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# Backsliders, Opportunists, and Renegades: A Contribution to a Pauline Marxist Theory of Sin

*In memory of Gene Warren, Jr., beloved comrade*

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What is sin for a Marxist? It is inapplicable, irrelevant, null and void. Or so it would seem if we are correct to attribute to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels a critical theory and practice of proletarian self-emancipation whose hallmarks were Promethean defiance of gods, rulers, and paternalistic do-gooders.<sup>1</sup> For example, in 1847 the young Marx ridiculed the notion of “social principles of Christianity” that were presumably superior to communist principles and would somehow obviate the need for self-emancipation through philanthropic gestures of goodwill: “The social principles of Christianity declare all vile acts of oppressors against the oppressed to be either just punishment for original sin and other sins [*der Erbsünde und sonstigen Sünden*], or trials that the Lord in his infinite wisdom imposes on the redeemed.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, as Marx writes earlier in the same text, “the proletariat ... expects help from nobody but itself.”<sup>3</sup> Hal Draper even ironically identified what he called the “sin of charity”<sup>4</sup> as a way to disparage the fantasy of emancipation bestowed from above instead of demanded from below.

But if there exist not only planetary but also moral boundaries within which human beings should strive to realize the conditions of possibility for human flourishing,<sup>5</sup> then even or especially Marxists should investigate the nature of sin – at least in the classical sense of the concept. The contemporary world has inherited this sense of sin from Paul of Tarsus and his first-century letter to Jesus loyalists living in Rome – most of whom he had never met (and who themselves had never met Jesus) – during the early years of Nero’s reign as emperor: the so-called “Letter to the Romans.”<sup>6</sup> But over three hundred years before Paul dictated his letter, such Greek writers as Aristotle had already been

using the term *hamartia*, which English translations of the New Testament have standardly rendered as *sin*, even though *hamartia* simply means “error,” “flaw,” or, more precisely, with an archery metaphor, “missing the mark or bullseye.”<sup>7</sup> For instance, in chapter two of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains virtue as an ethical state that differs from vice as follows:

... [V]irtue is concerned with feelings and actions in which excess is in error [*hyperbolē hamartaneta*] and subject to blame, as is deficiency, whereas the mean is subject to praise and is on the correct path (and both these features are characteristic of virtue). Hence virtue is a sort of medial condition because it is able to aim at and hit the mean. Further, it is possible to err in many ways [*hamartamein pollachōs*] (for the bad belongs to what is without a limit, as the Pythagoreans portrayed it, and the good to what is determinate), whereas there is only one way to be correct. That is why erring is easy and being correct difficult, since it is easy to miss the target but difficult to hit it. So because of these facts too, excess and deficiency are characteristic of vice, whereas the medial condition is characteristic of virtue: “for people are good in one simple way, but bad in all sorts of ways.” Virtue, then, is a deliberately choosing state, which is in a medial condition in relation to us, one defined by a reason and the one by which a practically-wise person would define it. Also, it is a medial condition between two vices, one of excess and the other of deficiency. Further, it is also such a condition because some vices are deficient in relation to what the relevant feelings and actions should be and others are excessive, but virtue both finds the mean and chooses it.<sup>8</sup>

For Aristotle, then, the term *hamartia* captures the many erroneous ways by means of which one winds up exceeding or falling short of the desired mean of moral virtue and, hence, lapses into moral vice. In what follows I shall focus on one of these ways in particular: *akrasia* or “lack of self-control.”<sup>9</sup>

With his *Poetics*, Aristotle introduces a tragic dimension into the concept of *hamartia*. In chapters thirteen and fourteen he discusses

what [poets] should aim at and what they should beware of in constructing plots, i.e. how tragedy will achieve its function. Since the construction of the finest tragedy should be not be simple but complex, and moreover it should represent terrifying and pitiable events (for this is particular to representation of this sort), first, clearly, it should not show (i) decent men undergoing a change from good fortune to misfortune; for this is neither terrifying nor pitiable, but shocking. Nor [should it show] (ii) wicked men [passing] from misfortune to good fortune. This is most untragic of all, as it has nothing of what it should; for it is neither morally satisfying nor pitiable nor terrifying. Nor, again, [should it show] (iii) a thoroughly villainous person falling from good fortune into misfortune: such a structure can contain moral satisfaction, but not pity or terror, for the former is [felt] for a person undeserving of his misfortune, and the latter for a person like [ourselves]. Consequently the outcome will be neither pitiable nor terrifying. There remains, then, the person intermediate between these. Such a person is one who neither is superior [to us] in virtue and justice, nor undergoes a change to misfortune

because of vice and wickedness, but because of some error [*hamartia*], and who is one of those people with a great reputation and good fortune....<sup>10</sup>

As Nancy Sherman has explained, for Aristotle “the tragic hero is not simply the victim of arbitrary fate or irrational accident”; and this is precisely why *hamartia*, when it occurs in a successful tragic plot, “focuses on agency.”<sup>11</sup> Sherman continues:

The protagonist is not simply a victim of nature’s caprices or faulty mechanics. Rather what matters is that the agent chooses, ... yet chooses in a way that leads to calamity. The choice goes awry because of ignorance or misjudgment that are *in principle* more within human control than sudden gusts of wind. This need not imply culpability; to be the cause of harm, either through act or omission, may be neither sufficient nor necessary for moral liability ... still it does point to a class of impediments that are internal to the conditions of human agency.<sup>12</sup>

