

Deirdrest

By Stephen T. Ziliak*

A few years ago I was invited to give an after dinner speech in celebration of Deirdre McCloskey, part of a *festschrift* held for her in Chicago at The Cliff Dwellers Club. I was keenly aware that The Cliff Dwellers had once counted the poet and Abraham Lincoln biographer, Carl Sandburg, and the film critic and screenwriter, Roger Ebert – he of Siskel and Ebert fame – as members. Louis Sullivan, a giant of modernist architecture, had spilled liquor and tears scribbling his memoir at the storied Club. I drank a couple of Guinness with Susan B. Carter and Richard Sutch and took to the podium anyway. Needless to say, I tried to keep it light and say as little as possible about Sandburg-and-Debs socialism, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, and statistical significance.

Deirdre and I met 30 years ago, early September 1991, in Iowa City, Iowa. For the past 29 years we have collaborated happily and productively on a variety of books and articles, and in a fashion which most academics do not know from experience: we write over each other. We take over a document palimpsest-like, athletically almost, and lovingly revise each other's prose before passing it back. The circle remains unbroken. We have completed 4 books (okay: around 3.75 books) and two dozen articles that way. People are amazed by the way we finish each other's sentences and yet keep the conversation (and good humor) going. We have always been that way with each other, though some find it hard to believe that Don got along that well with anyone. He did; we did. Some were jealous of our easy rapport and extensive collaboration, and I get that; but sometimes people just click, and McCloskey and Ziliak click.

It is not because we are so much alike, or that we never quarrel, or that we completely agree about reggae music and the Green New Deal (Germans call such policy "prudent," and remind us to turn out the lights but we are not quarreling here). Most readers of Deirdre McCloskey know that for her first job she (that is Don or Donald McCloskey at the time) was hired by Milton Friedman to be an assistant professor of economics at the University of Chicago, teaching price theory and economic history, which she did for 12 years earning tenure and academic fame. Friedman is perhaps best known the world over for saying "There is no such thing as a

* College of Arts and Sciences & Social Justice Studies, Roosevelt University, 430 S. Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL 60605, United States. The author can be reached at sziliak@roosevelt.edu.

free lunch,” by which he meant there is a price or cost to every action. I beg to differ but not for the same reasons that other historians in the audience are begging.

You see, when I was rounding the bend to complete the PhD in Economics at the University of Iowa, academic year 1995–1996, a student needed to obtain a signature from three different tenured faculty members to get the PhD thesis and thus the diploma officially approved. In October of 1995 I joked with Deirdre, “I have Donald McCloskey, I have Deirdre McCloskey, that’s two; I only need one more!” So her gender change was a free lunch for me, very economical. I wish I could tell that to Friedman over a Guinness.

I took a big gamble back in July 1991, a gamble that proved to be more than statistically significant. I moved my little family, including two children under the age of five, from Indiana to Iowa to study with a person I admired in books but had never met in person nor even spoken to. It was not an easy decision, and not everyone thought it sounded like a good idea. Don had many qualities one could admire, and a lot of the time he utilized them. But not like Deirdre, who has and is so much more.

One day in early September, 1991 I was standing in Phillips Hall at the University of Iowa, waiting for the only elevator to arrive, when I saw Don McCloskey. (Phillips Hall is the former home of an Economics Department that had once employed Frank H. Knight and Henry C. Simons.) I said hello and we shook hands. Said I had studied history and philosophy of economics and other sciences with H. Scott Gordon, and *The Applied Theory of Price* (McCloskey 1982) with a game theorist, Roy Gardner – the longtime coauthor of Elinor Ostrom – all at Indiana. (Gordon and Gardner wrote my recommendation letters to Iowa.) I said I had read nearly everything or anyway what I could find in libraries before the internet. I quit my job as a government labor economist and moved my family to Iowa City to study with you.

DM: “Are you good at math?”

SZ: “Pretty good; I taught myself calculus, linear algebra, and regression analysis.”

