

Babeuf 1797

Babeuf's Defense (From the Trial at Vendôme, February-May 1797)

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... After the 13th of Vendémiaire, I observed that the majority of the people, tired of a Revolution whose every fluctuation and movement had only brought death, had been – one can only say – royalized. I saw that in Paris the simple and uninstructed multitude had actually been led by the enemies of the people into a cordial contempt for the Republic. This multitude, who are capable of judging things only by their sensations, had been easily persuaded to make a comparison that goes something like this: What were we under royal domination, what are we under the Republic? The answer was entirely to the detriment of the latter. It was then quite simple to conclude that the Republic was something detestable and that monarchy was better. And I was unable to see anything in the new constitutional structure or in the attitudes of the men whose task it was to run the machinery of government that would bring people to like this Republic any more than they did. I said to myself: the Republic is lost, barring some stroke of genius that could save it; surely monarchism will not hesitate to regain its hold upon us. I looked around me and saw many people who were defeated, even among those patriots, once so fervent and courageous, who had made so many successful efforts to strengthen Liberty. The sight of universal discouragement, of – if I can go so far as to say this – absolute muzzling all around; then the sight of disarmament, the complete stripping away of all the guarantees that the people had once been given against any unwarranted undertakings on the part of those who govern them; the recent imprint of irons that almost all energetic men bore on their flesh; and what seemed to me the almost complete conviction of many people who were not able to offer very good reasons for their attitude, that the Republic might really, after all, be something other than a blessing; these various causes had very nearly brought all spirits to a state of total resignation, and everyone seemed ready to bend under the yoke. I saw no one who might be disposed to revive the courageous mood of earlier days. And yet, I told myself, the same ferment of zeal and of love for all men still exists. There are perhaps still ways of keeping this Republic from being lost. Let every man make an effort to summon back his strength; let every man do what he can. For my own part, I am going to do whatever I believe to be within my power.

I gave words to these feelings in my *Tribune of the People*. I said to everyone: Listen: Those among you who have apparently come around to feeling, as a result of a long series of public calamities, that the Republic is worthless and that the Monarchy might be preferable – you people are right, I swear it. I spelled it out in capital letters: WE WERE BETTER OFF UNDER THE KINGS THAN WE ARE UNDER THE REPUBLIC. But you must understand which Republic I mean by that. A Republic such as the one we see is totally worthless, without a doubt. But this, my friends, is *not* the true Republic. The true Republic is something that you do not yet even know about.

All right then, if you wish, I will try to tell you something about it, and I am almost certain that you will idolize it.

The Republic is not a word – not even several words – empty of meaning. The words *Liberty* and *Equality*, which have continuously resounded in your ears, cast a spell over you in the early days of the Revolution because you thought that they would signify something good for the People. Now they mean nothing to you at all, because you see that they are only vain articulations and ornaments of deceitful formulas. You must be made to learn that in spite of all this, they can and must signify a good that is precious for the greatest number.

The Revolution, I went on in my discourse to the people, need not be an act totally without results. So many torrents of blood were not spilled merely to make the lot of the people worse than it had been before. When a people makes a revolution, it is because the play of vicious institutions has pushed the best energies of a society to such an extreme that the majority of its useful members can no longer go on as before. It feels ill at ease in the situation that prevails, senses the need to change it, and strives to do so. And the society is right to do so, because the only reason it was instituted in the first place was to make all its members as happy as possible: *The purpose of society is the common welfare*.

It is this formula, comprised within the first article of the covenant of the Year 1 of the Republic, that I have always held to as my own, and I will continue to do so.

The aim of the revolution also is the well-being of the greatest number; therefore, if this goal has not been achieved, if the people have not found the better life that they were seeking, then the revolution is not over, even though those who want only to substitute their own rule for somebody else's say that it is over, as you would expect them to. If the revolution is really over, then it has been nothing but a great crime.

So I strove to make people understand what the nature of the *common welfare*, which is the aim of society, or of the *welfare of the greatest number*, which is the aim of the

Revolution, might be.

