

BABEUF AND THE GRACCHI: A COMPARISON OF MEANS AND ENDS

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In the autumn of 1795, in Paris, a radical revolutionary journalist named François-Noel Babeuf was released from prison.¹ It was only the latest in a series of imprisonments; this time, it had been on charges of ‘inciting rebellion, murder, and dissolution of the national representative body’.² Upon his release, Babeuf adopted the first name of Gracchus, in honour of Tiberius and Gaius Sempronius Gracchus, brothers who were both killed in pursuit of various reforms in Rome in the second century BCE. This was not the first time he had taken a new name from Roman history; in 1789, at the outset of the Revolution, Babeuf had similarly abandoned his given name and taken to calling himself Camille, after the Roman general Camillus. However, Camillus had fallen from Babeuf’s favour, and he now condemned the man as, in reality:

a true and devoted advocate of the senatorial and patrician caste, [who had] while insidiously pretending to advocate that of the plebeians, negotiated mutual concessions between the two parties which, but for him, might have been more entirely advantageous to the people.³

By 1795, Babeuf felt that his ‘democracy had become purer and more austere’,⁴ and the Gracchi replaced Camillus as his Roman model and inspiration.

Although a minor character in the French Revolution as a whole, Babeuf has an importance out of proportion to his actual actions or accomplishments.

¹ Interest in Babeuf has been marginal in English scholarship. The best recent books on Babeuf and his ideas are by R. B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), and Ian H. Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997). These spend relatively little time on Babeuf’s pre-Revolutionary life, concentrating primarily on his proto-socialist ideas and conspiracies after 1789.

² François Furet, ‘Babeuf’, in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), 181.

³ Babeuf, quoted in Albert Mathiez, *After Robespierre: The Thermidorian Reaction* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1965), 76.

⁴ Babeuf, quoted in *ibid.*, 75.

According to François Furet:

Babouvism was the last resurgence of Jacobin extremism and no doubt the only doctrine to incorporate at the theoretical level the egalitarian passions of the day, [and]...it embodied the new theory of a revolutionary putsch. ...[Babeuf] not only represents the last remnants of the popular agitation of the Year II, he also stands for a radical critique of property and an unprecedented form of political organisation.⁵

Babeuf's extreme radicalism prompted R.B. Rose to name him 'the first Revolutionary Communist',⁶ and Ian Birchall wrote of the need to acknowledge Babeuf's 'rightful place in the history of socialism'.⁷ He was at one and the same time both the last of the old-style Jacobin revolutionaries and the first of a new sort of socialist revolutionary.

Given such judgements, it is curious that Babeuf's choice of name has not received more attention. Furet, for instance, passes over Babeuf's self-christening with the quick observation that the name was 'a way of proclaiming his belief in an egalitarian division of all land and property'.⁸ Birchall mentions it briefly and provides a bit of contemporary context,⁹ but makes no further comment or analysis.¹⁰ Rose does not even mention the renaming in his discussion of the events surrounding Babeuf's release from prison.¹¹

Left largely unexplored in the historiography, therefore, is the actual nature of the parallels, if any, between Babeuf and the Gracchi. The problem is perhaps simply that the question falls halfway between two very different fields of inquiry, revolutionary France and ancient Rome. The specialists in either field are little inclined to spend much time in the other, and so the issue is left with nothing more than the sort of passing mentions described above. By doing so, however, many interesting questions are left unexplored. Were there any real similarities between the goals and methods of the Gracchi in Republican Rome and those of Babeuf in Revolutionary Republican France? Were the Gracchi radical revolutionaries of the sort which Babeuf — albeit unsuccessfully — unquestionably was? How appropriate was Babeuf's adoption of the name Gracchus as a symbol of revolutionary, democratic purity and fervour? And how much did Babeuf actually know about the Gracchi in the first place? The purpose of this article is to address

⁵ Furet, *Critical Dictionary*, 179.

⁶ R.B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).

⁷ Ian H. Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), 160.

⁸ Furet, *Critical Dictionary*, 181.

⁹ See below, notes 20 and 21.

¹⁰ Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 47.

¹¹ Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 204–210.

these questions. It first explores the knowledge extant about the Gracchi in late eighteenth-century France, and more specifically what Babeuf himself was likely to know about them. It then examines, in light of contemporary knowledge, the programmes and methods of the Gracchi and Babeuf, and concludes that Babeuf's identification of the Gracchi was more a result of limited knowledge, and perhaps a revolutionary fervour for a classical republican past, than on any real similarities between them.

BABEUF'S KNOWLEDGE OF THE GRACCHI

It is unlikely that Babeuf acquired any great knowledge of the Gracchi from his education. Far from enjoying the sort of upper-class classical education which would have grounded him in Roman history, including that of the Gracchi, Babeuf had no formal education at all.¹² 'I was born in the mud', he later wrote.¹³ Babeuf's father was an ex-soldier who worked at the lowest rank in the royal tax farm, barely supporting his wife and thirteen children (of whom only four survived). It appears that the young François-Noel received a decent basic education in reading, writing, and arithmetic from his father, but probably little more. He compensated for this lack of formal education, to some degree, by his own vast reading. According to Birchall, Babeuf 'devoured books throughout his adult life, and his writings reveal a remarkable range of references. Yet, as a self-taught thinker, he never studied any subject systematically'.¹⁴ By later in his life, he had acquired a reasonable but uneven knowledge of Roman history.¹⁵ Although the breadth of his readings was very wide—his correspondences and writings attest to that¹⁶—it was indeed not systematic in any way, and the depth of his understanding or knowledge in many areas probably suffered as a result of that fact.

