
Donald McCloskey observes in his groundbreaking Rhetoric of Economics that “[e]conomists are unselfconscious about their rhetoric. Most of it is dead in the way that a polite cliché is dead to writers without self-conscious skill. Economists use a have-a-nice-day rhetoric that does not know itself or care” (72). McCloskey’s challenge for economists to rigorously interrogate their own language is taken up by Ulla Grapard and Gillian Hewitson’s insightful and timely collection of essays, Robinson Crusoe’s Economic Man: A Construction and Deconstruction, that seeks to raise awareness about the potency and perils of the deployment of “Robinson Crusoe”—the text, the character, and the trope—in economic discourse. Aiming to consolidate extant remarks on “Robinson Crusoe” and to add to them new ideas about its role in economic theory and practice, Grapard and Hewitson’s volume surely contributes to McCloskey’s goal: the production of a “rhetorical criticism” of economic discourse, which, “like a course of psychoanalysis, might make economists more self-aware, modest, and tolerant, better in person and profession” (McCloskey 175).

The title of this collection describes the volume’s “deconstruction” of the “economic man” often read as central to Defoe’s narrative of a man stranded on an island. Each of the volume’s three parts approaches “Robinson Crusoe” from a different perspective: economic history, feminist theory, and postcolonial critique. In spite of their invocation of theorists and theories more typically associated with literary and cultural studies of Defoe, seven of the twelve contributors to this project come out of economics or political economy departments. One contributor “worked in the South African trade union movement” (xvii); two additional contributors work extensively in economics and economic history. While reflections, therefore, on such things as Pareto optimality, the Lausanne School, and contemporary textile and electronics industries might be cause for concern for some Defoe enthusiasts, the
volume manifests the successes of an interdisciplinary spirit that is often accused of delusional optimism about the ability of critical methods to cross disciplinary boundaries. A number of selections—it need be noted—were not composed for this volume specifically, the earliest of which, Stephen Hymer’s “Robinson Crusoe and the Secret of Primitive Accumulation,” was first published in 1971. The inclusion of Hymer’s essay, which has the salutary effect of reminding us that Defoe’s “novel” has been read in an imperialist context for over forty years, provides a crucial early critique of economists’ misunderstanding of the basic contours of Robinson Crusoe’s economies. Far from exemplifying the free exchange of labor, Defoe reveals that the “secret of capital is … that it is based on other people’s labor and is obtained through force and illusion” (60). Although Hymer’s essay is not the first in the volume, its historical precedence and the frequent presence of its ideas in other essays in the collection demonstrate its influence on the volume’s contributors. Hymer seeks to recapture the nature of the Crusoe economy prior to its appropriation by neoclassical economics. Whether or not Crusoe in its moment could have been written or read as an allegory of the violence underwriting primitive accumulation, Hymer sees in Crusoe’s expropriations something quite unlike Joseph Schumpeter’s vision of an accumulation that always entails a return for the dispossessed.

By 1982, overtly political (Marxist) positioning was not necessary to gain purchase on the contingency of the Crusoe metaphor. It was in that year that Michael V. White composed “Reading and Rewriting: The Production of an Economic Robinson Crusoe” for the Southern Review, now this collection’s opening essay. White’s essay, along with William S. Kern’s “Robinson Crusoe and the Economists,” provide exceptionally clear micro-histories of economists’ use of “Robinson Crusoe.” White shows that it was the nineteenth-century rewritings that “produced” the sense that Crusoe was “economic” in the way we understand him today: “the calculating Crusoe was produced at approximately the same time—the mid 1850s—as the ‘economic agent in time and space’ appeared in texts by [Richard Jennings and Herman Gossen]” (25).

