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Critical Theory from *The Gulag Archipelago*: Style, Technique, and *Ideologiekritik*

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Abstract: *The Gulag Archipelago* has been treated consistently as a conservative indictment of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union. When subsumed into his later writings, this perception has reinforced amongst progressives an enduring portrait of Solzhenitsyn-the-man as a backward-looking anti-modernist and reactionary. I advocate a return to the text itself in isolation from Solzhenitsyn's corpus, and in a manner more cognizant of the political practices latent in its prose. In its style and structure, certain specific techniques can be found where the search for formal methodology has left previous commentators on the Left disappointed. The place of Solzhenitsyn's magnum opus in the history of political thought is here reassessed on the basis of its style, pointing to its potential contribution to critical theory and to its relevance for critical social analysis today.

Throughout the almost two thousand pages of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* there radiates an excoriating condemnation of the Soviet state. However, though it is doubtless true that "Solzhenitsyn repudiates Marxism" (Medvedev 1974b: 69), a now axiomatic reading of *The Gulag Archipelago* and his other works, this does not rule out *The Gulag Archipelago* as a source for critical theorizing and social analysis in our own time. I would argue that Solzhenitsyn cannot so easily be quarantined off from the practices, predicates, and propensities of the critical or even Marxian tradition, just as one cannot really say that there are no tools of critical theory in Solzhenitsyn's prose. The point in what follows is that there exists a more nuanced relationship in *The Gulag Archipelago* to the deeper tradition of critical philosophy that lies through and beyond Marxian critique.

Most scholarship on Solzhenitsyn-the-Man has repeatedly read the book as a conservative counter-revolutionary tract, a view which has been entrenched since its original publication in the early 1970s. The consequence is that *The Gulag Archipelago* itself has today been incorporated into the totalizing reputation of Solzhenitsyn's corpus, but a reputation mostly earned by Solzhenitsyn in other places. The triumphant, Fukuyamist, post-Soviet, and largely Atlanticist secondary scholarship has variously stressed Solzhenitsyn's metaphysical idealism, religiosity (Ericson and Mahony xli), conservative constitutionalism (Rowley; Ericson and Mahony xxxix), anti-modernism (Tempest 2010), authoritarianism (Congdon 56-57; Laber 4), ethno-nationalism (Confino; Yanov 565-66; Mandel 56), Counter-Enlightenment proclivities (Medvedev 1974b: 71), and even putative propinquity to the extreme Right on certain issues (Rowley 336). However, though these observations and assessments have emerged primarily from his later *publitsistika* writings of the 1990s, they have generally built upon the condemnatory assessment of *The Gulag Archipelago* that emerged from the Left at the time it was first published in English in 1974. It is from this early critical literature that the enduring

portrait of *The Gulag Archipelago* emerges as a work of conservative reaction and comprehensively anti-Marxist invective. Laying out this enduring portrait is the business of the introductory sections below, and an exploratory and critical re-examination of it is the business of the sections that succeed them. The aim here is neither a “revisionism,” nor any claim to discovering the “real” Solzhenitsyn, but rather questioning the enduring portrait of *The Gulag Archipelago* and re-reading this work without automatic reference to Solzhenitsyn’s corpus as a whole.

I argue that *The Gulag Archipelago* differs crucially from the other products of Solzhenitsyniana. The “utopian and incompetent propositions” to be found in his *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* (Solzhenitsyn 1974; see also Medvedev 1974b: 61), the unstable and shrill modulations in *Alexander Solzhenitsyn Speaks to the West* (1978), not to mention the polemical works of the 1990s on ethno-nationalism (i.e., 1990; 1995), might be monochromic in their fulsome condemnation of the Revolution and Marxism-Leninism (1974: 42; 1978: 38), but in the “literary investigation” that is *The Gulag Archipelago* another quite different dimension emerges, one that contains a sophisticated set of critical techniques that are more germane to the idiom of ethico-political struggle engendered by the “camp” as a modulation or technology of social control (Welsh 2020). As we shall see, if Gulag narratives are indeed “bifunctional objects whose informational and aesthetic functions become ‘marked’ at different periods of reception” (Toker 2000: 7), then the prospect of Deleuze’s “control societies” (1992) and Antonio Negri’s “social factory” (1992, 2018) ought to provoke new questions about *The Gulag Archipelago* as a source for critical theorizing in our own time.

This means that we ought to interrogate *The Gulag Archipelago* as a text in its own right, if we wish to understand that text’s conditions of emergence, the practices of which it forms a part, or even how the literary qualities of that work might offer a different kind of contribution to the history of political thought than is offered in the enduring portrait. One must not fall into what Quentin Skinner framed as either the “myth of coherence” or the “myth of doctrines” (66-67), whereby, respectively, either the sought for coherence in a writer’s lifework is insinuated into one of their texts regardless of the conditions into which that text was produced as an individual and discrete speech act, or a text is taken to be the author’s comprehensive and definitive statement on some given topic, theme, or question in the canon of political philosophy (i.e. human nature, the ideal polity, the logic of history, etc.). Such myths abound, usually in such expressions as “but as Solzhenitsyn makes clear elsewhere...” (Ericson and Mahoney xxxvi), and it is my intention here to avoid them. These fallacies turn the seemingly conservative, irrational, or “metaphysical” vignettes that are temptingly evident in *The Gulag Archipelago* into anticipations *in nuce* of the explicit political and intellectual positions taken by the later Solzhenitsyn: *The Gulag Archipelago* is thereby integrated biographically into the conventional and enduring portrait of the author rather than treated as a singular text with particular properties that connect the author to a particular context in a particular way. This discrepancy has meant that many find in the work the paw prints of the curmudgeonly reactionary expected later and then look no further. To escape this anachronistic reading, the concentration on Solzhenitsyn’s life, pronouncements, and subsequent mobilization in the service of neo-conservative apologetics should make way for a consideration of *The Gulag Archipelago* as a text in itself. What follows pertains not to the man but to the text, and especially to the literary quality of the text as *political prose*.

Post-Marxist Critical Theory

This imperative to resist the myths of “coherence” and “doctrines” when reading *The Gulag Archipelago* must be matched by a resistance to ill-informed and clichéd conceptions of marxisant critical theory that have never comprehended the rich mosaic that is the marxian tradition of social analysis and philosophy. To be receptive to the argument below, one must divest oneself of the automatic assumption that marxian critical thought is synonymous with determinism, totalizing absolutes, conscious and programmatic action, utopian political forms, or tired sociological categories. These properties have never been universally held amongst marxian thinkers, analysts, and practitioners, and most certainly do not characterise marxian thinking today. To identify marxian elements or critical theoretical assumptions and practices in *The Gulag Archipelago*, one must be prepared for incoherence, inconsistency, heterodox formulation, and for alloying with other traditions of thought in a manner that one can find today in Post-Marxism and the New Materialisms, as well as amongst the torchbearers of Frankfurt critical theory. When Marx is mentioned below, it is therefore *marxian* critical theory that is being signified, rather than the Marxism-Leninism against which Solzhenitsyn railed.

