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Commerce and Liberty: Responses to the Slave Trade by Defoe and Swift

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Abstract:

The eighteenth century in England was one of expansion of commerce, trade and the growth of colonies. The slave trade during the eighteenth century was considered to be of economic importance to the financial existence of Britain. Slave trade was justified on the basis of economic progress and morality. Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe were two such writers commenting on this world. Swift wrote against the trading interest because he saw it as a site of instability. Swift also wrote on the cause of the Irish people, whom he saw as being 'slaves' under the British. Defoe, in contrast to Swift championed the cause of trade and merchants. The merchant for Defoe was a force of 'liberty'. This paper studies the responses of Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe to the African slave trade and its interconnections with commerce and liberty during the eighteenth century.

Keywords: Commerce, Liberty, Slavery, Post-Colonialism.

Eighteenth century England was an age of expansion of commerce, trade and the growth of colonies. According to Samuel Johnson, "There was never such a time in which so much trade engaged the attention of mankind" (Dabydeen 26). The Slave Trade is an important feature of the long eighteenth century. The slave trade during the eighteenth century was considered to be of economic importance to the financial existence of Britain. Slaves were brought to Britain by returning merchants. David Dabydeen shows that the presence of Black slaves in England was recorded in posters and newspaper advertising. Apart from this paintings also depict slaves as footmen, soldiers (26-32). Black people were a visible minority in England.

Slave trade could have been said to begin with the trips of John Hawkins to Africa in the early sixteenth century. According to P.E.H. Hair and Robin Law, a significant slave trade emerged with the introduction of sugar cultivation in Barbados in the early 1640s which created a substantial demand for African slaves within the British Empire and led to the creation of the Royal African Company in 1663 (255). Such labour was central to the economy and society. The Atlantic slavery was connected in an intimate way with commodity production and forms of labour exploitation. By the mid-seventeenth century England, would be competing with the Dutch for the distinction of being the world's largest slave trader. This mercantile system had no qualms in converting human beings into property.

The early British Empire as David Armitage points out it was an "oceanic empire of trade" (3). The chief characteristic of the British Empire was commercial and in this respect it was

different from past empires. Nationalism, Mercantilism, and Liberation were the unique quality of the British Empire. James Thomson's *Rule Britannia* was the ideal representation of the British Empire, where British men would "not be slaves", liberty would defeat tyranny and the empire of the seas would outlive military monarchies (Armitage 179).

The paradox emerges when at the same time England was participating in the brutal programme of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. There is no doubt that England owed all its maritime success to the commerce with the African and American colonies. However, the ideas of British political benefits did not include the people of Africa. Historical prejudices, converted the people of Africa to 'savages', in need of English civilisation. This led to a redefinition the concept of liberty for them. Liberty for the African people is identified with English mastery and reason.

Charles Davenant represents English colonial authority as liberating while Spanish colonialism is seen as heartless and rapacious. Competition with other colonial powers fuelled testimonials of English civility. Thus the English Slave Trade is legitimised; acting on behalf of oppressed men and women. This contradiction is apparent in the *Spectator* by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. The *Spectator* is a friend of the trader, who can sympathise with the victims of slave trade but at the same time holding that they are in fact better off in English hands.

Suvir Kaul shows in his *Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, how the eighteenth century aesthetic codes, led to normative definitions of not just racial being but also gender, family and sexual practice. According to Kaul writers accounted for differences by creating racist hierarchies of human achievement with the English at the pinnacle and the English merchant as the hero, as George Lillo's *The Merchant of London* (1731) seems to present (23).

It is crucial to look into ideas of liberty during the eighteenth-century Felicity A. Nussbaum describes the paradox produced during this period between principles of liberty, equality and multiplication of racial identities which led to inequalities (136). The idea of English liberty was very much in currency and the image of a free constitution was cherished. As David Armitage point out, the Hanoverian kings appeared to possess the sovereign authority and devolved on their Parliament all the executive powers of government (1).

However, along with a free constitution, Protestantism and oceanic commerce also provided the ideology to protect the freedom of the inhabitants of Britain. The British saw it as their divine mission to export these ideas to every corner of the British Atlantic world. James Thomson's *Liberty* (1736) locates the migration of the fire of liberty from Greece to England. As Laura Doyle states, to be white is to be fit for freedom and the white man's burden is to lead others by modelling the subjectivities required to practice proper freedom. According to Doyle, "...the racialization of freedom was fed by the Atlantic Slave trade" (3). Anthony Pagden too notes the claim that the English would bring the maximum benefits to the metropolis and not exploit the resources of the non-Europeans but help them overcome their primitive modes of life (95).

