

For all mankind

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Léon Blum's essay *For All Mankind*, written in 1941 while in jail and published in 1945 upon his release from a concentration camp, plays a distinctive role in the history of French socialism. It is not a book about theory and it does not make any definitive statements about socialist doctrine or principles. Arguably it does more than this: it offers a defining insight into what humanism should mean for socialists.

The essay is set against a backdrop of dreadful hardship. Blum, who dominated French socialism for thirty years, was incarcerated and deported to Buchenwald for his resistance to Nazism. Prior to the fall of France in 1940 he had become a figure who passionately embodied the errors of communism. He was the first socialist to lead the Third Republic in 1936, using his leadership of the Popular Front to dramatically reduce the gap between "ideals and practice." The inner strength which enabled him to resist and carry on fighting was his belief in a humanist value set which binds together justice, reason and wisdom.

Blum's optimism, even his naivety, took its fair share of criticism. He was often satirised, in particular by Marxists, for playing by the rules and for his reluctance to commit wholeheartedly to political struggle. Yet, what his insights into the Nazi-led defeat that swept France show us is that the nation's surrender stemmed from its leaders oblivion to the interests of its people; first and foremost on the part of the ruling class but also by the labour movement. "We became too strong, too cautious. We were progressively cast in the mould of everyday life. We became complacent. At a time when the nation was expecting a rallying cry from our ranks, no strong voice could be heard," he wrote in reference to himself and other socialist leaders. His generation had failed their self appointed task.

The essay argues that our representatives and leaders must remain closely in tune with the interests and needs of the people they are elected to serve. It shows that in pursuing their own self interest, the leaders of the left in France at that time had allowed a divide to develop which forbade them from stirring up the nation in times of hardship. In essence the ruling class had lost its virtue.

At a time when the parties of the left in Europe are re-examining their identity and the crisis of representation they face, it is useful to draw on Blum's writings to remind us that socialism is first and foremost a humanist political culture. Men of Léon Blum's

generation, and even more so in the generation previous to his, dared to speak of spirituality. Nowadays, this would cause a shock in modern socialist parties where cold reason and the interplay of interests dominate. Blum rejected such an approach: “all that is inescapable is not necessarily fair.” He passionately believed that people possess the “instinct of justice” and that moral choice can and should trump a narrow definition of self-interest.

For Blum, democracy and socialism are absolutely interdependent and thus socialism could not exist if it did not adhere to the fundamentals of democracy and fairness. Herein lay his vision; a synthesis between socialism and democracy that would only materialise when the political class realised that their core mandate was not to impose their own interests upon the people, but to give people the skills and values to make their own democratic and ethical choices. It is a demanding view of political organisation. To avoid falling into the traps of avant-gardes who pretend to hold the truth, or of new oligarchies who use the people to serve their own interests, strong moral standards need to permeate socialism.

Obviously, Léon Blum does not have the lexicon of our times; his concepts were devised within the framework of republican and Marxist traditions. Yet, the fundamental belief underpinning his reflection – and this is why his essay stands the test of time – is that democracy is the first and permanent resource of socialists. Social democracy should continue to confront itself with the ethical implications of its political choices. The quest for adequate means is obviously essential. The current crisis of capitalism demands new economic thinking. Yet a social democratic answer has to take the form of a moral critique of the limits and weaknesses of markets. In this respect, reading *For All Mankind* still proves incredibly pertinent as it reminds us never to forget our true aims.

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