What we are dealing with here is Marx’s mode or style of social critique as reworked first by the Frankfurt school (Adorno, Horkheimer, Fromm, Marcuse, etc.), and then later by left-bank French poststructuralists (Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Guattari, Lyotard, etc.), and is sometimes referred to as *Post-Marxism*. Though highly eclectic and ranging agglomerations of critical social thinking, these loose groupings have brought to the tabernacle of Marxism a particular but decisive set of problematizations. On the one hand, the nightmare of Soviet power, proletarian coordination into Fascism, and mechanised extermination, required a rethinking of historical materialism. On the other hand, the principal categories of Marxist social thought demanded more stringent interrogation, given the way in which they had been hypostasized into dogma and ideological formula. What these tributaries have injected into the Marxian canon is an epistemological reassessment of the Marxist tradition in light of the political and social developments of the 20th century, particularly with respect to ideology, rationality, and “actually existing socialism.” The result has been a hyper-modern reflexivity in the later 20th century regarding actually existing Marxism as a totalizing system of thought. What has emerged in recent decades out of this processing is a mode of social critique allergic to programmatic “isms,” obsessively cautious and introspective about the formation of epistemic systems, cognizant of the paradigmatic nature of *rationalités*, and constantly alert to the coordinating unities of discourse and ideology. The result is less a *Marxism*, with all its associations of totalizing and deterministic absolutes, and more a porous and pragmatological tradition of critical techniques and dispositions developed directly from the canon of Marxian scholarship, as well as from Marx himself. Retaining its materialist ontology, but sensitive to the need for synthesis with other traditions of social critique, it is an ecumenical Marxism shorn of doctrine and (covering all metaphorical senses of the term) railroad tracks. It is in this way that we can speak of *marxian*, or *marxisant*, critical theory that is suitably prepared for the 21st century.

Solzhenitsyn’s attack on the Bolshevik Party, the Vanguard Doctrine, the

Soviet State, and the orthodox ideology of Marxism-Leninism as *the* programmatic agenda of social transformation in the USSR constitutes an explicit, direct, and iterated rejection of “actually existing socialism.” However, this does not mean that there is no room in *The Gulag Archipelago* for elements or techniques of Marxian thought, or for the broad tradition of critical philosophy from which Marxian critique has drawn its resources and in relation to which it exists in a continuous state of reformation, reformulation, and renewal.

Marx’s dialectical mode, steeped in the Hegelian augmentation of Kant’s epistemological critique, did not speak the scientific language of mechanistic causation (Harvey 24, 110, 193–200). Even though he might have inverted Hegel’s idealism into the grubby loam of materialist analysis, Marx retained the emphasis on dialectical relationality and the opening of spaces for contingent action that this negative dialectical thinking made possible. Bourgeois anglophone liberals can read Marx in their own image just as effectively as dogmatic Marxists, and in so doing interpret causal and mechanistic conceptualization in their translation of his words, but that tells us more about them than it does about him. What is so remarkable about Marx, when actually read, is how light, sophisticated, reflexively aware, epistemologically sensitive, and advanced his “pragmatological” mode of analysis is (Fleischer 123; Tomba vii). As we shall see, the dialectical core of Marx’s analytical style emphasized the contradiction internal to objects (i.e., concepts, social relations, state forms), rather than any positive schematic of scientific causation or prognostication. Irrespective of the directions in which Marx’s work was later developed, his social critique emphasized the “conditions of possibility” opened up by the exploration of contradictions in social phenomena as they became critical. In this way, one can speak of a humanist Marx whose principal critical mode was one of negation, and for whom any socialist future was without positive content. This is a critical-dialectical Marx, rather than either the prophet of Soviet hagiography or the bogeyman of liberal detraction.

I shall build up the central argument of the article: *The Gulag Archipelago* makes use of the techniques of critical theory¹ that are surprisingly close to Marx’s own analytical techniques, making of *The Gulag Archipelago* a potential contributory source for critical theoretical analysis of contemporary society in a way contrary to prevailing assumptions. The point is to indicate the ways in which the work offers an archive for critical theorists (see Ahmed), a tool-box of critical techniques (Deleuze and Foucault 208), and an inspiration for social critique. By questioning the over-literal reading of *The Gulag Archipelago* in the enduring portrait, through a demonstration of *a methodical force* of Solzhenitsyn’s *style*, I show that *immanent critique* is a conspicuous feature of this style and that a form of *dialectical thinking* in Solzhenitsyn’s prose bears a striking resemblance to the techniques of critical theory. How *The Gulag Archipelago* has the potential to make a heterodox, though problematic, contribution to critical theory is something that I clarify in the Conclusion.

The Enduring Portrait

For subscribers to the enduring portrait, Solzhenitsyn quite simply made a complete and damascene *volte-face* from the “kind of purified Leninism” of his more

¹ Here, “Critical Philosophy” refers principally to the German tradition from Kant, through Hegel and Marx, to the Frankfurt Critical Theory of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, *et al.*

youthful years (Solzhenitsyn 2007 I: 135) into an embrace of conservative politics, nationalism, and reaction. Though the process was actually more gradual and piecemeal (Toker 2019: 198), this basic assessment seems to be confirmed from the pen of the man himself:

this state of mind [Leninism] stayed with me for a long time. When I was young, my sense of the world was highly convoluted. Its elements clashed and conflicted with each other: my views were very different from what they are now. Indeed, as a young man I was interested in dialectical and historical materialism, which was the cause of all this [Gulag, Soviet Dictatorship, Stalinism, etc.] (Cited in Tempest 2019: 586).

