



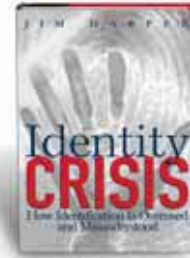
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Policy Report

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Bourgeois Virtues?

BY DEIRDRE McCLOSKEY

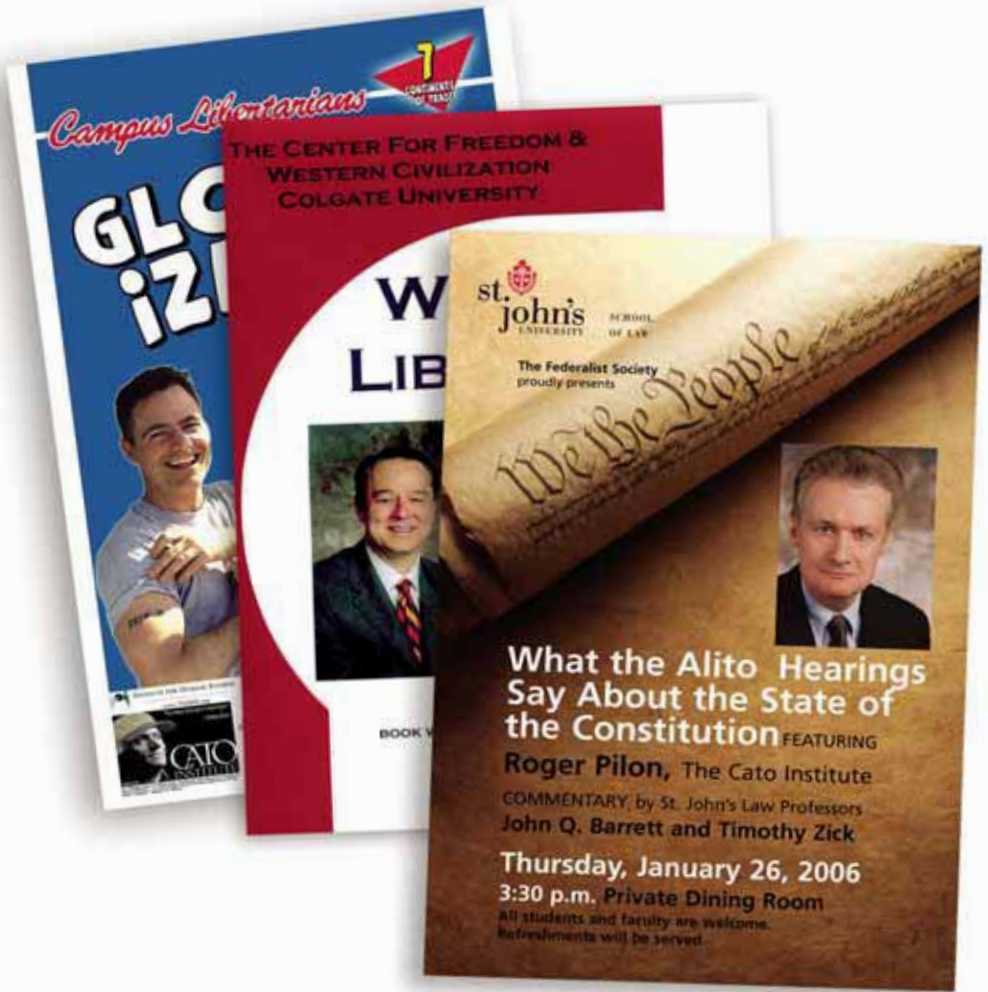
bring good news about our bourgeois lives. I preach here, in the vocabulary of Christianity, from the Greek for the defendant's side in a trial, an "apology" for capitalism in its American form.

I do not mean "I'm sorry." The argument is an *apologia* in the theological sense of giving reasons, with room for doubt, directed to nonbelievers. It is directed toward someone who is suspicious of the phrase "bourgeois virtues," pretty sure that it is a contradiction in terms. And I preach, with less optimism about changing her mind, at someone who thinks the phrase is worse: a lie.

