

Honorable Mention

Untitled

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Abstract:

The perils of political trends in Western societies are the focus of Bastiat's famous statement "The state is the great fiction by which everyone endeavors to live at the expense of everyone else." What brought us to this point? How do we most properly define the forces that wish to lead us away from liberty? And, how can we best stop the false progression that is, ultimately, human regression? When I read Bastiat's words, these are the questions which emerge and require answering, the questions Bastiat (perhaps) intended to inspire in all of us. Bastiat tended to focus not simply on defining freedom, but in properly labeling its opponents. This appears to me to be his most enduring legacy, the ability to see reality and express it logically and understandably. Ultimately, I am inspired by his words to analyze how we may all pick up where he, and many other brilliant philosophers, left off; to best carry the banner of individual freedom into the next millennium and attempt to re-cement the inherent rights of humans to...live.

Few thinkers have had such a profound and lasting effect on people as has Frederic Bastiat; his ability to take what appears to be a complex idea, the state, and simplify it has inspired generation after generation of people longing to preserve the true ideas of liberty. Currently we face an era in which the seeds of liberty need to be re-sown, a time when the popular concept of freedom is a perversion of the direst sense.

Although the words of Bastiat ring just as true today as they did more than one hundred and fifty years ago, the opposition has had significant opportunities to refine and polish their language of slavery and statism into their most effective message yet: equality. Our society and culture has lost its grasp on the true definition of liberty and, in doing so, has risked the loss of our very soul; we are in peril of losing that which makes all of western society special and unique. Perhaps more precisely, we are losing that which makes humans unique; the ability and desire to innovate, progress, and prosper.

When considering what Bastiat meant when he stated: “The state is the great fiction by which everyone endeavors to live at the expense of everyone else” we must try to fully understand the downward spiral in societal understanding and the erosion of knowledge which has led us to a point where liberty has become a punch-line and the government has become an entity to be entrusted to not merely ensure the pursuit of happiness, but to promote and to attempt to guarantee some concept of happiness itself. Liberty has not just become perverted, though, worse yet our culture has become apathetic towards freedom; and, it has become rather confused as to precisely what freedom is. Of course, in this folly our society has also lost sight of what the state was meant to be; our government was not designed to be a surrogate savior of its members, but a tool for allowing members to combine their numbers, relieve an opportunity cost and, by doing so, foster growth and innovation while protecting that which is most vital to the advancement of a free society: property. Finally, and perhaps most critically, we must consider whether there is a way to reclaim the mind of our society; to restore the lust and passion for a free market and free nation where those who put forth effort and

provide value are rewarded in kind without the restriction of some arbitrary measure of “plenty.”

One of the most disturbing trends in modern Western society is the lack of understanding of the basic concept of liberty. Freedom is a word often spoken, but seldom felt. For example, people often thank our soldiers for serving to protect our freedoms while simultaneously casting votes which are the equivalent of “lawful plunder” (Bastiat, 1850). Plunder is at present the focus of our government, the political practice of taking the property of one for use in trade with another has become commonplace; the cost for receiving such a prize being simply one vote, an exceptionally fair trade for those receiving the stolen goods. James Madison (1997 ed.) aptly dubbed this type of majoritarian state sponsored plunder as, “force as the measure of right” (pp. 68); politics in Western society has devolved into a barter system where the slim majority (or a sufficient collaboration of minority factions) can reward others with status and power as long as they make good on the promise to separate individuals from their rightfully gained possessions. What is, and has always been a crime for an individual, theft, has become lawful for the state and, even worse, it has become the status quo. Politically, we hardly speak of the protection of property rights against plunder; the best we can hope for is a lesser degree of confiscation of our property and, often times, that is simply a fantasy.

Ultimately, in America and the West there exists no bastion of freedom in any of the dominant political parties. For each, there are concessions to be made for some diluted remnant of individual liberty. At this point, when choosing between them, we are simply choosing which “idea” or perversion of freedom we are most comfortable with:

the “positive” freedoms of the modern liberals where all are to be brought equal with others; or a modified and restricted version of Locke’s natural rights which conservatives pick and choose as being acceptable to bestow upon the masses. How appropriate it was that F.A. Hayek (1944) dedicated *The Road to Serfdom* to “the socialists of all parties.” It is through our own collective apathy, and an innate desire for some fantastic illusion of the equality of results, that has driven our society to this madness; where we trade our most valuable asset as humans, our liberty, for whatever token of perceived security one or the other may offer. And, as Ben Franklin prophetically warned us, trading the former for the latter will most assuredly get us neither.