Since my interest lies in how such impediments are understood both in Paul’s mission and in Marxism, let us turn then to consider how *hamartia* figures in the *Letter to the Romans*. Early in the letter Paul contends that

apart from Torah [*chōris nomou*], God’s justice [*dikaioynē*] has been disclosed, being born witness to by the Torah and the Prophets, God’s justice through loyalty to Jesus, the Messiah, for all who are faithful. For there is no distinction, since all have erred and fallen short [*hēmarton kai hysterononta*] of God’s glory; they are now justified freely as his gift [*charis*], through the emancipation [*apolytrōsis*] that is in Jesus, the Messiah, whom God put forward as a place of mercy by his blood, effective through faithfulness. He did this to show his justice, because of divine forbearance for the errors [*dia tēn paresin tōn harmartēmatōn*] that previously took place; it was to prove at the present time [*nyn kairos*] that he himself is just and that he justifies the one who is loyal to Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, a messianic age of “justice” [*dikaioynē*] has opened up human history and disclosed untapped emancipatory possibilities.<sup>14</sup> According to Paul, this new age was anticipated by Jewish texts and traditions but “at the present time” [*nyn kairos*] had occurred “apart” [*chōris*] from these through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Pursuit of justice no longer requires Torah observance but only loyalty to the Messiah Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Paul is emphatic: all human beings fall short and make mistakes. As a result, the possibility of escaping injustice arises not from human effort alone but instead operates as a “gift” [*charis*] – a term whose theological import as *grace* has too often obscured its political significance as the force that propels “emancipation” [*apolytrōsis*] from oppression and exploitation.<sup>16</sup>

Paul develops this contrast between sin/death, on the one hand, and grace/life, on the other in chapter five. In 5:12–21, he offers an “emergentist” account of sin that has historically spread from sinful acts of individuals (for purposes of argument, let us say by Adam, the representative first human being) until it has assumed collective proportions, indeed, has assumed the form of a “cosmic tyrant,” indeed a *Body of Sin*.<sup>17</sup> Over and against this relentless “transmission of sin,” by means of which death has “ruled”

[*ebasileusen*] throughout human history, Paul insists that all those “receiving an abundance of grace and the gift of justice will rule in life” [*perisseian tēs charitos kai tēs dōreas tēs dikaiosynēs lambanontes en zōē basileusousin*].<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting here that Paul uses the verb *basileuō*, which has the connotation of ruling a *basileia* – the very term used in the Greek-speaking eastern part of the Empire to characterize the Roman kingdom as such. In opposition to the Body of Sin has thus arisen a *Body of Christ*, which has opened up the possibility for an inclusive and egalitarian counter-kingdom to spread: “The Body of Christ ... constitutes a rival cosmos, the new creation breaking in, bringing about the end of the old creation which, for the time being, is constituted by the Body of Sin.”<sup>19</sup>

Moving on to chapter seven, we encounter the *locus classicus* in Paul’s letter for his understanding of *hamartia*. As is customary for thematic and stylistic reasons, let us break up the chapter into two distinct parts: 7:1–7a (written in the first-person plural); 7:7b–25 (written in the first-person singular). In the first part of the argument, Paul appeals to the entire Roman community comprised of both Gentiles and Jews:

Do you not know, brothers and sisters – for I am speaking to those who know Torah – that Torah is binding on a person only during that person’s lifetime? Thus a married woman is bound by Torah to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from Torah concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that aspect of Torah, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress. In the same way, my friends, you have been put to death [*ethanatōthēte*] to Torah through the Messiah’s body, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, misguided passions [*ta pathēmata hamartiōn*], which were through Torah, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from Torah, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the spirit. What then should we say? That Torah is error [*hamartia*]? Certainly not!

In the second part of his argument, at the decisive moment when Paul insists that the Torah is *not* a form of *hamartia*, he rhetorically shifts from the second-person plural to the first-person singular in order to speak fictively “in character” and thereby convey in an especially vivid way the internal struggle within each of us – whether Jesus loyalist or not – to do what is good without lapsing into moral weakness and, consequently, acting otherwise than we ought.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, if it had not been for Torah, I would not have known error [*hamartia*]. I would not have known what it is to desire if Torah had not said, “You shall not desire.” But error, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of desire. Apart from Torah error lies dead. I was once alive apart from Torah, but when the commandment came, error revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For error, seizing an

opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. Therefore, Torah is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was error, working death in me through what is good, in order that error might be shown to be error, and through the commandment might become errant beyond measure. For we know that Torah is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under error. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that Torah is good. But, in fact, it is no longer I that do it, but error that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but error that dwells within me. Therefore, I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in God's Torah in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of error that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus the Messiah! So then, with my mind I am a slave to God's Torah, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of error.

What are Paul's main points in this passage? Firstly, Paul depicts a fierce struggle between an "old life" and a "new life" that marks a rupture in one's life that exceeds mere conversion. As Kathryn Tanner puts it eloquently, such a transition from death to life

might be likened to the release or cancellation of an enslaving debt, one that is otherwise impossible to remit by way of one's own resources. Sin can itself be considered a sort of unpaid debt in which one has failed to make good on what God has provided, defaulted on the obligation to act in accord with God's good intentions, in ways that can no longer be remedied through one's own efforts, every such attempt simply bringing one into greater debt because of one's fundamental corruption. Sin in this way eventuates in a kind of debt-slavery, imprisoning one within the debt that is sin itself, making it impossible to repay, a form of unrelenting bondage. The transition out of debt is consequently quite abrupt; no gradual repayment from within prison walls brings about one's release from its prison. That release comes suddenly from unexpected quarters, in ways that cancel one's own need to pay. Christ becomes the strange currency or treasure that allows one now to make good on one's obligations to God, and in that way Christ breaks one's bondage to sin.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, there is for Paul an ineradicably tragic dimension to human existence – not so much because our nature is "fallen" but because we can and do make mistakes in judgment and, even worse, fail to act in accordance with what we have judged to be good for ourselves and others.<sup>22</sup> Such a perspective captures Paul's embedding within, and debt to, his first-century Pharisaic Jewish theoretical problematic.<sup>23</sup> For example, Alan Segal has argued that Romans 7 vividly conveys Paul's own anxieties regarding Torah observance. In other words,

this is not a theoretical or theological discussion of why humanity is unable to keep the law. It is the self-description of a man relating his personal experience: his attempt to find a compromise between the two sociological groupings in Christianity and discovery that he could not. It is the confession of a man who could and did live as a Pharisee but finds ceremonial Torah a backsliding temptation after his transformation to a new spiritual body. He still has desires to live as a Pharisee; indeed, it is a simpler position because it is easier to observe the laws than to try to walk the fine line between the two communities of Christians. But he overcomes his desires and continues to live a life of faith.<sup>24</sup>

