

RESEARCH

Becoming a Master of an Island Again: On the Desire to be Bodiless

Adriana Zaharijević

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, RS
zaharijevic@instifdt.bg.ac.rs

Reading *Robinson Crusoe* 300 years after its first publication can help us understand two major fantasies of our current moment: the desire to be in complete possession of oneself and thus invulnerable to the endless reconfigurations of the world one merely happens to be part of; and the desire to return to the times when society was ordained as an aggregate of self-contained, self-actualizing individuals. Both fantasies have been invested in the creation of the two paradigmatic figures of our time – the neoliberal homo economicus and the white masculine master of his property and affairs. Both desires have, additionally, rested upon numerous erasures not only of vulnerability and inter/dependence in general, but also and significantly of the body. I argue, however, that the desire to be bodiless goes hand in hand with the desire to place and possess bodies, as material or symbolic property, which are for various reasons denied the capacity to be self-actualizing, indivisible, and independent. Robinson Crusoe works as a fictional figure with which a self-possessed master identifies with and desires to return to.

Keywords: Robinson Crusoe; body; bodiless; possession; vulnerability

Bodies and Fantasies

This text is about contemporary bodies and accompanying fantasies about bodilessness. My main claim is that the paradoxical longing for bodilessness has its twin face in neoliberal and authoritarian regimes of rationality: in the desire to be in complete phantasmal possession of oneself and thus invulnerable to the endless reconfigurations of the world; and in the desire to return to the phantasmal times when society was ordained as an aggregate of self-contained, self-actualizing individuals. Both fantasies have been invested in the creation of the paradigmatic figures of our time – the neoliberal *homo economicus* and the white masculine master of his property and affairs. My wager is that both regimes build on a fiction of an independent, sovereign, self-sufficient, and self-actualizing being – that is, an individual. The supposition I begin with is that the notion of individual is misleading, because it acts as a paradigm, both in economic and political terms, of a featureless anyone. I will instead claim that the individual is neither anyone nor everyman, a bodiless abstraction, but a very concrete abstraction of a certain kind of bodies, which rests upon numerous erasures of vulnerability and inter/dependence.

To counter the misleading notion of individual as universally applicable, and to show how neoliberal and authoritarian fantasies converge, I propose we once again read Robinson Crusoe, the mariner of York, as the true representative of the modern individual. Interchanging two fictions, Robinson for an individual, reveals inherent limitations of the latter, exposing, in addition, how the desire to be bodiless goes hand in hand with the desire to place and possess bodies, as material or symbolic property, which are for various reasons denied the capacity to be self-actualizing, indivisible, and independent.

Robinson Crusoe is a curious character: everyone, wherever we come from, remembers something, however vaguely, about this wretched mariner, everyone knows bits of the tedious story of a shrewd but lonesome, pious, and industrious man who happened to have spent quite a long time on an island. We were, many of us, taught in schools that this book was a paradigm of an adventure novel.¹ But the narrative structure of adventure, especially in its abridged forms (those that clip early colonial, capitalist ventures that tell us why Robinson ended up in the Caribbean and what rewards he encountered once he left his 'Paradise gained' [Bellhouse 1982]), easily transforms into a survival instruction manual. He is, as Virginia Woolf claimed, a model of a 'naturally cautious, apprehensive, conventional, and solidly matter-of-fact intelligence' (Woolf 1925), a creature easily freed from socially moulded desires, turning them into well-calculated needs. It is for this reason that already in the 19th century Robinson often acted as a blueprint of an emerging economic man, and that he regularly appeared as part of the fiction of what is in political philosophy figured as the state of nature. Robinson Crusoe is the one who lives without others, without infrastructures and institutions: his independence is absolute. His isolation from society, important for the economists, and his disposition to create society from null, important for the political philosophers, gave this adventure novel quite an unexpected afterlife.

Fiction: The Mariner of York

Arguing for non-violence, a 'fiction' which many of her interlocutors proclaim utterly unrealistic, Judith Butler would also begin one of her more recent analyses with this all-too-powerful and quite widely accepted fiction. 'Some representatives of the history of liberal political thought', says Butler, 'would have us believe that we emerge into this social and political world from a state of nature. And in that state of nature, we are already, for some reason, individuals, and we are in conflict with one another. We are not given to understand *how we became individuated*, nor are we told precisely why conflict is the first of our passionate relations rather than dependency or attachment' (Butler 2019, 12). Butler's fictional self-sufficient creature, set to use violence to foreground his independence represented by his possessions, has also been identified with Robinson Crusoe, although just in passing. Why is it that we find Robinson Crusoe, as a useful fiction, in so many places? Following Peter Hulme, who observed in his *Colonial Encounters* that 'the island episode of Robinson Crusoe... provides a simplifying crucible in which complexities can be reduced to their essential components' (Hulme 1986, 186), I want to first see what is it that this fiction provided us with, to then see how it frames our economic and political fantasies today.

