual: it would thus appear that Marx and Engels were hoping to interest readers in Babeuf’s thought in his own right.⁶²

For a further clue as to how Marx and Engels viewed Babeuf and the tradition he inspired, we may return to the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and the final paragraph of the section on critical-utopian communism cited above. This is the single sentence, ‘The Owenites in England, and the Fourierists in France, respectively oppose the Chartists and the Réformistes.’ Coming from Marx and Engels, who despite having disagreements with members of both of these groups frequently intervened, in articles, letters and speeches, in support of both English Chartism and the French republican-democratic newspaper *La*

⁶² Engels, ‘The Festival of Nations in London,’ *MECW* 6:3-6; ‘Progress of Moral Reform on the Continent,’ *MECW* 3: check; Letter to Karl Kautsky, February 20, 1889, *MECW* check; Marx, ‘Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality,’ *MECW* 6:312-340, 321; ‘Plan for a Library of the Best Foreign Socialist Writers,’ *MECW* 4:667.

Réforme for as long as they were in existence, this statement was evidently intended as a criticism, rather than a mere observation of the state of affairs.⁶³ Yet particularly with regard to Chartism (if only because it is better known today), the juxtaposition of these avowedly communist (or semi-communist) currents is likely to sound odd to modern ears. Historians have long debated the radicalism of the Chartist movement, but the Six Points elaborated in the Charter of 1838 (namely, suffrage for all men above twenty-one, voting by secret ballot, equal-sized electoral districts, an end to the property qualification required to stand for Parliament, pay for MPs, and annual elections) are likely to sound rather less radical than our preconceptions of allies of Marx and Engels might lead us to expect--especially since each of these demands, with the single exception of annual Parliaments, was actually met in the United Kingdom during the following century, with arguably no very radical results. Yet not only were Marx and Engels committed and vocal supporters of Chartism--Engels declaring in 1847 that he was 'proud to call himself a Chartist "name and all,"' and Marx, at the same meeting, reporting on behalf of the Democratic Committee of Brussels that 'The Democrats of Belgium felt that the Chartists of England were the real Democrats, and that the moment that they carried the six points of their Charter, the road to liberty would be opened to the whole world'--but the Chartist leaders George Julian Harney and Ernest Jones were also members of the Communist League from 1847.⁶⁴ The significant similarities that Marx and Engels, at least, evidently thought to obtain among these movements are thus a useful

⁶³ See e.g. Marx, Engels and Philippe Gigot, 'Address of the German Democratic Communists of Brussels to Mr. Feargus O'Connor,' July 17th, 1846, *MECW* 6:58-60; 'The *Neue Berliner Zeitung* on the Chartists,' *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, June 23, 1848, *MECW* 7:113-114; Engels, 'The Reform Movement in France,' *The Northern Star*, November 20, 1847, *MECW* 6:375-382, esp. 380; and the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*'s support for *La Réforme* against *Le National* in 1848-1849, *MECW* check

⁶⁴ 'The *Northern Star* on the meeting in London on November 29, 1847 to mark the 17th anniversary of the Polish Insurrection of 1830,' *MECW* 6:616-623, 621, 619; Marx and Engels, 'Letter to Citizen Cabet, editor of the *Populaire*,' *MECW* 7:8-9

reminder both of the radical nature of demands for democracy in Europe the 1840s, and of the deep significance of the struggle for equal suffrage rights in the nineteenth-century communist tradition.⁶⁵ Marx and Engels were in fact quite explicit on this point: the English Chartists were more in keeping with the spirit of communism than men like Fourier or Saint-Simon precisely *because* of their democratic commitments, and especially on account of the way that they epitomised proletarian self-help.⁶⁶ So too, and for the same reasons, was Babeuf; and an adequate grasp of Babeuf's ideas and the legacy of the democratic-communist convictions that he espoused--both of which were available to Marx and Engels in exactly the same form that they are to us today, in Buonarroti's 1828 book--is indispensable if we wish to understand some of the basic assumptions that went into the making of Marx's and Engels's most fundamental political commitments. After all, just as Marx and Engels had contrasted the Owenites and Fourierists with Babeuf and his followers at the outset of this section of the *Manifesto*, it is plausible to suppose that Babeuf and his followers would have joined them in support of Chartism and *La Réforme*.

