

Defoe and the “Projecting Age”

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Introduction to the Italian edition of
Essay Upon Projects: Daniel Defoe,
Sul progetto, Milan: Electa, 1983)

Footnotes begin on page 84.

Introduction

Necessity, which is allow'd to be the Mother of Invention, has so violently agitated the Wits of men at this time, that it seems not at all improper, by way of distinction, to call it, *The Projecting Age*. For tho' in times of War and Publick Confusions, the like Humour of Invention has seem'd to stir: yet, without being partial to the present, it is, I think, no Injury to say, the past Ages have never come up to the degree of Projecting and Inventing, as it refers to Matters of Negoce, and Methods of Civil Polity, which we see this Age arriv'd to.

...

THE History of Projects

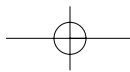
WHEN I speak of Writing a *History of Projects*, I do not mean either of the Introduction of, or Continuing of necessary Inventions, or the Improvement of Arts and Sciences before known; but a short Account of Projects, and Projecting, as the Word is allow'd in the general Acceptation at this present time, and I need not go far back for the Original of the Practice.

...

Wherefore 'tis necessary to distinguish among the Projects of the present times, between the Honest and the Dishonest.

...

In 1697, Daniel Defoe published his *Essay Upon Projects*.¹ In this singular work, in many senses uncannily pertinent to our time, Defoe announces the advent of the “Projecting Age.” The essay came two decades before the publication of another work by Defoe: *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner* (1719),² the adventure novel that brought universal fame to its author. In these works—explicitly in the first, implicitly in the second—the theme is that of man’s capacity to project. But the idea of project-oriented behavior expressed in the essay is diametrically opposed to the one illustrated in the novel.





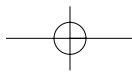
While, in the essay, Defoe advances the hypothesis of a project seen above all as an application of the “methods of civil policy”³—in the words of the author—to resolve the problems of a society profoundly shaken by “wars and public confusions,”⁴ in the novel, man’s ability to project is oriented exclusively toward the resolution of the problems of an individual whom fate (or, in the real episode that inspired Defoe, the discretionary power of the first mate of the ship) has tossed up on an uncharted shore, forced to live alone, without other men, “without society,” in a hostile environment.⁵

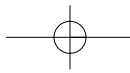
This is why Robinson never asks himself what would be “very useful to society,” but always and only what would be “very useful to me.”⁶ This explains, and partially justifies, the results Robinson achieves: he doesn’t design or project for others, but only for himself. His project activity never (or almost never) pays tribute to the value systems and norms that usually stipulate the mode of the project and the characteristics of the object being designed. He has only one problem: to survive. Anything that lies outside the realm of this will to survive is not perceived as a problem. And given the fact that Robinson is, above all, a “problem solver,” whatever he does not perceive as a problem just doesn’t, in practice, exist.

In this same context, we find another guiding principle in Robinson’s behavior: only what is convenient is pertinent. His obsession, in the final analysis, always is utility. This is why he often has been considered an emblematic figure for militant utilitarianism, or even the forerunner, in certain ways, of the ethical utilitarianism of Bentham, and the first exponent of the “bourgeois” ideology. Many authors have seen Robinson as the archetypal expression of the Protestant work ethic.⁷

In the composition of his material world, Robinson absolutely avoids any reference to—or reminder of—the institutionalized forms of culture. Effectively speaking, he never seeks a cultural legitimization for the objects he produces: the very idea of such legitimization would seem senseless to him. When he decides, for example, to make himself an umbrella, he does not set out to create an object of “art” or of “artistic craftsmanship,”⁸ but simply to make a device that will protect him from the sun and the rain, and that can be closed at will.

The scarcity of resources, and the lack of materials and tools, make his task extremely difficult. To attempt it, Robinson drastically revises his creative strategy: in such adverse conditions, he cannot follow a traditional approach. He cannot, in fact, start with a generic idea of an umbrella—the umbrella “once seen in Brazil”—from which to launch a series of partial inventions whose sum will be the umbrella-object. The path he selects is, obviously, another: reducing the volume of the partial inventions to a minimum, and trying to find in nature—“ready-made,” as it were—the constituent parts of his future umbrella.



