



Which economic agent does Robinson Crusoe represent?

Claire Pignol

► To cite this version:

Claire Pignol. Which economic agent does Robinson Crusoe represent?. inla Akdere and Christine Baron (eds). Economics and Literature A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach, 1, Routledge, pp.79-95, 2017, 978-1-315-23161-7. 10.4324/9781315231617 . hal-03823271

HAL Id: hal-03823271

<https://paris1.hal.science/hal-03823271>

Submitted on 6 Dec 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Which economic agent does Robinson Crusoe represent?

In *Economics and Literature. A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach*, Çınla Akdere, Christine Baron (eds.), Routledge, 2018: 79-95.

Claire Pignol¹

Université Paris I – PHARE

Abstract

The paper questions the posterity of Defoe's character in economics and literature. After an overview of its use in economic theories and in literary criticism and history, it emphasizes the reasons why Crusoe may represent an economic agent, for his disposition to calculate and work in order to satisfy his needs. But it shows that Crusoe behaves in a much more ambivalent manner than the universal and atemporal agent portrayed by marginalist economic theory since the end of the 19th century. We emphasize especially that work is not for Robinson understood first as a means for acquiring goods, but as the best mean to escape his loneliness.

Introduction

To cite Jean-Paul Engélbert, Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* is a "literary myth of modernity". The instant success of the novel, Rousseau's praise in *Emile*, homages from Stevenson or Conrad, the many and various rewritings – collective desert island adventures (or 'robinsonades') from the 17th century onwards, inverted robinsonades from the 19th century – make Crusoe a character that both builds on and reflects modern man's representation of himself.

Economists have appropriated this myth to denounce it, or otherwise to see in it a confirmation of their approaches. Crusoe is without a doubt one of the rare literary characters to have impregnated, even superficially, political economy: the *New Palgrave*, the reference dictionary for economists, has an entry for "Robinson Crusoe" where the novel is introduced and discussed. It is certainly the only novel that, in economics, enjoys such a reputation.

¹ I thank Bruna Ingrao, Fritz Söllner and the editors for their helpful comments on a previous version.

There appears to be a certain ambiguity in the way that economists use the novel, one that reflects and reinforces the character's own ambiguity. In the novel, as in the commentaries written on it, in economics as much as in literature, for an economist it is striking to remark that several types of economic agents are mixed together in the same character – not only different, but even contradictory. We will discuss here the patterns and issues that this jumble of characters presents, based on the hypothesis that such a mixture is perhaps what best expresses the fact that we ourselves are a contradiction of economic agents.

After an overview of the way the novel has been interpreted and used in economics and in literature, we will see how the desert island experience transforms Crusoe. From an agent subject to a desire for unlimited riches, he becomes a *homo œconomicus* (in the sense used by economic theory since the 19th century), seeking to increase his well-being through work. It also becomes clear, however, that Crusoe paradoxically heralds an anti-*homo œconomicus*, characterised by going beyond the limits of an economy given over solely to subsistence.

Overview: the ambiguity of a myth

There appears to be as much ambiguity in the way economists have used the Crusoe character as there is in literary interpretations.

Robinson's posterity in economics: robinsonades or Robinson?

Firstly, in economics, the Crusoe character must be distinguished from the robinsonades invented by classical economists from the end of the 18th to the beginning of the 19th century. Little interested in Defoe's character, they portrayed lone agents – similar, though only in that sense, to Crusoe – who meet each other by chance. These robinsonades demonstrate the theory of value: their purpose is to establish conditions of exchange, without taking account of historical circumstances. As Karagöz underlines, neither a model of isolated agent nor the name of Robinson Crusoe can be found in the major work of the classical school (Karagöz 2014: 78).

As we know, Marx condemned these castaway adventures² and insisted on the essential difference between Crusoe's work, of immediate social value, and the private work of a merchant agent, whose social nature is perhaps problematic. He thus began a tradition critical of naturalism in political economy; a tradition where calling a theory a robinsonade was equivalent to discrediting it. This is firstly because Crusoe's adventure is the story of an isolated individual portrayed as a 'natural' man, while all economic realities are actually historical. Secondly, essential questions about economics are less about an individual and their actions, than about the coordination of their behaviour through collective acts. Thus, reducing economic questions to those posed by Crusoe is equivalent to refusing to correctly state economic questions³.

While Marx treats this enthusiasm for robinsonades in classical political economy with some irony, early neoclassical authors from the end of the 19th century, on the contrary, discovered the Crusoe character as an example of the psychological verity of their approach. Not all marginalist authors used Robinson Crusoe. As it is detailed in White (1982), Karagöz (2014) and Soellner (2016), those who did followed several goals. Jevons (1871) and Wicksteed (1888) invoked Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to explain the principle of diminishing marginal utility; Menger (1871), to illustrate the idea that the relative value of corn and water depends on the available quantity. Wicksell (1893) or Knight (1960) went beyond these ideas and use Robinson's story to illustrate utility maximization. Wicksell refers to Robinson's utility maximization by assuming a given amount of labor time that Robinson has to divide between digging roots and gathering rushes but Wicksell or Brown explain the an the trade-off between leisure and goods (Soellner 2016: 41). Böhm-Bawerk (1889), Clark (1899), Jevons (1871) and Fisher (1930) imagine a Robinson who optimizes inter-temporally and thus save and invest according to his rate of time preference and the rates of return of possible investments (Soellner 2016: 41-43).

