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Herfried Münkler

Marx, Wagner, Nietzsche

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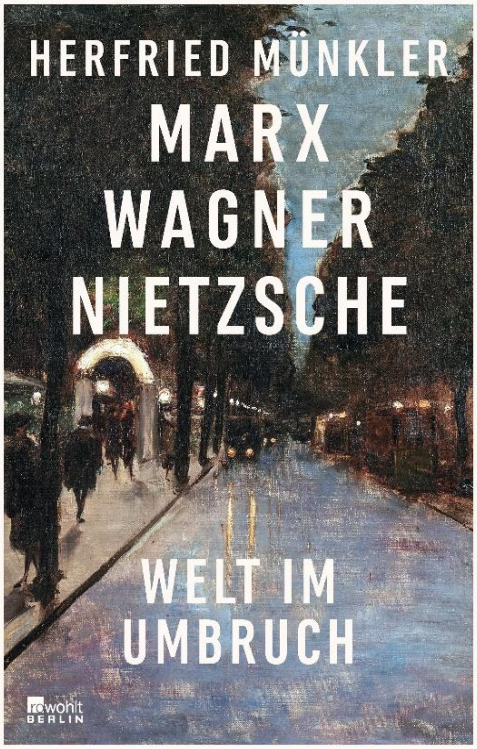
A triumvirate that shaped more than one epoch



Marx, Wagner, Nietzsche – these three thinkers had a profound influence on the 19th and 20th centuries. As contemporaries who alternately admired, rejected or ignored each other, they shaped an era of enormous scientific diversity and social change. Their antagonisms and contradictions lead to the heart of the development of Germany.
Herfried Münkler follows these three fascinating figures and evokes an entire era. He describes the surprising parallels in the lives of Marx and Wagner: their participation in the 1848 revolution, flight, expulsion and exile, a period of great turmoil and then the creation of an outstanding work, the formation of a large group of followers and the difficult responsibility for what their followers made of these works. Nietzsche, who was a little younger, is a philosophical event; like Marx, he shapes generations. All three go beyond the boundaries of the bourgeois conventions of their time and create something new – which then becomes a different, an unexpected reality.
Nineteenth century Germany, which was so rich, so promising, passes into an age of extremes, of political catastrophes.
An exciting book about three great thinkers, the beginning of the modern world and, not least, the German mentality.

Herfried Münkler, born in 1951, is a professor of political science at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Many of his books are considered seminal works, such as *The Myths of the Germans* (2009), which won the Leipzig Book Fair Prize, as well as *The Great War* (2013), *The New Germans (2016)* and *The Thirty Years' War* (2017), which all spent months on the SPIEGEL bestseller list. Münkler has received many awards, including the Science prize of the Aby Warburg Foundation and the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Fellowship.

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Herfried Münkler

MARX, WAGNER, NIETZSCHE
A WORLD IN TURMOIL

Sample Translation: Excerpt chapter 1 by Simon Pare

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INTRODUCTION: LIGHT AND SHADE

Marx, Wagner, Nietzsche: all three have been the subject of great and intense debate, and this is reflected in a profusion of studies of their lives and work and also their impact on the twentieth century. Each was in his own way a preeminent figure in his chosen field — social theory, music and philosophy respectively. All three were comets who blazed a long trail through the sky that glows to this day or has sparked back into life in the twenty-first century after temporarily losing its lustre. It is clear that many of the subjects they tackled and the impulses they gave are still relevant or newly relevant today. To illustrate this, without going into too much detail: Wagner's idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ('total work of art'), for example, has found its way into films and series through the use of poetic or musical leitmotifs to link successive seasons with diverging plot lines, an evolving cast and twists and turns in the characters' personalities; Marx's *analysis of society* has become topical again at a time when the neoliberal age of capitalism has revived old inequalities and produced new social divisions; and Nietzsche's conception of individual freedom has come to prominence as the will to act out our needs and inclinations under what many people regard as the ever-increasing restrictions and regulations of mass society. It is evident that the contemporary relevance of these ideas, as well as their inherent criticism, does not all point in the same direction – and that was also the case during the three men's lifetimes. Then, as now, they represented different visions of society and culture, which is what makes comparing them such an instructive and exciting exercise.

This is admittedly no easy task. Marx, Wagner and Nietzsche all had an immense impact on the twentieth century, inspired political and cultural movements named after them, and influenced people's worldviews and expectations. First we must peel back the semantic layers added to their work by their eponymous schools and interpretations — Marxism, *le wagnerisme* (the French term has become the norm) and Nietzscheanism, referring to a specific reading of Nietzsche's philosophy.

My goal is not to add further individual studies to the abundant body of ever more specialized research but instead to look at the three in a comparative manner, considering both their similarities and their differences. I will approach Marx, Wagner and Nietzsche as observers, critics and contemporaries during the nineteenth century, a century of turmoil whose mental impact was even more powerful than its material effects. All three men monitored this turmoil, but they drew very different conclusions. Marx wanted to use and channel the turmoil to achieve certain goals; Wagner wanted to reverse large parts of it and return to an

earlier state, a society governed more by the moral economy than by the laws of the marketplace; Nietzsche's thinking was even more comprehensive in its scope, and his objective of a 'revaluation of all values' was a reversion to a pre-Christian system of values.

However, this is an approximate and extremely simplistic indication and does not do full justice to the pronounced ambiguities in the thinking of Marx, Wagner and Nietzsche. They certainly pursued these objectives, but in some respects they also occasionally strove for their opposite or at least for something incompatible with them. None of the three is easy to interpret or to be judged by a single yardstick.