DM: “Do you know classical languages?”

SZ: “I won summa cum laude on the National Latin Exam when I was in high school.”

DM: “Great! We can begin to put the fragments of civilization back together again.”

The elevator arrived, and we took it. Thirty years on and we haven’t stopped talking. We took a lot of flak from our colleagues because of our views on statistical significance; a lot of flak. (Dished it out, too.) Our email inboxes were not always flooded with love letters and we know for a fact that we each lost job offers. But we stuck together and to the evidence and truth, emphasizing economic and substantive significance and urging abandonment of statistical significance. Our view is starting to prevail, including in the Supreme Court of the United States (McCloskey and Ziliak 2010) and at the American Statistical Association (Ziliak 2019; 2016). We are proud of many things, *The Cult of Statistical Significance* (Ziliak and McCloskey 2008) and “The Standard Error of Regressions” (McCloskey and Ziliak 1996) especially – an article which has been imitated and applied by other researchers to analyze use of

statistical significance in every field of science and business and governance, from agriculture and medicine to accounting and law. We are an unusually cooperative team for a couple of economists; after all these years we still finish each other's sentences, more or less accurately, and always with good intention – lovely. Back at the elevator:

SZ: “Just one thing, a concern I have about working together.”

DM: “What’s that?”

SZ: “I’m a socialist.” (In 1991 I was an avid reader of *The Monthly Review* and had been a volunteer for the Indiana Civil Liberties Union. A poet friend in Indianapolis, Etheridge Knight (1931–1991), thought I was going to the University of Iowa to study poetry and hooked me up with his friend, poet Galway Kinnell, who taught there.)

DM: “No problem (*laughs*). Some of my best friends are Marxist.”

I want to share two little stories about my friend, “Deirdrest.” First, I’d like to share a story about the author of a book called *The Bourgeois Virtues*, published in 2006. One hazy afternoon in the late summer of 2005, Deirdre and I drove together from Chicago to downstate Decatur, Illinois. It was a longer trip than we had figured. We were going to Millikin University to attend a conference marking the 20th year since the publication of her book, *The Rhetoric of Economics* ([1985] 1998), the book that induced me to quit my job and move to Iowa. The conference was organized by Paul Turpin, I was one of the speakers, and the assembled included Nils Goldschmidt and Arjo Klammer.

Back in Chicago I was a bit slow getting the car on the road, and Deirdre and I were hungry. I recommended a stop in Joliet at a Jamaican place that is known for making good jerk chicken. We arrived to the conference late, rather late, as I recall – low and slow is best for smoking and driving, too, right? Ya mon. Again, I am very sorry, Paul and everyone! Well, in 2005, Deirdre was still writing volume one of *The Bourgeois Virtues*. The first lecture – the keynote address of the whole conference – was to be her speech describing the nature and meaning of bourgeois virtues to economics. The session was held in Millikin’s Chapel, a Christian chapel, and the speaker, Deirdre, stood in front of the altar, where the speaker’s podium was located. It was a hot and humid summer evening in southern Illinois, the sun was setting, and she was barefoot in a dress, her toes painted red.

Now some of you knew Willie, the late Will Shakespeare (whom I named, by the way), Deirdre’s dog. Willie was in 2005 Deirdre’s spanking new puppy. So Willie was the third rider in the car during the road trip, and quite the backseat driver for a 2 month old dog. Willie came to Deirdre’s big speech in the Chapel, following a grand tradition established by the late Janie Austin, a Yorkshire terrier, who used to hide from shyness inside a suitcase until Deirdre’s speech was over, popping her head up and looking over the suitcase edge only at the sound of audience applause. Willie was not so trained (he was his own dog, scrappy to the end) biting things and people, barking in church, dragging around books and flip flops, darting between chairs. It could have been the jerk.