² "The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, belongs among the unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century Robinsonades, which in no way express merely a reaction against over-sophistication and a return to a misunderstood natural life, as cultural historians imagine" (Marx 1957).

³ Since Robinson Crusoe's experiences are a favourite theme with political economists, let us take a look at him on his island (...). All the relations between Robinson and the objects that form this wealth of his own creation, are here so simple and clear as to be intelligible without exertion (...). Let us now transport ourselves from Robinson's island bathed in light to the European middle ages shrouded in darkness. Here, instead of the independent man, we find everyone dependent (...). Let us now picture to ourselves (...) a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common (...) . *All the characteristics of Robinson's labour are here repeated, but with this difference, that they are social, instead of individual*" (Marx 1967, our italics).

Edgeworth (1881) uses the arrival of Friday on the island to illustrate bilateral exchange (see White 1982: 118).

For those economists, Robinson Crusoe is used to embody the immutable individual element that expresses the human nature at the root of any economy. White (2008) emphasizes it: “The role of a Crusoe economy [for late 19th century authors] was not simply to illustrate various components of supply and demand theory. It was also utilized to support the claim that the principles of rational behaviour, and above the laws of economics as defined by that theory, *could be applied to any type of economy – from the isolated individual to ‘modern civilization’*. It appears obviously in Clark’s following citation: ‘The general laws of the wealth-creating and the consuming process are the same in all economies; (...) It is not because the life of a Crusoe is of much importance that it has been introduced in economic discussion. It is because the principles by which the economy of an isolated man are directed still guide the economy of a modern state” (Clark 1899: 52)’”.

Similarly, Marshall explained in the fifth edition of the *Principles*, that the decisions of investments are “the same (...) in all phases of civilization, and not peculiar to its modern, or so called ‘capitalist’ phase. Our illustration will be equally applicable to Robinson Crusoe as to an enterprising builder of today” (Marshall date II, 368⁴). Later, in the Walrasian tradition, Robinson is met to express the case of an immediate combination of consumption and production decisions, without the help of prices (Koopmans 1957: 17). In modern textbooks in microeconomics, Robinson has left his mark on even the most recent and elaborate of economic theories (Varian 1992: 349–51; Varian 2010: 609–30; Mas-Colell *et al* 1995: 526).

Robinson’s posterity in literature: an “economic interpretation” from a literary viewpoint

If the Crusoe character and the concept of the economy that he represents for economists is ambiguous, traditional literary interpretations of the novel are traditionally no less so. Two interpretations prevail: the first, economic and realist; the second, allegorical and religious (Engélibert 1997; White 1982). According to the religious

⁴ Cited by White 1982: 118.

interpretation, based on a symbolic reading of the text, Crusoe's adventure is an allegory based on puritanical tradition. The story of a conversion, and the stay on the island, can be read as the spiritual trial of a hero in search of salvation.

We will concentrate in particular on the economic interpretation, portrayed especially by Ian Watt. Literary critic and historian of the 20th century, Watt has worked on the rise of the novel in the 18th century. According to him, Robinson Crusoe, like Faust, Don Juan or Don Quixote, reveals the problems of individualism in the modern period, and Defoe's character is especially emblematic of the "characteristic aspirations of Western man" (Watt 1951: 95). The Crusoe character then embodies the modern *homo œconomicus* in search of economic and social success, and his insular seclusion is a metaphor for the isolation of man at the start of the Enlightenment. From a more contextual perspective, this interpretation sees Defoe's novel as expressing the development of the middle classes after the 1688 revolution; the novel thus appears to portray the emergence of the bourgeoisie.

This interpretation is based on three themes developed in the novel:

i) The first is the back-to-nature theme, which sets the Crusoe economy in the nature of things. For Ian Watt this reading of the novel as a return to an agricultural life without society is above all Rousseau's reading: Crusoe, says Rousseau, would develop Émile's imagination about material work and train him to make judgements not on others, but on the utility of things. It is worth noting that this is also, paradoxically, the reading made by the first neoclassical economists, who defined the agent, even before exchange, in their relationship with nature: non-socialised production.

ii) The second economic theme of the novel, doubtlessly the most important one, is the exaltation of the dignity of work, credo of capitalism, which gives an ideological sense to the division of labor. Crusoe relives the happy tale of the economic development of humanity, mastering highly diverse skills and gaining, through this labor, a multitude of objects that have improved its well-being. The role of labor in forming the agent, the individual, is comparable to the place that it begins to take up in society.

iii) The third and final economic theme is Crusoe's isolation, which becomes a metaphor for the isolation of the modern individual after the dissolution of traditional

social ties. In other words, according to Watt, a metaphor for the atomization of *homo œconomicus*. But it is also a metaphor for the isolation of the 17th century English bourgeoisie, living like Crusoe in a political no-man's-land. Thus Crusoe transfers a rudimentary economy onto the island, which both resembles and absolves England's burgeoning capitalism.

Nature, work, and isolation: three themes transpose a nascent capitalism onto an economy that defines *homo œconomicus* as outside of history, in direct contact with himself and with nature, mediated purely by his own work. This first economic reading of the novel, making each person's relationship with the economy appear to be a given, is nevertheless closely intertwined with historical and social themes. The homage to isolation can also be read as the expression of a specific historical situation; that of the rising bourgeoisie, with Crusoe as its hero. There are therefore two accounts of the novel: the story of an economy outside of history, that claims to be true to all economic agents in all societies; or concurrently, the story of a moment in humanity's economic development: capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie.

