

Article

Becoming Nonhuman: The Case Study of the Gulag[†]

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Abstract: Based on the experience of innocent individuals who were arrested and sent to the Gulag, this paper examines the transformation from being human to being nonhuman. It suggests that during this process, one shifts from belonging to nonbelonging. As a result, similarly to Winston Smith–Orwell’s hero in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the prisoner is rebooted and reborn as an object belonging to the Gulag. In this situation, the prisoner internalizes the Gulag’s rules in the deepest possible manner.

Keywords: Gulag; affordance; nonhuman; nonbelonging

1. Introduction

While being-in-the-world, we do not perceive our body as an object. Rather, the lived-body (or body-as-subject) facilitates our perception of the world. When healthy, and when the situation does not require us to focus our attention on the body, it is immersed within the world, and no clear distinction exists between the body and the world. Indeed, the boundaries are fluid: “The overall experience of being-in-the-world is inseparable from how one’s body feels in its surroundings” (Fuchs and Schlimme 2009, p. 571). Thus, we feel at home in the world, meaning that the world is within our reach.

According to Ratcliffe (2008), the sense of belonging is much closer to our daily life experience—we are accustomed to feeling at home within the world. Furthermore, he suggests that “when we are comfortably passive or involved in a smooth context of bodily activity, neither the body nor the physical boundary between the body and everything else is especially conspicuous . . . body and world are, to some extent at least, undifferentiated” (p. 95). Note that when no firm boundary separates the internally and externally directed senses, we cannot isolate proprioception from the perception of things which are outside the body.

A sense of nonbelonging can be expressed as bodily changes, as changes in the world, or as both: “Someone with a pervasive feeling of strangeness, of being dislodged from everyone and everything, might say ‘my body feels strange’, ‘the world seems strange’, ‘everyone looks strange’ or just ‘it feels strange’” (Ratcliffe 2015, p. 63). Indeed, according to Ratcliffe (2008), “feelings of the body and feelings towards objects in the world are two sides of the same coin” (p. 111). Hence, any alteration in the bodily level of experience finds expression in how we experience the actual world. This dual description can be explained by the fact that such apparently distinct symptoms constitute varying ways to depict the same phenomenon, namely, “a changed sense of body is also a changed sense of world and the experience can be described with reference to either side of a unitary self-world relation” (p. 115).

We continuously sense the body in the context of the world and the world in the context of the body. Thus, “feelings of the body and feelings towards objects in the world . . . [are] two sides of the same coin, although one side or the other will often occupy the experiential foreground” (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 111). Any changes in the sense of body are consequently expressed in the perceived world and in our sense of belonging to the world, because “the body that falls into the background is not just the body that acts.” Thus, the body “constitutes a sense of belonging, a context within which all purposive activities

are embedded.” In turn, “the increasingly conspicuous body is not just something that withdraws from a within-world activity; it is also a change in the sense of belonging” (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 112).

This paper examines the transformation from a sense of belonging to a sense nonbelonging. To that end, it analyzes the process by means of which an innocent person¹ was arrested and sent to the Gulag.² The next section examines the process of becoming a prisoner and the journey to the Gulag. Subsequently, the discussion provides a phenomenological account of how the prisoner develops a sense of nonbelonging, mainly in the context of affordance.

2. Becoming Nonhuman³

2.1. From the Moment of Arrest to Arrival at the Gulag

2.1.1. First Steps

The process of imprisonment was rapid and harsh, with devastating results. For example, Julius Margolin, who was imprisoned in the Gulag from 1940 to 1945, describes the experience of becoming a prisoner as follows: “When I entered the police station, I immediately ceased to be a human being” (Margolin 2013, p. 89).⁴ The encounter between the Law and the individual was violent and brutal, yet moreover constituted an immediate process via which the individual—suddenly and without any prior preparations—ceased to be treated as a human being. One moment previously, the person was a member of the human race, only to find herself suddenly outside this *group*. This reality is at the same time both implausible and possible (we will return to this issue in the last part of this paper). As Solzhenitsyn (1975) outlines, the moment the door closed, the prisoner’s previous life was left behind, and, in an instant, the unimaginable became the only possible reality. From that point onwards, not only was he confronted by what he had done but also, in accordance with Article 19 of the Criminal Code, by what he had not done:

No treason had taken place; but the interrogator envisioned an intention to betray—and that was enough to justify a full term, the same as for actual treason. *True, Article 19 proposes that there be no penalty for intent, but only for preparation, but given a dialectical reading one can understand intention as preparation.* And “preparation is punished in the same way [i.e., with the same penalty] as the crime itself” (Criminal Code). In general, “*we draw no distinction between intention and the crime itself*, and this is an instance of the superiority of Soviet legislation to bourgeois legislation”. (Solzhenitsyn 1975, pp. 61–62, my emphasis)⁵

In this situation, there was only one way to survive, to give up your previous life completely. As we see:

¹ A critical analysis reveals that in a totalitarian regime, the subject is always a suspect and can always become “an objective danger.” Nevertheless, the shift from being an actual citizen and a potential prisoner to becoming a potential citizen and an actual prisoner is a radical one.

