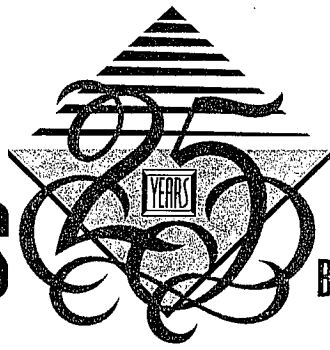


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# BOURGEOIS BLUES



By Donald McCloskey

The bourgeois have won. Furthermore, they deserve to win, since they are the good guys. The 21st century will be the century of the universal middle class. It will exhibit the bourgeois virtues.

“Bourgeois virtues”? Don’t make me laugh. The bourgeoisie may be useful, even necessary. But *virtuous*? Since 1848 or so the intellectuals, who at first welcomed the bourgeoisie most cordially, have been sneering this way at the very idea of “virtue” in the middle class. “Man must labor, / Man must work,” says a nursery rhyme for moderns, “The executive is / A dynamic jerk.”

Charles Dickens, the first and most successful of the anti-bourgeois writers, loved peasants and proletarians most warmly and had a kind word even for some of the aristocracy. But he detested the merchants and mill owners. The merchant Scrooge hurls his “Bah: humbug!” at a Christian holy day, a celebration of peasant virtues. Mr. Gradgrind, teaching little children to be wage slaves, declares, “Now, what I want is, Facts.” The motto, “Facts alone are wanted in life,” rejects all that is noble and aristocratic and romantic in the talk of virtue.

We talk of virtue in one of two ways only, the patrician or the plebeian, the virtues of the aristocrat or of the peasant, Achilles or Jesus. The two vocabularies are heard each in its own place, in Camp or Common. The one speaks of the pagan virtues of the soldier—courage, moderation, prudence, and justice. The other speaks of the Christian virtues of the worker—faith, hope, and charity. Achilles struts the Camp in his Hephaestian armor, exercising his noble wrath. Jesus stands barefoot on the mount, preaching to the least of the Commoners.

Camp and Common, the romantic hero or the working-class saint: That’s been our talk of good and bad. And yet we live now in the Town, we bourgeois, or are moving to the Town and bourgeois occupations as fast as we can manage.

The prediction that the proletariat would become the universal class has proven to be mistaken. Half of employment in rich countries is white collar, a figure that’s steadily rising. Jobs for peasants, proletarians, and aristocrats are disappearing. The class structure that the intellectuals analyzed so vigorously in 1848 and have since tried to keep in place is going or is gone.

The explanation is that the production of things has become and will continue to become cheaper relative to most services. In 50 years, a maker of things on an assembly line will be as rare as a farmer. The proletariat, an urban and secular version of the rural and religious peasantry, have sent their children to Notre Dame and thence to careers in plastics. Brahmins may lament, churchmen wail, bohemians jeer. Yet the universal class into which the classes are melting is the damnable bourgeoisie.

The result will be a massively bourgeois Town. It’s time for the intellectuals to stop complaining about the fact and to recognize the bourgeois virtues.

To sing only of aristocratic or peasant virtues, of courage or of solidarity, is to mourn for a world well lost. We need an 18th-century equipoise, a neoclassicism of virtues suiting our condition. We are all bourgeois now. For some decades about 80 percent of Americans have identified themselves as “middle class” (such consciousness of course may be false). The ideals of nationalism or socialism have not suited our lives (refer for empirical verification to records of the Great European Civil War 1914-1990). The ideals of the townsman, by contrast, have suited us peacefully, and no surprise.

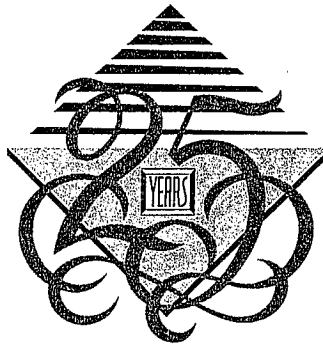
Bad news? A future of selfish SOBs? The country club regnant? The death of community? No, unless you swallow the talk of Western clerks and scribblers since 1848.

