

What is Real Wealth? A Ruskinian Framework for Economic Justice

Jeffrey L. Spear and Lynn Stuart Parramore

March 27, 2015

Panel: "Challenging Economic Injustice Through Literature"

"It is long since past the time when we should have put the question of inequality back at the center of economic analysis and begun asking questions first raised in the nineteenth century."

Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 2014

"There is no wealth but life."

John Ruskin, *Unto This Last* (1860)

On New Year's Day, 1844, John James Ruskin, the father of Victorian art and social critic John Ruskin gave his twenty-four-year-old son a seascape by J.M.W. Turner to honor the publication of the first volume of *Modern Painters*, which had rocketed the young man to fame. Ruskin had declared it the finest work of England's greatest painter: "If I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work," he wrote, "I should choose this."¹

¹ *Modern Painters I* (*The Works of Ruskin*. 39 vols. Ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London: George Allen, 1903-12. III: 571. Hereafter cited in the text)



The Slave Ship

At first glance the picture appears to show a sublime red and orange sunset spreading over a stormy sea. But a closer look reveals that something terrible is happening. A sailing ship labors in heavy waters in the distance; while in the foreground, human hands and feet linked by chains struggle in the churning waves. Monsters of the deep are rising up to feed upon the fragmented bodies.



The Slave Ship, Detail

Turner's painting, "Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming on" (now called "The Slave Ship") was inspired by a 1783 fraud case that was filed after the captain of the *Zong* ordered 132 sick slaves to be shackled and thrown overboard. The captain reasoned that insurance money could not be collected on slaves who perished from illness, but would be paid for those cast overboard to save a ship, as would be true of any cargo. The insurance company won the case, convincing an English court that the *Zong* had never been in real danger of sinking. But despite the moral outrage stirred by the mercenary murder of 132 human beings, there was no criminal trial. Under English law of the time no

felony had been committed. When Turner displayed the painting at the Royal Academy in 1840, he attached lines from his poem “The Fallacies of Hope”:

Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds

Declare the Typhon's coming.

Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard

The dead and dying – ne'er heed their chains

Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!

Where is thy market now?"

The tensions in this painting between life and death, humanity and nature, human life and market value are among those that drove Ruskin to become one of the most trenchant critics of classical political economy and Victorian capitalism. The longer he lived, the more uneasy he became in appreciating and interpreting the representation of mankind and nature in art while the British economic system rationalized the despoiling of nature and the debasement of living human beings. *“You cannot have a landscape by Turner, without a country for him to paint; you cannot have a portrait by Titian, without a man to be portrayed”* (Oxford Lectures XX: 107). Although he is still primarily remembered as an art critic, there have been periodic revivals of Ruskin’s social thought. Searching for humane alternatives to our current economic models, intellectual historians from a variety of disciplines are again revisiting Ruskin’s prescient economic ideas.²

² See, for example, Christopher May, “John Ruskin’s Political Economy: ‘There is No Wealth but Life.’” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. Accessed on March 9, 2015.

http://www.academia.edu/1967015/John_Ruskin_s_Political_Economy_There_is_N

Over the course of his lifetime, Ruskin put forth arguments which anticipated, in the language of his own time, a dazzling array of social reform initiatives, including free public education and vocational training; New Deal-style public works programs for the unemployed; guaranteed medical care for the needy; green belts around urban areas; regulation of economic development for the protection of the environment and the public health; clean energy; public assistance and housing for the elderly, disabled, and poor; a graduated income tax; minimum wage laws; ethical investment campaigns; consumer boycotts; and income ceilings for the wealthy. Ruskin's ideas inspired the establishment of the National Trust, William Morris's Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and informed the rhetoric of the Labour Party's founders. Mahatma Gandhi read Ruskin's *Unto this Last* on a long train ride in South Africa and wrote that it changed his life instantly, causing him to appreciate the connection between the individual and the whole of society.³

As the topic of systemic inequality takes center stage in discussions of human progress, Ruskin's insights into the provenance of economics, the proper relation between people in the economic sphere, and the true nature of wealth suggest approaches to such current problems as income and wealth distribution, the excesses of capitalism, and the social and environmental costs of production from outside the conventional frame of capitalism versus some form of socialism.

[o Wealth but Life](#) and David Craig, *Ruskin and the Ethics of Consumption*. Charlottesville: UVA Press, 2006.

³ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Writings*. Ed. Judith Brown. (Oxford U Press: 2008) 29.

At the root of his challenge to the status quo lies Ruskin refusal to recognize economics as a separate discipline divorced from moral philosophy and consequently immune to the ethics taught by religion and the humane side of Western culture. With considerable foresight, he warned that the emergence of economics as a technical discipline generated faulty premises from which harmful policies were deduced. To Ruskin economics was not an abstract, neutral field of study, as claimed by contemporaries like Mill, Nassau Senior, John Elliot Cairnes, and David Ricardo, who famously asserted that “it is not the province of the Political Economist to advise:--he is to tell you how to become rich, but he is not to advise you to prefer riches to indolence, or indolence to riches.”⁴ Ruskin, in contrast, saw economics as an inquiry into how an economy of abundance could best advance human development and social harmony.

