

# Equality, the Rights of Man and the Birth of Socialism

By David North  
24 October 1996

*The following is a lecture given by David North, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party, at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on 24 October 1996.*

We are now approaching the conclusion of a presidential election which, even by the standards of contemporary American politics, is exceptional for its intellectual and moral bankruptcy. It is an election without issues, without ideas, without programs and without purpose.

The presidential campaign seems to have degenerated into a leap year ritual, an event that automatically follows, for no reason in particular, the summer Olympic games.

The main beneficiaries of the election process, aside from the winning candidates, are the pollsters, the advertising agencies that design the attack ads, the network conglomerates that broadcast them, and, of course, the corporations that have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to finance the candidates of the Democratic and Republican parties. The electoral process provides no forum for the discussion and examination of serious political and social questions.

If elections have assumed a ritualistic character, it is because they have been stripped of any democratic content. In a country of nearly 300 million people, the political alternatives are defined by no more than two parties, between which there exist no political differences that are even worth commenting upon.

In justifying its exclusion of Perot, not to mention all other "third parties"—including the SEP—from the two televised debates, the official commission stated that it decided to include only viable candidates—defining "viable" as candidates who have a plausible chance of winning the elections.

No effort was made to justify this on the basis of democratic principles. So worm-eaten is American democracy that candidate debates are organized as if there were no difference between them and sporting events. The only real distinction is that the qualifying rules for a sports contest are more objective than those governing electoral debates.

The decision to determine eligibility on the basis of a candidate's chances of winning makes a farce of the democratic pretensions of the electoral process. First of all, the chances of the different candidates are determined before they have had a chance to present their ideas to the electorate.

Or to put it somewhat differently, whether they are to be given this opportunity depends upon whether they are deemed to be potential winners. It does not take a great deal of political insight to understand how little this has to do with real democracy.

Elections are not only about "winning." One of their most important functions is, supposedly, to provide a public forum for the discussion of important issues. When Jerry White, the presidential candidate of the SEP, made this point during a PBS debate on the treatment of third-party candidates by the media, the representative of the *Detroit News* was dumb-founded. This idea had never occurred to him before.

The principle that governs the American electoral process is that of

exclusion, not inclusion. The question which must be asked is why this is the case. It is not simply a matter of excluding individuals, but of limiting as much as possible the range of ideas that can be placed before the public.

Thus we have an election in which media coverage is confined to two parties; in which official discussion is confined to two highly controlled debates, each with one and the same moderator.

If one takes the time to reflect on the situation, its absurdity becomes almost immediately apparent. To understand the cause of this absurd situation requires, however, that the electoral process be examined within the framework of the social composition and social contradictions of American society.

The most important feature of contemporary social life in the United States is the accelerating pace and magnitude of economic polarization. The degree of social stratification is greater than at any time in the last half century. During the past quarter century, there has been an unprecedented reverse redistribution of wealth, from the working class into the bank accounts of those who control vast sums of capital.

There are innumerable studies which document and quantify this on-going social process. For example, the richest two percent of the American people control more wealth than the poorest 40 percent. The richest 10 percent control more wealth than the remaining 90 percent.

In the two debates that were officially sanctioned, there was not a single question that raised, even obliquely, the issue of social and economic polarization in the United States. There were hardly any references, in either debate, to any of the broader social conditions which manifest the brutal significance of the deepening social inequality.

## The new ideologists of inequality

The absence of a discussion of social inequality in the United States by the two political parties is hardly an oversight. Although the subject of inequality is largely ignored by the bourgeois candidates, it is the subject of a great deal of discussion in other circles. Indeed, one of the most significant "intellectual" trends of recent years—if that is the right way to describe this process—has been the attempt to develop a hard-nosed justification for inequality.

*The Bell Curve* by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray achieved notoriety because of its unabashed racism. Notwithstanding their own lame denials, the authors certainly did write a racist tract. But, as a matter of fact, the racist arguments are introduced in support of a broader, utterly reactionary defense of social inequality.

The essential thesis of Herrnstein and Murray is that social inequality is the natural and legitimate expression and product of genetically-determined mental capacities. The rich are rich because they have superior genes. The socializing and intermarriage of the rich is preserving a gene pool that tends to guarantee wealth and success for their offspring.

