

# **RUSKIN ON POLITICAL ECONOMY, OR 'BEING PREACHED TO DEATH BY A MAD GOVERNESS'**

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Willie Henderson. 2000. *John Ruskin's Political Economy*. Routledge. London. Pp xv + 200. ISBN 0-415-20067-9.

Willie Henderson has drawn upon recent literary theory to write a good book on a much neglected topic, namely John Ruskin's views on classical political economy, and consequently the arguments and conclusions contained in this publication deserve to be reviewed at length. Before proceeding to my highly qualified criticisms of this book, however, the now relative obscurity of its central character, at least within the narrow world inhabited by economists, calls for some prefatory biographical remarks. Ruskin was one of the most influential art and social critics of the nineteenth century and, indeed, his writings conveniently frame the Victorian Age, his first piece appearing in 1830 and his last in 1900. He was also a tragic figure of theatrical, if not Greek, proportions. He was delicate, exceedingly thin and possessed an unshapely mouth, having been savaged by a dog in early childhood; his unhealthy filial devotion to his grim evangelical mother and doting vintner father, which continued into middle age, clearly retarded his emotional development; and his disposition to morbidity and hypochondria constantly threatened to push him over to madness, as the following passage, written at 43, reveals: "I feel as if I were living in one great churchyard, with people all around me clinging feebly to the edges of open graves" (quoted in Harrison 1911:310). Although Ruskin sufficiently mastered these and other fragile character attributes to develop a charming disposition and to attain fame in his chosen career as a prophet and seer, he unfortunately did not have the strength of mind to overcome his very public travails of finding a suitable companion. The initial woman of his affections spurned his callow advances and, on the rebound, he married Euphemia ('Effie') Chalmers Gray in 1848. This marriage remained unconsummated and soon disintegrated, with Effie at one stage describing it as "worse than suffering the pains of eternal torment" (Ruskin 1854:12). The marriage was annulled in 1854 on the prompting of Effie, who, driven by her hatred for Ruskin, publicly declared him to be impotent. Ruskin privately claimed that this was not the case, stating that consummation initially did not take place due to the financial anxieties of Effie's parents, and, though he quickly realised that they were incompatible, that he continued to offer his services from time to time. He added: "I can claim my virility at once, but I do not wish to receive back into my house the woman who has made such a charge against me" (ibid:16). The scandal worsened when Effie shortly after ran off with the bohemian and pre-Raphaelite, John Everett Millais, who was a close friend of Ruskin and with whom Effie eventually had eight children. Ruskin's private life then sank into further turmoil when he became madly infatuated with Rose La Touche, whom he first encountered when she was nine and a half (some say eleven) in his capacity as her private art tutor. He waited until 1866, when she was eighteen, to make the first of his proposals, but her mother finally forbade such a union after corresponding with Effie,

who still bore ill feelings towards Ruskin. Rose, who was also mentally unhinged, died prematurely in 1875, and Ruskin subsequently began to experience intermittent bouts of more obvious mental illness, before experiencing a major collapse from ‘brain fever’ in 1889 and unrelenting madness until his death in 1900. The drawing room gossip that followed these travails was less painful to Ruskin than his belief that his emotional needs and passions—the natures of which we should not be too quick to infer—remained unmet. He is recorded as having stated that the major calamity of his life was not finding love.

