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Louis Blanc

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Yann Tholoniati – “Louis Blanc”

In Ness, Immanuel (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*. New York, Blackwell Publishing, 2009 : 401-402.

Born in Madrid in 1811, Jean-Joseph-Charles-Louis Blanc was the son of a general tax-inspector of King Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon’s brother. Blanc went up to Paris in 1830 in order to study law after his family had been ruined by the revolution of 1830. He worked two years in Arras as a private tutor and as a freelance journalist for *Le Progrès du Pas-de-Calais*. Back in Paris in 1834, he joined the Republican cause and worked for *Le National* and *Le Bon Sens*, of which he became the chief editor in 1837. His reputation grew as he campaigned in favour of the extension of the universal suffrage, thanks to the *Revue du progrès* (1839-1842) and *La Réforme*. Meanwhile, he wrote *Histoire de dix ans, 1830-1840*, and *Histoire de la Révolution française* (published in 1841), in which he took the defence of Robespierre, and which obtained a great success. Blanc also expounded his Republican opinions in *L’Organisation du Travail*, published in 1839 in the *Revue du progrès*, and which was reprinted ten times between 1841 and 1848. According to Louis Blanc, the history of societies is governed by three principles, authority (vanquished in 1789), individualism (which emerged after 1789) and fraternity. In order to reach this last goal, ruthless competition in the economy and among men has to be abolished and replaced by workers’ cooperatives, the social workshops. The state would provide the financial means for a start and would name the staff. It would then act as a regulator of the market, which would not disappear but be controlled. A strong believer in state intervention, Blanc advocates the interrelationship of social and political reforms. As a defender of the role of the state, he is violently criticised by Proudhon, who is in favour of the power of the people by the people. If Proudhon embodies democratic socialism, Blanc expresses the ideas of a state socialism which gained a wide popularity among the workers and the craftsmen.

In 1848, Blanc took an active part in the “banquet campaign”, a tour of major French cities where claims in favour of the Republic were made in the form of toasts during banquets. The revolution in February brought him to power: he took part into the provisional government as a representative of the left, with the worker Albert, and his ideas were more popular than ever. On February 25th, he wrote a proclamation defining the right to work: work should be guaranteed by the state, and workers should be allowed to create trade unions. He asked in vain for the creation of a Ministry of Work. Named at the head of the Luxembourg Commission, that is to say the government’s commission for the workers, he implemented the first social workshops, an initiative which was opposed by the provisional government. Indeed, the workshops were quite rapidly transformed into charity workshops; they also became a means of drawing the mass of unemployed workers out of Paris. Although Blanc was elected in March 1848 to participate in the Constituent Assembly, he had to resign from the executive power under the defiance of the moderate Republicans which now formed the majority of the new assembly. Although Blanc disapproved of the invasion of the Assembly by the demonstrators on May 15th, he was accused of sedition by the Conservatives, and had to flee from France. The June uprising of 1848, repressed in a welter of blood, was triggered by the closing of the national workshops Blanc had contributed to implement. He fled to Brussels, then settled in London, where he remained during the Second Empire. He dedicated himself to the writing of historical books, such as the *Histoire de la Révolution de 1848* (published in 1870, in twelve volumes) which vindicates his attitude during the revolution. Between 1865 and 1867, the newspaper *Le Temps* published his “Letters about England”. He came back to Paris on September 4th, 1870, and worked in favour of national union and all-out war against Prussia. Blanc was elected the first representative of the Seine in 1871, but the “hero of 48” condemned the Parisian Commune as illegal and a threat to the Republic which had recently been proclaimed. He was re-elected in 1876. In 1879, alongside the senator Victor Hugo, he campaigned for the amnesty of the Communards, which was eventually voted on July 11th, 1880. He died in Cannes in 1882 and was given a state funeral in Paris by the Third Republic.

Yann Tholoniati
(750 words)