



## How capitalism and the bourgeois virtues transformed and humanized the family

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### ABSTRACT

McCloskey's two volumes argue that a change in our ideas about the dignity of human beings laid the groundwork for the tectonic changes in economic organization known as the advent of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution also changed human behavior by cultivating further the virtues that nourished it. This process can be seen in the way in which the capitalism transformed the family from the realm of "Prudence mostly" to "Love mostly." Rather than undermining some romanticized vision of family life, capitalism is responsible for humanizing it by opening space for Love.

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Deirdre McCloskey's two volumes on *The Bourgeois Virtues* (2006) and *Bourgeois Dignity* (2010) provide an original and fertile set of ideas for understanding the economic history of the last few centuries and the evolution of the modern, industrial, and wealthy world. Taken together, the two volumes describe a virtuous circle between ideas and institutions. Assuming that the promised evidence of the third volume is compelling, and there is no reason to think otherwise, what McCloskey is arguing is that a change in our ideas about the dignity of human beings laid the groundwork for the tectonic changes in economic organization known as the advent of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. These changes in economic organization brought with them a massive increase in wealth and human well-being, what McCloskey calls "The Great Fact." However, the shift in economic organization did much more. It also enhanced the ideological change that precipitated it by cultivating a whole range of virtues, what McCloskey calls "the bourgeois virtues," that are often not recognized as products of capitalist economic relations. Changing ideological beliefs made possible the modern industrial-capitalist economy, which in turn has enabled us to treat each other better than ever before in human history.

In *The Bourgeois Virtues*, McCloskey (2006) argues that capitalism is not, contrary to the views of most of its critics and many of its defenders, a matter of what she calls "Prudence Only." That is, capitalism neither requires nor encourages that humans only

make use of the one virtue of Prudence, which is best understood as the sort of broadly calculative, instrumental rationality associated with mainstream economics. To the contrary, "Bourgeois life has not in practice, I claim, excluded the other virtues. In fact, it often has nourished them" (McCloskey, 2006, p. 8). In her account, capitalism has produced a society in which we are better able to act in ways that demonstrate Love, Faith, Hope, Courage, Temperance, Prudence, and Justice. For my purposes below, I am going to focus on the virtues of Prudence and Love.

One area of human life that was transformed by the processes McCloskey focuses on is the institution of the family. Paralleling the economic transformation with a slight lag, the family of the post-industrial era is a significantly different institution from the one that characterized the centuries before. These differences are ones that would widely be described as "improvements" and, I will argue, they are the product of the changes in ideology and economic organization that are described in McCloskey's work. Critics of capitalism often argue that it has turned the family into a mere appendage of the capitalist production process, complete with its stress on instrumental rationality and sole focus on Prudence. This argument is mistaken.

Specifically, I want to explore the relationship between Prudence and Love within the Western family. Space limitations will make this discussion very broad and not do real justice to the complexity of the topic, but I hope to capture the essence of the issue in the space available. No doubt, as McCloskey (2006, pp. 93–94) points out, Love has always been present in the family. However, the political and economic circumstances of the pre-industrial era put a premium on Prudence over Love (at least on the margin) in

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how the family functioned from day to day. Love was indulged when it could be, but Prudence frequently demanded that Love take a back seat. What capitalism did was to invert the relative importance of Prudence and Love. Capitalism made it possible for families to be first and foremost about Love and has led us to think that family decisions made by Prudence alone are not very virtuous. To the extent capitalism's success requires functional families, McCloskey is quite right to say that capitalism both promotes and requires the bourgeois virtue of Love. Contrary to the critics, it was *prior* to capitalism and industrialization that the family would have been more accurately described as an "appendage" to the economy. Capitalism and industrialization *humanized* the family and turned it into an institution largely centered around Love and emotional satisfaction and other of the bourgeois virtues, rather than being almost all about Prudence.

### 1. The pre-industrial family

The development of sedentary agriculture profoundly transformed humanity in a whole number of ways, including the institution of the family. Agriculture led to an extension of the division of labor and exchange *via* specialization as an increasingly central element of human society. Agricultural specialization and exchange required the complementary development of early forms of private property and basic legal institutions to ensure the successful use of exchange as an economic allocation process. The extension of the division of labor and the rising level of wealth that accompanied it made it possible for married couples to geographically and economically separate themselves from the larger group and to establish the marital dyad, rather than bands of kin, as the constituent institution of the social order. Though this was not the "nuclear family" of modernity, it did represent an important shift from the community to the family as the basic economic and political unit. Another way to see this is that individual families began to take on functions that were previously those of the band/tribe/community as a whole.