Babeuf probably became familiar with the Gracchi through reading Plutarch's *Lives* at some point in his youth, most likely in a French translation.¹⁷ He may also have had access to sources in Latin, as there is some evidence that he may have known that language. Given the unsystematic nature of his learning, his level of understanding concerning the goals and methods of the Gracchi is open to

¹² Rose, drawing on H.T. Parker, identifies Plutarch, Sallust, and the first three books of Livy as the main sources on Roman history in French education at the time. Plutarch is the only one of these which discusses the Gracchi, although the surviving summaries of two later books of Livy mention both brothers; see R.B. Rose, 'The Red Scare of the 1790s: The French Revolution and the "Agrarian Law"', *Past and Present*, 103 (May 1984): p114–15. General histories of Rome were easily available in French translation at the time.

¹³ Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 9–11; Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 10.

¹⁴ Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 17.

¹⁵ Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 10–11.

¹⁶ Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 19, 23–24; Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 19–21.

¹⁷ Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 47.

question. Plutarch is only one of the sources of information on the Gracchi, albeit one of the most important, and is not necessarily the most complete or accurate; Appian and Cicero are the other two major sources. Their respective value is disputed; Daniel Gargola cites Appian as a generally ‘more detailed and coherent account’ of the Gracchan reforms, for instance, but David Stockton argues that ‘both in their way are unsatisfactory’ and are guilty of major ‘joint or individual omissions or obfuscations’.¹⁸ It is also true, of course, that much more has been learned about ancient Rome in the two centuries since Babeuf’s death, and it would be unreasonable to condemn him for not knowing things that were not known to anyone at the time.

In addition to whatever information Babeuf may have acquired through his reading, the Gracchi were not unknown to the general public, although this may have consisted more of caricature and symbolism than of accurate historical information. In February 1792, a play entitled *Caius Gracchus* premiered in Paris. Written by ‘one of the best-known revolutionary dramatists, Marie-Joseph Chénier’, it presented a simplified and dramatised version of part of the story of the Gracchi, based on Plutarch’s version of events.¹⁹ It portrayed the rebellion of Gaius, the younger of the Gracchi brothers, against the Roman Senate, in the name of equal division of the land amongst the people. He was opposed by the consul Opimius, the designated representative in the play of wealth and inequality. Babeuf was not actually in Paris during the run of the play, having returned to his native Savoy for a time, so he probably did not see it himself. Nevertheless, it serves as an excellent example of the symbolism and meaning which was being attached to the Gracchi at the time, and thus provides an indication of what Babeuf would have been signaling by his adoption of the name. The sentiments which the playwright put into the mouth of Gaius in this play, speaking to the people of Rome, are strikingly similar to those espoused by Babeuf by 1795:

[Gaius:]
 Vous avez adored le nom de liberté;
 Elle n’existe point dans les remparts de Rome,
 Par-tout où l’homme enfin n’est point égal à l’homme
 [You have worshipped the name of freedom;
 it does not exist within the walls of Rome,
 or anywhere where man is not equal to man.]²⁰

¹⁸ Daniel Gargola, ‘Appian and the Aftermath of the Gracchan Reform’, *American Journal of Philology* 118 (1997): 555; David Stockton, *The Gracchi* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 1–2.

¹⁹ Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 47.

²⁰ *ibid.*

To Babeuf and his contemporaries, the Gracchi were exemplars of a struggle for equality and liberty for the people against a corrupt, or at least overbearing and dictatorial, Senate. Montesquieu had written of the Gracchi in this vein more than half a century earlier, attributing their deaths to their struggle against wealth and power,²¹ a struggle which was centred on the question of the ownership and distribution of land. By taking their name for his own, Babeuf was announcing that he considered himself to be a similar champion of liberty and equality. The Gracchi, however, were concerned with the equitable distribution of publicly owned land, a distinction which was lost in the France of the 1790s. As Ronald Ridley writes, ‘the revolutionaries in France ... completely misinterpreted Roman agrarian history to claim that the Romans imposed a limit on *private* landholding, which was to serve as a model for revolutionary confiscations’.²² It was on this point that Babeuf’s identification with the Gracchi rested.

THE HISTORICAL GRACCHI

So what of the real, historical Gracchi? In contrast to Babeuf’s humble origins, the brothers were born into a family of substantial wealth and standing in Rome, Tiberius in 161 BCE and Gaius in 154 BCE. They were technically plebeian, not patrician, but the family was ‘accepted within the ranks of the nobility by reason of [family members’] attainment to the highest offices at Rome’,²³ and their mother Cornelia was the daughter of Scipio Africanus, who had defeated Hannibal in the Second Punic War. Both of the Gracchi brothers and their sister married into important Roman families. Tiberius and Gaius were thus born into the centre of power and influence in republican Rome, and received a thorough upper class education to match their expected future roles as Roman officials.²⁴ They appear to have fit the model of the classic Roman statesman; Plutarch praised their ‘bravery in the face of the enemy, just dealings with subject peoples, scrupulous fidelity in public office, and restraint in pleasurable indulgence’, though he acknowledges that personal ambition and familial expectations played a role in their political choices.²⁵ Appian describes Tiberius as ‘a man of noble birth, outstanding ambition, and formidable oratorical powers, and on all these counts very well known to everyone’.²⁶ Henry Boren writes of Tiberius that ‘it is

²¹ Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les Causes de la Grandeur des Romains et de Leur Décadence* (1748 text), 10th edition, ed. Camille Jullian (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1939), 87–8.