This enterprise relies on a number of guiding principles. First, the three men's work has been passed down to posterity largely through the arbitration of their 'heirs'. In Marx's case, it was his political companion and congenial comrade-in-arms Friedrich Engels who compiled the disparate writings Marx left behind into one unified work. Engels was less scientifically scrupulous than Marx, casually aligning things that Marx did not intend to align and took pains not to warp. Without Engels Marx might have remained one of many nineteenth-century writers who digested the age of turmoil without reaching any clear conclusions. What that means, however, is that Engels was also the first in a long line of interpreters who made Marx's work clearer than Marx himself had left it. Whether he adhered to Marx's desires is still a matter of regular controversy.

For Wagner it was his wife Cosima who made sure that the Bayreuth festival, staged only twice during his lifetime, became an annual event. She had looked after most of his correspondence, first as his private secretary and then as his spouse, and had helped him to realize his gigantic project. Like Engels with Marx, she was deeply familiar with Wagner's endeavour and far more than just a 'helping hand'; she was the driving force behind it. It is anyone's guess whether she actually forced through plans for the festival against the wishes of her hesitant and occasionally defiant husband, but what is beyond dispute is that without her the festival would have petered out when Wagner died. At the same time, Cosima imposed near-blanket censorship on Wagner and ensured that only what she wanted to survive, survived. This began with her diaries in which she recorded (only) those of Richard Wagner's statements that she judged to be important, and ended with her burning any of his letters she preferred posterity not to see.[1]

In Nietzsche's case, it was his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche who took on the task of compiling his collected works with Heinrich Köselitz — Nietzsche called him

[1] Some of Marx's correspondence was also burnt, not by Engels but by Marx's daughter Eleanor who did not wish certain aspects of her parents' lives to be disclosed.

Peter Gast — who, due to the philosopher's seriously impaired vision, had been Nietzsche's indispensable aide in his final years. Köselitz/Gast was one of very few people capable of reading Nietzsche's handwriting, but Elisabeth soon marginalized him and took sole control of the publication project. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche meddled considerably with her brother's work; indeed, she even went so far as to distort it. She literally seized possession of it, and this included extending the Nietzsche Archives in Weimar, which meant that she was able to determine who could consult Nietzsche's papers and who couldn't.[2] Cosima censored her husband, whereas Elisabeth 'edited' her brother's work to align it with her own beliefs.

The three men's work has been rendered newly accessible in recent decades and presented to the public in a significantly altered form. In Marx's and Nietzsche's case, there have been new editions produced in line with scientific standards; in Wagner's there have been new productions, among other places in Bayreuth, in his very shrine. The new editions have either reversed the retrospective adaptations or, at the very least, highlighted them. What these processes revealed were works that, though not entirely different, had clearly been modified.

The *Marx-Engels-Werke (MEW),* which were completed while the GDR was still in existence, have been joined by a complete works edition, the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA)* which was initiated in East Berlin and Moscow and has been continued since 1993 at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences; though not yet finished, work is at an advanced stage. It downgraded the previously preeminent statues of *Das Kapital* insofar as the economic writings of Marx (and Engels) have been consolidated into a separate section, which shows *Das Kapital* as *one* step in his work on economic matters. Furthermore, it presented the fragments of volumes two and three of *Das Kapital* left by Marx alongside the versions completed and published by Engels. This displays the partial failure — or in any case the faltering nature — of Marx's great enterprise. The second section of the complete works of Marx and Engels amounts to a 'desacralization' of *Das Kapital.* In addition, this edition includes a text that has come to be known as *German Ideology*, which Marx and Engels had not intended for publication, and it is presented in the state in which the two of them had left the pieces of writing and consigned, as they put it, to the 'nibbling criticism of mice'. The *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* also includes the full range of Marx's ethnological studies, which raise the question of the extent to which he had already begun to revise the deterministic view of history of which there are intermittent glimpses in his work. The *MEGA* has placed Marx in the context of his times,

[2] Her only real adversary in this respect was Nietzsche's old friend Overbeck, who kept some of the philosopher's papers in Basel and refused to hand them over to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche.

rescuing him from congealing into an icon and being exploited for ideological purposes, and making him more accessible.
The *Critical Edition of Nietzsche's Works and Letters* by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari has resulted in an even more radical revision, and it is the basis for the far more widespread *Critical Study Edition*. It does not include *The Will to Power*, which Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche and Peter Gast elevated to Nietzsche's magnum opus, nor does one find the two-volume *The Innocence of Becoming*, which Alfred Baeumler composed from Nietzsche's papers; both were in the *Wesentliche Herausgeberprodukte*. Colli and Montinari resumed the project that Karl Schlechta had started in the 1950s to present Nietzsche's oeuvre for the first time stripped of the distortions introduced by his sister and her helper. Instead of Nietzsche's intellectual development supposedly culminating in *The Will to Power*, this edition divides his writing into three periods: the early works under Wagner's considerable influence; the middle phase, during which, using French moralist literature, Nietzsche is intent on deconstructing the humanistic notion of man and his pathos; and, lastly, the late texts from *Zarathustra* to *Twilight of the Idols*, in which Nietzsche's thought revolves around the self-affirmation of the outstanding individual amid the all-consuming masses.
The altered view of Richard Wagner is less the result of a new edition of the complete works than the product of new performances, the most important of these being Patrice Chéreau's 1976 production of the *Ring*. Chéreau transposed the mythical events to the nineteenth century and sent the gods on stage dressed as representatives of a bourgeoisie whose lust for power and concupiscence plunges into such debt as can only be repaid through crime. Mythical happenings that had been set in in the mists of the Germanic past were brought back down to earth by Chéreau and situated in the late nineteenth-century imperial age, allowing him to reveal the debt spiral of bourgeois society as the secret behind Wagner's mythical enchantment. Wagner had wanted to leave all temporal context behind, but Chéreau dragged him back into reality. The intellectual reclamation of Wagner and Nietzsche through new productions, new editions and new interpretations was, as we can see, not an essentially German project but a European enterprise in which the Italians and the French played a leading role.

