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BABEUF'S CONSPIRACY VIEWED BY THE PRESS OF THE UNITED STATES

Georges Lefebvre concluded his Preface to the 1957 edition of Buonarroti's famous history of Babeuf's conspiracy with a sort of challenge to historians, saying that the final word on it still remains to be said. Whether Lefebvre's summons to further research on the subject has been a cause of new studies cannot be answered. All that can be said is that historians have continued to lift the veil on some hitherto obscure aspects of this conspiracy. Evidence of this trend was produced at the International Colloquium of Stockholm on August 21, 1960, to commemorate Babeuf's birthday.¹ What appeared to be comparatively new was the emphasis on the impact of Babouvism outside of France. This was shown in three papers, two on Germany and one on the Austrian Tyrol. The two on Germany² dwell on the reporting of the movement in the German press. We are told that alongside the generally turgid and hostile accounts there were analyses of Babouvist ideas in *Minerva*, the review of Hamburg, drawn from *Le Tribun du peuple* and the dossiers of the Babouvist trial. This review ran as many as ten articles on Babeuf and Drouet, who was boosted into prominence because of his official standing. The third paper³ suggests the probability of Babouvist infiltration among the insurgent Tirolese peasants early in the nineteenth century. It has also been shown elsewhere that Babeuf's organization served as a model, both in structure and methods, for the Italian underground, *Società dei Raggi*, that reached out from Piedmont to Romagna with the object of uniting the peninsula.⁴

¹ Babeuf et les problèmes du babouisme, ed. by Albert Soboul (Paris, 1963).

² Ju. Ja. Moškovskaja, "Otkliki na process Babefa v Germanii", in: Francuzskij Ežegodnik, 1960, pp. 121-135 (with a summary in French), and Walter Markov, "Babeuf, le babouisme et les intellectuels allemands (1796-1797)", in: Babeuf et les problèmes du babouisme, pp. 175-203.

³ Hilde Koplénig, "Revendications agraires dans l'insurrection tyrolienne de 1809", in: Babeuf et les problèmes du babouisme, pp. 205-214.

⁴ Jacques Godechot, "Le babouisme et l'unité italienne", in: Revue des Etudes Italiennes, III (1938), pp. 277-279.

Yet these echoes of Babouvism seem faint in comparison with those in England and the United States. An inspection of the press in both countries reveals a widespread and even deepening interest in the Babouvists as the case against them sharpened. It is not the intention here to survey the reporting on them in both countries, but to center attention on the American press. Still, before entering upon this project, it may be pointed out in brief that while the English press as a whole portrayed them as an odious lot, there were a few lengthy stories that were less colored by passion and inclined to regard the principal conspirators as men worthy of respect. Thus Babeuf was presented as "a man of parts, in the exercise of which nothing was able to daunt him". And Jean-Baptiste Drouet was portrayed as a hero whose career was dedicated to the service of the French Republic.¹ The Babouvist *Acte d'insurrection*,² found among his papers and released by the French government in the belief that it would besmirch its authors, was described in detail. But very little was said on the Babouvist program, which had as its aim the replacement of the establishment based on private property by another resting on common ownership. The British press featured instead the violent methods the conspirators counted on to achieve their end. Neither did it publicize the names of the leading conspirators. Save for Babeuf, they remained virtually unknown figures.

A similar policy seems to have been followed by the American press. Like the reporting in other countries, fact and fiction were given equal standing. Babouvism was made out to be synonymous with royalism. It may be said at the outset that the stories in American newspapers were monotonously unfriendly, partly because their sources were officially French. Yet, for all the hostility to the Babouvists, the fact that the press gave them as much space as it did was some measure of the importance attributed to their conspiracy. John Quincy Adams, American Minister at the Hague, considered their arrest sufficiently significant to inform his government of their forthcoming trial. The Directory, he wrote further, "were so apprehensive of similar consequences, that they found it expedient to address a proclamation to the people, warning them against the designs of the terrorists".³

¹ See, e.g., *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics and Literature for the Year 1796*, XXXVIII, pp. 149-152. A longer article in a similar vein appeared in *The New Annual Register, or General Repository of History, Politics and Literature, for the Year 1796*, pp. 201-205.

² Copie des pièces saisies dans le local que Baboeuf occupoit lors de son arrestation, pp. 15-18, 25-26; also published as a small pamphlet, *Le comité insurrecteur de salut public, au peuple, Acte d'Insurrection*.

³ John Quincy Adams, *Writings* (New York, 1913), II, p. 26.

