“There must be neither rich nor poor”: The Role of Economic Inequality in the French Revolution

by

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B.A., University of Washington, 2019

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of History

We acknowledge and respect the lək ʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 was accompanied by widespread demands for equality. While much has been written on the social privileges and political inequalities denounced by revolutionary leaders, relatively little has been said on the economic inequality that plagued eighteenth-century France and was a central issue for the urban and rural poor. This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining the role of economic inequality in the French Revolution, both as it shaped and was shaped by the events of the revolutionary decade. Preliminary *cahiers*, popular petitions, legislative records, and political pamphlets make it possible to illustrate both the attitudes and demands of the lower classes and the reactions of the middle-class revolutionary leadership, and reveal that economic inequality had significant material and ideological impacts. Although little progress was made toward actually reducing inequality, popular demands and legislative responses created a framework for the modern welfare state which would be realized in the post-revolutionary world. Ideologically, lower-class efforts to achieve economic equality were distilled in their most radical form by Gracchus Babeuf, whose Conspiracy of Equals would become an important forbearer for the socialist and communist movements of the nineteenth century. These institutions and ideologies remain prevalent in our own society, and studying the role of economic inequality in the French Revolution illuminates their origins and subsequent development.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of an almost-countless number of people. First and foremost, thank you to my family: my mom, who still insists on handing me every hotel brochure for the history section; my dad, who has proudly written more words in instruction manuals than he has read in books; all of my grandparents, who have taught me so many lessons throughout my life; and my siblings, who have kept me laughing and smiling the past two years. Even when all of you did not understand what I was studying or why, you have given me love and encouragement to pursue my interests. Thank you also to my partner Bridget, for countless hours of phone or zoom calls full of suggestions, laughs, rants, plans, or just chats. This thesis would not have been possible without you listening (or even pretending to listen) as I talked through which chapter, section, or part that I was going to work on that day.

I have been fortunate in my life to have the support of a great network of friends. To my friends back in Washington and across the US, thank you for the virtual gatherings that kept me sane and grounded. To the friends I have made in the UVic history department, thank you for the hikes, dog-walks, writing sessions, even the Canadian trivia games. You all made me laugh, and I am glad I could return the favor as I tried to guess (apparently obvious) Canadian artists or hockey teams. And to all my young and energetic friends on the UVic Ultimate team, thank you for giving me a space to get outside and take my mind off of writing for a few hours per week. Thank you also to my landlady Joan, who helped me move to a new city (and country) and gave me a perfect space to work.

I also want to thank all of the instructors who have gotten me to this point. Thank you to my teachers at Auburn Riverside, including (but absolutely not limited to) Mr. Sumner, Mr. Wright, Mr. Monsen, and Mrs. Ellis-Sumner, for guiding me and inspiring my love of history

and learning in general. Thank you also to my professors from the University of Washington. Dr. Walker, Dr. Jonas, Dr. Gowing, and Dr. Schmidt, the many meetings we had both about classes and in preparation for graduate school were invaluable in setting me up for this process. Lastly, thank you to my committee member, Dr. Alexander, for his work and insightful contributions on my thesis, and to my fantastic supervisor, Dr. Walshaw, who has gone above and beyond to make sure not only that I completed this thesis, but also that I had an amazing experience at UVic and that I learned everything necessary to continue studying history in the future.

While you all deserve more than the few words I can give you here, know that I am immensely grateful to each of you for your contributions to this thesis. Thank you!

Introduction – Economics in the Historiography of the French Revolution

It is difficult to dispute that inequality was a major factor in the French Revolution. Expressions of public opinion like the *cahiers* and pamphlets, lower-class mobilizations from the Great Fear to the *sans-culottes* movement, and government policies ranging from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen to the General Maximum of 1793 all had in common a commitment to the revolutionary principle of *égalité*. But what kind of inequalities was the revolution seeking to address? What was the substance of the equality that the French and their governments pursued from 1789 to 1799? Numerous studies have been written on political inequality in the revolution, explaining how voting and citizenship rights (limited as they were) turned France from an autocracy to a democracy.[1] Similar research on social inequality has centered on the abolition of the nobility and other forms of hereditary superiority.[2] To this list can be added more recent works on gender, race, and religion (to name a few examples) which have traced these forms of inequality throughout the Revolution.

Despite this preponderance of research, one area that remains noticeably understudied is economic inequality. Poverty was rampant in eighteenth-century France, and economic issues often motivated popular demands for political and social equality which have been studied in their own right. Thus when the deputies of the National Assembly abolished feudalism in 1789, they were responding as much or more to a starving peasantry who could not afford to pay seigneurial taxes as they were to a disgruntled bourgeoisie who wanted to eliminate hereditary social privileges. Popular and government efforts to reduce economic inequality shifted French poor relief from small, Church-administered charity programs in the *ancien régime*, to a

[1] For an overview of recent political works, see Paul Hanson, "Political History of the French Revolution since 1989," *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 3 (2019): 584–92.
[2] See, for example, Colin Lucas, "Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution," *Past & Present* 60 (August 1973): 84-126.

legitimate, albeit moderate, organized welfare program in the early revolution, to a utopian vision of financial and property redistribution in the radical period. Although these radical goals never came to fruition, the organized system of public welfare that emerged was a major step forward, and dreams of redistribution re-emerged in later socialist and communist movements. These changes were a result of economic pressures and the related demands of the lower classes. By mobilizing the urban and rural poor, economic inequality played a major role in shaping French politics and society throughout the revolutionary period and beyond.

Although economic inequality specifically has been understudied, the past century of revolutionary historiography has contributed important new works on economics more broadly in the French Revolution. Beginning in the 1920s, Marxist historians dominated revolutionary historiography with an interpretation that included a socioeconomic class framework. This framework allowed for detailed studies on the different class-based interactions in the Revolution, but struggled to accommodate non-class or intra-class topics. In the 1950s and 1960s major challenges emerged, de-centering class in favor of politics, ideology, gender, and more. This "revisionist" view, as it became known, inspired an explosion of new studies and perspectives that expanded our understanding of the Revolution, while at the same time undermining the cohesiveness of revolutionary historiography. A Marxist historian in 2014 accused revisionism of seeking to discredit the Marxist interpretation "without itself being able to articulate a convincing alternative," while as early as 1987 a revisionist historian described the field as "splintered and atomized." [3]

[3] Henry Heller, "Bankers, Finance Capital and the French Revolutionary Terror (1791-94)," *Historical Materialism* 22, no. 3–4 (2014): 172-216, 173. Jack Censer, "The Coming of a New Interpretation of the French Revolution?," *Journal of Social History* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1987): 295-309, 296.

One promising trend to emerge from this clamor of ideas has been an increased focus on economics in the revolution. Revisionist historians have written detailed works linking economic status to engagement in political or ideological movements, and neo-Marxists have expanded their class-based framework by acknowledging class as a formative process incorporating economics, politics, society, and more. Turning this economic research toward a focus on economic inequality and revolutionary efforts to address it has the potential to bring together disparate social and political understandings of the revolution. Rather than try to propose an entirely new framework for revolutionary historiography, this paper suggests that an economic focus, found in both Marxist and revisionist works, represents a promising middle ground in the "splintered" historiography of the French Revolution. In order to best understand the potential of this economic focus, this chapter will trace the development of the orthodox Marxist interpretation and the revisionist critique before analyzing those more recent works that study the revolution through specific economic topics.

The Marxist Interpretation

The orthodox or classic Marxist interpretation is rooted in the works of nineteenth century socialists like Karl Marx, Albert Mathiez, and Jean Jaurès. Solidified by Georges Lefebvre in the 1920s and 1930s and bolstered by the research of Ernest Labrousse and Albert Soboul, this framework examines the causes and effects of the revolution in strictly class-based terms, which both highlighted economic issues and constrained discussion of them to how they shaped class identities. In its general form, the Marxist interpretation presents the revolution as

the inevitable collapse of France's aristocratic feudal order at the hands of a rising bourgeoisie, who implemented capitalist policies to further their commercial and political interests.[4]

Although Marx himself did not lay out a complete Marxist framework for understanding the French Revolution, his mid-nineteenth century theories were heavily influenced by the events of just a few decades prior. In turn, the Marxist interpreters of the revolution adopted many of their central tenets directly from Marx's writings. The most fundamental of these was the view of the revolution as a bourgeois revolt against feudalism. Marx, in his 1848 "Manifesto of the Communist Party," identified "the modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society," and which "historically, has played a most revolutionary part." [5] While Marx was speaking in general terms, he applied these concepts to the French Revolution in particular throughout his other works.[6] Thus, when revolutionaries denounced and abolished the privileges of the nobility, Marxist historians have identified a French bourgeois class overthrowing the old feudal order. Marx went further, explaining that "the establishment of Modern Industry and of the world market […] in the modern representative state" marked the victory of the bourgeoisie.[7] With its embrace of republicanism and capitalist free trade policies, the French Revolution was a perfect model for the victory of bourgeois capitalism over the feudalism of the *ancien régime*.

In Marx's understanding, the Revolution played a fundamental role in the progression of class conflict. Having dismantled the feudal order, the bourgeoisie revealed the blueprint for overthrowing their own system and "also called into existence the men who are to wield those

[4] For a thorough and critical Marxist review of the original social interpretation, see Jack Amariglio and Bruce Norton, "Marxist Historians and the Question of Class in the French Revolution," *History and Theory* 30, no. 1 (February 1991): 37–55.
[5] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Selected Works*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Seventh Edition (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986): 31-63, 36-37.
[6] For example, see Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Daniel De Leon (New York: International Publishing Company, 1897). 12.
[7] Marx and Engels, "Manifesto," 37.

weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians." [8] For the Marxist interpreters, the French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution not just because it broke down feudalism and established capitalism, but because such a revolution was a necessary prerequisite for the eventual proletarian uprising. This predictive element was central to Marx's writings in the mid-nineteenth century and would fundamentally shape the writings and beliefs of later Marxist interpreters of the revolution.

As Marx's ideas spread in France and the rest of Europe, scholars of the French Revolution adopted a Marxist framework. In the late nineteenth century, the historian Albert Mathiez and the socialist politician Jean Jaurès began interpreting the revolution in class terms, specifically identifying its promise of a proletarian future.[9] But the leading proponent of the Marxist interpretation would be Georges Lefebvre, who in the 1920s and 1930s made Marxism into the dominant revolutionary paradigm. Inspired by Marx, Mathiez, and Jaurès, Lefebvre laid out his class-based view most thoroughly in his famous 1939 work *Quatre-vingt-neuf*, released in English as *The Coming of the French Revolution* in 1947.[10]

Lefebvre's most prominent contribution to revolutionary historiography was his work on the rural poor. In his monumental 1924 thesis "*Les paysans du Nord pendant la Révolution française*," Lefebvre revealed a peasantry that had its own priorities and accomplishments during the Revolution.[11] Whereas Marx had asserted the primacy of urban society and claimed that the subjection of "the country to the rule of the towns" was part of the bourgeois revolution,

[8] Ibid., 18.
[9] François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 7.
[10] Robert Palmer, "Preface," in Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, trans. Robert Palmer (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1947): v-xvii, xi.
[11] Georges Lefebvre, *Les paysans du Nord pendant la Révolution française* (Lille: Marquant, 1924).

Lefebvre's research led him to distinguish between the urban and rural poor.[12] He summarized his framework in the introduction to *The Coming of the French Revolution*, explaining that

> The first act of the Revolution, in 1788, consisted in a triumph of the aristocracy […] But, after having paralyzed the royal power which upheld its own social preeminence, the aristocracy opened the way to the bourgeois revolution, then to the popular revolution in the cities and finally to the revolution of the peasants – and found itself buried under the ruins of the Old Regime.[13]

Lefebvre thus agreed with Marx that the revolution progressed from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie to the common people, but the four-stage framework created space for his own findings on the significant role of the peasantry. This model was immensely valuable. By making the aristocracy, bourgeoisie, urban poor, and rural peasantry into four individual objects of study, Lefebvre opened the door for a host of detailed Marxist studies on previously underrecognized actors, especially the urban and rural poor.

Importantly, however, Lefebvre's was still a bourgeois revolution. Discussing the social classes of the revolution, he clarified that "of these the most important, the one which led and mainly benefited from the Revolution, was the bourgeoisie." [14] He went further in his concluding remarks, stating that "the bourgeoisie laid the definitive foundations of the new society." [15] Although his framework offered hope for a future proletarian movement, Lefebvre was very clear that the revolution itself was shaped by and for the bourgeoisie. Even in his discussion of the lower classes, Lefebvre explained that urban workers' revolts were "to the advantage of the bourgeoisie" and that the peasantry, despite their role in ending feudalism, remained opposed to the modern notions of property and capitalism advanced in the revolution.[16] Just as Marx had

[12] Marx and Engels, "Manifesto," 39.
[13] Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, 3.
[14] Ibid., 41.
[15] Ibid., 214.
[16] Ibid., 101, 151; Lefebvre, *Les paysans du Nord*, 880.

asserted the primacy of the urban bourgeoisie, Lefebvre and other Marxist historians subjected the goals and achievements of the urban and rural poor to the overarching bourgeois revolution.

An important aspect of the Marxist model is the idea of a systemic economic crisis in France that made the revolution not only possible but inevitable. Lefebvre, for instance, pointed to an "insurmountable" combination of poor harvests, trade disruptions, and failed policies creating the economic conditions for revolution.[17] The most thorough evidence for this theory, however, came from the research of the economic historian Ernest Labrousse in the 1930s and 1940s.[18] In his 1933 work *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIII^e siècle*, Labrousse combined his interest in long-term economic cycles with his class-based view of historical events. Through a detailed examination of patterns in the prices of commodities like wheat, wine, and wool, as well as incomes, rents, and taxes, Labrousse compiled statistical evidence of an outdated feudal economy that could no longer support the needs of the French people, particularly the poor farmers who made up the majority of the population. The conjunction of long-term price rises and short-term crop failures could not be averted under the feudal structure and, in his view, made the revolution unavoidable.[19] Labrousse bolstered the Marxist interpretation with thorough collections of evidence, and solidified the view of the revolution as inevitable.

After Lefebvre, the most prominent Marxist revolutionary historian was Albert Soboul. As Chair of the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne from 1967 to 1982, Soboul was the leading defender of the classic Marxist view against revisionist challenges in the second

[17] Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, trans. Joan White (London: NLB, 1973).
[18] Louis Cullen, "Labrousse, the Annales School, and Histoire sans Frontières," *Journal of European Economic History* 34, no. 1 (2005): 309-50, 309.
[19] Ernest Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIII^e Siècle*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Paris, France: Librairie Dalloz, 1933), 617-18.

half of the twentieth century. At the same time, Soboul produced some of the most detailed research to date on the popular revolution, most notably his 1958 doctoral thesis, abridged and translated into English in 1972 as *The Sans-Culottes: The Popular Movement and Revolutionary Government, 1793-1794*.[20]

The Sans-Culottes explored the revolution "from below" by examining the Parisian urban poor from 1792 to 1794, while also seeking to address apparent contradictions in the Marxist framework.[21] Using Lefebvre's "four revolutions" model, Soboul explained why a bourgeois revolution temporarily implemented anti-capitalist policies like the Maximum by attributing these policies to the pressures of a politically-active urban poor.[22] While he credited the *sans-culottes* with radicalizing the revolution, Soboul struggled to clearly define the *sans-culottes*. He eventually settled on a combination of socioeconomic class and political (anti-aristocratic) affiliations, and cited this disunity as one reason that the *sans-culottes'* coalition was ultimately unsustainable in the face of the dominant bourgeoisie.[23] Like Lefebvre's peasantry, Soboul was able to present the *sans-culottes* as a historically significant and impactful revolutionary force while also inscribing them within the overarching structure of the bourgeois revolution. The relative incoherence of the *sans-culottes* as a class, however, made it difficult to fit them within a class-based framework. As a result, Soboul concluded somewhat confusingly that "although the *sans-culottes* lacked class awareness, one cannot deny the existence of a certain class consciousness among wage earners." [24] *The Sans-Culottes* painted one of the most detailed

[20] Albert Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes: The Popular Movement and Revolutionary Government 1793-1794*, trans. Remy Inglis Hall (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), xv.
[21] Ibid., 1.
[22] Ibid., 53-54.
[23] Ibid., 23-24, 259.
[24] Ibid., 258.

portraits to date of the revolutionary Parisian poor and addressed some inconsistencies, but it also revealed the limits of an interpretation defined by class.

Revisionism and the Marxist Response

While Lefebvre, Labrousse, Soboul, and others continued to produce works within the Marxist framework, other historians began to identify inconsistencies and limitations within their theory. Beginning with his 1954 lecture, "The Myth of the French Revolution," the historian Alfred Cobban systematically questioned two fundamental pillars of the Marxist interpretation: the revolution's feudal origins and its class-based motivations.[25] He acknowledged that revolutionaries believed they were destroying feudalism, but after examining the system of taxes and privileges that existed in 1789, Cobban concluded that it was "historically unjustifiable" for historians to equate these "seigneurial rights" with the larger (and largely defunct) medieval structure of feudalism.[26] On a similar note, Cobban contrasted the Marxists' relatively homogenous view of a "revolutionary" bourgeoisie with his own analysis that revealed "widely divergent levels of wealth and status" and various levels of support or opposition toward the revolution.[27] By drawing attention to these inconsistencies and accusing the Marxists of selecting and framing evidence to fit their theory, Cobban opened the door to a range of new studies that de-centered class and focused instead on issues of political culture, Enlightenment ideology, gender, and more.[28]

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[25] Gwynne Lewis, "Introduction," in Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, second edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1999): xiii-xlix, xiii.
[26] Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 27, 33, 36.
[27] Ibid., 55.
[28] For example, see Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*; Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984); and Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, *Ideas in Context* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Although some Marxists, such as Albert Soboul, continued to dismiss revisionism and produce works within the classic social interpretation model, a number of Marxist historians took up the challenges of Cobban, François Furet, and other prominent revisionists and constructed a new class model for the revolution. These neo-Marxists, while maintaining their commitment to class conflict as foundational to the Revolution, adopted a more open view of class as an intersectional process that combined forces of economics, power, and culture. This response did not re-establish the cohesiveness and dominance of its early twentieth century predecessor, but it did inform a new generation of nuanced political-economic studies like those of Florence Gauthier, Guy-Robert Ikni, and Peter McPhee on popular movements and land reform policies.

This relatively new Marxist view was explained most clearly in Gregor McLennan's 1981 piece "Soboul and French Revolution Historiography." [29] McLennan joined revisionists in accusing Soboul of bending evidence to fit his orthodox Marxist framework. This "essentialism," as McLennan identified it, caused "both empirical and conceptual problems" and as a result Soboul's study "suffer[ed] from real inconsistencies." [30] An effective interpretation, according to McLennan, had to accept four revisionist critiques: that "the bourgeoisie was not a class-conscious unity"; that the popular movement had both anti-feudal and anti-capitalist elements; that the radical phase of the Year II was "not necessarily a predictable part of the logic of bourgeois revolution"; and that "the ascription of class interests to nearly every social force or category in the revolution" is problematic.[31] These critiques complicated the Marxist view but, contrary to revisionist claims, they did not invalidate the entire framework.[32] In fact, McLennan accused many revisionist critiques of being so empiricist, or data-focused, that they lacked any

[29] Gregor McLennan, *Marxism and the Methodologies of History* (London: NLB, 1981).
[30] Ibid., 178-180.
[31] Ibid., 193-194.
[32] Ibid., 194.

sort of framework to give their theories meaning.[33] Combining legitimate revisionist critiques with an overall Marxist framework, according to McLennan, created a non-essentialist Marxist model that would be open to new and previously contradictory evidence.

The 1988 article "Class, Power, and Culture," by Jack Amariglio, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff elaborated on this neo-Marxist model.[34] Similarly to McLennan, the authors began by rejecting Marxist essentialism while denouncing revisionist accounts which, according to them, replaced class essentialism with other forms of political, social, or cultural essentialism.[35] Instead, they emphasized the importance of "the combined result of economic processes (including the class processes) and forms of political processes." [36] This proposal envisioned class not as a social structure, but as a complex and "intereffective" process that linked economics, politics, culture, power, and more.[37] It is this model of class as a process that has enabled Marxist historians of the French Revolution to produce invaluable works in the decades since Cobban's revisionist critique.

One of the most prominent historians of the popular movement in the French Revolution, Florence Gauthier, wrote in this revised Marxist tradition. Her 1977 book, *La voie paysanne dans la Révolution française: l'exemple de la Picardie*, drew on both orthodox and neo-Marxism to examine the revolutionary peasantry. Gauthier, like Lefebvre before her, viewed the peasant revolution as its own unique process in the French Revolution. But where Lefebvre's peasantry ultimately receded into the greater bourgeois revolution, Gauthier asserted the independence and

[33] Ibid., 195.
[34] Jack Amariglio, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff, "Class, Power, and Culture," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 487-501.
[35] Ibid., 487, 499.
[36] Ibid., 488.
[37] Ibid., 498-499. For an application of this concept to the French Revolution specifically, see Amariglio and Norton, "Marxist Historians and the Question of Class in the French Revolution," 51.

effectiveness of what she labelled *la voie paysanne*, the peasant route.[38] Through a case study of rural Picardy, Gauthier showed that the poor peasantry were fundamental in the destruction of feudalism, while at the same time fiercely opposed to any form to capitalism that only benefitted former seigneurs and large landholders.[39] *La voie paysanne* pushed for the egalitarian distribution of common lands to turn the rural poor into independent proprietors, resembling the land redistribution of the "Agrarian Law" so resisted by liberal revolutionaries.[40] New smallholders would go on to encourage the development of capitalism and investment in the countryside well beyond 1799. In this way, Gauthier accepted the overall Marxist view of a peasant revolution that assisted in the destruction of the *ancien régime*, while insisting on the independent agency of that popular movement in shaping French capitalism.

Guy-Robert Ikni examined the redistributive tendencies of the French peasantry in detail in his 1982 article "Sur les biens communaux pendant la Révolution française." Where early Marxist interpreters like Lefebvre and Soboul had seen the peasantry as anti-capitalist, conservative, and largely inconsequential after the abolition of feudalism, Ikni, like Gauthier, introduced a more nuanced view. The policy of dividing common lands set the individualism of the bourgeois peasantry against the egalitarianism of the "rural proletariat," or the smallholding and landless poor. The first wanted the common lands divided into inalienable properties. The second, by contrast, wanted lands divided and owned according to usage, a more fluid system which would enable those with small plots to exploit larger shares of land than those with large plots.[41] This still followed general capitalist property notions, but adjusted them to the needs of

[38] Florence Gauthier, *La voie paysanne dans la révolution française : l'exemple de la picardie* (Paris: Librairie François Maspero, 1977), 9-10, 23.
[39] Ibid., 128.
[40] Ibid., 167.
[41] Guy-Robert Ikni, "Sur les biens communaux pendant la Révolution Française," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, Problèmes agraires de la Révolution Française, 247 (1982): 71-94, 74, 80.

the rural poor. Ikni examined the spectrum of popular actions, ranging from abrupt land-clearings to the equal sharing or division of properties to engaging in traditional communal practices.[42] Each of these represented a different balance of liberalism and egalitarianism, and there was no universal solution. In this way, the peasant movement resembled the revolution as a whole, constantly struggling to resolve the tensions between the middle class push for individual liberties and property rights and the more radical, redistributive demands of the urban and rural poor.

Although not explicitly Marxist, Peter McPhee's 1989 article "The French Revolution, Peasants, and Capitalism," written on the impact of revolutionary land reforms, elaborated on neo-Marxist concepts. McPhee synthesized earlier economic and demographic studies like those of Lefebvre and Labrousse to bolster the conclusions of Gauthier and Ikni that the peasantry was not a conservative or strictly anti-capitalist force.[43] Drawing on Lefebvre's own analysis of nineteenth-century census data, McPhee showed that revolutionary reforms demanded by the peasantry, including the sales of *émigré* lands and the division of common lands, encouraged a proliferation of small and medium-sized landholdings (less than twenty acres) in the decades after the revolution.[44] This proliferation of smaller landholdings (in contrast to the consolidation of large farms in England) led Lefebvre and other French historians to conclude that the peasantry slowed France's nineteenth century economic development. McPhee disagreed, citing the work of Jean-Claude Toutain and Jean Marczewski, among others, to show that French agricultural productivity in the nineteenth century actually grew at double or even triple the rate

[42] Ibid., 84.
[43] Peter McPhee, "The French Revolution, Peasants, and Capitalism," *The American Historical Review* 94, no. 5 (December 1989): 1265-80, 1268.
[44] Ibid., 1267.

of population growth.[45] By synthesizing a number of narrowly focused studies on peasant subsistence and economics, McPhee concluded that the revolutionary peasantry, in advocating for policies that encouraged small farms, actually helped to spur France's economic development rather than hinder it. In this way, the economic needs of the peasantry were translated to policy changes which affected all of France.

Economic Histories

In recent years, the debate between Marxists and revisionists over the nature of class and the development of capitalism has given way to innovative studies that connect an impressive breadth of revolutionary issues through an economic focus. Noelle Plack, Katie Jarvis, and Rebecca Spang are a few historians who have researched particular ideas or events to reveal the economic forces at work in the revolution. While not disavowing the existence of social and class-based issues, these studies go beyond the Marxist framework and use economics as a lens for understanding revolutionary politics, culture, society, and more.

Noelle Plack's 2016 article "Drinking and Rebelling: Wine, Taxes, and Popular Agency in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1791" focused specifically on the role of one policy – the taxation of wine – in the Parisian tax revolts of July 1789 and its aftermath. The article illustrated how an interconnected view of economic, social, and political histories can better our understanding of revolutionary events. For instance, Plack identified wine (and the taverns it was consumed in) as a central social institution which played a fundamental role in creating and facilitating popular culture.[46] But by 1789 wine was becoming increasingly unaffordable to the Parisian masses,

[45] Ibid., 1270-1271.
[46] Noelle Plack, "Drinking and Rebelling: Wine, Taxes, and Popular Agency in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1791," *French Historical Studies* 39, no. 3 (August 2016): 599-622, 603.

largely because of the disproportionate tax burden that internal customs barriers placed on the urban poor. With egalitarian political ideals circulating in Paris in the summer of 1789, the excessive taxation of wine became the vehicle by which the urban poor were radicalized. They understood their inability to afford something central to their community as inequality, and this socioeconomic understanding inspired the directly political action of attacking Parisian customs barriers and demanding tax reforms.[47] In this way, alcohol served as an economic bridge between the social and the political for the French people.

Katie Jarvis, in her 2018 article "The Cost of Female Citizenship: How Price Controls Gendered Democracy in Revolutionary France," used a similar concept called "economic citizenship" to analyze politics and gender in the wake of the sweeping price controls of the General Maximum.[48] Economic citizenship referred to "the ways in which an individual's economic activities […] position him or her within the collective social body," and the Maximum exemplified this because it "assigned political value and social duties to economic roles" (for instance, consumers were seen as patriotic while merchants were deemed suspect).[49] Thus when fighting broke out between Parisian market-women (the *Dames des Halles*) who were negatively affected by the Maximum and patriotic *Citoyennes Républicaines* who wanted it enforced, their conflict was part of a broader effort "to articulate economic citizenship." [50] The conflict linked questions about the definition of patriotism, the economic feasibility of price controls, and the role of women in revolution. But rather than address the significant political and economic problems raised by the women, the deputies of the National Convention used

[47] Ibid., 605-606.
[48] Katie L. Jarvis, "The Cost of Female Citizenship: How Price Controls Gendered Democracy in Revolutionary France," *French Historical Studies* 41, no. 4 (October 2018): 647–80.
[49] Ibid., 649.
[50] Ibid.

gender as a scapegoat for the disorder and closed all women's political clubs in France.[51] Jarvis' concept of economic citizenship is a useful example of how an economic focus can tie together events like the Maximum and the closure of women's clubs, which at first glance appear unrelated.

Rebecca Spang's book *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (2015) similarly connected disparate fields by focusing on money as "stuff" – something that is both an idea and a concrete material. This dual concept of money allowed Spang to treat money "as a political and social, as well as an economic, mediator," bridging the gap between the Marxist focus on economically-defined groups and revisionism's emphasis on political and ideological trends.[52] For instance, Spang explored the role that a "national currency" had in radicalizing the revolution. While revolutionary leaders agreed on the importance of a unified national currency, they struggled to choose any one material to base it on. The debate unwittingly highlighted the extreme economic gap between the poor, who may never have seen more than a silver or even copper coin, and wealthy merchants who dealt in large sums of gold. As Spang explained, the revolution's "emergent political language of universalism coexisted with very blunt statements about socioeconomic differences." [53] The national currency debate exposed the contrast between political ideals of equality and economic realities of inequality, leading the poor to identify "equality as a hope for the future." [54] This hope radicalized the poor and inspired them to push the revolution itself in a more radical direction from 1792 to 1794. Spang used her concept of money as a mediator by which social status or economic needs translated to political

[51] Ibid., 671.
[52] Rebecca L. Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 5, 8.
[53] Ibid., 138.
[54] Ibid., 137-139.

consequences, and inversely through which political acts had real socioeconomic impacts. This historiographical focus on economics has already allowed for important connections between the different fields of revolutionary history, and it holds significant promise going forward.

Economic Inequality in the French Revolution

If one could claim an obvious conclusion from the historiographical debate over the French Revolution, it is that there is no one "right" framework. With that said, each interpretation has contributed significantly to our understanding of the Revolution, and the work that follows will draw on Marxist (both classic and revised) and revisionist accounts to study economic inequality in the Revolution. For example, following Marx, Lefebvre, Soboul, and others, this paper makes use of class as one possible tool for analyzing economic inequality in the Revolution. From this perspective, one could argue that economic inequality influenced the competing interests of the lower classes, who mobilized politically to fight for their subsistence, and members of the middle and upper classes, who resisted these efforts in part to defend their own economic interests.

However, this model has been necessarily altered by both neo-Marxists and revisionists, and the work that follows rejects as much of the classic Marxist framework as it accepts. For one, while I acknowledge the preeminence of a professional middle class in the Revolution, I nevertheless argue that the popular movement possessed its own agency which cannot be subsumed within an overarching bourgeois Revolution. Likewise, rural movements ranging from anti-seigneurialism to *partage* protests were independent from, and sometimes in conflict with, the interests and demands of the popular Revolution in Paris. In cases like these, revisionist perspectives have been incorporated to explain the diverse interests of a single supposed class.