Second, the conversation between Wagner, Marx and Nietzsche is a largely imaginary conversation because, with the notable exception of the close contact between Wagner and Nietzsche, which broke off abruptly after eight years, they barely acknowledged one another's existence. Marx made a few pronouncements about Wagner, but Wagner never spoke about Marx, and neither Nietzsche nor Marx engaged with the other. This comparative approach therefore seeks to identify events

and developments that occupied their minds and on which they expressed fairly firm opinions. However, this account does not move from one phase in their lives to the next, or from one historical event to the next; it circles around the three, adopting a different angle each time and gradually gaining a better understanding of their thinking.

Third, there are 'nodes' — points at which the biographies of Marx, Wagner and Nietzsche intertwine. By this we mean events of especial importance to all three men when their careers intersected or overlapped. August 1876 is one of these 'nodes'. The first festival was held in Bayreuth, a highpoint in Wagner's artistic endeavours; Nietzsche travelled there from Basel; and Marx was affected by the regional disruption on his way to Karlsbad, as we know from the disgruntled descriptions he gave in a few letters. The period from summer 1870 to spring 1871 is another, very different 'node': Wagner was euphoric about the victories of the German army over the French, indulging in fantastical ravings about the destruction of Paris, while Nietzsche volunteered as a medic, joined the German troops and, after paying a visit to the battlefield at Wörth, accompanied the badly wounded home. Back in Basel, he fretted about the threat posed by the Paris Communard revolt to France's cultural heritage in the Louvre. Meanwhile, in London, Marx commented on the France-Prussian war and the uprising in Paris, and assessed both in the light of his revolutionary expectations. All three observed proceedings; all three came to separate verdicts.

The situation is somewhat different regarding the 1848/9 revolution, in which both Wagner and Marx were actively involved — Marx as editor-in-chief of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in his attempt to further his political aims through journalism, Wagner, the Hofkapellmeister, as a belligerent revolutionary on the Dresden barricades. Nietzsche knew very little about it as he was only four years old and grew up in the countryside. The 1948/9 revolution represented a critical juncture in the lives of both Wagner and Marx, as the failure of the revolution forced them into exile. It was without consequence for Nietzsche's future life.

Anti-Semitism is another such 'node'. It affected all three of them, either as supporters of rising hostility to Jews or as opponents of this development. Yet, here too, things are more complex than they appear at first sight. Despite being born into the family of a rabbi, was Marx fundamentally anti-Semitic? In much the same way Nietzsche, who had been brought up in a pietist presbytery, wished to 'revalue' from the bottom up a world marked by Christianity? Was Wagner's incontrovertible anti-Semitism tempered by opportunism when it came to raising money for the festival and hiring musicians and singers? And how does Nietzsche's idea of the Jewish

origins of the 'slave revolt against morals' relate to the unwavering anti-anti-Semitism of his final decade of creative activity? This 'node' illustrates the ambiguity of the three men's stances on the topics and challenges of their time particularly well.

Fourth, the focus is on a specific period. The lifetimes of Wagner, Marx and Nietzsche all lie within the nineteenth century. Wagner was born in 1813 in Leipzig, a few months before the battle that decided the political fate of Europe and sealed the end of Napoleon's domination of the continent. This end defined the lives of Wagner and Marx, and Nietzsche came to see Napoleon's downfall as a tragedy for Europe. Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig was significant for Marx, who was born in 1818 in Trier, insofar as the city of Trier and the whole area on the left bank of the Rhine north of the Hunsrück was granted to Prussia at the Congress of Vienna; otherwise, he would have been born French. It seemed natural to dedicate a section to Napoleon, as all three saw him as possessing both Promethean and demonic attributes.

Marx and Wagner died in 1883 — Wagner in Venice, Marx in London. While Wagner's funeral, including the conveyance of his coffin from Venice to Bayreuth via Munich, was worthy of a prince, only a handful of people attended Marx's burial. Wagner was a European celebrity when he died; Marx would only achieve that status posthumously. This is even more true of Nietzsche, if, rather than his physical demise, we take his 'intellectual death' in early January 1889 as our reference: he had succumbed to madness and was therefore oblivious to the fact that his philosophy had captivated people's minds all over Europe. He spent the remaining years of his life first in Jena psychiatric hospital, then in his mother's custody and finally in his sister's care. Born in 1844 in Röcken near Lützen, close to one of the battlefields of the Thirty Years' War, Nietzsche died in 1900. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche spared no effort to ensure that his funeral, close to the house where he was born in Röcken, befitted the philosopher's new-found fame.