While Babeuf is today best known as 'the first revolutionary communist,' as his biographer R. B. Rose describes him, and while it was indeed his communist ideas to which

⁶⁵ As Engels enthused in the article 'The Decline and Approaching Fall of Guizot' in *The Northern Star* in June 1847, even a limited extension of the franchise was expected to have radical results: 'Electoral Reform means admission of the smaller tradesmen to the Suffrage, and this means, in France, "the beginning of the end". Rothschild and Louis Philippe know very well, both of them, that admission of the smaller "bourgeoisie" to the suffrage means nothing but "LA RÉPUBLIQUE!"' *MECW* 6:213-219, 219

⁶⁶ See e.g. Marx, 'The communism of the *Rheinischer Beobachter*' in the *Deutsche-Brüsseler-Zeitung*, September 5, 1847: 'Does the Herr Consistorial Counsellor then believe that the proletariat, which is more and more adhering to the Communist Party, will be incapable of utilising the freedom of the press and the freedom of association? Let him just read the English and French working men's newspapers, let him just attend some time a single Chartist meeting!' *MECW* 6:220-234, 225; and Engels, 'Principles of Communism,' *MECW* 7:341-357, 356: 'In England...the Chartists, who are all workers, are incalculably nearer to the Communists than are the democratic petty bourgeois or so-called radicals.'

Marx and Engels were referring when (as Hunt noticed) they described his doctrines in the *Manifesto* as ‘universal asceticism and social levelling in its crudest form,’ it was not, in fact, his communism for which he was principally known during the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁷ As Rose reported, ‘for at least a generation after the revolution, Babeuf’s historical reputation was that of a martyr for democracy and not of a prophet of communism.’⁶⁸ For Rose this illustrated the limitations of the post-Revolutionary generation’s conception of Babeuf’s goals, but against this he judged that Buonarroti’s account of the Conspiracy of the Equals had succeeded in bringing Babeuf’s communism to the fore among a wider audience. Rose maintained this position despite acknowledging that even Buonarroti’s enthusiastic English translator Bronterre O’Brien, also a Chartist and a self-declared *opponent* of communal property, had not seen anything in Buonarroti’s depiction of Babeuf’s politics to undermine his conviction that (as O’Brien put it) ‘Buonarroti’s book contains one of the best expositions I have seen of those great political and social principles which I have so long advocated.’⁶⁹ In fact, both Rose’s and Buonarroti’s books stand primarily as testaments to the visibility and motivational force of Babeuf’s democratic commitments (most pointedly in the form of support for the ‘plebeians’ against the feudal aristocracy), somewhat ahead of his communist ideals. Babeuf’s chief desire throughout his career was to ‘activate’ the agency of the people, without whom ‘nothing great can be done,’ as he put it in the prospectus for his newspaper, *Le Tribun du Peuple*, in 1795. This had to begin with securing popular self-government; and the strategies he adopted in the service of this end were, *pace* Talmon and (following him)

⁶⁷ Marx and Engels, ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party,’ *MECW* 6:514

⁶⁸ Rose, *Babeuf*, p. 329

⁶⁹ Filippo Buonarroti, *Babeuf’s Conspiracy of Equality* ed. and trans. Bronterre O’Brien (London, 1836), p. xiv. O’Brien goes on to say, ‘I was so forcibly struck by the coincidence of Buonarroti’s ideas with my own, that I immediately resolved to translate the book.’ On O’Brien’s opposition to communal property, see pp. 213-220.

Hunt, far from smacking of totalitarianism.⁷⁰ The Conspiracy of the Equals was no ‘vanguard party’ but rather an organisation dedicated, in the first instance, to bringing down a government that, it was believed, had usurped the right of the people to be governed by a constitution of their own choosing. Far from working towards a ‘minority revolution,’ the conspirators believed that their supporters ran into the tens of thousands in Paris alone, and they tried to communicate with these individuals by word of mouth, placards and through the press at every possible opportunity.⁷¹ They did suppose that a provisional dictatorship--closer to the Roman than the twentieth-century model--would be inevitable in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Directory, before the necessary elections could be organised, but it was expected to last no more than months or even days, and the conspirators’ commitments to education for all and to the ‘sacred right of a free press’ were strong.⁷² As for ‘wholesale terror,’ though one member of the conspiracy, Rossignol, may have anticipated the prospect of ‘heads falling like hail’ in retribution for the persecution suffered by democrats after Thermidor, the general expectation seems to have been that, after a couple of days of fighting in the streets (as seemed inevitable at every revolutionary juncture), ‘tranquillity’ would speedily be restored.⁷³

