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Bourgeois Virtue

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WE HAVE TWO WAYS of talking about the virtues, and we seem stuck on them. One way is patrician, which concerns what John Casey calls "pagan" virtues. The four classical pagan virtues are those of Odysseus: prudence, temperance, justice, and courage. The aristocrat is honorable, great-hearted in hospitality, quick to anger. "You wine sack, with a dog's eyes, with a deer's heart," says Achilles—exhibiting more courage than prudence, temperance, or justice—"Never / once have you taken courage in your heart to arm with your people."

The other way of virtue-talk is plebeian, the way of St. Paul. The peasant suffers yet endures. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God. . . . Owe no man any thing, but to love one another." Faith, hope, and charity, these three, but the greatest is charity. It is a "slave morality," bending to the aristocratic virtues that Nietzsche and other Hellenizers prized.

The two vocabularies of the virtues are spoken in the camp and common. Achilles struts through the camp in his Hephaestian armor, exercising a noble wrath. Jesus stands barefoot on the Mount, preaching to the least of the commoners.

And yet we live mostly now in the town, we bourgeois, or else we are moving to townly occupations as fast as we can manage, trading the old cow for a car. The aristocracy is gone, though some intellectuals wish not. And the prediction that the proletariat at the other end would become the universal class has proven to be mistaken.

Jobs for the two older classes are disappearing. Half of the employment in rich countries is white-collar, and the percentage is rising. The very soldiers in capitalist democracies are shufflers of paper. The production of things has become steadily cheaper. A barber or a professor was not much more productive in 1990 than in 1800, or, for that matter, in 400 B.C. It still takes fifteen minutes with a pair of

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scissors to do a short back and sides and fifty minutes with a piece of chalk to convey the notion of comparative advantage. But the farmer since 1800 has become more productive in the United States by a factor of 36. We cannot eat 36 times more food, though some of us try, and so the farmer's share in employment has fallen towards nil. A piece of cotton cloth that sold for 40 shillings in the 1780s sold for 5 shillings in the 1850s, and nowadays, using the same values of money, for a few pence. The cheapness led spinning out of the home, then weaving, canning, the making of men's and women's clothing, and food preparation. Stanley Lebergott recently calculated that the time involved in food preparation during the years from 1900 to 1965 fell from 44 hours a week to 10. Calculating power itself—adding, multiplying, and carrying—that sold for \$400 in 1970 sold for \$4 in 1990. Workers on the American manufacturing line peaked at about a fifth of the total labor force after World War II and the percentage has been falling ever since, although only slowly at first. Fifty years from now a maker of things on an assembly line will be as rare as a farmer. The only jobs left will be hamburger flipping on the one side and bourgeois occupations on the other.

It is usual to praise a pagan or a Christian virtue and then to complain how much we moderns lack it. Shamefully we bourgeois are neither saints nor heroes. The age is one of mere iron—or aluminum, or plastic—not pagan gold or Christian silver. The townsfolk are useful, maybe necessary, but not *virtuous*. "Why, the very idea! Bourgeois *virtue*?" The bourgeois virtues have been reduced to the single vice of greed.

The intelligentsia thunders at the middle class but offers no advice on how to be good within it. The only way to become a good bourgeois, according to Flaubert and Sinclair Lewis and Paolo Pasolini, is to stop being one. Not having an ideal of bourgeois virtue, or devaluing the ideal by comparison with Christian and aristocratic virtue, leaves us unable to talk about virtue at all. We bourgeois are left without reasons for ethical standards. We are left with What's Profitable: "Yet a great deal of money is made here. Good day, sir."

Ethics courses in business and medical schools exhibit the dilemma. Some time ago the Harvard Business School was given \$20 million to study ethics in the old way—all the ethics that money could buy. Harvard Medical School has waxed ethical, too. The professors staffing the courses believe that ethical questions are matters of crisis. What are the ethics of insider trading? Would Jesus have signed on? What about the transplantation of organs? How would Kant have felt about that one? Yet neither aristocratic nor peasant virtue can offer much minute-by-minute help in how to be a good bourgeois.