Kern systematically surveys the differential deployment of Crusoe, from Frédéric Bastiat and Henry Carey through myriad economic schools, identifying a recurrence that is triggered by and generative of a microeconomic turn within the discipline that rendered necessary the production of an isolated individual desirous of maximizing utility. Because classical economists—Adam Smith, for example—had little interest in contemplating the needs and choices of individuals abstracted from a system of social relations, Crusoe was not, for them, “economic” in a disciplinarily meaningful way. Paraphrasing the rise in interest in Crusoe in the nineteenth century, Kern writes: “the shift in focus to the problems of microallocation characteristic of neoclassicism opened up significant opportunities to employ Crusoe. Because microeconomics focuses on the analysis of decisions made by individual consumers,
workers, employers and business firms with given preferences and resources, Crusoe’s setting becomes an ideal context in which to analyze these decisions” (65).

The final contribution to Part I of the collection is Antonio Callari’s ingenious Foucauldian reading of Crusoe’s modernity by way of an assessment of the economic deployments surveyed by White and Kern. Callari argues that if the Crusoe figure exemplified any particular economic ideology, he would cease to function as a producer of subjectivity; Callari thus focuses on Crusoe’s ability to serve competing economic ideologies. While a strict categorization would freeze Crusoe, the endless re-use of him as text, character, and trope echoes, Callari theorizes, the novel’s own insistence on Crusoe’s continual acts of self-making.

If Part I of the collection highlights different uses of “Robinson Crusoe,” Parts II and III expose the dangers inherent in such uses. Grapard’s and Hewitson’s contributions to the volume focus on the tendency of economists to decontextualize Crusoe in the service of promulgating an economic individual that is resolutely masculine in nature. As Grapard states: “one may well ask what the story of a single, white, colonial … male … can possibly tell us about modern economies” (97). Defoe’s novel, like neoclassical economic discourse, is seemingly bereft of sexual politics, and yet as Grapard observes, the novel, like the economic reality of the world, is haunted by power imbalances that are often grounded in gender inequities.

Hewitson observes in her essay that neoclassical economics would like to be able to substitute unproblematically a female “Robyn Crusoe” for Robinson Crusoe, but ostensibly gender-blind neoclassical work, like Defoe’s own text, cannot fully accommodate the feminine while it remains reliant on the terms of selfish individualism. Specifically, the “rational economic man” is posited against “irrational” female flesh (126): “[t]he female body is the source of all that neoclassical economics cannot deal with and has defined as irrational,” particularly attitudes and values associated with reproduction and “the mother” (127). Hewitson and Grapard extend these lines of analysis in a jointly authored additional shorter essay on The Swiss Family Robinson (1812) and Lost in Space (1998), a contemporary re-telling of the nineteenth-century re-telling of the Crusoe tale. These newer versions of the Crusoe myth illustrate that even when the narratives are supplemented by the complicating presence of females and families, they nevertheless produce the masculine subject of neoclassical economics, in which the virtues of rationality and self-sufficiency—the virtues of homo economicus—are privileged.

Brian Cooper’s contribution to the volume identifies the Robinsonades of Harriet Martineau and Jane Haldiman Marcet—Life in the Wilds (1832) and “The Three Giants” (1833), respectively—as responsible for Crusoe’s domestication. While Crusoe was already safe for children by the time of Rousseau, these texts, according to Cooper’s formulation, “make Crusoe safe for economics and economics safe for children” (134). Because the Robinsonades integrate the traveler into a “web of family, class and racial relations,” they can more directly and usefully confront “Malthusian
anxiety” about population growth, presenting the world as equipped for the reception of Britons who will, imminently, have to leave the restrictive economy of Great Britain (135).

Christine Owen’s essay on Defoe speaks to the concerns of scholars working in the wake of J. G. A. Pocock. She observes, “Defoe is able to produce a Crusoe as a trading figure who is neither purely masculine and rational, nor feminized by trade, but who demonstrates a hybridity that is no longer problematic and false, but is authoritative” (164). Whether Defoe would have so readily associated trade with the kinds of effeminacy that he and Pocock more tightly connect with the consumption of luxury goods and the volatility of paper credit is debatable, but in raising the provocative notion of gender ambivalence in Defoe, Owen’s work encourages us to continue to refine our thinking about the relation of gender and commerce in Defoe’s work, a set of negotiations that Stephen Gregg’s recent Defoe’s Writings and Manliness (2009) has brought to center stage. Owen further explores nuances of Defoe’s gendering of trade in her book, The Female Crusoe: Hybridity, Trade and the Eighteenth-Century Individual (2010), which is also reviewed in this issue of Digital Defoe.