Thus my analysis of the Jacobin Maximum in chapter three cites important works by Margaret Darrow and Katie Jarvis, both of whom complicate the view of uniform middle or lower-class interests by demonstrating the importance of memory, culture, and political conflict in shaping revolutionary events.[55] The repressive policies of the Directory are similarly analyzed in chapter four through Lynn Hunt, David Lansky, and Paul Hanson's study of the ideological leanings of political leaders, which often but not always aligned with their economic interests.[56]

Where class is used as an analytical tool, I draw on a much broader neo-Marxist definition that goes beyond social or economic categories. As explained by Amariglio, Resnick, and Wolff, classes are also molded by politics, culture, and power.[57] Although I argue that economic inequality was a foundational issue for popular actions during the Revolution, and although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explain the full array of factors influencing the lower classes, my analysis nevertheless includes reference to non-economic forces such as the importance of gender in the October Days (see chapter two) and the role of political and military issues in the fall of the *sans-culottes* (see chapter three). This combination of Marxist, revisionist, and neo-Marxist accounts brings out the role of economic inequality while avoiding a reductionist or essentialist analysis which would define the Revolution in purely economic terms.

Beginning in the *ancien régime*, this paper will explore economic inequality in pre-revolutionary France, in the opening months of the Revolution, in the radical phase, and in the reactionary period of the Directory. Economic inequality changed significantly both as a concept and as a fact of life during this time, and it shaped the Revolution as much as it was shaped by it.

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[55] See Margaret H. Darrow, "Economic Terror in the City: The General Maximum in Montauban," *French Historical Studies* 17, no. 2 (Autumn 1991): 498-525; and Jarvis, "The Cost of Female Citizenship."
[56] See Lynn Hunt, David Lansky, and Paul Hanson, "The Failure of the Liberal Republic in France, 1795-1799: The Road to Brumaire," *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 4 (December 1979): 734-59.
[57] Amariglio et. al, "Class, Power, and Culture," 488.

Conceptually, the Revolution saw drastic changes in the way society understood the meaning of equality and who deserved to be equal, with important implications for subsequent reform movements in the nineteenth century. At the same time, the political experiment of the 1790s opened the door to a number of new policies attempting to address economic inequality, which achieved mixed results during the Revolution but established a model which would be influential in the post-revolutionary world. By examining the role that economic inequality played in the French Revolution, we can better understand the Revolution, the historical context for this enduring problem, and the ideologies and institutions which have arisen in response to it.

Before studying economic inequality in the Revolution, it will be important to understand its context in the *ancien régime*. An expanding population and a stagnant economy, combined with volatile crop yields, made the eighteenth century one of economic hardship for much of the French population. Frequent subsistence crises and the failures of piecemeal, Church-affiliated charity programs were part of life for the peasantry. Even before the Revolution, rural demands boiled over in uprisings like the 1775 Flour War, which in many ways prefigured the agrarian movements of 1789 and beyond. Amidst hardships and uprisings, Enlightenment *philosophes* and their predominantly wealthy audiences engaged in debates over the meaning of equality and which policies could be implemented to reduce the extreme economic inequality visible in France's impoverished population. The reality of economic inequality and the ideological debates surrounding it were intertwined in eighteenth century France, with important implications for the Revolution to come.

Similarly, the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 saw significant policy debates take place against the backdrop of violent unrest among the urban and rural poor. In the countryside, crop failures and rising anti-seigneurial sentiment sparked the Great Fear of 1789,

which saw peasants across France attack and in many cases physically destroy the institutions that enforced the fees and taxes that they were forced to pay on their land and crops.[58] In Paris, the urban poor engaged in episodes of mass popular violence like the sacking of the Bastille and the October Days. All of these actions were motivated by the immediate economic needs of the crowd, but they had important implications for the course of the political revolution taking place at Versailles, as the Estates General declared itself the National Assembly and began enacting major changes in policy.[59] And with the promise of representative government, both the poor and revolutionary leaders worked toward new, institutional solutions to the poverty and subsistence crises afflicting so much of France.

As moderate policies failed to meaningfully reduce economic inequality, and as the Revolution became more politically radical, demands shifted. Using the political violence of the Terror, the *sans-culottes* advocated for sweeping economic protections like the General Maximum which would have been unthinkable to implement just months earlier. In the countryside, moderate land reforms gave way to demands for a fully redistributive Agrarian Law. The push for an Agrarian Law revealed as much about the liberal bourgeois government as it did the rural poor and their advocates. With land redistribution policies, the deputies walked a fine line between repression and appeasement which, at least temporarily, forced them to reckon with decidedly illiberal modifications to their concept of property. The egalitarian nature of urban and rural movements in this period marked a significant shift from the disorganized nature of *ancien régime* charity and even from the moderate welfare programs of the early Revolution.

[58] For more on the Great Fear, see Lefebvre, *The Great Fear*, and Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution, 1789-1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 57-58.
[59] See George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).

As the Revolution moved from the radical phase to the reactionary years of the Thermidorian Convention and the Directory, economic thinking diverged sharply. Politically, radical proposals for economic equality were repressed and the government once again adopted more moderate proposals to reduce only the extreme consequences of inequality, with disastrous consequences for the lower classes. At the same time, the ideas of the radical phase were not erased, and the insurrectionary push of Gracchus Babeuf and the "Conspiracy of Equals" would consolidate egalitarian demands in one of the earliest communist movements. Babeuf's movement sustained and advanced the idea of economic equality through the reactionary years of the Directory, connecting the radical proposals of 1793 to the socialist and communist movements of the nineteenth century.

Economic inequality as a concept and as a reality did not disappear in 1799. In fact, as France industrialized throughout the nineteenth century, the ideas explored in the French Revolution became all the more important to the urban poor as they experienced the low wages and high prices associated with urban industrial labor. As in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century set the lived experiences of the (particularly urban) poor alongside the policy debates of early socialists and, around midcentury, the emergence of Marxist communism. This problem, like the theories and policies it has inspired, has shown no signs of diminishing in the two-plus centuries since the French Revolution. Imperialism, neoliberalism, globalization, and the financial impacts of climate change, to name just a few factors, have all exacerbated the wealth gap in recent decades, and ensure that economic inequality will remain a fact of life for the foreseeable future. Before, during, and after the French Revolution, economic inequality has motivated popular movements to push for political change. Studying its impact during the revolutionary decade – a time when leaders and commoners alike believed, correctly or not, that

they were free to reshape society as they saw fit – can reveal important social, political, and economic patterns within the Revolution. But perhaps more importantly, doing so can trace how the Revolution shaped both our modern conceptions of inequality and our methods for addressing it. By examining the role of economic inequality in the French Revolution, I hope to shine a light on both the contemporary and current consequences of this issue.

Chapter One – Economic Inequality in the *Ancien Régime*

The French Revolution emerged, at least in part, from the severe economic crisis facing France in the eighteenth century. The Estates General, which would declare itself the National Assembly and dismantle the institutions of the *ancien régime*, was originally convened in 1789 to address the insolvency of the French monarchy. But France's pre-revolutionary economic issues went far beyond the specific question of the crown's finances. Throughout the eighteenth century, the consolidation of property and wealth by the aristocracy and upper middle classes contrasted with stagnant wages and rising prices for the rest of France. The result was severe economic inequality, and both traditional forms of Church-administered charity and haphazard government interventions failed to slow what Colin Jones has called the "mass pauperisation" of France.[1] In 1775, economic tensions contributed to the widespread food riots of the Flour War, as poor rioters expressed their subsistence insecurity through violent attacks on local leaders and grain merchants. In what was an ominous sign of things to come for the French government, the Flour War showed a growing popular awareness and disapproval of government economic policies. With economic hardship as a backdrop, eighteenth-century Enlightenment *philosophes* introduced new perspectives on the meaning of equality and the obligations of society toward the poor, while reformers attempted to ease the worst consequences of economic inequality.

The decline of religious charity, the popular awareness demonstrated in the Flour War, and the concepts of equality introduced during the Enlightenment would shape the eighteenth-century development of economic inequality as both a concrete experience and an abstract idea. As leading intellectuals increasingly condemned the failures of traditional poor relief, the last

[1] Colin Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpelier Region, 1740-1815* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 30.

years of the *ancien régime* witnessed the first major state efforts to secularize and standardize poor relief. While these early efforts were disorganized and often undertaken only reluctantly, they marked a significant shift in poor relief that would be expanded on during the early revolutionary period. Exploring the origins of this transition to state-managed assistance in greater detail is vital to understanding the role of economic inequality in the Revolution itself.

Ancien Régime Poverty and Charity

Poverty in the eighteenth century was widespread, with Olwen Hufton claiming that by 1789 between one-third and one-half of the French population was poor or indigent.[2] This was a result of many different factors, from population growth to early industrialization, and the *cahiers de doléances* can provide us today with vivid illustrations of the suffering of the French poor. A large, informal network of religious charities existed in France to address such suffering, but the persistence and spread of poverty exposed the shortcomings of these methods. The nature of *ancien régime* poverty and charity made economic inequality into an urgent issue even before the Revolution, and would significantly shape the events of 1789.

One of the primary causes of the spread of poverty in eighteenth-century France was rapid population growth. Demographic statistics are uncertain, but Hufton estimated that France's population rose from roughly 19 million in 1720 to 27 million by the end of the century.[3] In her 1974 work *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, Hufton explained that up to the closing decades of the seventeenth century the French population was curtailed by "starvation and the sometimes related systematic annihilation of whole communities by

[2] Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France 1750-1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 24.
[3] Ibid., 14; Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance*, 29.

pestilence." [4] By the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, improvements in agricultural efficiency, food circulation, and disease awareness meant that episodic mass casualty events in specific communities were replaced with generalized and chronic hunger and malnutrition amongst all of the French poor.[5] The reduction of disease and famine allowed the French population to grow much more rapidly, but this increased the demand for employment and food.

The French economy did expand during this period, but it did not keep pace with the population boom. Perhaps more importantly, as Colin Jones noted, there was a "fatal unevenness of what development was achieved." [6] Jones, analyzing the Montpelier region, showed that most economic expansion during this period was limited to trade and industry. Even agricultural development mostly occurred amongst large farmers, or consisted of the transition from grain and other subsistence crops to cash crops like vines, which made small farmers more dependent on markets for their necessities. This in turn contributed to a spike in subsistence prices, as the national price of wheat more than doubled from 14 to 34 *livres* in the last four decades of the *ancien régime*.[7] Small farmers were unable to produce enough for their own subsistence while urban workers, who faced intense competition for work and stagnant or even declining wages if they were employed, were unable to afford a steady supply of food.[8] Hufton confirmed that economic growth throughout France was either "not sufficiently great or it was not in the direction that mattered […] in providing the grain to feed more mouths." [9] Wealthy (and usually urban) landlords accumulated properties from struggling small farmers and charged increasing

[4] Ibid., 13-14.
[5] For an overview of the changes in French demographics during this period, see M.W. Flinn, "The Stabilisation of Mortality in Pre-Industrial Western Europe," *Journal of European Economic History* 3, no. 2 (1974): 285–318.
[6] Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance*, 31.
[7] Ernest Labrousse, "Le prix du blé en France dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle d'aprés les états statistiques du controle général," *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale* 19, no. 2 (1931): 133-211, 211.
[8] David Garrioch, "Mutual Aid Societies in Eighteenth-Century Paris," *French History and Civilization* 4 (2011): 22-33, 32–33 has shown that unemployment was an ever-present fear for workers.
[9] Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 14.

rents on their lands, leaving the poor with ever-smaller tracts of land which no longer produced enough grain for self-sufficiency.[10] The author of a preliminary *cahier* from the parish of Lignères-la-Doucelle, for example, lamented that the farms in his community had become so small that peasants could only produce enough grain for three months of the year, and that they could only eat bread two days per week.[11] Thus, although France had largely moved beyond the deadly episodic tragedies of preceding centuries, the privation felt by these peasants was constant and widespread by the late eighteenth century.

National trends like population growth and economic stagnation were not the only issues facing the French poor in this period. The *cahiers* are filled with complaints about onerous taxes and seigneurial dues that were applied unevenly across France.[12] The hated salt tax known as the *gabelle*, to name one example, raised the price of salt to nine or ten times its original value in some regions. Nobles were exempt from the *gabelle* and the middle class benefitted from salt sales and tax collection, but the poor were often subjected to arbitrary and punitive regulations. These included being forced to purchase a minimum amount of salt annually, being forbidden from keeping salt for longer than a year, and even being investigated by special experts who tasted the skin of cattle to ensure they weren't being fed salt.[13] It is not surprising, then, that a preliminary *cahier* from the parish of Boissé called for the abolition of "ce malheureux fléau de la Gabelle qui, par son seul nom, fait trembler l'Univers." [14] Regional inflation or unemployment

[10] Ibid., 59; Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance*, 31.
[11] "The parish of Lignères-la-Doucelle," (1789), in *French Revolution Documents*, vol. 1, ed. J.M. Roberts and R.C. Cobb (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966): 78-81, 78.
[12] Gilbert Shapiro, "What Were the Grievances of France in 1789? The Most Common Demands in the Cahiers de Doléances," in Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998): 253-79, 258-259.
[13] Theodore Sands and Chester Penn Higby, "France and the Salt Tax," *The Historian* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1949): 145-65, 150, 155-156.
[14] "The parish of Boissé," (1789), in *French Revolution Documents*, vol. 1, ed. J.M. Roberts and R.C. Cobb (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966): 83-86, 83.

could also worsen local economic conditions, and any incapacitating disease or injury could force a worker and his entire family into indigence.[15] And in the context of early industrialization in northern France, many *cahiers* asked the Estates General to consider whether or not the introduction of "English machines" in textile industries, which increased efficiency but also displaced low-wage workers, was acceptable.[16] Others called for the machines to be banned outright in the name of the public good.[17] This patchwork of regional and national, short and long-term factors contributed to the economic inequality of the late *ancien régime*.

There were, of course, attempts to help the poor during this period. In the fifteenth and sixteenth century, charity had been seen as a primarily religious obligation and had been administered locally through the Catholic Church, which operated hospices and organized the distribution of alms to the poor within communities.[18] Building on this tradition, the charity programs of the eighteenth century also incorporated the liberal attitudes of the emerging middle-class, which emphasized the value of labor as both a social obligation and a means for the poor to achieve economic independence.[19] The result was the popularization of institutions like the *hôpitaux généraux*, *ateliers de charité*, and *bureaux de charité*, which will be explained below. Although these charities ultimately failed to address the growing crisis of economic inequality, they would provide the blueprints for later revolutionary public welfare programs.

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[15] Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 18, 62.
[16] "Cahier des doléances du clergé du bailliage de Rouen, assemblée avec le clergé des autres bailliages secondaires," (1789), in *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 : Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises*, vol. 5, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1879): 590-94, 593.
[17] "The parish of Gouy," (1789), in *French Revolution Documents*, vol. 1, ed. J.M. Roberts and R.C. Cobb (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966): 86-87, 86.
[18] Emanuel Chill, "Religion and Mendicity in Seventeenth-Century France," *International Review of Social History* 7, no. 3 (December 1962): 400-25, 400-401.
[19] Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance* provides an excellent summary of the divide between work-based *bienfaisance* and traditional religious charity.

The *hôpital général* was perhaps the most dominant form of *ancien régime* charity. The first *hôpital* was a short-lived Parisian project established in 1612, but a small number of more successful models were established by St. Vincent de Paul and a group of religious advocates known as the Company of the Holy Sacrament in the mid-seventeenth century.[20] St. Vincent envisioned the *hôpitaux* as ecclesiastical institutions which would provide asylum, modest work, and religious instruction for the urban poor, and would be funded by voluntary local donations and, however minimally, the labor of those it employed. Drawn by the promise of a new and more organized solution to poverty, royal officials encouraged the establishment of more *hôpitaux* in the 1680s and 1690s.[21] But while St. Vincent imagined the *hôpitaux* as voluntary places of refuge, the state saw them as a means to clear the streets of beggars and impose public order. The resulting institution was a hybrid of traditional Christian charity and more recent beliefs in the importance of order and labor. Thus the *hôpitaux* in the eighteenth century provided aid for the invalid poor and emphasized Christian education within their walls, even as royal edicts turned them into repressive institutions that incarcerated able-bodied beggars and used Catholicism to imbue the poor with a sense of the importance of labor in society.[22]

Government intervention also hampered the ability of the *hôpitaux* to address poverty. The *hôpitaux* were almost entirely dependent on voluntary donations, and the added cost of policing and imprisoning beggars contributed to budget failures and an inability to provide adequate care. [23] And because the state was more concerned with public stability than humanitarian care, they pushed for the establishment of *hôpitaux* primarily in urban areas where the consequences of unrest were more dangerous. This focus further hurt the rural poor, who

[20] Chill, "Religion and Mendicity," 403-407.
[21] Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance*, 45; Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 139-140.
[22] Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 142; Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance*, 108, 139.
[23] Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance*, 133.

already had less access to urban forms of relief like begging and handouts from charitable programs.[24] A *cahier* from the rural parish of Saint-Vincent-Rive d'Olt explained that "il y a un hôpital établi dans la ville de Luzech; notre communauté paye des rentes à cet hôpital, et néanmoins nos pauvres n'en reçoivent aucun secours." [25] Despite paying seigneurial and Church dues that funded the local *hôpital,* the poor of this and other rural communities were neglected because of the government's prioritization of public order over public welfare.

Another major form of charity in the eighteenth century was the *atelier de charité.* The *ateliers* were effectively public works projects, funded jointly by the state and local elites, which provided paid infrastructure jobs for the able-bodied poor. The concept of work relief had existed in France since at least the fifteenth century, but because of how well it aligned with the eighteenth-century belief in the importance of labor, the crown began promoting the *ateliers* nationally in 1770.[26] As with the *hôpitaux*, the state leaned heavily on the Church for the administration of the *ateliers*. Local clergy determined who was eligible to work for the *ateliers* in their communities, and helped to coordinate larger projects that spanned multiple villages or towns. The *ateliers* were also highly localized projects, with officials prioritizing them in areas where the need was greatest, such as a region that had just suffered a poor harvest.[27] These localized efforts represented a step toward the state-managed poor relief of the Revolution, but still maintained the *ancien régime* framework of Church-administered charity.

Like the *hôpitaux,* the *ateliers* failed to make a meaningful impact on poverty. For one, despite the efforts of officials to establish *ateliers* in rural areas, the majority of funds

[24] Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 177.
[25] "The parish of Saint-Vincent-Rive d'Olt," (1789), in *French Revolution Documents*, vol. 1, ed. J.M. Roberts and R.C. Cobb (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966): 75-78, 76.
[26] William Olejniczak, "Working the Body of the Poor: The Ateliers de Charité in Late Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1990): 87-107, 89-90; Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 183.
[27] Olejniczak, "Ateliers de Charité," 94-95.

consistently went to urban projects which had more or wealthier local donors.[28] But it was the greed of these local elites rather than their location which curtailed the *ateliers* more than any other factor. The grievances of the poor are expressed quite clearly in a *cahier* from the bailliage de Gisors. Despite calling for more charitable programs, the author specifically demanded "la suppression des ateliers de charité sur des chemins que les seigneurs font percer pour leur luxe et l'embellissement de leurs terres." [29] Because the *ateliers* depended on private funding, donors frequently hijacked them by selectively funding their own personal projects, like building private roads or even decorating their estates. These blatantly private projects usually had no communal benefit, and led the poor to reject these projects in favor of other forms of aid.[30]

The shortcomings of the *hôpitaux* and *ateliers* turned both donors and the poor toward a third, more flexible form of charitable giving: the *bureaux de charité*.[31] The *bureaux* were usually managed by local religious leaders and encompassed a wide variety of programs that donated money to the poor, from small factories funded by wealthy local philanthropists to community donation pools that were collected and redistributed to the local poor. Because they did not require extensive administrative hierarchies or, in some cases, even a physical structure to function, the state and local donors alike promoted them as an affordable and simple form of charity, but these characteristics also prevented this form of poor relief from maintaining any sort of consistency or stability.[32] The crown also saw the *bureaux* as a method of solving rural poverty through the industrialization of the countryside. Some rural *bureaux de charité*, rebranded as *manufactures des pauvres*, enabled philanthropic elites to fund industrial centers

[28] Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 183.
[29] "Cahier de réunion en un seul des remontrances, plaintes, et doléances du tiers-état des villes, bourgs, paroisses et communautés composant le bailliage de Gisors," (1789), in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 5, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1879): 617-20, 619.
[30] Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 189; Olejniczak, "Ateliers de Charité," 100.
[31] Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance*, 89-90.
[32] Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance*, 132; Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 160-161.

where poor rural workers produced basic goods that would, in theory, pay for their own wages and then some. However, low-quality products and national economic instability severely limited sales, and most *manufactures* only survived as long as their benefactors funded them.[33] The *bureaux* and *manufactures* also offered different amounts or forms of relief depending on who funded or managed them, making them an unstable and uneven source of aid. Together, the shortcomings of the *hôpitaux*, *ateliers*, and *bureaux* left the French poor with few places to turn as their economic situation worsened. State efforts to promote these new programs had only damaged them by trying to maintain the piecemeal, localized, and religious format of traditional charity while centering their own priorities of labor and public order. As poverty increased and charity failed to relieve suffering, the poor turned their frustration on the institutions of the *ancien régime* that had traditionally guaranteed their subsistence.

The Flour War

In May of 1775, a series of popular uprisings known collectively as the Flour War burst out in Paris and the surrounding regions. These uprisings were caused by a number of connected factors. In addition to the general economic issues described above, a series of poor harvests led to high grain prices in 1775. The ensuing subsistence crisis was made worse by the government's new liberal economic policies under Turgot, the recently-appointed Controller-General of Finances, which deregulated the grain trade and removed consumer protections. Food riots had occurred in France well before 1775, but the unusually extreme repression of the Flour War was indicative of its importance.[34] Close studies of the composition and actions of the crowd in 1775

[33] Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, 167-170.
[34] For examples of earlier subsistence riots, see Louise Tilly, "The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict in France," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1971): 23–57.

paint the Flour War not only as an economic and subsistence-based crisis, but also as an early form of the popular politics that would find full expression in the Revolution fourteen years later.

The Flour War began in Beaumont-sur-Oise (just north of Paris) on 27 April, 1775 and rapidly spread to and around Paris. By the time the government regained full control on 18 May, over 300 urban and rural uprisings had occurred.[35] Riots broke out not just in marketplaces but also in the countryside, where crowds stormed farms or storehouses, and on roads and rivers, where they seized grain transports in acts known as *entraves*.[36] Cynthia Bouton, in one of the most detailed studies to date on the Flour War, used contemporary documents like arrest records, witness statements, and tax records to show that the "average" rioter was a middle-aged, married, semiskilled wage-earning man or woman with young children." [37] Flat wages and rising prices had a direct impact on these day-laborers, artisans, trade workers, and small farmers, while the failure of charity programs and the consolidation of properties by wealthy landlords left them with little security in the general economic crisis of late-eighteenth century France.

Prior to 1763, the monarchy had maintained a paternalist and interventionist economic policy that prioritized the subsistence needs of the people over absolute profit by regulating the supply and price of grain in local markets, especially in times of hardship.[38] The poor relied on these policies for their subsistence, internalizing the logic of paternalism as what English historian E.P. Thompson called the "moral economy of the poor." [39] If farmers did not bring their grain to market or if merchants charged inaccessible prices, consumers perceived those actions

[35] Cynthia Bouton, *The Flour War: Gender, Class, and Community in Late Ancien Régime French Society* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1993), 82.
[36] Cynthia Bouton, "Gendered Behavior in Subsistence Riots: The French Flour War of 1775," *Journal of Social History* 23, no. 4 (Summer 1990): 735-54, 739-740.
[37] Bouton, *The Flour War*, 98, 103.
[38] Tilly, "The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict," 26.
[39] E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present*, no. 50 (February 1971): 76-136, 79.

not just as economic issues but also as violations of social and moral obligations. Bouton, George Rudé, and others have applied Thompson's concept to the Flour War, explaining that the "moral economy" manifested itself in widespread acts of violence known as *taxation populaire*.[40] Rather than stealing grain outright, rioters in 1775 responded to high prices by setting a lower "just price" to reimburse sellers for looted grain.[41] In this way, they enforced the social obligations of merchants and large farmers while acting within the paternalist fabric themselves. A Flour War rioter named Louis Marais expressed this moral economy when he explained to police that he had not only engaged in *taxation populaire* by paying a reduced price for wheat, but that he had also ensured that others paid that price, defending himself with the simple statement that "la nécessité contraint à bien des choses." [42] This idea that the necessity of subsistence justified violent acts of *taxation populaire* was shared by many rioters.

Taxation populaire also explains the noticeable absence of the desperately poor from arrest records in the Flour War. On the one hand, Turgot worked actively to help the indigent and prevent them from entering into the riots. Immediately after rioting started, for example, he oversaw the establishment of *ateliers de charité* in towns like Reims and Lyon, as well as in the region around Paris.[43] But while these surely pacified some, they did not resolve the ongoing subsistence crisis, and thus can hardly explain the lack of arrests for the indigent during the riots. In accounting for this, Bouton identified a form of popular redistribution in which rioters first

[40] Cynthia Bouton, "L'«économie morale» et la Guerre des farines de 1775," in Florence Gauthier et. al, *La guerre du blé au XVIIIe siècle: la critique populaire contre le libéralisme économique au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Les Editions de la Passion, 1988): 93-110, 93-95.
[41] George Rudé, "La taxation populaire de mai 1775 à Paris et dans la région parisienne," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 28 (January 1, 1956): 139-79, 142.
[42] Charles Gabriel De la Balme and Jacques-Augustin De Bray "Procès-verbal de l'interrogatoire de Louis Marais," (1775), in *La Guerre des Farines: Contribution à l'histoire de la lutte des classes en France, à la veille de la Révolution*, by Vladimir Ljublinski, trans. Françoise Adiba and Jacques Radiguet (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1979): 367-69, 368.
[43] Bouton, *The Flour War*, 92-94, 111.

engaged in standard *taxation populaire* by seizing grain from merchants and paying a just price, but then would scatter some for those who could not afford even the reduced payment.[44] The moral economy prioritized the subsistence needs of the entire community, so the presence of the indigent inspired this more redistributive form of *taxation populaire*. And because authorities prioritized the arrest of those who had initially seized the grain, those who were too poor to engage in *taxation populaire* were often ignored despite benefitting from the riots.

Why did the Flour War occur? The general economic instability of the eighteenth century certainly exacerbated tensions and played a major role, but it was not a new issue in 1775. Poor harvests in the years preceding the Flour War (especially in 1774) culminated in soaring grain prices in 1775 and contributed to the unrest, but food riots sparked by previous poor harvests had been contained and subdued by the paternalist policies of the *ancien régime*, which subsidized grain during times of scarcity.[45] While these economic factors formed the context for the Flour War, the main cause was political: the government's dismantling of paternalism in favor of the liberalization of the grain trade.

Influenced by recent Physiocratic theories on the importance of agriculture and hoping to boost desperately-needed revenues, the newly coronated King Louis XVI and his Controller-General, Turgot, eliminated price restrictions on grain and allowed merchants and farmers to circulate their grain freely rather than binding them to local markets. In theory, deregulation would increase profits for large farmers and landowners, which would add to tax revenue and the growth of the entire agrarian economic sector.[46] Turgot also mistakenly believed that efficient

[44] Ibid., 109-112; Bouton, "L'«économie morale» et la Guerre des farines," 99.
[45] Rudé, "La taxation populaire," 141-142; Olwen Hufton, "Social Conflict and the Grain Supply in Eighteenth-Century France," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Hunger and History: The Impact of Changing Food Production and Consumption Patterns on Society*, 14, no. 2 (Autumn 1983): 303-31, 304.
[46] Florence Gauthier, "De Mably à Robespierre : un programme économique égalitaire 1775-1793," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 261 (1985): 265-89, 266-267.

redistribution based on supply and demand would prevent prices from rising unchecked, and that economic development would trickle down to help the poor.[47] Instead, liberalization worsened economic inequality by enriching wealthy producers at the expense of poor consumers. When prices became untenable in 1775 following poor harvests, the people found a government that was no longer willing to take any steps to address their subsistence needs. While Hufton has shown that paternalist policies had actually done little to reduce prices in times of crisis, they did perform a significant psychological function in convincing the people that their problems were temporary and localized. Liberalization led the common people to see the government, rather than local producers, as the source of their suffering.[48] A more widespread, systemic issue thus engendered a similarly widespread response, seen in the rapid communication and spread of uprisings from place to place.

The government's handling of the Flour War showed that leaders were aware of its significance. There were some cases in which they tried to promote liberalization peacefully. Officials were aware, for instance, of the significance of the Church as the guarantor of economic security for the masses, and used this to try to spread liberal ideology to the lower classes. Priests were ordered to remind their communities that *taxation populaire* was theft and a violation of divine and human laws.[49] Examples like these met with limited success, however, and the state's response to rioters was overwhelmingly one of repression. Rather than attempt to requisition grain or take other steps to lower prices, the government arrested hundreds of rioters and, on the orders of Louis XVI, used violence and harsh punishments to set examples.[50] Turgot mobilized the military to control crowds and make arrests, which eventually allowed the

[47] Ibid., 319; Bouton, *The Flour War*, 68.
[48] Hufton, "Social Conflict and the Grain Supply," 319.
[49] Rudé, "La taxation populaire," 165.
[50] Bouton, *The Flour War*, 100.

government to regain control. Sentences as severe as the death penalty were declared for leading rioters, although actual punishments were relatively minor once the uprisings had been quelled.[51]

Part of the reason for this violent repression was Turgot's belief that the Flour War was a mass conspiracy by his enemies to derail the liberal reforms he had enacted and remove him from office. The scale of the uprising as well as the ubiquitous pattern of *taxation populaire* seemed too coincidental to be a spontaneous act of popular unrest.[52] Another historical authority on the Flour War, George Rudé, has done thorough work on this conspiracy hypothesis, which was adopted not only by Turgot and other government officials but also by some historians, based on rioters' confessions (steered by interrogators) that they had been paid off, or by the tenuous links between the locations of uprisings and the estates of disgruntled former officials.[53] Rudé suggested that practically all of this evidence was fabricated, because a conspiracy was useful for French authorities (and unsympathetic historians) who were unwilling to acknowledge that liberal economic reforms were exacerbating economic inequality and harming the poor.