So all three were men of the nineteenth-century, but what does the nineteenth century represent? The British historian Eric Hobsbawm has written about 'the long nineteenth century', which began with the French Revolution and ended with the outbreak of the First World War. Others have linked the start of the nineteenth century to the American Revolution in 1776 and its end to the Russian Revolution in 1917. Whatever the chosen dates, the nineteenth century was an age of revolutions that fundamentally reshaped the political constitution of Europe and North America. It was equally an era of industrialization, which modified the lives of people in Western Europe at least as radically as the political revolutions, and European global dominion, though initiated in the sixteenth century, was only now fully asserted.

The nineteenth century probably saw people's 'realm of experience' and their 'horizon of expectation' diverge more than any other period in history. It was an age of upheaval and global transformation. The experience of misery and exploitation, coupled with mass impoverishment, unalleviated by societal benevolence or mass emigration as Hegel had envisaged in his *Philosophy of Right*, coexisted with the notion of a return of the Golden Age, a time when humankind had lived in untrammelled bliss. These conflicting experiences could be read both as decline and progress. Wagner and Nietzsche interpreted this turmoil as a decline that they sought to stop and reverse; Marx, on the other hand, saw it as the beginning of an age of unprecedented progress that needed accelerating.
And so the nineteenth century became a time of upheaval when different experiences and expectations crystallized into antithetical political movements. Background was dethroned as the fundamental criterion, religion lost much of its relevance for politics and society, theology forfeited its role as the leading academic discipline, and the rise of the natural sciences came with the promise of a previously unimaginable mastery of the world. The nascent social sciences — from Henri de Saint-Simon to Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer — contributed the idea that socio-economic processes could be planned. Charles Darwin dampened this frenzy of infinitely possibilities with his biological theory of evolution, which suggested that the scope of human self-determination was once more circumscribed. Both these schools — the idea that anything was possible, and the idea that almost everything was pre-destined — played an important role in Marx, Wagner and Nietzsche's thinking; their work displays both utopianism, the imagined realization of what humans desired, and responses to Darwinism, a theory of evolution based on the whim of fate.

All three, Marx, Wagner and Nietzsche, tried to make sense of this century and ascertain its shifts, describe emerging prospects and identify repositories of hope or determinants of change. We can understand their work as a permanent confrontation with the open-ended nature of the nineteenth century. In engaging in this debate, each of them repeatedly changed his view of the times and revised earlier judgements. This leaves the question of their 'true' view of the nineteenth century unresolved. The answer to this question has generally been sought in what it has become conventional to call their 'magnum opus': in Wagner's case *The Ring*, in Marx's *Das Kapital* and in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. My reflections in this book take a different approach. I will examine their thinking not by focusing on or reducing it to a particular topic but as a panorama, although this involves looking at what they *included* and what they *excluded*.

This method highlights the differences between the men. Marx tried to think systematically, even if he himself created no systems (only his imitators did); Nietzsche strictly rejected both the system and the systematic from the end of the 1870s onwards and expressed this stylistically in his preference for aphorisms; lastly, Wagner used a variety of leitmotifs to embed what happened on stage into a wider context, developing a multiplicity of perspectives that allowed the action to be interpreted in many different ways. How something will or did turn out depends on the instant in the story and in the musical memory, as well as the storyteller's personal perspective. All of these things militate against painting close portraits of the three figures. I do not pin or tie them down, and so over the course of the book they repeatedly appear in different or changed guises. Subjects and situations arise that cast them in a different light than how we are used to seeing them — or would like to see them. This parallel approach means that Marx, Wagner and Nietzsche are not only each illuminated by the others but also obscured by the others' shadows, and the interplay of the two, light and shadow, enables us to perceive them more precisely and more clearly.

1

PROPINQUITY, DISTANCE, AVERSION

Marx on his way to Karlsbad

In mid-August 1876 Marx was making his way through Germany to undergo treatment for his liver ailment in the Bohemian spa town of Karlsbad. He had spent some time there in each of the preceding two years, and the mineral water of which he had to drink many litres as a central feature of the treatment was clearly good for him. He was accompanied by his daughter Eleanor, known to her family and friends as 'Tussy', who was also seeking a cure for various complaints in Karlsbad. Travelling across Germany was not without its risks for Marx because he was now stateless, having given up his Prussian nationality in 1845, and under surveillance by the Prussian and Austrian secret police. Eleanor had been born a British citizen and this guaranteed a degree of protection for her father, who had applied in vain for British citizenship in 1874 before his first trip to Karlsbad. In the opinion of the doctors treating him, taking the mineral waters of the Ore Mountains was the best therapy there was for Marx's liver ailments. Louis Kugelmann, one of Marx's most dependable acolytes in Germany, had also encouraged him to make the journey, although Kugelmann's motives were evidently not entirely selfless, as he himself regularly went to the spa in Karlsbad and had hopes of meeting Marx there.

So Marx travelled to Bohemia three times and only discontinued his spa treatment when Bismarck's socialist laws made it too dangerous for him to cross Germany. He clearly appreciated his stays in Karlsbad, not only for its therapeutic effects but also on account of the social life there. Marx obviously felt at ease with the other spa guests, even though he should by rights have shunned most of them as 'philistines'. In one letter to Engels he fulminates against 'this band of philistines from Hamburg, Bremen and Hannover' who would not leave him in peace. The relaxed conversations in Karlsbad society did not revolve around the intricacies of economic theory that beset him in his London study as he strove to finish the remaining volumes of *Das Kapital*, prompting outbreaks of the furunculosis that had afflicted him for years. Here, it was predominantly personal experiences and memories that were at the centre of discussions, and this was an integral part of the spa treatment. Marx displayed a communicative charm in these conversations, a facet of his character that tended to become obscured by polemical passion when it came to matters of 'correct' theory. It was above all 'in the company of a spirited-seeming

woman,' a Viennese journalist reported on Marx's Karlsbad stay in 1875, 'that Marx becomes lavish with the rich, well-assorted treasures of his memory; he delights in stepping back into times past when Romanticism was still singing its last, free forest song […] and Heine carried verses back to his room, the ink still damp.'

