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The question of 'economic rationality' in John Ruskin's critique of Stuart Mill's political economy (preliminary draft)

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1. Introduction

In his passionate polemic against the dominant understanding of political economy in his time, John Ruskin (1819-1900) took Stuart Mill as the main focus for criticism. This choice is not obvious at a first glance, given that Mill was keen on displaying a 'moderate' and 'conciliatory' approach to the subject, and was even quite welcoming to some of the authors (e.g. the 'Lake poets' Coleridge and Wordsworth) and themes (e.g. the discussion of the 'stationary state' in the *Principles*) highly valued by Ruskin.

There has been some discussion about Ruskin's relation to Mill, namely questioning the '(un)fairness' of his uncompromising criticism (Fain 1951, 1956; Winch 2009). The issue is somewhat beside the point, since Ruskin was not aiming to provide a balanced assessment - his intent was polemical from the outset. Probably the focus on Mill can be best understood as a 'tactical move': since Mill was regarded as the main authority in political economy by the 1860s (the decade when there is a major 'concentration' of Ruskin's economic writings), he was an obvious target for an attempt to challenge and undermine established views on the subject.

In this paper, we argue that an essential element of Ruskin's antagonism was his radically different conception of economic action and motivation. It is quite significant that the focus of the first essay of *Unto this Last*, his most celebrated 'economic' work, is precisely a rejection of 'the modern soi-disant science of political economy' on the grounds that it neglected the role of 'social affections'. Although he does not explicitly mention it, we think Ruskin was clearly offering a critical reply to Mill's famous methodological essay, 'On the definition of political economy; and on the Method of Investigation proper to It' (1836). In contrast to Mill's rational wealth-maximizing individual, Ruskin emphasized the non-pecuniary and other-regarding dimensions of human motivation, where emotional and ethical elements like love, loyalty, duty, or honour figure prominently.

The paper unfolds as follows. After this brief introductory section, Section 2 presents a brief overview of Ruskin's 'economic' writings, pointing to their place in his voluminous *ouevre*, to their 'character', and to issues of reception. Section 3 directly looks at Ruskin's criticism of political economists' neglect of 'social affections', showing how they can be understood as a 'reply' to Mill's methodological essay. Section 4 offers a brief discussion and some tentative concluding remarks.

2. Ruskin's economic writings

Ruskin is most immediately known today as a very influential art critic, scholar, and professor, a sort of 'dictator of taste' in mid and late Victorian society. Among his fields of interest, painting and architecture figured prominently. In his works on painting, we can highlight his contributions to the dissemination of knowledge about Italian painting, most notably of the late gothic and early renaissance periods; the public endorsement of J.M.W. Turner, and especially of his later work, which were decisive for the enactment of Turner as *the* British national painter; and his involvement as an inspiring source and promoter of Pre-Raphaelitism. In architecture, he was, together with A.W.N. Pugin, an early advocate of the Gothic revival in nineteenth century British

architecture. Through his historical and theoretical studies in the field he exerted an influence which extends well into the twentieth century, and can be discerned in such important architects as Antoni Gaudi or Frank Lloyd Wright.

But Ruskin was a man of many interests and talents. Among these figures a deep apprehension regarding the socio-economic conditions of his country, in a time marked by the profound and rapid transformations associated with the rise of industrial capitalism. He sensed that the core elements of these transformations were inspired and/or legitimised by the emergent science of political economy. This is the reason why the critique of the dominant understanding of political economy, and the attempt to advance an alternative conception, a 'true political economy', became so important for Ruskin.

A common way to approach Ruskin's intellectual life is thus to establish a partition between a first period mostly devoted to 'art-work' and a second one, beginning somewhere in the 1850s, where socio-politico-economical concerns were dominant. Ruskin himself noted a transition in his interests, and dated it precisely in the year of 1860, between the finishing of the fifth and last volume of *Modern Painters*, and the beginning of the writing of the essays for the *Cornhill Magazine* that would form *Unto This Last*. Retired in Switzerland, he would later recall that 'in the valley of Chamouni I gave up my art-work and wrote the little book [*Unto this Last*] – the beginning of the days of reprobation', and, even more emphatically, that a 'new epoch of life and death begins' (XVII: xxi).

