Cecil E. Bohanon

The Economics of Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Introduction

As a novelist, writer and philosopher Alexander Solzhenitsyn is a legendary and living champion of human freedom. He is not, however, an economist. Solzhenitsyn's documentation of the horrors of the Soviet Gulag in both his fictional and non-fictional works gives profound insights into the human spirit in the presence of seemingly unbearable oppression. Solzhenitsyn's perspectives on human freedom are of great interest to all who love liberty. However, they are not primarily insights about economic freedom.

The purpose of this essay is to address the questions: What are the economics of Alexander Solzhenitsyn? Is Solzhenitsyn a free-market capitalist? Is he a Christian socialist? How can one characterize Solzhenitsyn's economic position? This is a challenging and perhaps quixotic quest because Solzhenitsyn is relatively uninterested in economic matters. Yet discerning a great thinker's insights (and perhaps misperceptions) about economics is an interesting exercise for those interested in free-enterprise education. To foreshadow the conclusions of the essay, Solzhenitsyn is a reluctant advocate of free markets, who is much more willing to constrain a free market than most libertarian economists. Yet Solzhenitsyn is in great sympathy with basic institutions of a free-market on both theoretical and practical grounds. This tension in his thinking makes many of his positions on policy issues seem naïve and utopian.

The essay is organized as follows. The first section examines the life of the author. The second section outlines some important philosophical themes from his work. The third section considers some economic positions Solzhenitsyn embraces. The fourth section offers a critique of Solzhenitsyn's economic perspectives on public choice grounds.

Cecil E. Bohanon is Profesor of Economics, Ball State University (Muncie, Indiana). A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Private Enterprise Education (APEE) in Orlando, Florida, April 4, 2005. The autor wishes to thank T. Norman Van Cott for helpful comments. All errors are the author's.

Life of Solzhenitsyn[1]

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was born on December 11, 1918 in Kislovodsk, Russia. His father had died in a hunting accident six months earlier. After his birth he and his mother moved in with her family in Rostov-on-the-Don in Southern Russia. The family was devoutly religious in the Orthodox Christian tradition. The family lost their land holdings in the Bolshevik

[1]The biography is drawn from Joseph Pearce's 1999 book: *Solzhenitsyn: A Soul in Exile*. Specific page references are given for points of importance.

revolution and was considered to be of "less desirable social origin" by the Soviet authorities. Nevertheless, young Alexander did gain admittance to one of the better schools in Rostov, where he excelled as a pupil.

Solzhenitsyn's adolescence and young adulthood were characterized by a drifting away from the Orthodox Christian faith of his family, to an enthusiastic acceptance of Marxism and atheism. By the time he entered the university he was a committed young communist. Although he had a great interest in literature he studied physics at the University of Rostov where, again, he excelled as a student. He married Natalya Reshtovskaya in a civil ceremony in April 1940.

Upon the outbreak of World War II Solzhenitsyn was initially classified, to his own disappointment, as medically unfit for military service. He and his wife were assigned to a teaching post in the small village of Morozovsk, 180 miles northeast of Rostov. As the war continued and Russia's need for soldiers expanded he was allowed to join the Red Army where he served in battle. He was twice decorated and eventually attained the rank of captain.

In February 1945, just before the war ended, Solzhenitsyn was arrested under Article 58, paragraph 10 of the Soviet criminal code for anti-Soviet propaganda. In correspondence with an old friend, intercepted and read by the military censors, he had made a number of derogatory comments about Stalin. For this perfidy he remained in the Soviet prison system until 1956.

Solzhenitsyn was shuffled among a number of prisons in the Moscow area during his first year in the system. In September 1946, because of his physics degree, he was assigned to the Marfino prison near Moscow that was simultaneously a research center. Such prisons were called *sharashkas*. The conditions in the *sharashkas* were generally better than in other prisons in the Soviet gulag. His experience in Marfino became the basis for his novel *First Circle*. It is interesting to note that during this time frame, Solzhenitsyn continued to be a loyal communist and a convinced atheist [Pearce (1999), p. 94].

In May 1950 he was transferred to a prison camp in Kazakhstan. The physical conditions there were worse than those encountered back in Moscow. This experience provided the basis for his novel *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and his non-fictional *Gulag Archipelago*. In January 1952 he was diagnosed with cancer and was sent to a treatment center, where he recovered from the disease. It was during this treatment regime that Solzhenitsyn converted (or reconverted) to the Orthodox Christian faith of his youth. In February 1953, after serving his full eight-year term, he was freed from prison but "permanently" exiled to the Kok-Terek region of Kazakhstan. Unaccompanied by his wife, who continued her university career in European Russia, he was employed as a village school teacher. The cancer recurred in early 1954, and he went to a cancer treatment center in Tashkent. Despite being given a 1 in 3 chance of recovery, he ended up being fully cured from the disease. This experience provided the basis for his novel *Cancer Ward*.