What is the solution to this problem of *akrasia*, that is to say, lack of self-control or moral weakness? Paul argues that *spirit* provides a way out of inner turmoil. Hence, in chapter eight, he draws a decisive conclusion that is predicated on the moral dilemma he has already posed:

Therefore [*ara*], there is now no condemnation for those who are in the Messiah Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life in the Messiah Jesus has set you free from the law of error and death. For God has done what Torah, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own son in the likeness of errant flesh, and to deal with error, he condemned error in the flesh, so that the Torah's justice might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to spirit set their minds on the things of spirit. For the mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of spirit is life and peace [*To gar phronēma tēs sarkos thanatos; to de phronēma tou pneumatatos zoē kai eirēnē*]. For the mind of the flesh is hostile to God; it is not subject to God's Torah – nor can it be. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in spirit, if indeed God's spirit dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Messiah's spirit does not belong to him. But if the Messiah is in you, though the body is dead because of error, spirit is life because of justice. If the spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised the Messiah from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies on account of this spirit that dwells in you.

The solution to the problem of moral weakness requires one to see that the root of the problem lies in what Paul calls “the mind of the flesh” [*to phronēma tēs sarkos*], which, in its opposition to God's Torah, leads to death; whereas, “the mind of spirit” [*to phronēma tou pneumatatos*] leads to life and peace. What exactly does this entail, though? How is a person supposed to regulate his or her desires and thereby reorient mentally from flesh to spirit, from death to life, from inner turmoil to peace? How, to use Stanley Stowers' way of putting it, may each of us achieve “self-mastery”?<sup>25</sup> For Jews, faithful Torah observance was thought to suffice.<sup>26</sup> But for Gentiles – who Paul argued need not and should not become Torah observant – self-mastery is to be attained precisely through discerning a radical freedom that arises from identification with Jesus the Messiah serving as a moral exemplar<sup>27</sup>: one who was crucified by the Roman Empire as a subversive but whose alternative conception of justice persisted in the inclusive and

egalitarian communities that Paul and others had established throughout the empire – that is to say, as the *spirit of a movement*.<sup>28</sup> Pamela Eisenbaum puts it exceptionally well:

For Paul, emulating Jesus's faithfulness meant not just trusting in God's promises; it meant acting in such a way as to realize those promises. Paul's mission was all about working to bring about those promises of God, and that was what he wanted others to do ... God's kingdom is coming. God's justice is coming. The Roman imperial order will be overturned. The faithful response is to act in accord with God's will in bringing about the kingdom.<sup>29</sup>

As a result, even more urgently for Paul, *now is the time*; God has *already* set into motion the transformation and redemption of the world. As Eisenbaum reminds us,

To be sure, there will be a judgment, an accounting of sin ... But it is not at all clear that the final judgment for Paul involves each and every person accounting for each misstep. It is the big sins of the world that need to be accounted for. The nations will stand before God as nations, not as individual persons. In modern terms, we may think of these as the sins of oppression, racism, pollution, corporate greed, to name a few. The Roman Imperial order in which Paul found himself certainly committed the same kinds of sins.<sup>30</sup>

A caution is in order at this point. As Eisenbaum reminds us,

... Paul does not literally see in humanity hopeless depravity. Not everyone is the same kind of evildoer. Not everyone has fallen into such moral turpitude as to be incapable of doing anything good. Paul is exaggerating the situation ... It is no revelation that human beings sin ... But Paul's point also goes beyond this ... [his] view is rather that humankind is unraveling as time draws to a close ... The current age is in decline; creation has become more and more corrupt –this is one of the reasons that things are coming to an end and a new age is about to dawn. All people will need to give account for themselves and their failures as they stand before God at the final judgment. Paul's apocalyptic perspective must be kept in mind.<sup>31</sup>

Yet as passionately urgent – *militant*, let us say<sup>32</sup> – as Paul's apocalyptic mission was in the first-century, what relevance might Paul have for contemporary Marxists who aspire to be faithful to their own texts and traditions? What could it mean to be a *Pauline Marxist* other than to set forth a blatant contradiction in terms?

Toward that end, let me at last offer some observations on how Marxism might indeed be reimagined in a Pauline way, not by engaging in one more “Marxist-Christian dialogue,” but by posing the question of how the concept of *hamartia* can shed light on a specific form of moral lapse that transpired in 1914 with the onset of World War One, the “Collapse of the Second International,” and subsequent political disorientation among socialist parties that had previously pledged opposition to war. As a provocation, it will be worth reflecting in this context not only on the *sin* of imperialist wars but also, and arguably even worse, on the *sin* of socialists who fail to oppose them.<sup>33</sup>

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In September 1915 the leading Russian revolutionaries-in-exile V. I. Lenin and Grigory Zinoviev coauthored a pamphlet on "Socialism and War."<sup>34</sup> Published in German, it was distributed to delegates who were attending the Zimmerwald Socialist Conference that was secretly held in a remote Swiss village to discuss opposition to World War I. The purpose of the pamphlet was to criticize the decision by leaders of the official Social-Democratic parties throughout Europe to side with their own governments and ruling classes; Lenin and Zinoviev make a socialist case against imperialist war, in contrast to "wars waged by an oppressed class against the oppressor class, by slaves against slave-holders, by serfs against landowners, and by wage-workers against the bourgeoisie," which are "fully legitimate, progressive and necessary."<sup>35</sup> Lenin and Zinoviev offer a compelling thought experiment or parable<sup>36</sup> to make their case:

