

THE BEST OF BASTIAT #3.1

“The Petition of the Manufacturers of Candles” (October 1845)

“We are suffering from the intolerable competition of a foreign rival whose production of light, it appears, is so far superior to ours that it is flooding our national market at a price that is astonishingly low.”



Claude Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850)

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[February, 2013]

Editor's Introduction

Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850) was the leading advocate of free trade in France during the 1840s. He made a name for himself as a brilliant economic journalist, debunking the myths and misconceptions people held on protectionism in particular and government intervention in general. When revolution broke out in February 1848 Bastiat was elected twice to the Chamber of Deputies where he served on the Finance Committee and struggled to bring government expenditure under control.

Knowing he was dying from a serious throat condition (possibly cancer), Bastiat attempted to complete his magnum opus on economic theory, his *Economic Harmonies*. In this work he showed the very great depth of his economic thinking and made theoretical advances which heralded the Austrian school of economics which emerged later in the 19th century.

Bastiat wrote many short articles between 1845 and 1850 in an attempt to appeal to a general audience by showing the folly and logical incoherence of the arguments for tariff protection and government subsidies to industry. His method was to wittily and cleverly refute the “half-truths,” confusions, and fallacies of the protectionists, or what he called their “economic sophisms.” His article “The Petition of the Manufacturers of Candles” (October 1845) is one of his best known and is an excellent example of his method and style. It appeared in the first collection of his *Economic Sophisms* which was published in January 1846.

“We ask you to be good enough to pass a law which orders the closure of all windows, gables, shades, wind-breaks, shutters, curtains, skylights, fanlights, blinds, in a word, all openings, holes, slits, and cracks through which the light of the sun is accustomed to penetrate into houses to the disadvantage of the fine industries that we flatter ourselves that we have given to the country”

“The Petition of the Manufacturers of Candles, etc.” (October 1845)¹

By the manufacturers of tallow candles, wax candles, lamps, candlesticks, street lamps, snuffers, extinguishers and producers of tallow, oil, resin, alcohol, and in general everything that relates to lighting

To Honorable Members of the Chamber of Deputies

Sirs,

You are doing all right for yourselves. You are rejecting abstract theories; abundance and cheapness are of little account to you. You are concerned most of all with the fate of producers. You want them to be free from foreign competition, in a word, you want to keep the *domestic market* for *domestic labor*.

We come to offer you a wonderful opportunity to apply your ... what will we call it? Your theory? No, nothing is more misleading than theory. Your doctrine? Your system? Your principles ? But you do not like doctrines, you have a horror of systems and as for principles , you declare that none exists in the economic life of society. We will therefore call it your practice, your practice with no theory and no principle.

“We are suffering from the intolerable competition of a foreign rival whose situation with regard to the production of light, it appears, is so far superior to ours that it is flooding our national market at a price that is astonishingly low.”

We are suffering from the intolerable competition of a foreign rival whose situation with regard to the production of light, it appears, is so far superior to ours that it is *flooding* our *national market* at a price that is astonishingly low for, as soon as he comes on the scene, our sales cease, all consumers go to him, and a sector of French industry whose ramifications are countless is

suddenly afflicted with total stagnation. This rival, which is none other than the sun, is waging such a bitter war against us that we suspect that it is instigated by perfidious Albion [1] (good diplomacy in the current climate!), especially as it treats this proud island in a way which it denies us. [2]

We ask you to be good enough to pass a law which orders the closure of all windows, gables, shades, wind-breaks, shutters, curtains, skylights, fanlights, blinds, in a word, all openings, holes, slits, and cracks through which the light of the sun is accustomed to penetrate into houses to the disadvantage of the fine industries that we flatter ourselves that we have given to the country, which cannot now abandon us to such an unequal struggle without being guilty of ingratitude.

Deputies, please do not take our request for satire and do not reject it without at least listening to the reasons we have to support us.

Firstly, if you forbid as far as possible any access to natural light, if you thus create a need for artificial light, what industry in France, would not bit by bit be encouraged?

