



Irving Kristol

Republican Virtue vs. Servile Institutions

In the end, when all has been said and done, the only authentic criterion for judging any economic or political system, or any set of social institutions, is this: what kind of people emerge from them? In this sense, it is true to say that institutions are made for the people, not vice versa. But today we understand this proposition in a very different way: we worry whether our institutions are sufficiently "responsive" to the people *as they are*, and assume that any discordance between the two constitutes strong evidence that the institution needs to be changed. Behind this assumption there lies a deeper dogma: that the very idea of helping people to shape themselves in a certain way is both presumptuous and superfluous. Presumptuous, because there is no superior knowledge available as to how people should be shaped. Superfluous, because the people will, if left alone, shape themselves better than anyone or anything can shape them. This might be called the democratic dogma, and it is a very different thing from the republican philosophy which animated this nation during its earlier decades but which gradually has become ever more incomprehensible to us. Indeed, it is by now so incomprehensible we find it difficult even to imagine that, as we remake—"restructure," as we say—our traditional institutions to suit us, we may simply be debasing these institutions so that they will more snugly fit our diminished persons.

It will be said that even to suggest such a hypothesis shows a remarkable lack of faith in the American common people. I would half-heartedly deny that accusation. I do indeed have faith in the common people—only I don't have very much faith in them. Nor is there anything snobbish or, as we now say, "elitist"

about such a statement. I include myself among those common people and, knowing myself as I do, I would say that anyone who constructed a political system based on unlimited faith in my good character was someone with a fondness for high-risk enterprises.

To put it another way: The common man is not a fool, and the proof that he is not a fool is that he has such modest faith in himself. On the other hand, the common man is human, too, and if politicians go around saying nice things about him, he'll not deny them either. What *will* happen is that the common man will simply become cynical about politicians and politics and public life in general—and this cynicism will, in the long run, have a deleterious effect on his character. For cynicism about others is always accompanied by a proportionate increase in self-centeredness. And as we become self-centered, we become less open to reason, have a weaker sense of obligation to our fellow citizens.

That it is possible to corrupt a citizenry—or for a citizenry to corrupt itself—is something the Founding Fathers understood but which we seem to have forgotten. Today we are sometimes prepared to believe that the people have been deceived into thinking erroneously. But we find it well-nigh impossible to admit that they are corrupt—behaving as if they had a bad character as distinct from a bad opinion or two. This is why we tend to take it for granted that all expressions of *material* grievances by the people must be basically legitimate. After all, people do have intimate as distinct from abstract—knowledge of their material circumstances. To regard this knowledge as less than authoritative is to cast doubt on their *innate* capacity for self-government. The Founding Fathers

permitted themselves to have such doubts, which their political theory then encompassed. We give ourselves no such license. Our instinct is always to assume that, once these material grievances are satisfied, the people's natural goodness of character will reassert itself.

Yet the evidence is much to the contrary: satisfying material grievances, these days, does not seem to calm people or make them more reasonable—it often rather encourages them to be even more unreasonable, and even sometimes to invent grievances as an occasion for being more unreasonable. The relation between satisfying men's material wants, or even material needs, and the quality of their moral nature is evidently an ambiguous and equivocal one.

This ambiguity was something the Founding Fathers were much more alert to than we are. They were sufficiently close to their Puritan heritage, and to traditional republican political philosophy, to believe that "luxury," as they called it—by which they meant merely that degree of material well-being which we today call "affluence"—would always represent a grave threat to the spirit of our institutions. None of the Founding Fathers, to my knowledge, ever praised their handiwork by suggesting it would lead to a "society of abundance." We may think that the Sears, Roebuck catalogue is a splendid testimonial to American civilization. Most of the Founding Fathers would have found it a worrisome document. And, had they been informed that people were purchasing this incredible variety of merchandise *by going into debt*, they would have been wildly alarmed.