I

America's interest in the conspiracy was a continuation of its long-standing interest in the French and their Revolution. But there was a difference. While the development of the French Revolution helped to draw party lines in the United States, the Babouvist conspiracy had no such effect. Conservative and liberal sheets alike viewed it as a frightening example and painted its leaders in unflattering colors. Neither Federalists nor Republicans, however apart they were on their country's objectives, countenanced any leanings to common ownership, such as the Babouvists advocated. Thus, both the Federalist and Republican press absorbed like a blotter such French epithets as "anarchists", "terrorists", "royalists". These terms were apparently not sufficiently condemnatory in the opinion of some editors, for they hastened to add that the Babouvists were "the accomplices, the partisans, the servants of Robespierre, Carrier, Lebon, Vadier, Collot, etc.", than whom there were no worse, in their opinion. At the same time newspapers congratulated the Directory for its timely discovery of the conspiracy. In keeping with the French official line,¹ many of them, including the influential *Gazette of the United States*,² identified the Babouvist conspiracy as a foreign plot to restore royalty in France.

By contrast, four sheets, copying the same English paper, portrayed four of the French Directors as men of high calibre. Reubell was said to be "a man of address and penetration", averse at once to weak and violent measures, and firm in conduct against anarchists and terrorists as well as against royalists. High praise went to La Revellière-Lépaux, reputed to be "a man of honest integrity", "peculiarly calculated to fill those situations, where maturity of judgment is more particularly required". Carnot was singled out for his abilities in engineering and statesmanship. True, he might be reproached for his past role in the Committee of Public Safety. Yet he was to be credited with much of the good done by the present government. The fourth Director, Letourneur, was invested with "great talent, discernment" and comprehensiveness of mind. Barras, the fifth Director, alone failed to earn the eulogia heaped on his colleagues. Three sentences on him, cited by the four sheets, said that he had "all the character, the roughness and courage of a soldier", and that he lacked great ability. "Besides he could not erase the stubborn facts that he was a *ci-devant* (Vicomte de Barras) and that his brother was an emigré."³

¹ A. Debidour, *Recueil des actes du directoire exécutif* (Paris, 1910), II, pp. 149-150.

² July 29, 1796.

³ *New York Argus*, May 18, 1796; *The Weekly Advertiser* (Reading, Pa.), June 4, 1796; *Federal Gazette and Baltimore Daily Advertiser*, May 23, 1796;

Nowhere in the American press have we discovered any sympathy with the Babouvist aims. This is not surprising since the radical objective of Americans at the time was a society of small artisans and farmers, a goal far removed from that of the Babouvists. The nearest to any justification of their enterprise, and by implication only, is to be found in the *Massachusetts Mercury*, May 20, 1796. Here was reprinted an editorial from the *Bulletin politique*, to the effect that the French Revolution was still unfinished. The argument ran somewhat as follows. The fact that France had a constitution and an organized republican government was in no way convincing that the revolutionary period had drawn to a close or that it had achieved stability; there were facts to disprove it, such as the existence of an admirably planted conspiracy, the prisons filled to the full with unfortunates, the exercise of arbitrary power by government agents, the suspension of a people's representative without even a hearing, the demand for perfect equality and an agrarian law, the continued existence of such bodies as revolutionary committees, revolutionary armies and revolutionary tribunes. Finally, stressed the *Mercury*, "massacres in the south, murders in the Vendée, pillage in Normandy, calumny in Paris". And it asked: "Are we not still in a state of revolution?"

This was the only instance we have come upon where the government of the Directory was considered not an advanced stage of the Revolution, but its interruption. The conclusion might well be drawn, which the Babouvists did, that another revolution was needed to complete the work left unfinished. However, a running theme in the American press as a whole was that the Babouvists were but old Jacobins in new attire. Their religion was revolution; their best government, anarchy; their apostle, Robespierre. Their principles were that war was better than peace; that terror was more effective than moderation, and the guillotine, than courts of law. They were in fact counter-revolutionists, linked to royalists, and frustrated and vindictive office-seekers.

Noticeable in many American editorials, just as in a number of pamphlets published in England about the same time, is a spirit with a tincture of chauvinism. It would be folly for the Americans to imitate the French, warned the *United States Chronicle*, for example. Their country was a hotbed of insurrection, while America was something of a promised land, an example of a nation that "knew how to

and The Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette (Alexandria, Va.), May 24, 1796. A laudatory description of all the Directors was reprinted a year later by the Boston Independent Chronicle of May 18, 1797, from the London Monthly Magazine, February 1797.

maintain the arts of peace and to enjoy a government sufficiently strong for all the purposes of society, and as free as social man can wish".¹

A fortnight later the *Gazette of the United States*, as if to caution Americans against possible allurements from abroad, reprinted an editorial from a Parisian paper, which said in part:

"those who would lead you from revolution to revolution are assassins; they are your implacable enemies, who, wearied of no longer being permitted to oppress you, would wish to overturn the magistrates chosen by you, putting themselves in their places, that they might sell to you the execution of the laws. Your enemies are those who, gorging with wine and thirsting for blood, sigh vehemently after that infernal constitution which would again invigorate those abandoned wretches who have been overthrown by the government.

