

H-France Review Vol. 17 (July 2017), No. 107

Stéphanie Roza, *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique: Du roman à la Révolution*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 398 pp. Bibliography and index. €38.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3705-2.

Review by Johnson Kent Wright, Arizona State University.

Admirers of J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* will recall a tantalizing suggestion toward its end, echoed in other writings of the time. Further research, Pocock hinted, was likely to reveal connections between the later incarnations of the "Atlantic republican tradition" and the earliest beginnings of socialist thought. Once uncovered, these linkages could well "end by establishing a kind of continuity between the days of Swift and those of Marx, and showing that there was in fact no moment at which the ideology of commerce was immune from the criticisms which the neo-Harringtonians had launched."<sup>[1]</sup> Although Pocock never uttered the name, there is no doubt about where the precise join between the two intellectual traditions, classical republican and socialist, was apt to be found--in the figure of "Gracchus" Babeuf, the Jacobin martyr who was also the first thinker of modern communism. As Pocock's pioneering edition of Harrington's *Oceana* and Quentin Skinner's memorable portrait of More suggest, the Cambridge reconstruction of the republican tradition could pay ample attention to its earlier utopian side-currents.<sup>[2]</sup> All these years later, however, no one from Cambridge seems to have taken Pocock's hint about a French connection between republicanism and socialism. The nearest miss is probably Michael Sonenscher's great essay on the four "levelers" whom Babeuf cited as avatars at his trial--Mably, Diderot, Helvétius, and Rousseau--but this text, a prolegomenon to his *Sans-Culottes*, offered no consideration of Babeuf himself.<sup>[3]</sup> It has been decades since there have been any significant sightings of the latter within the Anglosphere. Babeuf is missing even where he might be most expected: Gareth Stedman Jones's massive intellectual biography of Marx, tireless in tracing the sources of "Karl's" thought, dispatches him in less than half a page.<sup>[4]</sup>

It is in this context that the appearance of Stéphanie Roza's *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique: Du roman à la Révolution* takes on all its significance. Not only is this the most important work on Babeuf's life and writing, founded on fresh archival evidence and meticulous textual study, in at least a generation. But Roza's profile of Babeuf is preceded by equally incisive and compelling accounts of two earlier promoters of the idea of the "communauté des biens," Morelly and Mably. The result is to make *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique* the most commanding study of utopian thought in the eighteenth century since Baczkó's *Lumières de l'utopie*--a work broader in focus but less consequential than Roza's, which is now required reading for all students of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.<sup>[5]</sup> *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique* forms part of a larger publishing program, which includes newly accessible editions of Morelly's *Code de la Nature* and Buonarroti's *Conspiration*, together with a collective volume, co-edited with Pierre Crétois, which, for the first time, explicitly tackles the issue of the relation of French republicanism to the wider Atlantic republican tradition.<sup>[6]</sup> If it was ever valid to speak of gaps or barriers between the history of political thought as it was practiced in Paris and in Cambridge, that is now a thing of the past.

Roza's achievement in *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique* owes as much to form as it does to content. The book is a model of careful organization and clear and graceful writing. Its aim, Roza declares at the outset, is "l'étude d'un moment remarquable de mutation de l'utopie dans la deuxième moitié du XVIIIe siècle, qui la voit évoluer vers la forme du *projet politique*, impliquant l'élaboration d'une théorie de l'homme spécifique, une conception de l'histoire de la société, et des procédures d'action concrètes" (p. 11). The project in question was not yet communism, but rather the *communauté des biens*—the ideal adopted by each of the three figures under study. Roza warns against the temptations of any too teleological an account of its history. There is no presumption that Morelly, Mably, and Babeuf understood the term *communauté des biens* in the same way, or that the idea's career in the second half of the eighteenth century should be seen as matter of linear development toward a pre-determined end. Her goal, in the first instance, is to show how its transformation from theoretical ideal into political program took place within the work of each her three thinkers, operating in three very different intellectual and political contexts.

