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Upcycling Antiquity in *Unto This Last*

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Abstract This chapter highlights how Ruskin's 'upcycling' of the classical past informs his views on political economy in *Unto This Last*. His admiration for Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* is well known. Here I elucidate several other connections that have gone largely unobserved: Ruskin's debt to Aristotle's critique of money in the *Politics*, Plato's arguments about just distribution in the *Republic*, and Hesiod's notion of productive limits to wealth in the *Works and Days*. I also unpack Ruskin's allusion to a story about the Gracchi, champions of artisans and agriculturalists in Republican Rome, and his approval of Horace's castigation of the pursuit of private luxury at the expense of the public good.

Keywords Political economy. Communism. Classical influences. Plato. Aristotle. Hesiod. Horace. Xenophon.

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1 Introduction

When in *Unto This Last* Ruskin decries mercenary exchange as a "science built on nescience" that "depends wholly upon the ignorance, powerlessness, or heedlessness of the person dealt with" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 92) he deploys Latin wordplay to engage in scathing social critique. Similarly, in the run-up to the treatise's stunning conclusion, the oft-quoted THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE, printed in Roman capitals as if it were an epitaph for capitalism or a decree of the SPQR, Ruskin launches into an etymological lesson about the word 'value' (from the verb *valeo*, *valēre*, 'to avail toward life') and observes sarcastically that "if our well-educated merchants recalled to mind always this much of their Latin schooling" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 83), political economies worldwide would be more equitable and just.

Ruskin's re-purposing of the Classics pervades *Unto This Last*. On the surface his classical allusions are bombastic and rhetorical. At the structural level of his argument, however, the Greco-Roman influences run deeper, and have been less discussed, perhaps because Ruskin's Plutarch and Plato intermingle so ingeniously with passages from Old and New Testament Greats. Previous commentators on *Unto This Last* have missed much of the nuance and implication of Ruskin's references. His engagement with the Classics, I suggest, is not perfunctory or pretty window dressing to his prose. Rather it represents a creative "upcycling" of the past to address contemporary concerns. Ruskin, himself a resourceful artist of considerable talent, scours the scrap heap of history to construct a newly useful and morally beautiful economic worldview out of the detritus of antiquity.

This, however, is not the usual view, to judge by Shrimpton's verdict: "Though Ruskin's literary gifts gave it a distinctive formulation", he avers,

> his social thought was not unique. It derived from the Tory economics of the late 1820s and '30s, and from the work of the Götzist writers, above all Carlyle – whose profound though reactionary influence Ruskin frequently acknowledged […]. It is Ruskin's descriptive genius, rather than his powers of analysis, which makes his political writing interesting. (Shrimpton 2015, 128)

There is no doubt that Ruskin, like the rest of us, was a product of his times, influenced by contemporary discourse and debates on economic and aesthetic matters. But to reduce, and, by implication, dismiss Ruskin's economic thinking as derivative of immediate precursors flies in the face of what he himself says in the Preface to *Unto This Last*. "The real gist of these papers", Ruskin declares there, "their central meaning and aim, is to give, as I believe for the first time in

plain English – it has often been incidentally given in good Greek by Plato and Xenophon, and good Latin by Cicero and Horace –, a logical definition of WEALTH" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 18). Ruskin assumes a similar posture in *Munera Pulveris*, the conception of which was coeval with *Unto This Last*, where he observes: "The public [...] has revolted against these papers of mine as if they contained things daring and new, yet there is not one assertion in them of which the truth has not been for ages known to the wisest and proclaimed by the most eloquent" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 288). Whereupon he quotes Horace, one of his named sources for the ideas behind *Unto This Last*, approvingly and in Latin, on how wealth is worthless if you do not know how to use it properly (*Satires* 2.3.104-10), a point Horace gets from Aristotle before him, as we shall see.

