

Economic Sophisms and
“What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen”

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF FRÉDÉRIC BASTIAT

Jacques de Guenin, General Editor

*The Man and the Statesman: The Correspondence and Articles
on Politics*

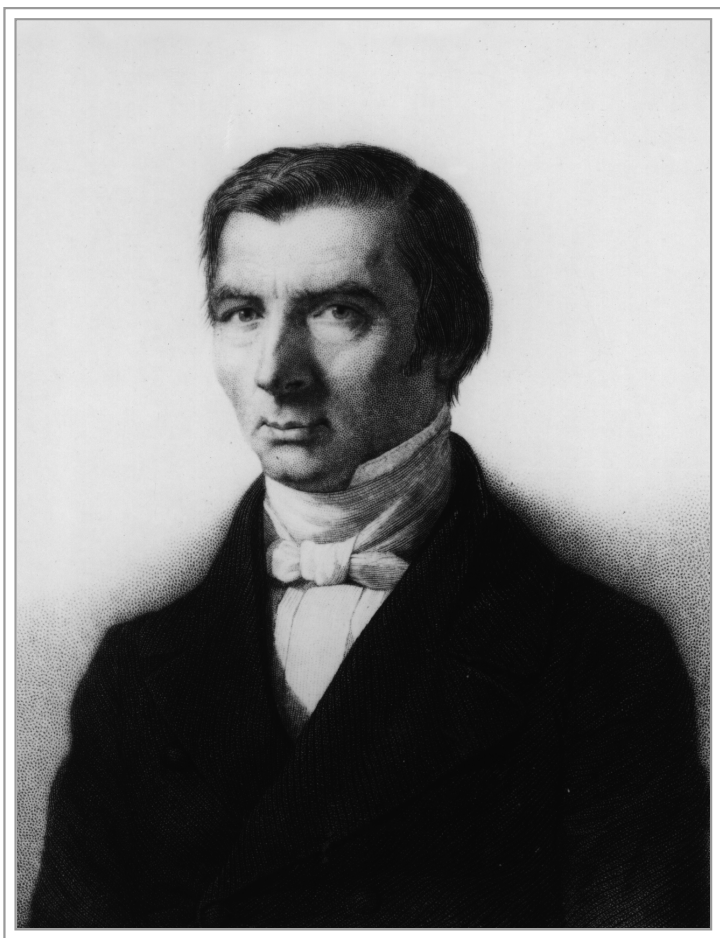
"The Law," "The State," and Other Political Writings, 1843–1850

Economic Sophisms and "What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen"

*Miscellaneous Works on Economics: From "Jacques-Bonhomme" to Le
Journal des Économistes*

Economic Harmonies

*The Struggle against Protectionism: The English and French Free-
Trade Movements*



Frédéric Bastiat

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“What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen”



FRÉDÉRIC BASTIAT

Jacques de Guenin, *General Editor*

Translated from the French by

Jane Willems and Michel Willems

with a foreword by

Robert McTeer

and an introduction and appendixes

by Academic Editor

David M. Hart

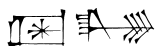
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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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Foreword

“The state is the great fiction by which everyone endeavors to live at the expense of everyone else.”

—FROM “THE STATE” (1848), BY FRÉDÉRIC BASTIAT

Claude Frédéric Bastiat was born in France in 1801. Two hundred years later, in 2001, I was invited to speak at his birthday celebration.¹ I titled my remarks “Why Bastiat Is My Hero.” That was over ten years ago, but I do not have to look back into my notes to remember the reasons why Bastiat was and still is my hero.

During his brief life of forty-nine years, Bastiat fought for individual liberty in general and free trade in particular. He fought against protectionism, mercantilism, and socialism. He wrote with a combination of clarity, wit, and wisdom unmatched to this day. He not only made his arguments easy to understand; he made them impossible to misunderstand and to forget. He used humor and satire to expose his opponents’ arguments as not just wrong, but absurd, by taking them to their logical extreme. He noted that his adversaries often had to stop short in their arguments to avoid that trap.

My introduction to Bastiat as a student was snippets from his “Petition by the Manufacturers of Candles” in economics textbooks. The brilliance of this text still thrills and inspires me.² In the petition, the candle makers call on the Chamber of Deputies to pass a law requiring the closing of all blinds and shutters to prevent sunlight from coming inside. The sun was unfair

1. To commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Frédéric Bastiat an international conference was held in Dax in June 2001 under the auspices of the Cercle Frédéric Bastiat and Jacques de Guenin. It was here that Liberty Fund’s project of translating the collected works of Bastiat was conceived.

