Robinson Crusoe and the secret of primitive accumulation

Every living being is a sort of imperialist, seeking to transform as much as possible of the environment into itself and its seed. Bertrand Russell

This primitive accumulation plays in political economy about the same part as original sin in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote of the past. In times long gone by there were two sorts of people: one, the diligent, intelligent, and above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential. Never mind! Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort had at last nothing to sell except their skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority that, despite its labor, has up to now nothing to sell but itself, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly although they have long ceased to work. Such insipid childishness is everyday preached to us in the defense of property . . . In actual history it is notorious that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force, play the great part. In the tender annals of political economy, the idyllic reigns from time immemorial . . . As a matter of fact, the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic. Karl Marx, Capital (1967), Vol. 1, Part 8, Chapter 26, “The Secret of Primitive Accumulation.”

The solitary and isolated figure of Robinson Crusoe is often taken as a starting point by economists, especially in their analysis of international trade. He is pictured as a rugged individual – diligent, intelligent, and above all frugal – who masters nature through reason. But the actual story of Robinson Crusoe, as told by Defoe, is also one of conquest, slavery, robbery, murder, and force (Defoe, 1948). That this side of the story should be ignored is not at all surprising, “for in the tender annals of political economy the idyllic reigns from time immemorial.” The contrast between the economist’s Robinson Crusoe and the genuine one mirrors the contrast between the mythical description of international trade found in economics textbooks and the actual facts of what happens in the international economy.

Stephen Hymer

Note on primitive accumulation: The word primitive is here used in the sense of “belonging to the first age, period, or stage,” i.e., of being “original rather than derivative,” and not in the sense of “simple, rude, or rough.” Marx’s original term was “ursprüngliche akkumulation,” and as Paul Sweezy suggests, it would have been better translated as “original” or “primary” accumulation. But it is too late to change current usage, and the word primitive should be interpreted in a technical sense, as in mathematics, where a primitive line or figure is a line or figure “from which some construction or reckoning begins.” In economics primitive accumulation refers to the period from which capitalist accumulation springs. It was not simple, though it was rude and rough.

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man who trade to their mutual benefit under conditions of equality, reciprocity, and freedom. But international trade (or, for that matter, inter-regional trade) is often based on a division between superior and subordinate rather than a division between equals; and it is anything but peaceful. It is trade between the center and the hinterland, the colonizers and the colonized, the masters and the servants. Like the relation of capital to labor, it is based on a division between higher and lower functions: one party does the thinking, planning, organizing; the other does the work. Because it is unequal in structure and reward it has to be established and maintained by force, whether it be the structural violence of poverty, the symbolic violence of socialization, or the physical violence of war and pacification.

I would like to go over the details of Crusoe's story - how, starting as a slave trader, he uses the surplus of others to acquire a fortune - in order to illustrate Marx's analysis of the capitalist economy, especially the period of primitive accumulation which was its starting point.

For capitalist accumulation to work, two different kinds of people must meet in the market (and later in the production process); on the one hand, owners of money eager to increase their capital by buying other people's labor power; on the other hand, free laborers unencumbered by capitalist obligations or personal property. Once capitalism is on its legs, it maintains this separation and reproduces it on a continuously expanding scale. But a prior stage is needed to clear the way for the capitalist system and get it started - a period of primitive accumulation.

In the last part of Volume I of Capital, Marx sketched the historical process by which means of production were concentrated in the hands of the capitalist, leaving the worker no alternative but to work for him. He showed how a wage labor force was created through the expropriation of the agricultural population and he traced the genesis of the industrial capitalist to, among other things, the looting of Africa, Asia, and America "in the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production." In the story of Robinson Crusoe, Defoe describes how a seventeenth-century Englishman amassed capital and organized a labor force to work for him in Brazil and in the Caribbean. Of course what Crusoe established was not a market economy such as emerged in England but a plantation and settler economy such as was used by capitalism in the non-European world. It might therefore be called the story of primitive underdevelopment.

Defoe (1659–1731) was particularly well placed to observe and understand the essence of the rising bourgeoisie and the secrets of its origins. The son of a London butcher, he was engaged in the business of a hosiery factor and a commission merchant until he went bankrupt. During his life he wrote many essays and pamphlets on economics, discussing among other things, banks, road management, friendly and insurance societies, idiot asylums, bankruptcy, academies, military colleges, women's education, social welfare programs, and national workshops. He was one of the first writers to rely on the growing market of the middle class to earn his living (Robertson, 1933; Fitzgerald, 1954; Van Ghent, 1961; Novak, 1962; Watt, 1963; Macherey, 1966; Richetti, 1969).

Merchants' capital

Robinson Crusoe's story can be told in terms of a series of cycles, some running simultaneously, through which he accumulates capital. In the early days these take the form M-C-M, i.e., he starts off with money, exchanges it for commodities, and ends up with more money. In the later phases when he is outside the money economy, they take the form C-L-C, as he uses his stock of commodities to gain control over other people's labor and to produce more commodities, ending up with a small empire.

Robinson Crusoe was born in 1632. The son of a merchant, he could have chosen to follow the middle station of life and raise his fortune "by application and industry, with a life of ease and pleasure." Instead he chose to go to sea - partly for adventure, partly because of greed.

