

THE BEST OF BASTIAT #1.1

A Life in Letters (1819-1850)

“I want the government to be limited to its essential functions, which are to guarantee the security of people and property, to prevent and repress violence and disorder, to ensure for all the free exercise of their faculties and the proper reward for their efforts”



Claude Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850)

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Editor's Introduction

Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850) was the leading advocate of free trade in France during the 1840s. He made a name for himself as a brilliant economic journalist, debunking the myths and misconceptions people held on protectionism in particular and government intervention in general. When revolution broke out in February 1848 Bastiat was elected twice to the Chamber of Deputies where he served on the Finance Committee and struggled to bring government expenditure under control.

Knowing he was dying from a serious throat condition (possibly cancer), Bastiat attempted to complete his magnum opus on economic theory, his *Economic Harmonies*. In this work he showed the very great depth of his economic thinking and made theoretical advances which heralded the Austrian school of economics which emerged later in the 19th century.

The following is a selection from Bastiat's correspondence written between 1819 when he was a young man living in Bayonne in the southwest of France and just before his death from throat cancer in December 1850. We have letters to his childhood friends, colleagues in the French and English free trade movements, fellow members of the Political Economy Society in Paris, personal friends, and leading figures in intellectual and political circles of the late 1840s. What is particularly interesting are his personal recollections of being involved in two revolutions, the July Revolution of 1830 and the February Revolution of 1848.

“I leave you to imagine the sight offered by a crowd of thirty thousand men, women, and children fleeing from the bullets, the shots, and those who fell.

An instinctive feeling prevented me from fleeing as well, and when it was all over I was on the site of a massacre with five or six workmen, facing about

sixty dead and dying people. The soldiers appeared stupefied. I begged

the officer to have the corpses and wounded moved in order to have the

latter cared for and to avoid having the former used as flags by the people

when they returned, but he had lost his head.

The workers and I then began to move the unfortunate victims onto the pavement, as doors refused to open.”

19 September 1819, Bayonne

“the science of commerce is not enclosed within the limits of routine”

You know that I mean to go into commerce. When I entered the world of business, I conceived of business as purely mechanical and thought that six months would be enough to make me a trader. This being so, I did not think it necessary to work very hard and I concentrated in particular on the study of philosophy and politics.

I have since lost any illusions I had on this point. I now recognize that the science of commerce is not enclosed within the limits of routine. I have learned that a good trader, in addition to knowing his merchandise and where it comes from, and knowing the worth of what he can exchange, and bookkeeping, all of which experience and routine can teach in part, must also study the law and broaden his knowledge of political economy, which is not part of routine and requires constant study.

5 August 1830, Bayonne

“I was expecting blood but it was only wine that was spilt”

[The 5th at midnight] I was expecting blood but it was only wine that was spilt. The citadel has displayed the tricolor flag. The military containment of the Midi and Toulouse has decided that of Bayonne; the regiments down there have displayed the flag. The traitor J—— thus saw that the plan had failed, especially as the troops were defecting on all sides; he then decided to hand over the orders he had had in his pocket for three days. Thus, it is all over. I plan to leave immediately. I will embrace you tomorrow.

This evening we fraternized with the garrison officers. Punch, wine, liqueurs, and above all, Béranger contributed largely to the festivities. Perfect cordiality reigned in this truly patriotic gathering. The officers were warmer than we were, in the same way as horses which have escaped are more joyful than those that are free.

1845, Paris

“the mischievous appearance of the newcomer”

There I [Mme Cheuvreux] saw Bastiat fresh from the Great Landes present himself at M. Say’s home. His attire was so conspicuously different from those surrounding him that the eye, however distracted, could not help but stare at him for a moment. The cut of his garments, due to the scissors of a tailor from Mugron, was far away from ordinary designs. Bright colors, poorly assorted, were placed next to one another, without any attempt at harmony. Floss-silk gloves covering his hands, playing with long white cuffs; a sharp collar covering half his face; a little hat, long hair; all that would have looked ludicrous had not the mischievous appearance of the newcomer, his luminous glance, and the charm of his conversation made one quickly forget the rest. Sitting in front of this countryman, I discovered that Bastiat was not only one of the high priests of the temple, but also a passionate initiator. What fire, what verve, what conviction, what originality, what winning and witty common sense! Through this cascade of clear ideas, of these displays, new and to the point, the heart was shown, the true soul of man revealed itself.