"Bourgeois virtues" is neither. Modern capitalism does not need to be offset to be good. Capitalism can, on the contrary, be virtuous. In a fallen world the bourgeois life is not perfect. But it's better than any available alternative. American capitalism needs to be inspired, moralized, completed. Two and a half cheers for the midwestern bourgeoisie.

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DEIRDRE McCLOSKEY teaches economics, history, English, and communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her latest book, *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*, is just out from the University of Chicago Press.



Roger Pilon, Tom G. Palmer, and other Cato scholars have taken the message of liberty and limited government to college campuses across the country in recent months. From Harvard to Berkeley, from West Point to UNC, they have discussed and sometimes debated free trade, property rights, the Patriot Act, and libertarian philosophy.

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Of course, like an aristocracy or a priesthood or a peasantry or a proletariat or an intelligentsia, a middle class is capable of evil, even in a God-blessed America. The American bourgeoisie, beginning in the late 19th century, organized official and unofficial apartheid. It conspired violently against unions. It supported the excesses of nationalism. It claimed credit for a religious faith that had no apparent influence on its behavior. Nowhere does being bourgeois ensure ethical behavior. During World War II, Krupp, Bosch, Hoechst, Bayer, Deutsche Bank, Daimler Benz, Dresdner Bank, and Volkswagen, all of them, used slave labor, with impunity. The bourgeois bankers of Switzerland stored gold for the Nazis. Many a businessman is an ethical shell or worse. Even the *virtues* of the bourgeoisie, Lord knows, do not lead straight to Heaven.

But the assaults on the alleged vices of the bourgeoisie and capitalism after 1848 made an impossible Best into the enemy of an actual Good. They led, in the 20th century, to some versions of Hell. In the 21st century, please let us avoid another visit to Hell.

I don't much care how “capitalism” is defined, so long as it is not defined a priori to mean vice incarnate. The prejudging definition was favored by Rousseau—though he did not literally use the word “capitalism,” still to be coined—and by Proudhon, Marx, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Luxemburg, Veblen, Goldman, and Sartre. Less obviously, the same definition was used by their opponents Bentham, Ricardo, Rand, Friedman, and Becker. All of them, left and right, have *defined* commercial society at the outset to be bad by any standard higher than successful greed.

Such a definition makes pointless an inquiry into the good and bad of modern commercial society. If modern capitalism is defined to be *the same thing* as Greed—“the restless never-ending process of profit-making

alone . . . , this boundless greed after riches,” as Marx put it in Chapter 1 of *Capital*, drawing on an anti-commercial theme originating in Aristotle—then that settles it, before looking at the evidence.

There’s no evidence, actually, that greed or miserliness or self-interest was new in the 16th or the 19th or any other century. “The infamous hunger for gold” is from *The Aeneid*, Book III, line 57, not from Benjamin Franklin or *Advertising Age*. The propensity to truck and barter is human nature. Commerce is not some evil product of recent manufacture. Commercial behavior is one of the world’s oldest professions. We have documentation of it from the earliest cuneiform writing, in clay business letters from Kish or Ashur offering compliments to your lovely wife and making a deal for copper from Anatolia or lapis lazuli from Afghanistan. Bad and good behavior in buying low and selling high can be found anywhere, any time.

To put the matter positively, we have been and can be virtuous and commercial, liberal and capitalist, democratic and rich. As John Mueller said in *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ralph’s Pretty Good Grocery*, “Democracy and capitalism, it seems, are similar in that they can often work pretty well even if people generally do not appreciate their workings very well.”

One of the ways capitalism works “pretty well,” Mueller and I and a few other loony pro-capitalists such as Michael Novak and James Q. Wilson and Hernando De Soto

and the late Robert Nozick claim, is to nourish the virtues. Mueller argues for one direction of causation: “Virtue is, on balance and all other things being equal, essentially smart business under capitalism: nice guys, in fact, tend to finish first.” Max Weber had a century earlier written to the same effect: “Along with clarity of vision and ability to act, it is only by virtue [note the word] of very definite and highly developed ethical qualities that it has been possible for [an entrepreneur of this new type] to command the indispensable confidence of his customers and workmen.”