Ruskin’s tortured private life and occasional want of mental balance patently influenced his intellectual endeavours, although, as numerous Ruskin scholars have repeatedly argued, this influence has been over-stated in the secondary literature and, worse, incorrectly used to dismiss his more opaque judgments as the natural issue of a disturbed mind. The precise nature of these intellectual endeavours, whatever their source, initially took the form of single-handedly redefining the nature and purpose of art for a Victorian middle class that was then all but begging to be directed in matters of culture. Ruskin’s theories of art, as articulated in his multi-volume *Modern Painters* (1843-60) and other celebrated works, are far too complex even to be adumbrated in this brief review. It is sufficient to state here that they were, from the beginning, constituted by a philosophy of life, the central theme of which was that contented and ‘whole’ individuals working within a just society, and striving to capture the essence of nature, produce fine and noble art (and commodities in general), while corrupt and despondent individuals working within an unjust society, and drawing upon the tools and images of the machine age, produce shoddy and depraved art (see Williams 1961 for a pithy introduction to this philosophy). It was consequently a very short step for Ruskin to shift his focus from art criticism to social criticism, which he did in the late 1850s. His primary target was the spokespeople for the new Victorian order, the political economists. His first concerted attack on the received economic vision of his times appeared in a series of lectures entitled ‘The Political Economy of Art’ in 1857, which were eventually published with additions as *A Joy for Ever* in 1880, and in which he argued that England should appoint a paternal head steward to manage the economy like an estate, directing industry and controlling the flows of resources, especially in the production of art and those endeavours that give rise to sub-standard commodities. He then turned his attention to political economy proper with four essays in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, which were published as *Unto This Last* in 1862, and in which he insisted that production and consumption patterns should be re-drawn in a way that would create a just society and allow individuals to achieve a higher plane of being or wholeness (a “felicitous fulfilment of function”), and, most importantly, sought to prove that the political economists employed faulty reasoning and the implausible concept of economic man to prevent the emergence of this just society and the associated ‘whole’ or perfected man. This was followed by ‘Essays on Political Economy’ in James Froude’s *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1862, which were eventually published with substantial changes as *Munera Pulveris* in 1872, and in which he embarked upon the ambitious (and seriously flawed) project of constructing an entirely new axiomatic economic system on terms of his own defining. He then made further attacks within *Sesame and Lilies* in 1865, which, though ostensibly about the art of reading and female education, is really yet another diatribe against modern life and economic relations. Ruskin also repeatedly returned to many of these issues in more general social commentaries, such as *Time and Tide* (1867) and the discursive and often startling epistolary series, *Fors Coligera* (1871-84).

The response to Ruskin's assaults on classical political economy was brutal and acerbic, if not scandalous. Thackery cut short his series of articles in the *Cornhill* and Froude, on the prompting of the publishers, ended his contributions to the *Fraser*. One critic facetiously stated that Ruskin's true sphere was art and that 'Unto this Last' should be his field of research (quoted in McCarthy 1903:336). Ruskin's views on political economy were singled out for particularly harsh ridicule partly because, unlike the many other social commentators of this time, he attacked political economy directly and systematically, rather than with the occasional acid remark or striking parable within a broader call for reform. Thus, whereas Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle and other social critics were tolerated for their references to 'grandgrindism', 'pig philosophy', 'the dismal science', and so forth, Ruskin could not be forgiven for caustic phrases such as the 'goddess of getting-on' and 'Britannia of the market', as they were coupled with analytical appraisals that ended with the indictments that Adam Smith was a blasphemer and the blackest of 'devils' and John Stuart Mill was 'cretinous' and a 'goose' (quoted in Henderson 2000: 34-5). The different reception given to Ruskin's close friend, Carlyle, is particularly telling, since Ruskin explicitly stated that Carlyle's tirades against the machine age were a source of inspiration and he laced his own narratives with Carlylesque abuse. Anthony Trollope was one of the first to contrast the wisdom of Carlyle with the rashness of Ruskin: "But I doubt whether many men will receive Carlylesque denunciations from Mr. Ruskin with any good to their souls. He produces them with the grace of poetic expression and the strength of well-arranged, vigorous words; but they do not contain that innate, conspicuous wisdom which alone can make such preaching efficacious" (1865: 298). Leslie Stephen was even more explicit about the implications of attacking political economy directly: "The craftsmen still believed implicitly in their Diana of the Ephesians. Carlyle's huge growls had passed over men's heads like distant thunder, too vague to be effective. Ruskin meant to be the lightening, striking distinct and tangible points" (1900: 420). Any umbrage taken over this systematic assault on political economy was then compounded by Ruskin's audacity in not only proposing an alternative to the *laissez faire* system with which this science was then associated, but in making this alternative authoritarian in nature. The paternalistic command economy promoted by Ruskin, especially in 'The Political Economy of Art' and *Munera Pulveris*, was censured for its orientalism, caeserism and, worse still, its Jacobin overtones. It was a blueprint to be classed with Plato's *Republic*, Thomas More's *Utopia* or Bishop Berkley's Bermuda project, and consequently dismissed as an impractical socio-economic system (see especially Thomas 1857:207).