1846, Saint-Sever

“the colonial system is the most disastrous illusion”

I must make myself clear on one vast subject, more especially as my views probably differ from those of many of you: I am referring to Algeria. I have no hesitation in saying that, unless it be in order to secure independent frontiers, you will never find me, in this case or in any other, on the conqueror’s side.

To me it is a proven fact, and I venture to say a scientifically proven fact, that the colonial system is the most disastrous illusion ever to have led nations astray. I make no exception for the English, in spite of the specious nature of the well-known argument post hoc, ergo propter hoc.

1846

“(I) want the government to be limited to its essential functions, which are to guarantee the security of people and property”

There is therefore a division to be made between private activity and collective or governmental activity. On the one hand, many people are inclined to increase the attributions of the state indefinitely. The most eccentric visionaries, such as Fourier, come together on this point with the most practical of the men of state, such as M. Thiers. According to these powerful geniuses, the state must, under their supreme management, naturally, be the great administrator of justice, the great pontiff, the great teacher, the great engineer, the great industrialist, and the people’s great benefactor. On the other hand, many sound minds espouse the opposite view; there are even those who go so far as to want the government to be limited to its essential functions, which are to guarantee the security of people and property, to prevent and repress violence and disorder, to ensure for all the free exercise of their faculties and the proper reward for their efforts. It is already not without some danger, they say, that the nation entrusts to a hierarchically organized body the redoubtable responsibility for the police force. This is indeed necessary, but at least the nation should refrain from giving this body more jurisdiction over moral, intellectual, or economic life, if it does not wish to be reduced to the status of so much property or of a mere thing.

20 April 1847, Paris

“free trade ... means bread for those who are hungry, clothing for those who are cold, education, independence, and dignity”

I have no need to tell you (Richard Cobden) how much I share your views on the political results of free

trade. We are being accused within the democratic and socialist party of being devoted to the cult of material interests and of bringing everything down to questions of wealth. I must admit that when it concerns the masses I do not share this stoic disdain for wealth. This word does not mean having a few écus more; it means bread for those who are hungry, clothing for those who are cold, education, independence, and dignity. But after all, if the sole result of free trade were to increase public wealth I would not spend any more time on it than on any other matter relating to agriculture or industry. What I see above all in our campaigning is the opportunity to confront a few prejudices and to have a few just ideas penetrate the consciousness of the general public. This is an indirect benefit that outweighs the direct benefits of free trade a hundredfold, and if we are experiencing so many obstacles in spreading our economic argument, I believe that providence has put these obstacles in our path precisely so that the indirect benefits can be felt. If freedom were to be proclaimed tomorrow, the general public would remain in its present rut with regard to other considerations, but initially I am obliged to deal with these ancillary ideas with extreme caution so as not to upset our own colleagues. For this reason, I am concentrating my efforts on clarifying the economic problem. This will be the starting point for more advanced views. I only hope that God will allow me three or four years of strength and life! Sometimes I tell myself that if I worked alone and for my own account, I would not have to take such precautions and my career would have been more useful.

Late 1847

“All forms of freedom go together. All ideas form a systematic and harmonious whole”

Like you (speaking to himself) I love all forms of freedom; and among these, the one that is the most universally useful to mankind, the one you enjoy at each moment of the day and in all of life’s circumstances, is the freedom to work and to trade. I know that making things one’s own is the fulcrum of society and even of human life. I know that trade is

intrinsic to property and that to restrict the one is to shake the foundations of the other. I approve of your devoting yourself to the defense of this freedom whose triumph will inevitably usher in the reign of international justice and consequently the extinction of hatred, prejudices between one people and another, and the wars that come in their wake...

I love freedom of trade as much as you do. But is all human progress encapsulated in that freedom? In the past, your heart beat for the freeing of thought and speech which were still bound by their university shackles and the laws against free association. You enthusiastically supported parliamentary reform and the radical division of that sovereignty, which delegates and controls, from the executive power in all its branches. All forms of freedom go together. All ideas form a systematic and harmonious whole, and there is not a single one whose proof does not serve to demonstrate the truth of the others. But you act like a mechanic who makes a virtue of explaining an isolated part of a machine in the smallest detail, not forgetting anything. The temptation is strong to cry out to him, "Show me the other parts; make them work together; each of them explains the others. . .

