

“Is Biography History?”

The Relationship between Ideas and Action in the Life of Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850): A Biographical Approach.

*Dr. David M. Hart,
Director of the Online Library of Liberty, Liberty Fund*



A Paper given at the Historical Society’s conference on “Popularizing Historical Knowledge: Practice, Prospects, and Perils,” University of South Carolina in Columbia, SC, May 31 - June 3, 2012.

Draft Date: Tuesday, June 5, 2012

**POPULARIZING HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE:
PRACTICE, PROSPECTS, AND PERILS**

Session IIA: IS BIOGRAPHY HISTORY? [Friday June 1, 10:15-11:45am]

Chair: Hans L. Eicholz, Liberty Fund

- “The Relationship between Ideas and Action in the Life of Fredric Bastiat (1801-1850): A Biographical Approach”, David M. Hart, Liberty Fund
 - “History, Praxeology, and the Promise of Biography”, Peter Mentzel, Liberty Fund
 - “The Devolution of Telos: Persönlichkeit and the Origins of the Idea of Context,” Hans Eicholz, Liberty Fund
-

Dr. David M. Hart, “Is Biography History? The Relationship between Ideas and Action in the Life of Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850): A Biographical Approach.”

Introduction: “Is Biography History?”

Of course, biography is not the be all and end all of history, although one might be excused for thinking this if one picked up an old history textbook from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. History was not just “one damned thing after another”, it was “one damned king (or president) after another” - history was the biography of the so-called “great men” who ruled over us, as if ordinary people did not exist (except to pay the taxes, serve in the outposts of the colonies, and die in the wars). This approach to history not only turned generations of students off the study of history but it was also so loaded ideologically with notions of adulation and obedience to “God, King, and Country” that it was only a matter of time before it was challenged and brought down by the intellectual revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s which firmly cemented social, economic, and “everyday” history into the ideological superstructure out of which history was written.

But like all revolutions, the pendulum has gone too far in the other direction and biography has been ghettoised into the sub-domain of the uncritical and sometimes sycophantic adulation of the rich (Steve Jobs), the famous (Founding fathers), and the powerful (Hitler). So, it is time for a bit of a corrective, and to return biography to a more measured role to play in the family of the study of history. Here are my reflections on the study of one particular man - a dead, white, European male in fact.

Introduction to Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850).

The early 19th century French political economist Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850) provides an interesting case study in how how biography can help deepen our understanding of both the past and the present. Bastiat became active in the movement to abolish tariff protection in France in the mid 1840s. As part of his work in the cause of free trade he showed his talents as a brilliant economic journalist. He then went on to become a formidable intellectual foe of the growing socialist movement in France, was elected twice to the Constituent and then the National Assembly during the Second Republic, participated in the street protests which broke out during the revolution in February and June 1848, and was working on a major treatise on economics when he died at the age of 49 from throat cancer on Christmas eve 1850.

Bastiat was not an armchair theorist (neither were John Locke nor John Stuart Mill for that matter). The study of his life shows how intertwined his thinking about economic and political theory was with his political activism. For example, his reading of economics books in the provinces for 20 years led him to take an interest in the French free trade movement; his activism in the failed free trade movement led him to discover he had considerable skill as a writer and that economic theory had to be rethought in order to make the case for free trade better; his opposition to protectionism and socialism led him into parliament where he learned first hand how parliamentary democracy worked and how it was beholden to powerful vested interests and this in turn led him to rethink the nature of the modern State on which he wrote some pathbreaking works of political theory as a consequence; his activity on the streets of Paris at the height of the Revolution in February and June 1848 led him to attempt to present his new economic and political ideas to a popular audience in the form of broadsheets which he wrote and edited with some younger friends and handed out on the street corners of Paris. The latter activity is most instructive here: what started as a brief article in his journal for the rioters of Paris later was reworked into his best known work of political theory, the pamphlet “The State.”

