

THAT WHICH IS SEEN

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The Unintended Consequences of Government Spending

M. Frederic Bastiat

That Which Is Seen and That Which Is Not Seen

Frédéric Bastiat

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Il est des français géniaux qui bénéficient d'une réputation internationale alors qu'on ne cite quasiment jamais leurs noms en France.

Frédéric Bastiat, le Pape du libéralisme, est de ceux-là, qui souffre probablement de la trop grande clarté de ses écrits !

Peut-être préfère-t-on, en France, se perdre dans des conversations ou des discussions sans fin plutôt que se référer simplement à des thèses lumineuses et pragmatiques.

A une époque où l'on ne peut s'affirmer « libéral » sans se voir traiter aussitôt « d'ultra », il nous a paru important de réhabiliter la pensée de Frédéric Bastiat qui défend la liberté de l'individu face à toute autorité. Il écrit en 1850 : « Il y a trop de grands hommes dans le monde ; il y a trop de législateurs, d'organisateurs, d'instituteurs de sociétés, de conducteurs de peuples, de pères des nations, etc. Trop de gens se placent au-dessus de l'humanité pour la régenter, trop de gens font métier de s'occuper d'elle... » et ajoute : « L'État, c'est la grande fiction à travers laquelle tout le monde s'efforce de vivre aux dépens de tout le monde »

Frédéric Bastiat nous rappelle que la pensée libérale, si elle est évidemment économique, est également une pensée philosophique, juridique et politique de la libération de l'homme.

Mais l'homme occidental moderne est-il vraiment jaloux de sa liberté ?

That Which Is Seen and That Which Is Not Seen Details

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Clinton says

That Which is Seen, and That Which is Not Seen accentuates the unanticipated consequences of government spending where Bastiat distinguishes between what is seen and unseen.

Excessive government spending is typically viewed only as prosperous, for the only perception is beneficial where the positives are seen while the unseen is forgotten or unnoticed. Basically, the seen and unseen ramifications fundamentally can be described as opportunity costs; nobody thinks about what they are foregoing in option B for A or even what harm option A caused or what good it prevented. The unseen is ignored because at the time in making a decision, government spending was the most valued alternative because government spending is viewed with no negative effects where only benefits exist; therefore, it is always praised for flawless economic planning, so nobody then realizes what was missed in alternative options.

Bastiat was a brilliant economist and philosopher as well as a staunch advocate for liberty, for he was clearly well ahead of his time. Even though his treatise on government spending was written in 1850, unfortunately, the seen and unseen in government spending still plagues economic thought even today. Bastiat created the foundations for libertarian and Austrian schools of thought.

Jorgina says

Frederic Bastiat is one of my heroes. When France, just out of anarchy, was testing new governments and leaning towards socialism, he bravely stood up and tried to warn them of the dangers and sophist reasoning of such a government type. What is seen... is so perfect to help you understand the failure of government subsidized farms, business, and even art. It explains how free enterprise becomes horribly shackled by government subsidies which actually limits an individual's spending/saving power; though sophists of socialistic programs tend to persuade people to forfeit these freedoms.

Kelly says

This is great stuff. I love the clarity of thought. I love encountering book written long ago that remains relevant today.

Bobparr says

Dopo il primo saggio, che da' il titolo alla raccolta, non ho trovato qualcosa di altrettanto interessante. La logica di Bastiat è tenera, ma inossidabile. Lungi da me voler dare torto o ragione alle idee espresse: d'altronde, il vecchio Galbraith una volta ebbe a dire che l'esistenza delle previsioni economiche rendeva l'astrologia una scienza rispettabile. Per induzione, lo stesso potremmo dire delle teorie espresse dagli economisti tutti. Anche se sulla presunta superiorità del liberismo potremmo avere qualcosa da dire... Gli altri saggi li ho sbocconcellati, ma dopo averne provati due li ho trovati non accattivanti per il mio gusto, e le

pagine sono rimaste vergini alla lettura.