If the conspiracy of Babeuf is a conspiracy of royalists, as there has been discovered some political buffoons in it, government may rest assured, that the nation wishes neither for royalism or anarchism. They wish ardently for a government, because without it there can be neither peace nor safety. They wish a government just and wise, because without it there is neither liberty nor happiness".²

The *Connecticut Courant*, drawing on French prints, declared its enmity to the Babouvists perhaps more compellingly than other American sheets. And because it set the tone for many of them, especially those of the Federalist persuasion, it may be relevant to the present purpose to cite at length its estimate of the Babouvists and their program:

"The conspiracy lately disconcerted at Paris may have caused some inquietude, but could in no manner be dangerous to a well organized and vigilant government. It was not one of those plots which, being carried on in the dark, explode before any step can be taken to check their baneful effects. Babeuf had long since openly preached the overthrow of the constitution, and proposed the agrarian law, which if executed would produce a neat annual revenue of about 9 or 10 dollars to each individual Frenchman; and a plan of that kind can only enter the head of a fool or an impostor. If all the suppositions, variations and

¹ July 14, 1796.

² July 29, 1796. The last paragraph was reproduced in the *Herald of the United States* (Warren, R.I.), August 13, 1796.

exaggerations usually made use of on such occasions are deducted, the whole conspiracy and the danger resulting from it will be reduced to this: A number of discontented people, partly *ci-devant* members of the Convention, expelled or arrested last year, partly officers driven from the army because of their incapacity, had assembled and deliberated on the means of taking an exemplary vengeance on their pretended oppressors; government, informed of this circumstance, determined to strike at them at the very moment when their guilt could not be disputed, and by this example of severity, they may hope to have effectually stifled the spirit of private vengeance which seemed again rekindling.

If those concerned in the plot had really intended to give the city of Paris up to plunder, this would be a sufficient proof of their utter ignorance and incapacity to attempt a revolution”.

It should be noted here that the *Connecticut Courant* misrepresented the program of the Babouvists. Actually they rejected an agrarian law, which meant the partition of property, and instead demanded common ownership.

The paper went on to introduce the principal participants of the conspiracy as they were named in the French reports. It may be observed now that, except for the names of Babeuf and Antonelle, all those cited by it belonged to the fringe of the Babouvist organization. They were Jacobins for the most part who were far from sharing its principles. Let us see how the conspirators were depicted in the *Connecticut Courant*:

“Indeed none of the accused has ever been distinguished for talents or any considerable degree of influence. Babeuf is a mere mountebank; Ricord, formerly member of the Convention and expelled, was a tolerably intelligent financier; Cha[s]les was before the Revolution a prebendary of a rich chapter of Chanoines, then member of the Legislative Assembly and of the Convention, at last expelled and confined in the castle of Ham. This immoral priest was always despised, even by those of his own party. Amar and Vadier were both members of the Committee of General Safety under Robespierre, both implicated in the accusation against Collot, Billaud-Varen[n]es and Barère, and both obliged last year to save themselves by flight. The latter is above 70 years old, a proof that violence is not exclusively the patrimony of youth. Antonelle is a *ci-devant* noble and languished in prison before the overthrow of Robespierre. Drouet was always of a violent and rash disposition; it is possible

that long sufferings in an iron cage at Brussels, and afterwards in an Austrian dungeon have considerably impaired, if not entirely deranged his mental powers; a passage in his own report to the Council of Five Hundred justifies this supposition; for when he leaped from the citadel of the Spielberg near Brinn and broke one of his legs, his plan, he said, was to seize a boat on a neighboring brook and descend down to the Black Sea, and to Turkey; a plan the impracticability of which would have struck a child of 10 years old.

Rossignol, once General in Chief of the west, is reputed for his ignorance and brutality.

It cannot be denied that many of the accused had plausible arguments for complaint against many members of the French Government, but as in their endeavors to procure satisfaction for private wrongs, they have resorted to means which have endangered the safety of a whole nation, it is self evident that they were neither true republicans nor worthy of a better fate than that they met with".¹

The above list of names calls for a few observations. In the first place, there is the absence of such top-ranking names as Buonarroti, Darthé, Germain and Maréchal. The first three were rarely mentioned in American newspapers,² although they were prominent defendants in the famous state trial at Vendôme. Maréchal was nowhere referred to, for his name, for some still uncovered reason, was kept from the list of the accused. In the second place, Drouet, as we said above, was catapulted into a top conspiratorial role. His name was bracketed with Babeuf's on almost every occasion so that the reading public was inevitably led to believe that he had a major part in the design to overthrow the Directory. But American newspapers merely copied from the French press. The truth was that the documents seized at Babeuf's hideout and submitted by the state as evidence at the Vendôme trial established beyond reasonable doubt that Babeuf and Drouet were far apart on means and ends.³ The fact that Drouet was a popular hero and a member of the Council of Five Hundred all the more suited the purpose of the Executive Directors. They grasped at every opportunity to feature him, and the American press responded accordingly. Newspapers of many sizable towns, from north to south,

¹ July 25, 1796.

