
A Lesson in Humility, a Lesson for Our Times

Alessandro Manzoni's The Betrothed

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“**M**inisters, general managers, commissars, prefects should purchase a copy . . . of Alessandro Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* to be read in idle moments, to be kept on their desk or on their nightstand at night, to be at hand when they cannot sleep. It is one of the best treatises on political economy ever written. They should ponder the words, full of truths and sense, of this great author and resolve at last to make themselves scarce as to private commerce. Let the government mind its business, and the citizens will mind theirs” (Einaudi [1919] 1961, 271–72).¹

These words were written by Luigi Einaudi (1874–1961), recommending *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*, 1827), a novel by Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873), to the massive ranks of Italian public officers. Einaudi would become, in 1948, the president of the fledging Italian Republic. Well before then, he was the country’s most prestigious economist. So why was he recommending *a novel* to “ministers, general managers, commissars, prefects” rather than a proper treatise in economics?

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1. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted in the references.

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Manzoni's book is indeed the story of two betrothed people, whose hope to get married is hampered by a local nobleman but who mostly by chance—or thanks to Providence—eventually overcome the obstacles he puts in their way. The two main characters show a kind affection, largely free of sensual passion, and the novel's key themes seem to be redemption and humility. So what does the novel have to do with economics?

Manzoni wrote what is perhaps the highest example of the historical novel. He uses the story of two common types to paint a larger fresco of History with a capital H, which he sees as the complex of social phenomena affecting the many rather than as the adventures of a few “great men.” Economics here comes in handy; it inspired in particular the twelfth chapter of the novel, which Einaudi recognized as a masterpiece in making clear vivid concepts dear to classical economists.

Novels are not lectures, and they should not be read as such. But stories can transform things as sometimes dreary as social and economic ideas into narratives that talk to people by evoking situations that resonate in their own lives.

In this regard, where an author comes from intellectually is not a mere detail. The struggle between liberty and power, the need for restraint in government, a strong revulsion for the powerful and mighty, an affinity to free-market economics, and a sympathy for the “small people” who must earn their living through work are important features of Manzoni's work. He wrote poems, tragedies, and essays, innovating literary genres profoundly. In the following pages, however, I am concerned mainly with *The Betrothed*, trying to highlight to what extent the novel can be considered as having a classical liberal message. Such a message was consistent with the author's mindset.

Alessandro Manzoni: A Brief Sketch of His Life and Times

One of Manzoni's most important achievements was to provide Italians with a common language. Even at the time of Italy's unification in 1861, only some 200,000 Italians out of a population of 25 million spoke Italian in a meaningful sense. In their daily undertakings, people used regional dialects often barely intelligible by “Italians” in other parts of the kingdom. However, the literati learned their Italian from Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed* and then made it the language in which newspaper articles were written and radio news was spoken. You can hardly think of any other writer who accomplished such a triumph. This triumph, however, may overshadow other accomplishments, his thoughts, and his personality.

The scion of a great family of the Italian enlightenment—his grandfather was the legal scholar Cesare Beccaria (1738–94), and his natural father was most likely Giovanni Verri (1745–1818), the younger brother of publicist Pietro Verri (1728–97)—Manzoni developed his worldview as a young man in the liberal intellectual circles of Paris. He joined his mother, Giulia Beccaria (1762–1841), there at age twenty. They both spent time in the salon of Sophie de Condorcet (1764–1823), where he entered

into contact with the Idéologues. Their intellectual leader was Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836), who had strong liberal principles and whose daughter Manzoni was at a certain point supposed to marry (Tellini 2007, 21).² Young Alessandro also developed a profound friendship with historian and linguist Claude Fauriel (1772–1844), who later translated Manzoni's work into French.