In his first voyage he starts off with £40 in "toys and trifles," goes to the Guinea coast (as mess-mate and companion of the captain whom he befriended in London), and comes back with five pounds nine ounces of gold worth £300. This is the first circuit of his capital. He leaves £200 of this sum in England with the captain's widow (the captain died soon after their return) and, using the remaining £100 as fresh capital, sets off on a second voyage as a Guinea trader in order to make more capital. Instead he meets with disaster. The ship is captured by Moors and he becomes a slave in North Africa. He escapes slavery in a boat taken from his master, accompanied by a fellow slave Xury, a black man, to whom he promises, "Xury, if you will be faithful to me, I'll make you a great man." Together they sail a thousand miles along the coast of Africa, until they are met and rescued by a Portuguese captain.

Fortunately for Robinson, there is honor among capitalists. The captain, who is on his way to Brazil, feels it would be unfair to take
everything from Robinson and bring him to Brazil penniless. "I have saved your life on no other terms than I would be glad to be saved myself... When I carry you to Brazil, so great a way from your own country, if I should take from you what you have, you will be starved there, and then I only take away that life I have given."

Robinson of course does not tell the captain that he still has £200 in England. Instead, he sells the captain his boat (i.e., the boat he took when he escaped) and everything in it, *including Xury*. An African is an African, and only under certain conditions does he become a slave. Robinson has some pangs of guilt about selling "the poor boy's liberty who had assisted me so faithfully in procuring my own." However the captain offers to set Xury free in ten years if he turns Christian. "Upon this, and Xury saying he was willing to go to him, I let the captain have him" (for sixty pieces of eight). Commodities are things and cannot go to market by themselves. They have to be taken. If they are unwilling, they can be forced.

Robinson arrives in Brazil where he purchases "as much land that was uncured as my money would reach, and formed a plan for my plantation and settlement, and such a one as might be suitable to the stock which I proposed to myself to receive from England." He soon finds "more than before, I had done wrong in parting with my forced."

The plantations in Brazil were short of labor, and so Robinson asks Robinson to go as "supercargo in the ship" during his famous shipwreck occurs. Years later, in the depths of isolation, he had cause to regret this decision which he views in terms of his original sin of "not being satisfied with the station wherein God and nature hath placed him..."

The cargo arrives, bringing great fortune to Robinson. The Portuguese captain had used the £5 the widow had given him for a present to purchase and bring to Robinson, "a servant under bond for six years service, and would not accept of any consideration, except a little tobacco which I would have him accept, being of my own produce." Moreover, he is able to sell the English goods in Brazil "to a very great advan-

tage" and the first thing he does is to buy a Negro slave and a second indentured servant.

This series of transactions presupposes an elaborate social network of capitalist intercommunications. The mythical Robinson is pictured as a self-sufficient individual, but much of the actual story, even after he is shipwrecked, shows him as a dependent man belonging to a larger whole and always relying on help and cooperation from others. The social nature of production turns out to be the real message of his story as we shall see again and again. There is no real paradox in this. To capitalism belong both the production of the most highly developed social relations in history and the production of the solitary individual.

Robinson now integrates himself into the community as a successful planter and accumulates steadily. But he cannot be content and soon leaves "the happy view I had of being a rich and thriving man in my new plantation, only to pursue a rash and immoderate desire of rising faster than the nature of the thing admitted."

The plantations in Brazil were short of labor, for "few Negroes were brought, and those excessive dear" since the slave trade at that time was not far developed and was controlled by royal monopolies of the kings of Spain and Portugal. Robinson had told some friends about his two voyages to the Guinea Coast and the ease of purchasing there "for trifles not only gold dust but Negroes in great numbers." (N.B. that the trifles listed are beads, toys, knives, scissors, hatchets, bits of glass, and the like – all but the first two are by no means trifles, as Robinson would soon find out.) These friends approached him in secrecy with a plan for outfitting a ship to get slaves from the Guinea Coast who would then be smuggled into Brazil privately and distributed among their own plantations. They asked Robinson to go as "supercargo in the ship to manage the trading part and offered [him] an equal share of the Negroes without providing any part of the stock."

Robinson accepts, and it is on this voyage that his famous shipwreck occurs. Years later, in the depths of isolation, he had cause to regret this decision which he views in terms of his original sin of "not being satisfied with the station wherein God and nature hath placed [him]..."

What business had I to leave a settled fortune, a well-stocked plantation, improving and increasing, to turn supercargo to Guinea, to fetch Negroes, when patience and time would have so increased our stock at home that we could have bought them from those whose business it was to fetch them? And though it
had cost us something more, yet the difference of that price was by no means worth saving at so great a hazard.

In fact he comes out ahead for by the end of the story Robinson has succeeded in accumulating much faster than if he had remained content, for he adds a new fortune from his island economy to the growth of his plantation. True, he must suffer a long period of isolation, but in many ways his solitary sojourn represents the alienation suffered by all under capitalism — those who work and receive little as well as those like Robinson who accumulate and always must go on, go on.

Island economy: the pretrade situation

The key factors in Robinson Crusoe's survival and prosperity on his island in the sun are not his ingenuity and resourcefulness but the pleasant climate and the large store of embodied labor he starts out with. In thirteen trips to his wrecked ship he was able to furnish himself with many things, taking a vast array of materials and tools he never made but were still his to enjoy. These he uses to gain command over nature and over other men. Of chief importance in his initial stock of means of production is a plentiful supply of guns and ammunition, which give him decisive advantage in setting the terms of trade when his island economy is finally opened up to trade.