Like Thomas Carlyle (who termed economics “the dismal science”), Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Alfred Tennyson, Ruskin rejected the concept of atomistic “economic man” joined to other units in what Carlyle called “the cash nexus.” He railed against the false Gospel of Mammonism, which made the pursuit of self-interest a social good and promulgated systems of exploitation that eluded the authority of the nominal ruling class, an aristocracy that had lost most of its function, while retaining most of its privileges. Ruskin recognized the immaterial constituents of wealth and condemned a system that benefited a minority of capitalists, owners and managers while leaving so many people idle who were willing to work, and consigning so many who were working to degrading, alienating, routinized, and

⁴ David Ricardo, *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*. Ed. Pierro Sraffa and M. H. Dodd. (Cambridge UP: 1951-73) Vol. 2, 338.

often dangerous labor. Ruskin understood that wealth is not morally neutral, writing that its commercial accumulation “may be indicative, on the one hand, of faithful industries, progressive energies, and productive ingenuities: or, on the other, it may be indicative of moral luxury, merciless tyranny, ruinous chicane.” (*Unto This Last* XVII: 52).

Ruskin’s attempts to resolve the conflict between social values and capitalist practices, which focused on evolutionary social change, resonate in our own time of concentrated wealth and the continued threat of insufficiently regulated markets. Many who seek alternatives to a dehumanized economic system today are following Ruskinian lines of thought, though they may not know it.

The Moral Philosopher

John Ruskin was born in 1819. As soon as he could read his evangelical mother set him to reciting the Bible aloud covering both testaments annually, year after year, later supplemented with Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Memorized before it could be understood, the Bible became something like a verbal unconscious, and given his father’s love of literature and art he was almost as familiar with Shakespeare, Byron, Scott, Wordsworth, and styles of art and architecture. In his maturity read and reread Plato and Dante. The first volume of *Modern Painters*, which made him famous at 24, was a spirited defense of Turner, particularly in his rendering of landscape and seascape as we experience them visually, not as ideal form — an argument rooted in the close observation of the natural world that he kept up throughout his long life. Indeed the career that began

with his description of a painted storm that passes judgment on — “the guilty ship as it labours amidst the lightning of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood,” (III: 572) ends with *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, a jeremiad against pollution of the world’s air at once moral and literal, making the British empire on which the sun was said never to set “one on which he never rises”(XXXIV: 41). His mode of evangelical religion stressed stewardship of the earth, and he bore witness to the industrial blackening of England’s once green and pleasant land and to the concomitant plight of the unemployed and the poor, many of whom were so distorted by scarcity as to be seen late in the century as degenerated into a race apart.

In the 1850s Ruskin, like Dickens and many others of his generation, came under the influence of Carlyle, who saw the revolutionary potential of men unemployed through no fault of their own by what came to be called the business cycle. But Carlyle feared what Marx and Engels desired. He called on those he termed “Captains of Industry” to respond to the burdens of workers laid off through no fault of their own in order to forestall direct action and blunt the force, particularly the physical force, of Chartism, the working-class protest movement. Although advocates of socialism quoted from their work, Carlyle, Ruskin and Dickens saw a more just economy as the means of stabilizing and humanizing the existing social order. They shared as well contempt for party politics, preferring in their various ways to advance reform by persuading the public rather than proposing legislation.

Ruskin's writing on political economy set the economics that followed Adam Smith against the long western tradition rooted in Scripture and classics of literature, philosophy and art. He began to explicitly address the question of economic justice in "The Nature of Gothic," tucked in the middle of his architectural masterpiece *The Stones of Venice*. There he sets his typical medieval man, a cathedral stone carver, a creator of gargoyles, who can freely express himself through his work while contributing to a coherent whole, against the modern employee whose repetitive labor, dictated by others, turns him into a mere tool. Of the division of labor, Ruskin declares that:

It is not, truly speaking, the labor that it divided but the men... so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail. The great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than their furnace blast, is all in very deed for this – that we manufacture everything their except men ... to brighten, to strengthen, to refine, or to form a single living spirit never enters into our estimate of advantages. (X: 196)

NAIL FACTORY



Wire Cut and Shaped by Belt-Driven Machines

Ruskin is here deploying Adam Smith the moral philosopher against Adam Smith the economist. To the philosopher, the efficiency of the division of labor proclaimed by the economist Smith was machinery for the production of enfeebled dunces:

The torpor of his mind renders him not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life... But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the laboring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it.⁵