Perhaps nothing better signifies the difference between the spirit of democratic capitalism in our old Republic and

in our contemporary one than their contrasting attitudes toward debt. To be a debtor, in the older view, was to mortgage your future and to surrender a portion of your independence. They regarded indebtedness as a condition to be avoided, if possible. And they had a low opinion of those who were perpetually in debt, or who seemed uncaring as to whether they were in debt or not—such people were then called “feckless.” It isn’t that the Founders were simply less sophisticated about economics than we are today. They were very sophisticated, in a different way. They judged an economic system, not merely by whether or not it improved one’s standard of living, *but also by what it did to the character of the people who participated in that system.* Our sophistication about economics completely ignores this aspect of the matter—to some degree, one suspects, because we assume that “the character of the people” is inherently unproblematic, but also because we assume that improved material conditions, no matter how achieved, cannot possibly mean an unimproved people.

This last is one expression of that “democratic dogma” which has supplanted the republican philosophy of the early period of this republic. A clear sign of the transformation I am referring to is the way in which the very words “republican” or “republic” have given way before the terms “democratic” or “democracy.” This verbal shift mirrors a profound political and psychological change. It is not that the two terms stand for distinctly different conceptions of the proper relations between a citizen and his polity. They need not, and for a long time did not: up until about fifty years ago, they were used without any sense of tension or contrariness existing between them. Indeed, they were frequently and familiarly conjoined together, so that one could speak easily of “our democratic republic” or “our republican democracy” without giving the matter much thought. Yet today the term “republican” has fallen into disfavor, and is rapidly falling into disuse. It is still the title of one of our major parties, but it is not exactly a proud title: Republicans (with a capital “R”) do not speak about “republicanism” (with a small “r”) but instead, like everyone else, speak about “democracy” and claim to represent the spirit of democracy, properly understood, not the spirit of republicanism, properly understood.

Why does the word “republican” make us so uncomfortable? Why have history textbooks ceased bearing such titles as “The American Republic: from its Founding to the Present Day,” in favor of something like “The Democratic Experiment” or “The Democratic Experience”? Why don’t we ever talk about “The Republican Experiment” or “The Republican Experience”? I don’t think it is merely fashionable linguistic convention which is at work here, but a much deeper and extremely significant habit of

mind. The two terms have assumed, over the decades, very different connotations. “Republican” is something we used to be; “democratic” is what we have become. As a matter of fact, one can put it more strongly than that: being “republican” is what we have been *liberated from* so that we could become “democratic.”

There is no doubt that the term “republican,” today, has about it an aura of confinement, constriction, a limitation of possibilities, whereas “democracy” suggests a genial expansiveness. If I were to say to a group of American educators that the purpose of our public schools is to produce republican citizens, they would either assume that I was being hostile or, more likely, that I had meant to say “democratic” and was merely engaging in a literary fancy. They would certainly sense that a school for republican citizens is something different from the kinds of schools they now administer and teach in.

At the root of that term, “republican,” there lies the idea of self-government. Not merely popular government, and not

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merely individual liberty, but a popular government and an individual liberty that is defined—and is therefore self-limiting—in a certain way. Self-government is self-definition. It is something strenuous, something which involves our making painful demands upon ourselves, something which directs us to a normative conception of the self to which we should properly aspire. You cannot have “self-government” in the individual case unless you have a clear—if general—idea as to the kind of person you ought to be, and you cannot have self-government collectively unless the members of that collectivity have a clear idea as to the kind of people they want to end up being. The idea of self-government is intrinsically normative and stands in opposition to any social and political system which fails to link popular government or individual liberty to a set of accepted values. That is why it is possible to speak of “republican virtue”—we do not in fact speak of it today but we do not find the phrase meaningless, either. On the other hand, one apparently cannot talk about “democratic virtue”—not only do we not use that phrase, but the very phrase itself

does not exist: it seems not to be a possible political expression. And the reason why this is so must have something to do with the fact that we conceive of democracy as a way of government and a way of life which has liberated us from the confines of such “virtue.” We have separated the democratic idea from the idea of self-government.

Montesquieu, whose political philosophy so powerfully shaped the thinking of the Founding Fathers, understood that in a large, commercial republic, whose stability was based on an equilibrium of economic interests and a balance of political factions, this stability could very easily dissolve into a war of all against all. To prevent this from happening, he said, one could not rely on any set of institutions but on the “spirit” of its citizens. It is this spirit to which the term “republican virtue” refers.

