
Debating violence on the desert island: Engels, Dühring and Robinson Crusoe

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Abstract Ever since the publication in 1719 of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the novel's eponymous protagonist has had a pervasive presence in the modern social and cultural imaginary, giving rise to an entire literary genre known as Robinsonades. In *Anti-Dühring* (1877), Friedrich Engels identifies such a Robinsonade in the work of Eugen von Dühring, the target of his polemic, and draws on it for a critique of ahistorical theories of violence. The particular version of the Robinsonade Engels ascribes to Dühring is fabricated, yet a close examination of this fabrication suggests that it serves important analytic and interpretive purposes. Ironically, Engels's critique of Robinsonades is so compelling that it ends up undermining his own tendency to economic and technological reductionism. Despite Engels's attempts to distance himself from the Robinsonade he projects onto Dühring, the Crusoe story acts as a fraught supplement to his own theory of violence. In particular, it reveals the tensions in his work between, on the one hand, economic and technological reductionism, and on the other hand, attention to social, cultural and symbolic forces without which no plausible history of violence can be written.

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Ever since the publication in 1719 of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the novel's eponymous protagonist has had a pervasive presence in the modern social and cultural imaginary, giving rise to an entire literary genre known as Robinsonades (Fisher, 2005). Little studied in detail, Robinsonades derive their basic structure from the existential struggle of characters stranded in the wilderness and forced to battle for survival. Open to infinite permutations of plot and characters, Robinsonades are primarily defined by their setting: the desert island, isolated from the comforts of civilization. By casting one or more protagonists in remote and isolated conditions, Robinsonades present a powerful hypothetical scenario for social theory: freed from the parameters of modern social life, the island is rendered a state of nature



of sorts onto which various assumptions about generic human behavior can be projected. Especially popular in eighteenth and nineteenth century European literature, Robinsonades resonate with some of the major controversies in modern social and political theory concerning the nature of sociality, the origins and purposes of political life, the role of culture, civilization and technology, and human mastery over nature.

This article examines how the Robinson Crusoe figure functions as a condensation point of such debates by reconstructing the late-nineteenth-century dispute between Friedrich Engels and Eugen von Dühring about the nature and historical function of violence. Looming large in that debate – albeit disavowed by Engels and disregarded entirely by the secondary literature – is the figure of Robinson Crusoe and especially the relation between Robinson and Friday. In his *Anti-Dühring*, Engels attributes to Dühring a simplistic version of the Robinson–Friday encounter, but as it turns out this specific narrative figure is nowhere to be found in Dühring’s work. I take this fabrication as a starting point for an investigation into the historical and theoretical contexts of Robinsonades in nineteenth century social theory. I argue that Engels’s attack on Robinsonades must be contextualized in the broader cultural and scientific debates of the late nineteenth century. Around that time, the Crusoe trope started to play an increasingly important role in marginalist economics. I propose to read Engels as offering a powerful critique of the trend, in the social and political theory of his age, to draw on the Crusoe story in rather unreflective ways. Interpreted against this background, Engels’s text acquires a new punch, for it contains the inadvertent contours of an anti-colonial critique of the Crusoe trope. Yet ironically, Engels’s attack on Robinsonades and his insistence on a historical approach to theorizing violence reveals the limits of Engels’s own theory of violence. A juxtaposition of Engels’s reading of Crusoe to Daniel Defoe’s version highlights the tension in Engels’s text between his well-known tendency to economic and technological reductionism and a more nuanced historical approach to theorizing violence. A more careful engagement with the Crusoe narrative would strengthen the latter (and in my view more interesting) side of Engels’s work.

Although the dispute between Engels and Dühring may appear quaint from a contemporary vantage point, I turn to it for three reasons: first, it provides a rich case study for the different appeals social theorists have made to Robinson Crusoe and the problems such appeals raise; second, it generated one of the most important canonical texts in Marxist theory: Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* (1877), a book that continues to be of interest not only to historically minded Marxists but still has something to teach us about theorizing violence; and third, the Dühring–Engels debate brings out some of the problems of theorizing violence in terms of universal historical logics, an approach that has still not entirely gone out of fashion (see, for instance, Pinker, 2011).

Robinsonades

In a typical Robinsonade, a solitary protagonist finds himself cast on a desert island, isolated from the comforts of civilization and encountering an inhospitable nature

(Green, 1990). In contrast to the Arcadian vision of a congenial and abundant nature that invites a pastoral harmony between a bountiful wilderness and humans content to live in frugal simplicity, a Robinsonade dramatizes the struggle between man (in the fully gendered sense on the word) and nature. In a Robinsonade, one or more intrepid heroes encounter conditions of scarcity and face the considerable challenge of extracting the provisions necessary for survival by relying on labor and ingenuity. Unlike similar characters – the traveling explorer, whose role is to document non-European lands and its inhabitants, or the settler colonialist who is expected to make these lands fit for European habitation – the marooned individual is a figure of displacement, serendipitously drawn into a different world.

The genre's highly charged political and existential themes resonate with some of the major debates in eighteenth and nineteenth century social and political theory concerning modern individualism (including anxieties about the bourgeois subject – fearful, guilty, caught between conflicting desires and facing the challenge of individuality amidst increasing pressure to conformity), the role of technology and human control over nature, the ambivalence of culture and civilization (Novak, 1963; Reckwitz, 1976). Against the backdrop of modern bourgeois anxieties, Defoe's Crusoe is a redemptive figure of strength and fortitude: a pragmatic, rugged and independent entrepreneurial spirit, he is the quintessential *homo faber* in the modern European imagination. As an island king, Crusoe functions as a sovereign, fusing the themes of human mastery over nature, and European dominion over the colonial world, with the gendered figure of the sovereign and autonomous individual, master over his passions and desires (Grapard, 1995).

