CHAPTER 3

From Political Economy to the Marxian Critique of Political Economy

As the revolutionary bourgeoisie had enlightened itself as to the principles of the new industrial society in the new science of political economy, so did the proletarian class assert its revolutionary aims in the critique of political economy. This is not a critique of single results of bourgeois economics from within. It is, fundamentally, a critique of the very premises of political economy based upon the new standpoint of a social class which, theoretically as well as practically, goes beyond bourgeois economy. It investigates the tendencies inherent in capitalist commodity-production which in the course of their further development produce the necessary basis for the economic, political, and ideological struggle of the proletarian class, and which will ultimately overthrow the bourgeois mode of production and advance to the higher production-relations of a socialist and communist society.

The Marxian ‘critique’ is not the first appearance of a genuine principle of criticism as a driving force in the development of economic science. Already in the earlier phases of political economy the mercantile system had been criticised by the Physiocrats, the Physiocrats by Adam Smith, and Smith by Ricardo. Nor was that earlier economic criticism a matter of pure theory. Each new phase of the theoretical development implied a new phase in the real historical development of the capitalist mode of production. There was no clear distinction; in fact, every historical phase was in itself a criticism of the preceding phase. For all that, the actual historical and theoretical ‘subject’ of economic science remained unchanged through all these stages. The bourgeois class in its revolutionary struggle against the obsolete forms of feudal production could not, and did not, distinguish its particular interests as a class from its general interest in the whole of historical progress. Even after the defeat of feudalism, for a considerable time it could still quite honestly regard itself as promoting the general welfare of society. During this phase, political economy was even striving to cooperate, with the utmost impartiality, in solving the new economic problems emerging from the increasingly unsatisfactory conditions of the real people, that is, the section that was actually working in the as yet undivided industrial society.

That state of things was profoundly changed by the new historical development which set in with the economic crisis of 1825 and the great political
changes of 1830. Henceforth, the new conditions established within bourgeois society no longer permitted an impartial analysis of the economic principles underlying those conditions. A strictly scientific investigation of social development was possible only from the standpoint of that class whose task in history is to transcend the narrow bourgeois horizons and, ultimately, to do away with classes altogether.\footnote{See Marx 1873.} The theoretical system of Ricardo marks the turning point.

The complete impartiality of the genuine scientific investigator which appears everywhere in the work of Ricardo, had seemed miraculous already to his contemporaries. ‘Mr. Ricardo seemed to have dropped from another planet’, said Lord Brougham. With faultless clarity, this English banker of the beginning of the nineteenth century, who nowhere goes beyond the boundaries of the bourgeoisie,\footnote{‘The “parallelograms of Mr. Owen” appear to be the only form of society which he knew outside the bourgeois one’ (Marx 1859).} presented in his system the inherent disharmonies as well as the harmonious and progressive features of the bourgeois mode of production; more particularly he revealed the inevitable opposition arising between the two industrial classes. He declared from the outset that the principal problem in political economy is to state the proportions in which the whole produce of society is allotted to each of the three social classes: the proprietors of land, the owners of capital, and the propertyless labourers.\footnote{See the ‘Preface’ to Ricardo 1817.} Thus ‘the contrast of class interests, of wages and profits, of profit and rent’, became indeed, as was later stated by Marx, the very ‘pivot’ of Ricardo’s economic investigation.\footnote{See Marx 1873; see also Marx letter to Weydemeyer, 5 March 1852 (Marx 1975–2004).}

Ricardo’s position in the history of economic science is precisely analogous to Hegel’s in philosophical thought, just as in a preceding phase the economics of Adam Smith had corresponded to the philosophy of Kant. This analogous historical position appears most clearly in Ricardo’s important contribution to what we have described in an earlier chapter as ‘bourgeois self-criticism’. The scientific criticism of the existing capitalist system, which pervades Ricardo’s economic system, surpasses the earlier economists’ occasional comments on the unpleasant sides of the new bourgeois conditions even more than the earlier philosophical critics had been surpassed by Hegel. While in dealing with Hegel we had to disregard the mystifying form of his statements in order to establish his realistic advance on his predecessors, the superiority of Ricardo’s criticism over that of his forerunners is clear as day. His critical statements not only surpass all previous criticism in their sweeping power of generalisation

\footnote{See Marx 1873.}