A psychoanalytic interpretation of Robinson's economy

Finally, it is worth citing Marthe Robert, a literary critic of the 20th century known for her psychoanalytic reading of modern literature; using Freud's "family romance of the neurotics", she suggests an interpretation that is partly economic, but characteristically different from those mentioned previously. In the family romance, when a child sees that their parents' social position is not the one they had imagined, they make up a more satisfying story of their origins. Freud thus identifies two stories: that of the foundling, according to Marthe Robert embodied in narrative literature by Don Quixote; and that of the bastard, tenaciously making his way, embodied by Crusoe. More precisely, Crusoe's is the tale of the path from foundling to bastard: Crusoe, disappointed by his father's low position in life, casts aside his parents by running away. If running away is patricide, shipwreck is the punishment. This is in keeping with the myth of the foundling. But the shipwreck is also a baptism that allows Crusoe to begin a new life where he painstakingly reclaims a place and a power in society: here then is the bastard story.

This is an economic interpretation, firstly because of the role of work in the story: it is by work that Crusoe substitutes the foundling myth with that of the bastard. But it is also

an economic interpretation in that Marthe Robert makes a parallel between a child's desire to escape a background without glory, and the fact that bourgeois civilization, a society of class and not of caste, is precisely one where it is possible to pass from one class to another. Politically or economically, it is the bourgeoisie that allows this childhood desire to be expressed and made a reality, to escape one's situation at birth. Crusoe thus embodies a desire – the desire to escape one's background – that might exist outside of the bourgeoisie, but that can also find its legitimacy and the right political conditions in a bourgeois society.

"Robinson Crusoe... can only be described in a society in movement, where the man with neither birthright nor quality can have some hope to raise himself up by his own means, even if it means a hard fight against the legacy that prevented him from climbing. It is the genius of Daniel Defoe that foresaw just how much the narrative genre owes its existence to the ideologies of the free enterprise" (Robert 2000: 140).

Once again a point of articulation can be found between a specific desire outside of history, imaginable in any society, and the possibility of making the desire come true in specific historical conditions. But whether this is about a desire or its coming true, in Marthe Robert's interpretation work is not what ties the economic agent to nature, what allows them to interact with things unsullied by others. It is firstly a social interaction, a method for resolving status rivalries, and for moving up the social hierarchy. This is the official ideology of a burgeoning capitalism: any man can change his life through his work. This ideology is based on a denial of the individual's motivations; motivations that are not only a desire for the well-being of an agent that was soon to be called *homo œconomicus*, but a desire for glory and social power.

There are several varied economic concepts present here. It is not enough to present Crusoe as a *homo œconomicus*, because he possesses a mix of traits that recall several kinds of economic agents: a merchant in that he seeks enrichment, a bourgeois in that he is worried about his social position, a capitalist in that he hoards, and on the island an agent in that he wishes only for the improvement of his well-being. And yet, all of these characters do not define a *homo œconomicus* expressing all of these dispositions or aspirations. It is not enough that these dispositions are all elements of economics, for them to define an economic agent. On the contrary, *homo œconomicus* has been built up

in economics as a very particular kind of agent, opposed to all other kinds of economic agents. And Crusoe embodies these diverse types of contradictory agents one after the other, but also sometimes simultaneously.

In part, Crusoe's capacity to represent contradictory types of agents is the result of the fact that staying on the island is a transformative experience. This transformation is especially visible in his attitude towards money. But beyond the transformation story, there remains a certain amount of confusion regarding how far this transformation goes. Some factors make its extent seem mitigated, or at least suggest the permanence of old character traits beneath the changes brought about by an island reclusion. This means that even if Crusoe is defined for the most part by the economy, he is not necessarily a clearly defined economic character. For the economist, this is what makes him interesting.

The desert island experience and the creation of a *homo œconomicus*

How does the insular experience turn Crusoe into the *homo œconomicus* as defined in economics? By the transformation of the character's attitude towards two economic objects: money and work.

Money and the desire for enrichment

The insular experience brings about a change in the character's attitude towards money. He starts out with a merchant's attitude, seeking a speedy path to enrichment, and ends with a *homo œconomicus'* attitude, only concerned with his well-being, for whom money means nothing because it has no intrinsic use. Amongst the factors that emphasize this transformation, the most notable are those that suggest that the Crusoe before his shipwreck wanted to become rich (thus his father's warnings against a too hasty desire for enrichment, the sale of his servant and companion of misfortune, despite the man having helped him to escape slavery and remained faithful), and those that express his transformation after the shipwreck, where he notices the lack of utility of money. Thus, when finding gold and silver on his wrecked boat, he exclaims: "Oh drug! What art thou good for? Thou art not worth to me – no, not the taking off the ground" (Defoe 1913: 41). The same scene occurs when he finds gold on another wreck. He also regrets having sold his slave; not for moral reasons, but for selfish and material reasons. He thinks how useful his slave would have been for farming on the island, whereas money is of no use to him.