Upon marrying his first wife, Enrichetta Blondel (1791–1833), Manzoni returned to the bosom of the Catholic Church, but his Christian fervor did not displace his liberalism. His friend Ruggero Bonghi (1826–1895) reported, "I have heard him say once, 'The time shall come when we must allow the Mormons to preach in the Cathedral's square!'" (1927, 76). Manzoni's adherence to Catholicism was profound and underlay his own understanding of the fallibility and limitations of each human. It never made him a supporter of the pope's temporal power, though. That was clear from the premise of his essay *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica* (Observations about Catholic morals, [1819] 1992), written in response to Jean Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi (1773–1842), who "attributed the moral corruption of the Italians to the papacy" (Wood 2013, 119). Manzoni said he was persuaded that "a man can occasionally have the duty of speaking for truth, but never that of enforcing it" ([1819] 1992, 9). Truth called for speakers, not for "enforcers." After his conversion, his intellectual sparring partner was Antonio Rosmini (1797–1855), a Catholic philosopher who likewise appreciated the tradition of liberalism, particularly in economics (see, e.g., Rosmini [1848] 2007).

Although Manzoni wrote only one novel, his literary production was substantial. Besides *The Betrothed*, he left a vast and complex literary legacy ranging from poetry to history. His writings can roughly be divided into three different periods. From 1801 to 1809, he wrote mainly poetry. We can date his best-known works, which can broadly be included in romanticism, from 1810 to 1827. They include five religious poems; two historical tragedies, *Il conte di Carmagnola* (The count of Carmagnola, 1820) and the *Adelchi* (1822); an ode on the death of Napoleon, *Il cinque maggio* (The fifth of May, 1821); the historical essay *Discorso sopra alcuni punti della storia longobardica in Italia* (Discourse on some points in Longobard history in Italy, 1822); the manifesto-letter to Cesare d'Azeglio (1763–1830) on romanticism (1823); and, indeed, the first edition of *The Betrothed* (1827). Thereafter, in the third period, up to his death, Manzoni concentrated on revising his novel and on penning linguistic, historical, and philosophical essays, including a late book on the French Revolution and an investigation of the historical novel that rejected it as a genre (Manzoni [1850] 1984), which he had started right after publishing his own great historical novel.

Manzoni was soon internationally recognized as one of the most powerful intellects of his time. *The Betrothed* was soon translated into English, although the first translation had "many faults," at least according to Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49), who

2. De Tracy had a substantial influence over Manzoni's views, including his understanding of language (Gensini 1995).

reviewed the book (Poe 1835). More translations followed, including two well-curated ones, in 1951 by Archibald Colquhoun and in 1972 by Bruce Penman (Manzoni [1827] 2016).³

Manzoni's liberalism included a profound understanding of economics. He was well acquainted with the work of authors such as Jean-Baptiste Say (1767–1832) and Adam Smith (1723–1790) and left numerous notes on the economic treatises and essays he read. His understanding of economics surfaced in his grand historical novel, particularly in chapter 12, where he deals with the famine in Lombardy. But his economic notions, in particular his support for free trade, also fit into his vision of human nature—which is a troubled one. For Manzoni, human beings are wicked, imperfect, fallible, prone to mistakes and delusions—and yet capable of good. Such good is more likely to come from humble sources than from the actions of the powerful and great. Indeed, his work seems to confirm that “great men are almost always bad men.”⁴

Commentators have often highlighted the influence on Manzoni of Augustin Thierry (1795–1856), whose “closest friend” (Gossman 1976, 5) was Manzoni's friend Fauriel. A renowned French historian but also a “noted political liberal, and an energetic and combative polemicist in the liberal cause” (Gossman 1976, 4), Thierry is considered one of the founding fathers of the classical liberal analysis of class conflict (Raico 1988).⁵ He “undertook voluminous researches [*sic*] and publications of the growth of commerce and industry, the emergence of the middle class, and the charters and oath-associations from the eleventh century whereby the legal and constitutional rights of the middle class were protected” (Liggio 1990).

For Thierry, the Germanic “barbarian” conquest shaped European societies, thanks to a confrontation “between the Roman and German manners” (1859, 27). With the Germans prevailing, “all the public powers transformed into desmenial privileges, the idea of nobility devoted to the profession of arms, and that of ignobility to industry and labour.” If the “liberty of the noble . . . was entirely a matter of privilege, derived from conquest and German usages,” “the idea of another kind of liberty, conformable to natural right, within the reach of all, equal to all, to which may be applied, after its origin, the name of Roman freedom” (1859, 33), survived in fortified towns. Cities were thus the cradle of the enterprising bourgeoisie, who aimed to achieve prosperity by trade. Political power appears thus to be established upon conquest, whereas “the seeds of civilizations” were guarded by “serfs” and “bourgeois,” whom “the conquerors devoured at their mercy” (Thierry 1835, xi).