Stalin had died in March 1953 and after a period of internal political turmoil in the Soviet Union many of the cases against political prisoners were reexamined. Solzhenitsyn's case was re-opened

and in February 1956 he was rehabilitated. The examining prosecutors concluded that his war time correspondences did " ... not constitute a crime" [Pearce (1999), p. 134]. In June 1956 he moved back to European Russia and was eventually reunited with his wife. He continued to teach high school and pursued his writing, sketching out and working on a number of fictional and non-fictional manuscripts.

In 1961 literary censorship in the Soviet Union appeared to be easing. Solzhenitsyn submitted his short novel *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* to the leading Russian literary journal *Novy Mir*. Its editor Alexander Tvardovsky was enthralled by the novel and vowed to do everything in his power to promote it and the then unknown novelist. However, actually publishing a novel about the Stalinist labor camps was no easy feat even in a post-Stalinist Soviet Union. It was almost a year before the work was publicly available. In the mean time news of the controversial unpublished novel became the talk of Soviet literary circles. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev became personally interested in it. He read the novel, liked it and ordered 23 copies for distribution to the members of the Party Presidium. *Novy Mir* published it in late 1962 with Khrushchev hailing it as a literary masterpiece from the podium at the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union. Solzhenitsyn and his novel became overnight sensations both within and outside the Soviet Union.

The cultural thaw of the early 1960's was, however, short-lived. By 1964 Solzhenitsyn had no official outlets for his work and began to publish his work via underground *samizdat* networks. During this time his archives were raided and seized by the KGB. (Fortunately, he had hidden copies of much of his works in a number of different locations). In late 1966 he began public readings of his forbidden works in Moscow where he openly criticized the KGB. Condemned by the authorities in the Soviet Union, his novels *Cancer Ward* and *First Circle* were published in the West in 1968. He was expelled from the Soviet Writers Union in 1969, but won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970.

The publication of *Gulag Archipelago* in Paris in December 1973 led to his expulsion from the Soviet Union in February 1974. Having divorced his first wife and remarried, his family joined him in Switzerland in March of that year. He lived and traveled in Europe for two years, until the summer of 1976 when the Solzhenitsyns were granted permanent asylum in the United States. He continued his career, writing and living in relative isolation with his family (now including three young sons) in Vermont. In June 1978 he was the commencement speaker at Harvard University. His Harvard speech was met with mixed reception in the West. The speech, given in Russian and simultaneously translated, condemned the West for what Solzhenitsyn perceived to be its loss of courage, material decadence and moral decay. Solzhenitsyn continued to live with his family in Cavendish, Vermont, and continued to write. He also gave occasional interviews and speeches. He returned to Russia in May of 1994, where he continues to live, write and lecture.

Solzhenitsyn's Thought

To understand Solzhenitsyn, one must first have an appreciation of the philosophical underpinnings of his thought. First and foremost, Solzhenitsyn, like many

other Russian writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Berdayev and Pasternak, is an Orthodox Christian. His understanding of human existence, good and evil, the modern world, and the nature and purpose of freedom is grounded in and shaped by this tradition. Each theme is examined in turn.

A. *The Meaning of Human Existence*.

Solzhenitsyn sees the purpose of human existence as one of spiritual development, not the attainment of human comfort, material well being or even happiness. As stated in his Harvard commencement speech:

> If, as is claimed by humanism, man were born only to be happy, he would not be born to die. Since his body is doomed to death, his task on earth evidently must be more spiritual: not a total engrossment of everyday life, not a search for the best ways to obtain material goods and then their carefree consumption. It has to be the fulfillment of a permanent earnest duty so that one's life journey may become above all an experience of moral growth: to leave life a better human being than one started it [Berman (1980), p. 19].

This quest for spiritual development in the confines of a material world is a theme in his work. It is epitomized by Solzhenitsyn's insistence that one must develop a personal "point of view" to attain full moral personhood. This "point of view" means not only a developed attitude and perspective, but also an integrity and truth that will stand the tests of adversity and time.

In the novel *First Circle*, the prisoner Nerzhin spent some time and effort searching for wisdom among the common people. He is disappointed to find that they have

> ... no homespun superiority to him .... What was lacking in most of them was a personal ***point of view*** which becomes more precious than life itself**.** There was only one thing for Nerzhin to do—be himself ... Everyone forges his inner-self year after year. One must try to temper, to cut, to polish one's own soul so as to become ***a human being*** (all emphasis in the original) [*First Circle*, pp. 388-89].