Without taking a biographical approach to the study of Bastiat's economic and political thought, the historian (or economist) would miss much of this richness and important detail. One could read his major works as just so many theorems and elaborations of their consequences, but this would miss the following things: why and when he took up certain ideas, his purpose in doing so, and the rhetoric he adopted to make his arguments. Perhaps the best reason for knowing as much as one can about the life and activities of Bastiat is that it helps the reader understand his jokes and puns which are strewn through out his writings. Bastiat was not only a great theorist but also a very funny and witty writer. Without biography all of this goes over the reader's head. We just just wouldn't get it.

The Biographical Approach to the History of Ideas

In my own field of intellectual history there have been a few attempts to bring biography back into the fold but this has had to fight against the "Old School" approach where the biography of the author plays little or no role. One older approach to doing the "history of ideas" is to do exactly that, to focus on the ideas (their meaning, origin, impact on others, contribution to debates) to the exclusion of the life of the author who produced those ideas. This approach was the standard practice for most of the 20th century and the assumption behind it was that ideas did in fact have a "life of their own" which could be understood by studying the words printed on the page. Many books written about the 18th century "Enlightenment" were in this vein. In the 1970s and 1980s a more complex version of this approach to the history of ideas was developed by Quentin Skinner at Cambridge with his 2 volume *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) in which the "debate" became the main focus of attention for the historian. The validity or "truth" of the ideas and arguments in the text were less important (even ignored) than studying every text which the author might have read or known about in order to establish the "intellectual context" and the very vocabulary used by the protagonists in the "pamphlet war" or "war of the books" which sprang up around key ideas and authors (such as Machiavelli). Again, biography was squeezed

out of the historical account as the author's personal life was seen to be irrelevant to the battle of the ideas which emerged from the words on the pages of the old texts.

There have been a few attempts to write a new kind of intellectual history which avoids the “disembodied ideas” of the Old School or the excessive focus on “texts” of the Skinner School. According to this approach it does very much matter who the author was and what he/she did when they were writing their “text;” who their friends were and what social and political circles they moved in; whether or not they were under threat by the censors and had spent time in prison; which side of a political battle they were on and whether or not their side “won”. According to historians who work with this model of doing the history of ideas there is a strong tie between the life of the author actually lived and the ideas they wrote on the page of a book or pamphlet. The author writes because he/she wishes to further a particular political, economic, or artistic cause (in other words they have a **PURPOSE**) and the ebbs and flows of the struggle for that cause determine the style and content adopted by the author (in other words they have a **STRATEGY** to achieve that purpose). To borrow a term from early modern and 18th century English and late Republican Roman history this approach to doing the history of ideas is “prosopographical” in that it attempts to delve below the superficial rhetoric of political and philosophical debate in order to uncover some deeper forces at work, such as to identify the particular ties between members of a social or political group and how they use ideas in order to further their goals and interests. Another way of stating this is the idea that an author is part of a **SOCIAL NETWORK** of people with whom he/she was involved who shared his/her political and intellectual purposes and who helped shape his/her thinking on various topics. In the case of some individuals, such as Madame de Staël (Necker) who was a key liberal opponent of Napoleon, the historian would be interested in who attended her salon at Coppet and with whom she slept (she was notorious for wanting to sleep with every (male) classical liberal in Europe). To know that Benjamin Constant was infatuated with her is an important biographical detail in order to completely understand his political philosophy.

This is not to say that the ideas expressed by an author do not have any intrinsic value (such as their “truth”) but it is to argue that the ideas they hold and argue for reveal many other aspects about what they were writing and why than just the words which appear on the page. Two outstanding examples of this biographical and prosopographical approach to the writing of intellectual history is Richard Ashcraft’s work on John Locke [*Revolutionary Politics and Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (1986)] and Jonathan Scott’s 2 volume work on Algernon Sidney [*Algernon Sidney and the English Republic, 1623-1677* (1988) and *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis, 1677-1683* (1991).]