3. In this article, I use the Penman translation (Manzoni [1827] 2016), and subsequent parenthetical citations to the novel give only the page numbers of this published translation.

4. John Emerich Edward Dalberg, Lord Acton, to Archbishop Mandell Creighton, April 5, 1887, Acton-Creighton Correspondence, at <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/acton-acton-creighton-correspondence>.

5. In his autobiographical work *Dix ans d'études historiques* (Ten years of historical studies, 1835), Thierry describes his idea of liberty: “any kind of government that would offer the greatest possible number of guarantees for the individual with the least possible amount of administrative action” (xvi).

Thierry blamed historians for “having created the history of France upon the sole history of the conquering Franks” (Smithson 1972, 84), thus upon great conquerors and military men rather than on the workings of traders, workers, and “ordinary” people. This message resonated profoundly with Manzoni, who adapted it to his own circumstances. In *Discorso sopra alcuni punti della storia longobardica in Italia* (1822), he notes that the barbarian conquests determined the “formation and permanence of these much different and, most importantly, unequal, societies,” the conquered and the conquerors. But “the chroniclers of the Middle Ages mainly report the major or outstanding events and only tell us the story of the conquering people, and in some instances limit themselves to the kings and the foremost characters of that people” (187, 188).

Manzoni knew Thierry personally and, like the French, in early 1820s began to read the “great collections of the *Historiens originaux de la France et des Gaules*” (Thierry 1835, xx). In those “unorganised collections, which were not only intended to the exclusive description of great events and personages,” Manzoni “would start focusing his interest on the world of the humblest people” (De Lollis 1926, 49).

In Manzoni’s novel, the main characters are humble people—indeed, a couple of farmers: at the end of the novel, Renzo, finally married to his Lucia, will purchase and manage a small silk mill. This outcome seems to be in accord with the shift in public opinion toward an appreciation of commercial jobs that Deirdre McCloskey (2016, 2019) has written about extensively.⁶ Yet it was not an uncontroversial choice in Manzoni’s times. His friend Nicolò Tommaseo (1802–74) commented in a review of the book that “a hillbilly can certainly be worthy of no less esteem than a king: but I wonder whether he deserves to be the subject of a novel” (1827, 104).

The Betrothed, in Short

Manzoni’s aim with *The Betrothed* was “to tell an invented story of two young peasants while at the same time evoking seventeenth-century Lombardy, in which the story was set, with all the historical accuracy he could muster” (Bermann 1984, 28).

The Betrothed is set in 1628, when Milan and the surrounding country were under Spanish domination. The duchy of Milan was part of the Spanish kingdom since Philip II had succeeded Charles V. Foreign rulers are not viewed with great sympathy, and the ideal of Italian independence was dear to Manzoni, in whose times the Austrians controlled Milan (they inherited the city after the war of Spanish succession). Yet Manzoni was frank in depicting Italians as imperfect human beings, not necessarily

6. It was a sudden shift in opinion that made common people and even their contrivances worth writing about. Consider the opening words of *Pinocchio*: “There was once upon a time . . . —‘A king!’ my little readers will instantly exclaim. No, children, you are wrong. There was once upon a time a piece of wood” (Collodi [1881] 1914, 11, ellipses in the original).

better than their foreign masters. Imperfection is a feature of the human condition, not of nationality.

The novel, which purports to be based on an old and faded manuscript, begins in a little hamlet in Lecco on Lake Como. At first sight, the betrothed who long to get married are not only utterly unaristocratic and unexceptional but also a very unlikely pair of characters for a romantic novel: Renzo Tramaglino is a silk weaver; his promised, Lucia Mondella, is a peasant.

They are good folks, common people with simple desires. They just want to get married and set up their household. But Don Rodrigo, a local nobleman, fancies Lucia also, after a casual and fleeting encounter with her on a country road. Don Rodrigo, the first nobleman we meet in the novel, is a local boss, a minor Vito Corleone. Rodrigo's henchmen convince Don Abbondio, the cowardly parish priest who is to marry the couple, that the wedding shouldn't take place, "questo matrimonio non s'ha da fare," which is but one of the very many sentences in the *Betrothed* that even Italians who never open a book commonly quote.

