

ROBINSON CRUSOE AS ECONOMIC MAN

A common interpretation of Crusoe is as economic man. His relationships with others are based primarily—some would say entirely—on their use for him; they are commodities who (which?) exist for his economic advantage. He forms a friendship with the English captain immediately upon being offered free passage on his ship. Despite Xury's bravery and loyalty, Crusoe sells him back into slavery—and for less than the boat they escaped in (sixty pieces of eight versus eighty pieces of eight). He regrets the loss of Xury twice, as a worker both on his Brazil plantation and on the island. It is on the island that Crusoe discovers an economic system of value based on an item's use; nevertheless, he keeps all the money he recovers from his expeditions to the two wrecks and from the corpse of the drowned boy. No social pressures or laws limit Crusoe's freedom to act in his own interests, so he functions with total *laissez faire*. On the island, he is the prototypical self-made man (or is he? He does, after all, rely on goods he retrieves from the two vessels).

As economic man, Crusoe has been specifically identified with capitalism, particularly by Marxist critics. His solitary state on the island, his limited relationships with others, including his own family, and the insignificance of sex/women reflect the nature of capitalism, which emphasizes individual self-interest. Because of the primacy of the individual, capitalism

tended to diminish the importance of personal as well as group relationships, and especially of those based on sex; for sex, as Weber pointed out, being one of the strongest non-rational factors in human life, is one of the strongest potential menaces to the individual's rational pursuit of economic ends... (Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Modern Novel*)

If you think about it, isn't Crusoe's closest and most meaningful relationship to a woman with the English captain's widow? She provides him with money in his early days and faithfully takes care of his money while he is a castaway. Of his own wife, all he has to say is that his marriage was not "to my disadvantage or dissatisfaction" (298). And the unimportance of women could not be clearer than in the list of goods he sends the colonists, "besides other supplies, I sent seven women" (299). They are merely one type of commodity.

Briefly, other basic capitalistic elements in the novel are the importance of contractual relationships, the economic motive, the drive to accumulate, venturing in search of economic opportunity, utilitarianism, and the weak connection to community and country. Ian Watt notes that money elicits the strongest emotion from Crusoe. When Crusoe learns how faithfully the Portuguese captain attended to his affairs, Crusoe is moved to tears and immediately writes a receipt for the 100 moidores the captain gives him. When his wealth arrives from Brazil, Crusoe becomes so ill with emotion that he believes he would have died if not for being bled by a physician.

KARL MARX AND ROBINSON CRUSOE

Karl Marx (1818-1883), in *Das Kapital* (1867), uses Robinson Crusoe as a favorable example of the pre-capitalist man producing goods because they are useful and producing only as much as is useful to him and not seeking a profit. Because Marx's theories are complex, I have summarized only as much of his theory as applied to the passage in which he refers to Crusoe. A more personal reason is that I found his prose unbelievably heavy and boring and didn't want to read any more of *Das Kapital* than I had to.

Marx points to the sixteenth century as the beginning of the bourgeois economic system of capitalism. In Marx's interpretation of capitalism, the laborer adds value to a product by transforming it so that it has a use. The capitalist takes the product produced by the laborer and sells it; he adds no value to the product and pays the laborer less than the value added by the laborer. Suppose the laborer worked ten hours, he is paid only for five; the capitalist takes the difference, i.e., makes a profit. In this system, the laborer is separated from the product. The exchange of goods reduces them to commodities. This transformation of goods into commodities allows for their exchange; over time, commodities are produced for exchange, and the exchange grows into commerce. Under capitalism, the producers in general relate socially to one another by treating the goods they produce as commodities and values; as a consequence, their private individual labor is reduced to a generic or homogeneous human labor and their connection to the product is hidden and becomes "a mystery." By "mystery," Marx means that people who buy a product give no thought to the amount of work needed to produce it or how well the laborer who made it was paid. To clear up this mystery, Marx looks at other forms of production. It is to illustrate this point that Marx discusses Robinson Crusoe as well as three other forms of production: feudalism, which is based on dependent cooperation; the peasant family, which involves common or directly associated labor; and his ideal, a community of free individuals who produce goods together.

The owners of the means of production control labor, and the productivity of labor either makes the capitalist richer or contributes to the expansion of capitalism itself. Marx's solution to the exploitation of labor by capitalism is "production by freely associated men... consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan." Let the worker control the means of production, Marx asserts, not capitalists. (The prototypical capitalist is, in Marx's words, a man for whom "enjoyment is subordinated to capital, and the individual who enjoys to the individual who capitalizes." Does this definition apply, in your opinion, to Crusoe?)