These ideas produced an amalgamation of the contradictory ideas of 'imperium' and 'libertas'. This became the distinct ideology of the British and led to formulations about the ways in which empire could be maintained while sustaining liberty.

Many British thinkers turned to Machiavelli's formulation of reconciling empire and liberty. Classical history showed that liberty gave rise to Republics that strove to safeguard liberty, internally and externally for the grandeur of the Republic. There was an emphasis on the belief that the greatness or 'grandezza' of the republic derived from its liberty. However, a contradiction which emerged was that the pursuit of 'grandezza' would lead to a loss of liberty for the republic as in the case of Rome. But neglect of 'grandezza' would only give temporary security and stability. Machiavelli's idea was that 'grandezza' would be better in a world of change and ambition (Armitage 126-129).

This was true of eighteenth century England as well, where political economists agreed that nations could not choose whether they remained self-sufficient or expansive. Trade linked all the nations and made them interdependent (Armitage 141). For the British, an empire of the seas based on commerce and not military, could enrich the nation, offer commercial 'grandezza' without endangering liberty. Empire then could be seen as compatible with liberty. Thus for many, trade came to be seen as the essential source and pre-condition of liberty.

James Harrington's arguments in *Oceana*, of the Roman preservation of liberties in the territories they colonized and thus propagating their empire, also provided the model for British thinkers not just to reconcile the pressures of liberty and expansion but also to 'export' the idea of liberty across the globe.

This idea was not an uncontested one and the reconciliation remained partial. Critiques were raised of the threat posed by the empire to the very fabric of English empire. The example of Rome was raised once again to argue about the avarice, corruption brought in by luxury. Kaul points out the anxiety felt by English men who could not bear the blurring of class boundaries caused by servants who consumed goods once above their station and the fear that trading dominance gave rise to domestic corruption (109). Inequalities emerged when it became apparent that the pursuit of maritime trade by England clashed with the trading interests of Scotland and Ireland. It led to the Navigations Act, passed by England, to preserve its own commercial interests. As Jonathan Swift noted, this led to disastrous consequences in Ireland.

The Slave Trade too threatened to disrupt and destabilise the ideas of the British Empire based on liberty. According to Doyle, narratives of slave trade then looked to classify one group as free and the other not yet capable of freedom (7). A negotiation was underway during the eighteenth century to address the complex issues of slavery and European enlightenment and civilization. The representations of blacks in English as 'inferior', 'savage', 'childish' and 'in need of guidance' were crucial points in arguments regarding slavery in the English imagination. Plantation owners like Edward Long (1734-1813) for example, while critical of the practices of his fellow planters, did not hesitate to relegate blacks to the status of animals (Jahoda 55).

Of course the plantations benefited from such an ideology which tended to view non Europeans/blacks as inferior, based on their inner disposition. Slavery was produced because of the rise of capitalism and the British economy grew because of the exploitation of slave labour (Harman 255). In this context it is worthwhile looking at the works of Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe. Swift can be seen clearly in relation to Defoe, as Nigel Dennis remarks, “each side demands the presence of the other if we are to understand a battle, a parliamentary conflict, and a divided nation” (662). Through their attitude regarding trade one can attempt to understand their views about the practice of slavery and ideas about liberty.

According to Kaul, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* 1719 is the depiction of a modern European who is no ‘mere conqueror’, but a trader, historian and missionary (68). Trade, for Defoe, was central to England’s economy. The value of trade was essential in maintaining civil order and national prosperity. Defoe’s values resound with the ideas espoused by the *Spectator*. Sir Andrew Freeport’s notions of trade are linked to nobleness and generosity and commerce is seen as divinely ordained. For Defoe, the ‘uncommercial nations’ were backward. According to Paul Langford, in the eighteenth century, “Commerce did not simply signify trade...but suggested a definitive stage in the progress of mankind” (Kaul 91). For Defoe, it is an ethical imperative to export Britain’s civilities alongside its system of commerce. Crusoe’s shipwreck is an exercise in understanding the attributes of English subjectivity shaped by the colonial experience and also defined in opposition to the non-European. His attitude towards non Europeans can be seen in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Captain Singleton*

For Defoe, liberty for Africans is identified as the promotion of their good on the plantations. Without concern for the maxims of humanity, trade is a source of misery. Crusoe’s ability to reap handsome rewards from the trade in the Caribbean makes clear his involvement with the slave trade. In the novel, the role which Friday plays in Crusoe’s salvation is prefigured in his relation to his fellow slave Xury. Crusoe’s escape depends on the bravery and guidance of Xury.