The principal point that must be made about the Conspiracy of the Equals is that it was, as Rose recognises, first and foremost an attempt to restore democracy in the shape of

⁷⁰ Babeuf, ‘Prospectus’ *Le Tribun du Peuple*, 1795; see also Buonarroti, *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 90-91. What follows refers to the features of ‘totalitarian democracy’ as listed by Hunt, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy*, p. 13: ‘a vanguard party, a minority revolution, an educational dictatorship by an elite possessing a monopoly of the means of communication and coercion, wholesale terror, and mass politicisation’.

⁷¹ Bronterre O’Brien, ‘To the Reader,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, p. xxiii

⁷² Rose, *Babeuf*, p. 237; Babeuf, ‘Prospectus for *Le Tribun du Peuple*,’ 1795

⁷³ Rose, *Babeuf*, pp. 238-240; Babeuf, ‘The Insurrectional Committee to the People,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 384-389

the Constitution of 1793, which had granted full rights of citizenship, including the right to vote, to every French man over the age of twenty-one.⁷⁴ That the establishment of the Constitution of 1793 was its immediate and chief goal is manifest in every piece of literature that the conspirators produced, both those for public and for more clandestine purposes: from their record of the creation of an insurrectional directory some time before March 30, 1796, to their first addresses to those members of the public whom they hoped would become its chief revolutionary agents, to the placards bearing the so-called ‘Analyse de la doctrine de Babeuf’ that were put up across Paris on the night of April 9, 1796, to garner support for the uprising then being planned.⁷⁵ Moreover, the Constitution of 1793 was the natural focal point for these friends of equality not merely because it had established universal adult male suffrage and was thus desirable in its own right, but also because--as Babeuf repeatedly pointed out in the pages of his newspaper and elsewhere--it had been ratified by 4,800,000 citizens voting in the primary assemblies, compared with the 900,000 who had approved of the Constitution of 1795 (which had re-imposed a property qualification on the franchise). Thus, Babeuf argued (following Rousseau), the law of majoritarianism dictated that the earlier Constitution still stood, government by the Directory was illegitimate, and it was the duty of every virtuous citizen to act to reclaim the active sovereignty of the people.⁷⁶ The vigour with which he advocated the return of the 1793 Constitution was, in fact, the principal

⁷⁴ Rose, *Babeuf*, p. 343

⁷⁵ ‘Creation of an Insurrectional Directory,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 302-303; ‘Primary Instruction of the Secret Directory, addressed to each of the Principal Revolutionary Agents,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 304-313; ‘Analysis of the Doctrine of Babeuf,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 318-326

⁷⁶ See, for example, Babeuf, ‘Do we owe obedience to the Constitution of 1795?’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 342-348; ‘Analysis of the Doctrine of Babeuf,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 318-326, especially pp. 325-326; Babeuf, ‘The Insurrectional Committee of Public Safety to the People,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 384-389

basis of his eventual execution; whereas others among the conspirators were also convicted of promoting it (the sole charge which the jury in the 1797 trial accepted against any of the accused, and one which had been a capital offence since 15 April 1796), ‘extenuating circumstances,’ mitigating against the death penalty, were deemed to apply in the majority of cases. In the cases of Babeuf and Darthe, no such circumstances were found.⁷⁷

Babeuf was thus no ‘totalitarian democrat,’ but rather a democrat *tout court*. While the conspiracy had not focused on communism, moreover, Babeuf was also certainly a communist: that is to say, he believed in the desirability of the establishment and administration of a system of communal property through political processes.⁷⁸ In Babeuf, democracy and communism could not be disentangled; and the assumption that these two aspirations, one overtly ‘political,’ the other more ‘economic,’ had a certain natural fit, continued to be a fundamental assumption of many of those on the left in the early part of the nineteenth century.