In the case of the ever-mysterious Etienne-Gabriel Morelly, this is a matter of accounting for the sudden pivot from his *Basiliade* (*Naufrage des Isles flottantes, ou Basiliade du célèbre Pilpai*, 1753), a utopian novel in the grand tradition, to the *Code de la Nature, ou le véritable esprit de ses lois* of two years later, a work long attributed to Denis Diderot. With this pirouette, Roza asserts, we have arrived at a critical juncture in the long history of utopian writing in the West. For the first time, the author of a traditional utopian novel went on to declare that what was *fictional* was in fact *feasible*. What made this epochal turn possible was inscribed in the philosophical anthropology set forth in the first three parts of *Code de la Nature*—a familiar Enlightenment eudaimonism and optimism, which, in Morelly's eyes, rendered the *communauté des biens* the property regime most suitable to human nature. More striking still, Roza argues, was the "Plan de législation idéale" with which the book concluded. If the scheme looks fairly conventional—a communal property regime, governed by an egalitarian democracy—what mattered most was simply the matter-of-fact detail in which it was presented, as a blueprint for building an actual social and political order. What was feasible was not necessarily possible, of course. Morelly himself was grimly pessimistic about prospects for realizing the "Plan" in present circumstances: "Je donne cette esquisse de lois par forme d'appendice, et comme un hors-d'œuvre, puisqu'il n'est malheureusement que trop vrai qu'il serait comme impossible, de nos jours, de former une pareille République." [7] But a crucial step in just that direction had been taken.

Far more is known, of course, about the life and writing of the abbé de Mably. Although there is no explicit reference to *Code de la Nature* in his works or correspondence, it seems reasonable to assume that he was aware of it, given its notoriety in the mid-1750s. This was precisely the moment that Mably completed his conversion to republicanism, announced in books on Greek and Roman history, on the heels of which followed his own embrace of the idea of the *communauté des biens*. As Roza argues, there is no mistaking the drama of its first appearance in his writing. Halfway through *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen*, the dialogue of 1758 in which a fictional English Commonwealthman sets forth what Keith Baker memorably called a "script for a French revolution," "Milord Stanhope" pauses in order to indulge a brief utopian reverie—a visit to an imaginary island straight out of More, whose communal regime, however, is also described as identical to that recommended by Plato in *The Republic* and that actually instituted by Lycurgus in ancient Sparta. [8] The reverie concluded, Milord Stanhope then returns to the business of suggesting how an overthrow of Bourbon Absolutism might be accomplished. *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* was too incendiary to be published in its author's lifetime, but the *communauté des biens* went on to become a permanent fixture in Mably's writing over the next two decades, above all in the major theoretical statement of his maturity, *De la législation*. As Roza shows, Mably advanced two major claims concerning the notion. Echoing Morelly, he argued that the *communauté de biens* fitted human nature better than any other property regime. Going far further, Mably also insisted that classical antiquity, and Sparta above all, provided proof of societies actually flourishing in the absence of private property. As for the prospects of establishing the *communauté des biens* in any modern European country, Mably was no more optimistic than Morelly. Yet the notion could still function in his writing

as a kind of regulative idea or ideal horizon around which a practical political program of democratic leveling could be constructed. As Roza puts it, “Mably a *républicanisé l’utopie* de la communauté des biens, en érigeant en premier lieu le Sparte de Lycurge et ses citoyens les ‘égaux’ en modèles historiques absolus; et il a *utopianisé la République*, en donnant à plusieurs exemples républicains du passé les allures d’autant de cités idéales, harmonieuses et bienheureuses parce qu’égalitaires” (p. 175).

With the career of Babeuf, the remaining gap between the republican and utopian traditions disappeared—closed with a bang, it might be said. While paying tribute to illustrious predecessors—Victor Daline, Claude Mazauric, Maurice Dommanget—Roza offers a novel interpretation of Babeuf’s intellectual *parcours*, the most illuminating and compelling that we now possess.[9] *Né dans la fange*, Babeuf was a very different figure from Morelly or Mably. He was an autodidact whose thought developed, through many twists and turns, in close relation to a series of vocational identities—*feudiste*, politician, journalist, and plotter. If the utopian impulse was there from the start, it was always, Roza suggests, citing the happy phrase of Béatrice Didier, a “*utopie de combat*.”[10] The guiding thread of her own account, however, is Babeuf’s relations with and debts to his intellectual predecessors. At the outset, during his career as feudal lawyer in Picardy, the dominant influence was doubtless that of Rousseau, with Restif de la Bretonne in the background as well, visible in Babeuf’s 1786 proposal for communal farms, in the famous letter to Dubois de Fosseux, uncovered by Daline. But there is also the more obscure figure of Nicholas Collignon, author of *L’avant-courrier du changement du monde entier par l’aisance, la bonne éducation et la prospérité générale de tous les hommes* (1786), evidently the inspiration for Babeuf’s recommendation a year later for something closer to the *communauté des biens* itself. Meanwhile, the strange “Discours préliminaire” to the *Cadastre perpétuelle* of 1786–1787 promoted yet another utopian idea, that of the redistribution of farmland into private parcels of equal size.