However one of Crusoe’s first transactions on escaping is to sell Xury and to invest in a plantation in Brasil (where he buys a Negro slave). Later Crusoe is reminded of Xury only in relation to the labour which Xury could have done on his plantation. Kaul locates Crusoe’s ease with all these transactions as standard practices that define commerce, planting and slave trade. Kaul sees these skills as necessary for a young adventurer to learn (70). Crusoe also agrees to head to Guinea to buy Negroes for the service of the plantations, which leads to the shipwreck and three decades on the island.

Friday’s depiction in the novel as uncivilized goes back to the cultural production of an English identity superior to the non European. Most of these portrayals observed the non European values and customs as inferior. Crusoe’s encounter with the natives and their rituals causes him to give thanks to God for being born in that ‘Part of the world where I was distinguished from such dreadful creatures as these’. The ignorance of Friday is also in contrast to the knowledge of the island which Crusoe has. Friday’s submission and servitude is characterised by the act of putting his head under Crusoe, thus confirming Crusoe’s

paternal mastery over Friday. Indeed the first word which Crusoe teaches Friday is 'Master'. In his analysis of *Robison Crusoe*, Peter Hulme too sees the relationship between Friday and Crusoe as a veiled and disavowed reference to the issue of black slavery. For Hulme, the novel portrays Friday's servitude as voluntary. Thereby the danger of forced labour is removed through Crusoe's intervention in saving Friday's life. Thus Friday's subjection removes any need to use force (205,206). Crusoe can then proceed to make Friday in his own image, thus vindicating the 'civilizational mission' which the merchant-planter embodies.

Crusoe's trials lead him to proclaim authority over the island and domination over Friday and the other natives of the Caribbean lands. This authority and ability to survive is derived not just from his previous experience as a colonial planter and slave trader but also the unacknowledged labour provided by Friday. Crusoe's authority, as Kaul remarks are also confirmed as righteous because of the degeneracy of human nature found among the Caribines (73).

English identity is also defined against other trading nations as well. Crusoe finds that unprovoked combat, against the natives might justify the conduct of the Spaniards 'in all their barbarities practised in America'. Thus English colonial conquest and trade is again re-imagined as a liberating and humane force. In the novel, the labours of Xury and Friday are reframed by Crusoe as his liberation of them but according to Doyle this narrative shows that the benefits of imperial wealth are reserved for the Anglo-Atlantic subjects only. Thus as Doyle states, "...the production of white identity as free and modern depends on an African-Atlantic presence and labour" (6). The violent realities of slave trade are then confined to the sidelines by Defoe. Crusoe can be seen participating in this venture in his encounter with Friday, civilising him. According to Doyle, Crusoe's loss and recovery of freedom will be "played by his intentions to have slaves than be one" (184).

The first part of Defoe's *Captain Singleton* (1720) describes the travels of a group of European sailors across the African continent. The Africans are consistently described as inhuman; their speech is confused with animal noises. The very place is seen as suited to barbarism. Laura Brown points out that the two categories of Africans who travel with them are either Europeanised or are crucial to perform the essential labour of extracting gold. Each time they show the Europeans sites of gold, not knowing the value of the metal, they are visualised as defective in their understanding and thus understood as inferior to Europeans (162,163). Trade is thus seen as an index of humanity and civilization.

Defoe's depiction of Quaker William is interesting. William shows sympathy to the Negroes of the slave ship who participate in a mutiny. He tells Singleton not to attack the ship, defending the right of the Negroes to stage a revolt. At the same time William can also trade in slaves. Two unstable positions are articulated here. This finds an expression in Defoe's *Colonel Jack* (1722) which tells the story of Jack who is kidnapped and sold into slavery. Jack works with the Africans initially later he is promoted to the position of an overseer but cannot forget his own experience and feels sympathy for the slaves. According to George E. Bouloukos, this makes him transform their captivity into an appreciation of his mercy. Jack's belief lies in the fact that the slaves nature arises from the master's cruelty. For Bouloukos,

Jack's experiment lies in showing that the slaves can be managed, not in questioning the system of slavery because the ultimate aim lies in increasing production. As Boulokos remarks, "this marks the invention of slave owner paternalism" (615-630).

The dangers associated with commerce, was sought to be undermined by creating the idea of noble merchants. This can be traced back to the concept of 'commercial humanism', as J.G.A Pocock has termed it. This defence of trade comes from an older and contemporary denunciation of the self centeredness of commercial men (Kaul 92). In the writings of Defoe, Steele and Addison, the values of aristocratic governed elite remain unquestioned but traditional humanism is defined to accommodate commerce in its vocabulary. This spirit of benevolence is articulated well by *Robinson Crusoe*, especially in Crusoe's relation with Friday. Friday's gratitude to Crusoe is essential to maintain and perform Friday's services. Crusoe can then maintain the role of the benevolent patriarch.