It is possible to argue, however, and contrary to Ruskin's own perception of the changes occurred in 1860, that the continuities in his thought run much deeper than it may appear at first glance. Indeed, the conventional view of Ruskin's work, which tended to establish two neatly separated periods of intellectual activity, was challenged from the beginning, even while Ruskin was still living. William Smart, after noting how Ruskin's writings tend to be segmented between the 'art work' and the

'social views', and consequently appeal to different audiences[1], claims that 'his teachings in both departments have been entirely homogeneous' (1883: 2).

The perspective which favours the underlying unity between his art and social criticisms seems now to be well established in the secondary literature:

> It would (…) be inappropriate to see his [Ruskin] life's work in two separate parts. The critical motivation which inspired his writings on art and architecture informs his analyses on political economy. (…) In the first part, Ruskin teaches his readers to see, for example, the (later) art of Turner, and then all art, with new eyes. In the activities of the second part of his life, he wishes readers to see directly, without the distorting lenses of laissez-faire and natural law, the economic, behavioural and material ugliness of unregulated capitalism.' (Henderson 2000: 14).

In his influential account of the 'cultural' tradition in British social and political thought, Raymond Williams had already expressed, in his analysis of Ruskin's thought, a similar point of view: 'The art criticism and the social criticism (…) are inherently and essentially related, not because one follows from the other, but because both are *applications*, in particular directions, of a fundamental conviction.' (1993 [1958]: 135; original emphasis).

Ruskin's economic ideas are sometimes consistently found in specific works or scattered throughout much of his other voluminous writing. It is even possible to claim that the first embryonic expression of his politico-economical views can be traced back to a short tale written in 1841 (when Ruskin was twenty-two), and published in 1850, *The King of the Golden River*[2]. Nevertheless, the two most significant texts are a series of four essays that first appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine*, published in book form as *Unto this Last* in 1862, and their sequel, a series of six essays published in the *Fraser's*

[1] 'It happens continually that those who respect him as an art critic have no interest in his social teachings, while those who agree with him in his social views have no interest in his art work' (Smart 1883: 2).

[2] One of the proponents of this view is Jeffrey Spear (1984: 52-54) who sees *The King of Golden River* as an anticipation of some of the major themes to be later developed in Ruskin's economic writings, namely how, on the one hand, a system based on the exploitation of men and nature is not only immoral but begets ruin, and, on the other hand, a virtuous system reconciling men between themselves and with nature can ultimately lead to prosperity.

Magazine in 1863, but were only edited as a book, with some revision, in 1871 under the title *Munera Pulveris*.

Ruskin's approach was from the outset one of declared hostility to conventional political economy. The opening of the first essay of *Unto this Last* leaves no doubts as to his unfavourable and polemical attitude and tone:

> Among the delusions which at different periods have possessed themselves of the minds of large masses of the human race, perhaps the most curious – certainly the least creditable – is the modern *soi-disant* science of political economy (XVII: 25).

From the beginning, then, there is a refusal of the scientific status of conventional political economy (it is a 'delusion', a '*soi-disant* science'), an idea repeatedly stressed by Ruskin - for instance when he claims that it is a 'bastard science' which should be distinguished from the 'real science of political economy' (that is, its own proposal), as 'medicine from witchcraft, and astronomy from astrology' (XVII: 200). Another interesting point about this passage is that this 'delusion' would be a feature of 'large masses of the human race', that is political economy is considered as a popular creed. This apparently strange view is a reminder that Ruskin wrote in a time when the academic institutionalization of political economy was yet to be accomplished, and the ideas of political economists where conveyed in books and generalist journals and reviews, which were directed at the 'educated' public at large. Furthermore, there was a significant literary output, mainly consisting of novels or other fictional works, dealing with the 'popularization' or 'vulgarization' of economic ideas, some of them explicitly conceived as youth educational devices[3].

The contemporary reception to the essays in the *Cornhill Magazine*, and to the *Fraser's* essays that appeared shortly after, could not have been worse: 'the initial reaction to Ruskin's economic writings had been largely one of indifference, bemusement, or hostility' (Winch 2009: 113). Ruskin was the target of a violent attack of the press (mainly though anonymous, or signed under pseudonyms, reviews); in both cases (*Cornhill* and *Fraser's*) the installments had to be curtailed due to protest by readers

[3] One could mention authors like Harriet Martineau, Jane Marcet, Maria Edgeworth, or Thomas De Quincey. See Henderson (1995).

and other pressures[4]. Perhaps most importantly, he failed to engage the 'political economists' in public debate, most notably John Stuart Mill, who had been throughout his explicit and implicit target.