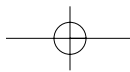


But this procedure requires knowing how to observe nature with a new, more belligerent gaze (i.e., knowing how to see every piece of reality as a potential piece of an umbrella). In this design option the utilitarian stance of Robinson would appear to be fully confirmed. He behaves, definitively, like a predator for whom everything is potential prey: every object, and every fragment of reality, every phenomenon observed is immediately interpreted in terms of its usefulness. For Robinson, in other words, there exists no clear line of demarcation between the rationality of the ends and the rationality of the means. In this vision, there is no place, nor time, for any premises based on values of any kind.

Of course, Robinson often calls upon his rich store of religious sentiment. He frequently invokes God, makes reference to the Bible, prays, thanks Providence, and makes moral judgments from a clearly Puritan point of view.⁹ But all this doesn't seem to affect his way of thinking about project activity, decidedly oriented toward utility and absolutely indifferent to ethical and aesthetic judgments. Neither does it influence his attitude of extreme objectivity, of total detachment, with which he observes the relationship between his work and the resulting products. Marx, in *Das Kapital*, makes an ironically positive assessment of this attitude, to the point of crediting Defoe's character with a certain contribution to political economics, or more precisely to the "theory of value."¹⁰

Let's look at another enlightening example. As soon as he reaches the island, Robinson knows he will have to build a shelter as soon as possible. But, from the outset, he also is aware of the difficulties involved: he must do it immediately, but he doesn't know where, how, and—above all—with what means. With the exception of some pieces of the wrecked ship, the means available are very limited indeed. Moreover, this lack of materials is accompanied by a lack of knowledge. Robinson, in the first days, knows nothing about the island. And this makes his undertaking even more problematic: he has to build a defensive structure capable of fending off the hostile forces of the environment, but he is not yet able to evaluate the real dangers—their force of impact, their quantity, the frequency of their attacks—and it is hard for him to decide on the requirements of consistency and size of his shelter. It is difficult to define its physical characteristics: on the one hand, he mustn't run the risk of making it too small, and, on the other, he cannot afford the luxury of making it too big.

Here again, as in the case of the umbrella, he must assume an attitude of voracious utilitarian appropriation of the surrounding environment. Here again, the dramatic immediacy of the problem to be resolved strongly conditions, in a reductive way, his design behavior: for him, the shelter is just a shelter, no more and no less. It never occurs to him, in other words, that his refuge could be a "work of architecture." And the result of his efforts demonstrates this: "a tent placed beneath a wall of stone and surrounded by a



sturdy enclosure of wooden posts and ropes.” A creation which, we should immediately note, could hardly meet with the immediate, unreserved acceptance of all as a “work of architecture.” At best, we could include it in the category of that “architecture without architects” which Bernard Rudofsky has called “nonpedigreed architecture.”¹¹

At this point, we might ask: can these two approaches to the project identified by Defoe in the late 1600s and the beginning of the 1700s—that of *An Essay Upon Projects* and that of *Robinson Crusoe*—be useful to nourish the present-day debate on the role of design? The answer, probably, is yes. There is little doubt that, with a few adjustments and adaptations, the questions raised at the time by Defoe also can be applied to our time.

Just consider the argument—central to the *Essay*—on the unavoidable need to confront the problems of society with a project-oriented approach. This position, yesterday and today, has its weak points: speaking generically of making projects without mentioning specific interventions can lead to a sort of self-satisfaction regarding a duty fulfilled, when actually what has been done exists only on the plane of verbal urgings, without any concrete impact.

