

Crusoe, Friday and the Raced Market Frame of Textbook Economics Pedagogy

Matthew Watson, University of Warwick

Reading *Robinson Crusoe* is never a pleasant experience. Defoe's eponymous character was intended to act as entertainment for his early eighteenth-century English readership. He was also scripted as a role model, someone for whom hard work and careful economic planning pays rich dividends. What the contemporary reader finds, however, is a shameless bully who through the most coercive means possible always get his way, enriching himself in the process at other people's expense. The time he spends alone on his desert island working through in his mind how he wants his story to end is an imperial fantasy. He places himself in some sort of biblical position as the 'first man' who is unrestricted in his ability to paint his life onto the canvas of a pristine natural landscape. He is no such thing, of course, because he uses this self-claimed status to act as the 'first man' of a commercial world that is clearly very much already part of the lived reality back at home, whereby he does not see a natural landscape at all so much as something of marketable value that can be exploited for the money it will eventually put in his pocket. Even the assumption that it is *his* desert island is a deceit drawn from the experiences of English imperialism into which he was socialised as a young man. He thinks nothing of making Friday into a stranger in his own land, a specific condition that has become impossible to ignore once again in the wake of the executive order travel ban that has done so much to blight this conference.

Fast forward three hundred years and none of Defoe's original plot lines have survived the process of being systematically unwritten by more recent generations of novelists. Everywhere you turn will provide you with yet another example of how all those who were rendered voiceless as Defoe allowed Crusoe to act out his imperial fantasy – women, people of colour – have been given a voice to tell the story of their engagement with a white male colonial settler from their own perspective. Everywhere except one place, that is. Economics textbooks remain the only medium that has proved immune to a complete reworking of Defoe's characterisation of Crusoe and Friday and to consequently ignore their significance as distinctly racialised signifiers of human 'worth'.

Robinson Crusoe is typically seen as the founding text in the tradition of the individualistic English-language novel. Crusoe himself was a literary hero in ways that had never been seen before, being animated by questions of neither love nor honour, but by straightforward economic self-preferment. Money and access to the social status that money can buy continued to be a staple of the English-language novel for at least the next two centuries. But no book placed on a pedestal so much as *Robinson Crusoe* did the slow, plodding, tedious details of a life devoted to steady capital accumulation. The early marginalists of the late nineteenth century saw in Crusoe what they were otherwise missing when challenged by the historically-oriented economists of their day to populate their new (and, at that time, very abstract) economic theories with someone who at least might be considered to approximate a real person. The success of Crusoe as some sort of neoclassical homo economicus persuaded the marginalists to push his use in all sorts of new directions: from their basic underlying conception of the market to economic theories of decision-making in both production and consumption and, from there, also on to economic theories of exchange and trade. It was at this point that they moved from an initial Robinson Crusoe case of a single economic agent on a desert island to

the subsequent Robinson Crusoe case of a two-person economy in which the desert island setting nonetheless permits exchange and trade to take place. Enter Friday.

But enter Friday *how* exactly? Not as a colonised subject whose future is determined for him via the barrel of a coloniser subject's gun. Not as a person with a history to reveal but even whose name is of such little relevance to the novel's eponymous narrator that the reader is left only to guess at what it might be. Not as a potential plot void in desperate need of subsequent characterisation at the hands of feminist, postcolonial and decolonial writers who have brought him to life in ways that Defoe simply disqualified. Bizarrely given the nature of the original text, Friday entered into economics as simply another homo economicus figure, where his name mattered not as a broader signifier of the inequalities of the imperial economy but as merely a 'someone else' for turning a one-person economic model into a two-person economic model. As Crusoe retains an element of his 'first man' status as the marginalists' original neoclassical homo economicus, this means that Friday is presented as just another Crusoe. Crusoe and Friday are thus treated formally as equals who market institutions allow to come together economically as voluntary contracting partners. They instinctively recognise one another's equal status in front of the law and it is this that allows them each to act out their prescribed lives as the same neoclassical homo economicus. Economists' Crusoe and Friday figures are exceptionally important pedagogical tools for teaching the beginning student how market institutions operate and why they are to be preferred over all other ways of organising everyday economic life. However, to perform the pedagogical function that the textbooks have in mind for them, they must behave antithetically to what has historically been implied by the 'Crusoe' and 'Friday' signifiers. Friday is therefore simply lifted out of one imperial fantasy and placed in another.

The Watson paper for the *New Political Economy* special issue thus reflects the theme of his ongoing UK Economic and Social Research Council Professorial Fellowship project, 'Rethinking the Market'. One of the project's focal points is to learn more about the way in which basic market principles are taught in economics so that they socialise students into a largely unquestioning attitude when faced with the claims of market ideology. Revealing the difference between the economics textbooks' Crusoe and Friday figures and the broader meaning of the 'Crusoe' and 'Friday' signifiers is an important task in this regard.

However, there is a lot more going on here than simply saying that economists typically get Crusoe and Friday wrong. The feeling has perhaps never been more intense than in the wake of the global financial crisis that the subject field's market models have failed. This is failure in a practical sense. In addition to that, though, a critical historiography of the use of Crusoe and Friday figures in economics pedagogy supports the claim that economists' market models also fail in an ontological and a moral sense. They provide a basis for presenting market relations as fundamentally relations of equals, where we know that this is not the case in practice, and where we also know that to gloss over the imperial context in which market ideology first took shape is to engage in politically expedient historical revisionism. In destabilising Defoe's original plot lines numerous writers have challenged their racist undertones by providing Friday with the ability to talk back to his colonial oppressor. If the economics textbooks are to remain the last place where the racialised 'Crusoe' and 'Friday' signifiers are accepted uncritically, then the theory of market exchange they seek to popularise should become another target of the decolonising spirit.