In 1858 after a long period of struggle, Ruskin lost faith in evangelical Christianity, and with afterlife uncertain, the inequities of this life increasingly

⁵ *The Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols. Ed. Edwin Cannan (Chicago: UC Press, 1976), 2:303.

demanded his attention. He advanced principles of political economy in essays so contrary to the dominant belief system of his time that the editors of the *Cornhill Magazine* and then *Fraser's* were forced to suspend them. As in his study of art and architecture, Ruskin starts with first principles and his own definitions, disregarding established usage, and so he proceeds in offering a new definition of wealth in the *Cornhill* essays published in book form as *Unto This Last* — a book cited in 1906 by the new Labour Members of Parliament as the one which had influenced them the most.⁶ For Ruskin, the premise from which all else flows is that wealth is life.

The Illth of Nations

The subject of wealth had been a thorny subject of debate for classical economists. For Adam Smith, political economy was defined as “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations,” the title of the book usually shortened to *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776 just as Britain was entering the Industrial Revolution. In it he rejected both the mercantilist view of the measure of a nation’s wealth as its store of gold and silver and the Physiocrat’s emphasis on wealth as all the produce of a nation’s farms. For Smith, the wealth of a nation consisted of both farm output and manufactured goods along with the labor it took to produce them. To increase its wealth, a nation had to expand its economic production, which could be done through the division of labor — the very proposition that Ruskin found so destructive.

In 1860, Ruskin’s definition of wealth as life deliberately moved away from abstract notions about maximizing of quantity found in the work of economists who

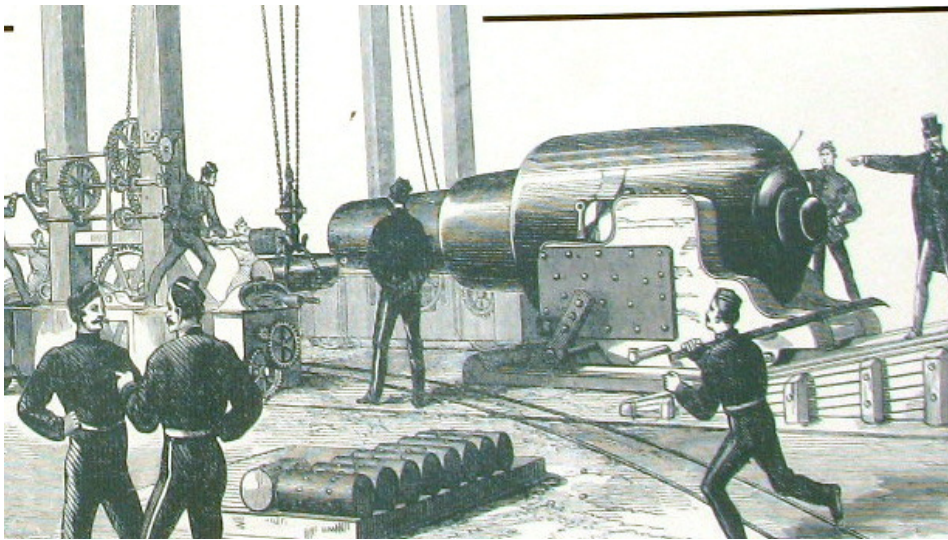
⁶ W. Henderson. *John Ruskin's Political Economy*. (London: Routledge, 2000) 26.

followed Smith, like the prominent theorist Nassau Senior who promoted a utilitarian view of wealth as consisting of scarce goods and services which have exchange value and produce utility. Ruskin, in contrast, insisted on a qualitative discussion of what actually makes human beings better or worse off. His conception harnessed the Old English associations of wealth with “weal” in the sense of well-being and health of mind and body. “There is no wealth but life,” declared Ruskin. “That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest numbers of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest, who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.” (*Unto This Last* XVII: 105).

Ruskin’s concept of wealth is relational. Something valuable, something having life-giving power, only becomes wealth when it is combined with a capable consumer, whether it is food for the body or food for the mind. The opposite of such wealth is not poverty, but what Ruskin calls “illth”: things that are to death devote just as the opposite of being well is being ill. In coining the term “illth,” Ruskin undoubtedly wished to call forth not only the notion of illness, but also filth, something rotten and sinful, like the assets built upon the exploitation of human beings in an immoral market system. Neither term is an absolute; they represent a ratio. That economy functions best that maximizes wealth and minimizes illth.

What classical economists called wealth is to Ruskin riches, and to him, the piling up of riches, generally in the form of money withdrawn from circulation, is an economic impediment because “the final object of political economy ... is to get a good method of consumption, and great quantity of consumption... to use

everything and to use it nobly." (*Unto this Last* XVII: 102). The aggregate wealth produced in a country is its common-wealth: the national store of things that avail life as opposed to a "common-illth and public nothing." For Ruskin, poverty represents the greatest failure of capital investment: "The Woolwich Infant is fed with 700 pound shot, and 130 pounds of gunpowder at a mouthful; not at all like Wapping infants, starving on a half-chance meal a day." (*Fors Clavigera* XXVII: 43).