To understand what constitutes wealth, Ruskin insists, the recent past is of little use, so Tory economics from the 1820s and 1830s is not going to cut it. The origins of Ruskin's economic ideas lie in premodernity. In adducing Plato as a witness, for example, Ruskin has in mind the *Laws*, which he quotes favourably in *Munera Pulveris* and had once entertained the notion of translating entire (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 277n). The citizens of Plato's ideal community described in the *Laws*, the philosopher's last work, consider Life (or soul, *psuchē*) as their most god-like possession, are forbidden by law to touch silver or gold, and only use coinage as a means of internal exchange for everyday needs (*Laws* 5.726, 742). In invoking Cicero, Ruskin refers primarily to the *De officiis* (*On Duties*) (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 184). As for Xenophon, his treatise the *Oeconomicus* ("Household Management") was a definitive influence and became the crown jewel in the Ruskin anthology *Biblioteca pastorum* ("A Library for Shepherds") from 1876, translated by none other than Ruskin's devoted student and posthumous editor Alexander Wedderburn, assisted by W.G. Collingwood.[1] Ruskin himself oversaw the work and provided a Preface. Ruskin found in Xenophon – whose treatise is essentially a guide to running a self-sufficient farm – "a faultless definition of Wealth, and explanation of its dependence for efficiency on the merits and faculties of its possessor" (Ruskin 1903-12, 31: 27), as for example in this exchange:

1 Here's how Wedderburn describes its origin: "In the Long Vacation of 1875 I joined Collingwood at a cottage he then had on Windermere, and there we completed our first draft of the translation. We then went over to Brantwood for a few days, and stayed, I think, a few weeks. Anyhow, we there revised the translation with Ruskin, reading it out to him, and he following our translation with the Greek. This was our morning's work, and in the afternoons we made the new harbour [...] or went expeditions with Ruskin. It was the first of many long stays at Brantwood for us both" (Ruskin 1903-12, 31: xviii).

SOCRATES: It seems, then, that in your view what is beneficial is wealth, what is harmful is not wealth.
CRITOBOULOS: Yes, that's right.
SOCRATES: In other words, the same things are wealth and not wealth according to whether one understands how to use them or not. (*Oeconomicus* 1.9-10)

In what follows I would like to highlight a few additional points of contact with antiquity in *Unto This Last* that bear closer scrutiny than they have received. The connections are perhaps more oblique or indirect than the foregoing, but that only makes them more interesting. In any event, the thinking behind the ancient works in question clearly informs Ruskin's views on wealth and human welfare and so merit our attention on that score alone. Xenophon, it will be seen, is just the tip of the iceberg.

2 Worthless Junk

In discussing *oikonomia* – "house-management", whence the word 'economy', what Ruskin glosses as "House-law" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 19) – in the *Politics* (1257a-1258b), Aristotle declares that money is merely a token and means of exchange, not an end in itself. It is, in fact, as he puts it rather colourfully, "worthless junk" – the word is *lēros* in Greek – "and wholly conventional. By nature", he says, "it is nothing". Proper economic management, he argues further, "takes more care for a household's human persons than for its inanimate goods". This last is an enlightened statement that Ruskin wears on his sleeve. One might say it is the organising premise behind the whole of *Unto This Last* beginning with the example of the starving mother and her crust of bread (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 27). Ruskin begins *Unto This Last* with this Dickensian image, but his real point of departure was a builders' strike in the autumn of 1859 that the then-new, self-proclaimed "science" of political economy touted by David Ricardo in *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817) and John Stuart Mill in *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), Ruskin insists, is powerless to resolve, much less comprehend. Market logic proceeds by a calculation wherein what Ruskin calls the social affections are "accidental and disturbing elements in human nature", whereas acquisitiveness and a desire for progress are the constant ones. "Let us eliminate the inconstants", Ruskin imagines his economist opponent to say, "and, considering the human being merely as a covetous machine, examine by what laws of labour, purchase, and sale, the greatest accumulative result in wealth is obtainable". But human relationships, Ruskin points out, do not work according to this calculus. "The disturbing elements in the social problem", he notes, "are

not of the same nature as the constant ones: they alter the essence of the creature under examination the moment they are added; they operate, not mathematically, but chemically" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 26).