The book concludes with a ferocious diatribe against the ideal of social

equality and a general denunciation of basic democratic values. Its authors call for the revival of ancient values, in which there is no place for concepts such as the equality of man. They hold up as their model ancient civilizations in which "society was to be ruled by the virtuous and wise few" and in which "the everyday business of the community fell to the less worthy multitude, with the menial chores left to the slaves."

That is not all: "The egalitarian ideal of contemporary political theory," declare Herrnstein and Murray, "underestimates the importance of differences that separate human beings. It fails to come to grips with human variation. It overestimates the ability of political interventions to shape human character and capacities."

Robert Bork's *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* is especially significant because it demonstrates the degree to which the defense of social inequality requires the explicit repudiation of the democratic foundations of the United States. This is a man who sat on the US Court of Appeals, was nominated by Reagan to the US Supreme Court in 1987 and came within two votes of being confirmed. The most important section of his book is chapter four, from which I wish to quote the first two paragraphs:

"Despite its rhetorical vagueness or because of it, the Declaration of Independence profoundly moved Americans at the time and still does. The proposition that all men are created equal said what the colonists already believed, and so, as Gordon Wood put it, equality became 'the single most powerful and radical force in all of American history.' That is true and, though it verges on heresy to say so, it is also profoundly unfortunate.

"The deep, emotional, indeed religious, appeal of equality is not, of course, a peculiarly American phenomenon; the ideal informs all of the West. Besides being a matter for regret, the appeal of equality, outside the context of political and legal rights, is puzzling. Neither of those thoughts is new; in fact, they are trite. Writer after writer has demonstrated the pernicious effects of our passion for equality and the lack of any intellectual foundation for that passion. If there is anything new in this book, it is the demonstration of the ill-effects of the passion in a variety of contemporary social and cultural fields."

Having decried the baleful influence of the Declaration of Independence and asserted, in the manner of a judge issuing a bench warrant, that the demand for social equality is without any intellectual substance, Bork gives us an astounding demonstration of his own mental virtuosity. There are simply no grounds, he proclaims, for condemning great wealth. Such condemnations are based on nothing but "envy," for, as Bork assures us, "It is impossible to see any objective harm done to the less wealthy by another's greater wealth."

"Nor," he continues, "is it clear why luxury should be morally repugnant. If luxury is inconsistent with the democratic ideals that have shaped our political culture, that only means that some of our democratic 'ideals' are the product of envy.... Envy certainly has shaped and continues to shape our political culture. That is probably why it is front-page news in the *New York Times* that the United States displays greater inequality in wealth than other industrialized nations. The unstated assumption that makes this worthy of the front page is that there is something morally wrong, even shameful, in having greater wealth inequalities than other societies.

"Nor does the contention stand up that the workings of democracy are impeded if there is too great a disparity in the wealth of citizens. There are many avenues to political power, and wealth is not the

most significant."

To comment on these lines would be to diminish their comic effect. Bork, no doubt, would be included by Herrnstein and Murray in a list of their "cognitive elite." But he is hardly a good advertisement for the theory of *The Bell Curve*.

There are striking similarities between *The Bell Curve* and *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*. While the first purports to be a work of objective science and the second of serious political and cultural analysis, both are, in essence, ideologically-driven justifications for the growth of inequality. Moreover, embracing inequality as a positive social principle, both books openly call for the repudiation of the entire intellectual tradition—dating back to the Enlightenment—that provided for the past 200 years the theoretical and scientific foundation for the world-historic struggle of oppressed humanity for social emancipation and equality.

Bork puts the case most bluntly. Using the term "liberalism" as an all-purpose swear word—connoting virtually any form of social policy that places even the slightest restraint upon the exercise of property rights, the extraction of profits and the accumulation of personal wealth—he sees it as the expression of a dangerous egalitarian tendency "that has been growing in the West for at least two and a half centuries, and probably longer."

As far as Bork is concerned, the curse of egalitarianism has haunted the United States ever since Jefferson's Declaration was accepted as the new nation's founding statement of principles. Its "ringing phrases are hardly useful, indeed may be pernicious, if taken, as they commonly are, as a guide to action, governmental or private. The words press eventually towards extremes of liberty and the pursuit of happiness that court personal license and social disorder." The problem with Jefferson, Bork writes, was that he "was a man of the Enlightenment, and the Declaration of Independence is an Enlightenment document."