Because the very word “virtue” so frightens us today, suggesting, as it does, fixed ideas of right and wrong which circumscribe our liberty—it is important to emphasize that “republican virtue,” in the American meaning of that phrase, is a very different kind of virtue from, say, Christian virtue or classical virtue as the ancient Greeks understood it. It does not signify an excellence of the soul, a perfection of the person. Our idea of “republican virtue” derives from the Romans, and it is a political conception rather than a religious one. Which is to say, “republican virtue” has fairly modest moral implications, rather than high and ambitious ones. Because these moral implications are so modest, “republican virtue” is compatible with a liberal society in which people can have, within limits, different opinions as to ultimate religious truths and different preferences as to their ways of life. What “republican virtue” asks of people is merely that they be public-spirited.

If this doesn’t sound like such a formidable demand, it is because we no longer quite understand what it means to be public-spirited. We think it means to have passionate opinions about the public good and to work furiously to translate these opinions into reality. In truth, public-spiritedness, in its original sense, means almost the opposite of that. It means curbing one’s passions and moderating one’s opinions in order to achieve a large consensus that will ensure domestic tranquility. We think of public-spiritedness as a form of self-expression, an exercise in self-righteousness. The Founding Fathers thought of it as a form of self-control, an exercise in self-government. If we are asked to identify a public-spirited citizen, we are likely to point to someone like Ralph Nader. The Founders pointed to “that noblest Roman of them all,” George Washington, as a model for the American citizen. And whatever Ralph Nader’s merits may be, they are not George Washington’s.

I have said that “republican virtue,” in its original American meaning, had only

modest moral implications. But it did (and does) have *some* moral implications, and if we look at George Washington, we see what they are. They include probity, truthfulness, self-reliance, diligence, prudence, and a disinterested concern for the welfare of the republic. In short, they are those virtues which we familiarly associate with "the Protestant ethic" or "the bourgeois ethic"—though, as a Jew, I might point out that they could also be properly associated with "the rabbinical ethic," a fact which the Puritans were certainly very conscious of.

Now, there are two things to be said about such virtues, and about the kind of human character they are supposed to give rise to. First, they are compatible with practically all the religions of Western civilization—including such essentially secular religions as Deism and Stoicism—and are therefore appropriate to a liberal and pluralistic society. And, secondly, they are rather "dull" virtues, precisely because they are so modest in their scope. This "dullness" was always taken to be meritorious, since it meant that you didn't have to be an exceptional person to be a perfectly good citizen. "Republican virtue" is an easy virtue, by the traditional standards of religion and moral philosophy: George Washington is—and was always supposed to be—a model American whom every school boy could assemble from his own parts.

So the question naturally arises: if "republican virtue" is so easy, why do we find the very suggestion of it so irksome? More than that: why do we find the very conception of it so repugnant? For the better part of American history, it was thought proper that every American boy should be encouraged to want to grow up to be like George Washington. Today, that would be regarded as a dismal fate, and we have even taken Washington's birthday away from him for the convenience of a long weekend.

I would say that the basic change in American history took place when it came widely to be believed that it was both natural and right for our republican institutions simply to adapt themselves to the American people, rather than vice versa. It was a gradual change—so gradual that only a few observers took notice of it. For the most part, it was simply accepted as the predestined fulfillment of "the democratic promise" and the full flowering of "the democratic faith"—phrases which are themselves by-products of this transformation. The history of the United States came to be written as the progressive liberation of the American people from all sorts of prior restraints which our rather narrow-minded ancestors insisted on establishing for the people's own good. I think that the history of the United States can indeed be fairly written in these terms. The key question is the degree to which one wishes to regard this history as progressive or otherwise.

