THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

An Arts Foundation Course
Unit 32

Twentieth-Century Responses to Industrialization

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Prepared by Christopher Harvie, Charles Harrison and Graham Martin for the Course Team

The Open University Press

Cover *Jacob Epstein* Torso in metal from the 'Rock Drill', *bronze, 1913–16 (Tate Gallery Photo: John Webb)*

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UNIT 32 TWENTIETH-CENTURY RESPONSES TO INDUSTRIALIZATION

CONTENTS

IMPORTANT NOTE

The television and radio programmes associated with this unit consist of television programme 32, a study of science fiction as a means of predicting the future of industrialization in the early twentieth century, and radio programme 32 *Life in a Railway Factory,* which looks at Alfred Williams, a steam-hammerman at Swindon Railway Works, who compared the rural life he had left with the organization and work-experience of a large industrial plant.

Television programmes 23 *Victorian* 29 *A Golden Age of Work* dealt in part with Ruskin's ideas and radio programme 25 *We War with Rude Nature* raises *Painting* and several of the themes we will be discussing.

You will need to consult the Course Reader, *Nature and Industrialization,* Alasdair Clayre (ed) (1977), Oxford University Press. You will also need to refer to the Colour Supplement and to the Supplementary Texts.

INTRODUCTION TO UNIT 32

After working your way through Units 21–31 in this extended case study you will, I hope, be conscious of some of the main political, intellectual and artistic debates raised by the experience of industrial change after the middle of the eighteenth century. Such issues include the political questions which turn on the division of the industrial spoils and the granting of new rights of citizenship and social control; the impact of new technologies, audiences and social situations on the techniques and subject matter of the creative arts, and, at a deeper level, the acquisition by significant groups in society, like women or the working class, of a new awareness or 'consciousness' of their social situation and the possibilities of remedying it.

Besides these issues, we have also uncovered a range of more fundamental if less straightforward questions, which hinge on the shift in man's relations with the natural world and with the historical past. Industrialization greatly enhanced his knowledge and control both of human personality and the resources of the natural world; but as well as liberating mankind from inherited superstition and constricting traditions this also defined his relations with the rest of nature as essentially exploitative, and imposed on societies throughout the world stresses and tensions which were to surface with explosive effect in the twentieth century.

The twentieth century has understandably been called 'the century of total war'. Certainly the two great wars have been dislocations as overwhelming in their consequences as industrialization was in the nineteenth century. Yet, thirty-three years after the end of the Second World War, many of the political and moral issues that social thinkers and creative artists raised in the nineteenth century have again become crucial. In this unit three of us attempt to discuss the contribution of social criticism, artistic theory and literature to such current questions by exploring the work of two individuals – the artistic and social critic John Ruskin and the novelist and poet D. H. Lawrence – and some of the pioneers of 'modernism' in the visual arts.

Christopher Harvie

PART 1 JOHN RUSKIN: IDEAS AND INFLUENCE

1 INTRODUCTION

When she read *The Stones of Venice* in 1851, Charlotte Brontë wrote to Mrs Gaskell: 'The *Stones of Venice* seem nobly laid and chiselled. How grandly the quarry of vast marbles is disclosed! Mr Ruskin seems to me one of the few genuine writers, as distinguished from book-makers, of this age.' Frederic Harrison (1831–1923) the radical critic, commented: 'A just and clear-sighted thought, worthy of *Jane Eyre*, with her way of seeing through outward show to the soul within the husk.' (Frederic Harrison, *John Ruskin*, page 69.) Charlotte Brontë's reputation, although rapidly acquired, has been sustained; Ruskin's, although comparable (roughly) until the period of the First World War, subsequently plummeted. As Lord Clark wrote in 1964 in his introduction to an anthology, *Ruskin Today*:

> Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century he was accepted by all thoughtful people as one of the impregnable figures of English literature . . . From Wordsworth to Proust there was hardly a distinguished man of letters who did not admire him . . . .
>
> Nor was his reputation confined to literature. Tolstoy, Gandhi and Bernard Shaw, to name only three, believed him to be one of the greatest social reformers of his time . . . When, at the first meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party, members were asked what had been the determining influence on their lives, almost every one answered 'the works of Ruskin.'
>
> Now, in the middle of the twentieth century, what is left of this towering reputation? Practically nothing but a malicious interest in the story of his private life. (*Ruskin Today*, pp. xi–xii.)