The critical assault against Ruskin was then all but carried with the accusation that he was incapable of writing in a systematic and coherent manner. This supposed fault with Ruskin's writings needs to be elaborated upon, as it is a judgment with which Henderson takes issue and upon which my few critical comments of Henderson's book rest. Ruskin wrote long, elaborate sentences, building clause upon clause, and conveyed his ideas by drawing upon rich metaphors, endless classical references, biblical parables and personal experiences. It was an extremely impressive prose style, which, according to J.B. Priestley, was deliberately imitated by Marcel Proust, who also happened to translate some of Ruskin's writings into French (1960:159). It nonetheless often became over-elaborate and excessively ornate (even by Victorian standards), and frequently entailed lurching between an immoderate number of metaphors and as many as twenty classical references within a few pages. It was also often discursive and chaotic, with Ruskin frequently leaving lines of reasoning unfinished in favour of pursuing needless digressions, allowing arguments

to become inexorably entangled, and giving the impression that his assertions were driven by emotion rather than reason. It certainly maddened the champions of classical political economy, who were raised on the ordered and precise reasoning of John Stuart Mill. They duly contrasted Ruskin's 'hysterical', 'sentimental' and 'effeminate' reasoning with the 'manly' scientific rigour of Mill. One critic wrote that "it is intolerable that a man whose best performances are deformed by constant eruptions of windy hysterics should be able to avail himself of the pages of one of our most popular periodicals for the purpose of pouring out feminine nonsense, in language which women would have far too much self-respect to employ, upon so grave a subject as political economy" (Anonymous 1860:274). This critic added that it was like, as with Sydney Smith's dean, being "preached to death by a mad governess" (ibid: 275). He then contrasted Mill's "vigorous logic and simplicity of style" with Ruskin's "intolerable twaddle about Ixion, Demas, Dante, and Ezekial's vision of wheels", and concluded that the reader's judgment of him will be determined according to his "preference for strong exercise on the one hand, or hysterics on the other" (ibid: 278; see also Anonymous 1862a: 286). A more sympathetic reviewer argued that Ruskin's power lay in a different direction: "So subtle a critic had not probably appeared since the time of Coleridge. He was unrivalled in the somewhat feminine faculty of entering into the thoughts of others. He could expound the half-unconscious intentions of poets and painters. Add to this subtlety an intense love and minute observation of nature, and a purity and generosity of spirit without which both his sympathy for nature and the works of genius would have been impossible, and then set forth his thoughts in a pomp of magnificent words, and we cannot be surprised that Mr Ruskin captivated many readers" (Anonymous 1862b: 292). This critic consequently concluded that Ruskin was unsuited to the study of social life and that it was inevitable that he would take refuge in sentimentalism and loose reasoning. He justified these forthright remarks on the grounds that a "half-delirious man, however highly gifted, cannot be allowed to move about unchecked with a lighted candle in a powder magazine" (ibid: 293). Henderson cites entirely different Victorian sources to illustrate these same, rather offensive, sexual contrasts, and it is therefore probably safe to assume that such dichotomies framed most of the contemporary readings of Ruskin's publications. One can only imagine what today's feminist post-structuralists would make of the charge that Ruskin wrote in a (female) scream.