We do, of course, regard it as progressive because this history has made

the United States into a wealthy and powerful nation. Above all, wealthy: we find sufficient justification in American history by reason of the fact that it has raised our standard of living so spectacularly. But we are not moved to inquire whether this has made us a better people or worse, in terms of the original ideals of this republic. In truth, we cannot imagine how an increase in prosperity could possibly make people worse, rather than better. Neither the Old Testament nor the New had any difficulty in conceiving such a possibility; nor did John Adams or Thomas Jefferson. They believed that people, if they lived carelessly and unreflectively, could corrupt themselves. We think the people are naturally good and that only their institutions can be corrupt.

It is not surprising that the first sphere of human action in which this new spirit manifested itself was the economic. It was the American businessman who first liberated himself from the idea of "republican virtue," in order to create as

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much wealth, as quickly as possible, for himself as for us. Prior to the Civil War, a businessman was a professional man, in the same sense that doctors and clergymen were professional men. That is to say, it was taken for granted that there was a connection between what he did and what he was—between his vocation and his character—a connection that intimated a code of behavior which defined what was "honorable" and what was not. Thus, it was thought to be dishonorable for a businessman to go bankrupt—not because this was a sign of failure, but because it meant that he was cheating his creditors, who had trusted him. And if a businessman did go bankrupt, it was thought honorable for him to spend the rest of his life paying off his creditors nevertheless—and for his children to assume this burden as well. This may not make any economic sense; our present casual and impersonal attitude toward bankruptcy might be more economically productive. But it did emphatically make *political* sense—if you believe that the effects of economics on our standard of living are less momentous than its effects upon our character.

"Free enterprise," until the Gilded Age, was supposed to be—it wasn't always in fact, but it was supposed to be—a form of moral behavior, and the business life was supposed to be a morally satisfying life. I know it will seem incredible but, up until the advent of the morally neutral entrepreneur who is nothing but an economic instrument—up until the Civil War, that is—most Americans seemed to be of the opinion that to be a businessman was to be an honest and trustworthy man. They were greedy and unscrupulous "speculators," of course. But a sharp distinction was made between such "speculators" and a businessman—not least by the businessmen themselves, who did not permit "speculators," no matter how wealthy, to become members of their clubs. The American businessman had "character," as we now say. And he was in good repute among his fellow citizens. Not in the very best repute, it must be said: prior to the Civil War, it was statesmen and soldiers who were the heroes of popular biographies, since they were thought to have an even greater measure of "republican virtue." But businessmen were much respected, and were thought to be an honorable class of men engaged in an honorable activity—i.e., an activity from which they emerged better men than when they first entered it, as a result of the discipline which this activity exercised upon their characters. The institution of business was thought to make for self-improvement and not simply self-enrichment.

This "bourgeois" businessman—about whose life and work there was absolutely nothing value-free—was succeeded by a more "liberated" type, a more "democratic" type, whose attitude toward economic activity was purely instrumental. The businessman ceased being a kind of man and became a kind of function, devoid of any specifically human qualities. Still, it is astonishing how long the bourgeois ethos lingered on. When I was very young, people who bought things on the installment plan were still regarded as feckless and irresponsible. But people who *sold* things on the installment plan were regarded as engaged in a shady enterprise—because they were, after all, corrupting other people into fecklessness.

All that was in another time, of course, and, I sometimes think, in another country. Today, businessmen assemble in solemn meetings in order to figure out what they should do to achieve public respect and favor. Their concern is both serious and sincere, and one almost does not have the heart to tell them that their problem is not in the area of *doing* but in the area of *being*. They, like the rest of us, were born into a world they never made, and—again like the rest of us—find it close to impossible to imagine that the trouble they are in is organically related to their having become the kind of successful people our society said they should become. —

Another illustration of what I have in mind is the extraordinary increase, in recent years, of strikes which, for quite trivial reasons, inflict enormous damage on the community. I am thinking especially of strikes by policemen, firemen, garbage collectors, and transport workers. These are quite common today, though they were yesterday very rare, and the day before yesterday were close to unthinkable. American trade unions used to be essentially defensive institutions—protecting the human rights and economic position of their members—and their ethos was one of fraternity. They have become purely acquisitive combinations, exercising monopoly power in a spirit of the-public-be-damned.