Imagine a slave-holder who owns 100 slaves warring against another who owns 200 slaves, for a more "just" redistribution of slaves. The use of the term of a "defensive" war, or a war "for the defense of the fatherland," would clearly be historically false in such a case and would in practice be sheer deception of the common people, philistines, and the ignorant, by the astute slave-holders. It is in this way that the peoples are being deceived with "national" ideology and the term of "defence of the fatherland," by the present-day imperialist bourgeoisie, in the war now being waged between slave-holders with the purpose of consolidating slavery.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the pamphlet repudiates *social-chauvinism*, namely, the view that, in the event of war, socialists should defend their own countries from "foreign oppression." As Lenin and Zinoviev put it, "social-chauvinism, which is, in effect, defence of the privileges, the advantages, the right to pillage and plunder, of one's 'own' (or any) imperialist bourgeoisie, is the utter betrayal of all socialist convictions ...."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, social-chauvinism illustrates well what can be called *opportunism*, that is to say, a political perspective that encourages "class collaboration instead of the class struggle, renunciation of revolutionary methods of struggle, helping one's 'own' government in its embarrassed situation, instead of taking advantage of these embarrassments so as to advance the revolution."<sup>39</sup> Not only does opportunism mark a betrayal of critical Marxism, the pamphlet singles out Karl Kautsky (a towering intellectual figure within the Second International), for failing to grasp that

the working class cannot play its world-revolutionary role unless it wages a ruthless struggle against ... backsliding, spinelessness, subservience to opportunism, and unparalleled vulgarisation of the theories of Marxism. Kautskyism is not fortuitous; it is the social product of the contradictions within the Second International, a blend of loyalty to Marxism in word and subordination to opportunism in deed.<sup>40</sup>

Only two years later, this political perspective was to animate the October Revolution in 1917 as a popular upheaval arising in large part from a repudiation of the barbarism of

World War I and a reorientation of struggle against Russian and other imperialisms. For example, earlier in the year on his arrival in Petrograd from exile, as S. A. Smith notes, Lenin argued in his *April Theses* that

the war remained one of “imperialist banditry,” which the Bolsheviks must unbendingly oppose. The Party accepted these new strategic perspectives at its April Conference only after considerable opposition had been overcome; the new views were concretized in the slogans “All Power to the Soviets!” and “Down with the War!” ... These perspectives had a tremendous impact, since they accorded with the deepest aspirations of the most radical element within the Petrograd proletariat ... [and] ... support for the Bolsheviks began to grow from this time, not only in reaction to political events but also to economic developments.<sup>41</sup>

If, as Carl von Clausewitz, the nineteenth-century German general and military theorist, once contended, “war is the continuation of politics by other means”<sup>42</sup> (a view endorsed by Lenin and Zinoviev in their pamphlet<sup>43</sup>), then one could equally well argue that the October Revolution was in large part the culmination of anti-war politics by other means.

For our purposes here, namely, sketching the outlines of Pauline Marxism that would take seriously such problems as human weakness, misjudgment, and betrayal – an entire Body of Sin over and against the Body of the Global Proletariat – let’s envision a normative extension of Lenin and Zinoviev’s positions by defining three terms that are implicitly operative in “Socialism and War”:

- **Backsliding** = having made a resolution to adopt a certain course of action deemed to be good, an individual or group nonetheless – as a result of fear, indecisiveness, or moral weakness – fails to act in this way but in a way contrary to what had previously been deemed good.
- **Opportunism** = the practice (by individuals, groups, or organizations) of taking advantage of circumstances with little regard either for principles or the consequences for others.
- **Renegadism** = the behavior of a person who deserts and betrays an organization, country, or set of principles.

It seems clear that in their pamphlet Lenin and Zinoviev repudiate all of these destructive practices and behaviors by those *backsliding* regarding not only political principle but also formal declarations (as in the anti-war Manifesto of the International Socialist Congress at Basle in 1912<sup>44</sup>), *opportunistically* finding common cause with their own governments, and thereby acting as *renegades*<sup>45</sup> to core features of socialist beliefs and practices.<sup>46</sup> However, their proposed remedy for these political disorders seems less clear, other than simply to reaffirm one’s socialist principles in a way analogous, perhaps, to Paul’s appeal to Jesus’s faithfulness unto death as morally exemplary. In this sense, only “true” – or “correct”<sup>47</sup> – faith (socialist or otherwise) can enable one to avoid the traps laid by sin.<sup>48</sup>

Yet there are no permanent solutions; for every human project – whether personal or political – contains the risk of (a) failure to implement it, (b) mischaracterization of it, or (c) outright betrayal of it. Such is the price of human finitude and partial understanding of the world around us. The watchword, then, remains *eternal vigilance*. This is precisely

why Paul had once exhorted the community of Jesus loyalists in Thessalonica in an extended metaphor that reversed Roman military imagery of domination in the service of emancipation:

[L]et us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having clothed ourselves with the breastplate of faithfulness and love, and for a helmet the hope of deliverance [*endysamenoī thōpaka pisteōs kai agapēs kai perikephalaian elpida sōtērias*].<sup>49</sup>

Although it may seem odd in the Marxist tradition and socialist movement – even theoretically jarring or downright “heretical” – to characterize backsliding, opportunism, or renegadism as *sins*, nonetheless these behaviors and practices exemplify grave errors of personal and political judgment and so are morally blameworthy as forms of “false consciousness.”<sup>50</sup> For a Pauline Marxist such behavior and practices are unavoidable given the inherent *fragility* of our human goodness;<sup>51</sup> indeed, they must be carefully studied in order to draw lessons about their causes and reflect on how best to avoid them, or at least minimize their impact. Was Paul’s view that human beings are so thoroughly encumbered by *hamartia* that their situation cannot be improved? To use his own expression, “certainly not [*mē genoito!*]”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, if, for Paul, faithful Torah observance was not sin, then neither are rigorous political analysis, program, and strategy for critical Marxists.