The novel in Defoe's hands becomes a way of articulating the ideas of individualism, moral uprightness, and cultural achievement of the English merchant and energising the myth of English imperialism. Thus as Kaul shows, the novel becomes a form that champions the domestic interests and values espoused by merchants and country gentry of England (25).

The eighteenth century saw the rise of the money economy, the establishment of the Bank of England, the rise of public credit and stock speculation. Swift's reaction to The African slave trade, carried out in the name of liberty can be studied through Swifts own status and experience in Ireland and in his *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

Swifts most energetic defence of Ireland against British colonialist policies can be found in *The Drapier's Letters* (1724-25), and *A Modest Proposal* (1729). Laura Brown highlights how for Swift, there is an intimate connection between female luxury and capitalism, as in *A Proposal to the Ladies of Ireland* (1729) (179). However this does not undercut Swift's attack on English policies. Swift understood that the benefits of Ireland's resources enriched the English economy rather than the native one.

Discrimination against the Irish can be traced back to tracts such as Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*(1595), where the Irish are seen as a separate and derogatory race. In early modern English treatises on the New World "Indians" the Irish frequently appear as analogous because similarly being primitive and barbaric. According to Lynda E. Boose, the terminology used to describe the 'primate behaviour' of the Africans was applied to the Irish as well (36). The Englishman's attitude to all forms of cultural difference was contemptuous and Swift understood this.

Swift's resentment at slavery appears in his letters after 1727, where the words slavery and slavish are used in reference to Ireland. In the Third letter of the Drapier, Swift wonders at the absurdity of being a free man in England and then being reduced to the status of a slave in six hours by crossing the channel. According to Irvin Ehrenpreis, Swift had no understanding of liberty separate from his political theory (59). By liberty, Swift meant a parliamentary monarchy. As Swift says, "the government without the consent of the governed is the very definition of slavery" (Ehrenpreis 59). Freedom, for Swift, consisted in legislative power,

where the whole body of people is fairly represented. For Swift the three sections of the legislature, the King, The House of Lords and The House of Commons must act responsibly and not overstep their limitations (Ehrenpreis 60). In the context of Ireland it is significant to note that these principles were not being followed. Swift accused England of enslaving his compatriots. In the fourth letter of the *Drapier* Swift realises the futility of appealing to the ideas of law, common rights and thinks that whining and crying for mercy would have served his purpose better.

The extended British imperialism was an offspring of internal colonialism in Ireland. As David Armitage states, “The English developed their ideas of racial supremacy, political hegemony, cultural supremacy and divinely appointed civilising mission in their relations beginning in Ireland in the sixteenth century” (6). Swift knew that the British Empire which consisted of Ireland, the colonies, the plantations were unequal members of the Empire. In the English Parliament the debates on Ireland were couched in the language of a docile dependency of England. Equal citizenship to the Irish was not considered. The Glorious Revolution which seemed to represent the victory of law and liberty was meant only for England. As the Anglo-Irish Williamite Richard Cox put it in 1689, “...Without the Subjection of Ireland, England cannot flourish and perhaps subsist” (Armitage 153).

For Swift, displacement and dispossession of the poor in Ireland caused them to experience the growth of commercial society differently from those stood to gain by it. Land ownership the traditional basis of authority, seemed threatened by competitive fortunes made by merchants and financiers. According to Colin Nicholson, unlike Mandeville, Swift found it difficult to grasp of how individual pursuit of private interests could develop any sense of a common good (122).

However trade was not completely rejected by Swift. Though Swift favoured the landed interests, as Louis A. Landa shows, he did argue for the importance of trade in the Irish context. His views appear in his Irish tracts. Ireland’s dependency on England and its status as a colonial subject made Swift analyse the economic problems (75-92). *On the Causes of the Wretched Conditions of Ireland (1726)* makes it clear that the hardships of Ireland are a result of the stagnant trade. Restrictions and prohibitions by England on Irish woollen industry and other discriminatory acts filled Swift with a sense of indignation.

In *A Modest Proposal (1729)* Swift demonstrates that the uneven development of Ireland is a result of English imperialism. Swift turns the infamous trope of cannibalism, a well used argument to characterise the non Europeans as savages, against the English. Thus Swift challenged the ideological arguments for imperial expansion. England becomes the ultimate cannibal. Thus the distinction between savagery and civilization at home is collapsed.