This insight also appears in his nonfictional *Gulag Archipelago*. "Point of view" arises as the culmination of spiritual development and is the primary bulwark against the indignity and abuse of a totalitarian state. Commenting on the horror of arrest and interrogation by the police apparatus of the Soviet state, he advises:

> From the moment you go to prison you must put your past firmly behind you. At the very threshold you must say to yourself: "My life is over, a little early to be sure, but then there is nothing to be done about it. I shall never return to freedom. I am condemned to die—now or a little later ... Only my spirit and conscience remain precious and important to me ... A human being ***has a point of view!*** (Solzhenitsyn's emphasis) … [*Gulag Archipelago*, p. 130].

He goes on to relate a powerful example of the triumph of a person with a "point of view":

> N. Stolyarova recalls an old woman who was her neighbor on the Butyrki (prison) bunks in 1937. They kept on interrogating her every night. Two years earlier, a former metropolitan of the orthodox Church, who had escaped from exile, had spent the night at her home in his way through Moscow. "But he wasn't the former Metropolitan, he was the Metropolitan! Truly, I was worthy of receiving

> him." "All right then. To whom did he go in Moscow?" "I know but I won't tell you." (The Metropolitan had escaped to Finland via an underground railroad of believers.) At first the interrogators took turns, and then they went after her in groups. They shook their fists in the little old woman's face and she replied: "There is nothing you can do to me even if you cut me into pieces. After all you are afraid of your bosses, and you are afraid of each other, and you are even afraid of killing me." (They would lose contact with the underground railroad) "But I am not afraid of anything. I would be glad to be judged by God right this minute!" [*Gulag Archipelago*, pp. 130-31].

In Solzhenitsyn's view the path to spiritual development is often mysterious and unpredictable. But the quest for material comfort, prosperity and worldly success, the apparent goals of life, are inevitably subordinate to spiritual development: the real goal of life. In *First Circle*, the young diplomat Innokenty Volodin lived a life of prosperity and comfort. As the privileged child of a hero of the Revolution he had married into a prominent family and advanced in the Soviet diplomatic service. But he became alienated from it all: he "lack(ed) something: he didn't know what" (p. 341). Upon examining the old fashioned ideas of his deceased mother in her diaries, his perspective on life changed from one of an Epicurean pleasure-seeking to one of ethical regard. He developed a "point of view":

> Up to then the truth for Innokenty had been: you have only one life. Now he came to sense a new law, in himself and in the world: you also have only one conscience. And just as you cannot recover a lost life, you cannot recover a wrecked conscience [p. 345].

Although never an apologist for the Soviet prison system, Solzhenitsyn sees much of his personal prison experience as a useful and necessary condition for his own spiritual development. As Nerzhin exclaimed in *First Circle*: "Thank God for prison! It gave me the chance to think" (p. 33). This theme is also explored in *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, when Aloysha the Baptist tells Ivan: "You should rejoice that you're in prison. Here you have the time to think about your soul" (p. 156), and again in *First Circle*, or as the character Sologdin states:

> " ... you ought to find out where you are, spiritually understand the role of good and evil in human life. There's no better place to do it than prison" [p. 136].

The providential hand of God is in the darkest disasters of human experience. As Solzhenitsyn expressed in an interview: "I am deeply convinced that God is present both in the lives of every person and also in the lives of entire nations" [Pearce (2003)].

B. *Nature of Good and Evil*.

A second component to Solzhenitsyn's thought is his understanding of good and evil. First, notions of relative evil are rejected: to Solzhenitsyn good and evil are absolutes. As Innokenty Volodin finds upon his arrest and imprisonment: "Good and evil had now been substantively defined for Innokenty, and visibly distinguished from one another, by that bright gray door, by those olive walls, by that first prison night" [*The First Circle*, p. 553]. This is also expressed in his Harvard speech, where he accuses Western intellectuals (such as George Kennan) of "mix(ing) good and evil, right and wrong, and mak(ing) space

for the absolute triumph of absolute evil in the world" [Berman, p. 13].

Nevertheless, the human ability to rightly choose between good and evil is not the exclusive domain of personal free will. Moral choices are often the consequence of accumulated culture, happenstance or social institutions, and as such judging others' moral choices must be done with compassion and humility. Solzhenitsyn contemplates rather extensively his rejection of an offer to join the Soviet internal police force, the NKDV, when he was a young communist in Rostov in the late 1930's.