The Woolwich Infant

“Wapping Infants” in London’s East End



In his view, every child has a human right to adequate food, clothing, shelter and education that he or she may have a chance to contribute to the common wealth, regardless of social class. In Ruskin’s economics, the investment in human beings is the most essential and morally significant element in a nation’s prosperity.

Today, when economists talk of wealth they are still usually thinking of something to be reckoned in terms of money — a quantitative rather than qualitative framework. It has taken a long time (and this process is far from complete) for economists to stop shying away from language that expresses the “common wealth” generally left out of assessments of the stock of a nation’s wealth: the health of the body, love, friendship, satisfying work, the delight of reading literature and experiencing arts— the things that make life worth living. Similarly,

economists have been slow to fully recognize the negative consequences of production, or “illth,” contained in tallies of wealth, and they have yet to fully grapple with the concepts of social costs and externalities that occupied Ruskin’s attention. In discussions of human capital, skills and knowledge are still usually considered in terms of their market value when such things are rarely simply reducible to prices.

But Ruskinian thinking is making something of a comeback. A notion akin to his concept of wealth and illth can be found in a recent trend of recommendations for governments to include measures of human well-being in national measurements of economic health, such as a 2008 report⁷ by economists Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen released on behalf of the French government calling for measurements that account for factors other than growth and a new attention to the social costs of negative externalities like environmental damage. The authors point to an unhealthy obsession with the gross domestic product⁸ that distorts policy and encourages economic instability and myriad social problems. Ruskinian distinctions between wealth and illth can be detected in arguments ranging from the work of the late ecologist Barry Commoner, which addressed the necessity of value judgments about the human and environmental costs of development, up to the recent linking

⁷ Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, “Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.” Viewed on March 9, 2015. <http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf>

⁸ Technically, GDP is a measure of income, not wealth, which values a flow of goods and services, rather than a stock of assets.

of environmental issues and a broader vision of social and economic justice found in work such as that of economist James K. Boyce⁹ on pollution and inequality.

If wealth is not material things with exchange value, but intrinsic, things of an availing nature in availing hands (an idea with a root that goes back to Xenophon in the 4th century BCE), what then, Ruskin asks, is money? This question is complicated because for him it involves social relationships, so money can, for example, mean power to command other people's labor. But he argues that its primary function is as a token of debt:

The currency of any country consists of every document acknowledging debt, which is transferable in the country, and currency itself depends on the existence of substantial means of meeting its demand. In other words, money is not worth the paper it is printed on if it cannot purchase goods and services. As for gold, it is only precious as long as people think it so. (*Unto This Last*, XVII:49)

Being rich means having more power to claim goods and services than others. So, Ruskin asks,

If the king alone be rich, or if a few slave-masters are rich and the nation otherwise composed of slaves is it to be called a rich nation? Inequality, which is the condition of riches, may be established in two opposite modes – namely, by increase of possession on the one side, and by decrease of it on the other – we have to inquire ... precisely in what manner the correlative poverty was produced. (*Munera Pulveris* XVII: 161-2).

If Ruskin were to survey the current economic landscape in the U.S., he would be struck by the grim reality that in the past four decades CEO pay has grown

⁹ James K. Boyce, Klara Zwickl, and Michael Ash, "Three Measures of Environmental Inequality." *Institute for New Economic Thinking working paper, Political Economy of Distribution series*. Viewed on March 16, 2015.

<<http://ineteconomics.org/sites/inet.civicaactions.net/files/Boyce%20et%20al%20Three%20measures%20-%20INET%20-%20May%202014.pdf>>

nearly 1,000 percent, far outstripping the growth in median worker pay or company share prices,¹⁰ and he would condemn this trend as a sign of an unhealthy economy. Doubtless he would also consider the manner in which the disparity has been produced (through the misallocation of resources, the manipulation of stock prices, a focus on short-term gains, the outsourcing of jobs, the stripping away worker protections, and the evasion of taxes) as resulting in net-illth for the country rather than wealth. He would not object to private education, he was never an egalitarian, but he would be horrified by the selective impoverishment of public education in the U.S. and the collapse of the idea that higher education improves chances for employment into the idea that the purpose of higher education is vocational. Education is a theme in his work from first to last. "You do not educate a man by telling him what he knew not, but by making him what he was not", "You do not learn that you may live, -- you live that you may learn."¹¹ He would not object to the persistence of class distinctions, but he would object mightily to the self-segregation of the well-to-do, the gated community mentality. Consider his recommendation to girls of the middle and upper classes who were taught needlework, that they make useful children's clothing from the best materials and give it directly to an honest person in need:

You may be deceived... and give them to the dishonest and hear of their being at once taken to the pawnbroker's, never mind that, for the pawnbroker must sell them to some one who has need of them. That is no business of yours; what concerns you only is that when you see a half-naked child you should

¹⁰ "The 100 Most Overpaid CEOs." Viewed March 1, 2015.

