

November 2017

## Reply to a Proposal to "Test" the Bourgeois Virtues: A Letter to a Young Scholar

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The trouble I have with your project, so far as it claims to test my writings, is that you greatly misunderstand what the three volumes say. It is *not* true, not remotely, that they say "In the three Volumes of the Bourgeois ethics you show that bourgeois virtues arose, which led to the Great Enrichment." I say nothing of the kind. (And by the way the three volumes are *not* called "the bourgeois ethics"; they are called "the Bourgeois Era," a very significant difference.)

You believe I suppose that the bourgeois became more virtuous. I doubt it, though it is true that with social support for its activities came a little better behavior. Probably not superior to what guildsmen in the Middle Ages showed. The clearest if not the most important example is the English Quakers, doing things like introducing fixed prices instead of bargaining, which ancient practice they viewed as violating the 9th commandment. Another and more important example is the rise of business schools internationally in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with their attempt, successful until corrupted in the 1980s by economists claiming that all that matters is the bottom line, to make business into a profession like law or priesthood or medicine.

But the main point of all three books is that the surrounding social *approval* for bourgeois activity is what mainly mattered. It transformed the world. Once only. I call it the Bourgeois Revaluation. The first volume is a defense of the ethical standing of business people *in any age, in any society*, against the widespread belief among the clerisy that business corrupts absolutely. I did it because if it was true, neither you nor I should defend businesspeople. Defend the Devil? It would make the apologetic side of The Bourgeois Era entirely pointless. Who cares how many autos or big houses we have if we are absolutely corrupt in soul?

Take down your copy of *The Bourgeois Virtues* and re-read (or read for the first time?) the second-to-the last page and the very last, "You ask me to preach." Note that the virtues there named in their commercial forms are *not* claimed to have *improved*. Bourgeoisies worldwide have exhibited them---or strikingly failed to exhibit them---in all ages from the caves to Enron. The change is not in psychology, as I say repeatedly (contradicting Max Weber by name, repeatedly). It is in the politics and sociology *supporting*, or strikingly not supporting (thus socialism), a commercially tested betterment that made the modern world, 1800 to the present. It happened only after 1800, stretching back to faint origins in Holland in the *Gouden Eeuw* and later in England with a Dutch king. It happened at first only in relatively liberal societies, in their relatively liberal eras, as it still does most greatly flourish, most of all after 1800.

I am at a loss to understand how you could fail to get the point. I say it over and over and over in all three volumes. Perhaps it is because you glanced at the title of the first volume and rushed forward to “test” it with “data,” meanwhile not pausing to be sure you had the “it” straight in your mind. You take the most simpleminded, conventional (see Weber), and erroneous interpretation of what I have said, and immediately run with it. It’s a bad intellectual habit, common I must say among scholars in many fields among them economics and economic history. I know, because I had the habit when I was young.

We need to understand, really understand, what our colleagues are claiming if we are going to “test” them. I welcome tests. If I am wrong, I will be sad but nonetheless glad that at least we know one thing better than we once did. That way lies scientific progress. But slap-dash “tests” that miss the point do not advance science. They make it go in circles.

I am not hopeful you will stop to think, but will admire it if you do. I remember an instance long ago in which John Komlos (a student of mine) and young Richard Landes (David’s son), both at the University of Pittsburgh at the time attacked an essay I had done on medieval interest rates, “testing” by exactly reversing my argument. I told John he was making a mistake, and explained why. He interpreted it merely as defensiveness, and they published a bad article that merely muddied the science.