Throughout history it has become clear that the tyranny to be most feared is that of the majority. Righteousness is then found merely in the quantity of people supporting one program or policy over another rather than the rights of individuals being the hallmark of a free society. Collective madness is ordained by the state and the means is the creation of a dominant and cohesive enough majority to fully enslave all others. It should be conveyed clearly, though never is, that using the political process to loot from one’s neighbors makes the act no less criminal or immoral. The cascade effect of such political obfuscation of the sanctity of property over many decades has resulted in a society where the goal of political action is to essentially enslave forty nine percent of society instead of preserving the rights of one, any one. Indeed, Western societies are very much made up of millions of slave masters wishing to bind and control their fellow citizens; or, as Bastiat clearly labeled it, endeavoring “to live at the expense of everyone else.”

The practice of slavery is often decried and condemned, and rightfully so. In this sense slavery is thought of only in terms of direct physical servitude to another single person and, historically, this has often been the case. Seldom, though, are the actions of the state, when veiled in altruism, seen as the conduit for millions of potential masters wishing to place others into bondage; however, this is the nature of the “state” that Bastiat spoke of. The Western world as a whole has come to embody this concept of a government serving as a mere special interest group channeling the desires of its most numerous “members” and punishing the minority. This “new” form of political slavery is absolved of its moral indiscretions in a time when truth is but a relative concept. One might even argue that this is the future envisioned by Marx and Engels (1888) when they wrote of Communism that:

It abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experiences...the first step in the revolution...is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy...to wrest, by degrees all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State...by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property (pp. 33-34).

As Western societies have encroached upon the dangerous threshold that is democracy, ever so slowly have we also crept towards Marx’s and Engels’ revolutionary conclusion where the state becomes a being of its own; whether or not the faces of the state change, the (seemingly) inevitable result stays the same. The political atmosphere appears perpetually driven by those wishing consumption without production and property without the investment of time or savings.

Perhaps our fate was sealed before the ink dried on our founding document here in America. It is often quipped that the Founders must be “rolling over in their grave” at what their country has and is becoming; however, it could be argued they knew the unfortunate truth all along. James Madison wrote in a *National Gazette* essay in 1792 (1997 ed.):

Who are the Best Keepers of the People’s Liberties? The people themselves. The sacred trust can be no where so safe as in the hands of the most interested in preserving it...Although all men are born free, and all nations might be so, yet too true it is, that slavery has been the general lot of the human race. Ignorant—they have been cheated; asleep—they have been surprised; divided—the yoke has been forced upon them. But what is the lesson? That because the people may betray themselves, they ought to give themselves up, blindfold, to those who have an interest in betraying them? Rather conclude that the people ought to be enlightened, to be awakened, to be united, that after establishing a government they should watch over it, as well as obey it (pp. 66).

People and societies, though it is a historically reasonable assumption, must not be resigned to such a position of perpetual servitude with only small, intermittent flickers of liberty which are set to be extinguished about as quickly as they are lit. To accept such an absolute makes those who carry the true message of freedom no better than the apathetic masses who, like lemmings, lead themselves off the proverbial cliff into bondage. Ironically, it is the peoples’ greed, the desire for the unearned, most often (and incorrectly) attributed to the free market, that ultimately invites the yoke which Madison spoke of. Individuals who wish others, whose possessions they envy, to be punished by the state make themselves vulnerable to their own level of servitude. Unfortunately,

shared sacrifice has become much more appealing to us, the freest people on Earth, than is the freedom to live, which always entails risk.

To those who wish to avoid risk, and thus forfeit liberty's potential rewards, the state is exercised as the weapon of a perverse system of equality where one's position in life is to be predetermined. The beginning and end of each individual's proverbial book already written, with merely a few pages in between left to the imagination, a life filled with emptiness and inevitability. Under a Plutocratic or Aristocratic system, such predetermination is labeled just as it is: immoral; however, under a democratic/majoritarian one it is called justice, a great error indeed. As we have learned in watching our Communist neighbors, the state can tend to flourish and appear to progress through the exercise of social justice while its people, many of whom willingly and unknowingly chose to subject themselves and their neighbors to universal poverty, whither on the vine of life for the betterment of the collective.