The social problem of a workers' strike consists in the relationship between an employer and the employed, "the first vital problem that political economy has to deal with" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 27). Market economics pronounces the impasse of a strike to be a clash of interests that produces an antagonism between the two parties. But the mother and her crust introduce a disturbing element that changes that equation. "If there is only a crust of bread in the house", Ruskin observes,

> and mother and children are starving, their interests are not the same. If the mother eats it, the children want it; if the children eat it, the mother must go hungry to her work. Yet it does not necessarily follow that there will be 'antagonism' between them, that they will fight for the crust, and that the mother, being the strongest, will get it, and eat it.

"Neither in any other case", Ruskin concludes, "whatever the relations of the persons may be, can it be assumed for certain that, because their interests are diverse, they must necessarily regard each other with hostility" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 27). The real problem with capital acquisition, according to Aristotle, is that money is not only junk, it is *unlimited*. This is what makes unearned income and usury so pernicious: "Its gain comes from money itself", Aristotle remarks,

> and not from that for the sake of which money was invented. For money was brought into existence for the purpose of exchange, but interest increases the amount of the money itself; consequently, this form of the business of getting wealth is of all forms the most contrary to Nature.

Accordingly, Aristotle recommends, unambiguously: "There should be a limit to all wealth". For Ruskin, one mechanism to ensure such limits in a market economy is the willing readiness of merchants and the financial sector generally to accept voluntary loss, as does a civil society's other professions (e.g., soldier, physician, clergyman). "In true commerce", he argues, "as in true preaching or true fighting, it is necessary to admit the idea of occasional voluntary loss". "The market may have its martyrdoms as well as the pulpit", he adds, "and trade its heroisms as well as war" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 39).

The Greek word for "interest" in Aristotle's passage, *tokos*, literally means 'offspring'. It was by Aristotle's time a dead metaphor, yet drawn, paradoxically, from the language of biological reproduction, prompting Aristotle to etymologise it for us: "This is how the word

arose", he says. "Things that are born", he observes, using its base verb *tiktō*, "resemble their parents; and so interest [*tokos*] is money born of money". We might imagine Aristotle fuming a bit beneath the surface of his text at the outrageousness of using a natural metaphor to describe what he regarded as an unnatural practice – unnatural, that is, because, in his view, self-increase and growth is not money's purpose. It is a means of exchange only. The ends of the exchange are the human persons on either side of a given transaction. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han, in a loosely Marxist analysis of the problem of freedom in a capitalist society, brings Aristotle's critique up to date for our era:

> Capital reproduces by entering into relations with itself as another form of Capital: through free competition. It copulates with the Other of itself by way of individual freedom. Capital grows inasmuch as people engage in free competition. Hereby, individual freedom amounts to servitude inasmuch as Capital lays hold of it and uses it for its own propagation. That is, Capital exploits individual freedom in order to breed […]. In the process, individuals degrade into the genital organs of Capital. (Han 2017, 3-4)

Against mere self-replication of capital through indiscriminate breeding, Ruskin sees justice as the regulating constant in human affairs, a factor that works chemically upon its practitioners. A concern for justice thus permeates the whole of his vision for a healthy political economy, even where it is not the explicit focus of discussion in any given instance. The title of the third of the four essays that make up *Unto This Last*, for example, is "Qui Judicatis Terram". Its Latin phrase, the first words of the Vulgate *Wisdom of Solomon* (an authoritative part of the Roman Catholic canon of scripture, part of the Protestant "Apocrypha"), means 'You who judge the earth', referring to those that hold power. But the resonant core of the thought is the unquoted command in the first half of the title's sentence in the source text, alluded to later in the essay, *Diligite iustitiam* – 'Love *justice*'. Ruskin's predilection for economy's etymological and conceptual roots – the "House-law" of Aristotle and Xenophon and those authors' prioritising of the household's persons over its material goods – form the backbone of his thinking.