²² Ronald T. Ridley, ‘*Leges agrariae*: Myths Ancient and Modern’, *Classical Philology* 95 (2000), 459.

²³ Henry C. Boren, *The Gracchi* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1968), 24.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 23–35; H.H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome 133BC to AD68*, 5th (1982) ed. (London: Routledge, 1959), 23–24.

²⁵ Plutarch, *Ti.Gr.*, III. 1; *ibid.*, VIII. 1–5.

²⁶ Appian, *CW*, I. 9.

universally conceded that [he] was high-minded and idealistic, interested chiefly in doing something for his poverty-stricken compatriots'.²⁷

The actions for which they became famous, and for which they were remembered in Babeuf's time and our own, took place during their respective tribunates. In the case of Tiberius, this was in the year 133 BCE. Upon becoming tribune, Tiberius immediately took up the issue of land reform and made the passage of a new *lex agraria*, an agrarian law, his main objective. In brief, he was concerned about the decline in the number of small farmers in Italy among both Roman citizens and allies. According to Plutarch, his brother Gaius later claimed that Tiberius first became concerned about the increase in large slave-worked estates when travelling through Tuscany on his way to Spain in 137 BCE.²⁸ Large tracts of *ager publicus* (public land) were being held and worked by large landowners, in defiance of laws which theoretically restricted any one man from holding more than 500 *iugera* (approximately 300 acres).²⁹

The issue of land reform was concerned ultimately with social stability and the security of the republic. The small farmer class was the traditional backbone of the Roman army, and furthermore constituted a 'stable and conservative influence in the Roman assemblies'.³⁰ In more concrete terms, the increase in the number and size of large estates in the countryside was contributing to an influx of the landless poor into Rome, which placed strains on the traditionally rural-based Roman society in a period of economic difficulty.³¹ The population of the city was growing restive and troublesome; food shortages, rising prices, and slave revolts in Sicily formed the backdrop to Tiberius' assumption of office.³²

The most commonly given explanation for Tiberius' land bill is that he was attempting to guarantee a suitable pool for recruitment into the military, since eligibility for military service was based on property requirements.³³ There is some evidence that the eligible population was declining, but this thesis is disputed.³⁴ Appian describes the preference of the rich to work their estates using slave

²⁷ Henry C. Boren, 'Tiberius Gracchus: The Opposition View', *The American Journal of Philology* 82, 4 (1961): 364.

²⁸ Plutarch, *Ti.Gr.*, VIII. 7.

²⁹ Appian, *CW*, I. 8; Stockton, *The Gracchi*, 9–11. The public land was legally the property of the Roman people, and was largely acquired by Rome as spoils of war or tribute from subjugated peoples.

³⁰ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 18; Boren, *The Gracchi*, 20.

³¹ This interpretation is challenged by Robert Horvath, who argues that 'the level of dispossessions was not significantly worse in 133 than in 183'. His contention is that it was 'fundamental changes in Roman jurisprudence' which arose out of 'the rapid economic development in Roman Italy in the first half of the second century' which made possible the actions of the Gracchi. See Robert Horvath, 'The Origins of the Gracchan Revolution', in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History VII*, ed. Carl Deroux (Bruxelles: Collection Latomus, 1994), 87–116.

³² *ibid.*, 41–45; Henry C. Boren, 'The Urban Side of the Gracchan Economic Crisis', *The American Historical Review* 63, 4 (1958): 890–902; Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 18–21.

³³ For a lengthier discussion of Tiberius' motives and the modern disputes about them, see Stockton, 31–39.

³⁴ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 22; Yanir Shochat, *Recruitment and the Programme of Tiberius Gracchus* (Brussels: Latomus Revue d'Études Latines, 1980), 46–47.

labour ‘to avoid having free men dragged off the land to serve in the army’, and notes that ‘slaves had...no liability to military service’.³⁵ Plutarch mentions the reluctance of Roman citizens to serve in the military, but he does not claim any actual lack of potential recruits.³⁶ Yanir Shochat argues that the evidence for this supposed decline is not sufficient to explain Tiberius’ actions, and his alternative explanation encompasses both military and social goals.³⁷ The military benefit was twofold: the distribution of a greater proportion of the burden of military service to Rome’s Latin allies, who were also to receive land under the proposed law, and greater security from potential slave revolts through the reduction of the number of slaves in Italy. The social benefit was the reduction of the number of poor Roman citizens in Rome itself, moving them out of the city and back onto the land as property owners.³⁸

