

How Engels Criticized Duhring's Apriorism

— Notes on studying "Anti-Duhring"

by Wang Che

Duhring — "Genius" or Swindler?

ANTI-DUHRING, Engels' great work, was the product of an acute inner-party struggle.

During the 1870s, Eugen Duhring, a lecturer at Berlin University, came out with a series of works which launched an all-round attack on Marxism, from philosophy and political economy to the theory of socialism. This attack did great damage to party unification and unity because it was in 1875 that the two sections of the German workers' organization, namely the Eisenachers and Lassalleans, had just joined to set up the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany. Although there were big defects in this fusion, to a certain degree it ended the situation in which there were sectarian splits and confusion in the German working class and strengthened the party. However, many people in the party did not study the basic theoretical question very well and their understanding of the Marxist world outlook was rather shallow. Taking advantage of this, Duhring made himself up as a big theoretical authority of the party by blowing his own trumpet and cheating in order to peddle his pseudo-socialist goods and create splits in the party.

As Engels had pointed out, Duhring and his little sect "were using all the arts of advertisement and intrigue." While he himself actually was a charlatan, Duhring berated others as "charlatans." Copying, stealing and talking nonsense, Duhring had the cheek to repudiate others time and again as "idiots" and "buffooneries," as if he was the greatest genius. Using high-sounding adjectives, he pompously and shamelessly praised himself—a "new mode of thought," "from the ground up original conclusions and views," "system-creating ideas," "an all-round penetrating work of thought," "in the grand style," and so forth. Briefly, in his eyes, everyone else was no good, other people's theories were all worthless and only his was the "final and ultimate truth." If that was the case, Engels said

sarcastically, then "we have before us the greatest genius of all time, the first superhuman, because infallible," and we common human beings could only "sink to the ground in deepest reverence before the mightiest genius of all time."

Engels' remark hit the nail on the head, because Duhring just wanted to establish his authority through this kind of advertising propaganda. He wanted others to believe that he, the great "genius" and "superhuman," was infallible and that things would be all right if others blindly followed him.

Marx and Engels despised and were disgusted at all of Duhring's trash. Calling him an "impertinent dwarf," Engels said that Duhring's babbling was "one of the most characteristic types of . . . bumptious pseudo-science" and "sublime nonsense." It was unfortunate, however, that such stuff was then forcing its way to the fore in Germany. Not only did Bernstein become an active Duhringist, but a good comrade like Bebel was also deceived by him. Far from being "purely academic," Duhring had clear-cut political and organizational lines. His theoretical attack on Marxism was prepared for his sham socialism and for splitting the party organizationally. Filled with wild ambition, he formed a sect in the party, attempting to make it the nucleus of a future separate party. His activities had indeed developed to an extent that was inimical to the cause of the party.

To raise the party's theoretical level, maintain party unity and make the recently united party advance along a correct line, Engels, supported and joined by Marx, took up his pen to smash Duhring's fierce attack.

A Priori Method Is an Idealist Method

Duhring had a full basket. Engels listed its contents as following: Nothing less than a complete *System of Philosophy*, mental, moral, natural, and historical; a complete *System of Political Economy and Socialism*;

and, finally, a *Critical History of Political Economy* — three big volumes in octavo. All this seemed quite formidable. But there was a question: Where did these big volumes and articles come from?

Weaving his web like a spider, Duhring made up this whole series of systems out of his “genius” brain. He imagined that, without any kind of experience and starting from the simplest “basic forms” or “basic elements” of things, he could logically deduce a whole system of philosophy by applying several understood axioms of philosophy and then, by sovereign decree, he imposed this constitution on nature and humanity. Engels pointed out:

“This is only giving a new twist to the old favourite ideological method, also known as the *a priori* method, which consists in ascertaining the properties of an object by logical deduction from the concept of the object, instead of from the object itself. . . . The object is then to conform to the concept, not the concept to the object. . . . The philosophy of reality . . . proves . . . to be . . . the deduction of reality not from itself but from a concept.”

Apriorism is an idealist theory of knowledge. The materialist theory of reflection holds that ideas are the reflection of objective reality, that all true knowledge originates from experience. So there is no knowledge prior to experience. Yet apriorism holds that the rational includes some “gifted concept,” “self-understood reason,” “born principles” or logical categories, that it does not arise from experience but is innate in the mind, and that starting from these principles or categories, one can get real knowledge through logical deduction. Apriorists do not admit the dependence of conceptual knowledge upon perceptual knowledge, but think that the former is independent; they oppose proceeding from practical experience, but stand for proceeding from the rational. They do not proceed from facts to concepts but vice versa.