A more careful interpretation reveals the Flour War as an early act of popular politics. In understanding why the government feared the Flour War rioters more than participants in previous riots, Bouton's work on gender in the Flour War is indispensable. Traditional food riots were almost exclusively the domain of married women, who were expected, by societal gender roles, to ensure the subsistence of their families. Thus it was women who went to the markets, and women who took action when those markets were empty. Additionally, women were perceived as politically powerless by French authorities and as a result faced less severe repression than men, making it a strategic choice for women to riot.[54] According to Bouton, the

[51] Ibid., 102; Rudé, "La taxation populaire," 165.
[52] Bouton, *The Flour War*, 99.
[53] Rudé, "La taxation populaire," 166-168.
[54] Bouton, "Gendered Behavior in Subsistence Riots," 741-743.

general economic downturn of the eighteenth century had "feminized" men by taking away their lands and incomes and making them dependent on market forces to achieve food security. As a result, poor men and women fulfilled similar roles in the marketplace by 1775, so the Flour War witnessed an unprecedented level of male involvement. The difference was that these men, despite their social and economic distress, were still politically meaningful in the eyes of the state because of their gender. Thus Bouton concluded that the involvement of men, "whose public actions embraced the political sphere," politicized the movement and transformed "a traditional vehicle of protest into a broader, albeit embryonic, political weapon." [55]

Rudé also suggested that the prevalence of *taxation populaire* required at least some political awareness among the crowds. If the Flour War were purely a protest of high prices, then rioters would have paid nothing for seized grain. High prices were certainly the catalyst, but the act of *taxation populaire* – holding wealthier producers and farmers accountable to an informal system of moral and economic obligations – necessitated a deeper understanding of the changes occurring in French society. In other words, in order to oppose their moral economy to the new policies of economic liberalism, the poor had to have at least some awareness of the policies they were opposing. To Rudé, then, the Flour War represented a popular anti-liberal mentality among the poor that erupted in 1775 in the face of high prices and no government assistance.[56] This awareness was also seen in the specific behaviors of the crowd. Bouton noted that the actions of rioters ranged from negotiations to insults to outright violence depending both on their target's rank in the social hierarchy, and on the perceived level of authority that the target had over the grain trade. [57] Thus a low-level merchant who had limited grain to sell would be treated more

[55] Ibid., 741-743, 747.
[56] Rudé, "La taxation populaire," 175-176.
[57] Bouton, "L'«économie morale» et la Guerre des farines," 98-99.

leniently than a large-scale farmer who chose to export grain for higher profits. This graduated system of popular justice showed a surprisingly high level of understanding of the government's economic policies and their effects on the lives of the poor.

However, it is important to recognize that, at most, the Flour War represents an early and incomplete popular political movement to address economic insecurity. The event, contrary to Turgot's belief, was not planned or organized ahead of time. The demands were limited to basic subsistence needs and the basic protections that the government had guaranteed for generations, rather than a new political program. The Flour War did not advocate for, or effect, any major changes as would be the case in the Great Fear or other revolutionary uprisings, nor is there any evidence that the rioters had any expectation of popular sovereignty, equality, or other Enlightenment ideals.[58] Perhaps most importantly, the Flour War ended in almost total defeat. Although Turgot was removed from office in 1776 and his reforms (including liberalization) were repealed, this was a result of disputes among government elites, not popular pressure, and in fact there was little functional restoration of paternalist policies.[59] This is not to say, however, that the Flour War was insignificant. While they made no concrete policy achievements, the rioters of the Flour War unknowingly bridged an important gap, linking the traditional subsistence protests of *ancien régime* society with a new, nearly explicitly political act that sought to assert the moral economic policies of the poor in the face of new government policies. In 1775, inequalities in the eighteenth century economy sparked an early form of popular politics that would have important consequences for 1789 and beyond.

[58] Rudé, "La taxation populaire," 151, 178; Bouton, "L'«économie morale» et la Guerre des farines," 110.
[59] Rudé, "La taxation populaire," 179.

Inequality and the Enlightenment

At the same time that much of the French population was struggling with severe economic inequality, leading Enlightenment *philosophes* argued that equality was a natural law with a fundamental place in human society. How they envisioned this natural law being applied, however, was hardly uniform. The dominant view, expressed by *philosophes* like Louis de Jaucourt, Louis Sébastien Mercier, and Voltaire, equality was simultaneously foundational and impossible in society, and inequality of wealth was a necessary reality. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, on the other hand, economic inequality was unacceptable in a virtuous society. Working from these competing concepts of equality, leaders and writers like Turgot and the Abbé de Mably proposed specific reforms meant to address the worst harms of economic inequality. Both the ideas and policies on inequality proposed during the Enlightenment would carry directly into the Revolution.

While nearly every Enlightenment *philosophe* agreed on the value of equality, many concluded that it was both impossible and undesirable in modern society. Louis de Jaucourt expressed this in his 1775 article, "Egalité naturelle," in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, perhaps the most prominent collection of Enlightenment theories assembled. Jaucourt defined "*égalité naturelle* ou *morale*" as "celle qui est entre tous les hommes par la constitution de leur nature seulement." [60] Despite the inviolability of natural equality, Jaucourt warned against the "chimere de l'*égalité* absolue, que peut à peine enfanter une république idéale," and even claimed that natural equality did not contradict the various material inequalities necessary in a society.[61] Harvey Chisick analyzed the seemingly contradictory nature of this view in 1991, explaining that

[60] Louis de Jaucourt, "Egalité naturelle," in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (Paris, 1751-72), 415, ARTFL *Encyclopédie*, https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/encyclopedie0521/navigate/5/1558/.
[61] Ibid.

for *philosophes* like Jaucourt equality was not a concrete social or political program, but a moral lesson.[62] This idea of moral equality was evident in Jaucourt's admonition that the wealthy and privileged "doivent traiter leurs inférieurs comme leur étant naturellement égaux." [63] This view did much to introduce new concepts of human equality to a society that was deeply unequal, but moral lessons did little to actually lesson the real impacts of poverty, slavery, a lack of women's rights, and other forms of unequal suffering.

Louis Sébastien Mercier explained the role of moral equality in society in his 1770 work of utopian science fiction, *L'An 2440*. After falling asleep in the 1760s and waking up in 2440, the narrator finds a new, utopian France where "our citizens are all equal; the only distinctions we know are those which naturally arise among men from their virtue, their genius, and industry." [64] Some specific policies had been enacted to reduce extreme instances of economic inequality, such as the abolition of state-sponsored trading companies that "caused all the wealth of the nation to pass into a few hands" and committed "unheard of evils" in French colonies, but Mercier's allowance for distinctions based on virtue, genius, and industry was telling of his beliefs.[65] Just as Jaucourt warned against the "chimere de l'*égalité* absolue" for the threat it posed to societal order, Mercier's proposed modest improvements for the poor while creating exceptions for major systemic inequalities.

Mercier, Jaucourt, and others thus placed little value in concrete efforts to pursue equality in European society, but the most openly hostile *philosophe* to the concept of equality was Voltaire. Perhaps the most famous figure of the Enlightenment, Voltaire's background as the son

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[62] Harvey Chisick, "The Ambivalence of the Idea of Equality in the French Revolution," *History of European Ideas* 13, no. 3 (1991): 215-23, 219.
[63] Jaucourt, "Egalité naturelle."
[64] Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*, vol. 2, trans. W. Hooper, (London: Printed for G. Robinson, in Pater-Noster-Row, 1772), 132, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/memoirsofyeartwo02merc.
[65] Ibid., 186-188.

of a state official and an aristocrat also made him one of the wealthiest. On most topics, his wealth and status gave him the rare freedom to criticize state and society without fear of financial repercussions.[66] But on equality, his background likely constrained his beliefs. In the entry "*Égalité*" from his 1764 *Dictionnaire philosophique,* Voltaire explained that although men were born equal, the desire for domination, riches, and pleasure naturally divided all men into many layers of oppressors and oppressed. Equality, to Voltaire, "est donc à la fois la chose la plus naturelle, & en même temps la plus chimérique." [67] In an oft-cited passage, Voltaire explained that it was fine for a cardinal's chef to believe that he was equal to the cardinal, and that if the Grand Turk invaded Rome and made him a cardinal he could even employ the former cardinal as his chef. Until that day, however, "le cuisinier doit faire son devoir, ou toute societé humaine est pervertie." [68] Voltaire applied this hyper-practicality to popular unrest and economic inequality, explaining that uprisings of the poor always failed because the powerful have money, and "l'argent est maître de tout dans un état." [69] The Enlightenment view of moral equality rarely left room for real-world application, but Voltaire in particular expressed outright opposition to equality.

Opposite Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau stood out as one of the most avid proponents of equality. Born in 1712, the son of a Genevan watchmaker and of a mother who died shortly after his birth, Rousseau was abandoned at ten years old when his father was exiled from Geneva. Rousseau worked odd jobs and educated himself throughout his teens and young adulthood, and his experiences during this time shaped his beliefs on equality. Rousseau spent

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[66] William Sewell, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 158-159; J.B. Shank, "Voltaire," ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2021 Edition. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/voltaire/#Aca.
[67] Voltaire, "Égalité," in *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, Portatif (London, 1764): 171-74, 171–73, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8626129s.
[68] Ibid., 174.
[69] Ibid., 173.

years working and living with servants for aristocratic and other wealthy masters, experiencing the pain of economic and social inequality firsthand.[70] Rousseau eventually met enough well-connected acquaintances that he was able to move to Paris, where he became a successful writer-philosopher and in 1755 wrote his *Discourse on Inequality*.[71]

In this famous essay, Rousseau laid out a starkly different view of equality than Voltaire and other proponents of a minimal moral equality. Instead, Rousseau proposed a more real and material form of equality that could only be achieved through institutional and societal reforms. He began with a division between what he called "natural" inequalities such as age, health, strength, or intelligence, and "political" inequalities like wealth, honor, power, and authority.[72] It was "every inequality of institution," according to Rousseau, that amplified otherwise insignificant natural inequalities and turned them into political inequalities. Specifically, he believed that inequality originated in personal qualities, and was bolstered by institutions like property and law until it ultimately culminated in an inequality of riches. These institutions were designed with the specific purpose of securing wealth and cementing inequality.[73] Where other *philosophes* saw inequality as necessary for societal order, Rousseau saw inequality (including the economic inequality that he experienced in his youth) as a deep flaw. He concluded by denouncing economic inequality in particular, saying "it is evidently against the law of nature that […] a handful of men should be ready to choke with superfluities, while the famished multitude want the commonest necessaries of life." [74] Inequality to Rousseau was an intentional and unjust violation of natural law.

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[70] Judith N. Shklar, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Equality," *Daedalus*, Rousseau for Our Time, 107, no. 3 (Summer 1978): 13-25, 14; Sewell, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality*, 201-202.
[71] Sewell, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality*, 211-212.
[72] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality* (New York: Philosophical Library, 2016), 8, Proquest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/lib/uvic/reader.action?docID=4499606.
[73] Ibid., 29, 48, 51-52; Shklar, "Rousseau and Equality," 15.
[74] Rousseau, *Discourse*, 52.

The practical application of Rousseau's equality was a more complicated matter. For one thing, Rousseau was perfectly clear throughout his writings that equality applied only between households, and that women should remain inferior to their husbands. Another issue was that, to achieve full equality in Rousseau's vision, society would have to revert almost entirely to a subsistence economy with no trade, luxury, art, or science.[75] For Rousseau, who frequently denounced the evils of technology and urban life, this was a necessary and worthwhile step, but few shared his conviction. Even working toward a moderate level of practical equality was a dangerous endeavor because suppressing elite interests would require a strong government, which Rousseau acknowledged carried the risk of despotism. He addressed this issue in greater detail in his best-known work, *The Social Contract*. When discussing the limits to a sovereign's power, Rousseau explained that "a real act of sovereignty" had to apply to all citizens in common, restricting or favoring them equally. Only the equitable application of all laws could protect individual citizens from being singled out for abuse by the body politic.[76] Rousseau's theory of a reciprocal relationship between government and governed created a means for a stronger state to reduce inequality while the people maintained checks against tyranny.

Whether they described it as a minimal moral lesson or a practical necessity, the leading theorists of the Enlightenment introduced equality into the mainstream of French political thought. For wealthy commoners and progressive aristocrats, moral equality was a way to profess modern virtues while maintaining the social and economic status quo. The full impact of these ideas would begin to be seen when, in the years leading up to 1789, the idea and promise of a different kind of equality – material equality – began circulating among the lower classes.

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[75] Shklar, "Rousseau and Equality," 18, 21.
[76] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn, Rethinking the Western Tradition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 175; Sewell, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality*, 222.

Before this happened, however, reform-minded writers and officials converted Enlightenment theories into concrete policies and proposals meant to reduce inequality. Chief among these reformers was the popular "villain" of the Flour War, Turgot. Although the consequences of his policies were harmful, Turgot used his brief stint as Controller-General Finances from 1774 to 1776 to implement a number of liberal reforms that he hoped would secure state finances and help the French poor by boosting the national economy. In a response to an administrative official who opposed his reforms, Turgot pointed out that the influence of the common people was growing, and denounced the unequal system of taxes and privileges that burdened them.[77] Significantly, he also pointed out that because nobility could be acquired through the purchase of administrative posts (what were called venal offices), "la cause du privilégié n'est plus la cause des familles distinguées contre les roturiers, mais la cause du riche contre le pauvre." [78] The perception in Enlightenment philosophy of privilege as a strictly economic division was a sign of the weakening of traditional *ancien régime* institutions in the face of a growing economic crisis.

Turgot was motivated by the Physiocratic belief in growing the economy through deregulation, especially in agriculture. This led to the first of his reforms, the ill-timed and ill-fated liberalization of the grain trade discussed above. Despite his supposed goal of aiding and listening to the common people, his violent suppression of the Flour War showed that this good will did not extend to those who disagreed with his view of progress. Another of Turgot's major reforms, the abolition of the guild system in France, was also meant to implement free trade by removing the many private commercial regulations enforced by the guilds. Turgot framed this as creating opportunities for the poor to enter positions previously open only to elites, but

[77] Ibid., 291-292, 300-301; Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, *Œuvres de Turgot et documents le concernant*, vol. 5, ed. Gustave Schelle, (Paris: F. Alcan, 1923), 182-83, 189, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k112907d.
[78] Turgot, *Œuvres de Turgot*, 188.

institutions like the Parlement of Paris denounced the reform as a dangerous undermining of the social order. Criticisms like this revealed the inherent connections between economic inequality and the privileged hierarchical structure of the *ancien régime*. This connection was also why Turgot was criticized by fellow officials for implementing "an inadmissible system of equality," leading to him being removed from office in 1776 and his reforms being fully repealed.[79]

Another reformer, and one of Turgot's fiercest critics, was the Abbé de Mably.[80] Mably agreed with Turgot and the Physiocrats on the importance of both improving agriculture and reducing inequality, but strongly opposed liberalization. In his *Du Commerce des Grains*, written in the immediate aftermath of the Flour War, Mably denounced Turgot's plan of trying to boost development by increasing the profits of the rich. The policy had only raised grain prices for the common people, increasing their misery and hurting the overall economy by slashing their expenditures on all non-subsistence goods.[81] Mably explained that "notre subsistance journalière est trop importante, pour l'abandonner aux entreprises, aux spéculations, aux espérances et à l'avidité des commerçants." [82] Supply and demand could manage regular commodities like clothes because people could wait to buy more in times of scarcity. But subsistence commodities were needed daily regardless of price, and as a result necessitated different rules than regular goods. The government policy of liberalization subjected the two to the same free market principles and was therefore both a political and an economic mistake.

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[79] Sewell, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality*, 293-297, 299, 302.
[80] For more extended overviews of Mably's beliefs, see Gauthier, "De Mably à Robespierre," and Julie Ferrand, "Mably and the Liberalization of the Grain Trade: An Economically and Socially Inefficient Policy," *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 20, no. 6 (2013): 882-905.
[81] Ferrand, "Mably and the Liberalization of the Grain Trade," 887, 891-892.
[82] Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, "Du Commerce des Grains," (1775), in *Collection Complete des Œuvres de L'Abbé de Mably*, vol. 13 (Paris: Ch. Desbriere, 1794): 242-98, 263, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb10603273?page=,1.

Mably's alternatives prioritized egalitarian measures over free market policies, and thus aligned closely with the moral economy of the French poor that was embodied by the Flour War rioters.[83] First, Mably proposed that the grain trade should only be conducted "par la voie des laboureurs et des fermiers" and only "dans les marchés." [84] These measures would cut out merchant middlemen, who purchased grain privately before it went to public markets and resold it (often to towns and other external buyers) for the highest possible profits. Making all sales public and putting them in the hands of local producers would help to keep costs responsive to community needs. Additionally, Mably suggested "qu'on établît des greniers d'abondance dans les principales villes de chaque district." [85] These public granaries would take in surplus grain after good harvests and store it as insurance against scarcity and high prices following poor harvests like the one in 1774.[86] Mably was not the only advocate for public granaries – the future Controller-General Jacques Necker, for one, floated the idea – but his proposal was the most far-reaching as part of a plan for protecting poor consumers from wealthy merchants.[87] The idea was also very popular among the lower classes, with several preliminary *cahiers* demanding their establishment, and would be influential during the Revolution. Mably viewed the Flour War as the poor trying to restore some form of popular control over local prices through a revolt against Turgot and his economic liberalism, and believed that his reforms were absolutely vital for addressing the subsistence needs of the increasingly poor majority of French commoners.[88] If the needs of the poor were not met, he predicted ominously, "ils brûleront les fermes et les châteaux, et le gouvernement, qui n'aura pas prévenu ces désordres, ne pourra peut-être pas y remédier." [89]

[83] Ferrand, "Mably and the Liberalization of the Grain Trade," 892-893.
[84] Mably, "Du Commerce des Grains," 267.
[85] Ibid., 269.
[86] Gauthier, "De Mably à Robespierre," 273; Ferrand, "Mably and the Liberalization of the Grain Trade," 899.
[87] Ferrand, 899-900.
[88] Mably, "Du Commerce des Grains," 248, 278.
[89] Ibid., 278.

Mably represents perhaps the clearest example of how the Enlightenment emphasis on equality, while able to coexist with fundamental *inequalities* when understood minimally as a moral lesson, also had the potential to destabilize *ancien régime* society when embraced by the lower classes as a concrete economic goal.

Conclusion

In his recent book *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality in Eighteenth-Century France*, William Sewell argued that the introduction of capitalist ideology and practices in the commerce of the eighteenth century made the argument for equality a possibility in the otherwise deeply hierarchical society of the *ancien régime*.[90] Although Sewell focused on broader trends of market exchanges and monetary value, his argument nevertheless provides a conceptual bridge between the growing economic inequality explored here (and the failure of *ancien régime* society to address it), and the emergence of new ideas of the state's power and obligation to help a population in need.

These changes were evident when traditional modes of Church-administered, localized, and piecemeal poor relief efforts were overwhelmed by the rising tide of poverty. All sides, from the seigneurs and Church leaders who had traditionally provided aid, to the poor and their allies who sought new alternatives, to the officials and leaders themselves who increasingly feared the breakdown of public order, began to see charity as a political responsibility. When economic crises were exacerbated by the crown's policies, the Flour War rioters reasserted their traditional demands of publicly-aided subsistence which, in the changing political and economic context of the late eighteenth century, took on a new meaning. These rioters, by demanding a minimum

[90] Sewell, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality*, 5.

level of government protection against starvation, were actually contributing to a growing idea that the government needed to positively assure the subsistence of the poorest people against the profits of the richest. And in the context of all of this, the leading writers and reformers of the Enlightenment were defining the minimum and maximum requirements that the law of natural equality placed on society. When it became evident that the *ancien régime* was either unable or unwilling to address the needs of the poor, and when a cascade of political, social, and economic factors converged to create the promise of change in Versailles in 1789, the crisis of economic inequality would become a driving force of popular participation in the French Revolution.

Chapter Two – The Early Revolution, 1789-1792

When King Louis XVI summoned the Estates General in 1789 for the first time in nearly two centuries, he was searching for the narrowest possible solution to the economic crises gripping France. He had cycled through Controllers-General in the 1770s and 1780s, but any substantive proposals for change ran up against entrenched privileges and threatened to undermine France's social and political order. An Assembly of Notables summoned in 1787 was dismissed after rejecting a series of economic reforms, including a universal land tax. A second set of reforms was blocked by aristocrats in the Paris *Parlement*, and attempts to circumvent the *Parlements* sparked an aristocratic revolt. Facing demands from the nobility as well as from prominent middle class lawyers and merchants, Louis agreed to summon the Estates General, France's long-neglected representative body, to consider economic reforms.[1]

The public input for the Estates General, seen in an explosion of pamphlet literature and in the *cahiers de doléances*, immediately went beyond the crown's desire for specific economic solutions. The French poor were facing both general financial hardship and an acute subsistence crisis due to poor harvests, and in this context the *cahiers* gave them the opportunity to engage with their national government with the hope of real reforms. That hope was only intensified by the chaotic political events of the summer of 1789, when the deputies of the Third Estate in Versailles (along with liberal nobles and clergy) named themselves the National Assembly, claimed a permanent role as the representative body of the French people, and began the long task of drafting a constitution. With these events, the French Revolution had begun.

[1] For an overview of the Pre-Revolution (1786-89), see Colin Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1988), 4-9 and McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 24-49.

But the political revolution did not occur in a vacuum, and the popular movements of the French rural and urban poor shaped the events in Versailles just as much as they were shaped by them. Thus when the National Assembly stalled on the issue of feudal dues, the rural poor engaged in widespread resistance to their economic exploitation under seigneurialism and forced the National Assembly to abolish feudalism – partially in 1789 and fully by 1793. And when the National Assembly faced the possibility of suppression by the crown, it was the Parisian masses who stormed first the Bastille and then Versailles itself, saving the Revolution and asserting its own voice in the process. These acts by the rural and urban poor impacted the attitudes and policies of revolutionary leaders who, however reluctantly, accepted for the first time the central government's obligation to address the worst excesses of economic inequality. From 1789 to 1792, the peasantry, the Parisian crowd, and the revolutionary government all played a role in redefining French economic policy. This "moderate" phase of the Revolution was significant both for its own innovations in welfare concepts and policies, and as a precursor to the radical redistributive policies of the National Convention. Understanding the roles played by each of these actors during the early Revolution will shed light on a society that, for the first time, attempted to take on the needs of its poorest members at the national level.

The Agrarian Crisis and the Great Fear of 1789

In the months leading up to the French Revolution proper, rural France was in upheaval. 1788 was one of the worst harvests in recent memory, leading to subsistence riots even more widespread than the Flour War fourteen years prior.[2] But when the political instability of July 1789 was introduced on top of the already-volatile economic situation in the countryside, the

[2] Lefebvre, *The Great Fear*, 24-27.

agrarian crisis gave way to a phenomenon known as the Great Fear. A wave of panic swept over almost all of rural France, inspiring popular violence against those *ancien régime* institutions, especially seigneurialism, which had caused the peasantry economic hardship for generations. The Great Fear was unlike traditional rural revolts in that it had direct political consequences, with the deputies declaring the complete abolition of feudalism on the famous night of 4 August 1789. But abolition in 1789 was anything but complete, and peasants continued to resist the system of economic exploitation left largely intact by the August decrees.

William Doyle identified three "main ingredients" in the agrarian crisis of 1789: hunger, hope, and fear.[3] "Hunger" closely followed the pattern of 1775. Population growth and uneven economic development had enriched the upper classes while leaving the majority of the French population economically vulnerable, and this general economic situation had deteriorated further from 1775 to 1789.[4] More acutely, France was struck by droughts in the spring of 1788, flooding that summer, and a long, frigid winter marked by devastating hailstorms. This catastrophic sequence ruined the harvest almost universally.[5] Louis XVI, announcing that "une grêle désastreuse a ravagé une vaste étendue de terrains," cut off grain exports while simultaneously attempting to assure the peasantry that there was still plenty of grain in France.[6] But the catastrophic weather had wiped out everything, including supplemental subsistence crops such as vines, olives, and chestnuts, and the king's efforts only confirmed popular fears of scarcity. The

[3] William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 184, Proquest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/lib/uvic/detail.action?docID=4963559.
[4] Peter Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 43; Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 152.
[5] Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 148-149.
[6] Conseil d'État, "Arrêt du conseil d'État, 7 September," (1788), in *French Revolution Documents*, vol. 1, ed. J.M. Roberts and R.C. Cobb (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966): 37-38; Conseil d'État, "Arrêt du conseil d'État, 23 November," (1788), in *French Revolution Documents*, vol. 1, ed. J.M. Roberts and R.C. Cobb (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966): 38-39.

various taxes and seigneurial dues imposed on the peasants, which were burdensome in normal times, became unbearable in the midst of a generalized subsistence crisis. Even before the meeting of the Estates General in May 1789, peasants had begun to (sometimes violently) reject these dues as economic vulnerability turned into a struggle for survival.[7]

"Hope" spread with the news that the king would summon the Estates General. In one of the most frequently-quoted encounters from this period, a poor peasant woman explained to the travelling Englishman Arthur Young that "it was said, at present, that *something was to be done by some great folks for such poor ones, but she did not know who nor how*, but God send us better, *car les tailles & les droits nous ecrasent*." [8] The convening of the Estates General gave the rural poor a sense of optimism that France would change for the better, but it was the accompanying *cahiers de doléances* that gave specific direction to their demands. Lefebvre, whose research on the agricultural crisis remains some of the most thorough to date, explained that the opportunity for the rural poor to put their grievances into specific words and action items in the preliminary *cahiers* awoke feelings of both hope and hatred. The preliminary *cahier* from Elbeuf, for instance, began with a long list of societal failures, from incompetent ministers to a plethora of unequal taxes, "qui couvre le plus beau royaume de l'Europe d'un crêpe funèbre et lui imprime le sceau du deuil et de la tristesse." [9] The local assemblies that debated and drafted the *cahiers* often brought out passionate expressions of anger or desperation like this, leading Lefebvre to call them "natural hotbeds of revolt." [10]

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[7] Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 61.
[8] Arthur Young, *Travels in France by Arthur Young during the Years 1787, 1788, 1789*, 2nd ed. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889), 197. Emphasis his.
[9] "Cahier des plaintes et doléances du tiers-état de la ville d'Elbeuf," (1789), in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 5, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1879): 620-23, 620.
[10] Lefebvre, *The Great Fear*, 38, 40.

The last ingredient for revolt came when the early sense of optimism gave way to fear that the Revolution would be suppressed. The initial reorganization of the Estates General as the National Assembly made significant early strides due to the indecisiveness of the king and his allies, but a more organized resistance mounted in July 1789. Rumors circulated of an armed repression, and reports described bloodshed in Paris as common people took to the streets to defend the Revolution. The chaos and confusion convinced peasants that the aristocracy would reassert its power and take revenge on the rebellious countryside through armed brigands and intentional starvation.[11] Such fears of aristocratic-inspired brigands had a long history in France, but the political uncertainty of 1789 reinforced them on a national scale.

The economic crisis also spread fear. Unemployment and high prices, especially after the poor harvest of 1788, multiplied the number of beggars across France. Major towns added to the problem by expelling their beggars into the countryside. The rest of the peasantry, dealing with their own subsistence insecurities, viewed these beggars as potentially dangerous criminals who were surely desperate enough to resort to brigandage if an aristocratic attack created the opportunity.[12] There were also economic tensions between town and country. The two were always linked by subsistence needs: the urban poor resented peasants for not providing more grain, while the rural poor feared the seemingly insatiable urban demand for grain. The government had long served as an uneasy buffer between the two, ensuring urban supply to the best of its ability while preventing excessive demand on the country. The apparent collapse of government authority, in the eyes of the rural poor, left them completely vulnerable to the

[11] Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 185.
[12] Lefebvre, *The Great Fear*, 210.

demands and anger of the towns.[13] These fears, combined with the dismal harvest, linked local subsistence needs with national political instability in the summer of 1789.

The combination of hunger, hope, and fear sparked increasingly violent unrest in the countryside, which resulted in the Great Fear of July 1789 at the same time that the urban revolution was reaching its own crescendo. Villages organized themselves into armed militias in preparation for the arrival of brigands, and "news" of reported sightings spread so quickly across France that the national panic seemed spontaneous to contemporaries. But this armed defense against imagined brigands quickly gave way to a real defense against the impossibility of meeting seigneurial demands in a time of hardship, and the Great Fear turned into an attack on the institutions of French feudalism on a massive scale. Rural rioters sacked the estates of their local seigneurs, burning records as they went.[14] In some cases they also violently attacked the seigneurs themselves, though most attacks targeted property.[15] The Great Fear, which was rooted in the subsistence insecurity of the peasantry, rapidly transformed into a political movement.

Even before 1789, *cahiers* provide evidence that the rural poor understood how the national political structure of feudalism translated to their immediate economic needs. The preliminary *cahier* from the small parish of Mansigné in western France is a revealing example of this. It began by explaining that the clergy, as members of the French state "like the other two orders," must likewise be subjected to taxes "in proportion to the property they possess." [16] The understanding of a connection between participation in society and the obligation to pay taxes

[13] Ibid., 27-29.
[14] McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 57-58; Lefebvre, *The Great Fear*, 137.
[15] Peter Jones, "The Peasants' Revolt?" *History Today*, May 1989: 15-19, 17.
[16] "Parish Cahiers of Écommoy and Mansigné," (1789), in *The French Revolution*, ed. Paul Beik (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970): 45-51, 45, 48. Beik explained that Mansigné represented a case that was "neither very conservative nor very radical."

was impressive in and of itself, but the parish also modified their demands according to the roles that the clergy played in society:

> the curés, especially those who enjoy moderate revenues and are at the head of a numerous flock, should, having regard to their obligations and to the number of poor in their parishes, be taxed more moderately […].[17]

The peasants of Mansigné recognized the links between societal roles and economic duties, which led them to demand a more equitable system while also making exceptions for those who fulfilled community obligations. The parish of Andelys revealed a similar awareness of the purpose of taxation when it demanded that certain onerous seigneurial and state dues be replaced by a universal land tax, the sale of Church lands, and a fee on luxury items.[18] Demands for the replacement, rather than abolition, of certain dues accounted for the public purpose of taxation while balancing it against the dire situation of the rural poor. John Markoff, in his intensive analysis of the *cahiers*, revealed that peasants across France possessed a similarly detailed understanding of the seigneurial system. Parishes frequently demanded the abolition of payments that served no public purpose, while allowing for the reform and continuation of taxes and dues that were directly linked to state or seigneurial services.[19] In the summer of 1789, it was this nuanced awareness that inspired the rural poor to target seigneurialism as a structure entrenched in both political and economic inequality.