2. As it did the great economic journalist Henry Hazlitt. See Henry Hazlitt’s “Introduction” to *Economic Sophisms*, FEE Edition, p. xiv.

competition to the candle makers and they needed protection. Protection from the sunlight would not only benefit the candle makers and related industries competing with the sun; it would also benefit unrelated industries as spending and prosperity spread. Bastiat anticipated Keynesian multiplier analysis, although for Bastiat it was satire with a very serious intent.

Bastiat wanted *Economic Sophisms* to serve as a handbook for free traders, and, indeed, when I was president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, we used his writings in our economic education efforts. Throughout the book, Bastiat attacks protectionist sophisms, or fallacies, methodically and exhaustively; however, he identifies a major problem of persuasion, namely, that most sophisms contain some truth, usually a half-truth, but it is the half that is visible. As he writes in his introduction: "Protection brings together in one single point all the good it does and distributes among the wider mass of people the harm it inflicts. One is visible to the naked eye, the other only to the mind's eye."³

For example, we can see for ourselves imports and new technology destroying domestic jobs. We can see government spending creating jobs, and minimum wage laws raising wages. To get from these half-truths to the whole truth, however, requires considering what is not seen, except "in the mind's eye."

The fable of the broken window is Bastiat's most famous illustration of the seen versus the unseen.⁴ The son of Jacques Bonhomme⁵ broke his window, and a crowd gathered. What a shame; Jacques will have to pay for another window. But wait. There is a silver lining. The window repairman will receive additional income to spend. Some merchant will then also have new income to spend, and so on. It's a shame about the broken window, but it did set off a chain reaction of new spending, creating prosperity for many.

Hold on, cautions Bastiat. If Jacques didn't have to replace his window, he would have spent or invested his money elsewhere. Then another merchant would have new income to spend, and so on. The spending chain initiated by the broken window happens and will be seen; the spending chain that would otherwise have happened won't be seen. The broken window diverted spending; it didn't increase spending. But the stimulus from the broken window was seen, and seeing is believing.

3. ESI Introduction, p. 4.

4. See WSWNS 1.

5. One of Bastiat's fictional stock characters, who appears frequently in *Economic Sophisms*.

The broken window fallacy sounds like a child's fairy tale, yet nothing could be more relevant today. We're told every day of the benefits of some government program or project, and most do some good. What we don't see is how taxpayers might have spent their own money for their own good. Or, if the government spending is financed by borrowing, we probably won't see the implications for the future burden of the additional debt, or for future inflation if the debt is monetized. We forget that governments can give to us only what they take from us.

Bastiat's lectures on the half-truth versus the whole truth, the short run versus the long run, the part versus the whole, and the seen versus the unseen teach us the economic way of thinking. While he was steeped in classical economics, his views were also based on what he experienced empirically. All he had to do was walk around the port city of Bayonne where he was born to see firsthand the disastrous results of "protection." The protection was protection from prosperity.

Bastiat was also influenced by the free-trade movement in England and its leader, Richard Cobden, who became a regular correspondent and firm friend for the last five years of Bastiat's life. Bastiat wanted to do for France what Cobden was doing for England, so he became an activist, establishing free-trade associations. He entered politics and was elected to the Chamber of Deputies. Many of his speeches, pamphlets, and other articles were directed specifically to statements made by his opponents in that chamber. He named names, but he was ever the gentleman in his debates, attacking the argument rather than the person.

In debate, Bastiat not only proved his opponents wrong; he showed that their positions, when stripped to the core, were absurd. Their focus on the producer rather than the consumer led them to view less output as better than more, and more work to achieve a given end as better than less. Consumers have a stake in efficiency and productivity, and their goals are in harmony with the greater good. Producers, on the other hand, find merit in inefficiency and obstacles to productivity. They wanted to count jobs, while Bastiat wanted to make jobs count. He exposed the absurdity of the fallacy when he suggested allowing workers to use their left hands only and creating jobs by burning Paris.

Bastiat pointed out that the lawmakers who were also merchants or farmers held conflicting positions. Back home they value efficiency and productivity, trying to get the most output and income from the least labor. Yet, as legislators, they tried to make work by creating obstacles and inefficiency.

They built roads and bridges to facilitate transportation and commerce, then put customs agents on the roads to do the opposite. He pointed out that if they farmed the way they legislated, they would use only hoes and mattocks to till the earth and eschew the plow.