When *The Gulag Archipelago* was first published in English in 1974, the contemporary Marxist Left reacted heavily to this explicit rejection of Marxism-Leninism. Given a reliance on historically specific formulations and a wish to concur in Solzhenitsyn's self-assessment, the absence of specific and explicit Marxist formulations in Solzhenitsyn's writings was enough for the work to be consigned into the *malbolge* of reaction. For fellow dissident Roy Medvedev, the ideological and political views that emanated from the "phenomenon of Solzhenitsyn" were "extremely backward for their times" (1974b: 74). For the Trotskyite Ernest Mandel, *The Gulag Archipelago* was replete with "reactionary conclusions" and was saturated with "reactionary ideology" (51, 53), which serves little but to expose "the moralist Solzhenitsyn" and his ahistorical or utopian "moralistic politics" (54, 58). For Francis Barker, what was realised in *The Gulag Archipelago* was "a retrogressive ideology" compounded upon "desperately reactionary values" (1975a: 148), with the book itself being "politically reactionary, socially and morally elitist, and in the end devoid of artistic interest" (1975b: 212).²

Roy Medvedev, who warns against dismissing Solzhenitsyn as a "reactionary and romantic" (1974b: 61), thus suggesting at least a space for more nuanced interpretation, takes issue with Solzhenitsyn's narrative of the Revolution, sticking to a much more positive line on Lenin. He posits a genuinely counterrevolutionary turn under Stalin (1971), and accuses Solzhenitsyn of collapsing the entire legacy of the Revolution into a conflation of the two (1974a). In their counterattack, critics from the Left subjected Solzhenitsyn himself to charges of being one of the "prisoners of Stalinist ideology" (Mandel 60), beholden to a "Stalinist heritage" (Frankel 481), and so placed him amongst those who "to some extent even adopt the theories with which Stalin and his executioners justified their crimes" (Mandel 51). In fact, it is in Solzhenitsyn's emphasis on continuity over rupture in the early history of the Soviet state that Medvedev saw a total absence of historical awareness, paying little attention to the possibility that historicity might be found in the structure and technique of the work itself.

To this latter possibility we shall return, but these criticisms bring us to the matter of Solzhenitsyn's historiography, theory, and method, as it is from his "method" that his purely reactionary politics are thought to emanate and take form. The first problem is the allegedly "less authoritative epistemological status" of Solzhenitsyn's unscientific and unsystematic "literary investigation" (Barker 1975a: 148). This was of great importance particularly to Marxists of the post-war years,

² Actually, it is in the more conventionally accepted artistic interest of the work that its progressive potential can be found.

for whom the social scientific method had not yet been touched by the trials of discourse analysis, poststructuralism, and the “cultural turn.” When not assuming its complete absence, evaluations of Solzhenitsyn’s “method” in *The Gulag Archipelago* emphasised its erratic confusion, its dubious embrace of the irrational, and its determinism.

Solzhenitsyn’s “understanding of history” is associated by Barker with the “epistemological and methodological form of the book,” which of course is found wanting and which he described as a concoction of “memory and divination,” a “mysterious reading of facts,” and an “organic irrationality by which Solzhenitsyn leaps from collected fact to historical generalisation” (1975a: 154). Medvedev even went so far as to write that *The Gulag Archipelago* demonstrates “nothing which one might call an historical background” (1974a: 25–36). Despite conceding that Solzhenitsyn seemed aware of “the old conflict between literary and scientific truths” (485), Boris Frankel echoed Irwin Silber by also questioning the methodological rigour in Solzhenitsyn’s “analysis of historical processes” (483). The consequence is a sense, on Frankel’s part, that Solzhenitsyn possesses “a fundamentally ahistorical view of the world.” These are precisely the species of conclusion to which one might come whilst searching vainly for social scientific method in a place where it has been explicitly disavowed. Again, for Barker there is “an immediate complexity” to Solzhenitsyn’s “ideological structure” in *The Gulag Archipelago*, but it “appears at times as personal confusion on the author’s part” (1975a: 153). However, when Barker remarks that this might be the result of an archaeological layering of Solzhenitsyn’s previous positions into *The Gulag Archipelago*, therefore assessing *The Gulag Archipelago* in terms of the rest of his corpus, we are back amongst Skinner’s interpretive fallacies.

Francis Barker’s general perception of an “irrational epistemology” in *The Gulag Archipelago* seems to be the result of an overliteral reading on his part, probably a consequence of an unsympathetic hunt for social scientific method and terminology. To give just one example, in Solzhenitsyn’s metaphorical allusion to interpersonal and intuitive “sensor relays” in the communicative relations between prisoners, sometimes referred to even as “spiritual relays” (Solzhenitsyn 2007 I: 185–86), his mysticism and irrationalism is apparently confirmed (Barker 1975a: 154). That this might be an artistic expression of a psychosocial operation in the human condition rather than a committed affirmation of the supernatural, does not seem to enter into consideration. Because Solzhenitsyn’s “automatic judgements before and without analytic thought” emerge apparently with “no [explicitly formulated] theoretical link between them,” Barker’s verdict is that “the foundations of his judgements are left unclear” and that *The Gulag Archipelago* is methodologically compromised (154). Without explicit formulation of a scientific method, the “progression is from unconscious statement, through distracting anecdote, to historical conclusions which are far from the realm of absolute truth that Solzhenitsyn insists that other men should inhabit” (155).

However, these criticisms of irrationalism and confusion notwithstanding, in the main Solzhenitsyn is deemed an ahistorical determinist, beholden to a teleological and presentist tendency carried by a “prejudiced and imaginative” mode of historical investigation (Barker 1975b: 206). In all, a much more dangerous prospect. When not being wayward or irrational, Solzhenitsyn’s “idea of history” is considered by Barker to be deterministic, either through his “technocratic” view of history as “a process imaginable in terms of machine-like

mechanisms which may be understood to have certain definable structures and (perhaps) to develop in accordance with historical laws,” or through his “organic” view of history as “a natural process, given and detached from human volition and responsibility” (1975a: 156). This is a decisive misreading. I would argue that *The Gulag Archipelago* is in fact one long endeavour to locate human agency and responsibility amidst great personal suffering and impersonal social forces; it actually furnishes a consistent satire on the dogma of historical determinism.

Whilst accepting Boris Frankel’s claim that the meaning of historical materialism is something that “the Soviet Party repressed and distorted,” I do not agree necessarily that “Solzhenitsyn’s understanding of Marx is a product of all the mechanistic and reductionist qualities with which Soviet Marxism is permeated” (Frankel 492). This might have been the way in which Solzhenitsyn often presented Marx, whilst addressing him explicitly through the curtain of official Stalinist dogma (the true object of his obloquy and critique). However, if we were to speak of Solzhenitsyn’s “understanding” of Marx as the degree to which he internalized and used, wittingly or unintentionally, the latter’s critical techniques of social analysis, perhaps his historical *understanding* can be seen in a new and more trenchant light, in contrast to the “misdirected and confused” picture one gets in his more explicit “diatribe against Marxist ideology” (492).