This is the very weakness that can be found in Defoe’s essay. What is the purpose of a hypothesis of project capacity seen as “methods of civil policy” when, after all, these methods turn out, in practice, to be incapable of contributing to a true change of “civil policy” as a whole?¹² To tell the truth, Defoe doesn’t overlook this issue. He himself mentions the danger of a project that is developed at the margins of the major social institutions, without any direct impact on those centers of power that decide on “the immediate Benefit of the Publick, and Employing of the Poor.”

To avoid this risk, Defoe proposes, in the *Essay*, not just one “project,” but many “projects” of institutes and structures serving the community, such as academies for the study of the English language, for the education of women, for the professional training of military leaders; credit institutes under the control of a central bank; a street network capable of guaranteeing intensive mobility of persons and goods, financed by the contribution to the “costs of urbanization”—as we would put it today—on the part of the landowners in the areas concerned; a system of taxation that includes, although in an as yet confused form, the present distinction among excise, taxation and duties; and an institute of mutual aid to protect merchants against the risks and effects of failure.

In this way, Defoe imagined it possible to persuade the centers of power of the time to effect a fairer reorganization of the social order. But this attempt, too, remained abstract and, all told, inconclusive, for the simple reason that it is not possible to create institutes or service structures only through the dictates of a project, and it is even less possible to change the world exclusively by *diktat*.



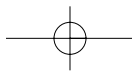
This is the criticism that always has been made of the project approach inspired by the “enlightenment.”

In recent times, in a generalized way, there is a tendency to make an exaggerated extension of this otherwise pertinent critique, to the point of invalidating any form of project activity. This tendency stems from the error of identifying “project” with “ideology,” or “project” with “plan.” We feel this is a grave error. Undoubtedly, the most misleading positions that have emerged in the recent debate on the project can be traced back precisely to this error. In practice, they have banalized, and even obscured, an important subject for theoretical reflection. Suddenly, the project is no longer seen as that activity that seeks to offer innovative solutions for the problems of the society and, therefore, it is no longer a factor of “innovative progress,” as L. Sklair puts it,¹³ but an activity of treacherous low-enlightenment ideologues (or wild utopians) straining at the bit to impose their totalizing designs (or dreams) upon humankind in general. The act of the project is stigmatized, leading to an indiscriminate rejection of project-oriented behavior, as we have seen. But what is overlooked here is the fact that, for better or worse, our era is one of design, and of projects—a “projecting age,” as Defoe called it three centuries in advance—perhaps the most “projecting” of all the eras of history.

As an example, let’s look at the case of the most recent developments in data processing technology, now in the process of radically altering the premises that, for thousands of years, have formed the basis for our material and social practices. These developments are certainly the result of an unprecedented level of technical-scientific creativity, but also of an unprecedented project-oriented industriousness. The same is true of other important developments in modern technology. Because one thing is obvious: in a world of technical objects and processes, as our world is becoming, to an increasing extent, project activity and its results are omnipresent. In this context, the anti-project rhetoric can only have one meaning: an acritical capitulation in the face of project activity that, in any case, is going to get done.

There also is a trend (or a movement) that makes the project-oriented behavior of Robinson Crusoe into a veritable behavioral model for our time. Thus, Robinson becomes the ideal archetype of a new project mode that, in contrast with the dominant methods today, does not make use of sophisticated technical and scientific knowledge, nor does it attempt to create objects of great structural and functional complexity; a new way of designing, therefore, that focuses on the elementary nature of the resources utilized and the simplicity of the solutions envisioned.

In this context, Robinson is introduced as a forerunner of the “poor technologies,” and an *avant la lettre* exponent of a design that explicitly rejects the institutional conditioning of the “rich technologies.” But these theorists tend to forget the fact that Robinson is a



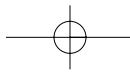
fictional character and, as such, he contains a high level of artifice.¹⁴ He is not free of all forms of institutional conditioning, as Defoe would have us believe, because he cannot escape from the subtle conditionings of the society to which he belonged before the shipwreck, a society to which, like it or not, he continues to pay tribute: the English society of the time of Lord Walpole, and that of Defoe. A closer look shows that the poor technology of Robinson is, if anything, a version of the emergence of the rich technology of Defoe's time.