I inquired into the reasons why at certain given periods the greatest number were not more fortunate. This inquiry led me to the following conclusion, which I dared to print in one of my first issues after the 13th of Vendémiaire:

“There are periods in which the ultimate effect of the cruel social order is that the whole of the society’s wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few. Peace, the natural state of things when all men are happy, is necessarily threatened at a time like this. The masses can no longer exist; they are completely dispossessed, and encounter only pitiless hearts among the caste that is hoarding everything. Effects such as these determine what will be the eras of those great revolutions predicted in books, in which a general upheaval of the system of property is inevitable, and in which the revolt of the poor against the rich is driven by such necessity that nothing can vanquish it.”

I had observed that the principal enactors of the revolution before me also concluded that their goal had to be that of rectifying the evils of our old vicious institutions, and of bringing about the well-being of society.

I had even, in this matter, painstakingly collected the observations of one of our legislator-philosophers, who died in his prime. Pains have also been taken to turn this simple collection into a piece of evidence against me, even though it was obvious that it had been faithfully copied from well-known texts... . Since it is being used against me in its entirety, I will surely be permitted to extract a part of it in order to justify myself:

“The welfare of men is a new idea in Europe... . You cannot endure the existence of an unfortunate or of a poor man in the State... . Let Europe come to realize that you no longer wish to have either unfortunates or oppressors in the territory of France... . The unfortunate are the powers of the earth; they have the right to speak as masters to the governments that neglect them... . Need makes the people who labor dependent upon their enemies. Can you conceive of the existence of an empire whose social relationships are contrary in their tendencies to the form of government? ...”

I reproduced these insights in the issues of my newspaper. I wanted to make the people realize what the result of the revolution had to be, what the republic had to be. I felt that I could perceive the people’s response quite distinctly; they were ready to love such a republic. I even dared to flatter myself with the thought that it was my writings that had

given rise to the hope of bringing about the new republic, and that had done so much to deroyalize the present one.

In whose eyes is this, thus far, not a good work?

You pressed your maxims too far, someone might tell me

This is what we must decide.

The plaintiffs have described on page 78 of the supplement of their Expose, a document that has as its title: *Analysis of the Doctrine of Babeuf*. There are a great many questions concerning it in various parts of the record of the trial, and it has been regarded as the *extreme* among all ideas of social upheaval. Therefore, it will be useful to examine this work in detail.

(Analysis of the Doctrine of Babeuf follows.)

When I was cross-examined during the trial, I declared that this document had not been drawn up by me, but, acknowledging that it was a fair analysis of the principles I had proclaimed, I approved it, and consented to its being printed and published. It was in effect a faithful summary of the doctrine that I had scattered throughout the various issues of my newspaper.

This doctrine appears to play the essential and fundamental role in a conspiracy. It figures in the accusation under the title, "Pillage of Property"; it is what terrifies the plaintiffs as they reproduce it in every odious form. They call it, successively, "agrarian law," "brigandage," "devastation," "disorganization," "dreadful system," "horrible upheaval," "subversion of the social order," "atrocious project," the sole result of which would necessarily be "the destruction of the human species; the reversion to the savage state, a life of roaming about in the woods, anyone who survived ... the total abandonment of all culture, of all industry ... nature left to her own resources ... the strong setting up their superiority over the weak as the sole source of rights; men becoming, if this doctrine is accepted, more ferocious than brute animals, fighting furiously over every scrap of food that they come upon.

This is most certainly the crux of the accusation. The other points are only accessories or appendages to it. The ends justify the means. To reach a certain goal, one must vanquish everything that stands in the way. Now, as to the hypothesis of social change in question, whether one chooses to describe it, after the fashion of the plaintiffs, as subversive of the whole social order, or to characterize it, in chorus with the philosophers and the great

legislators, as a sublime regeneration, it is indubitable that this change could not be brought about except by the overthrow of the established government and the suppression of everything in the way. These acts of upheaval and suppression would therefore be only the accessory, the necessary means for achieving the principal object, which is the establishment of what we and the philosophers call *the general or common welfare*, and what our accusers call *devastation and pillage*. It therefore stands proven as if mathematically, that the part of the accusation based upon my alleged resolve to found a system which has been appreciated in such greatly varying ways, is the principal and almost the sole part of the accusation, since the others are only branches emanating from it.