It was only with the advent of the Revolution that Babeuf encountered the writings of Mably for the first time, which sent him off in new, more political directions. Thanks to intrepid research in Moscow, Roza is able to give due attention to a surprising text of late 1790, hitherto examined only by Daline, which saw Babeuf defending private property as the very foundation of society. Closer study of Mably over the following months, however, was crucial in bringing Babeuf to his next major swerve: his full embrace, in the course of 1791, of the idea of an agrarian law à la Lycurgus. With this compass in hand, Roza guides us through the complexities of Babeuf’s relationship to Jacobinism over the next three years, which included his plea to Robespierre, in the spring of 1793, to assume the mantle of Lycurgus by renouncing the “*droits affreux*” of private property enshrined in the Jacobin Declaration of Rights, as well as Babeuf’s notorious depiction, at the time of Carrier’s trial, of the Terror as a matter of self-serving genocide. To all appearances, it was shortly after this, in early 1795, that the editor of the *Tribun du Peuple* finally discovered the *Code la Nature*, inaugurating the last phase of his intellectual career, with the *communauté des biens* now fixed firmly at the center of his thought. Among other things, this belated discovery of Morelly sparked genuine intellectual innovation. Roza highlights Babeuf’s advocacy of the “*magasin commun*” as a means for distributing the goods produced by the community in common. This was an idea with precedents in both Morelly and Mably—but also one that looked forward, she argues, beyond the wholly agricultural horizon of their thought, to a socialism proper to an industrial world. All that lay far in the future. Meanwhile, in the context of the Thermidorean reaction, Babeuf soon found himself at the center, along with Maréchal, Darthé, Buonarroti, Lindet, Amar, Vadier, and Drouet, of the re-grouping that formed the *Conspiration des Egaux*. By late spring 1796, their public demands for the restoration of the “*Constitution de l’an I*” and for the “*Communauté des biens*,” together with plotting for a coup in the capital, finally prompted the Directory to act. The trials that followed the ringleaders’ arrests, then the execution of Babeuf and Darthé in May 1797, brought one cycle of intellectual and political events to a tragic end—but also gave birth to another, thanks in large part to the posthumous tribute to the *Egaux* paid by Buonarroti.

Looking back on the story she has told, Roza characterizes it as one of “*une politisation progressive de l’utopie, par plusieurs biais convergents*” (p. 357). These included Morelly’s borrowings from

Enlightenment philosophical anthropology, Mably's classically republican historicization of utopian themes, and, above all, Babeuf's foresight in grasping how the Revolution had brought unprecedented opportunities for their realization. In their journeys, the trio was accompanied by a fourth thinker, who served, indispensably, as ally and adversary alike: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. By carefully reconstructing the dialogue that Morelly, Mably, and Babeuf each carried on with the *Citoyen de Genève*, Roza has made *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique* an essential work for understanding Rousseau's own views on property, as well as his reception during the late Enlightenment and Revolution. That poses a final question. Given that Morelly, Mably, and Babeuf each made the *communauté des biens*—rejected, of course, by Rousseau—the centerpiece of their work, should we look on the three as belonging to a single school of thought? Having warned against the dangers of teleology at the start, Roza's answer at the end is a firm no. The textual evidence for regarding either Mably or Babeuf as Morellystes is lacking. The trio is best considered an “anti-école de pensée,” whose intellectual careers suggest, not any kind of developmental narrative, but rather a set of variations on a single theme, as in the musical form (p. 365). Despite the rupture in the utopian tradition represented by the Revolution, the performance was only just getting started, of course. In a fascinating coda, Roza shows how many of the themes of the *Code de la nature* resurfaced almost immediately in the work of Fourier, the passionate anti-Jacobin who might be thought to have initiated the process of de-politicizing utopia once again. “Tradition plutôt qu'école de pensée,” she writes at the end, “l'utopie renouvelle sans cesse des questionnements immémoriaux: que signifie, au plein sens du terme, vivre en société? Qu'est-ce qui doit lier les hommes entre eux sans les aliéner? Comment concilier épanouissement individuel et bien commun? De ce point de vue, ce qui ne change pas dans les réponses apportées, est au moins aussi révélateur et intéressant que ce qui change” (p. 373).