The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner is still regularly figured as an adventure novel. However, the adventures – of an unruly youth who disobeys his father's vows, a seafarer and an investor, of an early plantation owner and slave-trader

¹ In the country where I come from, *Robinson Crusoe* has for decades, socialist era included, belonged to a mandatory reading material in primary schools (which, and this is quotation from the teachers' manual, serves to 'inspire children to adopt a positive attitude towards life and its predicaments, to develop responsibility and readiness to face problems, and to be content with whatever life confronts us with').

– are quickly passed over to transform themselves into a survival instruction manual (and the manual it was: at the time Robinson's fate was a real possibility, not only for privateers and pirates, but also for the settler-colonialists, indentured labourers, and convicts sent to far-away lands). Unlike 'the real Robinson', castaway Alexander Selkirk, who had spent four years and four dreadful months on a remote Pacific island, Robinson survives – completely on his own – for 26 long years. Indeed, the tale of the mariner-colonialist is an account of arduous survival – notably, free of illnesses, infirmities and insanity, no dread, phantoms, or deliriums ever haunt him.² Soon enough, Robinson describes his situation thus: 'I looked now upon the world as a thing remote, which I had nothing to do with, no expectations from, and indeed no desires about [although he did desire tobacco, turnip, beans and ink]... I was removed from all the wickedness of the world; I had neither the lusts of flesh, the lusts of the eye, nor the pride of life' (Defoe 1719, 164–165). What Robinson needs is circumscribed and wisely adapted, and it never turns into a delirious caricature of the civilization from which he has been temporarily banished, such as the one we encounter in the 1960s retelling of the story by Michel Tournier in his *Friday, or the Other Island*.

What frees Robinson from society is one deeply social activity: labour. On a lonely island, there is never idleness. Crusoe always works – and keeps accounts of that work. This Jack-of-all-trades was compelled to learn and re-learn all kinds of drudgeries women and men of lower stature must have known and done in the preindustrial era. Labour is central to the adventure (one is compelled to say that labour is the adventure itself): even in complete solitude one can be driven by continual prospering. Crusoe shows us that although the pleasures are scarce and there are no others to share them with or to protect them from, acquisition and expansion remain utterly meaningful. But in Lockean vein, labour is of necessity linked to property. It is almost as if the island was to become a possession, the conquest would have to come with a toil. Locke famously claimed that property comes about by the exertion of labour upon natural resources: when a man 'takes something from the state that nature has provided and left it in, he mixes his labour with it, thus joining to it something that is his own; and in that way he makes it his property' (Locke 1823, 5, 27); while James Mill proposed that the necessity of labour for obtaining the means of subsistence, as well as the means of the greatest part of our pleasures, is the law of nature attended with the greatest number of consequences (Mill 1820, ¶9).

Thus, instead of degenerating into a delirious state confronted with woeful endless solitude, Robinson is overpowered with joy by the sight of the land 'so fresh, so green, so flourishing, everything being in a constant verdure of flourish of spring that it looked like a planted garden'. He surveys it 'with a secret kind of pleasure', with a keen awareness 'that this was all my own; that I was king and lord of all this country indefensibly, and had a right of possession' (Defoe 1719, 128). His is a gaze of an invulnerable self-sufficient settler who, by mixing his labour with the lush nature, becomes its lonely but a rightful proprietor. It is for that reason, in words of James Joyce, that Robinson Crusoe is the true symbol of the British conquest – in the early 18th century only 'a prophecy of empire', which one century later turns into a myth promoting popular colonialism (qt. in Phillips 1997, 33–34).

² So much so that one wonders how this sudden erasure of society makes almost no imprint on his mind. Tournier's 1960s version of Robinson Crusoe resounds much more with our contemporary understanding of what it means to be so thoroughly left on one's own: after his first failed attempt to escape the desolate place, Tournier's Robinson 'degenerates rapidly into a state of animality, discovering oblivion in the stagnant waters and noxious vapours of a pig's wallowing-hole', becoming overcome by dread and phantoms. His later delirious reconstruction of the island as if it were populated by more than one person is somewhat less delirious than the fully placid acceptance of life as it is in the original Crusoe (Purdy 1984, 225–226).