> The NKVD school dangled before us special rations and double or triple pay ... It was not our minds that resisted but something inside our breasts. People can shout at you from all sides: "you must!" ... inside our head can be saying also: "You must!" But inside your breast there is a sense of revulsion, repudiation. I don't want to. *It makes me feel sick.* Do what you want without me; I want no part of it .... Without even knowing it ourselves, we were ransomed by small change in copper that was left from the golden coins our great-grandfathers had expended, at a time when morality was not considered relative and when the distinction between good and evil was very simply perceived by the heart [*Gulag Archipelago*, p. 160].

This leads to a rather subtle and non-judgmental view of good and evil. Evil is very real and very wrong, but no human being is authorized to become too self-righteous in its condemnation: *but for the grace of God go I*. In *Gulag Archipelago* Solzhenitsyn says quite emphatically:

> So let the reader who expects this book to be a political expose slam its covers shut right now. If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil. Socrates taught us: *Know thyself!*
>
> Confronted by the pit into which we are about to toss those who have done us harm, we halt, stricken dumb: it is after all only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't [p. 169].

To Solzhenitsyn the constraints on the human capacity for evil include a regard for a higher authority, such as God or natural law, social opprobrium against evil doing, and individual conscience that calls the evildoer to account. These natural counterbalances to evil, however, are swept away by ideology, especially by the utopian and totalitarian ideologies that permeated the 20th Century:

> To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he's doing is good, or else that it's a well-considered act in conformity with natural law. Fortunately, it is in the nature of the human being to seek a *justification* for his actions. Macbeth's self-justifications were feeble—and his conscience devoured him. Yes, even Iago was a little lamb too. The imagination and the spiritual strength of Shakespeare's evildoers stopped short at a dozen corpses. Because they had no *ideology*. Ideology—that is what gives

> evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes, so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors. That was how the agents of the Inquisition fortified their wills: by invoking Christianity; the conquerors of foreign lands, by extolling the grandeur of their Motherland; the colonizers, by civilization; the Nazi, by race; and the Jacobins (early and late), by equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations. Thanks to *ideology*, the twentieth century was fated to experience evildoing on a scale calculated in the millions [*Gulag Archipelago*, p. 175].

C. *Views on Modernity*.

Solzhenitsyn sees the primary problem of the 20th century as "irreligious anthropocentrism (that) cannot yield answers to the most essential questions of our life" [Pearce, 2003]. He traces this to the way humanism developed as a philosophy from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment to the Modern period. He sees the human focus of the Renaissance as inevitable and even desirable, for the preceding Middle Ages entailed "(an) intolerable despotic repression of man's physical nature" [Berman, p.16]. But as it developed, Renaissance humanism ceased to be constrained by the Christian tradition from which it arose. He sees the rejection of God as something that began to take hold in the Enlightenment and slowly came to permeate and corrupt Christian societies both in the East and in the West. In the East, the corruption came in the form of Marxism, which explicitly rejected God; in the West it was secular materialism, which simply ignored God. Yet either system is morally bankrupt and bound to fail for it ignores the spiritual nature of mankind. As he stated in his Harvard address, "humanism which has lost its Christian heritage cannot prevail in this competition" [Berman, p. 18]. In his Templeton Prize address, published in the London *Times*: " … if I were called upon to briefly identify the principle trait of the entire twentieth century ... Men have forgotten God" [Pearce (1999), p. 248]. In his Harvard address he refers to:

> .... the calamity of an autonomous, irreligious humanistic consciousness. It has made man the measure of all things on earth ... On the way from the Renaissance ... we have lost the Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and irresponsibilities. We have placed too much hope in politics and social reforms, only to find out that we are being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life" [Berman, p. 19].

It is not technology, progress in living standard, or even humanism that Solzhenitsyn rejects *per se*. It is when any of these so crowd out spiritual development that mankind becomes less than human. In every age humankind had been faced with potentially corrupting options and "temptations" to which "humanity had normally succumbed." True human progress, in Solzhenitsyn's view occurs when humankind, "standing before the things which are temptations ... shows himself able to overcome them" [Pearce (1999), p. 250]. In the normal course of human endeavors new options will emerge; this is part of human history. If those options are used to promote spiritual development then they are truly productive. However, new options are also temptations that potentially (and usually) detract from this spiritual quest.

D. *Nature of Freedom*.

Solzhenitsyn's view of freedom is also shaped by Orthodox Christianity. Neither the Marxist concept of freedom nor the actual evolution of freedom in the West is adequate. As outlined in his essays *From Under the Rubble*:

> After the Western ideal of unlimited freedom, after the Marxist concept of freedom as acceptance of the yoke of necessity—here is the true Christian definition of freedom. Freedom is ***self-restriction***! Restriction of the self for the sake of others [p. 136].