It is in part for these reasons that *Robinson Crusoe* is the only book that Émile, the protagonist of Rousseau's (2010 [1762]) treatise on education, is allowed to read before the age of twelve. Whereas Émile is summoned to identify with the shipwrecked Englishman in order to develop the aptitudes for a self-reliant life, in modern social theory Crusoe stands for more than the sovereign individual: unhinged from the strictures of modern societies, his island setting provides a spatially and temporally isolated biotope, a state of nature that is sufficiently indeterminate to be anywhere and nowhere and thus open to projections about human nature and generic human behavior. The Crusoe tale typifies a fictional anthropological laboratory for the study of the seemingly universal matrix of human sociality, turning Crusoe into a 'geo-poetic icon' of comparative anthropology (Gilroy, 2006, p. 659). In the words of Haken (1805), author of the five-volume *Bibliothek der Robinsone*, 'Robinson's history is a microcosm of the history of man and the progress of civilization' (p. vi, my trans.). As he offers a pliable surface on which various assumptions about human behavior and sociality can be projected, Robinson became a key trope for modern social theory (Rogers, 1972; Gellner, 1979, pp. 3–9; Bell, 1988), which is why it is not altogether surprising that he should also figure prominently in Engels's polemic against Dühring. In what follows, I introduce the Engels–Dühring debate and the role Robinson Crusoe plays in it before moving on to my analysis and its implications.



Engels versus Dühring

The immediate target of Engels's *Anti-Dühring* was Eugen von Dühring (1833–1901), a prominent German intellectual and lecturer at the University of Berlin. Dühring's work ranged from philosophy to economics, finance, mathematics, physics, law, psychology and literature. He claimed to offer a new foundation for the social sciences on the basis of an eclectic *mélange* of philosophical idealism and positivism, political utopianism, anti-capitalism, feminism and anti-semitism. Strongly influenced by Comte and Saint-Simon, and by their attempts to formulate universal historical and sociological laws, Dühring constructed an entire social theory around the claim that history is governed by the ebbs and flows of violence (Albrecht, 1927).

The claim that violence and war are the decisive forces that shape human history is by no means remarkable by nineteenth (or indeed twenty-first) century standards. Yet Dühring (1876) wanted to radicalize the claim, asserting the primacy and autonomy of what he calls 'political relations of violence' [*politische Gewaltverhältnisse*] (p. 5). Violence, Dühring contends, is and has always been the dominant force in human history, and it has led to the unjust domination of some human beings over others (Dühring, 1875a, pp. 200–201; Dühring, 1876, p. 257). According to Dühring, all forms of injustice and domination can ultimately be traced back to violence and robbery. Thus, he postulates an original violence at the core of historical development, a violence that continues to govern the present.

Inequality and injustice stem from what Dühring (1876) calls *Gewalteigenthum*, property based on violence (p. 5). The notion of *Gewalteigenthum* is Dühring's central political concept. It expresses the Rousseauian thesis that property is a type of domination and that all property ultimately results from slavery, war and subjugation (Dühring, 1875a, p. 240f.). All hitherto existing forms of social domination are consequences and effects of an original enslavement, a kind of primal scene that functions as a 'general schema' for power and subordination. Political institutions, economic relations and social hierarchies are thus all based on violence and oppression. Violence, he writes, is the 'adhesive' [*Kitt*] that holds society together (Dühring, 1875a, p. 386).

Dühring's view that violence governs history and that societies are constituted by violence through and through may seem reductionist, and this is certainly how it appeared to Engels. For Engels, violence is not the causal force of historical change but only its operator. The causality that determines violence is instead to be found in the underlying economic forces that drive the development of the *technologies* of violence and thus shape the outcomes of wars and other forms of political violence. In the face of Dühring's increasing popularity among German socialists, leaders of the newly founded *Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei*¹ urged Engels to develop this argument in writing (Merkel, 1989).² Originally serialized in installments in the party's newspaper *Vorwärts*, Engels's text was subsequently published as

Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft and became known as *Anti-Dühring* (Ullrich and Werchan, 1978).

Even though it was originally intended as a polemic against the ‘new German vulgar socialism’, Engels’s book had broader ramifications (Moufii, 2004). As it presents a very accessible (albeit highly schematic) account of Marxist theory, *Anti-Dühring* became a chartbusting success among socialists.³ It provided a conduit to the less accessible writings of Marx (especially the three volumes of *Capital*) and a lens through which a whole generation of Marxists read these texts (Riazanov, 1927, p. 199ff.; Jones, 1977, p. 82; Kopf, 1977, p. 814). Engels, in Carver’s (2003) words, ‘put Marxism on the map’ (p. 56). The book was especially influential among theorists of the Second International and contributed to the emergence of a Marxist orthodoxy steeped in an economic teleology of progress (Semjonow, 1978).

From a contemporary vantage point, the primary contribution of Engels’s theory of violence consists in a critique of Dühring’s metaphysical category of violence. Against Dühring’s view that violence is the principal causality of history, Engels stresses the political character of violence and emphasizes that as a political phenomenon, violence is never an independent variable (Balibar, 2010, p. 267). For Engels, violence always relies on instruments that in turn have to be produced using available manufacturing capacities, technologies and modes of organization. All forms of violence rely on the manufacture of tools (for example, weaponry). Furthermore, formations of violence are inextricably implicated with logics of interest and profit. As violence cannot be isolated from these historically variable economic factors, it makes little sense to conceive of it as an ahistorical force or to regard it as an anthropological constant. At issue here is not only the theory of violence but the underlying concept of history (Morfino, 2009). Engels attacks Dühring for naïvely relying on a view according to which ‘history’ consists of the political and military actions of states. Against this view, which he associates with conventional bourgeois historiography, Engels emphasizes the primacy of relations of production and exchange [*Produktions- und Austauschverhältnisse*].