We are compelled to agree with Joyce here. Robinson is not the natural man in the state of nature. He happened to have found himself in this tropical garden of Eden as a planter who had left his Brazilian colony on a slave-hunting mission. Although the isle is a perfect *terra nullius*, an ideal virgin land – also a perfect setting for a natural estate figure – the one who surveys and domesticates it does so not as the one who belongs to nature. Neither does he do that as a ‘civilized’ man who in nature observes God’s grace and providence, accepting that he is no more than a meagre part of some graceful scheme. Robinson is plain, but god-like schemer himself, thoroughly shaped by the civilization he helped to create. For him, ‘the island solitude is an exceptional occasion... for strenuous efforts at self-help. Inspired with this belief, Crusoe observes nature, not with the eyes of a pantheist primitive, but with the calculating gaze of a colonial capitalist; wherever he looks he sees acres that cry out for improvement, and as he settles down to the task he glows, not with noble savagery, but purposive possession’ (Watt 1951, 314). In that sense, Robinson’s state of nature is not a Hobbesian wolfish dystopia, Lockean naturalized domesticity, or Rousseau’s haven of noble savages: it is rather a small colony which – peopled or not – serves as a model of primitive accumulation (Hymer 2011, 19).

In both Locke’s and early utilitarian understanding, where there is labour and possession, there is always also a need for a government. In this vein, from the moment he embraced his fate, Robinson lived as a self-proclaimed sovereign. He first defines himself as a wistful king ruling over ‘his little family’, composed of a parrot, goats, one dog, and two cats – an absolute monarch over his ‘servants’, whom he could ‘hang, draw, give Liberty, and take it away’ (Defoe 1719, 191). In a phantasmally kingly fashion, and there being no other to dispute or rebel against ‘his sovereignty or command’, he treats the land and all it bestows as an emperor (ibid, 165; Bell 1988). Possession and dominion are here inextricably related: being a lonely emperor who possessed – or thought he had the right to possess – everything, extended to people who would inadvertently set foot on the island. Robinson provides us with an axiom that property holding involves the right to subordinate, which is part and parcel of a colonialist version of the state of nature figure. After some hundred pages of loneliness, his animal kingdom becomes upgraded with several men, and Robinson exclaims:

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. Secondly, my people were perfectly subjected – I was absolutely lord and lawgiver – they all owed their lives to me, and were ready to lay down their lives, if there had been occasion for it, for me.

Thus, the perfect subjection of *his* people comes only from his goodwill not to kill them, like the beasts and the birds he undoubtedly possessed, but to ‘place them’ like a patron, father and benefactor (ibid, 310, emphasis added).

Although the last long quotation reveals certain cheerfulness due to the fact that after two and a half decades Crusoe finally found some company, one needs to be wary with such a supposition. He is, upon a whole, a model of a self-sufficient man, who could and did survive on his own, free of redundant affects. What he feels is similar to what he needs, and all is gratified through tedious, repetitive, limitedly inventive work which produces a sense of continual, unhindered prospering. But there is still one affect that stands out in Robinson’s story, and that is fear. As Stephen Hymer observed, Robinson’s ‘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’ (Hymer 2011, 27). There is of course a

semblance of the Lockean absolute lord of his own person and possessions, who although wildly free, always remains fearful for what he is a proprietor of – his life, liberty, and estates; also, fear was the prime motivator for a Hobbesian individual in his version of the state of nature, where there was no property, no dominion, no mine and thine distinct, nothing apart from the right to war against all others (Locke 1823, 159; Hobbes 1965, 98). In the case of Robinson, years will have to pass for any other to appear in sight. Also, unlike Hobbesian and Lockean fictional predecessors, who presumably had only sticks and stones to defend what was supposed to be their own, the fearful Robinson is well-equipped with non-natural tools (to help him fortify a stronghold, to manically build walls and fences) and with arms which he knows how to use. He reserves for himself the right to war against all others, although no others are to be seen (after seeing a haunting footprint in the sand, he opts for even more seclusion and isolation, and if he leaves his fortress he does so armed with a gun, two pistols, and a cutlass). Thus, his independence, or his sovereignty, hinges on his strong *social* fear, which translates into subordination or annihilation of others.

The sociality of Robinson's situation is, however, easily forgotten, and not only due to the porousness of memory. The novel was too often abridged for purposes not literal in kind. For example, in Rousseau's *Emile* the young mind is instructed to read the story beginning with a shipwreck and ending with an arrival of the vessel which will eventually take Crusoe home. Robinson the survivor thus becomes a role model for the young charge, although the unabridged Crusoe is in all other things the most unlikely instantiation of Rousseauian aspirations.