Paul’s opposition was not to individual and collective improvement; if it had been, then there would have been no good reason for him to have endured personal hardship in order to organize a movement of self-governing communities of Jesus loyalists – hardship that culminated in his and others’ ghastly executions in Rome under Nero’s reign.<sup>53</sup> His opposition, as Dale Martin has argued, was rather to “the kind of perfectionism that has plagued so much of Christianity, at least in some of its forms.”<sup>54</sup> Martin elaborates:

Even when we try our best, we cannot seem to avoid harming our world and our fellow human beings, at least much of the time. The doctrine of original sin keenly expresses a fundamental human truth: we cannot completely escape the fact of our fundamentally flawed nature.<sup>55</sup>

But we are not for all that doomed to self-harm and the harm of others. Oppression, exploitation, violence, and war are not inevitable.<sup>56</sup> Martin reminds us that we

must not be too hard on ourselves – and certainly not on others. The more general classical meaning of *hamartia* as “missing the mark” could also be useful. When we fail, that does not mean we are completely “evil.” And when others fail us, we should not exaggerate the harm. The failure does not mean people are “evil.” It just means we and they are not perfect. It also means we are forgiven, and thus forgive others. A concept of sin allows us continually to love those we love but whom we fail as well as those we love but who regularly fail us.<sup>57</sup>

But what about a specifically *Marxist* perspective on perfectionism? As it turns out, in the last book he wrote, the Marxist sociologist Ralph Miliband movingly addressed the longstanding objection that the socialist project presupposes “a fundamental optimism about human capabilities.”<sup>58</sup> Miliband readily admits that “all history, and certainly the history of the twentieth century, has seemed to provide a bitter rebuttal of any such optimism ... So, too, to all appearances, do the cruelties which human beings inflict upon each other in the course of their daily lives.”<sup>59</sup> As a result, he continues,

the question which this endless catalogue of horrors insistently presses upon anyone committed to the kind of enterprise represented by socialism is obvious: is this the human material out of which societies based on cooperation, sociality and altruism are to be constructed? Does it not on the contrary invite the deepest skepticism about the possibility of constructing the sort of social order to which socialism aspires? Is not the notion of human perfectibility an illusion denied by stark and irrefutable reality? And is it not therefore a thousand times more reasonable to settle for improvements in the kind of social order which has been established in capitalist democratic societies, rather than strive for a certain-to-fail wholesale recasting of society?<sup>60</sup>

Yet Miliband’s response to what we could call the Perfectibility Objection is compelling. It nonetheless remains reasonable, he insists,

to believe that it should be possible, without any utopian illusions, to create a context in which collective cruelty would be seen for the abomination that it is, and made impossible by the resistance which it would evoke. Indeed, it may well be said that it is precisely the existence of so much evil which makes it essential to create a context in which evil may be conquered, or at least attenuated; and it is a counsel of despair to say that it cannot be done, that evil on a huge scale is part of the human condition, that its conquest is impossible.<sup>61</sup>

Miliband adds that “individual acts of cruelty” would lessen

in societies where conditions are created which foster solidarity, cooperation, security and respect, and where these values are given substance by a variety of grassroots institutions in all areas of life ... It is not in the least “utopian” to think that conditions can be created where collective and individual misdeeds can be turned into increasingly marginal phenomena.<sup>62</sup>

For Miliband there is no transcendent guarantee that the socialist project will succeed: as the stubborn demand for an alternative to capitalist crisis, socialism remains necessary; but it is not inevitable. Hence, Miliband’s viewpoint is obviously worlds apart from Paul’s fervent commitment to just such a guarantee, namely, that God will soon intervene in history, dismantle structures of oppression and exploitation, and definitively establish a reign of justice.<sup>63</sup> But Paul was mistaken. *God did not intervene.*

Why did God not assist the messianic rupture arising from the early Jesus movement by hastening the end of Roman domination? This is not just a “problem of evil”

that opens the way for a wide variety of skeptical or atheistic solutions.<sup>64</sup> We could say that the messianic rupture is more a break in God than in the world.<sup>65</sup> It reveals God to be other than what humanity (including Paul) have all too often readily wanted God to be, namely, a Cosmic Monarch who could guarantee favorable outcomes. Indeed, the foundational sin of Christianity – as the ossification of a dynamic Jesus movement – over the centuries has been habitually to *denegate* (in the Lacanian sense of a symptomatic denial/affirmation<sup>66</sup>) the messianic rupture by trying to preserve or restore an *Imago Dei* whose majesty would in fact be of no use to the oppressed.<sup>67</sup>

In this light, it is worth stressing, then, that Paul's egalitarian movement was successful only to the extent that it was eventually coopted into the very Roman imperial structures that the movement had initially threatened.<sup>68</sup> So what remains for contemporary Marxists inspired by Paul's life and letters to do? At the very least, to embrace his confidence that, despite the persistence of sin, grace still irrupts to infuse hope within us to endure another day in pursuit of social justice, a lasting peace, and an ecologically sustainable planet. To appreciate this, let us revisit the theological-political stakes of World War I, this time not via Lenin and Zinoviev but instead via a young Swiss pastor: Karl Barth.