The Benefits of Growth

The material side of capitalist and bourgeois success is, of course, wonderful. “Modern economic growth,” as the economists boringly call the fact of real income per person growing at a “mere” 1.5 percent per year for 200 years, to achieve a rise in per capita income by a factor of 19 in the countries that most enthusiastically embraced capitalism, is certainly the largest change in the human condition since the ninth millennium BC. It ranks with the first domestications of plants and animals and the building of the first towns. Possibly, modern economic growth is as large and important an event in human history as the sudden perfection of language, in Africa around 80,000 to 50,000 BC. In a mere 200 years our bourgeois capitalism has domesticated the world and made it, from Chicago to Shanghai, into a single, throbbing city.

I honor the material success and start every class I give on history or economics by showing an imagined chart extending from one side of the room to the other in which income per head bounces along at \$1 a day for 80,000 to 50,000 years . . . and then in the last 200 years explodes, to the \$109 a day the average American now earns. Your ancestors and mine were dirt-poor slaves, and

“Bourgeois life improves us ethically, and would have even if it had not also made us rich.”

ignorant. We should all make sure that people grasp that capitalism and freedom, not government “programs,” have made us rich.

But we should emphasize, too, as Benjamin Friedman does in his recent book, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, the ethical and political effects of enrichment. The combination of longer and richer lives since 1800 is one reason that liberty has spread. There are by now many more adults living long enough lives sufficiently free from desperation to have some political interests. The theory that economic desperation leads to good revolution is, of course, mistaken, or else our freedoms would have emerged from the serfs of Russia or the peasants of China, not from the bourgeoisie of northwestern Europe, as they did in fact. Material wealth can yield political or artistic wealth. It doesn't have to, but it can. And it often has. What emerged from Russia and China, remember, were the anti-bourgeois nightmares of Stalin and Mao.

And the enrichment in “expected adult years of goods-supplied life” has cultural effects, too, very big ones, as Tyler Cowen has taught us in his books, such as *In Praise of Commercial Culture*. The factor of increase since great-great-great-grandma's day is about 42.5. The longer, richer average now applies to six billion rather than to the former one billion people. So multiply each by a factor of six to get the increase in “world adult materially supplied years.” The result is a factor of 255. It nurtured the flowers of world culture, low and high, politics and music.

Beethoven, for example, in a world sized about 1.0 in such terms, was among the first highbrow musicians to support himself by selling his compositions to the public rather than to a noble patron. A market of bourgeois minipatrons was just emerging. Haydn had shown what could be done for musical art on the frontier of capitalism, moving in 1791 from the livery of Prince

Miklós Esterházy of Hungary to popular acclaim and commercial success as a bourgeois composer in London. That's 255 times more music, painting, and the rest, good and bad, glorious and corrupting. As a couple of acute observers, Marx and Engels, put it when all this was getting under way, “What earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?”

Ethics for a World of Commerce

Nonetheless, it is still routine to idealize a pagan or a Christian story of the virtues and then to sound a lament that in these latter days, alas, no one achieves the ideal. We live in a vulgar age of iron, or of plastic, it is said, not pagan gold or Christian silver. In the ethical accounting of artists and intellectuals since 1848, the townfolk are perhaps useful, even necessary; but *virtuous*? The aristocracy and peasantry-proletariat, it is reported by the clerisy, join in disdain for the merchant, who has neither the martial honor of a knight nor the solidarity of a serf. The bourgeois virtues have been reduced to the single vice of greed.