The obvious question is, if Bastiat's rhetoric was so effective, why didn't he prevail in the Chamber? His opponents' answer then, as now, is that these fancy notions may work in theory, but not in practice. "Go write your books, Mr. Intellectual; we are men of practical affairs." We might, however, answer on behalf of Bastiat that, in the short term at least, the fight against protectionism was sidetracked by the outbreak of the 1848 Revolution and the rise of socialism during the Second Republic. Bastiat, like many of his free market colleagues, had other matters to attend to during this period. In the medium term, we might say that Bastiat's free trade ideas did in fact have an impact. The signing of the Cobden-Chevalier Trade Treaty between England and France in 1860 is one important measure of the success of free trade ideas, at least in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the longer term, unfortunately, he, as do we today, underestimated the power that economic sophisms have over the popular mind in general and even over most of our legislators in particular. This confirms the importance of returning to Bastiat's ideas, for the power of his economic arguments as well as for the enjoyment of his inimitable brilliant style. So, even after more than ten years, Bastiat remains "my intellectual hero."

Robert McTeer

General Editor's Note

The Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat will be the most complete edition of Bastiat's works published to date, in any country or in any language. The main source for this translation is the *Œuvres complètes de Frédéric Bastiat*, published by Guillaumin in the 1850s and 1860s.¹

Although the Guillaumin edition was generally chronological, the volumes in this series have been arranged thematically:

*The Man and the Statesman: The Correspondence and Articles on
Politics*

"The Law," "The State," and Other Political Writings, 1843–1850

Economic Sophisms and "What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen"

Miscellaneous Works on Economics: From "Jacques Bonhomme" to Le

Journal des Économistes

Economic Harmonies

The Struggle against Protectionism: The English and French Free-Trade

Movements

There are three kinds of notes in this edition: footnotes by the editor of the Guillaumin edition (Prosper Paillottet), which are preceded by "(Paillottet's note)"; footnotes by Bastiat, which are preceded by "(Bastiat's note)"; and new editorial footnotes to this edition, which stand alone (unless they are commenting on Paillottet's notes, in which case they are in square brackets following Paillottet's note). Each sophism is preceded by a detailed publishing history which consists of (1) the original title, (2) the place and date of first publication, (3) the date of the first French edition as a book or a pamphlet, (4) the location in Paillottet's edition of the *Œuvres complètes* (1st ed. 1854–55), and (5) the dates of the following English translations: the first

1. For a more detailed description of the publication history of the *Œuvres complètes*, see Note on the Editions of the *Œuvres complètes* and the bibliography.

English (England) translation, the first American translation, and the FEE translation.

In the text, Bastiat (and Paillottet in the notes) makes many passing references to his works, for which we have provided an internal cross-reference if the work is in this volume. For those works not in this volume, we have provided the location of the original French version in the *Œuvres complètes* (indicated in a footnote by “OC,” followed by the Guillaumin volume number, beginning page number, and French title of the work).

In addition, we have made available two online sources² for the reader to consult. The first source is a table of contents of the seven-volume *Œuvres complètes* with links to PDF facsimiles of each volume. The second source is our “Comparative Table of Contents of the Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat,” which is a table of contents of the complete Liberty Fund series. Here the reader can find the location of the English translation of the work in its future Liberty Fund volume. These contents will be filled in and updated as the volumes come out and will eventually be the most complete comparative listing of Bastiat’s works.

In order to avoid multiple footnotes and cross-references, we have provided a glossary of persons, a glossary of places, a glossary of newspapers and journals, and a glossary of subjects and terms to identify those persons, places, historical events, and terms mentioned in the text. The glossaries will also provide historical context and background for the reader as well as a greater understanding of Bastiat’s work. If a name as it appears in the text is ambiguous or is in the glossary under a different name, a brief footnote has been added to identify the name as it is listed in the glossary.

Finally, original italics as they appear in the Guillaumin edition have been retained.

Jacques de Guenin
Saint-Loubouer, France

2. The first source is the main Bastiat page in the Online Library of Liberty, which lists all Bastiat’s works we have online <http://oll.libertyfund.org/people/frederic-bastiat>. The second source is “A List of Bastiat’s Works in Chronological Order,” which lists each of Bastiat’s known works with information about the original date and place of publication, its location in Paillottet’s edition of the *Œuvres complètes*, and its location in Liberty Fund’s edition <http://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/bastiat-chrono-list>.

Note on the Translation

Below we discuss some of the problems faced by translating a French work on political economy from the mid-nineteenth century into English. We begin with some general observations which are applicable to all the volumes in the Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat. These are followed by some remarks which are specific to the matters covered in this particular volume.