Tiberius’ land bill was not a radical or draconian piece of legislation, though it offended the rich, who had most benefited from the illegal use of large tracts of *ager publicus* and who had ‘become confident that no one would take it back from them’.³⁹ His was not even the first attempt to address this issue; Laelius had proposed a land bill some years before, but had withdrawn it in the face of opposition.⁴⁰ Tiberius’ bill amounted to an enforcement of the existing legal limits on *ager publicus*,—of which, as Appian notes, ‘no notice was taken’—and the distribution of the resulting excess to citizens and Roman allies in small allotments.⁴¹ Plutarch describes it as very moderate, and points out that it was written by Tiberius in consultation with eminent Roman jurists. The bill even offered monetary recompense to the dispossessed rich ‘landowners’.⁴² Cicero described Tiberius’ agrarian law as:

appeal[ing] to the common people...[and] likely to safeguard the fortunes of the poor. [But] the best people threw their weight against it, because they saw it was a source of discord, and believed that to remove the rich from their long-held possessions would be to rob the state of its defenders.⁴³

But he also condemned Tiberius for conduct which ‘divided one people into two parts’ and for establishing a ‘treasonous land commission [which] is daily

³⁵ Appian, *CW*, I. 7.

³⁶ Plutarch, *Ti.Gr.*, VIII. 3.

³⁷ Shochat, *Recruitment and the Programme of Tiberius Gracchus*, 47–50.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 80–89.

³⁹ Appian, *CW*, I. 7, 10.

⁴⁰ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 22; Boren, *The Gracchi*, 53.

⁴¹ Appian, *CW*, I. 8; Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero* 25–26.

⁴² Plutarch, *Ti.Gr.*, IX. 1-5; Boren, *The Gracchi*, 50. For a more complete discussion of the *lex agraria*, see Stockton, *The Gracchi*, 40–60.

⁴³ Cicero, *pro Sestio* 103, quoted in Stockton, 31.

starting revolutionary actions'.⁴⁴ Appian, in contrast, describes it as 'an excellent scheme', but claims that Tiberius got 'carried away above all by the benefits of the plan...and gave no consideration to the difficulties surrounding it'.⁴⁵

When attempting to have the bill passed, Tiberius departed from the usual procedures. He did not believe that it would win passage through the Senate, so using an obscure precedent he instead took it directly to the Popular Assembly for approval. There, it was vetoed on behalf of Tiberius' senatorial opponents by another tribune, M. Octavius. After repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempting to convince Octavius to withdraw his opposition, Tiberius convinced the people to depose his opponent and replace him with a more amenable tribune.⁴⁶ The bill was then passed — after the elimination of the proposed remuneration — and a Land Commission consisting of Tiberius, his brother Gaius, and his father-in-law Appius Claudius Pulcher was appointed.⁴⁷ This commission continued to function for years after the death of both of the Gracchi, albeit with different members and with, according to Appian, indifferent success.⁴⁸

Tiberius followed up this affront to the Senate with two other provocative actions. The first was the proposal to use the money of King Attalus of Pergamum, which had been left to the Roman people, to fund the land redistribution.⁴⁹ Again his opponents took offence, with many feeling that Tiberius was attempting to deprive the Senate of its control of finance and foreign affairs.⁵⁰ Second, he sought re-election as tribune, which was perceived as a bid for personal dominance. Plutarch characterises this action as 'trying to maim the power of the Senate from motives of anger and contentiousness rather than from calculations of justice and the public good'.⁵¹ Boren casts it in a more positive light, as a demonstration of Tiberius' desire to make sure that what had been done would not be undone, and possibly also as evidence of fears that he might be prosecuted once he was again a private citizen.⁵² He also asserts that '[t]he question of whether [running for a second term] was illegal cannot be finally decided. [Tiberius'] opponents claimed that it was', but it was not an action without precedent.⁵³ According to Appian, though 'the rich protested that it was illegal for the same man to hold office in consecutive years...Rubrius, the tribune who had been chosen by lot

⁴⁴ Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, Book 1. 31.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, I. 17; Appian, *CW*, I. 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, I. 12.

⁴⁷ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 26-27.

⁴⁸ Appian, *CW*, I. 18-19.

⁴⁹ Plutarch, *Ti.Gr.*, XIV. 1-3.

⁵⁰ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero* 27; Stockton, *The Gracchi*, 67-68.

⁵¹ Plutarch, *Ti.Gr.*, XVI. 2.

⁵² Boren, *The Gracchi*, 63; see also Appian, *CW*, I. 13.

⁵³ Boren, *The Gracchi*, 65.

to preside over this assembly, hesitated over the point'.⁵⁴ Regardless, it was this action, aided by confusion and misinterpretation of his motives by the Roman elites,⁵⁵ which led directly to the death of Tiberius and some three hundred of his supporters at the instigation of Scipio Nasica, the *pontifex maximus*.

Gaius survived the murder of his brother, and a decade later, after serving for some time on the agrarian commission created by Tiberius and in other posts, he was elected tribune in 123 BCE. He succeeded in this in spite of the opposition of the elites in Rome,⁵⁶ who feared what the brother of Tiberius might do once in office.⁵⁷ According to Appian, 'the populace...welcomed [his] candidature for the tribunate...[but] many of the senators thought little of him...He was elected with a remarkable majority'.⁵⁸ Whereas opposition to Tiberius did not begin until after his election, Gaius seems to have been tainted even before he began by the connection with his brother. Nevertheless, in spite of continuing hostility from the Senate—and the precedent set by his brother's fate—he was even re-elected the following year for a second term.