² In brief, Gulag is an acronym for the Soviet bureaucratic institution that managed the system of forced labor camps during the Stalin era from the 1930s until the 1950s. The first such camps were established in 1918. Since the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s novel, *The Gulag Archipelago*, the term has been widely used to describe any forced labor camp in the USSR (Applebaum 2004; Rossi 1989). It is very difficult to estimate the number of people who perished in these camps. According to a study by Getty et al. (1993), which is based on Soviet archival data, a total of 1,053,829 people died in the Gulag from 1934–1953. However, scholars fail to agree on the total number of victims. Some estimates suggest the figure 1.6 million during the entire period from 1929 to 1953, while others propose that over 10 million people perished (in this regard, see (Conquest 2008; Rosefielde 2009)).

³ Note that in this paper we do not seek to investigate the Gulag itself but rather to examine it as a test case of extreme trauma. For this reason, some of the descriptions are quite general and present a radical picture. While such generalization may be problematic for those interested in understanding the nuances of the Gulag, they are of no significance to the arguments advanced herein.

⁴ All quotes from Margolin were translated from Hebrew by the author.

⁵ We believe that lengthy quotations from works written by survivors of the Gulag are of particular importance because these rich descriptions offer the reader a fuller sense of what it meant to be a prisoner in the Gulag.

From the moment you go to prison you must put your cozy past firmly behind you. At the very threshold, you must say to yourself: “My life is over, a little early to be sure, but there’s nothing to be done about it. *I shall never return to freedom.* I am condemned to die—now or a little later. But later on, in truth, it will be even harder, and so the sooner the better. I no longer have any property whatsoever. For me those I love have died, and for them I have died. From today on, *my body is useless and alien to me. Only my spirit and my conscience remain precious and important to me.*” (Solzhenitsyn 1975, p. 130 my emphasis)

2.1.2. Becoming an Object—Doubting One’s Own Humanity

Inna Shikheeva-Gaist describes her experience after being imprisoned in the following way:

Here in the Lubyanka, *you are no longer a person.* There are people around you. Lead you down the corridor, photograph you, undress you, search you *mechanically.* Everything is *done completely impersonally.* You *look for a human glance*—I don’t speak of a human voice, just a glance—but you don’t find it. You stand disheveled in front of the photographer, try to somehow fix your clothes, and you are shown with a finger where to sit. An *empty voice* says ‘face front’ and ‘profile.’ They don’t see you as a human being! *You have become an object.* (Shikheeva-Gaist 1998, pp. 94–104 translated within Applebaum 2004, p. 129 my emphasis)

The major motif of this experience is dehumanization. As a prisoner, Inna futilely longed for someone to look at her in a certain way. Through what appears to be a completely planned process, becoming a prisoner deprived the captive of the sense of humanity, transforming the prisoner into an object lacking any subjective dimension whatsoever. Note that at this stage, no particular violence was employed against the prisoner. This is a critical point, because *even violent contact remains a form of contact*, and a striking hand is also a touching hand. In some senses, any kind of touch indicates existence. Yet, in the process described here, the individual was treated as an object of no significance whatsoever. Everything became mechanical, lacking interest and importance. No one was interested in the prisoner. Nothing was done especially for or because of the prisoner, who was merely another empty figure to be disassembled and put back together, before moving on to the next station.

Prisoners were deprived of human contact precisely because they were no longer considered human. When they were finally touched, the touch was not human but rather lacked any remnant of human dignity, as is corroborated by the testimony of a woman who underwent a gynecological examination: “There followed a brief, disgusting, gynecological examination. I kept silent, but I felt as if I had been deprived of all human dignity” (Applebaum 2004, p. 177).⁶ In Margolin’s words (Margolin 2013): “Based on how they behaved I understand that from their perspective *we were already dead, people erased from the list of human beings*” (p. 89 my emphasis). This citation is extremely important because it demonstrates the prisoner’s feeling, almost from the very first moment, that s/he is no longer part of the human race; s/he has lost something highly fundamental which precludes membership in the human race, even though it is not yet clear exactly what s/he has lost. Consequently, prisoners began to doubt their own humanity. Ultimately, they ceased to regard themselves as human, in order to understand why the system was almost justified in punishing them and why this outcome was inevitable: “After six weeks in a Soviet prison, no human expression remained on my face.” In the end, such a person indeed appeared to “deserve a sentence of no less than five years of hard labor” (p. 104). The prisoner rapidly became simply another product of the system, lacking almost any human dimension. Indeed, the main objective of these prisons was not only to make prisoners understand the full power of the system but also to internalize that they were in an inhuman place where inhuman things occur—a new world in which the inconceivable was not only possible but even essential (Arendt 1973).