It follows from this, it seems to me, that we must necessarily examine the following questions: did I really preach such a system? If so, in what spirit did I preach it – in the form of mere speculation, or with the hope of conspiring to bring it about by force and in spite of the people? Has this system been genuinely proven bad and destructive? Has it never been preached by anyone but me? Was it not preached before me, and did anyone before this, including even the kings themselves, ever aspire to punish its foremost apostles?

Several of these questions will soon be resolved. The first in two words. I really did preach the system of the *common welfare*; – I mean by these words, *the welfare of all, the general welfare*. I said that the social code which established in its opening line that the welfare of men was *the sole purpose of society*, consecrated in this line the unassailable standard of all truth and of all justice. It entirely sums up the Law of Moses and the prophets. I defy anyone to maintain to me that men, when they form themselves into an association, can have any other purpose, any other desire, than the happiness of all. I defy anyone to argue that they would have consented to this union if they had been told that it would be made up of institutions that would soon place the burden of toil upon the greatest number, force them to sweat blood and die of hunger, in order that a handful of privileged citizens could be maintained in luxury and idleness. But meanwhile all this has come about, as if the eternal laws did not in any way proscribe it, and so I have the right, as I am a man, to reiterate my demand that we carry out the original compact, which, though tacitly conceived, I admit, was nevertheless written in ineffaceable letters into the fibre of every human heart. Yes, it is one voice that cries out to all: *the purpose of society is the common welfare*. This is the primitive contract; it needs no other terms to clarify its meaning; it covers everything, because all institutions must be made to flow from this source, and nothing can be allowed to degenerate from its standard.

As for the second question, I have preached the system of the welfare of all only as a simple philanthropic speculation, as a simple proposition to the people, depending entirely upon the condition of their acquiescence. One can see, then, how far I was from being able to

realize such a scheme; for no man can, without deluding himself excessively, flatter himself that this acquiescence would be easy to obtain, and I can assure you that it is far easier to calculate all the obstacles that stand in the way of obtaining it, the endless opposition that would be encountered, and to judge all this insurmountable in advance.

In the course of my narration I will prove that I have done nothing to establish this system by force and in spite of the people.

In order to see if this system is really as bad, destructive and reprehensible as the plaintiffs make it out to be, citizen jurors, you must weigh against their views some of the reasons that I offered in justification of it during the course of my propagandistic work. In addition to the *Analysis* already presented, which, as I have pointed out, I did not compose, but which I have nevertheless approved and adopted, I myself offered in one of my writings a *résumé* justifying this doctrine. I will present it to you faithfully, citizen Jurors. What I am about to give you is my frank and sincere confession. Considering the notion of “getting along” with your fellows in which everybody is steeped nowadays, there will perhaps be several things in what I am about to say to you that will appear shocking. But, I beg of you, do not become alarmed before bearing me to the end. It is my soul and my intentions that you must judge; it is upon the depths of my heart and the final meaning of my avowals that I hope you will want to fix your attention. I hope to make you realize that my reflections upon the basic principles of society have always been founded upon pure philanthropy. Here then, presented with the utmost confidence, is the declaration that I believe I must make to you, expressed exactly as it was in my writings, concerning the purposes and the motives of men when they form themselves into a civil order.

“The lot of the individual” (I said in my *Tribune of the People*, No. 35, page 102), “did not have to worsen when he passed from the natural to the social state.

“By its origins, the land belongs to no one, and its fruits are for everyone.

“The institution of private property is a surprise that was foisted upon the mass of simple and honest souls. The laws of this institution must necessarily bring about the existence of fortunate and unfortunate, of masters and slaves.