Émile will not witness the utter relentlessness and true heights of Crusoe's ambition for wealth, but instead he will focus on Crusoe's patient island labours as farmer, shepherd and carpenter. Emile will be attentive to Crusoe's speeches about the uselessness of money on the island, and not read that Crusoe's greatest thrill – his heart flutters, he grows pale, sick and almost dies on the spot with joy – is when he learns he is rich in pounds sterling! (Bellhouse 1982, 132)

Similar abridgements, actual or assumed, were equally necessary for the shaping of Robinson into the paradigmatic *homo economicus* and the state-of-nature man. His being the *only* or the *first* man, existing as if there was no time before he became the only and the first, has been crucially produced by various abridgements, or erasures of the social that formed a shipwreck mariner.³

³ These abridgements had indeed very interesting effects. In 1948, during the final drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Australian delegate Alan Watt suggested an amendment to the opening clause of article 29, which in the original proposal read 'Everyone has duties to the community which enables him freely to develop his personality'. Instead, Watt proposed the wording which is now article 29, stipulating that 'everyone has duties to *the community in which alone* the *free and full* development of his personality is possible'. Watt's proposal, foregrounding the social character of the individual, was greeted by the Soviet and Latin American delegations, but encountered fierce dissent from Belgian, Chinese and US delegates who unanimously opposed the word 'alone'. In order to buttress the opposition to the magnifying of the function of society, Robinson Crusoe's situation was taken as a relevant counter-example. The Belgian delegate cited Defoe's novel almost as an empirical evidence for the eternal and universal nature of humankind: 'It might, first, be asserted that the individual could only develop his personality within the framework of society; it was, however, only necessary to recall the famous book by Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, to find proof of the contrary'. Watt seemed to have been persuaded by the Robinsonian argument and he consequently withdrew the amendment. Luckily, there was another possible reading of a fictional island situation, taken up by the Soviet delegation, which stated that Watt's amendment 'rightly stressed the fact that the individual could not fully develop his personality outside society. The example of *Robinson Crusoe*, far from being convincing, had, on the contrary, shown that man could not live and develop his personality without the aid of society. Robinson had, in fact, had at his disposal

But Crusoe's treatment of the others as a source of fear, as possible migrants besieging his realm, the land of which he is, in his mind, a sovereign and rightful possessor, speaks of sociality that cannot be easily erased (this, I would argue, applies equally to the fictionalized state-of-nature paradigms). Those migrants besieging Robinson's island belong to other races, cannibal at that – races that could only be eradicated or subordinated, killed or tamed, never available for some different kind of communion. When Friday once mentions that his people saved seventeen 'white mens' from drowning, who have now been living for four years at 'my nation', left alone by the savages who gave them victuals and 'make brothers' instead of eating them, the most of what Robinson can think of is 'the truce' (Defoe 1719, 286–287): for him, brotherhood with cannibals is beyond imagination. This applies to 'my new man Friday' as well. This unlikely 'friendship' begins with an assumption of privilege and cultural superiority, so pervasive for the entire colonial encounter with Americas (Todorov 1999). Their relationship cannot liberate itself from its initial master/slave framework (Hulme 1986, 205).

Before Friday's falling on his knees in front of his new master, Robinson would mention companionship only twice: once when his dog died of an old age after sixteen years, and once when he saw a shipwreck of a European vessel, longing, admittedly for the first time in his solitary life, after the society of 'but one soul saved out of this ship... that I might but have had one companion, one fellow-creature, to have spoken to me and to have conversed with' (Defoe 1719, 240). That sudden need for companionship produced a warm, irresistible resolution to get himself 'a servant, and, perhaps, a companion or assistant'. But instead of a potentially unruly and bellicose European, the companion appears in the guise of an exquisitely white-looking man of colour, who becomes singled out by not being killed. To that Friday famously responded thus: '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 for ever' (ibid, 260–261). This archetypal scene of colonial libidinality assumes a standing individual whose feet has been willingly put on a head of a non-individual, or, at most, of an individual-to-be in some indefinite future moment. Friday was, no doubt, humanized (or individualized): he speaks English, if a Pidgin one (the first word he gets to know is 'Master', which for him becomes Robinson's proper name), is clothed, does not eat other men but boiled and roast meat, works diligently, and is even christened by the high priest of the island. The 'Massa', however, never let go of an unfounded fear – unfounded because, according to Robinson's own account, they 'lived there perfectly and completely happy' (ibid, 283) – that Friday would once return to his nation, bring a hundred or two of his countrymen and make a feast upon him, forgetting 'all his obligation to' him (ibid, 287). That is, however, impossible, because 'Friday works like a slave and loves like a child. In addition, he performs many of the housekeeping functions and duties of a wife' (Grapard 1995, 46).