⁶ For more information about the source of this citation, see (Applebaum 2004, chp#7; footnote#38).

Aino Kuusinen, the Finnish wife of the leader of Comintern Oleg Kuusinen, describes her experience in the following manner:

In my cell I could hear every noise from outside ... All night long *I heard inhuman screams* and the repeated sound of the lash. A desperate and tormented animal could hardly have uttered such dreadful cries as the victims who were assaulted for hours on end with threats, blows and curses. (translated within [Applebaum 2004](#), p. 134 my emphasis)⁷

It thus seems that one of the major goals of the interrogation and torture was to ensure the prisoners understood that they were not longer ordinary human beings. Indeed, they were not interrogated as people but rather as objects on an assembly line. They began this process as human beings but, by the end of it, had become work tools. Along the way, they supplied the system with everything it wanted and needed.

2.1.3. In Search of the Simplest and Least Expensive Method

Although the interrogators did not hesitate to use “classic” physical torture methods in the interrogation rooms, these were not their first choice ([Applebaum 2004](#); [Solzhenitsyn 1975](#)).⁸ If there was time—and, in many cases, the interrogation lasted no longer than five minutes because both sides understood it was not worth the effort—the main idea was to torture the prisoner without leaving any physical signs. Two effective methods of this kind were depriving the prisoner of sleep and forcing the prisoner to remain standing, without rest. Under such conditions, prisoners very quickly lost their sanity:

The accused could be compelled to stand on his knees not in some figurative sense, but literally: *on his knees*, without sitting back on his heels, and with his back upright. People could be compelled to kneel in the interrogator’s office or the corridor for twelve, or even twenty-four or forty-eight hours ... Then there is the method of simply compelling a prisoner to stand there ... Sometimes even *one day of standing is enough* to deprive a person of all his strength and to force him to testify to anything at all ... One can say that *sleeplessness became the universal method* in the Organs. From being one among many tortures, it became an integral part of the system of State Security; *it was the cheapest possible method and did not require the posting of sentries*. In all the interrogation prisons the prisoners were *forbidden to sleep* even one minute from reveille till taps ... whoever was undergoing interrogation got no sleep for at least five days and nights. ([Solzhenitsyn 1975](#), pp. 111–13 my emphasis)

This was the simplest and least expensive method of torture, one that utilized the prisoner’s time and body without investing in sophisticated methods. Prisoners were of no interest or importance. They were simply forced to stand and prevented from sleeping so that their body would betray them. Eventually, prisoners would beg to be interrogated and reveal everything, without the system exerting any special efforts.

Sleep deprivation was a major component of the imprisonment. Many interrogated prisoners were absolutely forbidden to sleep during the day. In some cases, they were even forbidden to sit on the bed before 11:00 pm. Sleeping at night was also no simple matter. The lights in the cells were never turned off.⁹ In the main interrogation prisons, prisoners had to keep their arms on top of the blanket, always exposed. They were crowded together as they slept. As in the case of interrogations, the method was inhuman in its very essence, not only due to the system’s lack of humanity but also because the overall objective was to strip the prisoner of all aspects of humanity. This was a major junction in transforming the prisoner into an object.

⁷ For more information about the source of this citation, see ([Applebaum 2004](#), chp#7; footnote#46).

⁸ From June 1937 until 1939, routine beatings occurred, during which prisoners were severely injured.

⁹ As O’Brien says to Winston, “We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness.”

2.1.4. Solitude

Solitary confinement is a low-cost and useful way of breaking the prisoner:

Prison begins with the box, in other words, what amounts to a closet or packing case. The human being who has just been taken from freedom, still in a state of inner turmoil, ready to explain, to argue, to struggle, is, when he first sets foot in prison, clapped into a 'box,' which sometimes has a lamp and a place where he can sit down, but which sometimes is dark and constructed in such a way that he can only stand up and even then is squeezed against the door. And he is held there for several hours, or for half a day, or a day . . . Depending on local conditions, a divisional pit can be substituted for the box, as was done in the Gorokhovets army camps during World War II. The prisoner was pushed into such a pit, ten feet in depth, six and a half feet in diameter; and beneath the open sky, rain or shine, this pit was for several days both his cell and his latrine. And ten and a half ounces of bread, and water, were lowered to him on a cord. (Solzhenitsyn 1975, pp. 109–10)

Whether through solitary confinement or unbearable overcrowding—which are seemingly two sides of the same coin—the prison conditions led to a breakdown in the prisoner's personality. In both cases, the prisoner sank into involuntary solitude. Whereas in solitary confinement, the prisoner could not bear being totally cut off from the world and deprived of any stimulation or human discourse, in horrendously overcrowded conditions, the prisoner enjoyed not even one moment of quiet. Even committing suicide was impossible: the prisoner could not find a spot to perform the act. Under these conditions of unbearable overcrowding, prisoners tormented one another simply by their mere presence. Yet again, this is the simplest and least expensive form of torture:

The prisoners tortured the prisoners! The jailers pushed so many prisoners into the cell that not every one had even a piece of floor; some were sitting on others' feet, and people walked on people and couldn't even move about at all. Thus, in the Kishinev KPZ's—Cells for Preliminary Detention—in 1945, they pushed eighteen prisoners into a cell designed for the solitary confinement of one person; in Lugansk in 1937 it was fifteen. And in 1938 Ivanov-Razumnik found one hundred forty prisoners in a standard Butyrki cell intended for twenty-five—with toilets so overburdened that prisoners were taken to the toilet only once a day, sometimes at night; and the same thing was true of their outdoor walk as well. It was Ivanov-Razumnik who in the Lubyanka reception "kennel" calculated that for weeks at a time there were three persons for each square yard of floor space (just as an experiment, try to fit three people into that space!). In this 'kennel' there was neither ventilation nor a window, and the prisoners' body heat and breathing raised the temperature to 40 or 45 degrees Centigrade—104 to 113 degrees Fahrenheit—and everyone sat there in undershorts with their winter clothing piled beneath them. *Their naked bodies were pressed against one another, and they got eczema from one another's sweat.* They sat like that for weeks at a time, and were given neither fresh air nor water—except for gruel and tea in the morning. (Solzhenitsyn 1975, pp. 124–25 my emphasis)

In this impossible situation, the people who are imprisoned together and in exactly the same situation torture one another by their very presence. Furthermore, one's sense of boundaries collapses.

A sense of boundaries is vital because, as De Haan and Fuchs (2010) emphasize, "the loss of self is often accompanied by a feeling of being somehow too open to the world, of having a too 'thin skin'." Such a feeling may "lead to experiences of transitivity, of the permeability of boundaries between the self and others, or the self and the world." As a result, "other people and the world may be experienced as intrusive, invading the personal sphere" (p. 329). In a way, this situation can be defined as over-presence of the other—the prisoners tortured the prisoners.

Essentially, here too, the system did not actually do anything other than facilitate the hot and overcrowded conditions, circumstances that made individual's presence in the world became

unbearable. The prisoner's world was reduced to a crowded and teeming cell in which other humans ceased to be partners to a common fate but rather became instruments inflicting torture—thus inverting the very notion of inter-subjectivity. In effect, the prisoner's stinking, sweating, exhausted body, weak and in pain, also became the enemy, indeed, the prisoner was broken by the body, which cannot endure these conditions, rather than those responsible for the imprisonment. The system created a situation in which the prisoner's body was the enemy. It is important to stress that there was no defined enemy: the system was almost passive, simply creating an unbearable situation in which the prisoner's body became the source of suffering (for a wider discussion, see (Ataria 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Ataria and Gallagher 2015; Ataria and Neria 2013)).

2.1.5. Preventing Any Kind of Communication

To prevent prisoners involved in the same case from communicating with one another, and due to a lack of space, some of those interrogated were locked in cabinets measuring half a square meter for hours on end. Indeed, human communication could possibly bring about the collapse of the entire mechanism by preserving some element of humanity. Yet even when solitary confinement was not utilized, all communication between prisoners in the extremely overcrowded cells was prohibited. Clearly, enforcing such a rule was impossible. Yet communicating remained risky due to presence of at least one informer in each cell, which precluded free conversation, as is described by Elinor Lipper: "The prisoners are eternally suspicious of one another, for there is at least one person in each cell who informs the authorities of everything her fellow prisoners say" (Lipper 1951, p. 10).

Obviously, the awareness that an informer was present created an atmosphere of constant suspicion and even paranoia: no one had faith in anyone else, leading to a state of mind in which the prisoner was completely alone, or more precisely, one repulsive body situated among other repulsive bodies. This is a radical form of isolation: it is isolation without being isolated, isolation within a mass of people who, against their own will, have ceased to be human.

The goal of all the methods employed by the system was to isolate prisoners completely, so that they would not encounter any human gesture and might even forget that any such thing existed:

The loneliness of the accused! That was one more factor in the success of unjust interrogation! The entire apparatus threw its full weight on one lonely and inhibited will. From the moment of his arrest and throughout the entire shock period of the interrogation the prisoner was, ideally, *to be kept entirely alone. In his cell, in the corridor, on the stairs, in the offices, he was not supposed to encounter others like himself, in order to avoid the risk of his gleanings a bit of sympathy, advice, support from someone's smile or glance.* The Organs did everything to blot out for him his future and distort his present. (Solzhenitsyn 1975, p. 123, my emphasis)

2.1.6. One-Way Ticket

Following the interrogations, the prisoners were dispatched from one prison to another or, even worse, to the Gulag. Such a journey was paved with physical torments as well as planned and spontaneous acts of cruelty. Indeed, the system laid the groundwork for spontaneous cruelty as an unavoidable product of the journey. For the prisoner, the long, unbearable train trip constituted one stage in leaving behind the familiar world and former self: it signified entry into a new world in which all the rules of the game had changed profoundly and the individual ceased to be a human being. For example, Thomas Sgovio describes the journey as follows: "Our train left Moscow on the evening of June 24th. It was the beginning of a journey to the east that would last a month. [I will] Never be able to forget that moment. Seventy men [. . .] started to cry" (Sgovio 1979, pp. 129–35).