27 February 1848, Paris

"The workers and I then began to move the unfortunate victims onto the pavement"

As you will see in the newspapers, on the 23rd everything seemed to be over. Paris had a festive air; everything was illuminated. A huge gathering moved along the boulevards singing. Flags were adorned with flowers and ribbons. When they reached the Hôtel des Capucines, the soldiers blocked their path and fired a round of musket fire at point-blank range into the crowd. I leave you to imagine the sight offered by a crowd of thirty thousand men, women, and children fleeing from the bullets, the shots, and those who fell.

An instinctive feeling prevented me from fleeing as well, and when it was all over I was on the site of a massacre with five or six workmen, facing about sixty dead and dying people. The soldiers appeared stupefied. I begged the officer to have the corpses and

wounded moved in order to have the latter cared for and to avoid having the former used as flags by the people when they returned, but he had lost his head.

The workers and I then began to move the unfortunate victims onto the pavement, as doors refused to open. At last, seeing the fruitlessness of our efforts, I withdrew. But the people returned and carried the corpses to the outlying districts, and a hue and cry was heard all through the night. The following morning, as though by magic, two thousand barricades made the insurrection fearsome. Fortunately, as the troop did not wish to fire on the National Guard, the day was not as bloody as might have been expected.

All is now over. The Republic has been proclaimed. You know that this is good news for me. The people will govern themselves.

29 June 1848, Paris

"we managed to save several insurgents whom the militia wanted to kill"

Cables and newspapers will have told you (Julie Marsan) all about the triumph of the republican order after four days of bitter struggle.

I shall not give you any detail, even about me, because a single letter would not suffice.

I shall just tell you that I have done my duty without ostentation or temerity. My only role was to enter the Faubourg Saint-Antoine after the fall of the first barricade, in order to disarm the fighters. As we went on, we managed to save several insurgents whom the militia wanted to kill. One of my colleagues displayed a truly admirable energy in this situation, which he did not boast about from the rostrum.

25 April 1849, Paris

"I have a new, fertile idea that I believe to be true"

My friend (Félix Coudroy), by remaining in obscurity, I would have reasons with which to console myself if at least my somber predictions fail to

materialize. I have my theory to write down and I am receiving powerful encouragement just at the right time. Yesterday I read these words in an English review: in political economy, the French school has gone through three phases encapsulated by the following three names, Quesnay, Say, and Bastiat.

Of course, it is premature for me to be assigned this rank and role, but it is clear that I have a new, fertile idea that I believe to be true. This idea is one that I have never developed methodically. It has come through almost accidentally in a few of my articles, and since this has been enough to catch the attention of learned men...

14 October 1849, Paris

“I was not only incapable of speaking but also even of writing. What a bitter disappointment! What cruel irony!”

It is in vain that you predict late flowering happiness for me in the future. This cannot happen for me, even in the pursuit or the triumph of an idea that is useful to the human race since my health condemns me to hate the struggle. Dear lady, I have poured into your heart just a drop from the chalice of bitterness that fills mine. For example, just look at my difficult political position and you will see whether I can agree with the prospects you offer me.

I have always had a political idea that is simple, true, and can be grasped by all, and yet it is misunderstood. What was I lacking? A theater in which to expose it. The February revolution occurred. It gave me an audience of nine hundred people, the elite of the nation given a mandate by universal suffrage with the authority to put my views into practice. These nine hundred people were full of the best intentions. They were terrified of the future. They hesitated and cast about for some notion of salvation. They were silent, waiting for a voice to be heard and to which they could rally. I was there; I had the right and duty to speak. I was aware that my words would be welcomed by the Assembly and would echo around the masses. I felt the idea ferment in my head and my heart . . . and I was forced to keep silent. Can you imagine a worse form of torture? I was obliged to keep silent because just at this

time it pleased God to remove from me all my strength, and when huge revolutions are achieved such as to afford me a rostrum, I am unable to mount it. I was not only incapable of speaking but also even of writing. What a bitter disappointment! What cruel irony!