Popular action during the Great Fear reflected the political awareness of the peasantry. In one case, a letter written to the Duke of Montmorency by his steward explained that the rural poor had attacked a local aristocrat's estate because of her perceived blame for high grain prices.

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[17] Ibid., 49.
[18] "Cahier des doléances, remontrances et instructions de l'assemblée du tiers-état du bailliage d'Andelys," (1789), in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 5, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1879): 614-17, 615.
[19] John Markoff, "Peasants Protest: The Claims of Lord, Church, and State in the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 3 (July 1990): 413-54, 416.

The attackers destroyed her dovecotes (keeping doves was a symbol of privilege) and her seigneurial records, leaving as payment a receipt signed "The Nation." [20] Attacks like these fulfilled an immediate economic purpose for the peasantry – the destruction of seigneurial records halted or delayed the collection of onerous dues – while also demonstrating an awareness that their actions were part of a broader political movement, that of "the Nation" against feudalism. Even the violence of the attacks, which appalled the deputies, was necessary according to Markoff, whose comparative analysis showed that popular violence was a fundamental characteristic of all successful European anti-feudal movements.[21]

The excessive violence and destruction of the Great Fear forced the deputies to act quickly to appease the rioters. The deputies hoped to accomplish this by reforming feudalism, but on the famous night of 4 August, the patriotic fervor of liberal aristocrats inspired the National Assembly to declare the full abolition of seigneurialism.[22] The enormity of such a declaration was not lost on the deputies. The decree of 11 August began, "l'Assemblée nationale détruit entièrement le régime féodal," and the preamble to the Constitution of 1791 later claimed that there was no longer a "régime féodal." [23] With these grand promises, the primarily liberal and bourgeois deputies of the National Assembly hoped to subdue the countryside and protect the property being destroyed by rioters.[24] To that end – and with the help of a better harvest in 1789 – they were largely successful, and the violence of the Great Fear subsided.

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[20] "The Great Fear: letter from the steward of the Duke of Montmorency, 2 August 1789," (1789), in *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook*, ed. Philip G. Dwyer and Peter McPhee (London: Routledge, 2002): 22-23.
[21] John Markoff, "Violence, Emancipation, and Democracy: The Countryside and the French Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995): 360-86, 362.
[22] McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 58.
[23] Assemblée nationale, "The August Decrees," (1789), in *French Revolution Documents*, vol. 1, ed. J.M. Roberts and R.C. Cobb (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966): 150-55, 151; Assemblée nationale, "La Constitution du 3 Septembre 1791," (1791), Preamble, HeinOnline, https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.cow/zzfr0181&i=1.
[24] John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 204; Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 187.

What the rioters achieved with the night of 4 August was a promise of liberation from the unequal economic and political system of feudalism. But the implementation of that promise was far more complicated. The deputies saw feudal dues as another form of property that had to be protected, and between the passionate declarations of 4 August and the actual decree of 11 August, the promised abolition was almost entirely diluted. Even the first article, after declaring the destruction "entièrement" of feudalism, clarified that some dues and privileges would be "déclarés rachetables" and that any rights not explicitly abolished would continue until they were indemnified by the same people (the rural poor) who had been paying them in the first place.[25] The feudal question would be an enduring one for revolutionaries, and over the ensuing months leaders would make several attempts to categorize seigneurial rights according to how they were obtained and whether each one ought to be abolished, kept, reformed, or indemnified.

The empty promises of the August Decrees subdued the widespread violence of the Great Fear, but rural unrest continued. By and large, the rural poor ignored the distinctions created on 11 August and in subsequent decrees. Taking the Assembly at its word, they held that feudalism had been entirely abolished on 4 August, and peasants throughout France engaged in legal challenges, outright refusal to pay, or other means of resistance.[26] As Markoff summarized, "the country people were fighting the claims of the lords, not an esoteric conception of 'feudalism' defined by the National Assembly." [27] Aware as they were of the political impacts of seigneurialism, peasant politics were always grounded in experiences of hunger and poverty, and the promises of 4 August did little to address those problems.

[25] Assemblée nationale, "The August Decrees," 151.
[26] Georges Lefebvre, "La place de la Révolution dans l'histoire agraire de la France," *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* 1, no. 4 (1929): 506-23, 507; McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 70-71.
[27] Markoff, "The Countryside and the French Revolution," 376.

Although there was not another mass anti-seigneurial peasant movement like the Great Fear, the persistence of peasant resistance kept pressure on the revolutionary government. The deputies were sympathetic to the anti-seigneurial demands of the rural poor, but also felt themselves bound by the inviolability of seigneurs' property rights. It was the approach of war in 1792 that made the continuing rural unrest untenable. Recognizing that the rural poor would not be satisfied by half measures, and that national unity during a European conflict was more important than an absolute adherence to property rights, the Legislative Assembly conceded the issue.[28] Various exceptions were removed from the original decrees until finally, on 17 July 1793, the indemnification requirement was eliminated and feudalism was fully abolished.[29]

The Great Fear and subsequent acts of feudal resistance made up perhaps the most impactful popular movement of the revolutionary decade. Wealthy merchants, Enlightenment reformers, even French kings had tried and failed to reform the seigneurial system in France, but it had persisted, more or less intact, for centuries. It had not only worsened economic inequality by impoverishing the peasantry at the hands of local elites, but had entrenched that economic inequality as a rigid social and political hierarchy. This structure of inequality had reduced "le peuple," in the words of the *cahier* from Elbeuf, "à la plus extreme misère." [30] With the outbreak of revolution in 1789, anti-seigneurialism united the rural poor across France unlike any other issue and transformed local subsistence insecurities into a mass political movement that could not be ignored. However, the fact that the August decrees announced an incomplete abolition of feudalism showed how far the lawyers and other professionals in the National Assembly were willing to go of their own accord. The constant pressure applied by the rural poor throughout the

[28] Ibid., 381-382.
[29] Lefebvre, "La place de la Révolution dans l'histoire agraire de la France," 507.
[30] "Cahier de la ville d'Elbeuf," 620.

early Revolution paid off when the government, facing the added threat of external war, accepted their demands and abolished the unequal political, economic, and social system of feudalism, completing one of the most notable and lasting achievements of the French Revolution.

The Parisian Crowd in the Early Revolution

While the peasantry rallied around an anti-seigneurial program, a similar intersection of economic and political factors brought the urban poor of Paris into the Revolution. The "crowd," to use historian George Rudé's term, was a heterogeneous body whose composition evolved throughout the course of the early Revolution. [31] Nevertheless, the intervention of the crowd at two critical junctures – the storming of the Bastille and the October Days – asserted popular economic demands through direct political actions, shaping the direction and policies of the Revolution in the process. After these early *journées*, the deputies became less tolerant of unrest amongst the urban poor and were largely successful in suppressing popular economic movements, demonstrated in the response to the early wage movement. Nevertheless, the popular interventions of this period asserted the influence of the Parisian crowd and their demands in the Revolution, with important implications for future movements.

Before analyzing the critical interventions of the Parisian crowd in the Revolution, it is important to understand who they were. George Rudé's overview, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, explained that "they were drawn in their overwhelming majority […] from the workshop masters, craftsmen, wage-earners, shopkeepers, and petty traders of the capital." [32] These were the people most affected by the unemployment, low wages, and high prices that defined the eighteenth-century French economy. By 1789, for instance, Ernest Labrousse has

[31] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*.
[32] Ibid., 178.

estimated that Parisian wage-earners spent as much as 88% of their budget on bread alone.[33] So although the members of the Parisian crowd were more secure than the desperately poor who had to resort to begging or vagabondage, they were still subjected to intense economic vulnerability, which distinguished them from the comfortable or even wealthy bourgeoisie who made up the revolutionary leadership. The economic struggles of these urban poor were only worsened by the failed harvest of 1788, which had driven the price of bread up while bringing thousands of starving migrants to Paris.[34] Facing increased competition for bread, employment, and aid, the crowd enthusiastically supported the Revolution for its promise of economic reform.

The events of 1789 also made the urban poor into a political force. The National Assembly, by claiming to rule through the consent of the French people, introduced the concept of popular sovereignty and undermined the absolute authority of the monarchy. The crown had traditionally maintained strict control over the streets of Paris to ensure public order, so its sudden loss of power created a vacuum that was quickly filled by the politically-empowered and economically-anxious urban poor.[35] This authority would be demonstrated repeatedly throughout the Revolution in mass movements of the Parisian poor. These movements almost always originated out of subsistence needs, but their goals and achievements were distinctly political.

The first critical moment of intervention by the urban poor was the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789. The uprising began on 11 July with widespread attacks on the Parisian customs barrier, which enforced punitive indirect taxes that disproportionately affected the poor. Rioters destroyed 40 of the 54 gates of the barrier, which had long been a target of popular anger

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[33] Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus*, vol. 2, 597-608, in George Rudé, "Prices, Wages and Popular Movements in Paris during the French Revolution," *The Economic History Review* 6, no. 3 (1954): 246-67, 247.
[34] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 33.
[35] William Sewell, "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille," *Theory and Society* 25, no. 6 (December 1996): 841-81, 847.

as a physical embodiment of an economic burden. Noelle Plack has demonstrated that the timing of the outburst was rooted in social and economic factors, such as the communal consumption of alcohol which was inhibited by wine taxes, as well as the specific revolutionary political context that had caused ideals of equality and popular sovereignty to circulate amongst the Parisian crowd.[36] This initial outburst established a blueprint whereby the Parisian poor expressed economic demands through acts of political violence.

The attack on the customs barrier was limited both in the number of rioters and in the scope of their goals, but the movement expanded rapidly when news reached Paris on 12 July that Louis XVI had dismissed and exiled the popular Controller-General of Finances, Jacques Necker. There were already rumors that counter-revolutionary advisors to the king, known as the Court Party, were preparing to repress the Revolution through military force, so news of Necker's exile drove mass numbers of the urban poor into the streets of Paris. Having joined with the already-mobilized tax rioters, the urban crowd commenced three days of mass popular violence.[37] Parisian electors attempted to restore order in the city by establishing local *milices bourgeoises* with strict property requirements that excluded most wage-earners and other urban poor. Nevertheless, on 14 July the crowd obtained a large number of weapons from the Hôtel des Invalides and set its sights on the Bastille, an armory which also symbolized despotism and royal authority over the streets of Paris.[38] Up to 8000 rioters besieged the fortress, sparking a bloody conflict that ended in victory for the crowd after members of the royal guard joined them. The victory was marked by the violent execution of the fortress' governor and six of his soldiers, as well as the complete dismantling of the Bastille.[39]

[36] Plack, "Wine, Taxes, and Popular Agency," 600-601, 604.
[37] Rudé, "Prices, Wages and Popular Movements," 250.
[38] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 48-53.
[39] McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 54-55.

While Necker's exile served as a political catalyst, the poor who took to the streets in defense of the Revolution were motivated by their economic status. Paris, like the rest of France, faced egregious economic inequality in 1789. Its proximity to the royal court at Versailles and its significance as France's largest city meant that it was home to the wealthiest and poorest citizens from across the country, and the poor often lived in miserable, cramped conditions.[40] For the crowd, then, the Revolution and its message of natural equality offered a way to secure their subsistence and improve their living conditions. Defending the Revolution from the threat of royal suppression, then, was a way of defending their economic security and reducing economic inequality. Their specific actions reflected this as well. In addition to gathering weapons, the rioters seized grain and other vital resources from businesses and churches, and systematically destroyed financial records to prevent the collection of taxes.[41] In this way, while acting in defense of the Revolution's potential for significant economic reform, the crowd simultaneously used popular violence to guarantee their more immediate subsistence needs.

These economic actions also had major political consequences. Most tangibly, the fall of the Bastille forced the monarchy to retreat from outright military repression. Louis XVI dismissed the troops he had summoned, dissolved the Court Party and, on 17 July, visited Paris to publicly embrace the Revolution.[42] The crowd of 14 July also shifted the authority of Paris into the hands of revolutionary leaders who they trusted to be more responsive to their subsistence needs, and a new city government was established under Mayor Jean Sylvain Bailly.[43] The legitimacy of this new Parisian government, and increasingly that of the National Assembly, became rooted in the popular sovereignty most visibly exercised by the Parisian

[40] Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 166-168,
[41] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution, 48-50.*
[42] Ibid., 59; Sewell, "Inventing Revolution," 850.
[43] McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 55.

crowd. The approval of the people had always been linked to the satisfaction of their subsistence needs, but the acceptance of popular sovereignty by revolutionary leaders gave that approval a newfound importance. Threatened with the repression of the Revolution and all the hope that it held for the improvement of their precarious subsistence, the Parisian poor gave the concept of popular sovereignty its first concrete application in the form of popular violence.[44]

The storming of the Bastille introduced the exercise of popular sovereignty by the urban poor, but it was the October Days that solidified it. By October 1789, a better harvest signaled an end to the intense food insecurity of the previous year, but bread remained scarce. The French poor had a long history of believing in aristocratic "famine plots" meant to starve the people into submission, and their fears had only been reinforced by the machinations of the Court Party in July.[45] In this context, scarcity after a good harvest appeared suspiciously artificial. When news reached Paris that the royal guard at Versailles had scorned the Revolution at a banquet, it seemed to confirm that the king was still surrounded by counterrevolutionary influences at Versailles. On 5 October, the combination of economic and political anxiety inspired a crowd of poor market-women to march on Versailles and confront the king directly.[46] It is important to note that most people still had faith in the king himself. A peasant *cahier* from the region around Marseille declared that "Louis XVI est bon, il est juste," and another from the Third Estate of Meaux attributed "la grandeur de ces maux à l'éloignement où il a été tenu de la présence du monarque." [47] Even his apparent resistance in July was attributed to the influence of the Court

[44] Sewell, "Inventing Revolution," 852-853.
[45] See Steven L. Kaplan, "The Famine Plot Persuasion in Eighteenth-Century France," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 72, no. 3 (1982): 1–79.
[46] Suzanne Desan, "Gender, Radicalization, and the October Days," *French Historical Studies* 43, no. 3 (August 2020): 359-90, 363-364.
[47] "Doléances des ménagers, agriculteurs et paysans du terroir de Marseille," (1789), in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 3, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1879): 718-20, 719; "Cahier de doléances, plaintes et remontrances de l'ordre du tiers-état du bailliage de

Party. Louis XVI, the traditional guarantor of the people's subsistence, would not ignore their appeals if he only knew they were suffering.

Like the crowd that attacked the Bastille in July, those who marched on Versailles had two goals. First, they were going to ensure the king's support for the Revolution – and all that it promised for the improvement of people's lives – by getting him to pass the recently-decreed Declaration of the Rights of Man and the abolition of feudalism. Second, in the words of one Madelaine Glain arrested for her role in the march, "they were going to ask for bread at Versailles." [48] The poor market-women who initiated the march were perhaps the most directly impacted by the bread shortage, and they maintained a constant focus on immediate subsistence needs. The October Days, from the very beginning, combined economic and political aims.

The October Days, also known as the Women's March on Versailles, was defined by gender roles. The *journée* was started by women in the Parisian markets who, already agitated by empty stalls and high prices, were inspired by the more overtly political demands of Parisian revolutionary leaders to set off for Versailles. The women left Paris on 5 October and stormed both the National Assembly's meeting hall and the king's palace.[49] By the time they left the next day, the women (and the men who later joined them) had achieved both their economic and political goals. Louis XVI and the National Assembly agreed on a decree that guaranteed more affordable bread for the capital, Louis endorsed the revolutionary decrees, and the royal family was relocated to Paris where the crowd could watch for counterrevolutionary influences.

Meaux," (1789), in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 3, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1879): 727-32, 728.

[48] "The March of Parisian market-women on Versailles, October 1789," *Réimpression de l'Ancien Moniteur, seule histoire authentique et inaltérée de la Révolution française, depuis la réunion des États-Généraux jusqu'au Consulat*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1847), 544, in *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook*, ed. Philip G. Dwyer and Peter McPhee (London: Routledge, 2002): 28-30, 29-30.

[49] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution,* 72-73.

Women's leadership in the October Days was a result of both practical considerations and traditional gender concepts. Men were more likely to be under surveillance by revolutionary authorities, especially after a previous male-led attempt to march on Versailles had been suppressed at the end of August. Male activists were also more likely to be integrated into the Revolution as members of the National Guard, and so less likely to engage in a march on the government.[50] The market-based origins of the march also brought societal gender roles to the forefront of the events. As in pre-revolutionary food riots, women mobilized for bread because women were expected to ensure the bread supplies of their families.[51] The women of October 1789 were enforcing the traditional moral economy of the poor, but on national authorities rather than local officials and grain merchants. When men eventually joined the women after members of the National Guard pressured Lafayette into joining the march, the threat of male violence added a layer of urgency to the organized demands of the women.[52]

But the women who marched on Versailles were also acting in an entirely new context compared to traditional riots. Clubs, pamphlets, and newspapers were spreading the language of revolution, and the Bastille had spread what historian David Garrioch called "the most important political lesson" by teaching the urban poor that the government had to acknowledge their demands. Armed with a new political awareness, the marchers were able to assert their subsistence needs more effectively than in any traditional bread riot. Upon arriving in Versailles, for instance, the women showed their understanding of the Revolution's dual power structure by splitting up to occupy the spaces of both the king and the National Assembly.[53] Within the

[50] David Garrioch, "The Everyday Lives of Parisian Women and the October Days of 1789," *Social History* 24, no. 3 (October 1999), 244; Desan, "Gender, Radicalization, and the October Days," 366.
[51] Garrioch, "Parisian Women and the October Days," 242.
[52] Desan, "Gender, Radicalization, and the October Days," 366.
[53] Garrioch, "Parisian Women and the October Days," 232, 245.

Assembly, the women specifically targeted conservative (*monarchien*) and clerical deputies for criticism. They even briefly undertook the functions of the Assembly, participating in the debate and passage of the decree guaranteeing more bread for Paris.[54] The significance of the Women's March came from the ability of the crowd to utilize the Revolution's complex political dynamics to further their subsistence demands.

According to Rudé, the October Days "completed the Paris revolution of July" by forcing the king to agree to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the August Decrees.[55] Just as the fall of the Bastille had saved the Revolution's promise of economic reform, the Women's March secured the government's commitment to the egalitarian ideals professed in these policies. Moreover, by moving the king and (shortly after) the National Assembly to Paris where they were even more accessible to the masses, the October crowd cemented the relationship between popular violence and popular sovereignty introduced by the Bastille rioters. For both the urban poor and revolutionary leaders, the experience of visibly poor women and men overtaking the grand halls of Versailles and physically relocating the royal family left no doubt that "the people" and their economic needs, as represented by the Parisian crowd, had become a major force in the Revolution.[56]

After the October Days, the nature of urban popular movements changed drastically. On the one hand, strong harvests in 1789 and 1790 did eventually lower bread prices, cooling the most immediate cause of unrest. Even when another poor harvest in 1791 raised bread prices, the reduced prices of other consumer goods offset it enough to keep subsistence from becoming a catalyst for the remainder of this moderate period.[57] Additionally, the deputies decided after the

[54] Desan, "Gender, Radicalization, and the October Days," 377, 381.
[55] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 61.
[56] Desan, "Gender, Radicalization, and the October Days," 376.
[57] Rudé, "Prices, Wages and Popular Movements," 250-252.

October Days that despite their verbal commitment to popular sovereignty, the violence of the crowd had to be reined in before it threatened their own authority. On 21 October press censorship, martial law, and the death penalty for rebellion were introduced, with one agitator being executed later that day.[58] Between October 1789 and August 1792, these measures were mostly successful in preventing the urban poor from organizing to express their economic demands. The only notable exception was the early labor movement that began to gain popularity in this period. Strikes and other demonstrations for higher wages or better working conditions periodically interrupted the capital's economy, though largely on a small scale and with very little success. In fact, the primary result of these movements was the Loi Le Chapelier of 14 June 1791, which outlawed any employer or employee associations and labelled workers' coalitions as "attroupements séditeux" that would be punished to the full extent of the law.[59] This law was revealing of the revolutionary bourgeoisie's priorities. Economic liberalism was so intrinsic to their revolutionary ideology that resistance to it was treated as insurgency against the Revolution itself.

The interventions of the Parisian poor at critical junctures in the early years of the Revolution were a powerful expression of economic demands that accounted for the novelty of their political situation. The storming of the Bastille represented the crowd's efforts to save the Revolution from failing before it had even had a chance to act on its promises of improving their lives, while at the same time popular violence was used to guarantee subsistence security in the short term. The women who marched on Versailles similarly guaranteed the Revolution's commitment to egalitarian political ideals at the same time that they petitioned for the

[58] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 78.
[59] Rudé, "Prices, Wages and Popular Movements," 252-253; Isaac René Guy le Chapelier, "The loi le Chapelier: speech and decree 14 June 1791," (1791), in *French Revolution Documents*, vol. 1, ed. J.M. Roberts and R.C. Cobb (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966): 242-45.

government's help feeding themselves and their families. Subsequent efforts to fight for better working conditions showed how the revolutionary leaders, fearful of the influence displayed in early interventions, were temporarily successful at suppressing economic movements by the urban poor. While these movements were subdued for the remainder of the moderate period, they established a powerful model for the future of revolutionary economic movements.

Public Welfare in the Early Revolution

Just as the actions of the rural and urban poor influenced the Revolution, so too did the new ideas and policies of revolutionary leaders affect the daily lives of the poor. Innovations in public welfare during this period were an extension of changes that had begun in the *ancien régime*: society came to reflect the liberal ideology of moral equality, and legislators centralized welfare through work-based programs. Although the conceptual impact of these changes was often greater than their concrete benefits, it is important to recognize the progress made in this period.

The attitudes of the early revolutionary leadership toward the poor were inspired by the Enlightenment emphasis on natural equality over real socioeconomic equality. Even the grandiose Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen began with the phrase, "les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits. Les distinctions sociales ne peuvent être fondées que sur l'utilité commune." [60] Qualified equality like this protected property rights against possible claims of redistribution in the name of economic equality. Even the *Comité de Mendicité*, established in 1790 with the explicit goal of combatting indigence, admitted to

[60] Assemblée nationale, "Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du Citoyen du 26 août 1789," (1789), art. I. HeinOnline, https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.cow/zzfr0145&i=1.

"l'inégalité necessaire de fortune." [61] Poverty was regrettable, and the rich should ease the suffering of the poor, but it could not be erased. Some expressed outright disdain for the poor, like one pamphleteer who complained that "l'inégalité des richesses provient souvent de la faute de ceux ou des parents de ceux qui s'en plaignent." [62] Another reasoned that in all of France there were roughly 100,000 poor "qui ne sont pas heureux et qui mériteroient de l'être." [63] The lazy and other *mauvaises pauvres*, by implication, deserved their misery.

Moral equality was codified in the Constitution of 1791 with the distinction between active and passive citizens. By establishing strict monetary and residence requirements for civic rights like voting, holding office, and serving in the National Guard, the National Assembly enfranchised roughly 60-70% of the adult male population as active citizens. The remaining 30-40% would be passive citizens, a group Harvey Chisick has labelled "sub-sovereign people" because of their lack of civic rights. [64] The concept of passive citizenship tied one's economic status to their political rights and demonstrated the condescending paternalism that revolutionary leaders felt toward the poor. Even Jean-François Lambert, a member of the *Comité de Mendicité* who was a fierce advocate of economic relief for the poor, adamantly opposed giving them political rights. Granting the vulgar masses access to civic rights, in his view, would dilute the political competence and effectiveness of the people and therefore undermine their popular sovereignty.[65]

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[61] François Alexandre Frédéric de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt and Comité de Mendicité, "Premier Rapport du Comité de Mendicité," (Paris: L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1790), 13, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 20714, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/premierrapportdu00laro.
[62] "Panacée Politique Par Un Avocat Electeur," (1789), 1, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 6273, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/panacepolitique00avoc.
[63] Muguet, "Lettre à M. Necker," (Paris: L'Imprimerie de Didot l'aîné, 1789), 5, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 23057, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/lettre00unse_53d.
[64] Assemblée nationale, "La Constitution du 3 Septembre 1791," Title III, § 2, cl. 1-2, 6, § 3, cl. 2, Title IV, cl. 2; Harvey Chisick, "The People, Poverty and Politics in the Pamphlet Literature of the Early French Revolution – the Case of Jean-François Lambert," *History of European Ideas* 17, no. 2–3 (1993), 289.
[65] Chisick, "The People, Poverty and Politics," 297, 305.

Although most revolutionary leaders shared Lambert's unwillingness to extend political rights to the poor, there was at least one notable exception. In a pamphlet released before the convening of the Estates General in 1789, the Parisian engineer Louis-Pierre Dufourny de Villiers called for the creation of a "Fourth Estate" of poor workers, arguing that the profit-maximizing goals of the merchants and business-owners who dominated the Third Estate were fundamentally opposed to workers' desires for higher wages.[66] Citing "the basic principle that the privileged cannot represent the non-privileged," Dufourny claimed that only a Fourth Estate could guarantee legitimate political rights for poor workers.[67] Dufourny, who would go on to become a prominent Jacobin writer and activist, also showed a degree of hostility toward the wealthy when he concluded darkly that "great fortunes[…] are a public scourge" and that "the rich[…] do not require the solicitude of the great social family." [68] In both his advocacy for the poor and his hostility toward the rich, Dufourny went beyond the moderate attitudes of 1789 and anticipated a radical tone which would become prominent in 1793.

In 1789, however, the majority of revolutionary leaders followed the more moderate and paternalist stance of moral equality. But because moral equality denied the poor direct political access, it required the government to care for their needs. The right to subsistence was a fundamental belief of the French poor well before 1789, implicit in *taxation populaire* and the idea of a moral economy, but the Revolution saw the first efforts by policymakers to have it formally adopted by the French government. Both Lambert and Dufourny advocated for its

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[66] Louis-Pierre Dufourny de Villiers, "Grievances of the Fourth Order," (1789), in *Social and Political Thought of the French Revolution: An Anthology of Original Texts*, ed. and trans. Marc Allan Goldstein (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1997): 94-99, 97-98.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Harvey Chisick, "An Intellectual Profile of a Jacobin Activist: The Morality and Politics of Dufourny de Villiers (1789-1796)," in *Visions and Revisions of Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Christine Adams, Jack R. Censer, and Lisa Jane Graham (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997): 105-33, 106-108; Dufourny, "Grievances of the Fourth Order," 99.

recognition in 1789, and in 1790 the *Comité de Mendicité* called for the inclusion of a right to subsistence in the constitution:

> Où il existe une classe d'hommes sans subsistances, là existe une violation des droits de l'humanité […] si le soulagement de la pauvreté est le devoir d'une Constitution qui a posé ses fondements sur les droits imprescriptibles des hommes, elle est encore le besoin d'une Constitution sage […].[69]

The efforts of the *Comité* and other advocates to have a formal right to subsistence codified in 1791 were in vain, accepted only in the more egalitarian constitution of 1793. While not as concrete as a guaranteed right to subsistence, the deputies of the National Assembly did embrace an obligation to help the poor, and the Constitution of 1791 called for the creation of "un établissement general de secours publics" to supply aid and work for those in need.[70] Although the *ancien régime* government had begun to take on some functions of poor relief (see chapter one), the idea that the state ought to take on the entire system of public welfare was a huge step.

However, while the deputies felt an obligation to provide for those who were sick, elderly, or injured, that aid was not freely given, and *les pauvres valides* were expected to fulfill a reciprocal obligation to work for society. In its fourth report, the *Comité de Mendicité* explained that "le travail était la seule assistance qu'un Gouvernement sage pouvait donner à l'homme en état de travailler." The able-bodied poor man, the report continued, "n'est autre chose que l'ouvrier sans propriété, qui n'a point de travail." [71] Likewise, a decree of 30 May 1790 on poverty in Paris explained that while everyone had a right to subsistence or work, a

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[69] Jean-François Lambert, "Cahier des pauvres," (1789), 4, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k42968c; Dufourny, "Grievances of the Fourth Order," 95; La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt and Comité de Mendicité, "Quatrième Rapport du Comité de Mendicité," (Paris: L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1790), 2, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 20718, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/quatriemerapport00laro.
[70] Assemblée nationale, "La Constitution du 3 Septembre 1791," Title I.
[71] La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt and Comité de Mendicité, "Quatrième Rapport," 77.

healthy beggar who chose not to work forfeited that right.[72] Pamphlets called for able-bodied beggars who refused work to be "transported" to the colonies, and many were arrested.[73] While new attitudes toward poverty encouraged the state to embrace a leading role in public welfare, they were hardly benevolent to the poor.

