

Review of: "Liberalism Caused the Great Enrichment"

Andrew Denis¹

¹ City, University of London

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Deirdre Nansen McCloskey (2023) "Liberalism Caused the Great Enrichment", *Qeios*, 8 February 2023 (28k words, 49 pp in pdf – abstract of 1300 words). Preprint v1. Available at : <https://www.qeios.com/read/VZNU0T> and <https://doi.org/10.32388/VZNU0T>, pdf file available at <https://www.qeios.com/read/VZNU0T/pdf>.

(An earlier (2022) and slightly shorter version, without section headings, can be seen on the website of the Gary Becker Milton Friedman Institute for Research in Economics at the University of Chicago: https://bfi.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/PTSC22_HOW-ACATO-VERSION.pdf.)

Review by Andy Denis (City, University of London)

This must be the most exasperating paper that I have been asked to review. On the one hand. It addresses an issue I regard as extremely important, and proposes an answer to the question it raises which I am only too ready to believe. On the other. It is very badly written, indulgent, sprawling, prolix, and carelessly written.

McCloskey (hereafter DNM) first claims that the growth of human welfare, as measured by GDP per capita, has increased by a factor of 30, or 3,000%. I suspect that DNM exaggerates, but I am certainly prepared to believe that growth has been something of this order. Then DNM argues that the cause of this increase is 'liberalism', defined as general permission for ordinary people to do what they please in the economy. Again, I suspect that DNM exaggerates, and that this 'liberalism' is a major or leading cause, along with the other causes, which DNM dismisses – the development of the common law, the accumulation of capital, and so forth, but I certainly do approve of drawing attention to the importance of this under-appreciated leading factor. So I am in sympathy with the purpose of the paper, and was swayed, and learned about the topic, by reading it.

However.

The paper at 28k words is *much* too long. It is indulgent. Much of the material is insufficiently relevant to warrant inclusion. For example: the author does not need to lecture the reader on the sub-Saharan origins of our species. Nothing which supports the main contention of the paper depends on it. Sometimes these asides constitute hostages to fortune. They are not necessary in the first place, and distract the reader's attention when they are wrong. For example, DNM assures us that sea coal is shipped coal, an explanation that the *OED Online* rejects (<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/174120>). Again, the explanation of the nautical phrase 'in the offing' as meaning 'beyond the horizon' is completely wrong (<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130685>). At one point, DNM resorts to horse-

racing metaphors, referring to “an economy of commercially tested betterment by innovism out of liberalism. Creativity from innovism is the economy we in fact have”. So innovism is the *father*, and liberalism the *mother*, of betterment, but innovism is the *mother* of creativity. (*Out of* and *from* apply only to a dam, *by* to a sire.) It’s just too convoluted. Why not just say that liberalism allows creativity and innovation, which in turn lead to improvement? That would be concise and clear. Resort to horse-racing metaphors adds nothing and muddles things. Amongst many other examples, we have several paragraphs on French cuisine, an explanation that the historian Arnold Toynbee was the historian Arnold J. Toynbee’s uncle, and an anecdote about Mark Twain’s brother being killed in an explosion on a paddle steamer. These asides distract the reader and add nothing. All of this kind of irrelevancy can be eliminated, leaving the paper much shorter.

And yet there is a sense in which the paper is too short. The principal themes of the paper, and the supporting arguments, are under-developed and need further work. This might well lead to a book, or a series of papers which can then be worked up into a book. I would very much like to see it. Just to take one single example – there are many others in the paper – the central figure of a 30-fold increase in real income, 3,000% as DNM reminds us, a dozen times, is said in a footnote to be based on “Maddison’s old figures”, which, we are breezily assured, “have been confirmed pretty much by later research” without citing any – rather we are referred to Wikipedia. If this were a draft chapter of a PhD student’s thesis, I would carefully explain to them that this was not good enough, and that they would have to go back and do it properly. (It is also worth noting that a 30-fold increase in real income since 1800 implies barely more than a 1.5 % annual rate of growth, which sounds much less dramatic.)

I said earlier that the paper is carelessly written. It is **full** of typos – missing letters, or words, grammatical errors, sentences that seem to have been abandoned mid-stream. This interacts with the defect of prolixity already mentioned in the following sense. The references and allusions to material which is not of great relevance to the paper is often erudite, obscure even, but this means that probable typos cannot just be dismissed as such, but must be investigated. For example, we have a reference to Pennsylvanian oil leaking ‘from the gerund’ – probably a misprint for ‘from the ground’, but can we be sure? The ‘platting of property’ in China also looks like a typo, but on investigation it turns out that there really is something called *platting*, the subdivision of an area of land. So perhaps *gerund* and other apparent typos deserve a second look. At one point we have the fairly extraordinary claim that “The historical truth is that since the beginning of human societies, the investments, property rights, and civil peace have been more or less universal”. DNM makes no attempt to justify this claim, and indeed doesn’t even seem to notice how controversial such a statement is. Again, one is left wondering whether this too is a typo. We should not be put in the position of doubting whether the author means what they say. There is evidence of the curse of the spell-checker, in that most misspelled words are, in isolation, legitimate words themselves – we have *he* for *the*, or for *of*, and so on, throughout the paper. In my view, a paper in this condition is not ready to be placed in the public domain.

Citations are not always accurate, and bibliography entries not always in the right order (an entry for Mokyr appears before Marx, and Mazzucato before that). Adam Smith’s “obvious and simple system of natural liberty” is referenced to *The Wealth of Nations* (WN): 4.2.9, (p. 456 of the 1976 OUP edition). IV.ii.9 (as it should be written in the standard way of referring to WN) is indeed (mostly) on p 456, but this is not where the “obvious and simple system of natural liberty” is to

be found. (Rather this is the famous passage where AS refers to the “invisible hand”). The “obvious and simple system” is at IV.ix.51 (on p 687, in Vol 2, of that edition). Moreover, Smith’s reference to “the liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice” (WN: IV.ix.3, p 664 of the OUP edition) is edited to read “the liberal plan of [social] equality, [economic] liberty, and [legal] justice”, and incompletely referenced. Maybe Smith did mean social, economic, and legal, but maybe he didn’t – it’s at least plausible that he would have supported legal equality – equality before the law – and social liberty – the right to do what you want as long as it doesn’t injure someone else, in all social spheres, not just in the market, and so on. In any case, he didn’t write those words, and it is objectionable to write them into the passage. Just quote what he said, and then state your interpretation.

On balance then, a paper addressing an important topic, and asserting a plausible thesis, but spoiled by prolixity and carelessness.