The journey to the camps had a dramatic impact on the prisoners. During this journey, they were totally severed from their former life, forced into submissiveness and transformed into walking dead men, as described by Margolin:

During this entire time, I had a strange feeling. In the darkness of the wandering coffin, isolated from the outside world, I lost my sense of moving on the Earth. *I felt as if we were dropping downward, all the time downward, to the depths of the earth, outside the world of the living.* With each passing day we descended deeper. The darkness thickened around us, as if we had dived into *the depths of a bottomless well*. With every passing kilometer we traveled farther away from the surface of the earth, where the sun shines and people smile at one another, where you can breathe freely and without fear. We dove downward ceaselessly, and an invisible *satanic force carried us toward the heart of the night, to the underground kingdom from which there is no return.* With each passing day we moved *farther away from our past.* This was no ordinary journey. It was a *journey to the world of the dead.* We knew that when the journey ended and we exited the coffin, everything around us would be different, *and we would be different as well.* We had departed the area of memory, the history of the human race. The ongoing journey exerted a hypnotic force on us. We became submissive. (Margolin 2013, p. 110 my emphasis)

Based on a careful reading of Margolin's words, we might say that at each stage of the journey the prisoner moves further away from the world, not physically but in terms of being part of this world and society. Eventually, the prisoner can no longer be-in-the-world. Indeed, as the journey continues the prisoner rebuilds himself from scratch—he deletes his personal memories and historical past and is reborn anew, no longer part of the human race. More precisely, he was never actually part of this world but rather belongs to the Gulag (for a wider discussion in this context, see [Ataria forthcoming](#)).

The journey was so slow and difficult that in many cases prisoners simply froze to death or suffocated on the crowded trains. The prisoners were given almost no opportunity to relieve themselves during the journey; on the rare occasions that they were allowed to leave the train, they were frequently forced to relieve themselves in the presence of a laughing audience. Prisoners who were unable to control their bodily needs befouled themselves and those around them. Again, the system caused the prisoners to despise one another and mainly to despise the weak. Thus, in practice, the prisoners performed the work of the system and abused those weaker than themselves ([Applebaum 2004](#)). Yet, the primary hardship on these journeys was not violence but rather hunger and thirst. Obviously, the more the prisoners ate and drank, the more they would need to relieve themselves. Thus, the guards found it convenient to give the prisoners very little, if anything, to drink. However, even without the guards' self-serving interest in withholding fluids, the prisoners were allocated miniscule portions. Often, two kilograms of bread needed to last for more than a month. From time to time, the prisoners were also given salted herring, which of course made them even thirstier. Yet the prisoners were allocated only one glass of water a day, often even less. This was not sufficient to quench the prisoners' thirst and, under such circumstances, survival was difficult, in particular for old people and children. Barbara Armona describes one such case: "One two-year-old boy ran a high fever and cried constantly because of pain. The only help his parents could get was a little aspirin which someone gave to them. He grew worse and worse and finally died" ([Armona 1961](#), pp. 40–44 translated within [Applebaum 2004](#), p. 164).

Crucially, rather than exercising planned and organized evil, the guards expressed absolute indifference toward the prisoners, who were no longer human. As Nina Gagen-Torn speculates: "It wasn't evidence of evil, just the complete indifference of the convoy. *They didn't look at us as people. We were living cargo*" ([Gagen-Torn 1994](#), pp. 69–72 translated within [Applebaum 2004](#), p. 172 my emphasis).¹⁰

¹⁰ The government was aware of what was happening on these journeys and sometimes even punished the guards in charge, although this was not effective in changing the situation. The following case is revealing: In December 1944, a train of 51 wagons arrived at the Komsomolsk station, located in the far east of the country. Of the 1402 people who had been sent on the train, only 1291 arrived at their destination. Fifty-three died en route and 66 were left in hospitals along the way. Upon

2.1.7. The Battle of Sexes

The journeys to Kolyma by ship were even harsher. Here, the “survival of the fittest” system operated in the extreme, particularly in the encounter between the sexes. Indeed, brutal rape was the norm rather than the exception. Elena Glink, a survivor, describes the shipboard rapes:

