Morris, Bax and Babeuf
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This year sees not only the centenary of Morris's death but also the bicentenary of Babeuf's 'Conspiracy of the Equals', arguably the first revolutionary socialist organisation in history. But there is more than a coincidence of dates linking two great pioneers of socialist thought and practice; there is an interesting and, as far as I know, little discussed connection between the two men.

Sometime before his death Morris gave his friend and comrade Ernest Belfort Bax a copy of Victor Advielle's two-volume *Histoire de Gracchus Babeuf et du babouvisme*; it bore the inscription 'Given to E. Belfort Bax from William Morris on condition that the said Bax writes a clear account of the Babeuf episode'. (The book later found its way into the possession of G. D. H. Cole). That Morris should have made the request is in itself somewhat surprising; on Bax's own testimony 'comparatively few men of average education in the present day have ever heard of Babeuf'. Only one book had appeared in English on the subject – Bronterre O'Brien's translation of Buonarroti's *History of Babeuf's Conspiracy for Equality* (1836). Nor was Advielle's book exactly a bestseller. The author was a civil servant and amateur local historian, who published the book at his own expense; just three hundred copies were printed. We can only speculate how one found its way into Morris's hands. Bax did not carry out Morris's request until 1911, fifteen years after his friend's death. In that year Grant Richards published his *The Last Episode of the French Revolution: being a history of Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of the Equals*. This too had a quality of rarity about it, as it was one of only three book-length studies of Babeuf published in English this century.

Why did Morris show such interest in Babeuf? At first sight there would seem to be little in common between the Oxford-educated artist and the autodidact from Picardy who never went to school (though in *News from Nowhere* Morris anticipated the total abolition of schools). In fact Morris's correspondence and political writings reveal little interest in Babeuf, or, indeed in any aspect of the French Revolution. I have found just two references to Babeuf in Morris's political writings. The first comes in a lecture entitled 'The Hopes of Civilisation', delivered to the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League on 14 June 1885. Explaining the class nature of the French Revolution, Morris explains that:

The leaders of the French Revolution, even amidst the fears, suspicions, and slaughter of the Terror, upheld the rights of 'property' so called, though a new pioneer or prophet appeared in France, analogous in some respects to the Levellers of Cromwell's time, but, as might be expected, far more advanced and reasonable than they were. Gracchus Babeuf and his fellows were treated as criminals, and died or suffered the torture of prison for attempting to put into practice those words which the Republic still carried on its banners, and Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality were interpreted in a middle-class, or if you please a Jesuitical sense, as the rewards of success for those who could struggle into an exclusive class...
Between May 1886 and May 1888 Commonweal published, in twenty-five instalments, a series entitled ‘Socialism from the Root Up’, written jointly by Morris and Bax (later published in book form as Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome). This contains an account of the French Revolution in chapter VIII, and here too Babeuf is briefly mentioned:

One event only there remains to be mentioned; the attempt of Baboeuf [sic] and his followers to get a proletarian republic recognised; it has been called an insurrection, but it never came to that, being crushed while it was yet only the beginning of a propaganda. Baboeuf [sic] and his followers were brought to trial in April, 1796 [sic]. He and Darthes [sic] were condemned to death, but killed themselves before the sentence could be carried out. Ten others were condemned to prison and exile; and so ended the first Socialist propaganda.7

Four sentences only, and within them three errors of spelling or date; this does not betoken any great knowledge of Babeuf on the part of either man (in fact Bax, as the ‘expert’ on French history, very probably wrote this passage). Yet Morris clearly did feel some sort of affinity with Babeuf, and there are indeed important points of comparison between the quality of socialism advocated by the two men.

Firstly, and crucially, both belong to the tradition of what Hal Draper called ‘socialism from below’ as opposed to ‘socialism from above’.8 As an authentic Marxist, Morris believed that the emancipation of the working classes must be accomplished by the working classes themselves, or, as he memorably put it: “By us, and not for us”, must be their motto.9 We find exactly the same spirit in a document issued to the ‘agents’ (full-time organisers) of Babeuf’s ‘conspiracy’:

Make the people understand that they will never do anything great, that they will never make revolutions for themselves, for their true happiness, except when there are no rulers involved in any way in their movement: they must not be so distrustful of their own resources, and convince themselves that they, the people, are insufficient to be able to carry out a great undertaking.10

Secondly, Morris may have been attracted to Babeuf by his significance to the utopian socialist tradition. As he put it: ‘... if, in his theoretical scheme, [Babeuf] was the first of the utopian Socialists, [he] also forestalled in his notion of the necessity of taking possession of the political power, one of the foremost principles of the modern Socialist movement.’11 The greatness of Morris is that he draws on the full power of the utopian critique of capitalism, but always links it to the need for practical organisation in the ongoing class struggle. Babeuf, in an earlier phase of history, had drawn on the utopian communism of eighteenth-century France, but had striven to translate it into practical intervention in the revolutionary process. Morris could not help but have a fellow-feeling for him.