It is at this point that the state becomes the fiction Bastiat refers to, the magnificent oasis in the desert of life which holds the appearance and promise of paradise, but remains consistently just out of reach. The people, just thirsty and tired enough, continue placing blind faith in a reality which cannot and will not be. Desperation chains the children and grandchildren of prior generations who voted for the promise of the utopian fantasy, the same ones who enthusiastically handed in their freedoms to those who promised something for nothing; the world's oldest fraud. When the fraud fails, it is never because the concept is inherently flawed, but because the state did not do "enough" or was not given quite enough authority over its people. Just as in fascist and socialist governments of history, the state takes on a life of its own. One in

which the state, misconstrued as the representative of the collective, becomes preeminent over the very collective and certainly takes priority over any of its individual components. As the transformation from a society structured around the rule of law to one focused on the well-being of the state manifests itself, there ceases to be any consideration of individual desires or concerns. Morality is constantly redefined to satisfy the institution and the people's opinions and convictions are allowed only if it pleases the state; individual wants are blasphemy while selfish indulgence and supremacy lies, unequivocally, in the hands of the state.

The great perversion of freedom is thus complete. Ironically, few people during this long transition, that seems to begin as soon as the shackles are thrown off, would likely define the result as the goal. Many of those who ultimately serve as tools which facilitate the rise of the oppressor government, would ardently deny that this future is imminent because their intentions are, seemingly, of such a pure nature. Their inability to see the inevitable consequences of their actions are the result of the complete indifference to all prior evidence of human nature. Although humans have consistently proven time and time again throughout history that its predispositions are such, those who steer the vessel of freedom into the darkness do so with pride and self-assurance that this course will result in the elevation of humankind. Naively, they repeat the same behavior with the expectations of different results.

What, then, can be done to avoid such a path or right the ship? We must properly diagnose the societal disease to engineer a cure and, of course, any cure would have to be bolstered with perseverance. Although the problem is often attributed to education, this is a partially inaccurate assertion. Instead, the problem would lay more in mis-education,

a lack of understanding of the basic philosophy of what makes people truly free. It should come as no surprise that some of the most enduring philosophers of the last few hundred years; Locke, Bastiat, Madison, Jefferson, Hayek, and Rand dedicated much of their writings to this very topic; to extending the understanding of that simple concept that is liberty, finding different ways of rationally arguing the principles of human freedom. However, these ideas and principles are hardly taught and certainly not advocated across popular culture. There is little that can be said or written of the importance of individual liberty which has not already been done, but if the words do not reach the ears of those who so dearly need to hear them, the battle is lost.

One of the most important fronts of the battle for liberty is often won by the socialists of either side. The message which gets disseminated to those in the most formative years (and beyond) is controlled by the advocates of social engineering and the rise of the state. Unfortunately, the people who most value and understand the principles of individual freedom begin the fight at a deficit; they lack the programming which facilitates the statistics of all parties in reaching their goals: organization. It is inherently against the nature of the individualist or objectivist to organize for the purpose of shaping or coercing the minds of others. To the individualist, the goal is the idea of “to each their own,” thus rendering our lot impotent in a battle that has become merely about group size and political influence. To those who long for a free market, freedom of ideas, and the liberty to be left to their own devices, the concept of organizing to perpetuate a group goal is somewhat foreign. This simple fact is proof of the brilliance of America’s founders in creating a structure of government which was designed to frustrate factions and citizen coalitions through the division of constituency influence. Although generally

misunderstood as a by-product of partisanship, gridlock was not accidental; instead, the design of the U.S. Constitution as a document to confer only specific powers onto the federal government and preserve liberty was carefully crafted to produce gridlock. The uniqueness of this document has been lost to history through the amendment process and the very same logical deficiency which has stifled the efforts of those like Bastiat.