They raped according to the command of the tram “conductor” ... then, on the command “konchai bazar” [“stop the fun”] heaved off, reluctantly, giving up their place to the next man, who was standing in full readiness ... dead women were pulled by their legs to the door, and stacked over the threshold. Those who remained were brought back to consciousness—water was thrown at them—and the line began again. (translated within [Applebaum 2004](#), p. 171)¹¹

The young men who journeyed to Kolyma by ship had similar experiences, as described by Polish teenager Janusz Bardach:

As soon as the women appeared through the hole, the men tore off their clothing. *Several men attacked each woman at once.* I could see the victims’ white bodies twisting, their legs kicking forcefully, their hands clawing the men’s faces. The women bit, cried and wailed. The rapists smacked them back. ... I lost count of how many women had been captured. Screaming could be heard farther and farther away in the hold. *When the rapists ran out of women, some of the bulkier men turned to the bed boards and hunted for young men ...* These adolescents were added to the carnage, lying still on their stomachs, bleeding and crying on the floor. *Hundreds of men hung from the bed boards to view the scene, but not a single one tried to intervene.* ([Bardach and Gleeson 1998](#), pp. 191–92 my emphasis)

2.2. Internalizing the New Rules

2.2.1. Trust No One!

In sub-human conditions, the most basic form of human solidarity tends to disintegrate: “For in [the] camp they are very fond of beating up the weak—not only the work assigners and the brigadiers, but the ordinary zeks [prisoners] as well—so as not to feel completely weak themselves” ([Solzhenitsyn 1975](#), p. 213). This comment is important. The way to ensure that one was not viewed as the weakest was to harm someone else, someone who was identified as weaker. It was important to be at least one level above someone else, no matter who that might be. In the climate of absolute power which reigned in the Gulag, being the weakest was forbidden: weak was tantamount to dead. For this reason, Bardach entitled his book *Man Is Wolf to Man*.¹² In the story “An Individual Assignment,” Shalamov describes this somewhat differently:

Cold, hunger, and sleeplessness rendered any friendship impossible ... Dugaev—despite his youth—understood the falseness of the belief that friendship could be tempered by misery and tragedy. For friendship to be friendship, its foundation had to be laid before living conditions reached that last border beyond which no human emotion was left to a man—only mistrust, rage, and lies. Dugaev remembered well the northern proverb that listed the three commandments of prison life: “Don’t believe, don’t fear, don’t ask.”

Under the harshest possible conditions, the notion of a common fate, which in ordinary circumstances would have led to friendship, broke down. The prisoner was in a constant state

arrival, another 335 were hospitalized with third- or fourth-degree frostbite. The journey took 60 days, for 24 of which the train did not move. The echelon leader received nothing more than a reprimand.

¹¹ For more information about the source of this citation, see ([Applebaum 2004](#), chp#9; footnote#55).

¹² Paradoxically this book, like many others on the same topic ([Toker 2000](#)), also depicts many moments of humanity and a certain sense of human cooperation.

of war, not against the system as a whole but rather against the other prisoners, who found themselves in precisely the same situation. Indeed, in a constant battle for existence, it was impossible to trust anyone. As Solzhenitsyn (1975) puts it, “The supreme law of conduct had already become: Trust no one!” (p. 53) because, as “the old zeks admit and the former POW’s will tell you too: The one who sells you down the river is the one who ate from the mess tin with you” (p. 224).

This dictum seems to capture the essence of the Gulag or, more precisely, it encapsulates what was required of the prisoner under certain circumstances in order to survive. Everyone knew this, and those who did not internalize it died quickly. In “Typhoid Quarantine,” Shalamov describes the moment at which a man understands that he must use every means at his disposal in order to survive. This is a moment of deep inner fracture: “Only the instinct of a beast, roused by the mine, could and did suggest a way out.”

To survive, the individual needed to cease being human and become a beastly predator devoid of all inhibitions. Yet the prisoner was not just bestial but rather no longer human. The alienation between the prisoners arose precisely because the gaze of the other revealed the extent to which one had become inhuman and revealed what the future held: “These people who have lost their humanity are the reflection of what the future has in store for us” (Margolin 2013, p. 164). On the one hand, the living corpses were a threat, but on the other hand they also symbolized the only and apocalyptic possibility for all those who did not undertake dramatic measures to survive. These dramatic measures were tantamount to relinquishing one’s humanity.

