

FREDERIC BASTIAT

PROTECTION
AND
COMMUNISM

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Frederic Bastiat

Protection and Communism

Sir,

Do not be ungrateful to the revolution of February. It may have surprised, perhaps disturbed you, but it has also afforded you, whether as an author, an orator, or a practised statesman, some unexpected triumphs. Amidst these successes, there is one certainly of no usual character. We not long ago read in *La Presse*, 'The Association for the Protection of National Labour (the ancient Mimerel Club)¹ is about to address a circular to all its correspondents, to announce that a subscription is opened for the purpose of promoting in manufactories the circulation of M. Thiers's book upon Property. The association itself subscribes for 5000 copies.' Would that I had been present when this flattering announcement met your eyes. It should have made them sparkle with joy. We have good reason to say that the ways of Providence are as infallible as they are impenetrable. For if you will bear with me for a moment I will endeavour to prove that Protection, when fully developed, and pushed to its legitimate consequences, becomes Communism. It is sufficiently singular that a champion of Protection should discover that he is a promoter of Communism; but what is more extraordinary and more consoling still, is the fact that we find a powerful association, that was formed for the purpose of propagating theoretically and practically the principles of Communism (in the manner deemed most profitable to its members) now devoting the half of its resources to destroy the evil which it has done with the other half.

I repeat it, – this is consoling. It assures us of the inevitable triumph of truth, since it shows us the real and first propagators of subversive doctrines, startled at their success, industriously correcting with the proper antidote the poison they had spread.

This supposes, it is true, the identity of the principles of Communism and of Protection, and perhaps you do not admit this identity, though, to speak the truth, it seems to me impossible that you could have written four hundred pages upon Property without being struck by it. Perhaps you imagine that some efforts made in favour of commercial freedom, or rather of free trade, the impatience of a discussion without results, the ardour of the contest, and the keenness of the struggle, have made me view (what happens too often to all of us) the errors of my adversaries in exaggerated colours. But, beyond question, according to my idea, it requires but little effort to develop the principles you have been advocating into those of Communism. How can it be that our great manufacturers, landed proprietors, rich bankers, able statesmen, have become, without knowing or wishing it, the introducers, the very apostles of Communism in France? And why not, I would ask? There are numerous workmen fully convinced of the *right of labour*, and consequently Communists also without knowing or wishing it, and who would not acknowledge the title. The reason of this is, that amongst all classes interest biases the will, and the will, as Pascal says, is the chief element of our faith. Under another name, many of our working classes, very honest people be it observed, use Communism as they have always used it, namely, on the condition that the wealth of others should alone be liable to the law. But as soon as the principle, extending itself, would apply the same rule to their own property – oh! then Communism is held in detestation, and their former principles are rejected with loathing. To express surprise at this, is simply to confess ignorance of the human heart, its secret workings, and how strong its inclination is to practise self-deception.²

¹ An association, Mr. Porter informs us, composed like that assembling (or that did assemble, for we are not quite sure whether it still exists,) at No. 17, New Bond Street, exclusively of producers, at least of the article sought to be protected, and therefore of persons who believe themselves to be interested in excluding from the home market the productions of others.

² The truth of this is found on all occasions where the interests or the passions of men are concerned, and was rather amusingly shown in many ways when the free-trade measures of Sir R. Peel were being carried through. Then every interest desired free-trade, except with reference to the articles produced by itself.