Table 1. Items taken by Robinson Crusoe from the shipwreck

| Defense | ammunition, arms, powder, 2 barrels musket bullets, 5-7 muskets, large bag full of small shot |
| Food   | biscuits, rum, bread, rice, cheese, goat flesh, corn, liquor, flour, cordials, sweetmeats, poultry feed, wheat and rice seed |
| Clothing | men's clothes, handkerchiefs, colored neckties, 2 pairs of shoes |
| Furniture and miscellaneous | hammock, bedding, pens, ink, paper, 3 or 4 compasses, some mathematical instruments, dials, perspectives, charts, books on navigation, 3 Bibles |
| Tools  | carpenter's chest, 203 bags full of nails & spikes, a great screwjack, 1 or 2 dozen hatchets, grindstone, 2 saws, axe, hammer, 2 or 3 iron crows, 2 or 3 razors, 1 large scissors, fire shovel and tongs, 2 brass kettles, copper pots, gridiron |
| Raw materials | rigging, sails for canvas, small ropes, ropes and wire, ironwork, timber, boards, planks, 2-3 hundredweight of iron, 1 hundredweight of sheet lead |
| Animals | dog, 2 cats |
| Things he misses badly | ink, spade, shovel, needles, pins, thread, smoking pipe |

Robinson himself is fully aware of the importance of his heritage (see Table 1). "What should I have done without a gun, without ammunition, without any tools to make anything or work with, without clothes, bedding, a tent, or any manner of coverings?" he asks. And "by making the most rational judgment of things every man may be in time master of every mechanic art. I had never handled a tool in my life, and yet in time, by labor, application, and contrivance, I wanted nothing but I could have made it, especially if I had had the tools" (emphasis added). A European is a European and it is only under certain conditions that he becomes a master. It was not their personal attributes that gave Robinson and other European adventurers their strength vis-à-vis non-Europeans but the equipment they brought with them, the power of knowledge made into objects. This material base was the result of a complicated social division of labor of which they were the beneficiaries not the creators.

His island is a rich one, again thanks in part to the activities of other people. He surveys it with little understanding since most of the plants were unfamiliar to him. He makes no independent discovery but finds certain familiar items — goats, turtles, fruits, lemons, oranges, tobacco, grapes — many of which I imagine could not have gotten there except if transplanted by previous visitors from other islands. His own discovery of agriculture is accidental. Among the things he rescued from the ship was a little bag which had once been filled with corn. Robinson seeing nothing in the bag but husks and dust, and needing it for some other purpose, shook the husks out on the ground. A month or so later, not even remembering he had thrown them there, he was "perfectly astonished" to find barley growing.

Conditioned by capitalist tradition, Crusoe tries to keep account of his activities and "while my ink lasted, I kept things very exact; but after that was gone, I could not, for I could not make any ink by any means I could devise." He draws up a cost-benefit analysis of his position, stating in it "very impartially like debtor and creditor, the comforts I enjoyed, against the miseries I suffered." He finds his day divided into three. It took him only about three hours going out with his gun, to get his food. Another portion of his day was spent in ordering, curing, preserving, and cooking. A third portion was spent on capital formation, planting barley and rice, curing raisins, building furniture and a canoe, and so forth.

This passion for accounting might seem to confirm the economist's picture of Robinson as the rational man par excellence, allocating his
time efficiently among various activities in order to maximize utility. But then comes this astonishing observation, “But my time or labor was little worth, and so it was as well employed one way as another”! Contrary to the usual models of economic theory, Robinson Crusoe, producing only for use and not for exchange, finds that there is no scarcity and that labor has no value. The driving force of capitalism, the passion for accumulation vanished when he was alone. “All I could make use of was all that was valuable... The most covetous, gripping miser in the world would have been cured of the vice of covetousness, if he had been in my case.”

Robinson’s own explanation of this phenomenon is mainly in terms of demand. Because he is alone, his wants are limited and satiated before he exhausts his available labor time:

I was removed from all the wickedness of the world here. I had neither the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye or the pride of life. I had nothing to covet; for I had all that I was now capable of enjoying. I was lord of the whole manor; or if I pleased, I might call myself king, or emperor over the whole country which I had possession of. There were no rivals. I had no competitor.

This is true as far as it goes, but it is one-sided. Robinson’s greed went away because there were no people to organize and master. Marx’s proposition was that surplus labor was the sole measure and source of capitalist wealth. Without someone else’s labor to control, the capitalist’s value system vanished; no boundless thirst for surplus labor arose from the nature of production itself; the goals of efficiency, maximization, and accumulation faded into a wider system of values.

Later, when Robinson’s island becomes populated, the passion to organize and accumulate returns. It is only when he has no labor but his own to control that labor is not scarce and he ceases to measure things in terms of labor time. As Robinson’s reference to the miser shows, it is not merely a question of the demand for consumption goods. The miser accumulates not for consumption but for accumulation, just as the purposeful man in the capitalist era, as Keynes noted, “does not love his cat, but his cat’s kittens; nor, in truth, the kittens, but only the kittens’ kittens, and so on forward forever to the end of cat-dom. For him jam is not jam unless it is a case of jam tomorrow and never jam today” (Keynes, 1963, p. 370). Money and capital are social relations representing social power over others. Regardless of what goes on in the minds of misers and capitalists when they look at their stock, it is power over people that they are accounting and accumulating, as they would soon find out if they, like Robinson, were left alone.