Now, I am not saying that, in some instances, these Americans who go on strike do not have legitimate grievances. On the contrary: I assume they do. But a legitimate grievance can become illegitimate—just as a just war can become unjust—if the means employed are incommensurate with the ends sought. And I must say that I am appalled that a group of American workers should cease performing essential services to their fellow Americans because they seek a 5 percent or 8 percent increase in pay over what they receive or over what was offered them. Something is definitely wrong when that can happen, as it now does with increasing frequency. How can that rather trivial goal possibly justify such aggressive and costly action?

I have used the phrase, "that rather trivial goal," in order to put the matter as provocatively as possible. (Sometimes we do have to be provoked to think clearly.) I know I will be told that these workers have a difficult time making ends meet and that a 5 percent or an 8 percent increase is not to be sneered at. That is true enough—but I would also insist it is really beside the point. Very few of our workers live on the margin of subsistence; they are not in the kind of extreme and desperate condition which might justify such extreme and desperate action. The extra money, after taxes have been deducted, will make their situation slightly more comfortable than it was. And for *this* they are prepared to convulse the community and threaten the livelihood of their fellow-citizens—many of whom are surely less well off than they are. This can only be described as selfishness. And that description applies whether one regards their grievances as legitimate or not.

Nevertheless, very few of us seem to be able to say this bluntly, without embarrassment. We are more likely to point out that these ordinary people are behaving no differently from many greedy and unscrupulous businessmen. This argument has some truth in it—but what a strange truth it is! It implies, in effect, that the legitimate criteria of behavior in a democracy are to be found somewhere in the vicinity of the lowest common denominator. And, of course, under the pressure of this perverse moral egal-

itarianism, the lowest common denominator sinks ever lower.

After business and organized labor, just about every other area of American life followed a similar path. Religion may have followed more reluctantly, but follow it did. The sermon which denounced the failings of the congregation slowly gave way to the sermon which denounced the inadequacy of our social, economic, and political institutions. Making demands upon oneself became unpopular; making demands upon others became habitual. It is interesting to recall that, up until about a hundred years ago, it was common for Congress or state legislatures to call, by resolution, for a day of fasting, to take note of some particularly solemn occasion. Moreover, such calls were directed toward all citizens, rich and poor, indiscriminately. It is quite impossible for Congress even to contemplate such a resolution today. And should some brave Congressman introduce such a resolution, it would quickly be studded by amendments exempting all those below a certain level of income or who were engaged in various essential

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services. We find the very idea of a fast-day barbarous—it violates the nutritional rules established by HEW. And the idea that poor people should fast, just like everyone else, would strike us as utterly preposterous. We *know* that only people with full stomachs and on a well-balanced diet can be expected to meet such a harsh moral obligation. The fact that our ancestors, who were much poorer than we, thought otherwise is attributed to their lack of enlightenment—as is the fact that, even today, observant Jews and Catholics and Moslems think and act otherwise. Dostoevsky predicted, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, that when the anti-Christ came, he would have inscribed on his banner: "First feed people, and then ask them to be virtuous." We have improved on that slogan to the extent of adding decent housing, good schools, free medical care, and adequate public transportation as necessary preconditions of virtue. And then we wonder why such benevolence seems not to encourage people to have a good opinion of their political order. It does not occur to us that, in a democracy, if the citizenry lack

self-respect they will be incapable of any kind of respect—that to the degree we officially propound a mean and squalid view of humanity, there will emerge mean and squalid human beings. All of us normally become what we are expected to become, and if our society thinks it is normal for us to be enslaved to our appetites and our desires rather than to govern them, then we shall come to regard such enslavement as true liberty—and shall simultaneously regard any suggestion of self-government as an infraction of this liberty.

Our politicians have, over these past decades, learned this lesson well, in the sense that they have successfully debased themselves to what they take to be the appropriate common level. The average politician of today sees it as his role to gratify the appetites of the people—to liberate them from deprivation, as we say. The truly creative politician of today is more "far-sighted" in that he discovers new and original deprivations, popularizes them, makes them keenly felt. "What have you done for us lately?" is now assumed to be the absolutely proper question for the citizen to address to his representative, who, in turn, frantically speculates as to what he can do for them tomorrow. What this means, quite simply, is that by our traditional standards of republican political philosophy, American politics today is the politics of demagoguery, the politics of bribery. We obscurely recognize this fact by reserving the term "statesman" for those exceptional politicians who hold themselves somewhat aloof from this process of soliciting and pandering—though we are also so suspicious of our own sentiments, which smell ever so slightly of indecent elevation, that we will quickly and cynically wonder whether the "statesman" is merely a politician who is not running for re-election.

