

# Bastiat's Reductio ad Absurdum and the "Right" to Healthcare

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In making the case for liberty, 19th century economist Frédéric Bastiat perfected the technique of reductio ad absurdum. Simply, he would take the argument of his foe to extremes in order to magnify the true meaning behind a socialist's proposal or statement. Here are some abbreviated examples.

Bastiat made the case against protectionism in *The Candlemaker's Petition* concerning unfair competition by the sun.<sup>1</sup> He proposed that all should have to close their blinds during the day so that more candles were needed, as the "free" light provided by the sun was the ruin of the candlemakers. Since the candle industry was indispensable, as the only source of light at night, this protection of their industry was deemed justified.

When a railroad was proposed, every little town wanted a depot. Such was the furor and demand for the great number of depots that the train company could not profitably deliver goods or passengers. Bastiat, in his usual way, proposed that the train operate in reverse!

In his parable of the broken window,<sup>2</sup> Bastiat asks: "What would become of the glaziers if no one ever broke a window?" By this line of reasoning, superstorm Sandy is a great economic boon. Think of all the jobs that will be created to clear the rubble and rebuild!

Bastiat used his great knowledge and intellect to destroy his socialist opponents, pointing out the logical flaws in their arguments and legislation with the most penetrating insights. When he was almost consumed by his tuberculosis toward the end of his life, he could only whisper in the French Parliament, but by then, all those in the chamber, even his enemies, were riveted, as he spoke to a completely silent and awe-filled chamber.

Having had success with Bastiat's method of reductio ad absurdum in the past when dealing with hospitals or others seeking protection from me or my surgery center, I felt fairly confident as I utilized his method in a blog. I attempted to emulate him by making the case that those declaring healthcare a "right" must extend this "right" beyond our borders. Why should a fundamental human right vanish once the U.S. border is crossed?<sup>3</sup>

Bastiat had an advantage over me. The world was not so crazy in 1850. I thought I had successfully crossed the barrier of absurdity and made my point. I was wrong.

In the May 16, 2012, issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Lawrence O. Gostin, J.D., of Georgetown University Law Center, *proposes seriously* what I had proposed as absurd.<sup>4</sup>

Essentially, Gostin proposes that the whole world should be taxed to provide health insurance to everyone on the planet. The proposed Framework Convention on Global Health (FCGH) is modeled on the "successful" UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Just as the latter is expected to stop sea level rise and global warming, the FCGH could prevent the approximately one-third of global deaths that are purportedly caused by health inequalities. The FCGH would "reimagine global governance for health," using modalities such as "defining national responsibilities for the population's health," "defining international responsibilities for reliable, sustainable funding," and "coordinating fragmented activities."

Later, Gostin applauds the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the challenge to the Affordable Care Act because it "supports taxation as a public health tool."<sup>5</sup>

Others seem to go farther still. "Health equity," extending the right to health *care* to include the right to health, should be the heart of all policy making, national and global, writes Michael Marmot of the UCL Institute of Health Equity, University College of London.<sup>6</sup> Chiming in from Pakistan and India, Zulfiqar Bhutta and K. Srinath Reddy also call for global health equity.<sup>7</sup>

For my failed attempt at reductio ad absurdum to have succeeded I would need to have included extraterrestrials—or all organisms with a notochord.

My confidence shaken, I'm not sure I'll try this again. Elite academics from around the world are advocating absurdities far more extreme than those conceived by Bastiat.

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## REFERENCES

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