It is not surprising that this approach to doing the history of ideas has focused on periods of revolution, in this case 17th century England, when action and ideas were particularly close. By this I mean that one’s political actions (or the actions of the group to which one belonged) were very much the result of the ideas that one held; and that one’s ideas were constantly evolving in the face of actions by others (one’s opponents) and the counter-ideas they and they group were putting forward. One could get an appreciation of the ideas of, say John Locke, by just reading the text of the *Two Treatises*, but this would be an impoverished reading of the text. One could deepen one’s knowledge if one knew that he was responding to the work of the arch-legitimist and defender of divine right, Sir Robert Filmer’s *Patriarchia* (the Skinner approach). However the richness of Ashcraft’s approach is to place Locke in the much fuller context of intense rivalry between parliamentary factions, one of which was headed by his patron the Earl of Shaftesbury, and the cat and mouse game Locke had to play with the censors who were literally after his blood for sedition (hence his seeking refuge in the Netherlands). The language Locke uses in the *Two Treatises* reflects the careful manoeuvring he had to do in order to achieve his patron’s political ends and to avoid spending several evenings at the King’s pleasure.

Another important framework for understanding the connection between a person’s thinking and their action is provided by the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises. He called his magnum opus on economics “Human Action” (1949)

because he believed that human beings acted purposefully in order to achieve their chosen goals based upon an understanding of the world and their current place in it, which came from the ideas they held. Here is what he said in a chapter called “Human Reason”:

Action is preceded by thinking. Thinking is to deliberate beforehand over future action and to reflect afterwards upon past action. Thinking and acting are inseparable. Every action is always based on a definite idea about causal relations. He who thinks a causal relation thinks a theorem. Action without thinking, practice without theory are unimaginable. The reasoning may be faulty and the theory incorrect; but thinking and theorizing are not lacking in any action. On the other hand **thinking is always thinking of a potential action. Even he who thinks of a pure theory assumes that the theory is correct, i.e., that action complying with its content would result in an effect to be expected from its teachings.** It is of no relevance for logic whether such action is feasible or not.

It is always the individual who thinks. Society does not think any more than it eats or drinks. The evolution of human reasoning from the naïve thinking of primitive man to the more subtle thinking of modern science took place within society. However, **thinking itself is always an achievement of individuals. There is joint action, but no joint thinking. There is only tradition which preserves thoughts and communicates them to others as a stimulus to their thinking.** However, man has no means of appropriating the thoughts of his precursors other than to think them over again. Then, of course, he is in a position to proceed farther on the basis of his forerunners’ thoughts. The fore-most vehicle of tradition is the word. Thinking is linked up with language and vice versa. Concepts are embodied in terms. Language is a tool of thinking as it is a tool of social action.

The history of thought and ideas is a discourse carried on from generation to generation. The thinking of later ages grows out of the thinking of earlier ages. Without the aid of this stimulation intellectual progress would have been impossible. The continuity of human evolution, sowing for the offspring and harvesting on land cleared and tilled by the ancestors, manifests itself also in the history of science and ideas. We have inherited from our forefathers not only a stock of products of various orders of goods which is the source of our material wealth; we have no less inherited ideas and thoughts, theories and technologies to which our thinking owes its productivity. But **thinking is always a manifestation of individuals.**¹

¹ Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, in 4 vols., ed. Bettina Bien Greaves (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007). Vol. 1. Chapter: 1: Human Reason. < <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1893/110310/2296394>>.

The Life behind the Mind of Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850)



[*Claude Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850)*]

It is in this light provided by the methodologies of Richard Ashcraft and Ludwig von Mises that I would like to say something about my current project which is editing the Liberty Fund edition of the *Collected Works* of the 19th century French economist Frédéric Bastiat.² Like Locke and Sidney, Bastiat had the luck (or perhaps bad luck) to live during the 1848 Revolution and the Second Republic which resulted. I have found the biographical approach to the history of ideas

² *The Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund), General Editor Jacques de Guenin. Academic Editor Dr. David M. Hart:

- Vol. 1: The Man and the Statesman. The Correspondence and Articles on Politics (March 2011)
- Vol. 2: "The Law," "The State," and Other Political Writings, 1843-1850 (June 2012)
- Vol. 3: Economic Sophisms and "What is Seen and What is Not Seen" (October 2013)
- Vol. 4: Miscellaneous Works on Economics: From "Jacques-Bonhomme" to *Le Journal des Économistes* (April 2014)
- Vol. 5: Economic Harmonies (October 2014)
- Vol. 6: The Struggle Against Protectionism: The English and French Free-Trade Movements (June 2015)

pursued by Ashcraft and Scott to be most helpful in trying to not only understand WHAT Bastiat was saying in his books and pamphlets, but WHY he was saying it (his purpose in doing so), HOW he was saying it (the particular strategy he had adopted at any given point in time to best achieve his purposes), and FOR WHOM and WITH WHOM was he saying it.