If anyone were to suggest that, in a self-governing republic, it should be normal for the people's representatives to wish to be as statesmanlike as possible, continually engaged in a reasonable conversation with their constituents, he would be informed that he is not living in the real world. But this real world is something which we have ourselves constructed. American politics wasn't always like this, and wasn't ever supposed to be like this. Unbelievable though it may seem, there was a time—in living memory—when those who campaigned too energetically for public office were, for that reason alone, viewed with more suspicion. Public office was thought to be a burdensome obligation to which only the more public-spirited would aspire. I don't want to idealize the past or exaggerate its merits—what we are talking about is a matter of degree. The "democratic politician" has always co-existed, in this country, with the "republican statesman." But he certainly never predominated so absolutely as he does today.

The one group which seems to understand this situation best of all is the

politicians themselves. Most of them will admit, in private conversation, that they would much prefer to be statesmanlike, only they don't see how that is possible. They must, they say, be "responsive" to the people if they are to be able to function at all. The irony is that, as they become ever more "responsive," the people put less and less faith in them and in our political institutions generally.

Very much the same thing has happened in the field of education. When our schools were "republican" institutions, instructing young citizens in the three R's, in elementary civics, and in the rudiments of good manners, they had both self-confidence and universal respect. Today, when they are "democratic" institutions, when they are making few demands on their students but feverishly trying to satisfy all the demands which students make on them, they are in a condition of perpetual crisis. Most of the "progressive" and "liberating" reforms in education, over these past decades, have resulted in most of us being more dissatisfied with American education than was previously the case. You would think that this might give us food for thought—but, no, it only incites us to invent new and better reforms, all in the direction of encouraging students to express more freely their appetites, to more freely indulge their desires. And, inevitably, students end up lacking confidence in these institutions which, lacking all self-confidence, seem to have no other purpose than to pander to them.

And this, I think, is the main point which emerges from the American democratic experience of recent years. People do not have confidence in institutions which do not have confidence in themselves. People do not have respect for institutions which, instead of making demands upon them, are completely subservient to their whims. In short, a people will not respect a polity that has so low an opinion of them that it thinks it absurd to insist that people become better than they are. Not simply more democratic; not simply more free; not simply more affluent; but, in some clear sense, better.

The original republican idea of self-government was what we would today call high-minded. The self which is supposed to govern is necessarily conceived of as being a better self than the self which naturally exists, and the purpose of the republic, in all its aspects, is inherently a self-improving one. The later democratic idea of self-government is based on the premise that one's natural self is the best of all possible selves, and that it is the institutions of society which

are inevitably corrupting of natural goodness. These are two very different readings of human nature, and they lead to different kinds of politics. The first results in people making moral demands upon themselves; the second results in people making moral demands upon social reality.

I know of no way in which this philosophical argument about human nature can be settled in the abstract. But our own political experience does, I think, give us some empirical clues as to which reading of human nature is more humanly satisfying. And the evidence seems overwhelmingly favorable to the republican reading. After all, it is a fact that Americans today "have never had it so good," as one says, in the sense that they are wealthier and healthier and enjoy greater personal freedom than did their fathers or grandfathers. But it is also a fact that they don't feel at all good about themselves and their condition, and a great many of our young people seem to feel positively miserable about their human condition. It can hardly be without significance that, among the

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young especially, the idea of "liberation" from a "repressive" actuality should now be so popular. There are some of us who will delude ourselves into believing that these young people are fretful at the remnants of republican restrictiveness, and they will assert—in the words of Al Smith—that the only and sure cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy. If you are committed to the democratic dogma, that is the only possible remark you can make. You are not likely to contemplate the possibility that it is the very society based on this dogma which comes to be felt as "repressive" and from which "liberation" is sought.