Gaius' political activities were much more wide-ranging than those of Tiberius had been, but were similarly motivated by concerns about the state of the poor and the distribution of land. As tribune, he:

not only introduced measures to help the urban poor through the subsidised sale of grain but also reenacted, with some modifications, his brother's land law...and added to the agrarian reform laws ordering the foundation of colonies, a shift in tactics from the procedures envisioned by his brother.⁵⁹

Plutarch gives a long list of the laws he passed 'by way of gratifying the people and overthrowing the Senate'.⁶⁰ Two of these were clearly directly connected to the events of 133, being aimed at Octavius and at another official who had banished Tiberius' supporters after the murder; these laws prohibited the one from holding office again (though Gaius later withdrew this bill himself), and banished the other from Rome. Of his other laws:

one was agrarian, and divided the public land among the poor citizens; another was military, and ordained that clothing should be furnished to the soldiers at the public cost...that no one under seventeen should be enrolled as a soldier; another

⁵⁴ Appian, *CW*, I. 14.

⁵⁵ Plutarch, *Ti.Gr.*, XIX. 1–XX. 3.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, I. 21–23.

⁵⁷ Plutarch, *Caius Gracchus*, I. 1–III. 2.

⁵⁸ Appian, *CW*, I. 21.

⁵⁹ Gargola, *Appian and the aftermath of the Gracchan Reform*, 579. For a lengthier discussion of the legislation of Gaius, see Stockton, *The Gracchi*, 114–161.

⁶⁰ Plutarch, *C.Gr.*, V. 1.

concerned the allies, and gave the Italians equal suffrage rights with Roman citizens; another related to the supplies of grain, and lowered the market price to the poor; and another dealt with the appointment of judges...add[ing] to the membership of the Senate, which was three hundred, three hundred men from the equestrian order, and made service as judges a prerogative of the whole six hundred...He also introduced bills for sending out colonies, for constructing roads, and for establishing public granaries.⁶¹

Appian characterises Gaius' activities as being largely in opposition to the power of the Senate. The provision of grain to the poor at public cost, for instance, he describes as a means of 'undermin[ing] the senate'.⁶² But in spite of the animosity towards Gaius, his policies were very popular with the plebeians, and his bills did receive the assent of the Senate.

The opposition to, and dislike of, Gaius on the part of some senators was rooted in their fear of populist ideas which might threaten their power.⁶³ According to Plutarch, his opponents resorted to populist tactics of their own, using another tribune, Livius Drusus, to compete with Gaius for the people's favour through 'laws which aimed at what was neither honourable nor advantageous...to surpass Gaius in pleasing and gratifying the people'.⁶⁴ As his influence diminished as a result, Gaius resorted to recruiting a personal bodyguard of supporters, and his attempt to be re-elected a second time failed. The consul Opimius, using as an excuse the death of one of his servants at the hands of Gaius' supporters, convinced the Senate to pass a resolution calling on the consuls to protect the Republic from harm. In the ensuing violence, Gaius and some three thousand of his supporters were murdered.⁶⁵

Neither Tiberius nor Gaius did anything that was actually illegal under the laws of Rome, although some of their actions were unprecedented or at least very unusual.⁶⁶ The policies and laws which they advocated were, for the most part, reasoned and reasonable proposals which were passed by the people and which received the Senate's approval. They were, by their own lights, attempting to bolster and reinforce the Roman state and society, not attempting to overthrow the system, notwithstanding Cicero's claim that Gaius 'overturn[ed] the entire

⁶¹ *ibid.*, *C.Gr.*, V. 1–VI. 3. For more detail on Gaius' agrarian law, see Peter Garnsey and Dominic Rathbone, 'The Background to the Grain Law of Gaius Gracchus', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 75 (1985), 20–25.

⁶² Appian, *CW*, I. 21.

⁶³ Plutarch, *C.Gr.*, I. 3, II. 3; Appian, *CW*, I. 22.

⁶⁴ Plutarch, *C.Gr.*, IX. 1.

⁶⁵ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 36–37; Plutarch, *C.Gr.*, XIV. 1–XVII. 5; Appian, *CW*, I. 25–6.

⁶⁶ Boren argues that it was actually Tiberius' 'use of the office of the plebeian tribunate which was more precisely revolutionary...The fact that there were precedents of sorts for almost every action of Tiberius does not really make Tiberius' use of the office less revolutionary'; see Boren, *The Gracchi*, 61. It is unlikely, however, that Babeuf either knew of or understood the niceties of the Roman political and legal systems in such detail.

state of the country'.⁶⁷ Their 'crimes', if they committed any, lay not so much in what they did but in how they did it, which threatened the traditional dominance of the aristocratic Senate.⁶⁸ Boren makes this point specifically in relation to Tiberius,⁶⁹ but it holds true for Gaius as well. They both challenged, or at least were perceived as challenging, established customs and traditions, within the context of strong factional rivalries within the governing class of Rome.⁷⁰ G.E.M. de Ste. Croix sees them simply as a sign that 'there were now some members of the governing class who could see that reforms were necessary, however much the remainder of the oligarchy might resent them'.⁷¹ But they were not attempting to provoke or lead a revolution. Proof that the opposition was to their methods and not their policies may be found in the fact that, after their deaths, the laws they had passed remained in force for many years.

