

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