Although the leaders of the Conspiracy of the Equals directed their attention first and foremost to the establishment of the democratic Constitution of 1793, they did not suppose that once this constitution had been put in place, the reign of equality--which they characterised by the criteria of ‘*égalité, liberté et le bonheur commun*’ (‘equality, liberty and the general happiness’)--would automatically begin. On the contrary, Babeuf was quite clear

⁷⁷ The Directory’s decrees of 27 and 28 germinal, which introduced new penalties for forming public assemblies and posting illegal placards and made advocating the return of the Constitution of 1793 a capital offence, were really a testament to the efficacy of the conspirators in fomenting discontent with the Directorial regime--and remind us of the significantly repressive aspects of the government against which they were plotting. See further Rose, *Babeuf*, pp. 253, 325

⁷⁸ Whether many of those involved in the conspiracy, aside from Buonarroti, could easily be identified as communists is hard to say. Jean-Baptiste Goulart, one of the accused, offered the following interpretation of the conspirators goals during their trial in 1797: ‘a reduction in the price of all commodities necessary for the survival of the poor, and the recognition of paper money.’ Rose, *Babeuf*, p. 243

that, while the Constitution of 1793 ‘was a great practical step towards real equality,’ it ‘did not yet touch the end, nor was it fully competent to attain the general happiness.’⁷⁹ The ‘*bonheur commun*’ they expected to emerge gradually, over the months and years after the fall of the Directory and the establishment and dissolution of the provisional government which was to follow. As Buonarroti’s book showed, the conspirators were anxious about the form that the provisional government should take, for all the reasons that any modern democrat would expect; and it is not certain that they ever reached a decision on this point before the conspiracy was smashed and its leaders arrested in May 1796.⁸⁰ But their long term hopes, at least, were reasonably clear. The ‘general happiness’ that they had in mind would require, they supposed, the direct public administration of most of the territory of the Republic, with a view to keeping a network of common storehouses equipped with the products of agriculture and other forms of production such that the basic needs of every citizen for food, shelter, clothing and medical aid might be met.⁸¹ Babeuf’s focus in his writings was very much on the need of all citizens to have access to land, simply so that they could eat: a reasonable enough perspective at a time when feudal agricultural arrangements were only just beginning to be dismantled, and food scarcity and low wages had led to widespread hunger among the urban poor. ‘We claim--we demand--we *will* the communal enjoyment of the fruits of the earth,’ Babeuf declared; ‘*the fruits belong to all.*’⁸² At the same time, he took aim against the *ancien régime* reality of twenty million labourers working to

⁷⁹ Babeuf, ‘Manifesto of the Equals,’ first published in *Le Tribun du Peuple* no. 35, reprinted in *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 314-317; see also Buonarroti, *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 72-73

⁸⁰ Buonarroti, *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 100-107

⁸¹ Babeuf, ‘Manifesto of the Equals,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 314-317; Babeuf’s Reply to a Letter signed M. V., *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 364-374

⁸² Babeuf, ‘Manifesto of the Equals,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 314-317

keep the wealthy one million well-fed, and advocated that legislation be used to require that every able-bodied person contribute to the common effort of production.⁸³

This may sound alarming; yet the specific forms of political control that Babeuf had in mind were at least profoundly democratic. The day-to-day business of the shared consumption and production of the community was to be run by ‘local magistrates’--reminiscent of the archons of fifth- and fourth-century Athens--who would be, Babeuf wrote, ‘freely chosen by its members, agreeably to the laws, and under the direction of the supreme administration.’⁸⁴ The supreme administration itself would be elected in accordance with the Constitution of 1793, which is to say, by universal adult male suffrage with representative institutions established at both the local and national levels. As Buonarroti reported, however, the Babeuvistes also wished to infuse as high a degree of direct democracy as possible into this representative framework, and thus expected to accord a large role to the use of mandates, referenda, the people’s veto, and the power of initiative vested in the primary assemblies (which Babeuf identified with the Roman plebeians’ right of *provocatio*).⁸⁵ Finally, it bears emphasising that no one was to be forced to join the planned economic community, although all French citizens were to enjoy identical political rights for an indefinite period. It was believed that as time went on and the advantages of a system of communal property became increasingly obvious, few would choose to remain outside the ‘grand national community.’ ‘Old habits, old prejudices, will again seek to oppose obstacles to the establishment of the Republic of Equals,’ Babeuf wrote. ‘But what can avail a few

⁸³ Babeuf, check

⁸⁴ Babeuf, ‘Fragment of a Project,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 417-418; Buonarroti, ‘Fragment of a Draught of an Economical decree,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 418-425, esp. 420; Babeuf, ‘Manifesto of the Equals,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, pp. 314-317