Thirdly, Morris would undoubtedly have sympathised with the kind of socialism advocated by Babeuf. Morris, in ‘The Society of the Future’, urged both the ‘extinction of asceticism’ and ‘the extinction of luxury’.12 This is precisely the spirit of Babeuf, who fulminated against the needless luxury enjoyed by the Directory, yet believed that strict equality did not mean the sharing of misery but rather the extension of jouissance (enjoyment) and abondance (plenty) to all. Morris would surely have appreciated his insistence that ‘the republican is not the man of eternity, he is the man
of time; his paradise is this earth, he wants to enjoy freedom and happiness there, and to enjoy them while he is there, without waiting..." Indeed, the standard term used by Babeuf for his desired society – the word ‘socialism’ not yet being in use – was *bonheur commun* (common happiness).

So there is some reason to believe that Morris, on the basis of however limited information, saw Babeuf as a kindred spirit. And if he wished to see a book on Babeuf to provide enlightenment for himself and for the whole socialist movement, then Belfort Bax was the obvious choice of author. Bax was deeply influenced by the Paris Commune and by French history generally. His first important political article, written before he became a Marxist, was a passionate defence of Marat. He went on to write two books on Marat, as well as an outline history of the French Revolution. Bax made no major original contribution to the understanding of the French Revolution, but he was a powerful polemical writer, capable of both savagery and enthusiasm, and was always ready to draw modern parallels with historical characters and events. Apart from his talents as a populariser, there were two aspects of his work which would have appealed to Morris.

Firstly, Bax was quite clear as to the middle-class – or bourgeois – character of the French Revolution, even in its most radical, Jacobin phase. The earlier British advocate of Babeuf, Bronterre O’Brien, had idolised Robespierre and made little or no distinction between Jacobinism and socialism. For Bax, Robespierre was a ‘pedantic Rousseauite prig’, and he argued: ‘The fact is, Robespierre was a petit bourgeois, a Philistine to the backbone, who desired a Republic of petit bourgeois virtues, with himself at the head, and was prepared to wade through a sea of blood for the accomplishment of his end.’ (On this point Bax is much clearer than many later historians influenced by the traditions of French republicanism and the Popular Front.)

Secondly, Bax was quite clear and unhesitating on the question of violence. (Though many of his latter-day admirers might like to forget it, Morris, in *News from Nowhere* and elsewhere, was a firm advocate of revolutionary violence.) In referring to Marat’s support for the September massacres he points out that the massacre of the communards in 1871 was a far worse atrocity; and in citing Marat’s call to the people to take justice into their own hands against the ‘monopolisers’ he insists:

> It should be remembered by those who shudder at the words of Marat, that at this very period, and for long after, the common law of England caused dozens of human beings to be hanged every week, for trivial offences, such as stealing a loaf of bread; and yet the supporters of these laws are not execrated as monsters, but are merely described as unnecessarily severe in their views of justice.

Yet Bax seems to have lacked enthusiasm for the task assigned to him by Morris. It was to be fifteen years after Morris’s death before the book on Babeuf appeared. After all it was Marat, not Babeuf, who had been Bax’s hero as a young man, and Marat whom he described as ‘one of the most heroic and, as a natural consequence, one of the most calumniated champions the Proletariat has ever had.’ There had been no reference to Babeuf in the first book on Marat, and by the time Bax came to study Babeuf in depth, he was no longer so prone to hero-worship.

Indeed, there is an interesting indication that Bax long delayed even embarking on his study of Babeuf. The fifth edition of *The Story of the French Revolution* was
published in 1907 and contained prefaces referring to ‘correction of errors’ made for the second (1892) and third (1902) editions. The brief account of Babeuf in this volume reveals little knowledge of the subject; strikingly, Bax throughout spells his name Baboeuf. This is despite the fact that the correct spelling of the name is Baheuf and this is pointed out on page two of the first volume of Advielle’s work. So some years after Morris’s death Bax had apparently not yet opened the book that was to provide the basis of his account.