The growth of the market promotes virtue, not vice. Most intellectuals since 1848 have thought the opposite: that it erodes virtue. As the legal scholar James Boyd White puts the thought in his otherwise admirable *Justice as Translation*, bourgeois growth is “the expansion of the exchange system by the conversion of what is outside it into its terms. It is a kind of steam shovel chewing away at the natural and social world.”

And yet we all take happily what the market gives—polite, accommodating, energetic, enterprising, risk-taking, trustworthy people; not bad people. In the Bulgaria of old the department stores had a policeman on every floor, not to prevent theft but to stop the customers from attacking the arrogant and incompetent staff selling goods that at once fell apart. The way a salesperson in an American store greets customers makes the point: “How can I help you?” The phrase startles foreigners. It is an instance in miniature of the bourgeois virtues. As Eric Hoffer said, “It is futile to judge a kind deed by its motives.... We are made kind by being kind.” Thank you very kindly.

It is usual to elevate a pagan or Christian ideal and then to sound a lament that no one achieves the ideal. The numerous bourgeois virtues have been reduced to the single vice of greed. The intellectuals thunder at the middle class but offer no advice on how to be good within it. The only way to become a good bourgeois, say Flaubert and Sinclair Lewis, is to stop being one. The words have consequences. The hole in our virtue-talk leaves the bourgeoisie without reasons for ethics. Since they cannot be either knights or saints they are damned, as we are all, and say: To hell with it.

Consider the virtues of the three classes, matched to their character, aristocrat, peasant, or bourgeois (the “character” of a class will sometimes be its character in the eyes of others, sometimes in its own, sometimes in fact). Thus:



suasive talk that establishes trust is of course necessary for doing business. This is why co-religionists or co-ethnics deal so profitably with each other, as Quakers or overseas Chinese. The economic historian Avner Greif has explored the business dealings of Mediterranean Jews in the Middle Ages, accumulating evidence for a reputational conversation: In 1055

one Abun ben Zedaka of Jerusalem, for example, "was accused (though not charged in court) of embezzling the money of a Maghribi traders, [and] merchants as far away as Sicily canceled their agency relations with him." A letter from Palermo to an Alexandrian merchant who had disappointed the writer said, "Had I listened to what people say, I never would have entered into a partnership with you." Reputational gossip, Greif notes, was cheap, "a by-product of the commercial activity [itself] and passed along with other commercial correspondence." Cheating was profitless within the community. The market does not erode communities; it makes them, and then flourishes within what it has made.

The aristocrat, by contrast, does not deign to bargain. Hector tries to, but Achilles replies: "argue me no agreements. I cannot forgive you. / As there are no trustworthy oaths between men and lions, / Nor wolves and lambs have spirit that can be brought into agreement." The Duke of Ferrara speaks of his last duchess there upon the wall looking as if she were alive, "Even had you skill / In speech— (which I have not)—make your will / Quite clear to such an one.... / —E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose / Never to stoop." The aristocrat never stoops; the peasant or proletarian stoops to harvest or to tend the machine. The bourgeois stoops daily to make his will quite clear, and to know the will and reasons of the other. The aristocrat's speech is declamation (imitated by the professoriate). The aristocrat's proofs are like commands, which is perhaps why Plato the aristocrat loved them so. They convince (*vincere*, to conquer). The bourgeois, by contrast, must persuade, sweetly (*suadeo*, from the same root as "sweet").

•• The Classes & the Virtues ••

Aristocrat/Patrician	Peasant/Plebeian/Proletarian	Bourgeois/Mercantile
pagan	Christian	secular
Achilles	St. Francis	Benjamin Franklin
pride of being	pride of service	pride of action
honor	duty	integrity
forthrightness	solidarity	trustworthiness
courage	fortitude	enterprise
wit	jocularity	humor
courtesy	reverence	respect
propriety	humility	modesty
magnanimity	benevolence	consideration
justice	fairness	responsibility
foresight	wisdom	prudence
moderation	frugality	thrift
love	charity	affection
grace	dignity	self-possession
subjective	objective	conjective

The point is to notice the third, bourgeois column, the third estate of virtue, not to elevate it above the other two. Courage is in some personal experiences and social institutions a virtue. So is humility. But when the class left out is half the population, the old dichotomy of masters and men is not doing its ethical job.