Early revolutionary governments confronted the worst of economic inequality with a barrage of policies. The Legislative Assembly alone, in its 11 months of existence, passed 56 decrees on poverty. Legislators understood that many factors caused poverty, from old age and sickness to unemployment and workplace injury, and so they sought to address it through a variety of tactics centered around two tenets: welfare centralization and job creation.[74]

We have already seen evidence of how the establishment of the *Comité de Mendicité* in 1790 created a central location for reports and policies relating to poverty. The *Comité* quickly became "a formidable pressure-group, urging the Assembly to recognize its obligations to the poor and demanding ambitious schemes of public expenditure," explained Alan Forrest.[75] It was also a powerful advocate for a centralized welfare system. Although many deputies preferred the simplicity (and frugality) of assigning poor relief to local assemblies, the *Comité'*s second report explained that *ancien régime* charity efforts had actually made poverty worse in the eighteenth century by acting without a coherent, uniform plan.[76] Two revolutionary ideals required a

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[72] La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, "Rapport sur la situation de la mendicité de Paris," (1790), in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 15, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1883): 742-44, 742.
[73] For an example of a call to arrest beggars, see M. Cousin, "Mémoires sur les Moyens de donner du travail aux Ouvriers et aux Artistes de la Capitale," (1790), 5, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 16718, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/memoiressurlesmo00cous; Alan Forrest, "The Condition of the Poor in Revolutionary Bordeaux," *Past & Present* 59 (May 1973), 158 documents 71 beggars arrested in Bordeaux from February-March 1790.
[74] Alan Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), viii, 23.
[75] Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*, 24.
[76] La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt and Comité de Mendicité, "Second Rapport du Comité de Mendicité," (Paris: L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1790), 28-29, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 20715, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/secondrapportduc00laro.

centralized approach in the *Comité'*s view. The first was *égalité*, because a piecemeal approach in which different localities addressed poverty with varying levels of effort and funding could never be equal.[77] Second, and likely more persuasive for the deputies, was economic liberalism. Economic growth depended on the free circulation of labor, and tying aid to one's community hampered that circulation. Only with a national, uniform welfare system would potential workers be able to move freely across France without considering access to local forms of aid.[78]

The Revolution's centralizing tendency was perhaps most evident in efforts to streamline the *ancien régime Hôpital* system, which had lost its religious funding in 1789 due to the nationalization of Church properties and the abolition of feudal dues like the tithe. The *Hôpitaux* remained privately run by local clergy, and in fact religious orders devoted to charity were often exempt from religious reforms like the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.[79] But the new reliance of the *Hôpitaux* on centralized national funding allowed the government to implement new reforms. For instance, the strict local residency requirements which often excluded rural poor from accessing the urban Hospitals were eliminated, ensuring equitable access for all French poor regardless of their place of residence.[80]

The *Comité de Mendicité* also attributed poverty to the unemployment caused by France's uneven economic development.[81] In response, legislators pursued a vigorous policy of job-creation to address the root causes of poverty. For instance, the 30 May 1790 decree on Parisian begging implicitly guaranteed work for all able-bodied poor living in the capital.[82] When Necker expressed concerns about this provision, the Assembly reiterated that all able-

[77] Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*, 173.
[78] Richard B. Du Boff, "Economic Thought in Revolutionary France, 1789-1792: The Question of Poverty and Unemployment," *French Historical Studies* 4, no. 4 (Autumn 1966), 442.
[79] Forrest, "The Condition of the Poor in Revolutionary Bordeaux," 160.
[80] Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*, 36-40.
[81] Du Boff, "Economic Thought in Revolutionary France," 438.
[82] La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, "Rapport sur la situation de la mendicité de Paris," 743.

bodied poor had a right to subsistence "par le travail." [83] To this end, legislators turned to the *ancien régime* model of *ateliers de charité* which provided low-wage jobs on public works projects. By minimizing reliance on local donors, the renamed *ateliers de secours* were able to avoid much of the corruption that had afflicted the *ateliers de charité*, and became some of the most successful welfare schemes of the early Revolution at providing tangible improvements in the lives of the poor. Despite this, revolutionaries were uncomfortable with the level of state economic intervention the *ateliers* required and they were usually the first form of relief to be cut during times of financial pressure. By 1791 there were no new projects approved in Paris, and by 1792 they were being limited across France. A few years later in 1795, they were shut down entirely.[84] A woman's workshop, established by Bailly in 1790 and promoted by the *Comité de Mendicité*, followed a similar trajectory.[85]

The explosion of public opinion that accompanied the Revolution included a wide array of public proposals on how to solve poverty, which varied from effective to nonsensical. One pamphlet writer in 1789, for instance, recommended that France create an army of poor soldiers to send to Africa and Finland to raid their local resources and establish a new source of funding for welfare programs in France.[86] Other proposals were more reasonable. Major cities like Bordeaux and Paris, for instance, subsidized bread for the poor.[87] Not all sound concepts were adopted, as shown by the failed efforts of the *Comité de Mendicité* and various pamphleteers to

[83] Jacques Necker, "Lettre de M. Necker à M. le Président de l'Assemblée Nationale," (Paris: L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1790), 2, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 23151, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/lettre00unse_mro; La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt and Comité de Mendicité, "Rapport fait au nom des comités de rapports, de recherches et de mendicité," (Paris: L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1790), 1, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 20713, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/rapportfaitaunom00laro_3.
[84] Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*, 104-105, 109-113.
[85] Shelby T. McCloy, "Charity Workshops for Women. Paris 1790-95," *Social Service Review* 2 (June 1937), 274-276, 281.
[86] Muguet, "Lettre à M. Necker," 9-16.
[87] Forrest, "The Condition of the Poor in Revolutionary Bordeaux," 170-172.

convince the National Assembly to use nationalized Church lands to provide cheap, small plots of land for the rural poor.[88] From the chorus of ideas, both innovative and traditional, which emerged regarding public welfare in the early Revolution, the central government gradually adopted a set of policies that was both economically liberal and highly centralized. These policies, like the attitudes inspiring them, represented a major shift in the development of French poor relief as the government took on a much larger role in the funding and administration of programs that sought to minimize economic inequality.

But what was the actual impact of welfare policies in the early Revolution? In terms of concrete benefits, early revolutionary policies either failed to help the poor or actively hurt them. The nationalization of Church lands, a seemingly promising opportunity to provide land to the rural poor, was later denounced by poor advocates after the lands were sold in large chunks to already-wealthy landowners.[89] These ideas would play a much larger role in the radical phase of the Revolution, but initial land reforms almost exclusively benefitted the wealthy. The abolition of feudal dues, at least until 1793, likewise did little to help the poor. In fact, Hufton has shown that the abolition of some dues in 1789 destabilized the makeshift economies of the poor, such as the salt smugglers in southern France who were employed to dodge the *gabelle*.[90] The abolition of feudalism thus had little practical impact, but it did remove any obligation that former seigneurs felt toward their communities. Local elites had often supplied community services like providing for abandoned children and donating to local poor relief, but these ceased after August 1789.[91] The state hoped to fill in these services with centrally funded and administered programs

[88] Du Boff, "Economic Thought in Revolutionary France," 439.
[89] "Avis aux pauvres sur la révolution présente, et sur les biens du clergé," (1790), 9, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 1311, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/avisauxpauvressu00unse.
[90] Olwen Hufton, "Women in Revolution 1789-1796," *Past & Present* 53 (November 1971), 96.
[91] Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*, 122; Forrest, "The Condition of the Poor in Revolutionary Bordeaux," 148.

like the *Hôpitaux* and *ateliers*, but a lack of funding consistently dashed these hopes. The ambitious programs envisioned by the *Comité de Mendicité* were underfunded as the Revolution destabilized the tax base, and most programs were put on hold indefinitely.[92] Even the more radical National Convention would turn to less resource-intensive proposals like property reform due to the difficulty of funding this centralized welfare system. Regardless of their intentions, financial difficulties meant that idealist legislative plans rarely translated to real impacts.

That is not to say that the early Revolution was inconsequential for the poor. New policies did impact the lives of those who *were* able to receive aid in some form, like the rural poor who were finally given access to asylum in urban *Hôpitaux* or the former beggars who were able to find work in the *ateliers de secours* while they were available.[93] Additionally, the conceptual impact of the French government embracing a comprehensive system of public welfare cannot be overstated. Revolutionary leaders rapidly replaced the religious, localized, piecemeal charity system that had failed the poor of the *ancien régime* with a new system of centralized, work-based *bienfaisance*. Despite their failures, the revolutionary policies did positively impact the lives of some poor and, perhaps more importantly, created a powerful model for future welfare states with the funding and infrastructure to turn the ideas into results.

Conclusion

Égalité was foundational to the French Revolution. It appeared in the first article of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, in the preamble to the Constitution of 1791, and in the revolutionary motto *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. But this prominence invited debate over what kind of equality was desirable, and who was to be included. Olympe de Gouges made the case

[92] Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*, 172-173.
[93] Du Boff, "Economic Thought in Revolutionary France," 443.

for women's equality with her 1791 Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen, declaring that "woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights." [94] Toussaint Louverture and other leaders in the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) similarly exposed the hypocrisy of a French nation declaring liberty and equality while exploiting slave labor in its colonies.[95]

Excluded from direct political participation in the Revolution because of their economic status, the poor majority of France found itself part of the debate over *égalité* in 1789. When revolutionary optimism for the peasantry turned into fear of failure and backlash, they responded with a massive, united offensive against the seigneurial system that had enabled the rich to exploit them for so long. Between the Great Fear and the years of legal and economic resistance that followed, the rural poor turned their economic needs into political action, forcing the state to abolish feudalism. And when the Revolution faced repression and resistance from Louis XVI and his court, uprisings by the Parisian crowd in July and October 1789 saved the Revolution and all that it promised for French commoners, while also addressing the participants' immediate subsistence needs. Although the government suppression was temporarily successful in limiting popular demands for economic change (as seen in the response to the labor movement), the mobilization of the urban poor in the early revolutionary period created a powerful blueprint for the subsequent rise of the Parisian *sans-culottes*. In the midst of these popular movements, the ideas of natural equality and government obligation inspired a program of centralized administration and job creation that fundamentally altered approaches to poverty. The deputies used this model to move beyond the localized religious charities of the *ancien régime*, accepting for the first time a national obligation to reduce the worst instances of economic inequality by

[94] Olympe de Gouges, "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen," (1791), in *Tolerance: The Beacon of Enlightenment*, ed. Caroline Warman (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016): 49-51, 50.
[95] Toussaint Louverture, *The Memoir of General Toussaint Louverture*, ed. and trans. Phillippe E. Girard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) is an excellent compilation of Louverture's story in his own words.

improving the lives of the poor. The intersection of actions and ideas that took place in this period, between the rural and urban poor on the one hand and the leaders of revolutionary society on the other, shaped both the policies and the experiences of economic inequality in the French Revolution. With the victory of more radical forces in 1792, demands for moderate economic improvement would give way to calls for property redistribution, and economic equality would become a real goal of the masses.

Chapter Three – *Égalité* and Redistribution, 1792-1794

The radical turn of the French Revolution in 1792 and 1793 was inextricably linked to the resurgence of the popular movement. The government had established a tentative stability after the upheavals of the early Revolution, but that peace began to unravel when the king publicly rejected the Revolution in the Flight to Varennes in June of 1791. The Legislative Assembly attempted to maintain the status quo by claiming that the king had been kidnapped, but a coalition of the Parisian lower classes known as the *sans-culottes*, politicized by the events of the early Revolution, began to demand the abdication of the king and the establishment of a republic.[1] Rising prices and the outbreak of war with Austria and Prussia in April 1792 added to the feeling that the Revolution was on the brink, and Louis fueled tensions by persistently vetoing any significant legislation. At the same time, crowds of pro-revolutionary commoners from across France were flocking to the capital to be trained and organized for war, providing the *sans-culottes* with militant support.[2] Organized under the Paris Commune, the soldiers and common people of the capital invaded the Tuileries Palace on 10 August 1792 and engaged in a bloody conflict with the palace guards. Louis and his family fled to the Legislative Assembly which, acquiescing to popular demands, suspended the monarchy and called for the election of a new National Convention.[3]

With the insurrection of 10 August, "the people" and their needs rapidly returned to the forefront of revolutionary events. The next day, France enacted near-universal male suffrage with the elimination of passive citizenship for all but servants and the homeless, although even

[1] McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 89-90.
[2] Ibid., 94-95, 97.
[3] Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 186-192.

servants had access to sectional assemblies.[4] The victories of populist politicians like Jean-Paul Marat and Maximilien Robespierre in the September elections to the National Convention reflected this expanding political access. Within days of their first meeting, the deputies of the Convention declared France a republic and began navigating the crises facing the Revolution without King Louis as their figurehead.

The National Convention ushered in a period of hope and confusion, as genuine efforts to improve the lives of the French people were pursued alongside often-violent attempts to secure national unity and government authority in the name of defending the Revolution. In this context, the common people were inspired and empowered to demand more fully egalitarian measures to guarantee their access to both food and property, and their efforts would result in some of the most far-reaching policies of the revolutionary decade. In Paris, the *sans-culottes* contributed to both the intense violence of the Reign of Terror and the illiberal price-fixing policies of the General Maximum, articulating a complex relationship between economics and politics in the process.[5] In the countryside, longstanding grievances regarding the unequal distribution of property gave way to acts of popular violence against large landowners, forcing local governments and the National Convention to take action to maintain the loyalty of the rural poor. National attempts to redistribute property were hotly contested, however, and deputies were forced to redefine the balance between the foundational revolutionary rights of equality and property. For a roughly two-year period following the insurrection of 10 August, the people of France believed they had a chance to address their economic needs through the egalitarian redistribution of resources and property, and they pursued these goals forcefully. The policies

[4] R.B. Rose, *The Making of the Sans-Culottes: Democratic Ideas and Institutions in Paris* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1983), 167, 172.
[5] Jarvis, "The Cost of Female Citizenship," 649 explores a similar concept of "economic citizenship."

achieved by and for the French poor during this radical phase were highly revealing both of their needs and of how far the Revolution was willing to go to address them.

Urban Radicalism: The Reign of Terror and the General Maximum

Despite impactful moments of popular intervention in July and October 1789, the political agenda of the early Revolution had been dominated by the liberal professionals at the forefront of the National Assembly. But in the aftermath of 10 August, the Parisian *sans-culottes* emerged as one of the most potent political forces in France. The *sans-culottes* represented a cross-section of the Parisian lower classes, and their ideology leveraged their economic status into concrete political goals. These were expressed in demands for the Terror and the Maximum, which punished the economic enemies of the *sans-culottes* and reshaped the nature of revolutionary politics. While the concrete results of their activism were mixed, the government's brief acceptance of egalitarian economic policies was a significant break from traditional and liberal stances on economic inequality, and a major victory for the *sans-culottes*.

One of the reasons the *sans-culottes* became so influential was their diversity. Economically, they were situated below the upper-middle class and above the most indigent poor, encompassing anyone from domestic servants and water carriers to merchants and small-business employers. In the words of Robert Palmer, "they were the people of Paris without the frosting – and generally without the dregs." [6] This diverse composition resulted in diverse interests, as artisans and traders sought to protect small businesses while the most radical wing of the *sans-culottes*, the *Enragés*, agitated for consumer protections like price caps. Despite the absence of the most indigent members of society, poverty and scarcity were ever-present among

[6] Robert Palmer, "Popular Democracy in the French Revolution: Review Article," *French Historical Studies* 1, no. 4 (Autumn 1960): 445-69, 453.

the *sans-culottes*. Albert Soboul, author of the most authoritative study on the *sans-culottes*, explained that political obligations like dining out or attending sectional assemblies left even the relatively well-off among the group with very little time or money.[7] Working-class women known as *sans-jupons* also played a prominent role in popular politics. The *sans-jupons* advocated for the subsistence needs of their families through demands for price controls, recalling the same traditional role of bread guarantor which had inspired the market-women of the October Days or the rioters of the Flour War. Additionally, they protected the Revolution at home by denouncing counterrevolutionary suspects while their husbands and fathers were at war.[8] The popular movement in this period encompassed employers and employees, comfortable and desperate, men and women, and each of them brought their social and economic identity into the expanding arena of popular politics.

The most visible unifier for the *sans-culottes* was their dress. As historian Jennifer Harris explained in her work on revolutionary attire, the *sans-culotte* outfit combined working-class elements in the form of a short jacket and long pants (as opposed to the shorter *culottes* worn by the wealthy) with the classical Roman imagery of the Phrygian cap or *bonnet rouge*.[9] Through their dress, the *sans-culottes* turned their economic station into a universal political identity. And by turning "the dress of the common man" into the exclusive uniform of patriotism, the *sans-culottes* further distanced themselves from the hierarchical traditions of the *ancien régime*, in which clothing style was directly linked to one's social and economic status.[10] As the wealthy strove to show their patriotism and avert popular suspicion by adopting the outward appearance

[7] Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes*, 234-236.
[8] McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 141; Jennifer Harris, "The Red Cap of Liberty: A Study of Dress Worn by French Revolutionary Partisans 1789-94," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 283-312, 292-293.
[9] Harris, "The Red Cap of Liberty," 283, 286.
[10] Ibid., 290, 310.

of the *sans-culottes*, this common clothing was effectively imposed on revolutionaries of all backgrounds.

The outbreak of war in 1792 highlighted the severity of economic inequalities in revolutionary France, and in doing so shaped much of the *sans-culotte* identity. For one, after a poor harvest in 1791, the war exacerbated an already-perilous subsistence situation by blocking grain imports while at the same time requiring extensive provisions for the army.[11] Other factors, like the start of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, which cut France off from its exploitation of colonial slave labor, made the subsistence situation in France even worse for the market-dependent urban poor.[12] Palmer thus interpreted the *sans-culotte* movement as "an enormous wave of citizen self-help." [13] Especially vulnerable were the wives and children of the many *sans-culottes* who went to war, forced to rely on insufficient state relief for survival. To support these dependents and the military effort overall, the *sans-culottes* who remained in Paris demanded new taxes and forced loans on the rich.[14] These were imposed by various levels of government, and grew out of a sense that the wealthy were not contributing as much to the Revolution as the *sans-culottes* who defended it with their lives.[15] This contributed in turn to a growing popular view of the wealthy as potential counterrevolutionaries, in contrast to the virtue and patriotism of the poor.

The war also revealed that the government could do more to protect the poor from the increasingly-suspect rich. In an address to the National Convention in June 1793, the *Enragé* leader Jacques Roux cited the expansive powers of the wartime government to argue for the

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[11] Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution*, 284.
[12] Heller, "Bankers, Finance Capital and the French Revolutionary Terror," 189; Rudé, "Prices, Wages and Popular Movements," 253-254.
[13] Palmer, "Popular Democracy," 452.
[14] Forrest, "The Condition of the Poor in Revolutionary Bordeaux," 160.
[15] Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes*, 75-76; Marisa Linton, "Saint-Just: The French Revolution's Angel of Death," *History Today*, January 2015: 29-35, 33; Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution*, 28.

implementation of price controls: "La législateur a le droit de déclarer la guerre, c'est-à-dire de faire massacrer les hommes, comment n'auroit-il pas le droit d'empêcher qu'on pressure et qu'on affame ceux qui gardent leurs foyers ?" [16] Roux's argument highlighted the hypocrisy of deputies who were willing and able to violate the sanctity of life to make war, while claiming that property rights and liberal economic principles prevented them from instituting price controls to protect the poor. The war justified extraordinary government authority, and Roux was just one of many demanding for that authority to be used to defend the poor from the predations of the rich. In this way, while the war worsened the economic situation of the urban poor, it also exposed potential political solutions to their plight.

In this context of war and scarcity, the *sans-culottes* adopted an ideology that was both radically egalitarian and explicitly hostile to the rich. The egalitarianism of the *sans-culottes* was evident in the Parisian play *La Famille Indigente,* which debuted in March 1794, near the end of the radical period. The opening scene of the play featured a poor woman named Pauline thanking the heavens for sleep, because it relieved the poor of their misery and the rich "des plaisirs que l'or lui procure." [17] Plays were the dominant form of organized entertainment for the urban masses in this period, so Pauline's praise for the equalizing tendency of sleep, especially as it concerned the rich and poor, indicated the egalitarian values of the play's audience.[18] The concept of raising up the lower classes was evident in the early Revolution, including popular demands for bread subsidies and the efforts of the *Comité de Mendicité* to increase funding and centralization of welfare programs (see chapter two). But the *sans-culottes* took the pursuit of

[16] Jacques Roux, "Adresse," in Albert Mathiez, "Le manifeste des Enragés (Juin 1793)," *Annales révolutionnaires* 7, no. 4 (September 1914): 547-60, 550.
[17] Pierre Gavaux and Barthélémi-Ambroise Planterre, *La Famille Indigente, fait historique en un acte, mêlé de chant* (1794), 3, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 23803, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/lafamille00unse.
[18] McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 102.

equality further, seeking not only to raise up the poor but also to bring down the rich. *La Famille Indigente* was one example of this redistributive equality, and the *sans-culottes* reinforced it in daily life by forcing the wealthy to wear common clothing, or by using "tu" and "citoyen" in place of more formal terms.[19]

The resurgence of popular politics in the aftermath of 10 August applied intense, direct pressure on the revolutionary government to pursue egalitarian policies. In June 1793, *sans-culottes* responded to criticisms from moderate Girondins by surrounding the National Convention and forcing the arrest of 29 Girondin deputies.[20] The Purge of the Girondins secured the authority of the leftwing Jacobin party in the National Convention, but it also asserted the influence of the Parisian poor. The event was so significant that an educational pamphlet from the time, the "Alphabet des sans-culottes," named it one of the three most significant dates of the Revolution, along with the fall of the Bastille and the overthrow of the monarchy.[21]

Despite the leading role taken by middle-class professionals during the Revolution, they were not united solely by economic interests, and the increasing popular pressure during this period exacerbated divides which already existed due to external factors ranging from the war and its progress to differing beliefs in the ideal form of government. While the Girondins preferred representative government and a more economically hierarchical society, the Jacobins who chose to embrace the direct political support of the Parisian common people also had to embrace egalitarian attitudes (whether genuinely or not), and those who did became leading voices in government. The leading Jacobin Maximilien Robespierre, for instance, echoed popular suspicion of economic elites when he announced his intention that "commerce will be the source

[19] Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes*, 228.
[20] McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 116; Tackett, *Coming of the Terror*, 273-176.
[21] "Alphabet des sans-culottes, ou Premiers élémens de l'éducation républicaine," (Paris: Imprimerie de C.-F. Galletti, 1793-1794), 9, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k490150.

of public wealth and not merely of the monstrous wealth of a few families." [22] Saint-Just similarly expressed popular egalitarian demands when he explained in 1793 that "il ne faut ni riches ni pauvres." [23] The new Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen which prefaced the (never implemented) Constitution of 1793 illustrated the new egalitarianism of the revolutionary government, adding *égalité* as the first of man's natural rights (moving property from the first position to the fourth), and "le bonheur commun" as the aim of society. With these moves, according to Florence Gauthier, the Convention placed the poor man's equal right to existence in direct opposition to the rich man's right to property, which had dominated the early Revolution.[24]

A corollary to this egalitarianism was a belief that the rich did not need or deserve all of their wealth, which manifested itself as both fear and hatred of the wealthy. Roux expressed this in "Le manifeste des Enragés" when he lamented that "l'égalité n'est qu'un vain fantôme quand le riche par le monopole exerce le droit de vie et de mort sur son semblable." Roux went on to denounce "l'aristocratie marchande" as criminals, royalists, and "sang-sues du peuple" who were worse than the nobility or clergy of old.[25] While Roux represented the most radical wing of the *sans-culottes*, they were not alone in their hostility toward the rich. Soboul, who identified such hostility as a defining feature of the *sans-culottes*, quoted a feather dealer named Davelin who stated bluntly that "'neither the merchants nor the rich are worth sparing.'" [26] Parisian masses were suspicious that the wealthy were to blame for the mounting military and economic crises of the early Republic, and their suspicions were only reinforced when many wealthy families, afraid

[22] Maximilien Robespierre, "Rapport sur les principes de morale politique," (1794), in *The French Revolution*, ed. Paul Beik (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970): 276-88, 278.
[23] Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just, *Fragments sur les institutions républicaines* (Paris: Techener, Libraire, 1831), 53, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5487365q.
[24] Convention nationale, "Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du Citoyen," in "La Constitution du 24 juin 1793," (1793), art. I, II, HeinOnline, https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.cow/zzfr0184&i=1; Gauthier, "De Mably à Robespierre," 286.
[25] Roux, "Adresse" 548-551.
[26] Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes*, 17.

of the increasingly-hostile environment, began to flee Paris.[27] It was resentment of the rich as much as a benevolent and self-interested desire to help the poor that defined the ideology of the *sans-culottes.*

The egalitarian and anti-rich sentiments of the *sans-culottes* developed alongside the most well-known episode of the Revolution, the Reign of Terror. The Terror grew in part out of the economic anxiety and political agitation of the *sans-culottes*, and in turn created an atmosphere of violence which empowered them. Because their composition and ideology presented economic status as a direct indicator of political values, the *sans-culottes* understood opposition to their economic goals as opposition to the Revolution itself. [28] To overcome this opposition and pursue economic equality, then, they encouraged both popular and political violence through the Terror.

The enemies of the *sans-culottes* were not always the same as the enemies of the Jacobin deputies, however, and the weaponization of the Terror by the popular movement bridged the gap between economics and politics. In a study of bankers during the Terror, Henry Heller examined how the Terror was "directed not only against political but also economic enemies of the Revolution." [29] The economic policies of the Terror punished large-scale merchants and speculators whose success was deemed harmful to poor consumers, outlawing many investment activities under penalty of death. This hostility toward the "economic enemies" of the Revolution was a result of the popular influence on the mechanisms of the Terror. Although the *sans-culottes* were far from the only influential actors in the Reign of Terror, their egalitarian ideology

[27] Tackett, *Coming of the Terror*, 215.
[28] For more on how the *sans-culottes* identified their lives with patriotism see Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes*, 246.
[29] Heller, "Bankers, Finance Capital and the French Revolutionary Terror," 181.

and the background of popular violence that they established had important implications for how it played out.

The Terror would also play an important role in reinforcing the major policy achievement of the *sans-culottes*: the General Maximum. Popular demands for price controls predated the Revolution – they were already well-established, for instance, in the *taxation populaire* of the Flour War – but by the summer of 1793 the growing influence of the *sans-culottes,* the subsistence crisis, and the National Convention's desperate need to maintain the loyalty of the people during the war had made calls for price controls impossible to ignore. In May 1793, the Convention introduced price caps on grain, first at a departmental level and then nationally. With sharp price hikes in August and the recent memory of the Girondin purge at the front of their minds, Jacobin deputies declared the General Maximum on 29 September. The law set maximum prices for 39 individual goods, from meat and onions to soap and paper, guaranteeing not only the subsistence but also a minimum quality of life for consumers.[30] By prioritizing the needs of the poor over the profit margins of wealthy merchants, the General Maximum distilled the egalitarian ideology of the *sans-culottes* into policy form.

Outside the ranks of the *sans-culottes*, however, the Maximum was far less popular. Before he was purged from the Convention, Girondin leader Jacques Pierre Brissot issued a stinging rebuke of the Jacobins and their *sans-culottes* allies. Stoking fear in his audience, Brissot denounced "les désorganisateurs" and "les plus cruels ennemis du peuple" for causing anarchy in the wake of 10 August and for wanting to level "les propriétés, l'aisance, le prix des denrées, des divers services rendus à la société" as well as more abstract qualities like "les talens,

[30] Jarvis, "The Cost of Female Citizenship," 657; Darrow, "The General Maximum in Montauban," 498.

les connoissances, les vertus, parce qu'ils n'ont rien de tout cela." [31] Brissot and his moderate allies believed price controls would undermine the stability not only of the economy but of revolutionary society as a whole. Even Jacobin proponents viewed the Maximum as a temporary emergency measure, and passed a wage maximum alongside the General Maximum to protect business interests in the interim.[32] And when the *sans-culottes* tried to ensure equal access to housing by pushing for a rent maximum, the Convention held firm in its refusal.[33] While the egalitarianism of price controls appealed to the *sans-culottes*, it represented a potentially dangerous concept for bourgeois revolutionaries.

For others, the threat was more than theoretical. In a recent study, Katie Jarvis explored the Maximum's impact on "the 'heroines of 5 and 6 October' 1789," the Parisian market-women known as the *Dames des Halles*.[34] The Maximum applied equally to all levels of sale, eliminating profit margins because merchants had to sell their goods at the same prices they purchased them for. Smaller-scale merchants like the *Dames* could not survive under these conditions, but anyone who abandoned their trade was regarded as suspect under the Terror. Using the memory of their patriotic legacy to shield themselves against accusations of counterrevolution, the *Dames* publicly demanded reforms and violently resisted the *sans-jupons* of the local *Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires* who tried to force them to adhere to the Maximum.[35] The *Dames* were ultimately successful: although the deputies were unwilling to acknowledge flaws in the initial policy, in early November 1793 they quietly reformed the Maximum to allow for small profit margins. [36] But the *Dames*' activism had other,

[31] Jacques-Pierre Brissot, *A tous les républicains de France; sur la Société des Jacobins de Paris* (Paris: Imprimerie du Cercle Social, 1792), 5-6, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k85303p.
[32] Jarvis, "The Cost of Female Citizenship," 661; Palmer, "Popular Democracy," 460.
[33] Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes*, 237-238.
[34] Jarvis, "Cost of Female Citizenship," 655.
[35] Ibid., 663, 665-666.
[36] Ibid., 674.

unintended consequences. For the Jacobin deputies, the conflict between the *Dames* and the *Citoyennes Républicaines* represented not only an unacceptable division within their popular base, but also an inappropriate level of female activism. As a result, the Convention blamed the unrest exclusively on gender and used it as a catalyst for the closure of all women's political clubs.[37] The *Dames* were able to use memory and their political credentials to achieve necessary economic reforms under the Maximum, but their success came at the expense of the active political participation of all women in the Revolution.

Yet, despite this range of reactions – from reluctance to adamant opposition – the *sans-culottes* had successfully pressured the National Convention into implementing the General Maximum. The symbolic significance of such a victory should not be understated, as the policy represented a rare attempt by the revolutionary government to place the needs of the poor above the financial interests of the wealthy. The memory of such a commitment would not die easily among the common people.

But the concrete impact of the Maximum was more mixed. In Paris and other urban centers, the Maximum provided temporary shelter from the soaring prices associated with inflation and scarcity, while simultaneously disrupting the supply and distribution of food and other commodities for the future.[38] Additionally, as seen with the *Dames,* the Maximum exposed divisions within the *sans-culottes* between poor consumers who benefitted from the price caps and the more well-off small traders, artisans, and merchants who were directly harmed by them.[39] Thus while radicals like Jacques Roux denounced inviolable property rights, the author of the "Alphabet des sans-culottes" defended property in question and answer form:

[Demande]. Peux-tu prendre le bien d'autrui ?

[37] Ibid., 668, 670-671.
[38] Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*, 170.
[39] Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes*, 257.

