CHAPTER TEN

MARX’S CRITIQUE OF HEGEL

[For Hegel] the movement of the categories appears as the real act of production—which only, unfortunately, receives a jolt from the outside—whose product is the world.

(Marx 1857)

“Ask anybody in Berlin today,” announced the Telegraph für Deutschland of December 1841, “on what field the battle for dominion over German public opinion…over Germany itself, is being fought, and if he has any idea of the power of the mind over the world he will reply that this battlefield is the University, in particular Lecture Hall No. 6, where Schelling is giving his lectures on the Philosophy of Revelation” (Engels 1975). The new Prussian King, Friedrich Wilhelm IV had appointed a Minister of Culture with instructions to “expunge the dragon’s seed of Hegelian pantheism from Prussian youth,” and Hegel’s roommate and friend from his student days, Friedrich Schelling, had been summoned to Berlin to do the job (Beiser 1993).

The 21-year-old Frederick Engels continued: “An imposing, colorful audience has assembled to witness the battle. At the front the notables of the University, the leading lights of science, men everyone of whom has created a trend of his own; for them the seats nearest to the rostrum have been reserved, and behind them, jumbled together as chance brought them to the hall, representatives of all walks of life, nations, and religious beliefs. In the midst of high-spirited youths there sits here and there a grey-breaded staff officer . . .,” and Engels himself, one of the founders of modern communism, Mikhail Bakunin, founder of militant anarchism, and Søren Kierkegaard (2001), precursor of Existentialism…“then the signal for silence sounds and Schelling mounts the rostrum. A man of middle stature, with white hair and light-blue, bright eyes, whose expression is gay rather than imposing and, combined with a certain fullness of figure, indicates more the jovial family-man than the thinker of genius, a harsh but strong voice, Swabian-Bavarian accent, that is Schelling’s outward appearance.” Engels responded to Schelling’s denunciation of Hegel: “We are not afraid to fight….we shall rise confidently against the new enemy; in
the end, one will be found among us who will prove that the sword of enthusiasm is just as good as the sword of genius.” And it would not be long before Engels would find one who could indeed match enthusiasm with genius.

Since Hegel’s death, Hegelianism had broken through the walls of the academy and, unrestrained by their teacher, Hegel’s young followers had been drawing revolutionary conclusions.

The world had completely changed since the death of Hegel and Goethe in 1831/32. In 1830 France was hit by a recession, causing widespread unemployment and hunger; an invasion of Algeria organized to divert attention failed and on May 29 masses of angry workers came into the streets, and to their own surprise, took control of Paris. Their spokesmen were liberal-democrats, and a deal was done. But when the king dissolved parliament on July 26, the proletariat of Paris set up barricades again, the soldiers refused move against them, and the King was forced to abdicate. The July 1830 Revolution not only brought about a constitutional monarchy in France, a regime which would be in constant crisis until falling in 1848, but the repercussions of the Revolution spread across Europe, with a democratic movement growing quickly in Germany. In England the Chartist movement grew rapidly during this decade. The Birmingham Political Union was formed by Thomas Attwood in 1830, to press for parliamentary reform, Wm Benbow was advocating armed struggle to secure a workers’ holiday and in October 1831 mobs burnt and looted in Bristol, demanding parliamentary reform. The 1832 Reform Bill, far from assuaging democratic demands, only spurred on the Chartist movement.

During the previous decades, there had been many barricades erected in Paris and many battles between police and workers in Britain, but during the 1830s, these movements of the oppressed were increasingly choosing their own leaders, pursuing political demands of their own and were actually driving the reform agenda. This was completely new.

Political struggle over the preceding centuries could be broadly characterized as the progress of bourgeois liberal reform against the resistance of the privileged classes. To Enlightenment thinkers like Hegel, outbursts of anger by the rabble fell into the same category as degradation of the environment. Apparently arising directly out of material conditions, such events could not be understood as an expression of an idea, as political movements. Ideas and progress grew out of the culture and institutions created by the enlightened elite, not at the