At the center of Engels’s critique of Dühring is, oddly, an ironic appeal to the tale of Robinson Crusoe. Engels invokes Crusoe in his attempt to discredit social theories like Dühring’s that consider violence to be an anthropological constant. Such theories are typically based on a fictional origin story, on a mythic narrative that recounts the origins of human societies as resulting from some original violence occurring in a pre-social state of nature. In the case of Dühring, that original violence involves a master–slave schema with two isolated individuals whose encounter is structured by violence (Dühring, 1876, pp. 9–24). Unlike Hegel’s dialectic of lordship and bondage, where the relation of domination prevents the lord from attaining self-consciousness, in Dühring’s script, the master remains master and the slave remains slave. Engels glosses this scenario – not without some sarcasm – as the ‘famous original sin, when Robinson Crusoe made Friday his slave’ (MECW 25, p. 147).



The implication is that theories of violence such as Dühring's rely on an imaginary anthropological scene that inaugurates human history:

... Dühring provides no evidence. For everything is already proved through the famous original sin, when Robinson Crusoe made Friday his slave. That was an act of violence, hence a political act. And inasmuch as this enslavement was the starting-point and the basic fact underlying all past history ... it is clear that all economic phenomena must be explained by political causes, that is, by violence. (MECW 25, p. 153)

The scene in which Robinson enslaves Friday becomes the governing trope for Engels's entire theory of violence and the lens through which he criticizes Dühring's metaphysics of violence. By describing Crusoe's enslavement of Friday as the 'original sin', Engels alleges that, in Dühring's script, the violent deed functions as both origin [*Ausgangspunkt*] and basis [*Grundtatsache*] of all hitherto existing history; it represents not only the temporal beginning of human history, but also its immanent principle of movement. The tale of Robinson and Friday thus becomes the story of an origin, an origin in the foundational sense of a source from which the structural laws of history may be derived.

Engels's critique of the Crusoe tale sets up an argument regarding the economics of slavery. Insisting that the enslavement of Friday was not just the result of Robinson's intrinsic aggressiveness but a calculated move to advance his own economic interest, Engels infers that inequality precedes violence and that the Robinson–Friday encounter is a poor schema through which to argue for the primacy of violence. Slavery, Engels continues, cannot be the generic category under which all forms of oppression are subsumable, because slavery has a set of specific conditions of possibility. In order to be a slave-owner, one must fulfill two economic conditions: one must be able to provide tools for the slave's labor and one must have the means for the slave's maintenance and subsistence. Thus the historical existence of slavery is a sign of an unequal distribution of resources (MECW 25, p. 148). How can violence explain inequality if the archetypal relation of violence, namely, the scene of an original enslavement, itself presupposes inequality?

Engels later returns to the tale of Robinson and Friday in order to develop the main lines of his own, materialist, theory of violence. He quotes Dühring as saying that Robinson subjugates Friday 'sword in hand'. But:

Where did he get the sword? Even on the imaginary islands of the Robinsonades, swords have not, up to now, been known to grow on trees ... If Robinson could procure a sword for himself, we are equally entitled to assume that one fine morning Friday might appear with a loaded revolver in his hand, and then the whole relationship of 'violence' is inverted. Friday commands, and it is Robinson who has to drudge. We must apologise to the readers for returning with such insistence to the Robinson and Friday story, which

properly belongs to the nursery and not to the field of science – but how can we help it? We are obliged to apply Mr Dühring’s axiomatic method conscientiously, and it is not our fault if in doing so we have to keep all the time within the field of pure childishness. So, then, the revolver triumphs over the sword; and this will probably make even the most childish axiomatician comprehend that violence is no mere act of the will, but requires the existence of very real preliminary conditions before it can come into operation, namely, instruments, the more perfect of which gets the better of the less perfect; moreover, that these instruments have to be produced, which implies that the producer of more perfect instruments of violence, i.e. arms, gets the better of the producer of the less perfect instruments, and that, in a word, the triumph of violence is based on the production of arms, and this in turn on production in general – therefore, on ... the material means which violence has at its disposal. (MECW 25, pp. 153–154)

The first thing to note about this passage is that despite his professed apology to the reader for returning to this ‘nursery’ tale, Engels’s argument depends on the Crusoe anecdote and its inversion. The Crusoe story is not just a caricature of Dühring’s claims but also a parable to which Engels appeals – derisively – in order to conceptualize violence. Engels’s apology to the reader for returning to the anecdote and his blaming of Dühring for the childishness are therefore not entirely plausible. Engels’s case rests at least in part on the *reductio ad absurdum* of the version of the Crusoe narrative attributed to Dühring and on Engels’s offering a more persuasive rendition. The indictment of Dühring thus amounts not only to Dühring’s alleged reliance on fictional evidence. Rather, Engels charges Dühring with *misreading* this fiction. To read the story of Robinson and Friday properly, Engels implies, requires us to consider the conditions that provided Robinson with the sword and not Friday with a revolver. Once these conditions are accounted for, it will become clear that Robinson’s enslavement of Friday is not the result of a violent event but of a disparity in the technologies available to each of the characters and hence of the economic base that undergirds the availability of instruments to each side. Violence, the reader is to infer, is but the operator of a domination that finds its structural logic in the geographically uneven development of productive forces.

Given Engels’s emphasis on how Dühring misreads the encounter of Robinson and Friday, it is perhaps all the more surprising that his own readings of Dühring and Defoe are not all that careful. Indeed, Engels commits a number of gaffes, blunders that go beyond simple misreadings. For one, in Dühring’s work there is simply no mention of an encounter between Robinson and Friday. In all of his major historical, philosophical and social–scientific works published before 1878, I have been unable to find a single reference to this specific narrative figure. What Engels describes as the ‘original sin’, the ‘starting point and basic fact’ underlying Dühring’s account of history has no direct textual basis in Dühring’s work.