⁸⁵ Rose, *Babeuf*, p. 344

thousand malcontents against such a mass of human beings, all happy, and astonished at having been so long in quest of a felicity which they had within hands' reach?'⁸⁶

Today, of course, these hopes may seem naive. But the point is that Babeuf and his colleagues simply assumed that the practice of democracy and the implementation of a system of communal production and distribution to meet the basic needs of all would go hand in hand. The crucial linking factor was universal suffrage; and in its absence, there was no reason to think that the majority, once they had the vote, would *not* vote to replace the current system of property over which they had no control and under which they suffered, for one that they would be able to run themselves and in which they would run no risk of starvation.

That this was their expectation is clear. As Buonarroti still supposed in 1828, 'Obstacles to real radical reform never come from the majority of citizens; they always arise from the depraving influence of those who have found the secret of throwing upon others their proper share of the general labour. Reduce this corrupt minority to silence, and all the rest will applaud you, and second you with all their force.'⁸⁷ The important step, in this perspective, necessarily lay in making sure that the people understood what they could do with their political power; and here, Babeuf's faith in the power of communication and the attractiveness of his ideas shone through. 'If we speak clearly and honestly to the people,' he wrote, 'I feel sure that they will immediately declare themselves for equality.'⁸⁸ Nothing in Babeuf's writings, moreover, suggests that he expected precise adherence to his proposals; on the contrary, he consistently suggested that 'where the people is free, and may be consulted, it

⁸⁶ Babeuf, 'Manifesto of the Equals,' *Babeuf's Conspiracy*, p. 317

⁸⁷ Buonarroti, *Babeuf's Conspiracy*, p. 212

⁸⁸ Babeuf, 'Reply to a Letter signed M. V.,' *Babeuf's Conspiracy*, p. 373

is not to be assumed that others can judge better of its interests than the people itself can.’⁸⁹ He simply expected that the people, once they had secured their right to participate in self-government, would *want* to use their political power to address the inequalities of a system in which a few individuals were able to amass wealth and power at the expense of others. This is not to say that Babeuf and Buonarroti did not anticipate resistance to such a scheme; of course they did not imagine that those holding power under the old system would be inclined to give it up without a fight. But, as Babeuf emphasised, these were one million, by his estimates, against twenty. The conspirators thus put their faith explicitly in the power of majoritarianism, and the natural desire of the people to act according to the ‘lever’ of their own interests.⁹⁰

The crux of Babeuf’s ideas, and a vital part of the legacy of the Conspiracy of the Equals, can thus be described as a form of practical utilitarianism: what the Babeuvistes had in mind was a process of establishing the general happiness by harnessing the agency of the people to decide, through their votes, how it was that they wanted to live. As Babeuf put it in 1795, ‘popular government can and should have as a result the ease and happiness of all individuals.’⁹¹ Democracy and communism were thus for Babeuf two sides of the same political-economic coin, the one aspect of ‘*le bonheur commun*’ dovetailing quite naturally with the other.

The Conspiracy of the Equals may have been largely forgotten about by 1828, when Buonarroti’s book was first published. It is not well known today. But the story of Babeuf’s ideals and eventual martyrdom in the service of this package of democratic and communist

⁸⁹ Babeuf, ‘Primary Instruction of the Secret Directory, addressed to each of the Principal Revolutionary Agents,’ *Babeuf’s Conspiracy*, p. 305

⁹⁰ Babeuf, ‘Prospectus for *Le Tribun du Peuple*’ (1795)