If more tallow is consumed, more cattle and sheep will be needed and consequently, we will see an increase in artificial meadows, meat, wool, leather and above all, fertilizer, the basis of all agricultural wealth.

“We ask you to be good enough to pass a law which orders the closure of all windows, gables, shades, wind-breaks, shutters, curtains, skylights, fanlights, blinds, in a word, all openings, holes, slits, and cracks through which the light of the sun is accustomed to penetrate into houses to the disadvantage of the fine industries that we flatter ourselves that we have given to the country”

¹ “Pétition des fabricants de chandelles, etc.” (Petition by the Manufacturers of Candles, etc.) in *Sophismes Économiques* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1846).

If more oil is consumed, we will see an expansion in the cultivation of poppies, olive trees, and rapeseed. These rich and soil-exhausting plants will be just the thing to take advantage of the fertility that the rearing of animals will have contributed to our land.

Our moorlands will be covered with coniferous trees. Countless swarms of bees will gather from our mountains scented treasures which now evaporate uselessly like the flowers from which they emanate. There is thus no sector of agriculture that will not experience significant development.

The same is true for shipping. Thousands of ships will go to catch whales, and in a short time we will have a navy capable of upholding the honor of France and satisfying the patriotic susceptibility of us who petition you, the sellers of tallow candles, etc.

But what have we to say about *Articles de Paris*? [3] You can already picture the gilt work, bronzes, and crystal in candlesticks, lamps, chandeliers, and candelabra shining in spacious stores compared with which today's shops are nothing but boutiques.

Even the poor resin tapper on top of his sand dune or the poor miner in the depths of his black shaft would see his earnings and well-being improved.

Think about it, sirs, and you will remain convinced that perhaps there is not one Frenchman, from the wealthy shareholder of Anzin to a humble match seller, whose fate would not be improved by the success of our request.

We anticipate your objections, sirs, but you cannot put forward a single one that you have not culled from the well-thumbed books of the supporters of free trade. We dare to challenge you to say one word against us that will not be turned instantly against yourselves and the principle that governs your entire policy.

Will you tell us that if we succeed in this protection France will gain nothing, since consumers will bear its costs?

Our reply to you is this:

You no longer have the right to invoke the interests of the consumer. When the latter was in conflict with the producers, you sacrificed him on every occasion. You did this to *stimulate* production and to *increase its domain*. For the same reason, you should do this once again.

You yourselves have forestalled the objection. When you were told: "Consumers have an interest in the free introduction of iron, coal, sesame, wheat, and cloth", you replied: "Yes, but producers have an

interest in their exclusion." Well then, if consumers have an interest in the admission of natural light, producers have one in its prohibition.

"But," you also said, "producers and consumers are one and the same. If manufacturers gain from protection, they will cause agriculture to gain. If agriculture prospers, it will provide markets for factories." Well, then, if you grant us the monopoly of lighting during the day, first of all we will purchase a great deal of tallow, charcoal, oil, resin, wax alcohol, silver, iron, bronze, and crystal to fuel our industry and, what is more, once we and our countless suppliers have become rich, we will consume a great deal and spread affluence throughout the sectors of the nation's production.

Will you say that sunlight is a free gift and that to reject free gifts would be to reject wealth itself, even under the pretext of stimulating the means of acquiring it?

Just take note that you have a fatal flaw at the heart of your policy and that up to now you have always rejected foreign products *because* they come close to being free gifts and all the more so to the degree that they come closer to this. You had only a *half reason* to accede to the demands of other monopolists; to accede to our request, you have a *complete reason* and to reject us precisely on the basis that we are better *founded* would be to advance the equation $+ x + = -$; in other words it would be to pile *absurdity* on *absurdity*.

"You no longer have the right to invoke the interests of the consumer. When the latter was in conflict with the producers, you sacrificed him on every occasion. You did this to stimulate production and to increase its domain. For the same reason, you should do this once again."

Work and nature contribute in varying proportions to the production of a product, depending on the country and climate. The portion provided by nature is always free; it is the portion which labor contributes that establishes its value and is paid for.