### **The origins of the Enlightenment**

There is nothing particularly original in Bork's indictment of the Enlightenment. He is merely rehashing accusations that countless other reactionaries have hurled over the last 200 years against the progressive and revolutionary thinkers of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, his diatribe—which is itself only an ideological reflection of the general social outlook of today's ruling class—provides us with a welcome opportunity to look back into history, and, in doing so, obtain a better understanding not only of the past, but also the present.

The Enlightenment proper refers to a period of several decades in the eighteenth century, approximately from the 1710s to the 1780s. But historical periods do not always lend themselves to such simple chronological classification. The Enlightenment, conceived of as the expression of a profound broadening of man's intellectual horizons, must certainly be seen as the extension and outcome of the extraordinary advances in science that had, over the previous two centuries, fundamentally altered man's conception of the universe, the place of the planet Earth in the universe, and the place and role of human beings on that planet.

Until the early seventeenth century, even educated people still generally accepted that the ultimate answers to all the mysteries of the universe and the problems of life were to be found in the Old Testament. But its unchallengeable authority had been slowly eroding, especially since the publication of Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus* in the year of his death in 1543, which dealt the death blow to the Ptolemaic conception of the universe and provided the essential point of departure for the future conquests of Tycho Brahe (1546-1601), Johann Kepler (1571-1630) and, of course, Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Intellectually, if not yet socially, the liberation of man from the fetters of Medieval superstition and the political structures that rested upon it, was well under way.

The discoveries in astronomy profoundly changed the general intellectual environment. Above all, there was a new sense of the power of thought and what it could achieve if allowed to operate without the artificial restraints of untested and unverifiable dogmas.

Religion began to encounter the type of disrespect it deserved, and the gradual decline of its authority introduced a new optimism. All human misery, the Bible had taught for centuries, was the inescapable product of the Fall of Man. But the invigorating skepticism encouraged by science in the absolute validity of the Book of Genesis led thinking people to wonder whether it was not possible for man to change the conditions of his existence and enjoy a better world.

The prestige of thought was raised to new heights by the extraordinary achievements of Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) who, while by no means seeking to undermine the authority of God, certainly demonstrated that the Almighty could not have accomplished his aims without the aid of extraordinarily complex mathematics.

Moreover, the phenomena of Nature were not inscrutable, but operated in accordance with laws that were accessible to the human mind. The key to an understanding of the universe was to be found not in the Book of Genesis, but in the *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*. The impact of Newton's work on intellectual life was captured in the ironic epigram of Alexander Pope: "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night, / God said 'Let Newton be!' and all was light."

The achievements of thought led, quite inevitably, to growing interest in the nature of the cognitive process. Locke's (1632-1704) *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which repudiated the concept of innate ideas and established the objective source of thought in sensations derived from the external world, played a role in philosophy almost as revolutionary as Newton's *Principia* in physics.

If there were no "innate" ideas, there could not be "innate" evil. Man's thinking, and, therefore, his moral character, was, in the final analysis, a reflexive product of the material environment which acted upon him. Contained within this conception of human cognition was a profoundly subversive idea: the nature of man could be changed and improved upon by changing and improving the environment within which he lived.

How, then, was this improvement to be realized? The answer given was: Through the invincible force of human reason, which, in accordance with the new methodology of science, would seek to understand the world on the basis of a painstaking analysis of reality. This colossal faith in the power of reason to discover truth is the unifying intellectual principle of the Enlightenment. As Ernst Cassirer, the brilliant German biographer of Kant, explained:

"The whole eighteenth century understands reason in this sense; not as a sound body of knowledge, principles, and truths, but as a kind of energy, a force which is fully comprehensible only in its agency and effects. What reason is, and what it can do, can never be known by its results but only by its function. And its most important function consists in its power to bind and to dissolve. It dissolves everything merely factual, all simple data of experience, and everything believed on the evidence of revelation, tradition and authority; and it does not rest content until it has analyzed all these things into their simplest component parts and into their last elements of belief and opinion."

The "motto" of the Enlightenment, as Kant (1724-1804) wrote, was "*Sapere aude*," "Dare to know!" Fascinated with the power of thought, the great figures of the Enlightenment generally believed that reason was capable of resolving the problems that had troubled mankind for ages and of improving the human condition. Among the great tasks of reason,

according to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, was to secure for man his inalienable rights—which had been already identified by Locke as the right to life, liberty and property.

It is not difficult to discover much that appears to be naive in the miraculous powers that were assigned to reason by the great thinkers of the Enlightenment. Among the ranks of modern-day professorhood there is no shortage of tenured or tenure-track cynics who, weary beyond their intelligence, if not years, find much that is downright laughable in the optimism of the Enlightenment. After all, lucrative grants are awarded to those who justify and defend what exists.