What follows is a summary of key aspects of Bastiat's life along with suggestions about how these biographical details might help elucidate Bastiat's thinking and explain his activity in the period 1844-1850.

Life in Bayonne and Mugron (1801-1844)

- born in Bayonne in SW France - port town in wine growing region
- benefited from innovative education which emphasised modern languages, music
- entered family business before inheriting property from grandfather (became gentleman farmer)
- supported 1830 Revolution - his first political action was to persuade troops in Bayonne garrison to support the revolution
- appointed local magistrate at age of 30
- spent leisure time reading economics (in French, Spanish, English, Italian) and discussing world events with local friends
- *Links between his Ideas, Actions, and Biography:*
 - *grew up in port town engaged in world trade of wine - predisposed him to support free trade*
 - *witnessed first hand the effects of Napoleon's Continental blockade on French trade*
 - *innovative education which made him fluent in 4 modern languages*
 - *free time in which to read political economy for 20 years*
 - *showed strong liberal convictions and had the courage to act on them*

Active in the French Free Trade Movement 1844-1847

- discovers Richard Cobden's free trade Anti-Corn Law League and wishes to create similar movement in France - cofounder of French Free Trade Association and editor of their journal
- writes first academic article for JDE in 1844 on French and English trade policy - creates immediate sensation among Economists in Paris
- becomes active member of Political Economy Society in Paris
- in promoting free trade he discovers he has talent for economic journalism (wrote many articles for magazine *Libre-Échange* and two collections of *Economic Sophisms* (1846, 1848))
- also discovers he has a talent for economic and political theory in which he makes significant original contributions
- appointed to Institute in January 1846 - gives a course on economics at the School of Law in July 1847
- *Links between his Ideas, Actions, and Biography:*
 - *shows commitment to free trade cause and liberal political economy*
 - *shows talent for writing both popular and academic works*
 - *adapts his writing to accommodate changing fortunes of free trade movement: mixes humor and satire with more serious pieces according to need*
 - *the brilliant style he developed as journalist was carried over into his academic writing*

FB in Politics (1848-1850)

- after failure of free trade movement in France to achieve success like the ACLL FB seizes opportunity provided by outbreak of Revolution in February 1848 to successfully run for Chamber of Deputies to represent his local region (Les Landes) and to implement liberal reforms
- twice in 1848 (February and June) FB is on the streets of Paris handing out his newspaper advocating free trade and liberal politics, personally intervenes to stop the shooting by troops of protesters during June Days
- Elected in April 1848 to Constituent Assembly and in May 1848 to Legislative Assembly in which he is president of the Finance Committee, his aim was to reduce government expenditure and cut taxes

- FB caught between two factions he opposed in Chamber - on right the “party of order” of the conservative landowners and industrialists who wanted protective tariffs and government subsidies; on the left the socialists who wanted to begin building the welfare state in France (right to work legislation and state unemployment relief). FB usually sat with the liberal republican group, but voted for whatever side conformed to his liberal principles, e.g. he voted with the right to oppose social welfare legislation but with the left in defense of individuals to form trade unions.
- *Links between his Ideas, Actions, and Biography:*
 - *again shows commitment and courage in pursuing his ideas*
 - *hard working member of the finance committee*
 - *handicapped on floor of Chamber because a terminal throat condition (possibly throat cancer) made it impossible for him to speak*
 - *thus continued to pour forth pamphlets and articles to make the case of free trade and individual liberty in the best way he could*
 - *strategy changes to adapt to new intellectual opponents, the rising socialist movement which replace the protectionists as the most pressing opponent of liberty*
 - *agonized over the choice of appropriate language to use in these political and intellectual battles - went back and forth over the proper role of humour and satire (which was his forte). Eventually decided that more abrupt and pointed language was called for in a time of revolution - he decided to call a spade a spade, or rather to call the activity of the state theft and plunder. His writing had a much harder edge to it after this decision.*