In his relentless pursuit of justice Ruskin is again following Plato. The affiliation is captured perfectly in Ruskin's conclusion about ultimate value, which reads like a page out of the *Republic*:

> The whole question, therefore, respecting not only the advantage, but even the quantity of national wealth, resolves itself finally into one of abstract justice. It is impossible to conclude, of any given mass of acquired wealth, merely by the fact of its existence,

> whether it signifies good or evil to the nation in the midst of which it exists. Its real value depends on the moral sign attached to it. (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 52)

Ruskin illustrates what he means by this with a parable, in his telling far better than this mere summary here. Two sailors are cast away on an uninhabited coast. At first they farm the land of the interior in common and prosper. Over time they decide, out of no enmity, to divide the land into equal shares, and prosper still, each to his own, until one of them falls ill. Naturally the sick man will ask his friend to help him sow and harvest. The healthy man, "with perfect justice", Ruskin says, might ask for a written promise stating that his sick friend will give equal hours of labour in return, when he recovers, to compensate him for loss due to time away from work at his own farm. This arrangement persists for several years. Both properties, Ruskin observes, and both men will have suffered loss, the healthy man unable to devote full time to his own affairs, and the sick man the same, now indebted on top of that for several years' worth of labour to the other. "Considered as a 'Polis', or state", Ruskin writes, "they will be poorer than they would have been otherwise […] and the relations in which they stand to each other are also widely altered" (48-52).

Add a third man into the mix, Ruskin observes, and the outcome becomes worse: the division of land is into thirds; each man specialises in a certain kind of produce to maximise his comparative advantage; to administer the transfer of goods from one farm to the other one of them agrees to be a superintendent in exchange for some remunerative share of the goods conveyed; soon this middle man sees his own comparative advantage of hoarding goods to create scarcity, "ingeniously watching his opportunities to possess himself regularly of the greater part of the superfluous produce of the two estates". The result, as Ruskin notes, is mercantile wealth, and, as in the parable of the two castaways, "the wealth of the State, or of the three men considered as a society, is collectively less than it would have been had the merchant been content with juster profit. The operations of the two agriculturalists have been cramped to the utmost", he explains,

> and the continual limitations of the supply of things they wanted at critical times, together with the failure of courage consequent on the prolongation of a struggle for mere existence, without any sense of permanent gain, must have seriously diminished the effective results of their labour; and the stores finally accumulated in the merchant's hands will not in any wise be of equivalent value to those which, had his dealings been honest, would have filled at once the granaries of the farmers and his own. (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 52)

"Had his dealings been honest": that, for Ruskin, is the crux of the issue. The homology of macrocosmic polis to microcosmic soul that Plato articulates throughout the *Republic* is played out differently in Ruskin, but the idea is the same: The quality of collective wealth and well-being depends on the morality and integrity of persons. Plato, too, offers a parable about political economy in an *Ur*-community that foreshadows and perhaps inspired Ruskin's analysis. Before launching into his lengthy description of the training of the Guardian class, Plato (through his mouthpiece Socrates) runs a simulation to hypothesise how the first human communities arose organically out of reciprocal need. "None of us is self-sufficient", Socrates declares outright. "Do you think that any other originating principle causes a city to be built?". It is mutual need (*chreia*), Socrates infers, that creates human communities:

> One person has recourse to one person, another to another – the one because of one need, the other for a different need. Lacking as they do many things, they gather many people into one settlement to be both partners and helpers. To this collective living arrangement we have given the name 'city'. (*Republic* 369b-c)

Where is justice to be found in such a community? Socrates asks. "Perhaps", his interlocutor Adeimantus replies, "somewhere in the kind of need these people have of one another" (*Republic* 372a).

