

Karl Marx was disappointed with the 1848 Revolution in France, because it did not result in a communist government that would run the economy for the benefit of the working class. Frédéric Bastiat, on the other hand, had the exact opposite concern. He disagreed with the very notion that government intervention was either right or beneficial. For years, the French bourgeoisie had been receiving government favors through tariffs, monopolies, and various subsidies. Then, at the time of the 1848 Revolution, members of the French working class expected the new government to satisfy their need for employment. To Bastiat, the thought process of his fellow countrymen was both wrong and absurd; his own reasoning led him to believe that the role of government should be extremely limited.

Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850) was a French economist, politician, and writer who promoted classical liberalism—or what, ironically, would be termed “conservatism” today. Classical liberalism held to strong property rights in an unhampered market economy with little or no government interference.

For twenty years, from his early twenties to his early forties, Bastiat spent most of his time in quiet study on his family’s estate. Then for some six years, from 1844 until his death in 1850 from tuberculosis, he engaged in a very active public life that included serving as an elected deputy in the National Assembly and writing volumes as a major commentator on his times. The following excerpt is from an 1849 Bastiat essay on “Government,” where he elaborates on the “great fiction” of government.

Bastiat on the “Great Fiction” of Government

(Essays on Political Economy, by Frederick Bastiat, English translation revised and with notes by David A. Wells, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1877, pages 154, 156-167 & 172-173—this book was a revision of a previous English translation by an unidentified translator.)

I wish someone would offer a prize—not of a hundred francs, but of a million, with crowns, medals and ribbons—for a good, simple and intelligible definition of the word “Government.”

What an immense service it would confer on society!

The Government! what is it? where is it? what does it do? what ought it to do? All we know is, that it is a mysterious personage; and, assuredly, it is the most solicited, the most tormented, the most overwhelmed, the most admired, the most accused, the most invoked, and the most provoked of any personage in the world.

...now that the country has again and again changed the administration, for not having satisfied all its demands, I wanted to show that they were contradictory. But what could I have been thinking about? Could I not keep this unfortunate observation to myself?

I have lost my character forever! I am looked upon as a man without *heart* and without *feeling*—a dry philosopher, an individualist, a plebeian—in a word, an economist of the practical school. But, pardon me, sublime writers, who stop at nothing, not even at contradictions. I am wrong, without a doubt, and I would willingly retract. I should be glad

enough, you may be sure, if you had really discovered a beneficent and inexhaustible being, calling itself the Government, which has bread for all mouths, work for all hands, capital for all enterprises, credit for all projects, salve for all wounds, balm for all sufferings, advice for all perplexities, solutions for all doubts, truths for all intellects, diversions for all who want them, milk for infancy, and wine for old age—which can provide for all our wants, satisfy all our curiosity, correct all our errors, repair all our faults, and exempt us henceforth from the necessity for foresight, prudence, judgment, sagacity, experience, order, economy, temperance and activity.

What reason could I have for not desiring to see such a discovery made? Indeed, the more I reflect upon it, the more do I see that nothing could be more convenient than that we should all of us have within our reach an inexhaustible source of wealth and enlightenment—a universal physician, an unlimited treasure, and an infallible counselor, such as you describe Government to be. Therefore it is that I want to have it pointed out and defined, and that a prize should be offered to the first discoverer of the phoenix. For no one would think of asserting that this precious discovery has yet been made, since up to this time everything presenting itself under the name of Government has at some time been overturned by the people, precisely because it does not fulfill the rather contradictory requirements of the program.

I will venture to say that I fear we are, in this respect, the dupes of one of the strangest illusions which have ever taken possession of the human mind.

Man recoils from trouble—from suffering; and yet he is condemned by nature to the suffering of privation, if he does not take the trouble to work. He has to choose then between these two evils. What means can he adopt to avoid both? There remains now, and there will remain, only one way, which is, *to enjoy the labor of others*. Such a course of conduct prevents the trouble and the satisfaction from assuming their natural proportions, and causes all the trouble to become the lot of one set of persons, and all the satisfaction that of another. This is the origin of slavery and of plunder, whatever its form may be—whether that of wars, taxation, violence, restrictions, frauds, etc.—monstrous abuses, but consistent with the thought that has given them birth...