Engels was intimately familiar with Dühring's texts, and he owned and marked up multiple editions of Dühring's books with detailed marginalia and comments.⁴ We can therefore be reasonably confident that this was no mere oversight. The misrepresentation of Dühring's views could have been the ill-considered result of his endeavor to portray Dühring as an amateur thinker.⁵ However, closer attention to the cultural context in which the appeal to Crusoe occurs also suggests a different interpretive possibility. Engels knew that Dühring never mentioned the encounter between Robinson and Friday that Engels's text conjures as the ostensible origin and basis of all hitherto existing history. Moreover, Engels's readers were acquainted with Dühring's work; it is therefore unlikely that a blatant falsification would have gone unnoticed.

The best explanation for Engels's fabrication is that he constructed the Robinson–Friday scene by patching together a number of disconnected passages dispersed across Dühring's works. Even though Dühring never refers to the Robinson–Friday encounter, some of the structural elements of a Robinsonade are present in his texts. Dühring (1875a) conceptualizes the individual as 'sovereign' (p. 268). Elsewhere he invokes the hypothetical scene of an isolated individual who has to make decisions about how to allocate his time between various activities, a figure he sometimes (though not always) calls 'Robinson' (Dühring, 1866, p. 216; Dühring, 1875b, pp. 409, 411; Dühring, 1876, p. 9). In yet other places, Dühring (1876) refers to an encounter between two individuals, one of whom enslaves the other (pp. 9–24; see also Dühring, 1875a, pp. 199, 264). Dühring (1876, p. 9) never calls these two individuals 'Robinson' and 'Friday', and he explicitly notes that one could also imagine them cooperating equally. Engels likely drew on these passages to construct the Robinson–Friday encounter that he then projected onto Dühring.

Such a construction only makes sense if we consider the cultural context in which both authors were working. They were writing in a discursive field in which references to island castaways were regular and frequent both in literary works and increasingly in social and especially economic theory, a point alluded to by Engels's quip about the 'imaginary islands of the Robinsonades'. This reference to the Robinsonades suggests that Engels's sarcasm may be targeted not only at Dühring but at the broader cultural form that draws on the Robinson myth. At the time of Engels's writing, the Robinson figure started playing an increasingly important role in marginalist economics. I thus propose to read Engels's treatment of the Robinson–Friday encounter as a (perhaps inadvertent) contribution to a critical analysis of the Crusoe trope.

Crusoenomics

By the late 1870s, when Engels wrote *Anti-Dühring*, the Robinson Crusoe trope was a stock cultural reference point for origin stories of various kinds. From Wyss's

(1812) *Der schweizerische Robinson* through Marryat's (1841) *Masterman Ready, Or the Wreck of the Pacific*, Cooper's (1847) *The Crater*, Ballantyne's (1858) *The Coral Island* and Verne's (1874) *L'île mystérieuse*, Robinsonades had become a widespread, recurrent and familiar genre in European popular culture (Green, 1990). By 1898, Hermann Ullrich's *Robinson and Robinsonaden* counts over 700 Robinsonades, even though its bibliography remains incomplete (Fisher, 2005, p. 138). For social theory, the Crusoe trope emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, especially among economists, and by the end of the century Crusoe was a fixture in the major economic texts (Grapard and Hewitson, 2011). Before the 1840s, economists had rarely, if ever, mentioned Crusoe; neither Adam Smith nor David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Malthus or Jean-Baptiste Say drew on the Crusoe story as an allegory for economic behavior (Kern, 2011, p. 64; but see Gray, 1831, pp. 20–21). That changed in the 1850s with the appearance of the figure of the 'economic agent' in works by Gossen (1854) and Jennings (1855) (cited in White, 2011, p. 25). References to Crusoe became more widespread in the 1870s, as economists associated with the marginal revolution, such as William Stanley Jevons, Carl Menger, Alfred Marshall and Leon Walras, developed a new theory of value. For these economists, Crusoe became a central trope for displaying the principles associated with the marginal theory of value.

For economists, Crusoe serves to exhibit the ideas associated with optimization theory, the branch of microeconomics that deals with individual resource allocation. This theory relies on a particular model of the subject, an instrumentally rational individual who allocates resources in order to obtain optimal benefit (maximum satisfaction) in the present or future. Pictured as a hardy, self-sufficient (read: radically autonomous and individuated) man who orders his environment according to his preferences, divides his time and resources in a balanced manner and masters his life and island, Crusoe is the perfect icon for the rational, abstract and ahistorical individual on which modern microeconomics bases its models (Watt, 1996). As he is alone on his island, Robinson has to divide his time between different types of activities like fishing and hunting, and he has to decide how to allocate his time between work and leisure. According to Marshall (1890, p. 831) and von Böhm-Bawerk (1930 [1890], p. 102), Crusoe makes these decisions on the basis of how much utility or surplus he derives from each activity. Jevons (1879, p. 87) appeals to the 'varying esteem and desire' with which 'Robinson Crusoe must have looked upon each of his possessions' as a way to explain the marginalist redefinition of value in terms of utility. Equipped with pen and paper and obsessed with chronicling his life, Crusoe illustrates rational optimization according to microeconomic principles in an illuminating and witty form. Hence, Robinson Crusoe becomes the emblematic 'rational economic individual' for neoclassical economic theory (White, 1987, p. 217).

