

# When Richard Wagner Drew on the Sources of Bakunin, Proudhon and Stirner

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**Before feeding the nationalist passions of Greater Germany, the author of the Ring sought salvation in the libertarian revolutionaries. He read them as a dilettante, but their radicalism suited his chaotic personality. Little by little, however, he erased from his work any reference to a left-wing anarchism in favor of elitism and the cult of the chosen nation.**

Richard Wagner is considered to be one of the precursors of Nazism. However, the genesis of his masterpiece *Der Ring des Nibelungen* reveals an unexpected and surprising author, inspired by three 19th century libertarian revolutionaries, Bakunin, Proudhon and Stirner. How do these influences intertwine in the ideology of the Bayreuth master, increasingly impregnated over the years by the poison of anti-Semitism and German megalomania?

Bakunin was the first to play a role in the genesis of the composer's work: *Siegfried's Death* of 1848/49, a revolutionary work from the beginning of Richard Wagner's career, which constitutes the core and future conclusion of "The Ring of the Nibelung", is an expression of the biographical and social constellations that culminated in the days of May 1849, during the Dresden revolution, in which the young Wagner took part along with Mikhail Bakunin. This Siegfried is the rebel, the rebel in his pure state.

The anarchic element in Siegfried is his freedom, his unpredictability and unpredictability. He is the individual, the only one who is not caught up in an earthly intrigue that has "gold" as its object: "I bring neither land nor people," he says again in the final Ring when presenting himself to Gunther for a blood brotherhood: "neither father's house nor possessions / my only inheritance / is my body. In the first version of Siegfried, influenced by *The Essence of Christianity* by the young left-wing Hegelian Ludwig Feuerbach, published in 1841, Wagner replaces the old sinful gods with the new loving god of man born of the union of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, thus restoring the religious principle to the philosophical plane of "young Hegelian" thought: "May they be healed of their wounds and pure / the free companions of the Father of the universe / joyfully greet Walhalla, reunited for eternal happiness!" (Death of Siegfried). It is only after his meeting with Bakunin during the days of May 1849 that Wagner becomes convinced that the Walhalla and the earthly palaces cannot be populated by new gods, even if they are human in nature, and that they must be destroyed by fire, as is the case in the final version of the Ring at the end of

the Twilight of the Gods, when the pyre is set on fire and the fire spreads to Walhalla. Bakunin was not interested in Wagner's opera project, however, and when the composer spoke to him about a sketch for Jesus of Nazareth, Bakunin advised him to compose a single text in all variations: the tenor would sing, "Behead him!" the soprano, "Hang him!" and the basso continuo, "Fire! Fire!" Starting from Proudhon's reformist constructiveness, of which he had also become aware in Paris a few years earlier through Lehrs, Wagner, under the influence of Bakunin, arrived at creative destructiveness: "Bakunin had nothing but contempt for the French, in spite of their republic and their Proudhon-like socialism," Wagner recounts in *My Life*. Wagner is astonished by the striking contradiction between Bakunin, the gentle and amiable man, and the "terrible theories" that he enunciates. But Wagner did not stop at the "incendiary" poem: his idea of ordering and having hand grenades made probably originated in the leonine head of Bakunin, who had just moved into an apartment opposite the Wagner's, much to Minna's fury: Wagner asks his bourgeois wife even to bring him, amidst the clouds of gunpowder from the barricade fights, two bottles of wine and a considerable quantity of snuff, because he is immersed in a very explosive discussion with Bakunin. At the time, no longer concerned about the legality of his actions, Wagner felt that he had broken all the bridges behind him.

Did he make the shot himself? We still don't know; in any case, he "inflamed" the people. Bakunin, too, had a great affinity for fire, as evidenced by the fact that during the stoppages of the fighting he rested on a mattress in the town hall, with a lighted cigar in his hand, amidst the stores of gunpowder... In his autobiography, Wagner did not want to diminish the strong impression made on him by the Russian anarchist, even in the eyes of his king; as for Bakunin, after his arrest - Wagner, curiously enough, escaped - he called the composer a "chimerical spirit" (ein Phantast) in the eyes of the Saxon authorities, saying that politically he had nothing in common with him. But Wagner devoted thirty pages of his *Memoirs* to the Russian revolutionary, a native of the high nobility, that is, more than he devoted to any other person. Bakunin, who later became a revolutionary by profession and a terrorist wanted by all police forces, and who took refuge in Switzerland, was careful not to compromise the composer-poet, who was struggling to secure a bourgeois existence, which would later become a truly princely one, by renewing contact with him.