TRANSLATION MATTERS OF A GENERAL NATURE IN THE COLLECTED WORKS

Throughout the translation of this series, we have made a deliberate decision not to translate Bastiat's French into modern, colloquial American English. Wherever possible we have tried to retain a flavor of the more florid, Latinate forms of expression which were common among the literate class in mid-nineteenth-century France. Bastiat liked long, flowing sentences, where idea followed upon idea in an apparently endless succession of dependent clauses. We have broken up many but not all of these thickets of expression for the sake of clarity. In those that remain, you, dear reader, will have to navigate.

Concerning the problematic issue of how to translate the French term *la liberté*—whether to use the more archaic-sounding English word “liberty” or the more modern word “freedom”—we have let the context have the final say. Bastiat was much involved with establishing a free-trade movement in France and to that end founded the Free Trade Association (L'Association pour la liberté des échanges) and its journal *Le Libre-échange* (Free Trade). In this context the word choice is clear: we must use the word “freedom,” because this is intimately linked to the idea of “free trade.” The English phrase “liberty of trade” would sound awkward. Another word is *pouvoir*, which we have variously translated as “power,” “government,” or “authority,” again depending on the context.

A third example consists of the words *économie politique* and *économiste*. Throughout the eighteenth and for most of the nineteenth century, in both French and English, the term “political economy” was used to describe what we now call “economics.” Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as economics became more mathematical, the adjective “political” was dropped and not replaced. We have preferred to keep the term “political economy” both because it was still current when Bastiat was writing and because it better describes the state of the discipline which proudly mixed an interest in moral philosophy, history, and political theory with the main dish, which was economic analysis. In Bastiat’s day it was assumed that any *économiste* was a free-market economist, and so the noun needed no adjectival qualifier. Today one can be a free-market economist, a Marxist economist, a Keynesian economist, a mathematical economist, or an Austrian economist, to name a few. The qualifier before the noun is therefore quite important. This was not the case in Bastiat’s time.

A particularly difficult word to translate is *l’industrie*, as is its related term *industriel*. In some respects it is a “false friend,” as one is tempted to translate it as “industry” or “industrious” or “industrial,” but this would be wrong because these terms have the more narrow modern meaning of “heavy industry” or “manufacturing” or “the result of some industrial process.” The meaning in Bastiat’s time was both more general and more specific to a particular social and economic theory current in his day. The word “industry” had a specific meaning which was tied to a social and economic theory developed by Jean-Baptiste Say and his followers Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer in the 1810s and 1820s, as well as by other theorists such as the historian Augustin Thierry. According to these theorists, there were only two means of acquiring wealth, by productive activity and voluntary exchanges in the free market (i.e., *industrie*—which included agriculture, trade, factory production, services, and so on) or by coercive means (conquest, theft, taxation, subsidies, protection, transfer payments, or slavery). Anybody who acquired wealth through voluntary exchange and productive activities belonged to a class of people collectively called *les industriels*, in contrast to those individuals or groups who acquired their wealth by force, coercion, conquest, slavery, or government privileges. The latter group was seen as a ruling class or as “parasites” who lived at the expense of *les industriels*.

Bastiat uses the French term *la spoliation* (plunder) many times in his writings. Following from his view of “industry” as defined above, Bastiat believed that there is a distinction between two ways in which wealth can be ac-

quired, either through peaceful and voluntary exchange (i.e., the free market) or by theft, conquest, and coercion (i.e., using the power of the state to tax, repossess, or grant special privileges). The latter he described as “plunder.”

In Bastiat’s time, the word “liberal” had the same meaning in France and in the English-speaking worlds of England and America. In the United States, however, the meaning of the word has shifted progressively toward the left of the political spectrum. A precise translation of the French word would be either “classical liberal” or “libertarian,” depending upon the context, and indeed Bastiat is considered to be a classical liberal by present-day conservatives and a libertarian by present-day libertarians. To avoid the resulting awkwardness, we have decided to keep the word “liberal,” with its nineteenth-century meaning, in the translations as well as the notes and the glossaries.

TRANSLATION MATTERS SPECIFIC TO THIS VOLUME

More specific to this volume are the words and phrases which will be discussed below. In many cases we have found it very helpful to consult the earlier translation of the first two series of *Economic Sophisms* made by the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) in 1964.¹ Although we sometimes disagreed with their interpretation, we have found their notes and comments very informative and useful. We acknowledge in the footnotes when we have made use of their earlier work.