This brings us back to the present agenda. Solzhenitsyn’s authorial stance was clearly anti-Marxist, if we were to understand that term as a conscious rejection of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism and the doctrines of dialectical materialism upon which it was fed. It is not my intention to invert this stance. But if we were to accept that Solzhenitsyn’s intellectual development, the literary resources at his disposal, and the latent critical tools with which he would have been imbued as an educated Russian of his milieu (Toker 2000: 105–106),³ Marxisant critical techniques might have been drawn upon by Solzhenitsyn implicitly in his literary resistance to Soviet power. Though many may be loath to entertain such a notion, there is no necessary reason why his explicit condemnations of Marxism-Leninism and the Soviet state cannot leave room for aspects or moments of marxisant thinking and practice which animate certain implicit predicates, commitments, and loyalties to the tradition of critical philosophy that he seems to have retained from his upbringing. When Medvedev claimed of Solzhenitsyn that he “treats Marxism as though it were a dogma” (1974b: 71), perhaps it was indeed to the mainstream Marxist dogma of the Soviet Union that he reserved the core of his condemnation, leaving the possibility of other latent expressions of marxisant or otherwise critical thought unexamined. We should not fall into Skinner’s “myth of doctrines,” and instead consider how Wordsworth located the aesthetic power of multifunctional texts such as plain-folk epitaphs in the space between “content” and “stance” (1974; see Toker 2000: 28, 74).

The Gulag Archipelago is a multi-functional text where the congruence of textual content and authorial stance is not a straightforward one. Leona Toker has perhaps done the most to open up the enduring portrait to other ways of understanding Solzhenitsyn’s work, especially as regards his technique in *The Gulag Archipelago* as political prose. For example, by alluding to the “richness of Solzhenitsyn’s techniques of persuasion and their appropriateness to the concrete subjects touched” (2000: 106), she indicates more than rhetorical skill at work here.

³ Solzhenitsyn himself acknowledged that he was one of “*the twins of October*, those born along with the Revolution” (2007 II: 238).

This “appropriateness” to the “concrete subject” is also a carefully calibrated technique of social and political critique. Solzhenitsyn is here not necessarily Barker’s and Mandel’s devious and disingenuous rhetorician of the enduring portrait but a dissident who has learned the hard way that critique must often be gauged adroitly in hostile environments and especially when one is subject to “aversive controls” (2000: 112). Most importantly, Toker perceives not only the call-to-rebellion in *The Gulag Archipelago* (112–14), which is absent in the enduring portrait, but also how the literary technique in the work itself forms a kind of continuum of praxis into extratextual reality toward the destruction of the “controlling power” of the Gulag and the Soviet state.

Working along similar lines, I argue that, regardless of his explicit criticisms of Marxism-Leninism and the Bolsheviks, there does emerge a cumulative sense that throughout *The Gulag Archipelago* Solzhenitsyn persisted in a certain commitment to the techniques of critical theory, some of which being familiar from the work of Marx. Irrespective of whether it appears through the tangle of cognitive dissonance, inconsistent application, or otherwise incoherent thinking, Solzhenitsyn seems to prove Scott Fitzgerald’s definition of an artist as a person who can hold two opposing thoughts at the same time and still function. This is something that Ernest Mandel seems to note unwittingly when he alludes disapprovingly to the “contradictions in Solzhenitsyn’s thought” (57), which are assumed to be the “consequences of his rejection of Marxism” but which, I shall argue, might just as well demonstrate the Marxian awareness of dialectic as it is brought to bear upon the contradiction-riddled object under his scrutiny, the Soviet state.

What is important here is that the charges of irrationality, confusion, ahistoricity, determinism, and general lack of “method” in *The Gulag Archipelago* seem to derive more from a quite particular set of methodological expectations predicated upon a fairly restricted and sometimes dogmatic social scientific assumption of what “method” ought to be. If Solzhenitsyn’s reactionary and conservative politics flow from his dubious or absent method, then any argument that can demonstrate the possible presence of another kind of “method” might open the door to another reading of his politics in *The Gulag Archipelago* — as not quite as reactionary as has been thought.

The main criticisms of *The Gulag Archipelago* that were contemporary to its publication in the 1970s and which came to establish the conventional parameters of its interpretation are too easily held even today; they impede the book’s potential to stimulate fresh and inspiring kinds of critical social analyses. I do not propose to reclaim Solzhenitsyn as a closet historical materialist or Marxist. Rather, I attempt to return to the text of *The Gulag Archipelago* in a time of more sophisticated, protean, matured, and receptive critical theory, so as to encourage interest once again in a “literary investigation” that *n’a rien perdu de son importance aujourd’hui* (Miletitch), and which has so much to tell us, in particular about the logic of social control, in addition to an immensity of human suffering.

Style as a Critical Practice

The claim that *The Gulag Archipelago* has “been evaluated by non-Soviet critics largely in terms of literary style and quality” (Frankel 477) is dubious, for there remains much work to be done in this direction. Furthermore, it is clear that little connection has been made between its literary style and the political content and

import of the work. This connection is crucial for rebutting the myriad criticisms of Solzhenitsyn's "method" in *The Gulag Archipelago*.

There is no "method" in *The Gulag Archipelago* in any social scientific sense of the word. "Method" denotes a clearly formulated schema, a self-conscious strategy, a systematic procedure, a means of achieving a coherent end. Such a description is inappropriate here. This book, after all, is a "literary investigation," and makes no explicit reference to Marxist intellectual "methods," or to any other methods for that matter. Solzhenitsyn derives his anthropological compass from elsewhere, not from Marx or the Leninist or Trotskyist re-articulations but from some depth of the Russian variant of the Humanist tradition.⁴ However, not only is there a process of critical philosophical thought, but there is something else at work here, more ambiguous and yet potent.

Ironically, *The Gulag Archipelago* has many affinities with Marx's *style*,⁵ or at least the critical idiom derived from this style. It is in the literary quality of the text itself that a critical and analytic significance can be found through and beyond its artistic merits, and through which Solzhenitsyn's critical practice is given form and substance in a manner that is strikingly similar to those of critical theory. *The Gulag Archipelago* reveals the truth in Vladimir Nabokov's assertion that "style and structure are the essence of a book" (xxiii), over and above any embossing of great ideas therein, and Solzhenitsyn's style is the elemental core from which we must start in order to arrive at the critical theory present in *The Gulag Archipelago*. But how can style be a means of critique or critical action?

A *style* is a "holding together of disparate elements" or a "mode of composition" (Massumi xiii; see Deleuze 1972: 142–50), and is not necessarily governed by the *techné* of a conscious goal. It coalesces from elements which manifest in a "constellation of features, both large and small" (Chatman: 26). It is an event rather than an effect, and though more implicit than explicit it is no less potent than the propositions of scientific methodology. Referencing Joan Didion's *Democracy* (71), Robert Chodat claims that "style" is neither contrary to nor a negation of "ideas," nor even to "this or that 'thought' about modern social-political practices," but that the two are correlated in expression (133, 148). As a means of communication rather than a propositional method, style is a *practice*, rather than a *methodical* technique, something lived rather than deployed. It is less a hidden assertion than an "expression of attitudes" (147).