No, Sir; it is not the heat of controversy, which has betrayed me in seeing the doctrine of Protection in this light, for, on the contrary, it was because I saw it in this point of view before the struggle commenced that I am thus engaged. Believe me that to extend somewhat our foreign commerce – a consequential result which, however, is far from despicable – was never my governing motive; I believed, and I still believe, that property itself was concerned in the question; I believed, and I still believe, that our tariff of customs, owing to the principle which has given it birth, and the arguments by which it is defended, has made a breach in the very principle of property itself, through which all the rest of our legislation threatens to force itself. In considering this state of things, it seems to me that a Communism, the true effect and range of which, (I must say this to be just,) was not contemplated by its supporters, was on the point of overwhelming us. It seems to me that this particular species of Communism (for there are several kinds of it) flows logically from the arguments of the protectionists, and is involved when those arguments are pressed to their legitimate conclusion. It is upon this ground, therefore, that it seems to me of the utmost importance to meet the evil, for, fortified as it is by sophistical statements, and sanctioned by high authority, there is no hope of eradicating the error while such statements are permitted to take possession of and to distract the mind of the public. It is thus that we view the matter at Bordeaux, Paris, Marseilles, Lyons, and elsewhere, where we have organized the free-trade association. Commercial freedom, considered by itself, is without doubt a great blessing to the people; but if we had only this object in view, our body should have been named the *Association for Commercial Freedom*, or, more accurately, *for the Gradual Reform of the Tariffs*. But the word 'free-trade' implies the *free disposal of the produce of labour*, in other terms '*property*' and it is for this reason that we have preferred it. We knew, indeed, that the term would give rise to many difficulties. It affirmed a principle, and from that moment all the supporters of the opposite one ranged themselves against us. More than this, it was extremely objectionable, even to some of those who were the most disposed to second us, that is to say, to merchants and traders more engaged in reforming the Customs than in overthrowing Communism. Havre, while sympathizing with our views, refused to enlist under our banner. On all sides I was told, 'Let us obtain without loss of time some modification of our tariff, without publishing to the world our extreme pretensions.' I replied, 'If you have only that in view, exert your influence through your chambers of commerce.' To this they answered, 'The word free-trade frightens people, and retards our success.' Nothing is more true; but I would derive even from the terror inspired by this word my strongest arguments for its adoption. The more disliked it is, say I, the more it proves that the true notion of property is obscured. The doctrine of Protection has clouded ideas, and confused and false ideas have in their turn supported Protection. To obtain by surprise, or with the consent of the Government, an accidental amelioration of the tariff may modify an effect, but cannot destroy a cause. I retain, then, the word *Free-trade*, not in the mere spirit of opposition, but still, I admit, because of the obstacles it creates or encounters – obstacles which, while they betray the mischief at work, bear along with them the certain proof, that the very foundation of social order was threatened.

It is not sufficient to indicate our views by a word; they should be defined. This has been done, and I here transcribe, as a programme, the first announcement or manifesto of this association.

'When uniting for the defence of a great cause, the undersigned feel the necessity of declaring their creed: of proclaiming the *de-sign, the province, the means and the principles of their association*.

'Exchange is a natural right, like property. Every one who has made or acquired any article should have the option either to apply it immediately to his own use, or to transfer it to any one, whomsoever he may be, who may consent to give him something he may prefer to it in exchange. To deprive him of this power when he makes no use of it contrary to public order or morality, and solely to gratify the convenience of another, is to legalise a robbery – to violate the principle of justice.

'Again, it is to violate the conditions of social order – for what true social order can exist in the midst of a community, in which each individual interest, aided in this by law and public opinion, aims at success by the depression of all the others?

'It is to disown that providential superintendence which presides over human affairs, and made manifest by the infinite variety of climates, seasons, natural advantages and resources, benefits which God has so unequally distributed among men to unite them by commercial intercourse in the ties of a common brotherhood.

'It is to retard or counteract the development of public prosperity, since he who is not free to barter as he pleases, is not free to select his occupation, and is compelled to give an unnatural direction to his efforts, to his faculties, to his capital, and to those agents which nature has placed at his disposal.

'In short, it is to imperil the peace of nations, for it disturbs the relations which unite them, and which render wars improbable in proportion as they would be burdensome.

'The association has, then, for its object Free-trade.

'The undersigned do not contest that society has the right to impose on merchandise, which crosses the frontier, custom dues to meet national expenses, provided they are determined by the consideration of the wants of the Treasury alone.

'But as soon as a tax, losing its fiscal character, aims at the exclusion of foreign produce, to the detriment of the Treasury itself, in order to raise artificially the price of similar national products, and thus to levy contributions on the community for the advantage of a class, from that instant Protection, or rather robbery, displays itself, and *this* is the principle which the association proposes to eradicate from the public mind, and to expunge from our laws, independently of all reciprocity, and of the systems which prevail elsewhere.

'Though this association has for its object the complete destruction of the system of protection, it does not follow that it requires or expects such a reformation to be accomplished in a day, as by the stroke of a wand. To return even from evil to good, from an artificial state of things to one more natural, calls for the exercise of much prudence and precaution. To carry out the details belongs to the supreme power – the province of the association is to propagate the principle, and to make it popular.

'As to the means which the association may employ to accomplish its ends, it will never seek for any but what are legal and constitutional.

'Finally, the association has nothing to do with party politics. It does not advocate any particular interest, class or section of the country. It embraces the cause of eternal justice, of peace, of union, of free intercourse, of brotherhood among all men – the cause of public weal, which is identical in every respect with that of the *public consumer*.'