“The law of *heredity* is supremely abusive. It produces poor men from the second generation on. The two children of a man who is sufficiently rich divide up his fortune equally. One of them has only one child, the other has a dozen. Each of these latter children then has only one-twelfth of the fortune of the first

brother, and one-twenty-fourth of that of the grandfather. This portion is not sufficient to provide a living. Some of them are obliged to work for their rich first cousin; thus emerge masters and servants from among the grandchildren of the same man.

“The law of *alienation* is no less unjust. This man who is already the master of others descended from the same grandfather pays arbitrarily for the labor that they are obliged to do for him. This wage is still not enough to enable them to subsist; they are obliged to sell their meager portion of the inheritance to him upon whom they are now dependent. Thus they have been expropriated; if they leave any children, these poor waifs will have nothing but their wits to rely on.

“A third cause hastens the emergence of masters and servants, of the overly fortunate and the extremely unfortunate: it is the differences in wage and esteem that mere opinion attaches to the different forms of production and industry. A fantastic opinion of this sort leads people to attribute to the work-day of someone who makes a watch twenty times the value of that of someone who plows a field and grows wheat. The result is that the watchmaker is placed in a position whereby he acquires the patrimony of twenty plowmen; he has therefore expropriated it.

“These three roots of public misfortune, all the progeny of *property-heredity, alienation* and *the diversity of value* that arbitrary opinion, as sole master, is able to assign to the various types of production and labor – give rise to all the vices of society. They isolate all the members of society; they make of every household a little republic consecrated to a murderous inequality, which can do nothing but conspire against the large republic.”

When I arrived at these conclusions, citizen Jurors, and found that I had to regard them as irrefutable truths, I was soon led to derive the following consequences from them:

“If the land does not belong to anyone; if its fruits are for all; if possession by a small number of men is the result of only a few institutions that abuse and violate the fundamental law, it follows that this possession by a few is an usurpation. It follows that, at all times, whatever an individual boards of the land and its fruits beyond what he needs for his own nourishment has been stolen from society.”

And then, moving from consequence to consequence, believing firmly in the importance

of not concealing the truth from men, I came to the following conclusions, and published them:

“Everything that a member of the social body lacks of what would suffice for his various needs on any given day, has been taken from him. He has been despoiled of his natural individual property by the hoarders of the goods of the community.

“*Heredity* and alienation are homicidal institutions.

“The superiority of talents and of efforts is only a chimera and a specious trap, which has always unduly served the schemes of the conspirators against the equality and welfare of men.

“It is both absurd and unjust to pretend that a greater recompense is due someone whose task demands a higher degree of intelligence, a greater amount of application and mental strain; none of this in any way expands the capacity of his stomach.

“No grounds whatever can justify pretension to a recompense beyond what is sufficient for individual needs.

“Such a pretension is nothing but a matter of opinion, in no way validated by reason, and perhaps – it remains to be seen – not even valid in accordance with a principle of force, at least of a force purely natural and physical in nature.

It is only those who are intelligent who have fixed such a high price upon the conceptions of their brains, and if the physically strong had been able to keep up with them in regulating the order of things, they would no doubt have established the merit of the arm to be as great as that of the head, and the fatigue of the entire body would have been offered as sufficient compensation for the fatigue of the small part of it that ruminates.

“If this principle of equalization is not posited, then the most intelligent and the most industrious are given a warrant for hoarding, a title to despoil with impunity all those who are less gifted.

“Thus the equilibrium of well-being in the social state is destroyed, is overthrown, since nothing has been better proven than this maxim: that *one succeeds in having too much only by causing others not to have enough*.

“All our civil institutions, our reciprocal transactions, are nothing but acts of perpetual brigandage, authorized by barbarous laws, under whose sway we are occupied only in tearing each other apart.

“Our society of swindlers brings all sorts of vice, crime and misfortune in the wake of its atrocious primordial conventions, against which good men ally themselves in a vain attempt to make war upon them. In this they cannot be victorious because they do not attack the evil at its roots, because their measures are only palliatives drawn from the reservoir of false ideas created by our organic depravity.

“It is clear, then, from all that has been said, that everything owned by those who have more than their individual due of society’s goods, is theft and usurpation.

“It is therefore just to take it back from them.