The greatest thinkers of the Enlightenment, however, were, in the general direction of their thought and uncompromising honesty, revolutionists. Ruthless in their criticism of the world as it was, they sought to reveal the means by which the inalienable rights of man could be secured and the moral level of society elevated.

The themes of virtue and justice resonate throughout this period, especially in the writings of Montesquieu (1689-1755). For example, in one fantastic tale, Montesquieu relates the fate of an imaginary people known as the Troglodytes. Despising justice, their activities are guided by the motto, "I will live happy," and the outcome of the unrestrained individual selfishness that prevails within their society is its catastrophic downfall.

It is necessary at this point to examine, if only briefly, the nature of the society within which the Enlightenment developed. England, where the Cromwellian revolution had destroyed royal absolutism in the mid-seventeenth century, was already surpassing Holland as the country that was most developed along capitalist lines. But in France, the center of the Enlightenment, economic development stagnated beneath the weight of an archaic feudal structure, based on the Capetian dynasty, that was sanctified by the Catholic Church. This structure consisted of a complex and age-old network of social relations of privilege and dependency, lordship and vassalage, based on birth and blood line.

Inequality was the natural and unquestioned social premise of the entire feudal system. The place of every man and woman on the earth, from the exalted monarchs to the lowliest serfs, was to be accepted as the expression of a divine plan.

In the final analysis, profound changes in the economic foundation of society undermined the old political structures. By the eighteenth century the vast growth of capitalist enterprise in France was reflected in the growing political self-consciousness of the bourgeoisie. Within this historical context, the Enlightenment critique of French society expressed the growing dissatisfaction of the emerging bourgeoisie with the political supremacy of the unproductive and parasitic nobility.

Yet it would be simplistic and superficial to see in the work of the Enlightenment nothing more than the narrow expression of the class interests of the bourgeoisie in its struggle against a decaying feudal order. The advanced thinkers who prepared the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century spoke and wrote in the name of all of suffering humanity, and in doing so evoked universal themes of human solidarity and emancipation that reached beyond the more limited and prosaic aims of the capitalist class.

### **The critique of property**

This universalism finds extraordinary expression in the writings of Rousseau (1714-1778). In contrast to the other great figures of the Enlightenment, Rousseau does not participate in the glorification of reason. He bitterly calls into question the value of science and art, arguing that they are themselves instruments of man's corruption, debasement and oppression.

It is by no means necessary to accept this element of Rousseau's argument to acknowledge the genius of the underlying insight: that society as it has developed and exists is profoundly inhuman, antagonistic

to the natural instincts of man, and the source of his misery and suffering.

The profoundly revolutionary implications of this insight found striking expression in his brilliant *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Men*, published in 1755. Property, he explained, was not a natural attribute of human existence. In his natural state, man did not have property. It is the product of the growth of civilization which, once having come into existence, destroys man's humanity and enslaves him.

"The first man," writes Rousseau, "who, having fenced off a plot of land, thought of saying, 'This is mine,' and found people simple enough to believe him was the real founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors might the human race have been spared by the one who, upon pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had shouted to his fellow men, 'Beware of listening to this impostor; you are lost, if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and that the earth belongs to no one.'"

As there was once no property, so was there once no inequality. Like property out of which it develops, inequality is a product of civilization. The poor are oppressed by the power of property. Those who possess property are morally and intellectually disfigured by the struggle to obtain, keep and augment it.

The emergence of property and the destruction of equality led inexorably to "the most frightful disorder." Having acquired wealth, the rich "thought of nothing but subjugating and enslaving their neighbors, like those hungry wolves which, having once tasted human flesh, reject all other food, and no longer want anything but men to devour."

In his later *Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau offered a portrait of social inequality that speaks as powerfully to an audience on the eve of the twenty-first century as it did to readers in the mid-eighteenth century.

"Are not all the advantages of society for the powerful and rich?" he asked. "Are not all lucrative positions filled by them alone? Are not all privileges and exemptions reserved for them? And is not public authority completely in their favor? When a man of high standing robs his creditors or cheats in other ways, is he not always certain of impunity? Are not the beatings he administers and the acts of violence he commits, even the murders and assassinations he is guilty of, hushed up and no longer even mentioned after months? If this same man is robbed, the entire police force is immediately on the move, and woe to the innocent persons he suspects.... How different is the picture of the poor man! The more humanity owes him, the more society refuses him. All doors are closed to him, even when he has the right to open them; and if sometimes he obtains justice, it is with greater difficulty than another would have in obtaining a pardon.