Naturally, today's champions of the poor technologies see Robinson (correctly enough) as one who rebels against the unjust conditionings of the institutions of his time. On this subject, we should recall that, in *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*,¹⁵ published in 1720, one year after the *Adventures* (25 April 1719) and the *Farther Adventures* (20 August 1719), Defoe offers a glimpse of a different interpretation key for his novel: the life of Crusoe is merely the allegorical version of the tormented life of a person who really existed, the life of a man who "has suffered all manner of violences, of oppressions, of injurious reproaches, contempt of men..."

This person, he clearly intimates, is not the Scottish mariner Alexander Selkirk, alias Robinson Crusoe, but Defoe himself,¹⁶ that Defoe who is the skillful prompter of "all manner of violences." Because the creator of Robinson Crusoe was not only a novelist, essayist, and journalist of great genius, but also an unscrupulous advisor of powerful men, a bankrupt businessman hounded by creditors, a pamphleteer imprisoned for libel and then released... and a secret informer.

Nevertheless, the alternative that emerges from the two design philosophies of Defoe—the one explicitly formulated in *Essay* and the one outlined in the behavior of the character of Robinson—is not a modern one. The problems that face us today cannot be approached, and certainly not resolved, in terms of the acceptance or rejection of the institutions. Our most pressing problems, we should recall, are those related to war, the environment, and hunger, but also to freedom, equality, and dignity. Some of these problems, as we know, are institutional in nature. Others are only partially so, and still others are not institutional at all.

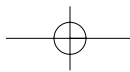
Defoe's *Essay Upon Projects* is the work of a maker of "Honest Projects" who lived in the particularly turbulent period of the birth of the bourgeois society. Reflection on this Defoe can help us to evaluate the possibility (and, above all, the probability) of developing "Honest Projects" in an era such as our own, an era in which the enormous complexity of the problems to be resolved puts our capacity to "project" to the hardest of tests every day.



- 1 D. Defoe, *An Essay Upon Projects* (Menston: The Scholar Press Limited, Menston 1969). This is a facsimile version of the original text published in London in 1697 by Th. Cockerill, and reprinted in 1700 with the title *Several Essays Relating to Academies*, and in 1702 as *Essay Upon Several Projects*. For a thorough analysis of this text, see W. Sombart, *Der Bourgeois. Zur Zeitgeschichte des modernen Wirtschaftsmenschen* (1913) (München: Verlag von Duncker und Humblot, München 1923). Importance can be attributed, above all, to Sombart's reflections on the "makers of projects" (*Projectanten*) in the 1600s and 1700s, toward whom Defoe assumes a critical stance of dialectical confrontation in his *Essay*. Defoe, in fact, openly takes his distance from these "makers of projects," who, in his opinion are a veritable scourge. He believed, with few exceptions there are unscrupulous peddlers of "dishonest projects," who should not be confused with those who, like Defoe himself, develop "Honest Projects" for the progress of the society of their time and of the future. The idea of a project approach which, coherently exercised at all levels of reality, can be a factor for modernization, represents the fundamental nucleus of this work.
- 2 In this text, we have used D.D., *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe. Written by Himself*, (London: Sands and Co., 1899), and also D.D., *Robinson Crusoe*, (London: Dent-Everyman, 1977), an edition based, as is well known, on the Shakespeare Head Press Edition, Oxford, 1927.
- 3 D. Defoe, *An Essay...*, 2.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 5 The solitude and isolation of the individual is a recurring theme in the narrative (and not only narrative) universe of Defoe. Characters such as Robinson, Captain Singleton, Moll, Colonel Jack, and Roxana all have chosen an insular state. And this isolation is seen as an individual tactic (or, better, as a strategy) for survival, like a protective buffer against a menacing world. But it also

