Engels’s Task in *Anti-Dühring*

**Why *Anti-Dühring* was Written**

On 3 January 1877, *Vorwärts* [*Forward*], the organ of the German Social Democratic Party, began to publish a series of articles by Engels under the general title ‘Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Philosophy’. The series ended with the article of 13 May of the same year. Yet on 27 July, the first article of a new series appeared, entitled ‘Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Economics’. Part of this series – Chapter 10 of the second section of the book – is Marx’s work. The last of these articles was published in *Vorwärts* on 30 December 1877. Finally, a third series began to be published on 5 May 1878 and concluded on 7 July of the same year. The general title of this last series was ‘Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Socialism’. In their publication in book form (three editions appeared during Engels’s lifetime: 1878, 1886, and 1894), the three series of articles appear as three sections. The title of the book – *Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science* – parodies, as do the titles of the series of articles, that of a book by Dühring on the economist Carey.

Eugen Dühring was a *Privatdozent* at the University of Berlin, who in 1868 had published a review of Volume I of Marx’s *Capital*. Shortly thereafter, Dühring declared his embrace of socialism and began to exercise a certain influence within the German Social Democratic Party. Dühring’s influence struck Liebknecht, Marx and Engels as quite negative. From Germany, Liebknecht urged Engels to take a stand with regard to Dühring. Engels consulted Marx, who believed that taking a stand could only be done ‘by criticising Dühring without any compunction’.\(^1\) On the other hand, in the same letter Marx points out that Dühring’s writings lacked importance in themselves, to such an extent that a critique of his works by Marx and Engels would be ‘too paltry’.\(^2\) Marx viewed Dühring’s danger, which was of little importance, in the satisfaction that he elicited among, as Marx puts it, the ‘artisans’ – that is, among the trivial socialist writers without any scientific preparation – and the flattering reception

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Dühring afforded them, which they could hardly fail to contrast with the severity with which Marx had always treated semi-educated figures bereft of any scientific spirit.

Dühring was indeed small potatoes. Today, as at the time of the second edition of Engels’s book, nothing remains of the work of the rhetorical Berlin pedagogue, who seems to have been fated to rack his brains on account of major scientific figures like Marx or the physicist Helmholtz. Given Dühring’s scientific incompetence, Engels himself was at first surprised by the success of his critique of Dühring. Yet he soon understood the source of Anti-Dühring’s success: this book was the first comprehensive exposition of the communist worldview inaugurated by Marx. Of course, we must not lose sight of the fact that an exposition as thematically diverse as Anti-Dühring can be no more than a manual of popularisation, considering that it hardly exceeds 300 pages in octavo format. Yet despite – or perhaps precisely because of – this fact, it was of great importance for the entire labour movement.

Anti-Dühring was in fact written with an immediate political and polemical motivation, and against an obscure muddler who is now forgotten. During the course of his work, however, Engels also found himself led to polemicise against an ideological current, perhaps always present in the socialist movement, which in his day was briefly represented by Dühring. From the point of view of the history of socialism, Dühring actually represents, despite his smug contempt for the utopian socialists, a return to a utopian, idealist foundation for the labour movement. For all socialist theory is based, according to Dühring, on abstract moral categories, such as Justice, Equality, the rejection of ‘violent property’, and so forth. While polemicising with Dühring, Engels goes about providing an exposition, as required by his arguments, of the bases of what is usually called ‘scientific socialism’, that is to say, a socialism that finds its support in historical reality, in actual human life, and not in a mere morally sanctioned desire.

Of course, the point is not that Marxism is devoid of moral motives. In criticising Feuerbach, Marx said that the word communist does not have a merely theoretical content, since it means being an active member of a specific party, which itself implies a moral element in anyone who has a right to call him- or herself a communist in Marx’s sense, for active party membership is the result of a choice, something belonging to morality. But in this regard Marxism is characterised by the claim that the content of moral postulates must be sought in reality. A clear example of the dialectic of morality and reality in Marxist thought can be found precisely in Anti-Dühring, in Chapter 10 of Part One, where Engels defines the moral concept of equality’s content for the labour movement and scientific socialism. Equality, for Marxism, is not an abstract