"Another less important consideration is that the losses of poor men are much less easy to offset than those of the rich, and that the difficulty of acquiring wealth always increases in proportion to need. Nothing is created from nothing; that is true in business as in physics; money is the seed of money, and the first ten francs are sometimes more difficult to earn than the second million. But there is still more. Everything that the poor man spends is forever lost to him, and remains in or returns to the hands of the rich...."

### **The American Revolution**

The influence of the Enlightenment was felt not only throughout Europe, but within the colonies of North America. The generation that was to lead the revolution was steeped in the writings of Montesquieu, Diderot (1713-1784), Beccaria and, particularly in the case of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

There has been endless debate on the ideological influences that shaped

the political and philosophical outlooks of those who led the revolutionary movement for independence. Generally, those who have sought to downplay the radical character of the independence movement have placed the main emphasis on the English influence, interpreting the Declaration of Independence as essentially a restatement of Locke's theory of natural rights.

There is no doubt that the writings of Locke exerted an immense influence on the generation of 1776. But nearly a century had passed since Locke had written his *Second Treatise on Civil Government*. And inasmuch as the conceptual products of the human mind are not static, but change under the influence of the objective reality which they reflect and strive to reproduce in abstract form, the formulation of the theory of natural rights in the Declaration of Independence differed fundamentally, in one highly significant aspect, from that of Locke's *Second Treatise*. The three natural rights recognized by Locke were that of life, liberty and property, or estate.

But in the Declaration of Independence, the "inherent and inalienable rights" identified by Jefferson are "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Why did Jefferson depart from the Lockean formulation and substitute for property "the pursuit of happiness?" It will not do to claim that the difference was of no significance. Jefferson and his associates were too steeped in the political thought of their age to choose their words carelessly, particularly on such a crucial matter.

I would hardly suggest that Jefferson was a proto-socialist who opposed the institution of private property. To appreciate the greatness of Jefferson, it is hardly necessary to make him out to be what he was not. To measure the leaders of that time by the degree to which they espoused an as yet nonexistent socialist ideology, for which there was no real material foundation, would be to impose upon them standards of an ahistorical character.

However, without seeking to interpret the Declaration of Independence as the portent of the socialist revolution of the future, it can still be said that by Jefferson's time the development of the world market and the rapid expansion of capitalist forms of production and commerce produced new social tensions of which the most politically conscious men of the age were not unaware. Certainly, the writings of Rousseau expressed in a highly artistic form at least an intuitive awareness of these tensions. It had already, by the late eighteenth century, become an issue for legitimate political debate whether life, liberty and property constituted an internally compatible triad.

It is undeniable that Jefferson was painfully aware that there existed conditions in which the right of property was in direct contradiction to that of life and liberty. He was, after all, a Virginian and a slave-owner. However, it is of historical and political significance that in a preliminary draft of the Declaration of Independence Jefferson included as one of the indictments against George III his perpetuation of the slave trade:

"He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, this opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain, determined to keep open a market where Men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce."

For reasons not hard to fathom, this passage was deemed unacceptable by many of Jefferson's colleagues at the Continental Congress and was

not included in the final draft. It was one of many compromises on the fatal subject of American slavery. How Jefferson's acceptance of these compromises should affect our evaluation of his historical role is a legitimate subject for debate, though, I must admit, that I am not among those who would be inclined to dismiss him as a mere hypocrite and disregard the world-historical significance of the Declaration which he authored.

In the context of this discussion, Jefferson's redefinition of the concept of natural rights, substituting "the pursuit of happiness" for property, endowed the document with an enduring, world historical significance. In using this formulation to justify the rebellion of American colonists against the Mother Country, Jefferson provided the inspiration for a more revolutionary, universal and humane concept of what truly constituted the "Rights of Man."

For Locke, the natural rights of life and liberty were crystallized in the ownership of property. In Jefferson, that relationship is not stated. Rather, life and liberty find meaning in "the pursuit of happiness," whatever that might be.

### **The French Revolution**

The victory of the American colonists over Britain sounded the tocsin for a new era of revolutionary struggles that were to sweep across Europe. The eruption of the French Revolution in 1789 marked the beginning of a new epoch in world history. Prior to 1789 there was nothing in history that could compare in scale, grandeur, pathos and tragedy with the events that were set into motion by the convocation of the Etats-General in May 1789 and the storming of the Bastille two months later.