The oppressor no longer acts directly and with his own powers upon his victim. No, our conscience has become too sensitive for that. The tyrant and his victim are still present, but there is an intermediate person between them, which is the Government—that is, the Law itself. What can be better calculated to silence our scruples, and, which is perhaps better appreciated, to overcome all resistance? We all, therefore, put in our claim, under some pretext or other, and apply to Government. We say to it, “I am dissatisfied at the proportion between my labor and my enjoyments. I should like, for the sake of restoring the desired equilibrium, to take a part of the possessions of others. But this would be dangerous. Could not you facilitate the thing for me? Could you not find me a good place? or check the industry of my competitors? or, perhaps, lend me gratuitously some capital, which you may take from its possessor? Could you not bring up my children at the public expense? or grant me some subsidies? or secure me a pension when I have attained my fiftieth year? By this means I shall gain my end with an easy conscience, for the law will

have acted for me, and I shall have all the advantages of plunder, without its risk or its disgrace!”

As it is certain, on the one hand, that we are all making some similar request to the Government; and as, on the other, it is proved that Government cannot satisfy one party without adding to the labor of the others, until I can obtain another definition of the word Government I feel authorized to give my own. Who knows but it may obtain the prize? Here it is:

“Government is the great fiction through which everybody endeavors to live at the expense of everybody else.”

For now, as formerly, everyone is, more or less, for profiting by the labor of others. No one would dare to profess such a sentiment; he even hides it from himself; and then what is done? A medium is thought of; Government is applied to, and every class in its turn comes to it, and says, “You, who can take justifiably and honestly, take from the public, and we will partake.” Alas! Government is only too much disposed to follow this diabolical advice, for it is composed of ministers and officials—of men, in short, who, like all other men, desire in their hearts, and always seize every opportunity with eagerness, to increase their wealth and influence. Government is not slow to perceive the advantages it may derive from the part that is entrusted to it by the public. It is glad to be the judge and the master of the destinies of all; it will take much, for then a large share will remain for itself; it will multiply the number of its agents; it will enlarge the circle of its privileges; it will end by appropriating a ruinous proportion.

But the most remarkable part of it is the astonishing blindness of the public through it all. When successful soldiers used to reduce the vanquished to slavery, they were barbarous, but they were not irrational. Their object, like ours, was to live at other people’s expense, and they did not fail to do so. What are we to think of a people who never seem to suspect that *reciprocal plunder* is no less plunder because it is reciprocal; that it is no less criminal because it is executed legally and with order; that it adds nothing to the public good; that it diminishes it, just in proportion to the cost of the expensive medium which we call the Government?

And it is this great chimera that the French nation, for example, placed in 1848, for the edification of the people, as a frontispiece to the Constitution. The following is the beginning of the preamble to this Constitution:

“France has constituted itself a republic for the purpose of raising all the citizens to an ever-increasing degree of morality, enlightenment, and well-being.”

Thus it is France, or an abstraction, which is to raise the French to morality, well-being, etc., Is it not by yielding to this strange delusion that we are led to expect everything from an energy not our own? Is it not announcing that there is, independently of the French, a virtuous, enlightened, and rich being, who can and will bestow upon them its benefits?...

The Americans formed a different idea of the relations of the citizens with the Government when they placed these simple words at the head of their Constitution:

“We, the people of the United States, for the purpose of forming a more perfect union, of establishing justice, of securing interior tranquility, of providing for our common defense, of increasing the general well-being, and of securing the benefits of liberty to ourselves and to our posterity, decree,” etc.

Here there is no chimerical creation, no *abstraction*, from which the citizens may demand everything. They expect nothing except from themselves and their own energy.

If I may be permitted to criticize the first words of the French Constitution of 1848, I would remark that what I complain of is something more than mere metaphysical subtlety, as might seem at first sight.