**A** potent source of virtue and a check on vice is the premium that a bourgeois society puts on discourse. The aristocrat gives a speech, the peasant tells a tale. But the bourgeois must in the bulk of his transactions talk to an equal. "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following.... What news on the Rialto?" It is wrong to imagine, as modern economics does, that the market is a field of silence.

Talk defines business reputation. A market economy looks forward and depends therefore on trust. The per-

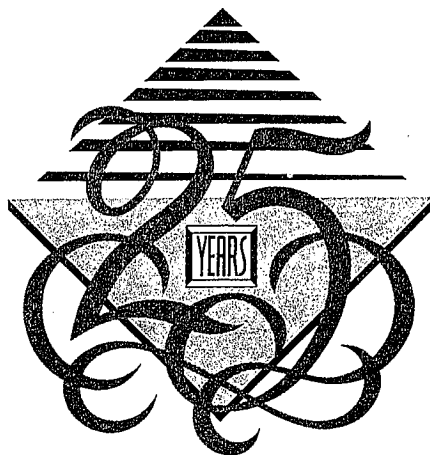
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The bourgeoisie talks with a will. About a quarter of national income is earned from merely bourgeois and feminine persuasion: not orders or information but persuasion. One thinks immediately of advertising, but in fact advertising is a tiny part of the total. Take the detailed categories of employment and make a guess as to the percentage of the time in each category spent on persuasion. Out of the 115 million civilian employees, it seems reasonable to assign 100 percent of the time of 760,000 lawyers and judges to persuasion, and likewise all the time of public-relations specialists and actors and directors. Perhaps 75 percent of the time of 14.2 million executive, administrative, and managerial employees is spent on persuasion, and a similar share of the time of the 4.8 million teachers and the 11.2 million salespeople (excluding cashiers). Half of the effort of police, writers, and health workers, one might guess, is spent on persuasion. And so forth. The result is that 28.2 million person-years, a quarter of the labor force, persuades for a living.

The result can be checked with other measures. John Wallis and Douglass North measure 50 percent of national income as transaction costs, the costs of persuasion being part of these. Not all the half of American workers who are white collar talk for a living, but in an extended sense many do, as for that matter do many blue-collar workers, persuading each other to handle the cargo just so, and especially pink-collar workers, dealing all day with talking people.

And of the talkers a good percentage are persuaders. The secretary shepherding a document through the company bureaucracy is called on to exercise sweet talk and veiled threats. The bureaucrats and professionals who constitute most of the white-collar work force are not themselves merchants, but they do a merchant's business inside and outside their companies. Note the persuasion exercised the next time you buy a suit. Specialty clothing stores charge more than discount stores not staffed with rhetoricians. The differential pays for the persuasion: "It's you, my dear" or "The fish tie makes a statement."

The high share of persuasion provides



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a scene for bourgeois virtues. One must establish a relationship of trust with someone in order to persuade him. *Ethos*, the character that a speaker claims, is the master argument. So the world of the bourgeoisie is jammed with institutions for making relationships and declaring character, unlike that of the aristocracy or peasantry or proletariat, who get their relationships and characters ready-made by status, and who in any case need not persuade.

Hollywood producers spend hours a day "buffing," which is to say chatting with their business peers, establishing relations. On the foreign-exchange markets the opening business of the day is to trade jokes useful for making human contact with clients. *Ethos* is all, as much as with any sneering aristocrat—or maybe more, since claimed less confidently. In Thomas Mann's first novel, the story of his German merchant family, the head of the firm scolds his unbusinesslike brother, a harbinger of bohemianism in the family: "In a company consisting of business as well as professional men, you make the remark, for everyone to hear, that, when one really considers it, every businessman is a swindler—you, a businessman yourself, belonging to a firm that strains every nerve and muscle to preserve its perfect integrity and spotless reputation."

**B**ourgeois charity, again, if not the "charity," meaning spiritual love, of the King James translation of the Bible, runs contrary to the caricature of greed. More than the peasant or aristocrat, the bourgeois gives to the poor—as in the ghettos of Eastern Europe or in the small towns of America. Acts of charity follow the bourgeois norm of reciprocity. The American Gospel of Wealth—founding hospitals, colleges, and libraries wherever little fortunes were made—is a bourgeois notion, paying back what was taken in profit. Middle-class people in the 19th century habitually gave a biblical tenth of their incomes to charity. The intrusion of the state into charity killed the impulse, re-making charity into a *taille* imposed on grumbling peasants: I gave at the office.