Renzo and Lucia resort to Friar Cristoforo for help and guidance. The good friar was an aristocrat and an arrogant man before undertaking a life of atonement. He confronts Don Rodrigo, hoping to convince him to let Lucia go—but to no avail. He cannot win him back to piety and Christian sentiments. Renzo and Lucia are then separated and will reunite only at the end of the story.

Renzo faces a perilous journey in a plague-infested Milan. He then repairs to Bergamo, which, although only a few miles from Milan, is under another sovereign power: Bergamo is part of the free Republic of Venice, not of the Spanish kingdom, as Milan is. He will become sick with the plague but recover.

Lucia is entrusted to a convent of nuns, where she is betrayed by Gertrude, a nun with a checkered past who is one of Manzoni's most tragic (and profound) characters. Gertrude has very little, if any, vocation but became a nun because her father, a "nobleman in Milan, who could count himself among the richest men in the city" (175), wanted desperately to keep his estate intact and pass it on in this condition to his first son. Such attachment to primogeniture stemmed from "the high opinion he had of his title" (175), which made him regard his own resources as merely sufficient for keeping up with it. The description of Gertrude's father is a masterpiece, an investigation of "so strange and confused a piece of work [as] the human heart" (207): the man shows himself selfish and mean when his daughter sets out on her unhappy course but at times reflects "a happy cordiality and a tenderness which were in fact largely sincere" (207).

Evicted from the convent because of Gertrude's betrayal, Lucia is at the mercy of l'Innominato (the Unnamed), a more powerful and gangsterish territorial lord than Don Rodrigo, who has in the past sought the Unnamed's help to persecute his hapless victims. Apparently a helpless captive, Lucia will, however, be the crucial figure in the Unnamed's conversion, making him doubt his conduct and wishing for change. He will ultimately be won back to the side of good by Federico Borromeo

(1564–1631), then bishop of Milan, a historical figure who was the cousin of St. Charles Borromeo (1538–1584).

The novel ends with Renzo and Lucia happily reunited, married by Don Abbondio (a personification of fear yet, like all the others, a truly *human* character who sometimes even utters some common sense), and moving out of the village as Renzo becomes a small businessman, the owner of a spinning mill near Bergamo.

The Column of Infamy and the Search for Visible Hands

As an appendix to an updated edition of the novel in 1840, Manzoni eventually published a little essay he wrote in 1829. *Storia della colonna infame* (*History of the Column of Infamy*, [1840] 1997). This historical essay places the novel in context and clarifies its author's interest in the issue of the plague in Milan as a social phenomenon.

History of the Column of Infamy is an investigation into criminal proceedings that took place in 1630. The accused were considered guilty of spreading the plague by smearing people and objects with a venomous ointment (*untori*). Of course, this was not what happened, but the people of Milan could not accept that the plague that struck them was the outcome of various contemporary causes: *somebody* must have deliberately infected them.

Among such various causes, a prominent one was the War of the Mantuan Succession, which during the Thirty Years War brought foreign troops onto Italian soil. But could it really be the case, the people wondered, that such an evil sickness simply traveled with unwitting soldiers?

A different conjecture was taking root among the citizens of Milan: that the plague was a contrivance by evil people who had their own nefarious ends.

One morning in June 1630, a woman standing at a window in Milan saw a man she happened to think might be an “*untore*” deliberately infecting people with the plague. She made her suspicion public, so the man was arrested. He happened to be Guglielmo Piazza, a commissioner of the Tribunal of Health. In ordinary times, the alibi he produced would have guaranteed him immediate acquittal.

But such were the times and such the thirst for names to blame that things took a very different turn. Piazza was then tortured and after horrible sufferings was induced to make a false confession. In so doing, he implicated an innocent barber, Giangiacomo Mora, who allegedly had given him the infected ointment and driven him to spread it on the city's houses. Mora, the barber, was then arrested and tortured and likewise induced to make a confession. The “evidence” provided by one clashed with the evidence provided by the other, but this didn't matter much.

