

On the (Limited) Virtue of Bourgeois Solutions to Humanly Problems

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It is good to be bourgeois. Get it? Be prudent. Be bourgeois! These admonishments sound somewhat strange. After all, people who tell you to be good usually want you to be loving and caring, or creative or excellent in some way or another. Being bourgeois? It sounds petty, if not boring. Yet it is the bourgeois virtues that are good for you and society, so Deirdre McCloskey argues. It is prudence that counts.

To hear Deirdre McCloskey talk about bourgeois virtues is somewhat strange. After all, she is a famous economist who, so you would expect, talks about markets and prices and does so preferably in mathematical terms. You certainly would not expect a moral lesson. But that is what McCloskey is offering. A part-time professor at the Erasmus University, she is currently working on four volumes about bourgeois virtues. The basic lesson is that it is not enough to rely on the mechanical processes of the market. Markets stimulate important virtues and virtues determine the outcome of markets. Against all those who rail against the vices of the market, she points at the virtuous behaviour that markets bring about. It is not just Prudence and Greed, she argues. It is not only about the “P variables of price, pleasure, payment, pocketbook, purpose, planning, property, profit, in a word, the Profane.” It is also about “Love and Courage, Justice and Temperance, Faith and Hope, that is, social Solidarity, the S variable of speech, semiotics, society, sympathy, service, sentiment, sharing, soul, spirit, stories, shame, in a word, the Sacred. It is in markets that people learn to deal with others, to sympathise with the needs of others, to socialize, to strive, and to deliberate. And all that is good for you and for society, so McCloskey argues.

The Netherlands takes a prominent place in her historical account. Modern world began in some respects, she thinks, not in Italy or England, but in the United Netherlands. The Dutch of the Golden Age were according to her exemplary in their bourgeois virtues. They were prudent and caring at the same time. They were enterprising and modest. If only the Dutch would be more like their ancestors, she pleaded to her audience at a symposium about the Dutch identity two weeks ago.

But is she right? Other speakers pointed at the prudent Dutch who decided to back the US in the Iraq war with the interests of Dutch companies in mind. Others called attention to the less than admirable role of the Dutch in the slave trade and the colonies.

Michael Zeeman stressed the role of the protestant ethics in the making of bourgeois Dutch society. Zeeman proceeded to argue that the anti-bourgeois and anti-clerical movement of the sixties are responsible for much of the troubles in Dutch society today. With prudence gone, managers can enrich themselves without shame, and with the churches empty the source of protestant values is quickly drying up. It made for a pessimistic outlook.

McCloskey remains optimistic, however. Her mission is to offer an apology for capitalism, using the word apology in the theological sense, as an address to non-believers. She is convinced that capitalism is a good thing, and bourgeois is not a

contradiction in terms. Capitalism is not the best of all possible worlds, she concedes, it is, however, just pretty good.

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The symposium on Deirdre McCloskey's work was held on May 6th, 2004 at Erasmus University Rotterdam, entitled "Dutch Identity: Virtues and Vices of Bourgeois Society." Among the speakers were Wiep van Bunge, Robert von Friedeburg, Dorothee Sturkenboom and Micheal Zeeman. The volume of the proceedings is now under preparation. For more information, you can contact with Altug Yalçintas at a.yalcintas@chello.nl