Robinson is partially aware of this when he meditates on the uselessness of gold on his island:

I smiled to myself at the sight of this money. “O drug!” said I aloud, “what art thou good for? Thou art not worth to me, no not the taking off of the ground, one of those knives is worth all this heap; I have no manner of use for thee; e’en remain where thou art, and go to the bottom as a creature whose life is not worth saving.” However, upon second thoughts, I took it away.

He thus negates the Mercantilist system which made a fetish out of gold, but does not fully pierce the veil of money to uncover the underlying basis of surplus labor – does not in his theories, that is; in his daily practice he is fully aware of the real basis of the economy. This shows up when he discusses the concept of Greed. In Robinson’s eyes, his original sin is the crime of wanting to rise above his station instead of following the calling chosen for him by his father. Isolation and estrangement are his punishment, and he feels that his story should teach content to those “who cannot enjoy comfortably what God has given them.” He feels guilty for violating the feudal institutions of status, patriarchy, and God. He does not consider that when he accumulates, he violates those whom he exploits – Xury, the Africans he sold into slavery, his indentured servants, and soon Friday and others. From the ideological point of view, Robinson is a transitional man looking backward and upward instead of forward and downward. This is why he learns nothing (morally speaking) from his loneliness. The miser is not in fact cured, the vice of covetousness easily returns.

Since the relationship of trade, accumulation, and exploitation is so crucial to understanding economics, we might dwell on it a little longer. The argument can be traced back to Aristotle, who felt that a self-sufficient community would not be driven by scarcity and accumulation, since natural wants were limited and could easily be satisfied with plenty of time left over for leisure. Such a community would practice the art of householding which has use value as its end. But Aristotle, an eyewitness to the growth of the market at its very first appearance, noted that there was another art of wealth getting – commercial trade – which had no limit, since its end was the accumulation of exchange value for its own sake. Aristotle was more interested in the effects of the rise of commerce than in its base and did not make the connection between exchange value and surplus labor. But it was
there for all to see. The emergence of the market in ancient Athens was a by-product of its imperial expansion, the looting of territories liberated from the Persians, the collection of tribute and taxes from other Greek states for protection, and the forced diversion of the area’s trade to Athens’ port (French, 1964; Polyani, 1957).

Keynes, though analytically imprecise, glimpsed the same point in his article on “National Self-Sufficiency” (Keynes, 1934), where he instinctively saw that some withdrawal from international trade was necessary to make the life made possible by science pleasant and worthwhile. He wanted to minimize rather than maximize economic entanglements among nations so that we can be “our own masters” and “make our favorite experiments toward the ideal social republic of the future.” He was all for a free exchange of ideas, knowledge, science, hospitality, and travel, “but let goods be home-spun whenever it is reasonably and commercially possible, and, above all let finance be primarily national.” He knew that it was not invidious consumption that was the problem, but the desire to extend oneself by penetrating foreign markets with exports and investment, which in the end comes down to an attempt to transform as much as possible of the world into oneself and one’s seed, i.e., imperialism.

To return to Robinson Crusoe. It is important to note that his isolation was accompanied not so much by loneliness as by fear. The first thing he did when he arrived on his beautiful Caribbean paradise was to build himself a fortress. It was only when he was completely “fenced and fortified” from all the world that he “slept secure in the night.” His precautions during the first eleven years when he is completely alone are astonishing. Yet during these years he is in no danger from wild animals or any living thing. His chief problem comes from birds who steal his seeds. He deals with them with dispatch, shooting a few and then “I took them up and served them like a carriage, so that I could fire all the seven guns in two minutes’ time. This wall I was thick and strong that it was indeed perfectly impassable. And no men of what kind soever I would ever imagine that there was anything impassable; and no men of what kind soever would ever imagine that there was anything beyond it.”

Three years after he sees the footprint, he comes across bones and other remains of cannibalism. (We leave aside the historical question of whether or not cannibalism was practiced by the Caribbeans. It is enough that Robinson sees the footprint, he reacts with fear and suspicion. His isolation, in short, is no more nor less than the alienation of possessive individualism, repeated a million times in capitalist society, and in our days symbolized by the private civil-defense shelter protected from neighbors by a machine gun.

Opening up of trade: forming an imperial strategy

The opening up of his economy to the outside world does not come to Robinson Crusoe in the form of abstract prices generated in anonymous markets but in the form of real people with whom he must come to terms. After fifteen years on the island, he comes upon the print of a naked man’s foot on the shore. His first reaction is fear. He was “terrified to the last degree, looking behind me at every two or three steps, mistaking every bush and tree, and fancying every stump at a distance to be a man.” He goes to his retreat. “Never frightened hare fled to cover, or fox to earth, with more terror of mind, than I.” From then on he lived “in the constant snare of the fear of man, a life of anxiety, fear and care.”

He thinks of destroying his cattle enclosure, cornfield, and dwelling, “that they might not find such a grain there and still be prompted to look further, in order to find out the persons inhabiting.” He builds a second wall of fortifications, armed with seven muskets planted like a cannon and fitted “into frames that held them like a carriage, so that I could fire all the seven guns in two minutes’ time. This wall I was many a weary month a-finishing and yet never thought myself safe till it was done.” He pierces all the ground outside his wall with stakes or sticks so that in five or six years’ time he had “a wood before my dwelling growing so monstrous thick and strong that it was indeed perfectly impassable; and no men of what kind soever would ever imagine that there was anything beyond it.”