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Abbandonato, data imprecisata

Karthik says

Classic book on economic sophisms! Bastiat uses a range of examples to show how being ignorant of political economy puts us in the danger of being dazzled by things only while taking the immediate effect of it (Seen) but the unseen long term consequence that plays out over the years are rarely never taken into account. To embrace it in thought and forethought helps us acquaint ourselves with long term consequences and compass of effects. Examples he uses allows you to see how assertions in political discourse can hide facts. Even though it was written long time ago when economic liberalism was sweeping through Europe, issues discussed are still relevant (taxation, public works to get to full employment, protectionism etc). All the arguments used in this book are still used by proponents of free market!

Richard Hannay says

Un libro fundamental. Escrito con asombrosa claridad desmonta las fábulas que nos cuentan para justificar la rapiña estatal y demuele el keynesianismo 25 años antes de que naciera Lord Keynes. Accesible a todo el mundo sin necesidad de conocimientos previos de economía. Es decir, que hasta Krugman podría entenderlo, si quisiera. Hágase un favor a Ud.mismo y lealo para comprender porqué el Plan Renove, las Viviendas de Protección Oficial y la inversión pública no son sino trampantojos para esquilmar al trabajador. Y porqué el Estado ni ha creado ni creará nunca un sólo puesto de trabajo productivo.

Ricardo Campelo de Magalhães says

I wish someone would have offered me this book before my degree.
It would have saved me a lot of trouble...

Anima says

"Two very different masters teach him this lesson: experience and foresight.

Experience teaches efficaciously but brutally. It instructs us in all the effects of an act by making us feel them, and we cannot fail to learn eventually, from having been burned ourselves, that fire burns.

I should prefer, in so far as possible, to replace this rude teacher with one more gentle: foresight. For that reason I shall investigate the consequences of several economic phenomena, contrasting those that are seen with those that are not seen."

Nathan Albright says

As someone who happens to be a fan of Bastiat's writing [1], I found this book to be deeply interesting. Perhaps, as someone who has now read three of the short books of a short-lived but deeply worthwhile French economist of the mid-19th century, I should stop being surprised at how relevant the author's writings are. Not only does the author provide a firm refutation of the fallacious economic reasoning of socialists and imperialists, continuing his trends in other writings, but the writings also anticipate the sort of ad hominem rhetoric that is still used against those who oppose socialist endeavors. The author's frustration at the misrepresentation of his position regarding government support and the attacks that were made against capitalists as middlemen while not showing the worse record of government as a middleman is the same sort of frustration that has been shared by many a later thinker who has been viewed as an enemy of humanity for pointing out that what government can do the private sector can generally do far better and far more efficiently, largely because it does so indirectly.

This book is a short one, like Bastiat's work in general, about 50 pages in length and divided into twelve shorter essays that were probably published independently as part of the author's efforts to combat socialism in the early French Second Republic before his untimely death due to tuberculosis. In these essays, Bastiat discusses the classic example of the broken window that would later become expanded into a much larger economic lesson by Hazlitt. He talks about the demobilization of troops, taxes, government supported arts, public works, intermediates, restrictions on trade, machinery, credit, Algeria, frugality and luxury, and the right to work and the right to profit. It is hard to know one's proper approach to Bastiat's clear and lucid economic writing. Should we cheer on that Bastiat's writing is still relevant to the political arguments of our own time or lament that the poor logic of socialists has not improved in the last 150 years to something better approaching sound reasoning and fair dealing. The fair reader of this book can take whichever approach they wish, but the results are the same in that this book retains its force and shows Bastiat as a clear thinking person who understands a great deal of what makes political economics such an unpleasant subject.

