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

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Bodies and fantasies

This text is about contemporary bodies and accompanying fantasies about bodilessness.[1] 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-actualising individuals. Both fantasies have been invested in creating the paradigmatic figures of our time – the neoliberal *homo economicus* and the white masculine master of his property and affairs. I wager that both regimes build on the fiction of an independent, sovereign, self-sufficient, and self-actualising being – that is, an individual. The supposition I begin with is that the notion of the individual is misleading because it acts as a paradigm of a featureless anyone, both in economic and political terms. 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 body, which rests upon numerous erasures of vulnerability and inter/dependence.

To counter the misleading notion of the 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, that is, 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 properties, which are, for various reasons, denied the capacity to be self-actualising, indivisible, and independent.

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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. Many of us were taught in school that this book was a paradigm of an adventure novel. 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"[2]), easily transforms into a survival instruction manual. As Virginia Woolf claimed, he is a model of a "naturally cautious, apprehensive, conventional, and solidly matter-of-fact intelligence," a creature easily freed from socially moulded desires, turning them into well-calculated needs.[3] For this reason, already in the 19th century, Robinson often acted as a blueprint of an emerging economic man, and 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 their interlocutors proclaim utterly unrealistic, Judith Butler would also begin one of their 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.[4]

Butler's fictional self-sufficient creature, set to use violence to foreground his independence represented by his possessions, has also been identified with Robinson

2 Mary L. Bellhouse, "On Understanding Rousseau's Praise of Robinson Crusoe," *Canadian Journal of Social and Political Theory/Revue canadienne de theorie politique et sociale* 6, no. 3 (1982).

3 Virginia Woolf, "Defoe," in *The Common Reader*, Ebook (London: The Hogarth Press, 1925), n.p., https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300031h.html#C08.

4 Judith Butler, "Interpretare la non violenza," *Aut Aut* 384 (2019): 12.

Crusoe, although just in passing. Why do 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," I want first to see what this fiction provided us with, to then see how it frames our economic and political fantasies today.[5]

The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner, to use the book's original title, 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, an early plantation owner and slave-trader – 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 faraway lands). Unlike "the real Robinson," castaway Alexander Selkirk, who spent four years and four dreadful months on a remote Pacific island, Robinson survives – entirely 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.[6] 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.[7]

What Robinson needs is circumscribed and wisely adapted. It never turns into a delirious caricature of the civilisation from which he has been temporarily banished,

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5 Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters. Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492–1797* (London: Methuen, 1986), 186.

6 So much so that one wonders how this sudden erasure of society makes almost no imprint on his mind. Turnier'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, Turnier'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. Anthony Purdy, "From Defoe's 'Crusoe' to Tournier's 'Vendredi': The Metamorphosis of a Myth," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 11, no. 2 (1984): 225–226.

7 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, Ebook (1719; reis., Planet eBook, n.d.), 164–165, https://www.planetebook.com/robinson-crusoe/. Further citations in text.

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. Robinson always works – and keeps accounts of that work. This jack-of-all-trades was compelled to learn and relearn 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 the Lockean vein, labour is necessarily linked to property. It is almost as if, for the island to become a possession, the conquest must come with 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"[8] – 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.[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" (128). His is a gaze of an invulnerable self-sufficient settler who, by mixing his labour with the lush nature, becomes its lonely but rightful proprietor. For that reason, in the words of James Joyce, Robinson Crusoe is the true symbol of the British conquest – in the early 18th century, only "a prophecy of empire," which a century later turned into a myth promoting popular colonialism.[10]

And we are compelled to agree with Joyce here. Robinson is not the natural man in the state of nature. He 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 this land does so not as the one who belongs to nature. Neither does he do that as a "civilised" man who observes God's

8 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689; reis., London: Rivington, 1824), 5, 27.

9 James Mill, *Government* (London: J. Innes, 1825), 9.

10 Quoted in Richard Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure* (London: Routledge, 1997), 33–34.

grace and providence in nature, accepting that he is no more than a meagre part of some graceful scheme. Robinson is a plain but god-like schemer, thoroughly shaped by the civilisation 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.[11]

In that sense, Robinson's state of nature is not a Hobbesian wolfish dystopia, Lockean naturalised domesticity, or Rousseau's haven of noble savages; it is instead a small colony that – peopled or not – serves as a model of primitive accumulation.[12]

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" (191). In an imaginary kingly fashion, and there being no other to dispute or rebel against "his sovereignty or command" (165), he treats the land and all it bestows as an emperor.[13] 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 (emphasis added; 310).

11 Ian Watt, "*Robinson Crusoe* as a Myth," *Essays in Criticism* 1, no. 2 (1951): 100.

12 Stephen Hymer, "Robinson Crusoe and the Secret of Primitive Accumulation," *Monthly Review* 63, no. 4 (2011): 19.

13 Ian A. Bell, "King Crusoe: Locke's Political Theory in Robinson Crusoe," *English Studies* 69, no. 1 (1988).

Thus, the perfect subjection of *his* people comes only from his good will not to kill them, like the beasts and the birds he undoubtedly possessed, but to "place them" like a patron, father and benefactor.