Engels's *Anti-Dühring* was written during the early years of the marginal revolution, that is, before the heyday of economists' fascination with Crusoe, but Engels was clearly aware of the trend. Already in 1857, Marx had scoffed – in the



unpublished manuscript that later became known as the introduction to the *Grundrisse* – at how riveted economists were to the Crusoe narrative (MECW 28, pp. 17–18). Marx references Carey's 1837 *Principles of Political Economy*, Proudhon's 1840 *What Is Property?* and Bastiat's 1845 *Economic Sophisms*, books that all draw in one way or another on the Crusoe setting for their arguments. In contrast to the later marginalist scenarios, these earlier references to Crusoe register not the allocation and optimization decisions of instrumentally rational economic subjects but the problem of an isolated individual providing for himself (Carey, 1837, p. 7); the struggle over property between owners and workers (Proudhon, 1994 [1840], pp. 35–66); and the fallacies of protectionism and mercantilism (Bastiat, 2007 [1845], pp. 399–408).

In contrast to Engels, for whom Robinson is a slave-master, in none of the economic textbooks does the Crusoe metaphor allegorize a relation of slavery. Indeed, what economists typically omit (with the exception, perhaps, of Proudhon) is that the story of Robinson Crusoe as told by Daniel Defoe is one of violence, colonialism and slavery and that Crusoe was not a penniless castaway but a plantation-owner and slave-trader. According to Defoe's novel, Crusoe is an English adventurer who goes to sea in the mid-seventeenth century and settles in Brazil where he acquires a plantation. He joins an expedition to bring slaves from West Africa but is shipwrecked in a heavy storm. Crusoe is the only survivor and is marooned on a remote island where he spends 28 years. Having managed to retrieve many items from the wreck, he builds a gated compound, keeps a calendar and lives of hunting, agriculture and farming livestock. A total of 25 years into his sojourn, he rescues an indigenous man who had been captured by cannibals roaming the island. Crusoe names the man 'Friday', teaches him English, converts him to Christianity and keeps him as his slave. Crusoe and Friday liberate more prisoners from the cannibals, among them Friday's father and a Spanish sailor, both of whom are integrated into Robinson's plantation economy. Crusoe finally escapes the island when a mutineer crew attempts to dump its captain there. Hence Joyce's (1964) famous reference to Defoe's novel as a 'prophecy of empire' and to Robinson Crusoe as the 'true symbol of the British conquest' (p. 24).

In their conventional narratives, economists tend to follow Defoe's chronology, according to which Crusoe is initially alone on the island, facing the particular optimization problem constituted by a one-person economy. Robinson divides his time between labor and leisure and allocates his labor as a function of the relative return of fishing, hunting and growing food. With the addition of Friday, the Robinson economy enters a new phase, which is typically represented either as an exchange economy, where Robinson and Friday operate as equal trading partners (Grapard, 1995, pp. 36–37), or following Edgeworth's (1881, p. 28) depiction, as a firm, with Robinson as the owner/manager and Friday as his employee.

Economics textbooks have a propensity to skip over the fact that the relation between Robinson and his 'man Friday' is organized by violence and domination.

Nor do they mention that the economy he establishes on his Caribbean island is not a free market but a colonial settler economy. As Hymer (1971, p. 17) explains, Robinson's economic success is not based on his 'ingenuity and resourcefulness' but on other factors, notably the labor of others. In a total of 13 trips, Crusoe is able to secure many useful items from his wrecked ship, and without these seized objects he would not have been able to thrive so successfully. His prosperity is bought by confiscation, slave labor, colonial appropriation and absentee ownership. For all the while Robinson is on his island, his plantation in Brazil is enormously profitable, such that when he returns he finds himself a wealthy man. In Defoe's (1994 [1719]) words, 'Master, all on a Sudden, of above 5000 £ Sterling in Money, and [of] an Estate, as I might well call it, in the Brasils, of above a thousand Pounds a Year, as sure as an Estate of Lands in England' (p. 205). Yet for economists, Crusoe remains the archetypal *homo faber*.

In this cultural and scientific context, Engels's rendition of Dühring's theory as a Robinsonade might be understood as a double gesture: on the one hand, it furnishes the intertextual referent that tacitly shapes Dühring's argument; on the other, it criticizes the unavowed Robinson–Friday scene as relying on a set of presuppositions that are plausible only under historical conditions of a radically unequal distribution of resources and technology and a fundamental epistemic asymmetry. By arguing for a materialist theory of violence through a sustained critique of the Robinson–Friday encounter, Engels highlights the hidden relations of power and violence that shape the social relations on Crusoe's island. Even though Engels lacks the language to analyze the colonial matrix and the layers of racialized forms of domination that operate in Defoe's novel, unlike most economists, he renders the encounter between Robinson and Friday as structured by violence and slavery. Might we thus read Engels's text as a contribution to a critical tradition that emphasizes the interlocking layers of domination on Crusoe's desert island (Watt, 1951; Hymer, 1971; Grapard, 1995; Hewitson, 1999; Grapard and Hewitson, 2011)?

Elements of such a critique can also be found in various places in Marx's work, from Marx's early attack on Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (MECW 6, pp. 112, 143), through the *Grundrisse* (MECW 28, pp. 17–18), to volume one of *Capital* (MECW 35, pp. 87–89, 294). The common topos of these passages is an ironic mockery of the role Robinson plays in the economic imaginary. What provokes Marx's particular scorn is the thought of a solitary individual detached from society, which Marx considers an absurd and lackluster fancy of bourgeois economists. For Marx, production is and has always been a shared social activity; hence to model it on one individual is meaningless and bizarre. From Marx's perspective, Robinson's ability to produce and survive is based on the labor of others, and the erasure of this labor in the economists' narrative constitutes a mystification. Engels's appeal to the Crusoe myth parallels this critique. The sarcastic remark, that even 'on the imaginary islands of the Robinsonades, swords have not, up to now, been known to grow on trees' takes aim at the labor and production that is



presupposed yet left unaccounted for in social theories that regard violence as the engine of historical change.