Proudhon's influence manifests itself in another way. It was only after the revolution of 1848-49, during his exile in Zurich, that Proudhon's masterpiece *What is Property?* fell into his hands. Wagner speaks in *My Life* of his own reading of Proudhon as a "singularly extravagant consolation in (my) situation of exile". In the Tetralogy he traces the tortuous path of gold, sowing misfortune everywhere, and symbolizing the circulation of money. It is obvious that he is here in the movement of Proudhon, according to whom "Property is theft". He appropriates the idea that evil has entered human society under the guise of money. Only a Siegfried-like figure, i.e. an incorruptible, naive, primitive soul, is, according to Wagner, in a position to break the spell of corrupting money, to return it "without interest", to remain in the Proudhonian jargon, to the daughters of the Rhine who are not the owners but the rightful guardians, for the sake of the world, but the legitimate guardians, to break the curse and restore the balance compromised by the will to power - for gold is only important insofar as, through the ring, it gives power over things and men. This is how the world plan of immanent justice is realized, according to Proudhon. In Proudhon/Wagner there is an almost mystical spiritual spark which is brought into reality by the torchbearer Siegfried. Wagner thus distinguishes himself from the "young Hegelians" and

the revolutionary anarchists of the time by making the revolutionary Siegfried a solitary figure. The third anarchist revolutionary in Wagner's work is Max Stirner, the individualist anarchist whose main work *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (The One and His Property), published in 1845, played a great role in the development of the Siegfried figure. Siegfried's attitude has the effect of materializing Stirner's philosophical declarations of intent: "Nothing can concern me more than Myself!" Wagner must have been aware of Stirner's main work, but he probably read it as little as the other political authors who had a lasting influence on him until 1849. All these ideas of the "young Hegelians" he absorbed as a dilettante, putting them together in a vaguely anti-capitalist aggregate, according to the ideological fashion of the time.

Regardless of his political ideas, Wagner can be characterized psychologically as an "anarchic personality", or to use a fashionable term, "chaotic". Wagner's political and human contradictions are so striking that he escapes classification. How can it be explained that during his most revolutionary period, in 1848-49, when he was a member of the *Vaterlandsverein* (Patriotic Republican Union), he was able to write a letter to King Frederick August II of Saxony assuring him of his fidelity and faith in the cause of the monarchy? Wagner's grandfatherly behavior always irritated those who knew him. Already as a child he was "in love with velvet and satin", which worried his mother; throughout his life he offended those around him with his immoderate taste for luxury.

If a revolution conceived on these theoretical grounds had prevailed in Germany, which did not yet exist as a nation at the time, Wagner would have grown old and wise in a united Germany of a democratic and socialist type, probably as a representative of the left-liberal wing, and his erring anti-Semitic and sycophantic ways in the princely courts would have been spared to humanity. But he later developed in the direction of right-wing anarchism and almost pre-Nazism, pushing Stirner's individualism toward an elitist egocentrism, even toward a brutal egoism, without realizing that he was moving away from Siegfried, triumpher of evil, to become the calculating Wotan of a cult, housed in his private *Walhalla* in Bayreuth, where evil could find a home. Decades later, Hitler would title his foul book *Mein Kampf* after Wagner's *My Life*, and countless racist pamphlets would be written in imitation of Wagner's 1850 text, *The Jews in Music*.

The racist and nationalist tendency as well as the elitist and dictatorial tendency appear with force in the final version of the *Ring*. Libertarian ideas and social criticism were later completely eliminated. The cult of the chosen nation (the *Wälzung*, the Germanic race) and the world-liberating leader (*Führer*), a glowing Aryan "Sunny Boy" Siegfried, appear. It is not surprising, therefore, that the cries of "Hoiho!" and "Heil!" from the *Ring* entered the "Greater Germany" of Wilhelm II and the Third Reich without further ado. And the total destruction by Siegfried and Brünnhilde in the showdown of *Twilight of the Gods* is a theoretical and aesthetic anticipation of the "scorched earth" policy systematically practiced by the National Socialists at the time of their defeat.

But when was Wagner's original ideological sin fulfilled? It cannot be proven that Bakunin had a direct anti-Semitic influence, but it is known that during the leadership disputes of the International, Bakunin never let an opportunity pass to attack his opponent Marx on his Jewish origin. After the disappointed hopes of a libertarian human society, a model inspired by the three most important anarchist theorists of his time, Stirner, Bakunin and Proudhon, Wagner appropriated, through anti-Semitism, of which unfortunately Bakunin and Proudhon were not always exempt, the most repugnant product of the decomposition of the ideology of "Young Germany". He made amends in Bayreuth and thus remained the eminent representative of a

dejected German bourgeoisie, which, after unsuccessful attempts towards democracy and the formation of a nation, took refuge under the wings of the eagle William II. It was not until 1874 that Wagner completed the score of the Ring, twenty-six years after Siegfrieds Tod. The world had undergone a radical change: the "new" Germany had entered its aggressive and imperialist phase, the moment of revolution had passed, and one disaster followed another. The contemporaries of the performance of the "completed" Ring unfortunately only perceive its ultra-nationalistic character.

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