To summarize, the Crusoe from before the shipwreck wants to make his fortune; the Crusoe of the island no longer cares about anything but his well-being, his production, and curses the desire for enrichment that was the cause of his travels and thus of his being shipwrecked. From an economic perspective, this transformation is from a desire for monetary enrichment to a desire for well-being.

However, it is a characteristic of political economy, from the 18th century up to today, to maintain that money lacks intrinsic value, that money is never desired for itself⁵, that it is needed ‘only to be got rid of’, an intermediary imposed by the difficulties of bartering. This discourse on money allowed political economy to take form in the 18th century, in physiocracy and early political economy. Even in mercantilism, in which the search for money is seen as an essential objective of economic policy, money is desired not for its intrinsic value but an increase in the quantity amount could be a condition of economic growth. From both viewpoints (mercantilist and liberal), it is through this discourse on the lack of money’s intrinsic value that political economy proved its harmlessness, and thus broke with the Aristotelian idea that there was a possible danger in an economy as soon as a good economy was replaced by bad chrematistics: the desire for unlimited enrichment. Lastly, this discourse on money naturalized economics, by separating it from politics. Money was the domain of the prince, while political economy, which aims to go beyond any monetary appearance, dealt not only with money but also with work, one of the most mutual of human experiences.

From this perspective, Crusoe from before the shipwreck embodies a mercantilist vision of the economy. This means that, for the individual as for a country, enrichment is synonymous with accumulating precious metals. Crusoe from after the shipwreck, transformed by an insular experience, heralds the agent in physiocracy, in classical economics, and even beyond in neoclassical theory from the late 19th century up to today.

The contrast between the two Crusoes is not, however, so clear. This is firstly because it is hard to be sure if the Crusoe from before the island really does unambiguously embody the merchant seeking enrichment: it is his father who attributes to him a desire to make his fortune while talking about his taste for travelling: “[he] designed me for the law; but I would be satisfied with nothing but going to sea” (Defoe 1913: 12). Secondly,

⁵ Even commodity money is demanded not for its use value but as a mean of exchange, for its purchasing power.

because the disdain he shows on the island for money does not deter him from keeping it, or from forgetting it when he has the chance to leave. His apparent disdain for money does not go so far as for him to refuse it completely. Finding a load of merchandise on a wreck he visits at the end of his stay, he takes a precise inventory: rum, cordial, shirts, handkerchiefs, neckcloths, and also gold and silver, which he describes in detail: "three great bags of pieces of eight, which held about eleven hundred pieces in all... wrapped up in a paper, six dubbloons of gold, and some small bars or wedges of gold; I suppose they might all weigh near a pound" (Defoe 1913: 259). The precision of his description seems to belie the assurance that follows: "as to the money, I had no manner of occasion for it: it was to me as the dirt under my feet". Crusoe is in fact so little indifferent to this money that he finds even more – "I found in this seaman's chest about fifty pieces of eight, in reals, but no gold" – keeps it – "I lugged this money home to my cave, and laid it up, as I had done that before which I had brought from our own ship" – and regrets being unable to retrieve more: "it was a great pity, as I said, that the other part of this ship had not come to my share ; for I am satisfied I might have loaded my canoe several times over with money; which, if I had ever escaped to England, would have lain here safe enough till I might have come again and fetched it" (Defoe 1913: 260).

Crusoe knows well that the uselessness of money only carries weight on the island, for him both a prison and a refuge. Of course, being restricted to confinement strips money of any use and thus gives him an escape from the corruption of money. But neither Crusoe nor the reader ever forget, either that outside of the island this money would have value again, or that he wants himself to escape the island. The ambiguity of his desires is most striking in the opposition between the feeling of being a prisoner of the island: "for though I was indeed at large in the place, yet the island was certainly a prison to me" (Defoe 1913: 136), and the understanding that this imprisonment protects him: "It was now that I began sensibly to feel how much more happy the life I now led was, with all its miserable circumstances, than the wicked, cursed, abominable life I led all the past part of my days" (Defoe 1913: 156).

This attitude towards money means that at least two economic aspirations cohabit within this character, both in his actions, but also in his understanding of economics inherent in his actions: the desire for monetary riches, versus a desire for real riches, made of useful things. If all of political economy, from the 18th century up to today, is built

upon the idea of a richness composed of useful things and not of money, Crusoe's ambivalence, feeling despite this the uselessness of money in his reclusion, shows the permanence of a more mercantilist perception of riches.

Though not the same as money, one of Crusoe's well-known traits is his penchant for inventories, for accounts and calculations⁶. He counts the things he retrieves from wrecks as much as the things he makes. He imagines with pride the surprise of someone visiting his cave like a shop. In the same breath that he uses to reject money, he evaluates in money that which he desires:

"I had... a parcel of Money... about thirty-six pounds sterling. Alas! there the nasty, sorry, useless stuff lay! I had no manner of business for it; and I often thought with myself that I would have given a handful of it for a gross of tobacco-pipes... nay, I would have given it all for sixpenny-worth of turnip and carrot seed out of England, or for... a bottle of ink" (Defoe 1913: 178).

Such equivalences remind one of the marginalist result of utility maximization, such that the rate of exchange between two commodities is in relation to their relative scarcity. Here, the relative scarcity of tobacco (seeds or ink) versus the relative plenty of gold coins with marginal utility close to zero determines their marginal rate of substitution. As Jevons noticed, even Robinson Crusoe can "look upon each of his possessions with varying esteem and desire for more, although he [is] incapable of exchanging with any other person" (Jevons 1871: 80). It is however a bit odd that the commodity used as a numeraire here is gold, in spite of its uselessness in the island, according to Robinson himself.