From this vantage point, even Engels's seemingly frivolous suggestion that the Robinson–Friday encounter could be rewritten with Friday confronting Robinson with a revolver has a different valence. That suggestion does not mean that the encounter between the two men would have ended differently had Friday been armed. Rather, it demonstrates the opposite: Robinson's military superiority over Friday is not what determines their relationship. For the superiority of arms is itself interlaced in a set of social relations – global relations of domination and inequality – that endow Robinson with access to economic and cultural resources, including technology, orders of signs and ideological systems that are not only inaccessible to Friday but entirely incommensurable.

Crusoe versus Engels

I have been interpreting Engels's appeal to the Robinson–Friday encounter as a critical albeit unwitting reading of a highly charged colonial narrative. More specifically, Engels's treatment of the Crusoe tale is part of a tradition that challenges the role of the Robinson trope in modern social theory, especially in neoclassical economics. But as the attentive reader will have noticed, there are a number of inconsistencies in Engels's Robinson tale. In the story told by Defoe, Robinson Crusoe does not enslave Friday with a sword in hand. According to Defoe's narrative, Crusoe saves Friday's life by shooting his pursuers with a firearm. Thus the revolver is not just a glib addition by Engels but is in fact an important part of Defoe's original script. Thereafter Friday kneels before Robinson, kisses the ground and places Robinson's foot on top of his head, a gesture which Robinson interprets as 'token of swearing to be my slave for ever'. Engels's indifference to the narrative sequence of Defoe's story has the effect of tacitly dismissing Robinson's version of the encounter as distorted. Robinson, who in Defoe's version is not only protagonist but narrator, is effectively dethroned from the position of presumptive impartiality. (Coetzee's (1986) *Foe* produces the analogous effect by removing Crusoe from the role of narrator.) Consistent with Engels's thesis that all forms of violence are determined by their material conditions, the encounter between Robinson and Friday constitutes a battle that is ultimately decided by the technology of violence available to either side. Yet while the thesis that violence is determined by its material conditions is plausible in the context of the history of warships and the evolution of modern battle formations, the universalization of this postulate through the Robinson–Friday story reveals its limitations. To claim that the history of European warfare has been shaped by the economic, industrial and technological conditions is one thing. It is quite another to assert that any form of violence is reducible to its instruments and technologies.

By framing the Robinson–Friday encounter as a contest of technologies of violence, Engels fails to account for the layered mode in which violence functions in this relationship. The relation between the two men is structured by a violence that is simultaneously mystified and disavowed. What makes the firearm important is that from their very first meeting, Friday dreads Crusoe’s weapons; he ‘was so frightened with the Fire, and Noise of my Piece; that he stood Stock still’ (Defoe, 1994 [1719], p. 147). Moreover, Crusoe cleverly exploits Friday’s fears by showing off his awe-inspiring firepower. Thus the fact that the gun is a more effective implement than say a sword has less significance in this story than its capacity to stage a spectacular display of violence, a display that Robinson skillfully replicates in order to maximize Friday’s terror. To Friday, the gun appears as a magical death-dealing device. In Defoe’s (1994 [1719]) words, he ‘thought that there must be some wonderful Fund of Death and Destruction in that Thing, able to kill Man, Beast, Bird, or any Thing near, or far off, and the Astonishment this created in him was such, as could not wear off for a long Time’ (p. 153). Friday speaks to the gun and implores it not to kill him; and Defoe writes that he would have worshiped the gun if only Robinson had let him.

We might say that the gun appears as a fetish, as an object endowed with mysterious magical capacities. As fetish, the gun is not an instrument reducible to a series of determinate physical properties such as caliber, type of barrel, velocity or range. Instead, it appears as the mystical bearer of the social and psychological attributes that characterize Robinson’s conduct toward the non-Europeans he meets on the island: hostility, a desire for domination and a propensity to violence. We must surely understand Friday’s fetishization of the gun as part of a racialized colonial fantasy in which Friday plays the part of the naïve noble savage who voluntarily pledges himself to bondage and servitude. To the extent that the gun functions as fetish – scripted through the contrast between civilized knowledge and primitive ignorance – it obscures the actual and latent violence that must have accompanied Friday’s enslavement.

In the Robinson–Friday encounter, the technologies of violence are not just utensils that inflict various degrees of harm and injury on bodies. Rather, these technologies, and in particular the gun, perform violence as a spectacle. That spectacle has three characteristics: first, it obscures the actual and latent forms of violence that must constantly be reproduced to generate and maintain a stable relation of bondage and domination; second, it dramatizes the epistemic asymmetry that derives from the colonial nature of this relation to the point where Friday’s enslavement can be mystified as voluntary; and third, it generates a legacy in the form of a memory of terror. Thus Loar (2006) reads the violent encounter between the two men as the ‘foundational moment of civilization and sovereignty’ that is subsequently disavowed by recourse to fantasies of Robinson’s benevolence and Friday’s duty (pp. 3–9). The spectacle of violence makes possible, at least in part, the socialization of Friday as a slave. That socialization is organized around the asymmetry between the two men with Robinson taking on the various roles of



slave-master, civilizer, language instructor, religious tutor and so on. The asymmetry is perhaps nowhere as obvious as in their respective names. For instead of asking the newly freed prisoner for his name, Crusoe 'made him know his Name should be *Friday*, which was the Day I sav'd his Life; ... I likewise taught him to say *Master*, and then let him know, that was to be my Name' (Defoe, 1994 [1719], p. 149). Only subsequently does Robinson proceed to teach Friday how to labor for him, turning the newly acquired servant into a means of production (Hymer, 1971, pp. 27–29). It would seem, then, that the act of naming whereby Crusoe quite literally constitutes himself as master marks an important juncture in coding the relation between the two men. It translates the legacy of violence, that is, the threat and memory of Robinson's formidable firearm, into a symbolic form organized through racial and colonial difference.

