

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

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Abstract

With the European Industrial Revolution, the bourgeoisie expanded rapidly but exploited the proletariat harshly. During the French Revolution, the proletariat gradually awakened and launched organized resistance, giving rise to the Equals Movement, hailed by Marx as the “first truly active Communist Party”. This paper explores the movement’s early communist nature. It first examines France’s socioeconomic background - early-stage capitalist development dominated by handicraft workshops, an agrarian-based economy, and intensified social contradictions from heavy taxation. It then analyzes the revival of utopian socialism, which provided ideological support, and the proletariat’s growing class consciousness. Finally, it elaborates on the Equals Movement’s development, including Babeuf’s revolutionary activities, the impact of the Thermidorian Reaction and Directory rule, its organizational structure, core demands of public ownership and equality, and its tragic suppression. The study reveals the movement’s historical significance as an early proletarian revolutionary organization and its enlightenment for subsequent communist movements.

Keywords

Equals, Babeufism, French Revolution, Proletarian class consciousness

Introduction

Socialism and capitalism emerged hand in hand; the rise of the bourgeoisie inevitably sparked the proletariat’s awakening and resistance. In modern Europe, socialist thought and movements emerged concurrently. Utopian socialism, a product of early communist ideas, though unscientific, offered crucial ideological guidance for proletarian revolutions. Notable examples include Müntzer’s peasant uprising during the German Reformation, Winstanley’s Digger movement in the English Revolution, and the Equals Movement led by Babeuf amid the French Revolution - this paper’s core focus [1,2].

The French Revolution, a pivotal event in modern European history, not only transformed France’s political landscape but also reshaped social class dynamics. Against the backdrop of nascent capitalist development, entrenched feudal privileges, and widespread economic hardship, the proletariat, once scattered and unorganized, began to recognize their shared interests and historical mission. Enlightenment’s ideals of liberty and equality, which permeated social and cultural spheres, laid the

ideological groundwork for the proletariat’s pursuit of genuine equality [3].

Utopian socialism, revitalized during the French Revolution, further fueled revolutionary sentiment by criticizing social inequities and proposing visions of communal prosperity. Babeuf’s thought directly addressed the proletariat’s grievances, advocating for the abolition of private property and the establishment of an egalitarian society. The Equals Movement, born from this context, represented the proletariat’s first systematic attempt to overthrow bourgeois rule and build a communist society. By analyzing this movement, this paper aims to deepen understanding of the early development of communist thought and the proletarian revolutionary movement, shedding light on their historical roots and evolutionary trajectory.

Development of the proletariat against the backdrop of the French Revolution

The development of French capitalism

In the late 18th century, during the French Revolution,

France's capitalist development was in the stage of manufacturing industries, still in the early phase of capitalist industrial economy. Large-scale machine production was nascent, with handicraft workshops scattered widely. Paris, with its concentrated handicraft workshops, became an industrial and economic center. Despite this, prior to the French Revolution, France's capitalist development was limited; the industrial bourgeoisie was weak, and petit-bourgeois egalitarianism dominated the populace.

Additionally, as a traditional agricultural empire, France's economy was heavily agrarian, with widespread peasantry. The legacy of royal rule, with its heavy taxes, further hindered capitalist economic development. These conditions restricted France's capitalist growth and made the revolution arduous, yet it also spurred unprecedented capitalist development.

During this period, the French People's taxes became more and more heavy because of the financial deficit caused by many foreign wars: (1) various social contradictions and social problems broke out because of economic discontent, (2) the weakening of the government's ability of social control aggravated the severity of the social problems; (3) the Enlightenment thinkers constructed a blueprint for a better life for the people in dire straits, a revolution is at hand.

On August 10th, 1792, the Parisian sans-culottes overthrew the monarchy and helped to found a Republic. What might otherwise have taken centuries to achieve appeared to materialize within hours [4]. The trouser-less men began to develop the belief that demonstrations of collective violence could enable France to circumvent the general laws of history and thus achieve the ideal of revolutionary revival in an instant.

The events of the summer of 1789 in France that led to a change in government from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy prompted a review of the status and practice of the fine arts in terms of the rhetoric of liberty and equality that consumed society [5]. The concept of freedom and equality has gradually been integrated into the French art circle, which has further promoted the wide spread of the concept of equality in French society, making it easier for the concept of equality to penetrate people's daily life, it transformed French society on the cultural level and promoted the progress of French Revolution.

Revival and development of utopian socialism

French utopian socialism traces back to Denis Vairasse's *History of the Sevarambians*. With the progression of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, French utopian socialism experienced a revival. In 1789, Bonneville and Fouché founded the Social Club, which espoused primitive communist ideas. Their publication, "Le Bouche de Fer" advocated the abolition of private property and oppressive rulers, promoting political equality and the redistribution of wealth [6]. Despite the political revolution achieving liberty, the social revolution for equality failed, neglecting the demands of the lower and middle classes. In this context, Babeuf's utopian socialism emerged, condemning the feudal aristocracy's oppression of peasants and proposing public ownership, collective farms, and tax reductions [7].

Development of the proletariat

The proletariat typically arises alongside the industrial bourgeoisie. France's underdeveloped capitalist economy and politics limited proletarian growth. During the French Revolution, many French workers did not yet recognize themselves as a distinct social class [8]. Workers, dispersed across small workshops, lacked ideological and organizational unity, seeing themselves as part of the urban populace rather than a cohesive proletarian force. However, pre-revolution unemployment, rising prices, arduous work conditions, and low wages forced workers to unite in strikes and protests. Some workers awakened to their plight, beginning the struggle for their rights.