Among the achievements of *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique*, first and foremost is the attention and illumination it bestows upon Babeuf. It is difficult to think of any other major political thinker and actor of the epoch who has been so neglected in recent historiography. This is true, above all, in the Anglosphere—just one of the reasons why it would be good to see an English translation of Roza's book sooner rather than later. Another is the spotlight she trains on Morelly. The scrupulous detail of Roza's analysis of the *Basiliade* and the *Code de la nature*—and the relation between the two—has no precedent in the scholarly literature. As for Mably, if he has been somewhat better served by historians in recent years, what *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique* offers is by far the most coherent and compelling account yet of the utopian moment in his thought. All in all, Roza's book is certain to give a much-needed boost to the study of all three thinkers. What then should we make of the way she invites us to regard the trio as a whole, as forming an *anti-école de pensée*, offering a set of variations on a theme? It is possible to wonder whether Roza has erred on the side of caution in this regard. For there are certainly indications in the text of a more conclusive way of reading the evidence, for which a different musical structure might be invoked. Given both the dense latticework of intertextual connections that Roza has uncovered between the three authors, and the obvious narrative linkages between the three contexts in which they worked, why not approach the story of the *communauté des biens* in the second half of the eighteenth century in terms of, say, sonata-form: Morelly having given the notion an Enlightenment exposition, Mably an extended republican development, and then Babeuf a glorious revolutionary recapitulation?

That would no doubt risk ending in precisely the sort of linearity or teleology that Roza set out to avoid. But the suggestion at least points to the wider implications of *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique*, which remain the same no matter how the relations between Morelly, Mably, and Babeuf are exactly framed. To see what these are, it is enough to turn to the volume that Roza co-edited with Pierre Crétois, *Le républicanisme social: une exception française?* This is not quite the first attempt to explore the possibility that French thinkers might claim a place in an Atlantic republican tradition à la Pocock and Skinner. Roza and Crétois rightly pay critical tribute to Jean-Fabien Spitz, whose *La liberté politique: essai de généalogie conceptuelle* (1995) was the pioneering effort along these lines, and who has also been responsible for introducing the thought of Philip Pettit in France.[11] But they and their

collaborators are indeed the first to tackle head-on the issue of the specificity of French republicanism, within the European tradition as a whole. The contributors cover a wide range of topics, moving from the Enlightenment to the Revolution and then to its aftermath: first, Christophe Miqueu writing on Rousseau and the radical Enlightenment, Pierre Crétois analyzing the link between popular sovereignty and equality in Rousseau, and Arnault Skornicki uncovering the neo-Machiavellian moment in French political economy; then François Brunel describing the individualist collectivism of Year II, Yannick Bosc tackling the opposition between Paine and Condorcet in regard to social protection, and Roza herself returning to Rousseau and Babeuf; and finally, Jean-Numa Ducange looking forward to Jaurès's socialist interpretation of the Revolution, and Thomas Boccon-Gibod considering the place of the general will in the French tradition as a whole. For all their variety, however, the essays converge on a consensual answer to the question posed by the volume's title. By comparison with other European republicanism, the French variant was indeed exceptional—exceptionally *radical*, both politically, featuring a commitment to popular sovereignty that went beyond anything in Italian, British, and North American republicanism, and socially, in championing unprecedented forms of egalitarianism, culminating in Jacobinism and Babeuvism

In their introduction to *Le républicanisme social: une exception française?*, Roza and Crétois suggest, plausibly enough, that is precisely the radicalism of French republicanism that has made it difficult to integrate it smoothly into Pocock's and Skinner's Atlantic republican tradition.<sup>[12]</sup> But the greater challenge, of course, is to explain why the French variant of the ideology should have assumed such a uniquely democratic and egalitarian shape in the first place. By and large, Roza, Crétois, and their fellow contributors skirt this larger question, contenting themselves with establishing the existence and describing the contours of social republicanism. It remains to be seen how this emergent *école de pensée* will explain the French exception. All that can be safely predicted is that their explanation is likely to follow the model established by Roza's account of her three utopians, focusing on the interconnections between the Enlightenment, the republican tradition, and the Revolution itself. As it happens, the adjective "radical" tops the agenda of Enlightenment studies today, thanks largely to the herculean efforts of Jonathan Israel. But *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique* returns our attention to a very different kind of radical Enlightenment from that described by Israel, who has shown scant interest in utopian thought, and, notoriously, drummed the Jacobins out of the Enlightenment altogether—never mind Babeuf.<sup>[13]</sup> The Cambridge school, on the other hand, is actually not without resources for explaining the advent of social republicanism in France. In addition to Michael Sonenscher's essay on the levelers upstream from Babeuf, cited above, Eric Nelson's first book, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* can be warmly recommended.<sup>[14]</sup> For what Nelson's Greek inheritance—Plato's "communism," Aristotelian redistribution, and agrarian law in the ancient world, More's and Harrington's utopian islands in the early-world—amounted to was a treasure-trove of normative and imaginative challenges to the rule of private property, all ready to be passed on to French social republicanism when the time came. Strangely, however, having detected something very close to that already in the Greek republics depicted by Montesquieu and championed by Rousseau and Mably, Nelson swerves away from the French Revolution itself at the end of his book—no doubt partly because to confront it would involve moving far outside the boundaries of intellectual history proper.