Let us in the end turn to one obvious fact: *Robinson Crusoe* is decidedly a gendered story, a story about a *man*, or perhaps about men. True, at the beginning and at the end of the novel, one does encounter a few female figures: his unconvincing mother, a true helpmeet of the symbolically recurrent figure of the father; a widow whom he entrusted with a sum of money who will, for her care and faithfulness, earn a name of his benefactor and steward;⁴ finally,

the products of human industry and culture, namely, the tools and books he had found on the wreck of his ship' (see Slaughter 2007, 45–8).

⁴ The 'widow' might be taken as a symbol of general benevolence with which almost everyone greets Crusoe, also remarked by Hulme (1986, 207, 213). There are many benevolent, plain-dealing, charitable, generous persons of integrity who helped Crusoe at various stages of his life, some of whose beneficence is cumulative, and has

there is a wife who appears on a penultimate page of the novel, and in a *single sentence* she is married, bore three children and died – in the novel that lengthily and painstakingly describes hunting, making candles and earthen pots, milking goats, drying grapes to make raisins, and so on. In addition to the general lack of affectivity which characterizes this virile tale, the negligible ‘wife’ episode also says something else about women. After his wife’s death, Robinson goes back to his ‘new colony in the island’, where he finds about twenty young children, begotten by five female Caribbean prisoners (captive men were slaving, women were concubines). As a true patron and landowner, he took care of his little island-society, providing it with ‘all necessary things, and particularly with arms, powder, shot, clothes, tools, and two workmen... a carpenter and a smith’; after dividing the land (reserving to himself the property of the whole), he leaves for Brazils and from there sends a vessel with some more people, ‘and in it, *besides other supplies*, I sent seven women, being such as I found proper for service, or for wives to such as would take them’. Since we may conjecture that the available women were natives of Brazil, Robinson naturally wanted his fellow Englishmen to do better and he promises ‘to send them some women from England, with a good cargo of necessaries’ (Defoe 1719, 390–391, italics mine). With the coming of English wives, we may expect, concubinage would be, to an extent at least, substituted by the proper institution of marriage.

Fiction: An Individual as *Homo Economicus*, as *Homo Politicus*

It was only in the 19th century that Robinson Crusoe became a powerful fiction, far surpassing the frames of the novel, and the frames of the adventure, itself. That is, Crusoe became a model individual only in the century of an individual – the moment in history marked by the transference of sovereignty from a sovereign monarch to a sovereign individual; the moment in which *laissez-faire* principle becomes a governing maxim of the new economic rationality; the moment when the sole owners of their own interests populated the space where free circulation of interests, in the form of goods and capital, had become possible; the moment of a deep transformation of the commonwealth and an age of reform; the moment in which a body of an individual was thoroughly shaped by the transformed politics of domesticity, the private and the public, and asymmetrical positioning of the sexes (Zaharijević 2014). Having engendered a fiction of its own – an individual, the 19th century contrived to find the name for it. That is also probably why Robinson lived through innumerable Robinsonades – several hundreds of them having been published before 1900 (Phillips 1997, 35).

Doubtlessly, one might wonder how a solitary shipwreck who would have spent three very unimaginative decades in the Caribbean, constantly fortifying his abode and accumulating what he could in his very basic economy, could have become a representative of a modern individual. This, however, ceases to be the question once we dissect the figure of the sole owner of his own interest, the subject of reform to whom the sovereignty has been transferred and who had to be ‘let go’ for a free and unimpeded circulation of interests to take place at all. On the one hand, both in economic and political imagery, an individual is simply anyone and no one in particular, a bodiless figure beyond and without time and space, a ‘one’ transferable into a state of nature or to a lonely island almost at a whim. On the other hand – and this is key, since it is almost by definition omitted from the towering waves of political

helped that after 29 years he returns to civilization as a truly rich man, a model capitalist. This important relationality becomes invisible in abridged versions of the novel, and erased from imagination based on a self-made, self-actualized man of an island.

philosophy and political economy, but is what gave true flesh to this spurious 'everyman'⁵ – an individual is the one who was, by the standards of his own time, considered sovereign and perfectible owner of his own interests, the one who knew them and acted in accordance with them, and was, therefore, granted the rights to represent himself and the right to be the sole owner of his own privacy. That was, however, not a bodiless anyone, but a white, well-to-do, metropolitan man. The two figures differ, but they also merge, hiding behind the indeterminate and seemingly interchangeable qualifiers (anyone or everyman).

