

Deirdre McCloskey, *Liberdade: 100 Conversation Starters on Liberalism, Latin America, and Brazil*. Columbia, SC: Ethos, 2025. 238 Pages. USD 25.00 (hardback).

In his book *The Chile Project: The Story of the Chicago Boys and the Downfall of Neoliberalism*, Sebastian Edwards writes about the implementation of pro-market policies in Chile from the top down; the subsequent rise in real per capita income as a result of those policies, moving from the bottom to the top ranks of Latin American countries; and the surprising turn away from liberal to socialist politicians after the protests of 2019 (Edwards 2023). This turn away from pro-market policies presents an enormous challenge for understanding the fate and promise of liberalism. Edwards provides a number of explanations that point towards a complacency on the part of the supporters of liberalism in Chile, the economists and policymakers, for example, who designed and implemented the successful reforms. Invoking Deirdre McCloskey and her work on rhetoric, Edwards argues Chile's turn was the result of a rhetorical failure. The supporters of liberalism simply stopped engaging in public discourse to defend their ideas and policies. Quoting McCloskey on what should have been the response to far-left alternatives, Edwards writes, "The answer to those attacks is, preach, preach, and preach!" (Edwards 2023, p. 277)

McCloskey continues to preach herself and persuade readers of the benefits of liberalism in her latest book *Liberdade: 100 Conversation Starters on Liberalism, Latin America, and Brazil*. The word *liberdade* means freedom or liberty in Portuguese, and the book consists of mini-essays, or conversation starters, on politics, economics, and society originally written for the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*. I prefer "conversation starters," as each entry runs about a page and a half of text, which is just enough space to introduce an idea, give some supporting evidence, and leave the reader eager to learn more. The length of the conversation starters is both a strength and weakness of the format. In their original form in the newspaper, one can imagine the conversation starters being just the right length for someone to read during the day, get a classical liberal perspective on current events, share with their neighbor, and begin a conversation. McCloskey's deft prose sparkles on the page, and each entry is a delight for the mind. As such, the reader—the addict of McCloskey's prose, myself included ever since picking up *The Rhetoric of Economics* (McCloskey 1998) over twenty years ago—hungers for more. There are arguments throughout the book's entries requiring further elaboration and more evidence in order to fully persuade. Starters, you see. This poses a challenge for how to recommend scholars use and learn from McCloskey's book, a point to which I will return.

Because use and learn, we must. Edwards's is a cautionary tale. And, McCloskey shows the way. The main objective for McCloskey writing her conversation starters and publishing them as a book is to convince people of the importance of liberalism for improving their lives. The Great Enrichment and what McCloskey calls the "Latin Lag" is her motivation for addressing an audience of Brazilians and Latin Americans more broadly. Long time readers of McCloskey will be familiar with her term the Great Enrichment, which describes the relentless increase in world real GDP per capita after the Industrial Revolution. More and more, we have come to understand that the big fact of modern economic growth is not that it started—the Industrial Revolution—but that it *continued*—the Great Enrichment. Not all countries fully experience the Great Enrichment, however. Many countries, including those in Latin America, fail to achieve levels of real GDP per capita similar to those found in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere, hence the Latin Lag. In order to flourish, what Latin America needs and what Brazil needs is liberalism, not coercion by the state. Although McCloskey's conversation starters were

originally written for a Brazilian audience, the themes she explores—liberty, common sense, and the struggle against coercion—are universal in their importance and will, thus, be of interest to a wide audience.

A glance at the table of contents reveals many familiar themes from McCloskey's earlier writings, such as liberalism as equality of permission, not equality of outcome or opportunity; statistical significance; spontaneous order; ethics; rhetoric, language, and talking; modern economic growth; liberalism versus the state in solving social problems; and why people are so attracted to statism. These familiar themes are woven throughout her commentary on contemporary issues, such as Milei's success in Argentina. The conversation starters span the period from April 2022 to February 2025 and appear chronologically throughout the book except for the first entry dated September 2023. Placed out of order at the beginning of the book, "Liberalism is Equality of Permission" sets the tone for the rest of the volume. McCloskey argues that out of the three new ideas about politics developed since 1700—liberalism, nationalism, and socialism—only liberalism is based on the idea that no adult should be coerced physically to obey any other person. Or, as the late David Boaz memorably put it, "In a sense there have always been but two political philosophies: liberty and power." (Boaz 2015, p. 39) National and socialism fall down on the side of power, liberalism on the side of liberty. This axiom runs through the heart of McCloskey's analysis.

