

“The Folly of Beginning a Work Before We Count the Cost”

Anarcho-Primitivism in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*

Michael Gurnow

“You don’t own property; property owns you.”

–B. Traven (*Treasure of Sierra Madre*)

Anarcho-primitivism states that humanity’s problems began once we abandoned our hunter-gatherer lifestyle in favor of an agrarian one. By contrast, our new sedentary way of life leads to social stratification and overpopulation due to a division of labor and food commodities being produced to the point of surplus.

Newfound labor-intensive activities restricted our leisure time thereby increasing stress. Physical health declined when nutritional diversity was forsaken for food bearing the highest yield, which—for the first time in our history—allowed for the possibility of mass starvation via crop and/or herd failure. Population expansion forced us to begin living apart from our natural environment, i.e. in urban habitats.

Due to close proximity and the demand for frequent long-distance travel, disease became prevalent. We not only forgot how to be self-sufficient but became dependent on technology. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud argues that this superficial domestication within an artificial construct created a mass pathology, as evidenced by the presence of large-scale warfare

Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* depicts this anthropological causation. Defoe presents a character that is divested of civilization and summarily benefits—physically, psychologically, emotionally, and morally—as he is forced to live a primitive existence. Sadly, then he makes the decision to replicate his lost culture and begins to suffer from many of the same ailments which he experienced prior to his separation from modern society.

When Robinson Crusoe is first cast ashore, on a remote tropical island near Venezuela, he worries whether he can survive. His fear is justified because, due to specialization, he does not possess the skills to be self-sustaining. He knows nothing of how to construct a shelter or identify wild edibles. Only with the aide of a firearm and a naive attitude toward the dangers of tropical water, does he progress through his first year.

By the commencement of his second year on the island, Crusoe has not only built a “castle,” but one replete with rafters, a thatched roof, shelving, two entrances, and a cellar. He fashions a table and chair along with various tools, such as a shovel and makeshift wheelbarrow. Through trial-and-error, he renders tallow from goat fat and crafts candles as well as a lamp. He learns to process food (dried grapes). Within the ensuing decade, he masters pottery, discovers the secrets of baking, builds two boats, constructs a Dutch oven, teaches himself the art of basket weaving, and successfully tans hides and tailors his own clothing.

Crusoe is pleasantly surprised that his needs are not only met, but surpassed by the island’s resources; “I possessed infinitely more than I knew what to do with.” He does become seriously ill shortly after his arrival but acute sickness is never mentioned again during his remaining 27 years on the island. This can be attributed to his heightened constitution, due not only to the nutritional diversity which the island affords—turtle, goat, fowl, hare, fish,

eggs, and fruit, the latter in the form of grapes, melons, lemons, limes, and oranges—but his increased physical activity and improved mental health.

He hosts an almost perpetual sense of accomplishment atop being relieved of social and familial pressures, expectations, and demands. Once he establishes a routine by which to sustain his daily needs, he finds that he is in possession of ample leisure time, whereby he takes up the “hobbies” (by definition, enterprises which are not vital to survival) of woodworking (as opposed to carpentry), tailoring, pottery, baking, and basket weaving.

Civilization demands that humans gain and retain absolute control. This is achieved by the immediate environment being domesticated so it no longer poses a threat before it is exploited in order to better serve a populace. Once this is completed, any (perceived) dangers posited by fellow humans are addressed in a like manner. This totalitarian approach to existence is in contrast to organic integration. Anthropocentrism quickly transforms into ethnocentrism. Sadly, Crusoe begins replicating the civilization and society from which he has been cast.

HIS CIVILIZED TENDENCIES FIRST AFFECT only him. He observes that the climate does not require one to be clothed and, as we see with the aborigines of the region, is actually prohibitive. His decision to remain almost fully dressed heightens the risk of dehydration.

He erects a second shelter though he states he does so for aesthetic reasons. One could argue this is a preventative measure should something happen to his “castle” (as witnessed when an earthquake occurred and a hurricane struck the island during the first year), but Crusoe’s capricious want foreshadows his ensuing, and otherwise avoidable, grief

During a week-long furlong to his second dwelling, he leaves a kid tethered at his “castle.” The goat nearly dies of dehydration. Though the animal was not kept as food, this incident nevertheless presages the trials of animal husbandry, to which he will later devote himself. When he realizes that his gunpowder supply is diminishing, he begins utilizing traps and snares. However, shortly thereafter and believing such to be more economic, he builds a corral and proceeds to tame and breed goats.

Likewise, he “accidentally” (after disposing of what he thought were mere husks) sows barley (before adding rice to his crop). He then dedicates his energies to horticulture. Granted, agriculture offers him the possibilities of butter, bread, and cheese, but it isn’t necessary for survival and results in a master-slave relationship that, inevitably, will be conveyed to people.

Crusoe was contented—and survived—upon the island’s resources, yet when he gains access to commodities which he prefers (as opposed to requires), he arbitrarily obligates himself: Not only must he plant, cultivate, and render seed, he has to feed, water, and supervise the goats and maintain their pen, atop crafting storage units.

