

Preface

The theme of our book is simple and true. But controversial.

It is that human liberty—and not the machinery of coercion or investment, or even science by itself—is what made for a Great Enrichment, from 1800 to the present. The Enrichment was really, really “great”: three *thousand* percent per person. Liberated people devising new technologies and institutions did an amazing job from 1800 to the present and will keep doing it. Liberty will make the Enrichment worldwide. And the Enrichment will not corrupt the human soul. The news, in short, is very, very good.

The Enrichment wasn’t achieved by governmental coercion, which is usually counterproductive—except maybe in plagues and invasions. Nor was it achieved by science unassisted, or the exploitation of slaves, or the routine accumulation of capital, or a profound dialectic of history, or a deep specialness of Europeans. It was achieved by liberty alone, a necessary and pretty much sufficient cause, which came tentatively to northwestern Europe in the eighteenth century. Give people liberty, and by uncoerced cooperation through commerce they become adults, enriched in body and soul.

You are doubtful and pessimistic. You worry quite understandably about populism or the environment or the decay of standards. We offer, though, an optimistic prediction and give ample evidence for it. The world will prosper mightily, if people play their cards right to favor liberty and its theory, liberalism—“liberalism” in the classic sense, born two centuries ago.

We make a little joke in the title of the book and throughout, in referring to “the Bourgeois Deal.” The word *bourgeois* (*boor-ZWAH*) means “of the urban middle class, businesslike.” Imagine our master proposition, articulated by either a bourgeois man in a London coffeehouse in 1820 or a bourgeois woman (Deirdre Nansen McCloskey) addressing a chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners in 2020:

Leave me, a bourgeois businessperson, pretty much alone, subject to sober ethics learned at my mother’s knee, and a few good and restrained laws, with an effective social safety net. In a word, give me and my fellow citizens liberty. Do not envy the rewards I get for selling innovations. They are tested by your willingness to buy them. If you don’t like them, and I fail, I won’t ask the government to coerce you into buying. The happy result will be that the innovations will make everyone enormously better off, by 3,000 percent, especially the formerly poor—your ancestors and mine.

You’ve heard a lot of dismal chatter since the Great Recession of 2008. As it, the most recent of the successively trademarked “Final Crises of Capitalism,” recedes into memory, we do well to remind ourselves that median weekly real earning of wage and salary workers is setting all-time highs every time the data are reported and is, the COVID-19 dip aside, about 10 percent above where it was at the depths of the Great Recession—and is well above its recent nadir in the second quarter of 2014.¹

You might recoil at the notion that we live in a blessed age. After all, hundreds of millions of people around the world remain in dire poverty. The United States government is separating immigrant children from their parents, holding them in cages, on the economically silly and morally obnoxious notion that by doing so they are somehow making America great again. We aren’t saying there aren’t serious problems. We are saying that things have gotten better, are getting better, and will continue to get better for the vast majority of humanity, and in a few generations for everyone on the planet—as long as we keep our ethical wits about us and opt for true liberalism.

Think it possible that the nonstop torrent of bad news filling your newspapers and e-readers and social media time lines is not giving you the complete story. Be wary, for example, of headlines about the exploits of “Florida Man,” a popular meme spawned by a loose public records law in the Sunshine State. It makes it exceptionally easy to write stories with headlines like “Florida Man Arrested for Burglarizing Cars in Jail Parking Lot Moments after Being Released” and “Florida Man Charged with Impersonating Officer for McDonald’s Discount.”² There are roughly 10.5 million actual Florida men. If only 0.01 percent of them are idiotic criminals, it’s still enough for about three outrageous “Florida Man” stories every day for a year. We admit that even in an innovation-embracing, bourgeois-dealing society, an occasional evil nitwit will show up and an occasional paragon of virtue will slip through the cracks into a life of destitution or just plain bad luck. We are claiming, on the basis of overwhelming evidence, that the bourgeois deal has made the cracks a lot smaller. Long may it reign.

So we beseech you, dear reader: don’t let the much larger positive story get lost amid the vivid and rare counterexamples, or even the miseries of mishandled plagues. On a long view, even since 2008, and since 1960 or 1900 or 1800, the economic world has leapt far, far beyond the zero-sum game of olden days. You need to stop thinking zero-sum. A liberal world is stunningly positive sum. The hands-off ideology of liberalism has allowed an invisible hand to push forward any society that permits it to work—not toward *capitalism* (a silly word, as we’ll show) but toward what we call “innovism.” The evidence is overwhelming that liberty, not coercion by a private master or a public state, inspires people to continuous betterment. For the poorest.

The political side of innovism, we note, is *liberalism*. We use the word, you see, *not* in its strange US sense, of “bigger and bigger government.” Such a “liberalism” usually gets the economy wrong and often enough slips into tyranny. Look at the misuse of the FBI and the IRS and ICE, the Palmer raids and the fugitive slave laws. Nor do we use the word in its even stranger Latin American sense of “suppressing the people with military tyranny,” which likewise

usually gets the economy wrong, and is tyranny already. There's something in the water of the Western Hemisphere. We use the honored *L*-word in its original and international sense of “no involuntary masters”—no masters over slaves, no husbands over wives, no kings or priests or politicians over citizens. On the contrary, you are permitted to say “take this job and shove it.” Or “take this marriage and shove it.” Or “take this politician and shove him.” It turns out that, like the free working of language or newspapers or fashion or rock music or cookery or most other human enterprises, permitting people in the economy to have a go, free of involuntary masters to whom they can't say no, usually gets the economy right. Not perfect, but pretty darned good. Three thousand percent good.