Three years after he sees the footprint, he comes across bones and other remains of cannibalism. (We leave aside the historical question of whether or not cannibalism was practiced by the Caribbeans. It is enough that Robinson thought so. European readiness to believe other people were cannibals, regardless of fact, plays the same role in determining trade patterns as the inter-European solidarity exhibited, for ex-
ample, between the Portuguese captain and
Robinson.) He withdrew further and "kept close
within my circle for almost two years."

Gradually fear wears off, and he begins to
come out more. But he proceeds cautiously. He
does not fire his gun, for fear it would be heard,
and he is always armed with a gun, two pistols,
and a cutlass. At times he even thinks of attack,
and builds a place from which he can "destroy
some of these monsters in their cruel bloody en-
tertainment and, if possible, save the victim they
should bring hither to destroy." But then he
thinks, "These people had done me no in-
jury . . . and therefore it could not be just for
me to fall upon them." He chastises the Span-
iards for their barbarities in America "where
they destroyed millions of these people . . . a
mere butchery, a bloody and unnatural piece of
cruelty, unjustifiable either to God or man; as for
which the very name of a Spaniard is reckoned
to be frightful and terrible to all people of
humanity or of Christian compassion." He de-
cides it is "not my business to meddle with them
unless they first attacked me."

During the next few years he keeps himself
"more retired than ever," seldom going from his
cell. Fear "put an end to all invention and to all
the contrivances I had laid for my future accom-
modations." He was afraid to drive a nail, or
chop a stick of wood, or fire a gun, or light a fire
for fear it would be heard or seen. He wants
"nothing so much as a safe retreat," and finds it
in a hidden grotto. "I fancied myself now like
something so much as a safe retreat," and finds it
in a hidden grotto. "I fancied myself now like
one of the ancient giants which were said to live
in caves and holes in the rocks, where none
could come at them." Yet even in this deep iso-
lation, it is only people that he feared. With
some parrots, cats, kids, and tame seafowl as
pets, "I began to be very well contented with the
life I led, if it might but have been secured from
the dread of the savages."

In his twenty-third year he finally sights some
of the Caribbeans who periodically visit the is-
land. He first retreats to his fortifications; but,
no longer "able to bear sitting in ignorance," he
sets himself up in a safe place from which to ob-
serve "nine naked savages sitting round a small
fire." Thoughts of "contriving how to circum-
vent and fall upon them the very next time" come
once more to his mind and soon he is dream-
ing "often of killing the savages." His
loneliness intensifies when one night he hears a
shot fired from a distressed ship and next day
finds a shipwreck. Helongs for contact with
Europeans. "O that there had been one or two,
nay, or but one soul saved out of this ship, to
have escaped to me, that I might have one com-
panion, one fellow creature to have spoken to
me and to have conversed with!"

His thoughts move from defense to offense.
His moral misgivings about Spanish colonization
recede into the background, and he begins to
form an imperial strategy. The plan comes to
him in a dream in which a captured savage es-
capes, runs to him, and becomes his servant.
Awaking, "I made this conclusion, that my only
way to go about an attempt for an escape was, if
possible, to get a savage into my possession; and
if possible it should be one of the prisoners." He
has some fears about whether he can do this and
some moral qualms about whether he should;
but though "the thoughts of shedding human
blood for my deliverance were terrible to me,"
he at length resolved "to get one of those sav-
ages into my hands, cost what it would."

About a year and a half later a group of about
twenty or thirty Caribbeans come ashore. Luck
is with him. One prisoner escapes, followed by
only two men. "It came now very warmly upon
my thoughts and indeed irresistibly, that now
was my time to get me a servant, and perhaps a
companion or assistant."

Robinson knocks down one of the pursuers
and shoots a second. The rescued prisoner, cau-
tious and afraid, approaches. "He came nearer
and nearer, kneeling down every ten or twelve
steps . . . At length he came close to me, and
then he kneeled down again, kissed the ground,
and laid his head upon the ground, and taking me
by the foot, set my foot upon his head; this, it
seems, was in token of swearing to be my slave
forever." Robinson has his servant. An econ-
omy is born.

Colonization

Friday, tired from his ordeal, sleeps. Robinson
evaluates his prize. The relationship they are
about to enter into is an unequal and violent one.
("Violence," writes R. D. Laing in The Politics
of Experience, "attempts to constrain the
other's freedom, to force him to act in the way
we desire, but with ultimate lack of concern,
with indifference to the other's own existence or
destiny.") It requires an ideological superstruc-
ture to sustain it and make it tolerable. Friday is
an independent person with his own mind and
will. But Robinson's rule depends upon the ex-
tent to which his head controls Friday's hand.
To help himself in his daily struggle with Friday,
Robinson begins to think of Friday not as a
person but as a sort of pet, a mindless body that
is obedient and beautiful. ("The use made of
slaves and of tame animals is not very different;
for both with their bodies minister to the needs
of life," Aristotle, The Politics.) The following
is a verbatim quote of his description of Friday,
except for the substitution of "she" for "he," "her" for "him." This is not done to suggest homosexuality but to emphasize how rulers conceive of the ruled only as bodies to minister to their needs. (To quote Aristotle again, "the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled.")

