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## The Lives of Deirdre McCloskey

**Her gender change may be the least iconoclastic thing about her**

*By Alexander C. Kafka* MARCH 20, 2016

**W**illiam Shakespeare, an excitable Norwich terrier, keeps wary watch from the top of the steps, near the voluminous shelves, the reading futon, and the two standing desks. At the bottom landing, Virginia Woolf, a hound mix, surveys the condos out the window across South Federal Street. At the expansive dining-room table, Deirdre McCloskey works her laptop and her phone. She coordinates forthcoming lecture trips to the International Monetary Fund and to Europe. She tries to help her 93-year-old mother move from Naples, Fla., to a home in Chicago. She tries, also, to figure out how humanity grew so prosperous.

Her 3,000-square-foot loft in the Printer's Row neighborhood of Chicago's South Loop used to be part of the Franklin printing factory. Now it's a reading and writing factory where McCloskey, who retired from teaching last year, pores through her 8,000-volume library for insights and evidence from economics, history, literature, theology, law, psychology, sociology, philosophy, rhetoric, communications, and anthropology. "My theory," she says in a warm and raspy voice that always seems on the verge of vanishing, "is that she who dies with 10,000 books wins." She approvingly cites the late Umberto Eco's attitude that it's the as-yet unread books that are most valuable.

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Twenty years ago, the former Donald McCloskey made [headlines](#) when he changed gender, a liberating but physically, professionally, and socially harrowing transition, which McCloskey detailed in her 1999 memoir, *Crossing*. "Deirdre will surely go to heaven; she's already been to hell, in terms of what she went through after that," says

the Nobel laureate Vernon Smith, of Chapman University, who has known McCloskey for 35 years.

As the University of Chicago Press plans to release next month the final volume of McCloskey's ambitious trilogy arguing that bourgeois values, rather than material circumstances, catalyzed the past several centuries' explosion in wealth, her gender change may be the least iconoclastic thing about her. A libertarian with tolerance for limited welfare interventions by government, an economist who critiques the way her colleagues apply statistics and mathematical models, a devout Christian who emphasizes charity and love but within free-market strictures, a learned humanist politically to the right of many of the scholars who inspire her, McCloskey is a school of one.

"Everybody regards her as a superb intellectual and somebody who has for many years disregarded disciplinary boundaries," says the economic historian Joel Mokyr, of Northwestern University.

**“I've seen so many academic careers end not with a bang but with a whimper. I thought that would happen to me.”**

In the company of Shakespeare and Woolf, McCloskey, at a half-dozen work areas lit by clusters of reading lights, completed the 1,700-page trilogy, which she calls an extended "essay." But she'll clearly never be done sharpening and revising its arguments. Only a few years ago, she thought it might go as long as six volumes. Research, for her, is an endurance sport with an ever-receding finish line. Add to that the press of time. She thinks her vision might be going. She's had both hips replaced. And she periodically inverts her 6-foot frame (she was co-captain of the football team at Cambridge's Buckingham Browne and Nichols) on a "Relax the Back" table, though she fears she'll have a stroke and be found by emergency personnel "hanging upside down like a bat." She's 73 and estimates she has a decade remaining of intense intellectual activity.

Still, it delights her to see the trilogy finished.

"I've seen so many academic careers end not with a bang but with a whimper. I thought that would happen to me," she says. "I am so glad that in my old age I have found a project that uses what talents I have."

McCloskey's singularity can be traced to her lifelong journeys across gender, politics, academic outlook, and religious viewpoint. She has shifted from male to female, from left to right, from narrow, math-centered economist to wide-ranging

interdisciplinary, and from secular to progressive Episcopalian. Those four strands have intertwined and influenced one another. In the experience of a lesser and less determined mind, they might have added up to flakiness or hopeless confusion. But even McCloskey's critics tend to venerate two or three phases of her varied career, if not all of them, and the word "brilliant" comes up not infrequently.

McCloskey is wry about the changes. "I seem to be condemned to spending the second half of my career contradicting the first half," she tells a trio of graduate students in an informal seminar at her home one evening when the rest of the country is watching the Super Bowl.

It's a good line, but the truth is more complicated. Each stage was necessary to the next, built on the models and knowledge of the period before, but improved as she confronted her disillusionment when those models proved fallible or at least insufficient to explain the complex world around her. The shifts, some reflected over the course of her 17 books, weren't fickle changes of mind but a pentimento layering of experience. "I think that's true of all our lives," she says, "don't you?"