In the course of the next five years, the revolution not only transformed France, but established the basic political, social and ideological foundations of what became known as the modern world and which, notwithstanding the fatuous claims of the post-modernists, persists to this day.

The French Revolution was not "caused" by the Enlightenment, as reactionaries and police-minded devotees of the conspiracy theory of history have so often claimed. The roots of the revolution lay deep within the social and economic development of French and European society. But the Enlightenment certainly prepared men to accept the necessity of the revolution and to articulate its vision.

The Enlightenment had taught man to think in terms of changing for the better the conditions of human life; to conceive of society not as the work of God, but as the product of man; to conceive of injustice and inequality not as, in the case of the former, the necessary consequence of the Fall of Man, nor as, in the case of the latter, the earthly manifestation of a divinely inspired order. Both, rather, were seen as proofs that existing institutions were faulty, having lacked in their design the activity of reason. The revolution was the means by which the affairs of man would be reshaped in accordance with the dictates of reason.

But in the matchless irony of history, the revolution that had been hailed at its outset as heralding the triumph of reason proceeded along lines that even its most conscious participants had not foreseen. As it developed and gathered momentum, the revolution seemed to have a force of its own, summoning up leaders at one time only to cast them off and destroy them at another. Leaders and factions raced to keep up with events which moved at a speed never before known in history.

If nothing else, the revolution meant the violent, elemental and uncontrollable intervention of the popular masses into political life. Again and again, the basic course of events was suddenly altered by the insurrectionary movement of the Parisian sans-coulottes, who drove the revolution along an ever more radical course.

The French Revolution was incomparably more radical than the American. But this is not to be explained by references to the more prudent and constitutionally-minded Puritan temper of the American

colonists. Under different circumstances, more than a century earlier, the Puritans in England, under the leadership of Cromwell, had demonstrated that they were fully prepared to apply an ax to the neck of a king. The differences between the revolution that had occurred in the New World and that which swept across France was rooted in objective conditions.

First of all, there existed no feudal heritage in North America. However formidable the British government may have appeared to the American colonists, the resistance it offered to the rebellion hardly equaled that of the *ancien regime* and its allies throughout Europe. For Britain, the issue posed by the American demand for independence was, in the final analysis, a matter of policy. For the *ancien regime*, the demands and aims of the revolution raised questions of life and death. Hence, the implacability of its resistance.

This resistance, in turn, called for ever more radical measures by the revolutionary forces. By 1793 the French Revolution confronted not only the resistance of the aristocracy and its allies within France, of which the Vendee uprising was the most extreme expression. It was also at war with Britain and virtually all of aristocratic Europe. Such a situation did not encourage moderation.

Fighting for its own survival, the bourgeoisie could not hope to defeat the forces of the *ancien regime* without issuing the broadest appeal to all the oppressed of France and, indeed, Europe and even the world. The Declaration of the Rights of Man, issued in the first period of the revolution, had proclaimed the inviolability of property. But the unrestricted exercise of this right collided with the elementary social interests of broad sections of the urban masses, without whose support the French bourgeoisie could not possibly defeat the *ancien regime*.

It was not enough to recognize, in theoretical and purely legal terms, the "equality of rights." For the broad masses, the word "equality" meant far more than the abstract acknowledgment that all men had, in some technical sense, equal standing in a court of law. It meant, rather, that all people had the right to enjoy a good life, and to partake of the just distribution of the wealth produced by society as a whole. The comfort and security that only a small number of people enjoyed, on the basis of their personal wealth, as a privilege, should be available to all as a right.

In North America the colonial bourgeoisie had led and organized the struggle against Britain without serious internal opposition within the ranks of the revolutionary movement. In France, however, the essentially bourgeois aims that had been articulated in the opening stages of the Revolution were increasingly challenged by demands of a broader and more radical social character. Even as it shattered the foundations of feudalism, the omnipotence of bourgeois property rights was called into question by the social demands advanced by the urban masses. Jacques Roux, a radical Jacobin, declared before the Convention on June 25, 1793, "Equality is but a vain phantom when the rich, through their monopolies, exercise the right of life and death on their fellow men."