BABEUF: EQUALITY AND DEMOCRACY

Babeuf's own struggles were also very much based around the issue of the ownership and distribution of land, at least in the beginning. More broadly, he was concerned with property and property rights in general. His concern with land issues went back to the pre-Revolutionary period, when he earned his living as a *feudiste*, researching old feudal documents in order to provide landowners with legal evidence of their feudal rights. This career gave him a broad experience in the law relating to land rights, feudal duties, and entitlements, but also exposed him to the abuses and exploitation which the landowners often inflicted on the poor. Babeuf discovered what he described as a:

monstrously extortionate history...[that the landowners] succeeded in exploiting the properties of those who laboured and cultivated...The most ancient titles are almost all nothing but the ratification of enormous iniquities and vicious robberies. It was law enforced with sword and torch in hand on peasants.⁷²

His experiences as a *feudiste* left a permanent mark on Babeuf, and his thoughts on the land problem were eventually to lead him to the proto-socialist ideas of the *société des égaux*.⁷³ As early as 1786, three years before the Revolution, he discussed the possibility of establishing collective farms as a means of reducing

⁶⁷ Cicero, *The Laws*, Book 3. 21.

⁶⁸ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 27–28.

⁶⁹ Boren, 'Tiberius Gracchus: The Opposition View', 362–369.

⁷⁰ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 56, 7.

⁷¹ G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient World* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 359.

⁷² Quoted in Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 14–15.

⁷³ This phrase is variously translated as the Conspiracy for Equality or the Conspiracy of Equals, and is discussed further below.

exploitation, promoting social and economic security, and increasing equality.⁷⁴ He wrote a book in 1789, *Le cadastre perpétuel* [the perpetual register], which dealt with making taxation on land fairer and more efficient, a demand which was made in many of the *cabiers de doléances*, the lists of grievances which were central to the beginning of the Revolution.⁷⁵

More importantly, Babeuf devoted a great deal of thought to the question of the *loi agraire*, the agrarian law, which was much debated in the 1780s and 1790s in France. In its simplest form, this was simply a law which called for the dividing up of the land amongst the people.⁷⁶ It was intended to remedy the inequities of having large estates owned by small numbers of the rich while many of the poor went without property altogether, and thus concerned the seizure and redistribution of private land in one fashion or another. The idea of the agrarian law provoked strong feelings on both sides of the argument, and the volatility of the issue is attested to by the decision of the Convention in 1793 to make its advocacy a capital offence.⁷⁷

In fact, Babeuf himself does not seem to have been in favour of the agrarian law *per se*. In the 1780s, before the revolution, he wrote that such a law would be extremely difficult to carry out, and would have hugely disruptive effects on agriculture and society:

The division of the land, an absurd operation, could be carried out only amidst bloodshed following a terrible upheaval: if it ever took place, it would condemn each person to isolation, that is, to impotence, and necessarily what had been destroyed one day would begin again the next. The agrarian law, understood as distribution of the land in equal portions, would deny all the skills which agriculture itself has had to recognise in its own interest, it would abolish every other profession except that of farmer; it would waste both space and time.⁷⁸

By 1796, Babeuf had completely rejected the idea of the agrarian law, claiming that it would at best eliminate inequality for one day, after which it would promptly re-emerge.⁷⁹

Despite such clear statements, Babeuf acquired a reputation as an advocate of the agrarian law, and for good reason. Whatever his later ideas or ideals may

⁷⁴ Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 24–25.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 27–28.

⁷⁶ For a more complete discussion of this topic, see M. Jones, 'The Agrarian Law : Schemes for Land Redistribution During the French Revolution', *Past and Present* 133 (November 1991), 96–133, and Rose, 'The Red Scare of the 1790s', 119–27.

⁷⁷ For a discussion of the interpretations and misinterpretations of the classical versions of the agrarian law which contributed to this decree, see Rose, 'The Red Scare of the 1790s', 114–18.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 25–26.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 50.

have been, Babeuf's proposals in the early stages of the Revolution seemed to amount to an agrarian law in practice. In 1790, for instance, he called for the nationalisation of feudal lands, which should then be sold off in order to pay the nation's debts.⁸⁰ Presumably, much of this land would have ended up in the hands of small farmers rather than large estate owners. This was, as Rose points out, a program which 'went beyond even the most extreme Jacobin measures... in its implications'.⁸¹ K.D. Tonnesson argues, however, that the agrarian schemes proposed by Babeuf left actual ownership in the hands of the state; citizens would be granted the usufruct on the land but could not sell or otherwise alienate it.⁸² His ideas changed and grew more extreme over time, however, and Rose and Birchall argue that inconsistencies in Babeuf's position were a result of the development of his thought over the course of the upheavals brought about by the Revolution, and of his difficulties in expressing his ideas in concrete and coherent form.⁸³ At any rate, even if he felt they were ultimately insufficient, Babeuf likely approved, in the early years of the Revolution, of any measures which at least moved towards equality.