Solzhenitsyn sees two types of human freedom: internal freedom and external freedom. Internal freedom is innate, while external freedom is social. Both types of freedom are desirable for the goal of spiritual development, but external freedom is not sufficient or even necessarily conducive to spiritual development.

> We are creatures born with an inner freedom of will, freedom of choice—the most important freedom of all is a gift to us at birth. External or social freedom is very desirable for the sake of undistorted growth, but it is no more than a condition, a medium, and to regard it as the object of our existence is nonsense. We can firmly assert our inner freedom even in external conditions of unfreedom ... [*Under the Rubble*, pp. 21-22].

As with progress or material wealth or any of the other developments of modernity, it is how freedom (either internal or external) is *used* that matters. In the absence of some spiritual influence, freedom becomes unsustainable and imbalanced. Solzhenitsyn emphasizes the obvious connection between freedom and responsibility, between rights and corresponding obligations. In his view, in the West this correspondence has been broken and "freedom" has degenerated to mere self-indulgence. External freedom as it has developed in the West has not been conducive to spiritual growth precisely because it has emphasized rights and ignored obligations. As stated in his Harvard address: "It is time in the West, to defend not so much human rights as human obligations" [Berman, p. 8].

To Solzhenitsyn, in the tradition of Berdayev and Dostoevsky [see Nucho (1966)], freedom is more of a burden and an obligation than an option or a right. To divorce political or social rights from moral obligations perverts and corrupts freedom. As he went on to state in the Harvard address:

> ... in the American democracy at the time of its birth, all individual human rights were granted on the ground that man is God's creature. That is, freedom was given to the individual conditionally, in the assumption of his constant religious responsibility. Such was the heritage of the preceding one thousand years. Two hundred or even fifty years ago, it would have seemed quite impossible, in America, that an individual be granted boundless freedom with no purpose, simply for the satisfaction of his whims. Subsequently, however, all such limitations were eroded everywhere in the West; a total emancipation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice ...
>
> The West has finally achieved the rights of man, and even to excess, but man's responsibility to God and society has grown dimmer and dimmer [Berman p.17].

Solzhenitsyn's Economics

Solzhenitsyn's worldview influences his economic viewpoint. Nonetheless, two cautions must be exercised when considering his specific economic and political pronouncements. First, in the tradition of Russian intellectuals since Tsarist times, the writer simultaneously eschews and embraces political discussion. On one hand, the Russian intellectual insists his work is not about political or economic policies, but rather about grander issues of philosophy, morals, the human condition and theology. On the other hand, the intellectual goes on to discuss, often in great detail, specific economic and political issues of the day.

One explanation for this apparent contradiction is the absence of active political opposition throughout Russia's history [see Carter (1977) and Paxson (2004)]. Therefore, prominent Russian writers and scientists who have access to popular media often make pronouncements in fields outside their expertise simply because no one else does so.[2] In 1970 Solzhenitsyn declared: "It is not the task of the writer to defend or criticize ... one or another mode of government organization" [Carter, p. 1], although in 1973 he provided a number of specific criticisms in his *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*. In 1990, although declaring "I have no special expertise in economics and have no wish to venture definitive proposals here ... " [*Rebuilding Russia*, p. 35], Solzhenitsyn went on to endorse (and condemn) a number of rather specific economic and political ideas and policies.

Second, Solzhenitsyn clearly indicates that the political and economic arrangements of any society are of secondary importance to the central human task of spiritual development. This is expressed in his work both before his expulsion from Russia in 1974 and before his return in 1994:

> ... Christ himself teaches us "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's"—not because every Caesar deserves it, but because Caesar's concern is not with the most important thing in our lives [*Under the Rubble*, p. 24].

> ... the structure of the state is secondary to the spirit of human relations... The strength or weakness of a society depends more on the level of spiritual life than on its level of industrialization. Neither a market economy nor even general abundance constitutes the crowning achievement of human life [*Rebuilding Russia*, p. 49].

This is all very consistent with his view that material standards of living are unimportant to spiritual development. The semi-autobiographical protagonist in *Cancer Ward*, Pavel Rusanov, finds a great deal of satisfaction and happiness in the harsh conditions of exile of Kazakhstan and observes: "It's not our level of prosperity that makes for happiness but the kinship of heart to heart and the way we look at the world. Both attitudes lie within our power, so that a man is happy so long as he chooses to be happy, and no one can stop him" [p. 266].

