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**William Henderson, *John Ruskin's Political Economy*,
Routledge, 2014, 224 pp. \$52 Paperback.**

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Book Review

From the point of view of the science of economics, John Ruskin (1819-1900) is generally treated, if treated at all, as a marginal aesthete. Ruskin is, undoubtedly, something of an outlier, marginalized because his rhetoric and interests are more artistic than scientific, and his writing more stylistic than clear and coldly logical. Willie Henderson seeks to establish Ruskin's relevance to the discipline of economics by offering a careful and critical reading that engages the substance of Ruskin's economic ideas along with their stylistic presentation.

Henderson works to persuade the reader that the treatment of Ruskin as a nonsensical stylist by economists is misguided, both because economics is better when it can account for ethics, history, and beauty, but also because Ruskin's economic ideas are weighty in their own right. While Ruskin does not provide straightforwardly clear, scientifically guided texts, his intent is to disrupt and disturb the conformity of economic science by offering an "alternative ethical basis to existing versions of political economy" (22). Henderson's reading, informed by "the rhetorical turn" in economics, illustrates that Ruskin's "ethical, aesthetic and historicist approach" should be taken seriously as a means to "the realization of social harmony" (122).

First, Henderson explores Ruskin's economic ideas, especially those found in *Unto this Last* and *Fors Clavigera*. Ruskin's economic rhetoric is both "brilliant" and carries "a significant economic message to his readership" (45). As everyone knows, for Ruskin the production and consumption of a peach and a bombshell cannot be reduced to equal terms. What we fail to appreciate is that Ruskin's rhetoric carries with it other significant ideas as well as a powerful methodology that would improve the quality of economic thought if it was given its due.

Ruskin, for example, emphasizes the importance of social relationships. While he generally adopts the point of view of an aristocrat who wants the wealthy to do right by the poor, his examples are often drawn from the domestic sphere and underscore allocation without hostility. By drawing upon Christian concepts, Ruskin emphasizes the human soul, the affections, and the moral sentiments. Ruskin believes "in the need for a system of ethics neither based on an impossible law nor cantilevered on the notion of economic selfishness" (51). He contrasts the "destructive principles of laissez-faire and the 'practical; working of true polity'" to initiate a dialogue about the real substance of wealth.

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Ruskin, Henderson shows, seeks to uncover the source of wealth in wholesome, human work and activity as illustrated “by the Greek notion of *techné*, as set out in Plato’s *Republic*” (53). *Techné* signifies “the rules and practical actions governing the appropriate (i.e., good or right) application of a craft or skill” (53). Henderson develops Ruskin’s use of the concept of *techné* to uncover the moral motivations for human work as opposed to the purely monetary motivations that often prevail in economic models. Ruskin’s economic focus is always on justice and true value as measured by the social good to the community. Henderson convincingly shows that these economic ideas remain relevant and that they constitute “a sustained methodological attack on a one-dimensional, hypothetical-deductive notion of economic man” (62).

By examining the structure of his ideas, Henderson uncovers Ruskin’s unique methodology of studying economic problems, a methodology originating in Baconian observation. Ruskin’s “critical eye and keen sense of observation” was honed through his study of art, architecture, and artist’s studios (139). By beginning with the centrality of aesthetic judgment and rooted in cultural production, Ruskin’s concerns were “about how life ought to be lived” and about why “the notion of a separate, segregated economic domain” is essentially wrong-headed (9). When contrasted with John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Ruskin’s method is historical where Mill’s is logical, intuitive where Mill’s is coldly rational and scientific (143). Ruskin’s anti-systematic approach to political economy is part of the reason why he is an easy figure to marginalize by those who do not see in this methodology a means to abstract understanding. This is, however, precisely the great gift of Ruskin’s methodology. Henderson reveals that Ruskin’s approach encourages us to see more essential truths than those found on the surface of things. By concentrating on “a simplified ideal of the independent artisan,” Ruskin’s “alternative economic morality” views action “as concrete and moral, located in the *techné* and in the lived experience . . . of what it is to be a farmer, housewife, and singer” (84). Henderson notes that this approach stresses the ethical purposes of work and seeks to restore moral capacity to the conversation of political economy.