It's not so. Capitalism and the bourgeois life can be, and to some extent already are, virtuous. That is, bourgeois life *improves us ethically*, and would have even if it had not also made us rich. I realize that such optimism is not widely credited. It makes the clerisy uneasy to be told that they are *better* people for having the scope of a modern and bourgeois life. They quite understand-

ably want to honor their poor ancestors in the Italy of old or their poor cousins in India now, and feel impelled to claim with anguish as they sip their caramel macchiato grandes that their prosperity comes at a *terrible* ethical cost.

On the political left it has been commonplace for the past century and a half to charge that modern, industrial people are alienated, rootless, angst ridden, superficial, materialistic, and that it is precisely participation in markets that has made them so. Gradually the right and the middle have come to accept the charge. Some sociologists, both progressive and conservative, embrace it, lamenting the decline of organic solidarity. By the early 21st century, some on the right have schooled themselves to reply to the charge with a sneering cynicism, “Yeah, sure. Markets have no morals. So what? Greed is good. Bring on the pizza.”

But it's not so.

A little farmers' market opens before 6:00 a.m. on a summer Saturday at Polk and Dearborn in Chicago. As a woman walking her dog passes the earliest dealer setting up his stall, the woman and the dealer exchange pleasantries about the early bird and the worm. The two people here are enacting a script of citizenly courtesies and of encouragement for prudence and enterprise and good relations between seller and buyer. Some hours later the woman is moved to buy \$1.50 worth of tomatoes from him. But that's not the point. The market was an occasion for virtue, an expression of solidarity across gender, social class, ethnicity.

The Seven Virtues

In other words, markets and the bourgeois life are not always bad for the human spirit. In certain ways, and on balance, they have been good.

How so? The virtues came to be gathered by the Greeks, the Romans, the Stoics, the Church, Adam Smith, and recent “virtue

“The bourgeois virtues are merely the Seven Virtues exercised in a commercial society. They are not hypothetical.”

ethicists” into a coherent ethical framework. Until the framework somewhat mysteriously fell out of favor among theorists in the late 18th century, most Westerners did not think in Platonic terms of the One Good—to be summarized, say, as Maximum Utility, or as the Categorical Imperative, or as the Idea of the Good. They thought in Aristotelian terms of Many Virtues, plural.

“We shall better understand the nature of the ethical character,” said Aristotle, “if we examine its qualities one by one.” That still seems a sensible plan. Since about 1958 in English a so-called virtue ethics—as distinct from the Kantian, Benthamite, or contractarian views that dominated ethical philosophy from the late 18th century until then—has revived Aristotle’s one-by-one program. “We might,” wrote Iris Murdoch in 1969, early in the revival, “set out from an ordinary language situation by reflecting upon the virtues . . . since they help to make certain potentially nebulous areas of experience more open to inspection.” That again seems reasonable. Here are the Western Seven with exemplars.

- **Faith**—St. Peter
- **Hope**—Martin Luther King Jr.
- **Love**—Emma Goldman
- **Justice**—Gandhi
- **Courage**—Achilles, Shane
- **Temperance**—Socrates, Jane Austen
- **Prudence**—Ben Franklin

The system is a jury-rigged combination of the “pagan” virtues appropriate to a free male citizen of Athens (Courage, Temperance, Justice, and Prudence) and the “Christian” virtues appropriate to a believer (Faith, Hope, and Love).

Jury-rigged or not, the Seven cover what we need in order to flourish as human beings. So also might other ethical systems—Confucianism, for example, or Talmudic Judaism, or Native American

shamanism—and these can be lined up beside the Seven for comparison. There are many ways to be human. But it is natural to start with the Seven, since they are the ethical tradition of a West in which bourgeois life first came to dominance.

What then *are* the bourgeois virtues?

The leading bourgeois virtue is the Prudence to buy low and sell high. I admit it. There. But it is also the prudence to trade rather than to invade, to calculate the consequences, to pursue the good with competence—Herbert Hoover, for example, energetically rescuing many Europeans from starvation after 1918.