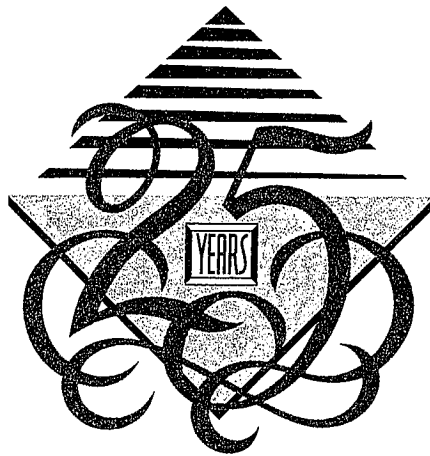
One could go on. The bourgeois vir-

tues are in for a long run and need exploration and praise. We already have Japanese bourgeois and now Korean and Taiwanese; later Pakistani in volume, and Mexican. The world is about to become one Rialto.

**A**nd yet the intelligentsia detests this splendid bourgeoisie. The detestation is not new. Anciently the poet Horace prefers his Sabine valley to troublesome riches or recommends stretching one's income by contracting one's desires, even while accepting large gifts in cash or land from Maecenas and Augustus. The disdain for money grubbing becomes a literary theme and merges smoothly with the Christian virtues.

But over the past two centuries the hostility to the money-grubbing class has become frantic. After a brief flirtation with pro-bourgeois writing in the 18th century (Daniel Defoe is the high point; Voltaire admired the English and bourgeois virtues; Jane Austen, late, admired at least the marriage market), literature sinks into a sustained sneer. The novel begins as the epic of the bourgeoisie but becomes with Balzac and Dickens an anti-epic, a Dunciad of the middle classes. German romantics and French statistes and English evangelicals in the early 19th century were bourgeois by origin but did not like it, not one bit. Overwhelmingly the French men of letters who barked at the bourgeoisie were the sons of lawyers and businessmen. So too were German men of letters, such as Marx and Engels. The American progressives, advocating a secularized but nonetheless Christian ideal for public policy, were the sons and daughters of Protestant ministers, bourgeois all.

It's a puzzle. In his astonishing *Bohemian Versus Bourgeois: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century*, Cesar Grana asks, "What is it in the spiritual scene of modern society that may account for such intellectual touchiness, willfulness, and bitterness" among the intelligentsia against the bourgeoisie? His answer was what has since been called the "aporia of the Enlightenment project," namely, the conflict between



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freedom and rationalism in modern life. The bourgeoisie is seen by intellectuals such as Dickens, Weber, and Freud as the embodiment of rationalism.

Grana is probably correct. An impatience with calculation has been the mark of the romantic since Herder. Don Quixote's idiotic schemes in aid of chivalry are precisely uncalculated, irrational but noble.

The modern men Grana writes about, however, have been mistaken all this time. They mistook bourgeois life, the way a rebellious son mistakes the life of his father. The life of the bourgeoisie is not routine but creation, as Marx and Engels said. What has raised income per head in the rich countries by a factor of at least 12 since the 18th century is originality backed by commercial courage, not science. Dickens was mistaken to think that Facts alone are wanted in the life of manufacturing. Manufacturing depends on enterprise and single-mindedness far from coolly rational.

Weber was mistaken to think that the modern state embodies principles of rationality in bureaucracy. Anyone who thinks that a large, modern bureaucracy runs "like an army" cannot have experienced either a large, modern bureaucracy or an army. Freud was mistaken to claim that modern life forces a choice between the reality principle and eroticism. A businessperson without an erotic drive (suitably sublimated) achieves nothing.