Although the last long quotation reveals certain cheerfulness, since Crusoe finally found some company after two and a half decades, one needs to be wary of such a supposition. He is, on the 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, producing a sense of continual, unhindered prospering. But there is still one affect that stands out in Robinson's story – 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."[14] There is, of course, a semblance of the Lockean absolute lord of his person and possessions, who, although wildly free, always remains fearful for what he is a proprietor of – his life, liberty, and estates. Fear was also 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.[15]

In the case of Robinson, years pass before any other to appear in sight. And, 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 build walls and fences manically) and with arms which he knows how to use. He reserves for himself the right to war against all others, although no others are anywhere 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 sovereignty, hinges on his intense *social* fear, which translates into subordination or annihilation of others.

The others are a source of fear, possible migrants besieging Crusoe's realm, the land of which he is, in his mind, a sovereign and rightful possessor. Moreover, these migrants belong to other races, and 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 17 "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"; for him, brotherhood with cannibals is beyond imagination (286–287). This applies to "my new man Friday" as well.

14 Hymer, "Robinson Crusoe," 27.

15 Locke, *Two Treatises*, 159; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651; reis., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 98.

This unlikely "friendship" begins with an assumption of privilege and cultural superiority, so pervasive for the entire colonial encounter with the Americas.[16] Their relationship cannot liberate itself from its initial master–slave framework.[17]

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 old age after 16 years, and once when he saw a shipwreck of a European vessel, longing, admittedly for the first time in his solitary life, for 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" (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:

> 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 (260–261).

This archetypal scene of colonial libidinality assumes a standing individual whose feet have 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, humanised (or individualised): he speaks English, if a Pidgin English (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 account, they "lived there perfectly and completely happy" (283) – that Friday would once return to his nation, bring hundred or two of his countrymen, and make a feast upon him, forgetting "all his obligation to" him (287). Yet that is 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."[18]

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 novel's beginning and end, one does encounter a few female figures: his unpersuasive mother, a true helpmeet of the symbolically recurrent figure of the father; and a widow, whom

16 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

17 Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 205.

18 Ulla Grapard, "Robinson Crusoe: The Quintessential Economic Man?" *Feminist Economics* 1, no. 1 (1995): 46.

he entrusted with a sum of money, who will, for her care and faithfulness, earn a name of his benefactor and steward.[19] Finally, there is a wife who appears on a penultimate page of the novel, and, in a *single sentence*, she is married, bears three children, and dies – in the novel that lengthily and painstakingly describes hunting, making candles and earthen pots, milking goats, drying grapes to make raisins, etc. In addition to the general lack of affectivity which characterises this virile tale, the negligible "wife" episode also says something else about women. After his wife's death, Robinson returns to his "new colony in the island," where he finds about 20 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 Brazil 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" (390–391). 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 adventure. 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 the *laissez-faire* principle becomes a governing maxim of the new economic rationality; the moment when the sole owners of their interests populated the space where the free circulation of interests, in the form of goods and capital, had become possible; the moment of a profound transformation of the commonwealth during an age of reform; the moment in which the transformed politics of domesticity thoroughly shaped the individual body, the

19 The "widow" might be taken as a symbol of general benevolence with which almost everyone greets Crusoe, also remarked by Hulme (*Colonial Encounters*, 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 helped that after 29 years he returns to civilisation 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-actualised man of an island.

private and the public spheres, and asymmetrical positioning of the sexes.[20] Having engendered a fiction of its own – that is, the fiction of an individual – the 19th century contrived to find the name for it. That is also probably why Robinson lived through innumerable Robinsonades – hundreds of them having been published before 1900.[21]

Undoubtedly, one might wonder how the solitary survivor of a shipwreck – who would have spent three unimaginative decades in the Caribbean (constantly fortifying his abode and accumulating what he could in his 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 interest, the subject of reform to whom the sovereignty has been transferred, and who had to be "let go" for the free and unimpeded circulation of interests to take place at all. On the one hand, 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 philosophy and political economy, but is what gave actual flesh to this spurious "everyman"[22] – an individual is the one who, by the standards of his own time, was considered the sovereign and perfectible owner of his 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 privacy. This individual, however, was 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 frames 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*

20 Adriana Zaharijević, *Ko je pojedinac? Genealoško propitivanje ideje građanina* (Loznica: Karpos, 2014).

21 Phillips, *Mapping Men*, 35.

22 My understanding of an individual is much indebted to a methodological approach described by Duncan Bell in his *The Idea of a Greater Britain. Empire and the Future World Order 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 22, 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 time 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.

> is, of right, *absolute*. Over himself, over his own body and mind, *the individual is sovereign* (emphasis added).[23]

If this were an apt description of Crusoe, only some sentences further in his *Essay on Liberty* would Mill inadvertently provide one for Friday as well, introducing a potent contradiction concerning the notion of "anyone":

> 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.[24]

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.[25] Mill stresses a common liberal belief that no monarch, baron, lord, or state had the right to relativise 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 only in a very remote metaphorical sense legally rightful possessors of their bodies and minds.[26]

In terms of economic imagery, it was in the 19th century that Robinson became a figure used to foreground the relevance of capital, or labour, or choice, or exchange.[27] Notably, we do not find him in the thinking of Adam Smith. All these uses are remarkably absent in the 18th century, when middling sorts only began to take shape, and when the individual was only ambivalently on the horizon as the basic unit of

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23 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859; reis., Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 13.