All the while, Henderson makes acute observations and offers insightful judgments derived from Ruskin’s rhetoric. Henderson traces the origins of Ruskin’s ideas in history and along the way revivifies the importance of a number of thinkers to the history of economics. Ruskin admitted that the roots of his ideas were found in the classical world, including the works of Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Horace. This tradition gave considerable force to Ruskin’s critique of mid-nineteenth century political economy. By tracing this history, Henderson provides a lively and provocative reading of the importance of both Xenophon and Plato to the history of economic thought. Ruskin extended these ideas through his use of domestic metaphors creating “an economic space within which social distance, which overcomes the power of social affection and morality, is eliminated” (78). Henderson illustrates that Ruskin’s sense of justice is essentially platonic, and that Plato inspired Ruskin to see agency in terms of justice, morality, and one’s duty to society. Like Plato, Ruskin’s rhetoric leans toward the utopian, but it also seeks to create an ethical and practical economics. Henderson emphasizes the importance of an economic rhetoric that sees people how they are and doing what they do rather than a focus on impersonal and abstract economic forces or ideas.

The biological basis for value, essential to his sense of urgency of poverty alleviation, the notion of reason guiding self-interest, the sense of market failures, the idea of unequal exchange conditions, the painfully slow nature of ‘trickle-down effects’ and

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the need for regulation, government and co-operation suggest parallels with what today would be called a structuralist approach to economic development, and this despite the fact that his approach is not essentially materialistic but moral (105).

Henderson successfully argues that Ruskin's economic rhetoric is both relevant and part of an important strand in the history of ideas which sees human productivity and work as a consistent and essential element of human life, human culture, and human societies.

In addition to tracing the origins of Ruskin's economic thinking, Henderson likewise demonstrates the influence of Ruskin's ideas, including the challenge they present to Mill and the illuminating effect they had on William Smart (1853-1915), the first occupant of the Adam Smith Chair, John Bates Clark (1847-1938), and Alfred Marshall (1842-1924). By drawing upon Ruskin's marginalia in his personal copy of Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, Henderson works like a historical detective, piecing together a plausible account of the development of Ruskin's critique of Mill. The marginalia do not indicate wholesale or unfair criticism. Indeed, Henderson shows that the gist of these notes indicate that Ruskin learned a great deal from Mill and even admired some passages of his *Principles of Political Economy*. Likewise, he found much to disagree with. Where "Mill achieved a logical system," "Ruskin achieved a set of insights concerning the relative nature of economic knowledge which eventually worried its way into the thought of his later economically concerned readers" (143). Because "Mill's notion of science expelled literary claims to higher truth" and "excised the imagination," it is well for us to read Ruskin alongside Mill in order to gain a true and just appreciation of mid-nineteenth century economic representations (143).

Henderson shows that Ruskin's style cannot be divorced from the substance of his critique of political economy. Likewise, he proves the relevance and importance of Ruskin's economic ideas. After reading Henderson, it is hard to imagine that anyone could dismiss Ruskin as an illegitimate source of economic insight and wisdom. Henderson's argument hinges on the fact that the ancient world and in Ruskin there is nothing resembling an economic system "distinct from what people do in their lives" (68). By focusing on the "illth" and "wealth" created by what we do, Henderson helps us see more clearly the harms of an abstract economic science that strives to exist independently of ethics and political community. Like Adam Smith and Ruskin before him, Henderson emphasizes that few economic indicators are more important than the flourishing culture of ordinary people going about their ordinary work. This observational, historical, and aesthetic approach to economics helps ensure that we remember the perennial relevance of what people actually do, how they actually live, and what they actually value.



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