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# Investigating the Origins of Body-Disownership: the Case Study of the Gulag

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**Abstract**

This paper describes the phenomenology of the prisoner in the Gulag. In this extreme situation, the prisoner is reduced to the body-as-an-object and, as a result, develops a strong sense of hostility towards the body. In cognitive terms, this mechanism can be defined as body-disownership.

**Keywords**

disownership – body – Gulag – Merleau-Ponty – phenomnology

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In the memory of Varlam Tikhonovich Shalamov (1907–1982)

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## 1 Introduction

Body-disownership is a destructive mechanism in which one identifies one's body as one's enemy and, as a result, tries to dispose of that body. This paper is part of a larger project (Ataria, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2018) designed to investigate this phenomenon and provide phenomenological and cognitive accounts of it.

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The first article in this project focuses on the Muselmann (Ataria & Gallagher, 2015), a term used in the Nazi concentration camps to describe prisoners that were near death due to exhaustion, starvation, and helplessness, a classic example of how body-disownership can develop. Nonetheless, the case of the Muselmann is unique, among other reasons because the concentration and death camps were the extreme conclusion of the Nazi propaganda campaign against the Jewish body. Indeed, as Goldberg (2017) demonstrates, during World War II, Jews in the ghettos deeply internalized the Nazi notion of the Jewish body as weak and filthy. Thus, it is easy to discern how body-disownership developed in this case, particularly based on psychoanalytic theory and the victim's identification with the victimizer. By contrast, one of the main goals of this paper is to explore how body-disownership develops when there is no such clear attack on body image, and, as such, it focuses on a different regime: the totalitarian regime in the USSR.

Similarly to Hitler, Stalin imposed a totalitarian regime. Indeed, some scholars identify parallels between the two regimes (Arendt, 1973).[1] Nevertheless, while the Nazi regime chose the Jews as its objective enemy, the Communist regime for the most part selected its enemies in an arbitrary fashion, without preliminary propaganda directed principally *against the body*. Thus, it is interesting to examine how a mechanism such as body-disownership could develop without any preliminary conditions, and for this purpose the current paper presents a phenomenological investigation of the Gulag.[2]

Gulag was the acronym for the Soviet bureaucratic institution responsible for managing the system of forced labor camps during the Stalin era, from the 1930s until the 1950s, although 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 extremely difficult to estimate the number of people who died in these camps. According to a study by Getty, Rittersporn, and Zemskov (1993) that utilizes Soviet archival data, a total of 1,053,829 people perished in the Gulag in the years 1934–53. However, scholars disagree regarding the total number of victims: some estimates are as low as 1.6 million deaths

1 Yet, nevertheless, we must not confuse these two regimes, each one of which had its own unique characteristics (Friedländer, 1984).

2 This is a far wider phenomenon, and the use of the term "the phenomenology of the Gulag" is somewhat superficial. It would be more accurate to say that this article employs testimonies written by individuals who were imprisoned in various forced labor camps during different periods. It is almost unnecessary to note that different forced labor camps in various periods had particular characteristics, in addition to other factors that must be considered.



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during the entire period from 1929 to 1953, while others exceed 10 million (in this regard see the following studies: Conquest, 2008; Rosefielde, 2009).

This paper seeks to demonstrate how, under conditions of extreme and ongoing stress,[3] during which the subject is confronted by absolute and systematic force that cannot be challenged in any way, the human dual structure—the simultaneous existence as both subject and object—collapses. When the prisoner is reduced to body-as-object and even identifies the body itself as the enemy, a unique mechanism develops, a mechanism which I define as body-disownership and which is based on self-abhorrence focused on the body-as-object.[4] Indeed, I have suggested elsewhere that "in order to develop the experience of disownership toward the entire body, the body must become a pure object; that is an *object among objects*" (Ataria, 2016a, p. 9). Yet despite this, I have as yet not fully explained why disownership can develop in such a situation. This paper endeavors to delve deeper, exposing the roots of body-disownership.

Before moving ahead, however, it is important to clarify briefly why disownership is usually misunderstood. The sense of ownership is defined as the feeling that this is my body and that it is me "who is undergoing an experience" (Gallagher, 2000, p. 15).[5] Indeed, this phrasing sounds somewhat Cartesian—as though there exists some "I" to which the body belongs. However, this phrasing is erroneous and misleading. As I have shown in other studies (Ataria, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c), while the sense of ownership is within the normal range, it remains invisible, yet essentially, although we do not feel it, it is of course extant. The feeling that this body belongs to me is a very basic foundation—however the term itself is misleading. Phenomenologically speaking, although always present, the sense of ownership awakens only when it is absent, in other words, only when the sense of ownership declines (or by contrast increases significantly) do I feel it. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Ataria, 2018, Figures #3, #7), with regard to the subjective experience, this decline is felt as an over presence.

3 It seems that any kind phrasing is misleading here: ongoing trauma, inhuman conditions, etc. Yet I have chosen to use this more natural phrasing.

4 The phrasing here is without doubt dualistic. As opposed to other cases, in which the dualistic phrasing hinders us, we can suggest that in extreme cases there indeed exists a sense of being detached from the body, and thus the terminology is dualistic. Even if this is incorrect from a philosophical perspective, it accurately reflects the nature of the experience.

5 Although the manner in which we define the concept of ownership clearly has ramifications on the concept of disownership, further discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of the present article. An examination of this issue requires a separate study (see: Ataria, 2018; in press b).



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Keeping this in mind, the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the subject-object tension and, thereafter, based mainly on testimonies of former Gulag prisoners, examines the process of becoming a pure object. At the end of this process, so it will be suggested, the individual identifies the body as the enemy.