² We have found them cited in *The Lancaster Journal* (Pa.), June 17, 1796; *The Western Star* (Stockbridge, Mass.), August 7, 1797; and in *The Albany Gazette* (N.Y.), August 7, 1797.

³ See *Copie des pièces saisies*, op. cit., pp. 156, 207.

reprinted *in extenso* the answer he wrote to the government's charges, after escaping from prison, as well as his strong protest against the wrongs done, in his name, to the representative body.¹

At least four American sheets,² all of them drawing on the same French source and employing identical terms, poured acid comments on his reply to the government. They mocked his claim to the most ardent patriotism and to have lived according to a noble philosophy; they ridiculed his assertion that he had been fired with the love of liberty and equality at the age of sixteen, after having read Rousseau, Mably and Raynal. In reply they wrote with a modicum of ignorance: "It appears that Drouet has lost part of his philosophical memory in riding post, for neither Rousseau, Raynal, or even Mably, whom at the age of 16, he certainly could not understand, have ever said any thing in their abstract theories, that resembled the principles put in action, by the Constitution of 1793. The systems which they have advanced are so far from having that popular tendency, that they would at this day be regarded as a counter-revolution. What a rage these demagogues have for resting for support upon Raynal and Rousseau! Senseless Beings! ye have never read them! Every page of their writings contains their condemnation." Finally, the defenders of the radical Constitution of 1793, whom Drouet represented as patriots, were categorized by the four sheets as "that aristocratic league, the most cruel that has ever yet appeared upon the earth".

Once the principal conspirators were under lock and key, the Executive Directory issued two communiqués which found their way to the American press. A study of the documentary evidence concerning the accused, said the Directors, had left a deep impression on the Council of Five Hundred, of which Drouet was a member. Babeuf, they said, had confessed everything, but Drouet had denied everything. They added that the Council would name a committee to examine the evidence and to report on the form and manner of judicial procedure.³ Thus the American press, like its French model, assigned

¹ Copie de l'instruction personnelle au représentant du peuple Drouet, pp. 202-204, 232-233, 244-245. See Gazette of the United States (Philadelphia), July 13, August 6, September 1 and October 20, 1796; The New York Herald, August 10, 1796; The New York Minerva, August 8 and November 3, 1796, and April 28, 1797; The Boston Mercury, August 5 and 12, 1796; Bache's Philadelphia Aurora, April 17, May 2 and August 2, 1797; South Carolina State Gazette (Charleston), October 19, 1796.

² The New York Herald, August 10, 1796; The New York Minerva, August 8, 1796; Gazette of the United States, August 6, 1796; The Massachusetts Mercury (Boston), August 12, 1796.

³ Le Directoire exécutif aux Français, (Paris,) 2 prairial an IV (May 21, 1796); and Compte-rendu du Directoire exécutif aux Conseils relatif à la conspiration

Drouet one of the highest roles in the Babouvist conspiracy. Because of his official position the Executive Directors proceeded to prepare a state trial of all the accused before a High Court of Justice. This plan they held to even after Drouet's escape from prison with the collusion of Director Barras. From the official viewpoint, his getaway did not free the other accused from the jurisdiction of the High Court.

II

Before turning to the portrayal of Babeuf in the American press let us look briefly at its account of the Marquis d'Antonelle, a member of the central committee of the Babouvist organization. He had had a commanding part in the stormy politics of the Convention, having presided at the trials of Marie Antoinette and of proscribed Girondins. It is not clear from the accounts whether Americans were aware of the high place he held in the conspiracy. They put in the same category the *Journal des hommes libres*, to which he steadily contributed, with the two well known Babouvist papers, *Le Tribun du peuple* and *L'Eclaireur du peuple*. The linkage amounted to a serious charge, for according to the printed story both *Le Tribun* and *L'Eclaireur* "formally demand the overthrow of the Constitution and of the Directory. Comparing the measures of the existing government with those of the old court, they apply to its measures the appellations of traitors and miscreants, and predict that they will die on the scaffold. *L'Eclaireur du peuple*, in particular, declares all the members of the commission of eleven to be infamous, and stiles the constitution prepared by them and accepted by a great majority of the people a code of slavery." By contrast it proclaimed the Robespierrists "the avengers of the human race", invoked "their sacred names" and said "that the Revolution is scarcely begun".¹

In other words, Antonelle was charged with guilt by association. In further proof at least four American sheets cited a French-inspired story to the effect that in the above-named *Journal des hommes libres* Antonelle had defended the two Babouvist papers and assailed the Executive Directors. He was reported saying that *L'Eclaireur* was uncommonly dedicated to the cause of the people; that the government of the Directory was a set of monsters and tyrants more offensive than Nero and Caligula; that the nation's armies should march on the capital, sweep out the governing group, abolish the Constitution of

qui vient d'être découverte, Paris, 23 floréal an IV; also The Massachusetts Mercury, August 5, 1796.