Another interlocutor, Glaucon, Plato's older brother, likens Socrates's aboriginal, agrarian city – one characterised by communitarian values and vegetarian simplicity, in which inhabitants "take pleasure in sex with one another but, as a precaution against poverty or war, will not produce children beyond their means", who "when they grow old and die, pass on to their progeny a way of life just like the one they themselves enjoyed" – to a city fit only for slop-eating pigs for its lack of refined cuisine. It becomes clear to Socrates that the ensuing conversation will not be about the sustainable agrarian polity he describes as "true", and "healthy" but a disquisition on the luxurious, "feverish" cities of his own day. From that point in the dialogue the rest of the *Republic* proceeds with philosophical prescriptions to cure such cities (like his contemporary Athens), sick with fever.[2]

Plato's speculation that cooperation, not competition, lies at the heart of healthy communities forms part of his larger programme to define justice. He compares his investigation into what constitutes political economy as big letters on a billboard that are easier to read than the fine print needed to describe a human soul (*Republic* 368d).

2 For a full discussion of this passage see Usher 2020, 91-109.

But just as harmony amongst parts characterises the healthy city, so too the soul, whose rational, spirited, and appetitive functions do their own jobs properly and do not encroach on each other's work and thus put one's life out of balance (*Republic* 434b-43d). It is hardly a stretch or overstatement to characterise Plato's larger hopes for human flourishing in the *Republic*, as are Ruskin's in *Unto This Last*, with the words of the old slogan "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need".[3] Yet Ruskin's comradeship with this idea, as we shall see, owes allegiance not to Marx and company but harks back instead to Plato and his ilk.

3 Hesiodic Measures

The view about the role of justice in a mercantile economy that Ruskin ultimately adopts in *Unto This Last* is surprisingly akin to one propounded by its earliest advocate, the Greek poet Hesiod (c. 750 BCE), who deeply influenced Plato's thinking, too. "Political economy", Ruskin writes, "(the economy of a State, or of citizens) consists simply in the production, preservation, and distribution, at fittest time and place, of useful or pleasurable things".

> The farmer who cuts his hay at the right time; the shipwright who drives his bolts well home in sound wood; the builder who lays good bricks in well-tempered mortar; the housewife who takes care of her furniture in the parlour, and guards against all waste in her kitchen; and the singer who rightly disciplines, and never overstrains her voice, are all political economists in the true and final sense: adding continually to the riches and well-being of the nation to which they belong. (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 44)

This assessment is but a stone's throw away from Hesiod's excellent advice from his poem *Works and Days*. As Ruskin quotes that poem elsewhere in *Unto This Last* – in Greek, no less (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 114) – there is no doubt that he had been reading the bard from Boeotia. Indeed, Hesiod was planned for inclusion in the *Biblioteca pastorum* had that project advanced beyond the first published volume (Ruskin 1903-12, 31: xiv). The choice was apt, since Hesiod himself was a shepherd and his poem comprised a sort of a *Poor Richard's Almanack* of miscellaneous advice about living in an agricultural milieu. Cautioning his audience not to overload a ship with goods for

3 A phrase popularised by Marx (*Critique of the Gotha Program*, 1875), but perhaps originating with French utopians. (It is variously attributed to Louis Blanc and Étienne-Gabriel Morelly.)

trade, to give one example among several, lest it sink, or a wagon, lest its axle break, Hesiod declares:

> Do not put all your provisions in hollow boats.
> Load the lesser part and leave the bulk aside,
> for it's a disaster to meet with grief on the waves at sea.
> Awful, too, if by hoisting excess (*hyperbios*) weight onto your wagon you wreck its axle and the cargo is ruined.
> Observe measures; rightness (*kairos*) is best in all things. (*Works & Days* 689-94)