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

Class consciousness or class consciousness refers to the understanding and understanding of self-existence, group belonging, social status and historical mission of class members, as well as the awareness to organize common actions. The common production practices and life experiences of the proletariat are the realistic basis and logical starting point for the awakening of the proletarian class consciousness. The proletarians who suffered both physical and mental torture began to resist the exploitation of the bourgeoisie. At first it was an individual worker, then a worker in a certain factory, and then a worker in a certain labor department in a certain place, with the individual workers who directly exploited

them.

The bourgeoisie fights. In the process of continuous struggle, the proletarians are constantly awakening to their identity consciousness of belonging to the same class, and the conflict between workers and capitalists gradually takes on the nature of a class conflict. The proletariat continues to increase in number and strength, and “feels more and more of its own power”. The class consciousness of the proletarians began to awaken and gradually grew into a large-scale and highly organized political force. Before the awakening of class consciousness, the proletariat was only a class “in itself” and its struggle against the bourgeoisie was spontaneous and decentralized. With the formation of class consciousness, the proletariat gradually rose to become a “self-made” class, the power of the proletariat was aroused, and its struggle against the bourgeoisie became increasingly more conscious and organized.

The Equals movement amid the French Revolution

Babeuf's early revolutionary activities

On July 14th, 1789, the Bastille fell, sparking the French Revolution that would soon sweep away the old feudal order. Babeuf showed unprecedented revolutionary fervor, transitioning from a clerk and surveyor to a champion of the oppressed. He initiated tax resistance in his hometown and a petition movement across France, gathering wide support and leading to his imprisonment. His arrest only served to fuel his resolve, turning him into a symbol of resistance for many. After release, he founded the “Picard Courier”, advocating public ownership and the abolition of feudal privileges. Through his writings, he passionately argued that true liberty could not exist without economic equality. Babeuf's early revolutionary activities enhanced his reputation and spurred widespread ideological awakening among the populace, laying the groundwork for later radical movements.

The Thermidorian reaction and the directory

The Thermidorian reaction's significance is debated; some scholars view it as the end of the French Revolution, while others see it as its continuation. This reaction significantly impacted the French political landscape, catalyzing the Equals Movement. On July 24th, 1794, Thermidorian Reactionaries, representing the bourgeoisie, overthrew the Jacobin rule of Robespierre and ended the Reign of Terror. They implemented

measures favoring the bourgeoisie, such as economic deregulation and trade freedom, further exploiting the proletariat and intensifying class conflicts [9]. The Thermidorian rule faced opposition from Babeuf and other revolutionaries. In October 1795, royalist insurrections in Paris were suppressed by Napoleon.

The Thermidorians then established the Constitution of the Year III and transitioned to the Directory, a period marked by political turmoil and coups [10]. The Directory's policies, while fostering some social recovery, failed to resolve France's broader issues, paving the way for Napoleon's rise and continued proletarian suffering.

The progress of the Equals movement

Despite the revolution establishing capitalist systems and Enlightenment principles, the proletariat and lower classes remained impoverished. In Paris, widespread hunger and cold led to deaths, including Babeuf's daughter. The bourgeoisie, meanwhile, indulged in excess and persecuted revolutionaries. Workers lamented their sacrifices for the revolution amid worsening conditions [11]. Babeuf's “Free Speech” newspaper denounced the Thermidorian Reaction as a “civil war of the rich against the poor”, calling for armed rebellion. Adopting the name Gracchus Babeuf, he emulated the Roman tribunes, expressing his commitment to the people's cause [12]. He advocated public management and the abolition of private property.

On December 11th, 1795, Babeuf declared the need for an uprising to continue the revolution, drawing the Directory's attention and leading to his imprisonment. In prison, Babeuf formed the “Conspiracy of the Equals”, planning an armed revolt to overthrow the Directory. The conspirators established strict organizational protocols, clear objectives, and aimed to create an “egalitarian republic” with communal ownership and resource distribution [13]. They widely disseminated propaganda to mobilize support [14]. Babeuf's deep understanding of class struggle and engagement with workers had significant nationwide impact.

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

Piketty analyzes the historical link between national income and asset returns, identifying wars, shifting land values and slavery as factors shaping his core conclusion that wealth outpaced labor income growth. For readers familiar with Marx, it is unsurprising that Piketty's definition of "capital" faces multiple critiques in this volume. Marx conceptualized capital not as a tangible asset, but as a social relation generating surplus value appropriated by capitalists through the M-C-M' circuit. He demonstrated that firms' pursuit of relative surplus value boosts productivity and capital returns, though it ultimately triggers crises forcing capital divestment. Piketty attributes capital's faster growth to its adaptability to new uses yet overlooks the underlying social relations driving firms to seek these applications. This volume contends that such relations are inherent to the property and production structures of global capitalism.

Conclusion

Eighteenth-century French society is defined by rigid feudalism and a privilege-based hierarchy, which make its radical egalitarian revolution exceptional. The revolution's egalitarian ideas are deeply influenced by Enlightenment rationalism and natural rights discourse, developing as the revolution progressed. Babeuf's utopian socialism emerges as a response to bourgeois equality claims, reflecting proletarian dissatisfaction with capitalist democracy. The Equals, founded amid conflicts between workers and reactionary bourgeois rulers, affirm popular sovereignty and proposed concrete plans to overthrow bourgeois rule, becoming the first revolutionary proletarian political organization. Their focus on agrarian and commercial capitalism ignored industrial production, which reveals the limitations of utopian socialism. However, their emphasis on mass mobilization for rebellion remains an instructive reference for proletarian revolutionaries.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funds.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to show sincere thanks to those techniques who have contributed to this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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