Is there a word in this programme which does not show an ardent wish to confirm and strengthen, or rather perhaps to re-establish, in the minds of men the idea of property, perverted, as it is, by the system of Protection? Is it not evident that the interest of commerce is made secondary to the interest of society generally? Remark that the tariff, in itself good or evil in the financial point of view, engages little of our attention. But, as soon as it acts *intentionally* with a view to Protection, that is to say, as soon as it develops the principle of; spoliation, and ignores, in fact, the right of property, we combat it, not as a tariff, but as a system. *It is there*, we say, that we must eradicate the principle from the public mind, in order to blot it from our laws.³

It will be asked, no doubt, why, having in view a general principle of this importance, we have confined the struggle to the merits of a particular question.

³ As Mr. Porter says, in one of his excellent notes on M. Bastiat's work on *Popular Fallacies*, 'The true history of all progress in regard to great questions, involving change in social policy, is here indicated by M. Bastiat. It is in vain that we look for such change through the enlightenment of what should be the governing bodies. In this respect, all legislative assemblies, whether called a Chamber of Deputies or a House of Commons, are truly representatives of the public mind, never placing themselves in advance, nor lagging much behind the general conviction. This is not, indeed, a new discovery, but we are much indebted to Mr. Cobden and the leading members of the Anti-Corn-Law League for having placed it in a point of view so prominent that it can no longer be mistaken. Hereafter, the course of action is perfectly clear upon all questions that require legislative sanction. This can only be obtained through the enlightenment of the constituency; but when such enlightenment has been accomplished – when those mainly interested in bringing about the change have once formed their opinion in its favour, the task is achieved.'

The reason of this, is simple. It is necessary to oppose association to association, to engage the interests of men, and thus draw volunteers into our ranks. We know well that the contest between the Protectionists and Free-traders cannot be prolonged without raising and finally settling all questions, moral, political, philosophical, and economical, connected with property. And since the Mimerel Club, in directing its efforts to one end, had weakened the principle of property, so we aimed at inspiring it with renewed vigour, in pursuing a course diametrically opposite.

But what matters it what I may have said or thought at other times? What matters it that I have perceived, or thought that I have perceived, a certain connexion between Protection and Communism? The essential thing is to prove that this connexion exists, and I proceed to ascertain whether this be so.

You no doubt remember the time when, with your usual ability, you drew from the lips of Monsieur Proudhon this celebrated declaration, 'Give me the right of labour, and I will abandon the right of property.' M. Proudhon does not conceal that, in his eyes, these two rights are incompatible.

If property is incompatible with the right of labour, and if the right of labour is founded upon the same principle as Protection, what conclusion can we draw, but that Protection is itself incompatible with property? In geometry, we regard as an incontestable truth, that two things equal to a third are equal to each other.

Now it happens that an eminent orator, M. Billault, has thought it right to support at the tribune the right of labour. This was not easy, in the face of the declaration which escaped from M. Proudhon. M. Billault understood very well, that to make the state interfere to weigh in the balance the fortunes, and equalize the conditions, of men, tends towards Communism; and what did he say to induce the National Assembly to violate property and the principles thereof? He told you with all simplicity that he asked you to do what, in effect, you already do by your tariff. His aim does not go beyond a somewhat more extended application of the doctrines now admitted by you, and applied in practice. Here are his words: —

'Look at our custom-house tariff? By their prohibitions, their differential taxes, their premiums, their combinations of all kinds, it is society which aids, which supports, which retards or advances all the combinations of national labour; it not only holds the balance between French labour, which it protects, and foreign labour, but on the soil of France itself it is perpetually interfering between the different interests of the country. Listen to the perpetual complaints made by one class against another: see, for example, those who employ iron in their processes, complaining of the protection given to French iron over foreign iron; those who employ flax or cotton thread, protesting against the protection granted to French thread, in opposition to the introduction of foreign thread; and it is thus with all the others. Society (it ought to be said, the government) finds itself then forcibly mixed up with all these struggles, with all the perplexities connected with the regulation of labour; it is always actively interfering between them, directly and indirectly, and from the moment that the question of custom duties is broached, you will see that you will be, in spite of yourselves, forced to acknowledge the fact and its cause, and to take on yourself the protection of every interest.

'The necessity which is thus imposed on the government to interfere in the question of labour, should not, then, be considered an objection to the debt which society owes to the poor workmen.'

