

The State

Frédéric Bastiat

Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850) was an economist, statesman, and author during a period when France was drifting rapidly toward socialism. His clear description of that trend and its evil consequences, written in 1849, merits serious consideration in the United States of America today.

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, intelligible definition of the term, *The State*.

What an immense service such a definition would render to society!

The State! What is it? Where is it? What does it do? What should it do? We only know that it is a mysterious being; and, it is certainly the most petitioned, the most harassed, the most bustling, the most advised, the most reproached, the most invoked, and the most challenged of any being in the world.

I have not the honor of knowing my reader, but I would stake ten to one that sometime in the last six months you have designed Utopias, and if so, that you are looking to The State for the realization of them.

But alas! That poor unfortunate being, like Figaro, knows not which

plea to hear nor where to turn. The hundred thousand mouths of the press and of the platform cry out all at once —

Organize work and the workmen.

Cover the country with railways.

Irrigate the plains.

Reforest the hills.

Establish model farms.

Colonize Algeria.

Educate the youth.

Assist the aged.

Equalize the profits of all trades.

Lend money without interest to all who wish to borrow.

Emancipate Italy, Poland, and Hungary.

Encourage the arts, and train musicians and dancers for us.

Restrict commerce, and at the same time create a merchant marine.

Discover truth, and put a bit of sense into our heads. The mission of The State is to enlighten, to develop, to ennoble, to strengthen, and to sanctify the soul of the people.

“Wait, Gentlemen! A little pa-

tience," says The State beseechingly. "I will try to satisfy you, but for that I must have some resources. I have prepared plans for five or six entirely new taxes, the mildest in the world. You will see how gladly people will pay them."

But then a great hue and cry arises: "No! No! A fine thing — doing something with resources! This is hardly worthy of The State! Instead of loading us with new taxes, we call upon you to repeal the old ones. Decrease the salt tax, the liquor tax, the stamp tax, custom-house duties, monopoly license fees, and tolls."

In the midst of this tumult, the people have changed their government two or three times for failing to satisfy all their demands. To date, everything presenting itself under the name of The State is soon overthrown by the people, precisely because it fails to fulfill the somewhat contradictory features of its platform.

I fear we are, in this respect, the dupes of one of the strangest illusions which has ever taken possession of the human mind.

MAN RECOILS from effort, from suffering. Yet, he is condemned by nature to the suffering of privation if he does not make the effort to work. He has only a choice then, between these two: privation, and work. How can he manage to avoid

both? He always has and always will find, only one means: *to enjoy the labor of others*; to arrange it so that the effort and the satisfaction do not fall upon each in their natural proportion, but that some would bear all the effort while all the satisfaction would go to others. This is the origin of slavery and plunder, whatever form it takes — whether wars, impositions, violences, restrictions, frauds, etc., monstrous abuses, but in accord with the idea which has given them birth.

Slavery is subsiding, thank heaven, and our disposition to defend our property prevents direct and open plunder from being easy. However, there remains the unfortunate, primitive inclination in all men to divide the lot of life into two parts, throwing the trouble upon others and keeping the satisfaction for themselves. Let us examine a current manifestation of this sad tendency.

THE OPPRESSOR no longer uses his own force directly upon his victim. No, our conscience has become too sensitive for that. There is still the tyrant and his victim, but between them is an intermediary which is The State — the Law itself. What could be better designed to silence our scruples and — more important — to overcome all resistance? Thus do all of us, by various claims

and under one pretext or another, appeal to The State:

"I am dissatisfied with the ratio between my labor and my pleasures. In order to establish the desired balance, I should like to take part of the possessions of others. But that is a dangerous thing. Couldn't you facilitate it for me? Couldn't you give me a good post? Or restrain my competitors' business? Or perhaps lend me some interest-free capital, which you will have taken from its rightful owners? Or bring up my children at the taxpayers' expense? Or grant me a subsidy? Or assure me a pension when I reach my fiftieth year? By this means I shall achieve my goal with an easy conscience, for the law will have acted for me. Thus I shall have all the advantages of plunder, without the risk or the disgrace!"

All of us are petitioning The State in this manner, yet it has been proven that The State has no means of granting privileges to some without adding to the labor of others.

The State is the great fiction through which everybody endeavors to live at the expense of everybody.

Today, as in the past, nearly everyone would like to profit by the labor of others. No one dares admit such a feeling; he even hides it from himself. So what does he

do? He imagines an intermediary; he appeals to The State, and every class in its turn comes and says to it: "You, who can do so justifiably and honestly, take from the public; and we will partake of the proceeds."