⁹¹ *ibid.*

commitments was widely celebrated on the European left during the 1830s and 1840s, and formed a major part of Marx and Engels's sense of the tradition to which they belonged. To be sure, not all democrats who identified themselves with the Revolution--or even with the Babeuvistes--were communists: an obvious example was Bronterre O'Brien, who as we have seen explicitly described himself in 1836 as an opponent of the elimination of private property. Yet as O'Brien himself acknowledged, his was almost the minority position: the view that the public happiness was compatible with a system of private property had been rejected not merely by the Babeuvistes, but by 'thousands of the French democrats of 1793,' along with 'Robert Owen and his disciples of the present day.'⁹² This is not to suggest, of course, that Babeuvistes were the most important influence behind the pursuit of democracy, communism and the idea of the '*bonheur commun*' during this period. But, as Engels demonstrated in the Owenite journal the *New Moral World* in 1843, in the collocation of revolutionary hopes and dreams on the left, the memory of Babeuf continued to play a large part. The French Revolution, Engels wrote, had revealed that 'we must have either a regular slavery--that is, an undisguised despotism, or real liberty, and real equality--that is, Communism'; and while Napoleon had proven the first, Babeuf had proven the second. Crucially, Babeuf's fame was at this point so great that Engels did not even feel that he had to dwell on him at any length. 'I think I may be short upon the subject of Babeuvism,' he wrote, 'as the history of the conspiracy, by Buonarroti, has been translated into the English language.'⁹³

More research remains to be done on the relationship between democracy and communism in the nineteenth century, and on the democratic bases of Marx's and Engels's

⁹² O'Brien, *Babeuf's Conspiracy*, p. 217

⁹³ Engels, 'Progress of Moral Reform on the Continent,' *MECW* 3:393

communism in particular. The best illustration of Marx's and Engels's relation to the French revolutionary tradition as they perceived and practised it in this regard, however, is Engels's article 'The Festival of Nations in London,' written at the end of 1845 for a German audience and published in the journal *Rheinische Jahrbucher zur gesellschaftlichen* in 1846. The occasion for this piece was a meeting of assorted left-wing Chartists, working-class German *émigrés* and revolutionary activists of other nationalities held in London on 22 September, 1845 to commemorate the anniversary of the establishment of the French Republic on 22 September, 1792, at which an official international society of Fraternal Democrats was formed. Marx and Engels had been instrumental in helping to arrange the meeting and continued to play a major role in the group until it ceased its activities in 1853, although neither was actually in the country when the inaugural meeting took place and Engels wrote up his account from reports of the speeches given there printed in the *Northern Star*.⁹⁴ He began with a paragraph mocking what he saw as his German audience's political parochialism. 'What do the nations matter to us? What does the French Republic matter to us? Did we not long ago grasp the notion of nations and did we not determine the place of each of them; did we not assign to the Germans the sphere of theory, to the French that of politics, and to the English that of civil society?' he wrote, with characteristic aplomb (and prefiguring Lenin's dictum that Marx's thinking was a construct of German philosophy, French politics and English economics with a striking levity). 'Keep calm, dear Germany,' he counselled. 'The nations and the French republic matter a great deal to us.'⁹⁵

Neatly drawing together several of the themes that I have advanced in this paper into one sentence, Engels then went on to make the central claim of his article. 'The fraternisation

⁹⁴ *MECW* 6:661

⁹⁵ Engels, 'The Festival of Nations,' *MECW* 6:3

of nations under the banner of *modern democracy*, as it began from the French Revolution and developed into French communism and English Chartism, shows that the masses and their representatives know better than the German theoreticians how things stand.’ While the ‘German theoreticians’ dithered with Hegel and the pure ‘concept of democracy,’ Engels wrote, there was springing into existence ‘a *real* democracy which the whole of Europe is rushing to embrace.’ This ‘real democracy’ had emerged directly from the French Revolution, and the terms in which Engels described it are highly revealing in relation to a few themes of Marxist interpretation that have often caused trouble, particularly as concerns Marx’s and Engels’s apparent dismissal of the ‘political’ in favour of the ‘social,’ as, for example, in Marx’s 1846 article ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform’. Here, crucially, Engels indicated just how narrow was the conception of the ‘truly’ or ‘merely’ political that he used (and presumably shared with Marx). His first point was that the words fraternisation and democracy ‘now have a social meaning in which the political meaning is dissolved.’ What he meant by this was evidently something that we might call a distinction between constitutional questions and the kinds of social issues that we, today, have no difficulty in recognising as acutely political in their ramifications. The Revolution had been ‘something quite different from a struggle for this or that form of the State,’ which people in Germany still imagined it to be, he wrote. Indeed, ‘The connection of most insurrections of that time with famine, the significance which the provisioning of the capital and the distribution of supplies assumed already from 1789 onwards, the maximum, the laws against buying up food supplies, the battle cry of the revolutionary armies...the testimony of Carmagnole according to which Republicans must have *du pain* as well as *du fer* and *du Coeur*--and a hundred other superficialities already prove...how greatly democracy differed at that time from a mere political organisation.’ For Engels, then, modern democracy was not and should not be a

‘mere’ form of political organisation; rather, it should encompass social and economic issues as well.