The word *kairos* in Greek, translated above as "rightness", is virtually a gloss on the preceding word in the first half of that line, "measures" (*metra*). The word is drawn from the vocabulary of archery and weaving. In ancient archery *kairos* referred to a vulnerable aperture in a target at which one aimed, like a 'bullseye', or a 'chink' in armour. In weaving it denoted the triangular opening where a weaver sent the woof-thread (attached to a shuttle) through the warp (not unlike English 'loophole'). From these original uses the word came to mean doing something skillfully, with precision, at just the right moment (Onians 1951, 343-8). It is telling that Plato uses the same word and idea to characterise the cooperative work of the inhabitants of his healthy city, where each person "does his work exactly when and how it needs to be done" (*Republic* 370c). The word I translate as "provisions" above literally means 'life' (*bios*), as in the 'means' of life; the adjective "excess" is *hyperbios*, which the dictionaries will tell you derives from the Greek noun *biē*, 'force/strength', but, coming hard on the heels of *bios*, and in the hands of a resourceful poet like Hesiod who was always keen on folk etymologies, suggests 'beyond (*hyper*) what life (*bios*) requires', or, perhaps not unfairly in this context, 'surplus'. Even if that was true, did Ruskin know any of this? There is no way to tell, but it does not matter, as his equation of wealth and trade with fostering life, and his call to observe the just times and seasons of good measure, put him squarely in Hesiod's camp.

4 "These Are My Jewels"

Ruskin asks in the final essay of *Unto This Last*:

> Since the essence of wealth consists in power over men, will it not follow, that the nobler and the more in number the persons are over whom it has power, the greater the wealth? Perhaps it may even appear, after some consideration, that the persons themselves *are* the wealth. (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 55)

To support this claim Ruskin turns once again to antiquity, and a story preserved by the anecdotist Valerius Maximus (*fl.* 14-37 CE) about Cornelia, the mother of the brothers Gracchi, Gaius (c. 154-121 BCE) and Tiberius (c. 163-133 BCE). Cornelia, Valerius recounts, was entertaining a fellow mother from Campania as a guest in her house. The Campanian matron was quite keen to show off her jewelry, the finest work on offer at that time. Cornelia kept her guest engaged in conversation about her bijoux until Tiberius and Gaius returned from school, whereupon she declared in turn: "These are *my* jewels" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 56).

It is an interesting choice of anecdote, invoked briefly to exemplify Ruskin's view that "the true veins of wealth are purple – and not in Rock, but in Flesh –, perhaps even that the final outcome and consummation of all wealth is in the producing as many as possible full-breathed, bright-eyed, and happy-hearted human creatures" (56). The Gracchi became martyrs for the cause of economic and social reform and were lionised as such in ancient Rome. Tiberius, as tribune of the plebs, championed a comprehensive bill in 133 BCE designed to enforce a centuries-old law limiting landholding by individual Roman citizens. Its purpose was to break up large estates, *latifundia* (essentially factory farms), and redistribute land to the growing number of landless poor and veterans, who had found themselves displaced and were migrating to the overpopulated metropolis – more than a little like the situation spawned by the Enclosures and Industrial Revolution that Ruskin was seeking to redress. For his efforts Tiberius was assassinated by Senatorial elites. Gaius, who took up his brother's reformist mantle, also paid for it with his life. Doubtless, these details were not lost on Ruskin, who perhaps means his readers to recall the Gracchi's politics of just distribution and their valour. Even the market must have its martyrdoms.

This final essay is in fact entitled "Ad valorem". It contains an enquiry into what constitutes value. Ruskin's conclusion is that "the value of a thing is independent of opinion, and of quantity. Think what you will of it, gain how much you may of it, the value of the thing itself is neither greater nor less" (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 85).

To drive his point home and to debunk the card-carrying economist's notion (in this case Mill's) that value is simply something's market worth in exchange, Ruskin summons up the Classics once again, this time with both irony and indignation:

> Much store has been set for centuries upon the use of our English classical education. It were to be wished that our well-educated merchants recalled to mind always this much of their Latin schooling, – that the nominative of *valorem* (a word already sufficiently familiar to them) is *valor*; a word which, therefore, ought to be familiar to them. *Valor*, from *valēre*, to be well or strong

> (ὑγιαίνω); – strong, *in* life (if a man), or valiant; strong, *for* life (if a thing), or valuable. To be 'valuable', therefore, is to 'avail towards life'. A truly valuable or availing thing is that which leads to life with its whole strength. In proportion as it does not lead to life, or as its strength is broken, it is less valuable; in proportion as it leads away from life, it is unvaluable or malignant. (Ruskin 1903-12, 17: 83-4)