<http://www.asyouow.org/ays_report/the-100-most-overpaid-ceos/>

¹¹ Cited by James Clark Sherburne, *John Ruskin, or the Ambiguities of Abundance* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972) 230.

have good and fresh clothes to give it, if its parents will let it be taught to wear them, If they well not, consider how they came to be of such a mind, which it will be wholesome for you beyond most subjects of inquiry to ascertain. (Preface to *Sesame and Lilies*, XVIII: 40).

Ruskin also expresses his sensitivity to inequality that denies to the poor a chance of self-fulfillment in his sardonic denunciations of what the rich typically do with their riches:

So, also, the power of our wealth seems limited as respects to the comforts of the servants, no less than their quietude. The persons in the kitchen appear to be ill-dressed, squalid, half-starved. One cannot help imagining that the riches of the establishment must be of a very theoretical and documentary character (*Unto this Last*, XVII: 40)

Such critiques anticipate themes developed in Thorsten Veblen's writing on conspicuous consumption and John Kenneth Galbraith's examination of economic inequity in *The Affluent Society*.

As for a Ruskinian view of markets, the various versions of economic man, who "desires to obtain additional wealth with as little sacrifice as possible" (Nassau Senior) in a market in which, according to Mill "buyers must be supposed to buy cheap, as seller to sell dear"¹² is little more than a model in which dishonesty is incentivized. The theoretical corrective of competition and the notion that the abstract hypotheses of a morally neutral science of economics can be brought to bear upon business practices through an art of political economy or social morality was to Ruskin backwards.

¹² Jeffrey L. Spear, *Dreams of an English Eden* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 140.

The prescience of Ruskin's focus on ethics and responsibility in market relations has become especially clear in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007-08, which exposed the reality that capitalists are ready and able to use the opportunity of market failures to enrich themselves by amplifying and exacerbating such failures. Ruskin foresaw how these failures would drag down the innocent, as they have done in financial markets in which capital circulates in search of socially useless gains from trading unregulated financial derivatives instruments so dangerous that investor Warren Buffet refers to them as "weapons of mass destruction," or in such monstrosities as the American health insurance market, where players are incentivized to avoid risking capital on innovative solutions that might expand coverage and instead work to create complex policies that result in premiums in which only a small percentage of the cost to consumers actually goes to care. For Ruskin, such failures would be criminal.

The Great Recession



Ruskin's attention to systemic exploitation through unequal exchange anticipates the attention of economists like George Akerlof, whose 1970 paper, "The Market for Lemons," revealed that information asymmetry creates markets in which cheaters prosper and ethical actors are driven out, as well as his forthcoming book *Phishing for Phools*, which highlights how such actors prey upon the cognitive and emotional weaknesses of consumers to sell them products that are useless or harmful¹³ Ruskin's warnings about the accumulation of riches through cheating and

¹³ See "Phishing for Phools: A Presentation by George Akerlof." [Canadian Institute for Advanced Research](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G351V_l3YAk). Video accessed on YouTube March 26, 2015.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G351V_l3YAk. In 2012, Akerlof delivered a presentation on *Phishing for Phools* at the Union Theological Seminary in a discussion co-sponsored by the Institute for New Economic Thinking. See Lynn Stuart Parramore, "Cornel West to Economists: 'Wake Up From Your Mechanistic,

deception foreshadows the attention to ethical breaches in the work of thinkers like former bank regulator William K. Black, who has noted that not only do CEOs often serve their own interests at the expense of the corporation that employs them, but use the firm as a mechanism for the perpetration of rampant fraud. In markets rife with bribery, wage theft, accounting fraud, overbilling, perjury, and product safety violations, Ruskin's ironical assessment of the favored methods in capitalism of accumulating riches is apt:

This "robbing of the poor because he is poor," is especially the mercantile form of theft....The ordinary highwayman's opposite form of robbery – of the rich, because he is rich...being less profitable and more dangerous than the robbery of the poor, it is rarely practiced by persons of discretion." (*Unto This Last* XVII:58).

Ruskin knew that the relations of the actual marketplace are between human beings and their psychology, their values, the sense of identity is organically, not mechanically related to market transactions. That John Stuart Mill, for example, saw the need to regulate self-interest to make it conform to public interest, Ruskin saw as an unwitting contradiction of his own principles. Far from being ethically neutral, a Ruskinian political economy would teach how ethical relationships between people can be best advanced in the economic sphere.