Along with Heinrich Heine and Marx's memories of his personal interactions with the poet, Goethe must surely have featured in these conversations (the master had himself taken the waters at Karlsbad many times), especially as Marx could recite a number of his poems from memory.[3] These conversations were a welcome distraction from the strictly regimented spa routine — 'up at 5 or half past 5 in the morning. Next, drink 6 glasses consecutively at different sources. There must be at least 15 minutes between one glass and the following one.' He even reported his encounter in Karlsbad with a certain Simon Deutsch, with whom he had once had a violent dispute in Paris, as having been 'most pleasant'; 'half of the medical faculty [the staff of the clinic and spa] here were also soon clustering around me and my daughter; most suitable people for my purposes here, where one thinks little and laughs a lot.'

Marx was clearly in search of entertainment, not arguments. This made Louis Kugelmann, who happened to be at the spa with his wife at the same time as Marx and his daughter 'Tussy', all the more of an irritant. Marx wrote to Engels that Kugelmann had become unbearable: 'For the sake of conviviality, he gave me a room between his and Tussy's, and so I enjoyed him not only when I was with him but also [due to the thin walls] when I was alone. I patiently tolerated his constant earnest chatter, uttered in a deep voice […] but my patience finally snapped when he bored me a little too much with his domestic scenes. This arch-pedant and trivial bourgeois philistine fancies namely that his wife does not understand, does not grasp his Faustian nature that aspires to a higher worldview, and torments the little lady, who is superior to him in every respect, atrociously. This caused a scandal between us; I moved to a higher floor, liberating myself entirely from him […] and only just before he left did [we] patch things up […] again.'

As for the social theorist and political activist, we are confronted with a man who never missed an opportunity to polemicize. Indeed, he would go out of his way to have an argument, working himself up until he could no longer free himself of the raging controversies. Marx the polemicist was by no means a pleasant contemporary, because one could never be sure that a dispute with him would not escalate further. He was deadly serious about matters of science. During his spa stays in Karlsbad, however, he was a completely different person, entertaining and generally cheerful,

[3] Marx listed Goethe as one of his favourite writers alongside Aeschylus, Dante and Shakespeare.

especially in conversation with women; he was adept at defending them from their smugly superior husbands, as he demonstrated with the Kugelmanns. In agreeable company, this Karl Marx was very similar to Richard Wagner, just as the two of them were very alike when they locking horns with a supposed or actual adversary.

As Marx and his daughter Eleanor made their way to Karlsbad in August 1876, their plan was to stop off for a day in Nuremberg to rest and visit the city, which, as Marx notes, is 'the original (extremely interesting) home of German *Knotentum*', meaning craftsmen and journeymen. 'The suitcases were unloaded and entrusted to a man with a cart, who was to accompany us to the nearest inn, right beside the railway. But there was only one room left at this inn, and at the same time the landlord announced the terrible news that we would have trouble finding accommodation elsewhere because the city was swamped, partly because of the congress of millers and bakers, partly with people from all over the world who were intending to go to the Bayreuth festival of fools organized by that state musician Wagner.'

The complete lack of accommodation in Nuremberg forced father and daughter to continue by train to Weiden, where they arrived late only to find that all the inns there were also full 'and so we had to hold out on the hard chairs of the railway station until 4 o'clock in the morning'. A heatwave caused them additional inconvenience. They finally arrived in Karlsbad where everything turned out well. 'Even on very hot days [I found] familiar wooded gorges,' wrote Marx, 'where it was bearable. Little Tussy, who suffered quite a lot during our journey, is visibly recovering here, and Karlsbad has the same wonderful effect on me as ever. In the past few months, I have suffered a recurrence of the awful pressure in my head, but now it has completely disappeared again.'

The source of their inconveniences was the first Wagner festival in Bayreuth. Marx's last trip to Karlsbad is one of the few moments in which he discusses Wagner and his musical work — not at all favourably, which is surely linked to his travel problems due to the festival guests. The way Marx talks about Wagner suggests that this was not his first encounter with the composer and his project. Over twenty years earlier, Wilhelm Pieper, a young philologist who had fled Germany on account of his 'revolutionary activities' and assisted Marx as his secretary, had played a few of Richard Wagner's compositions to him on the piano, and Marx did not take to the music. His haemorrhoids were playing up and he was therefore in a bad mood, he wrote to Engels on 12 February 1856 — 'and what is more, Pieper has just played me some music from the future.' His summary: '*C'est affreux* and makes one alarmed about the future and its poetry-music.' Marx's aesthetic tastes were fairly conservative. He couldn't warm to Marx's music, not even before Wagner was a 'state musician'.