Ruskin's definition of wealth has Xenophon written all over it, from the use of the word ὑγιαίνω in the opening salvo to the last sentence, which is essentially a paraphrase from the *Oeconomicus*. Indeed, Ruskin's ingenious coining of his famous antonym for wealth, "illth" owes a good deal to Socrates's view in Xenophon, quoted earlier, that "what is harmful (*ta blaptonta*) is not wealth" (*Oeconomicus* 1.9-10); Aristotle's dismay at characterising interest as *tokos* ('offspring') in his time finds its corollary in Ruskin's impatience with twisted notions of wealth that fail to account for the human persons involved in its creation.

5 A Communist of the Old School

The late Francis O'Gorman, a brilliant Ruskin scholar and Companion in Ruskin's Guild of St. George, was troubled by what he called "the posthumous conversion of John Ruskin into a figurehead for, and often enough a founder of, socialism" (O' Gorman 2020, 43). "Often enough", O'Gorman laments, "the claim of 'being influenced by' involves not reading and being inspired by a writer's ideas, but by re-reading or mis-reading them – or looking only for portions, taken out of context, with which we agree". "Ruskin was", he continues, "as Shrimpton notes, no actual source of socialist orthodoxies. He was, for example, '[u]ntouched by such concepts as surplus value, alienation, class struggle, or dialectical materialism'"(O' Gorman 2020, 46).

This is true enough, but it is a legitimate question to ask, as O'Gorman himself seemed prepared to entertain, whether all readings of the past are in a sense mis-readings or appropriations. Whatever view one holds on that point, the direction in which Ruskin was reading was to the rear of the recent past and of his contemporaries. (Marx, after all, was living in London at the time *Unto This Last* appeared, working feverishly on the last two volumes of *Das Kapital*, and nary a word.) When Ruskin declares of himself that he is "a Communist of the old school – reddest also of the red" in *Fors Clavige*ra (Ruskin 1903-12, 28: 116) the occasion for the comment is news he had received of the burning of the Louvre during the Paris Commune riots on 23 May 1871: "For, indeed, I am myself a Communist of the old school", he writes in July

> reddest also of the red; and was on the very point of saying so at the end of my last letter; only the telegram about the Louvre's being on fire stopped me, because I thought the Communists of the new school, as I could not at all understand them, might not quite understand me. For we Communists of the old school think that our property belongs to everybody, and everybody's property to us; so of course I thought the Louvre belonged to me as much as to the Parisians, and expected they would have sent word over to me, being an Art Professor, to ask whether I wanted it burnt down. But no message or intimation to that effect ever reached me.

The sarcasm here is unvarnished and Ruskin was clearly smitten by his own ironical stance for he continues the rant of this letter in *Fors* with various further clarifications of his position, beginning with the hue of his red:

> We old Reds fall into two classes, differing, not indeed in colour of redness, but in depth of tint of it – one class being, as it were, only of a delicately pink, peach-blossom, or dog-rose redness; but the other, to which I myself do partly, and desire wholly, to belong, as I told you, reddest of the red – that is to say, full crimson, or even dark crimson, passing into that deep colour of the blood which made the Spaniards call it blue, instead of red, and which the Greeks call φοινίκεος, being an intense phœnix or flamingo colour: and this not merely, as in the flamingo feathers, a colour on the outside, but going through and through, ruby-wise.

Ruskin's red-blooded Communism entails not the abolition or expropriation of private property but rather a curious mixture that might result if you crossed More's *Utopia* with Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread*. His description of it bears quoting at length.