The Goddess of Getting On

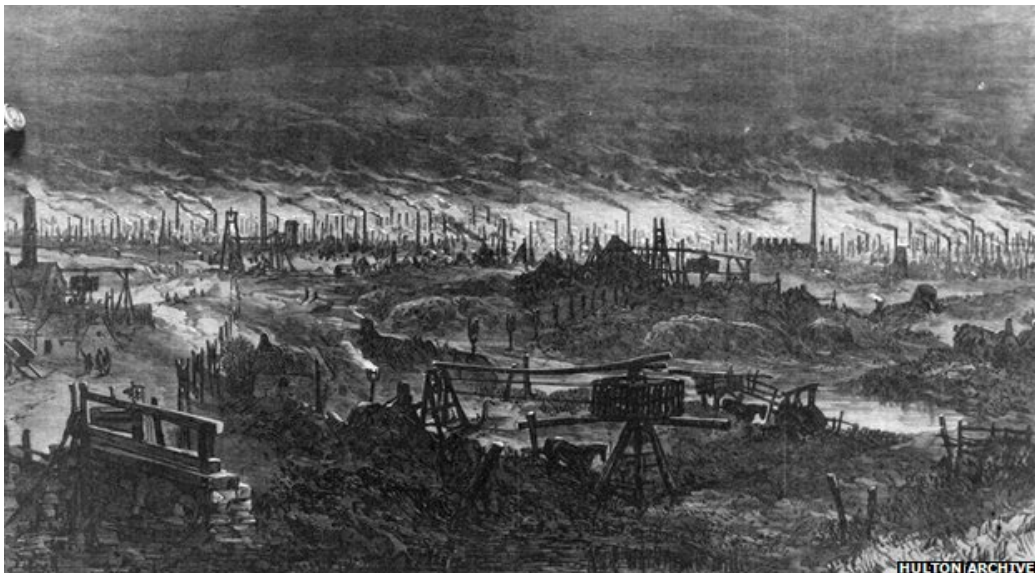
For Ruskin, Victorian political economy was not a science, but a false religion, the religion that was practiced six days a week setting one day aside for the nominal one. As evidence, Ruskin pointed out that the values of a society are expressed in its shrines. In an 1864, he delivered a lecture to businessmen who asked him for advice on the architecture of a new Bradford Exchange. Instead, Ruskin unleashed a prophetic denunciation of an unhealthy culture rife with materialism and unjustifiable inequality:

Your railroad stations, vaster than the Parthenon, and innumerable; your chimneys, how much more mighty and costly than cathedral spires, your harbor piers, your warehouses, your exchanges --- all these are built to your great Goddess of Getting-on...Look strictly into the nature of the power of your Goddess of Getting-on; and you will find she is the Goddess — not of everybody's getting on — but only of somebody's getting on. This is a vital, or rather deathful, distinction. While to one family this deity is indeed the Goddess of Getting on, to a thousand families she is the Goddess of *not* Getting on. 'Nay,' you say, 'they have all their chance.' Yes, so has every one in a lottery, but there must always be the same number of blanks. 'Ah! but in a lottery it is not skill and intelligence which take the lead, but blind chance.' What then! do you think the old practice, that 'they should take who have the power, and they should keep who can,' is less iniquitous, when the power has become power of brains instead of fist? (*The Crown of Wild Olive*, XVII: 447-8).