Not anarchy: we accept that some government is necessary. Well, McCloskey thinks so, at any rate. Carden is more sanguine about the viability of a sort of anarchy, understood not as nihilism but as no rulers.³ In opposition to liberalism, people will often say, taking an indignant tone, “There must be *some* role for government!” To which we reply, “Yes, though ‘some role,’ such as safety nets and plague response, doesn't justify grotesquely large and illiberal governments pushing you around.” That there is at least a plausible argument for carbon taxes does not give the government license to regulate in withering detail the domestic and international trade in sauerkraut. James Madison said in *Federalist* 51, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” Humans are not angels. The trick is to frame a government for nonangels, whether the rulers or the ruled. It had better be small, because any government tends to corrupt. Power is the ability to physically coerce people to do things they can't be persuaded to do voluntarily, such as paying taxes or getting inoculations or serving on the eastern front. Big governments exercise more power over more people—people harmlessly chatting or strumming or knitting or dealing in the economy. We believe, and so should you, that the more involuntary masters the citizens have, the worse they do, materially and spiritually. With too many masters with too much power, they are reduced to children. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Madison himself, like Jefferson and Washington, was not a con-

sistent liberal. Though talking a good deal about liberty, all three had large numbers of slaves. Our own special heroes of the Revolutionary era are rather Adam Smith and Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, who thoroughly rejected the ancient impulse to employ a visible hand of masterful coercion to push people around. A new and liberal ideology of hands-off, leave-alone, no-push, combined with a wise generosity toward the poor and the disabled, gave the masses permission to flourish. They did, spectacularly.

The result contradicts an ever-fashionable itch to make up more and more “polices” directed from above. “Let’s expropriate the rich people,” says the left. “Let’s do more policing of the poor people,” says the right. We say: Give permission to all the people, and give effective, non-demeaning help to the poor and disabled among them, and all will continue to flourish in body and mind. Sang the African American poet Langston Hughes in 1936, “O, let America be America again—/ The land that never has been yet—/ And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.” Hallelujah.

§

That is, the McCloskey-Carden team is properly, honorably “liberal,” in the old and international sense, and does not sit anywhere along the conventional left-right spectrum. The disagreements along the spectrum are merely about *whom* to push around with government-sanctioned coercion. Pick your favorite pushees, and take your place along the spectrum. Immigrants. Workers. Customers. Entrepreneurs. Members of the United Auto Workers in Dearborn on May 26, 1937. Democratic protestors in Hong Kong late in 2019. Our friends sitting self-satisfied on the left or right or middle of the spectrum of coercion mistakenly think that *they* can claim the honorable title of champions of liberty/freedom. They can’t.

Real liberals like us say that personal liberty and political liberty and economic liberty are all of a piece. Latin *liber*, says the *Cambridge Latin Dictionary*, was long understood by the slave-holding ancients as “possessing the social and legal status of a free man (as opp. to slave),” and then *libertas* as “the civil status of a free man,

freedom.” The new liberal plan born in the eighteenth century came to mean the startling notion of a society consisting *entirely*, if ideally, of free people. No slaves at all. Equality of status and permission. No pushing around. Minimally coercive. Sweet-talking. Persuasive. Rhetorical. Voluntary. Humane. Tolerant. No racism. No Jim Crow. No voter suppression. No abusing of immigrants. No imperialism. No reign of terror over gay people. No unnecessary taxes. No imprudent collective projects. No domination of women by men. No casting couch. No beating of children. No messing with other people’s stuff or persons.

That is, liberty is liberty. It’s meaningless by parts. To put it in terms of the Abrahamic religions, God wants humans to have free will. Only then is their choice of bad or good, sin or redemption, meaningful. To put it in secular terms, you are still a slave if only on odd days of the month. As a free person you seek the permission, equal to anyone else’s, to braid hair for a living, to open a factory, to love whom you wish, to call out a tyrant in the newspaper. But the left or right or middle on the spectrum want to deny you one or another permission. Shame on them.

§

This book is a popular riff from Carden’s pen on McCloskey’s Bourgeois Era trilogy (2006, 2010, 2016)—three long, academic, heavily footnoted, and (McCloskey claims) decisively argued volumes, 1,700 pages in total.⁴ It says that bourgeois life is not evil and that approval of it led to a Great Enrichment. It says too that the usual materialist explanations for the Enrichment are wrong. It says, on the contrary, that changes in the ethics, rhetoric, and ideology of northwestern Europeans, and now the world, led to liberalism, innovism, and enrichment.

The trilogy relies on a large body of scientific and humanistic literature, ranging from national income accounts to Shakespeare. Here Carden substitutes, with McCloskey’s more or less heavy editing, brief examples and quickie arguments—adding a bit of corny clowning around, in which both authors idiotically delight. In an-

cient Greece a dramatist would put on a trilogy of serious plays but then add a fourth, short, comical “satyr play.” So here.

The motto at the outset, by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, is not clowning around or satirical. It urges us to “engage in continuous conversation, testing one another, discovering our hidden presuppositions, changing our minds because we have listened to the voices of our fellows.” That’s good advice in thinking about auto repair or marital issues. So too we believe it’s good advice in thinking about history and economics.

If in the end you’re not persuaded that the world has been very lucky indeed to have embraced, even if only partially, the liberalism and the innovism of the Bourgeois Deal, go in peace. Yet we hope, dear reader, that at least you leave with some doubts rattling in your brain.