FB the Scholar of Political Economy and Political Theory

- parallel with his journalism and political career FB also pursues an academic agenda to rework theory of political economy in new directions
- gives a course on economics at the School of Law in July 1847 which were to become his magnum opus *Economic Harmonies* (part 1 in February 1850)
- regular attendee at meetings of the Société d'économie politique where he presented radically new ideas on rent and population theory - all income including rent are the result of the exchange of “service for service”; there is no Malthusian population trap as human creativity and international free trade has solved the population problem.
- FB's theory of the state emerges out of his direct experience of the revolution, both on the streets of Paris as well as in the Chamber - his

famous essay on “The State” (1848) began as a short article in his street newspaper aimed at the workers of Paris; expanded into an article for the *Journal des Debats* read by intellectuals and men of affaires and then a stand alone booklet.

- parallel with his desperate efforts to finish his magnum opus on economics before he died, FB also planned to write “A History of Plunder” in which he would apply his theory of the state and exploitation (plunder) to a sociological and historical work on the rise of the modern state. Never completed, only wrote a couple of chapters and a draft outline.
- *Links between his Ideas, Actions, and Biography:*
 - *letters show how torn he was about being involved in politics, journalism, and academic writing when he knew he only had a short time to live*
 - *he knew had had original and interesting ideas about economics which he wanted to develop - was frustrated by the lack of time and the criticism of his colleagues in the Society for Political Economy (especially over his theory of rent).*
 - *the evolution of his ideas are the direct result of the political battles he had been fighting firstly against protectionism in the press and then socialism in the Chamber of Deputies. Many of his theoretical ideas were first presented in popular journalistic pieces written in the “heat of battle”*
 - *the closeness with and respect he had from the other political economists in the Society was revealed in reports of the tearful final farewell they gave him when he left to “recuperate” in Italy in October 1850. They knew they were losing one of the best economists and writers they had ever come across and he knew he would never return.*
 - *his letters also reveal the great personal courage he showed in working and fighting to the very end in spite of the great pain he felt and his inability to swallow.*

Conclusion

My conclusion is that the life of FB is a good example of how the “biography of ideas” developed by Ashcraft for Locke and Scott for Sidney, and Mises’ theory that “human action” is purposeful and ultimately based upon the ideas that an individual holds, can be profitably used to deepen our knowledge and appreciation of Bastiat ideas in the late 1840s. The historian has to know what Bastiat was doing between 1844 and 1850 in order to understand what he was thinking and why he thought the things he did. Studying the texts by themselves is not sufficient. Studying the events of his life without reference to the evolution of his ideas is also not sufficient.

We can clearly identify a **PURPOSE** behind Bastiat’s journalistic and scholarly writings: he was passionate about individual and economic liberty and wanted to see these causes advanced, first against the protectionists and then against the socialists. He began with a rather diffuse notion of natural rights and the operation of the free market which he deepened as he thought more about what he was trying to achieve. By 1850 he had developed a sophisticated and innovative theory of liberty, the state, and how the free market operated which he did not have when he began campaigning in 1844. This can explain **WHY** he was saying and doing what he did.

We can identify a **STRATEGY** which he adopted to serve this purpose, which he altered according to the changing circumstances he faced. Bastiat began with economic journalism, then political activism and pamphleteering, and then more scholarly writing. As he pursued each of these activities he discovered what talents he had - he was a brilliant economic journalist, but he was a poor public speaker who got worse as he disease progress, and he was a blossoming academic theorist who was running out of time to do what he wanted to do - and he adapted his strategy to suit the political circumstances of the day, leaving behind 6 large volumes of letters, pamphlets, articles, and a nearly finished treatise. He also changed the style of his writing to suit the changing circumstances. He went back

and forth in his use of humour and satire before finally settling on a more serious tone for his last works . This can explain HOW he went about achieving his purposes.