Both Piazza and Mora were promised immunity in exchange for their confessions, yet they were sentenced to death. They were placed on a cart in full view of the crowd; their right hands were struck off as they passed Mora's shop; they were tied alive to the wheel; and after six hours of further torment, they were put to death. Mora's house was

demolished, “never to be rebuilt,” and in its place a pillar, called the “Column of Infamy,” hence the title of Manzoni’s work, was erected on the spot, where it stood till 1778.

Both the essay and Manzoni’s novel make a crucial point: we are often incapable of understanding, let alone accepting, phenomena without tracing them back to clearly identified responsible or guilty people, heroes or villains. We want visible hands.

In this sense, *The Betrothed* is a critique of what F. A. Hayek (1899–1992) would describe as the “ingrained propensity of our thinking to interpret everything anthropomorphically” ([1966] 1991, 87). To clarify this concept, Matt Ridley points out that “the history of Western thought is dominated by skyhooks, by devices for explaining the world as the outcome of design and planning” (2015, 7). We humans have difficulty understanding that some social phenomena have no single cause or a single author. But particularly when we see certain phenomena as bad or dangerous, we can’t help but rush to find somebody to blame. Unhappy with invisible hands, we search for visible ones. This mindset easily nurtures conspiracy theories, and “passionate natures are all too ready to accept the passionate assertions of a crowd,” Manzoni writes in *The Betrothed* (259).

Manzoni knows well that this attitude is ingrained in our nature, which can’t be rooted out simply with education, as Enlightenment thinkers liked to think. The proceedings that he narrates in *History of the Column of Infamy* were uncovered by Enlightenment publicist Pietro Verri in *Osservazioni sulla tortura* (Observations upon torture, 1776/1804), a work contemporary with the more celebrated *De’ delitti e delle pene* (On crimes and punishments, 1764) by Manzoni’s grandfather, Cesare Beccaria. Manzoni read and absorbed the information from Verri’s work, but he was nonetheless dissatisfied with it.

Verri considered what happened to Piazza and Mora the result of widespread ignorance and the barbarous institution of torture. Manzoni thought, however, that “from so much evil inflicted without reason by men on their fellow men, it should . . . be possible to draw conclusions of a more general character” because “ignorance of natural science may have undesirable effects, but it cannot cause wickedness. Nor do bad institutions function automatically” (Manzoni [1840] 1997, 554). The problem lay, Manzoni wrote, in “perverse passions” (555), which inform wicked acts and are dreadfully dangerous when they animate powerful men.

These “perverse passions” do not necessarily need evil institutions or sheer ignorance to become dangerous. “Man,” Manzoni reasons in *History of the Column of Infamy*, “can always deceive himself, and terribly deceive himself.” Indeed, “fear and fury can equally well be provoked by evils that may really be, and sometime are, an effect of human depravity” but yet “fear and fury, when not controlled by reason and charity, are unhappily liable, on the flimsiest pretexts and following the wildest assertions, to presume the guilt of men who are simply unfortunate” ([1840] 1997, 564). Sometimes people rightly react with outrage to mischief that originates in human malice. But sometimes they claim incorrectly that unhappy events are the outcome of human

malice. In his novel, Manzoni shows that such a way of thinking is more often the result not of men ruminating in isolation but of men getting together as a mob. He does not claim that “personality vanishes” and “a collective mind is formed” once people join a crowd (LeBon [1895] 2001, 12). Yet the lust for skyhooks reinforces itself as a powerful glue for when men join each other in a newly formed mob.

In one of the most famous chapters in *The Betrothed*, poor Renzo, dispatched to Milan to avoid running into Don Rodrigo as Renzo looks for his fiancé, Lucia, ends up in a mob that is revolting against bakers who are supposedly hoarding flour and bread. The mob uprising was a historical fact, the “tumulto di San Martino,” which occurred on November 11 and 12, 1628.

The mob is prone to follow people with a violent nature, whose passionate search for “visible hands” and evil mischief has turned them into self-appointed commissioners of the people: “In popular uprisings there are always a certain number of men,” Manzoni explains in the novel, “inspired by hot-blooded passions, fanatical convictions, evil designs, or a devilish love of disorder for its own sake, who do everything they can to make things take the worst possible turn” (264).

Certainly, there are others who, “inspired by friendship or fellow-feeling for the people threatened by the mob, or by a reverent and spontaneous horror of bloodshed,” push “the bulk of the mob . . . its raw material . . . is made up of a fortuitous conglomeration of human beings” in the opposite direction (264).