And you will remark well that in his arguments, M. Billault has not the least intention of being sarcastic. He is no Free-trader, intentionally disguised for the purpose of exposing the inconsistency of the Protectionists. No; M. Billault is himself a Protectionist, *bonâ fide*. He aims at equalizing our fortunes by law. With this view, he considers the action of the tariffs useful; and being met by an obstacle – the right of property – he leaps over it, as you do. The right of labour is then pointed out to him, which is a second step in the same direction. He again encounters the right of property, and again he leaps over it; but turning round, he is surprised to see you do not follow him. He asks the reason. If you reply – I admit in principle that the law may violate property, but I find it *inopportune* that this should be done under the particular form of the right of labour, M. Billault would understand you, and discuss with you the secondary question of expediency. But you raise up, in opposition to

his views, the principle of property itself. This astonishes him; and he conceives that he is entitled to say to you – Do not act with inconsistency, and deny the right of labour on the ground of its infringement of the right of property, since you violate this latter right by your tariffs, whenever you find it convenient to do so. He might add, with some reason, by the protective tariffs you often violate the property of the poor for the advantage of the rich. By the right of labour, you would violate the property of the rich to the advantage of the poor. By what chance does it happen that your scruples stop short at the point they do?

Between you and M. Billault there is only one point of difference. Both of you proceed in the same direction – that of Communism: only you have taken but one step, and he has taken two. On this account the advantage, in my eyes at least, is on your side; but you lose it on the ground of logic.

For since you go along with him, though more slowly than he does, he is sufficiently well pleased to have you as his follower. This is an inconsistency which M. Billault has managed to avoid, but, alas! to fall himself also into a sad dilemma! M. Billault is too enlightened not to feel, indistinctly perhaps, the danger of each step that he takes in the path which ends in Communism. He does not assume the ridiculous position of the champion of property, at the very moment of violating it; but how does he justify himself? He calls to his aid the favourite axiom of all who can reconcile two irreconcilable things — *There are no fixed principles*. Property, Communism – let us take a little from both, according to circumstances.

'To my mind, the pendulum of civilization which oscillates from the one principle to the other, according to the wants of the moment, but which always makes the greater progress if, after strongly inclining towards the absolute freedom of individual action, it falls back on the necessity of government interference.'

There is, then, no such thing as truth in the world. No principles exist, since *the pendulum ought to oscillate from one principle to the other, according to the wants of the moment*. Oh! metaphor, to what a point thou wouldst bring us, if allowed!

But as you have well said, in your place in the Assembly, one cannot discuss all parts of this subject at once, I will not at the present moment examine the system of Protection in the purely economic point of view. I do not inquire then whether, with regard to national wealth, it does more good than harm, or the reverse. The only point that I wish to prove is, that it is nothing else than a species of Communism. MM. Billault and Proudhon have commenced the proof, and I will try and complete it.

And first, What is to be understood by Communism? There are several modes, if not of realizing community of goods, at least of trying to do so. M. de Lamartine has reckoned four. You think that there are a thousand, and I am of your opinion. However, I believe that all these could be reduced under three general heads, of which one only, according to me, is truly dangerous.

First, it might occur to two or more men to combine their labour and their time. While they do not threaten the security, infringe the liberty, or usurp the property of others, neither directly nor indirectly, if they do any mischief, they do it to themselves. The tendency of such men will be always to attempt in remote places the realization of their dream. Whoever has reflected upon these matters knows these enthusiasts will probably perish from want, victims to their illusions. In our times, Communists of this description have given to their imaginary elysium the name of Icaria,⁴ as if they had had a melancholy presentiment of the frightful end towards which they were hastening.

⁴ This, as most of our readers are aware, is an imaginary country at the other side of the world, where a state of circumstances is supposed to exist productive of general happiness – moral and physical – to all. The chief creator of this modern Utopia, from which indeed the idea is confessedly taken, is M. Cabet, whose book was published during the year of the late revolution in France. It is meant to be a grave essay on possible things, but could only be considered so, we venture to think, in Paris, and only there in times of unusual excitement. The means by which M. Cabet and his followers suppose their peculiar society could be established and maintained, are beyond conception false, ludicrous, and puerile. M. Cabet was obliged to leave France for a grave offence, but found a refuge and no inconsiderable number of followers in America, where, by the side of much that is excellent and hopeful, flourishes, perhaps, under present circumstances, as a necessary parallel, many of the wild and exploded theories of the world.

We may lament over their blindness; we should try to rescue them if they were in a state to hear us, but society has nothing to fear from their chimeras.

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