Paul and the Messianic Community

Paul was a Communist

That sounds more like a tasteless provocation than something that could help to explain what he was. Communism, after all, represents a rule of terror that disposed of millions of people on the ash-heap of history; it represents the complete perversion of the idea of general equality for which it stood.

But did the movement initiated by Paul fare any differently? Is Christianity not also a continuous ‘criminal history’, during which anybody who strayed from the ‘right faith’ (not least the Jews) was at risk of his or her life? Tortured, murdered in the name of Christ, who for Paul was the realisation of the humanity of God the liberator? If we try to translate Paul’s project into the language of today, though, communism lends itself to the task: as the belief in the possibility of a world that is completely different from the one that is real, as the practical recognition that this new world cannot be found in castles in the air, but can be found in the old world as the active hope for the kairos, where a ‘novelty’ occurs suddenly and surprisingly and has to be seized with courage. In modernity, only communism has dared this kind of radicalness, hence it alone corresponds to the ‘early Christianity’ conceived by Paul, which was still entirely messianic and not at all ‘Christian’. Only if we understand the difficulties of communism can we understand the difficulties of the Pauline concept: its precariousness, its ‘impossibility’, the threat of its perversion into its totalitarian opposite. Those who read Paul purely as a ‘dogmatist’ are doubtlessly immune to the ‘temptation’ of engaging in the society propagated by Paul, a society where all have all together, a communist society. Those who read in that way do not know any better than to think that such engagement has nothing to do with their faith. But they are mistaken. If we take Paul as the founder of Christianity, then we cannot withdraw from his engagement. For better or worse, we will be communists, letting ourselves be led forth from Christianity into an extraordinarily questionable movement, one which barely even still exists at the moment, but which might recur at any time. For ‘in it [the future] every second was the narrow gate,

1 Church critic Karlheinz Deschner’s Christianity’s Criminal History (8 volumes so far, 1986–2004), describes in great detail the transgressions of which the different Christian Churches, confessions, sects and their representatives, as well as the Christian rulers throughout the history of Christianity, are accused.
through which the Messiah could enter’ (Benjamin).\(^2\) Except, the question will be: will he find faith on earth (Lk 18:8)?

Currently, Paul is experiencing a renaissance as a ‘Leninist’. In his book on Paul, Alain Badiou (1997) explains Paul's topicality with the observation that ‘there is currently a widespread search for a new militant figure ... called upon to succeed the one installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the century, which can be said to have been that of the party militant’\(^3\). And in his book on Paul, Daniel Boyarin (1994), a Talmud scholar, writes that Paul's expression, ‘There is no Jew nor Greek’, reminds him of a phrase taken from Hillel Kempinsky, archivist of the ‘Bund’ in New York:\(^4\) ‘Paul was the first Bolshevik’\(^5\). But the association of Paul with Lenin can already be found in the first version of Karl Barth’s *The Epistle to the Romans* (published in German in 1919). Barth refers to Lenin's *The State and Revolution* (1917) to show that *The Epistle to the Romans* is concerned with ‘more than Leninism’\(^6\). But this ‘more than’ is an outbidding of the radicalness of Leninism and not its dismissal on account of being too radical. *The State and Revolution* is definitely radical: the state is not the end of all historical wisdom but its ‘withering away’ when ‘the necessity of observing the simple, fundamental rules of the community will very soon become a habit’.\(^7\) This is the ‘great structural parallelism’: the ‘virtually religious veneration of the state which was to be superseded and replaced through revolution’ that both Lenin and Paul ‘fought against’ (Marquardt).\(^8\) In this context, the ‘more than’ does not mean that in Paul’s framework the problem of ‘the state and revolution’ is only solved in the beyond: ‘Your [the messianic community’s] state is in heaven (Phil 3:20)’; but it does mean: ‘He bursts forth from God and through God’s strength with the aim not to improve the existing state, but to replace it; to supersede the power of injustice above and below with the power of justice’\(^9\). For Lenin, the prerequisite for the ‘withering away’ of the state is the socialist state, which can only come about through violent revolution. For Paul, the prerequisite for this ‘withering away’ is the messianic community, which is not

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2 Benjamin 2003, p. 397.
3 Badiou 2003, p. 2. Similarly Žižek: ‘there is no Christ outside Saint Paul in exactly the same way, there is no “authentic Marx” that can be approached directly, bypassing Lenin’ (2000, p. 2).
4 The General Jewish Labour Bund, founded in 1897, was an autonomous Jewish workers’ organisation in what was at the time Russian Poland, Lithuania and Belarus.
5 Boyarin 1997, p. 228.
6 Barth 1985, p. 506.
7 Lenin 1960, p. 474.
8 Marquardt 1972, p. 129.
9 Barth 1985, pp. 503f.