Anyway, Deirdre had this idea in advance that shooting a water pistol at Willie would solve the dog problem, and concealed her legal weapon until the appointed time. Standing in front of the altar, facing the congregation was Deirdre with a bright neon green and pink plastic water pistol in her right hand, her index finger on the trigger, and she began to speak: “As Saint Augustine said in *The City of God*,” and then “... Willie! Willie! Get off the chair!” she screamed, Boom! boom-boom-boom! as she squirted the water pistol at the cute little terror, now scurrying around even more, to dodge (or play with) the spray gun. The cross was positioned behind where Deirdre was standing; Jesus was not on it, it was not that kind of church, but we sensed His living presence and then “Well, as I was saying, the attention of economists is fixated on one character, Max U (she means “maximize utility”), a nice Jewish Vietnamese man who is a charming character, for sure, but narrow ...” She was urging us to think about how the three theological virtues – faith, hope, and charity – plus the four cardinal virtues – justice, courage, temperance, and fortitude – could be used to replace utilitarianism and then ... “Willie! Willie! Put that down, Willie!” Boom-boom! Boom-boom!

There is one other little story I’d like to share, which I think only one of you knows. I first learned about Don’s arrest in Iowa from my son, who, though only 8 years old, had read the *Iowa Press Citizen* that summer day in 1995 and saw a news article about his dad’s professor. Later that night, though the lights were out and my son was in bed, I heard some noise coming from his room and I looked through the door to check on him. He was singing – and the historians and close friends of Deirdre will get this reference – “Peas, peas, peas, peas, eatin’ goober peas” [in low bass voice, my son imitating Don’s voice] followed by “Peas, peas, peas, peas, eatin’ goober peas” [in high alto or soprano, again, with volume and wonderment]. Peas, peas, peas, peas ... Son, I said, are you okay? “Yes, I’m fine.” What are you doing? I gently asked. “I’m trying to see what Don is going to sound like when he becomes Deirdre.”

*

So what a pleasure it is to edit a volume of essays crafted by distinguished scholars who share with me a deep interest in and *use* for Deirdre’s ideas and scholarship. Deirdre is Queen of the Seminar and the papers collected here are a brilliant reflection of her catholic (Anglican, she would hasten to note) and pluralistic philosophy. This is not to say that we all agree with her main or auxiliary claims; we do not. I, in my dissertation, did not (Ziliak 1997; 2004). As a matter of fact, it is precisely the heterogeneous mix of rigorously-argued views collected here, from Nussbaum and Klamer to Dekker-Kuchar and DeMartino, which shall undoubtedly contribute to the rigor and relevance of future McCloskey studies.

The Nussbaum-McCloskey exchange alone is worth the price of admission. After reading Martha Nussbaum’s magnificent essay, “Identity, Equality, Freedom: McCloskey’s *Crossing* and the New Trans Scholarship,” I began to pose the Woll-

stonecraft Question to anyone who will listen. Most people, academics included, get tongue-tied trying to answer it. (My mother is one of the few who can answer without tripping over words; when she was recovering from a surgery I read parts aloud to her.) An incomparable philosopher of feelings and justice, Martha Nussbaum has wrested from Deirdre's autobiographical *Crossing* ([1999] 2019) a foundational question of gender studies and bourgeois economics and theories of the self at once – a major trifecta. Her brave and vulnerable and beautifully written essay offers so much more, as Deirdre notes in her reply, and is deserving of the widest possible audience.

Arjo Klamer is one of Deirdre's closest colleagues in the study of rhetoric and virtue ethics; their collaboration began in the late 1980s and has been, like ours, more or less continuous. Klamer argues here that Deirdre's social accounting and mechanisms are incorrect, or at minimum incomplete, suggesting in effect that the bourgeois virtue approach to economics needs an appointment with an ontologist (or at least a values counselor and logistics team). Persky draws the reader's attention to a similar phenomenon. He argues that worker owned and cooperative forms of organization share, on the surface, a similar set of virtues in his essay on "John Stuart Mill, Virtues, and the Laboring Classes: Notes on McCloskey." And yet Deirdre does not seem to think that her virtues and theory are much disturbed by the ubiquity of large scale, top down, hierarchical, and absentee ownership capitalist structures. A former editor of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* Persky has been Deirdre's colleague in economic history and the history of economic thought at the University of Illinois-Chicago Department of Economics for more than two decades.