St Pancras Station

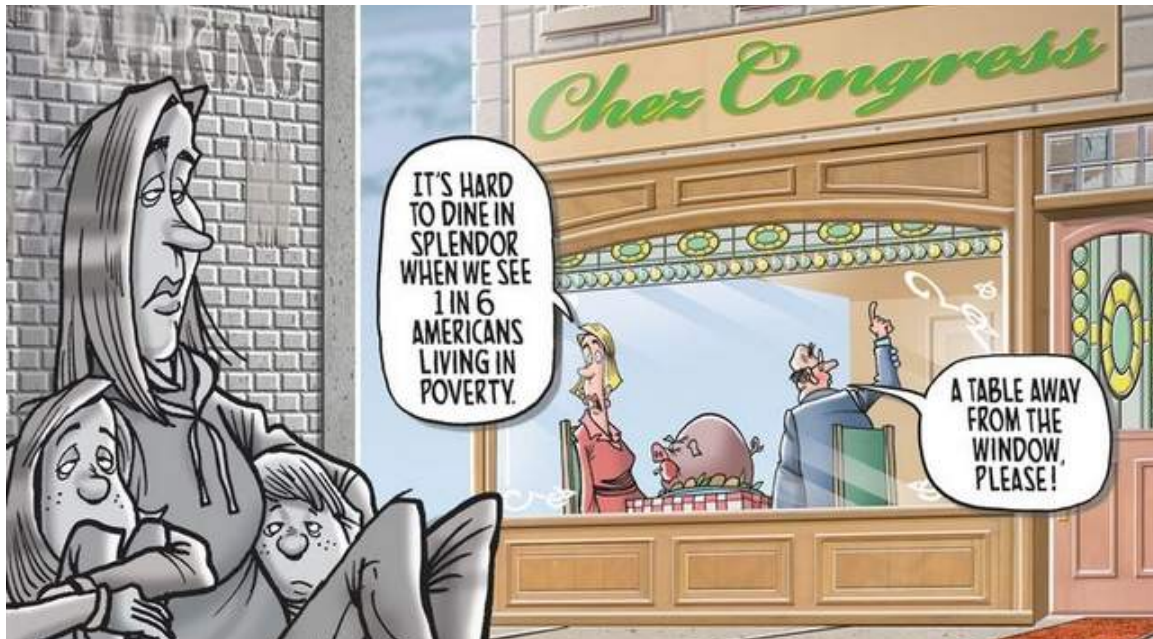


The “Black Country” Around Wolverhampton



Ruskin would find ample evidence of new shrines dedicated to the Goddess of Getting On in Silicon Valley, where companies like Google and Apple, recently implicated in a wage cartel involving charges of defrauding employees of billions of dollars, appear to be engaged in a contest to build the most lavish and futuristic headquarters, meanwhile straining the infrastructure of surrounding communities and cheating the government of revenue streams through elaborate tax avoidance schemes.¹⁴ He would also find ardent votaries of the Goddess in the political sphere, where those who have taken the power are often the ones flush with illth gotten gains and willing to go to enormous lengths to hold on to them. It would not surprise him that for the modern CEO of Wall Street or Silicon Valley, getting on requires the liberal distribution of funds into the pockets of politicians, who can make arrangements for investment income to be taxed at lower rate than a worker who toils for her paycheck.

¹⁴ Jesse Drucker, "Google Joins Apple Avoiding Taxes With Stateless Income," *Bloomberg.com*. Viewed on March 9, 2015.
<<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-05-22/google-joins-apple-avoiding-taxes-with-stateless-income>>



As Ruskin foresaw, the businessman dedicated to the Goddess would expend his energy organizing most things to his liking, as Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page have proven in their extensive data on U.S. policy from 1981 to 2002, which shows that it is the wealthy few who move policy, while the average American has very little influence and when she disagrees with elites, she nearly always loses.¹⁵

Today, the dark power of illth is perhaps nowhere as dramatic as in the crisis of climate change, where the worship of the Goddess may well make the Earth uninhabitable for human beings. This is where the betrayal of human interest, as well as the moral and spiritual failure, of economics becomes most glaring. Although he lost his sectarian faith, Ruskin never abandoned the idea that the human race was meant to live in harmony with nature. In his view, everyone who owns property

¹⁵ Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics*. View on March 1, 2015.

<http://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens_and_page_2014_testing_theories_of_american_politics.doc.pdf>

has a duty to contribute to the common wealth: “land shall not be wantonly allowed to run to waste, that streams shall not be poisoned by the persons though whose properties they pass, nor air rendered unwholesome beyond given limits” (*Munera Pulveris* XVII: 239-40).

Ruskin was not an ecologist in the modern sense — he arrived at his views by way of religion not science. But he thought in terms of what we might call whole systems. The cost of mining, for example, includes the cost of restoring the landscape and those costs cannot legitimately be passed on or pushed off onto other citizens or the state, but must be subtracted from company profits. The same is true of industry that pollutes the air or water. A system built on the dual exploitation of nature and of workers produces an illth that obscures the sun that is the source of life, which is wealth. The fact that we retain the word “pollution” in this context indicates that we still feel that a river of sewage or a curtain of smog to be morally perverse.

The Prophet of Social Reform

Having observed the misery created by Britain’s economic system and having examined its causes, Ruskin set about to find methods of relieving it, no matter how distant the goal of restructuring society may have been. Taking as his model the chivalric quest, illustrated in the image of the steadfast warrior in Dürer's *Knight*

and Death, he set about to use the resources at his command to push for social change (Spear, *Dreams*, 133-4).¹⁶

Through his lectures and writings, Ruskin attempted to change minds and encourage the practical application of his ideas by pointing out exploitation and convincing his audiences that they had a moral responsibility to confront it in their own spheres. He called for English manufacturers, for example, to shape the market, rather than to merely follow it by focusing on long-lasting and well-crafted durable goods following regulated quality standards and enhancing the lives of workers. His ideas about craft and manufacture were considered impractical to many contemporaries, but William Morris later developed them with considerable success, emphasizing, as Ruskin did, cooperation over competition. Together, the radical conservative Ruskin and his disciple the Liberal-turned-communist poet, printer, designer and entrepreneur William Morris not only contributed to the development of English socialism and the arts and crafts movement, but influenced the idea of small-scale, decentralized production of the kind advocated by twentieth-century economist E. F. Schumacher, of “small is beautiful” fame.