¹ Aurora, General Advertiser (Philadelphia), May 12, 1796; South Carolina State Gazette, May 31, 1796.

1795, divide the land and restore the system of the Robespierrists.¹ Two months later it was announced in America that seals had been placed on the *Journal des hommes libres* for having been accessory to the conspiracy and defended "the cause of Babeuf, Drouet and others".²

The true culprit in official opinion was Gracchus Babeuf, and American newspapers were quick to accept the French judgment. Accordingly they cast a lurid light upon him. He was drawn as a bloodthirsty terrorist and an impostor; he was called a royalist agent, unscrupulous, self-seeking and motivated by ungovernable ambition. His character was likened to that of the lowest. He was said to be devoid of morals and loyalty; he was placed at the head of a band of criminals and made the author of a monstrous plan to set up a reign of terror more frightful than Robespierre's. To exemplify his audacity and madness the *Aurora* of Philadelphia translated for its readers twelve articles of the *Analyse de la doctrine de Babeuf, proscrié par le directoire exécutif pour avoir dit la vérité*, one of the principal documents of the Babouvists. The intention was obviously to alarm Americans and to cause them to shudder at the thought that such principles might find converts in the United States. Here is the way the *Analyse* was introduced by the *Aurora*:

"It is not in vain that we have denounced the plans with which the anarchists and terrorists have audaciously threatened us for several days past.

To give an idea of these audacious plans, we publish the following paper, which has been profusely printed by them within these few days, in the suburbs:

Analysis of the doctrine of Babeuf, a Tribune of the people, proscribed by the Executive Directory for having told the truth".³

Then followed the text of the first twelve articles which epitomized the credo of the Babouvists. We have no way of knowing how it was received by readers. Probably they regarded its principles as singular or questionable at least, for social criticism in America at the end of the eighteenth century never went the length of the social levellers or Diggers in the English Revolution or of the Babouvists in the

¹ Gazette of the United States, May 12, 1796; *Aurora*, General Advertiser, May 12, 1796; Federal Gazette and Baltimore Daily Advertiser, May 18, 1796; The Argus or Greenleaf's New Daily Advertiser (New York), May 11, 1796.

² See, e.g., The Herald, A Gazette for the Country (New York), July 17, 1796. For the relation of the *Journal des hommes libres* to the Babouvists see the article of Max Fajn in *International Review of Social History*, XIX (1974), pp. 228-244.

³ June 25, 1796.

French Revolution. It did not look to communism as the alternative to the existing order, but sought the ideal social relations in a community of small owners. Two social critics may be cited as examples: William Whiting, physician and magistrate, defender of Daniel Shays's insurrection; and William Manning, an untutored innkeeper in Massachusetts.

Significantly the first used the pseudonym Gracchus to identify himself with the lowly. The sense in which he used it implied a struggle between the haves and have-nots. But there was a big gap between Whiting's and Babeuf's understandings of the class war. The first viewed it as "a never ending" conflict between a rich aristocracy and the vast number striving for equal properties; the second, as a struggle "between exploiters and exploited", which would come to an end when the existing establishment was replaced by another in which all worked and contributed to the general good. In other words, Whiting aimed at a society of small owners; Babeuf, at common ownership, common labor and enjoyment.¹ Whiting's aim was shared by William Manning. It would be achieved, he argued in his *Key of Liberty*, through the education and organization of the producers of the country's wealth. They would be the architects of an egalitarian society. It was a coincidence that Manning outlined his plan the year the Babouvists were convicted.²

Let us return to the *Analyse de la doctrine de Babeuf*. To cite all the articles would only burden the present text; but a number may be conveniently introduced to illustrate the kind of egalitarianism contained in the *Doctrine*. The first article reiterated the eighteenth-century theory of natural rights, but with a slant that promised to surpass the ideal equality of Dr Whiting, for instance. "Nature", the article read, "has given to every man an equal right to the enjoyment of all properties." Article two suggested the direction and goal, namely, "to augment, by the concurrences of all, every common enjoyment". The implication, here, the stiff translation notwithstanding, was the obligation of all to labor, which article four combined with enjoyments to read: "Labours and enjoyments ought to be common to all." Why? one may ask. Article five answers: "There is oppression when one wears himself out by labour and wants every thing, while another has abundance and does nothing." Therefore,

¹ On Dr Whiting and his ideas, see Stephen T. Riley, "Dr. William Whiting and Shays' Rebellion", in: *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, October 1956, pp. 119-166; on Babeuf and Babouvism see my *Essays in Political and Intellectual History* (New York, 1955, reprint 1969), ch. V.