All this being said, Solzhenitsyn clearly prefers capitalism to socialism. The superiorities of capitalism and the defects of socialism, however, have noth-

[2]As in the West, intellectual hubris undoubtedly contributes to Russian intellectual pontifications, although historically the price of these public displays are much higher in Russia than in the West!

ing to do with the higher living standard a free market offers: if anything, a higher living standard is a mark *against* capitalism for Solzhenitsyn.

There has been a persistent question raised among free-market intellectuals in the West: If capitalism did not offer higher living standards than socialism, if a centrally planned economy gave a higher living standard than a free market economy, would you still support capitalism as an economic system? Ben Rogge and Milton Friedman, among others, have indicated a preference for capitalism even if it generated a lower living standard than socialism (although they argued that it did not). This, however, is not an easy question with an obvious answer. Solzhenitsyn is unique among intellectuals in that he would likely express a *stronger preference for capitalism if it offered a lower living standard than socialism!* Unlike Rogge and Friedman, who see higher living standard as an argument for a particular economic system, Solzhenitsyn sees higher living standard as an argument *against* (or at best irrelevant) for a particular economic system.

Perhaps more than any twentieth century writer, Solzhenitsyn sees the failure of socialism as a moral failure rather than an economic failure, and that the superiority of a free market lies in its absence of coercion and its potential ability to foster conditions conducive to personal spiritual development, not in its attainment of higher levels of material comfort for ordinary people.

To Solzhenitsyn, frail and sinful individuals typically succumb to the temptations of crass materialism under both capitalism and socialism. The socialist bureaucrats of his novels are just as venal as any Western capitalist, the Soviet consumer is just as greedy and materialistic as the Western consumer, and materialism is a blight on the task of spiritual development.

But there are two overwhelming, unredeemable and crucial flaws of Soviet-style socialism, and likely in all socialist systems to Solzhenitsyn. First, socialism must be based on coercion, and second, it must rely on a "collective lie."

Socialism (especially in its Soviet incarnation) requires the ownership of the means of production by the state. All economic decision-making and activity must be subordinate to and under the direction of the state. The only way to ensure this subordination is by force. Coercion must be used to ensure compliance with central economic directives. And to Solzhenitsyn the use of coercion corrupts the user of coercion, and debilitates those coerced. Its unbridled use in all aspects of life is not consistent with spiritual development. As he stated in an interview published in 2003:

> In different places over the years I have had to prove that socialism, which to many Western thinkers is a sort of kingdom of justice, was in fact full of coercion, of bureaucratic greed and corruption and avarice, and consistent within itself that socialism cannot be implemented without the aid of coercion. Communist propaganda would sometimes include statements such as "we include almost all the commandments of the Gospel in our ideology." The difference is that the Gospel asks all this to be achieved through love, through self-limitation, but socialism only uses coercion (Pearce, 2003).

But second, and more important, unlike petty authoritarianism, which makes limited demands on individuals,

the Soviet system required that all aspects of life and culture be subject to the state. Once the state program is established all criticisms are off limits. This precludes any honest assessment of any aspect of life, since all must pay continual homage to the wisdom and felicity of the party and the system. This pretense and hypocrisy undermines the development of good character and is spiritually debilitating.[3]

Commenting on the Soviet system before his expulsion from Russia, Solzhenitsyn states:

> Our present system is unique in world history, because over and above its physical and economic constraints, it demands of us total surrender of our souls, continuous and active participation in the general, conscious ***lie.*** To this putrefication of the soul, this spiritual enslavement, human beings who wish to be human cannot consent (*Under the Rubble*, pp. 24-25).

Solzhenitsyn's approval of capitalism, on the other hand, is limited and less than enthusiastic. He is a continual critic of the lifestyle choices and materialism of the West. He does, however, affirm two basic institutions of a market economy: private property and free economic initiative. But even these institutions and those who participate in them must be subject to self-limitations in the spirit of Christian freedom or they will be as corrupt as their socialist counterparts. "Untouched by the breath of God, unrestricted by human conscience, both capitalism and socialism are repulsive" [Pearce (2003)].

But Solzhenitsyn sees private property and private economic initiative as natural and proper for humans, a necessary part of their life, and provided they (both the institutions and humans!) are subject to limitations, useful for spiritual development. They are more than a necessary evil, but less than an unqualified good. His comments on land-owning by peasants in pre-Revolutionary Russia are perhaps most revealing of his views on private property and free markets. It is interesting to note that these were offered before his expulsion from Russia, before his experience of living in the West, and well before the collapse of the Soviet system:

> The peasant masses yearned for *land* and if this in a certain sense means freedom and wealth, in another (and more important) sense it means obligation, in yet another (and its highest) sense it means a mystical tie with the world and a feeling of personal worth [*Under the Rubble*, p. 21].

