

Economic Game Changers: Frédéric Bastiat |

Lesson Plan

Why do we need to examine beyond what is seen to understand the true effects of any economic decision?

Students will understand that every policy and decision produces both seen and unseen effects, and that sound economic thinking requires weighing the hidden costs – not just the visible benefits – when judging whether a choice creates real wealth or simply moves it around.

Learning Objectives:

- Define the seen and the unseen and explain how both relate to opportunity cost.
- Explain the broken window fallacy and why destruction does not create wealth.
- Analyze how a real policy, such as the National Workshops, produces both visible benefits and hidden costs.
- Evaluate an argument for trade protection or redistribution by identifying its unseen consequences.
- Apply Bastiat's seen/unseen method to a current decision or policy.

Key Vocabulary:

- **The Seen:** The immediate, visible effects of an action or policy, such as jobs created or a factory saved.
- **The Unseen:** The alternatives that never happen because of a decision, such as other jobs or spending that could have occurred.
- **Opportunity Cost:** The value of the next best alternative you give up when making a decision.
- **Legal Plunder:** The use of the law to take from one group and redistribute to another by force.
- **Natural Rights:** Rights such as life, liberty, and property that exist before government and that the law exists to protect.

Educational Standards: CCRA.R.7, CCRA.R.10, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.W.7, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2, CCRA.L.6

Academic Subject Areas: Economics, U.S. History, Civics, Political Philosophy

What You'll Need

- Video: *Ca\$h Cour\$e: Economic Game Changers: Frédéric Bastiat* (Watch [Here](#))
- Worksheet: *Ca\$h Cour\$e: Economic Game Changers: Frédéric Bastiat* (Link [Here](#))
- Whiteboard for writing and a TV / Monitor to show video



Lesson Plan (45 mins.)

Warm-Up: (10 mins.)

Teacher Note on the Historical Context: Before introducing the lesson, briefly set the historical stage for your students. Frédéric Bastiat lived in France during a period of upheaval. In 1848, revolution overthrew the French monarchy — France's third revolution in fifty years — during the "Hungry Forties," when crop failures across Europe caused food shortages and steep price increases. Facing mass unemployment, the new provisional government created the National Workshops, paying over 100,000 men state-guaranteed wages to perform redundant manual labor, such as leveling the ground and paving the streets. Bastiat, a former merchant who had witnessed the damage caused by trade-protectionist policies at his family's export business, argued that such programs consume wealth rather than create it. The National Workshops collapsed within months and touched off further violence in the streets — the real-world proof that some economic ideas have disastrous results.

1. Introduce the concept of **opportunity cost** to students: the value of the next best thing you gave up when you spent your money/time. Let students know that today's economist, Frédéric Bastiat, spent his life asking a second question about every decision and every policy: *what about the effects nobody sees?*
 - Ask students: Have you ever made a choice that looked like a clear win on the surface but quietly cost you something you didn't notice at first? For example, you earn \$50 and spend all of it on a new video game. The game is what you see. But what did you give up — the shoes, the savings, the concert you can no longer afford?
2. Have students do a quick Think-Pair-Share:
 - Think of the last time you spent real time or money on one thing instead of another.
 - What did you give up to do it? Was giving that up worth it?
 - Let a couple of students share. Guide them toward the idea that the thing they gave up is real, even though it never happened — that is what Bastiat calls "the unseen."
3. Write each Key Vocabulary term and its definition on the board. Ask students to take notes.
4. Introduce today's Cash Course video by explaining that students will see how Bastiat used one simple idea — the seen and the unseen — to expose why well-meaning government programs and trade barriers often leave people worse off, using a broken window, a candlemaker's petition, and France's real-life National Workshops.

Watch and Apply: (25 mins.)

1. Watch the video "*Cash Course: Economic Game Changers: Frédéric Bastiat*" as a class.
2. After the video, discuss the following questions:
 - What does Bastiat mean by "**the seen**" and "**the unseen**"?