Robespierre's government, though committed to the defense of bourgeois property, was compelled to make significant concessions to the popular masses. Price controls were established September 1793. A law broadening the availability of public education was promulgated in December 1793. And in May 1794 the revolutionary government introduced a law of national charity that contained the initial elements of a popular system of social security. These measures of popular egalitarianism repelled ever larger sections of the French bourgeoisie, which came to view the aspirations of the masses with even greater fear than they did the counter-revolutionary threat posed by the mortally wounded remnants of the old feudal aristocracy.

In the course of the French Revolution the concepts of the Rights of Man and equality acquired a broader and far more radical significance than they had before 1789. The Rights of Man and the Rights of Property could no longer be seen as one and the same. The division that now appeared between the two terms was not the work of theoretical

speculation, but of the historical struggle of real social forces. This found concrete expression in an event that represented both a tragic finale to the French bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century and a heroic anticipation of the socialist revolutionary struggles of the working class in the nineteenth century, the "Conspiracy of Equals" led by Gracchus Babeuf (1760-1797) in the year 1795.

The program of Babeuf was a brilliant, though premature, anticipation of the basic socialist strivings of the working class of the future. Before his execution in 1797, Babeuf asked that his friends preserve all notes and documents pertaining to his conspiracy. "When people come to dream again of the means of procuring for humanity the happiness that we proposed, you will be able to search through these notes and present to all the disciples of Equality—what the corrupt men of today call my dreams."

I have referred to Babeuf as a "premature anticipation" of the future socialist movement. It was premature in the sense that the social forces upon which the realization of a communistic program depended existed at that point only in embryonic form. It was only during the first decades of the nineteenth century that the rapid development of industry created the conditions for the emergence of a mass proletariat in Western Europe.

Indeed, by the time of the publication of Buonarroti's historical account of Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals in 1828 there existed a more substantial working class, whose advanced representatives adopted this volume as one of the first great works of the emerging socialist movement. Another 20 years were to pass before the publication of the work that laid the political foundations of modern socialism, the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels.

#### **The significance of this heritage**

Upon reviewing these extraordinary chapters in the history of human action and thought, one is both inspired and ashamed—Inspired by the grandeur, universality and timelessness of the ideas and sentiments that animated the great liberating struggles of the eighteenth century, ideals that contributed to the founding of this country; and ashamed by the intellectual poverty and selfish insignificance of what passes for political life nowadays.

We have at our disposal material resources of which our revolutionary ancestors could hardly even dream. Were it not for the social and political obstacles that stand in the way of its realization, the eradication of poverty, not just in the United States, but throughout the world, would be merely a technical problem which the existing level of science and industry is fully capable of solving.

And yet, nowadays, we are offered justifications and rationalizations for the existence of poverty and even squalor that would have embarrassed and offended thinking people 200 years ago. In our present society, people are conditioned to walk down a city street and take no notice of the ubiquitous scenes of human distress and social misery.

But 200 years ago old Tom Paine wrote: "The present state of civilization is as odious as it is unjust. It is absolutely the opposite of what it should be, and it is necessary that a revolution should be made in it. The contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye is like dead and living bodies chained together."

No one could imagine hearing such words spoken by any of the candidates of the "major" parties. They are capable of nothing but hypocritical platitudes which lay bare the chasm that separates the social interests defended by these instruments of capitalist rule from those of the broad masses of people. Capitalist society is as much the *ancien regime* of the late twentieth century as feudal society was the *ancien regime* of the late eighteenth.

Two hundred and twenty years ago Jefferson declared that the equality of man was a self-evident truth—that is, it was not a debatable point. But today, the defenders of our *ancien regime* declare that the equality of man is not only a debatable point; they assert it is a fallacy, and that we should

embrace as the essential principle of social life the inequality of man. A social order that requires the services of such defenders deserves to perish.

Of what importance is the work of the Enlightenment and the revolutions it prepared to our own generation? Of course, as Marxists schooled in the materialist conception of history, we understand very well the limitations, ambiguities and contradictions of the thinkers and revolutionaries of the eighteenth century. No doubt, a pedant could compile quotations in which these limitations would be easy to pinpoint. But it is necessary to recognize and honor that which is enduring in their ideas and their actions.

The revolutionary spirit of the Enlightenment animates the principles and struggles of the Socialist Equality Party. Only our party fights to secure for the working class its inalienable rights in the only way that those rights can be secured, through the revolutionary struggle to put an end to capitalism and establish an international socialist society.

To contact the WSWP and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wswp.org>