Yes, private landholdings led to higher living standards and there is nothing wrong with that. But more important, landholding led to personal responsibility and a sense of social obligation. Finally, landholding made the peasant part of a larger system and helped the ordinary person develop social and spiritual connections. This facilitates spiritual development and growth. Indeed, the urge for land is predicated on a spiritual longing.

During the same time frame he noted that:

[3]The evil of self-deception and its derogatory impact on the human soul as outlined by Solzhenitsyn is likely based from and certainly echoed in Dostoevsky. Father Zossima, the wise and holy priest in *Brothers Karamazov* advises: "Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to such a pass that he cannot distinguish the truth within him or around him, and so loses respect for himself and others. And having no respect he ceases to love ..." (p. 20).

> The fundamental concepts of private property and private economic initiative are part of man's nature, and necessary for his personal freedom and his sense of normal well being [*Under the Rubble*, p. 138].

But he went on to note that, unrestrained and unlimited, they would generate instability and social evil:

> … (private property and private economic initiative) would be beneficial to society *if only* ... if only the carriers of these ideas on the very threshold of development had *limited themselves*, and not allowed the size of their property and the thrust of their avarice to become a social evil, which provoked so much justifiable anger, not tried to purchase power and subjugate the press. It was as a reply to the shameless money-grubbing that socialism in all its forms developed [*Under the Rubble*, p. 138].

At the crumbling of the Soviet Union and after two decades of residence in the West, his views are remarkably consistent. Private property and private commercial enterprise are essential to post-Soviet Russia, but they must be constrained and limited. In 1990 he stated:

> ... it is impossible to create a state governed by laws without first having an independent citizen ... But there can be no independent citizen without private property. After seventy years of propaganda, our brains have been instilled with the notion that one must fear private property and avoid hired labor as though they were the work of the devil: that represents a major victory of ideology over human essence ... The truth is that ownership of modest amounts of property which does not oppress others must be seen as an integral component of personality, and as a factor contributing to stability, while conscientiously performed, fairly compensated hired labor is a form of mutual assistance and a source of goodwill among people [*Rebuilding Russia*, p. 36].

But post-Soviet Solzhenitsyn always qualifies his approval for private property and private enterprise with both general and specific calls for regulation and limitations:

> ... the overall picture seems clear enough: healthy private initiative must be given wide latitude ... At the same time there should be firm legal limits to the unchecked concentration of capital, no monopolies should be permitted in any sector ... [*Rebuilding Russia*, p. 36].

> We must learn to respect healthy, honest and intelligent private commerce (and to distinguish it from predatory dealings built on bribes and swindling of inept management): such commerce stimulates and unifies society ... it is clear that in addition to strict environmental controls, and substantial fines for despoiling the environment, financial incentives should be in place for efforts aimed at restoring or protecting nature, as well as bringing back traditional crafts [*Rebuilding Russia*, p. 39].

Although Solzhenitsyn has clear regard for market institutions, he is unabashed in his calls for limits on market processes. Although his first preference, of course, is for self-imposed limits which market participants place on themselves, it seems clear that he is comfortable with a great deal of state intervention if self-imposed limitations are not "adequate." In addition to the state imposed regulations and central directives alluded to above, Solzhenitsyn has called for policies of zero economic growth [*Under the Rubble*, p. 138], for strict anti-trust laws, for progressive taxation [*Rebuilding Russia*, p. 37], for screening technological innovation [*Under the Rubble*, p. 138], for limits on foreign investment

[*Rebuilding Russia*, p. 38], and for general land use restrictions [Pravda (2001)]. This is hardly the picture of a Randian libertarian or an Austrian or Chicago School economist.

Solzhenitsyn is a strong critic of what he perceives to be modernity's uncontrolled conquest of nature, pursuit of "endless" economic growth, and large scale dehumanizing enterprises (of either socialist or capitalist origins), considering all these to be perverse notions springing from the Enlightenment. Before his exile from Russia he was quite critical of Soviet environmental and economic policy on these grounds. His criticisms had a great of deal in common with the work of E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*. Indeed, Solzhenitsyn noted and approved such comparisons: "I came to the same conclusions in parallel with him but independently. If you have read my *Letters to the Soviet Leaders* you will see I say much the same thing as he did at about the same time" [Pearce (2003), p. 206].