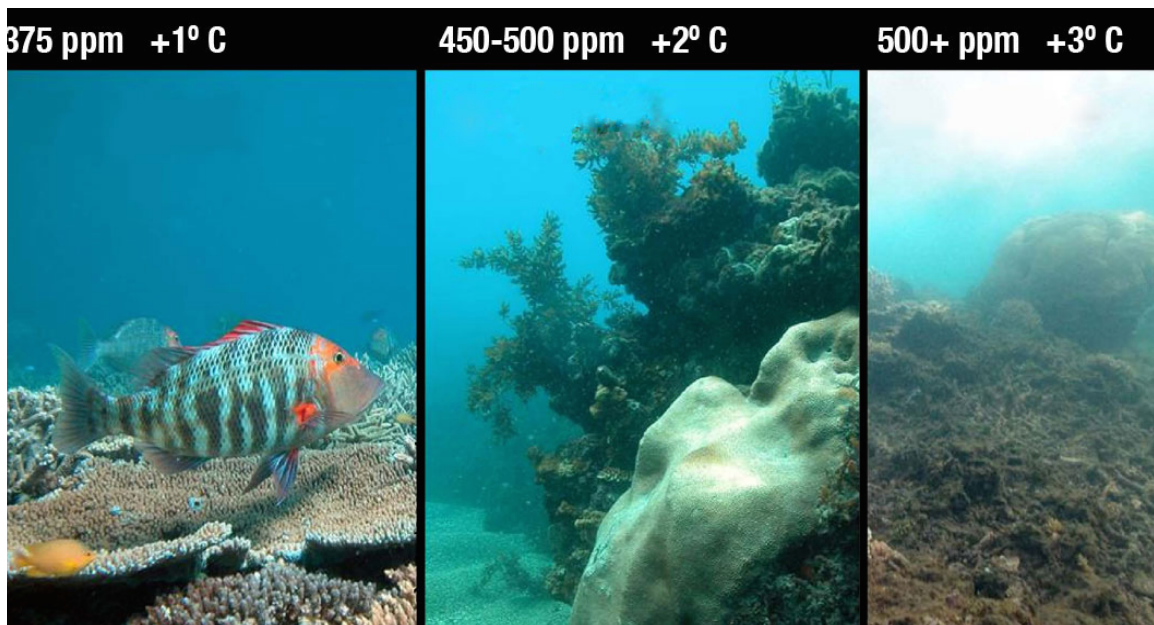
Ruskin believed in private property, but since he was not committed to free markets, he saw the necessity of government regulation. For large scale economic enterprises providing essential services, such as railroads, Ruskin proposed that they be developed as national utilities and expanded with minimal disturbance of the landscape. He also advocated housing that was planned this way. After Canon

Hardwicke Rawnsley introduced the young Octavia Hill to Ruskin, he saw that she had abilities that went beyond the copy work she had been hired for and, impressed with her proposals for improved housing for the poor, he used some of his inheritance to buy three poverty-stricken houses in Paradise Place -- a slum so vile that the police only patrolled there in pairs. He gave them to Hill to manage, which she did successfully, promising the tenants she would use rental income to improve the properties. As Ruskin had anticipated, Hill demonstrated that even the poorest of the poor can behave responsibly given hope and opportunity, and that when rent is reinvested, while immediate profit may be reduced, slums can be transformed into viable communities, which is better for everyone in the long run.

Ruskin's most important insight was that if our concept of wealth has no place for the things that make life worthwhile; if on the contrary it is accompanied by poverty, degradation of the environment, increasing inequality, depression, and disease, then we are using the wrong framework. If we were to subtract illth from wealth and disallow the increase of profit through the shedding of intrinsic costs, then first world economies would turn out to be quite poor, and we would see that we are accumulating illth at a pace that will potentially lead to violent social unrest, and, worse still, an unlivable Earth.

It may be a sign of our present failure of imagination that the ideas of nineteenth century humanists often sound like so many foolish dreams. But along with Carlyle, J.A. Hobson, and critics from other traditions, including Marx and Engels, Ruskin paved the way for changes in the British economic system. His fervor

may seem a bit intense for our times, and his specific proposals often reflected his personal obsessions, but we can take away from his work the essential knowledge that we are misleading ourselves if we do not consider illth and find the language and tools to grasp it and consider it in our discussions of human prosperity. Ruskin's key ideas are radical: that everyone deserves a start in life that will enable them to find work expressive of their human being; that each generation has been given stewardship of the earth with the final end of restoring Eden not poisoning the planet; that a healthy culture is one in which true wealth —the maximum development of life itself— is more important than money.



Effects of Increasing Amounts of CO₂ on Sea Life
NOAA: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration