Chapter 6

One Hundred Years On: To What ‘Literary Genre’ Does Marx’s *Capital* Belong?

*Reading Capital*, the title chosen by Louis Althusser a few years back in presenting a collection of studies, was a phrase intended provocatively: as a protest against the fashion of the ‘young Marx’, against the growing tendency to read Marx as a pure philosopher. Yet ‘reading *Capital*’ is also a problem from another point of view, beyond any strong feelings in favour of or against a fashion. In order to avoid such feelings and for the sake of brevity, I am here going to pose the problem of interpreting Marx in a non-polemical manner.

One of the oddest characteristics of the literature on *Capital* is the array of extreme opinions aroused by its interpretation. This is well known and not worth emphasising here. However, it is appropriate to point this out, for the climate that characterises the interpretation of Marx itself suggests something about the nature of Marx’s work.

It is probably of more interest to consider for a moment the kind of assessment of *Capital* – much more concerned with objective, academic decency – typical of major authors who cannot allow themselves, given their scientific stature, a straightforward apology for capitalism by means of a crude refutation of Marx’s book. Yet given their class position, nor can they dispense with an indirect apology for that social order by means of an intelligent justification for the thesis that *Capital* is outmoded. Schumpeter is probably the highest authority in this distinguished category. However, it is not a good thing to invade other specialists’ field and, on the other hand, the distinguished category of authors that I have mentioned also includes prestigious philosophers whom the author of these notes can approach with less risk of misunderstanding due to technical inadequacy. The philosopher Benedetto Croce – Schumpeter’s contemporary and for a time the holder of the high ideological throne in Europe later held by such authors as Bergson and Heidegger – offers a good starting point. Moreover, Schumpeter’s historical-cultural affinity with Croce is considerable: Croce also went through the experience of an extensive reading

of Marx; he too decided to take Marx to task; and he likewise explains Marxism (at times) as deriving from an – erroneous to his mind – overestimation of Ricardo, etc. But above all, Croce expresses in a typical way the problem that I am discussing. He expresses it, of course, as an anti-Marxist. In several of his books, and mainly in his *Storia della storiografia italiana nel secolo decimonono [The History of Nineteenth-Century Italian Historiography]*, Croce notes, in the context of a general criticism of Marxism, and as a basic objection to Marx’s economic writings and especially *Capital*, that those texts do not comprise a homogeneous treatise on economic theory – or ‘political economy’; as it was traditionally called – but a set of ‘canons’ or methods for the interpretation of the past, plus a few analyses and propositions of a truly theoretical sort, as well as a ‘prophetic’ or ‘elliptical’ impulse toward another kind of society, to which political action leads.

This kind of criticism cannot be directly reduced to the common propaganda, according to which *Capital*, as an analysis of capitalist reality, became outdated long ago. Yet it does move indirectly in the same direction, since this criticism amounts to saying that the science of economics has attained forms of pure theory – like physics or biology – that are neutral with respect to any socio-political programme or undertaking. Marx’s work, like that of Ricardo, is prior to this theoretical standard; it is, therefore, an outmoded work.

There is something to be learned from that subtle liquidation of *Capital* and, in general, of the writings of the mature Marx. It is necessary to learn something from this because it captures a certain fact, even if only to turn it into the axis of an indirect apology for capitalism. The fact in question is accessible to any reader without excessively unconscious prejudices: it seems clear that in reading most of the pages from the most mature Marx – including many from *Capital* – we immediately have the impression that we are reading a different type of literature from that which we have in front of us when reading a treatise of economic theory or a monograph on some economic problem. And the difference cannot be explained solely by ideological factors, that is, by the fact that the majority of the economic, educational or research texts that we read in the here and now are unmistakably rooted in a bourgeois foundation and bourgeois culture. That explanation is inadequate, since we also notice a great difference in genre of reading between a large part of *Capital* and the expositions of Lange, Strumilin or Dobb concerning, for example, the functioning of socialist economies. (This is why Althusser’s use of the word ‘theory’ to refer to all of the writings from Marx’s maturity also proves so incorrect and confounding).

Words are not as innocent as they may appear. To begin with, words never appear, or never count, alone, individually; they only count within structures,