The most well-known representative of apriorism is the 18th century German philosopher Kant. He held that sense material alone could not become knowledge, because such material itself was confused and insignificant, and knowledge was formed only after sense material had been arranged through human reason by innate logical categories. While being arranged, sense material was given a law by human reason. Therefore law did not exist objectively but was created by human beings. Hegel also was an apriorist although what he said was somewhat different. He held that reason or logical categories existed long before world history. The development of these categories

created natural and human history, and nature and human history were governed by logical laws or “the universal divine reason.” Duhring was completely exposed by Engels who pointed out that on the one hand Duhring in general repudiated Hegel’s philosophy as “delirious fantasies,” on the other hand Duhring copied the really “delirious fantasies” of Hegel’s apriorism.

In criticizing apriorism, Engels incisively elaborated the principle of the materialist theory of reflection. He said that principle was not the starting point of research, but was its ultimate result, that it was not for the objective world to adapt to principle but a principle was correct only when it conformed to the objective world. But Duhring turned things upside down. With convincing arguments, Engels explained that all knowledge, including mathematics which seemed very abstract, came from practical experiences.

Duhring’s “socialism” was created by the apriori method. According to him, socialism was neither a reflection of the objective law of social development at all nor a reflection of the class interests of the proletariat, but was derived from the so-called principle that was universal and just.

In order to penetratingly expose Duhring’s error from a broad historical background, Engels described in detail the emergence and development of the idea of socialism. He gave a general account of the ideas of the Utopians Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen whose philosophical ideas were derived from the French materialists of the 18th century. However all materialism before Marx was not thorough; especially when its proponents talked about things in the sphere of social life, they all slipped into idealism. These Utopians were no exception. They observed social history not from the conditions of material life in society, but from the so-called principle of reason. They judged everything by their “reason.” They also put socialism on the basis of the principles of “reason” and “justice.” They regarded abstract principles like “reason” and “justice” as primary and demanded that social life conform to these principles. As a result they submerged themselves in apriorism.

The Utopians’ theses, however, played a positive role under the then historical conditions. But it was entirely retrogressive and reactionary for Duhring to put out his stuff when Marxism had emerged. Actually, his aim was not to advocate socialism at all. As Engels made clear, Duhring did not raise, even in the slightest way, any criticism of the capitalist mode of production. Duhring thought it was very fine. He only fancied that capitalist society could eliminate its defects. This

obviously is neither scientific socialism nor utopian socialism, but utopian capitalism!

China's Wang Ming, Liu Shao-chi and other swindlers tailed after Duhring. They denied practice, neglected investigation and study and advocated "cultivation" behind closed doors. They regarded general truth as pure abstract formula out of the vacuum, and spread the fallacy that theory was the product of a genius' brain. As early as the 1930s, they used "reason" as the central slogan of "national defence philosophy," saying that "reason" was the "universal and just basis of truth." They even said that socialism would surely be achieved so long as this abstract "reason" was developed. Later they propagated a supra-class "philosophy of public interests" and distorted communism as the realization of an abstract principle of "public interests" to cover up their real aim of opposing the dictatorship of the proletariat and clinging to the capitalist road. They also denied that the human brain could only reflect objective laws and babbled that objective laws depended on human beings for development. Since human beings could develop objective laws, they certainly could create them too. Aren't all these refurbished versions of apriorism which had long been repudiated by Marxism in the history of thought? From studying *Anti-Duhring*, we are able to see the reactionary idealism of these swindlers very clearly.

Historical Development Is Not Decided by Men of Genius

Utopian socialists believed that society could be changed by the force of reason alone and that reason was apriorist and eternal. They denied the fact that knowledge depends on social practice and truth is a process of development. Proceeding from this, they inevitably derived the idealist conception of history which considers history as being created by genius. Engels said:

"[To all these] socialism is the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice and needs only to be discovered to conquer all the world by virtue of its own power. And as absolute truth is independent of time, space, and of the historical development of man, it is a mere accident when and where it is discovered." "If pure reason and justice have not, hitherto, ruled the world, this has been the case only because men have not rightly understood them. What was wanted was the individual man of genius, who has now arisen and who understands the truth. That he has now arisen, that the truth has now been clearly understood, is not an inevitable event, following of necessity in the chain of historical development, but a mere happy accident. He might just as well have been born 500 years earlier, and might then

have spared humanity 500 years of error, strife, and suffering."

There was a legendary saying in ancient China that "a wise ruler will emerge every 500 years," and the Jewish nation had recorded the coming of the Messiah as told by the prophets. These embody the wish for a sage or saviour to emerge in so many years who would deliver the people from their misery. It was a great pity that so few sages or saviours appeared every 500 or 1,000 years. Before they came into being, the slaves had no alternative but wait patiently. Consciously or unconsciously, the utopian socialists considered themselves saviours. From their viewpoint, history was not made by slaves but by heroes, geniuses and great men. Past history was dark and full of ignorance and errors, and only one or two geniuses could bring the light of reason to the world and create a genuinely rational society. They put the question of social system as one of knowledge which they summed up to be a question of genius. Consequently they negated mass struggle and class struggle. Though Duhring had thoroughly discredited the utopian socialists, he completely inherited and developed their mistaken view.