Conversation in Karlsbad kept returning to the festival in Bayreuth. A bad-tempered Marx adds a postscript to a letter to Engels dated 19 August 1876: 'Here, it has all been about the future since the drumroll of future music in Bayreuth.' In a letter to his daughter Jenny ('Jennychen') from late August he gives an update on the success of his treatment, a temporary change in the weather that has broughtthe heatwave to an abrupt end and new acquaintances he has made, most of them academics. What did they talk about? 'Absolutely everywhere one is tormented with the same question: "What do you think of Wagner?" Characteristically for this new German-Prussian imperial musician, he and his spouse (the one who left von Bülow), along with that cuckold Bülow and their communal father-in-law Liszt, are all four of them staying in one house in Bayreuth, cuddling, kissing and adoring one another and having a good time. Now consider also that Liszt is a Roman monk and Madame Wagner (Cosima by name) is his "natural" daughter by Madame d'Agoult [the mother of Liszt's children] — it would be hard to concoct a better libretto for Offenbach than this family group with its patriarchal relationships. The stories of this group — like the *Nibelung* — could be the subject of a tetralogy.'

Marx shows no interest in discussing the tetralogy being performed in Bayreuth, and dismisses any enquiries about the subject with mocking remarks targeting Wagner's nebulous family circumstances. Cologne-born Jacques Offenbach found fame in France, where he had developed *grand opéra* further into *operette* and used it satirically to make fun of Second Empire French society. Marx's sarcastic suggestion that Offenbach should take an interest in the relationships in the Wagner family pinpoints two different aspects: firstly, that Richard Wagner had 'pinched' Cosima from her husband, the conductor Hans von Bülow, one of Wagner's earliest fans, and fathered two children with her while she was still married to von Bülow; secondly, that Cosima was the illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt, who had since taken minor orders and called himself Abbé Liszt. Marx could also have pointed out that in *The Communist Manifesto*, countering notions that communism equated to a 'community of women', he had written: 'Our bourgeois, not content with having the wives and daughters of our proletarians at their disposal, not to mention common prostitutes, take the greatest pleasure in seducing each other's wives.'[4]

Contrary to the impression he gave, however, Marx was clearly not entirely disinterested in Wagner's *Ring* project. His comment that Wagner's love life and sexual affairs could be staged as a tetralogy along the lines of the Nibelung, suggests that he had studied the contents of Wagner's work: Wotan's constant love affairs, which produce a handsome horde of children; the jealous outbursts Wotan's consort

[4] Tr. Samuel Moore, 1888.

Fricka launches at her husband; Sieglinde's adulterous tryst with Siegmund in the house of her husband Hunding, to whom she had been wedded against her will and whom she sedates with a sleeping potion on this one night; and of course the fact that the sexual intercourse between Siegmund and Sieglinde was incestuous. Marx must have been aware of all of these things or else he could not have alluded to the tetralogical suitability of the Bayreuth gathering of Richard and Cosima Wagner, Hans von Bülow and Franz Liszt. He was unwilling to comment further, however, about *The Ring of the Nibelung* and the problems of hunger for power and the force of the law, possessiveness and exploitation.

An unacknowledged interest in *The Ring of the Nibelung*

Was Marx envious of Wagner's success? Envious of the fact that Wagner's name was on everyone's lips whereas he had to content himself with relatively modest print-runs of his books, including *Das Kapital*, which he had spent over two decades writing? It could be expected that Marx was interested in Wagner's *Ring*. People must have drawn it to his attention in Karlsbad that Wotan's attempt to break free of the traps into which he had manoeuvred himself through his thirst for power, pride of ownership and lust amount to a critique of bourgeois, capitalist society; they must have mentioned the doomed bid to dissolve enmeshed socio-economic relations with violence and thus the failure of the kind of Bonapartist project embodied by Napoleon III and practised by Bismarck. People will have told him that all these things were bound to interest him! Perhaps Marx's report that 'Absolutely everywhere [he was] tormented with the same question: "What do you think of Wagner?"' conceal these and other questions.

A few months after his spa visit, he writes to Wilhelm Alexander Freud with whom he was in contact in Karlsbad. At the very beginning of his letter he mentions their stay there, asks on behalf of his daughter Eleanor for the name of the author of a book about Shakespeare and then turns to Wagner: 'The "Oriental question" (which will end with the revolution in Russia, whatever the outcome of the war with the Turks) and the mustering of social democratic forces in the fatherland [this refers to the Reichstag elections on 10 January 1877] will surely have convinced the German cultural philistines that there are more important things in the world than Richard Wagner's future music'. 'More important things' can only mean that people in Karlsbad talked of little other than Wagner's festival in Bayreuth.

Thus, Marx describes those who are interested in Wagner as 'cultural philistines'. Friedrich Nietzsche had used this term a few years earlier in the first of his *Untimely Meditations* against David Strauss, but we cannot assume that Marx knew this text.

The word 'philistine', which the Romantics had adopted from student jargon to mark their distance from the uncultivated bourgeoisie, too obsessed with their day-to-day business, had become widespread, but the term combining philistines and culture was coined by Nietzsche. He had used it to denounce what he thought was a common bourgeois aversion to Schopenhauer's philosophy and Wagner's works. Marx therefore summarily inverted the thrust of the terms, transforming words that that Nietzsche had used to *defend* Wagner into a position *attacking* Wagner — a technique of which he made frequent use.