If an orange from Lisbon is sold at half the price of an orange from Paris, it is because natural and consequently free heat gives to one what the other owes to artificial and consequently expensive heat.

Therefore when an orange reaches us from Portugal, it can be said that it is given to us half free and half paid for, or in other words, at *half the price* compared to the one from Paris. Well, it is precisely *its being half-free* (excuse the expression) that you use as an argument to exclude it. You say, “How can domestic labor withstand the competition of foreign labor when domestic labor has to do everything and foreign labor only half of the task, with the sun accomplishing the rest?” But if this matter of things being *half-free* persuades you to reject competition how will things being *totally free* lead you to accept competition? Either you are not logicians or, in rejecting half-free products as harmful to our domestic economy, you have to reject totally free goods *a fortiori* and with twice as much zeal.

“You have a fatal flaw at the heart of your policy and that up to now you have always rejected foreign products because they come close to being free gifts.”

Once again, when a product, coal, iron, wheat, or cloth, comes to us from abroad and if we can acquire it with less work than if we made it ourselves, the difference is a free gift bestowed on us. This gift is more or less significant depending on whether the difference is greater or lesser. It ranges from one-quarter to half- or three-quarters of the value of the product if foreigners ask us only for three-quarters, half-, or one-quarter of the payment. It is as total as it can be when the donor asks nothing from us, like the sun for light. The question, which we set out formally, is to know whether you want for France the benefit of free consumption or the alleged advantages of expensive production. Make your choice, but be logical, for as long as you reject, as you do, foreign coal, iron, wheat, and cloth, *the closer* their price gets to *zero*, how inconsistent it would be to accept sunlight, whose cost is *zero*, throughout the day?

Notes

[1] “Perfidious Albion” (or faithless or deceitful England) was the disparaging name given to Britain by its French opponents. It probably dates from the 1790s, when the British monarchy subsidized the other monarchies of Europe in their struggle against the French Republic during the revolution. Bastiat makes fun of this name in a later Sophism by talking about “Perfidious Normandy.” See ES2, XIII “Protection, or the Three Municipal Magistrates,” below. See the glossary entry on “Perfidious Albion.”

[2] This is a dig by Bastiat at the famously bad British weather. By making it so often overcast in Britain the sun seems to be favoring the British artificial light industry in a way that it doesn't for the French industry which has to suffer economic hardship because there is more sunny weather (at least in the south of France). The average number of hours of sunshine per year in Britain (1971-2000) was 1,457.4. For France, Lille in the north east had 1,617 hours (1991-2010), Paris had 1,662 hours, Bordeaux (near where Bastiat lived) had 2,035 hours, and Marseille on the Mediterranean had 2,858. For Australia (1981-2010), Townsville in North Queensland had 3,139 hours, Sydney had 2,592, and Hobart in the south had 2,263 hours.

[3] “Articles de Paris” were high priced luxury goods produced in France and included leather goods, jewelry, fashion clothing, perfume, and other such goods.

Further Information

SOURCE

Originally published as “Pétition des fabricants de chandelles, etc.” (Petition by the Manufacturers of Candles, etc.) in the *Journal des Économistes*, October 1845, T. 12, p. 204-07. It later appeared in the first book of *Sophismes Économiques* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1846). The collected “economic sophisms” will appear in vol. 3 of Liberty Fund’s *The Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat* (forthcoming).

LF’s edition of *The Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat*, in 6 Vols. ed. Jacques de Guenin (2011). As each vol. is published it will appear on the OLL at <oll.libertyfund.org/title/2451>.

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FURTHER READING

More works by Bastiat can be found here <oll.libertyfund.org/person/25>.

“I love all forms of freedom; and among these, the one that is the most universally useful to mankind, the one you enjoy at each moment of the day and in all of life’s circumstances, is the freedom to work and to trade. I know that making things one’s own is the fulcrum of society and even of human life.”

(Draft Preface to Economic Harmonies, 1847)



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