

How did Adriano Olivetti influence John Ruskin?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to interpret Ruskin's thought through the lens of contemporary political economy and cultural policymaking.

The first section focuses upon Ruskin's critical thoughts on industrial economy and technical reproducibility, which mirror new sustainable paradigms of production and consumption: economies of scale and competition are exchanged with unique crafting and personal interactions.

The second section focuses on labour and education: Ruskin identified expressive freedom as a criterion of artistic quality opposed to mechanic perfection, anticipating the relationship between skills, knowledge management and the working environment in the experiences of contemporary creative industries.

The third section focuses on arts and society: Ruskin championed a crucial role for art and beauty in society, which not only contemporary philosophers but also advanced companies trust as a powerful driver of growth. Today, Ruskin's theories on heritage, creativity and cultural activities reveal challenging implications for cultural management and policymaking.

*In conclusion Ruskin's theories effectively suit the challenges of our century, while his value system proves a pioneering *weltanschauung* for our world.*

Keywords

economics, culture, management, innovation

Changes require interpretation

Adriano Olivetti was born exactly one year after John Ruskin's death. Yet, when we read and interpret Ruskin we cannot ignore the intellectual filter offered by the approach and strategy crafted by this unique entrepreneur who was able to forecast a cultural, creative and productive framework that only in the present years we are discovering and exploring. In such a respect both Ruskin and Olivetti provide us with a powerful vision whose understanding and adoption can support a consistent and effective change from the serial manufacturing paradigm to the emerging economy (and society) whose pillars are participation and creativity.

The aim of this paper is therefore to interpret Ruskin's thought through the lens of the intuitions related to contemporary political economy and cultural policymaking, in the awareness that they are only partially accepted and adopted, and in view of their value for the coming years in which the global economy is bound to radical changes. The first section focuses upon Ruskin's critical thoughts on industrial economy and technical reproducibility, which mirror new sustainable paradigms of production and consumption: economies of scale and competition are exchanged for unique crafting and personal interactions.

The second section focuses on labour and education: Ruskin identified expressive freedom as a criterion of artistic quality opposed to mechanic perfection, anticipating the relationship between skills, knowledge management and the working environment in the experiences of contemporary creative industries. Without any stumbles an artefact can be either useful or nice, but it should not deserve the definition of "art". The third section focuses on art and society: Ruskin championed a crucial role for art and beauty in society, which not only contemporary philosophers but also advanced companies trust as a powerful driver of growth. Today, Ruskin's theories on heritage, creativity and cultural activities reveal challenging implications for cultural management and policymaking.

Our loss of innocence is reflected in the impossibility to appraise Ruskin's thought as if we were his contemporaries. After Adriano Olivetti we can read Ruskin in a transparent way, focusing upon the many anticipations he crafted for an unpredictable society. The paper will try to interpret, within a sort of parallel framework, the common visionary intuitions of Ruskin and Olivetti, in order for us to emphasize the coming features of a society still reluctant to change and innovation that each of them had already highlighted. Was it too early?

Interpreting Ruskin through Olivetti's views opens a wide and fertile trail aimed at facing the emerging challenges of the coming years: the value hierarchy that such a non-conventional association can craft can generate the pioneering *weltanschauung* we need to access the future, finally releasing the cultural constraint that tried to acknowledge the serial manufacturing capitalism as the definitive golden age of history.

John Ruskin, uniqueness as beauty: subverting the industrial logics

In some creative artists intuition verges on clairvoyance: John Ruskin, writer, poet and art critic, surely was one of them. The impossibility of framing him into a single category, combined to his farsightedness in interpreting the instances of a time different than his own, cause a curious twist in the epistemology of his thought: it is not Ruskin that helps us understand our times, but rather our times which shed a new light on Ruskin's ideas. His versatility seems to fit a world, our own, where multidisciplinary approaches qualify as the most appropriate toolkit for analysing reality: he probably was, although unawarely, the first cultural economist.

With appalling intuition he went beyond the commonplace meaning of economics, that tried to embellish as a science in those years, identifying it as a *social science*, where the adjective makes the word more flexible and humble, oxymorically. In par-

allel, he contested the binomial association of work and its market value, stressing the human, dignifying dimension of labour – which would become crucial in Olivetti's view of the factory. Eventually, his advocacy of social reform and of the role of culture in society: he understood *avant la lettre* that social justice and cultural sustainability were fundamental aspects of the same revolution.

The demand for perfection is always a sign of misunderstanding of the ends of art.