As conditions became increasingly difficult, for example in the far north, it became necessary to act more selfishly and violently to survive the day, without thinking about tomorrow. Indeed, the motto was “You can die today, I’m going to die tomorrow.” In some way, the camps exemplified the Darwinian model in its purest and most brutal sense—the survival of the fittest. Indeed, in systems which isolate the prisoners, forcing them to cope alone with absolute, totalitarian power, the very concept of humanity breaks down and the individual loses all human qualities:

There was no room left for human feelings such as friendship, compassion, generosity. This was why there were so many fights; why the weak were trodden upon—everyone was looking for someone on whom to take out his anger. In *Burepolom I felt myself becoming a different person, isolated from others, less apt to give help to someone who needed it*. I began losing what had been instilled in me since childhood—warmth, sensitivity, readiness to help. *My humanity was slipping*. (Bardach and Gleeson 1998, p. 222 my emphasis)

A reincarnation, a transformation was necessary in order to survive: the prisoner needed to relinquish all dimensions of humanity. It was vital to understand that one’s greatest enemy in the Gulag was the attempt to express humanity. Indeed, the only alternative to being indifferent about something was to *become hostile toward it*. Any emotion other than basic hostility was forbidden in the effort to survive. Under such circumstances, no one cared at all:

What if I were to faint? Choke? have a heart attack? Go crazy? Hang myself? Nothing. No one would care. I was a wild animal trapped in a cage. I wanted to thrash against the walls of the cell until I lost consciousness and died. Was my neighbor pounding the door with his fists or his head? (Bardach and Gleeson 1998, pp. 218–19)

2.2.2. New Model of Humanity

Often the prisoners themselves, and particularly the criminals among them, totally adopted the concept that political prisoners were not human beings. They cruelly combined this with the principles of social aggressive Darwinism. Thus, as one became weaker, accordingly one became less human. This reached its extreme when, due to a shortage of guards, the criminal prisoners in effect became the all-powerful leaders:

In the early 1930s, a shortage of guards forced the camp commanders to use criminals in that capacity, and the precedent remained in place. Criminals now ruled over the political

prisoners; they could be counted on to intimidate, harass, and brutalize as severely as the NKVD did. (Bardach and Gleeson 1998, p. 201)

In the climate of the Gulag, the concept of humanity underwent a revolution. Those who were strong were human, while the weak were no longer human beings. In other words, the stronger were not only more human but even more moral and worthy, as Shalamov describes in his story “Dry Rations”: “A physically strong person was better—yes, better—more moral, more valuable than a weak person who couldn’t shovel twenty cubic meters of dirt out of a trench in a day. The former was more moral than the latter.” Paradoxically, in the distorted conditions of the Gulag, the willingness to harm another made those who engaged in such behavior appear more human (and thus even more moral). By contrast, the weaker were less human, making it natural for them to suffer harm: “The dokhodyagi,¹³ often racked with diarrhea, soiled their pants. Working next to them was unpleasant, and back in the tent, when we began to warm up, the stench was unbearable.” Therefore, naturally, “those who had soiled themselves were often beaten and thrown out” (Bardach and Gleeson 1998, p. 234).

None of this is coincidental. Systems that revere the concept of power create situations in which solidarity becomes practically impossible. Under the conditions generated by the Gulag, the only division was that between masters and workers, strong and weak. There was no longer any room for human contact. The balance of power made it impossible to resist. For example, after Bardach attempted to resist one of the criminals who abused him, he found himself in solitary confinement for a week, without food and water. In many cases, this was in effect a death sentence: “My violent outbursts would lead me nowhere except to the isolator, and that would turn me into a *dokhodyaga* faster than working in the gold mine” (Bardach and Gleeson 1998, p. 216).

As the working conditions and the weather became harsher and the food rations diminished, the struggle for survival became even more brutal. Here too, of course, there were some exceptions. Yet, under these conditions of severe polarity, there were masters on the one hand and the dead on the other. Herling describes how, at the moment a prisoner’s needs are met—affording a position of strength, even if only for one evening or for a single moment—that person could no longer tolerate the presence of the living corpses begging for a portion of food, no matter how meager, even those who had been constant companions, day and night:

I shall never forget the day when I was fortunate enough to be taken on to help in the kitchen for a few hours. I was forbidden to take food out from the kitchen and into the zone with me; but in the evening, when I had scrubbed all the cauldrons clean, and had eaten my fill in there, I suddenly saw, behind the frozen window-pane, Dimka’s face, then Sadovski’s, and two hands holding out empty mess-cans through the serving-hatch under the window-pane. One of the cooks walked up to the window and suddenly slammed the hatch-cover down over the opening; the begging hands jerked with a spasm of pain, but rapidly withdrew outside without dropping their cans. *I looked at the wretches on the other side of the glass with disgust, with loathing, although not long before I myself had started to come out in the evenings to beg for dregs of soup at the kitchen.* It is a mistake to suppose that only a beggar who has broken away from it can understand the misery and suffering of his former companions. *On the contrary, nothing repels a man so much and rouses him to rebellion as the picture of his own human condition carried to the lowest extreme of degradation, suddenly brought before his eyes.* (Herling 1951, p. 216 my emphasis)

This testimony is of the utmost importance. *It clarifies that (often) when one finds oneself in a position of strength, no matter how low and for how short a time, one rapidly develops the same hostility toward the*

¹³ Those who became *dokhodyagi* developed all the signs of serious vitamin deficiency, among them pellagra, scurvy, and various types of diarrhea. They often lost the ability to see in the dark. Their legs swelled up and their skin was covered with giant blisters and open sores. The *dokhodyagi* ate literally everything—dogs and cats, rotten food and anything else they could put into their mouths. They were unable to control their bowels, emanated a foul stench, and were barely able to move.

weak. Immediately, the weak become repulsive and one ceases to see them as human. This process is inevitable in a setting that focuses on both the concept of power and isolating the subject. These walking corpses are the closest thing to the prisoner, who knows that any mistake, no matter how small, will put him in their shoes. Yet at the same time, and in effect due to this intimate connection, the prisoner fears them most of all.