Sadly, we are poor marketers of the philosophy which we endeavor to live. Those who advocate liberty attempt to peddle a superior product that we allow the competition to package. Additionally, we are consistently frustrated that individual liberty is an idea which must be sold to others; so secure in the ideas which we cherish and wish to promote, we often have a limited understanding as to why something so simple and beautiful needs to be marketed and is not an inherent component of all people.

Although it is convenient to blame the structure of government or those who have been chosen to serve, Bastiat's statement reveals that those are merely convenient straw men saddled with the culpability for the decline of Western society. Bastiat, instead, illustrated how it is a natural human progression to revert to oppressive behavior to meet an end; the statement talks of the state as the tool of the people who endeavor "to live at the expense of everyone else," not the opposite. The people being the origin of the perversion of liberty, it is the people at large who must be reached to repair the breach. Just as it took many decades to strip away the liberties our forefathers risked their lives and their treasure for, it will likely take decades to reverse. Therefore, focus and organization must be exercised if there is hope of regaining that which we have already lost. If the opposition is constantly choosing the weapons with which we engage in intellectual battle, then we begin at a deficit. Ultimately, although we can find security in

our ideas and convictions, we do not understand nor employ to their full extent the tactics of those which we oppose.

Specifically, the use of words that carry clear meaning is of great importance; watering down the message only deemphasizes the pitfalls of our current path and leaves the message vulnerable. Saul Alinsky (1971), an excellent strategist in waging political war, wrote at length of the importance of choosing words which properly convey the serious nature of a conflict:

The question may legitimately be raised, why not use other words—words that mean the same but are peaceful, and do not result in such negative emotional reactions?...by using combinations of words such as ‘harnessing the energy’ instead of the single word ‘power’ we begin to dilute the meaning; and as we use purifying synonyms, we dissolve the bitterness, the anguish, the hate and love, the agony and triumph attached to these words, leaving an aseptic imitation of life...To pander to those who have no stomach for straight language...is a waste of time...We approach a critical point when our tongues trap our minds. I do not propose to be trapped by tact at the expense of truth...We strive to invent sterilized synonyms...but the words mean something different, so that they tranquilize us (pp. 49-50).

Essentially, Alinsky understood what Bastiat knew; Bastiat did not call taxation for wealth redistribution unfair, he labeled it clearly and concisely as “lawful plunder.” This type of boldness when framing our ideas and the reality we see is an art we must rediscover and employ resolutely.

Additionally, if the utopia that the statist and socialists speak of were to have been a reality five hundred years ago, it is reasonable that humans would have advanced

at an anemic pace, if at all. Adam Smith (2007 ed.) correctly observed of man that “by pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of society more than when he really intends to promote it” (pp. 352). Smith’s statement is historically accurate because only during periods when the productive abilities of humans were unleashed for the purpose of personal consumption or the accumulation of wealth has humankind made great leaps forward in technology and quality of life. It is hardly coincidental that the freest people on Earth, those of the Western world, have been the most innovative; therefore, the evidence is squarely on our side. Conclusive evidence requires no equivocation and the opposition will certainly never willfully admit an intellectual defeat; however, achieving the goal of liberty does necessitate decisiveness and vigor.

Liberty, albeit simple and clear, is a difficult concept to relate to others. In the battle of words we are confronted by ideas such as equality and social justice, words which convey a feeling of security and promise. The difficulty of the battle lies in the fact that true liberty solves nobody’s problems directly, but provides the means to solve everyone’s problems simultaneously. Once the ties of bondage are firmly in place, people will once again begin longing for the liberty they relinquished, but it is our task to begin changing the hearts and minds of people who find freedom in the servitude of others. Our task is difficult and, to be successful we must modify our methods. No longer will equivocation of words suffice; as long as the consequences of an oppressive state are clear, so must our words be equally clear in conveying the severity of the moment. Compromise is not a word that our leaders should indulge themselves in for the sake of political longevity, else we shall one day wake up and find that all is lost and discover that our future is not our own to determine. Carefully, strategically, and with

great diligence we must press our ideological enemies, revealing their shortcomings and their sinister intentions. Above all else, we should take great steps in reminding ourselves and others that “individual rights are not subject to a public vote; a majority has no right to vote away the rights of a minority; the political function of rights is precisely to protect minorities from oppression by majorities (and the smallest minority on earth is the *individual*)” (Ayn Rand, 1963).

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