There are too many good conversation starters in McCloskey's book for me to mention all of them, so let me instead mention a few I found particularly striking. On the need to preach the benefits of liberalism, McCloskey writes in "No Alternative to Liberalism, (2/2)" and "Appeal to the Heart" about the need to appeal not only to people's heads in convincing them about the desirability of liberalism but also their hearts, arguing classical liberals must talk to people through popular culture. The same is true in commenting on contemporary events, as the stakes of getting policy right are simply too high to leave public discourse in the hands of reporters, for example ("Chile's Constitutional Wisdom"). Public persuasion is important, because the ideas that people believe in their heads and feel in their hearts are what provide the social support structure for liberalism. Liberalism imposed from above rests on fragile ground. Writing in June 2022 on Chile's turn from liberalism in "No Institutions Without Ethics," McCloskey (2025, p. 39) argues, "The party of let's-try-socialism-once-again is popular not because "neoliberalism" failed, but because people have forgotten that it succeeded. Chile's tragedy is that liberty had been imposed not by popular opinion but by state coercion." Liberalism needs smart and informed adults—a theme running through the book—who take a sober look at economic history, for example, and recognize how liberalism in McCloskey's telling made the modern world and sustained the Great Enrichment ("Crisis Rhetoric" and "New Technology Caused by Liberalism Made the Modern World").

The need to "[exercise] an adult, sophisticated "rhetorical" sense" (McCloskey 2025, p. 102) to support liberalism, for example when evaluating claims by politicians about the effects of particular policies and voting accordingly, seems urgent in our world today. Think "Liberation Day" tariffs and wealth taxes on California billionaires. What is the fate of liberalism if so many of our fellow citizens have in fact lost their ability to judge such policies? My prior—from such works as *The Vanishing American Adult* (Sasse 2017) to the decline in long form reading—is that there is a crisis in adult liberalism. This is an argument McCloskey does not explore.

She does address the question on why so many people support statism. It begins with our experience as children and teenagers in a family, where mothers and fathers allocate resources and make decisions on behalf of everyone in the family. The family works and is the source of

lifelong affection and bonds that bring meaning to our lives. The problem is that as we age and leave that first family of ours we apply the metaphor of the family to society as a whole and cast the state in the role of mother and father (“Families are Nice and Necessary, and Dangerous”). And, because these first years out in the world alone for the first time—in a job or at college—are so formative, we do not grow out of our statism. Most of us in fact remain statist (“Routine Modern Statism”). People simply believe in state intervention to solve all social problems (“The State and Social Problems”). There seems to be some possible tension here in McCloskey’s argument. We cultivate adult liberalism in part through interacting in the marketplace. Why does this not serve as a bulwark against statism? Do we simply contain multitudes? I would like to have seen McCloskey consider this tension. Lastly, I would have liked to read McCloskey’s thoughts on the role market volatility and crises, such as the Great Recession, play in hardening people’s belief in statism. Living through market volatility without “an adult, sophisticated “rhetorical” sense” seems a likely pathway to supporting statist politicians and policies.

“Things you don’t know” is an example of one of McCloskey’s conversation starters that begs for further elaboration and evidence, especially for the non-economist reader. She lists a number of facts about the economy and economic history that people think they know but are actually wrong. Getting the economics wrong matters a great deal, because it influences people’s views of economic policies. The problem is that I can imagine readers holding these beliefs scoffing at McCloskey’s dismissal. How does she know? Again, conversation *starters*. We cannot blame McCloskey for the formatting constraints inherent in writing short columns for a newspaper. Herein lies an opportunity for how scholars can use McCloskey’s book to great effect. Start conversations. In classrooms. Have students read “Things you don’t know,” and assign each student a fact to research and verify. Use “Diversity” to teach students about gains from trade and that the Ricardian model applies to not only goods X and Y. Speaking of Ricardo, use “The Labor Theory is Wrong” to introduce the labor theory of value and how it steers Marx to such wrong conclusions about how the economy works. Use “A Criticism of Liberalism” and “Limits to Liberalism?” to have students consider criticisms to liberalism and then have them propose additional criticisms beyond the ones McCloskey writes about.

As usual, McCloskey has written an excellent book. Given the format’s constraints, there is less meat than her readers are used to, but what is here are the choice cuts. Taken as a whole, the conversation starters make a powerful case for liberalism. I think McCloskey is so effective, because she practices the method of economics she has so long espoused, namely “humanomics.” In “Hirschman,” she defines humanomics as “an economics that uses all the resources of our culture, from numbers to words, from life to art.” (McCloskey 2025, p. 126) Humans and the human experience are on every page. McCloskey’s writing comes from the world (she practices what she preaches; see McCloskey (1997)). She draws evidence in favor of liberalism not only from our own time but also from humanity’s written conversation throughout history. She believes in the power of ideas to make our world better. Listen to her preach. It’s enough to make a liberal of us all.

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