3. Discussion

Throughout the years and decades, interrogations under Article 58 were almost never undertaken to elicit the truth, but were simply an exercise in an inevitably filthy procedure: someone who had been free only a little while before, who was sometimes proud and always unprepared, was to be bent and pushed through a narrow pipe where his sides would be torn by iron hooks and where he could not breathe, so that he would finally pray to get to the other end. And at the other end, he would be shoved out, an already processed native of the Archipelago, already in the promised land. (Solzhenitsyn 1975, pp. 94–95)

Our sense of belonging to the world is so obvious that in our daily life we simply tend to forget we are part of this world. We belong not merely to the world around us but also to the same human race. It seems that power becomes an *absolute power* when it can remove humans from their familiar world and transform them into nonhumans—placing a person outside the human race. This process transforms a living-subject, engaged with the world, into a dead object which is detached from the world—it is a shift from belonging to nonbelonging.

Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (Kafka 2002) exemplifies this process: Gregor Samsa awakes one morning only to discover that he himself has been transformed into a giant insect (*ungeheures Ungeziefer*):

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug. He lay on his armour-hard back and saw, as he lifted his head up a little, his brown, arched abdomen divided up into rigid bow-like sections. From this height the blanket, just about ready to slide off completely, could hardly stay in place. His numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his circumference, flickered helplessly before his eyes.

Amazingly, in a split second, Gregor Samsa no longer belongs; he is no longer part of this world or of human society. Shocking as it may seem, it does not require too much effort to make such a shift. Let us explain this notion further using the concept of affordance.

According to Gibson (1979), affordance is “something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.” Moreover, he continues, “the affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill.” (p. 127). Gibson (1982) further stresses that “not only objects but also substances, places, events, other animals, and artifacts have affordances,” thus, we can “assume that affordances are not simply phenomenal qualities of subjective experience . . . instead, they are ecological, in the sense that they are properties of the environment relative to an animal” (pp. 403–4).

Affordance can also be described in terms of potential for action: “Different layouts afford different behaviors for different animals, and different mechanical encounters” (Gibson 1979, p. 128). Gallagher and Lindgren (2015) stress that “we perceive the world in terms of what we can do, that is, in terms of its pragmatic meaning” (p. 393). Continuing this line of thought, Gallagher and Zahavi (2014) argue that “when I perceive something, I perceive it as actionable.” Thus, in essence, “such affordances for potential actions (even if I am not planning to take action) shape the way that I actually perceive the world” (p. 211).

Note, however, that for (Gibson 1979), affordance cannot be reduced to perception. Rather, it is a concept that refers to “the whole spectrum of social significance” (p. 128). With this in mind, we may say that when we develop a sense of nonbelonging to the world, the range of possibilities that we can

accomplish decreases and the pragmatic phenomenal field representing the I-can shrinks, resulting in a feeling that almost everything is beyond our abilities. The phenomenal field becomes an I-Cannot kind of field. In this situation, the world no longer calls for action—what was once part of the field of affordance is currently unreachable, the world of the living becomes inaccessible and unapproachable (for a wider discussion see: [Arieli and Ataria 2018](#); [Ataria 2015](#)).

The process of becoming a prisoner is in fact twofold: In the first stage, the prisoner's sense of belonging to the world of the living declines, until the captive no longer feels part of the human race. In the second stage, the prisoner develops a new sense of belonging: to the Gulag. This twofold structure first nullifies one's actional field (of the living) and in turn creates a new actional field. In this process, the structure of affordance is updated: What was once within reach is no longer obtainable and what once seemed impossible is now within range. In other words, the I-Can becomes I-Cannot and, simultaneously, the I-cannot becomes I-can. Thus, the prisoner no longer feels part of human society—it is as though the very notion of humanity is beyond reach. Instead, in order to survive, the I-Can phenomenal field is deconstructed. As a result, the world itself changes, turning into a *new brave world*. The byproduct of this process is destructive: the (so-called) old world is no longer familiar, no longer within reach. Under these conditions, nothing of the so-called "old-self" remains. Indeed, just like Orwell's hero Winston Smith ([Orwell 1949](#)), the prisoner reboots and is reborn as an object belonging to the Gulag.

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