Marx also refers to Crusoe in Grundrisse; there he sees in Robinson Crusoe not "a reaction against oversophistication and a return to a misunderstood nature life" but "rather the anticipation of 'civil society.'"

CRUSOE'S ORIGINAL SIN

Crusoe's conversation with his father about leaving home and his leaving home can be interpreted from an economic perspective as well from a religious perspective.

The father, in urging Crusoe to stay in the comfortable position (the middle class) where God placed him to, represents an older view of a man's duty, which is to accept the lot God assigned him in a society where social class is essentially fixed and in a class which is stable. Crusoe, on the other hand, represents a modern social and economic ideal; his desire to venture forth and his aspirations to make more are the hallmarks of capitalism. Ian Watt transforms Crusoe's "original sin" of restlessness and disobedience into economic motive: "Crusoe's 'original sin' is really the dynamic tendency of capitalism itself, whose aim is never merely to maintain the status quo, but to transform it incessantly."

In Watt's view, religion has little effect on Crusoe. Despite all his references to Providence and punishment, he ends richer than his father; moreover, Crusoe experiences no real retribution for his "original sin" (without discounting Watt's main point, I believe that spending 25 years totally alone qualifies as a terrible punishment).

COUNTERARGUMENT

There are objections to seeing Crusoe as economic man. He is, after all, a man alone on an island; does that make him an economy of one person? Can an economy exist if there is no society? Diana Spearman asserts, "no one in his senses would choose the story of a man cast alone on an uninhabited island to illustrate a theory which only applied to the exchange of goods and services."

CAPITALISM, COLONIALISM, AND IMPERIALISM

In order to keep expanding, capitalism requires a cheap source of raw materials and markets for finished products. Colonies serve both functions for the mother country. So though capitalism and colonialism are not identical, they are closely associated. In the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, colonialism and imperialism were generally synonymous; today the terms are still often interchanged, though they are not truly identical. In colonialism, one nation controls the territory, the economy, and the political structure of another country; in imperialism, one nation extends its empire or its dominion over another nation. Thus, colonialism is one form that imperialism may take in extending its domination of other lands; today, however, imperialism is more likely to consist of a wealthy, powerful nation coercing or threatening weak or poor nations to control them politically and/or economically.

Crusoe acts as a colonizer in assuming complete dominion over the island and any people he encounters. The land and all its products belong to him. Several times he notes the abundance of trees suitable for making masts (the British navy and merchant ships looked to the American colonies to meet their need for trees to make masts). Crusoe's actions as an individual duplicate those of nations in claiming land for colonies. When Crusoe leaves the island, he leaves behind English and Spanish sailors as colonists. An absence of years does not diminish his ownership. The chapter which narrates his return to the island is titled "*I Revisit My Island*" (italics added for emphasis). He visits "my" colony on the island (298) and gives some land to the Europeans, keeping title to the whole island for himself. In return, they agree not to leave the island (do they have any choice, since Crusoe has the only boat?).

As an embryo imperialist, Crusoe sees himself as king and others as his subjects, including his pets. He creates, not a democracy, not a republic, but a kingdom. He imposes his will on others, most obviously Friday, but also on the worst of the English mutineers, whom he forces into staying on the island. For James Joyce, Robinson Crusoe is "prophetic," forecasting English imperialism:

The true symbol of British conquest is Robinson Crusoe, who, cast away on a desert island, in his pocket a knife and a pipe, becomes an architect, a carpenter, a knife grinder, an astronomer, a baker, a shipwright, a potter, a saddler, a farmer, a tailor, an umbrella-maker, and a clergyman. He is the true prototype of the British colonist, as Friday (the trusty slave who arrives on an unlucky day) is the symbol of the subject races. The whole Anglo-Saxon spirit is in Crusoe: the manly independence; the unconscious cruelty; the persistence; the slow yet efficient intelligence; the sexual apathy; the practical, well-balanced religiousness; the calculating taciturnity.

Crusoe as imperialist-conqueror is not a twentieth century invention, as Jules Fesquet's 1877 illustration of a heroic Crusoe demonstrates. Fesquet presents Crusoe as Hercules with a nude muscular body, Hercules's trademark lion's skin, and a sword. His sovereign rule is suggested by the orb he holds and the abject submission of the native. This picture asserts European domination over native populations, whose inferiority is expressed not only in the cannibal's submissive posture but in a somewhat less muscular body. The limitlessness of Crusoe's/the white man's power is suggested by the absence of a frame around the original illustration. An aside: do you think the prone figure is Friday?

I suggest that this drawing also shows how adaptable Robinson Crusoe is, how different time periods, with contemporary values, can still find in this novel a meaningful and even profound significance. This is why I discussed that Crusoe as a mythic or an archetypal figure.