Solzhenitsyn's (naive?) Public Choice Theory

So how would Solzhenitsyn structure the state so as to rein in what he perceives to be the excesses of capitalism while safeguarding against a despotic and totalitarian regime? Here is where Solzhenitsyn is simply unclear. At one level Solzhenitsyn sees the key to good government being both the people and the elected representatives exercising self-restraint. Yet in his most extensive political essay, *Rebuilding Russia*, written in 1990, he offered a number of very specific proposals for Russia. So how will good government be attained in Russia? While arguing that "we embark on democracy at a time when it is not at its healthiest" [*Rebuilding Russia*, p. 79], Solzhenitsyn did endorse some form of democracy for Russia in 1990. Paraphrasing Karl Popper, he is for democracy "not because it abounds in virtue, but in order to avoid tyranny" [*Rebuilding Russia*, p. 63] and thinks that the most important component of any democratic system is its respect for individual rights and its capacity to limit government power [*Rebuilding Russia*, pp. 64-65].

A great admirer of the Swiss system, he envisioned a great deal of local autonomy and local political participation in Russia. Yet in another context, Solzhenitsyn stated that "it is today (in 1990) by no means inappropriate to have a strong presidency" [*Rebuilding Russia*, pp. 95-96]. His proposals in *Rebuilding Russia* reflect a pragmatic proposal for political reform for post- Soviet Russia, as a starting point for further national discussion, not as systematic political philosophy.

He nevertheless qualifies it all with observations such as:

> If we do not wish to be ruled by a coercive authority, then each must learn to rein himself in. No constitution, law or election will assure equilibrium in society ... A stable society is not achieved by balancing opposing forces, but by conscious self-limitations: by the principle that we are duty bound to defer to a sense of moral justice [*Rebuilding Russia*, p. 54].

But how does an ethic of self-limitation systematically emerge in society? Can it be engineered? He did not say in his 1990 missive, but later his answer is no: "Unfortunately, the idea of self-limitation is not successful if you do try to propagandize it" [Pearce (1999), p. 211]. In his view, the very attribute necessary to restrain political activity is outside the direct influence of the politi-

cal process. Certainly, a totalitarian ideological system such as the Soviet Union would preclude the development of a social ethic of self-restraint, but a democratic or merely autocratic system is not destined to establish one either.

Like other conservative intellectuals, Solzhenitsyn does not see the moral virtue necessary to sustain a market economy as necessarily automatic or self-generating. His view is perhaps most similar to that of German economist Wilhelm Roepke, who argued that:

> Market economy, price mechanism, and competition are fine, but they are not enough. They may be associated with a sound or an unsound structure of society. But whether society is sound or unsound will eventually decide not only society's own measure of happiness, well-being and freedom, but also the fate of the free market economy [Roepke (1960), p. 35].

Like Solzhenitsyn, Roepke believed that the "fount of virtue" necessary to sustain a healthy society must come from somewhere other than the market or the state.

Ultimately, Solzhenitsyn believes that religion is an essential component to a free society, but also affirms that only religion that is voluntarily embraced can provide the virtue necessary for a good society. Solzhenitsyn has never called for a theocratic state or even any state sanction to any particular religion or to religion in general. Although an Orthodox Christian himself, he expresses rather liberal views about other faiths. His 2003 interview with Joseph Pearce is revealing.

> Pearce: Is the only hope a return to religion?
>
> Solzhenitsyn: Not a return to religion but an elevation toward religion. The thing is that religion itself cannot but be dynamic which is why "return" is an incorrect term. A return to the forms of religion which perhaps existed a couple of centuries ago is absolutely impossible. On the contrary, in order to combat modern materialistic mores, as religion must, to fight nihilism and egotism, religion must also develop, must be flexible in its forms, and it must have a correlation with the cultural forms of the epoch. Religion always remains higher than everyday life. In order to make the elevation towards religion easier for people, religion must be able to alter its forms in relation to the consciousness of modern man. Of course, one cannot declare that only my faith is correct and all other faiths are not. Of course God is endlessly multi-dimensional so every religion that exists on earth represents some face, some side of God. One must not have any negative attitude to any religion but nonetheless the depth of understanding God and the depth of applying God's commandments is different in different religions.

Concluding Comments

Classical liberals are uncomfortable with the notion that the key to good public-sector outcomes is "good people doing good things." Part of the classical liberal intellectual project has been to design institutions that do not rely on the virtue of individuals to generate good results. Although Solzhenitsyn does express a preference for liberal institutional arrangements over others, he is deeply skeptical of the liberal project. For Solzhenitsyn, political and economic freedoms are not ends in themselves, but simply potentially useful means for spiritual development. But they are precarious means, not destined or fated to produce the desired end. Only if accompanied by sufficient self-discipline and self-restraint is freedom useful or socially viable.

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