When he does not calculate, as when he builds a canoe that he claims to have cost him "infinite labor", "a prodigious deal of pains" and is useless because it is far too heavy to carry to the shore, he scolds himself: "now I saw, though too late, the folly of beginning a work before we count the cost, and before we judge rightly of our own strength to go through with it" (Defoe 1913: 175-176).

White, in his article on Robinson Crusoe in the *New Palgrave* (2008), considers that the character of Defoe's novel, in contrast to marginalists' *homo œconomicus*, calculates

⁶ Such a calculation reminds Max Weber's idea of capitalism, which can also be reminded by the importance of religion in Crusoe's narration. As White emphasize, Defoe's novel can be read as a "moral tale or fable of redemption through a nonconformist Christian salvation" (White 1982: 119).

poorly. We will see how it is true concerning especially the calculation of utility of goods versus disutility of labor. But up to this point, what is most clearly and more importantly obvious is not whether Crusoe can count well, but that he thinks about it often, that he displays an interest in these questions, and that he is not silent on them.

Work, subsistence and sufficiency

The second element that makes Crusoe a *homo œconomicus* is his relation to needs and to work, the way in which he worries about his subsistence. Marthe Robert points out that no other hero that precedes him, Ulysses or Don Quixote, is preoccupied in this manner. They feed themselves, of course, but without working like ordinary men to ensure their subsistence. Instead, they vanquish it in glorious combat. Crusoe, on the contrary, worries about the means for earning his subsistence without being heroic, counting not on his courage, but on his industry and on the tools and merchandise he retrieved from the wreck. "It was in vain to sit still and wish for what was not to be had" he writes only as soon his second day on the island; "this extremity roused my application" (Defoe 1913: 75). No glorious combat there to ensure his subsistence; anyone can identify with this unheroic hero.

He appears to be even less heroic when, very soon after, his survival ceases to be an issue. He manages to extract from the ship beached on the shore tools and materials which make it clear to him that his subsistence is not in danger.

"Then it occurred to me again, how well I was furnished for my subsistence... What would have been my case, if I had been forced to have lived in the condition in which I at first came on shore, without necessaries of life, or any means to supply and procure them?... I had a tolerable view of subsisting without any want as long as I lived" (Defoe 1913: 92-93)

From this moment on, Crusoe does not fear want, and congratulates himself regularly. Having "stated... very impartially, like debtor and creditor, the comfort I enjoyed, against the miseries I suffered", he contrasts the hardship of his isolation: "I am divided from mankind, a solitary; one banished from human society", with the happiness of lacking nothing for his subsistence: "But I am not starved and perishing on a barren place, affording no sustenance" (Defoe 1913: 96).

Sure of his subsistence, needs are replaced with well-being. He does not work in order to subsist, whatever he does, he aims towards improving his well-being. Crusoe rejoices in having no battle to take part in, no wild beasts to tame. His exploits consist only of very ordinary tasks, requiring a long, monotone and fastidious amount of time, while previous heroes do glorious battle, or use subtle cunning, with immediate results. Marthe Robert seems right in remarking to what point Crusoe:

"breaks the conventions of a purely theoretical Utopia, where life sustains itself miraculously without taking issue with concrete problems. For the first time in narrative literature, reality could not be vanquished with only the strength of desire, one needed tools, calculations, all the experience and patience of a workman. Up to this point the novel was a notoriously idle genre... the name suggests that one never works in one. Crusoe put an end to that imposed idleness... With him, work, exertion, and need took their place at the heart of the utopia. It was no longer a case of denying the empirical world in order to take revenge on or lament how disappointingly bereft one was, but instead to transform it at any moment into a vast workshop where the mind and the hands were equally active."

(Robert 2000: 141)

Robinson, anti-*homo œconomicus*: consumption and work

The trade-off between consumption and leisure

This tendency to work to satisfy one's needs or better one's well-being unambiguously expresses the actions of the ordinary man, the *homo œconomicus*, who uses rare resources (that is, natural resources) and working time to satisfy possibly infinite needs or desires. He appears to clearly illustrate the trade-off that happens between consumption and leisure, between the usefulness procured from goods and the uselessness implied by work, as microeconomics would put it. It is easier to understand that late 19th century marginalist economists claimed that Defoe's character proved the truth of their analyses: Crusoe, more even than he expresses the aspirations of a bourgeois to climb the social hierarchy, heralds the calculating *homo œconomicus*, the atemporal agent living in touch with himself and detached from historical contingencies.

However, the very conditions in which Crusoe trades-off between leisure and consumption are, for at least two reasons, very different to those of the agent maximizing

his usefulness, as portrayed by neoclassical theory. The first of these differences comes from his relation to needs, the second from his relation to work.