One of the two major goals Henderson sets himself in his book is to challenge the received view that Ruskin's writings on political economy were indeed rambling nonsense. He wishes, in his words, to provide a critical "and non-prejudicial reading which looks to Ruskin's sense rather than his madness", and thereby to show that Ruskin's methodological and analytical insights into classical political economy have some bearing on the longer-term development of economic understanding (2000: xiv). Henderson especially decries the view that Ruskin was an eccentric amateur, and, uncharacteristically using some rather clumsy and new-fangled terminology, believes that Ruskin's work is "informed by a solid knowledge basis" rather than an "amateurish knowledge base" (ibid: 3-4). He is also careful to emphasise that knowledge of his emotional instability, "which some thought they had perceived from his emotive writing long before knowledge of his problems were made public, has supported much unjust and lazy criticism of his work" (ibid: 7). In fact, although Henderson admits that his madness should be kept distantly in view, he maintains that the post-modern mantra of 'death of the author' should be invoked when any explanation is based on Ruskin's health rather than his writings (ibid: 7). The second central goal Henderson sets himself is to persuade the reader that nineteenth century

economic texts can be examined by using the tools of rhetorical analysis and modern literary criticism, in addition to those tools that are common to more conventional methods (ibid: xiv). Ruskin's works provide rich soil for this sort of 'literary' approach. They are brimming with lavish metaphors, allegories, parables and obscure classical references ripe for 'deconstruction' (in the broadest meaning of that term). The very titles of Ruskin's works, such as *Sesame and Lilies* and *Munera Pulveris*, are obscure and in need of analysis. Henderson also points out that the loose construction of these works allows them to be read in a number of ways, each with different policy implications for the problems of the modern world, whether these be impoverishment in Central America or global warming. In his words: "It is time, given that Thatcherite, market-led solutions are being re-examined in a period of Hegelian synthesis inaugurated by New Labour, for his contribution to the development of economic ideas to be considered" (ibid: 4).

Henderson explores these two themes by examining the meaning and impact of Ruskin's writings from a number of different perspectives, or what Henderson calls 'frames'. This approach partly dictates the structure of the book, with each chapter examining Ruskin and his writings from a particular standpoint. There is, for example, a chapter on Ruskin's conception of economic agency, another delineating the way in which Ruskin drew on Xenophon, another tracing the hold Plato had on Ruskin, another showing the way in which Ruskin influenced Alfred Marshall, and so on. This strategy gives rise to the sort of repetition and stiltedness that one would normally find in an edited book of essays, but it is nonetheless successful. Henderson, in particular, makes a number of insightful observations about Ruskin's writings of which I am certain that historians of economic thought were either unaware or only half aware, and he cleverly draws upon modern literary techniques to provide credible evidence that Ruskin's writings were, indeed, framed and sustained by a well-defined conceptual system. This Ruskinian research program consisted of a number of elements, and because Henderson himself delineates them in a discursive manner, the page references that follow are only partial indicators of where they are discussed within his text. First, Ruskin rejected the abstract notion of an economic man operating in a deterministic 'single-exit model', in favour of a 'concrete' man with a complex set of motivations, a soul, and a capacity to decide (ibid:62). Second, he embraced historicist notions (of sorts) by focusing on the origins and destinations of economic phenomena, by emphasising that the current economic science was based on an accidental historical stage, and by repeatedly arguing that everything is of time and place and hence mutable (ibid: 121, 128). Third, he was something of a Baconian in that he dispensed with grand abstract relationships in favour of careful observation and drawing the shortest of inductive inferences from the particular and the concrete (ibid: 30-1). Fourth, he implicitly rejected the art-science dichotomy in favour of an ethically based political economy, in which consumption rather than production and distribution was the central focus; that is, to enable individuals to reach a higher level of being or wholeness, the political economist should direct them to choose 'life-availing' consumption commodities (which constitute wealth) over 'life-destroying' commodities (which constitute "illth"), as well as to produce these commodities using certain manufacturing methods rather than others (ibid: 131). Finally, and as mentioned previously, at a policy level he drew upon Xenophon and Plato to reject the 'destructive and unjust' *laissez faire* system in favour of an 'organic' economy administered by a natural aristocracy and managers analogous to estate stewards. Henderson, in short, maintains that Ruskin's attack on political economy is "based on the irrelevance of a scientific approach, and the centrality of an ethical, aesthetic and

historicist approach, for the realization of social harmony” (ibid: 122).