Finally, we can identify the SOCIAL NETWORK of people with whom he was involved who shared his political and intellectual purposes, who helped shape his thinking on various topics, and who helped him achieve his purposes. Bastiat rose to fame quite late in life (43 years old) and quickly was accepted into English free trade circles led by Richard Cobden, and then the French political economists who were based in Paris around the Society for Political Economy, the Guillaumin publishing firm, and the *Journal des Economistes*, and finally the Finance Committee of the National Assembly. Bastiat learned from and responded to them, and they in turn commented on Bastiat's work and pushed him in new directions. This can explain FOR WHOM and WITH WHOM Bastiat was doing what he did.

Bastiat provides us with a good example of an individual who had a set of well-thought out (though evolving) ideas upon which he based his actions in order to achieve certain specific goals. He modified his ideas as circumstances changed, he adapted his strategies to achieve his goals, and he cooperated with other individuals who shared his ideas and his goals. The biographical study of his life provides the historian with the information which is needed to understand his ideas, his purposes, and his strategies, as well as to evaluate his successes and failures as a man of ideas and of action. To return to Mises' useful summary of the relationship between ideas and action in the life of a man:

Action is preceded by thinking. Thinking is to deliberate beforehand over future action and to reflect afterwards upon past action. Thinking and acting are inseparable... But thinking is always a manifestation of individuals.

This was certainly true in the case of Frédéric Bastiat.

About Dr. David M. Hart

Degrees: PhD (Cantab), MA (Stanford), BA (Hons) Macquarie, Sydney.

Currently occupation: Director of the Online Library of Liberty and Academic Editor of the *Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat*.

Contact information:

- Email: <dmhart@mac.com>
- Website: <<http://davidmhart.com>>
- Blog: <<http://davidmhart.com/blog/>>

Bio

David Hart was born and raised in Sydney, Australia. He did his undergraduate work at Macquarie University, Sydney, writing a thesis on the radical anti-statist thought of the Belgian/French political economist Gustave de Molinari. After spending a year in Germany studying German Imperialism and the origins of the First World War at the University of Mainz, he completed an M.A. in history at Stanford University writing papers on the 18th century French Physiocrats. While at Stanford he worked on student programs for the Institute for Humane Studies (when it was located at Menlo Park, California) where he was founding editor of the *Humane Studies Review: A Research and Study Guide*.

He received a Ph.D. in history from King's College, Cambridge on the work of two leading French classical liberals of the early 19th century, Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer who pioneered a liberal class theory of history. He then taught for 15 years in the Department of History at the University of Adelaide in South Australia where he was awarded the University teaching prize.

Since 2001 he has been the Director of the Online Library of Liberty Project at Liberty Fund in Indianapolis <<http://oll.libertyfund.org>>. The OLL has won several awards including a "Best of the Humanities on the Web" Award from the

National Endowment for the Humanities in 2006. His research interests include the history of classical liberal thought, war and culture, and film and history.

He is currently the Academic Editor of Liberty Fund's translation project of the *Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat* (in 6 vols.) the first volume of which came out in March 2011 (The Correspondence) and volume 2 (Political Essays) in June 2012. He is also editing for Liberty Fund a translation of Molinari's *Conversations on Saint Lazarus Street: Discussions on Economic Laws and the Defence of Property* (1849).

David is also the co-editor of two collections of 19th century French classical liberal thought (with Robert Leroux of the University of Ottawa), one in English published by Routledge: *French Liberalism in the 19th Century: An Anthology* (Routledge studies in the history of economics, May 2012), and another in French called *The Golden Age of French Liberalism* (forthcoming late 2012).

On his personal website <<http://davidmhart.com>> David has his lectures and a considerable number of resources on 19th century classical liberal thought, including a large section on Molinari, Bastiat, and other French classical liberal political economists (mostly in French).