BOURGEOIS VIRTUE

Ethics has turned recently from universal theories to the particular virtues, as in Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, or John Casey's *Pagan Virtue: An Essay in Ethics*. It has also turned to narratives in aid of the virtues—for example, Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin's *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* or Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Feminist thinking on the matter, such as that found in Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, or Nel Noddings's *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, has questioned the presumption of universal ethics, in particular the worship of masculine virtues. As Bernard Williams puts it, in the new approach—as new as Aristotle—“morality is seen as something whose real existence must consist in personal experience and social institutions, not in sets of propositions.” It is local knowledge, not universal, located in the camp or common or town.

Consider the virtues of the three classes, matched to their character. The “character” might be in the eyes of others, or in its own eyes, or, less commonly, in fact.

The Classes and the Virtues

Aristocrat Patrician	Peasant Plebeian	Bourgeois Mercantile
pagan	Christian	secular
Achilles	St. Francis	Benjamin Franklin
pride of being	pride of service	pride of action
honor	duty	integrity
forthrightness	candor	honesty
loyalty	solidarity	trustworthiness
courage	fortitude	enterprise
wit	jocularly	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 not to elevate bourgeois virtue over the others in some

universal sense. The point is to sidestep universal senses. In some personal and social circumstances, courage is a virtue. (In others, it is a vice.) So is humility. (Likewise.) But when the class left out by the virtue-talk is half the population, on its way to being all the population, the vocabulary of the virtues is not doing its job. As Richard Rorty puts it, "detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (in, e.g., novels and ethnographies), rather than philosophical or religious treatises, were the modern intellectual's principal contributions to moral progress." Chinua Achebè's *Things Fall Apart* or the writings of Borges inspire me to act ethically toward Nigerians or Argentineans more than does any amount of philosophizing about universal good. A modern society needs poetry and history and movies about bourgeois virtue: integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, enterprise, humor, respect, modesty, consideration, responsibility, prudence, thrift, affection, self-possession.

So far society has gotten poetry and history and movies about the older virtues, looking back on many-tower'd Camelot and sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain. The result has been mostly bad, as in the nationalist wars down to 1914 and the ideological wars that followed.

Hellenism, for example, made war into a contest of aristocratic virtues, Hector and Achilles armed with cordite and barbed wire. In his autobiography of 1928, the German classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff speaks fondly of a Scottish colleague, who "was a gentleman in the full sense of the word. . . . [He was] proud of his great nation and of the British Empire, as was proper, but also as a true patriot ready to give free play to the patriotism and pride of another. United in this frame of mind as good friends," he continues, dreaming of Ilium and immortal fame, "we sent our sons to meet each other in the field." Wilamowitz's son Tycho attained in the trenches of the Great War "an early death on the field of honour," honorably gassed, perhaps, or suffocated in his bunker, or run over by a truck.

Romantic Teutonism, on the other hand, invented a primitive community of equals exhibiting the peasant virtues. The theory is still credited by non-historians. Prince Kropotkin, writing to the Russians in 1901 from the safety of a bourgeois nation, declared that communism would be "nearer to the folknote self-government than representative government can ever be," and promised that "owing to the immense productivity of human labor which has been reached nowadays [and how reached, my dear Prince?] . . . a very high degree of well-being can easily be obtained in a few years by communist work." Ah yes, a few years of communist work.

We are all bourgeois now (for some decades about 80 percent of Americans have identified themselves as "middle class," a consciousness that may of course be false). The ideals of nationalism or socialism do not suit our lives. Those of townspeople, the bourgeoisie, do.