Mandel complained that Solzhenitsyn's politics is "oriented not towards the masses but toward individual protest" (60). I read Solzhenitsyn's style as a direct functional extension of his experience of oppression and suffering, and his survival in an environment tasked with destroying his political subjectivity; it is therefore immanent to the way in which his critique is at the same time an "ethico-political experimentation" in the auto-production of subjectivity (Lazzarato 169, 248). The assumption here is that "the *form* of a literary work has an ethical aspect" (Toker 2000: 9), and that "the content of ethically oriented writings may be 'implicated in their literary structure, not only as it happens or by an author's deliberate choice but intrinsically' " (ibid.; see also Lang 120). In contrast to an explicitly scientific method of criticism, the subtlety of style makes of it more a personal ethical practice than a paratactic method of organized resistance. It is by that practice that

⁴ This can also be said of Varlam Shalamov; see Toker 2019: 166.

⁵ The striking similarities can emerge from the recent discussion of Marx's style in Jessop and Sum 2018.

the survival strategies in the Gulag are continued and developed after Gulag into social and political critique through the genre of Gulag memoir. Style is a more appropriate medium for conspiratorial *parrhesia* than the direct rebellion or confrontation to be found in the explicit and coherent methods of political science (Foucault 2001; Welsh 2018: 38–41).

Both Solzhenitsyn's style and the recourse to style itself as a mode of social and political critique are neither an accident, deficiency, nor weakness in his work. It is rather the continuation of a strategic counter-conduct that began in East Prussia with his arrest in February 1945 and developed through his seven-year survival of the Gulag.

The significance of implicit style can be considerable, even when found in quite modest places. Let us take the example of Solzhenitsyn's penchant for rustic aphorism and the wisdom of proverbs, found in many of his works from *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1970 [1962]), through *The First Circle* (1968), right up to *The Red Wheel* cycle: "pride grows in the human heart like lard on a pig" (2007 I: 163); "from good to evil is one quaver" (168); "well-fed horses don't rampage" (262); "A human being is not a devil, but he won't let you live" (2007 II: 286); "beat the crow and beat the raven, and in the end you'll get to the white swan" (295). Apparently quaint traditionalism? This paremiological constituent of his style counters the inhuman and alienating rationality of a Soviet order obsessed with technocratic reason, and outmanoeuvres it with an intimately human familiarity, a maneuver that he explicitly defends by reminding the reader that "proverbs, after all, are made up about people" (2007 III: 457). Solzhenitsyn draws our attention back to even Marx's admonition that in every criminal there is "a warm-blooded human being . . . 'whose existence is sacred' . . . a citizen," and then concedes "but our jurists have no time to read Marx, particularly such *unthought-out* parts as these" (2007 II: 302; italics mine). The impersonalized rationality of the Soviet state, and its hunger for formula and *quadrillage*,⁶ is contrasted with the essential humanity of lived life.⁷

Proverb also supplies the economy and particularity of expression congenial to the ease of communication that Herbert Spencer (15) thought so quintessential to efficacious written style. Solzhenitsyn's proclivity for proverb brings to his style a compendiousness in what it attempts to communicate, a style that packages dissentient thought, a coded style that requires the reader to possess a crib-sheet, which naturally much of his intended Russian readership would have anyway. Proverbs such as these are deployed as counter-conceptualizations that internalize contradictions of the objects that they are deployed to critique in a way sufficient to mask their critical operation. Amidst the intimidating and explicit requirements of formal procedure, proverbs are a means of questioning formal knowledge without direct or disputatious confrontation. Rather than being the unreflexive assertions of peasant ignorance or anti-modernism, they can often furnish an oblique means of expressing an alternate insight or position in an obscure or ambiguous manner, where the lack of clarity constitutes precisely the problematized moment for pause and re-assessment that critique from a subordinate position requires when subject to "aversive controls." The sardonic and worldly scepticism evinced in such proverbs is not necessarily a symptom of an intransigent mind, but the signifier of a mind

⁶ For the meaning of *quadrillage* in modern rationality, see Foucault 2003: 31–52; 2010: 260n1.

⁷ It is precisely with these living rather than abstract individuals that Engels and Marx's *The German Ideology* puts the ship of historical materialism to sea.

like Adorno's (1997) that recognizes the contradictions internal to things. This is brought out by the wry or ironic tone that suffuses Solzhenitsyn's use of proverbs; they are never presented merely as statements about the Universe *sub specie aeternitatis* but arise in critical response to the truth claims made by others, usually Party dogma or the programmed pontifications of orthodox communists.

In like vein, Barker observed a proclivity for *anecdote* as "the basic unit of Solzhenitsyn's narrative." Intriguingly, he further claims that the "precise function" of this technique is "to form the basis of, and help obscure the assertive status of, general observations on Soviet history" (1975a: 155). Meant as a criticism of Solzhenitsyn's dishonesty, this assessment fails to take into account the way anecdote might constitute precisely the kind of indirect technique necessary for critique of an oppressive society and its discourse.

What we are left with then is "style" somewhere between Sloterdijk's Diogenesian *Kynicism* (1987) and Foucault's "techniques of the self" (2000b). Exploring ethical practices and these kinds of techniques of the self as an element of politics need not be the narcissistic or reactionary move it is sometimes considered to be (see Cruikshank), but a necessary repositioning in response to "aversive controls" such as those characteristic of the camp. It can be a stoical *anakhoresis* (ἀναχώρησις) (Foucault 2000b: 238), a retreat into oneself to remember rules of action. It is a *parakeuazo* (παρασκευάζω, 239), a kind of preparatory exercise by which one can transform truth into a permanent principle of action. The aim is to gain control over our own subjectivity through "ethico-political experimentation," that is to say, "acts of enunciation" as "self-positioning, self-production, and a capacity to secrete one's own referent" (Lazzarato 18), re-territorializing one's own terrain of action.

If we accept Foucault's claim that "no technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise," then we can entertain the notion that written style is an "*askesis* [ἄσκησις] that should be understood as a training of the self by the self" (2000a: 208–209). But this "self-writing" is not a substitute for action — it is constitutive of action, for such "writing is associated with the exercise of thought" that engenders a kind of linear series "from meditation to the activity of writing and from there to *gumnazein* (γυμνάσιον), that is, to training and trial in a real situation — a labor of thought, a labor through writing, a labor in reality." There is a continuum here that eschews the idea of a rupture in thought-writing-action, and in doing so denies a necessary lacuna of thought and action. The implication is that style acquires a methodical force, even a political force, for if "writing constitutes an essential stage in the process to which the whole *askesis* leads: namely, the fashioning of accepted discourse, recognized as true, into rational principles of action," then style is the term to characterize the mode and agenda of this political thought-action. This is the *ethopoietic* function of writing as an element of self-training toward political practice — "it is an agent of the transformation of truth into *ethos*"; in it personal ethical practice becomes political.