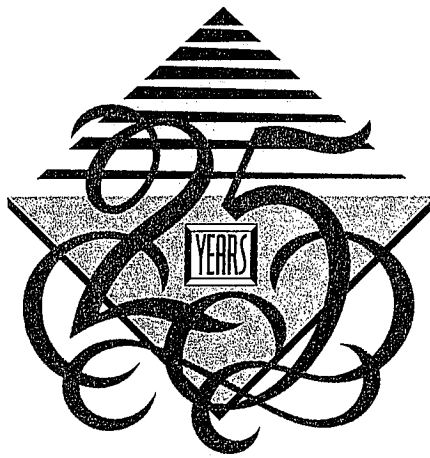
**T**his lack of insight by the intelligentsia into business life is odd. It reminds me, I repeat, of an adolescent boy sneering at his father: Remarkable how the old fellow matured between my 16th and 22nd birthdays. The European novel contains hardly a single rounded and accurate portrait of a businessman (Thomas Buddenbrook is an exception). The businessman is almost always a cardboard fool, unless he proves in the end to evince aristocratic or Christian virtues. Intellectuals in the West have had a tin ear for business and its values. Thus Arthur Hugh Clough in 1862, "The Latest Decalogue": "Thou shalt have one God only; who / Would be at the expense of two?" and so on in the vein of a clever adolescent down to "Thou shalt not steal; an empty feat, / When it's so lucrative to cheat. / ...Thou

shalt not covet, but tradition / Approves all forms of competition.”

Economics, as the science of business, has been similarly spurned since 1848, leading to more adolescent sneering at what the lad does not quite grasp. (Lad, not lass: Portraits of bourgeois women in literature are numerous and accurate from the hands of women novelists—or even from men, Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* [ranging from whore to noblewoman, but always enterprising] or Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* or James’s portrait of a lady, down to Brian Moore’s *Mary Dunne* or Judith Hearne. It is bourgeois men on the job whom novelists have failed to grasp.) Early in the 19th century, writers like Macaulay or Manzoni read and understood economics and applied it intelligently. Manzoni’s novel *The Betrothed* (last edition, 1840) contains an entire chapter on the unhappy effects during a famine of imposing price controls (*un prezzo giusto*).

But after 1848 the intellectuals construed economics as the faculty of Reason, arrayed against the Freedom they loved, a misunderstanding encouraged by the talk of “iron laws” among classical economists. Or else they portrayed businesspeople as mere con men (thus Twain and Howells). By the late 19th century economics had dropped out of the conversation entirely. No intellectual since 1890 has been ashamed to be ignorant about the economy or economics. It is a rare English professor—David Lodge, for example, in *Nice Work*—who can see the businessperson as anything other than The Other.

**A** change is overdue. To admire the bourgeois virtues is not to buy into Reaganism or the Me Decade. Greed is a bourgeois vice, though not unknown among other classes. But the market and capitalism produce more virtue than vice. We must encourage capitalism, it being the hope for the poor of the world and being in any case what we are, but our capitalism need not be hedonistic or monadic, and certainly not unethical. An aristocratic, country-club capitalism, well satisfied with itself, or a peasant,



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grasping capitalism, hating itself, are both lacking in the virtues. And neither works. They lead to monopoly and economic failure, alienation and revolution. We need a capitalism that nurtures communities of good townfolk in South-Central L.A. as much as in Iowa City. We encourage it by talking seriously about the bourgeois virtues.

Being ashamed of being bourgeois has for two centuries amounted to being ashamed of America. The sneerers at Ben Franklin like Baudelaire and D. H. Lawrence were notorious as anti-democrats and anti-Americans. Charles Dickens hated the United States as much as he hated businessmen. But America is not the only bourgeois society: Germany is, too, though one that in its intellectual circles wishes it was not; Italians are famous townfolk; and China, having for centuries cities larger than anywhere else, must have a bourgeois tradition counter to the peasant or aristocrat.

We live not in a global village but in a global town, and have for a long time. A myth of recency has made the virtues arising from town markets seem those of a shameful parvenu. In economic history dependent on Marx, such as Weber’s *General Economic History* (1923) or Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* (1944), the market is seen as a novelty. From this historical mistake arose the 19th-century fairy tales of lost paradise for aristocrats or peasants. It has taken a century of professional history to correct the mistake.

Medieval men bought and sold everything from grain to bishoprics. The Vikings were traders, too. Greece and Rome were business empires. The city of Jerico dates to 8000 B.C. The emerging truth is that we have lived in a world market for centuries, a market run by the bourgeoisie. It is time we recognized the fact and started cultivating those bourgeois virtues, of which we are to witness a new flowering. ■

*Donald McCloskey is John F. Murray Professor of Economics and professor of history at the University of Iowa.*