March 1850, Paris

“[women have] been successively beast of burden, slave, servant, and mere instrument of pleasure”

I am sending Mlle Louise (Cheuvreux) a few verses on women, which I liked. They are, however, by a poet who is an economist since he has been nicknamed the free trade rhymer. If I had the strength I would do a free translation of this piece in thirty pages of prose; this would do well in Guillaumin’s journal. Your sweet little tease (I do not forget that she possesses the art of teasing to a high degree, not only without wounding but almost caressing) does not greatly believe in poetry of production and she is perfectly right. It is what I ought to have called Social Poetry, which henceforth, I hope, will no longer take for the subject of its songs the destructive qualities of man, the exploits of war, carnage, the violation of divine laws, and the degradation of moral dignity, but the good and evil in real life, the conflicts of thought, all forms of intellectual, productive, political, and religious combinations and affinities, and all the feelings that raise, improve, and glorify the human race. In this new epic, women will occupy a place worthy of them and not the one given to them in the ancient Iliad genre. Was their role really to be included in the booty?

In the initial phases of humanity, when force was the dominant social principle, the action of woman was wiped out. She had been successively beast of burden, slave, servant, and mere instrument of pleasure. When the principle of force gave way to that of public opinion and customs, she recovered her right to equality, influence, and power, and this is what the last line of the small item of verse I am sending Mlle Louise expresses very well.

3 July 1850, Les Eaux-Bonnes

“I would like this theory to attract enough followers in my lifetime”

However, I do not conceal a personal wish. Yes, I would like this theory to attract enough followers in my lifetime (even if only two or three) for me to be assured before dying that it will not be abandoned if it is true. Let my book generate just one other and I will be satisfied. This is why I cannot encourage you too strongly to concentrate your thinking on capital, which is a huge subject and may well be the cornerstone of political economy. I have no more than touched upon it; you will go further than I and will correct me if need be. Do not fear that I will take offence. The economic horizons are unlimited: to see new ones makes me happy, whether it was I that discovered them or someone else that is showing them to me.

1 November 1850, Rome

“I would ask for one thing only, and that is to be relieved of this piercing pain in the larynx; this constant suffering distresses me.”

If I put off writing to you (Félix Coudroy) from day to day, my dear Félix, it is because I always think that in a little while I will have the strength to indulge in a long chat. Instead of this, I am obliged to make my letters ever shorter, either because my weakness is increasing or because I am losing the habit of writing. Here I am in the Eternal City, my friend, unfortunately very little disposed to visit its marvels. I am infinitely better than in Pisa, surrounded by excellent friends who wrap me in the most affectionate solicitude. What is more, I have met Eugene again and he comes to spend part of the day with me. So, if I go out, I can always give my walks an interesting aim. I would ask for one thing only, and that is to be relieved of this piercing pain in the larynx; this constant suffering distresses me. Meals are genuine torture for me. Speaking, drinking, eating, swallowing saliva, and

coughing are all painful operations. A stroll on foot tires me and an outing in a carriage irritates my throat; I cannot work nor even read seriously. You see the state to which I am reduced. Truly, I will soon be just a corpse that has retained the faculty of suffering. I hope that the treatment that I have decided to undergo, the remedies I am given, and the gentleness of the climate will improve my deplorable situation soon.

Further Information

SOURCE

These extracts come from *The Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat. Vol. 1: The Man and the Statesman: The Correspondence and Articles on Politics* (LF, 2011) <oll.libertyfund.org/title/2393>.

LF's edition of *The Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat*, in 6 Vols. ed. Jacques de Guenin (2011). As each vol. is published it will appear on the OLL at <oll.libertyfund.org/title/2451>.

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FURTHER READING

More works by Bastiat can be found here <oll.libertyfund.org/person/25>.

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Another useful sampling of the contents of the OLL website is the collection of weekly *Quotations about Liberty and Power* which are organized by themes such as Free Trade, Money and Banking, Natural Rights, and so on. See for example, Richard Cobden's "I have a dream" speech <oll.libertyfund.org/quote/326>.

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