3. Ruskin's critique of 'economic rationality'

One of the central objections raised by Ruskin against political economy was the narrowness of the assumptions concerning human motivation. The most articulated attempt to deal with this issue can be found in the first essay of *Unto this Last*, 'The Roots of Honour'. As we have noted in the previous section of the paper, the essay begins with a strong statement on the 'delusional' character of political economy, the delusion resulting from the idea, on which Ruskin claims the '*soi-disant* science' was based: 'that an advantageous code of social action may be determined irrespectively of the influence of social affections' (XVII: 25).

According to Ruskin, political economy rested on the premise that the human being is solely motivated by 'avarice and the desire for [individual] progress', transformed into a mere 'covetous machine', while the 'social affections' are regarded as 'accidental and disturbing elements in human nature' (XVII: 25). For Ruskin, the downplaying of the role of social affections (or 'Soul'), which he believed were crucial to understand human behaviour, vitiated the conclusions of 'modern political economy', undermining its relevance: 'Observe, I neither impugn nor doubt the conclusions of the science if its terms are accepted. I am simply uninterested in them, as I should be in a science of gymnastics which assumes that man had no skeletons (…). The reasoning might be admirable, the conclusions true, and the science deficient only in applicability' (XVII: 26). Further expanding the analogy, he adds that political economy assumes 'not that the human being has no skeleton, but that is all skeleton', ignoring the 'Soul', and thus resulting in 'an ossifiant theory of progress' (XVII: 26).

[4] For a detailed scrutiny of the hostile reactions in Victorian press, see Cockram (2007: 40-66).

Ruskin's account of the perspective on human nature assumed by political economy strongly suggests that he undertook a careful reading of John Stuart Mill's methodological discussion, particularly as expressed in the essay 'On the Definition of Political Economy and the Method of Investigation Proper to It', first published in the *London and Westminster Review* (October 1836). In his efforts to circumscribe the object of political economy, and in order to avoid its over-extension as the study of 'whole of man's nature as modified by the social state, (…) the whole conduct of man in society' (1844 [1836]: 137), Mill argued that:

> [Political economy] is concerned with [man] solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end. (…) It makes entire abstraction of every other human passion or motive; except those which may be regarded as perpetual antagonizing principles to the desire of wealth, namely, aversion to labour, and the present enjoyment of costly indulgences.' (1844 [1836]: 137-138).

A similar idea was, more parsimoniously, expressed by Nassau Senior, when he considered the 'first elementary proposition of the science of political economy' to be 'that every man desires to obtain additional Wealth with as little sacrifice as possible' (1938 [1836]: 26)

It was this perspective on political economy which Ruskin loathed. On the one hand, the abstraction from the 'whole of human conduct' ran contrary to his holistic approach, which insistently underscores the wider imbrications of 'economic' phenomena. On the other hand, even if we should start from an abstraction, the *homo oeconomicus* and its exclusive desire for wealth possession, that Ruskin translated into 'avarice' and 'covetousness', was a deficient hypothesis, an arbitrary abstraction, since it ignored 'social affections'.

It should be noted that Mill was entirely conscious of the abstraction, and even of the reductionism and unrealism, involved in his proposal for the foundation of economic theory. Political economy should reason *as if* humans were thus motivated, while knowing that, in reality, the 'operations' under study 'were the result of a plurality of motives' (1844 [1836]: 138). He adds that no political economist was ever 'so absurd as to suppose that mankind are really thus constituted, but (…) that is the mode in which science must proceed' (1844 [1836]: 139).

The attempt to build a separate and abstract science founded on an assumed narrow view of human motivation was quite in line with Bentham's utilitarianism, quite influential among political economists, most notably James Mill, John Stuart's father. However, it hardly squares with other approaches that were unanimously considered as an integral part of the emergent science, namely Adam Smith's. According to Emma Rothschild and Amartya Sen: 'economic life, for Smith, was intricately interconnected with the rest of life, or with the life of politics, sentiment, and imagination. Economic thought was interconnected with the rest of thought, or with legal, philosophical, and moral reflection.' (Rothschild and Sen 2006: 319).