So why begin a unit on nature and industrialization in the twentieth century with a Victorian writer whose popularity, once enormous, has not apparently been maintained? The quotations from Charlotte Brontë may explain Ruskin's historical significance, but has he any importance today?

Now one of the aims of this unit is to discuss recent criticisms of unchecked industrialization from both scientists and humanists: questions like the preservation of ecological balance and the 'exploitation' by the 'developed' world of the rest of the world's population and a disproportionate quantity of its natural resources. But you will find, if you explore these issues, that this criticism is continuous, from the Victorian period to the present. This section is the result of such an exercise. My case, which I have to prove to you, is that, of the various Victorian 'social critics' or 'sages' (see Units 24–25, *The Experience of Industrialization*, Section 14), John Ruskin had a unique influence – direct and indirect – on ideas about industrialization and culture. Moreover, Ruskin himself, idiosyncratic and perverse but capable of dramatic insights and vivid advocacy, personified a type of response which used the resources of religion and the arts to criticize the 'mechanistic' and 'materialistic' views of society and culture which were dominant in the first phases of industrialization. Part 1 of this unit deals, therefore, not with Ruskin's career as a whole, but with three of his key concerns: art, economics and nature. It surveys his ideas, their importance in his own age, and their significance today, both directly and by their effect on social action.

I give below the extracts from Ruskin's works which are printed in the Reader. You will be asked to read through some of them in the course of this section, and you may care to read, or re-read, all of them before you start.

Reference	*Passage*
III.3	'Turner's Childhood' from *Modern Painters*, 1860 edition
IX.2	'Rochdale and Pisa' from *Modern Manufacture and Design*, 1858
IX.3	'A city as it might be' from *The Mystery of Life and its Arts*, 1868

XVII.7 'The Nature of Gothic' from *The Stones of Venice,* 1851–3

XVII.8 'There is no wealth but life' from *The Veins of Wealth,* 1862

XX.1 'Millais and Turner' from *Pre-Raphaelitism,* 1851

2 LIFE AND ART

2.1 LIFE

John Ruskin was born in London in 1819, the son of a wealthy Scottish wine merchant (who did more than anyone else to make sherry a popular drink in Britain) and his wife, also of Scots descent. He was therefore, in our money, the son of a millionaire, and later a millionaire himself. He was also, in speech and many aspects of his mind, 'a Scot of Scots'. His upbringing was, characteristically, a severe Calvinist one, but his father was also a connoisseur, who, with wife and only child, travelled widely on the continent, and mixed in artistic society. He was wealthy enough to purchase for his son the education of a 'gentleman commoner' at Christ Church, Oxford (1836–42) where Ruskin studied both the classical curriculum and, unofficially, art and natural history. Not long after, he burst into print (anonymously) with the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843), a passionate defence of the art of J. M. W. Turner. Despite its author's youth this gained enormous popularity and was steadily expanded, until it ran into five volumes. Charlotte Brontë wrote of it: 'I feel now as if I had

Figure 1 John Ruskin aged thirty-four, painted 1853 by (Sir) John Everett Millais at Glenfinlas, Perthshire, 'looking quietly downstream, upon a lovely piece of worn rock.' At the end of that year Ruskin's wife Effie sued successfully for annulment of the marriage, and in 1855 married Millais. (Private Collection).

been walking blindfold – this book seems to give me eyes'. Ruskin's interests then widened into architecture, especially that of mediaeval Italy. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3) were the result.

In the late 1850s, following an unconsummated and unhappy marriage to Effie Gray (who, on its annulment, married the painter Millais), he developed his views on art and architecture into a criticism, maintained until his mind finally clouded in the 1880s, of *laissez-faire* and industrialism. His first sustained social criticism was *Unto this Last* (1862). Despite its initial unpopularity, Ruskin's reputation as prescriber for the ills of Victorian society grew, and he followed it with a series of letters and addresses on a wide range of scientific, artistic, social and political topics, published, usually under strange Latin titles, by his disciple George Allen (the founder of the firm of Allen and Unwin). In 1867, at the time of the second Reform Bill, he put forward a somewhat bizarre plan for the reconstruction of British society on the lines of a sort of feudal socialism, and attempted to follow this up by founding the Guild of St George (1871) whose ambitious aims for handcraft communities finally declined into a few small-scale projects.