The DeMartino-McCloskey dialogue is a serious and illuminating and yet surprisingly entertaining debate on value theory and "loss" in economics and society; neither author is taking prisoners. Graduate students who are struggling (as we all do) to make heads or tails of so-called "Welfare Theorems" of economic theory; at the same time, professional economists and others who wish to advance their understanding of the scope and limits of Pareto-arguments and unregulated trade will surely benefit. In like fashion, academics hoping to revive the dialogical form of the scientific paper will find an admirable example here. Each paper advances McCloskey studies in one way or another. Deirdre herself accepted our invitation to pen an intellectual autobiography and as usual she delivered generously and beyond expectation.

The idea for this special issue was originally inspired by a retrospective conference on McCloskey scholarship which was organized by Nils Goldschmidt and held in November 2019 at the Walter Eucken Institut, Freiburg. I wish to express my sincere thanks to all contributors and participants, to Lars Feld for the hospitable atmosphere and for making the conference welcoming to all. It was a genuine pleasure that Viktor Vanberg participated in the discussions as the *spiritus rector* of the Eucken Institut, one of the leading voices in establishing the transatlantic discussions on liberalism between Germany and the United States.

Economists grow anxious when speaking about causality, as they should. But if not for Mark McCabe we would be empty handed right now except possibly when visiting Alter Simon in Freiburg or Miller's in Chicago. With gratitude,

Stephen T. Ziliak.

References

- McCloskey, D. N. (1985) 1998. *The Rhetoric of Economics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- McCloskey, D. N. (1999) 2019. *Crossing: A Transgender Memoir*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McCloskey, D. N. and S. T. Ziliak. 1996. "The Standard Error of Regressions." *Journal of Economic Literature* 34 (1): 97–114.
- McCloskey, D. N. and S. T. Ziliak. 2010. *Brief of Amici Curiae Statistics Experts Professors Deirdre N. McCloskey and Stephen T. Ziliak in Support of Respondents* (vol. No. 09–1156, pp. 22). Washington, DC: Supreme Court of the United States. Edward Labaton et al. Counsel of Record (Ed.), Matrixx et. al. v. Siracusano and NECA-IBEW Pension Fund, filed Nov. 12, 2010.
- Ziliak, S. T. 1997. "Kicking the Malthusian Vice: Lessons from the Abolition of 'Welfare' in the Late Nineteenth Century." *Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance* 37 (2): 449–68.
- Ziliak, S. T. (ed.). 2001. *Measurement and Meaning in Economics: The Essential Deirdre McCloskey*. Cheltenham: Elgar.
- Ziliak, S. T. 2004. "Self-Reliance Before the Welfare State: Evidence from the Charity Organization Movement in the United States." *Journal of Economic History* 64 (2): 433–61.
- Ziliak, S. T. 2016. "The Significance of the ASA Statement on Statistical Significance and P-Values." *American Statistician* 70 (sup1): 129–33.
- Ziliak, S. T. 2019. "How Large Are Your G-values? Try Gosset's Guinnessometrics When a Little 'p' Is Not Enough." *American Statistician* 73 (sup1): 281–90.
- Ziliak, S. T. and D. N. McCloskey. 2004a. "Size Matters: The Standard Error of Regressions in the American Economic Review." *Journal of Socio-Economics* 33 (5): 527–46.
- Ziliak, S. T. and D. N. McCloskey. 2004b. "Significance Redux." *Journal of Socio-Economics* 33 (5): 665–75.
- Ziliak, S. T. and D. N. McCloskey. 2008. *The Cult of Statistical Significance: How the Standard Error Costs Us Jobs, Justice, and Lives*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.