

Government

Frédéric Bastiat

1849

I wish some one would offer a prize for a good, simple, and intelligent definition of the word "Government."

What an immense service it would confer on society!

The Government! what is it? where is it? what does it do? what ought it to do? All we know is, that it is a mysterious personage; and, assuredly, it is the most solicited, the most tormented, the most overwhelmed, the most admired, the most accused, the most invoked, and the most provoked of any personage in the world.

I have not the pleasure of knowing my reader but I would stake ten to one that for six months he has been making Utopias, and if so, that he is looking to Government for the realization of them.

And should the reader happen to be a lady: I have no doubt that she is sincerely desirous of seeing all the evils of suffering humanity remedied, and that she thinks this might easily be done, if Government would only undertake it.

But, alas! that poor unfortunate personage, like Figaro, knows not to whom to listen, nor where to turn. The hundred thousand mouths of the press and of the platform cry out all at once--"Organize labor and workmen."

"Repress insolence and the tyranny of capital."

"Make experiments upon manure and eggs."

"Cover the country with railways."

"Irrigate the plains."

"Plant the hills."

"Make model farms."

"Found social workshops."

"Nurture children."

"Instruct the youth."

"Assist the aged."

"Send the inhabitants of towns into the country."

"Equalize the profits of all trades."

"Lend money without interest to all who wish to borrow."

"Emancipate oppressed people everywhere."

"Rear and perfect the saddle-horse."

"Encourage the arts, and provide us musicians, painters, and architects."

"Restrict commerce, and at the same time create a merchant navy."

"Discover truth, and put a grain of reason into our heads. The mission of Government is to enlighten, to develop, to extend, to fortify, to spiritualize, and to sanctify the soul of the people."

"Do have a little patience, gentlemen" says Government, in a beseeching tone. "I will do what I can to satisfy you, but for this I must have resources. I have been preparing plans for five or six taxes, which are quite new, and not at all oppressive. You will see how willingly people will pay them."

Then comes a great exclamation: "No! indeed! where is the merit of doing a thing with resources? Why, it does not deserve the name of a Government!

So far from loading us with fresh taxes, we would have you withdraw the old ones. You ought to suppress

"The tobacco tax."

"The tax on liquors."

"The tax on letters."

"Custom-house duties."

"Patents."

In the midst of this tumult, and now that the country has again and again changed the

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administration, for not having satisfied all its demands, I wanted to show that they were contradictory. But, what could I have been thinking about? Could I not keep this unfortunate observation to myself!

I have lost my character forever! I am looked upon as a man without heart and without feeling - a dry philosopher, an individualist, a plebeian--in a word, an economist of the practical school. But, pardon me, sublime writers, who stop at nothing, not even at contradictions. I am wrong, without a doubt, and I would willingly retract. I should be glad enough, you may be sure, if you had really discovered a beneficent and inexhaustible being, calling itself the Government, which has bread for all mouths, work for all hands, capital for all enterprises, credit for all projects, oil for all wounds, balm for all sufferings, advice for all perplexities, solutions for all doubts, truths for all intellects, diversions for all who want them, milk for infancy, and wine for old age--which can provide for all our wants, satisfy all our curiosity, correct all our errors, repair all our faults, and exempt us henceforth from the necessity for foresight, prudence, judgment, sagacity, experience, order, economy, temperance, and activity.

What reason could I have for not desiring to see such a discovery made? Indeed, the more I reflect upon it, the more do I see that nothing could be more convenient than that we should all of us have within our reach an inexhaustible source of wealth and enlightenment--a universal physician, an unlimited treasure, and an infallible counselor, such as you describe Government to be. Therefore it is that I want to have it pointed out and defined, and that a prize should be offered to the first discoverer of the phoenix. For no one would think of asserting that this precious discovery has yet been made, since up to this time everything presenting itself under the name of the Government has at some time been overturned by the people, precisely because it does not fulfill the rather contradictory conditions of the programme.

I will venture to say that I fear we are, in this respect, the dupes of one of the strangest illusions which have ever taken possession of the human mind.

Man recoils from trouble--from suffering; and yet he is condemned by nature to the suffering of privation, if he does not take the trouble to work. He has to choose, then, between these two evils. What means can he adopt to avoid both? There remains now, and there will remain, only one way, which is, to enjoy the labor of others. Such a course of conduct prevents the trouble and the satisfaction from preserving their natural proportion, and causes all the trouble to become the lot of one set of persons, and all the satisfaction that of another. This is the origin of slavery and of plunder, whatever its form may be--whether that of wars, imposition, violence, restrictions, frauds, &c.--monstrous abuses, but consistent with the thought which has given them birth. Oppression should be detested and resisted--it can hardly be called absurd.