She was a comely, handsome woman, perfectly well made, with straight strong limbs, not too large, tall and well-shaped, and, as I reckon, about twenty-six years of age. She had a very good countenance, not a fierce and surly aspect, but seemed to have something very manly in her face and yet she had all the sweetness and softness of a European in her countenance too, especially when she smiled. Her hair was long and black, not curled like wool; her forehead very high and large; and a great vivacity and sparkling sharpness in her eyes. The color of her skin was not quite black, but very tawny; and yet not of an ugly yellow, nauseous tawny, as the Brazilians and Virginians, and other natives of America are; but of a bright kind of a dun olive color that had in it something very agreeable, though not very easy to describe. Her face was round and plump; her nose small, not flat like the Negroes', a very good mouth, thin lips, and her fine teeth well set, and white as ivory.

Robinson has a gun, but he cannot rule by force alone if he wants Friday to be productive. He must socialize his servant to accept his subordinate position. Robinson is at a great advantage for he has saved the man's life, but a careful program is still necessary, going through several stages of development, before the servant internalizes the authoritarian relationship and is able to act "independently" in a "dependent" fashion. The parallels between Robinson's education of Friday, and the actual procedures of colonization used in the last two hundred years are striking.

**Step 1.** The first thing Robinson does is set the stage for giving himself and Friday names that are humiliating to Friday and symbolic of his indebtedness. "First I made him know his name should be Friday, which was the day I saved his life; I called him so for the memory of the time; I likewise taught him to say Master, and then let him know that was to be my name."

**Step 2.** Robinson further establishes relative status by covering Friday's nakedness with a pair of linen drawers (taken from the shipwreck) and a jerkin of goat's skin and a cap of hareskin he had made himself. He "was mighty well pleased to see himself almost as well clothed as his master."

**Step 3.** Robinson gives Friday a place to sleep between the two fortifications, i.e., a middle position, partly protected but outside the master's preserves. He sets up a burglar alarm so that "Friday could in no way come at me in the inside of my innermost wall without making so much noise in getting over that it must needs waken me," and takes other precautions such as taking all weapons into his side every night. Yet as Robinson says, these precautions were not really needed, "for never man had a more faithful, loving, sincere servant than Friday was to me; without passions, sullenness, or designs, perfectly obliged and engaged; his very affections were tied to me like those of a child to a father; and I dare say he would have sacrificed his life for the saving of mine upon any occasion whatsoever." The allocation of space helps remind Friday of his position and keep him subordinate.

**Step 4.** Friday is then given the skills necessary for his station and his duties, i.e., the ability to understand orders and satisfy Robinson's needs. "I... made it my business to teach him everything that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful; but especially to make him speak and understand me when I spoke."

**Step 5.** Next comes a crucial moment in which Robinson, through a cruel show of force, terrifies poor Friday into complete submission. Robinson takes Friday out and shoots a kid with his gun. (He is no longer afraid of being heard.) The poor creature, who had at a distance indeed seen me kill the savage, his enemy, but did not know or could imagine how it was done, was sensibly surprised... He did not see the kid I had shot at or perceive I had killed it, but ripped up his waistcoat to feel if he was not wounded, and as I found presently, thought I was resolved to kill him, for he came and kneeled down to me, and, embracing my knees, said a great many things I did not understand; but I could easily see the meaning was to pray me not to kill him.

In this ritual death and rebirth, Friday learns the full extent of Robinson's power over him. Robinson then kills various animals, and teaches Friday "to run and fetch them" like a dog. But he takes care that Friday never sees him load the gun, so that he remains ignorant of the fact that you have to put in ammunition.

**Step 6.** The first stage of initiation is completed, Robinson can move on to establishing the social division of labor on a more subtle base. He teaches Friday to cook and bake, and "in a little time Friday was able to do all the work for me, as well as I could do it for myself." Then Robinson marks out a piece of land "in which Friday not only worked very willingly and
very hard, but did it cheerfully.'" Robinson explains that it was for corn to make more bread since there were now two of them. Friday, by himself, discovers the laws of property and capitalist distribution of income in fully mystified form. "He appeared very sensible of that part, and let me know that he thought I had much more labor upon me on his account than I had for myself, and that he would work the harder for me, if I would tell him what to do."

Step 7: Graduation. Robinson now instructs Friday in the knowledge of the true God. This takes three years, during which Friday raises such difficult questions that Robinson for a time withdraws, realizing that one cannot win by logical argument alone, and only divine revelation can convince people of Christianity. Finally, success. "The savage was now a good Christian." The two become more intimate, Robinson tells Friday his story and at long last "let him into the mystery, for such it was to him, of gun-powder and bullet and taught him how to shoot."

Robinson gives Friday a knife and a hatchet and shows him the boat he was planning to use to escape. Partnership and expanded reproduction

For roughly ten years, between the time he first saw the print of a foot in the sand until he met Friday, Robinson Crusoe led a life of fear, anxiety, and care during which his productive activities were reduced to a minimum and he scarcely dared to venture outside the narrow confines of his strongholds. When Friday comes, he becomes expansive again, teaching, building, accumulating. Though no mention is made of accounting, one can deduce that labor again became valuable, for Robinson is once more purposeful, and interested in allocation and efficiency, as he orders, causes, gives Friday to do one thing or another, instructs him, shows him, gives him directions, makes things familiar to him, makes him understand, teaches him, lets him see, calls him, heartens him, beckons him to run and fetch, sets him to work, makes him build something, etc., etc. Through his social relation with Friday, he becomes an economic man. Friday becomes labor and he becomes capital – innovating, organizing, and building an empire.