I am suggesting, in other words, that we stop sneering at the bourgeoisie, stop being ashamed of being middle class, and stop defining a participant in an economy as an amoral brute. The bad talk creates a reality. Adam Smith knew that a capitalist society such as eighteenth-century Edinburgh could not flourish without the virtues of trustworthiness or bourgeois pride, supported by talk. Smith's other book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which scarcely any economist reads, was about love, not greed; esteem, not venality. Yet even many economists have learned by now that moral sentiment must ground a market. (Some go on trying to solve the Hobbes Problem, well into its fourth century of irresolution—namely: Can a mob of unsocialized brutes be proven on a blackboard to create in the end a civil society? The problem lacks point if people are already French or American.)

The growth of the market, I would argue, promotes virtue, not vice. Most intellectuals since 1848 have thought the opposite: that it erodes virtue. "It was a fundamental principle of the Gradgrind philosophy that everything was to be paid for. . . . Gratitude was to be abolished, and the virtues springing from it were not to be. Every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across a counter." As James Boyd White puts it in his otherwise admirable *Justice As Translation*, bourgeois growth is bad because it 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 (I am informed by Poles who claimed to have seen it), the department stores had a policeman on every floor, not to prevent theft but to stop the customers from attacking the arrogant and incompetent clerks selling goods that fell apart at the moment of sale. The way a salesperson in an American store greets customers startles foreigners: "How can I help you?" It is an instance in miniature of bourgeois virtue.

Even an ethics of greed for the almighty dollar, to take the caricature at its face value, is not the worst. For example, an ethics of greed is better than an ethics of slaughter, whether by patrician sword or plebeian pike. Commercial greed must work by mutual agreement, not by violence. "There are few ways in which a man can be more

innocently employed than in getting money," said Dr. Johnson. The disdain for modest greed is ethically naïve, because it fails to acknowledge that the greed prospers in a market economy only by satisfying the customer.

Donald Trump offends. But for all the envy he has provoked, he is not a thief. He didn't get his millions from aristocratic cattle raids, acclaimed in bardic glory. He made, as he put it in his first book, deals. The deals were voluntary. He didn't use a .38 or a broadsword to get people to agree. He bought the Commodore Hotel low and sold it high because Penn Central, Hyatt Hotels, and the New York City Board of Estimate—and behind them the voters and hotel guests—put the old place at a low value and the new place, trumped up, at a high value. Trump earned a suitably fat profit for seeing that a hotel in a low-value use could be moved into a high-value use. An omniscient central planner would have ordered the same move. Market capitalism should be defended as the most altruistic of systems, each capitalist working, working, working to help a customer, for pay. Trump does good by doing well.

And even from a strictly individual view, the bourgeois virtues, though not those of Achilles or Jesus, are not ethical zeros. Albert Hirschman (who speaks precisely of "bourgeois virtues") recounts the career from Montesquieu to Marx of the phrase "doux commerce," quoting for instance William Robertson in 1769: that sweet commerce "tends to wear off those prejudices which maintain distinctions and animosity between nations. It softens and polishes the manners of men." In his play at the dawn of bourgeois power, George Lillo has his ideal of the London merchant, Thorowgood, assert that "as the name of merchant never degrades the gentleman, so by no means does it exclude him." Thorowgood on leaving the office instructs his assistant to "look carefully over the files to see whether there are any tradesmen's bills unpaid." The aristocrat can sneer at the goody-goodness of the bourgeois; but after all, in seriousness, is it not a matter of virtue to pay one's tailor? What kind of person accepts the wares of tradesmen and refuses to give something in return, though promised? No merchant he.

The honesty of a society of merchants goes beyond what would be strictly self-interested in a society of rats, as in that much maligned model of the mercantile society, the small midwestern city. A reputation for fair dealing is necessary for a roofer whose trade is limited to a town with a population of fifty thousand. One bad roof and he is finished in Iowa City, and so he practices virtue with care. By now he would not put on a bad roof even if he could get away with it, and he behaves like a growing child internalizing virtues once forced on him.

