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Frédéric Bastiat: Libertarian Challenger or Political Bargainer?

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Frédéric Bastiat: Libertarian Challenger or Political Bargainer?

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BRIAN BAUGUS

Social thinkers and scholars tend to moderate their beliefs, especially their most radical beliefs, as they age. Many who begin their careers as radical libertarians, challenging the status quo and extensive state power, tire over time or realize that holding such views obstructs their careers. Hence, they moderate their views or compromise their most radical ideas, at least publicly, and express greater support for incrementalism and working within the established system. Examples of this tendency include such major figures as Edmund Burke and Herbert Spencer. Of course, any thinker may change his positions over time or make greater distinctions in applying his basic beliefs to different issues. This tendency is especially pronounced, however, if a thinker seeks wide public approval. Political aspirants in particular frequently compromise or bargain away their more radical positions. Only a few major thinkers, such as Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, Ludwig von Mises, and Murray Rothbard, have maintained radical libertarian positions consistently throughout their lives—and Böhm-Bawerk did so despite holding a high position in the government on several occasions. Perhaps the rarest case of all is that of the thinker who seeks political office and public approval yet expresses *increasingly* radical libertarian views.

Claude Frédéric Bastiat was such a thinker. He is best known for the radical libertarian positions he expressed in his most famous writings, most of which were

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penned during the final two years of his life. Especially noteworthy are his uncompromising stands on free trade, limited government, and the classical-liberal philosophy in general. Arguments set forth in his famous tract *The Law* demonstrate that Bastiat stood well apart from most members of the French political class in the mid-nineteenth century.

Bastiat's clear, concise, engagingly framed statements of libertarian philosophy in *The Law*, *What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen*, and other works are still widely disseminated by libertarian organizations. Because he was a prolific writer, however, researchers may examine his entire body of work to investigate his intellectual development. In this article, I consider not only the famous works he produced at the end of his career, but also his political letters and works as a legislator to show how his thinking about political economy developed.

Bastiat's Life

Bastiat was born in 1801 and died on Christmas Eve in 1850.¹ From his vantage point as a member of a merchant family, he observed at first hand the damage tariffs did to trade, producing empty warehouses and a lower standard of living. He advocated free trade throughout his life. Unfortunately, he never saw a single day of free trade in France because import prohibitions and high tariffs preceded his birth, and French trade was not liberalized until ten years after his death. As Frank William Taussig observed in 1911,

[T]he great [Napoleonic] wars led to the complete prohibition of the importation of manufactures, reaching its climax in Napoleon's Continental system. The system of prohibition thus instituted, while aimed at Great Britain, was made general in its terms. Hence the importation into France of virtually all manufactured articles from foreign countries was completely interdicted; and such was the legislation in force when peace came in 1815. This system doubtless was not expected to last after the wars had ceased, but, as it happened, it did last until 1860. Successive governments in France made endeavours to break with the prohibitive system, but naturally met with strong opposition from the manufacturing interests, not prepared to meet the competition of Great Britain, whose industries had made, and were continually making, rapid strides. The political position of the governments of the Restoration and of Louis Philippe was such that they were unwilling to forfeit support by pushing measures in which, after all, they were not themselves deeply interested. ([1911] 2002)

By 1840, Bastiat was well versed in classical economics, primarily the works of

1. For details of Bastiat's life, I rely on Roche 1971.

Adam Smith and Jean Baptiste Say, and he was a dedicated free trader, but he did not become an outspoken advocate until he discovered the Anti-Corn Law League in England and Richard Cobden in particular. Cobden's success in organizing in support of free trade with speeches, debates, and articles inspired Bastiat to act. The two men began a lifelong correspondence. Bastiat published his first article on free trade in a leading journal in 1844, initiating a prodigious outpouring during the remaining six years of his life.