Slavery is disappearing, thank heaven! and, on the other hand, our disposition to defend our property prevents direct and open plunder from being easy.

One thing, however, remains--it is the original inclination which exists in all men to divide the lot of life into two parts, throwing the trouble upon others, and keeping the satisfaction for themselves. It remains to be shown under what new form this sad tendency is manifesting itself.

The oppressor no longer acts directly and with his own powers upon his victim. No, our conscience has become too sensitive for that. The tyrant and his victim are still present, but there is an intermediate person between them, which is the Government--that is, the Law itself. What can be better calculated to silence our scruples, and, which is perhaps better appreciated, to overcome all resistance? We all therefore, put in our claim, under some pretext or other, and apply to Government. We say to it, "I am dissatisfied at the proportion between my labor and my enjoyments. I should like, for the sake of restoring the desired equilibrium, to take a part of the possessions of others. But this would be dangerous. Could not you facilitate the thing for me? Could you not find me a good place? or check the industry of my competitors? or, perhaps, lend me gratuitously some capital which, you may take from its possessor? Could you not bring up my children at the public expense? or grant me some prizes? or secure me a competence when I have attained my fiftieth year? By this mean I shall gain my end with an easy conscience, for the law will have acted for me, and I shall have all the advantages of plunder, without its risk or its disgrace!"

As it is certain, on the one hand, that we are all making some similar request to the Government; and as, on the other, it is proved that Government cannot satisfy one party without adding to the labor of the others, until I can obtain another definition of the word Government I feel authorized to give it my own. Who knows but it may obtain the prize? Here it is:

"Government is the great fiction through which everybody endeavors to live at the expense of everybody else."

For now, as formerly, every one is, more or less, for profiting by the labors of others. No one would dare to profess such a sentiment; he even hides it from himself; and then what is done? A medium is thought of; Government is applied to, and every class in its turn comes to it, and says, "You, who can take justifiably and honestly, take from the public, and we will partake." Alas! Government is only too much disposed to follow this diabolical advice, for it is composed of ministers and officials--of men, in short, who, like all other men, desire in their hearts, and always seize every opportunity with eagerness, to increase their wealth and influence. Government is not slow to perceive the advantages it may derive from the part which is entrusted to it by the public. It is glad to be the judge and the master of the destinies of all; it will take much, for then a large share will remain for itself; it will multiply the number of its agents; it will enlarge the circle of its privileges; it will end by appropriating a ruinous proportion.

But the most remarkable part of it is the astonishing blindness of the public through it all. When successful soldiers used to reduce the vanquished to slavery, they were barbarous, but they were not absurd. Their object, like ours, was to live at other people's expense, and they did not fail to do so. What are we to think of a people who never seem to suspect that reciprocal plunder is no less plunder because it is reciprocal; that it is no less criminal because it is executed legally and with order; that it adds nothing to the public good; that it diminishes it, just in proportion to the cost of the expensive medium which we call the Government?

And it is this great chimera which the French nation, for example, placed in 1848, for the edification of the people, as a frontispiece to its Constitution. The following is the beginning of the preamble to this Constitution:--

"France has constituted itself a republic for the purpose of raising all the citizens to an ever-increasing degree of morality, enlightenment, and well-being."

Thus it is France, or an abstraction, which is to raise the French to morality, well-being, &c. Is it not by yielding to this strange delusion that we are led to expect everything from an energy not our own? Is it not giving out that there is, independently of the French, a virtuous, enlightened, and rich being, who can and will bestow upon them its benefits? Is not this supposing, and certainly very gratuitously, that there are between France and the French--between the simple, abridged, and abstract denomination of all the individualities, and these individualities themselves--relations as of father to son, tutor to his pupil, professor to his scholar? I know it is often said, metaphorically, "the country is a tender mother." But to show the inanity of such a constitutional proposition, it is only needed to show that it may be reversed, not only without inconvenience, but even with advantage. Would it be less exact to say:

"The French have constituted themselves a Republic to raise France to an ever-increasing degree of morality, enlightenment, and well being."

Now, where is the value of an axiom where the subject and the attribute could change places without inconvenience? Everybody understands what is meant by this: "The mother will feed the child." But it would be ridiculous to say, "The child will feed the mother."

The Americans formed another idea of the relations of the citizens with the Government when they placed these simple words at the head of their constitution:--

"We, the people of the United States, for the purpose of forming a more perfect union, of establishing justice, of securing interior tranquillity, of providing for our common defense, of increasing the general well-being, and of securing the benefits of liberty to ourselves and to our posterity, decree," &c.