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In a theologically explosive commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans, completed in 1918 during the revolutionary upheavals following the war,<sup>69</sup> displaying moments of "wild excitement,"<sup>70</sup> Barth provocatively asserts both that Christianity is "*more* than Leninism" [*mehr als Leninismus*]<sup>71</sup> and that the "state and revolution" for Christians lies "in heaven, in the hiddenness of human beings."<sup>72</sup> Yet Barth's argument is not for political quietism (Christianity is certainly not *less* than Leninism!); on the contrary: it is precisely a call for Christians to negate the "presupposition and essence" of the capitalist state.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, it is a reminder that they should

concentrate on the *absolute* revolution from God and ... leave the entire area of the penultimate to the process of dissolution, into which it has fallen, anyway; of course, without lifting a finger to preserve the existing order, but also without interfering in its destruction as such. As Christians you have no more to do with it than with the overthrow of the damned in general. ... He is coming, anyway.<sup>74</sup>

In a remarkable passage of biblical exegesis that gave voice with the actual events unfolding around him, Barth proclaims that Christians should

fulfill your duties without illusion, but *no* compromising of God! Payment of tax, but *no* incense to Caesar! Citizens' initiative and obedience but *no* combination of throne and altar; *no* Christian patriotism, *no* democratic crusading. Strike and general strike and street fighting, if need be, but *no* religious justification and glorification of it! Military service as soldier or officer, if need be, but under *no* circumstances army chaplain! Social-democratic but *not* religious socialist! The betrayal of the gospel is *not* part of your political duty.<sup>75</sup>

Barth's point, then, is not for Christians *as Christians* to avoid or embrace political struggles, whether they be they reformist or revolutionary; rather, it is that the sheer grace of God's "*absolute* revolution" not only exceeds but serves as the standard to determine the success of any *relative* social transformation achieved by flawed human beings. Barth cautions that "the cause of divine renewal should not be confused with the cause of human progress. The divine must not be politicized, nor the human theologized – not even for the benefit of democracy and social democracy [i.e. socialism]."<sup>76</sup>

In sum, despite insisting on a sharp demarcation between the relative and the absolute, Barth also notes: "it goes without saying that ... Christians have nothing to do with monarchy, capitalism, militarism, patriotism, and liberalism ... ." <sup>77</sup> Why? Because – and at his point Barth directly quotes from Paul's letter – "How can we who died to sin go on living in it?"<sup>78</sup> The simple answer is that we cannot; indeed, we *must* not; for the messianic age has already begun. But there is a more complicated answer.

Barth reminds Christians engaged in political struggles that they should not expect that God will protect them in their decisions and actions: "You should not be surprised if you are defeated by evil despite all personal purity. You must not be indignant if you too suddenly feel God's wrath, to which you have not given due consideration."<sup>79</sup> Yet, he continues, there is no reason to worry about one's "complicity with political processes":

Even your "bad conscience," the soiled gloves you will in any case take off, must not mislead you. It is quite right for you, too, if you are *not yet* a new creation, to suffer from God's wrath. But, if you *are* a new creation, God's justice will save you from anger. Your sins, including your political sins, will then be forgiven.<sup>80</sup>

Let us conclude with Barth's moving tribute to the advancement of freedom in human history, a passage in which he argues that although God "had to leave behind" previous stages and institutions of world history – from the Roman Empire through the Middle Ages, to the French Revolution, German Idealism, and Pietism – it was "always a good thing."<sup>81</sup> Even more important, Barth asserts, is the current prospect of a greater realization of concrete human freedom:

Perhaps God is currently preparing to leave behind him the old and insecure socialism. For perhaps its historical hour has come to an end without bringing the world what it should have brought it. And with that, its sectarian enclosed truths and powers were freed up for new formations and experiments. But more important than this dissolution will be the other, the fulfilling historical hour, when the now-extinguished glow of Marxist dogma will shine anew as world truth [*Weltwahrheit*], when the socialist church will rise in a world that has become socialist.<sup>82</sup>

Composed in the midst of the 1917 Russian Revolution and on the eve of the 1918 German Revolution, Barth's rousing call to collective action not only conveys the militant spirit of Paul; it also allows for the possibility for a distinctly Pauline Marxism.

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<sup>1</sup> For my own normative defense of self-emancipation, see Stolze 2020, pp. 263-92. For a definitive rebuttal of the view that Marx adhered to a “Promethean” faith in limitless economic growth and scientific-technological progress, see Bellamy Foster 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Marx and Engels 1976, p. 231; Marx and Engels 1977, p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> Marx and Engels 1976, p. 225; Marx and Engels 1977, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> Draper 1978, pp. 150-3.

<sup>5</sup> On the concept of “planetary boundaries” and the moral challenge it poses for Marxists, see Stolze 2020, pp. 304-21. In this article I leave aside the structural sense of sin concerning the climate emergency, but see Moe-Lobeda 2013 and Castillo 2019.

<sup>6</sup> In his definitive commentary on Romans, Robert Jewett concludes that “with a high degree of probability” this letter was drafted from Corinth “in the winter of 56-57 C. E. or the early spring of 57” (Jewett 2007, p. 18). Nero was emperor from 54-68 C.E.

<sup>7</sup> For an introduction to Aristotle’s use of the term, see Sherman 1992.

<sup>8</sup> NE 1106b-1107a; Aristotle 2014, pp. 28-9.

<sup>9</sup> See Aristotle NE VII.1-10; Aristotle 2014, pp. 113-29. For contemporary philosophical investigations into the classical problem of *akrasia*, see Holton 2009 and Mele 2012.

<sup>10</sup> P 52b28-53a11; Aristotle 1987, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Sherman 1992, p. 178.

<sup>12</sup> Sherman 1992, p. 178.

<sup>13</sup> Rom 3:21-26. Through this article, I have modified the New Revised Standard Version in consultation with the Greek text in Nestle Aland 2012. In all quotations from Paul, unless otherwise noted, I translate *nomos* as Torah – since both are better understood not as “law” but “instruction” – and use variations on “error” or “mistake” to capture the meaning of *hamartia* and its verbal forms.

<sup>14</sup> Welborn 2015.

<sup>15</sup> As Eisenbaum (2009, pp. 216-9) argues, Paul’s primary intended audience was Gentiles in the mixed Roman assemblies of Jesus followers, who wrongly thought that they had to become Torah observant in order to be delivered from the ravages of *hamartia*. I have translated *apolytrōsis* as “emancipation” in order to convey the strong sense of the term as the manumission of slaves through the payment of a ransom – in this instance, of course, the ransom paid was understood to be Jesus’ crucifixion.