Well read and prepared owing to his life as a gentleman farmer and amateur scholar and debater, Bastiat plunged full tilt into the public intellectual battle. He published a series of articles in 1844 and early 1845 that were collected in his *Economic Sophisms* (many of the same articles also appear in his *Economic Fallacies*); he wrote a book about Cobden,² and he traveled to Paris and to London (to meet Cobden). In 1846, he advocated successfully on behalf of the Bordeaux Association of Free Trade. The association's success inspired Bastiat and comrades to launch the Free Trade Association, France's version of the Anti-Corn Law League.

Between 1789 and 1848, France had three monarchies, two republics, and one tyrant. This governmental turmoil inspired a variety of political movements to seek support and power. Communists, socialists, monarchists, republicans, supporters of Napoleon, anarchists, and various other groups were all out in force in France in the 1840s. Bastiat's waxing popularity and strong, clear stands inspired some in his home electoral district to encourage him to stand for election as a deputy to the National Assembly. He did so, but lost decisively to the monarch's preferred candidate.

Aside from his failure in electoral politics, Bastiat's other efforts were going well. By the end of 1846, the Free Trade Association's meetings had standing room only, and he was editing the association's national publication *Le libre-échange*. As political unrest grew in France, however, support for the Free Trade Association and its cause waned; initial fervor for the association did not translate into national support. Yet Bastiat himself remained popular.

After Louis Phillipe's abdication in February 1848, Alphonse de Lamartine, who had been publicly sympathetic to several of Bastiat's positions, assumed power as head of the Second Republic. Lamartine offered Bastiat a government position, which he declined. Bastiat believed, however, that he needed to be more than a journalist and critic, so he decided to stand for election again. This time, in the spring of 1848, he won office as a deputy in the National Assembly. The Assembly's primary task was to produce a new constitution under which new elections would be held. Bastiat assumed office soon after the election in 1848, one of the most turbulent years in French history, with popular unrest coming to a head in late June as a second revolution, which resulted in the entire Assembly's being held hostage at one point and in

2. Liberty Fund is preparing the first English translation of this book as well as of Bastiat's correspondence with Cobden. It is scheduled for release in June 2008. For readers of French, Liberty Fund has made available scanned French text at its Online Library of Liberty.

three days of bloody street fighting in Paris. Despite these experiences, Bastiat stood for election again under the new but fatally flawed constitution, and he was reelected in December 1849. This same election brought Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, later known as Napoleon III, to power as head of state. Despite Napoleon's great popularity, Bastiat spoke against him during the campaign and voted for fellow Assembly member General Louis-Eugène Cavaignac, who had been granted dictatorial powers during the June uprising and then renounced those powers once calm was restored.

During this time, Bastiat's health continued to fail. Even before his first election, he had been sick with tuberculosis, the disease that had killed his father, and he took rest breaks in warmer climates whenever possible. By 1850, the disease had advanced, and his time in the Assembly was minimal. Always a limited orator, he almost ceased speaking publically after the onset of his disease, but his pen was not stilled. In his last twelve months of life, he produced the pamphlet *The Law*, which became his most famous and enduring work, as well as the first volume and a rough draft of the second volume of *Economic Harmonies*, his long-planned economic treatise. On doctor's orders, he traveled to Italy during the winter of 1850, and while visiting Rome for the Christmas holidays, he died.

Analyzing Bastiat

For my discussion here, I divide Bastiat's writings into three categories, which are more distinct in the abstract than in reality: preelective writings; direct responses to political issues of the day; and more general writings in political economy. By examining Bastiat's policy views on a variety of issues, I show that he moved toward a radical libertarian position as time passed. He was always a libertarian in his views on free trade, but as his interests embraced broader issues of freedom and the proper role of government in a free society, his writing took on a different tenor. He wrote to Cobden, "Rather than the fact of free trade alone, I desire for my country the general philosophy of free trade. While free trade itself will bring more wealth to us, the acceptance of the general philosophy that underlies free trade will inspire all needed reforms" (qtd. in Roche 1971, 58).