When Ruskin wrote this sentence he was at the crossroads between his vocation as art critic and his growing interest in the socioeconomic issues of the rising manufacture industry; it was 1854, and *The Nature of Gothic* was published as an addition to his *Stones of Venice*: Ruskin had already begun to search for other criteria than the strictly aesthetic ones to judge art, and was developing a critique to mass production of standardised goods. The issue of beauty and creativity in an industrialising world is one which probably only Walter Benjamin had felt more acutely and illustrated more precisely than Ruskin. What is left of creativity in an industrialised world? What creative desires does the arts and crafts fulfil for both the craftsman and the consumer in the era of manufacture?

The social instances of Ruskin's thought as well as the Arts and Crafts movement are experiencing a resurgence today. As said by David Pye, «handicraft or hand-made are historical or social terms, not technical ones»¹: craftsmanship, opposed to manufacture, is culturally and politically connoted. The contemporary movement referred to as “craftivism” (crisis for crafts and activism) inherited and empowered the scale and scope of Ruskin's reflection as well as Morris' utopian guilds. Millions of handicrafters sell their unique creations on social media and other platforms (namely *Etsy*), often engaging in personal interactions with their buyers.

The shared culture of production underlying craftivism and, more generally, contemporary handicraft production probably represents the first radical and yet nonviolent alternative to capital market economy. The shared values of such cultural community can be identified as cultural commons with rules and ideals very similar to those implicit in Ruskin's criticism: in these new sustainable paradigms of production and consumption, economies of scale and competition are exchanged with unique crafting and personal interactions. A new, somewhat unpredictable, intangible heritage is being crafted, with spread and shared roots, fertile processes, multicultural horizons.

When writing about the nature of Gothic Ruskin sensed a legacy between uniqueness and beauty which, in his thought, were rooted in the social adherence of people to the essence of their time and in the individual creativity and freedom of expression manifested through craftsmanship. This legacy is reflected today in the subversion of the production chain, turned into a production kaleidoscope: this innovative business model is characterised by a conscious struggle for creativity, a redefinition of the value proposition, fluid interactions, both vertical and horizontal, between fellow-sellers and buyers. The people and the way they express their uniqueness through arts and crafts is at the centre of this model, which so much recalls Ruskin's wholehearted appeal to sincerity, adhesion and natural inspiration in art.

Craftivism and analogous movements, however, respond to industrialisation by practicing an elusive resistance to standardisation and to the industrial system. These claims find an almost perfect correspondence in Ruskin's view of Gothic art as an expression of individual creativity and artistic freedom; and yet, Ruskin's later writing will attempt to dismantle (or at least to ruthlessly criticise) the industrial system from within, seeking an alternative industrial revolution, rather than an alternative *to* it. He would be paired in this audacious challenge by another man only: Adriano Olivetti.

“The strategy of Beauty”

The strategy of beauty is not an ornament. It's the discovery of an existential tie between nature, object and person².

If we mixed together sentences by Ruskin and Olivetti in a jar, we would have a hard time attributing a sentence to its actual author: what might seem a typical ruskinian statement, in facts, was actually written by Furio Colombo on his experience with the Italian entrepreneur and philanthropist Adriano Olivetti.

Ruskin's battle against manufacturing industry was already lost for good when Olivetti began organising his factories in what would become a world-famous model; not differently from mid-1800s England, however, 1950s Italy allowed very little room for dissent: it would have been foolish to oppose the magic engine of the economic boom, or even to question its production modes: Olivetti, not differently from Ruskin, was facing the perplexities of a laggard system in front of his unclassifiable modes of thought and action. Conventional wisdom is always afraid of changes.

Ruskin's philosophy recalls almost ominously the Olivetti philosophy of doing business: a philosophy combining creativity, beauty and leisure to create a sort of joy in production, in which the ruskinian accent on the dignity of labour is echoed and amplified. «If only I could prove the factory is a common good...»³. An indirect *fil rouge* ties the entrepreneur from Ivrea to the founder of the *Guild of St. George*, where he expected people to enjoy «the wealth and health of unalienated labour»: they were aspiring at the construction of contemporary commons. Ruskin had in facts unveiled the disregarded expectations of the industrial system: that of an overall well-being which was eventually condensed in the hands of the few; Olivetti, similarly, was concerned on the impact of its factory not only on the individual workers within it, but on the social and environmental dimensions of the place in which it was active: more simply, on a community. In this respect he was the only real leader in the Italian scenario: a manager in the proper sense, who mediated, oriented and inspired, rather than the mere owner and handler of a capital fortune.

Ruskin's and Olivetti's critique to the industrial system differs from the one of their contemporaries in that culture and creativity played a crucial role in it. Ruskin's most controversial (and challenging) intuition was that labour could not just be intended as workforce producing value in monetary terms; in other words, he rejected the abstraction of human lives into gears of the industrial engine; as a consequence the role of culture and leisure in his theory of labour had to be by no means less factual: workers' alienation could not be alleviated when the workday was off, in a constantly in-

sufficient spare time⁴. This was amplified by the shape of the manufacturing towns, where the productive, institutional and social centre was surrounded by a magmatic periphery⁵.