It must once again be emphasised that I do not take issue with this depiction of Ruskin’s writings. Henderson has made his case so well that, in my view, it is now indisputable that Ruskin had a grand ‘Schumpeterian’ vision and that this vision sustained his arguments not only in his often cited *Unto This Last*, but his less well known epistolary writings and the numerous lectures he published over many decades. It is, however, one thing to argue that Ruskin distantly held a conceptual framework, and entirely another to contend (as Henderson seems to contend) that he successfully articulated this framework. Ruskin’s over-ripe sentences, his predilection for needless digressions, his ‘grasshopper’ habit of jumping from point to point without any warning to the reader, his self-important use of personal experiences to overstate a case, his preoccupation with definitions and the etymology of words, his excessive use of obscure classical and biblical references, his failure to draw links between the different elements of his conceptual system, his needless attacks on his *bete noire*, the noble John Stuart Mill, often combine to make very irritating reading. It certainly explains why Ruskin is largely unread today. It also partly explains why the Victorian critics, who were more ready than modern readers to accept classical references and ornate writing styles, tore strips from him. There is, unfortunately, simply no space in this review to cite sufficient passages to illustrate the way in which these various writing strategies often prevented Ruskin from carrying an argument to a clear and convincing end. The following sentence of 239 words (!) on the meaning of capital does, however, illustrate the sort of difficulties created by Ruskin’s preference for classical references and metaphors:

“Not a profit, as the ancients truly saw, and showed in the type of Ixion;— for capital is the head, or fountain head, of wealth—the ‘well-head’ of wealth, as the clouds are the well-heads of rain; but when clouds are without water, and only beget clouds, they issue in wrath at last, instead of rain, and in lightening instead of harvest; whence Ixion is said first to have invited guests to a banquet, and then made them fall into a pit filled with fire; which is the type of the temptation of riches issuing in imprisoned torment,— torment in a pit, (as also Demas’ silver mine,) after which, to show the rage of riches passing from lust of pleasure to lust of power, yet power not truly understood, Ixion is said to have desired Juno, and instead, embraced a cloud (or phantasm), to have begotten the Centaurs; the power of mere wealth being, in itself, as the embrace of a shadow,—comfortless, (so also ‘Ephraim feedeth on wind and followeth after the east wind’; or ‘that which is not’—Prov. xxiii. 5; and again Dante’s Geryon, the type of avaricious fraud, as he flies, gathers the *air* up with retractile claws,—‘l’aer a se raccoglie,’) but in its offspring, a mingling of the brutal with the human nature: human in sagacity—using both intellect and arrow; but brutal in its body and hoof, for consuming, and trampling down” (1862:99-101).

This passage, which admittedly is one of his worst, is tarted up like an over-adorned Victorian drawing room. The excess of metaphor and scholarly references are trash in the same way that the superfluous mathematics and econometrics in recent issues of the *American Economic Review* are trash.

Henderson unfortunately does not distinguish clearly between the question of Ruskin’s ability to sustain a broad ‘vision’ and the very different question of his rhetorical ability to articulate the wisdom, or even the particulars, of this ‘vision’. Henderson sometimes even seems to imply that his own ‘recovery’ and delineation of Ruskin’s broad conceptual framework amounts to demonstrating that Ruskin was