In terms of political imagery, Robinson gives a frame to John Stuart Mill's famous definition of an individual: 'The only part of the conduct of *any one*, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his *independence* is, of right, *absolute*. Over himself, over his own body and mind, *the individual is sovereign*' (Mill 2001, 13). If this was an apt description of Crusoe, only some sentences further in his *Essay on Liberty* Mill would inadvertently provide one for Friday as well, introducing a potent contradiction concerning the notion of 'any one': 'Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end... Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one' (ibid, 14). Domenico Losurdo defines this benevolent despotism for 'the savage' on their right path to progress – destined to disappear in the distant, indeterminate future – as Mill's 'pedagogical dictatorship', which stands side by side with his universalist sovereignty claims (Losurdo 2011, 7). What Mill stresses here was a common liberal belief that no monarch, baron, or lord, and no state had the right to relativize this independence, simply because it belonged to an individual – it defined what an individual was. An individual is of right independent in an absolute sense, as if no baron and no society existed – as if he were not only the sovereign and a rightful possessor of his own body and mind, but also of an entire island where only birds and beasts kept company to one such body and mind. However, if the body and mind belonged to a barbarian – say, Friday – his independence was, equally of right, not absolute, because he was not an individual, but an obedient servant who could only hope for a mild and fair lord, embodied here by Robinson himself. Similar inferences could be drawn for women, who were, legally speaking, rightful possessors of their bodies and minds only in a very remote metaphorical sense.⁶

In terms of economic imagery, it is in the 19th century that Robinson became a figure used to foreground the relevance of capital, or labour, or choice, or exchange (Watson 2011). Notably, we do not find him in Adam Smith, and all these uses are remarkably absent in the 18th century, when middling sorts only began to take shape and when individual was only ambivalently on the horizon as the basic unit of society. However, in the century of an individual, Robinson is used to posit the axiom of political economy – as the basis of the two most dominant economic strands, the neoclassical and later Austrian school – according to which,

what is true for the individual is true for society... all economic phenomena are accomplished in [man in isolation], and he is so to speak a *summary of society*. In the same

⁵ My understanding of an individual is much indebted to a methodological approach described by Duncan Bell in his *The Idea of a Greater Britain*, where he argues that the understanding of the history of political thought is an exercise in retrieval and archaeological reconstruction of the languages through which past generations conceived of the world and their relationship to it, which most of the times happens not at the level of the towering waves of economic and social theory, but in the murky shallows of recondite and largely forgotten policy debates (Bell 2007, 22).

⁶ Let us remind ourselves of Carole Pateman here who argued that 'women are not *incorporated* as individuals but as women, which, in the original contract means as natural subordinates' (1988: 181).

way, the human race, taken as a whole, is a huge, collective and multiple man to whom the truths observed of individuality itself can be applied (Bastiat, qt. in Hart 2015).

Neoclassical Crusoe economics are founded on the premise that there are universally valid economic laws, that is, archetypal cases extricable from contingent historical circumstances and social conditions (Söllner 2016, 45), something to which already Marx referred with derision. As Fritz Söllner claims, 'in a way, every man in neoclassical economics lives on an island of his own' (ibid, 61).

Robinson's Body and the Fantasies of Bodilessness

The invocation of the fictional figure of Robinson Crusoe had a single purpose: to be interchanged with another – politically and economically – crucial fiction, that of an individual, whose cruciality we rarely question, and which we also rarely take as fictional. As I tried to briefly demonstrate, the fiction gained its centrality in the 19th century, which is also a time of a desired return today – a time of plenitude and acknowledged entitlements. Therefore, I will claim, first, that Robinson Crusoe presents itself as the embodiment of an independent, sovereign, self-sufficient, and self-actualizing possessor, that is, an individual. Here I speak of embodiment on purpose, because it is this kind of body that is a matter of desire, a body which is almost not there, a body which can be imagined away – centrally, an invulnerable body. My second claim is that the desires of our neoliberal authoritarian era have been shaped around a fantasy of the society of Robinsons, self-sufficient individuals in the double sense: as the individuals who desire to be and succeed in being possessors of islands of their own, and as the individuals endowed with power to organize and define, restrict and delimit the meaning of possession. The abstraction of a body, that is of vulnerability, is central to both. Vulnerability is something that is a trait belonging to others – various beings dependant on, and thus subordinated to, the invulnerable individual, invulnerable because he is supposedly not defined by any relations towards others. It is this un-relationality that produces Robinson's invulnerability – undisputed capacity to survive in any circumstances, without others, beyond society. Such a capacity, however, does not depend only on a firm will, abundance of imagination, or a quick-learning mind, but also and significantly on the absence of the body – born, changing, ailing, aging. Bodilessness is a fictional precondition of invulnerability.

