

from the supposed beneficiaries. The two paragraphs of elaboration that follow the designation of the state as the supreme fiction are as prophetic an indictment of the welfare state as one could find:

Each of us, more or less, would like to profit from the labor of others. One does not dare to proclaim this feeling publicly, one conceals it from oneself, and then what does one do? One imagines an intermediary; one addresses the state, and each class proceeds in turn to say to it: "You, who can take fairly and honorably, take from the public and share with us!" Alas, the state is only too ready to follow such diabolical advice: for it is composed of cabinet ministers, of bureaucrats, of men, in short, who, like all men, carry in their hearts the desire, and always enthusiastically seize the opportunity, to see their wealth and influence grow. The state understands, then, very quickly the use it can make of the role the public entrusts to it. *It will be the arbiter, the master, of all destinies. It will take a great deal; hence, a great deal will remain for itself. It will multiply the number of its agents; it will enlarge the scope of its prerogatives; it will end by acquiring overwhelming proportions.*

But what is most noteworthy is the astonishing blindness of the public to all this. When victorious soldiers reduced the vanquished to slavery they were barbarous, but they

were not absurd. Their object was, as ours is, to live at the expense of others; but, unlike us, they attained it. What are we to think of a people who apparently do not suspect that reciprocal pillage is no less pillage because it is reciprocal, that it is no less criminal because it is carried out legally and in an orderly manner; that it adds nothing to the public welfare; that, on the contrary, it diminishes it by all that this spendthrift intermediary that we call the state costs. (*Italics supplied*).

Tocqueville's Foresight

This prediction of the expanding role of the state recalls another vision of the perceptive French political scientist and traveler in America, Alexis de Tocqueville, expressed in somewhat more poetic terms:

Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent, if, like that authority, its object were to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood; it is well content that the people should rejoice, provided they think of nothing but rejoicing. For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness. It provides for

their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property and subdivides their inheritances. *What remains but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living? . . .*

The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent and guided. Men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence. It does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes and stupifies a people, till *each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd*. I have always thought that servitude of the regular, quiet and gentle kind which I have just described might be combined more easily than is commonly believed with some of the outward forms of freedom; and that it might even establish itself under the wing of the sovereignty of the people. (*Italics supplied*.)

Bastiat's Distinctive Service

Bastiat's works, quite extensive despite the fact that he died comparatively young, are not as well-known to American readers as they should be. So it is a distinct public service of the publishers, the Van Nostrand Company, with the aid of the Volker Foundation,

to issue English translations of three of his works under the titles *Selected Essays on Political Economy* (352 pp., \$7.50), *Economic Sophisms* (291 pp., \$6.75), and *Economic Harmonies* (596 pp., \$11.50).

Unlike economists who put their ideas in forbiddingly abstruse and difficult terms, Bastiat operated with humor and satire, understandable to all. He was a master of the device known as *reductio ad absurdum*, making an unsound idea ridiculous by carrying it to extreme conclusions. Two examples of this method are his proposal for "a negative railway" and, best of all, his imaginary petition of candlemakers against the unfair competition of the sun.

Some eager beaver, intent on the local interests of Bordeaux, had proposed that a new railway from Madrid to Paris should have an artificial break, with change of trains at Bordeaux. This would benefit local hotels, carriers, porters, and others standing to gain employment from such a break. An excellent idea, comments Bastiat. But why stop with Bordeaux? Why not break the railway at half a dozen other way stations, for the same supposedly beneficial results? Better yet, why not construct a railway line that is all breaks, a "negative railway"?