I contend that this personification of Government has been, in past times, and will be hereafter, a fertile source of calamities and revolutions.

There is the public on one side, Government on the other, considered as two distinct beings; the latter bound to bestow upon the former, and the former having the right to claim from the latter, all imaginable human benefits. What will be the consequence?

In fact, Government is not maimed, and cannot be so. It has two hands—one to receive and the other to give; in other words, it has a rough hand and a smooth one. The activity of the second is necessarily subordinate to the activity of the first. Strictly, Government may take and not restore. This is evident, and may be explained by the porous and absorbing nature of its hands, which always retain a part, and sometimes the whole, of what they touch. But the thing that never was seen, and never will be seen or conceived, is, that Government can restore more to the public than it has taken from it. It is therefore ridiculous for us to appear before it in the humble attitude of beggars. It is radically impossible for it to confer a particular benefit upon any one of the individualities which constitute the community, without inflicting a greater injury upon the community as a whole.

Our requisitions, therefore, place it in a dilemma.

If it refuses to grant the requests made to it, it is accused of weakness, ill-will, and incapacity. If it endeavors to grant them, it is obliged to load the people with fresh taxes—to do more harm than good, and to bring upon itself from another quarter the general displeasure.

Thus, the public has two hopes, and Government makes two promises—*many benefits and no taxes*. Hopes and promises, which being contradictory, can never be realized.

Now, is not this the cause of all our revolutions? For, between the Government, which lavishes promises that it is impossible to perform, and the public, which has conceived hopes which can never be realized, two classes of men interpose—the ambitious and the

Utopians. It is circumstances which give these their cue. It is enough if these vassals of popularity cry out to the people: "The authorities are deceiving you; if we were in their place, we would load you with benefits and exempt you from taxes."

And the people believe, and the people hope, and the people make a revolution!

No sooner are their friends at the head of affairs, than they are called upon to redeem their pledge. "Give us work, bread, assistance, credit, education, more money," say the people; "and at the same time deliver us, as you promised, from the taxes."

The new *Government* is no less embarrassed than the former one, for it soon finds that it is much easier to promise than to perform. It tries to gain time, for this is necessary for maturing its vast projects. At first, it makes a few timid attempts: on one hand it institutes a little elementary instruction; on the other, it makes a little reduction in some taxes. But the contradiction is forever rearing its ugly head; if it would be philanthropic, it must raise taxes; if it neglects taxing, it must abstain from being philanthropic.

These two promises are forever clashing with each other; it cannot be otherwise. To live upon credit, which is the same as exhausting the future, is certainly a present means of reconciling them: an attempt is made to do a little good now, at the expense of a great deal of harm in the future. But such proceedings call forth the specter of bankruptcy, which puts an end to credit. What is to be done then? Why, then, the new Government takes a bold step; it unites all its forces in order to maintain itself; it smothers opinion, has recourse to arbitrary measures, repudiates its former maxims, declares that it is impossible to conduct the administration except at the risk of being unpopular; in short, it proclaims itself *governmental*. And it is here that other candidates for popularity are waiting for it. They exhibit the same illusion, pass by the same way, obtain the same success, and are soon swallowed up in the same gulf.

...Citizens! In all times, two political systems have been in existence, and each may be maintained by good reasons. According to one of them, Government ought to do much, but then it ought to take much. According to the other, this twofold activity ought to be little felt. We have to choose between these two systems. But as regards the third system, which partakes of both the others, and which consists in exacting everything from Government, without giving it anything, it is chimerical, absurd, childish, contradictory, and dangerous. Those who proclaim it, for the sake of the pleasure of accusing all Governments of weakness, and thus exposing them to your attacks, are only flattering and deceiving you, while they are deceiving themselves.

For ourselves, we consider that Government is and ought to be nothing whatever but the united power of the people organized, not to be an instrument of oppression and mutual plunder among citizens; but, on the contrary, to secure to everyone his own, and to cause justice and security to reign.