> Public, or common, wealth shall be more and statelier in all its substance than private or singular wealth; that is to say (to come to my own special business for a moment) that there shall be only cheap and few pictures, if any, in the insides of houses, where nobody but the owner can see them; but costly pictures, and many, on the outsides of houses, where the people can see them: also that the Hôtel-de-Ville, or Hotel of the whole Town, for the transaction of its common business, shall be a magnificent building, much rejoiced in by the people, and with its tower seen far away through the clear air; but that the hotels for private business or pleasure, cafés, taverns, and the like, shall be low, few, plain, and in back streets; more especially such as furnish singular and uncommon drinks and refreshments; but that the fountains which furnish the people's common drink shall be very lovely and stately,

> and adorned with precious marbles, and the like. Then farther, according to old Communism, the private dwellings of uncommon persons – dukes and lords – are to be very simple, and roughly put together, – such persons being supposed to be above all care for things that please the commonalty; but the buildings for public or common service, more especially schools, almshouses, and workhouses, are to be externally of a majestic character, as being for noble purposes and charities; and in their interiors furnished with many luxuries for the poor and sick. And, finally and chiefly, it is an absolute law of old Communism that the fortunes of private persons should be small, and of little account in the State; but the common treasure of the whole nation should be of superb and precious things in redundant quantity, as pictures, statues, precious books; gold and silver vessels, preserved from ancient times; gold and silver bullion laid up for use, in case of any chance need of buying anything suddenly from foreign nations; noble horses, cattle, and sheep, on the public lands; and vast spaces of land for culture, exercise, and garden, round the cities, full of flowers, which, being everybody's property, nobody could gather; and of birds which, being everybody's property, nobody could shoot. And, in a word, that instead of a common poverty, or national debt, which every poor person in the nation is taxed annually to fulfil his part of, there should be a common wealth, or national reverse of debt, consisting of pleasant things, which every poor person in the nation should be summoned to receive his dole of, annually; and of pretty things, which every person capable of admiration, foreigners as well as natives, should unfeignedly admire, in an æsthetic, and not a covetous manner [...] A fat Latin Communist gave for sign of the strength of his commonalty, in its strongest time, –
>
> "Privatus illis census erat brevis,
> Commune magnum"
>
> which you may get any of your boys or girls to translate for you, and remember; remembering, also, that the commonalty or publicity depends for its goodness on the nature of the thing that is common, and that is public.

It is revealing that the beatific vision unfurled here resolves itself into the words of Horace and his poem about the pitfalls of privatised luxury (*Odes* 2.15.13). The Latin translates "For them" – referring to Romulus, Rome's legendary founding shepherd, and Cato the Elder (234-149 BCE), the Republic's staunchest advocate – "private assets were small, the common wealth great". In fact, Horace observes in the next lines, left by Ruskin unquoted, but paraphrased amply in the tirade prior, Roman law under the old Republic "insisted that towns

and the temples of the gods should be beautified at public expense with fresh-cut stone".[4] But lest there be any doubt as to the sources of Ruskin's political and economic thinking he openly declares them at the outset of this diatribe:

> I will content myself with telling you what we Communists of the old school mean by Communism; and it will be worth your hearing, for – I tell you simply in my 'arrogant' way – we know, and have known, what Communism is – for our fathers knew it, and told us, three thousand years ago.

The impetus for Ruskin's creative upcycling of old ideas to address the situation of his own time invites comparison with a now well-worn phrase that arose in Paris from the circles of fashion, and one of which Ruskin might have approved had he been aware: "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*", "the more things change, the more they stay the same", an observation by Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, editor of *Le Figaro*, which first appeared in the January 1849 issue of the satirical magazine *Les Guêpes* ("The Wasps"). But considering Ruskin's penchant for biblical idiom, there is also this similar view expressed by the Preacher: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun" (Eccles. 1:9). Either way, in *Unto This Last* Ruskin found the materials to build a new society strewn about in the waste bin of humanity's past. This admirably heuristic approach to problems of political economy is also an ecological one, as it represents a repurposing of proven materials we already have close to hand. The Ancients, as Ruskin shows us from his own day and age, could very well be the best hope for ours, too.

4 *Leges* […] *oppida publico / sumptu iubentes et deorum / templa novo decorare saxo* (ll. 18-20).

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