A woman at a cocktail party who told the story of her bad roof (re-done for free, at the roofer's instigation) refused to tell his name. A rat would have ruined the businessman to improve the story. After all, the woman's own reputation wasn't at stake.

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

For one thing, talk defines business reputation, as at the Iowa City cocktail party. A market economy looks forward and therefore depends on trust. The persuasive talk that establishes trust is necessary for doing much business, and that is why co-religionists or co-ethnics deal so profitably with each other. 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 trader. When word of this accusation reached other Maghribi traders, merchants as far away as Sicily canceled their agency relations with him." Reputational gossip, Greif notes, was cheap, "a by-product of the commercial activity [itself] and passed along with other commercial correspondence." 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." With such information, cheating was profitless within the community.

Old Believers in Russia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held a similar position, as Alexander Gerschenkron once pointed out. The Old Believers refused to adopt the late-seventeenth-century reforms in the Russian church, and were in other ways far from progressive. Yet because of their peculiarity they were able to establish a speech community within the larger society. Old Believers on the northern River Vyg, for example, were able in the early eighteenth century to become major grain merchants to the new St. Petersburg "by utilizing their connections with the other Old Believers' communities in the southern parts of the country." Sir William Petty observed at the time that "trade is not fixed to any species of religion as such, but rather to the heterodox part of the whole." Any distinction will do. Quakers were great merchants in eighteenth-century England. The overseas Chinese, segregated from the rest of the population (and therefore able to talk inexpensively with one another

about breaches of contract among their own), are more successful in trade than their cousins at home.

The aristocrat does not deign to bargain. Hector tries, and Achilles answers: "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, late duchess there upon the wall, "Even had you skill / In speech—(which I have not)—to 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 stoops silently to harvest the grain or to run the machine; the bourgeois stoops metaphorically to make his will quite clear, and to know the will and reason of the other. The aristocrat's speech is declamation, and his proofs are like commands, which is perhaps why Plato the aristocrat and some Western intellectuals after him loved them so. The proof of the irrationality of the square root of 2 convinces (*vincere*, to conquer). The bourgeois by contrast must persuade, sweetly (*suadeo*, from the same root as English *sweet*).

The bourgeois goes at persuasion 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—1.5 percent of national income. Take instead the detailed categories of work and make a guess as to the percentage of the time in each job spent on persuasion. Out of the 115 million civilian workers it seems reasonable to assign 100 percent of the time of the 760,000 lawyers and judges to persuasion; and likewise all the public relations specialists and actors and directors. Perhaps 75 percent of the time of the 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 28.2 million person-years, a quarter of the labor force, persuading.

The result can be checked against 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 of the half of American workers who are white-collar talk for a living, but in an extended sense many do, and for that matter, so do many blue-collar workers, persuading each other to handle the cargo just so, and pink-collar workers dealing all day with talking customers and cooks. 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 workforce 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." As Adam Smith said in his lectures on jurisprudence, "everyone is practising oratory . . . [and therefore] they acquire a certain dexterity and address in managing their affairs, or in other words in managing of men; and this is altogether the practise of every man in most ordinary affairs . . . , the constant employment or trade of every man." Not constant, perhaps, but in Smith's time a substantial percentage and in modern times fully 25 percent.

Is the persuasive talk of the bourgeoisie then "empty," mere comforting chatter with no further economic significance? It can't be. If that was all it was, the economy would be engaging in an expensive activity to no purpose. By shutting up we could pick up a \$20 bill (or more exactly a \$1,500,000,000,000 bill). A quarter of national income is a lot to pay for economically functionless warm and fuzzies. The fact would not square with the most modest claims of economics. The businesspeople circling La Guardia on a rainy Monday night could have stayed home. The crisis meeting in the plant cafeteria between the managers and the workers would lack point.

Adam Smith, as usual, put the matter well. The division of labor is the "consequence of a certain propensity . . . to truck, barter, and exchange . . . [I cannot pause here to consider] whether this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature, of which no further account can be given; or whether, as seems more probable, it be the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason *and speech*." *The Wealth of Nations* did not again mention the faculty of speech in a foundational role, though Smith, who began his career as teacher of rhetoric, did remark frequently on how businesspeople and politicians talked together. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he called speech "the characteristic faculty of human nature."