The moderation of needs

Let us begin by saying that *homo œconomicus* is defined by the desire to always consume more: it's a constant of economic thought since the 18th century, more or less explicitly, more or less adamantly, to assume that there is a rarity of resources compared to need. From the "desire of bettering our condition, a desire which, though generally calm and dispassionate, comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave" described by Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776: 415), to the non-satiation hypothesis of the modern general equilibrium theory, the agent is faced with desires exceeding their resources, and in economic theory an abundance of means relative to need is never put forward. We should bring qualifications to this statement concerning both the economists and philosophers of the 18th century and the first marginalists authors. Mandeville, Hume and Smith have taken their part in the debates on luxury goods and their frivolity or, on the contrary, their social function. Later, Walras (1988 [1889]: 107.) or Pareto (1909: 199 and 667) assumed the existence of a satiation point. However, the marginalist authors who used Robinson as an illustration of economic man didn't follow their predecessors of the 18th century and, when they accepted the existence of a satiation point, assumed a local non-satiation, the satiation being a characteristic of a society which escapes the economic problem,. Geanakoplos' comment about the non satiation hypothesis in the general equilibrium model is suggestive: "The non satiation hypothesis seems entirely in accordance with human nature" (Geneakoplos 2008). From that viewpoint, as Soellner emphasizes (Soellner 2016: 50), Robinson is characterized, at the opposite, by the moderation of his needs. Rousseau has been aware of it and it is in opposition to the burgeoning political economy, and promoting the moderation of needs, that he made Crusoe an example for Émile (Rousseau 1969: 455). Crusoe's moderation in needs is not due to the fact that Crusoe is reasonable, although this is the case for Émile's education. It is due to the situation of a man deprived of socialization, whose needs are consequently extremely limited.

It is therefore the island that imposes on Crusoe a moderation of needs that so inspires Rousseau, and makes Crusoe, in this sense, an anti-*homo œconomicus*. This moderation

changes considerably the economic issues he needs to resolve, compared to those of the *homo œconomicus* described by economists. Crusoe only needs to produce enough for his consumption, a quantity that cannot be infinite:

"My stock of corn increasing, I really wanted to build my barns bigger... I found that the forty bushels of barley and rice were much more than I could consume in a year; so I resolved to sow just the same quantity every year that I sowed the last, in hopes that such a quantity would fully provide me with bread" (Defoe 1913: 170-171).

Only when Friday arrives is the cultivation allowed expand, measured in terms of what he will need: "I began now to consider that having two mouths to feed instead of one, I must provide more ground for my harvest, and plant a larger quantity of corn than I used to do" (Defoe 1913: 285).

He expresses himself the distinction between the desert island and the English economy he has left:

"In the first place I was removed from all the wickedness of the world here; I had neither the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, nor the pride of life. I had nothing to covet, for I had all I was now capable of enjoying... There were no rivals; I had no competitor, none to dispute sovereignty or command with me. I might have raised ship-ladings of corn, but I had no use for it; so I let as little grow as I thought enough for my occasion... But all I could make use of was all that was valuable: I had enough to eat and to supply my wants, and what was all the rest to me? ...if I sowed more corn than I could eat, it must be spoiled... In a word, the nature and experience of things dictated to me, upon just reflection, that all the good things of this world are no further good to us than they are for our use; and that, whatever we may heap up indeed to give others we may enjoy as much as we can use and no more... I possessed infinitely more than I knew what to do with. I had no room for desire, except it was of things which I had not, and they were but trifles, though, indeed, of great use to me" (Defoe 1913: 176-178).

This moderation of needs through forced isolation makes Crusoe an economic agent whose problem is less a rarity in resources, than the permanence of desire. Richard Steele wrote of Alexander Selkirk (the man believed to be the real-life Crusoe) that: "When those Appetites were satisfied, the Desire of Society was as strong a Call upon him, and he

appeared to himself least necessitous when he [was wanting in] everything" (cited in Barthes 2002: 55).

Today, the agent of neoclassical analysis carries Crusoe's name; an agent with desires that are a given of nature, previous to any socialization, and whose objective is to satisfy these desires. The novel, however, sees the desires and needs of a man given over to isolation as a problem. Crusoe survives only through a semblance of socialization: he writes a journal, prays to God, tames a parrot in order to speak, and lives only in the hopes of a return to social life. If he is interesting to economists because they can use his character, it is a very superficial interest. Economics remembers less the character of Crusoe and the difficulties he faces existing outside of human society, than the situation which he has been artificially placed in. This is despite the fact that Defoe's Crusoe, especially before meeting Friday, comes up less against the problem of efficiently using nature to satisfy his needs, than against a longing for human society.

The attitude towards work and working time

The second major difference between Defoe's Crusoe and the *homo œconomicus* is his relationship to work. While the *homo œconomicus* wishes to limit as much as possible their working time, Crusoe, who has an unlimited amount of time, does not seek to mitigate his exertion. To say it in marginalist terms, he doesn't determine his labor time by equalizing the marginal productivity of his labor with his subjective evaluation of the relative value of good in leisure (i.e. the quotient of marginal utility of goods on marginal utility of leisure). That has been detailed by White (1982), Karagöz (2014) and Soellner (2016).

His time on the island is entirely taken up by work, and this long working time is in contrast with the speed of enrichment through trade. He often mentions that, to produce the smallest object, his work is "infinite", and requires "an inconceivable deal" of pains. When he makes furniture, without which "I was not able to enjoy the few comforts I had in the world", it takes him a "prodigious deal of time" and "infinite labor". "This will testify for me that I was not idle, and that I spared no pains to bring to pass whatever appeared necessary for my comfortable support" (Defoe 1913: 99).