The "Joan Baez socialism," as she puts it, was in reaction to the Vietnam War. McCloskey recalls blocking then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's car during a student protest as he tried to get to a Harvard speaking engagement. She enjoys astonishing her Marxist friends by quoting more lefty folk songs than they can. Because Keynesianism was the oxygen Harvard econ grad students breathed when McCloskey studied with her beloved mentor there, Alexander Gerschenkron, she once believed that government had a substantial role to play in stimulating the economy. But the free market was doctrine at Milton Friedman's University of Chicago, where McCloskey taught for 12 years after grad school. There she pursued esteemed studies of how early England's property law influenced its economy, of how people interact in markets, and of the misleading nature of statistical correlation — the last boiling down to the argument that just because something can be statistically tracked doesn't mean it matters and, conversely, that many things that matter don't lend themselves to tidy statistical tracking.

Though tenured in both economics and history and just a few years away from a full professorship, she left the University of Chicago in 1980 because among the couple dozen faculty members in the econ department there, she says, "there are the barons and the help," the barons being Nobel winners and their protégés, the help being those carrying heavy teaching loads and administrative tasks. "I could see that they were putting me in the help category," she says.

She sought intellectual and professional sanctuary at Iowa, under the influence of the literary critic Wayne Booth, known for his study of narrative as rhetoric. Inspired by

works like Booth's *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* and writings by the British philosopher Stephen Toulmin on argument, McCloskey recognized that the systematic, mathematical structures of modern economics, even when they took the form of graphs and formulas, were a form of metaphorical persuasion, not scientific proof. More broadly, the move to Iowa, where she would teach for the next 19 years, sparked in her a general humanistic awakening. She was almost 40 and thought to herself, "I've got to have more of an intellectual life." She learned Greek and Latin and delved into the *Times Literary Supplement*, reading as many titles as she could from among books discussed there.

Stanley Fish recruited her in 2000 from Iowa to the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she taught for the next 15 years. "She is a person of uncommonly broad learning who was continually rethinking old questions and posing new ones," says Fish, now a distinguished visiting professor at Yeshiva University's Cardozo School of Law. At UIC, McCloskey applied her interdisciplinary fervor to the big economic question of prosperity and plunged into her bourgeoisie project.

The gender change and the religious awakening have been integral to that. She became during that transitional time, by her own reckoning and by many who know her, more compassionate and less doctrinaire. Untangling the correlations among femininity, piety, and a gentler bourgeois economic Theory of Everything, however, is harder. McCloskey doesn't know what sparked what — it all evolved quickly *en masse*.

"Certainly my Christianity has something to do with my gender change," she says. Donald had been liberal and raised as a boy in a home "with a toleration of queers," but "becoming one in the sight of the world gave me a broader sympathy and clarity."

**R**eligion helped focus McCloskey, in an interestingly gendered way, on *The Bourgeois Virtues* — the trilogy's first volume, in 2006. She defines and categorizes "the Christian and Feminine virtues" of love, faith, and hope, "the pagan and masculine virtues" of courage and temperance, and "the androgynous virtues" of prudence and justice, and then systematizes and applies them to the life of commerce. For instance, she writes that the first 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." Then there's "Temperance to save and accumulate, of course" — but also "to educate oneself in business and in life, to listen to the customer humbly, to resist the temptations to

cheat, to ask quietly whether there might be a compromise here." Love is "to take care of one's own, yes," but also one's employees, partners, colleagues, customers, and fellow citizens.

"Consider," she writes, "the bourgeois virtues contrasted with the earlier alternatives. The aristocratic virtues elevate an I. The Christian/peasant virtues elevate a Thou. The priestly virtues elevate an It. The bourgeois virtues speak instead of We, negotiating between I and Thou with reference to It, as civilized people must."

