In 1957, shortly before he died, the great historian of the French Revolution Georges Lefebvre wrote: ‘The last word has not been said about the Conspiracy of the Equals’. Nearly half a century later, this remains true, as these three recent studies of Babeuf’s work and influence reveal.

It is scarcely surprising that there should be continued interest in Babeuf. The very idea of socialism is going through a profound crisis. The two traditions that have dominated the labour movement for the last seventy years, Stalinism and parliamentary social democracy, are dying; if a new movement is emerging from the anticapitalist demonstrations of Seattle and after, its contours are still sketchy. To return to a figure who stands at the very birth of modern socialism cannot fail to be instructive.

François-Noël Babeuf (later he adopted the forename Gracchus) was born in 1760 in Picardy. He never went to school and, in his adolescence, learnt the reality of the proletarian condition as a labourer on the Picardy canal. Even before the Revolution, his correspondence shows him to have been an acute social critic who made penetrating observations on the nature of property and the oppression of women. With the Revolution, he became active as a journalist and campaigner against unjust taxation. He initially supported Thermidor, but soon came to believe that the post-Thermidorian régime was betraying the potential of the Revolution. He published a newspaper, Le Tribun du peuple, and, as repression against critics of the régime increased, organised a ‘secret directory’, with organisers in the twelve arrondissements of Paris, to make propaganda, and to prepare the overthrow of the government. The planned insurrection

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1 Buonarroti 1957, I, p. 16.
would restore the Jacobin Constitution of 1793 as a first step towards ‘common happiness’ [bonheur commun], based on equality and the collective organisation of production. The authorities forestalled the threat and arrested many of the group’s leaders; after a prolonged trial in the spring of 1797, Babeuf was executed. As the first person to describe a recognisably socialist society, and to go beyond the utopians of the Enlightenment by exploring the organisational needs of a transition to a new order, he eminently deserves the description of the ‘first revolutionary socialist’.²

Philippe Riviale is already known to Babeuf scholars as the author of La Conjuration,³ in which he made extensive use of the papers seized at the time of Babeuf’s arrest and subsequently published in volume form by the prosecuting authorities. Riviale declared himself as independent of all schools of historical interpretation, and rejected both the right-wing attempt to belittle the importance of Babeuf, and the left-wing orthodoxy that saw him as a ‘precursor’ of later socialism. While his extended disquisition on historical inevitability was less than satisfactory, he was able to make a vivid recreation of the lived reality of the conspiracy by showing that it was neither irrelevant nor ‘premature’, but a choice by free human beings to engage in an enterprise whose outcome was not determined – or at least not knowable – in advance.

Riviale’s return to Babeuf is something of a disappointment. The book is subtitled ‘an apologia for Gracchus Babeuf’, and Riviale ignores the work of previous historians, and dismisses ‘erudition’ with contempt. The aim is to liberate Babeuf from abstract historical schemata and allow him to speak in his own voice. The substantial majority of the book consists of extensive passages from Babeuf’s writings and recorded utterances, divided into three sections: Babeuf as journalist, the ‘conspiracy’ and the trial. Riviale’s own commentaries are relatively modest, though far from uncontroversial.

Riviale has thus provided us with a valuable anthology of Babeuf’s writings.⁴ In quoting Babeuf’s political journalism Riviale reminds us what a fine polemicist he was. Babeuf’s vigorous defence of principle in politics, his contempt for the equivocations of those who compromise in the name of tactics and invoke the apathy of the masses as an excuse for their own inaction, his unconditional assertion that the emancipation of the oppressed must be the work of the oppressed themselves, stand as models of fine prose and honest politics. The adversaries who take shape in the course of these polemics are types whom we can easily recognise in our own age. Thus Babeuf to Fouché, later Napoleon’s police-chief:

Considerations, based on all available examples, have led me to believe that, in a popular state, truth must always appear clear and unadorned. It must

² For studies in English, see Rose 1978; Birchall 1997a.
⁴ There have been several previous anthologies; the best, Dommanget 1935, is now virtually unobtainable.