About three years after Friday arrives, Robinson's twenty-seventh year on the island, an opportunity for enlargement comes. Twenty-one savages and three prisoners come ashore. Robinson divides the arms with Friday and they set out to attack. On the way, Robinson again has doubts as to whether it was right "to go and dip my hands in blood, to attack people who had neither done or intended me any wrong." "Friday," he observes, "might justify it, because he was a declared enemy, and in a state of war with those very particular people; and it was lawful for him to attack them," but, as he could not say the same for himself, he resolves unilaterally for both of them not to act unless "something offered that was more a call to me than yet I knew of."

The call comes when he discovers one of the victims is a white man and he becomes "enraged to the highest degree." As it turns out, the prisoner is a Spaniard; given what Robinson had previously said about Spanish colonial policy, one might have thought he would have some doubts about what was lawful. But he does not, and along with Friday, attacks – killing seventeen and routing four. (Friday does most of the killing, in part because he "took his aim so much better" than Robinson, in part because Robinson was directing and Friday doing.) The Spaniard is rescued and they find another victim in a boat who turns out to be Friday's father, his life luckily saved because his fellow captive was white.

Now they were four. Robinson has an empire which he rules firmly and justly with a certain degree of permissiveness and tolerance. My island was now peopled, and I thought myself very rich in subjects; and it was a merry reflection, which I frequently made, how like a king I looked. First of all, the whole country was my own property, so that I had an undoubted right of dominion. Second, my
people were perfectly subjected. I was absolute lord and lawgiver; they all owed their lives to me, and were ready to lay down their lives, if there had been occasion of it for me. It was remarkable, too, we had but three subjects, and they were of three different religions. My man Friday was a Protestant, his father was a pagan and a cannibal, and the Spaniard was a Papist. However I allowed liberty of conscience throughout my dominions.

The period of primitive accumulation is over. Robinson now has property. It is not based on his previous labor, but on his fortunate possession of arms. Though his capital comes into the world dripping blood from every pore, his ownership is undisputed. Friday was not a lazy rascal spending his subsistence and more in riotous living, yet in the end he still has nothing but himself, while the wealth of Robinson Crusoe increases constantly although he has long ceased to work.

With time, more people arrive on his island. Robinson shrewdly uses his monopoly of the means of production to make them submit to his rule. As the empire grows, its problems become more complex. But Robinson is ever resourceful in using terror, religion, frontier law, and the principle of delegated authority to consolidate his position and produce a self-reproducing order.

Robinson learns that there are fourteen more Spaniards and Portuguese staying with the Caribbeans, "who lived there at peace indeed with the savages." They had arms but no powder and no hope of escape, for they had "neither vessel, or tools to build one, or provisions of any kind." Robinson of course has the missing ingredients for their rescue, but how can he be sure he will be paid back? "I feared mostly their treachery and ill usage of me, if I put my life in their hands, for that gratitude was no inherent virtue in the nature of man; nor did men always square their dealings by the obligations they had received so much as they did by the advantages they expected."

Robinson cannot depend on the law to guard his property. Instead he uses religion. Europeans do not require so elaborate a socialization procedure as Friday because they have come by education, tradition, and habit to look upon private property as a self-evident law of nature. The Spaniard and Friday's father are to go to where the other Europeans are staying. They would then sign a contract, "that they should be absolutely under my leading, as their commander and captain; and that they should swear upon the Holy Sacraments and the Gospel to be true to me and to go to such Christian country as that I should agree to, and no other; and to be directed wholly and absolutely by my orders."

Robinson converts their debt to him into an obligation towards God. Thus men are ruled by the products of their mind.

The trip is postponed for a year, while Robinson's capital stock is expanded so that there will be enough food for the new recruits. The work process is now more complicated because of the increase in numbers. A vertical structure separating operations, coordination, and strategy is established on the basis of nationality—a sort of multinational corporation in miniature. "I marked out several trees which I thought fit for our work, and I set Friday and his father to cutting them down; and then I caused the Spaniard, to whom I had imparted my thought on that affair, to oversee and direct their work."

When the harvest is in, the Spaniard and Friday's father are sent out to negotiate. While they are away, an English ship arrives at the island. Robinson is filled with indescribable joy at seeing a ship "manned by [his] own countrymen, and consequently friends." Yet at the same time, "some secret doubts hung about [him]," for perhaps they were thieves and murderers. This we have seen is a typical reaction of Robinson Crusoe to other people; it is a prudent attribute in a society of possessive individuals where all are the enemy of each. Caveat emptor.

Some of the crew come ashore with three prisoners. When the prisoners are left unguarded, Robinson approaches them: "I am a man, an Englishman, and disposed to assist you, you see; I have one servant only; we have arms and ammunition; tell us freely, can we serve you?" The three prisoners turn out to be the captain of the ship, his mate, and one passenger. The others are mutineers, of whom the captain says, "There were two desperate villains among them that it was scarce safe to show any mercy to; but if they were secured, he believed "all the rest would return to their duty."

The charges being laid, a quick decision and verdict is reached. Robinson sides with authority. The captain offers a generous contract to Robinson: "Both he and the ship, if recovered, should be wholly directed and commanded by me in everything; and if the ship was not recovered, he would live and die with me in what part of the world soever I would send him; and the other two men the same." Robinson asks for much less: recognition of his undisputed authority while they are on the island, free passage to England for himself and Friday if the ship is recovered.