Manzoni does not embrace the Enlightenment view that the problem lies exclusively with popular credulity and with the populace’s widespread ignorance. There is something deeper, in human hearts, that makes credulity and false information (“fake news”) all the more dangerous. A taste for simplification and the endless search for a culprit can easily be exploited by fanatics and power-hungry men alike. Even his hero, Renzo, is carried away in the frenzy, although he never resorts to the extreme step of killing the city commissioner charged with regulating the provision of supplies, whom the mob considers responsible for their hardship because he “protects the bakers” (252). Manzoni knows of the role of those men who try to carry the many in an evil direction but considers that the very size of the mob makes of individual men the “raw material” of the mob.

Manzoni has been seen, namely by Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), as being patronizing toward the poor, but Manzoni does not show Renzo to be a worse human being than the dignitaries who at the beginning refuse to acknowledge the existence of the pestilence, then move to consider it “not a true pestilence,” and eventually recognize it to be “a pestilence without any doubt . . . but now a new idea was attached to it, the idea of poisoning and witchcraft” (650). The erudite and well-off Don Ferrante, a bookish intellectual who takes alchemy and witchcraft seriously, dies because he assumes the plague does not exist.

Human beings are capable of extraordinary things, such as the Capuchin friars who provide shelter and aid against the plague or the many people who end up helping Renzo and Lucia in their adventures, including a converted criminal, the Unnamed. Yet

humans are prone to biases; they tend to look for visible hands and culprits to explain bad things happening to them, and they may abuse power to please the crowd. On the canvas of history, Manzoni paints a highly realistic portrait of humanity.

Manzoni the Economist

Manzoni's understanding of humanity informs his understanding of economics. In *Bourgeois Equality* (2016), echoing Luigi Einaudi, Deirdre McCloskey writes that the twelfth chapter of *The Betrothed* is something that an economist "could reprint . . . for a lecture in Economics 101" (591).

The twelfth chapter sets the stage for the mob uprising that I have already mentioned. It opens with a description of the "second year of bad harvest," which produces a scarcity of wheat and therefore of bread. The shortage is a by-product of the War of the Mantuan Succession. First, "the damage and waste caused by the war" are such that land close to the battlefields "remained uncultivated, having been deserted by peasants who were compelled to go out and beg their bread [*sic*] instead of growing it by the sweat of the brow for themselves and for their fellow men" (240). This shortage is added to other, less-visible consequences of the war: "the unbearable level of taxation, levied with incredible greed and incredible folly; the . . . behaviour of the troops quartered in the villages" (240).

With the miserable harvest comes a shortage, and "[w]ith the shortage came its painful, *salutary*, inevitable consequence, a rise in price" (241, emphasis added).

Be careful not to miss the word *salutary*.⁷ By "salutary," Manzoni meant that higher prices would draw grain from foreign countries because the lure of profit would outweigh the trouble of transport and storage. A price rise would stir up the incentives for local producers to endeavor to grow more grain. The *dynamic* effects of a price rise are felt on the supply side, increasing production so that a given good can later become less scarce again, and the price thus decline.

For this healthy adjustment process to develop, the price should be allowed to rise. But an abrupt increase in price produces "a common conviction that it is not in fact the shortage of goods that has caused the high prices. People forget that they have feared and predicted the shortage, and suddenly begin to believe that there is really plenty of grain, and that the trouble is that it is being kept off the market. . . . The storehouses and granaries were known to be full, overflowing, bursting with grain" (Manzoni 1827, 241). Manzoni's insights into mass psychology allow him to see how it is the popular mood—the people's instinctive association of higher prices and profiteers—that jeopardizes the price system.

7. In the first draft of the novel, *Fermo e Lucia* (1823), Manzoni connects "a confused, albeit lively, notion of the gap between the need of food and the means to fulfill it, between wheat and hunger." He reflects on how charity can temper need and desperation but also points out that "besides the means to make that evil tolerable, manifold, alas, are those to aggravate it . . . which can be subsumed under two main headings: the notions of the people, and the measures of the rulers" ([1823] 2015, 501, 503).