Half of Smith's formula, the faculty of reason, became in time the characteristic obsession of economists. Smith himself did not much pursue it. Economic Man, rationally seeking, is not a Smithian character. It was later economists, especially Paul Samuelson during the 1940s, who reduced economics to the reasoning of a constrained maximizer, Seeking Man, *Homo petens*. Samuelson's seeking has a peasant cast to it: the maximization of known utility under known

cōnstraints sounds more like Piers Plowman than Robinson Crusoe. The utilitarian reduction of all the virtues to one maximand makes all virtues into prudence. The windup mice of modern economic theory know nothing of humor, affection, integrity, and self-possession. Smith's notion of *Homo loquans*, Speaking Man, squares better with the varied virtues of the bourgeoisie.

The high share of persuasion provides a scene for bourgeois virtue. 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, from credit bureaus to business schools. The aristocracy and the peasantry got their characters ready-made by status, and, in any case, they did not need to persuade. Thomas Buddenbrook bitterly 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."

The bourgeoisie works with its mouth, and it depends on word of mouth. Tom Buddenbrook, in the 1850s, thinks of his grandfather who during the Napoleonic Wars made the family's fortune out of talk: "He drove in a four-horse coach to Southern Germany, as commissary to the Prussian army—an old man in pumps, with his head powdered. And there he played his charms and his talents and made an astonishing amount of money." Tom himself most enjoys "trade he came by through his own personal efforts. Sometimes, entirely by accident, perhaps on a walk with the family, he would go into a mill for a chat with the miller, who would feel himself much honoured by the visit; and quite *en passant*, in the best of moods, he could conclude a good bargain." At the crisis of 1848, the Assembly in the novel is trapped by a mob in the town hall. "The natural instinct towards industry, common to all these good burghers, began to assert itself: they ventured to bargain a little, to pick up a little business here and there." Charming the generals, chatting with the miller, picking up a little business here and there. What news on the Rialto?

On the other hand, idle talk is not bourgeois. Idle, artistic, romantic talk is a habit of the bohemians sprung from the bourgeoisie, adumbrated in Christian Buddenbrook, of whom Tom the bourgeois says, "There is such a lack of modesty in so much communicativeness. . . . Control, equilibrium, is, at least for me, the important thing. There will always be men who are justified in this interest in them-

selves, this detailed observation of their own emotions, . . . poets," or novelists, like the Mann brothers, Thomas and Heinrich.

Now of course the sweet talk among the bourgeoisie can be parodied, and it has been since 1848 to the point of tedium. In *Buddenbrooks*: "Everybody puts his best foot forward before strangers. We all take care to say what will be pleasant to hear." The intellectuals sneer at the vulgarity of business talk ("Run it up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes"), "the clumsy but comfortable idioms which seemed to embody to [the burghers] the business efficiency and the easy well-being of their community."

Bourgeois friendship is false in aristocratic or peasant terms. Tom's father recalls his own business experiments as a young man: "My journey to England had for its chief purpose to look out for connections there for my undertakings. To this end I went as far as Scotland, and made many valuable acquaintances." These acquaintances of which one hears so much in a bourgeois society are hardly friends on the aristocratic model of Achilles and Patroclus. The acquaintances could turn, exhibiting "all the sudden coldness, the reserve, the mistrust at the banks, with 'friends,' and among firms abroad which such an event, such a weakening of working capital, was sure to bring in its train." Yet even such acquaintanceship—even if not Aristotle's notion of true friendship—is a virtue.