Admittedly, we have a clue that Marx was interested in Wagner's *Ring* even later, and indeed a much more detailed clue that the evidence quoted so far. Unfortunately, this document is a lost letter whose existence we know of only because Engels mentions it in a footnote to the treatise *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, published in 1884, after Marx's death. 'In a letter from spring 1882,' Engels writes: 'Marx condemns the complete distortion of prehistory in Wagner's Nibelung text in the strongest terms. "Has it ever been known that the brother embraces the sister like a bride?"' Engels' quotation of Marx proves that Marx was familiar with the text of Wagner's *Ring,* and his ironic imitation of Wagner's linguistic style suggests the same. Marx totally disagreed with the contents of the *Ring* cycle — in this case *The Valkyrie* — and Engels cites Marx's accusation: 'To the "horny gods" whose love affairs Wagner modernizes and makes more risqué with a touch of incest, Marx responds: "In prehistoric times, the sister *was* the wife, *and it was moral*."'

In the fourth edition of his book *The Origin of the Family*, Engels expanded this footnote by initially reporting a French reader's objections to Marx's position, then trying to refute them and supporting Marx in his summary 'that when the Norwegian sagas came into being, marriage between siblings, at least among gods, did not provoke revulsion'. This clarifies once more the central point of Marx's argument: it wasn't *the fact that* Siegmund and Sieglinde embarked on an incestuous relationship that Marx held against Wagner, but that Wagner *portrayed* this as a violation of law and order.

Marx obviously read the *Ring* cycle as a text that ought to live up to scientific criteria, and not as a work of art, an adaptation of ancient Nordic legends, a critique of capitalism through the medium of myth or something akin to that. This demonstrates his fundamentally negative, even 'curmudgeonly' attitude to Wagner and his *Ring*, since he would never have made similar claims about his revered Aeschylus or his *Oresteia*. A good case can be made that Marx's opinion of his 'fellow revolutionary' from 1848/9 was clouded by his envy of the other man's success and fame, and that he did not wish to address the dimension of the *Ring* that is critical of society and capitalism. Maybe he had systematically distorted his view of the cycle so as not to

have to engage with its contents, whatever the outcome of that engagement might have been. The fact that he couldn't appreciate Wagner as a composer or his music may well also have played a part. It is possible, however, that in this case — *pars per toto* — Marx was trying to expose the revolutionary components of the *Ring* as a sham. According to this argument, Wagner was staging the incest between Siegmund and Sieglinde as a revolutionary breach of the prevailing order, when in fact it was nothing of the sort because Wagner's alleged order never existed. Further, Wagner's revolutionary pose was a mere illusion for entertainment purposes: horny gods as elevated amusement for a philistine, navel-gazing audience.

How much did Wagner know about Marx?

All the same, Marx did express opinions about Wagner, whereas there is no mention of Marx from Wagner and no hint of any familiarity. Certainly, we must assume that Wagner had heard of Marx, among other things because he was a regular at Dresden's 'Literary Museum' during his time there from 1843 to 1849, and it displayed publications in which articles by Marx appeared. It is possible that Wagner might have spotted the only published volume of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, edited by Arnold Ruge and Marx, and that a particular article caught his eye. The musicologist Eckart Kröplin has noted the presence of similar expressions in Marx's article 'On the Jewish Question' and some of Wagner's writings and letters from the 1850s. If Wagner really did pick up the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, we can assume that he read this article — a review of two books by Bruno Bauer — because he was particularly exercised by the link between Jews and capitalism that it discussed. However, it is unlikely that a copy of the *Jahrbücher* actually made it to Dresden, as the police intercepted almost the entire print-run as the volumes were being smuggled into Germany. There is a stronger argument that if Wagner ever did get hold of the *Jahrbücher*, this must have been during his later exile in Zurich.
In any event, he never met Marx face to face. At the beginning of April 1842 Wagner and his wife Minna left France, where he had been in regular contact with Heinrich Heine and written a series of texts clearly influenced by Heine's style. He had also set Heine's poem 'Les deux grenadiers' to music. Albeit not very successfully: nowadays, Robert Schumann's arrangement is much better known. Wagner's sporadic admiration for Heine was indeed so far-reaching that he modelled his 1841 'Pariser Amüsements' and 'Pariser Berichte' on Heine's art reports from Paris. Marx did not arrive in Paris until October 1843, whereupon he immediately got in touch with Heine. Thus, Wagner and Marx missed each other by one and a half years. Before this stay in Paris, Marx had been in Dresden to visit the author Arnold Ruge.

He *could* therefore have met Wagner, but at that time there was no particular reason for him to do so. There were no further opportunities after that because Marx lived in London from August 1849 onwards, and Wagner in Zurich. What is more, their political positions had diverged to such an extent that the two men had nothing to do with each other. Had Marx not suffered such disruption in Nuremberg and Weiden due to the Bayreuth festival, and had he not been caught up in conversations about Wagner in Karlsbad, there would probably be no mention of Wagner and his work in Marx's writing.

One final chance that Wagner might have become aware of Marx deserves a mention: mutual friends and acquaintances who could have informed one man about the other. They presumably did, but such reports have not made their way into their letters or notes. The first person who comes to mind is the revolutionary Georg Herwegh, who shared a household with Marx and Ruge and their wives in Paris for a few months, although this cohabitation soon ended due to disagreements between the two women. Herwegh remained in contact with Marx and often met up with Wagner in Zurich, from where they embarked on long hikes in the Alps and presumably occasionally discussed politics. It is unlikely that Herwegh said nothing about Marx.

Another potential middleman between Marx and Wagner was the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who had distinguished himself as a revolutionary in Dresden with Wagner before being arrested and extradited to Russia a little later. After being banished to Siberia, he escaped, made his way back to Europe and met both Wagner and Marx; he fell out spectacularly with the latter. He could also have told Wagner about Marx, especially since he had been in close contact with Marx before his activities in Dresden. If he did, there is no trace of the relevant exchanges.