Economically, families in the pre-industrial era can be fruitfully understood in terms close to how we might analyze firms today. Members of the household, which likely included not just mom, dad, and kids, but extended family members and possibly servants or others, were seen as assets for the household's productive activities. Those assets were controlled by the male head of the household, as women, and somewhat later only married women, were often prohibited from owning land or being a party to a contract. Wives and children were expected to contribute to production activities, with children working the fields as soon as they were able to do so in a meaningful way. Wives split their time between market production activities and the household production activities associated with child-care and general household management activities such as food and cleanliness. Shorter (1975, p. 68) offers a list of the different productive activities men and women typically engaged in pre-industrial France. As he comments, "Farm women were active in the fields as well as within the home."

The act of marriage created a new unit of production as well as the context in which new producers (children) could be created. In hunter/gatherer and agricultural societies, labor to collect or grow food was the basic necessity and the family as a structure for the inheritance of the land to grow it on was equally important. Even families engaged in craft work required a cheap source of labor. Having children was an easy way to augment the labor force and increase the family's ability to generate income. Obviously, this came at a cost, both in terms of the direct resources required to feed, clothe, and house children and in terms of the opportunity cost in terms of market production of the labor devoted to the marginal

household production time required to care for children. This trade-off was especially steep while children were very young and less so as children aged, with economies of scale implying declining marginal and average costs of caring for additional children as they aged.

The centrality of the family's economic functions meant that even parent-child relationships were often seen in crudely economic terms. As Shorter (1975, p. 5) describes it: "While a residual affection between mother and child... has always existed... in traditional society the mother had [to be] prepared to place many considerations – most of them related to the desperate struggle for existence – above the infant's welfare." This is but another way of noting the high opportunity cost of maternal time. Having extended family members present helped free up the mother's time especially in poorer, rural families. Shorter (1975, pp. 170–171) documents another strategy that poorer mothers sometimes used, which was to simply leave their children alone for very long stretches of time, not only leaving them "to stew in their own excrement for hours on end" but also making them vulnerable to death by fire or being attacked by wild animals (see also Flandrin, 1979). In some cases, parents simply abandoned children altogether when the costs of caring for them exceeded their expected (and discounted) future contributions to household output. In a world of extreme scarcity, Prudence must go where Love would fear to tread.

Were these parents, especially these mothers, simply "monsters?" Shorter (1975, p. 169) argues that they were not. They were responding to the constraints of their circumstances:

They had merely failed the "sacrifice" test. If they lacked an articulate sense of maternal love, it was because they were forced by material circumstances and community attitudes to subordinate infant welfare to other objectives, such as keeping the farm going or helping their husbands weave cloth.

In the world of the early 21st century, the vast majority of humans do not face circumstances that would lead to the choices made by pre-modern families. But what explains the predominance of parental love in the form that we now know it? Shorter suggests that those millions of pre-modern mothers eventually "consciously decide[d] to reorder their priorities" and put their children above all else. In economic terms, he ascribes this reorientation to a change in preferences.

This is McCloskey's argument in action. This transformation of attitudes toward children began to take place at around the same time as the Industrial Revolution. The evidence further suggests that while it is clear that preferences changed as individuals, including children, were seen as the morally relevant unit and that therefore their desires should be respected, this process can also be understood as a change in constraints. Parents have always, in some sense, loved their children, but in the marginal subsistence world pre-dating modernity, that love often came at a cost higher than they were able to bear. To indulge their desire to love would have risked their sheer survival. In the pre-industrial family, Prudence took precedence over Love. As we will see later, when the wealth produced by the advent of capitalism and industrialization raised living standards and reduced family sizes, it lowered the cost of indulging these sentiments, and those sentiments poured forth between both parents and children and the marital dyad itself.

It was not only children whose lives were subject to narrowly economic considerations. Similar prudential decisions characterized the husband-wife relationship.<sup>1</sup> Husbands remained both the

<sup>1</sup> Stone (1977) provides a classic overview of marriage and family during this era in England.

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