“Even someone who could prove that he is capable, by the individual exertion of his own natural strength, of doing the work of four men, and so lay claim to the recompense of four, would be no less a conspirator against society, because he would be upsetting the equilibrium of things by this alone, and would thus be destroying the precious principle of equality.

“Wisdom imperiously demands of all the members of the association that they suppress such a man, that they pursue him as a scourge of society, that they at least reduce him to a state whereby he can do the work of only one man, so that he will be able to demand the recompense of only one man.

“It is only our species that has introduced this murderous folly of making distinctions in merit and value, and it is our species alone that knows misfortune and privation.

“There must exist no form of privation but the one that nature imposes upon everyone as a result of some unavoidable accident, in which case these privations must be borne by everyone and divided up equally among them.

“The products of industry and of genius also become the property of all, the domain of the entire association, from the very moment that the workers and the inventors have created them, because they are simply compensation for earlier discoveries made through genius and industry, from which the new inventors

and workers have profited within the framework of social life, and which have helped them to make their discoveries.

“Since the knowledge acquired is the domain of everyone, it must therefore be equally distributed among everyone.

“A truth that has been impertinently contested by bad faith, by prejudice, by thoughtlessness, is the fact that this equal distribution of knowledge among everyone would make all men nearly equal in capacity and even in talent.

“Education is a monstrosity when it is unequal, when it is the exclusive patrimony of a portion of the association: because then it becomes, in the hands of this portion, an accumulation of machinery, an arsenal of all sorts of weapons that helps this portion of society to make war against the other, which is unarmed, and to succeed thereby in strangling it, deceiving it, stripping it bare, and shackling it down to the most shameful servitude.

“There are no truths more important than those that one philosopher has proclaimed in these terms: ‘Declaim as much as you wish on the subject of the best form of government, you will still have done nothing at all so long as you have not destroyed the seeds of cupidity and ambition.’

“It is therefore necessary that the social institutions be such that they eradicate within every last individual the hope that he might ever become richer, more powerful, or more distinguished because of his talents, than any of his equals.

“To be more specific, it is necessary *to bind together everyone’s lot*; to render the lot of each member of the association independent of chance, and of happy or unfavorable circumstance; *to assure to every man and to his posterity, no matter how numerous it may be, as much as they need, but no more than they need*; and to shut off from everybody all the possible paths by which they might obtain some part of the products of nature and of work that is more than their individual due.

“The sole means of arriving at this is to establish a *common administration*; to suppress private property; to place every man of talent in the line of work he knows best; to oblige him to deposit the fruit of his work in the common store, to establish a simple *administration of needs*, which, keeping a record of all individuals and all the things that are available to them, will distribute these

available goods with the most scrupulous equality, and will see to it that they make their way into the home of every citizen.

“This form of government, proven by experience to be practicable, since it is the form applied to the 1,200,000 men of our twelve Armies (what is possible on a small scale is possible on a large scale as well), is the only one that could result in unqualified and unalterable universal welfare: *the common welfare, the aim of society*.

“This form of government,” I continued, “will bring about the disappearance of all boundary lines, fences, walls, locks on doors, trials, thefts, and assassinations; of all crimes, tribunals, prisons, gibbets, and punishments; of the despair that causes all calamity; and of greed, jealousy, insatiability, pride, deception, and duplicity – in short, of all vices. Furthermore (and the point is certainly essential), it will put an end to the gnawing worm of perpetual inquietude, whether throughout society as a whole, or privately within each of us, about what tomorrow will bring, or at least what next year will bring, for our old age, for our children and for their children.”

This, citizen jurors, was the interpretation of the code of nature with which my mind was occupied. I believed that I could see everything that was written on the immortal pages of this code. I brought these pages to light and published them. Certainly it was because I loved my fellow man, and because I was persuaded that the social system which I conceived was the only one that could bring about his happiness, that I wanted so much to see him disposed to adopt it. But I did not imagine – it would have been a most illusory presumption – that I could have converted him to this idea: it would have taken no more than a moment’s contemplation of the flood of passions now subjugating us in this era of corruption that we have come upon, to become convinced that the odds against the possibility of realizing such a project are more than a hundred to one. Even the most intrepid partisan of my system ought to be convinced of this.