Free Trade

At the time, it was widely asserted that France's dominant economic problem was a scarcity of goods. Bastiat argued that the main cause of this scarcity was the tariffs France had kept in place since the Napoleonic Wars. He denounced the tariff as a concept and as a policy: "[N]ow tariffs can raise prices only by diminishing the supply of commodities in the market! Then we put in practice the theory of scarcity, when we apply tariffs" (1934, 1). On this issue, Bastiat was consistent throughout his public life. He attacked trade restrictions in many ways and on many occasions. The preceding quotation comes from one of his first articles. When he wrote *What Is Seen and*

What Is Not Seen after his first election to the Assembly, he compared the protectionist to a murderer: “His [a protection-seeking merchant’s] first idea was to stop this abuse [metal imports from Belgium] by direct intervention with my own two hands . . . I’ll take my carbine, he said to himself. I’ll put on my four pistols in my belt, I’ll fill my cartridge box. . . . I’ll go to the frontier. There I will kill the first metalworker, nailmaker, blacksmith, mechanic, or locksmith who comes seeking his own profit” (1964b, 25–26).

Bastiat explains that after some second thoughts, the protectionist decided a better option was to go to the “law factory,” a place of many dark and underhanded dealings. He thereby exposed himself to less risk of physical retaliation. Moreover, “[t]he force that Mr. Protectionist might exercise himself at the frontier and that which he has the law exercise for him, can be judged quite differently from the moral point of view. There are people who think that plunder loses all its immorality as it becomes legal. Personally I can not imagine a more alarming situation” (1964b, 29). This language is almost identical to the language Bastiat uses in *The Law*, where he declares, “Tariffs are Plunder” (1998, 15).

The Tax Gatherer

If Bastiat was solidly and consistently libertarian on free trade, he also took up other important issues. In one of his most amusing and enlightening stories, “The Tax Gatherer” (1964b, 138–43), written in his early period, he touched upon several matters, some of which demonstrate his consistency, whereas others show a libertarian shift over time. This story also showcases Bastiat’s talent for appealing to both the popular audience and the political class.

In “The Tax Gatherer,” Bastiat describes a conversation between a vinedresser named Jacques Bonhomme (the French version of “Joe Sixpack”) and Monsieur LaSouche, the tax collector. Jacques questions why he should pay the tax collector six of the twenty tons of wine he has produced. It turns out that the proceeds of Jacques’s tax will be used as follows: one ton to service public debt; one ton to pay for judges, police, schools, roads, and tax collectors; two tons for the military; one ton to support Algeria, a French colony; and one ton for the cloth maker.

Jacques accepts without dispute that his tax payments should be used to pay interest on the public debt and to pay for the various government services listed. In later writings, Bastiat did not discuss public debt frequently, except to express concern at its size, and he may have accepted its service as proper. In the story, Jacques acquiesces: “All right, service for service is quite fair and I have nothing to say against it” (1964b, 138).

With regard to education, however, Bastiat’s views changed. In the Assembly, he submitted an amendment that he described as having “as its object the abolition of university degrees” (1964b, 240). In France at the time, the entire university system was under government control. Bastiat’s amendment was not antieducation, but

anti-government education. Unable to support his amendment orally, Bastiat submitted a fifty-three-page written communication in its support. In this submission, he discusses how government education keeps private schools out of business, forces people who do not use the educational system to pay for it, and teaches things many people do not want taught. He argues that the system has a threefold problem: it is uniform, disastrously administered, and inflexible (240). A few years later, Bastiat used even stronger language in *The Law*, where he describes public education as legal plunder and organized injustice (1998, 18, 27). Bastiat may have favored educational reform for many years. In a letter he sent to the electors of his district in the late 1820s, he mentions the need for such reform (1934, 332). Jacques's failure to raise this issue does not prove that Bastiat was unconvinced of the need for educational reforms. Moving from justifying taxation for education to calling it legal plunder, however, signifies a definite shift toward a more radical libertarian position.