² William Manning, *The Key of Liberty* (Billerica, Mass., 1922). It was published by Samuel Eliot Morison with a Foreword on Manning.

continues article six, he is guilty of a crime who exclusively appropriates the products of land and industry, because, says article seven, "In a true society there should be neither rich nor poor." And the rich who "will not give up their superfluities to the indigent", declares article eight, "are the enemies of the people". For all these reasons and others, not considered here, the *Analyse* argued that the French Revolution still remained to be completed.

The document's line of reasoning was simple, dangerously appealing to Americans of the 1790's. For if Whiting and Manning voiced the political thinking of many unlettered, there was always the chance that in the prevailing atmosphere of the time Babeuf's teachings might be echoed among them. Republicans of Whiting's and Manning's persuasions were alarmed by the Federalist domestic and foreign policies which, they charged, were surrendering the nation to the rich and leading it into the arms of Great Britain against its former ally; and they asked themselves whether this apprehensive course could not be reversed, and if so by what method. That recommended in the *Analyse* was perilous. It might burst into insurrection and possibly inflame into revolution. Insurrection had been tried by Shays and failed. But that did not discourage further outbreaks, such as the Whiskey Rebellion, which Manning called "The Pittsburg[h] insurrection".¹ No wonder the *Aurora* prefaced the *Analyse* so disparagingly. The fact that the document appeared, to our knowledge, only in one newspaper may be of some significance.

On the other hand, Babeuf's open letter to the Directory, *Babeuf au Directoire exécutif*, was widely publicized by the American press.² For here American journalists believed they had found ample proof of his audacity and even of his duplicity. He told the Executive Directors that he feared neither death nor transportation, that he welcomed a fate like that of the Sidneys and Barneveltdts. Such a destiny would only raise altars to him. Though behind prison bars, he was presumptuously daring, it was said, writing as if he wielded immense power that could challenge the authority of the Directory. He called upon it to quash the whole case and declare that there had really been no serious conspiracy. In return he guaranteed it safety against the wrath of the French democrats.

A data bank was in the making for a portrayal of Babeuf and his

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

² Suite de la copie des pièces saisies, pp. 235-239; also in *Débats du procès instruit par la Haute-Cour de Justice contre Drouet, Baboeuf et autres*, II, pp. 204-207. It was summarized by many newspapers. See, e.g., *The Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), August 1, 1796; *The Massachusetts Mercury*, August 5, 1796; *Greenleaf's New York Journal and Patriotic Register*, July 29, 1796.

character. American newspaper owners were generous with columns on Babeuf's interrogation and the *Acte d'insurrection*.¹ The verbatim account of the questions and answers were too sensational to be missed. Let us pause to look at a portion of the examination reported in the press. After a number of questions regarding his paper, *Le Tribun du peuple*, he was asked whether he had preached the restoration of the Constitution of 1793 "and the annihilation of that of 1795". He replied that he had always preached liberty against tyranny. His answer to the question whether his object had been the overthrow of the government was that, having been convinced of its oppressive character, he would do everything in his power to destroy it. Questioned on the means he intended to employ, he said: "All the means which might be lawful against Tyrants." Pressed further, he added with some circumspection: "the destruction of the oppressive government, murder aside, would have been sufficient". He refused to comment on what did not concern him personally. When he was asked to name his accomplices he expressed indignation and told the questioner: "I do not know why the man who interrogates me supposes me so weak of understanding as not to be capable of perceiving the insidiousness of this question."

This turned the interrogation to the *Acte d'insurrection*. Babeuf did not deny its authenticity, but he disclaimed sole responsibility for it and for determining the date of its outbreak; "had it depended on my wish alone", he answered, "the first favorable moment would have been seized for the overthrow of Tyranny, and delivering the people from the miseries that overwhelm them." The principal, directing articles of the *Acte d'insurrection* were given full columns as eminently newsworthy.

Babeuf's name received so much prominence in the internationally advertised conspiracy that people were curious to know his history and his character. A true biography of him did not exist at this time nor for years afterwards. In Great Britain he was considered sensational enough to merit a brief and malicious description in two bulky volumes on prominent personages of the French Revolution.² It was too far removed from the facts to be of any use to the historian. It granted

¹ E.g., The Massachusetts Mercury, August 5 and 12, 1796; The Eastern Herald (Portland, Me.), August 22, 1796; The New York Argus, August 1 and 8, 1796; Gazette of the United States, August 8, 1796; Greenleaf's New York Journal, August 2 and 9, 1796; The Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette, August 16, 1796; The Lancaster Journal, August 19, 1796; Carlisle Weekly Gazette (Pa.), August 17, 1796.