<sup>16</sup> But see Tamez 1993, Harrison 2017, and Keesmaat and Walsh 2019. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to consider, a fruitful direction for future research would be to identify the theological-political points of convergence between a Pauline Marxism and Karl Barth’s theological dialectic of sin and grace – his famous verbal alternation of a divine “No!” and “Yes!” As George Hunsinger has rightly stressed, though, for Barth grace has the last word in this exchange. This is because “grace that is not disruptive is not grace ... grace, strictly speaking, does not mean continuity but radical discontinuity, not reform but revolution, not violence but nonviolence, not the perfecting of virtues but the forgiveness of sins, not improvement but resurrection from the dead. It means repentance, judgment, and death as the portal to life. It means negation and the negation of the negation. ... Grace may of course work silently and secretly like a germinating seed as well as like a bolt from the blue. It is always as incalculable as it is reliable, unmerited, and full of blessing. ... Those whom God loves may be drawn to God through their suffering and be privileged to share in his sufferings in the world, because grace in its radical disruption surpasses all that we imagine or think” (Hunsinger 2000, pp. 16-17). Hunsinger has also noted the affinities between Barth and liberation theology, which also stresses the centrality of grace in social transformation (see Hunsinger 2017, pp. 193-209).

<sup>17</sup> See Croasmun 2017. With Croasmun, I understand Paul’s identification of an original act of sin by an individual human being – call him “Adam” – to be not a (dubious) causal *biological* claim but an *ontological* one. However, I readily grant, as Dale Martin notes, that “the doctrine of original sin keenly expresses a fundamental human truth: we cannot completely escape the fact of our fundamentally flawed nature” (Martin 2017, p. 292). On the evolution of that doctrine, see Wiley 2002 and Nelson 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Rom 5:17.

<sup>19</sup> Croasmun 2017, p. 121.

<sup>20</sup> On Paul’s use of *prosopeia*, see Stowers 1994, pp. 264-9.

<sup>21</sup> Tanner 2019, p. 55. On sin as a form of debt, and salvation as debt cancellation, see also Anderson 2010.

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<sup>22</sup> Although I cannot do so here, it would be worthwhile to consider in this regard the contribution of a few Marxists who have considered the tragic dimension to human existence conveyed by *hamartia* –notably Raymond Williams (1979) and Terry Eagleton (2003)

<sup>23</sup> For an overview of the “flexible” Pharisaic tradition that Paul inherited, see Eisenbaum 2009, pp. 116–31.

<sup>24</sup> Segal 1990, pp. 244–5.

<sup>25</sup> Stowers 2003.

<sup>26</sup> This was also the position defended by Philo of Alexandria (see Stowers 2003, pp. 531–4).

<sup>27</sup> Stowers 2003, pp. 534–40.

<sup>28</sup> On the inclusive, egalitarian, and profoundly anti-imperial nature of these “Christ Associations” in general, see Kloppenborg 2019; specifically at Rome, see Lampe 2003; Keesmaat and Walsh 2019. On spirit (*pneuma*) in the New Testament as an animating force for the Jesus movement, see Carroll 2018 and Wenk 2004 (who aptly calls spirit a “community-forming power”). More generally, Joel Kovel stressed the vital role of spirit in all human liberation struggles (see Kovel 1991).

<sup>29</sup> Eisenbaum 2009, p. 241.

<sup>30</sup> Eisenbaum 2009, p. 253.

<sup>31</sup> Eisenbaum 2009, p. 235.

<sup>32</sup> I wholeheartedly agree with Alain Badiou (2003) that Paul offers a compelling model of militancy for Marxists today. However, for my disagreements with the details of Badiou’s understanding of Paul’s strategy, see Stolze 2020, pp. 50–52.

<sup>33</sup> On war as a sin, see Hedges 2009. On the Second International’s collapse in the face of WWI, see Haupt 1972. Another theological-political point of convergence between Karl Barth’s theology and what I am calling Pauline Marxism is that both are firmly rooted in the antiwar socialism that emerged from the 1915 Zimmerwald Conference. Barth himself was vociferously opposed to WWI and appalled when his former professors Martin Rade and Wilhelm Herrmann publicly expressed their support for the German government’s war policies. On Barth’s opposition to WWI, see Grimshaw 2018, pp. 4–5; Klempa 2016; and Puffer 2020. For a reappraisal not only of Barth’s lifelong socialist commitment but also his union organizing activity from his ten years as a young “red pastor” in Safenwil, Switzerland, see Hunsinger 2017; Chung 2015, pp. 28–113; Klempa 2016, pp. 9–13; Dorrien 2019, pp. 217–69; and Pangritz 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Lenin 1964.

<sup>35</sup> Lenin 1964, p. 299.

<sup>36</sup> On Lenin’s creative reworking of the sayings and parables in the Gospels, and fashioning of his own distinctive parables, see Boer 2013, pp. 31–58.

<sup>37</sup> Lenin 1964, p. 301.

<sup>38</sup> Lenin 1964, p. 307.

<sup>39</sup> Lenin 1964, p. 310.

<sup>40</sup> Lenin 1964, p. 312.

<sup>41</sup> Smith 1987, p. 66.

<sup>42</sup> Clausewitz 2007, p. 28, in which Howard and Paret’s translation reads: “War Is Merely the Continuation of Policy by Other Means.”

<sup>43</sup> Lenin 1964, p. 304. Interestingly, as a section title, they significantly expand Clausewitz’s slogan as follows: “War is the Continuation by Other (i. e. Violent) Means.”

<sup>44</sup> On the Basle Manifesto and its predecessor resolutions passed in Stuttgart in 1907 and Copenhagen in 1910, see Joll 1974.

<sup>45</sup> As is well known, Lenin applied the term “renegade” to Kautsky in a pamphlet published in 1918 after the latter had publicly expressed his opposition to the October Revolution; see Lenin 1965.

