

SOLZHENITSYN AND MODERN POLITICS

John Eastby

The Other Solzhenitsyn: Telling the Truth about a Misunderstood Writer and Thinker,
by Daniel J. Mahoney (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2014)

Professor Daniel Mahoney has premised his new collection of essays, *The Other Solzhenitsyn*, on his bet against “the diminishing ‘relevance’ of Solzhenitsyn’s work in years to come” (p. xi). To my mind there is little doubt that this premise will prove correct. In the first place, the world needs continuous reminding that the logic of totalitarianism is not simply a temporally or geo-culturally confined phenomenon, and that Solzhenitsyn will remain the indispensable guide to interpreting that phenomenon. But Professor Mahoney attaches an additional significance to the life and work of Solzhenitsyn: he sees Solzhenitsyn as a “subtle thinker and gifted writer” whose vision is continuous “with the deepest and most humane currents of classical and Christian thought” (72). This, I also think, is a correct evaluation of Solzhenitsyn’s ultimate significance, and Mahoney rightly defends that proposition.

Professor Mahoney is an established Solzhenitsyn interpreter (most notably with *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Assent from Ideology* and *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings: 1947–2005*, jointly edited with Edward Ericson Jr.). This new effort is not a general exposition but, rather, a series of nine topical essays along with two

appendices aimed at defending Solzhenitsyn from his critics. The defensive impetus for Mahoney’s essays lies in his concern that essential features of Solzhenitsyn’s thinking have been deeply, and in some cases willfully, misunderstood. Professor Mahoney aims to correct that distorted view of Solzhenitsyn’s thinking through a serious reencounter with Solzhenitsyn’s corpus. The context of that reencounter is shaped, first and foremost, for Mahoney in the political interplay between patriotism, on the one hand, and the moral expectations of human behavior arising from a universal spiritual source, on the other—in Solzhenitsyn’s case, suggests Mahoney, that source is Orthodox Christianity.

The titles of these essays mostly speak for themselves. “An Anguished Love of Country: Solzhenitsyn’s Paradoxical Middle Ground” thematically explores and decisively refutes the argument that Solzhenitsyn was an uncritical Great Russian nationalist. “Nicholas and the Coming of the Revolution” (a small part of which analyzes information still available only in *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*) provides an excellent review of Solzhenitsyn’s damning analysis of Nicholas’s statesmanship, or absence thereof, in the *Red Wheel*. “Two Critics of the Ideological ‘Lie’: Raymond Aron’s Encounter with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn” delineates with care the profound respect with which Aron, one of the great Western social thinkers of the post-World War II era, approached Solzhenitsyn.

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Some of Mahoney's most interesting and helpful essays include "The Artist as Thinker: Reflections on *In the First Circle*" (which is now available in an extended version); "Solzhenitsyn, Russia, and the Jews Revisited," a reflection on *Two Hundred Years Together* (for which excerpts only are available in English in *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*); and "The Binary Tales: The Soul of Man in the Soviet—and Russian—Twentieth Century" (based on translations available in English only in the past four years; the lack of authoritative English translations of all Solzhenitsyn's work, as Mahoney's essays demonstrate, constitutes a serious failure of the American publishing industry). The appendices ("Really Existing Socialism and the Archival Revolution" and "The Gift of Incarnation") respectively detail for the general reader just how much of the archives of the Soviet regime are now available to scholars and offer a touching introduction by Natalia Solzhenitsyn to her edited volume of the *Gulag Archipelago*, prepared for use in Russian schools.

Professor Mahoney deserves our thanks for his insistence that Solzhenitsyn was a principled artist whose work and thought should not and, if we are to be intellectually honest, cannot be pigeonholed in Western-imposed categories of analysis. Mahoney argues convincingly that much of the Western public has been too quick to see Solzhenitsyn as a polemicist and does an excellent service for thoughtful readers, and for Solzhenitsyn, by saving him from the critical associations with National Bolshevism, Eurasianism (by some accounts the current vision of President Putin), pan-Slavism, and Great Russian imperialism so often ascribed to him by unfriendly interpreters. Solzhenitsyn was not a reactionary nationalist, unless all nationalism is by definition reactionary, and he was not a hyper-Orthodox ideologist, although as Mahoney makes clear, he envi-

sions neither a vibrant Russia without the Church nor a decent world without a genuine spiritual life. He was not a purveyor of "isms" and we do him injustice if we reduce him to such.