Using the materialist conception of history, Engels thoroughly refuted this idealist conception of history. He pointed out that the final causes of all social and political changes should be sought, not in man's brain or better insight into "eternal truth" or "universal justice," but in the economic base of society and class struggle. The birth of capitalism was not because of mistakes in man's knowledge; it was historically inevitable because the capitalist system corresponded to the development of the social productive forces under the then historical conditions. Similarly, that the capitalist system must give way to the socialist system is not because people come to know that it is contradictory to the principles of justice and equality or merely because they want to abolish classes, but because the capitalist relations of production retard the development of the social productive forces and only the socialist relations of production can liberate those forces. Therefore, the question is not one of first imagining a perfect social system in the mind and then imposing it on society. Only by objectively observing and knowing the laws governing the development of society and relying on the struggle of the masses to transform theory into material force can society be changed.

Marxism has always recognized the reaction of mental on material things and the role of heroes, leaders and geniuses in history. But no matter how great the geniuses are, they cannot change the laws of history and

decide its course. History is not created by a few men of genius but by the masses of the people. Only when the ideas of heroes, leaders and men of genius represent the interests of the advanced class, correspond to the needs of the objective reality and are grasped by the masses can they become a great material force to transform the world.

A genius is no more than somewhat wiser and more talented than the others. But where do wisdom and talent come from? Liu Shao-chi described wisdom as a "natural quality," inherent and independent of social practice, and purely physiological endowment. This is just a refurbished version of apriorism. Talent belongs to the category of knowledge and is not something endowed by nature. Although man's wisdom and ability are related to the degree of perfection of his brain, the evolution of his brain has been the result of man's long-time labour and the development of language. As the human brain itself is a product of labour, how can man's wisdom and ability be separated from social practice? Moreover, physiological differences between people cannot explain at all that talent is naturally endowed because they only constitute the natural material foundation for the development of talent and provide the possibility for this development. The real forming of talent is acquired through tempering and study. All such assertions as born "talent," "all-embracing talent" or leaders are nothing but out-and-out lies! Wisdom and ability can be derived only from social practice and from the masses. Chairman Mao has contributed greatly to the development of this question. He pointed out: The brain of any hero and outstanding man can only play the role of a processing plant and its raw material or semi-finished products come from the masses. The lowly who personally take part in practice are most intelligent and truth is in the hands of the masses. Only when the leaders first become students of the masses can they become the latter's teachers. According to this view, geniuses are not isolated individuals, but are the representatives of the classes. They come from the masses, and are most adept at concentrating their wisdom. If there were no masses, there would be no genius. The masses are the real heroes and the genius of heroes and leaders is the concentrated expression of the wisdom of the masses, the classes and the party.

Obviously, the genius referred to by Marxists is entirely different from what the idealists talk about. Liu Shao-chi and swindlers like him put a Marxist label on the idealist apriorist trash and thought they could deceive people by substituting the false for the truth. However, the more diligently we study the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin and Chairman Mao's

works, the more clearly we see through these swindlers' lies and sophistry.

Scientific Socialism Emerges and Develops on the Basis of Revolutionary Practice

Why couldn't people like Saint-Simon found scientific socialism? Was it because they lacked genius? No. Engels regarded Saint-Simon as a man of genius, but no genius can go beyond the limit set by his time. It was because of the historical conditions that people like Saint-Simon fell into utopian socialism. At that time capitalism was in its period of ascendancy and the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie had not developed yet, so it was impossible to foresee the proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Why could Marx and Engels found scientific socialism? Was it merely or mainly because of their genius? The answer is no. As to Marx' genius, Engels only mentioned it on a few occasions and never specially stressed it. On the contrary, Engels stressed in many places in *Anti-Duhring* and his other works the historical and practical conditions which gave rise to Marxism. In the era of Marx and Engels natural science made tremendous advances and the three great discoveries of cells, transformation of energy and the evolution of living things provided strong scientific proof of dialectics. On the other hand, in the words of Engels, "certain historical facts had occurred which led to a decisive change in the conception of history," i.e., the first workers' uprising in Lyons, France, in 1831 and the Chartist movement — the first nationwide workers' movement in England which reached its climax between 1838 and 1842. These facts showed that with the development of big industry and of the bourgeoisie's newly seized political rule, the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie was raised to the principal contradiction in the most developed European countries. Marx and Engels were able to found their theories precisely because they personally took part in revolutionary practice at that time, read many books, studied large quantities of material in natural science and social history, studied the economic structure of capitalism and its inner contradictions and summed up the historical experience of the international workers' movement. As Engels put it: "Socialism was no longer an accidental discovery of this or that ingenious brain, but the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes — the proletariat and the bourgeoisie."