Again, it should be emphasized that this book is not only short but it is a classic in the best way. Bastiat shows himself indefatigable when it comes to pointing out that believing that Government should not do something does not mean that it should not be done in the first place. Our contemporary age shows both that our society is full of broken windows and that government is not very trustworthy at dealing with those broken windows, wherever or whatever they are. It is to be regretted that to believe that government should not provide health care--because it does a poor job at it and is very inefficient at it--often is viewed as being against health care being provided to those who cannot pay for its full price themselves. One has to deal with the question of what happens, though, if charity is insufficient and people are insufficiently creative at solving problems. How can we make public efforts unnecessary through making private ones more effective? One wishes that Bastiat had more time in writing about these matters because his writings against socialism and in favor of thrift and industry were deeply profound and worthy of reading today.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

Kristy says

It is amazing how much this book (only 46 pages) can be applied TODAY! Mr. Bastiat was a native of France who lived from 1801-1850. Everyone should read this. EVERYONE! He speaks on the disbanding of troops, taxes, theatres, fine arts, public works, the credit, frugality and luxury etc...

Some favorite quotes, "Your arguments are fashionable enough, but they are too absurd to be justified by anything like reason." (Don't you love that! Love it!)

Other phrases/quotes I liked:

"But let us get to the root of the matter. We are deceived by money."

"pretend reformer",

"ignorance proclaiming itself infallible",

"injustice perpetrated by the law",

"no good can come from legal or illegal plunder",

"to take by violence is not to produce but to destroy",

"on a wrong road, inconsistency is inevitable",

"In every public expense, behind the apparent benefit, there is an evil which is not so easy to discern".

"...it almost always happens that when the immediate consequence is favourable, the ultimate consequences are fatal, and the converse."

Karl Nordenstorm says

In this economics-book Bastiat does not only convince you of his opinions. His wit and plane style makes you root for him, and you very well may think of his opponents as ridiculous fools after you put Bastiat away.

Bastiat analyzes economic problems in two ways. He either presents the conflicts as those between free trade and protectionism by painting up absurd extremes of the opposing opinions. For instance suggesting that we treat the sun as a hostile foreign exporter who destroys the domestic candle-industry. The other method is to present the conflicts between economists via extremely concrete scenarios. This is what Bastiat does in the parable about the broken window.

However witty and convincing I find Bastiat, I must admit that he systematically portrays his opponents in the least favorable way possible.

Tyler says

The content of this book is great. Bastiat is a great writer and economist. The biggest quarrel with this book is that it's extremely repetitive. You have it figured out within the first two or three chapters. The content of this book, however, is EXTREMELY important and valuable. This is a good book to give to people who are interested in delving out of mainstream economics or making the people who are interested in mainstream economics a little bit weary of everything they've been taught. Bastiat makes a very compelling, logical, and reasonable case for these counterintuitive cases. I recommend Bastiat to just about anyone and I would this book to them, too. Simply because the information in it is crucial to understand.

David says

Truly a brilliant work! Written over 165 years ago and so applicable and relevant to today's economy and political situation. Understanding that this is an English translation of a French work written and translated with somewhat archaic terms, it is still very clear and understandable. Bastiat makes all his points with sound reasoning and clear logical defense in the most succinct way. The book is a quick read and would benefit anyone who wants to better understand government, political economy and the choices and necessary consequences of various programs. Next to "The Law" by the same author, this must be one of my all-time favorites; it should be re-read on a regular basis.

This public-domain work is available for free in various forms, making it an effortless addition to anyone's library. Electronic versions are available as part of a Bastiat collection from Gutenberg.org as Essays on Political Economy. It is also available as a free PDF and eBook format from Mises.org as The Bastiat Collection. Finally, audiobook versions are available for free downloads from Mises.org and Libravox.org.

Barry says

A great explanation of how a free market is more effective, efficient, and just than government attempts to protect jobs. This should be required reading in high school, and Bastiat's "The Law" in college. The public would no longer be duped into believing that the economy is stimulated by destroying property (ie, Broken Window Fallacy, e.g. Cash for Clunkers), by providing subsidies for certain industries (farming, green energy), or through tariffs on foreign goods.

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<http://www.knigolandia.info/2010/06/b...>