Similarly, in Olivetti's model, culture was not a mere diversion, as music in the background of a factory – it was the basis and the reference of life in the factory: he understood how human dignity deploys itself in labour, and that dignifying (or dehumanising) labour was a cultural matter. Hence his famous fondness for cultural professions and the importance they played in his model. Olivetti was, not differently from Ruskin, pursuing beauty, in human life as well as in objects, in a mutually beneficial and fruitful exchange.

The way labour and industry are intended is culture-bound; as a consequence, the role of culture is fundamental in determining, shaping and improving both the working conditions and the industry in itself. This approach has huge implications also on the way technology was intended by Olivetti: he criticised the fetishist and self-centred use that was being made of it, intuiting how the problem was not technology, but the way workers and work were intended in connection to technology. By demonstrating with simplicity in his model how labour is not an evil, when regulated by decent conditions and empowered by cultural instances, Olivetti had anticipated the discourse on the substitution of technology to humans. What is more, he had hinted the solution: work was for him synonym of creativity and dignity, not of mere survival.

It is, again, in the light of these developments that Ruskin's considerations on technology and machinery in human progress can be stripped by the misconceptions of his time. He had sensed, in facts, that technology was a cultural rather than an ontological issue. These voices stood aside from the discourse on industrial development for two centuries. It is worth noting, however, that industry and progress have always been seen as synonym of one another, and that probably only Ruskin and Olivetti understood before, and in spite of, their times how such progress ought to be cultural before being industrial, economic and financial in order for it to be just, self-reproducing, sustainable.

Our secret weapons: the works of art and intellect

Culture and cultural policy are now at a turning point in their interconnections with politics, the civil society and creative industries. While the role of culture as a driver of growth is emerging in the discourse of entrepreneurs as well as in public policy, disquieting falls in public spending for culture and the loss of relevance attributed to culture in educational programmes are occurring.

Ruskin and Olivetti lived at similar delicate crossings in their respective worlds (the industrial revolution and the post-war economic boom). In the contemporary context this experience proves precious, as they easily moved in a complex, rapidly evolving world whose easy enthusiasms they were never prey of. On the contrary, they provided an answer to the instances of their time from an uncommon, sharp perspective which wasn't only pioneering for their times: it draws a map for ours.

In the seven years separating the *Stones* and *Unto This Last*, John Ruskin had reversed the terms of his theoretical proposition: from judging art according to the values of the society which produced it, he was now using art, education and culture as criteria to judge society – or, better, he had understood how the former could not go without the latter. As a matter of fact in 1860, interrogated by the Public Institutions Committee about the opening of museums on weekdays (in order for the working class to be able to visit them), Ruskin's answer was that it would have been of no use, if these workers' condition would not allow them to have the energy and the intellectual faculties to appraise the works of art⁶.

In the complex system of Ruskin's thought, then, art and society engaged in a twofold relationship: on the one hand, he saw education as «not the acquisition of a body of knowledge, but instruction in what will fit them to do their work and be happy in it»; on the other

art is of no real use to anybody but the next great Artist; that it is wholly invisible to people in general – for the present – and that to get anybody to see it, one must begin at the other end, with moral education of the people, and physical⁷.

Like our manufacturing ancestors, our cultural policy is far from reaching this somewhat enlightened view on culture: it rather puts an emphasis on the direct, monetary impact of culture to justify public support and society's general interest; Ruskin, instead, had understood that the long-term generation of social impact, human capital and creative spillovers were the real and sustainable values of culture for society, though hardly quantifiable.

Ruskin's perspective, fluid and adaptive, proves more acute and pioneering than our own in interpreting the value of art and culture for contemporary society. In his view art is at a time necessary to society and embedded in it; a fundamental right and an inalienable necessity, but not by reason of its market value, its moral instances or its supposed intrinsic value: art produces value precisely because it is useless⁸.

A kindred intuition seems to pervade Adriano Olivetti as he announces almost triumphantly to have «taken our secret weapons to all villages: books, courses, the works of intellect and art. We believe in the unconditioned revolutionary virtue of culture, which gives humans their true power»⁹. A post-war awareness characterizes his terminology, more politically connoted, but just as powerful as Ruskin's. Olivetti's challenge was more than a managerial experiment, or an extravagant efflorescence embedded in an industrial system: it was a holistic *weltanschauung*, subtended to a model of living and organising which aspired to pervade society holistically. It was also much more than naïve philanthropy: the pervasiveness of culture in the factory and outside of it (the whole urban fabric at Ivrea was reflecting the sense of community generated by Olivetti) benefitted at a time the effectiveness of production and the people involved, generating creativity and a form of self-generated welfare.