Style then is a counter-conduct and technique of the self that eschews explicit method but nevertheless feeds into political and social critique, and that is deployed in circumstances where technologies of domination preclude strategies such as rebellion, escape, confrontation, organization, and refusal. The camp is precisely this kind of technology, and Solzhenitsyn's style performs a critical counter-conduct contrived to meet this power in a non-homologous way, pointing the way toward a critical theory as we shift our gaze from the *Kulturkritik* in his

“style” to the *Ideologiekritik* into which it is developed.

Immanent Critique of Ideology

Latent in Solzhenitsyn’s “style,” his well-known techniques of parody and pastiche, his use of proverbs, strings of anecdotes, and acerbic irony, is the notion of contradiction. An implicit foregrounding of contradiction is integral to his practice of *Ideologiekritik*. For Solzhenitsyn, ideology is the object of critique. It is “what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination” (2007 I: 174). One might assume that this remark, which summarizes much of his aversion to Soviet discourses, merely confirms the reading of Solzhenitsyn as a cultural conservative with religious inclinations. Yet what one finds in *The Gulag Archipelago* is neither merely normative nor ahistorical assertions but a form of *immanent critique*, and it is this immanent critique that forms the principal basis for Solzhenitsyn’s contribution to critical theory.

As a necessary condition of critical social thought (Jessop and Sum 2016), immanent critique is “a means of detecting the societal contradictions which offer the most determinate possibilities for emancipatory social change” (Antonio 332). It is not simply to import one’s own paradigm into a normative kind of criticism, but to take “norms that are *inherent to an existing (social) situation* as its starting point” (Jaeggi 75). It is the analysis or interrogation of an object (concept, idea, doctrine, narrative, argument, social relation, political system, state, etc.) that has “turned in on itself,” in that “it constitutively embodies competing and contradictory claims and norms that cannot be realised consistently or that will necessarily turn against their original purpose upon being realised” (ibid.). For Solzhenitsyn, the Soviet State, and the Gulag synecdoche as its proxy, were clearly such an object. Immanent critique entails a commitment at some level to the historical notion of improvement, even if a reflexive and ambiguous commitment that places itself within the terms of its own critique (Adorno 2001).⁸ It necessarily claims there to be a contradiction internalized by the object of the critique, which in turn implies a restless resolution to that contradiction. Immanent critique therefore entails a critical motion, movement through time, and is that “form of critique that applies *transformative* principles that are *immanent* to social reality” (Stahl 3; see also Cooke 42). It is this “transformative character” and temporal motion through immanent critique that signals what is actually a progressive historicity in *The Gulag Archipelago*.

A key component of immanent critique is the “hermeneutic of suspicion” (Ricoeur), which can be understood as the holding of “certain reservations regarding the self-interpretation of social entities and individuals” (Jaeggi 65). This suspicion is precisely the point of departure for Solzhenitsyn’s “literary investigation” into the Soviet Union, and is the reason why he returns time and again to Soviet discourse as his primary focus of critical attention. By their own words shall they be judged! However, immanent critique always entails at least some normative criteria supplementary to the immanent criteria (Jaeggi 69–71; Jessop and Sum 2016: 105–109). Accordingly, and in order to criticize the Soviet regime and the techniques of its political technology, Solzhenitsyn resorts quite

⁸ Consider Theodore Adorno’s reading of Kant’s relationship with the Enlightenment in Adorno 2001.

often to normative premises beyond the historical formation of Soviet discourses. These normative premises seem to originate in themes ascribed to Tsarist Russia — church, nation, commune, timeless humanity, etc. — and it is this aspect of his writing that has supplied the army of unsympathetic commentators with all the evidence they need of his reactionary and ahistorical conservatism. But this normative field is necessary for an immanent critique to be put into motion. For such normative premises to be brought to bear alone in normative critique would be one thing (Toker 2000: 27), but when vectored through the technique of immanent critique, they take on a different complexion — not at odds with the critical tradition but supplementary, necessary for, and articulatory of it. He does not merely resort to normative, that is to say reactionary, moralizing, or comforting resignation over some putative human essence, or to a self-serving naturalization of the social,⁹ but mobilizes immanent critique *by reference to* a normative scale of experiences external and prior to dominant Soviet discourses.

One must consider how Solzhenitsyn here is making use of the normatively Russian intellectual, social, and historical resources at his disposal, which most Anglophones find alien and definitionally backward due to the conventional association of those themes with East-of-Elbe *Sonderwege* (see Blackbourn and Eley),¹⁰ and which are therefore necessarily condemned as retrograde in Western modernisation discourses. However, this mobilization of cultural resources is not necessarily incompatible with critical, radical, or historically progressive critique. Raymond Williams reminded us that “mobilization of the existing resources of ‘the people’ against a naïve or alien ruling class” is neither wishful thinking nor reactionary error, and even that “most ‘Marxist’ movements . . . grew out of and inherited and often depended on radical movements of other kinds” (Williams 86–87). Likewise, E. P. Thompson (1968) noted how the resistance of English workers to early industrialization drew on resources familiar to *them* — anti-popery, temperance, bucolic romance, feudal rights, the Tree of Liberty, the Natural Freeborn Englishman figure, and so on, and we hardly condemn those heroes of the labor movement as just a crowd of ahistorical reactionaries and bigots.

As in the case of the “reactionary” and “conservative” resistance to highly rational and Enlightened land enclosures, urbanization, and factory centralization in early 19th-century Britain, in much of Solzhenitsyn’s romantic rehabilitation of pre-Revolution themes from Russian history, such as in his direct comparison of Tsarist prisons and Soviet prisons or in his pedestalling of the *zemstvo* in contrast to the collective farm, there emerges a social engagement through an immanent critique of the claims made by the Soviet State regarding its supposedly greater enlightenment, improvement, and humanitarianism in comparison with its Tsarist predecessor. It provides the normative basis from which a necessary “hermeneutic of suspicion” can arise and immanent critique be launched.

It is from this synthesis of the normative and the immanent that Solzhenitsyn’s sardonic irony stems. Trenchant sarcasm and a spritely ironic tone saturates Solzhenitsyn’s writing in *The Gulag Archipelago*, so much more potent than run-of-the-mill sarcasm by virtue of its poignancy, heart felt pain, and its

⁹ Such an operation would be diametrically opposite to the critical; see Sayer 772–73.

¹⁰ The Elbe River in Northern Germany, at which the Soviet and Allied armies met in 1945, is regarded as a metaphorical boundary separating historiographically the western, modern, and advanced legacy of the bourgeois revolutions from what is condemned as eastern, reactionary and backward in “whiggish” historiography.

ability to elicit humoured response. This literary device integrates all three classical modes of persuasion — *logos* and *ethos*, as well as *pathos*: it is not only satisfying, encouraging, and even (ironically) delightful in a Burkean sense (Burke 32–37), but entirely fitting to immanent critique in a work that also draws upon a normative field of experiences, criteria, and thematic contrasts.