By 1796, Babeuf's ideas had grown much more radical, and the methods which he proposed for bringing them to fruition had likewise become more extreme. He was no longer willing to accept mere steps in the right direction as being sufficient; it was necessary to take action, to force the Revolution to move forward. The agrarian law was no longer on his agenda, having been replaced by the immediate goal of, as Rose puts it, 'the universal abolition of property and...the establishment of "*le bonheur commun*" by the pooling of all resources'.⁸⁴ This was in effect the complete reverse of the agrarian law, which sought to convert public property into private.

His radicalism had doubtless been reinforced by his repeated imprisonments during the early 1790s. These had either forced or allowed him to develop and clarify his political ideas and to make contact with many of the others who would join him in the Conspiracy of Equals. The imprisonments had also left him much more cynical and critical about the character and motivations of those whom the Revolution had brought into power. First the Convention and then the Directory had betrayed or were in the process of betraying the ideals and potential of the Revolution in order to maintain themselves in power. The early promise of liberty and equality was fading, especially in the post-Thermidorian

⁸⁰ Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 84–85; see also Jones, "The Agrarian Law", 125, 128.

⁸¹ Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 85.

⁸² K.D. Tonnesson, "The Babouvists: From Utopian to Practical Socialism", *Past and Present* 22 (1962), 66.

⁸³ Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 99; Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 37.

⁸⁴ Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 211.

period of reaction following the overthrow and execution of Robespierre in 1794.⁸⁵

Politically, Babeuf was an advocate of direct democracy, and had been so since 1789 at the latest.⁸⁶ In the short term, and in the propaganda carried out by the Conspiracy, Babeuf called for a return to the Constitution of 1793, which had never been implemented and had since been superseded by the less democratic Constitution of 1795.⁸⁷ The 1793 Constitution promoted direct democracy through the requirement that all laws must be submitted to primary assemblies of citizens for approval before going into force.⁸⁸ However, the implementation of this Constitution would not be the final step in the creation of political equality.⁸⁹ As Tonnesson describes it, ‘the field of direct democracy was to be [further] enlarged. The citizens would in fact be called upon daily to take part in affairs of state; their whole life would be devoted to *communauté*’.⁹⁰

Babeuf believed that the state and society could and should truly be run directly by the people: ‘The People are the Sovereign...they should exercise as much sovereignty as they absolutely can themselves’.⁹¹ Even Babeuf, however, did not believe that this could be done overnight, or easily. Thus, his political programme involved a sort of dictatorship to make the transition from the corrupt Republicanism of the Directory to the direct democracy and equality of the future.⁹² While he believed passionately in the people, even his own ‘Prospectus’ for his newspaper, *Le Tribun du Peuple*, revealed the contradictory belief that someone was needed to lead and educate the people:

The people is apathetic and cowardly, say its detractors; therefore, they add, its inevitable fate is to be suppressed. Silence, imbecile rulers! Silence too, tame slaves! The people will prove to you that it is not irresponsible; it will show you once and for all what it can do, *when its enlighteners have shown it the value of revolution...when it has been told what is necessary* so that this revolution should be for the people, in the last analysis, despite all the opposition of the enemies of common happiness.⁹³
[emphasis added]

So, paradoxically, the Conspiracy of Equals would first bring about yet another revolutionary dictatorship. This political dilemma was never truly resolved by

⁸⁵ Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 50–53; Tonnesson, ‘The Babouvists’ 67.

⁸⁶ Albert Soboul, ‘Some Problems of the Revolutionary State 1789–1796’, *Past and Present* 65 (1974), 68.

⁸⁷ Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 60–61.

⁸⁸ Furet, *Critical Dictionary*, 183.

⁸⁹ Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 235.

⁹⁰ Tonnesson, ‘The Babouvists’, 64–65.

⁹¹ Babeuf, quoted in Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 77.

⁹² Soboul, 69–70.

⁹³ Quoted in Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 61.

the conspirators, and the actual course which events would have taken had they been successful is unclear.⁹⁴ What is clear is that, first, Babeuf recognised and accepted that violence would be a necessary part of carrying out his reforms: ‘The social reformer must take a large view of things, he must mow down all that hinders him, all that stands in his way’.⁹⁵ Second, he believed that the people could not be trusted to have power placed immediately in its hands:

We must ensure that power, removed from the hands of the rogues who now hold it, should pass into the hands of pure, true, absolute democrats, men of the people, those who are supremely its friends.⁹⁶

Presumably these friends were none other than the conspirators themselves, though they never conclusively agreed on a course of action.⁹⁷

This temporary dictatorship would be needed to carry out a radical redistribution of property which was both derived from and necessary to the political equality which Babeuf sought to bring about. In short, by this point, instead of the mere redistribution of land, he aimed for a complete elimination of private property in order to create true equality. Even before the Revolution he had shown an interest ‘in a sweeping plan of social reorganisation based on equalization of wealth’.⁹⁸ His thinking on the land question had come a long way from his ideas in the 1780s on making taxation fairer and more regular. What he advocated by 1796 has been described by Furet as ‘communism’s first entry into the public arena’.⁹⁹ According to Birchall, Babeuf ‘aimed...[at] establishing a socialist order’;¹⁰⁰ though the terms “communism” and “socialism” had not yet even been coined, what Babeuf advocated was ‘recognizably the same as what later socialists have fought for’.¹⁰¹ Tonnesson writes that by 1795, after his imprisonment and release, ‘a really collectivist social organisation...[Babeuf’s] maximum program ... dominated his thoughts’.¹⁰²

The exact contours of this ‘maximum program’ are difficult to define, as there were differing opinions on this issue within the conspiracy, and Babeuf’s writings are somewhat contradictory. It is unclear whether Babeuf ‘aimed merely at an egalitarian distribution of privately produced goods [or] the collectivist

⁹⁴ Soboul, 73.