In sum, from Defoe's novel we learn that Friday's enslavement is not the result of a contest of forces but the consequence of a spectacle of violence cleverly staged by Robinson. The spectacle of violence is converted into a stable relation of domination through a series of cultural and economic practices that include schooling Friday into his subordinate role. (The comparison with Coetzee's version is once again instructive: Coetzee's Friday has had his tongue severed; thus the trauma and the relation of domination is symbolized by Friday's inability to speak and tell a coherent story of his enslavement; see Spivak, 1999, pp. 177–197.) Far from being shaped only by economic inequality narrowly understood, the relation between Robinson and Friday is molded by a history of physical, structural and symbolic violence, in addition to an ideology of duty and sacrifice, all of which make Friday beholden to Robinson.

These various dimensions of violence elude Engels's analysis because they have no conceptual place in the techno-reductionism that understands violence only through its material instruments. This reductionism, considered orthodoxy among Marxist theorists of the Second International (Labriola, Plekhanov, Kautsky) reflects a deterministic conception of social orders. It privileges, as textual support, Marx's 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that contains the base-superstructure model and the famous line that social existence determines consciousness (MECW 29, p. 263). Thus G.A. Cohen, one of the most articulate and scrupulous defender of technological reductionism, distinguishes aspects of social reality that are materially productive from those that may be socially and institutionally necessary but not immediately productive. Evoking the example of a plantation in which slaves are confined by stone walls and toil under the watchful eyes of armed overseers, Cohen (1978, pp. 33, 47) argues that although the guards and the walls may be socially indispensable, they are not materially productive. In a way that is reminiscent of Engels, Cohen insists that the institutional infrastructure of violence is causally subsidiary (and thus ontologically epiphenomenal) to the productive forces at work in any given social order. Engels and Cohen treat the revolver, the plantation wall and the soldier as elements of the social order that, while perhaps necessary,

ultimately play but a supportive role in the historical schema determined by the development of productive forces.

The problem with this ‘technological’ historical materialism is that it is hard to see how we can understand productive forces (instruments, raw materials and especially labor power) outside the social and historical forces – including modes of violence – that shape them (Kennedy, 2005; Callinicos, 2006). Take Friday’s labor power. How can his productive capacities (skills, knowledge and ingenuity, all of which are part of labor power) be conceptualized as logical before his socialization as a slave? How can Friday’s skills, which he ostensibly learns from Robinson, be divorced from the practices and narratives in which these teachings were embedded? If they cannot, which is what I am arguing, then the rigid separation between the ‘material’ and the ‘social’ cannot be maintained, opening the path for a richer and more plausible theorization of violence (Carver, 1982, pp. 30, 61).

The Crusoe story nuances the excessively schematic picture Engels draws of how modern forms of domination, inequality and exploitation function. Such nuance helps us appreciate Engels’s contribution to a critique of universal anthropologies of violence that view violence as a fixture of human nature. It also discloses a vacillation in Engels’s theory of violence between on the one hand, a professed commitment to the schematic techno-determinism and, and on the other, evidence of a richer and more subtle attention to historical detail.

An example of this vacillation can be seen in the unfinished brochure *Die Rolle der Gewalt in der Geschichte*, written in 1887 and published posthumously in 1895 (MECW 26, pp. 453–510). In that brochure, Engels applies the theory of violence developed in *Anti-Dühring* to European politics in the late nineteenth century. In the face of Prussia’s successful effort to bring about German unification through war, Engels attempts to show that war and violence function as a historical supplement made necessary by the specific weaknesses of the German bourgeoisie. Lest Bismarck’s success be interpreted as corroboration of the proposition that history proceeds through violence and war, Engels insists that militarism is a historically specific, and therefore limited phenomenon. Countering the positivist historiography that glorifies militarism, Engels insists on the salience of other factors, most notably economic forces and interests. Yet for a text billed as a case study for the primacy of economic conditions over the efficacy of violence, the brochure goes to inordinate length to account for ostensibly superstructural determinants of political events: political ideologies; conditions for popular mobilization; the role of political audiences and the passions that motivate them, including anger and desire; issues of historical memory; and symbolic constraints of political action. In short, the attention to issues of political culture and matters of historical memory is in tension with the stated objective to demonstrate the primacy of economic forces and class struggle over political ones.

An analogous tension can also be glimpsed in Engels’s discussion of militarism in *Anti-Dühring*. In an excursus on military history – a field he had been studying for



decades (Wallach, 1968; Neumann and von Hagen, 1986) – Engels argues that the acceleration of technological progress and the industrial production of weaponry are leading to armament spirals and eventually to wars of gargantuan dimensions. With an eye to the Franco–Prussian War of 1870–1871, he observes: ‘The army has become the main purpose of the state and an end in itself; the peoples are there only to provide soldiers and feed them. Militarism dominates and is swallowing Europe’. Yet militarism is ultimately self-defeating. The armament spiral, Engels prophesies, will lead to the collapse of states and thus to the disintegration of militarism ‘by the dialectics of its own evolution’ (MECW 25, p. 158).