Similarly, when he manages to make his own bread, he does little to hide the lengthiness and difficulty of the affair. He lists the tools that he did not have; plough, spade and shovel. He makes them, but they are so flawed that they wear down quickly, and he describes with minute detail the work of planting, harvesting and storing the wheat.

"However, this I bore with too, and was content to work it out with patience, and bear with the badness of the performance... and all these things I did without, as shall be observed; and yet the corn was an inestimable comfort and advantage to me too. But this, as I said, made everything laborious and tedious to me; but that there was no help for" (Defoe 1913: 163).

Of course he works this much, like *homo œconomicus*, to increase his well-being. But this is neither the only, nor the first reason that he does so. Firstly, it is important to note that he feels as much satisfaction surveying his finished work, as he feels satisfaction in consuming. On imagining a visitor discovering his cave: "so that had my cave been to be seen, it looked like a general magazine of all necessary things; and I had everything so ready at my hand, that it was a great pleasure to me to see all my goods in such order, and especially to find my stock of all necessaries so great" (Defoe 1913: 99). This pleasure from surveying his work is doubled with the pleasure of possession: "my country-seat... my bower... my tent... my cattle" (Defoe 1913: 206).

Above all, however, work in itself is a pleasure for Crusoe, a source of satisfaction. He expresses amazement at being able to carry out, by force of effort, any craft, though he is only an ordinary man without any special talent. Having arrived on the island on the 30th of September 1659, he writes about his day in his journal, on the 4th of November of the same year: "The working part of this day and the next were wholly employed in making this table, for I was yet but a very sorry workman, though time and necessity made me a complete natural mechanic soon after, as I believe they would do any one else." (102-103). When he manages to make bread, he is amazed at being able to do alone what is usually accomplished through a complex division of labor: "It might be truly said that now I worked for my bread. It is a little wonderful, and what I believe few people have thought much upon, viz., the strange multitude of little things necessary in providing, producing, curing, dressing, making, and finishing this one article of bread." (Defoe 1913: 162).

This amazement, as Ian Watt remarks, shared by Rousseau who wants himself to pass it on to Émile, is only really a surprise for an individual who is part of a complex division of labor. Crusoe appears to express nostalgia for a self-sufficiency that perhaps never existed, but which, with the development of a merchant and capitalist society, is no longer at its most extreme. This nostalgia is anti-economical because economics promotes division of labor which increases productivity.

This kind of relationship towards work makes Crusoe part of a paradoxical utopia. A utopia, because when on the island Crusoe is happy. This happiness comes from a good relationship with his work. Paradoxical, because a utopia generally excludes or at least limits working time. The utopia of economic science would be to reduce working time while at the same time enjoying potentially infinite consumption. However Crusoe's utopia – and Rousseau is aware of this – is one that relishes not consumption, but infinite work.

Not only are natural resources abundant on the island, but working time is even more so, and Crusoe does not seek to reduce it: "but what need I have been concerned at the tediousness of anything I had to do, seeing I had time enough to do it in? nor had I any other employment, if that had been over, at least that I could foresee, except the ranging the island to seek for food" (Defoe 1913: 95-96). Again, when he makes his furniture, he has to cut a whole tree to make just one plank: "but this I had no remedy for but patience, any more than I had for the prodigious deal of time and labor which it took me to make a plank or board; but my time and labor was little worth, and so it was as well employed one way as another" (Defoe 1913: 99).

Crusoe seems a far cry from the figure of the rational economic agent: instead of a *homo œconomicus* confronting the rarity of nature and wanting to save his work and exertion, he is more like two economic agents, or more precisely post-economic.

He seems similar, first of all, to the unestranged worker described by Marx in his *Manuscripts of 1844*, distinguishing man from animal by the "free, conscious activity" he exerts in work, since "[animals] build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. ... It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom." (Marx 1844: 31-2).

For Marx “in creating a world of objects by his personal activity... man proves himself a conscious species-being” (Marx 1844: 31), and this praise for work underlies and explains the estrangement from work: if the production of the world’s objects was not what brought man in contact with himself and with others, then the estrangement from work, the dispossession of the worker, would not have brought about the “estranged life”, the “estranged man” that characterizes the condition of the worker under capitalism (Marx 1844: 33). *Critique of the Gotha Program* also reveals that the highest point of communist society will be reached when work will have become “not only a means of life but life's prime want” (1875). Work is done, not to satisfy need, but as the expression of each person’s humanity, and this is precisely what Crusoe experiences, without this work ever ceasing to be work or being seen as pure leisure. Work, when it becomes a primary need, remains an experience of exertion and difficulty, in expectation of results.

The economic agent described by Keynes in “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren” also comes to mind: an agent freed from the needs of subsistence. In this text written in 1930, Keynes declares that the economic problem of humanity, defined by the struggle for subsistence, will soon disappear, and so, “for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem—how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well.” (Keynes 1963: 367).

This situation, Keynes predicts, will be that much more difficult to resolve, because man, forced since the beginning of humanity to employ his time for the purpose of satisfying his needs, will find himself lacking in such a justification for his activity.

