Robinson Crusoe: Castaway or Economic man?

A Marxist reading of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*

According to Investopedia, Homo economicus, or economic human, “is the figurative human being characterized by the infinite ability to make rational decisions,” and it has often been considered that *The Life and Adventures of* *Robinson Crusoe* is a novel which illustrates the principals of economic man. One cannot take on this argument without first considering the influences that the author, Daniel Defoe, was exposed to in his lifetime. The works of philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke would have been well known by Defoe, and ideas such as popular sovereignty, the social contract method, and the state of nature would definitely have been on his mind while writing his novel. It can be said that fear is a rational reaction to the unknown, and so the unwillingness to let go of one’s familiar activities can be very understandable. Later on, Philosopher Adam Smith would also be familiar with these concepts, and influenced by Hobbes, Locke, and the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Smith is considered the father of economics as a science, and “as a member of the school of classical economic thought, Smith fused economics with moral theory regarding the way man ought to live (Twigg).” This idea is the theory of utilitarianism, “the moral action is the one that maximizes utility. Utility is defined in various ways, including as pleasure, economic well-being and the lack of suffering (Britannica).” Defoe’s protagonist Robinson Crusoe is a prime example of the ideological influence of this theory, and this can be viewed through his maximization of useful material on his island, and refusal to become idle. His unwillingness to let go of his familiar social activities is caused by his fear of being out of the social sphere.

Crusoe is afraid of reverting to the state of nature; idleness is at the root of this fear, and, therefore, he makes what he believes are rational decisions during his time on the island. Crusoe maximizes not only the utility of material goods but his own capabilities as well. Crusoe is not satisfied with basic comforts, he only thinks of his own benefit, and he uses religious ideology as a shield against his own selfish nature. He is in every sense economic man, and his inability to let go of society and capitalist culture while stranded on an island for twenty-five years is irrefutable evidence of such. Consequently, I will argue that Defoe’s novel does, in fact, illustrate the principals of the economic man, and analyze the text alongside Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations.*

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau were the most significant philosophers of the social contract school, and their shared idea was “that the nature of society, whatever its origins, was a contractual arrangement between its members (Knutsen).” With this, the idea of Popular Sovereignty comes into play. Since Crusoe is the only inhabitant of the island for the greater part of his exile, he becomes the sovereign or believes he is the true owner of the island. “The reason men entered society was to protect themselves against the dangers of the "state of nature" (Knutsen).” Crusoe is cast away from society so suddenly that he fears the idleness that comes with the state of nature, but he also uses this opportunity to colonize the island because that is the most ‘rational’ decision a castaway economic man can make. “Surveying it was a secret kind of pleasure… to think it was all my own, that I was king and lord of all this country indefeasibly, and had the right of possession (Defoe 73).” Crusoe claims the rights to this land and takes into account everything he ‘owns’ such as the trees and animals. As economic man, it is only rational that Crusoe takes control of land for the benefit it provides the economy and individual desires of wealth and comfort.

Without society, Crusoe creates his own in order to avoid the state of nature, and everything he does is seen as rational. He becomes everything he needs in order to survive, and indulges in keeping an account of his productivity and time on the island. Everything he does is not without a purpose, he refuses to be slothful, and in doing so creates his own economy of one. Crusoe’s ability to learn different trades to suit his needs over time fits with Adam Smith’s idea that yes, we are our labor, but nevertheless, we are not born to that particular form of labor. “The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education (Smith II).”

Even though it seems like Crusoe takes on the role of economic man in order to survive on the island, it is actually his natural state. He is economic man even before he becomes a castaway. His restlessness and selfish desires are what lead him to be trapped on the island to begin with; he is unsatisfied with stability and the middle station of life he was born into:

“the middle station of life was calculated for all kind of virtues and all kind of enjoyments; that peace and plenty were the handmaids of a middle fortune; that temperance, moderation, quietness, health, society, all agreeable diversions, and all desirable pleasures, were the blessings attending the middle station of life; that this way men went silently and smoothly thro’ the world, and comfortably out of it (Defoe 5).”

Crusoe had no desire to go smoothly through life, and definitely not with the help of his father. Self-interest, Smith said, is what leads to the division of labor and encourages individuals to focus on and become experts in certain types of labor. If owning a plantation is considered labor, then Crusoe’s self-interest was certainly to be in power over others, and to gain access to what he believed to be a better station in life.

Even with his growing plantation, Crusoe remained restless and selfish, and so he sets out to obtain slaves. He is economic man, and economic man is a colonizer when the economic opportunity can be found through the exploitations of others. People are simple commodities to Crusoe, and they are only useful so long as they provide him an economic advantage. Characters such as Xury and Friday are prime examples of Crusoe’s commodification of others. “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 (cuny.edu).” Marxists define capital as “a social, economic relation” between people (boundless), and Crusoe cannot let go of his desire for capital because his fear is to lose his relation to people and to become idle. He also uses religion to justify his selfish behavior, and it can be viewed as another ‘rational’ decision because he uses it for his own gain.

“Religion, which Karl Marx called “the opiate of the masses,” is an ideology that helps to keep the faithful poor satisfied with their lot in life (Tyson 57).” Obviously, Crusoe is not faithful enough to be satisfied with the middle station of life that he was born into. In Rousseau’s Social Contract, he states that “The most ancient of all societies, and the only one that is natural, is the family: and even so the children remain attached to the father only so long as they need him for their preservation (Rousseau).” Robinson Crusoe is not satisfied with comfort and does not wish to live life smoothly under the care of his father’s comfortable wealth until he dies. He remains attached to his father until the age of eighteen until he finally decides to run off to sea, and does not regret his decisions until he looks back on where he could have been in life during his time on the island:

“I have been in all my Circumstances a Memento to those who are touch'd with the general Plague of Mankind, whence, for ought I know, one half of their Miseries flow; I mean, that of not being satisfy'd with the Station wherein God and Nature has plac'd them; for not to look back upon my primitive Condition, and the excellent Advice of my Father, the Opposition to which, was, as I may call it, my ORIGINAL SIN; (Defoe 141)”

Here we can see how Crusoe conveniently uses religious ideology like sinning to justify his capitalist, colonialist nature. One can be absolved of sin, and so by involving ‘God’ and ‘forgiveness’ Crusoe can justify his own self-interests and continue down the same path so long as he says sorry every so often.

On the island, Crusoe has no use for money, and yet he collects the gold and silver that he finds upon the two shipwrecks that are key to his survival. “I smil'd to myself at the sight of this money, O drug! said I aloud, what art thou good for? Thou art not worth to me… 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 (Defoe 43).” He knows that money will do nothing for his survival on the island and yet he cannot just leave it behind. This is another way of saying he cannot leave society and capitalist culture behind. In Rousseau’s Social Contract, he states that “MAN is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they (Rousseau),” and I believe this quote wholly encompasses Robinson Crusoe. Smith believes that all men are the same until they are known by their labor; the division of labor is what causes the differences in class and economic status, and since one cannot escape capitalist culture they are slaves to it. Crusoe thinks himself to be the master of others, the king of the island, the sovereign, and yet he ‘remains a greater slave than they.’ Robinson Crusoe is economic man, and cannot escape this role or the idea that he must always make rational decisions in order to benefit himself and the economic world. In conclusion, I do believe that Defoe’s novel illustrates the principals of an economic man because Robinson Crusoe is a capitalist, a colonizer, and a slave to the economic realm of society. His ability to make ‘rational’ decisions indicates his role as an economic man, and his ability to learn different trades of labor in order to survive helps to illustrate some of the principles present in Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations.*

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