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THE STRUCTURE OF THE SOVIET CONCENTRATION CAMP AND ARCHETYPES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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I spent the years 1949-1954 in Soviet prisons and camps on a political charge of anti-Soviet activity. During that period I conceived and developed a lasting interest in archaic social forms and ways of thought and in the reasons for their retention, stability and transformation. Later, this helped me to arrive at a fresh interpretation of my own experience of the camps. In point of fact, the social structure of the camps and the forms of social behaviour characteristic of their inmates are in some degree, sometimes quite distinctly, reminiscent of the structure and forms of behaviour of archaic societies.

The criminal world, which makes up the largest component of the Soviet prison and camp population, has hardly been studied at all. The social, psychological, fictional and publicist studies of the criminal world in that country belong mainly to the pre-revolutionary past (the books of Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, S.V. Maksimov, Doroshevich and others). Publications of this kind came to an end in the Soviet period as a result of the closed nature of Soviet society, the all-pervading secrecy, and the disappearance of such sciences as sociology and social psychology. The 1920s and the early 1930s saw the last few publications on that topic (the articles of Gernet, publications in the journal *Solovetsky Islands*, which was brought out by prisoners in the concentration camp located on the Solovetsky Islands; among the authors was D.S. Likhachev, now a famous academician and expert on Russian cultural history). Subsequently, books which touched on the topic of my paper one way or another appeared only in the West (for example, Chalidze's book *Criminal Russia*, Shalamov's short stories, and Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*). Only recently, with the opening up of topics hitherto banned, have publications on this topic begun to appear in the Soviet press. They include a discussion in the journal *Soviet Ethnography* in which I also took part (Kabo 1990).

Despite all this, the criminal world is still very poorly studied and there is no serious sociological research on it in our country. Apart from the reasons I have already mentioned, it is the closed nature of that world itself which is responsible. It does not admit outsiders and can only be studied from 'outside'. This paper does not claim to be a profound study. I am attempting merely to generalize my own observations and comprehend the causes at the base of these phenomena. What has been published in recent years makes it possible to trace the dynamics of these phenomena in time. (One should bear in mind that several decades intervene

between mine and contemporary observations.)

In the past, and as it is now, the structure of camp society had a hierarchical nature. In my time, there was at the top a small but tightly knit group of regular thieves (*vory v zakone*). At the bottom was the great mass of so-called workers, or battlers — in the colloquial Australian sense — *rabotiagi* or *muzhiks*. Between these two groups was an intellectual stratum: bookkeepers, medical staff, etcetera.

In turn, at the head of the group of thieves, there was a still smaller group of superior thieves. Within this small group there went on a constant battle for power, as a result of which one or other of the thieves would be declared in breach of the thieves' law, the thieves' code of honour. These recreants and traitors then would fall into the category of bitch (*suka*) and would be condemned to death. Should they succeed in avoiding execution, the camp administration would transfer them to a camp dominated by bitches.

I found myself at first in a camp of this kind. It was dominated by bitches — former thieves condemned by their former comrades to physical elimination. Arbitrariness and the rule of force reigned in their camp — not the thieves' law. It was a kind of unstructured, chaotic state. Then a group of regular thieves were brought into the camp. They managed to get hold of weapons — knives — and executed a coup. It was a 'night of the long knives', followed by a morning on which the bodies of the murdered bitches were carried out of the barracks. The rule of law was restored. The thieves established a rigid and, according to their notions, just order. Within the loose and unstructured state which had existed under the bitches, there crystallized a firm structure which possessed a clear and defined form. No longer could anyone at his whim rob a *muzhik* of money or a parcel from home. When he got the cash he had earned felling trees, he would hand over a previously arranged sum to the brigadier, who would then pass it on to the thieves' treasury (*obshchak*). In addition, the brigadier was obliged to pass thieves off as workers in his paperwork, although in fact they did not work but stayed in the zone (that is, the camp area) or kept themselves warm by a fire in the forest. For their part, the thieves guaranteed the workers an undisturbed existence, 'social protection'. The administration also had a stake in such a system of 'indirect rule' (a term which derives from British colonial administration: control which is not direct, but through local chiefs). The system guaranteed order in the zone and the fulfilment of the production plan.

Going back to the hierarchical structure of camp society, one should add that the lowest rung of the thieves' hierarchy was occupied by a particular category of young criminals undergoing training at the hands of the superior thieves. They were intended for recruitment to the body of thieves and eventually to become regular thieves. While they were still only learning the rules of the thieves' world, they already belonged to the ruling stratum. Finally, at the very bottom of the

social structure, were the passive homosexuals. Their first duty was to provide for the needs of the thieves, for which they enjoyed certain privileges – for example, being occasionally released from heavy labour in the forest.