- A boy breaks a window. The townspeople say, "Well, at least it gives the glazier work." Is the town richer or poorer after the window is broken? If breaking windows made society richer, why wouldn't we break every window?
 - The glazier gets paid, and everyone can see him working. Who **doesn't** get paid because the window had to be repaired instead? Why is that person easy to overlook?
 - The government pays 100,000 workers to pave roads that don't need paving. Everyone can see the workers earning a paycheck. Where did the money come from to pay them? What else might that money have been used for if it had remained with the people who earned it?
 - When the government "creates" a job, has it actually created new wealth, or has it shifted resources from one place to another? How could you tell the difference?
 - Do people have a right to own what they earn? If the government can simply pass a law taking someone's property, what does that say about property rights? Bastiat argued that the law should protect life, liberty, and property. What changes when the law becomes the thing taking property instead of protecting it?
 - In *The Candlemakers' Petition*, what point was Bastiat making about trade protection? The candlemakers wanted the government to block sunlight so people would have to buy more candles. How is that similar to asking the government to block inexpensive foreign goods?
 - Bastiat argued that every government policy has visible winners and less-visible costs. Think of one government program or policy you support. Who benefits? Who pays for it? Whose costs might be easy to overlook?
3. Talk through these concepts introduced in the Bastiat episode. Emphasize that Bastiat challenged people to look beyond the immediate, visible effects of any decision and to account for the costs that are hidden or never materialize. Good economic thinking weighs both the seen and the unseen.
- **The Seen and the Unseen → Every decision or policy has visible effects as well as hidden costs and missed opportunities.**
 - **Legal Plunder → Bastiat argued that using the law to take property from one group in order to benefit another redistributes wealth by force rather than creating new wealth, making it an abuse of the law's proper purpose.**
 - **Trade Protectionism → Policies that protect one industry may produce visible benefits for a small group, while imposing larger, less visible costs on consumers and the broader economy.**
4. Hand out the worksheet. Students can work independently or in pairs, depending on class needs.

Wrap-Up: (10 mins.)

1. Recap the lesson objectives. Go over the worksheet as a class. Review response.

2. Connect relevant concepts to students' lives. Ask students to explain what Bastiat would predict would happen if the government were to take people's homes or businesses and redistribute them. What would be the immediate ("seen") effects? What longer-term or hidden ("unseen") effects might follow?
3. Exit Ticket (Door Check): Ask students to respond to this question on the back of their worksheets before handing in:
 - What is the key idea Bastiat teaches about looking at any policy or decision?
 - Give one example of something that is "seen" and the "unseen" cost behind it.
4. Collect the worksheet and door check as formative assessments.

Optional Extension Activity

For teachers with a 60-minute block, or for those who want students to engage with Bastiat's own method, using satire to expose the logic of trade protection. Bastiat didn't just argue against protectionism; he made it look ridiculous by following it to its logical end. In "*The Candlemakers' Petition*," he had candlemakers demand that the government block out the sun so people would be forced to buy candles. Students will do the same: petition the government to "protect" their industry from an absurd competitor.

Setup (5 mins.):

Review the real *Candlemakers' Petition*. The candlemakers' complaint sounds reasonable at first — a foreign rival is flooding the market with cheaper light, workers' jobs are at stake, the government must act. Only then does Bastiat reveal the rival is the sun. Put the pattern on the board so every group follows it: (1) name the cheaper competitor threatening your industry, (2) list the "harms" it causes, (3) demand a specific government action to block it, (4) insist it's all for the good of the workers and the nation. The more serious and official the tone, the funnier — and sharper — the result.

Round 1 — Write the Petition (15–20 mins.):

Assign each group an industry and an absurd competitor for that industry. Their petition must keep a completely straight, official tone.

- **The Umbrella Makers' Guild** — petitioning against their competitor, *clear skies and sunshine*.
- **The Alarm Clock Manufacturers** — petitioning against their competitor, *the rooster and the sunrise*.
- **The Streetlamp & Lantern Company** — petitioning against their competitor, *the moon and the stars*.
- **The Bottled Water Company** — petitioning against their competitor, *rain, lakes, and rivers*.
- **The Bridge Toll Company** — petitioning against their competitor, *shallow water and boats*.

Invent-your-own lane: Any group that would rather create its own may, on one condition — the competitor has to be something *free, natural, or obviously good for people and relatively easy to make/construct*. That constraint is the whole point: it forces the industry to argue against abundance itself. (A group stuck for ideas: sweater makers vs. warm weather; flashlight makers vs. the moon; map printers vs. people who know where they're going.)

Round 2 — Present and Vote (10–15 mins.):

Each group reads its petition aloud in full, official seriousness. After all groups present, the class votes — not on the funniest, but on the petition that made the *most convincing-sounding case for an absurd idea*.

Debrief (5–8 mins.):

- Every petition sounds a little reasonable at first — "save our jobs, protect our industry." At what exact point does each one become obviously ridiculous?
- In each case, who seems to benefit (the seen), and who actually pays (the unseen)? Who loses when the streetlamp company gets the shutters closed, or the bottled water company gets the rivers fenced off?
- Now the real turn: how is asking the government to block *sunlight* different from asking it to block cheaper *foreign goods*? Is it different in kind, or only in how obvious the absurdity is?

Surface the central insight. Bastiat's point wasn't simply that trade barriers make products more expensive. It was the government intervention changes the natural flow of resources. Protecting one industry means labor, money, and materials are diverted from other uses that people would have freely chosen. The protected jobs are visible. The opportunities that disappear are not — the purchases never made, the businesses never started, the investments never funded. Bastiat challenged people to judge every policy not only by what it creates, but also by what it prevents.

Don't have time for the full lesson? Quick Activity (10-15 mins.)

Distribute the worksheet and have students complete it as they follow along with the video. Or, have students watch the video at home and use the worksheet as a quick quiz the next day in class.