Mill explicitly noted that the model of scientific inquiry that he advocated for political economy required a special caution when it comes to apply general, theoretic, knowledge to particular, empirical, cases. Given the self-conscious abstractions of political economy, its conclusions must be supplemented by an allowance for the specific circumstances of the case under consideration – the 'disturbing causes' must be taken into account. Mill is very explicit on the proper way to do this. The relevant analogy for the rising science of political economy should be physics – that is, economic laws operate mechanically:

> When the disturbing causes are known, the allowance necessary to be made for them detracts in no way from scientific precision (…). The disturbing causes are not handed over to be dealt with by mere conjecture. Like *friction* in mechanics, (…) their effect is found to admit of as accurate an estimation as those more striking effects which they modify. The disturbing causes have their laws, as the causes which are thereby disturbed have theirs; and from the laws of the disturbing causes, the nature and amount of the disturbance may be predicted *à priori*, like the operation of the more general laws which they are said to modify or disturb, but with which they might more properly be said to be concurrent. *The effect of the special causes is then to be added to, or subtracted from, the effect of the general ones*. (1844 [1836]: 150-151; emphasis added).

Ruskin seemed to be quite conscious about this way of procedure, as his summary of the conventional political economy's handling of social affections shows:

> Let us eliminate the inconstants, and (…) examine by what laws of labour, purchase and sale, the greatest accumulative result in wealth is obtainable. Those laws once determined, it will be for each individual

> afterwards to introduce as much of the disturbing affectionate element as he chooses, and to determine for himself the result on the new conditions supposed (XVII: 25).

Ruskin's opposition to this kind of method of analysis rests precisely on a rejection of the appropriateness of the mechanical analogue for political economy (or, more generally, for the social sciences). He argues that a more promising methodological strategy would be to look at chemical processes as the relevant metaphor for social processes. Mill's mechanistic methodology would be 'perfectly logical and successful (…), if the accidentals afterwards introduced were of the same nature as the powers first examined' (XVII: 25). But this would not be the case when self-interested wealth-maximizing motivations interact with the social affections:

> [T]he disturbing elements in the social problem 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 [i.e. mechanically, in the sense of 'added to' or 'subtracted from' expressed by Mill], but chemically, introducing conditions that render all our previous knowledge unavailable (XVII: 26).

Ruskin's appeal to chemistry may be related to the argumentation developed in Mill's *System of Logic* (1843), where a taxonomy of scientific knowledge is presented, establishing a distinction between the sciences which observe the 'law of the composition of causes' and the 'heteropathic' sciences. Examples of the former (where 'the joint effect of several causes is identical with the sum of their separate effects') are physics and political economy; chemistry, on the contrary, is an example of a heteropathic science[5]. For Ruskin, then, a meaningful political economy would necessarily fall into the Millian category of 'heteropathic sciences'.

Throughout his writings, Ruskin repeatedly argued that a 'true' political economy must rest on new foundations, involving a more richly textured picture of human motivation, not readily amenable to separable treatment into different motivational vectors. Ruskin insisted on the role of 'social affections' or 'Soul', meaning, firstly, that people do not behave mechanically, like some rational automaton – the emotional,

[5] An excellent and most helpful account of Mill's *Logic* can be found in Hands (2001: 15-25).

'affective' dimension is of crucial importance. Additionally, taking into proper account that people have a 'Soul', makes it possible to consider other motivations for action beyond self-aggrandizement. In Ruskin, these 'other motives' assumed the form of morally-oriented behaviour, particularly under the influence of 'honesty'.

In 'Of King's Treasures', a lecture on reading and the value of books which was part of the *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), one of the most widely read of Ruskin's works, he presented his writings on political economy as an endeavour to 'assume that a little honesty, or generosity, – or what used to be called 'virtue', – may be calculated upon as a human motive for action', even in 'matters of business'. (XVIII: 57). In the Preface to *Unto This Last*, he had been much more emphatic concerning the role of honesty. Not only it could be 'calculated upon' as a motive for action, but was a central element in the constitution of economic order. In fact, it was *more* important than strict self-interested conduct: 'Honesty is not a disturbing force, which deranges the orbits of economy; but a consistent and commanding force, by obedience to which – and by no other obedience – those orbits can continue clear out of chaos.' (XVII: 19).