[Réponse]. Non.
D. Pourquoi ?
R. Parce que je ne voudrais pas qu'on prît le mien.[40]

Divisions like these were among the reasons that Jacques Hébert, author of the famous *sans-culottes* journal *Le Père Duchesne*, rebuked the lower classes for "going at each other like cats and dogs and eating each other up instead of working hand in hand" to resist the rich.[41]

According to a study by Margaret Darrow, the Maximum also had the paradoxical effect of protecting the liberal free market economy. By turning every commercial transaction into a suspect interaction, the General Maximum focused popular attention on merchants, who were already regarded suspiciously in popular culture due to their role in enforcing high food prices. [42] In effect, the Convention gave legal and patriotic authority to the traditional moral economy of the poor and in doing so diverted popular criticism of the liberal capitalist economy. Faced with a subsistence crisis, the poor were encouraged to direct a cultural resentment toward particular bakers, butchers, and other local figures who were accused of violating consumer protections, rather than questioning or resisting the broader liberal economic system that was failing to provide for their subsistence (as had occurred on a smaller scale in the Flour War). In Darrow's words, the Maximum "channeled the radical potential of the subsistence crisis and dissipated it in the prosecution – even persecution – of petty retailers.[43]

Whether one views the Maximum as a symbolically important step forward in the fight for economic equality, as a materially insufficient policy, or as an "essentially conservative" government strategy in the model of Darrow, the impact of the *sans-culottes* on the Maximum

[40] "Alphabet des sans-culottes," 18.
[41] Jacques Hébert, "The Great Anger of Père Duschene against the Rich," (1793), in *The Permanent Guillotine: Writings of the Sans-Culottes*, ed. and trans. Mitchell Abidor (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018): 99-102, 100.
[42] Darrow, "The General Maximum in Montauban," 499, 502. Although Darrow's study centers on the implementation of the Maximum in the city of Montauban, the general effects of the Maximum on urban unrest hold true across France.
[43] Ibid., 524.

and on the French Revolution was undeniable.[44] From the broad economic range of their composition, to the radical egalitarianism and anti-rich hostility that formed the backbone of their ideology, to the temporary achievement of their goals under the Terror and the Maximum, the *sans-culottes* represented some of the most prominent and impactful revolutionary advocates for economic equality. By turning their economic positions into political ones, the *sans-culottes* were able to shift the revolutionary agenda from a minimal commitment to addressing only the most blatant economic inequalities to a more radical commitment to working toward real economic equality.

"The Bourgeois Great Fear": The Agrarian Law and Rural Redistribution

While the *sans-culottes* pursued equal access to food and other vital commodities, the push for economic equality in the countryside coalesced around land redistribution. Despite making up over two-thirds of the French population at the time of the Revolution, peasants owned only one-third of land nationally, and as little as one-twentieth in some regions near large cities, so gaining access to land was a major priority.[45] Property reforms in the early Revolution had failed to help the rural poor and had even contributed to an open rebellion in the Vendée. Facing the same radicalizing factors as the urban poor – subsistence shortages, the dangers of internal and external war, and a government willing to listen to the demands of the lower classes in return for their loyalty – the rural poor successfully agitated for property redistribution in the form of more accessible sale conditions for *biens nationaux* and a mechanism for the division (or *partage*) of common lands. Taken together, these policies amounted to an "Agrarian Law" and forced the bourgeois deputies to reconsider their absolute concept of property rights. As with the

[44] Ibid., 525.
[45] Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 7; Lefebvre, *The Great Fear*, 7-8.

Maximum, the concrete impacts of these policies were mixed at best. While they made a real difference in peasant lives in some regions, the policies were resisted or ignored completely in most of France. Regardless of material impacts, however, the achievements of the rural poor from 1792 to 1794 had enormous ideological consequences for the future of popular movements.

The "Agrarian Law" was a familiar concept for revolutionary leaders, but its exact meaning was unclear. At a minimum, it referred to the ancient Roman precedent of dividing up unclaimed lands (gained either through conquest or by clearing wastelands) amongst the landless poor, but it could also refer to a more radical Spartan model in which the state forcibly divided both private and public properties amongst all people.[46] The former was radical enough for liberal-minded French landowners, but the latter was so dangerous that it became, in the words of Peter Jones, "the bourgeois Great Fear." [47] Revolutionary elites learned about the Agrarian Law in their Enlightenment education, but the *philosophes* suggested only a very limited version. Montesquieu, for instance, warned against applying the Agrarian Law too suddenly, while Rousseau suggested limiting the size of future land purchases instead of redistributing existing properties. [48] Ultimately, revolutionary leaders came to see any version of the Agrarian Law as incompatible with property rights and dangerously destabilizing for society.

The French poor were less likely to know the Agrarian Law by name, but that did not stop them from pushing for some form of property redistribution even before 1792. Preliminary *cahiers* from Andelys, Gisors, Elbeuf, and Domfront in Western France all demanded that royal properties be alienated to alleviate tax burdens, while Chevannay in Eastern France called for the

[46] R.B. Rose, "The 'Red Scare' of the 1790s: The French Revolution and the 'Agrarian Law,'" *Past & Present* 103 (May 1984): 113-30, 114-116.
[47] Peter Jones, "The 'Agrarian Law': Schemes for Land Redistribution during the French Revolution," *Past & Present* 133 (November 1991): 96-133, 99.
[48] Rose, "'Red Scare' of the 1790s," 116-117; Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice*, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 95-96.

Agrarian Law by name.[49] After the events of 1789, the newspaper *Révolutions de Paris* described the Revolution itself as "une véritable loi agraire mise à execution par le peuple. Il est rentré dans ses droits. Un pas de plus, et il rentrera dans ses biens." [50]

The commons were slightly more complex: traditionally regarded as an important resource for the poor, an eighteenth-century *ancien régime* policy known as *triage* had allowed local elites to claim portions of the lands for themselves.[51] Additionally, a petition from Lesquielles-Saint-Germain in the Aisne department explained that the commons actively hurt the rural poor, because they had to pay taxes on common lands while only the wealthy could afford the livestock which grazed on them.[52] The solution to this was to divide the commons into individually-owned plots, an idea which gained popularity during the Revolution. Without this *partage*, in the words of another petition from Martel in the Lot department, "le patrimoine des pauvres deviendrait plus sûrement celui des riches." [53] Despite these early demands for land reforms, little real progress was made from 1789 to 1792. The French peasantry devoted their efforts to the abolition of feudalism, and the period's defining property reform (the nationalization of church properties in 1790) served almost exclusively to perpetuate existing

[49] "Cahier du bailliage d'Andelys," in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 5, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1879): 614-17, 615; "Cahier du bailliage de Gisors," in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 5, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1879): 617-20, 618; "Cahier de la ville d'Elbeuf," in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 5, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1879): 620-23, 621; "Cahier des doléances plaintes et remontrances contenant l'expression du vœu général des habitants de la ville et de toutes les paroisses du bailliage secondaire de Domfront," (1789), in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 1, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1879): 722-26, 725; Rose, "'Red Scare' of the 1790s," 119.
[50] Louis-Marie Prudhomme, *Révolutions de Paris*, 96 (7-14 May 1791), 247, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1051208v.
[51] Ikni, "Sur les biens communaux," 78.
[52] "Lesquielles-Saint-Germain : Pétition de la majorité des habitants aux directoires du département et du district," (1792), in *Le partage des biens communaux: Documents sur la préparation de la loi du 10 Juin 1793*, ed. Georges Bourgin (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1908): 12-14, 12-13.
[53] "Martel : Pétition de la commune à l'Assemblée," (1790), in *Le partage des biens communaux: Documents sur la préparation de la loi du 10 Juin 1793*, ed. Georges Bourgin (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1908): 135-37, 137.

economic inequalities by auctioning land in large, expensive plots, which transferred them from the clergy and nobility to the wealthy bourgeoisie.[54]

The failure of early property redistribution was disappointing for peasants across France, but in the Vendée in Western France it was deadly. The Vendée was a region of relatively comfortable peasants who lived and worked on isolated farms surrounding a central bourg. Before the Revolution, these peasants had faced minimal seigneurial exploitation, and the Church was a key pillar in their otherwise dispersed communities. Instead of seigneurialism, the primary cause of peasant unrest was economic exploitation at the hands of the village bourgeoisie, who collected excessive taxes from the rural poor. The early Revolution exacerbated these tensions, boosting the economic and political standing of the bourgeoisie while increasing taxes on the peasantry. At the same time, major achievements like the abolition of feudalism or the passage of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy either did little to help the Vendean peasants or actively undermined their communities.[55] In this context the auctions of *biens nationaux*, which were already resented as an attack on the Church, became yet another hated symbol of the Revolution when lands were purchased almost exclusively by the local bourgeoisie. When exempt bourgeois officials began demanding military conscripts in the spring of 1793, the tense situation in the Vendée ignited into a devastating civil war that dragged on for years, killing some 200,000 on each side and threatening the very existence of the Revolution.[56] The war in the Vendée was not caused solely by the sales of *biens nationaux*, but it highlighted the danger of ignoring the unequal distribution of land in revolutionary France.

[54] Jones, "The 'Agrarian Law,'" 101; Gross, *Fair Shares for All*, 106-107; Lefebvre, "La place de la Révolution dans l'histoire agraire de la France," 507-508.
[55] McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 110-111; Charles Tilly, "Some Problems in the History of the Vendée," *The American Historical Review* 67, no. 1 (October 1961): 19-33, 22-26.
[56] McPhee, *The French Revolution*, 111.

Although the material impact of the early sales of *biens nationaux* ranged from ineffective to disastrous, Peter Jones pointed out how, symbolically, "a public confiscation underwritten by the state rendered all property relations instantly negotiable." [57]The seizure and sale of Church properties in the name of the nation made it easier to envision a similar program being enacted in the name of the poor. Discussion of more equitable land distribution was repressed after the Champs de Mars Massacre, but the government's decision to fully abolish feudalism without indemnification in 1792 indicated a new willingness to make concessions on property rights.[58] Popular hopes for an Agrarian Law-style redistribution of land were fully revitalized on 14 August 1792 when the Convention, in response to 10 August, ordered the egalitarian distribution of common lands and *biens nationaux* amongst the poor and landless.[59]

When the deputies turned to other issues and failed to carry out the promises of 14 August, the rural poor took redistribution into their own hands. In Versailles, Picardy, and the Oise, for instance, peasants seized and claimed *biens nationaux* formerly belonging to the crown and *émigrés*, increasing pressure on the deputies to formalize a more accessible auction format.[60] In regions with fewer royal, Church, or *émigré* estates to be auctioned, the rural poor instead pursued *partage* more actively. This was evident in the *partage* demands of Walloon Flanders which, according to David Hunt, "assumed the dimensions of a mass movement." [61]

The mobilization of the poor for land reforms sparked episodes of violence across France, which were recorded in petitions and reports compiled by Georges Bourgin in 1908.[62] One of

[57] Jones, "The 'Agrarian Law,'" 100.
[58] Ibid., 104.
[59] Peter Jones, "Agrarian Radicalism during the French Revolution," in *Reshaping France: Town, Country and Region during the French Revolution*, by Alan Forrest and Peter Jones (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1991): 137-51, 142.
[60] Ibid., 143-144; Lefebvre, "La place de la Révolution dans l'histoire agraire de la France," 514.
[61] David Hunt, "Peasant Politics in the French Revolution," *Social History* 9, no. 3 (October 1984): 277-99, 282
[62] Bourgin, *La partage des biens communaux*.

these, a landowners' petition from Tréloup in the Aisne department, explained that "la majeur partie des habitants" were dividing up common lands in accordance with the declaration of 14 August, despite the fact that the Convention had overturned the *partage* order in October rather than provide instructions for carrying it out.[63] The crowd, "armés de haches et autres armes offensives," responded to resistance with threats and violence, so the landowners appealed to the Convention for "la sûreté de leurs personnes, de leurs familles et de leurs propriétés." [64] A *journaliers*' petition from the commune of Saint-Hilaire in the Allier department (today the Hautes-Pyrénées) presented a similar case from the opposite perspective, explaining how the poor had built, "de bonne foi, de mauvaises chaumières" on lands which they believed had been promised to them by the Convention.[65] With local elites attacking and burning down their homes, the *journaliers* appealed to the Convention to clarify *partage* policies to save their homes and give them access to the land.[66] While isolated incidents like these hardly approached the scale of violence seen in the anti-seigneurial movement of the early Revolution, taken together they represented a major source of unrest at a time when the Revolution was facing dire threats from within and without. It was in this context, with the hopes of the rural poor rising alongside the fears of the propertied classes, that the debate over the Agrarian Law began in earnest.

The conflicting interests of revolutionary leaders – a national need to maintain the loyalty of the lower classes on the one hand and a principled and self-interested desire to protect property on the other – led to a series of remarkable poor relief proposals by the deputy Bertrand Barère on 18 March 1793. Barère had initially been elected to the Estates General as a moderate,

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[63] "Tréloup : Pétition d'un groupe d'habitants à la Convention," (n.d.), in *Le partage des biens communaux: Documents sur la préparation de la loi du 10 Juin 1793*, ed. Georges Bourgin (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1908): 420-21, 420; Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 139.
[64] Tréloup, "Pétition," 420-421.
[65] "Saint-Hilaire : Pétition des journaliers à la Convention," (1793), in *Le partage des biens communaux: Documents sur la préparation de la loi du 10 Juin 1793*, ed. Georges Bourgin (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1908): 422-23, 422.
[66] Ibid., 422-423.

but he aligned with the Jacobins during the radical phase and became a leading architect of the Terror within the Convention, revealing a willingness to balance bourgeois interests and popular demands.[67] On 18 March, he began by calling for the death penalty for anyone who proposed "une loi agraire ou toute autre, subversive des propriétés territoriales, commerciales, et industrielles." [68] This decree, accepted by the Convention, was the most famous part of Barère's speech, and it appeared so reactionary that the historian Jean-Pierre Gross cited it as evidence of a "red scare" in France regarding the Agrarian Law.[69] But immediately after this proposal, Barère denounced landowners who preached the importance of property to the poor while refusing to give them the aid "que tout homme qui a du superflu doit à l'homme qui meurt de faim." [70] He thus proposed a more organized system of public welfare and a new progressive tax on excess wealth and luxury, balancing out the repression of Agrarian Law proposals.

More importantly, Barère claimed that counterrevolutionaries were exploiting France's economic inequality, fomenting anarchy by turning the landless against large landowners. Whether the episodes of popular violence occurring across France were autonomous or (as deputies like Barère alleged) at the behest of the Revolution's enemies, they presented a threat to the Revolution that the Convention had to address. The obvious solution to this was to reduce the number of landless poor, so Barère called on the Convention to seize *émigré* properties and sell them to the poor in small, affordable lots – an Agrarian Law in all but name.[71] The deputy Charles Ambroise Bertrand de la Hosdinière echoed the Martel petitioners when he, responding to Barère, called for *partage* "par tête entre les citoyens de tout âge et de tout sexe qui n'ont

[67] Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution*, 318.
[68] Bertrand Barère, Dominique-Vincent Ramel-Nogaret, and Charles Ambroise Bertrand de La Hosdinière, "Point de décret d'enthousiasme," (18 March 1793), in *Archives Parlementaires*, vol. 60, ed. Jérôme Mavidal and Emile Laurent, Première Série (1787 à 1799) (Paris: Librairie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1908): 292-93, 292.
[69] Gross, *Fair Shares for All*, 93.
[70] Barère et. al, "Point de décret d'enthousiasme," 292.
[71] Ibid., 293.

aucune propriété" to prevent "le patrimoine des pauvres" from being enjoyed exclusively by the rich. The apparently blatant contradiction of outlawing discussion of the Agrarian Law while proposing land redistribution was, according to Peter Jones, part of a broader government strategy. Deputies made firm rhetorical commitments to property rights to placate landowners, but their actual policies compromised on some of these rights to appease and aid the rural poor.[72]

The land reforms pursued by the deputies were extraordinarily complex. Across the revolutionary decade, Jones identified eight sets of legislation encompassing some 400 separate decrees.[73] While the majority of these only benefitted wealthy buyers, three decrees passed in the wake of 10 August specifically benefitted the rural poor: the decree of 3 June 1793 on the sale of *émigré* lands, the decree of 10 June distributing royal lands at Versailles, and the decree of 10 June establishing a process for the *partage* of communally-owned properties (see Appendix A for an overview of key revolutionary land reform dates). Deputies avoided the forbidden label "Agrarian Law," but the implementation of these decrees amounted to a legitimate attempt to seize the properties of certain elites and redistribute them to the poor.

The decree of 3 June and the first decree of 10 June addressed *émigré* estates and the royal properties at Versailles, respectively. Because the rural poor were already dividing and claiming *biens nationaux* in the wake of 14 August, legislators had little choice but to establish a state-sanctioned method for redistributing the properties in order to prevent violence, to protect property rights, and to ensure that the state could extract some revenue from the sale of the lands. The decrees made *émigré* and crown lands available at auction like other *biens nationaux*, but the decree of 3 June reformed auction rules to benefit poor buyers. The properties were to be sold in smaller, more affordable plots, and in communes without any common lands, the decree required

[72] Jones, "The 'Agrarian Law,'" 106-107.
[73] Ibid., 97.

local officials to portion off enough of the *biens nationaux* to provide each household with a small (one-*arpent*) lot to lease.[74] The rural poor had been outbid by wealthy buyers since the beginning of the Revolution, so these changes sought to increase land ownership by making the *biens nationaux* more accessible to the rural poor.

In one sense, the revised auction rules were radical. They allowed for an equitable redistribution of *émigré* and crown lands which, in Jones' description, amounted to "the agrarian law in action." [75] But while the idea of redistribution was radical, the implementation in these decrees was far less so. Instead of reforming existing systems of inequality (for example, through national redistribution or property limits), revolutionary leaders sought to secure the rural poor within their own bourgeois property model through a narrowly confined redistribution of properties belonging to the Revolution's enemies.[76] Further, the landless poor were only given *use* of the land, because transferring actual ownership without purchase undermined property rights too severely.[77] Thus while the reformed sale of *biens nationaux* required minor changes in the idea of absolute property rights, the overall bourgeois model was left intact.

The other major property reform of this period was the second decree of 10 June. Responding to the reports of violent crowds attacking landowners and seizing common lands in the countryside, the deputies established a formalized, two-step procedure for *partage*. First, recognizing that not all communities were alike and that the forced division of all commons would be unpopular, the Convention called for each commune to vote on *partage*. Passage only required one-third of residents to vote yes, and nearly all residents were eligible, including

[74] Gross, *Fair Shares for All*, 106-108.
[75] Jones, "The 'Agrarian Law,'" 116-117.
[76] Gross, *Fair Shares for All*, 110.
[77] Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 159.

women and the indigent (though cases of women voting were rare).[78] The only citizens excluded from voting or receiving plots were absentee landowners and seigneurs who had encroached on the commons. If the vote passed, then common lands were divided by head between all residents regardless of age or sex. Recipients had near-complete ownership of their lands, with the sole exception that they could not sell them for 10 years to prevent immediate consolidation. [79]

Unlike the *biens nationaux*, which were only *leased* to the landless poor, the deputies did not believe that the commons were being redistributed from one owner to another. As the "patrimoine des pauvres," the commons were only being restored to their original owners in the updated form of private property. Thus while *partage* almost exactly matched the more minimal Roman Agrarian Law model of distributing cleared wastelands to the poor, for the French revolutionaries it was an answer to the dual problems of rural land inequality (and the ensuing threat of popular agitation) and communal contradictions to private property.[80] Most importantly, because the land was seen as being *restored* rather than *redistributed*, the conceptual threat that *partage* posed to existing property rights was minimal.

The convenience of these Agrarian Law policies in theory – both *partage* and the reformed sales of *biens nationaux* – was rarely matched by their effectiveness in practice. In the case of *partage*, there were some departments in southern France, as well as to the North and East of Paris, where the predominance of traditional, smaller-scale agriculture made *partage* more desirable as a means of accessing small plots of land.[81] But in the rest of France, *partage* either failed to achieve a one-third majority or was never enacted because it divided the

[78] Noelle Plack, "Agrarian Individualism, Collective Practices and the French Revolution: The Law of 10 June 1793 and the Partition of Common Land in the Department of the Gard," *European History Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2005): 39-62, 52.
[79] Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 143-144; Plack, "Agrarian Individualism," 41; Ikni, "Biens communaux," 79
[80] Gross, *Fair Shares for All*, 101; Plack, "Agrarian Individualism," 41.
[81] Plack, "Agrarian Individualism," 45; Ikni, "Biens communaux," 91.

peasantry and faced opposition from local elites. Within the peasantry, the implementation of *partage* exposed existing inequalities between poor, landless peasants for whom *partage* represented a means of attaining private property, and comfortable farmers who stood to lose access to one of their most valuable resources. While the anti-seigneurial campaign of the early Revolution had masked these divisions by uniting both poor and rich peasants against a common foe, their common interests were dissolved with the abolition of feudalism in 1792.[82]

Peasants were divided by a number of other questions regarding *partage*. The decree, for instance, only applied to already-cleared lands or drainable marshes, but few of these remained due to the informal claims of the landless poor and wealthy seigneurs. It also divided lands equally among individuals, but included no clarification for how to keep plots together within a family.[83] These legal uncertainties presented significant barriers to the passage of *partage* within villages. Customary property notions also hampered the *partage* movement. Like the sale of *biens nationaux*, *partage* relied on a bourgeois-style desire for private property, but both ecological and generational concerns led some to maintain their traditional communal property notions.[84] The Société d'agriculture de Caen was expressing the concerns of the local poor when, in a statement to their departmental director, they explained the risks of *partage* for "la generation future, qui aura des pauvres et n'aura plus de biens communaux à leur partager." [85] The combination of legal confusion and diverse views of property rights made even a one-third threshold difficult to attain.

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[82] Albert Soboul, "The French Rural Community in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Past & Present* 10 (November 1956): 78-95, 85; Lefebvre, "La place de la Révolution dans l'histoire agraire de la France," 516.
[83] Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 148-149; Plack, "Agrarian Individualism," 42.
[84] Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 149; Nadine Vivier, "Une question délaissée: les biens communaux aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles," *Revue historique* 3, no. 587 (1993): 143-60, 151 in Plack, "Agrarian Individualism," 42.
[85] "Caen : Réponse de la Société d'agriculture de Caen au directoire du département," (1791), in *Le partage des biens communaux: Documents sur la préparation de la loi du 10 Juin 1793*, ed. Georges Bourgin (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1908): 44-45, 44.

In the face of this divided peasantry, officials and elites discouraged and resisted *partage*. Prior to the decree of 10 June, a petition written by an individual landowner denounced *partage* demands as the poor attempting to use "la preuve du pâturage des moutons pour établir que des terrains sont des communes," and claimed that legalizing their efforts would be a "coup mortel à l'agriculture." [86] Local notables especially resented the egalitarian nature of the June decree, which allowed not only for women and the indigent to vote and receive land, but also promised equal claims for servants and their employers. These seemed to be the same destabilizing consequences as those they feared from the Agrarian Law.[87] On a practical level, rural elites feared that distributing land would undermine the availability of cheap labor as formerly-landless rural poor gained an independent means of achieving their subsistence. As a result there were numerous cases of the wealthy blocking or minimizing *partage*, and enforcement by the National Convention was often delayed by deputies focusing on other issues.[88] There were exceptions to this in regions with strong support for *partage*, but in most cases the opposition of local officials was significant. For those regions, between the near-unanimous opposition of the wealthy and the divided opinions of the peasantry, it becomes possible to see why Peter Jones concluded that "the commons were not partitioned because it suited *nobody's* interests to do so." [89]

The reformed sales of *biens nationaux* produced similarly limited results. Outside of Versailles, where government scrutiny and the narrow scope of the project transferred 1,568 *arpents* of crown lands to 1,546 poor peasant or artisan families, few properties were actually auctioned under the new rules.[90] As Jean-Pierre Gross explained, this was because any

[86] "Nonancourt : Pétition d'un habitant à l'Assemblée législative," (1792), in *Le partage des biens communaux: Documents sur la préparation de la loi du 10 Juin 1793*, ed. Georges Bourgin (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1908): 77-78, 78.
[87] Plack, "Agrarian Individualism," 44-45.
[88] Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 148-153.
[89] Ibid., 148.
[90] Jones, "The 'Agrarian Law,'" 116-117.

redistributive potential was curtailed by the "commercial considerations" of the decree of 13 September 1793.[91] Coming shortly after the initial reforms, the decree of 13 September again revised auction rules to remove the provision of leases for the landless, instead offering them 500-livre credit vouchers which could be used to purchase land. These had to be repaid over twenty years and could only be used at auction, where the peasants were once again consistently outbid by wealthy buyers.[92] The September decree thus reprioritized state revenues in the selling of *biens nationaux,* walking back the core concept of 3 June by replacing land grants with almost-valueless vouchers for the rural poor. There were some areas where royal and *émigré biens nationaux* had been redistributed more evenly, as shown in the extensive research of Lefebvre on the Département du Nord.[93] According to Jones' comparison of the Nord to other regions, however, successful redistribution required a perfect combination of "an ample supply of *émigré* property; complaisant surveyors […]; staunchly Jacobin district authorities, and last, but not least, crowd pressure in order to deter overbids from village bourgeois and non-resident landowners." [94] This combination was very rare, so the successful cases in the Nord appear more as the exception that proves the rule.

Yet, if the material impact of Agrarian Law policies in the Revolution was underwhelming, the overall effect was far from meaningless. Ideologically, the mere concept of giving land to the poor and landless, like the initial nationalization of Church lands, permanently altered the foundation of property rights. With the June decrees, the National Convention admitted that there were cases (however narrow) which justified the seizure and redistribution of property in the name of the common welfare. This was a radical leap from the hands-off,

[91] Gross, *Fair Shares for All*, 108.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Lefebvre, *Les paysans du Nord*.
[94] Jones, "The 'Agrarian Law,'" 121.

religious approach to charity projects under the *ancien régime*, and even from the early revolutionary welfare projects that only sought to address the worst cases of economic inequality by providing work or resources to the indigent poor. Although the end of the radical period again diminished popular hopes for redistribution, the poor would remember the potential of such policies. Even materially, land sales encouraged some new smallholders across France who were able to make significant strides in socioeconomic standing and subsistence security. The reduction of even a slight amount of suffering was a notable impact that should not be understated. This should be considered along with the fact that many of those who did not receive land in the summer of 1793 were able to acquire it from struggling bourgeois and nobles throughout the Revolution and its aftermath. Overall, as Jones argued, there was "a stealthy conquest of the soil in the two and three decades that followed" the decrees of June 1793.[95]

Partage also affected traditional peasant notions of property. Soboul claimed that "even though the Law of 10 June 1793 was only partially applied and that in different ways," it contributed to the destruction of communal property by encouraging property privatization amongst the French rural poor, which they carried out unofficially through the remainder of the Revolution.[96] Jones, among others, disagreed with this statement, concluding in his study of agrarian reforms that "customary rights, it should be emphasized, were not seriously eroded by the Revolution." [97] The reality likely lies somewhere in the middle: in regions where economic, political, and agricultural conditions allowed for or even encouraged *partage*, the Revolution contributed to a shift from notions of communal property to a new, bourgeois model of private property. In other regions these customs outlasted the Revolution. Perhaps the most notable

[95] Lefebvre, "La place de la Révolution dans l'histoire agraire de la France," 518; Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 161.
[96] Soboul, "The French Rural Community," 91.
[97] Jones, "The 'Agrarian Law,'" 130.

effect, described by historian Nadine Vivier, was that by putting communal property up for a vote, revolutionary land reforms forced peasants to make a conscious decision between privatization and collectivism.[98] The process of debating and voting placed the economic struggle for land equality squarely within the ideological and political debates of the Revolution.

Conclusion

The efforts of the urban and rural poor to achieve a genuine program of economic equality between 1792 and 1794 had an enormous impact on the Revolution. By supporting and influencing the Reign of Terror and the General Maximum, the *sans-culottes* attempted to aid the poor and bring down the rich. These efforts made economic equality a matter of political patriotism, instilling popular egalitarianism into the Revolution. At the same time, the rural poor demanded economic equality in the form of land redistribution, pressuring the National Convention to implement an Agrarian Law-style reform package in the June decrees. Without undermining the bourgeois model of individual property ownership, these reforms temporarily acceded to the egalitarian and even communal economic interests of the rural poor. It was perhaps inevitable that the rural poor would face the same reckoning, as *partage* in particular forced them to choose between new and traditional notions of property.

Ironically, these achievements became primary factors in reducing the influence of the urban and rural poor. In the case of the *sans-culottes*, the Maximum uncovered major economic divisions between employers and employees which weakened the movement as a whole. Likewise, the state-sanctioned violence of the Terror, which the *sans-culottes* so eagerly weaponized against their economic enemies, was in turn weaponized against them by the

[98] Nadine Vivier, *Propriété collective et identité communale: les biens communaux en France, 1750-1914* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998), 168, 176 in Plack, "Agrarian Individualism," 43-44.

National Convention. In the words of Soboul, "the *sans-culottes* had called for a strong government which would eradicate the aristocracy; they were not prepared for the fact that in order to win, this government would be obliged to force them to toe the line." [99] Reformed b*iens nationaux* auctions and *partage* voting similarly divided and weakened the peasantry, leaving the rural poor more vulnerable to the anti-egalitarian resistance of local elites.

Through a combination of appeasement and suppression, the National Convention maintained the loyalty of the French poor through the crises of 1792-94. Although the fall of Robespierre in July would mark the beginning of a reactionary and conservative period that would last through the end of the Revolution, and although there would be no more massive popular movements in that time, 1794 was not the death-knell for economic equality in the Revolution. As the Thermidorian Convention and the Directory sought to respond to economic inequality in their own ways, Babeuf and his Conspiracy of Equals would emerge with a new brand of radical egalitarianism that drew on lessons learned from 1792 to 1794. In both the reactionary government and the radicalizing underground, the impacts of the urban and rural egalitarian movements from this period would be felt long after their suppression.

[99] Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes*, 252.

Chapter Four – Repression and Conspiracy, 1794-1799

When Robespierre was arrested by reactionary deputies in the National Convention on 9 Thermidor, Year II (27 July, 1794), the Parisian poor were conspicuous in their silence. Frustrated by Jacobin policies like the curtailing of sectional politics and the enforcement of a wage maximum, the majority of the *sans-culottes* either abstained from Robespierre's defense or actively sided with the Convention.[1] Many believed that the fall of Robespierre would open the door to the end of revolutionary government and the implementation of the suspended, egalitarian Constitution of 1793, but the Parisian poor watched instead as the Convention transformed into a reactionary, repressive body.