Alas! The State 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 eagerly seize every opportunity to increase their wealth and influence. The State quickly perceives the advantages it can derive from the role entrusted to it by the public. It will be the judge, the master of the destinies of all. It will take a lot: then much will remain for itself. It will multiply the number of its agents, and increase its functions, until it finally acquires crushing proportions.

BUT THE MOST remarkable thing is the astonishing blindness of the public while all this takes place. In the past, when victorious soldiers reduced the vanquished to slavery they were barbarous, but they were not foolish. Their object, like ours, was to live at the expense of others; but they succeeded, where we fail. What are we to think of a people who never seem to realize that *reciprocal plunder is no less plunder* because it is reciprocal; that it

is no less criminal, because it is carried out legally and peacefully; that it adds nothing to the public good, but rather diminishes it by the amount of the cost of that expensive intermediary we call The State?

And this great illusion we have placed, for the edification of the people as a frontispiece to the Constitution. Here are the first words of the preamble:

"France has constituted itself a Republic to . . . raise all the citizens to an ever-increasing degree of morality, enlightenment, and well-being."

Thus it is France — an *abstraction* — which is to raise the French — or *realities* — to morality, well-being, and so on. Isn't it our blind attachment to this strange delusion that leads us to expect everything from a power not our own? Isn't it suggesting that there is, apart from the French people, a virtuous, enlightened, rich being who can and should bestow its favors upon them?

THE AMERICANS develop a different idea of the relationship of the citizens with The State, when they placed these simple words at the beginning of their Constitution:

"We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, in-

sure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain . . ."

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

I contend that the *personification* of The State has been in the past and will be in the future, a fertile source of calamities and revolutions. There is the public on one side, The State on the other, considered as two distinct beings; the latter obligated to bestow upon the former, the former having the right to claim from the latter a flood of human benefits. What must happen?

The State has two hands, one for receiving and the other for giving — a rough hand and a smooth one. The activity of the second is necessarily subordinate to the activity of the first. Strictly speaking, The State can take and not give back. This can be seen and can be explained by the porous, absorbing nature of its hands, which always retain part and sometimes all of what it touches.

But that which is never seen, which never will be seen, and which cannot even be imagined, is that The State can return *more* to the people than it has taken from them.

Therefore it is ridiculous for us to appear before The State in the humble attitude of beggars. It is utterly impossible for it to confer a specific benefit upon some of the individuals who make up the community, without inflicting a greater injury upon the community as a whole.

OUR DEMANDS, therefore, place The State in an obvious dilemma! If it refuses to grant the requested benefit, it is accused of weakness, ill-will, and incapacity. If it tries to grant their requests, it is obliged to load the people with increased taxes — to do more harm than good — and to bring upon itself general displeasure from another quarter.

So, the public has two hopes, and The State makes two promises: *many benefits and no taxes* — hopes and promises, which, being contradictory, can never be realized.

Is not this the cause of all our revolutions? For between The State, which lavishly promises the impossible, and the public, whose hopes can never be realized, there come to interpose two types of men: the ambitious and the Utopians. The circumstances give them their cue. These office seekers need only 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 substitute a new government for the old.

No sooner are their friends in charge of things, than they are called upon to redeem their pledge. "Give us work, bread, assistance, credit, instruction, colonies," say the people, "and meanwhile deliver us, as you promised, from the clutches of the tax gatherer."

THE NEW government is no less embarrassed than the former one, for it is easier to promise the impossible than to do it. It tries to gain time which it needs for maturing its vast projects. First it makes a few timid attempts: On one hand, it slightly expands primary education; on the other, it makes a small reduction in the liquor tax. But the contradiction always confronts the administration: If it would be philanthropic, it must attend to its treasury; if it neglects the treasury, it must give up being philanthropic.

These two promises are always and inevitably clashing with one another. To live upon credit, that is, to exhaust the future, is certainly a temporary method of reconciling them — an attempt to do a little good now, at the expense of a great deal of harm in the future. But this procedure calls forth

the specter of bankruptcy, which puts an end to credit. What is to be done then? Why then, the new government defends itself boldly. It unites its forces to maintain itself: It smothers opinion, has recourse to arbitrary measures, ridicules its former slogans, declares that it is impossible to govern except at the risk of being unpopular; in short, it proclaims itself *governmental*.

And this is what other candidates for office are waiting for. They exploit the same illusion, follow the same course, obtain the same success, and are soon swallowed up in the same abyss.

THE LATEST manifesto of the Montagnards, which they issued at the time of the presidential election, concludes with these words: — "*The State ought to give a great deal to the people, and take little from them.*" It is always the same tactics, or rather, the same mistake. The State must:

Give free instruction and education to all the citizens.