Jacques does disagree with the balance of the tax collector's list: he does not want to support the military, the colony, or the subsidization of other firms. Bastiat maintained throughout his public life that all these projects are illegitimate. In *Economic Harmonies*, his last published work, he offers a truly libertarian conception of government: it is "legitimate only when the intervention of force itself is legitimate" (1964a, 453) and the government acts for the protection of liberty, property, and individual rights—although he muddles his definition somewhat by conceding that government should administrator public property such as rivers, forests, and highways (459).

Jacques adamantly opposes giving up two tons of his wine to support the military. He has had two sons die in military service, and he favors a much smaller military establishment. This position, too, Bastiat held consistently throughout his career. As a member of the Assembly, he advocated for a smaller military. When a supporter of a larger army reproached him, Bastiat responded that if there were profit in large armies, then the entire male population of France should be put under arms (Roche 1971, 119–20). In contrast to the imperialist view espoused by many European statesmen of his day, Bastiat's general view held that trade was much better than war and that the two were incompatible:

A nation isolates itself looking forward to the possibility of war; but is not this very act of isolating itself the beginning of war? It renders war more easy, less burdensome, and, it may be less unpopular. Let countries be permanent markets for each other's produce; let their reciprocal relations be such that they can not be broken without inflicting on each other the double suffering of privation and a glut of commodities; and they will no longer stand in need of naval armaments, which ruin them, and overgrown armies, which crush them; the peace of the world will not then be compromised by the caprice of statesmen; and war will disappear for want of

what supports it, for want of resources, inducements, pretexts, and popular sympathy. (1934, 81)

Jacques is also distressed about spending on Algeria, a French colony starting in 1830. He sees no need to pay for roads and harbors in Algeria, when he has few of the same at home. He does not forthrightly affirm that France should quit Algeria, only that his money should not pay for anything in the colonies that he does not have at home. Jacques's lack of commitment on the issue reflects Bastiat's own uncertainty about colonization throughout his career. In *What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen*, he subtitles one section "Algeria," but touches on the subject of Algeria only tangentially, stating that "[i]t is not within the province of this essay to evaluate the intrinsic worth of the public expenditures devoted to Algeria" (1964b, 40). For consistency, Bastiat should have opposed colonization as strongly as he opposed large armies, for how is colonization accomplished but by invasion and military conquest? Imperial colonization, however, was popular and provided a sense of national prominence and glory. As Bastiat explains, resources used to support colonization are part of what is not seen. In France, the army had been used regularly to suppress the civilian population, and in the unsettled political climate of France at the time the case against large armies, at least at home, was more obvious and immediate than the case against colonization. It is difficult to know if Bastiat was being publicly political or internally inconsistent, but in any event he was not adhering to a systematically libertarian philosophy in these cases.

Jacques is distressed that one ton of his output will be used as a subsidy for another manufacturer who is experiencing a "considerable pecuniary loss," according to the tax collector. Jacques is indignant that the cloth maker has a claim on his wine, his neighbor's corn, and his employees' wages: "The recipe is as infallible as it is ingenious. But zounds! It is awfully iniquitous" (1934, 142). This subject, including a long list of subsidies that he considered "legal plunder" (1998, 18, 27), is another on which Bastiat maintained a more radical position.

Jacques seems to be more a "mind your own business" citizen than a strong or radical libertarian. Using Jacques's views as a point of departure, however, we see that Bastiat shifted some of his ideas and hardened his libertarian stances over time, becoming more of a radical. If Jacques and the tax collector had conducted their conversation a few years later, certain aspects of it probably would have been different.