Indeed, this widespread belief supports “certain official measures which the multitude always regards (or always has regarded up to the present day), as fair, simple and ideally calculated to bring out the grain that has been secreted” (241). This is how price controls are put in place, and yet “all the official measures in the world, however vigorous there may be, cannot lessen man’s need for food, nor produce crops out of season” (242). These measures have unintended consequences: they are “certainly not calculated to attract imports from other areas where there might conceivably be a surplus. And so the trouble continued and grew worse” (242).

Crucially, Manzoni doesn’t believe that the unruly mob is the only party unable to grasp what price rises are good for. The government is in the thrall of the same delusion. The two face different incentives. The mob is just hungry and needy. The “ingrained propensity of our thinking to interpret everything anthropomorphically,” to search for visible hands, is made all the more cogent by this state of need. Officials should perhaps know better, but in actual fact they share the same, basic assumption as the mob: they believe they can save the day at the stroke of a pen.

Indeed, the Spanish authorities fix the price at a level that would be “right” with much cheaper grain. To Manzoni, Grand Chancellor Antonio Ferrer, the price fixer, “was behaving like a lady of a certain age, who thinks she can regain her youth by altering the date on her birth certificate” (242).

There is—if not a slippery slope—certainly a vicious circle caused by allegedly benevolent interventionism. Manzoni understood well that if setting a lower price doesn’t make bread magically appear on people’s table, these delusional measures nonetheless consolidate the popular belief in an almighty government. This way, intervention breeds intervention—with much conceit and little benefit. “On 15 November Antonio Ferrer published a proclamation . . . according to which no one who had grain or flour in his house was allowed to buy any more. . . . [T]here was also a fresh order that the shops must be kept well supplied with bread. . . . Anyone who can suppose that such a proclamation could be carried out must have enviable powers of the imagination” (564–65).

In a sense, Manzoni wrote a wonderful parable on unintended consequences. Consider the following passage, in which the perverse effects of government meddling unfold.

[If the public authorities] were going to command the bakers to produce all that bread, they had to take steps to see that the raw materials were available. In times of shortage the authorities always busy themselves with methods of making bread out of foodstuffs which are normally eaten in other forms; and so in this instance it had been decided to start using rice as an ingredient in the so-called “mixed loaf” [T]here was a proclamation that reserved, for the disposal of the commissioner and tribunal of provisions, one-half of whatever quantity of unpolished rice . . . that each individual might have in his possession, with penalties for anyone disposing of the same without the

permission of the said authorities of confiscation of the goods in question and a fine of three *scudi* for measure. . . . But rice had to be paid for, at a price out of all proportion to the price of bread. . . . And the governor published another proclamation . . . fixing the price of the afore-mentioned rice Anyone who asked a higher price, or refused to sell, was to lose the goods in question . . . and suffer greater financial penalties and corporate penalties up to service in the galleys. (565, 566)

The “salutary” rise in price would have brought in grains from other parts of Europe to Milan, but “[s]ince the prices of bread and flour were kept so low in Milan, the natural consequence was that processions of people from the country came into town to buy those goods” (566). How was the problem solved? By prohibiting people to take bread outside the city.

Manzoni notes: “The mob had thought it could create times of plenty by looting and incendiarism; the government thought it could prolong them by the threat of the lash and the galley” (567). These measures led to a vicious cycle of interventionism: “[T]here is in fact a necessary connection between all those strange provisions. Each was an inevitable consequence of the one before, and all followed logically from the first, which fixed a price for bread which was so far removed from the real price—by which we mean that which would have resulted from the relationship of supply and demand” (567).

Manzoni’s understanding of economics was sophisticated, as economist Augusto Graziani (1865–1944) recognized in his essay “Le idee economiche del Manzoni e del Rosmini” (Manzoni’s and Rosmini’s economic ideas, [1878] 1912). Manzoni was an avid reader and wrote many marginal notes on what he read in economics. Like his friend Rosmini (Mingardi 2018), he criticized Melchiorre Gioia (1767–1829) extensively. In his notes, he repeatedly found fault with the utilitarian and materialistic Gioia, particularly for what Manzoni saw as Gioia’s lack of understanding of classical economics. Manzoni was familiar with the works of J. B. Say (1767–1832) and Adam Smith (1723–90). He sympathized with these ideas and maintained that “Smith ascribed—to the division of labour neither more nor less of what was proper” (1885, 131).