successful in explicating this framework. I am not, of course, suggesting that Henderson has made no attempt to answer this second question directly and independently from the first. If anything, Henderson has taken particular care to show that the rhetorical strategies employed by Ruskin were very different from those used by the classical political economists, and that they should not be deemed inferior for this reason alone. In an interesting chapter in which Ruskin's texts are favourably compared with Mill's, for example, he painstakingly establishes that Ruskin shunned the systematic thinking of political economy in favour of anti-systematic thinking, in which imagination was allowed to run riot and closure of argument was less important. It is nonetheless my view that Henderson is less convincing in his contention that Ruskin was persuasive, and that if his 'recovery' of Ruskin's conceptual framework is put aside, he is still less convincing. I believe, like the majority of the Victorians believed, that Ruskin simply failed to enunciate his 'vision' for political economy, even when judged by the alternative standards used to appraise his idiosyncratic rhetorical strategies, and that he was rightfully upbraided for this failure. It is in these very circumstances that the 'rhetoric of economics' and related (less anarchic) post-modern methods of appraising texts are open to ill-directed use. Such methods correctly broaden the criteria by which texts are judged and are therefore both liberating and healthy, but they also tempt critics to raise an inferior text above its station. This, I believe, has happened in this case. Henderson is entirely correct to argue that Ruskin's texts have been neglected and undervalued, but he also clearly over-rates their quality. This is especially evident when he stands them alongside Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*. There is still a canon of classical texts in economics, only they are no longer judged on a single Archimedean point, and I am afraid that Mill's *Principles*, for all its faults, is part of this canon, and that *Unto This Last*, for all its outstanding attributes, is not. Mill may have over-systemised and striven too hard for closure in his texts, but Ruskin rarely bothered even to close an argument; Mill may have failed to draw sufficiently upon metaphors to illustrate his meaning, but Ruskin's excessive use of metaphors often seems to excuse him from stating expressly what he means; Mill may have sent many to sleep by needlessly devoting page after dull page to surveying the different land systems of his time, but Ruskin irritates far more by drawing upon personal experiences to arrive at the most outrageous generalisations, and so on.

The important issue of Ruskin's contribution to economic thought nonetheless remains open for debate. I believe that his legacy to political economy emanates from isolated passages within his texts rather than from the texts themselves, and hence from certain aspects of the ideas within his framework rather than from the framework itself. Ruskin's bathetic writings pitch from naive observations and vulgar lavishness to perceptive remarks and passages of poetic genius, and it is the latter that lodged in the Victorian mind. He may have failed to communicate his conceptual framework to contemporary readers, but not every passage was as inscrutable as the one I cited earlier in this review, and every third passage certainly made the Victorians stop and think. Henderson does not quite make this point, but he does correctly maintain that historians of economic thought have underestimated the degree to which Ruskin influenced the economists of his time, and he himself briefly sketches the impact Ruskin had on Alfred Marshall, William Smart and John Bates Clark. The full-length book tracing the various ways in which Ruskin influenced the economists of the late-Victorian age has, however, yet to be written. Consider, for instance, Ruskin's appeal, made most emphatically in the fourth essay of *Unto This Last*, for political economists to analyse, and then deliberately shape, consumer preferences for wealth and 'illth'. As

already mentioned, Ruskin insisted that the traditional focus on the production and distribution of an ill-defined wealth should be replaced by the investigation of the way in which the consumption of certain commodities elevates the individual to a higher plane of being (and thereby “avails life”), while the consumption of others reduces them to a state of degradation (and thereby leads to a type of “death”). In his words: the “real science of political economy, which has yet to be distinguished from the bastard science, as medicine from witchcraft, and astronomy from astrology, is that which teaches nations to desire and labour for the things that lead to life: and which teaches them to scorn and destroy the things that lead to destruction” (1862:85). It was to be a ‘science’ of consumption, albeit a strange sort of science with an abundance of ‘oughts’ (cf 1873:147). Various aspects of this core Ruskinian principle, even when clouded by his idiosyncratic style, must have been one of the sources of inspiration for historicists, such as T.E. Cliffe Leslie and John Kells Ingram, to study the way in which consumer preferences change through historical time. It also must have at least facilitated the reception of the incipient neoclassical program of studying consumer preferences at a point in historical time, not to mention the wider New Liberal framework to which the English version of this program was (all too briefly) attached. Indeed, historians of economic thought would do well to ponder Ruskin’s role in the intellectual revolution that occurred in the 1860s in matters relating to social amelioration. Such reflection would, amongst other things, act as a useful tonic to the prevailing over-emphasis on the way in which the marginalist timetable was governed by the neoclassical economists’ (in)ability to imitate developments in the physical sciences; an over-emphasis that appears, ironically, to be driven more by the need for some scholars to display their prowess in grasping the mathematical tools of the physical sciences than by their very reasonable belief that many economists have suffered, and continue to suffer, from that debilitating psychological malady, ‘physics envy’. So, all things considered, I am thankful to Henderson for forcing me to read Ruskin’s economic texts from start to finish, rather than, as on previous occasions, hurling them across the room, half read, with exasperation and contempt.

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