Engels substantiates this claim about the self-destruction of militarism with two different arguments. The first locates the contradiction of militarism in the *soaring cost* of weaponry and hence the eventual inability of states to continue financing the escalating military expenditure. The second sees the *social organization* of organized violence as militarism’s ultimate death knell: as armies are forced to rely on mass mobilization and conscription, the increasing familiarization of the people with arms will enable the popular masses to turn their weapons ‘against the warlords in command’. While Engels sees these two arguments as complementary, it is, as Balibar (2010, pp. 265–266) points out, conceptually more interesting to oppose them. Whereas the first line of reasoning tends toward a technological determinism along the lines of G.A. Cohen discussed above, the second focuses on the social organization of violence and presupposes the formation of a *collective will*. In Engels’s words, ‘this moment will arrive as soon as the mass of the people – town and country workers and peasants – will have a will’ (MECW 25, p. 158). By tying the dialectic of militarism not to a technological trajectory but to the – invariably contingent – constitution of a collective political subject, Engels seems to open the possibility for a historically attuned analysis of the factors that might influence such an outcome in favorable and unfavorable ways. In short, we are a far cry from the deterministic Engels whom everyone relishes to loathe (Lukács, 1971 [1923]; Avineri, 1968, p. 3; Lichtheim, 1964, p. 234ff.).

Conclusion

The fantasy of Crusoe’s island permeates not only nineteenth-century literary production but also social theory, including the Engels–Dühring dispute of the 1870s. Tracking the Crusoe trope through that exchange yielded two apparently separate discoveries: first, the Robinson–Friday encounter was concocted by Engels and projected onto Dühring’s text. Second, Engels’s cursory reading of Defoe leads him to neglect the various layers of violence that operate in the Crusoe story. Rather than simply lumping these two discoveries together under the category of academic malpractice, I have argued that they are interconnected. Even though the Robinson–Friday encounter is not found in Dühring’s work, the scene as constructed

by Engels serves a critical analytic purpose. On the one hand, it conveys the extent to which Dühring's theory tacitly replicates the Robinson trope, and on the other, it exposes the unavowed historical presuppositions of the Robinson–Friday scene, including the radically unequal access to resources, technology and knowledge. It turns out that the desert island is not a generic anthropological laboratory but riven with hidden relations of power and violence. Yet the very same theoretical commitments that allow Engels to uncover the premises of the desert island scenario leave him unable to account for the layers of structural and symbolic violence that operate in Defoe's story. Despite Engels's attempts to distance himself from the Robinsonade he projects onto Dühring, the Crusoe story ultimately acts as a fraught supplement to his own theory of violence. Political violence (whether it is state violence or indeed revolutionary violence) has social dimensions that are poorly understood by Engels's reduction of violence to technology. These social dimensions come to the fore in the relation between Robinson and Friday, shaped, at least in part, by the practices, theatrics and performances of violence. Encoding modes of physical, structural and symbolic violence that go unaccounted for in the endeavor to reduce all violence to technological and economic determinants, the Robinson–Friday encounter adds a rich and nuanced account of the relation between manifest and latent violence to Engels's theory. Engels needs such an account lest his materialist theory succumb entirely to his propensity to technological and economic determinism.

The Crusoe story sheds light on the compelling aspects of Engels's theory of violence, which are too often buried under his teleological and deterministic tendencies and his derivative model of politics. Engels's critique of universal anthropologies of violence and his argument that violence is not a spontaneous and unmediated eruption of human nature but has material conditions of possibility remain relevant and persuasive. An analysis of these conditions of possibility must be part of any critical assessment of violence. However, the point that violence is always mediated must be radicalized: violence is not only subject to the technological (and thus ultimately economic) conditions that control its production. Formations of violence are also mediated by conditions that regulate their circulation, consumption, transformation and reproduction, all of which feature prominently in the Robinson–Friday encounter.

Note on abbreviations and translations:

MECW refers to Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* in 50 volumes (New York: International Publishers, 1975–2004); MEGA refers to the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: Dietz, 1975–1990 and Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1991–). As the English translations of *Anti-Dühring* are notoriously unreliable, I have sometimes modified translations for the sake of accuracy and consistency.



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Notes

- 1 The *Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei* was founded in 1875 on the basis of the Gotha program (see Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', MECW 24, pp. 75–99) to unite the German Labor movement following the split between the followers of Ferdinand Lassalle, grouped in the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein* (founded in 1863) and those of August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, who were associated in the *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei* (founded in 1869 in the town of Eisenach, hence the party is also known as the *Eisenacher*).
- 2 Wilhelm Liebknecht to Engels, 1 February 1875; Liebknecht to Engels, 21 April 1875 (MEGA I/27, pp. 685–686).
- 3 Although Marx offered some notes as a contribution to the book, the extent to which he approved of Engels's text remains controversial. In the secondary literature today, few accept the claim by the editors of the MEGA (1988), that *Anti-Dühring* consolidates Marx and Engels's research (MEGA I/27, p. 16*) or, as Merkel (1985), the managing editor of the volume, proposed that the book had been written in 'unmittelbarer Zusammenarbeit mit Marx'. Critics, notably Thomas (1976) and Carver (1980, 1984, 2003), have pointed to the fact that Marx's contribution was only mentioned in the preface to the second edition of *Anti-Dühring*, published after Marx's death. In contrast, Welty (1983) and Stanley and Zimmermann (1984) contend that in the absence of any explicit dissociation on behalf of Marx, there is no reason to assume a disagreement.
- 4 For details, see the editorial comments in MEGA I/27, pp. 695–697. Engels's personal copy of the first edition of the *Cursus* (IML/Berlin, Sign. Ma719) is part of the Marx–Engels Archive located in the SAPMO collection in the Bundesarchiv in Berlin. His copy of the second edition is located in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History in Moscow (RGASPI 1/1/3725).
- 5 Adamiak (1974, p. 110) argues that Dühring 'stood to the left of Marx and Engels' and that Engels purposely 'misrepresents Dühring' in order to reverse their positions.

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