9 Thermidor marked the last major turning point for economic inequality in the French Revolution. From Robespierre's execution the next day to the beginning of Napoleon's rule in 1799, the Thermidorian Convention and (after 1795) the Directory systematically erased the egalitarian achievements of the radical phase. The reactionary deputies consolidated middle-class interests and suppressed both the demands and the actions of the poor. But while the concrete influence of the lower classes on the Revolution was stifled, their egalitarian ideology found a new voice in Gracchus Babeuf and his Conspiracy of Equals. Babeuf drew on the abstract demands and material needs of the lower classes to formulate the most thorough and radically egalitarian program of the Revolution. Despite the failure of his conspiracy, his impact extended far beyond his execution in 1797.

[1] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 128; Colin Jones, "9 Thermidor: Cinderella among Revolutionary *Journées*," *French Historical Studies* 38, no. 1 (February 2015): 9-31, 23.

Reaction and Repression: The Thermidorian Convention and the Directory

"Civil equality, in fact, is all that a reasonable man can claim. Absolute equality is a chimera […]" [2] This 1795 statement appears more similar to Voltaire's anti-egalitarian philosophy than the Revolution's language of *égalité*. But the speaker, François Antoine Boissy d'Anglas, was far from a conservative outlier. Boissy d'Anglas was a leading member of the Thermidorian Convention and the Directory. His beliefs not only represented those of the majority of deputies, but also were enshrined in government policies and in the Constitution of the Year III (1795) which he helped to draft. These beliefs and policies were fundamentally opposed to the interests of the lower classes. While the poor demanded political rights, the Constitution of the Year III restricted popular movements in the name of social order and government authority. While the poor demanded equality, Boissy d'Anglas and others professed appreciation for elitism and inequality. And while the poor demanded continued economic redistribution, the government dismantled the egalitarian proposals of the Jacobins in favor of a more moderate welfare system. These attitudes and policies directly contributed to a mass economic and subsistence crisis, and the Parisian poor responded with a final push to translate their economic needs into political actions in the uprisings of Germinal and Prairial, Year III. When the government repressed these movements, it effectively ended the role of the lower classes in the French Revolution.

The deputies of the Thermidorian Convention and the Directory had a reactionary view of economic inequality and the lower classes. First among these views was an emphasis on order and authority which specifically rejected the influence of the poor. Having regained political power after the Terror, wealthy and moderate politicians were determined to avoid more "violent

[2] François Antoine Boissy d'Anglas, "Discours Préliminaire Au Projet de Constitution Pour La République Française," (1795), in *The French Revolution*, ed. Paul Beik (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970): 313-24, 317.

convulsions like those from which we are barely recovering." [3] The Convention closed Jacobin clubs and censored leftwing media in an effort to subdue both popular politics and remaining Jacobin politicians (known as Neo-Jacobins), but the most comprehensive assertion of reactionary authority came in 1795 with the Constitution of the Year III.[4] Denouncing the Constitution of 1793 as "the organization of anarchy," Boissy d'Anglas presented the new document as "the result of enlightenment and civilization" which would establish "sound institutions whose continual effect is the maintenance of order and tranquility." [5] It began with a more limited Declaration of Rights, with 22 articles – slightly more than the 17 from 1791, but far fewer than the 35 declared in 1793.[6] A new Declaration of Duties was also added, with nine obligations for the French people. Of these nine, four were focused on following the law, and a fifth explained the importance of respecting property rights as the foundation upon which rests "tout l'ordre social." [7] With fewer protections and added obligations for people, the new Constitution solidified government authority and condemned subversive popular actions as illegal and unconstitutional.

Paradoxically, the government's imposition of order was initially bolstered by violent gangs known as the *jeunesse dorée*, or gilded youth, though they were a far cry from the crowds of hungry *sans-culottes*. According to the sympathetic memoir of playwright Georges Duval, the *jeunesse dorée* were "made up of all the young people who belonged to the upper classes of Paris society which had more or less suffered from the Revolution […] all those who belonged to the

[3] Ibid., 318.
[4] For more on the Neo-Jacobins under the Thermidorian Convention and the Directory, see Isser Woloch, *Jacobin Legacy: The Democratic Movement under the Directory* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970).
[5] Boissy d'Anglas, "Discours Préliminaire," 315-317.
[6] Convention nationale, "La Constitution du 5 Fructidor an III," (1795), HeinOnline, https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.cow/zzfr0190&i=1.
[7] Convention nationale, "Devoirs," in "La Constitution du 5 Fructidor an III," arts. 3, 5-8.

honourable bourgeoisie." [8] One historian referred to the aftermath of 9 Thermidor as "an 'open season' on Terrorists," with gangs of wealthy *jeunesse dorée* patrolling French towns and taking revenge on the poor and on officials who had advocated for radical policies from 1792 to 1794.[9] Duval, himself a member of the *jeunesse dorée*, recounted an attack on the Paris Jacobin Club in November 1794, in which his group took a group of Jacobin women prisoners and decided to whip them "*in extenso*" as punishment. This, according to Duval, was light punishment for "those abominable Furies of the guillotine." [10] The *jeunesse dorée* repressed agitation among the *sans-culottes* and helped to ensure the victory of moderate and conservative politicians over Neo-Jacobins, allowing the Thermidorian Convention to consolidate its authority and reverse Jacobin economic policies. However, after the *jeunesse dorée* were involved in a royalist uprising in October 1795, they were repressed as well.[11]

The prioritization of order and authority was accompanied by a renewed prominence of elitist attitudes like those seen in the early Revolution (see chapter two). The poor were increasingly attacked by conservative voices, and although some Neo-Jacobins managed to persist under the Directory, the suppression of leftwing politics in the wake of the Terror meant that few sympathetic leaders among the bourgeoisie were able to advocate for the poor.[12] In a 1795 issue of the rightwing newspaper *La Quotidienne*, for instance, the royalist columnist Jean-Pierre Gallais identified three kinds of poor: those who were too weak or lazy to work for their subsistence, those who were too improvident to plan for their future, and those who were so

[8] Georges Duval, "The Gilded Youth Attack the Jacobin Club, November 1794," (1844), in *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook*, ed. Philip G. Dwyer and Peter McPhee (London: Routledge, 2002): 115-17, 115.
[9] Michael L. Kennedy, "The 'Last Stand' of the Jacobin Clubs," *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 309-44, 334.
[10] Duval, "Gilded Youth," 116-117.
[11] Peter McPhee, *Liberty or Death: The French Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 302.
[12] Jeremy D. Popkin, *The Right-Wing Press in France, 1792-1800* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 78.

overcome with violent passions that they would rather steal than live honestly.[13] In 1799, a member of the Directory made the point even more bluntly: "L'oisiveté avec de la fortune n'est pas ordinairement dangereuse […] l'oisiveté proprement dite, qui ne s'applique qu'à celui qui veut être fainéant." [14] These views were in stark contrast with the *sans-culottes*' idea of honorable poverty, or even with early revolutionary distinctions between the *mauvaises* and the *vrais pauvres*. Instead, Thermidorian social and political leaders associated wealth with fundamental decency, and poverty with stupidity or moral corruption.

But the poor were not just seen as inferior individuals; they were feared as a politically dangerous group. A prominent pamphlet written by Adrien Lezay-Marnésia in 1796 distinguished two kinds of people in a state: "l'une *ayant*, doit tendre à conserver et veut l'ordre qui conserve; l'autre *n'ayant rien*, doit tendre à renverser et veut le désordre qui déplace […]." [15] Boissy d'Anglas used a similar argument when presenting the Constitution of the Year III, explaining that "we must be governed by the best […] with very few exceptions, you find such men only among those who, owning a piece of property, are devoted to the country that maintains it […]." [16] This refrain was not altogether different from the logic used by the deputy Barère in 1793, when he argued in favor of giving land to the poor so they would become attached to the Revolution and would want to defend it (see chapter three). But where Barère sought to address the root cause of disorder by distributing property to the poor and landless,

[13] Jean-Pierre Gallais, "Paris," in *La Quotidienne ou le Tableau de Paris*, 22 prair. III (10 June 1795): 1-3, 1, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k49422c/f476.item.
[14] Jacques Gautret, "Opinion de J. Gautret (de Maine-et-Loire), Sur le vagabondage" (Paris: L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1799), 4, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 18975, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/opiniondejgautre00gaut_6.
[15] Adrien Lezay, "Les ruines, ou Voyage en France, pour servir de suite à celui de la Grèce" (Paris: Migneret et Maret, 1796), 32, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6472085t.
[16] Boissy d'Anglas, "Discours Préliminaire," 318.

Lezay and Boissy d'Anglas wanted to silence calls for economic reform by depriving the lower classes of political rights.

Just as the Enlightenment concept of "moral equality" had allowed the leaders of the early Revolution to preach equality while promoting the economic interests of the middle class, the prevalence of elitist attitudes after Thermidor allowed for and even supported economic inequality. We have already seen how Boissy d'Anglas argued against absolute equality as a "chimera," but others went further. Gallais explained that "c'est la nature qui nous fit naître grands ou petit, forts ou foibles, noirs ou blancs […] De cette diversité résulte l'inégalité, & l'inégalité fait le soutien de la société." [17] Gallais turned the Enlightenment concept of equality on its head, arguing that *inequality* was natural and foundational in society. Even moral equality lost its hold, with one conservative newspaper saying of the poor that "the soul hardens against compassion for their fate." [18]

It was in this context that the Constitution of the Year III enshrined inequality in the very foundations of the Directory. Elections served both as flashpoints for popular mobilization, and as opportunities for the lower classes to elect reform-minded leaders, so one goal for the deputies of the Thermidorian Convention was to reduce the franchise for the poor.[19] While any French man who paid a property tax could vote in the initial round of primary assemblies, these only served to choose the wealthy electors who would actually vote for members of the Council of 500 and the Council of Ancients.[20] This two-stage process echoed the United States' election process, which used the electoral college as a safeguard against the voting influence of the lower

[17] Gallais, "Paris," in *Quotidienne*, 11 ther. III (29 July 1795): 1-3, 1-2, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k49422c/f668.item.
[18] *Grondeur*, 13 fri. V (3 Dec. 1796), quoted in Popkin, *Right-Wing Press in France*, 107.
[19] Hunt et. al, "The Road to Brumaire," 737.
[20] Convention nationale, "La Constitution du 5 Fructidor an III," Titles II, III, IV, V. For the list of property requirements for electoral assemblies, see Title IV, art. 35.

classes, and Boissy d'Anglas specifically referenced Sam Adams and the United States government in his speech to the Convention. It also effectively revived the National Assembly's concept of passive citizenship, linking political rights directly to economic station. An analysis of the Directory's composition demonstrated the effectiveness of these measures, showing predominantly "educated, property-owning" professionals with "virtually no representatives of the lower classes." [21] The Constitution of the Year III, by institutionalizing the elitist attitudes of the deputies, led to the election of wealthy deputies who cemented those elitist institutions. This positive feedback loop ensured that the poor were deprived of political rights and representation for the remainder of the Revolution.

In addition to fears of political instability, reactionary deputies also feared the destabilizing social consequences of poverty, especially when it manifested as begging and vagabondage, and pursued welfare policies driven by those fears. Boissy d'Anglas claimed that "beggars and vagabonds are not part of the social corps," and in 1798 the deputy Housset praised an *ancien régime* policy that had transported vagabonds to the colonies, arguing that vagabondage "ne peut être toléré dans une république bien organisée." [22] He and another deputy, Jacques Gautret, even expressed fears that beggars were part of a grand network of counterrevolutionary conspirators, adding still more urgency to the issue.[23] Beggars and vagabonds undermined government authority and the bourgeois social order through their refusal or inability to work, so addressing them became a priority for the reactionary government.

[21] Hunt et. al, "The Road to Brumaire," 743.
[22] Boissy d'Anglas, "Discours Préliminaire," 320; Housset, "Opinion de Housset, Sur les moyens de prévenir et réprimer le vagabondage" (Paris: L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1798), 5-6, Newberry Library French Pamphlet Collection, FRC 11946, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/opiniondehousset00hous_0.
[23] Housset, "Opinion d'Housset," 14; Gautret, "Opinion de Gautret," 3.

The policy proposals which developed from these attitudes reflected an elitist disdain for the poor. Housset, for example, stopped short of calling for a revival of *ancien régime* transportation, but instead suggested forced labor for able-bodied beggars and imprisonment for the elderly and infirm.[24] Gautret believed that a time would come when society could provide work for the poor, but in the meantime, "l'intérêt de la société est que ces hommes en soient séquestrés." It was permissible, according to Gautret, that an individual who disturbed social order "souffre un peu davantage." [25] Another deputy, the *idéologue* and phrenologist Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis, called for the unification of prison and welfare systems because poverty, while not a crime in itself, caused a "disposition aux actes qui troublent l'ordre social." [26] While these and other proposals had unique elements, they all shared a willingness (even eagerness) to address manifestations of poverty through state violence against the poor.

Amidst the circulation of these proposals, the Directory developed a welfare program which, while still more coordinated than the privately-run *ancien régime* charities, was a significant retreat from the national and redistributive plan of the Jacobins. The decree of 16 Vendémiaire, Year V (7 October, 1796), for instance, repealed a measure which had fully nationalized the funding and administration of the French *hôpital* system. From 1796 on, the *hôpitaux* in each commune were administered by five commissioners overseen by municipal councils, and *biens nationaux* were restored to the *hôpitaux* as a source of funding.[27] Similarly, the *Grand Livre de Bienfaisance Nationale*, a Jacobin effort to establish a national pension scheme for the rural poor, was abandoned in the Year V and replaced with a system of locally-

[24] Housset, "Opinion d'Housset," 7.
[25] Gautret, "Opinion de Gautret," 11.
[26] Jones, *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution*, 327; Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, "Opinion de Cabanis, Député de la Seine, Sur la nécessité de réunir en un seul système commun, la législation des prisons et celle des secours publics" (Paris: L'Imprimerie Nationale, 1798), 2, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k43028w.
[27] Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*, 56.

collected and administered funds.[28] Through policies like these, the Directory retreated from the unitary national welfare system proposed in the early Revolution by the *Comité de Mendicité* and attempted by the Jacobin Convention. Instead, legislators designed a poor relief network that was administered and primarily funded at the local level, with minimal national financial support.

Excessive bureaucracy, the ongoing demands of war, and an overall lack of concern by the deputies meant that even this reduced system, like those of previous revolutionary governments, was an almost immediate failure. Local and national sources of funding meant for the *hôpitaux* and other aid programs were consistently delayed or used for other expenses, and many *hôpitaux* closed under the Directory.[29] In the face of these failures, the reality of Directorial welfare more closely reflected the proposals of Housset, Gautret, and others. *Dépôts de Mendicité,* initially proposed by the *Comité de Mendicité* to incarcerate recalcitrant beggars, became far-reaching prisons that housed all kinds of people in need of economic relief.[30] Despite the promise of a more organized and efficient welfare scheme, the Directory's policies held little to no material benefit for the poor. Only with the stabilization of French administration and finance in the late nineteenth century would the policies proposed at this time begin to bear fruit.

The attitudes and policies of the reactionary deputies left the lower classes extremely vulnerable when, in 1795 and 1796, a combination of natural and political factors caused one of the worst subsistence crises of the eighteenth century. The catalyst for this was the repeal of the Maximum on 23 December 1794.[31] Almost immediately, the prices of vital goods soared to exorbitant levels. Prices in Paris in April of 1795 reached roughly 750% of their 1790 levels, and

[28] Ibid., 84.
[29] Ibid., 62-63, 84.
[30] Ibid., 94-95.
[31] Rudé, "Prices, Wages and Popular Movements," 246-267, 261.

the price of bread in particular increased by 3,260%.[32] In just two months, from late March to late May, 1795, the price of bread rose from 25 *sous* to 16 *livres*.[33] The *assignat* also collapsed, falling to a basically-worthless 0.75% purchasing power by October 1795.[34] Subsidized bread rations in Paris, a policy passed as part of the General Maximum which had survived abolition, were reduced to mere ounces as the government failed to meet demand, and a measure in March 1795 forbade anyone who owned furniture from accessing subsidized bread.[35]

Autumn harvest failures and a freezing winter turned the government's economic crisis into a humanitarian catastrophe. Begging increased, and violence became so common that grain shipments had to be escorted by military convoys.[36] The journalist Nicolas Ruault lamented, "we have become a hydra with 650,000 heads with as many empty stomachs that have been hungry now for a long time, and it is impossible, not necessarily to satisfy the hunger, but to half feed it." [37] Starvation took the lives of countless poor, and a Parisian police report from 29 March, 1795 described a father killing two of his three children to try to save his family from starvation.[38] Episodes like this demonstrated the horrific conditions of 1795 and 1796. In the absence of a responsive, well-funded relief system, these conditions quickly became untenable.

The resulting Germinal and Prairial uprisings represented, in the words of George Rudé, "the final, and most considerable, effort of the Parisian *sans-culottes* to impose their will on their rulers as an independent political force." [39] Hunger, which Ruault called "seditious by nature,"

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[32] McPhee, *Liberty or Death*, 284; Rudé, "Prices, Wages and Popular Movements," 263.
[33] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 144. 1 *livre* = 20 *sous*, and the average worker earned 20-24 *sous* per day. For more on this, see Ian Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 5.
[34] McPhee, *Liberty or Death*, 309; Howard G. Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 47.
[35] Rudé, "Prices, Wages and Popular Movements," 261, 264; Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 149.
[36] McPhee, *Liberty or Death*, 309; Brown, *Ending the French Revolution*, 47.
[37] Ruault, "The *Journées* of 12 and 13 Germinal, 1 and 2 April 1795," (1795), in *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook*, ed. Philip G. Dwyer and Peter McPhee (London: Routledge, 2002): 123-24, 124.
[38] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 148.
[39] Ibid., 142.

was the obvious catalyst for the uprisings, but the *sans-culottes* continued to link politics and economics as they had under the Jacobin Convention.[40] In both Germinal (12 Germinal III or 1 April 1795) and Prairial (1 Prairial III or 20 May 1795), rioters stormed the government to make their demands directly to political leaders. Mobilizing under the slogan "du pain et la Constitution de 1793," rioters explicitly called for political reforms like the restoration of redistributive policies, the release of imprisoned Jacobins and, according to a pamphlet released on the eve of the Prairial uprising, "l'abolition du gouvernement révolutionnaire dont chaque faction abuse tour à tour pour ruiner, pour affamer et pour asservir le peuple […]." [41] The *sans-culottes*, now armed with years of political experience, were able to enunciate both political and economic solutions to their problems.

While the uprisings mirrored the dual economic-political structure of previous *sans-culottes* movements, they occurred in a far less sympathetic context. In both cases, the Thermidorian Convention convinced the crowd to disperse with empty promises, then used the military and the *jeunesse dorée* to repress them.[42] After the second, and more violent, uprising in Prairial (in which the crowd killed one deputy, Féraud, and presented his head to Boissy d'Anglas), the deputies brutally suppressed the popular movement as a whole.[43] 132 participants were arrested, including both the poor rioters and, notably, any deputies who remained sympathetic to their cause, and a special military commission sentenced 34 of them to imprisonment, 18 to deportation, and 36 to death.[44] More generally, thousands of Neo-Jacobins and *sans-culottes* were arrested, calling for the Constitution of 1793 was made a capital crime,

[40] Ruault, "*Journées* of 12 and 13 Germinal," 124.
[41] "Insurrection du Peuple, pour obtenir de pain et reconquérir ses droits," *Gazette nationale ou le Moniteur universel* no. 244 (23 May 1795): 1, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://www.retronews.fr/journal/gazette-nationale-ou-le-moniteur-universel/23-mai-1795/149/1302937/1.
[42] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 149, 154-155; McPhee, *Liberty or Death*, 286.
[43] Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 153; Beik, *The French Revolution*, 313.
[44] McPhee, *Liberty or Death*, 286.

and the government began to purge its members more frequently to ensure that moderates stayed in power.[45] As a result, although the subsistence crisis continued well beyond May 1795 and sparked occasional episodes of unrest, the remainder of the Revolution unfolded without the political-economic mobilizations of the lower classes that had played such a prominent role in the early and radical years.[46]

Through an ideology which prioritized order and authority and valued social and economic success, and a set of policies which fundamentally rejected the economic egalitarianism of the *sans-culottes* and the Jacobins, the Thermidorian Convention and the Directory set the stage for the end of lower-class political movements in the French Revolution. The repression was all but complete by the spring of 1795, but when economic conditions became so severe that the Parisian *sans-culottes* once again stormed the seat of government to demand policy reforms, the government successfully suppressed the movement and, along with it, the active participation of the poor in the Revolution. While the middle classes had held a leading role in government and society since 1789, until 1795 the lower classes had consistently influenced events according to their political and economic needs. From Prairial to the rise of Napoleon, however, that element of popular influence was suppressed, and the Revolution was shaped by and for the middle class.

[45] Ibid., 286, 298; Mette Harder, "A Second Terror: The Purges of French Revolutionary Legislators after Thermidor," *French Historical Studies* 38, no. 1 (February 2015): 33-60, 60.
[46] A case can be made that *chouannerie* and brigandage represented two enduring examples of popular activism, but the former lacked economic and popular roots, and the latter lacked political motivation and organization. For more on these, see chapters two, eight, and nine in Brown, *Ending the French Revolution*.

Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals

In researching how economic inequality mobilized the lower classes during the French Revolution, there is a near-constant dichotomy between the material consequences of popular uprisings and their ideological impacts. While the concrete achievements of popular movements in Paris and in the countryside were often mixed, these movements gradually built an egalitarian ideology that went beyond what was actually accomplished in revolutionary policy. And whereas the former was repressed by the Thermidorian Convention and the Directory, the latter reached its peak in the person of Gracchus Babeuf, a peasant-turned-radical-insurgent who consolidated the diverse ideological legacy of the revolutionary poor into a cohesive and radical program. This occurred in three phases of Babeuf's life. First, from his birth in 1760 to the end of the radical phase in 1794, Babeuf drew connections between the economic hardship of the peasantry and the political tactics of the Parisian crowd. From 1794 to his arrest in 1797, Babeuf strove to eliminate the gap between an ideological vision of equality and its practical implementation, resulting in his Conspiracy of Equals. Lastly, his trial in 1797 and the subsequent spread of his ideas in the socialist circles of the nineteenth century revealed that Babeuf's most enduring impact was to transmit the popular egalitarianism of the Revolution to a nineteenth-century society which would be more receptive to socialist ideas.

Born 23 November, 1760 to a peasant family in rural Picardy, the early life of François-Noel (later Gracchus) Babeuf both exposed him to the life-threatening struggles of the rural poor and prepared him to engage in the politics of revolution.[47] On the one hand, Babeuf's early life was defined by economic hardship. His father was a retired soldier employed in salt tax

[47] I will only focus here on the parts of Babeuf's life which bridged the rural and urban revolutionary experiences. For a more comprehensive biography, see R.B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1978).

collection, and while not indigent, his family was mostly illiterate and far from wealthy. Of thirteen children in his family, for instance, Babeuf was one of just four to survive childhood. R.B. Rose, in his thorough account of Babeuf's life, cited this and other hardships as fundamental to Babeuf's later welfare proposals.[48] Nevertheless, his father's insistence and his own commitment ensured that Babeuf learned to read and write and was exposed to Enlightenment works from a young age.[49] This combination of harsh personal experience and philosophical idealism formed a foundation for Babeuf's egalitarianism.

Babeuf's ideas solidified in the years preceding the outbreak of Revolution. He worked as a *feudiste* (a legal advisor for feudal lords) from 1779 until the abolition of feudalism in 1789. In 1795, he reflected that "ce fut dans la poussière des archives seigneuriales que je découvris les affreux mystères des usurpations de la caste noble." [50] Having lived through poverty himself, Babeuf's experience as a *feudiste* revealed exactly how the mechanisms of inequality functioned to oppress the poor. One of his first attempts to address this was the *Cadastre perpetuel*, published in late 1789. The *Cadastre*, at a surface level, called for a modernization of land survey methods so that taxes could be levied more efficiently. But in a preface and in his promotion of the pamphlet, Babeuf argued that taxes were about more than just state revenue. Taxes had to support the right to subsistence, including new state responsibilities including free financial, religious, medical, judicial, and education services for the poor.[51] With these proposals, the *Cadastre* publicly marked Babeuf's entrance into the Revolution as a radical reformer.

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[48] Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 8-10.
[49] Ibid., 10; Stéphanie Roza, "Social Rights and Duties in Babeuf and the Neo-Babouvists (1786-1848)," *French History* 33, no. 4 (2019): 537-53, 538.
[50] Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 11; Gracchus Babeuf, *Tribun du peuple* no. 29 (8 January 1795), 1, Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k84733g.
[51] Roza, "Social Rights," 542; James Harkins, "The Socialism of Gracchus Babeuf on the Eve of the French Revolution," *Science & Society* 54, no. 4 (Winter, 1990/1991): 427-41, 435-436.

But Babeuf's impact in the early Revolution was not just theoretical. According to Rose, he was "active and influential" in early popular movements.[52] While in Paris promoting the *Cadastre*, Babeuf not only witnessed the immediate aftermath of the storming of the Bastille in July, but also helped to mobilize the sections for the Women's March in early October.[53] Upon returning to Picardy, he used the tactics that he had witnessed in Paris – namely, the spread of ideas and demands through popular petitions – to rally the rural poor against seigneurialism. Babeuf launched a petition with specific policy goals, including the abolition of the *aides* and *gabelle*.[54] This campaign also politicized the rural poor, educating them on important principles like direct democracy, representative government, the right to subsistence, and a right to *partage*.[55] In addition, he published radical pamphlets and journals, led strikes, and steered popular violence against specific seigneurial or government sites to maximize impact, all of which frequently led to his arrest and imprisonment.[56] Babeuf's participation in the early Revolution thus advocated concrete steps toward reducing inequality, while simultaneously setting the stage for a more radically egalitarian movement in the future.

Babeuf's role in the Jacobin government of 1792 to 1794 was more ambiguous, and he spent much of this period living in poverty and migrating among various administrative posts. Despite this, he continued to embrace a role as defender of the people. He changed his name to Gracchus (after the Roman Gracchi brothers) in May 1793, and shortly thereafter found work in the Paris Commune's *Bureau des Subsistances*.[57] Babeuf's belief in a right to subsistence was

[52] R.B. Rose, "Tax Revolt and Popular Organization in Picardy 1789-1791," *Past & Present* 43 (May 1969): 92-108, 93.
[53] Ibid., 101.
[54] Babeuf, *Tribun du peuple* no. 29, 2.
[55] Rose, "Tax Revolt," 104-108; Babeuf, *Tribun du peuple* no. 29, 2.
[56] W.J. Fishman, "Noel 'Gracchus' Babeuf (1760-1797): Prophet of Élitism," *History Today* 16, no. 5 (May 1966): 308-13, 308; Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf*, 32.
[57] Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 137; Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf*, 39-40.

supported by his own experiences of rural scarcity, but it was this urban project of grain provisioning (for Paris and for the military) that gave concrete application to his beliefs. In 1795, Babeuf cited the work of the *Bureau des Subsistances* to argue for the feasibility of national redistribution, claiming that "what is possible in a small way is possible in a large way." [58]

Radical policies like the Agrarian Law and the Maximum, advanced respectively by the rural and urban poor, also shaped Babeuf's egalitarian program during this period. Prior to the Revolution, Babeuf had predicted that any equality achieved by an Agrarian Law would be quickly erased by consolidation, but in 1789 he had reversed course and supported it as a practical and immediate step for reducing rural poverty.[59] In the end, the widespread ineffectiveness of property redistribution under the Jacobin government confirmed Babeuf's earlier skepticism. In 1795, he reiterated that "that from the morrow of [the Agrarian Law's] establishment inequality would return," and demanded more far-reaching reforms.[60] Similarly, Babeuf's initial appreciation for the General Maximum turned to disappointment as the Jacobin deputies gradually suppressed the popular movement and used a wage maximum to protect business interests.[61] The Maximum, he said in 1795, had in fact functioned "à stabiliser la tyrannie." [62] Babeuf agreed with the intent of both the Agrarian Law and the General Maximum – to equalize wealth between the upper and lower classes – but took issue with their practical limitations. The Agrarian Law, by turning the rural poor into landowners, would do nothing to prevent inequality from reasserting itself in the future. And the Maximum, by shielding urban

[58] Gracchus Babeuf, *Tribun Du Peuple* no. 35 (30 November 1795), in in *The French Revolution,* ed. Paul Beik (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970): 329-38, 336.
[59] Harkins, "Socialism of Gracchus Babeuf," 432, 438.
[60] Babeuf, *Tribun Du Peuple* no. 35, 331.
[61] Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf,* 140-141.
[62] R.P. Levy, "Babouvism and the Parisian Sans-Culottes," *Journal of European Studies* 11, no. 3 (September 1981): 169-83, 179.

consumers from high prices, just masked deeper systemic issues in the capitalist economy. Only by going beyond these proposals could a true program for equality be achieved.