In *Bourgeois Dignity* (2010), she gets into the ideological bouts at the heart of her argument, contending that the upsurge of wealth over the past 250 years or so cannot be explained by institutions, materials, capital accumulation, thrift, infrastructure, geography, trade, genetics, slavery, war, inheritance, science, wealth distribution, or any other traditional explanation, single or combined. Many of those factors may have contributed to the mushrooming of mankind's prosperity by a factor of at least 10 and as much as 30 in rich countries — the Great Enrichment, she calls it. They may even have been necessary to it. But, she writes, they were not sufficient. The catalyst, McCloskey says, was a new admiration for bourgeois values that became established in 16th- and 17th-century Northwestern Continental Europe, particularly among the Dutch, before influencing 18th-century England, 19th-century America and France, and then the rest of the world.

The third, new volume, *Bourgeois Equality*, traces how ideas that arose from a newfound liberty and dignity among commoners gelled into a "reevaluation" called liberalism that invigorated ordinary people to become innovators and entrepreneurs, and increased regard for and acceptance of them in society at large.

**M**ccloskey's bold emphasis on ideas over material causes — unsurprising, given the compass of her argument and the scores of daunting thinkers past and present she wrangles with — garners mixed reactions.

"People are very divided," says Gregory Clark of the University of California at Davis, an economic historian who studies social mobility. He extols her early studies of medieval agricultural institutions, the Industrial Revolution, and the decline of the British economy in the 19th and early 20th centuries. "What was nice about these papers is that the ideas were often simple but very adroitly brought to data and using basic economic principles in ways other people hadn't thought of." Clark admires McCloskey's "chutzpah" in making so many intellectual transitions but thinks the

bourgeois trilogy has been "her least successful endeavor," marred by messy cultural arguments without "nice empirical counterparts" that can be tested.

**McCloskey 'has lived her life literally and figuratively in a search for truth ... based on the idea of radical individual autonomy.'**

Chapman's Vernon Smith disagrees. "I find her argument very persuasive," he says. "Economic historians are pretty well agreed that there was a spectacular takeoff in growth in Northern Europe around the middle of the 18th century, and I think property rights were necessary but not sufficient for that. Something else was going on, and I think her whole idea of the change in attitude is a great hypothesis." Smith, whose Nobel-winning laboratory experiments demonstrated that people don't act in purely self-interested ways, says McCloskey's trilogy offers a historical and ideological context for that observation, and is part of the field's long struggle to escape from maximum-utility-based theories.

John Nye, a specialist at George Mason University in British and French economic history, is largely in accord with McCloskey's metacritique and methodology, though he thinks that at key economic junctures in history, ideas matter more "at the margins" than as a central driving force. A nation's rhetoric and its policies are often very different, he points out: Look at the Philippines, which favors the free market in theory but is relatively hamstrung with antimarket regulations. McCloskey's "main thesis is plausible but insufficiently supported," he says. "Deirdre in her youth would have worked harder to make the case ironclad."

In the third volume, McCloskey goes after Thomas Piketty's and similar handwringing over inequality, saying it emphasizes the relative inequality of the poor rather than their absolute welfare. As long as there's a pie, no matter its size or quality, you'll always be able to worry over how to slice it, she says, and that is a futile distraction from innovation and entrepreneurship.

But Robert Solow, an emeritus professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who won a Nobel in 1987 for a neoclassical model of economic growth, shares neither McCloskey's dismissive attitude toward questions of inequality nor her optimism about the market's potential to mitigate it. "If you look at history as a wrestling match between greed and charitable conscience," he says, "greed on the whole seems to be winning." He doesn't deny that societal affluence has increased over all and in some places a lot. But, he asks, "Do you want to live in a society in which there are these enormous extremes of income and wealth?" He thinks those extremes pose a threat to democracy, but beyond that simply make life morally and aesthetically worse.

Straying far from her Harvard Keynesianism of yesteryear, McCloskey now finds government market interventions patronizing and oblivious to unforeseen consequences. She ridicules "the idea that you can make an economy expand by just spending more. If that were true, the Industrial Revolution would have happened in Mesopotamia four millennia ago."

She also dismisses the pessimism of Robert Gordon, the Northwestern University economist who, in his recent, much-discussed book, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*, sees technological growth as having slowed, leaving a precarious or wannabe middle class in danger of spiraling down the drain of a service economy of poorly paid Walmart greeters and Starbucks baristas. McCloskey, in contrast, bets that the 37 percent of the world population in China and India whose incomes are rapidly growing will lead to "a gigantic increase in the number of scientists, designers, writers, musicians, engineers, entrepreneurs, and ordinary businesspeople devising betterments that spill over to the now rich countries allegedly lacking in dynamism." Similarly, she banks on innovation to overcome current environmental and health problems.