The only surviving indirect statement by Wagner about Marx are the words of the editor and publisher of the *Bayreuther Blätter*, Hans von Wolzogen, and it is inconceivable that his magazine would have printed them in 1880 without Wagner's approval. Von Wolzogen railed against the 'prevailing socialist theory […] of the Jewish social politician Marx, who lives in England'. Setting aside the fact that the description of Marx as a 'social politician' is inaccurate in contemporary usage, it was the stress he put on 'Jewish' that largely reflects perceptions in Bayreuth. Richard and Cosima Wagner's anti-Semitism enveloped every subject worth speaking about and stifled discussion.

Friedrich Nietzsche in Bayreuth

In August 1876 when, much to his discontentment, Marx was dealing with the fallout from the Bayreuth festival in Nuremberg, Weiden and Karlsbad, Nietzsche was sojourning in Bayreuth, although he could not stand it there for long (he had arrived from Basel on 23 July). He took off into the nearby Fichtelgebirge mountains and from there to Klingenbrunn in the Bavarian Forest to recover, in rural seclusion, from the toll Bayreuth had taken on his nerves. He did however then resolve to return to the festival town, where he attended the first cycle of performances of the *Ring*, although his physical suffering proved greater than his aesthetic exaltation. His visits to the festival theatre were ruined by throbbing headaches.

'I nearly regretted it!' Nietzsche wrote to his sister two days after his arrival in Bayreuth. 'So far it has been dismal. A headache from noon on Sunday to Monday night, fatigue today; I cannot hold my quill. I was at a rehearsal on Monday, but I did not enjoy it at all and had to leave.' One week later: 'I am not well, I can see that! Constant headaches, although not of the worst kind so far, and faintness. Yesterday I could only listen to The Valkyrie in a dark room; watching anything is impossible! I long to be elsewhere, it is senseless to stay. I dread every one of these long artistic evenings.'

Varying reasons could be to blame for Nietzsche's suffering at the festival. The first is his extreme sensitivity to the weather, which immediately manifested itself in severe headaches due to the heatwave that was affecting the border area between Franconia and Bohemia at the time, and about which Marx too complained. The wooded mountains brought him swift relief, and when he returned to Bayreuth, so did his headaches. Then there is his growing distance from Wagner. They met again in Sorrento in autumn the same year, but there would no more meetings after that — whereas Nietzsche had paid regular visits to the Wagners in the preceding years. Their *estrangement* had set in earlier, but the *final break* only occurred in the autumn of 1876.

A different explanation is based on the suspicion that Nietzsche felt neglected by the Wagner's attitude towards him. After all, it had been he, with his text *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, who had made the most significant intellectual contribution to the festival's inauguration. Tapping into the identity of German classicism, as epitomized by Goethe and Schiller, according to which the Germans' mission was not to develop their power but to renew and refine culture, Nietzsche had tied the resurrection of Hellenic culture with the Bayreuth festival and compared Wagner to the Greek tragedian Aeschylus. Between them, he wrote, there were 'such approximations and affinities that one is reminded almost palpably of the very relative nature of all

concepts of time'. However, 'the spirit of Hellenic culture lies endlessly dispersed over our present-day world', making it necessary for someone with the capacity to draw together and unite the remotest threads — 'Not to cut the Gordian knot, as Alexander [the Great] did, so that its ends fluttered to all corners of the earth, but *to tie it again* — that is now the task. I recognize in Wagner such a counter-Alexander.'[5] For all his estrangement from Wagner, which Nietzsche had felt after Wagner moved from Tribschen to Bayreuth, as a tribute this was virtually unsurpassable.

Nietzsche knew after writing *The Birth of Tragedy* that he had committed professional suicide as a classical philologist by comparing Wagner to Aeschylus and dubbing Wagner a counter-Alexander. He had risked a great deal for Richard Wagner, leading him to write to the composer: 'If I consider what a gamble I have taken this time, in retrospect I feel dizzy and self-conscious, and I feel like the rider on Lake Constance.'[6] He wrote simultaneously to Cosima: 'If I think back to what I have dared to do, I close my eyes and a retrospective terror comes over me. It is almost *as if I staked my own life*.'

Yet not only did Nietzsche run great risks with his text, he also assigned an enormous mission to Wagner and to Bayreuth as the festival's location. In hindsight, it can be said that he awoke expectations that almost doomed the festival to failure. He set the bar almost impossibly high for the first performances of the *Ring*. Aesthetically, he stylized the cultural revival as a 'Reformation of the theatre', and in socio-political terms he added: 'Certainly modern man would have been altered and reformed.' Art, concentrated in the town of Bayreuth and the last two weeks of August 1876, would be the lever by which humankind and society would be fundamentally remoulded. Of course, Nietzsche had not dreamed this up on his own; he had compiled statements by Wagner and crafted them into a systematic whole. He was therefore nervous when he set out from Basel before the end of the university term when he actually still had a week of teaching left. He appears to have sensed that there was a gaping chasm between his claims and the festival's actual possibilities. The agonizing headaches set in during his first stop in Heidelberg and they plagued him throughout August. The heat was by no means entirely to blame.

[5] *Untimely Meditations*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale. CUP Cambridge 1983.

[6] This refers to a poem by Gustav Schwab about a rider who unwittingly crosses the frozen Lake Constance, only realizing his mistake upon reaching the far shore safely.