The men who brought the captain ashore are attacked. The two villains are summarily executed in the first round, the rest are made prisoners or allowed to join the captain and Rob-
inson. More men are sent to shore from the ship, and are soon captured. One is made prisoner, the others are told Robinson is governor of the island and that he would engage for their pardon if they helped capture the ship. The ship is seized with only one life lost, that of the new captain. Robinson, still posing as governor, interviews the five prisoners and hearing the "full account of their villainous behavior to the captain, and how they had run away with the ship and were preparing to commit further robberies," offers them the choice of being left on the island or being taken to England in chains to be hanged. They choose the island and Robinson is so much the richer. Laws make criminals and criminals make settlers. In a repeat of his lesson to the birds, Robinson orders the captain "to cause the new captain who was killed to be hanged at the yardarm, that these men might see him."

On the 19th of December, 1686, twenty-eight years and two months after his arrival, Robinson goes on board the ship, taking with him his great goatskin cap, his umbrella, one of his parrots, and the money he had taken off the ship. He also takes Friday but does not wait for the return of Friday's father and the Spaniards. Instead he leaves a letter for them with the prisoners being left behind, after making them "promise to treat of Friday's father and the Spaniards. Instead he leaves a letter for them with the prisoners being left behind, after making them "promise to treat them in common with themselves."

He returns to civilization and discovers capital's power for self-sustaining growth. His trustees had given in the account of the produce of my part of the plantation to the procurator fiscal, who had appropriated it, in case I never came to claim it, one third to the king, and two thirds to the monastery of St. Augustine, to be expended for the benefit of the poor and for the conversion of Indians to the Catholic faith; but for that if I appeared, or anyone for me, to claim the inheritance, it should be restored: only that the improvements, or annual production, being distributed to charitable uses, could not be restored.

He was thus a rich man, "master all on a sudden of about £5,000 sterling in money, and had an estate, as I might well call it, in Brazil, of about a thousand pounds a year, as sure as an estate of lands in England."

He also had his island to which he returns in 1694. He learns how the Spaniards had trouble with the villains when they first returned but eventually subjected them, of their battles with the Caribbeans, of the improvement they made upon the island itself and of how five of them made an attempt upon the mainland, and brought away eleven men and five women prisoners, by which, at my coming, I found about twenty young children on the island." Robinson brings them supplies, a carpenter, and a smith and later sent seven women "such as I found proper for service or for wives to such as would take them."

Before he leaves the island, he reorganizes it on a sound basis. Dividing it into parts, he reserves to himself the property of the whole, and gives others such parts respectively as they agreed upon. As to the Englishmen, he promised to send them some women from England, "and the fellows proved very honest and diligent after they were mastered and had their properties set apart for them." With property and the family firmly established, the ground is clear for steady growth.

Moral

We may stop at this point and consider the very high rate of return earned by Robinson on his original capital of 40. It cannot be said that he worked very hard for his money, but he was certainly a great organizer and entrepreneur, showing extraordinary capacity to take advantage of situations and manage other people. He suffered the pains of solitude and the vices of greed, distrust, and ruthlessness, but he ended up with "wealth all around me" and Friday -- "ever proving a most faithful servant upon all occasions."

The allegory of Robinson Crusoe gives us better economic history and better economic theory than many of the tales told by modern economics about the national and international division of labor. Economics tends to stay in the market place and worry about prices. It has more to say about how Robinson's sugar relates to his clothing than how he relates to Friday. To understand how capital produces and is produced, we must leave the noisy sphere of the market where everything takes place on the surface and enter into the hidden recesses of the factory and corporation, where there is usually no admittance except on business.

Defoe's capitalist is transported to a desert island outside the market system, and his relations to other people are direct and visible. Their secret of capital is revealed, namely, that it is based on other people's labor and is obtained through force and illusion. The birth certificate of Robinson's capital is not as bloody as that of many other fortunes, but its coercive nature is clear.

The international economy of Robinson's time, like that of today, is not composed of equal partners but is ordered along class lines. Robinson occupies one of the upper-middle levels
of the pyramid. (The highest levels are in the capitals of Europe.) Captains, merchants, and planters are his peer group. With them he exchanges on the basis of fraternal collaboration. (Arab captains excepted.) They teach him, rescue him, do business for him, and keep him from falling beneath his class. He in turn generally regards them as honest and plain-dealing men, sides with them against their rebellious subordinates, and is easy with them in his bargaining. Towards whites of lower rank he is more demanding. If they disobey, he is severe; but if they are loyal, he is willing to share some booty and delegate some authority. Africans and Caribbeans are sold, killed, trained, or used as wives by his men, as the case may be. About the white indentured servants, artisans, etc., little is said by Defoe in this story.

The contradictions between Robinson and other members of the hierarchy give the story its dynamics. He is forever wrestling with the problem of subordinating lower levels and trying to rise above his own. The fact that he does not see it this way but prefers to make up stories about himself makes no difference. He denies the conflict between himself and Friday by accepting Friday's mask of willing obedience. And he conceives of his greed as a crime against God instead of against man. But his daily life shows that his social relations are antagonistic and that he knows it.

In the last analysis, however, the story is only partly dialectical. We hear only of how Robinson perceives the contradictions and how he resolves them. In this work of fiction he is always able to fuse two into one. In actual life one divides into two, and the system develops beyond the capitalist's fantasy of proper law and order. Economic science also needs the story of Friday's grandchildren.

References