But just when you have her pegged as the ultimate libertarian poster girl, McCloskey endorses steep inheritance taxes and government subsidies for education and for maternity and child care. And in line with her religious views, she advocates charitable giving.

**I**n addition to the trilogy's content, some readers buck at its size and baroque style.

"The heft, the air and the title of this book all promise a big thesis," wrote Jim Holt in [his \*New York Times\* review](#) of the first volume. "But what the devil could that thesis be?" He feels baffled and bludgeoned by McCloskey's "luxurious orgy of quotations, epigrams, pop-cultural and poetic allusions, charts, lists, etymologies, asseverations, innuendoes, zingers and brickbats." Coming closer to the truth than he might have realized, Holt complains, "She has read the library, and won't let you forget it."

Others, however, find a vast whimsical curiosity-cabinet beauty to the trilogy — surprising, enthusiastic insights by a careful but adventurous thinker reacting to a century-spanning intellectual grab bag. A poem by the Puritan settler Anne Bradstreet. Tenets of Confucius or the Hebrew prophet Amos. The literary historian John Loftis. The scientist and author Jared Diamond. Anything and everything from those many yards of bookshelves is grist for McCloskey's insatiable mill.



Kevin J. Miyazaki, Redux, for The Chronicle Review

George Mason's Peter Boettke, reviewing *Bourgeois Dignity* in 2011, calls it "a breathtaking intellectual tour." The best way to understand her work, he says, is "as the book Adam Smith would have written had he combined *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* into one book."

Regarding the trilogy's length, McCloskey begs your pardon but says she is attempting to counter a couple centuries of bourgeoisie bashing from every direction by the "clerisy," a term she borrows from Coleridge and employs to mean "opinion makers and opinion takers, all the reading town."

"The prosecution in the past two centuries has written out the indictment of the developing free and bourgeois and business-respecting civilization in many thousands of eloquent volumes," she writes before listing some of those authors — "Baudelaire, Marx, Engels ... Veblen, Ortega y Gasset, Sinclair Lewis, T.S. Eliot ... Terry



Eagleton, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Zizek ..." and so on for the better part of a page. And now allow her to speak for the defense.

That valiant defense, alas, may be lost on much of academe, at least on academic economists, who are, says MIT's Solow, generally hunkered down in their conceptual silos. "They don't really welcome that kind of breadth," he says. "They want to stick to what is methodologically familiar and make the kinds of inferences they're used to making."

But it is being heard loud and clear by a broader libertarian audience, many of whom see McCloskey as a towering figure in the movement. She "has lived her life literally and figuratively in a search for truth and understanding and human experience based on the idea of radical individual autonomy," says Nick Gillespie, editor of Reason.com. He says she "has forced economists to reckon not just with their subjects' humanity but with their own humanities" and the limits of the discipline's emphasis on mathematics and precision. McCloskey's "ability to shift from humanities to economics," he says, "is probably as stunning and as mind-blowing as any transformation she has done with her own body."

"She's in any given year one of the top 10 or 15 candidates that I'm sure the Nobel Prize committee is considering," says Walter Block, a prominent libertarian economist at Loyola University New Orleans. But two things might thwart that. Nobel committees like hedgehogs more than foxes and she's both, and they might not savor her love of the market.

**F**rom the battles of ideas, family, writ large and small, has always been a shelter for McCloskey, but sometimes a turbulent shelter.

It was from her dad, Robert McCloskey, the popular Supreme Court historian at Harvard, that she learned to respect academic life, and to think she was capable of succeeding in it. But she got her work habits and her argumentative skills from her mother, Helen, a gifted opera singer who gave up her career prospects for family but later became a serious poet.

The couple argued about everything, although Robert famously persuaded Helen to stop for cigarettes on the drive to the hospital where he died of a heart attack at age 53. It was an unhappy marriage, and growing up an introverted stutterer (the stutter afflicts her still, but far less), McCloskey felt a lot of tension in the house.

She wasn't able to leave that tension behind. *Crossing* details how McCloskey's sister, Laura, a psychologist, had her involuntarily committed twice during the gender transition. In the years since, they've mended fences and are now very close. But other wounds endure.