Some ten years ago, in the midst of the rebellion on our campuses, an article appeared in the *New York Times*

Magazine. It was written by a Yale psychologist, and its title was a quotation from one of the student leaders. That title was "You Don't Know What Hell Is Like Unless You Were Raised in Scarsdale." Now, Scarsdale is one of our most affluent and sophisticated suburbs. It is also, so far as young people are concerned, one of the most tolerant and "permissive" places in America. Nothing is too good or too expensive for the children of Scarsdale. And yet, the children for the most part despise it and leave it as soon as they can.

This is a serious matter. For the American democracy today seems really to have no other purpose than to create more and more Scarsdales—to convert the entire nation into a larger Scarsdale. That is what our political leaders promise us; that is what our economic leaders promise us; and even our religious leaders will issue indictments against the nation because there are still so many people who are "underprivileged" by the Scarsdale standard. But Scarsdale is obviously an experiment that has failed. And the reason—equally obvious, I should think—is that the life it proposes to its citizens is so devoid of personal moral substance, and is therefore so meaningless.

We are troubled by this phenomenon, and we wonder why it is that Americans, even as they improve their material conditions, are losing faith in their institutions. We also begin to wonder how these institutions can be made more "responsive" to the people, so as to soothe their discontent. What we do not wish to see is that our institutions are being made ever more "responsive" to the wrong people—to the people as they are, not as they might be. People do not respect institutions which are servile; people only respect a society which makes demands on them, which insists that they become better than they are. Without such a moral conception of the self, without a vivid idea as to the kind of person a citizen is supposed to become, there can be no self-government. And without self-government, the people perish—from boredom, from a lack of self-respect, and from a loss of confidence in their institutions which, they realize, only mirror their alienation from the better selves that lie dormant within their actual selves. □

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Solzhenitsyn's Inferno

In Chekhov's *Seagull* a character announces that in a well-made play a gun hanging on a wall must discharge before the performance is over. So it was with the overall work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. His first published work, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, though set in a Soviet prison camp, ends on an ironically soothing note. The grim day in question, readers are told, was not a bad day at all; there were no unusual horrors, no illness, in fact Ivan Denisovich succeeded in obtaining an extra ration of bread. Similarly, in the partly autobiographical novel *Cancer Ward* (which Solzhenitsyn had hoped, as it turned out in vain, to have published in the USSR) the ending is relatively happy: the central character escapes for a time the clutches of death and is on his way to the relative luxury of exile in a distant village in Central Asia. It was in *The First Circle* that the premonition of more dreadful accounts grew stronger. A novel describing a research institute manned by convict scientists and technicians was named after the outermost, relatively humane and benign circle in Dante's *Inferno*. Clearly, readers were to expect more.

Now it is all here. *The Gulag Archipelago* is a mammoth of a book, over twelve hundred pages in all, only half of that available in English so far. It does, as expected, take us into the center of the hell of the vast empire of Soviet concentration camps, and since its reality is more frightening than anything artistic imagination could contrive, Solzhenitsyn wisely eschews all temptation to broadly display his skills as a novelist. Even though both Russian volumes are subtitled "an experiment in literary investigation," Solzhenitsyn the artist remains very much in the background, and his presence is only unobtrusively felt in the quasi-literary manner of presentation of the material. Most of the time, the author's function is that of a historian, of an eyewitness and a collector of other prisoners' testimonies. Only occasionally does the writer's ordinarily controlled outrage spill over into a heavily sarcastic aside.

Much of what is found in the two large volumes has long been known to specialists and to others in the West who wanted to know. There have been, over the years, survivors' accounts and several scholarly studies of the Soviet system of periodic purges and the network of concentration camps, most recently Robert Conquest's magisterial *The Great Terror*. Solzhenitsyn's unique contribution is merging, as it were, the two types of accounts, grounding the individual eyewitness stories in a context of historical perspective and injecting

dramatic immediacy and human concreteness into the understandably somewhat abstract treatises of scholars.