Here there is no chimerical creation, no abstraction, from which the citizens may demand everything. They expect nothing except from themselves and their own energy.

If I may be permitted to criticise the first words of the French Constitution of 1848, I would remark, that what I complain of is something more than a mere metaphysical subtilty, as might seem at first sight.

I contend that this personification of Government has been, in past times, and will be hereafter, a fertile source of calamities and revolutions.

There is the public on one side, Government on the other, considered as two distinct beings; the latter bound to bestow upon the former, and the former having the right to claim from the latter, all imaginable human benefits. What will be the consequence?

In fact, Government is not maimed, and cannot be so. It has two hands--one to receive and the other to give; in other words, it has a rough hand and a smooth one. The activity of the second necessarily subordinate to the activity of the first. Strictly, Government may take and not restore. This is evident, and may be explained by the porous and absorbing nature of its hands, which always retain a part, and sometimes the whole, of what they touch. But the thing that never was seen, and never will be seen or conceived, is, that Government can restore to the public more than it has taken from it. It is therefore ridiculous for us to appear before it in the humble attitude of beggars. It is radically impossible for it to confer a particular benefit upon any one of the individualities which constitute the community, without inflicting a greater injury upon the community as a whole.

Our requisitions, therefore, place it in a dilemma. If it refuses to grant the requests made to it, it is accused of weakness, ill-will, and incapacity. If it endeavors to grant them, it is obliged to load the people with fresh taxes--to do more harm than good, and to bring upon itself from another quarter the general displeasure.

Thus, the public has two hopes, and Government makes two promises--many benefits and no taxes. Hopes and promises, which, being contradictory, can never be realized.

Now, is not this the cause of all our revolutions? For, between the Government, which lavishes promises which it is impossible to perform, and the public, which has conceived hopes which can never be realized, two classes of men interpose--the ambitious and the Utopians. It is circumstances which give these their cue. It is enough if these vassals of popularity cry out to the people: "The authorities are deceiving you; if we were in their place, we would load you with benefits and exempt you from taxes."

And the people believe, and the people hope, and the people make a revolution!

No sooner are their friends at the head of affairs, than they are called upon to redeem their pledge. "Give us work, bread, assistance, credit, instruction, more money," say the people; "and withhold deliver us, as you promised, from the demands of the tax-gatherers."

The new Government is no less embarrassed than the former one, for it soon finds that it is much more easy to promise than to perform. It tries to gain time, for this is necessary for maturing its vast projects. At first, it makes a few timid attempts. On one hand it institutes a little elementary instruction; on the other, it makes a little reduction in some taxes. But the contradiction is forever starting up before it; if it would be philanthropic, it must attend to its exchequer; if it neglects its exchequer, it must abstain from being philanthropic.

These two promises are for ever clashing with each other; it cannot be otherwise. To live upon credit, which is the same as exhausting the future, is certainly a present means of reconciling them: an attempt is made to do a little good now, at the expense of a great deal of harm in future. But such proceedings call forth the spectre of bankruptcy, which puts an end to credit. What is to be done then? Why, then, the new Government takes a bold step; it unites all its forces in order to maintain itself; it smothers opinion, has recourse to arbitrary measures, ridicules its former maxims, declares that it is impossible to conduct the administration except at the risk of being unpopular; in short, it proclaims itself governmental. And it is here that other candidates for popularity are waiting for it. They exhibit the same illusion, pass by the same way, obtain the same success, and are soon swallowed up in the same gulf.

We had arrived at this point, in France, in February, 1849. At this time the illusion which is the subject of this article had made more way than at any former period in the ideas of the French people, in connection with Socialist doctrines. They expected, more firmly than ever, that Government, under a republican form, would open in grand style the source of benefits and close that of taxation. "We have often been deceived," said the people; "but we will see to it ourselves this time, and take care not to be deceived again?"

What could the Provisional Government do? Alas! just that which always is done in similar circumstances--make promises, and gain time.

It did so, of course; and to give its promises more weight, it announced them publicly thus: "Increase of prosperity, diminution of labor, assistance, credit, gratuitous instruction, agricultural colonies, cultivation of waste land, and, at the same time, reduction of the tax on salt, liquor, letters, meat; all this shall be granted when the National Assembly meets."

The National Assembly meets, and, as it is impossible to realize two contradictory things, its task, its sad task, is to withdraw, as gently as possible, one after the other, all the decrees of the Provisional Government. However, in order somewhat to mitigate the cruelty of the deception, it is found necessary to negotiate a little. Certain engagements are fulfilled, others are, in a measure, begun, and therefore the new administration is compelled to contrive some new taxes.