Ruskin's last main public intervention was as Slade Professor of Art at Oxford (1870–4 and 1883–4), when he attempted – with much success – to preach his social gospel to the new elite of the reformed universities. But madness, which would now be diagnosed as schizophrenia, intervened, and a brief recovery (1881–3) was not sustained. He lived out the rest of his life in seclusion at Brantwood, near Coniston, living on the income of £4,000 a year brought in by his works, having given away the rest of a fortune of over £300,000. He died on 20 January 1900. Few writers of his period can have been so widely printed; the *British Museum Catalogue* lists over 550 titles of books by or about him, published between 1843 and 1950, including translations in all the main European languages.

2.2 ART

EXERCISE

In Units 22–23, *Nature, Work and Art,* Stephen Bayley devotes several pages (pp. 47–50) to Ruskin. At this stage, please re-read these. What sort of picture of Ruskin is he building?

DISCUSSION

Well, it's not terribly flattering. Stephen Bayley contends that Ruskin imposed moral criteria on pictures 'whose content was wholly aesthetic' – although he qualifies this by saying that he was 'as various and confusing a man as Turner'. He then describes Ruskin's 'moral bludgeon' as 'intimidating art in England', trying to persuade a highly-industrialized society to revert to 'an imaginary mediaeval world where the craftsman was in love with his work'.

Now there's a lot of truth in this, but I don't think it does Ruskin, or his times, full justice. For *Modern Painters* was truly an epoch-making work. As the pioneer of the re-discovery of Victorian culture, G. M. Young, wrote in *Portrait of an Age*: 'In Sydney Smith's stately compliments to the Graduate of Oxford, the eighteenth century bows itself off the stage and introduces its successor.' (Page 13.)

We have to remember that the Graduate of Oxford was not simply the wealthy son of a noted patron, but a gifted artist and a formidable writer. Read through 'Turner's Childhood' (Reader, III.3), an extract from the fifth volume of *Modern Painters* (admittedly written a lot later) and you will gain some idea of the 'punch' of his remarkable style. The book was not simply art criticism but a work of art in its own right, with its rich word-pictures of the artist's environment and

subject matter. It was well fitted to catch the attention of the nouveau-riche, well-heeled art patrons (whom Jeremy Maas described in radio programme 23) eager for instruction in good taste, not having inherited it. By championing Turner, it was appropriately patriotic, and its religious attitude to art made it conform to the ethos of the day. Before 1843, remember, much fashionable painting was more like faking – producing old masters for new houses – or was rakishly pagan, like the luscious nudes of William Etty. Art had to be squared with the religious intensity of the time – this is the decade of the Oxford Movement in England the 'Disruption' in Scotland. So Ruskin's reputation in the 1840s and 1850s, when his comments on new paintings were almost holy writ, reflected an art world which was tidying itself up and elevating its moral tone.

Ruskin's social criticism was yet to come, but it arose from his 'moral seriousness'. The profundity of a painting was seen as depending on the effort required properly to examine it, which 'decoded' – as it were – the effort that a great artist – Turner, or later the Pre-Raphaelites – had given to its creation. In a way, this was not unlike the 'labour theory of value' that both Adam Smith and Karl Marx adhered to – that the value of an object was determined by the amount of work embodied in it. Hence Ruskin's later fury at James McNeill Whistler's *Falling Rocket* (1877) a painting which seems not unlike many of the late Turners Ruskin energetically defended. His language then was certainly intemperate: 'He had never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face!' But the reason for this hostility was Whistler's view that art – or painting – should be regarded as having both technical *and moral* autonomy. 'Art for art's sake' – the ruling dogma of 'modernism' in art, was something Ruskin had no time for.