should be said that the menacing world with which Robinson must come to terms is not the same as that of Defoe's other characters. While the solitary Robinson grapples with the "world of nature," it is the "world of men" that engages the "loners" Singleton, Moll, Jack, and Roxana. The opposition between the world of nature and the world of men can be insufficient or misleading, however. It does not account for the relationship between "state of nature" and "natural man": a relationship which, as we know, was at the center of the important philosophical (and philosophical-political) debate of the 1600s and 1700s in England. Defoe was, to some extent, a protagonist in this debate but, above all, he was an interpreter, although not always faithful, of the various positions in the conflict. See the exhaustive treatment of this subject in M. E. Novak, *Defoe and the Nature of Man*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963). Defoe, like Locke, was strongly attracted by two political philosophies of an opposing character: that of Th. Hobbes and that of R. Cumberland. According to Novak, Defoe's idea of the "natural condition of humanity" (Locke) is simply a cross between the *lupus* of Hobbes and the *agnus* of Cumberland. This is because Defoe could not be unaware, and did not ignore, the difficulties of espousing only one or the other of these political philosophies. On the one hand, Robinson doesn't allow himself to be squeezed into the categories of Hobbes: he is a "natural man" in solitude and solitude, as we know, is not seen favorably by Hobbes. Cfr. Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651). On the other, Cumberland (*De legibus naturae*, 1672), the faithful propagator of the thinking of the Dutch H. Grotius (*De jure belli et pacis*, 1625) could never have accepted Robinson as his prototype of natural man. Robinson is not sufficiently independent of the "commands of the rulers" although, in his case, the rulers are not physically present on the island, but only in the baggage of "moral" values he has brought with him. Cfr. F. Chapman Sharp, "The Ethical System of Richard Cumberland and Its Place in the History of British Ethics," *Mind* XXI: 83 (1912): 371–398.

- 6 L. Terzi, preface to the Italian edition of *The Life...* (Milan: Adelphi, 1963): xii.
- 7 P. Coliaco, *Biografia del personaggio nei romanzi di Daniel Defoe* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1975), 47: "For Robinson, every product of his activity seems to reveal its own most intrinsic nature as a product of work, and work seems to appear to him as 'time of work.'" This is true, but excessive simplification on this subject can lead us away from the reality of Defoe's thinking. Moreover, extreme caution should be used regarding the very widespread thesis according to which Defoe's support for the work ethic can be explained "totally" in terms of the Protestant ethic. Cfr. M.E. Novak, "Robinson Crusoe and Economic Utopia," in *Kenyon Review* 25 (1963): 474–90. Although the Protestant work ethic appears in Defoe and in Robinson, as Novak correctly emphasizes, in a very pale shading, today, many continue to see the "active vocation" of Robinson as one of the essential characteristics of the "emerging bourgeois" and, therefore, as a proof of the Protestant roots of the "spirit of capitalism." This is a line of interpretation that makes an appeal, as we know, to Max Weber, for whom the origins of capitalism should be sought above all in the Protestant ethic (i.e., in the sanctification of labor, asceticism, austerity, etc.). See the famous essay by M. Weber, "Die protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus" in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* XXI (1905): 1–110. It is well known, however, that Weber's version of the origins of capitalism never has been totally accepted by scholars of the subject. For example, W. Sombart has offered a different version. See W. Sombart, *Luxus und Kapitalismus* (München: Verlag von Duncker und Humblot, 1913).