Bastiat on Property

Bastiat's solidly libertarian views on property are almost as famous as his views on free trade. He is well known for having turned several pithy phrases in defense of property rights. While in office, he wrote a series of open letters collectively titled "Property and Plunder" in which he rebutted attacks on property rights by a coalition of varied socialists. Later, in *Economic Harmonies*, he laid out briefly his philosophical view of property:

God created the world. On the surface and in the bowels of the earth, He placed a host of things that are useful to man in that they are capable of satisfying his wants. . . . He placed men in the midst of these raw materials and [natural] forces and bestowed them upon him gratis. To them men applied their energies; and in so doing they performed services for themselves. They worked for one another; and in so doing they rendered reciprocal services. These services, when compared for purposes of exchange, gave rise to the idea of value, and value to the idea of property. . . . If what I assert is true, then certainly the right to property is unassailable. (1964a, 236–37)

Bastiat establishes why property rights are vital and should not be violated. He returns to the theme of property rights in *The Law*, drawing a distinction between property, or the “application of [man’s] faculties to natural resources,” and plunder, or the “seizing and consuming [of] the products of the labor of others” (1998, 6). However, on this issue, too, Bastiat was more moderate in his early years.

In 1846, Bastiat published an open letter to the electors of his district—he called it a Profession of Faith—in which he indicated a willingness to accept limitations on property rights: “But, even supposing that the tax on alcohol could not be suppressed (which I am far from conceding), it seems clear to me that it could be largely modified, and that it would be easy to cut out its most distasteful elements. All that would be necessary would be to induce the owners of vineyards to give up certain exaggerated ideas on the extent of their right of property and the inviolability of their domicile” (Bastiat 2001). In the notes to the translation of Bastiat’s letter prepared by members of the board of the Cercle Bastiat, his position is explained as follows:

The reader may be shocked by what looks like an acceptance of property right limitations. Yet, there is no question that Bastiat has always been a staunch defender of property rights. What he was trying to do, then, was to convince the wine growers to accept some achievable compromise. For example, grapes were being taxed when leaving the vineyard. Producers claimed that however dispersed, their vineyards were part of a single property. They also objected to the taxman coming into their cellar to control their production and called it a violation of domicile. Wine production was then taxed at more than 15 levels, and these taxes were largely irrational. Bastiat wanted to reduce the number and level of taxes and proposed a more rational approach, which of course still required some controls. (Bastiat 2001)

Although the whole of Bastiat’s work defended property rights, this letter shows that Bastiat was willing to have the government violate wine producers’ property rights in order to extract taxes from them. He issued a more comprehensive statement on

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property rights in his essay “Property and Law,” published May 15, 1848, just days after his first election. Here, Bastiat uses a broad definition of property and states that his purpose in the essay is to “ask whether the right to property is not one of those rights which, far from springing from positive law, are prior to the law and are the reason for its existence” (1964b, 98). He maintained this view to the end of his life, in *Economic Harmonies* referring to taxation of property as extortion and equating it to armed robbery (1964a, 262–63).

Bastiat clearly preferred, at least publicly, to promote a more moderate view of property rights in 1846. After two years of increased exposure to the political process (and an election loss), however, he became comfortable with a more radical position on this matter.

Bastiat on Government Responsibilities

A passage from *The Law* is as clear and concise a statement of a radically libertarian vision of government as any one paragraph can convey:

It is not true that the legislator has an absolute power over our persons and our property, since they pre-exist him, and his task is to surround them with guarantees. It is not true that the function of the law is to regulate our consciences, our ideas, our wills, our education, our opinions, our work, our trade, our talents, our recreation. Its function is to prevent the rights of one person from interfering with the rights of another in any of these matters. Because it has force as its necessary sanction, the law can have as its legitimate domain only the legitimate domain of force, namely, justice. And as each individual has the right to use force only for legitimate self-defense, collective force, which is only the union of individual forces, cannot rationally be applied for any other end. The law, then, is solely the organization of the pre-existing individual right to legitimate self-defense. (1998, 68–69)

Earlier, however, Bastiat’s statements were more moderate and allowed more latitude for government action, as attested by his 1846 open letter to the electors:

For my part, I believe that when the powers that be have guaranteed to each and everyone the free use and the product of his or her faculties, repressed any possible misuse, maintained order, secured national independence and carried out certain tasks in the public interest which are beyond the power of the individual, then they have fulfilled just about all their duty.