Modern Painters resulted in Ruskin being introduced to Thomas Carlyle, with profound effects on his later social philosophy. As Stuart Brown has explained in Units 28–29 *Work, Morality and Human Nature,* Carlyle preached 'the gospel of work'. Ruskin, who was a much less ferocious character, refined this by distinguishing between 'Useful Work' and 'Useless Toil'. But common to both was an apprehension about the consequences of the new 'mechanistic' industrial order. Contrast the concluding passage from *Modern Painters* reproduced below with the opening paragraph of Carlyle's 'Signs of the Times' (1829) (Reader, XVI.1):

> The fact is verily so. The great man of our England, (J. M. W. Turner), in the first half of the nineteenth century, in the strength and hope of his youth, perceives this to be the thing he has to tell us of utmost moment, connected with the spiritual world. In each city and country of past time, the master-minds had to declare the chief worship which lay at the nation's heart; to define it; adorn it; show the range and authority of it. Thus in Athens, we have the triumph of Pallas, and in Venice the Assumption of the Virgin; here, in England, is our great Spiritual fact for ever interpreted to us – the Assumption of the Dragon. No St George any more to be heard of; no more dragon-slaying possible: this child, born on St George's Day, can only make manifest the dragon, not slay him, sea-serpent as he is; whom the English Andromeda, not fearing, takes for her lord. The fairy English Queen once thought to command the waves, but it is the sea-dragon now who commands her valleys; of old the Angel of the Sea ministered to them, but now the Serpent of the Sea; where once flowed their clear springs now spread the black Cocytus[1] pool: and the fair blooming of the Hesperid[2] meadows fades into ashes beneath the Nereid's[3] Guard.
>
> Yes, Albert of Nuremberg;[4] the time has at last come. Another nation has arised in the strength of its Black anger; and another hand has portrayed the spirit of its toil. Crowned with fire, and with the wings of the bat. (*Modern Painters,* Vol. V, Part IX, ch. X, page 25.)

[1]Cocytus: from Greek mythology, a river in Hades.
[2]Hesperid: from the Hesperides, in Greek mythology, 'the fortunate isles'.
[3]Nereid: from Greek mythology, sea-nymph.
[4]Albert of Nuremberg: Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), German painter and his engraving 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse'.

2.3 ARCHITECTURE

The successive volumes of *Modern Painters* saw Ruskin's art criticism widen into social criticism. Some would say that, as an art critic, he scarcely developed. For instance, he was still writing as the Impressionists painted in Paris, but he seems to have been oblivious of their existence. On the other hand others would argue, with Ruskin himself, that if one had moral expectations of art, the logical thing to do was to concentrate on 'the greater arts', the design of the buildings that housed people's lives, work and worship. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* – Truth, Beauty, Power, Sacrifice, Obedience, Labour, Memory (although Ruskin said he could add several more if he wanted to) – became the textbook for a generation of architects. Its lessons were enforced by the practical examples of *The Stones of Venice.* This was an even tighter equation of aesthetics with ethics. Its opening sentences announced bluntly that Britain's economic success did not entitle her to moral supremacy:

> Since first the dominion of men was asserted over the ocean, three thrones, of mark beyond all others, have been set upon its sands: the thrones of Tyre, Venice and England. Of the First of these great powers only the memory remains; of the Second, the ruins; the Third, which inherits their greatness, if it forget their example, may be led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction. (*The Stones of Venice* Vol. I, 1851.)