Another bourgeois virtue is the Temperance to save and accumulate, of course. But it is also the temperance to educate oneself in business and in life, to listen to the customer, to resist the temptations to cheat, to ask quietly whether there might be a compromise here—Eleanor Roosevelt negotiating the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

A third is the Justice to insist on private property honestly acquired. But it is also the justice to pay willingly for good work, to honor labor, to break down privilege, to value people for what they can do rather than for who they are, to view success without envy, making capitalism work since 1776.

A fourth is the Courage to venture on new ways of business. But it is also the courage to overcome the fear of change, to bear defeat unto bankruptcy, to be courte-

ous to new ideas, to wake up next morning and face fresh work with cheer, resisting the despairing pessimism of the clerisy from 1848 to the present. And so the bourgeoisie can have Prudence, Temperance, Justice, and Courage, the pagan four. Or the Scottish three—Prudence, Temperance, and Justice, the artificial virtues—plus enterprise, that is, Courage with another dose of Temperance.

Beyond the pagan virtues is the Love to take care of one’s own, yes. But it is also a bourgeois love to care for employees and partners and colleagues and customers and fellow citizens, to wish all of humankind well, to seek God, finding human and transcendent connection in the marketplace in 2006, and in a Scottish benevolence c. 1759.

Another is the Faith to honor one’s community of business. But it is also the faith to build monuments to the glorious past, to sustain traditions of commerce, of learning, of religion, finding identity in Amsterdam and Chicago and Osaka.

Another is the Hope to imagine a better machine. But it is also the hope to see the future as something other than stagnation or eternal recurrence, to infuse the day’s work with a purpose, seeing one’s labor as a glorious calling, 1533 to the present. So the bourgeoisie can have Faith, Hope, and Love, these three, the theological virtues.

The bourgeois virtues are merely the Seven Virtues exercised in a commercial society. They are not hypothetical. For centuries in Venice and Holland and then in England and Scotland and British North America, then in Belgium, Northern France, the Rhineland, Sydney, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Bombay, Shanghai, and in a widening array of places elsewhere, against hardy traditions of aristocratic and peasant virtues, we have practiced them. We have fallen repeatedly, of course, into bourgeois vices. Sin is original. But we live in a com-

“I hope to make “bourgeois” a *geuzennaam*, to remake a word of contempt into a word of honor.”

mercial society, most of us, and capitalism is not automatically vicious or sinful. Rather the contrary.

“Bourgeois virtues” is no contradiction. It is the way we live now, mainly, at work, on our good days, and the way we should, Mondays through Fridays.

Reclaiming “Bourgeois”

I would like to recover the word “bourgeois,” taking it back from its enemies. The word “capitalist,” referring in the opinion of Communists in the 1880s to greedy monopolists of the means of production, was taken back in the 1980s to mean “advocates for and actors in free markets.” “Quaker” and “Tory” originated as sneers but were calmly appropriated by the victims and made honorable.

In April 1566, 200 armed and Protestant-

sympathizing aristocrats from the Low Countries presented a petition to Margaret of Parma, Catholic Philip’s regent in Brussels, urging her to grant religious tolerance. She was advised by one of her counselors to pay them no heed. They were merely, said he in his aristocratic French, “*gueux*,” that is, “beggars.” Never mind that the petitioners were themselves French-speaking aristocrats.

The noblemen seized upon the word, and called themselves proudly thereafter

Beggars, Dutch *Geuzen*. Baron Henry Brederode, their leader, was called *Le Grand Gueux*. That summer the new word was claimed too by the Protestant iconoclasts. “*Vivent les Gueux*,” the rioters cried in Antwerp.

The word has remained alive in the Dutch language. The pirate navy that took Brill from the Spanish in 1572 called itself the *Watergeuzen*, Sea Beggars. The orthodox Calvinists marching to kill off toleration in 1616 called themselves the Mud Beggars. One of the illegal newspapers during the German occupation of World War II was *De Geus*, The Beggar. The normal Dutch word for such reversals of a sneer became *geuzennamen*, beggars-names.

I hope to make “bourgeois” a *geuzennaam*, to remake a word of contempt into a word of honor.

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