Yet, while Solzhenitsyn was not in substantive sympathy with the extreme "right" in Russia, he also was critical of those modes of thought that Mahoney refers to, variously, as "the radical individualism of modern society," "left-liberalism," and "the modern ideology of progress," which arise in a compact-based society such as the United States. Mahoney suggests that Solzhenitsyn found a prudential middle ground between the extremes of right (nationalist) and left (individualist) dogmatism in spiritually derived moral principles of self-limitation and repentance (158).

Appealing as this argument seems, I am not sure it finally lays to rest the concerns of liberal critics of Solzhenitsyn's nationalism, which appears to be, predominantly, a form of ethno-nationalism. Mahoney notes that Solzhenitsyn was exceptionally tolerant of competing sources of spiritual life (not all self-restraint need be specifically Christian self-restraint). Moreover, it is the case that Solzhenitsyn at one point argued that Russia should let Chechnya go—a call unheeded by either Yeltsin or Putin. So it seems that spiritual considerations are powerful enough to restrain individual self-assertion and the national impulse in someone such as Solzhenitsyn; but, insofar as Russia itself goes, neither the principle nor the practice of national self-restraint seems to have taken hold.

I am inclined to think that a world in which the voluntary self-limitation and forbearance described by Professor Mahoney constituted the norm, and not the exception, would be the only world truly marked by human progress. But how might we hope

to fashion a working path to such a future? As is well known, Solzhenitsyn, at Harvard, called on individuals to scale a new height of vision similar to attaining a new anthropological stage. This vision, beginning with the voluntary recognition of a "Supreme Complete Entity," would set the West on an epochal turn toward divinely inspired self-restraint.

But for the American citizens he was addressing, the political order was (and is) in principle, if not always in practice, indifferent to ethnic and, for that matter, spiritual heritage. And I am genuinely led to wonder if the political order founded on compact is not ultimately more fertile ground for divinely inspired self-restraint than is a political order erected explicitly on an ethnic basis. Mahoney's discussion of *Two Hundred Years Together* highlights Solzhenitsyn's call for national repentance and mutual collective moral responsibility for the sins perpetrated by both Russians and Jews against each other. But, leaving aside what would seem to be issues of proportion in this relationship, this discussion also has the effect of demonstrating just how corporately modern Russians view themselves.

American liberals, perhaps particularly the most sober (and nonradical) of them, will, it seems to me, always consider it problematic to invoke nationality, as opposed to compact or individual consent, as the basic premise of a polity. To put it in slightly different terms, the conceptual "one people" of the Declaration is inherently more equivocal and determined by compact or consent

than is the idea of nationality invoked by Solzhenitsyn when he speaks of Russia and Russians. Europeans, because their governments are grafted on to preliberal communities, are more comfortable with the reality of the nation, or, put similarly, the tribe. As we see daily, however, in the increasingly multiethnic states of Europe, building and maintaining a tolerant, more or less liberal, society is extremely challenging if ethnic culture is the first principle of society. From what is observable to the eye, no European nation-state has been as successful in squaring that circle as has the United States, which is itself observably challenged.

I admit I do not have any satisfying answers to these concerns. Modern liberalism's formal indifference to ethnicity and religion often seems to cramp spiritual growth (as Solzhenitsyn has argued) and to induce cultural and spiritual backlash arising from the loss of place and relationships. As Mahoney has abundantly demonstrated, Solzhenitsyn, in his life and work, provides a model for personal growth into spiritual tolerance and self-restraint. But we may ask, can either a nation or a contractual political community be self-restrained if individuals or citizens are not? And we may further ask, what is the most pragmatic path to that self-restraint? Will the prospect for political self-restraint find more fertile soil in which to take root within the formal sociological indifference of liberalism or within the formal, corporate commitment characteristic of ethnic and spiritual nationality politics? †