⁹⁵ Babeuf, quoted in Tonnesson, ‘The Babouvists’, 70.

⁹⁶ Document quoted at the Conspirators trial in 1797, quoted in Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 154.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 155–156.

⁹⁸ Furet, *Critical Dictionary*, 184.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 183.

¹⁰⁰ Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 63.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰² Tonnesson, ‘The Babouvists’, 66.

organisation of production'.¹⁰³ On the whole, the balance of evidence indicates that the latter was closer to Babeuf's ideal. Writings by Babeuf and other conspirators in the spring of 1796 condemned private property in the form of land or the means of production as criminal; wealth of all sorts were to be, in the words of Rose:

sequestered by the Republic, and the labor of the citizens was to be given a rational direction by its rulers. All the products of the land and of industry would be collected in 'public depots' and distributed equally by 'the public authority'.¹⁰⁴

This was a far more radical scheme than had been suggested by anyone else in France over the course of the Revolution, or indeed by anyone anywhere else at that time. The description of Babeuf as the first of a long line of socialist revolutionaries seems very apt.¹⁰⁵

Like the Gracchi, Babeuf's career ended in violent death, although his was by legal execution rather than murder at the hands of a mob. He was arrested, along with other members of the Conspiracy of Equals, in May 1796. After a lengthy trial which began in February of the following year, Babeuf was condemned to death. He was guillotined at Vendôme on 27 May 1797.

CONCLUSION: REFORM VS. REVOLUTION

On balance, it is clear that Babeuf's adoption of the name of the Gracchi was misplaced at best. According to what was known—or, perhaps, more accurately, believed—about them at the time, it was an inspired choice of name. But a direct comparison of the programmes and methods of the Gracchi and Babeuf shows far greater differences than similarities.

On the one hand are two Roman aristocrats, wealthy and privileged but apparently sincerely concerned about the welfare of the poor. They saw a need for serious reforms to safeguard the health of the state, and suffered for their attempts to carry them through. According to H.H. Scullard, they:

should not be regarded as would-be Greek tyrants, Fascist dictators or Marxist theorists. It is not certain, for instance, that Tiberius even objected to large estates as such...[but] there is no good reason to deny that they aimed at disinterested social and economic reform.¹⁰⁶

Boren sees them as men who were forced to use extraordinary means to attempt needed reforms, but who in taking such actions inadvertently precipitated the

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 63–64.

¹⁰⁴ Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 231–232.

¹⁰⁵ See Birchall, *Spectre of Babeuf*, 1–4. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 1–3.

¹⁰⁶ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 37.

growing conflicts in the Roman state which led to the downfall of the Republic.¹⁰⁷ Their intention was to reinvigorate and reinforce the currently existing Roman state, at least in part by returning to what they believed were the practices of the Roman past. In terms of their land reforms, they were concerned with the concentration of publicly-owned land in the hands of wealthy landowners at the expense of the poor, and sought to reallocate this land in a more equitable fashion which would bolster support for the Republic. The Gracchi never attempted to use violence to promote or carry out their policies, but murderous and illegal violence was ultimately used against them both.

On the other hand is Babeuf, unequivocally a radical revolutionary, who sought to overthrow the already Revolutionary government of France in order to replace it with one even more extreme, and who wished to abolish private property of any kind as inconsistent with the absolute equality of all men. In stark contrast to the Gracchi, he was concerned with the private ownership of land, not public, and his most extreme programme sought in fact to do away with the former completely. He accepted the fact that violence would be necessary to bring about his aims. Some writers inaccurately describe Babeuf as being a sort of reactionary, seeking perfection in a past golden age of equality.¹⁰⁸ But what he proposed for society had never actually existed before, anywhere or anytime, no matter what he believed. His real goal was to demolish society as it then existed in order to remake it in a new and just fashion, not to return to any real earlier age. In the end, he was legally arrested, tried, and executed by the state he sought to overthrow.

Obviously Babeuf himself, as he demonstrated by adopting the name of Gracchus, believed that the comparison was justifiable, and in the popular conception of the Gracchi in his time they were true revolutionaries. But the truth of the matter was otherwise. The Gracchi sought to strengthen and uphold the Roman republic; Babeuf wished to overthrow and radicalise the French republic. Though their methods may have been extreme for their time and place, the goals of the Gracchi brothers were not truly revolutionary. It is ironic that a true radical like Babeuf should identify himself so closely with two sincere, but in many ways reactionary, reformers like Tiberius and Gaius Sempronius Gracchus, who sought merely to preserve and improve the conservative, aristocratic Roman Republic. The First Revolutionary Communist had, in the end, little more in common with the Roman aristocrats than an interest in the distribution of the land and in the welfare of the poor; that, and a violent death at the hands of those whom their ideas threatened.

¹⁰⁷ Boren, *The Gracchi*, 127–129.

¹⁰⁸ See, for instance, Tonnesson, 'The Babouvists', 61.