

Ruskin and the Politics of Seeing

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My research this summer was on the political thought of John Ruskin, a leading public intellectual and art historian of the 19th Century. He began his career with an impassioned defense of modern landscape painting and the works of J.M.W. Turner and ended his life as one of England's most outspoken critics of industrialization's impact on society. While often recognized as one of the Victorian period's greatest minds, his prodigious output has stifled close analytic study of his political and social thought.

Much of the available scholarship studies Ruskin's rhetoric, on the occasion he is engaged truly philosophically, Ruskin is either assimilated to the orbit of another thinker or his thought left disjointed and undeveloped. While Ruskin is indeed a great stylist and certainly was heavily influenced by his contemporaries, I argue that neither his aesthetic theories nor his social activism can or should be separated from each other. Both represent a profound and unique engagement with the crisis of the mid-nineteenth century. Through close analytic reading of Ruskin as political philosopher, one is able to appreciate the social implications of his aesthetic theories and in turn the theoretical underpinnings of his radical activism.

Ruskin writes of the radical disordering, chaos, and disenchantment that came with the industrial revolution. He shares much with the diagnoses of his mentor Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, the earlier essays of J.S. Mill, and, to an extent, Karl Marx. However, he differs in his sensitivity to the role art and architecture play in a civilized society. The art of an age comes to characterize its spirit and conditions, allowing one to see its triumphs and poverties. However, more than a barometer of social health, Ruskin proposes it as solution and remedy. Art, then, becomes essentially political. Further, through his reflections on genius, Ruskin is able to harmonize human excellence and philosophy into a society that is artistic. That is, Ruskinian genius, instead of producing philosophic treatise, turns to artistic creation. Art becomes a substitute for philosophy, taking on a reformist and edifying nature that avoids the otherwise destabilizing influence of philosophy.

My work this summer will be expanded upon as an honors project in the Department of Government & Legal studies, focusing on the 'dual' role art plays in Ruskin's corpus: both a dignifying act for the day laborer *and* means of expression for the most excellent man.

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