² [John Adolphus,] Biographical Anecdotes of the Founders of the French Republic and of other Eminent Characters Who Have Distinguished Themselves in the Progress of the Revolution (London, 1797), I, pp. 203-204.

parenthetically that Babeuf must have possessed some extraordinary talents, either in council or in action: "Or else it is not to be supposed, that such men as Drouet, Robert Lindet, Antonelle, and Felix Lepelletier, would have chosen him for their leader." In America, the *Daily Advertiser* had a story on him, translated from the *Courrier de l'Egalité*, which the well-known *Gazette of the United States* printed in full.¹ This biography, longer than that appearing in Great Britain, attempted to link Babeuf to the events of the Revolution. But the full effect was a distortion. Nowhere, as far as we know, neither in Great Britain nor in the United States, was any notice taken of Antonelle's description of his character given before the High Court sitting at Vendôme: a man of selfless aims, motivated by the desire to gain the people's happiness in the face of persecution, poverty and aspersion; a courageous man, with profound convictions and inflamed with zeal to fulfill his end; a man of transparent sincerity, rendered unhappy by his deep devotion to an almost hopeless cause and by his persistent meditation on the ills of society which he could not remedy.²

The biography of Babeuf, taken from an official French source, and made available to Americans, bespoke a spirit of outright enmity. The opening paragraph was short and innocuous: "Francis Noel Babeuf was born in the commune of St. Quentin; he is about 36 years old; his father, a poor man employed in the excise upon salt, had him taught to write, and he writes extremely well." A bit of praise was inserted later: Babeuf, said the anonymous author, "did not want for penetration, he applied himself diligently, and became a pretty good feudist". Otherwise he was belabored with abuse and calumny so much so that the final picture had little resemblance to the original. He was disreputable and dishonest, the story had it, and he was unmanageable and quarrelsome. He had fallen out with every one of his employers, had engaged in many lawsuits and lost them all. A deceitful Babeuf thus emerged. Here are two examples cited in the account:

"A lady who resided at Paris, entrusted him with the removal of the rent-roll of a small fief which she possessed near Roye. He performed it, received the arrearages, rendered no account, was sued by the lady and lost his cause. The former prior of St. Aubin, near Roye, entrusted him with the renewal of the registry of his priory – he performed it, engaged in a law suit with the prior, and lost his cause."

¹ August 5, 1796.

² *Journal de la Haute-Cour de Justice et l'Echo des hommes libres*, No 31, 6 Ventôse, An V, Supplément.

Even his morals and marital life did not escape tarnish. The public read that during his restless days of wrangling with employers, "he had to marry a servant girl whom he had got with child". Nothing was said of his abiding affection for his wife or of his enduring loyalty to his family. The biographer ended his portrayal with these words: "Such, Citizen, is the man who, when he was a servant, did not surely doubt, but that he should one day have played the part of a great conspirator and that he should have offered to the Directory to treat with them, as 'from one authority to another'."¹

The above history of Babeuf was calculated to arouse mockery. News of his and his fellow conspirators' arrest had the complete approbation of the American press. Everything bearing on them was deemed newsworthy by large and small sheets in the United States. For example, the two addresses issued by the Directory, the one to the people and the other to the Council of Five Hundred, in which it postured itself as the heroic and vigilant defender of the country's security against the machinations of "a band of thieves and assassins", were given ample attention.² Citing from the conspirators' *Acte d'insurrection*, the Directory underscored the aims of the would-be insurgents: the death of the governing body and general staff of the army of the interior; the restoration of the Constitution of 1793; and the general pillage of the capital, including large and small business houses. The addresses were supplemented with a report of the debate they caused. Portions of it were given almost verbatim, especially those where deputies were inclined to regard the conspiracy as the dire event which clarified the mistakes of the Revolution since the Constituent Assembly.³

This reporting, it may be pointed out, was in thorough keeping with the anti-French sentiment in the United States, mounting since the signing of the Jay Treaty. The anti-Gallic wave swept along many

¹ For a good biographic summation of Babeuf's early years, see Claude Mazauric, *Babeuf et la conspiration pour l'égalité* (Paris, 1962), pp. 55-71. The most complete account is by V. M. Dalin, *Grakch Babef* (Moscow, 1963).

² The Connecticut Courant, July 11, 1796; Greenleaf's New York Journal, July 15, 1796; Gazette of the United States, July 13, 1796; The Columbian Centinel (Boston), July 9, 1796; The Salem Gazette (Mass.), July 12, 1796; United States Chronicle, July 14, 1796. For the titles of the two addresses see p. 98, note 3.