Now, I transport myself, in thought, to a period a few months hence, and ask myself, with sorrowful forebodings, what will come to pass when agents of the new Government go into the country to collect new taxes upon legacies, revenues, and the profits of agricultural traffic? It is to be hoped that my presentiments may not be verified, but I foresee a difficult part for the candidates for popularity to play.

Read the last manifesto of one of the political parties--which they issued on the occasion of the election of the President. It is rather long, but at length it concludes with these words: "Government ought to give a great deal to the people, and take little from them." It is always the same tactics, or, rather, the same mistake.

"Government is bound to give gratuitous instruction and education to all the citizens."

It is bound to give "A general and appropriate professional education, as much as possible adapted to the wants, the callings, and the capacities of each citizen."

It is bound "To teach every citizen his duty to God, to man, and to himself; to develop his sentiments, his tendencies, and his faculties; to teach him, in short, the scientific part of his labor; to make him understand his own interests, and to give him a knowledge of his rights."

It is bound "To place within the reach of all literature and the arts, the patrimony of thought, the treasures of the mind, and all those intellectual enjoyments which elevate and strengthen the soul." It is bound "To give compensation for every accident, from fire, inundation &c., experienced by a citizen." (The etcetera means more than it says.)

It is bound "To attend to the relations of capital with labor, and to become the regulator of credit."

It is bound "To afford important encouragement and efficient protection to agriculture."

It is bound "To purchase railroads, canals, and mines; and, doubtless, to transact affairs with that industrial capacity which characterizes it."

It is bound "To encourage useful experiments, to promote and assist them by every means likely to make them successful. As a regulator of credit, it will exercise such extensive influence over industrial and agricultural associations as shall insure them success."

Government is bound to do all this, in addition to the services to which it is already pledged; and further, it is always to maintain a menacing attitude toward foreigners; for, according to those who sign the programme, "Bound together by this holy union, and by the precedents of the French Republic, we carry our wishes and hopes beyond the boundaries which despotism has placed between nations. The rights which we desire for ourselves, we desire for all those who are oppressed by the yoke of tyranny; we desire that our glorious arms should still, if necessary, be the army of liberty."

You see that the gentle hand of Government--that good hand which gives and distributes, will be very busy under the government of the reformers. You think, perhaps, that it will be the same with the rough hand--that hand which dives into our pockets. Do not deceive yourselves. The aspirants after popularity would not know their trade, if they had not the art, when they show the gentle hand, to conceal the rough one. Their reign will assuredly be the jubilee of the taxpayers.

"It is superfluities, not necessities," they say, "which ought to be taxed."

Truly, it will be a good time when the exchequer, for the sake of loading us with benefits, will content itself with curtailing our superfluities!

This is not all. The reformers intend that "taxation shall lose its oppressive character, and be only an act of fraternity." Good heavens! I know it is the fashion to thrust fraternity in everywhere, but I did not imagine it would ever be put into the hands of the tax-gatherer.

To come to the details:-Those who sign the programme say, "We desire the immediate abolition of those taxes which affect the absolute necessities of life, as salt, liquors, &c., &c."

"The reform of the tax on landed property, customs, and patents."

"Gratuitous justice--that is, the simplification of its forms, and reduction of its expenses." (This, no doubt, has reference to stamps.)

Thus, the tax on landed property, customs, patents, stamps, salt, liquors, postage, all are included. These gentlemen have found out the secret of giving an excessive activity to the gentle hand of Government, while they entirely paralyze its rough hand.

Well, I ask the impartial reader, is it not childishness, and more than that, dangerous childishness? Is it not inevitable that we shall have revolution after revolution, if there is a determination never to stop till this contradiction is realized: "To give nothing to government and to receive much from it?"

If the reformers were to come to power, would they not become the victims of the means which they employed to take possession of it?

Citizens! In all times, two political systems have been in existence, and each may be maintained by good reasons. According to one of them, Government ought to do much, but then it ought to take much. According to the other, this two-fold activity ought to be little felt. We have to choose between these two systems. But as regards the third system, which partakes of both the others, and which consists in exacting everything from Government, without giving it anything, it is chimerical, absurd, childish, contradictory, and dangerous. Those who parade it, for the sake of the pleasure of accusing all governments of weakness, and thus exposing them to your attacks, are only flattering and deceiving you, while they are deceiving themselves.

For ourselves, we consider that Government is and ought to be nothing whatever but the united power of the people, organized, not to be an instrument of oppression and mutual plunder among citizens; but, on the contrary, to secure to every one his own, and to cause justice and security to reign.

The End

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