- 8 Defoe always was rather distrustful of art. He is a "puritan suspicious of art," as Anthony Burgess puts it. This is the same factor discussed by James Joyce in the famous conference held in Trieste in 1912, now published in D.D., *Robinson Crusoe* (Turin: Einaudi, 1963). But in the case of Robinson, Paul Valéry offers a more subtle version, making a distinction between an early Robinson, the one we meet just after the shipwreck, still in the impoverished phase, and another Robinson, the one in the phase of security and abundance. Regarding the latter, he writes: "A well-made dwelling, plentiful supplies, essential securities rediscovered—all this leads, as a consequence, to the possibility of having 'free time' (*loisir*). In the midst of these assets, Robinson became a man once again, or namely an indecisive animal, a being that mere circumstances are not sufficient to define. He breathed distractedly. He didn't know which phantoms to pursue. He was threatened by the fate of devoting his time to letters and the arts." P. Valéry, "Histoires brisées. Robinson. Le Robinson oisif, pensif, pourvu in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 412.
- 9 Cfr. M. Praz, "Defoe e Cellini" in *Studi e svaghi inglesi* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1937). On this subject, Praz points out: "Although Robinson insists that he is constantly occupied with religious thoughts, what is admirable in him is not his contemplation, but his action" (p. 38); "Robinson... prays a good deal, but he acts even more" (p. 39); "his moralistic fervor is little more than a feeble *posteventum* reflection" (p. 52).
- 10 Cfr. S.S. Prauer, *Karl Marx and World Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 335. For the economic implications of the fiction and essays of Defoe, see K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Rinehart, 1944): "Defoe had individuated the truth that seventy years later Adam Smith may or may not have understood." These assessments, very widespread today, are not shared by M.E. Novak, *Economics and Fiction of Daniel Defoe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962). Novak sees Defoe as one of the most vigorous defenders of the mercantile system. Cfr. also M.E. Novak, *Robinson Crusoe and Economic Utopia*, Novak harshly criticizes those economists who have attempted to "use Crusoe as a hero for their parables" (p. 477). On the position of Defoe regarding the theme of pauperism and charity, see the stimulating introduction by V. Accattatis to D.D., *Fare l'elemosina non è carità, dare lavoro ai poveri è un danno per la nazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982). Categorizing Defoe, in the present-day view, among the conservatives of his time is a judgment that, like all other judgments on Defoe, is subject to discussion.
- 11 B. Rudofsky, *The Prodigious Builders*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977), 18.
- 12 Cfr. M. Apollonio, "Defoe," *La Scuola*, Brescia 1946. Apollonio writes: "While today we are amazed by the intrinsic validity of his schemes... his contemporaries, and especially the bureaucratic revisers of his proposals, could willingly have done without them" (p. 84).
- 13 L. Sklair, *The Sociology of Progress* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 117.
- 14 Nevertheless, one must be very cautious on the subject of the artificiality of Defoe's characters, because the most striking thing about his fiction is the high level of plausibility of his stories. This made him one of the great forerunners of realism, or of a "visionary realism," as Terzi correctly defines it, or of a "magical realism," in Apollonio's view. De Quincey admired Defoe for that "air of verisimilitude" of his narration [P. Rogers, ed., *Defoe. The Critical Heritage*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 118]; and J.L. Borges speaks of the "novelas exasperadamente verosímiles de Daniel Defoe" (*Discusión*, Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1932), 97). Borges knows, perhaps better than anyone, how the maniacal description of the detail—typical of Defoe, and also of Borges himself—leads, sooner or later, to the fantastic.
- 15 D. Defoe, "Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: With his Vision of the Angelick World" in *Novels and Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe* (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1927).
- 16 The life of Defoe is, in fact, a long sequence of misadventures and troubles of all kinds, many of which, it should be said, were not exceptional events in the existence of "men who lived by the pen" in that period in European history. What is important is to know how these personal misfortunes were interpreted (and, at times, made into raw material for creativity) by those subjected to them. It is a delicate point. It may be useful, in this case, to make a comparison (or to look for similarities and differences) between personalities who had similar careers, full of vicissitudes. This is the method used by Schwob, who compares Defoe and Cervantes, and by Praz, who compares Defoe and Cellini. In Defoe as in Cellini (but not in Cervantes) there is a strong sense of self-commiseration. But it is a self-pity that should not be confused with resignation. Neither Defoe nor Cellini belongs to that category of resigned victims who, in a certain sense, congratulate themselves on their own unfortunate status.