Sophism

The very title economic “sophisms” poses a problem. *Sophisme* can be translated directly as “sophism,” preferred by the FEE translator in 1964, or as “fallacy,” which is the term preferred by nineteenth-century translators. We have sided with the FEE translator here in most instances. Bastiat uses the word in a couple of different senses. The term can refer to an obvious error in economic theory; that is, a “fallacy.” It can also refer to an argument that has an element of truth in which this partial truth is used speciously to make a case for one particular economic interest in a debate; that is, a piece of “sophistry.” In this latter sense, which makes up the bulk of this book, the word “sophism” is the preferred translation. The word “sophism” is also

1. *Economic Sophisms*, FEE edition, and “What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen,” in *Selected Essays on Political Economy*, FEE edition.

used to refer to Bastiat's essays in which he attacks these false or sophistical economic ideas, as in "In the sophism about the broken window Bastiat argues. . . ." We hope the meaning is clear from the context.

Humor

Bastiat enjoyed creating neologisms in order to poke fun at his adversaries. These words were sometimes based on Latin words and sometimes on French words. We have tried to find English equivalents which capture the flavor of Bastiat's originals and his intent. These are explained in the footnotes. Some examples are the two towns "Stulta" and "Puera" ("Stupidville" and "Child-ishtown"); the tax collector "M. Lasouche" (Mr. Blockhead); "M. Prohibant" (Mr. Prohibitor or Mr. Prohibitionist); and the two lobby groups the "Sinistrists" (the Left Handers) and the "Dexterists" (the Right Handers).

Another weapon in Bastiat's lexical armory was parody. He liked to take government institutions or documents, or well-known works of literature, and write a parody of their structure and content. A good example of this is his creation of a "Lower Council of Labor" (for ordinary shopkeepers and workers) to make fun of the protectionist and establishment "Superior Council of Commerce." Another is his mimicking of government "circulars" (or memoranda) issued in the early months of the Second Republic. As a deputy and vice president of the Finance Committee of the Chamber he would have seen many of these, and he is thus able to mimic their style wonderfully. But the supreme example of his skill as a writer is his parody of Molière's parody of seventeenth-century doctors. He takes Molière's acerbic commentary on the primitive medical practices of his day and turns it into a very sharp critique of the behavior of customs officers of his own day. These pose some difficulty for a modern translator; indeed, much has to be explained in the footnotes in order for these parodies to make sense, as he wrote his parody in "dog Latin" for which we have used the excellent translation made by FEE.²

Of all the challenges facing a translator, one of the hardest is explaining puns, which are usually unique to a given language. Bastiat liked to pun, as the footnotes will make clear. A good example is from the sophism "The Right Hand and the Left Hand" (ES2 16) in which the king is asked to expand the amount of work in the country (and thus increase "prosperity") by forbidding people to use their right hands. Bastiat has a field day creating a

2. See *Economic Sophisms*, FEE edition, p. 194.

new lobby group, the “Dexterists,” who campaign for the freedom to work with one’s right hand, and the “Sinistrists,” who lobby for the use of the left hand only. In Bastiat’s mind, all this is so much “*gaucherie*.” Another good example is the case of the customs barrier across the Bidassoa River, on the border with Spain, which legally permits trade (which is taxed) “over the river,” but which drives the black market in untaxed goods “under the river” (or “underground” as it were).³ He also puns on the names of the streets on which various lobby groups were located. For example, the main protectionist lobby group, the Association for the Defense of National Employment, had its headquarters on the rue de Hautville (Highville Street) and thus is an open target for puns on whether or not they are in favor of high prices or low prices.

Some of Bastiat’s funniest moments come with his frequent wordplay, which is especially hard for a translator to convey. We have attempted to do this without intruding too much on the reader’s patience. England was seen as both a real military enemy because of its role in the war against the French Republic and then Napoléon’s Empire, and as an economic enemy because of its advocacy of free trade. England was known as “Perfidious Albion” (Deceitful England), and so to show the absurdity of this idea Bastiat invents the notion of “Perfidious Normandy,”⁴ which threatens Paris because it can produce butter more cheaply.

French word order is also used to make a political point. In French an adjective can precede a noun or follow it without too much difference in meaning. In English this makes no sense. Bastiat has a protagonist argue with an opponent of free trade (*libre-échange*) who despises the very idea because it is English, but quite likes the idea of being free to buy and sell things because this is an example of *échange libre* (trade which is free).⁵

Plain Speaking

Bastiat was torn between using a more lighthearted style which used humor, puns, wordplay, and satire to make his important economic and political points, or using a more serious and sober style. He made a name for himself as a witty and clever economic journalist when he wrote for the free trade journal *Le Libre-échange*, which he edited between 1846 and early 1848, in

3. See ES3 10.

4. See the entry for “Perfidious Albion,” in the Glossary of Subjects and Terms.

5. See ES3 13.