Beyond this sphere, religion, education, association, work, exchanges, everything belongs to the field of private activity, under the eye of public

authority, whose role should only be one of supervision and of repression. (Bastiat 2001)

The first paragraph poses no challenge to libertarianism, depending on how some of the terms are defined, but the second paragraph raises questions. It is not clear what Bastiat means when he states that the legitimate function of government is to supervise and repress. A charitable interpretation is that he meant government should supervise as the referee of a game, enforcing the rules, but otherwise uninvolved in the game itself. Such an interpretation is consistent with much that he wrote. But his further use of the term *repress* is problematic. Libertarians rarely use this term in a positive sense, and a charitable interpretation of Bastiat's usage is not possible with any certainty. At best, his wording is vague; at worst, it implies approval of an intrusive government that exerts a great deal of control over people's lives.

Bastiat asserts that the state is not equipped to manage and provide education, but then he states:

That does not mean to say that the powers that be should withdraw in complete indifference. As I have already said, their mission is to supervise the use and repress the misuse of all our faculties. I accept that they should accomplish this mission to the fullest extent, and with even greater vigilance regarding education than in any other field; that the State should lay down conditions concerning qualifications and character-references; that it should repress immoral teaching; that it should watch over the health of the pupils. I accept all that, while yet remaining convinced that its solicitude, however scrupulous, can offer only the very slightest guarantee compared to that instilled by Nature in the hearts of fathers and in the interest of teachers. (2001)

This passage is one of Bastiat's most lenient and allows great latitude to the government, for what would the government consider more immoral than teaching contrary to the government's own interests? This statement contrasts sharply with other libertarians' views on education (see, for example, Rothbard 1973). Bastiat, a devout Catholic who even gained the pope's notice, undoubtedly had certain ideas in mind when he wrote this passage, and residents of his rural district probably understood what he meant, as some modern readers may also. Yet can anyone doubt that any government will use the powers Bastiat conceded in this statement to shape education to suit its own purposes?

Bastiat may have believed that some forms of dissent are unacceptable or at least not useful. In the 1846 letter to the electors, he wrote:

Consequently, if the public understands and wishes to defend its true interests, it will halt authority as soon as the latter tries to go beyond its

sphere of activity; and for that purpose the public has an infallible means, which is to deny authority the resources with which it could carry out its encroachments.

Once these principles are laid down, the role of the opposition, and I would even say that of Parliament as a whole, is simple and clearly defined.

It does not consist in hindering the government in its essential activity, in denying it the means of administering justice, of repressing crime, of paving roads, of repelling foreign aggression.

It does not consist in discrediting or debasing the government in the public eye, in depriving it of the strength it needs.

It does not consist in making government go from hand to hand by changing ministries, and less still, by changing dynasties.

It does not even consist in ranting childishly against the government's tendency to intrude; for that tendency is inevitable, incurable, and would manifest itself just as much under a president as under a king, in a republic as in a monarchy. (2001)

This passage begins promisingly enough with Bastiat reminding his readers that should they disagree with the government, they can always withhold resources. He goes on, however, to detail actions that are, in his opinion, unacceptable in public discourse. Although these rules may be useful regarding how to engage in a civil debate, one wonders what Bastiat would have people do when they have few legitimate options in expressing disagreement with the government.

Debasing government may have negative long-term consequences, and such efforts are unworthy of people of ideas. However, has the government not debased itself by intruding into so many aspects of life? Would Bastiat have people sit silent for fear of debasing the government even while it grows ever larger and more rapacious? One wonders what the 1846 Bastiat who wrote this letter would think of his 1850 counterpart who wrote *The Law*. Would he consider this pamphlet an unwarranted debasement of government and a collection of childish rants or an advancement of the cause of liberty?