If one goes by what has been written and by memoirs, then the basic elements of this structure existed also in pre-revolution Russian gaols. Hence it has a certain continuity and, at the same time, reflects the hierarchical features of the period, of which I shall say more later. From the oral evidence I have heard (I am not familiar with the special literature), a certain hierarchical structure also pertains in Australian gaols, headed by criminals serving the longest terms – normally murderers. In Soviet gaols, on the other hand, a place in the élite is determined, not by the length of the sentence, but by entry to the caste of thieves outside the prison system. In my time, the so-called 'technical thieves', top-class professionals, artists and virtuosi of their calling, enjoyed peculiar prestige. My information, though it may not be accurate, is that, in Australia, prisoners of this type (usually bank robbers) enjoy high, but not the highest, status.

Soviet professional thieves, among their own kind, are highly respected and form a kind of aristocracy of the criminal world. My observation was that they stood out from the mass of prisoners by virtue of their relatively high intellectual development, their manner, and occasionally their love of poetry. They also stood out for their speech and their complete mastery of thieves' slang.

The whole hierarchical structure of camp society, as I saw it more than thirty years ago, was a mirror reflection of Soviet society. The caste of thieves, bonded by tight discipline and the thieves' law, imitated (spontaneously or consciously) the ruling Communist Party with its hierarchical structure, its discipline and regulations, its caste nature, its privileges and its monopoly of power. The youngsters (*maloletki*), the future regular thieves, were a kind of Komsomol, a forge hammering out future Party members. The trials at which the bitches were condemned were reminiscent of Stalin's trials of 'enemies of the people', and indeed the fate of the bitches was reminiscent of their fate – to be ruthlessly eliminated. The *muzhiks* were obliged to work conscientiously – which is the sacred duty of every Soviet man. They paid income tax to the thieves (outside prison, to the state, or rather the ruling party). Once that was paid, they could live in peace, with a feeling of enjoying social protection. Like the Party, the thieves had a simple ideology. They had a simple justification for their way of life: 'everyone steals'. They were convinced that the whole of society was built on theft. The thieves divided humanity into two polar opposites – those who were thieves and those who were not (the *fraiery*) — just as the official ideology divided society into workers and capitalists. Just as moral laws cease at the boundary between the workers and the expropriators and are not applicable to the latter, they cease also at the boundary between thieves and the rest of humanity and are not

If that is so, it is not surprising that some social units, for whatever reason, should reproduce ancient, primeval structures of organization and behaviour. This occurs most frequently when these social units are in peculiar, extreme situations or when they attempt to separate themselves from the rest of society in order to preserve themselves, maintain internal stability, or for other reasons. At the base of this phenomenon are structures of consciousness which are identical for the whole of humanity, identical both in space and time. It is they which facilitate the reproduction in different human groups, at different times, of certain universal phenomena in social relations and the area of the spirit, which bring modern social systems or isolated cultural phenomena close to archaic forms.

Ethnography, sociology and history provide a number of examples of this. One of them is the thieves' world, inside and outside prison, in which we have been able to observe the peculiarities characteristic of it in, as it were, a concentrated and undisguised state. Other examples can be found in the spontaneous groups formed by teenagers. How the structure of the primeval social unit and the paradigms of consciousness characteristic of it are reproduced in a group of young people placed in extreme circumstances is well described in Golding's novel *Lord of the flies*. Masonic lodges and other secret societies reproduce many characteristic features of secret or male unions in late primeval society. The same applies to the reproduction of a caste hierarchy: that is, the same natural, spontaneous process in conditions of isolation, in the army, among children in boarding schools, a process determined by the ancient structures fixed by history in social consciousness and behaviour. The classic castes, however, are of a hereditary origin, being closed to representatives of other castes. In the camp, a man may climb the hierarchical ladder or, on the contrary, may be relegated to the bottom of society. This social mobility (relative as it is) distinguishes the social groups of the camp from the classic castes. Hence, when one speaks of the camps, it is more appropriate to use more neutral concepts, such as social stratum, a system of social strata. Though it should be admitted that the society of thieves, as a result of its closed nature and the regulation of the whole life of its members as far as their relations with the outside world, has many features of the caste.

In elucidating this phenomenon, I attach great importance to the theory of archetypes and subliminal psychology of Carl Jung. Naturally, universal phenomena engendered by ancient archetypes of mythological consciousness appear not in a pure form. Their specific, individual image is determined by socio-historical factors, as I have said earlier. A modern social unit can only with great caution be compared with an archaic one. The culture of archaic societies is rich and complex and in this respect is not in principle different from our own. When we speak of reproducing archaic structures in modern societies we refer to universal phenomena, to the reproduction of a particular pattern, not the whole

wealth, the varied content of archaic cultures. In the past it constituted a whole system. Now, however, we are dealing with its contours, but with a different content, or fragments of what was there previously. The reproduction of ancient social structures should not be confused with the intergenerational transmission of cultural phenomena. The mechanism of reproduction is different. Phenomena which arise in the course of this are of a different origin. They fulfil purposes set by contemporary reality. In the specific conditions we have been speaking of, they are meant to reinforce and consolidate the collective, to provide it with the stability it needs in the battle to survive, to preserve its value system and to organize its relations with the outside world.

All that I have spoken about is still inadequately studied. This applies most of all to the phenomenon of the reproduction of ancient social structures in modern circumstances.

NOTE

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