24 Mill, 14.

25 Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism. A Counter-History* (London: Verso, 2011), 7.

26 Let us remind ourselves of Carole Pateman here: "women are not *incorporated* as individuals but as women, which, in the original contract means as natural subordinates": *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988), 181.

27 Matthew Watson, "Competing Models of Socially Constructed Economic Man: Differentiating Defoe's Crusoe from the Robinson of Neoclassical Economics," *New Political Economy* 16, no. 5 (2011).

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 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 (emphasis added).[28]

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, which Marx already referred to with derision.[29] As Fritz Söllner claims, "in a way, every man in neoclassical economics lives on an island of his own."[30]

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 have tried to briefly demonstrate, the fiction gained its centrality in the 19th century, which is also a time of the desired return today – a time of plenitude and acknowledged entitlements. Therefore, I will first claim that Robinson Crusoe presents itself as the embodiment of an independent, sovereign, self-sufficient, and self-actualising possessor, that is, the embodiment of an individual. Here I speak of embodiment on purpose, because this kind of body is a matter of desire, an almost non-existent body, a body which can be imagined away. My second claim is that the libidinal economies 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 the power to organise and define,

28 Frédéric Bastiat as quoted in David Hart, "Literature in Economics, and Economics as Literature II: The Economics of *Robinson Crusoe* from Defoe to Rothbard by way of Bastiat," David Hart's Webpage, June 28, 2015, http://davidmhart.com/liberty/Papers/Bastiat/CrusoeEconomics/DMH_CrusoeEconomics.html.

29 Fritz Söllner, "The Use (and Abuse) of Robinson Crusoe in Neoclassical Economics," *History of Political Economy* 48, no. 1 (2016): 45.

30 Söllner, 61.

restrict, and delimit the meaning of possession. The abstraction of a body, that is, vulnerability, is central to both.

The 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 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 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."[31] However, we should not forget that the wealth of this isolated individual, utterly 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 nothing, and provides us with a potent image of the desired *homo politicus*. Again, we are dealing with a particular type of individual, not with – as the early 19th-century writers wanted us to believe[32] – 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, the political) framework might look like, nor is he a sailor who, in his wanderings, embarks on 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 finds a *terra nullius*, an island devoid of other people he can proclaim to be his own. Although

31 Grapard, "Robinson Crusoe," 40.

32 As Samuel Taylor 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 protobiologist – 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": Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia II*, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. George Whalley (1812; reis., Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984, emphasis added), 165.

he would live in the wilderness, he is not wild, "barbarous" or "savage" – these terms remain in use for other creatures deemed not to 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 but forever sane, independent from any infrastructures, needing 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 (but also choice, exchange, and capital) could be emotional and reproductive. In Robinsons' economic and political world, 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, or 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 become political or economic agents. What happens to women is they marry, bear children, and die – and they do as much in a single sentence. Women remain forever tied to their bodies. They *are* their bodies.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, 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 colonised, etc.; 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 acts 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* – 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) – a return to the necessary and justified form of fortifying the (white and male) mastery over the island – is the true mark of our authoritarian libidinal economies. Thus, the society of Robinsons assumes both (i) the perpetuation of the economic illusion of abstract equality of all to, in a bodiless fashion, become the masters of an island, *and* (ii) 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 on a drive to accumulate more possessions and treat others as possessions. It assumes 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 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.[33] And when, what is more, it was Robinsons who were "placing" other (bodies) as their phantasmal property on their phantasmal islands. It is precisely as the phantom-possession that Eva von Redecker 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 fantasised bodilessness, invulnerability, and independence.[34] For some to be bodiless, other must remain bodies; for full possession to take place, others need to stay in the position of possessions, never attaining the status of possessors themselves.

The desire to be (or become) bodiless has been framed as rejecting 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 dependant solely on their 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 – turn 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, or 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 it when young, infirm, and old; or cannot ever get pregnant, that is, *become divisible*. The society of Robinsons wants to supersede a society organised 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 "society of Robinsons" is a fantasy of an asocial society of inventive bodiless entrepreneurs outside or beyond the bonds that make one vulnerable. But it is also, and

33 Brenna Bhandar ("Possessive Nationalism: Race, Class and the Lifeworlds of Property," *Viewpoint Magazine*, February 1, 2018) defines this 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.

34 Eva von Redecker, "Ownership's Shadow: Neoauthoritarianism as Defense of Phantom Possession," *Critical Times* 3, no. 1 (2020).

at the same time, a fantasy of a deeply structured society of the invulnerable – of the perpetual colonisers 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 and making oneself or your country (your island) great again, in the times of neoliberalism, assumes a return to the time of the individual, who has a servant who puts his non-white head under one's foot as a token of swearing to be enslaved forever; having a woman who 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.

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