Though it was never his intention, Solzhenitsyn's use of immanent critique places him within the same workshop of critical philosophy as Marx, who clearly laid out his own statement of programmatic immanent critique in a now-famous letter to Arnold Ruge (1844):

I am therefore not in favor of setting up any dogmatic flag. On the contrary, we must try to help the *dogmatics* to clarify to themselves the meaning of their own positions. . . . [The state] everywhere comes into contradiction between its ideal mission and its real preconditions. Out of this conflict of the political state with itself, therefore, one can develop social truth. . . . Then we shall confront the world not as doctrinaires with a new principle: "Here is the truth, bow down before it!" We develop new principles to the world out of its own principles (Marx 1978 [1844]: 13–14).

This brings us back to perhaps the most decisive aspect of immanent critique here: the *internal contradictions* of a given situation, institution, doctrine, claim, or concept. This core feature requires a lengthier treatment in regard to Solzhenitsyn's text, not only for the reason that it is the core dynamic motor that pushes his immanent critique into confrontation with political and social transformation through historical time but because Solzhenitsyn's relationship with "dialectic" — the core concern of which being the internalization of contradictions to objects — is problematic, intricate, and in need of elaboration. My argument here must proceed from the *implication* of critical motion in immanent critique to the *elaboration* of critical motion in dialectical thinking.

Dialectical Thinking vs. Dialectics

There is an explicit rejection and burning hostility to "Dialectics" throughout *The Gulag Archipelago* — Dialectics with a capital D. Solzhenitsyn himself constantly mocks the Dialectics of Soviet officialdom, the dogmatic Marxism of Stalin's henchmen, the Vanguard Doctrine, and the tortuous, self-serving, and specious reasoning characteristic of Soviet state discourses. Vyshinsky's "dialectics" of soviet legality comes in for special mockery. Solzhenitsyn has a humanistic antipathy to the Marxist-Leninist "science" of history and its determinist posturing, and it is upon this second of the "Two Marxisms" that he brings excoriating criticism to bear.¹¹ His explicit position on Dialectics has two aspects: disgust at the inhuman determinism of the Vanguard Doctrine and contempt for the disingenuous sophistry of political opportunists. However, neither of these necessarily compromise a properly *dialectical style* in Solzhenitsyn's writing.

The "extended dialectical interpretation" (2007 I: 60), to which Solzhenitsyn refers when speaking in Kafkaesque vein of the politically opportunistic implementation of the infamous Article 58 of the RSFSR Criminal Code, alludes to

¹¹ The first and later being scientific, stadial, developmental, formulaic and determinist; the second and earlier being Hegelian, historicist, properly dialectical. See Gouldner; Wood 4.

the intellectual enabling of cynically willed conclusions, disingenuous meanings, and convenient inversions of intent and motive, where “yes ceases to be yes and no ceases to be no” in the name of the struggle against bourgeois legality (2007 I: 100).

Perhaps Vyshinsky, no less than his listeners, needed this ideological comfort at the time. When he, who was both evil and quick of mind, cried out from the prosecutor’s platform, “Shoot them all like mad dogs!” he, at least, understood that the accused were innocent. And in all probability he and that whale of Marxist dialectics, the defendant Bukharin, devoted themselves with all the greater passion to the dialectical elaboration of the judicial lie: for Bukharin it was too stupid and futile to die if he were altogether innocent (thus he needed to find his own guilt!); and for Vyshinsky it was more agreeable to see himself as a logician than as a plain downright scoundrel (2007 I: 101n8).

We see here how dialectic is mobilized not to problematize and deconstruct in the manner of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* but, inversely, to elaborate, suture, and self-servingly apologize within the anti-juristic instrumental rationality of Soviet discourse. It is this Leninist, and later Stalinist, deployment of Dialectics in the construction of closed systems of thought that Solzhenitsyn holds in such contempt.¹² The explicitly anti-Leninist Solzhenitsyn mocks the dictum “existence determines consciousness” (2007 II: 412), or “being determines consciousness” (2007 III: 17, 323), citing numerous examples of contingent and counter-historical behaviour in the Gulag that apparently contravened this “swinish principle” of historical necessity (2007 II: 412). The provenance of this formulation is not entirely clear,¹³ but his criticism is evidently intended as a sideswipe at Dialectical or Historical Materialism that attempts to explain social history in terms of the material forces and relations in which human beings are situated, by which they are motivated, and in terms of which they understand their actions. Aimed primarily at the Marxist-Leninist schematization of history as the history of class struggle, and thus with Hegel lurking in the background, Solzhenitsyn is once again criticizing not the aleatory but the *determinist* application of historical materialism in the Vanguard Doctrine. His explicit criticism of it might be enlisted by others in their idealist and voluntarist critiques of materialism in general, and Solzhenitsyn’s obvious desire to restore individual agency (and thus individual culpability) back into the equation of Soviet society does give credibility to such enlistment.

But if all this might lead readers to think that there is no dialectic in Solzhenitsyn’s writing, and that he is simply an idealist or voluntarist, they would be mistaken. It is not to dialectical thinking that Solzhenitsyn objects but to the undialectical, dogmatic, teleological assertion of linear causality that has become petrified in the apologetics of the Soviet state under the name of Dialectics. In fact, Solzhenitsyn’s criticism takes an implicitly dialectical form.

A useful differentiation can be found by placing *Dialectics* in contrast to *dialectical thinking*, for the dialectic proper is a “style of thinking” rather than a scientific method (Dowling 19). In differentiating “negative dialectics” from the

¹² Elsewhere, this Soviet species of “dialectical materialism” has been described as an “extremely mechanical, and extremely undialectical, way of thinking that all too often gave way to crude positivism” (Foster, Clark, and York 238).

¹³ This may allude to Marx’s “Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy.”

positive dialectic familiar in the straw man of Historical Determinism, Adorno pointed out that to think dialectically “means to think in contradictions” and in antinomies (1997: 144), not in self-serving adherence to dogma, schema, scientific system, and historical determination. It is a thinking that is at odds with “unequivocal synthesis” (Buck-Morss 63) and evades the tendency toward unanimous interpretation. Far from a Hegelian and teleological dialectic toward the unfolding of an Absolute Reason, this is a tendency implicit in Marx’s dialectical thinking, and has been more developed in later Marxian critical theory, where “there is no synthesis” (Harvey 62). This kind of practical dialectical thinking is driven not by the systematic unfolding of historical necessity but by “a critique of the fact that critique itself, contrary to its own tendency, must remain within the medium of the concept,” a paradox that extends to philosophical activity as a whole — “it lies in the definition of negative dialectic that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total” (Adorno 1997: 406). This “dialectical style” is a restless realization of the contradictions internalized to concepts in the interests of power that are constituted and reproduced through “identity thinking.” It is intrinsically subversive and dissentient. It is not the dogmatic system of thought fossilized in the vindictive portrayal of émigrés, and which Solzhenitsyn also repeatedly mocks under the rubric of *Dialectics*. Solzhenitsyn’s constant, almost jaundiced, criticism of actually-existing Soviet Dialectics is not a rejection of dialectical thinking but a demand for the application of dialectical thinking to itself, and thus actually the quintessence of dialectical thinking.