The simplest and most complex heritage of Ruskin's and Olivetti's views consists precisely of this apparent *aporia*: the purpose of labour and education is none but happi-

ness, the purpose of art is none but being useless – and here lies their power and their value, unquantifiable as much as it is indispensable. More simply, indispensable since unquantifiable.

What about the future?

Ruskin's views, in the light of Olivetti's experience, help shape new strategies for contemporary cultural policy, defining new value systems and setting new priorities for both culture and education. Informal patterns of learning and the sharing of experience substitute objective (i.e. conventional) knowledge, while flexibility and creativity prove more fertile than hierarchies and protocols. The emphasis on utility fails to capture the value generated by vocation and inspiration: while some pioneering businesses are in the process of reshaping their internal systems of evaluation and of human resources management, this lesson fails to reach public educational programmes, still anchored to outdated protocols of teaching, learning and evaluating.

Olivetti's "strategy of beauty", which embedded culture and the arts in every aspect of production and of his workers' life, reflects a simple intuition which contemporary cultural policy still gasps to reach: that people never meet art and beauty in their everyday life. In present times, the notion of heritage has crystallised creativity and cultural innovation, opening a critical hiatus between society and the arts; the cultural system, then, is interpreted without appeal as a market failure, is rescued by public support organised according to windfall funds which ensure its survival and deliver its resources to an elitist niche, within a sort of "permanent emergency" framework.

At the opposite end of the policy spectrum is a manufacturing mode of thought inherited by the dominating industrial paradigm, where a dimensional obsession for numeric indicators subdues culture to a set of sterile monetary rules and to an output-driven, exploitative perspective. The former approach leads to an *art pour l'art* conception which drains public resources without generating a sustainable impact; commodification and mass production of artistic entertainment are among the unsatisfying result of the latter.

Forgetful of the necessity of building its own demand, the cultural sector is castled in ivory towers isolated from the majority of its potential users and beneficiaries; the long-term survival and success of cultural strategies, i.e. their sustainability, calls for new strategies and policies. They will be, unavoidably, policies in which culture is attributed the audacious pervasiveness and naturalness it had in Olivetti's strategy and in Ruskin's view, benefitting society and the cultural sector at a time. In synthesis, policies aimed at favouring creative intuitions, fostering social inclusion, empowering standard educational tools, acting a cultural penetration in every urban cluster, and introducing culture in the everyday life of citizens.

¹ D. PYE, *The nature and art of workmanship*, «Technology and Culture», 10 (2), 2007.

² «La strategia della bellezza non è un ornamento. È la scoperta di un nesso essenziale tra natura, oggetto e persona». F. COLOMBO, *Il tempo di Adriano Olivetti*, Roma, Edizioni di Comunità 2019. Translation by the author.

³ F. COLOMBO, *Il tempo...* cit.

⁴ S. LUX, *Arte, Società e Tecnica*, Roma, Beniamino Carucci editore 1971.

⁵ Cfr. From Ancient Greek, periphery means “the space around (*peri*) the centre where workers can reproduce their energy and bring it back (*feréin*) to the factories”. For an eloquent analysis see F. JACOBS, *The eggs of price: an Ovo-Urban analogy*, Big Think 2011 (<https://bigthink.com/strange-maps/534-the-eggs-of-price-an-ovo-urban-analogy>).

⁶ Cfr. E. ALEXANDER, *Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin and the Modern Temper*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press 1973.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ It is not by chance that he identified the value of architecture («an eminently social form of art», as seen by E. ALEXANDER, *Matthew Arnold...* cit.), in contrast to mere building, in the ornament, necessary because it is useless (J. RUSKIN, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Mineola, Dover Publications 1989). Uselessness of art will be emphasized a few decades after by the trial Brancusi vs. the United States. See for a technical and critical description of the issues and the implications at stake M. TRIMARCHI, S. MONTI, *Taxes and the arts: a dilemma between constraints and incentives*, «Rivista di diritto finanziario e scienza delle finanze», LXXIII, vol.4, 2014, pp. 533-548. A topic definition of art, embedding its useless nature, has been offered by the creative artist Brian Eno (*BBC Music John Peel Lecture*, London, British Library, 27 September 2015), who states that «art is everything that you don't have to do».

⁹ «Abbiamo portato in tutti i villaggi le nostre armi segrete: i libri, i corsi, le opere dell'ingegno e dell'arte. Noi crediamo nella virtù rivoluzionaria della cultura che dona all'uomo il suo vero potere», A. OLIVETTI, *Il cammino delle comunità*, Roma, Edizioni di Comunità 2013. Translation by the author.