It would be good to think we could look forward to something like that from Roza, Crétois, and their colleagues: a comprehensive analysis of the revolutionary career of social republicanism, showing its debts to prior intellectual tradition, but anchoring itself firmly in the political and social history of the Revolution. In the meantime, we can be grateful for Stéphanie Roza's illuminating account of one its most astonishing fruits, the "mutation," as she calls it, represented by Babeuvism, suddenly turning familiar utopian longings into a concrete political program. It is striking that Perry Anderson should have once used the same term, quite independently of Roza, to describe the emergence of the socialist tradition out of Jacobinism.<sup>[15]</sup> In any case, once the mutation occurred, there was no turning back. As we have seen, *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique* concludes with a glance forward to Fourier. But utopian socialism was of course destined to be overtaken by an even grander

political program, which claimed both Robespierre and Babeuf as inspirations. Although it has received far less attention than Stedman Jones's *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, 2017 has seen the publication of one of the most original interpretations of Marx's *Capital* in many years, William Clare Roberts's *Marx's Inferno: the Political Theory of Capital*.<sup>[16]</sup> Few readers will fail to be stirred by its author's claim that the first volume of *Capital* is actually modeled, structurally, on the *Inferno*. Scarcely less striking, however, is the case Roberts makes for seeing Marx as a neo-republican thinker, albeit an extremely radical one. Babeuf himself does not figure in the text; but that is only a sign that there is much work left to do—much to look forward to here as well.

## NOTES

[1] J. G. A. Pocock, "Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch Philosophers," in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 235-252 (see p. 245); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 502-505.

[2] See James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana* and *A System of Politics*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Quentin Skinner, "Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Virtue of True Nobility," in *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2, *Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 213-244.

[3] Michael Sonenscher, "Property, Community, and Citizenship," in Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler, eds., *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 464-494; and *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[4] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 136.

[5] Bronislaw Baczko, *Lumières de l'utopie* (Paris: Payot, 1978).

[6] Etienne-Gabriel Morelly, *Code de la nature*, ed. Stéphanie Roza (Montreuil: Editions de la ville brûle, 2011); Philippe Buonarroti, *Conspiration pour l'Egalité dite de Babeuf*, eds. Jean-Marc Schiappa, Jean-Numa Ducange, Alain Maillard, and Stéphanie Roza (Montreuil: Editions de la ville brûle, 2014); Stéphanie Roza and Pierre Crétois, *Le républicanisme social: une exception française?* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2014).

[7] Morelly, *Code de la nature*, p. 148.

[8] Keith M. Baker, "A Script for a French Revolution: The Political Consciousness of the Abbé Mably," in *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 86-106.

[9] See Victor Daline, *Gracchus Babeuf à la veille et pendant la grande Révolution française, 1785-1794* (Moscow: Editions du progrès, 1987); Claude Mazauric, *Babeuf et la conspiration pour l'Egalité* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1962); Marcel Dommange, *Babeuf et la conjuration es Egaux* (Paris: Spartacus, 1969).

[10] Béatrice Dider, "Statut de l'utopie chez Gracchus Babeuf," in Alain Maillard, Claude Mazauric, and Eric Water, eds., *Présence de Babeuf: Lumières, Révolution, Communisme* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1993), p. 37.

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[11] Jean-Fabien Spitz, *La liberté politique: essai de généalogie conceptuelle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1995), *Le moment républicain en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), and *Philip Pettit: le républicanisme* (Paris: Michalon, 2011).

[12] I make a more extended case for this suggestion in my own contribution to the volume while arguing that Cambridge also has something to contribute to explaining “social republicanism,” pointing to the essay by Sonenscher, cited above, and the book by Nelson, referred to below.

[13] See, above all, Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[14] Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[15] At the end of his great essay on Francis Fukuyama, “The Ends of History”; see Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 371.

[16] William Clare Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Johnson Kent Wright  
Arizona State University  
[Kent.Wright@asu.edu](mailto:Kent.Wright@asu.edu)

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ISSN 1553-9172