"My marriage family has turned against me completely," McCloskey says of her ex-wife, a nursing professor, and their two now grown children. "They won't talk to me. ... It's been really terrible, it's like being stabbed. I have three grandchildren I've never seen."

Other relationships help fill that void. Her scholarly contacts form an extended global network. When they come to Chicago, she enjoys hosting them at her apartment and wining and dining them at the nearby Cliff Dwellers Club, with a 22nd-floor penthouse view of Lake Michigan.

And at her Sunday-evening seminars, since her retirement, she keeps the pedagogical embers glowing. Graduate students find solace in being able to openly discuss libertarian principles away from the suspicion, if not the scorn, they say is sometimes engendered by that topic in their department hallways. "Overcome the fear of failure," she advises them, "of contempt, of bad opinion." Over soup and bread served by McCloskey, and scones and Chinese New Year dumplings brought by the students, they discuss *The Bourgeois Virtues*. They bemoan certification and licensing madness, antimarket barriers to professional entry. They talk about the death penalty and about balancing the costs of crime with those of crime prevention. McCloskey challenges them with a squint — push harder, dig deeper — then rewards an insight with a lean back, a tilt of the head, and a smile that telegraphs, Now you're on to something.

Then there are McCloskey's fellow congregants, from academics to bankers to homeless people, at Grace Place Episcopal Church of Chicago. In the airy, open-beamed sanctuary across South Dearborn Street from McCloskey's apartment, on a frigid Sunday in February, the Rev. Ethan Jewett reads from Luke. The passage describes Jesus rebuking an "unclean spirit" that afflicts a boy who has convulsions and foams at the mouth. He heals the child and returns him to his father.

After the service is a friendly coffee hour, then lunch at a neighborhood joint called Hackneys, around the corner from where McCloskey parks her used canary-yellow Smart car with a bumper sticker advocating "Separation of Economy and State." Over pizza she recalls seeking spiritual comfort during the most trying times of her transition in Iowa City. The Catholics were a bit frosty. The Unitarians were sweet, but she didn't get much intellectual stimulation from their discussion of *Heather Has Two Mommies*. The Episcopalians were just right.

The Episcopal Church, she has written, "suits me. The image is right — 'suits.' It feels like a comfortable set of clothes, the great poetic tradition from the Book of Common Prayer to T.S. Eliot, the middle way between a harsh Calvinism and an authoritarian Catholicism, the implanting of the church in the community and the corresponding mission of helping the poor."

For McCloskey, it's a mission with her singular libertarian twist. Across the street from her building, a homeless man named John sells issues of *StreetWise*. She pays him \$20 monthly not to push the newspapers on her. John has held up his end of the deal and, she says, "I'm thinking of giving him a raise."

**I**n *Crossing*, McCloskey described her dread of being "read" as a man in a dress.

She dreads it no longer. First of all, it doesn't happen much — only in the Castro District of San Francisco, she says, where the radar is acute. Most of the time, she's just a woman — a tall woman with a striking and generous laugh, but a woman. And if she is "read," she doesn't care. She's comfortable — after so many surgeries, tribulations, and epiphanies — in her own skin.

More-intimate relationships, the kind she speculated about in her memoir those two decades ago, seem unlikely, she says now. It's not so much a trans thing, she explains. As she discusses with her church women's group, successful older women of expectations and means often have trouble finding a partner. She ventured into online dating, and it was a fiasco. One guy spent the whole evening talking about his deceased wife and his job, then looked crestfallen when McCloskey didn't invite him up to her place. Another wouldn't shut up about horse races.

No matter, she says. She had a very successful 30-year marriage to the love of her life.

She concentrates instead on her work. She wants to remind people that although she has ventured into the humanities, she's still a badass nuts-and-bolts economist. She plans a third edition of the microeconomics textbook *The Applied Theory of Price* and wants to revisit medieval peasant property law. And she's drafting a book called "God in Mammon: Economic Sermons," to show that being a good Christian can be consistent with a free-market economic life. "Christian Libertarianism," "Work in the World," "Feed the Poor," and "What Would Jesus Spend" are among chapters in progress.

Shakespeare and Woolf greet her back at her apartment. Shakespeare zips up to the second floor again, past paintings and prints and a poster, in Dutch, with a little saying that struck a chord with McCloskey. She translates it:

"For the concert of life, there is no program."

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