Solzhenitsyn recognizes what David Harvey has called the “intuitive power” of dialectical thinking (11) as a power of deconstructive interrogation that functions through such elusive tactics as paradox, humour, satire, and “ruse,” as we have seen above (Adorno 1997: 141). Thus, we get the kind of ironic criticism of the (self-serving) contradictions internal to official Soviet Dialectics apparent in passages like this: “In only one respect did Vyshinsky fail to be consistent and retreat from dialectical logic: for some reason, the executioner’s bullet which he allowed was not relative but absolute” (Solzhenitsyn 2007 I: 101). When Solzhenitsyn, once again, critiques Dialectics through the literary technique of the proverb — “*Dialectics*. (Which used to be crudely described in the folk saying: ‘Whichever way you point a wagon tongue, that’s the way it goes’)” — we see irony being used once again to bring out the contradiction in the claims of the Soviet Power. The passage continues,

the Code cannot be a dead weight in the path of the judge. The articles of the Code had been around during ten, fifteen, twenty years of rapid change, and, just as Faust said: *The whole world changes and everything moves forward / And why should I be afraid to break my word?* All the articles of the Code had become encrusted with interpretations, directions, instructions. And if the actions of the accused are not covered by the Code, he can still be convicted. (2007 I: 290).

There are numerous other examples of contradiction in Soviet government discourse throughout the text. There is the policy of *Socialism in One Country* (nationalism) coexistent with the suppression of Socialist Zionism (nationalism) (2007 III: 345, 346fn). There is the persistent reliance on “the technology of forty centuries earlier!” in the world’s first and only socialist state (2007 II: 91):

On that day when the U.S.S.R., with trumpets blaring, loosed into the heavens the first artificial earth satellite — opposite my window in Ryazan two pairs of *free* women, dressed in dirty zek pea jackets and padded britches, were carrying cement up to the *fourth floor in hand barrows*. (2007 II: 591)

In an earlier part of the book he notes: “before trying our hands at revolution, we should have exterminated the bedbugs in this country!” (2007 II: 223). He comments on the self-contradiction inherent in the sheer number of people sentenced under Article 58(7), “Wrecking”:

For centuries the people had built and created, always honorably, always honestly, even for serf-owners and nobles. Yet no one, from the days of Ryurik on, had ever heard of *wrecking*. But now, when for the first time all the wealth had come to belong to the people, hundreds of thousands of the best sons of the people inexplicably rushed off to *wreck*. (2007 II: 64).

Solzhenitsyn juxtaposes the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of the “*withering away* of the state” at the passage into socialism with Stalin’s 1934 doctrine of socialism through the “*maximum intensification* of state power” (2007 II: 121). His wry critical summary of this “unexpectedly brilliant” piece of legerdemain on the part of Whiskers is characteristically succinct: “Entry into socialism via the maximum strengthening of prison!”

Examples of this dialectical thinking are replete throughout *The Gulag Archipelago*, and in concert with the other critical techniques identified above they effectively bring a socially critical dimension to Solzhenitsyn’s prose. From the methodical force in style, through the technique of immanent critique, to the *Ideologiekritik* in dialectical thinking, *The Gulag Archipelago* emerges as a potential contribution to the ongoing endeavours of critical theory.

My intention in this article has been neither to resuscitate Solzhenitsyn nor to appropriate him for the Left or any other group. I want to return to the text of *The Gulag Archipelago* in a manner that further opens up debate over the work, its relevance, and its place in Solzhenitsyn’s writings, and that challenges some of the easily held notions of the work as constituting an unambiguously reactionary and conservative philippic. Solzhenitsyn is no unacknowledged Marxist, nor an unwitting historical materialist. However, this does not mean that *The Gulag Archipelago* cannot offer a surprisingly rich source for the critical theory of contemporary society, regardless of the author’s explicitly anti-Marxist authorial stance. I do not mean to imply that *The Gulag Archipelago* itself is a work of critical theory, but rather that it is in there. The work does not provide a critical theory, but it has the capacity to inform our critical thinking and social analyses, given that the logic of the camp technology has an uncanny knack of reappearing on the stage of social history.

I am referring not just to the penal institutions of our own time but to a broader register of social control that uses techniques familiar from the concentration or labor camp as a political technology (the “differentiated ration pot,” the “brigade” system, *malveillance*, limitless postponement of release).

Though the degree of suffering, degradation, and what Solzhenitsyn called “soul mange” (2007 II: 621–22, 640) in the Archipelago is beyond comparison with quotidian life in 2021, we ought not to underestimate the thematic recurrence of camp tropes and technologies in a variety of contemporary social theatres, ranging from religious organisations to audit regimes, not to mention the panoptic-affective technique of our surveillance societies more generally. Approached in this way, *The Gulag Archipelago* can yield a versatile contribution to contemporary social critique, as well as to the formation of counter-conducts to the rationality of domination (see Welsh 2017, 2020).

However, it would do violence to Solzhenitsyn’s writing if one were anachronistically to force *The Gulag Archipelago*’s protean and sometimes digressive explorations into yet another ideological schema imposed from without. The objective here has been rather to point to one more possibility of a non-exclusive reading that brings the book’s insights into a position where they might inform and articulate recurrent or contemporary experiences of social control. It will suffice to say that *The Gulag Archipelago* expresses a sophisticated understanding of the logic of power and control that was lacking in the Marxism which he rejected and which later rejected him. In particular, how “ethico-political practice” can be understood as a constitutive element of social critique is a decisive contribution of *The Gulag Archipelago* to critical theory and praxis.

Solzhenitsyn’s magnum opus is influenced by a tradition of critical philosophy that activates critical-theoretical techniques of analysis. The spirit of critique in Solzhenitsyn’s thought-action is not too far away from Marx’s own. This is a thought-action that does not emplace a historical materialist schematics compromised by deterministic teleology or formulaic developmentalism, but which does share an emancipatory (though non-utopian) horizon of expectation that is so characteristic of the critical enterprise. It requires the reader to shrug off that caricatured Marxism familiar from decades of uninformed and complacent detraction of the kind that rails against the straw man of determinism, teleological grand narrative, base-superstructure crudities, cold war mudslinging, and which consistently testifies to an insufficient familiarity with Marx’s canonical texts, recent reformulations, and the broader critical traditions within which Marxian critical theory has come into being.

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