Neoliberal regime of rationality posits an individual as if it is outside of society, but from society, simultaneously social and alone, independent from the changing and transient realities, isolated *as if* the society's structures had not existed. Robinson provides us with an economic fantasy that every man lives on an island of his own, existing *as isolated*, even if he is among his fellow *homines economici*. For a successful application of this scheme, Robinsons need to be as rational, selfish, prudent and calculating beings, indivisible and detached from the environment (and, for that matter, detachable, that is 'abstractable' from the comparable conditions of domination and exploitation, as much as Crusoe himself was abstracted from colonialism and slavery, embroiled in those often forgotten, or abridged, parts of the 'Crusoe economics'). 'When mainstream economists choose to ignore the historical and political aspects of Defoe's story in the construction of their stories, they are in effect denying the centrality of these phenomena to explanations of economic relations' (Grapard 1995, 40). However, we should not forget that the wealth of this isolated individual, completely unhampered by society, comes to him not from his kingly efforts on the island, but from colonial appropriation, plantation slavery, capitalist contracts and absentee ownership.

On the other hand, Robinson tells us what kind of individual builds a political society 'from null', and provides us with a potent image of the desired *homo politicus*. Again, we are dealing

with a very specific type of an individual, not with – as the early 19th century writers wanted us to believe⁷ – probable everyman. Robinson is an adult white man, brought up in an aspiring lower middle-class environment in England. He is thus neither a natural man of the contract theories who builds society as if he never knew what a non-natural, that is, political framework might look like; nor is he a sailor who in his wanderings embarks the shores of a utopian island. Crusoe is an adult whose childhood we tend to erase, as much as we are invited to erase his capitalist and colonial past and future beyond the island. His absolute independence on an island had been preceded by various forms of (social) dependence in his (childhood and) youth, and is foregrounded by the fact that he happens to find a *terra nullius*, an island devoid of other people he can proclaim to be his own. Although he would live in wilderness, he himself is not wild, 'barbarous' or 'savage' – these terms remain in use for other creatures deemed to not have yet attained the status of an individual. His needs (like his skills and tools) remain social, but circumscribed and wisely adapted. He remains a white proprietor, who provides us with the axiom that property holding involves the right to subordinate. And in his virile self-sufficiency, no delirious desires appear, or rather, none other than the desire to perceive himself a king and the lord, the invulnerable owner of himself and the island which is almost an extension of his bodiless body – a body which is never ill, forever sane, independent from any infrastructures, in need of no institutional support.

And to be bodiless in this way, one needs to be a he: in the last pages of the novel, we indeed find a *femina economica*, a creature whose sole labour (or choice, exchange value, capital) could be emotional and reproductive one. In the economic and political world of Robinsons, women have but one role: they give birth to men who live on islands of their own. Women have no part in contracting, fighting, rioting, building – they appear on the scene at the very end, when all is settled to enable the growth or rather the multiplication of individuals, who then become political or economic agents. Women are defined as significantly relational – as wives they are in relation to men who would take them; instead of being indivisible (*in-dividus*), they are crucially divisible, and their whole existence is measured by their bodily capacity to become divided and redoubled. What happens to women is – they marry, bear children and die. Women remain forever tied to their bodies. They are their bodies.

As was said at the very beginning, the longing for bodilessness has its twin face in neoliberal and authoritarian regimes of rationality. Such a longing is entwined with aspirations for a world sharply divided into Robinsons and Fridays, women and men, the colonists and the colonized, and so on, a world sharply divided into those who 'are bodiless' and those bodied and vulnerable beings whose body ties them to a specific place in the hierarchy of things. In that sense, the individuals who live independently on islands of their own are full possessors not only of themselves, but of all else they *place* on their island which functions as an extension of their life, property and estate. Also, the individuals who live independently on islands of their own, are the same ones who *of right* – in order to confirm their absolute independence – define, restrict, subject and kill those who are, for some reason or other, 'islandless' or who dare to encroach the islands 'not of their own'. Demanding this right (again) – as a return to necessary and justified form of fortification of the (white and male) mastery over the island – is the true mark of our neoliberal authoritarian regimes of rationality. Thus, the society of Robinsons assumes both the perpetuation of the economic illusion of abstract equality of all

⁷ As Coleridge argued in his 1812 re-reading of *The Life and Strange Adventures*, Defoe's genius made this stranded individual not into some natural philosopher or a proto-biologist – even if 'many delightful pages & incidents might have enriched the book', because in that case 'Crusoe would cease to be the Universal Representative – the person, for whom every reader could substitute *himself* – But now nothing is done, thought, or suffered (or desired) but what *every man* can imagine himself doing, thinking, (feeling) or wishing for' (Coleridge 1812, 165).

to, in a bodiless fashion, become the masters of an island; *and* the political claim to install inequality at the very heart of that illusion, as the natural part of the mastery.