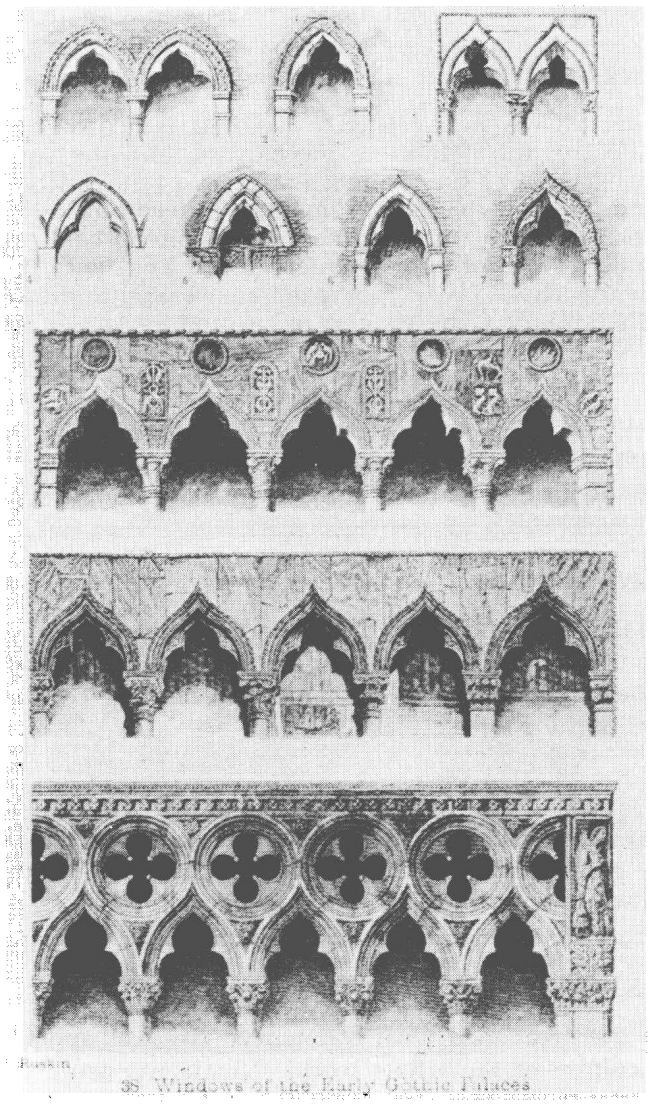

Figure 2 Windows of the Early Gothic Palaces, Drawing by John Ruskin. (Photo from J. Ruskin (1906) The Stones of Venice, *George Allen, Vol II, opposite page 257.)*

Again, external factors (about which Ruskin must have had mixed feelings) ensured that both books would make a significant impact. Italy was being opened up to tourists. The railway reached Venice in 1846, and in the 1850s Cook's tourist parties were becoming commonplace in its hotels. At the same time, in Britain, the movement in architectural taste towards electicism, or variety of styles, and in particular away from classicism, ensured that his advocacy of Venetian gothic would be well received, while the Protestant impulse in Ruskin which led him to prefer the austere gothic of the earlier church to the elaborate classicism of the Renaissance, made Venice more attractive to the English than Rome. Less than a century earlier, a not unrepresentative traveller, Edward Gibbon, had written of the Rialto and St Mark's Square:

> . . . old and in general, ill-built houses, ruined pictures, and stinking ditches, dignified with the pompous denomination of canals, a fine bridge spoilt by two rows of houses on it, and a large square decorated with the worst architecture I ever saw. (Letter to his stepmother, 22 April 1765, quoted in E. T. Cook, *The Life of Ruskin* Vol. 1, page 302.)

After *The Stones of Venice* this changed dramatically, 'We do not remember' said a writer in the *North British Review* in May 1854 'anything in the history of art in England at all corresponding in suddenness and extent to the effect which the works of Mr Ruskin have already exercised on the popular taste directly, and through popular taste on the taste and theories of artists themselves.' (Quoted in Cook, *The Life of Ruskin,* page 305.)

In so far as this impact merely influenced the repertoire of architectural styles, however, Ruskin lived to regret it. Soon he was lamenting the growth of 'Venetian' warehouses, churches and pubs, and by the mid-1860s could write:

> The architecture we endeavoured to introduce is inconsistent alike with the reckless luxury, the deforming mechanism, and the squalid misery of modern cities; among the formative fashions of the day, aided, especially in England, by ecclesiastical sentiment, it indeed obtained notoriety; and sometimes behind an engine-furnace, or a railroad bank, you may detect the pathetic discord of its momentary grace, and, with toil, decipher its floral carvings choked with soot. I felt answerable to the schools I loved, only for their injury. ('The Mystery of Life and Its Arts' in *Sesame and Lilies,* 1866.)

EXERCISE

Read through the extract 'Rochdale and Pisa' (Reader, IX.2). What was Ruskin's main complaint about the manufacturing towns of Victorian England?

SPECIMEN ANSWER

Ruskin argues that the conditions for great art, of the standard of Pisa, cannot exist in the squalor of places like Rochdale, because the creation of wealth – regardless of the consequences – is given more predominance than the quality of life of the mass of the people.

EXERCISE

From what you've read about Ruskin and Venice in this section, what message did he use the parallel between Pisa, or Venice, and England to convey? Was this simply an argument for a return to a mediaeval past?