The virtues of the bourgeois are those necessary for town life, for commerce and self-government. The virtue of tolerance, for example, can be viewed as bourgeois. Its correlations in European history, such as between Spain and Holland, suggest so. The experience of uncertainty in trading creates a skepticism about certitude—the arrogant and theoretical certitude of the aristocrat or the humble and routine certitude of the peasant. As Arjo Klammer has pointed out, "the dogma of doubt" is bourgeois, an attitude suited to the vagaries of the marketplace.

Bourgeois charity, again, if not the "charity," meaning love, of the English bibles, 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. Walter Annenberg gives \$500 million to schools in one jolt and we are not astonished. Middle-class people in the nineteenth century habitually gave a biblical tenth of their incomes to charity. The intrusion of the state into charity killed the impulse, remaking charity into a *taille* imposed on grumbling peasants: I gave at the office.

— And yet the intelligentsia detests this splendid bourgeoisie. The detestation is not new. Anciently the poet prefers his Sabine valley to troublesome riches, even while accepting large gifts in cash or land from Maecenas and Augustus. The disdain for moneygrubbing has always been a literary theme, and it merged smoothly into Christian virtue. But over the past century and a half, hostility to the moneygrubbing class has become frantic. After a brief flirtation with pro-bourgeois attitudes in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—Daniel Defoe's heroes are not aristocrats; Voltaire admired the English 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 statists and English evangelicals in the early nineteenth century were bourgeois by origin, but did not like it, not one bit.

As Shaw observed in 1912:

The first half of the XIX century considered itself the greatest of all centuries. The second discovered that it was the wickedest of all centuries. The first half despised and pitied the Middle Ages. . . . The second half saw no hope for mankind except in the recovery of the faith, the art, the humanity of the Middle Ages. . . . For that was how men felt, and how some of them spoke, in the early days of the Great Conversion, which produced, first, such books as the *Latter Day Pamphlets* of Carlyle, Dickens' *Hard Times*, . . . and later on the Socialist movement . . . which has succeeded in convincing even those who most abhor the name of Socialism that the condition of the civilized world is deplorable.

The Great Conversion took decades to spread beyond a handful of avant-garde clerks. Meanwhile popular literature from the Horatio Alger stories to Dale Carnegie and the *Reader's Digest* continued to reflect on bourgeois virtues. And yet the clerks won in the end. High culture does.

The treason of the clerks since the middle of the nineteenth century has been a treason against their fathers, who were uniformly bourgeois. Overwhelmingly the French men of letters who barked at the bourgeoisie were the sons of lawyers and mill owners. So too were German men of letters, for instance, 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 is a puzzle. In his astonishing *Bohemian versus Bourgeois: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1964, César Graña asked, "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 bour-

geoisie? His answer was what has since been called the "aporia of the Enlightenment project"—namely, the conflict between freedom and rationalism in modern life. The bourgeoisie is seen by intellectuals such as Dickens, Weber, and Freud as the embodiment of rationality.

Graña was probably correct. Impatience with calculation is the mark of romance, especially in parody. Don Quixote's idiocies in aid of chivalry are uncalculated but noble. Mr. Gradgrind becomes a Member of Parliament, "one of the respected members for ounce weights and measures, one of the representatives of the multiplication table, one of the deaf honorable gentlemen, . . . one of the dead honorable gentlemen, to every other consideration."

But the intellectuals were mistaken about the growth of rationality. They mistook bourgeois life, the way a rebellious son mistakes the life of his father. The life of the bourgeoisie is not routine but creative. What has raised income per head in the rich countries by a factor of twelve since the eighteenth 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 the 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 compels a choice between the reality principle and eroticism. A businessperson without an erotic drive, suitably sublimated, achieves nothing.