All this, then, citizen jurors, was, more than anything else, a consolation that my soul was seeking. Such is the natural and palpable inclination felt by every man who loves his fellows, who gives thought to the calamities of which they are the victims, who reflects that they themselves are often the cause of these afflictions, to examine in his imagination all the possible curative measures that could be taken. If he believes that he has found these remedies, then, in his powerlessness to realize them, he afflicts himself for the sake of those whom he is forced to leave to their suffering, and contents himself with the feeble compensation of tracing for them the outlines of the plan that he feels could end their woes

for all time. This is what all our philosopher-legislators did, and I am at best only their disciple and emulator, when I am doing anything more than merely repeating, echoing, or interpreting them. Rousseau said: I fully realize that one should not undertake the chimerical project of trying to form a society of honest men, but I nevertheless believed that I was obliged to speak the whole truth openly.” When you condemn me, citizen jurors, for all the maxims that I have just admitted stating, it is these great men whom you are putting on trial. They were my masters, my sources of inspiration – my doctrine is only theirs. From their lessons I have derived these maxims of “pillage,” these principles that have been called “destructive.” You are also accusing the monarchy of not having been quite as inquisitorial as the government of our present Republic; you accuse them of not having prevented the corrupting books of a Mably, a Helvétius, a Diderot, or of a Jean Jacques Rousseau, from falling into my hands. All those who govern should be considered responsible for the evils that they do not prevent. Philanthropists of today! It is above all to you that I address myself. It is because of these philosophical poisons that I am lost. Without them, I would perhaps have had your morality, your virtues. Like you, I would have detested brigandage and the overthrow of the existing social institutions above all things; I would have had the tenderest solicitude for the small number of powerful men of this world; I would have been pitiless toward the suffering multitude. But no, I will not repent of having been educated at the school of the celebrated men whom I have just named. I will not blaspheme against them, or become an apostate against their dogmas. If the axe must fall upon my neck, the lictor will find me ready. It is good to perish for the sake of virtue

I was not being fanciful, citizen jurors, when I said that this trial would be the trial of all those philosophers whose remains have been placed in the Pantheon, as long as you would condemn us for our popular and democratic opinions, out of which the principal count in the accusation has been forged under the title, “project for pillaging all property.” These philosophers too, formulated and published such projects. Various fragments of their projects are in the volumes that have been placed in evidence against us. And for this reason I believe I have the right to suspect rather strongly that the court is presuming to judge them along with us. What else could be the meaning of those fragments in the accusation that I am about to cite, which are the work of the author of the *Social Contract*? ... Let me read from them:

“Before these terrible words *mine* and *thine* were invented; before the existence of this cruel and brutal species of men called *masters*, and of that other species of rogues and liars called *slaves*; before there were men so abominable as to *dare to have too much while others were dying of hunger*; before mutual dependence had forced them all to become cunning and jealous traitors... . I

would like someone to tell me what their vices and crimes could then possibly have consisted of... . I am told that people have been long disabused of the chimera of a golden age. It should be added that men have been long disabused of the chimera of virtue!”

It says in the volume printed by the court that the draft of this statement is written in Babeuf’s hand. I tell you that it is only a copy. The proof that I am about to give you of this will perhaps suffice to place other such attributions in question. The original is from the hand of Jean Jacques Rousseau. I have no fear of compromising this new conspirator by mentioning him here, since he can be neither harmed nor tainted by the judgement of this tribunal. I therefore do not hesitate to say that it was he who presided over the Society of Democrats of Floreal; he was one of their principal instigators. But what is the date of this statement of his that I have cited? 1758. It is a response made by the philosopher to M. Bordes, Academician of Lyons, *having to do with the discourse on the sciences and the arts*. These words are therefore somewhat prior to the conspiracy that is now being examined. Oh! what does it matter? For that matter, this conspiracy dates its origins from a much earlier time. Poor Jean-Jacques! ...

Babeuf Archive