Give a general and professional education, as much as possible adapted to the needs, talents, and capacities of each citizen.

Teach every citizen his duty to God, to man, and to himself; develop his perceptions, his aptitudes, and his faculties; teach him, in short, the skill of his trade; make him understand his own in-

terests, and give him a knowledge of his rights.

Place within the reach of all literature and the arts, the heritage of thought, the treasures of the mind, and all those intellectual possessions which elevate and strengthen the soul.

Give compensation for every disaster, fire, flood, etc., experienced by a citizen. (The *et cetera* means more than it says.)

Act as mediator in the relations between capital and labor, and become the regulator of credit.

Give substantial encouragement and effectual support to agriculture.

Purchase railroads, canals, and mines — and doubtless administer them with its characteristic industrial ability!

Encourage useful experiments, promote and assist them by every means likely to make them successful. As a regulator of credit, it will have extensive control over industrial and agricultural associations in order to assure their success.

The State *must* do all this, in addition to the services to which it is already pledged! For instance, it is always to maintain a menacing attitude towards foreigners. The signers of the manifesto say that: "Bound together by this holy union, and by the precedents of the French Republic, we carry our wishes and hopes beyond the barriers which despotism has raised between nations. The rights which

we desire for ourselves, we desire for all those who are oppressed by the yoke of tyranny; we desire that our glorious army should, if necessary, again be the army of liberty."

You see that the gentle hand of The State — that good hand which gives and distributes — will be very busy under the direction of these reformers. You think perhaps it will be the same with the rough hand — that hand which penetrates and takes from our pockets?

DO NOT deceive yourselves. The politicians would not know their trade, if they had not the art, when showing the gentle hand, to conceal the rough one. Their reign will assuredly be the jubilee of the taxpayers!

"It is luxuries, not necessities," they say, "which ought to be taxed."

Won't it be wonderful that the treasury, in overwhelming us with favors, will content itself with curtailing our luxuries!

This is not all. This party of reformers intends that "taxation shall lose its oppressive character, and be only an act of brotherhood." Good heavens! I know it is the fashion to thrust brotherhood in everywhere, but I did not imagine it would ever be put into the proclamations of the tax gatherer.

Well, I ask the impartial reader, is this not childishness, and more than that, dangerous childishness? Is it not inevitable that we shall have revolution after revolution, if it is once decided never to stop till this contradiction is realized: "Give nothing to The State and receive much from it?"

Citizens! At all times, two political systems have been in existence, and each can justify itself with good reasons. According to one of them, The State should do a lot, but then it should take a lot. According to the other, this twofold activity ought to be limited. We have to choose between these two systems.

But the third system, which partakes of both the others, and consists in exacting everything from The State without giving it anything, is chimerical, absurd, childish, contradictory, and dangerous. Those who advocate such a system are only flattering and deceiving you, or at least are deceiving themselves.

As for us, we consider that The State is and ought to be nothing whatever but *community force* organized, not to be an instrument of oppression and mutual plunder among citizens, but, on the contrary, to guarantee to each his own, and to cause justice and security to reign.

The Hot Fight Over The Right To Work

Edward Maher

IN MAY, 1953, fourteen resolute *hombres* in the State of Texas remembered the Alamo and resolved to go down fighting if need be rather than surrender to overwhelming odds. The battleground was a court of justice and the force arrayed against them was a group of powerful nation-wide unions, backed by the authority of federal law. The point at issue was whether it is permissible under the Constitution of the United States to require people to join labor unions to get or keep their jobs.

This question has become hotter this year than a packed airliner waiting to be cleared for take off, and the temperature is building up steadily both nationally and in many state capitals. Eighteen of the states now have laws which forbid compulsory unionism in any form, and efforts are afoot currently to pass similar laws in over a dozen more states. Their proponents call these "right-to-work" laws; organized labor says the real objective is the "right-to-wreck" unions. Several other court cases,

in addition to the one in Texas, are in the works and are expected to reach the U. S. Supreme Court before they are finally settled.

The federal Taft-Hartley Act, governing the bulk of labor-management relations, prohibits the negotiating of "closed shop" agreements between unions and employers. The Act does allow the "union shop," under which nonmembers and new employees are required to apply for union membership within a specified time, usually 30 days. When the union shop is coupled, as it often is, with "preferential hiring," or hiring through the union, the effect is the same as that of the closed shop. Section 14 (b) of the Taft-Hartley Act recognized the right of states to guard against such coercive unionism: "Nothing in this Act shall be construed as authorizing the execution or application of agreements requiring membership in a labor organization as a condition of employment in any State or Territory in which such execution or application is prohibited by State or Territorial law."

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