Near the end of the letter, Bastiat falls victim to the siren song of all politicians, funding for the local project, or, as the French might have said, *porc*. “We are further told: ‘The money spent [on colonization] helps to support many people.’ Yes, indeed, Kabyle spies, Moorish moneylenders, Maltese settlers and Arab sheikhs. If it were used to cut the ‘Grandes-Landes’ canal to excavate the bed of the Adour River and the port of Bayonne, it would help to support many people around us, too, and moreover it would provide the country with an enormous capacity for production” (Bastiat 2001). I do not know if the Grandes-Landes canal was a worthwhile project—it was never undertaken—but Landes was Bastiat's district when he was elected in 1848. It is unlikely that he mentioned this particular project in a letter to the electors because it was the worthiest public-works project in all of France.

I have quoted Bastiat at length in this section in an effort to avoid misrepresenting him and to provide the full context of the ideas I am discussing. To be fair, it has to be said that he also expressed in his letter to the electors many of the ideas for which he is better known. Fairness also requires recognition that his position was far more libertarian than the prevailing political thought in France. Nevertheless, the 1846 letter indicates that he was not consistently advocating a radical libertarian position at that time.

Bastiat's Outlook

In addition to what Bastiat directly stated in his political economy writings, other indicators offer insight into his ideological outlook. One such indicator is titled "A Chinese Story" (1934, 123–27). Published around the same time as "The Tax Gatherer," it is a parable about how physical and bureaucratic obstacles to trade have the same effect, but a secondary element of the story also merits our attention. Two large towns in China are connected only by a canal, and the emperor sees fit to have the canal blocked with stones. Bastiat tells us the story in time-lapse fashion, having the emperor and his minister return to the shores of the canal every three months. After three months, they see road crews working next to the canal; three months later, the road is complete, and three inns have been built along it; and three months later still, the road is heavily traveled and lined with all sorts of shops and merchants. Bastiat makes several points about trade and labor diversion versus job creation. Perhaps more important, he reveals an appreciation of spontaneous-order economics. Blocking the canal creates entrepreneurial opportunities that road builders and all sorts of merchants seize without any government direction. Indeed, they are responding to a government-created obstacle and working to circumvent it. In "A Chinese Story," government is not a positive force in any way; it creates obstacles to free commerce, obstacles to which people must respond and adjust.

Another interesting window into Bastiat's thinking is his voting record as a legislator: he never voted in the majority. This behavior may not be the best indicator of his views because most of the proposed legislation on which he voted was statist, and much was unreservedly socialist. However, to spend more than two years in the legislature and never vote in the majority hardly seems the product of mere chance (Roche 1971, 111).

Conclusion

The Bastiat who wrote *The Law* and *What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen* was strongly libertarian, but he had not always expressed such views. A difficulty in appraising Bastiat's ideas is that he employed a variety of literary devices to make his points: stories, conversations, and even short plays, in addition to ordinary articles. He excelled in using humor, sarcasm, *reductio ad absurdum*, and other such rhetorical

devices, which taken out of context may easily mislead. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that his thinking changed over time. Several possible reasons may help us to understand these changes.

Bastiat was in a difficult situation, working against strong, prevailing socialist thought that was opposed primarily by monarchists and empire builders. There were very few libertarians. An article with too many libertarian ideas might have been ineffective. Therefore, he picked his points carefully and limited them in any one article. We see this focus in his writings on colonization. Though attacking the idea of colonization, he never rejected it, and his attacks were muted. He saved his full-scale attacks for his longer work *Economic Harmonies* and, as death approached, for his legacy pieces.

Bastiat became popular. As he wrote and spoke and later won elective political office, his profile increased. Such prominence usually pressures one to be more consistent in one's views. Those on the pedestal of popularity are also under the microscope, and inconsistency in such circumstances is more conspicuous. At the time that Bastiat wrote his 1846 letter to the electors, he was known, but not so widely as he would be only a few years later. By the time he wrote *The Law* and *Economic Harmonies*, he was very well known, and the need to leave a systematic and consistent legacy may have pressed on his mind especially as he faced impending death. By 1850, he was so well known and his ideas so widely followed that he named a philosophical heir, Gustave de Molinari, to carry on his work.