In order to persuade his readers on the centrality of behaviours which cannot be reduced to strict self-interest, Ruskin made frequent use of examples derived from common experience, often presented in dramatic tones, where the antagonism of individual interests does not prevail. An illustration of this kind of argumentative strategy is the example of a starved mother with her starved children in face of a single 'crust of bread'. The interests are divergent, since 'if the mother eats it, the children want it; if the children eat it, the mother must go hungry to her work'. If we look at this 'conflict' from the perspective of the interplay of strict self-interest(s), the solution would be, Ruskin suggests, to struggle for the bread, resulting in a situation where 'the mother, being strongest, will get it, and eat it'(XVII: 27). But would it be so in a real domestic setting?[6]

[6] Ruskin made extensive use of the domestic metaphor in a variety of contexts, as Henderson (2000) clearly shows. One can even argue that the domestic setting provided the reference on which Ruskin modelled his political economy, amplifying the original sense of the 'economic' (law of the house) that he found in Xenophon: '[Ruskin] felt that the ethical sense, a moral force which balanced human greed, operated most strongly in the immediacy of family life and sought to reproduce this in the context of farm, factory and nation as a whole' (Henderson 2000: 77). For Jane Garnett, 'Ruskin liked the model of

Ruskin's examples, however, were not circumscribed to the domestic sphere, where they can easily be dismissed as irrelevant to the 'proper' domain of economic science, supposedly centred on market transactions. In fact, he found in the domain of labour relations evidence of the actual presence of 'affective' elements, and also, and maybe more significantly, of the difficulties and potential conflicts steaming from the neglect of morally grounded mutual obligations. In contrast to what could be expected in terms of the self-interested 'economic' logic, nurturing the affections can indeed be the most 'profitable' strategy. Since workers are not 'an engine of which the motive power was steam, magnetism, gravitation, or any agent of calculable force', but an 'engine whose motive power is a Soul', Ruskin asserted that:

> The largest quantity of work will not be done by this curious engine for pay, or under pressure, or by help of any kind of fuel which may be supplied by the chaldron. It will be done only when the motive force, that is to say, the will or spirit of the creature, is bought to its greatest strength by his own proper fuel: namely, by the affections (XVII: 29-30)

The critical assault on the theory of human motivation, and on the concomitant methodological reductionism, can be regarded as one of the more forceful dimensions of Ruskin's critique of classical political economy. A nineteenth century voice claimed that Ruskin, 'most notably of all who have attacked it, overthrown and destroyed that figment of orthodox imagination, the "economic man".' (Stimson 1888: 444). The issue is all the more relevant since, contrary to Stimson's verdict, this 'figment of imagination' not only was not 'overthrown' and 'destroyed', but would survive in the most refined and effective way in the neoclassical theories that would dominate economics from the late nineteenth century onwards[7].

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the household precisely because in the household it was by definition not possible to abstract economic from social relationships' (Garnett 2000: 222).

[7] Stimson was indeed very optimistic about the place reserved for Ruskin in the future development of economic thought – he concluded his article on the recently founded *Quarterly Journal of Economics* with the following pronouncement: '…though the future political economy may not build from him directly, yet it will be rather with Ruskin's earth than with Ricardo's straw that its bricks for building shall be made.' (Stimson 1888: 445).

4. Final remarks

Ruskin's attack against 'economic rationality' can be placed within a wider 'romantic' tradition of criticism. The terms and the tone of the reactions against Bentham's utilitarianism by authors like William Hazlitt, Samuel Coleridge or Thomas Carlyle, clearly resonate in Ruskin's rejection of Mill's view of political economy and of the 'motives' which it should consider for the sake of constructing its distinctive scientific approach. If Mill's definition is surely one of the earliest expressions of the *homo oeconomicus* assumption, then Ruskin's alternative view lies firmly within the domain of what Richard Bronk termed the *homo romanticus*: 'the self-creating, sentimental, sympathetic and imaginative social animal' (Bronk 2009: 225).

Ruskin believed that considering man *as if* he was solely motivated by his own material again was a flawed foundation for political economy – indeed he rejected its scientific status, claiming that it was a 'popular creed' like 'alchemy, astrology, witchcraft' (XVII: 25). But his stronger concern was that this 'creed' could actually influence behaviours, by sanctioning what he saw as morally debasing conducts. The problem thus was not only that this was a 'wrong' approach to theory-building, the real danger was that it might became 'right'. For Ruskin, conversely, it was the task of a sound political economy not only to provide a better account of actually existing economic practices, but to promote moral enhancement – and he tried to do precisely that, namely through advancing proposals for an ethics of production and an ethics of consumption[8].