In a survival situation, any unnecessary expenditure, especially ones which run the risk of injury (such as carpentry), is undeniably foolish. Though we could defend his decision to build a second shelter, few will argue that food storage isn’t a luxury, especially when produce is available year-round, and—more importantly—rearing livestock is dangerous.

These stresses are compounded by the possibility of crop failure and livestock losses as leisure time summarily diminishes due to agricultural responsibilities. Moreover, these “conveniences” restrict Crusoe’s naturally diversified diet.

Crusoe’s mental and emotional strait is further exacerbated when he discovers a foreign footprint in the sand. After 15 years of having “nothing to covet,” he fears that “they [natives] [will] find my enclosure, destroy all my corn, and carry away all my flock of tame goats, and I should perish at last for mere want.”

It is worthy to note that Crusoe refuses to acknowledge that, prior to his agricultural endeavors, a hunter-gatherer existence had sustained him and, thus, if such destruction were to occur, it would not result in his inevitable starvation. Upon finding the mysterious print, he spends three days in hiding and only reappears when he can no longer afford to neglect his goats. Had a threat been present, his arbitrary dependency upon livestock might have cost Crusoe his life.

He devotes the next two years to reinforcing his “castle” and, to better veil his herd, builds another corral further into the island, all while abstaining from fire craft or engaging in any leisure activities for fear of being discovered.

At the heart of Crusoe’s paranoia lies his residual culturally-induced imperialism: Aware that other individuals might manifest themselves as a potential society, he claims private ownership. He believes a hierarchy must neces-

sarily exist—of which, he presumes he naturally resides at its apex—and, ergo, that others will desire what he “owns” as a consequence, so much so that he lives in crippling fear for almost a decade.

Whereas, he once rejoiced that, “I was removed from all the wickedness of the world here; I had neither the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, nor the pride of life,” when the mere thought of a society presents itself, it all returns.

His propriety over objects and animals quickly metamorphoses into domestication and ownership of people. Once more, this is merely an extension of one of civilization’s creeds: A person must control one’s surroundings.

He subsequently rescues a Caribbean native from being cannibalized—not on moral grounds—but because Crusoe is in need of additional labor. Unnecessary augmenting the island’s population puts both parties at risk of contracting disease and is a mortal liability for Crusoe given that the new arrival is a cannibal.

Crusoe’s apprehension is evident in his forcing the aborigine to sleep outside the “castle’s” fortifications. In hopes of subduing the threat, he neutralizes the native by eradicating his identity.

Crusoe issues him an English title, “Friday” (thus depriving him of his given name), Christianizing him (negating his religion), and—perhaps paradoxically—assimilating him to European customs (dispossessing him of his culture) the exact process slavers exerted over their captives.

A further irony is that Crusoe was once enslaved yet regards and treats Friday as ethnically subservient, as epitomized by Crusoe’s insistence that Friday refer to him as “Master.” Crusoe proceeds to rescue others and tyrannize them, i.e., a Spanish refugee is described as “my [Crusoe’s] Spaniard.”

Crusoe eventually sends out a rescue mission and, in preparation for greater numbers returning, he expands crops, domesticates more goats, dries additional grapes, and weaves extra baskets in order to transport a greater amount of goods. Before the mission’s return, mutineers dock and are quelled. After subverting them, since they too are products of specialization, he teaches five of the insurgents agriculture before leaving them the island.

Years later, he returns to find the island’s population so great (children are now present after women were brought from the mainland) that he designates private plots for each of its residents. (The irony is that he postpones his return to the island, in part, due to owning a Brazilian plantation which he cannot personally oversee besides fretting about the security of his money while abroad.) Not only does he compound the dilemma by adding two workmen to the colony (growing numbers necessitate the arrival of technology in the form of a blacksmith), but he sends for more supplies and women from Brazil and England.

Of these goods, cows and hogs are included, which implies that he believes (and perhaps rightfully so by this time), that the island cannot—or will not in the near future—naturally sustain its human population.

As with his request for Brazilian women, bringing foreign fauna to the island runs the risk of importing disease which could result in the demise of the island’s indigenous livestock and, conversely, introduce the new fauna to native illness.

Thus, if—for whatever reason—the island’s populace had to resort to a hunter-gatherer existence, Crusoe’s induction of civilization, especially in the guise of agriculture, might inhibit survival because the islanders’ unregulated numbers are now dependent upon set yields (war, the consequence of class division and/or hubris, ruined a previous year’s crops), the native habitat may be unable to support present numbers, and/or the island’s ecosystem might be compromised.

When Robinson Crusoe first arrives on the island, he adopts anarcho-primitivist principles and soon finds himself happier than he had ever been. Unfortunately, he decides to abide by the dictums of civilization and, as a result, his newfound contentment promptly vanishes.

Though for many years his ensuing discomfort is singular and self-inflicted, he departs from the island after instilling its remaining members with the ideals which deprived him of a rewarding existence. The inevitable consequence is that the island’s inhabitants will not be afforded the life which Crusoe once enjoyed nor will the island be able to sustain its populace as it once had.

fifth Estate

Michael Gurnow

“The Folly of Beginning a Work Before We Count the Cost”

Anarcho-Primitivism in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/383-summer-2010/folly-beginning-work-count-cost>

Fifth Estate #383, Summer, 2010

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net