The lack of insight by the intelligentsia into business life is odd. It reminds one, I repeat, of an adolescent boy sneering at his father: remarkable how the old chap matured between my seventeenth and twenty-first birthdays. The European novel contains hardly a single rounded and accurate portrait of a businessman (Thomas Buddenbrook is a notable 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 said in "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 lad sneering at the commercial success that put him through Rugby School in Oxford (Clough's father was a cotton merchant), 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,

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; it is bourgeois men on the job whom novelists, male or female, have failed to grasp.) Early in the nineteenth century such writers as Macaulay or Manzoni read and understood economics and applied it intelligently. Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed* (whose last edition was 1840) contains an entire chapter on the unhappy effects of imposing price controls during a famine. But later the intellectuals construed economics as the faculty of Reason, arrayed against the Freedom they loved, a misunderstanding encouraged by the chatter about "iron laws" among classical economists. Or else they portrayed businesspeople as con men (thus Twain and Howells).

By the late nineteenth century economics had dropped out of the conversation entirely. No intellectual since 1890 has been ashamed to be ignorant about the economy or economics. Lawyers and physicists sound off about economics without having cracked a book. Historians study Marx as though he were not a minor Ricardian. Biologists passionate about economic ecology could not pass the first hour exam in Econ. 101. It is a rare English professor—David Lodge, for example, in *Nice Work*—who can see the businessperson as anything other than The Other, or The Enemy.

It is supposed not to be relevant that the intellectuals who are nostalgic for aristocratic or peasant virtues do not know what they are talking about, whether it is the bourgeois work they spurn or the manual labor they deplore. Marx never visited a factory. The long-shoreman and writer Eric Hoffer, who was in a position to have opinions on the matter, once observed that Marx, the son of a lawyer and a grandson and nephew of rabbis, "never did a day's work in his life, and knew as much about the proletariat as I do about chorus girls."

A change is overdue. To admire the bourgeois virtues is not to buy into admiration for selfishness. Capitalism needs encouragement—it being the hope for the poor of the world and being in any case what we have. But capitalism need not be hedonistic or monadic and certainly not unethical. An aristocratic, country-club capitalism, well satisfied with itself, or a peasant, grasping capitalism, hating itself, are both lacking in virtue. And neither works in town. They lead to monopoly and economic failure, alienation and revolution. We need a capitalism that nurtures communities of good townfolk, in South Central Los Angeles as much as in Iowa City. We encourage it by talking seriously about the bourgeois virtues.

One can think of people and countries to stand as models. Benjamin Franklin and America lead the pack. Graña recounts the venom

— against Franklin in the writings of D. H. Lawrence, Stendhal, and Baudelaire: “a knave in Franklin’s style,” writes Baudelaire, was part of “the rising bourgeoisie come to replace the faltering aristocracy,” which otherwise a new aristocracy of intellectuals would resupply. It is natural to think of millionaires in imagining an ideal bourgeois, Henry Ford, for example, or Sam Walton of Walmart. But it is not necessary: Macaulay, Whitman, Lincoln, Twain, Frost, Orwell were bourgeois and in their best moods unashamed of it. Being ashamed of being bourgeois has for a long time amounted to being ashamed of America. Scratch a pro-American and you find a pro-bourgeois. The sneerers at Franklin, such as Baudelaire and Lawrence, were anti-democrats and anti-Americans. Dickens came to detest the United States as much as he came to detest businessmen.

A myth of recency has made the virtues arising from towns seem those of a shameful parvenu, such as Franklin and America. In economic history dependent on Marx, such as Max Weber’s *General Economic History* or Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation*, the market is seen as a novelty. “Market economy,” claimed Polanyi with little evidence, “is an institutional structure which, as we all too easily forget, has been present at no time except our own.” From this Marxist historical mistake arose the fairy tales of lost paradises for aristocrats or peasants and a reason for ignoring the bourgeois virtues.

It has taken a century of professional history to correct the mistake. The late David Herlihy put it this way in 1971: “Research has all but wiped from the ledgers the supposed gulf once considered fundamental, between a medieval manorial economy and the capitalism of the modern period.” Medieval men bought and sold everything from grain to bishoprics. The Vikings were traders, too. Greece and Rome were business empires. The city of Jericho 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. Time to recognize the fact and to cultivate a bourgeois virtue.