This is a paradoxical motion of a contemporary individual: forward, in providing ever more signs of complete possession over oneself; and backwards, in search of entitlements, power and privilege, supposedly phasing away in a world in which so many bodies sought and partially gained recognition in their dependent and non-self-sufficient ways. The backwards-looking fantasy of entitlement relies both on a drive to accumulate more possessions and to treat others as possessions. It assumes not only that the available number of islands would never be equally distributed (as the extensions of the possessors' body islands are in fact figured as indivisible). It also affirms the notion that the number of islands should remain restricted and available only for the true masters. For that, the world needs to return to a fictional state where everyone knew their place:⁸ when, what is more, it was Robinsons who were 'placing' other (bodies) as their phantasmal property on their own phantasmal islands. It is precisely as the phantom-possession that Eva von Redecker (2020) terms the contemporary residual entitlement, the disposition to dominium – where for some to have it, others need to be it – others whose very 'being the phantom-possession' implies embodiedness, vulnerability, and dependence – and where 'having phantom-possession' secures the opposite, the fantasized bodilessness, invulnerability, and independence. For some to be bodiless, other must remain bodies; for a full possession to take place others need to remain in the position of possessions, never to attain a status of possessors themselves.

The desire to be (or rather again become) bodiless has been framed as a rejection of any form of dependency and interdependency. The central tenet of a lonely island framework is an enduring struggle for survival: the individuals are self-sufficient because they are self-preserving and dependent solely on their own enterprising wits and sturdy frame. The society of Robinsons is markedly asocial. Industriousness, plainness, and moderation, coupled with the lack of any complex desires – other than to possess – turns them into the ones who owe nothing to society, not only to others, but to its infrastructures and institutions: each one is a society of his own. Framed as Robinson, a human is, almost by nature, not dependent; framed thus, a human is also never hungry, cold, ill, divisible: the human is *without* a body – since it either lives on an imaginary Caribbean island, free from illness, infirmities and insanity; or has someone, like Friday, to take care of him when young, infirm and old; or cannot ever get pregnant, that is *become divisible*. Society of Robinsons wants to supersede a society organized around bodies and vulnerability; to erase its potential to make everyone equal in their vulnerability, something utterly inadmissible within the frame of an arithmetic aggregate of isolated and deserving individuals. The fantasy of the 'society of Robinsons' is a fantasy of an asocial society of inventive bodiless entrepreneurs, who are outside or beyond the bonds that make one vulnerable. But it is also, and at the same time, a fantasy of a deeply structured society of the invulnerable – of the perpetual colonizers who of right turn nature and people into property, manage and place them as their rightful possession, and treat them as a pure sum of well-calculated needs.

The desire to be bodiless, or to return to the fictional time of bodilessness, is not an innocent fantasy: it revolves around entitlements, possession, and conflict. Taking back control

⁸ In her text 'Possessive Nationalism', which considers how property and relations of ownership give a specific form to contemporary racisms and nationalisms (in the post-Brexit, post-Trump era), Brenna Bhandar defines the contemporary fantasy of entitlement and *terra nullius* as a fantasy of a return to a simpler, secure time of plenitude, when everyone knew their place (Bhandar 2018). Her insistence that the 'current intensifications of racism, right-wing populism and globalized, neoliberal forms of capitalist exploitation require us to find ways to *estrangle* and *depose* the possessive individual and its practices, desires, and habits that are the foundation of contemporary political formations' (ibid), is completely in line with my own argument in this text.

and making oneself, or your country (your island) great again, in the times of neoliberalism, assumes a return to the time of individual, who has a servant who puts his non-white head under one's foot as a token of swearing to be a slave forever; having a woman who only marries, bears children, and dies; having your fellow countrymen who continue to accumulate the wealth of your island, which remains the sole property, an extended body of a rightful master and possessor, who reaches out to other island-proprietors in an open exchange, which is then the name for a society.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Zaharijević, Adriana. 2020. "Becoming a Master of an Island Again: On the Desire to be Bodiless" *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 23(2), pp. 107–119. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.322>

Submitted: 09 April 2020

Accepted: 01 July 2020

Published: 15 December 2020

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