In the *Drapier’s Letters (1724-25)* Swift writes to counter the Woods Halfpence which was going to be introduced in Ireland. Swift articulated that Irish people are subject to the same rights and liberties as the English. As Swift states, “Wood hath liberty to offer his coin, and we have law, reason, liberty and necessity to refuse it” (Ewald 180). Swift highlight the

unconstitutionality of the English policies, based upon force. Swift realised that as a colony or dependent nation Ireland was meant only to serve the economic interests of England.

The ideological Challenge to the idea of Britishness and global empire is visible in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Clement Hawes notes correctly that though Swift is often classified as a conservative, however the satire in *Gulliver's Travels* sharply critiques the violence of colonial modernity (140). Reversing the seventeenth and eighteenth-century colonial discourses is a specific strategy which Swift's makes use of.

Gulliver's Travels is written in the form of a travelogue. Travelogues were very popular in the Eighteenth century. Travelogues provided readers information about exotic places and were accepted as objective testimony. The travelogues described inhuman practices, political absolutism and degeneracy of these States, confirming the superiority of European customs and norms. They sought to link the African with the primate in the chain of being and incapable of progress, brutish, ignorant, bloody. Such writings played an important role in British economy and culture in contributing to ideas of empire and civilisation. But travel writing is ridiculed by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*.

The unreliability of the narrative of *Gulliver's Travels* can be compared with the fictions of the travelogues being extensively written during the eighteenth century. As Colin Nicholson notes, the reader in *Gulliver's Travels* encounters a "calculated disordering of perception and participation" (91).

Gulliver's typical colonial vanity, as a superior colonial subject is repeatedly undercut. In the Second book, Gulliver proudly lists the achievements of his militaristic country. However the king of Brobdingnag is horrified at Gulliver and exposes his lack of moral principles. The King comes to the conclusion that his people might be 'the most pernicious race of little odious vermin...to crawl upon the face of the earth'.

The magical island in the voyage to Laputa resembles the English, extracting resources from various dominions below. Swift, drawing from his experiences in Ireland, clearly depicts the violence of the colonial state. Swift highlights the social cost of the process of imperialism.

At the end of the book, Gulliver is so alienated from his sense of self that he could not even look at himself in the mirror and discards his own culture. The assumptions about non Europeans presented in the travelogues are undercut in Book Four where Gulliver learns that he is 'a real Yahoo in every limb and feature'. As Laura Brown notes, "the active undermining of the ideology of racial superiority...in Gulliver's Travels certainly would have been accessible to an eighteenth century audience." (198)

The most violent condemnation of imperialism is provided in Book four of *Gulliver's Travels*. "For instance, a crew of pirates....to rob and plunder...the natives driven out or destroyed...crew of butchers employed in so pious an expedition...to convert and civilize". For Swift civilization is equated with barbarism. Europe's claim of civilising the 'savages' is satirised through a disordering of perception. For Hawes, Gulliver thus becomes the fragmented antithesis of the self sufficient Robinson Crusoe.

Defoe could speak against slavery in *A Reformation of Manners* (1702), he could also advocate a paternal system of commerce to deal with slave labour. Defoe sees commerce and trade as noteworthy and it inspires him. John Mc Veagh notes the uniting of two distinct insights in Defoe, of economic matters and a human awareness. Mc Veagh notes that in Defoe's writings, human issues hold his attention (54). Defoe could speak against Spanish excesses and brutality but the English merchant is seen as a liberating and civilising influence. Material, moral and life, as Defoe notes in his *Review Vol3 No2* (1706), stems from commerce. This made him an advocate of a humanitarian slavery, embodied by Crusoe, Quaker William and Colonel Jack.

J.G.A. Pocock points that the Augustan debate did not just oppose entrepreneurial interests to agrarian. In fact it was the creation of a finance capitalism which led to speculation with funds which caused resentment (Hawes 13). Thus Swift could advocate for trade in Ireland. At the same time the mechanics and ideology of racial superiority operating this system, made him realise its inhuman costs. Swift could see how imperialism and racism were part of an economic system whose reach was ever expanding.

In an age where Trade and Slavery went hand in hand, 'liberty' became a powerful site of debate. Ideas of liberty provided the impetus for abolitionist movements later in the century. However, early on, liberty was used in the subjugation and of non Europeans. This dual nature of the term and its dialectic with commerce can be found in the works of Swift and Defoe. So while Defoe's islands are populated by barbarians meant to be taught and civilized; Swift's islands are the homes of civilized persons who see the colonists as butchers.

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