Perhaps the most important feature of *The Gulag Archipelago* may be discerned from the dates that appear below the two words of the title page: 1918-1956. The dates reveal that the vast territory of prisons, camps, and ostensibly "free" settlements that are all part of a land ruled over by the secret police was not, as Soviet authorities would have us believe, a temporary aberration of the system that came into existence under Stalin and promptly disappeared after the dictator's death. The dates "1918-1956" emphasize that the jails and camps are an integral part of the Soviet State, that they came into existence immediately after its establishment in November 1917, and survived even after Stalin's death in March 1953. And although the account breaks off in 1956, the year of Khrushchev's famous attack on Stalin, Solzhenitsyn makes no suggestion that the archipelago of prisons has receded into the past. He need not have. Ample evidence is available of its continued existence, and new accounts continue to reach the West with depressing frequency, including much documentation on that newly fashionable institution, the psychiatric prison for inmates whose "illness" is their disagreement with government policies.

The Gulag Archipelago is, in essence, an account of a war that the Soviet regime has been waging on its people for well over half a century. One need only open the book at random to discover the bewildering variety of categories of citizens who were at any one time judged sufficiently dangerous to warrant their incarceration in camps. To pick a random page, 59 of volume one, we learn that among those imprisoned in the mid-1930s were: 1) Schutzbündlers, "who lost the class battles in Vienna and had come to the Fatherland of the world proletariat for refuge"; 2) Esperantists, "a harmful group which Stalin undertook to smoke out during the years when Hitler was doing the same thing"; 3) "Illegal philosophical circles"; 4) "Teachers who disagreed with the advanced laboratory-team system of instruction"; 5) "Employees of the Political Red Cross"; 6) "Mountain tribes of the North Caucasus who were arrested for their 1935 revolt"; 7) "Believers, who this time were unwilling to work on Sundays.... And there were collective farmers sent up for sabotage because they refused to work on religious feast days...."; 8) "And, always, there were those who refused to become NKVD informers. (Among them

were priests who refused to violate the secrecy of the confessional, for the *Organs* had very quickly discovered how useful it was to learn the content of confessions—the only use they found for religion.)"

A similar effect may be achieved by glancing through any one of the pages in the glossary that appears at the end of the English translation of the first volume. Thus, on page 638, we find among others the following: "Crimean Tatars—Exiled by Stalin to Central Asia in 1944 on charges of collaborating with the Germans. Dashnak—Anti-Bolshevik group in Armenia after 1917 Revolution. Doctor's Case—The arrest of leading Kremlin physicians, most of them Jews, in 1952 on trumped-up charges of plotting against the lives of Soviet leaders.... Hehalutz—Zionist movement that prepared young Jews for settling in the Holy Land; it founded most of the kibbutzim. Hiwi—German designation for Russian volunteers in German armed forces during World War II; acronym for Hilfswillige. Industrial Academy—A Moscow school that served as a training ground of industrial managers in late 1920s and early 1930s. Ingush—Ethnic group of Northern Caucasus; exiled by Stalin in 1944 on charges of collaboration with Germans. Kalmyks—Ethnic group of Northern Caucasus; exiled by Stalin in 1943 on charges of collaboration with German forces."

The monstrosities of concentration camp existence are all here: the starving prisoners, the dying, the dead. There are a few hair-raising incidents (e.g., in 1929, about a hundred prisoners were burned alive for nonfulfillment of production quotas) but not very many; one suspects that Solzhenitsyn chose not to cite a large number of them for aesthetic reasons. There are the children condemned to hell for the alleged sins of their fathers, already killed or still languishing in other camps; in camp conditions, these children were soon transformed into vicious animals, ready and eager to kill for a piece of bread. Prisoners—women and men alike—were beaten and starved and tortured with labor beyond their strength and the women were also systematically raped. Political doctrine resulted in preferential treatment for common criminals who were encouraged to assert their rule over class enemies, the "politicals." Some consideration was also shown former Soviet policemen now themselves in jail. There is grim irony in pages describing occasional evenings of "entertainment" for the inmates: camp administrators had become convinced that songs and music are conducive to increased labor productivity.

Convict labor, Solzhenitsyn points out,