The Bax who finally settled his accounts with Baheuf in 1911 was in many ways a different man from the comrade in whom Morris had invested his hopes. Bax had played an important role in helping Morris to develop as a Marxist due to his greater familiarity with economic and historical matters. But contrary to the claim sometimes made that Bax was the better Marxist of the two, Bax without the complement of Morris’s aesthetic and moral passion showed signs of degenerating into the mechanical and fatalistic ‘Marxism’ characteristic of the Second International. A number of factors contributed to this: his belief that imperialism had given a ‘new lease of life’ to capitalism; his growing admiration for the increasingly reformist German Social Democracy; and, perhaps worst of all, his increasingly stringent anti-feminism. This last was a particularly blatant example of vulgar materialism. Women were alleged to be unfit to vote as their brains were smaller than men’s as a result of the fact that ‘the whole female organism is subservient to the function of child-bearing and lactation.’ By 1914 his friend Archibald Robertson believed that Bax had ‘lost much of his revolutionary zeal’, and the sorry story ended with his support for the British side in the First World War.

This is not to say that The Last Episode of the French Revolution is a poor or inadequate book. It makes a significant contribution to the understanding of Babeuf’s place in the Revolution, certainly as far as English readers are concerned. Unlike Buonarroti and his translator O’Brien, Bax looks at Baheuf from a Marxist perspective. He draws out sharply the differences between Babeuf and Robespierre:

> It was, moreover, not true that the distinctive feature in the doctrine of Babeuf, its communistic character, was to be found in any of the writings and speeches of Robespierre and his partisans. Robespierre, St Just, and the rest were jealous upholders of the rights of private property. Their ideal was a Republic of the small middle-class, with the citizens possessed each of moderate means, sober, frugal, laborious, misery and want unknown, and an accumulation of wealth beyond a certain limit discouraged. This was the Rousseauite ideal of the period. Thus, though not possessed of a high originality, Babeuf certainly does himself injustice in professing to regard himself as a mere follower of Robespierre or any of the earlier leaders...

That the communistic idea was not original with Babeuf we have already shown in an earlier chapter of the present work. He undoubtedly derived it from the writings of Mably and Morelly. What was original in Babeuf was his attempt to place it as the immediate goal of the society of his time, to be directly realised by political methods. Babeuf was the first to conceive of communism in any shape as a politically realisable ideal in the immediate or near future....

In thus sharply distinguishing Babeuf from even the most radical wing of the bourgeois revolution, and in stressing his effort to transcend utopianism by practical
organisation, Bax brings out the major historical significance of Babeuf. Indeed, the arguments he presents would justify a far more vigorous claim of 'originality' than he himself is prepared to make. Moreover, his account presents full English translations of several of the key documents of the 'Conspiracy'. Bax thus enhanced the understanding of Babeuf, and, although in many ways his book has been outdated by more recent scholarship, it is still very much worth reading.

Yet it is hard to avoid feeling that Bax did not quite write the book that Morris had hoped for. Although Bax sees Babeuf's thought as original, he is often grudging about admitting its significance, for example, by putting too much emphasis on his debt to Rousseau. There is sometimes a rather patronising attempt to measure Babeuf's inadequacy against the superior standards of 'Modern Socialism':

The theory of the Equals, as that of their successors, the Utopian Socialists of the earlier nineteenth century, was a scheme of social reconstruction. Today, in the earlier twentieth century, we have done with schemes. Modern Socialism has no scheme: it has certain principles, and certain tactics and methods of action for the furtherance and carrying out of those principles, but as to the precise construction of the detail of life in the society of the future it ventures no prophecy.28

Would it be too fanciful to see the above as a mild snub, not only to Babeuf, but also to the author of News from Nowhere?

This rather lukewarm tone is characteristic of the book, and contrasts markedly with the volume on Marat published over thirty years earlier. Bax understood the importance of Babeuf, but he never admired him as he admired Marat. At the beginning of the book Bax lists his main sources.29 These include the works of Advielle and Buonarroti, as well as a study from a conservative standpoint published in 1849 by Edouard Fleury, brother of the novelist Champfleury. Advielle's work was significant as it included much new material on Babeuf's early life, as well as reproducing some of his pre-1789 correspondence and his speech at the Vendôme trial. But Advielle had little knowledge of socialist thought, and saw Babeuf as no more than a manifestation of Christian humanitarianism. In addition Bax consulted the documents seized at the time of Babeuf's arrest, and the files of Le Tribun du peuple and other papers published by Babeuf.

All this provided a substantial documentary basis to the book. Yet it is noteworthy that the two decades before the publication of The Last Episode had seen a widespread interest in Babeuf in the international socialist movement. Jaurès, Gabriel Deville, Victor Méric, Albert Thomas and Kropotkin (whom both Bax and Morris knew well) had all made a contribution to the understanding of Babeuf from a modern socialist perspective. (Jaurès's Histoire socialiste was to provide a major impetus to the academic study of Babeuf by Aulard, Mathiez and Lefebvre.)30 Yet there is no indication of this work in Bax's book; he may have done his duty to his dead friend by consulting the major sources, but there is no evidence of any enthusiasm to engage in contemporary debate.