Bastiat was self-taught. He never finished college, and his training in political economy came primarily from reading Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say. It speaks volumes for his intellect that he absorbed these writings, combined their wisdom with the lessons of his own experiences, and became a leading light of a free society even though he was surrounded by statist. Smith and Say were available to all literate men, and Bastiat's experiences were not unique, yet few of his contemporaries acquired a comparable clarity of vision. Because he did not have formal training under the tutelage of a master, he had not experienced the associated scholarly debate and exposure to critique during his formative years that would have brought rigor and consistency to his thinking. Once he entered the political world and was exposed to debate and critique, however, he sharpened his ideas and forged them into a consistent whole.

Bastiat was politically minded. Much of the material for questioning his intellectual commitment to libertarianism comes from early in his career and from political documents. Running for office does strange things to a man and sometimes induces him to make statements he does not believe or later regrets. Bastiat did not win the 1846 election, so we have little basis for judging whether his letter expressed his true beliefs or was mere electioneering blather. Some evidence suggests that he was still finding his way on certain issues, such as education.

Although Bastiat may have been fuzzy on certain matters in the mid-1840s, continual exposure to politics during the last six years of his life sharpened his focus.

Firsthand experience with both the political process and the particular political actors of his day may have paved the way for his becoming a more consistent and systematic libertarian thinker. He wrote *The Law*, perhaps his most radical work, in June 1850, just a few months after Napoleon III was elected. As Bastiat became more knowledgeable about politics, he may have perceived more serious threats to liberty and become convinced that liberty needed a more thorough and vigorous defense.

Bastiat maintained a friendship and a correspondence with Richard Cobden. The Englishman had a range of interests that encompassed much more than free trade. It was to him that Bastiat first expressed an interest in systematic freedom. Perhaps their correspondence broadened Bastiat's interests and helped him to organize his thoughts outside the hurly-burly of the public arena.

Bastiat possessed a rare ability to understand sophisticated economic ideas and then turn them into stories, witticisms, articles, and political speeches that different audiences could understand. As Ludwig von Mises said, the early economists "devoted themselves to the study of the problems of economics," and in "lecturing and writing books they were eager to communicate to their fellow citizens the results of their thinking. They tried to influence public opinion in order to make sound policies prevail" (qtd. in DiLorenzo n.d.). This description certainly fits Bastiat's approach.

In trying to influence policy, however, Bastiat had priorities. Free trade was always his primary interest and the one on which he was most consistent. His early views on other issues were essentially libertarian, but not as well formed as his views on trade. As he was exposed to a broader array of issues and had to vote on them in the Assembly, his libertarianism became more consistent, and by the end of his life he had emerged as a truly radical thinker, challenging the status quo of his day and exhorting everyone to embrace liberty. "[N]ow that the legislators and do-gooders have so futilely inflicted so many systems upon society, may they finally end where they should have begun: May they reject all systems, and try liberty" (1998, 76). As F. A. Hayek wrote in his introduction to a collection of Bastiat's works, referring specifically to *What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen*, "No one has ever stated more clearly in a single phrase the central difficulty of a rational economic policy and, I would like to add, the decisive argument for economic freedom. . . . It is indeed a text around which one might expound a whole system of libertarian economic policy" (in Bastiat 1964b, ix).

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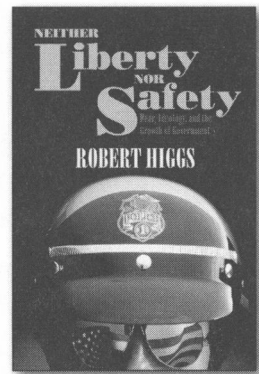
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