³ Among the newspapers that published or summarized the *Acte d'insurrection* and related pieces are: The Eastern Herald, August 22, 1796; The Massachusetts Mercury, August 5 and 12, 1796; Greenleaf's New York Journal, August 2 and 9, 1796; New York Argus, August 1, 1796; Gazette of the United States, August 8, 1796; The Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette, August 16, 1796; The Carlisle Weekly Gazette, November 2, 1796; South Carolina State Gazette, November 2, 1796; The Lancaster Journal, June 17, 1796.

Americans, who were led to believe that what was happening in France might well happen in the United States if the democratic forces were permitted to get stronger and the common man given greater participation in the government. For such was the ill-boding consequence of revolution and democracy. America therefore should take preventive steps if it wished to avoid a holocaust of terror, such as Babeuf and his accomplices had planned to carry through in France.

The exhortation of the *Massachusetts Mercury*, written by one who signed himself "A True American", might have been endorsed by many of his countrymen at the time. "*Independence*", he declared, "was obtained at too dear a rate to be bartered away for the aggrandizement of citizens. Let us reject *foreign influence* as the most poisonous weed that could take root in our land; no salutary plant can flourish near it. Where we have the sad example of so many nations staring us in the face, we shall be criminal indeed to lose our liberties by the same means."¹ And the same *Mercury* exclaimed many months later: "Revolution! What a change does this word bring with it! Ah Revolution! ruin, misfortune, atrocities, all these thou canst effect; everything is in thy power."² It is well known that the swell of apprehension in the United States culminated in the Alien and Sedition Acts and hastened military preparations for a war with France.

This climate of opinion may account for the publication in the American press of the severe measures taken by the Directory to exhibit its vigilance against a possible resurgence of popular protest. Even comparatively small sheets like the bi-weekly *New York Herald: A Gazette for the Country*,³ with which Noah Webster was associated, and the *Eastern Herald* of Portland, Maine,⁴ published the French decrees which prohibited antigovernment propaganda, popular assemblies that were considered provocative to incitement, and the wearing of any other badge of distinction than the national cockade. This was as much as to tell the American readers that preventive action against the populace was both admirable and necessary if another revolution was to be precluded.

III

After the wide publicity given to the conspirators' *Acte d'insurrection* and their leader no news regarding them was given headline importance by American newspapers, save the tragic *Affaire de Grenelle*. The

¹ August 5, 1796.

² May 19, 1797.

³ April 6 and July 27, 1796.

⁴ July 4, 1796.

proceedings of the Vendôme trial received little or no notice. Not a word was printed about the behavior of the prisoners in court, or the long defense of Babeuf, a volume in length, or the altercation between the judges and the accused. Only small items were inserted on the Court's verdict, which condemned seven to deportation, convicted four for contumacy, and sentenced Babeuf and Darthé to death.¹

The episode of Grenelle would not merit space here were it not that the bulk of the American press, still spoon-fed by the French, linked it to the conspiracy. The police reported that though the guilty had been put behind bars to be tried, many of their friends and sympathizers were about, charging the government with royalist leanings; that to divert public indignation from the crimes of the conspirators, they shouted royalist slogans, distributed white cockades in order to become the center of a movement with the object of rescuing Babeuf and his accomplices and inaugurating the terror called for by the *Acte d'insurrection*; and that for this purpose they conspired to win the troops at the camp of Grenelle. Fortunately, said the report, the Directory was informed in advance. The plotters were cut down. Of the hundred or more seized, many were condemned to death or deportation.² Such was the story as it was communicated by the chief of police to the Directory. Not a hint in the American press that the incident at Grenelle might have been fomented by agents of the government to wipe out potential opposition from the left, while it was preparing the Vendôme trial.

After this bloody event, the names of the Babouvists and their projected insurrection disappeared from the American press, save when factional disputes were said to endanger the position of the Directory. Then its opponents were likened to "anarchists" and their attacks on the government to "a burnt offering to the name of Gracchus Babeuf".³ Otherwise the Babouvists were forgotten. They were replaced by Bonaparte and his Italian campaign.

¹ The *Minerva* (New York), April 28, 1797; *Aurora*, May 2 and August 2, 1797; *Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), April 15, 1797; *Carlisle Weekly Gazette*, August 3, 1797; *The Western Star*, August 7, 1797; *The Albany Gazette*, August 7, 1797.

² *New York Herald: A Gazette for the Country*, October 22, 1796; *The Massachusetts Mercury*, October 21, 1796; *Gazette of the United States*, October 20, 1796; also *Aurora*, October 4, 1796; *The Connecticut Courant*, October 31, 1796; *The Western Star*, November 7, 1796; *The Lancaster Journal*, October 28, 1796; *The Virginia Herald* (Fredericksburg), November 1, 1796; *Norfolk Herald* (Va.), October 31, 1796.

³ See, e.g. *The Providence Gazette* (R.I.), September 16, 1797.