The 'true' or 'real' political economy that he hoped to put in the place of the 'bastard science' (XVII: 85) would be explicitly normative and prescriptive. The split between the 'art' and the 'science' of political economy, advocated by authors like Mill[9] or Senior, was explicitly rejected: : 'Political economy is neither an art nor a science; but a system of conduct and legislature, founded on the sciences, directing the arts, and impossible, except under certain conditions of moral culture.' (XVII: 147).

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[8] For a comprehensive account and discussion of Ruskin's ethics of consumption, including a briefer treatment of the ethics of production, and of the articulation between the two, see Craig (2006).

[9] In his methodological essay, Mill argued that 'art' and 'science' were 'essentially distinct' ideas: These two ideas differ from one another as the understanding differs from the will, or as the indicative mood in grammar differs from the imperative. The one deals with facts, the other with precepts. Science is a collection of *truths*; art, a body of *rules*, or directions for conduct. The language of science is, This is, or, This is not; This does, or does not, happen. The language of Art is, Do this; Avoid that. (1844 [1836]: 124-125).

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It is easy to dismiss John Ruskin's economic writings as unscientific fancies of an exalted and eccentric Victorian intellectual. Joseph Schumpeter, in his massive *History of Economic Analysis*, devoted about one page to evaluate Ruskin's economic ideas (Schumpeter 1997 [1954]: 411). After a brief acknowledgement of Ruskin's work on the field of art criticism[10] and of his contributions to a 'general sociology of art'[11], Schumpeter begins his comment on Ruskin's turn to 'the mission that was to make him so popular with the crowd as well as with economists of radical propensities'[12]. Basically Schumpeter accused Ruskin of not following in the domain of political economy the same careful principles of scholarship that marked his art work:

> We know that he prepared himself most sedulously for his career as an interpreter of art; that he mastered techniques and studied historical detail according to the canons of scholarship. (…) In the field of economics he did nothing of the sort; all he did was to add generous indignation to half-understood observations and undigested pieces of reading. The judgement I pass on him (…) is exactly the same that he himself would have passed on any writer who undertook, for example, to criticize Turner's paintings without having previously acquired, by moral neutral study, an adequate mastery of the relevant facts.

Indeed, Ruskin had no direct influence on the trajectory of political economy, soon to be re-christened as 'economics'. If we exclude the case of John A. Hobson, himself a self-styled 'heretic' [13], there were no disciples to build upon his criticism and proposals, giving life to the 'true political economy' he aimed for. His books dealing with economic issues, most notably *Unto this Last*, were however widely read after the initial hostile reaction, and Ruskin was very influential in the labour movement and within wider circles interested in social reform. Such eminent figures as Mahatma

[10] Ruskin is described as 'one of those creative interpreters of art (…) whose interpretations are themselves works of art', although Schumpeter immediately adds that he did not 'believe in them *as interpretations*' (original emphasis).

[11] A very dubious qualification for the work about the conditions of production, distribution, and consumption of art, which Ruskin ostensibly classified as a *political economy* of art.

[12] Schumpeter dating of Ruskin's 'turn' ('from the end of the 1860's') is not correct. Almost all the major works with economic content were written and published, as we have seen, *before* the end of the 1860s. Probably Schumpeter intended to write 'the end of the 1850s'.

[13] In his masterful autobiography, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, Hobson fully acknowledges how is 'humanist economics' is derived from Ruskin's work (Hobson 1938). Probably he was the 'economist of radical propensities' that Schumpeter had in mind.

Gandhi and Leon Tolstoy were among those for who contact with Ruskin's texts had a 'transformational' effect. Ruskin would probably be quite pleased with that outcome. After all, his struggle was precisely to counter the influence of dominant economic discourse on 'the minds of large masses of the human race'.

As for this one-sided controversy with Mill over 'economic rationality'[14], we may say that it is a very interesting moment from the perspective of the history of economic thought. Mill's definition of political economy contained one of the first and clearest articulated formulations of the *homo oeconomicus* assumption, an assumption that would prove so influential and pervasive in the subsequent trajectory of economic science. Ruskin's early objections touch several of the issues that, to our day, have been raised against it: the complexity of human motivation, the significance (and 'economic value') of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, the role of emotions and imagination, or the moral and ethical dimensions of economic action.

[14] Although Ruskin's presence in the intellectual landscape of Victorian was overwhelming, and therefore impossible to ignore, Mill recoiled from debate and never replied to Ruskin's attacks.

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