SPECIMEN ANSWER

The wealth of the great mediaeval commercial city was spent in a way that added to the culture of the whole world. Nineteenth-century England – of equivalent prestige in its time – seemed simply to be squandering resources and leaving little of value. Ruskin specifically rejects mediaevalism, arguing that where there is exploitation, in whatever age, social collapse will follow.

DISCUSSION

Venice, to the Victorians was a symbol both of past and future. It was the pre-eminent example of commercial civilization whose style the British urban middle class attempted to emulate; it also represented the dignified remains of an industrial state after its commercial supremacy had departed. This was the burden of Ruskin's 'Sermon in Stones': not a new style of decorative architecture, but a demand for urban reconstruction and a responsible urban elite. At this level, Ruskin influenced many of the leaders of the public health movement, like Sir John Simon (the Chief Medical Officer to the Privy Council after 1855) and Octavia Hill (whose efforts for improved working-class dwellings and charity organization laid, albeit in a paternalist manner, the basis of modern social casework).

But his influence went further. Like W. E. Forster (Units 24–25, *The Experience of Industrialization,* Section 14) he responded to Carlyle's criticism of the supremacy of commercial over social goals. The impact of industrial organization in general and machinery in particular, coupled with the European revolutions of 1848, increased awareness among the elite of the danger of estrangement between classes. Practically, this led to his involvement after 1854 in the Working Men's College, an enterprise of the Christian Socialists, theoretically it led to the section of *The Stones of Venice* entitled 'The Nature of Gothic', where he extended Carlyle's vivid perception of the mechanization of society to condemn the consequences of the division of labour. It seemed to him that unless men could profit from, enjoy and be secure in their work their discontent could reach explosive dimensions.

3 RUSKIN ON ECONOMICS

The trades unionists and socialists who provided the market for the thousands of cheap editions of Ruskin's writings sold before 1914 were influenced by Ruskin's economics more than by his art-criticism, although the two were closely linked, both in Ruskin's own writings and in his influence on the socialist William Morris. As the latter wrote in his preface to the Kelmscott Press edition of 'The Nature of Gothic':

> John Ruskin, the teacher of morals and politics, has done serious and solid work toward the new-birth of society, without which genuine art, the expression of man's pleasure in his handiwork, must inevitably cease altogether, and with it the hopes of the happiness of mankind. (Quoted in James Ramsay Macdonald, 'William Morris', in *Prophets of the Century*, page 268.)

His economic influence was, however, not limited to socialists. John Atkinson Hobson (1858–1940), one of the most influential economic thinkers of the twentieth century, wrote in his autobiography:

> From him I drew the basic thought for my subsequent economic writings, viz. the necessity of going behind the current monetary estimates of wealth, cost and utility to reach the body of human benefits and satisfactions which give them a real meaning. (Hobson, *Confessions of An Economic Heretic*, page 42.)

EXERCISE

How did Ruskin's economic thought differ from the tradition against which it reacted? and how did it differ from the 'scientific socialism' of Marx and Engels? To grasp what the essentials of these doctrines were, go back and re-read Unit 21, *Key Concepts*, pp. 11–16 and Units 24–25, *The Experience of Industrialization*, pp. 73–4.

DISCUSSION

From this, you will see that 'classical' economists who advocated industrialization, generalizing rather too easily from *The Wealth of Nations*, thought that the 'invisible hand' of market economics would secure economic growth and social development without anyone having to consult anything more than his own self-interest. Nations were similar; it was rational for them to live at peace with one another and trade together, each specializing in the economic activity it was best suited to. Out of the links built up by such international trade would come international understanding, as it would be in no-one's interest for one nation to advance its own concerns through war. Thus, in Goldwin Smith's words, 'one heart as well as one harvest for the world' would be the outcome of industrialization.

Overall, Karl Marx's view wasn't dissimilar: he saw the struggle as one within states rather than as one between states. The capitalists would maintain peace because it suited them. Wars between nations were old-fashioned: the war the workers would have to prepare for was the civil war which would end capitalism.

In this way both capitalism and 'scientific' socialism were rational *and* utopian. Both were predicated on the idea that the laws of economics were 'natural' – capable of scientific prediction – and both entailed an underestimation of the irrational in man's nature.

But, even in Adam Smith's day these 'natural laws' of economics could conflict with the 'natural tendency' of groups of businessmen to conspire against the