Manzoni was a free trader—arguing that free trade was the means to mitigate famine, like the argument he made about the “salutary” rise in price in *The Betrothed*. “Abundance, or scarcity, is never general everywhere,” he wrote in one of his jotted notes, and it may differ country to country. This “kind of inequality” justifies “the opinion in favor of freedom, which is the general means of getting wheat from the places where it overflows . . . to the places where it is lacking” (1885, 217). He thought that either legislators were wise enough to allow goods to flow “with the favour of the law, with flying colours, in the light of the sun,” or as a consequence of their not being wise enough, “goods shall enter in spite of the law, under the guise of smuggling, under the shine of the moon.” He found it puzzling that people in government didn’t grasp that

point “fifty years after Smith’s death, and several after Say’s passing, and with Cobden and Bastiat alive and still active” ([1848]1986, 457).

Conclusions

Admirers of Manzoni included some of the great learned individuals of his age. Just consider that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) thought that in *The Betrothed* “Manzoni’s internal culture appears so high, that scarcely anything can approach it. It satisfies us like perfectly ripe fruit” (in Eckermann [1836] 1875, 270–71). The work is a monument to the power of fiction, a potent story of the lives of two ordinary people, and any essay that focuses only on its politics and economics is bound to do no justice to the genius of its author.

Yet its politics and economics *are* notable, particularly for a tradition of thought, classical liberalism, that often appears arid and distant from the powerful work of the imagination.

Can novels teach what pamphlets cannot? When in 1923 *The Betrothed* was placed in the Italian high school curriculum, Luigi Einaudi had great hopes: “[W]hoever can infuse in our youth the spirit of the economic chapter of Alessandro Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* would fully achieve the civil and spiritual end” of the teaching of economics. “To succeed in making those immortal pages to be thoroughly appreciated would mean to have deeply penetrated the spirit of science and to partake of a true economic sense of history and of life. . . . [A] renewed economic teaching would play a not inconsiderable part in the mental development of Italy’s new generations” (Einaudi 1923).

That did not happen: Italians did not grow particularly knowledgeable about political economy, at least as far as we can see from their voting patterns. Attempts to politically control prices, in particular, are no less frequent in Italy than in other countries. Just consider that at the end of 2019 the Italian Parliament passed a law regulating the prices of books and that requests for substantial intervention rose when with the spread of the COVID-19 virus in 2020 the price of protective masks skyrocketed.

Whatever effect reading Manzoni’s work produced in Italy, that work is highly valuable for those who care about liberty. On one hand, Manzoni—building on the lesson given by Thierry—explicitly wanted to write about *common* people, to put them for once on the center stage of history. His novel is by design a critique of the mighty and their pretensions. On the other hand, Manzoni did not *idealize* the common folk: he described them with their biases, with their prejudices, with their need for visible hands and skyhooks.

In this sense, the novel is a great lesson in humility. Humility in attempts to intervene in the economy and manage prices, even during plague and famine. Humility in our pretenses to understand social phenomena and govern them without considering how weak and biased our own understanding is. Humility in thinking the lives and

stories of some are more interesting and meaningful than the apparently dull lives of ordinary folks.

Deirdre McCloskey has summed up the promises of liberalism in the 1800s as “a new if imperfect equality before the law and a new if imperfect equality of dignity in society” (2019, 131). Manzoni wrote a novel that epitomized such imperfect equality but also wondered about the mechanisms by which common people pushed against an essential part of a free society—namely, a free economy. In the space of a novel, by looking into “so strange and confused a piece of work” as “the human heart,” he also allows us to see the merits and dangers of “so strange and confused a piece of work” as the free society.

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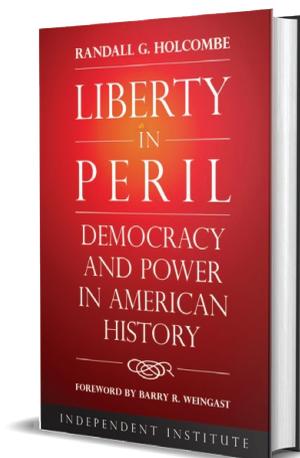
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