Conclusion

Defoe’s hero is supposed to be symbolic of the beginnings of capitalism in Europe, repeatedly used by economists to illustrate an analysis of an agent’s behaviour faced with a miserly nature. It is doubtlessly a paradox that Crusoe, identified with *homo œconomicus*, represents an agent like the one imagined by Marx or Keynes for humanity’s future, beyond the development of the productive forces of capitalism, “into the lap of economic abundance” (Keynes 1963: 368). Defoe’s Crusoe, though he is undeniably a character plagued by economic questions, is nevertheless essentially different from the Crusoe imagined by economists. More than the question of a miserly nature and man’s

infinite need, his behaviour towards work and desire, shows that the economic problems he faces are about the construction, or rather the permanence of a desire to live. But just because Crusoe represents an agent freed from the necessities of subsistence, or because the economic problem that defines him is less about scarcity than about the use of time and resources, does not mean that there is no economy. It remains present firstly through work, in the Marxian sense of the first of human needs. It also remains present in that the desire to live is linked to material acts that aim to maintain a life and build a world of objects. In terms that do not explain but rather express surprise, this work of literature states that which escapes scientific argument; to what point the economy, in the largest sense, forms our individual modern-day lives.

Bibliographie

- Barthes R. (2002), *Comment vivre ensemble. Cours et séminaires au collège de France*, 1976-77, Paris: Seuil.
- Böhm-Bawerk E. (1889), *Kapital und Kapitalzins: Positive Theorie des Kapitaless*, Innsbruck: Wagner.
- Brown H. G. (1926), *Economic Science and the Common Welfare*, 3rd edition, Columbia: Lucas Bros.
- Clark J. B. (1899), *The Distribution of Wealth: A Theory of Wages, Interest, and Profits*. New York: Macmillan.
- Defoe D. (1719, 1913), *Robinson Crusoe*, Philadelphia: G.W. Jacobs and Co.
- Edgeworth F. Y. (1881), *Mathematical Psychics. An Essay on the Application of Mathematics to the Moral Sciences*, London: Kegan Paul & Co.
- Engélibert J.-P. (1997), *La postérité de Robinson Crusoé : un mythe littéraire de la modernité*, Geneva: Droz.
- Fisher I. (1930), *The Theory of Interest, as Determined by Impatience to Spend Income and Opportunity to Invest It*, New York: Macmillan.
- Geanakoplos J. (2008), “Arrow–Debreu model of general equilibrium” in S. N. Durlauf and L. E. Blume (eds.), *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, 2nd edition, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jevons W. S. (1871), *The Theory of Political Economy*, London: Macmillan.
- Karagöz U. (2014), “The Neoclassical Robinson: Antecedents and Implications”, *History of Economic Ideas*, 22 (2), 75-100.

- Keynes J. M. (1963), "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren" in J. M. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 358-374.
- Knight F. (1960), *Intelligence and Democratic Action*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Koopmans T. (1957), *Three Essays on the State of Economic Science*, New York: McGraw Hill.
- Marshall A. (1907), *Principles of Economics*, 5th edition, London: Macmillan.
- Marx K. (1857), *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm>
- Marx K. ([1972]1875), *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>
- K. Marx, ([1932]2000), *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by Martin Mulligan, *Marx/Engels Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf>
- Marx K. (1967), *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm>
- Mas-Colell A., Whinston M. and Green J. (1995), *Microeconomic Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Menger C. (1871), *Grundsätze der Volkswirtschaftslehre*. Vienna: Braumüller.
- Pareto V. (1909), *Manuel d'économie politique*, Paris: V. Giard and E. Brière, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5518153f/f7.item.r=sati%C3%A9t%C3%A9.zoo>
- Robert M. (2000), *Roman des origines et origines du roman*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Rousseau J.-J. (1969), *Emile, Œuvres Complètes*, Tome IV, Bibliothèque de la Pléïade, Paris: Gallimard.
- Smith A. (1776), *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, London: Strahan and Cadell.
- Soellner F. (2016), "The Use (and Abuse) of Robinson Crusoe in Neoclassical Economics", *History of Political Economy*, 48 (1), 35-64.
- Varian H. R. (1992), *Microeconomic Analysis*, 3rd edition, New York: Norton.
- Varian H. R. (2010), *Intermediate Microeconomics*, 8th edition, New York: Norton.

- Walras L. (1889), *Eléments d'économie politique pure ou Théorie de la richesse sociale*, 2nd edition, Lausanne : F. Rouge; Paris: Guillaumin, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.
- Walras L. (1988), *Eléments d'économie politique pure ou Théorie de la richesse sociale*, Œuvres complètes, Tome 8, Paris: Economica.
- Watt I. (1951), "Robinson Crusoe as a Myth", *Essays in Criticism*, April, 1(2), 95-119.
- Watt I. (1957), *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, London: Chatto and Windus.
- Watt I. (1996), *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- White M. V. (2008), "Robinson Crusoe" in S.N. Durlauf and L.E. Blume (eds.), *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, 2nd edition, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, <http://www.dictionaryofeconomics.com/article?id=pde2008_R000163>
- White M. V. (1982), "Reading and Rewriting: the Production of an Economic", *Southern Review*, 15, 115-142, reprinted in U. Grapard and G. Hewitson (eds.). (2011), *Robinson Crusoe's Economic Man*, London: Routledge.
- Wicksell K. (1893), *Über Wert, Kapital und Rente nach den neueren nationalökonomischen Theorien*, Jena: Fischer.
- Wicksteed, P. H. (1888), *The Alphabet of Economic Science*. New York: Kelley & Millman.