In the first essay in Part III of Robinson Crusoe’s Economic Man, Melanie Samson reveals four assumptions economists make when invoking Crusoe:

1. The economic subject is representative and autonomous.
2. The economic subject has freedom of choice.
3. There are no barriers to changing vocations.
4. Individuals in domestic markets model nations in international markets.

In response to these assumptions, Samson points out,

1. Crusoe is particular and has unique biases and aids that reveal his connections and dependency.
2. Race and gender biases heavily shape economic choices all over the world.
3. Changing jobs is far more complex than the Crusoe metaphor implies.
4. Nations are internally fragmented by inequities in labor markets.

If her essay does more to highlight the inability of neoclassical economics to account for the realities of the international labor market than to reveal new layers of meaning in Robinson Crusoe, Samson’s easy rhetorical movement from one subject to the other illustrates the extent to which “Robinson Crusoe” has been incorporated and naturalized.

Anna Neill offers an insightful and fresh perspective on the economics of the eighteenth century in her contribution to the collection, arguing that Defoe’s Crusoe stories are characterized by an undecidability regarding the role of government in the
expansion of global commerce. Too often marked by an anachronistic understanding of the ‘freedom’ of markets in the early modern period—a conception that fails to pay heed to the nuances of mercantilism and the view that trade and nation were bound together in countless ways—scholarship on eighteenth-century economics needs more of what Neill has to offer here. While the transportation of criminals by the state is useful in expanding trade, native and colonialist violence in distant lands, Samson reminds us, always spoils the efficacy of government. Trade steps in to produce a modicum of civility, but because the colony is so distant, it too fails to produce order. In the end, for Neill, Defoe appears less optimistic about global trade than is sometimes supposed.

In the title of the penultimate essay of the volume, Eiman Zein-Elabdin poses an interesting question: “How Does an African Student of Economics make Sense of Robinson Crusoe?” Arguing that someone who embraces an ethics of “social obligation, sharing and personal commitment instead of individual accumulation” (215) would find the neoclassical Crusoe illegible, Zein-Elabdin proceeds to show that whether we consider Crusoe in terms of human nature, European culture, or as an economic subject, he would not strike the African student as a convincing model for formulating an economic community. Pointing to Crusoe’s relations of dependency and obligation, Zein-Elabdin shows that the message of Defoe’s novel is not nearly as supportive of the neoclassical paradigm as has been assumed.

The final contribution to Robinson Crusoe’s Economic Man provides a reading of J. M. Coetzee’s Foe (1986). Nicole Bracker argues that, while literature can be read in terms of economies and exchanges, citing Marc Shell, Coetzee’s novel is structured not by the logic of scarcity undergirding traditional economic doctrines, but by the logic of waste and expenditure as elaborated by Georges Bataille. The novel offers an “intertextual web,” an “extravagance and superfluity” that “defies … restricted economy” (239). The final part of Foe, Bracker speculates, resists full meaning while never lapsing into meaninglessness, allowing the voice of the other to come through without it ever being fully integrated into a system of ethical or political utility—it is a “critique of oppression,” but resists “idealizing an alternative” (244–45).

The overarching strength of Grapard and Hewitson’s volume is an ideational and ideological capaciousness — some might call it indirection — that recognizes the dangers of homogenizing and monolithic economics. True to the underlying claim of virtually every contribution, that the economic subject cannot be disembedded from the world, the collection refuses to believe that scholarly inquiry can or should be conceptualized as autonomous, divorced from other disciplines or from a wider world that is now bearing witness to the folly of its belief in the notion that we are all on our own private islands.

Dwight Codr
University of Connecticut, Storrs
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