Engels’s next remarks brought out the significance of the Constitution of 1793 and Babeuviste traditions in this general scheme of things – essentially as the true representatives of the working people: ‘As it is, it is well known that the Constitution of 1793 and the terror originated with that party which derived its support from the insurgent proletariat, that Robespierre’s overthrow signified the victory of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat, that Babeuf’s conspiracy for equality revealed the final consequences of the democracy of ’93-- insofar as these were at all possible at that time.’ Concluding this thought and cementing the inclusion of the social within democracy as it was then being practised, Engels completed this paragraph as follows: ‘The French Revolution was a social movement from beginning to end, and after it a purely political democracy became a complete absurdity.’⁹⁶

Precisely what Engels meant by this was clarified in his next sentence, which is perhaps as cogent a testament to the fusion of democracy and communism as is to be found in the thought of Marx and Engels. ‘*Democracy nowadays is communism,*’ Engels stated. ‘Democracy has become the proletarian principle, the principle of the masses.’ Acknowledging the vagueness that some of these ideas had at a popular level, he continued, ‘The masses may be more or less clear about this, the only correct meaning of democracy, but all have at least an obscure feeling that social equality of rights is implicit in democracy.’ In fact, Engels went on, this meant that ‘the democratic masses can safely be included in any calculation of the communist forces. And if the proletarian parties of the different nations unite they will be quite right to inscribe the word “Democracy” on their banners, since,

⁹⁶ Engels, ‘Festival of Nations,’ *MECW* 6:4-5

except for those who do not count' (Engels was here referring to the aforementioned 'German theoreticians') 'all European democrats in 1846 are more or less Communists at heart.'

Evidently, Engels shared with Babeuf the illusion that the restoration of the constitution of 1793 would inevitably lead to the endorsement of communism by the proletarian majority. But there is no suggestion here that democracy would be superseded. On the contrary, it was as much the necessary condition for communism as the adoption of communist principles appeared to be the inevitable consequence of its introduction. This was the tradition of democratic communism as it was forged in the French Revolution, and it is the tradition to which Marx and Engels belong.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to recontextualise the political thought of Marx and Engels by situating it in relation to the French Revolution, and specifically in the tradition of democratic communism represented during the Revolution by Gracchus Babeuf and his followers. I have argued that Marx and Engels identified themselves with this tradition, and assumed, like Babeuf before them, that a renewal of the Revolution's most democratic moment, as epitomised by the Constitution of 1793--which included universal suffrage, free and fair national and local elections, majoritarianism, a uniform civil and criminal code, and freedom of assembly, speech and of the press--would be a necessary precursor to, and continuing feature of, communism.

Marx and Engels' communism--like that of Babeuf before them--was democratic 'all the way down'. Their commitment to democracy was not a mere prelude to their communism (in either an analytical or chronological sense), nor did they conceive of communism as a

more 'genuine' or 'truer' substitute for democratic political practices. They would have been baffled and surprised by the separation of communism from democracy in later accounts of their thought (including the use of the term 'conversion' to describe their embrace of communism), just as surely as they were baffled and frustrated by the dawning realisation, towards the end of their lives, that the natural 'twin'--at least in this period of human history--of the kind of liberal representative democratic measures that they supported might, in fact, be a regime of private property in the form of capitalism, rather than the public administration of communal property which was the hallmark of communism. Yet not until some time after the period with which this paper is concerned did the gradual unfolding of communism twinned with democracy cease to seem the most likely political development. The surprise for these mid-nineteenth century communists (and democrats and Chartists) was that universal suffrage, when it finally came, did not result in the move towards full citizen control of the social bases of production (though we should not forget that many features of the approach to that condition most cherished by Marx and Engels, such as a graduated income tax, politically imposed limits on inheritance, and state-funded universal education, did indeed come to pass). To comprehend fully the thought of these nineteenth-century political activists, we must perhaps learn to feel the shock of the fact that before the twentieth century was out, it was capitalism that had come to be perceived as the natural ally of the democratic political process, rather than the communism of many of the nineteenth-century men and women who worked so hard to achieve democracy.