Thus Bax does not use his material to full advantage. Although he consulted the documents confiscated at Babeuf's arrest and published by the authorities for the trial,31 he does not draw out the extraordinary picture they provide of the day-to-day activities of the Conspiracy during its brief existence: the work of the agents, distribution of leaflets, flyposting, compiling of lists of contacts, and the constant sensitivity to the
mood of the population. If he had done so he might have seen some fascinating parallels with the Socialist League. Certainly, he would not have been so confident about seeing Blanqui's conspiratorial organisation as the direct successor to Babeuf.  

Although it is insignificant that Bax makes a number of factual errors—for example, about the date of Babeuf's release from prison in 1794 (where he follows Advielle) or even in his claim that the last issue of Le Tribun du peuple came before the closing of the Panthéon club (although No 41 of Le Tribun, which he lists among his sources, refers to the closure)—he is rather more contentious in his assertion that the cages in which Babeuf and his associates were transported to Vendôme for trial were followed by others containing wives and children, including Madame Babeuf. As Advielle makes clear, Madame Babeuf and her child went on foot from Paris to Vendôme.  

Neither does Bax mention that the defendants at Vendôme included five women, some of whom had played a significant role in the conspiracy, notably Sophia Lapierre, who courageously defied the legitimacy of the court and led the prisoners in song in defiance of the judge. All the women were in fact acquitted, on the instruction of the judge, a fact which Bax might have mentioned if only to confirm his belief that the courts were more lenient to women than to men.  

He did, however, find space for a one-and-a-half page digression on the evils of modern feminism even though this bore no relation to his subject.  

Bax missed another opportunity of linking babouvisme to the spirit of Morris. He quoted in full the famous Manifesto of the Equals (drafted by Sylvain Maréchal) and explained that the Secret Directory had not published it because it objected to the sentence ‘Perish, if it must be, all the arts, provided real equality be left us!’ But he failed to note that, in its insistence on the overriding necessity for socialist transformation, this phrase had an echo in Morris's letter to the Manchester Examiner of 14 March 1883: “… popular art has no chance of a healthy life, or, indeed, of a life at all, till we are on the way to fill up this terrible gulf between riches and poverty. Doubtless many things will go to filling it up, and if art must be one of those things, let it go.”—words that should be remorselessly hurled in the faces of those who claim Morris's wallpaper was more important than his socialism.  

Yet whatever reservations there may be about Bax's book, we can only be grateful that Morris urged him to write it. However limited Morris's actual knowledge of Babeuf may have been, he clearly had an intuition that here was a libertarian revolutionary socialist who belonged to the same tradition as himself. Since Bax's time our understanding of Babeuf has been greatly enhanced, notably by the work of Maurice Dommanget and Victor Dalin. We now have many documents that were unavailable to Morris and Bax which serve to confirm the importance of Babeuf as a key figure in the revolutionary socialist tradition. In the reconstruction of a socialist movement free from the distortions and corruption of both Stalinism and Social Democracy, the re-appropriation of both Babeuf and Morris will have a vital role to play.

NOTES
1 Victor Advielle, Histoire de Gracchus Babeuf et du babouvisme, (Paris 1884).
4 The other two are D. Thomson’s *The Babeuf Plot*, (London 1947), and R. B. Rose’s *Gracchus Babeuf*, (Stanford 1978).
6 Published by Swan Sonnenschein in London in 1893.
8 Hal Draper, ‘The Two Souls of Socialism’, in *International Socialism*, 11 (1962). Draper does not discuss Babeuf or Morris in his article, but, interestingly, traces the distinction of the two traditions back to a comment made by Bax in his *Peasants’ War in Germany* (1899).
10 *Copie des pièces saisies*, (Paris 1797), I, p. 203.
12 *Political Writings of William Morris*, op. cit., p. 193.
13 *Journal de la liberté de la presse*, No. 5, p. 2.
16 Jean Paul Marat, (London 1880), and *The Story of the French Revolution*, op. cit.
20 ibid., p. iii.
21 ibid., pp. 103–5.
23 See *The Victorian Encounter with Marx*, op. cit., pp. 45, 74, 84 and 98.
27 ibid., p. 135.
28 ibid., p. 7.
29 There is a favourable reference to Jaurès’s history in *Reminiscences and Reflexions*, op. cit., p. 130.
30 See note 10 above.
32 ibid., p. 190.
33 *Historie de Gracchus Babeuf et du babouvisme*, op. cit., I, p. 228.
34 Bax even accused Winston Churchill of excessive leniency to the suffragettes c.f. *The Fraud of Feminism*, op. cit., p. 115.
36 *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*, op. cit., p. 139.