Liu Shao-chi and swindlers like him described genius as something mysterious and preached that geniuses were men of "foresight and vision." All this

obviously is apriorist trash which runs completely counter to Marxism. Chairman Mao has pointed out: "In feudal society it was impossible to know the laws of capitalist society in advance because capitalism had not yet emerged, the relevant practice was lacking. Marxism could be the product only of capitalist society. Marx, in the era of laissez-faire capitalism, could not concretely know certain laws peculiar to the era of imperialism beforehand, because imperialism, the last stage of capitalism, had not yet emerged and the relevant practice was lacking; only Lenin and Stalin could undertake this task. Leaving aside their genius, the reason why Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin could work out their theories was mainly that they personally took part in the practice of the class struggle and the scientific experimentation of their time; lacking this condition, no genius could have succeeded." Here Chairman Mao pointed out very clearly that genius is neither the only nor the principal condition, that the principal condition is practice and there is no such thing as "foresight and vision" free from the restrictions set by history and practice.

Similarly Mao Tsetung Thought can only emerge in the present era in which imperialism is heading for total collapse and socialism is advancing to worldwide victory. Chairman Mao has been able to develop Marxism-Leninism to a new stage mainly because modern China was the focus of the various contradictions in the East and Chairman Mao, in the great struggle led by him of carrying out the new-democratic revolution, the socialist revolution and socialist construction in China over the past half century and during the great struggle against imperialism, modern revisionism and the reactionaries of various countries, has summed up the enormously rich and new experience of the proletariat and the revolutionary masses and integrated the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of the contemporary revolution.

Man's practice is a process of continuous development and will never be ended; so is man's knowledge. People's knowledge at any given stage of development is relative truth which contains factors of absolute truth but is not absolute truth. What is absolute truth? Chairman Mao has given a precise definition: "The sum total of innumerable relative truths" constitutes absolute truth. "Innumerable" means countless and knowledge cannot be completed. Therefore, no individual can exhaust absolute truth and enjoy absolute scientific authority. Putting on airs as an absolute authority who "knows everything," Duhring advertised his goods as the "final and ultimate truth" and bragged that his thinking was able to exclude any tendency to a "subjectively limited conception of the

world." Engels scathingly refuted this fallacy, pointing out: Everyone's knowledge is limited by subjective and objective conditions and therefore cannot be of unconditional and paramount significance. The so-called "infallible" genius and superman who exhausts absolute truth simply does not exist. However, through the efforts of generation after generation, mankind is continuously approaching absolute truth. In this sense, only the endless development of man's knowledge itself is of unconditional and paramount authority.

Liu Shao-chi and swindlers like him kept changing their tactics in opposing Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought. At first they described Marxism-Leninism in absolute terms and negated the fact that Mao Tsetung Thought is a development of Marxism-Leninism. After this tactic had failed, they in turn tried to make Mao Tsetung Thought absolute and denied the fact that Mao Tsetung Thought can develop continuously. The greatness of Chairman Mao lies precisely in the fact that he always stands in the van of history and continuously makes his thought and practice advance together. Making Mao Tsetung Thought absolute and solidified in itself is counter to Mao Tsetung Thought. Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought has in no way exhausted truth but ceaselessly opens up roads to the knowledge of truth in the course of practice. Liu Shao-chi and the other swindlers superficially praised Mao Tsetung Thought, but actually disparaged and slandered it; superficially they wanted to establish the absolute authority of Chairman Mao, but actually they were trying to establish their own absolute authority. We must thoroughly expose their vicious and treacherous tactics!

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It is almost 100 years since Engels wrote his *Anti-Duhring*. Although Duhring had been fairly well-known, a few years after *Anti-Duhring* was published, nobody paid any more attention to his works, while Engels' *Anti-Duhring* became one of the most popularized Marxist classics which still preserves its splendour today. It is because of his role as a teacher by negative example that Duhring was not completely forgotten. People know his name only by reading *Anti-Duhring*. How inexorable is history's judgment! However, Liu Shao-chi and swindlers of his type could not learn the historical lesson from this fact. They still used apriorism to oppose the theory of reflection and dressed themselves up as geniuses who created history, born saviours and infallible supermen so as to carry out their criminal plot of usurping Party and state power and restoring capitalism. But all this was only wishful thinking. Unable to turn back the wheel of history, they could only be crushed by it in the end!