<sup>46</sup> No doubt there are other reasons that one could wind up doing what he or she doesn’t want to do besides ethical weakness, for example: doing things out of fear, acting under orders, and mistaken identity (in the psychological senses of displacement, transference, condensation, fetishism, projection, or compulsive repetition); see Sokolowski 2017, pp. 120–42. But I leave these aside.

<sup>47</sup> Correctness, not truth, better captures the *practical* dimension of faith as loyalty to a cause, whether religious or political. Here I borrow Louis Althusser’s distinction, which he framed in terms of “correctness” versus “justice” (see Althusser 2017, pp. 41–44). Interestingly, Althusser applied this distinction to warfare: wars, can be (a) just but not correct, (b) correct but not just, (c) both correct and just, or (d) neither correct nor just. For example, he continues, “the imperialist wars of 1914–1918 and even of 1939–1941, although they were experienced as being just by those who took part in them, were neither correct nor just, inasmuch as

they were purely and simply wars between imperialist states, blind powers subject to the law of capitalist accumulation, which they were by no means capable of controlling" (Althusser 2017, p. 43).

<sup>48</sup> Thanks to Mike Grimshaw for this insight (personal communication).

<sup>49</sup> 1 Thess. 5:6-8.

<sup>50</sup> Denise Meyerson has reworked the classical conception of ideology as "false consciousness" and explored a wide variety of what she calls "motivated mistakes" (see Meyerson 1991).

<sup>51</sup> See Martha Nussbaum's great work on ancient Greek dramatic and philosophical accounts of human fragility; Nussbaum 2001. Roland Boer rightly notes that not only did Lenin did not adhere to a view that human beings are perfect but even pointed out "the many failings of the Bolsheviks" (Boer 2013, p. 209).

<sup>52</sup> Rom 7:7.

<sup>53</sup> On these executions in retaliation for the massive fire that swept through the city in the year 64 C. E., see Lampe 2003, pp. 82-4. For a skeptical challenge to the conventional image of Nero as a persecutor of Christians, see Shaw 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Martin 2017, pp. 292-3.

<sup>55</sup> Martin 2017, p. 292.

<sup>56</sup> For reflections on Paul's "ethic of nonretaliation and peace," which is presented most fully in Rom 12:14-21, see Zerbe 2012, pp. 141-68.

<sup>57</sup> Martin 2017, p. 294

<sup>58</sup> Miliband 1995, p. 58. In an extraordinary essay on "Socialist Hope in the Shadow of Catastrophe," Norman Geras developed Miliband's reflections "by way of examining more closely some of the assumptions about human nature that he reviews or himself deploys in articulating it" (Geras 1998, pp. 83-120).

<sup>59</sup> Miliband 1995, pp. 58-9.

<sup>60</sup> Miliband 1995, p. 59.

<sup>61</sup> Miliband 1995, pp. 60-1.

<sup>62</sup> Miliband 1995, p. 61.

<sup>63</sup> Wasserman 2018.

<sup>64</sup> James Sterba has recently offered a stimulating contribution to the longstanding question of how to reconcile God's goodness – indeed, God's very existence – with the degree and amount of natural and moral evil in the world (see Sterba 2019). Interestingly enough, Sterba makes his case in part by drawing out the implications of a *Pauline Principle* ("Never do evil that good may come of it"), which is a formulation occurring in Rom 3:8 that expresses a charge directed against, and repudiated by, Paul).

<sup>65</sup> I owe this formulation to Mike Grimshaw (personal communication).

<sup>66</sup> See Lacan 2006, pp. 308-33, 746-54.

<sup>67</sup> Strictly, speaking, of course, such re-enthronement of God as a Cosmic Monarch is an *inversion and reversal* of the *Imago Dei* revealed in Genesis 1, which itself operated as ancient Israel's ideological dethronement of the divine potentates of its neighboring states. On the liberatory implications of Genesis 1, see Middleton 2005. On the general Biblical vision – yet to be fulfilled – of substantive metaphysical, ethical, and social equality, see Berman 2008.

<sup>68</sup> Howard-Brook 2016.

<sup>69</sup> It is not surprising that Barth's radical first commentary on Romans has yet to be translated; instead only the thoroughly rewritten second version published in 1922 (and by 1928 had gone through six editions) is available in English.

<sup>70</sup> Gorringer 1999, p. 37.

<sup>71</sup> Barth 1985, p. 506. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of passages from Barth's commentary are my own. On Barth's relationship not only to Lenin's political perspective but also to the latter's influence on Swiss socialists while he was in exile in Zürich, see Gorringer 1999, pp. 37-48; Chung 2015, pp. 134-46; and Marquardt 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Barth 1985, pp. 507. With the phrase "in the hiddenness of human beings" Barth draws on Rom 2:15-16: "They [Gentiles] show that the work of Torah is written on their hearts, while their conscience bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them on that day when, according to my gospel, through the Messiah Jesus, God will judge the hiddenness of human beings." As Paul S. Chung has noted Barth's irregular use of a singular verb coupled with the plural subject "your [Christian] state and revolution," suggests that he was alluding to the title of Lenin's pamphlet, "which was circulated underground within the radical leftists of the SPS [Swiss Socialist Party]," and excerpts of which he could have read while composing his commentary on Romans (Chung 2015, p. 135n.26). At any rate, as Chung

concludes, even if Barth hadn't read (excerpts of) the pamphlet, "it is safe to say that Lenin's works and Leninism would have been within Barth's horizon" (p. 136).

<sup>73</sup> Barth 1985, p. 506.

<sup>74</sup> Barth 1985, p. 506.

<sup>75</sup> Barth 1985, pp. 520-21. I have slightly modified the translation in Gorringer 1999, p. 46

<sup>76</sup> Barth 1985, p. 509.

<sup>77</sup> Barth 1985, p. 509.

<sup>78</sup> Rom 6:2.

<sup>79</sup> Barth 1985, p. 510.

<sup>80</sup> Barth 1985, p. 510.

<sup>81</sup> Barth 1985, p. 444.

<sup>82</sup> Barth 1985, p. 444.