Having consolidated the ideas of the urban and rural poor into an expansive egalitarian model, Babeuf worked from 1794 to 1797 to put his vision into practice. This was made possible, paradoxically, by the repression of the post-Thermidorian government. Shortly after the death of Robespierre, Babeuf was arrested for criticizing the reactionary government in his newspaper, the *Tribun du Peuple*. In prison, Babeuf met fellow radicals like Philippe Buonarroti, a former Italian aristocrat and Jacobin official arrested after Thermidor.[63] Buonarroti would later describe the prisons in 1795 as "foyers d'une grande fermentation révolutionnaire," and it was there that Babeuf formed the inner circle of an insurrectionary group referred to as the "Equals." Given amnesty after a failed royalist uprising in 1795, the Equals formed the *Société du Panthéon* and Babeuf redoubled work on the *Tribun du Peuple*. Their movement gained popular support when the repeal of the Maximum and the failure of the Directory's welfare policies caused the catastrophic subsistence crisis of 1795 and 1796, which Buonarroti identified as "un prodigieux secours" to their efforts.[64]

As Babeuf sought to gather support through the publication of the *Tribun* and other works, he gradually laid out the full extent of his egalitarian program. This was rooted, above all, in his belief in a right to live, akin to the right to subsistence which had long been fundamental to popular movements and had been embraced by some leaders during the radical period. Stéphanie Roza has shown, however, that Babeuf's concept of a right to life was far more extensive than

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[63] For more on Buonarroti, see W.J. Fishman, "Filippo Buonarroti," *History Today* 17, no. 3 (March 1967): 170-79.
[64] Patrice Higonnet, "Babeuf: Communist or Proto-Communist?," *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 4 (December 1979): 773-81, 780; Philippe Buonarroti, *Conspiration pour l'Égalité, dite de Babeuf*, vol. 1 (Brussels: Librairie Romantique, 1828), 129, Gale Primary Sources, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0107906164/MOME?u=uvictoria&sid=bookmark%20MOME&xid=611c0e5c&pg=1.

just a right to exist, and it encompassed a host of physical and moral rights.[65] This was evident in a draft economic decree later published by Buonarroti, which called for guaranteed free housing, clothing, laundry, lighting, heat, food and drink, and even healthcare.[66] Babeuf's maximal understanding of the right to life also included a free universal education system to counter the corrosive effects that unequal education had on society.[67]

The key aspect of Babeuf's program for achieving this right to life was the abolition of private property. Even before the Revolution, Babeuf had raised the idea of an equal society without property, but had been ultimately unwilling to advocate such a radical step at the time.[68] After the disappointing results of the more limited property redistributions under the Jacobins, however, Babeuf called for the complete abolition of private property. This was stated most clearly in issue 35 of the *Tribun du Peuple*, which included his famous "Manifesto of the Plebeians." Babeuf declared that "we will prove that the soil is no one's, but belongs to all," and that "any of it that an individual hoards beyond what can nourish him is a social theft." [69] This was already a radical denial of perhaps the most fundamental value of the revolutionary middle class, but Babeuf went beyond rejecting property in theory. Babeuf denounced all institutions and transactions which supported private property as "merely acts of perpetual brigandage" which needed to be abolished. And because he framed property as theft, he claimed that "it is therefore just" for the lower classes to forcibly reclaim what they should rightfully own, be it land, goods, or food.[70] One-time property redistributions like the Agrarian Law could reduce

[65] Roza, "Social Rights," 540-541.
[66] Philippe Buonarroti, "Draft Economic Decree (Fragment)," (1828), in *The Spectre of Babeuf*, by Ian Birchall (London: Macmillan Press, 1997): 172-77, 174.
[67] Babeuf, *Tribun Du Peuple* no. 35, 335.
[68] Harkins, "Socialism of Gracchus Babeuf," 430, 437.
[69] Babeuf, *Tribun Du Peuple* no. 35, 333.
[70] Ibid., 334-335.

inequality temporarily, but Babeuf believed that full equality could only be achieved with the abolition of property altogether.

Not only were these theories more radical than those of many revolutionary reformers, but Ian Birchall has claimed that Babeuf was truly unique because "he did not confine himself to dreaming; he organized politically for the realization of his dreams." [71] The Equals' primary target was the Directory. Babeuf lamented "the heaping up of calamities and public oppression" that had accelerated under the Directory, and the "Manifesto of the Equals" published by the co-conspirator Maréchal denounced the Constitution of the Year III, as well as the Constitution of 1791, as "aristocratic charters" which "fixed [the people's] chains instead of breaking them." [72] Even three decades after the Revolution, Buonarroti maintained that the Directory was "illégitime dans son origine, oppressif dans son esprit et tyrannique dans ses intentions." [73] In the "Manifesto of the Plebeians," Babeuf sought to achieve equality through a direct appeal to popular violence. "The revolt of the poor against the rich," Babeuf explained, "is so necessary that nothing can prevent it." [74] To the poor who wanted to avoid violence, Babeuf pointed out that a "civil war" was already ongoing, but that it was "all assassins on one side and all defenseless victims on the other." [75] Drawing on past episodes of revolutionary popular violence which had overthrown seigneurialism, the Bastille, or the moderate Girondin deputies, Babeuf framed an insurrection for equality as an act of self-defense by the lower classes against wealthy predators.

[71] Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf*, 1.
[72] Babeuf, *Tribun Du Peuple* no. 35, 331; Sylvain Maréchal, "Manifesto of the Equals," (1796), in *The Spectre of Babeuf*, by Ian Birchall (London: Macmillan Press, 1997): 167-70, 169.
[73] Buonarroti, *Conspiration pour l'Égalité*, 82.
[74] Babeuf, *Tribun Du Peuple* no. 35, 331.
[75] Ibid., 338.

The theories of Babeuf and the Equals, the anti-Directorial sentiment, and the calls for violence all came together in the founding of the Conspiracy of Equals on 30 March, 1796. Babeuf, Buonarroti, and five other radicals formed an insurrectionary committee, planted agents to undermine the police and sectional authorities of Paris, and developed a plan to incite targeted popular violence to overthrow the Directory and replace it with a "Republic of Equals." [76] A table published in 1828 by Buonarroti estimated that, without counting workers, the Conspiracy counted on the support of some 17,000 Parisians.[77] The workers, it was assumed, would support the movement once it began. After the Directory fell, the Conspiracy planned to implement Babeuf's egalitarian program by establishing a central administration similar to the *Bureau des Subsistances* on a national level. This "supreme administration," as it was named in the Draft Economic Decree, would receive and redistribute food and goods to all French people and would preserve surplus grain for "years of scarcity," expanding on the model of public granaries advanced earlier in the Revolution.[78] The Economic Decree, though not a direct plan for the Conspiracy, also envisioned investing extensive authority in a supreme administration, which would control the movement of people within France and have the ability to impose "perpetual forced labor" as punishment.[79] Babeuf and the other members of the Conspiracy of Equals envisioned an ideal, perfectly equal society, but they recognized the necessity of harsh measures to achieve and maintain the practical application of their vision.

Babeuf's legacy was defined by the failures and successes of the Conspiracy of Equals. In the short term, the conspiracy failed, and the Republic of Equals never came to fruition. An insurrectionary agent named Georges Grisel, disparaged by Buonarroti as "un infâme hypocrite"

[76] Maréchal, "Manifesto of the Equals," 169-170.
[77] Buonarroti, *Conspiration pour l'Égalité*, 189.
[78] Buonarroti, "Economic Decree," 175.
[79] Ibid., 175-176.

and "pervers," betrayed the conspiracy to the Parisian police, and Babeuf and the Equals were quickly arrested.[80] A public trial at the High Court at Vendôme, which lasted from February to May, 1797, ended in the execution of Babeuf and another conspirator named Darthé, and the deportation of Buonarroti and six others.[81] With Babeuf's death on 27 May, 1797, the repressive authority of the Directory triumphed over the radical egalitarianism of the Equals, and the concept of absolute, economic equality was eliminated from the Revolution.

There is also evidence to suggest that the Conspiracy of Equals was too early to succeed. As with the fall of Robespierre, the arrest, trial, and execution of Babeuf inspired only minimal popular agitation.[82] Some of this can be attributed to the level of Directorial repression in 1797, but it is clear that Buonarroti's estimates of popular support were overblown. In many ways, Babeuf can be seen as a direct antecedent of nineteenth-century socialism, or even as the first communist: he frequently spoke of the "bonheur commun" (or "common happiness") to describe something very similar to socialism, used the terms "prolétaire" and "ouvrier" when discussing workers' issues, and even coined the term "communitism" in 1793. But the context in which he was speaking was very different than that of nineteenth-century socialists and communists.[83] Namely, as discussed in chapter three, the *sans-culottes* of the French Revolution were an incredibly diverse coalition of the French lower classes which included both workers and employers, and in no way formed a unified interest group akin to the urban proletariat of industrial nineteenth-century France. While the lower classes were able to rally around common egalitarian interests during the Revolution, Babeuf's notion of an absolutely equal society devoid of private property did not appeal to the majority of the *sans-culottes*, many of whom were

[80] Buonarroti, *Conspiration pour l'Égalité*, 178.
[81] Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf,* 306, 326.
[82] See Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 285 on the 9 September uprising at the Grenelle military camp.
[83] Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf*, 133, 150; Roza, "Social Rights," 548.

striving to attain or preserve property themselves. For this reason, RP Levy explained that "Babouvism of necessity was not particularly relevant to the *sans-culottes*." [84] Even if Grisel had not betrayed the Conspiracy, it was unlikely that the Parisian masses would have coalesced in support of Babeuf's proposed abolition of private property.

Despite its collapse in 1797, the Conspiracy of Equals did succeed in one way: it produced a cohesive model of revolutionary ideals that would be transmitted into the post-revolutionary world. The public trial at Vendôme gave Babeuf his most high-profile platform to date for outlining his egalitarian vision, and he took full advantage of it. His final defense speech lasted five days and rooted *le bonheur commun* in the teachings of major western figures including Socrates, Jesus, and Rousseau.[85] In this speech as in his other works, Babeuf enunciated a concept of equality that was thorough, far-reaching, and revolutionary. It was thorough with respect to the rigorous philosophical foundation for equality that he established over the course of his life, and it was far-reaching in the sense that, starting from the simple concept of the right to subsistence, Babeuf expanded on it to envision an absolute equality that encompassed economic as well as racial, gender, and religious equality.[86] In fact, as early as 1786, Babeuf had likened "the claimed superiority of man over woman and the despotic authority he asserts over her" to the domination of the lower classes by the aristocracy, and claimed that "it is […] the housewife who *wears the trousers*" in good households.[87]

Babeuf's notion of equality was also revolutionary, and it established a model to be followed by radicals in the nineteenth century thanks in large part to Buonarroti. Deported at

[84] Levy, "Babouvism and the Parisian Sans-Culottes," 180.
[85] Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf*, 76-77.
[86] Ibid., 135, 136, 141.
[87] Gracchus Babeuf, "Extract from Letter of June 1786 to Dubois de Fosseux," (1786), in *The Spectre of Babeuf*, by Ian Birchall (London: Macmillan Press, 1997): 161-66, 163, 165. Emphasis his.

Vendôme, Buonarroti continued to support radicalism and insurrections for the remainder of his life, gaining renown among reformers as a "professional revolutionist." [88] In 1828, he published the *Conspiration pour l'Égalité, dite de Babeuf*, immortalizing Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals. The work was extremely popular in the context of both spreading industrialization (with the ensuing deterioration of workers' living standards) and the July Revolution, and inspired a school of neo-Babouvists in the 1830s.[89] Major socialist and communist leaders including Marx, Engels, and Trotsky were all influenced by the theories and tactics of Babeuf, and Marx reportedly always had a copy of Buonarroti's work on his bookshelf.[90] Babeuf's vision for the achievement of actual equality, so absolute that even the rural and urban revolutionary poor he had drawn inspiration from could not support it, would not be attempted for many decades after the Revolution. In some ways, the radical reformers and insurgents of the nineteenth and twentieth century fulfilled Maréchal's prediction in the "Manifesto of the Equals" in 1795: "The French Revolution is only the forerunner of another revolution which will be greater and more impressive, and which will be the last." [91]

Conclusion

In the years between the execution of Robespierre in 1794 and the collapse of the Directory in 1799, the role of economic inequality simultaneously reached its most limited and its most expansive point in the Revolution. Under the Thermidorian Convention and the Directory, an emphasis on social order and government authority was bolstered by elitist

[88] Fishman, "Buonarroti," 170.
[89] Roza, "Social Rights," 549-550.
[90] Fishman, "Buonarroti," 176; R.B. Rose, "Babeuf and the Class-Struggle," *Australian Economic History Review* 16, no. 2 (September 1976): 367-78, 367; Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf*, 1.
[91] Maréchal, "Manifesto of the Equals," 168.

attitudes which accepted and even promoted economic inequality. Resulting policies reversed the national egalitarian steps taken by the Jacobins in favor of a more localized welfare network, and these policies did nothing to protect the poor from the devastation that they helped to cause. And when the lower classes attempted to assert their voice once again in the Germinal and Prairial uprisings, the popular movement as a whole was repressed. The political mobilization of the poor, from the first days of the Revolution, had been the primary vehicle through which the experience of economic inequality was transformed into concrete political acts. When the popular movement was repressed, then, so too was the influence of economic inequality on revolutionary policy.

At the same time, however, Gracchus Babeuf brought the issue of economic inequality to its ideological extreme. Babeuf's life connected the disparate experiences and goals of the urban and rural poor into a cohesive understanding of inequality. Under the Directory, he transformed his theories into specific political practices and worked to implement them with the Conspiracy of Equals. The radically egalitarian vision of Babeuf extended beyond the suppression of his conspiracy, and even beyond his own death. That vision would find its audience in the nineteenth century, when it would influence an age of industrialization, an age of socialist reformers, and an age of revolutions.

Conclusion – Institutions and Ideologies of Economic Inequality

On 18 Brumaire, Year VIII (9 November, 1799), disaffected political leaders coordinated with General Napoleon Bonaparte to overthrow the unstable Directory and establish a Consulate led by the young general. A self-declared "soldier of liberty" dedicated to the preservation of "conservative, tutelary, and liberal ideas," Napoleon consolidated the values and achievements of the upper middle class throughout his 16-year reign as Consul and (beginning in 1804) Emperor of France.[1] Most historians agree that the Coup of 18 Brumaire brought about the end of the French Revolution by placing authority in the hands of one leader and curbing political upheaval. It also marked the conclusion of a tumultuous but significant chapter in the history of economic inequality, an issue which shaped French attitudes and policies throughout the revolutionary decade. Many of the questions which arose in this period would be addressed by the institutions and ideologies of the nineteenth century, and continue to have an impact today.

Even before 1789, economic inequality was becoming an increasingly pressing problem in France. In the eighteenth century, the combination of a growing population, a changing economy, and a persistent system of privileges contributed to widespread poverty and subsistence insecurity. This economic crisis overwhelmed the local religious charities of the *ancien régime* and inspired the royal administration to begin exploring avenues of state intervention. But the state's interest in charity was more about maintaining public order than making a humanitarian impact, so intervention remained limited. In the Flour War of 1774-75, the lower classes took their economic security into their own hands; the anti-liberal riots that ensued represented an early mode of popular politics which would find fuller expression in the

[1] Napoleon Bonaparte, "Justifying the Coup of Brumaire, 10 November 1799," (1799), in *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook*, ed. Philip G. Dwyer and Peter McPhee (London: Routledge, 2002): 136-39, 138.

Revolution itself. While these concrete experiences of inequality played out, the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment debated equality as a concept. Many agreed that true equality, though present at birth, was a dangerous fiction in modern society, and that a *moral* equality between men was a more appropriate interpretation. But while moral equality was the dominant philosophy for most, Rousseau expressed a contrary vision of economic equality and reformers began proposing policies to reduce real inequality. These ideas and policies would be influential throughout the Revolution.

From 1789 to the end of the moderate period in 1792, economic inequality inspired massive popular movements in the capital and across France, which intersected with the political priorities of revolutionary leaders and impacted their decisions. The coordinated violence and property-destruction of the Great Fear pressured deputies to abolish feudalism partially in 1789 and, due to ongoing popular resistance, fully in 1792. Likewise, in July and October of 1789, the Parisian poor mobilized politically with the storming of the Bastille and the March on Versailles. In these events, the poor expanded on the lessons of the Flour War and enunciated economic demands in specifically political terms. Throughout the Revolution, economic inequality continuously pushed the lower classes into the political movements sweeping France, and the events of this period in both the countryside and in Paris set influential precedents. This period also witnessed a transformation in official attitudes toward economic inequality, as the Enlightenment idea of moral equality was institutionalized through acts like the Declaration of Rights of Man and the Constitution of 1791. While the efforts of the *Comité de Mendicité* to nationalize and centralize poor relief went largely unrealized, the government's willingness to shift from private charity to public welfare was both novel and important.

Between 1792 and 1794, the lower classes demanded redistributive policies to pursue actual economic equality, and in the process pushed the Revolution in a more radical direction. In Paris, the *sans-culottes* supported the political mechanisms of the Terror and weaponized it against the merchants and speculators who threatened their economic security. The General Maximum, demanded by the *sans-culottes* and enforced by the Terror, redistributed wealth from the rich to the poor by setting price limits which effectively eliminated profits in the name of consumer protection. For the rural poor, *biens nationaux* reforms and *partage* decrees constituted an Agrarian Law in all but name. These mechanisms allowed landless peasants to acquire small plots of land, either from the private properties formerly owned by the Church, crown, or *émigrés*, or from common lands that had been disproportionately exploited by wealthy seigneurs. Yet despite popular intentions, the implementation of both urban and rural redistributive policies was limited from the start by entrenched liberal values like the free-market economy and the inviolability of private property. The grand egalitarian designs proposed by the Jacobins served as inspiration for later generations of reformers and drastically expanded the concept of public welfare, but economic inequality continued almost unabated.

The final period of the Revolution, from Robespierre's death in 1794 to the Coup of 18 Brumaire in 1799, was decidedly anti-popular. The attitudes and policies of the Thermidorian Convention and Directory simultaneously institutionalized economic inequality with the Constitution of the Year III and worsened it in the economic crisis of 1795 and 1796. The repression of popular politics after Prairial curtailed the ability of economic inequality to affect concrete change, but its ideological influence endured in the experiences and the work of Gracchus Babeuf. Babeuf translated the economic needs of the urban and rural poor into a coherent and radical political program, which he worked to implement in the Conspiracy of

Equals. Despite his failure, his legacy in nineteenth-century socialist circles ensured that the consequences of revolutionary economic inequality outlived the end of the Revolution in 1799.

Throughout this account, two major trends have emerged. The first was the institutional impact of economic inequality. The political mobilization of the lower classes during the French Revolution, inspired by the blatant inequality of their economic status, drove a near-complete overhaul of French poor relief. What began as a disorganized network of privately-run religious charities in the *ancien régime* became a plan for a national, unified welfare system in the early Revolution. The Jacobin government went so far as to briefly implement redistributive economic policies under pressure from the rural and urban poor, but even the decentralized program of the reactionary governments included elected officials and state funding in a more organized welfare system. The application of these programs was limited at every turn by the financial and political upheavals of war and revolution, but by 1799 the clear outlines of the modern welfare state had been established.

The predominantly local welfare institutions of the Directory were solidified under Napoleon, and remained largely unchanged until the late nineteenth century. From 1797 to the beginning of the Third Republic, aid was distributed in cash and kind through the locally-governed *bureaux de bienfaisance*.[2] At the same time, a system of *hôpitaux* and *hospices* cared for the sick, elderly, and infirm, and the state paid for the care of abandoned children and the mentally ill.[3] While the central government provided some funds for these programs, leaders showed little willingness to expand welfare programs along the lines of the revolutionary model, and so poor relief continued to be supplemented by private religious charities akin to those of the

[2] John H. Weiss, "Origins of the French Welfare State: Poor Relief in the Third Republic, 1871-1914," *French Historical Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 47-78, 49-51.
[3] Ibid., 51-52.

ancien régime. These often focused on preaching to beggars while providing limited monetary aid, with one such effort in Paris specifying that distributors appear randomly and without warning in order to prevent the poor from depending on their aid.[4] These projects were insufficient by design, with religious leaders expressing that inequality could not and should not be eliminated. In 1849, for instance, the archbishop of Bourges argued that "there will always be inequalities of rank and fortune in society, or society itself would cease to exist. The contrary thesis […] is posed only by impudent dreamers and blind utopians." [5] These beliefs echoed those of anti-egalitarian conservatives from the Revolution and limited the positive potential of religious charity. While some feared that the anger of the poor would spark class conflict, the founder of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Frederick Ozanam, believed it was his organization's mission to get "many alms from the rich and much resignation from the poor." [6] Rather than reduce the economic inequality at the heart of the tensions, Ozanam and other Christians sought to neutralize conflict through Christianization.

Nineteenth-century poor relief combined some revolutionary ideas with more traditional eighteenth-century private charity, but the limits of such a disorganized structure eventually forced the leaders of the Third Republic to revisit the comprehensive national welfare system proposed during the Revolution. The Third Republic, in comparison to revolutionary governments, benefitted from a more efficient bureaucracy, a greater sense of national unity, better economic growth and stability, and the absence of an existential military threat, so it was able to pass and fulfill a number of decrees which, according to John Weiss, "laid the legislative

[4] Edward R. C.M. Udovic Ph.D., "'What About the Poor?' Nineteenth-Century Paris and the Revival of Vincentian Charity," *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 14, no. 1 (1993): 69-94, 90.
[5] Cardinal Du Pont, *Mandernent pour le carême* (1849), in Udovic, "The Revival of Vincentian Charity," 76.
[6] Frederic Ozanam, *A Life in Letters* (1986), in Udovic, "The Revival of Vincentian Charity," 81.

foundations for a national welfare administration." [7] This included the decree of 12 December, 1892, which guaranteed medical care for the poor (excluding those able to work), and the decree of 14 July, 1905, which expanded "obligatory" public assistance to the sick, infirm, and elderly.[8] Although the recipients and mechanisms of public welfare have varied by country and continue to evolve to this day, the revolutionary institutions put in place under the Third Republic included many of the features seen around the world today. This framework for the modern welfare state represented the culmination of the attitudes and policies toward economic inequality that began effecting institutional change in 1789.

Equally significant to the institutional consequences of revolutionary economic inequality was its ideological impact on nineteenth-century socialism and communism. Socialism, as it was developed by French reformers in the 1830s and 1840s, encompassed a diverse array of proposals, and much work has been done to demonstrate the connections between these ideologies and the revolutionary radicalism that preceded them.[9] William Sewell, for instance, claimed that the victory of bourgeois private property in the Revolution over traditional feudal and communal restraints represented "a radical redefinition of the very nature of property," which made private property the primary target of nineteenth-century socialists.[10] Pamela Pilbeam demonstrated other, more constructive influences, linking socialist plans for a national workshop in 1848 to revolutionary efforts to provide state-funded infrastructure jobs for the able-bodied poor.[11] Pilbeam also referenced utopian communist Etienne Cabet, who was inspired by

[7] Weiss, "Poor Relief in the Third Republic," 47, 56, 66.
[8] Ibid., 62, 64, 74.
[9] William Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 219.
[10] Ibid., 114.
[11] Pamela Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx: Workers, Women and the Social Question in France* (Teddington, UK: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2000), 163. For more on the continuities between the revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848, see Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France*.

the "embryonic communism" of the Jacobins.[12] William Henry Chamberlin took Jacobin comparisons further, claiming that the "close kinship between the Jacobins […] and the Russian Bolsheviks" was "only the most salient and perhaps the most important of many parallels between the French and Russian Revolutions." [13] Be it bourgeois property rights, national public works projects, or Jacobin government, the Revolution left a lasting impact on the socialism of the nineteenth century.

The most significant socialist influence to emerge from the Revolution, however, was Gracchus Babeuf. We have already seen how the memory of Babeuf was transmitted to socialists through the writing of Buonarroti. Babeuf became a hero for socialist revolutionaries, and his ideas were influential in their doctrines.[14] Marx described Babeuf's efforts as "the first direct attempts of the proletariat to attain its own ends," which failed only because bourgeois capitalism had not been fully installed and the proletariat had not fully developed.[15] Babeuf's opposition to private property and economic inequality was shared not only by his co-conspirator, Buonarroti, but also by other radical socialists and communists including Auguste Blanqui, Cabet, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.[16] It is no accident that these reformers, who developed their theories in the decades after the publication of Buonarroti's account in 1828, often echoed and built on the arguments developed by Babeuf in the 1790s. An 1892 statement by the socialist theorist and activist Benoît Malon, "we are revolutionaries when circumstances demand it and reformists always," was reminiscent of Babeuf's efforts to combine utopian thought with practical efforts.[17]

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[12] Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx*, 124.
[13] William Henry Chamberlin, "The Jacobin Ancestry of Soviet Communism," *The Russian Review* 17, no. 4 (October 1958): 251-57, 251.
[14] Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx*, 28.
[15] Marx and Engels, "Manifesto," 59.
[16] Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx*, 13-14.
[17] Mira Adler-Gillies, "Reform or Revolution: Benoît Malon and the Socialist Movement in France, 1871-1890," *French History and Civilization* 6 (2015): 172-88, 182.

Babeuf failed to create his egalitarian society in 1797, but he nevertheless condensed the most radical elements of the revolutionary popular movement into a single coherent program. As a result, the ideological legacy of economic inequality in the Revolution would be realized through those nineteenth-century socialists and communists who read and were inspired by Babeuf, and whose doctrines remain influential today.

Recent data shows that economic inequality has decreased in France in the two centuries since the French Revolution, but a comparison to the modern United States reveals a persistent and worsening inequality (see Appendix B). Christian Morrisson and Wayne Snyder, in their study of the historical French income gap, found that just before the Revolution, the wealthiest 10% of the French population earned roughly half of all income, while the bottom 60% made up just 21% of the income distribution.[18] According to data from the World Inequality Database, modern France compares favorably: In 2018, the top 10% earned 32% of income, while the bottom 60% earned 30.4%.[19] The gap between rich and poor is still significant, but noticeably less than in the eighteenth century. Additionally, this gap has been declining or constant since the implementation of revolutionary welfare systems under the Third Republic.[20] The modern-day United States, however, is facing a gap that is not only similar to that of eighteenth-century France, but is steadily increasing. The 45.8% income distribution for the top 10% of U.S. earners in 2018 is slightly lower than in late eighteenth-century France, but so too is the 19.1% distribution for the bottom 60%.[21] What's more, while income inequality declined in the U.S.

[18] Christian Morrisson and Wayne Snyder, "The Income Inequality of France in Historical Perspective," *European Review of Economic History* 4 (2000): 59-83, 69.
[19] World Inequality Database, "Income Inequality, France, 1900-2021," World Inequality Database, accessed April 9, 2022, https://wid.world/country/france/.
[20] Ibid.
[21] World Inequality Database, "Income Inequality, USA, 1913-2021," World Inequality Database, accessed April 9, 2022, https://wid.world/country/usa/.

from 1940 to 1980, it has risen drastically in the decades since.[22] And while the data for the World Inequality Database is current through 2018, early analysis indicates that the recent coronavirus pandemic has only increased inequality.[23] This comparison, while limited, is a useful exercise for observing broad trends in economic inequality. It is instructive, for instance, to see the reduction in French income inequality from the eighteenth century to today, which aligns almost exactly with the realization of revolutionary policy proposals. At the same time, it is perhaps more shocking to see the similar income disparities of eighteenth-century France and the modern-day U.S.

Limited data points can hardly capture the entirety of economic inequality across borders and centuries, and the modern context is starkly different from that of 1789. First, the Industrial Revolution dismantled the revolutionary *sans-culottes* coalition of workers, independent craftsmen, petty merchants, and small-business employers, giving rise to an industrial working class that was opposed to many of its former allies. This class was more politically-unified in its goals, but lacked the organization and breadth of the Parisian *sans-culottes*. Furthermore, agricultural development and urbanization diminished both the size of the rural population and the economic centrality of agriculture, which has significantly affected the nature of both problems and potential solutions. Lastly, when looking beyond the time and borders of eighteenth-century France, it is impossible not to point out issues of global inequality today. Imperial violence and exploitation, a lack of development, and global food insecurity are just a few issues which have impacted much of the world's population, and these considerations must be part of any modern discussion of inequality.

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Robert Gebeloff, "How the Pandemic Hurt Workers More Than Investors," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2021, sec. B; Max Fisher and Emma Bubola, "The Poor Are Harder Hit by the Spread of Disease," *The New York Times*, March 16, 2020, sec. A.

But while the differing contexts between revolutionary France and the modern world may make parallels between specific actors and policies irrelevant, the same fundamental questions that the revolutionaries struggled with in 1789 remain unanswered today. For one, what are the obligations of the state with respect to economic inequality? Many countries provide welfare programs, but issues of how much aid to provide, or of whether to apply citizenship or work requirements, remain unsolved. At the same time, reformers and leaders call for more far-reaching, redistributive policies, including wealth taxes, universal basic incomes, and subsidized housing.

Underlying many of these debates is one, fundamental question explored but left unresolved in the eighteenth century: What is the meaning of equality? The U.S. Declaration of Independence, written before the French Revolution but still a foundational document today, declares "that all men are created equal." [24] Given both the Enlightenment inspirations for the document and the status of women, enslaved Africans, and the poor in 1776, it is reasonable to claim that the authors of this document believed in the same minimal "moral equality" as the leaders of the French Revolution, rather than attempts to achieve real equality. The United Nations drafted an even more potent statement of equality in its 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which began with the claim that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world […]." [25] But despite countless grand statements like these, still today there is no unanimous understanding of equality, and issues of racial, gender, religious, and economic inequality remain prominent. The French Revolution raised far more questions

[24] Thomas Jefferson, "The Declaration of Independence," (1776), University of Florida Historic American Documents, https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/133/historic-american-documents/4957/the-declaration-of-independence/.
[25] UN General Assembly, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," (Paris, 1948), Preamble, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

than it answered, especially concerning the meaning of equality. But by looking at the ways in which both the lower classes and political leaders responded to economic inequality in the French Revolution, we can gain a deeper understanding of the origins of our own institutions and ideologies.

Appendices

Appendix A – Key Land Reform Dates

14 August 1792 – Ordered division of village common lands, but without a plan for implementation.
28 August 1792 – Allowed peasants to demand restoration of common lands formerly seized by seigneurs.
11 October 1792 – Repealed decree of 14 August 1792.

18 March 1793 – Established the death penalty for proposing the Agrarian Law, followed by proposals for welfare reform, progressive taxation, and redistribution of *émigré* properties.

3 June 1793 – Called for sale of *émigré* lands according to new auction rules that helped poor buyers.
10 June 1793 (1) – Established *mode de partage* for dividing village commons.
10 June 1793 (2) – Ordered redistribution of crown lands at Versailles according to auction rules of 3 June 1793.
13 September 1793 – Replaced 3 June 1793 auction rules with new voucher system for the landless.

2 Frimaire II (22 November 1793) – Divided church and *émigré* lands into smaller plots to allow *partage* recipients to add to their properties.
Ventôse Decrees (8 and 13 Ventôse II or 26 February and 3 March, 1794) – Proposed seizing lands of exiles and enemies of the Revolution to redistribute to the poor (never enacted).

Appendix B – Income Inequality Table

	France (Late 1700s)[1]	France (2018)[2]	United States (1980)[3]	United States (2018)[4]
Top 10%	49.5%	32%	33.9%	45.8%
Bottom 60%	21%	30.4%	27.5%	19.1%

[1] Morrisson and Snyder, "Income Inequality of France," 69.
[2] World Inequality Database, "Income Inequality, France."
[3] World Inequality Database, "Income Inequality, USA."
[4] Ibid.

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