## 2 The Twofold Structure

According to Merleau-Ponty (2002), we are our bodies, "I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it" (p. 173). Notably, however, Merleau-Ponty does not suggest that humans can be reduced to physical aspects (the corporeal body) and explained only in this way. Indeed, our bodies are not merely physical entities—we are not only the body-as-object: "The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art" (pp. 174–5). Merleau-Ponty argues that the very structure of our existence as subjects in the world is rooted in our unique bodily structure—we are at the same time both a body-as-subject and a body-as-object. Unlike the body-as-object, meaning the body as it is perceived from a third person perspective (3PP), the body-as-subject or the lived-body (Leib) is full of meaning, neither a dead body (Körper) nor a pure object.

The body is a unique instrument possessing both particular capabilities and certain limitations. In the course of using *it* (yet not being separated from *it*), we are present in the world as active agents. Thus, "it is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive 'things'" (p. 216). In fact, "I could not grasp the unity of the object without the mediation of bodily experience" (p. 235). Yet the body-as-object does not enable us to engage with the world. Rather, we understand the world around us via the lived-body. In fact, the lived-body molds and is molded by the environment around it. In other words, the lived-body is absorbed within a bodily world.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the body, as a constitutive subject-object type of entity that creates a world replete with meaning, is located at the center of our existence. Essentially, the body lies at the very heart of the structure of subjectivity:

> In so far as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world. The ontological



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> world and body which we find at the core of the subject are not the world or body as idea, but on the one hand the world itself contracted into a comprehensive grasp, and on the other the body itself as a knowing-body (p. 475)

In its most basic sense, we can reduce subjectivity to the first-person-perspecive (1PP)—perceiving the world from within our body. While we are in the world, we cannot avoid our own 1PP. Indeed, the entire world is facing in a specific direction—toward the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). My presence in the world via my body is tantamount to manipulating my surroundings by means of my body. For example, if I am holding an apple in my hand, I can turn it around to check if any parts of it have become rotten.

However, we are not merely subjects, but rather this instrument, our body, is also an object in the world. Yet the body is a unique instrument that is always with us. Moreover, we cannot examine this object from the outside, as we do other objects, and nor can it stand before us, in our perceptual field, like other objects. In fact, our body facilitates an examination of other objects in the perceptual field from the outside, something that is impossible in the case of the body itself.

We can break down other objects into smaller units, dissolve them, play with them, and even destroy them. Yet this is not possible in the case of our own body. Although our body is an object in the perceptual field, it differs fundamentally from all the other objects. Indeed, our body is responsible for transforming the perceptual field from objective to subjective, something that is always perceived from a particular perspective—from within one's body, that is, from a first-person-perspective (1PP). In that sense, this world is bodily world.

However, it would be erroneous to treat the perceptual field as something[6] that exists only from a subjective viewpoint, because, as was noted, our body is also an object among other objects. This can best be understood through the sense of touch:

> Tactile experience … adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot unfold it before us, and it never quite becomes an object. Correspondingly, as the subject of touch, I cannot flatter myself that I am everywhere and nowhere; I cannot forget in this case that it is through my body that I go to the world, and tactile experience occurs 'ahead' of me, and is not

6 Obviously it is not a thing, it is not an entity but rather an ongoing process.



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> centred in me. It is not I who touch, it is my body; when I touch I do not think of diversity, but my hands rediscover a certain style which is part of their motor potentiality, and this is what we mean when we speak of a perceptual field.
>
> MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002, p. 369

The perceptual field entails both subject and object. We are in the midst of the world and part of it, yet we are not the same as other pure objects. This preliminary sense of being thrown into a "brute world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 156) has no sense of *Who*. Rather, the field of perception is a mixture, incorporating things that are "inseparable from a person perceiving it" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 373). ~~Within this~~, the body is the "stabilized structure" (p. 373); namely, the body is responsible for organizing the field from a certain perspective: "My point of view is for me not so much a limitation of my experience as a way I have of infiltrating into the world in its entirety" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 384). We are at once object and subject, perceiver and perceived. As long as this structure remains stable, our body cannot be merely another object in space.

In our daily life, there exists some kind of equilibrium between the body-as-subject and the body-as-object. However, this equilibrium can be disturbed; in turn, any alteration in this equilibrium changes our way of being-in-the-world. In particular, "It appears as an object of conscious attention, particularly when it is inadequate for a task to be performed, be it by a lack of capacity, fatigue, illness or numbness, and whenever it becomes an object for others to whom I feel exposed". In such a situation, the lived body—which allows us to be thrown into the world effortlessly—is no longer implicit. Rather "the body's performance is made explicit and may often be disturbed" (Fuchs & Schlimme, 2009, p. 571).

Under normal conditions, we do not feel a sense of detachment from the body or from the world—"When one feels 'at home' in the world, 'absorbed' in it or 'at one with life', the body often drifts into the background" (Ratcliffe, 2008, p. 113). However, when we no longer feel at home in the world, the body becomes progressively more salient as an object. Accordingly, the sense of belonging decreases, leading us to experience the body more as an object and less as a lived body. Consequently, "the body is no longer a medium of experience and activity, an opening onto a significant world filled with potential activities." Instead it becomes "thing-like, conspicuous, an object … an entity to be acted upon" (Ratcliffe, 2008, p. 113). As such, the equilibrium between the lived-subjective body and the dead-objective body shifts towards the body-as-object: we no longer perceive via our body and instead feel the body as-an-object; the body moves from the background into the foreground.



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Therefore, the sense that the body becomes more salient, or less absent, indicates the existence of a problem. For example, during experiences of pain and suffering, the body becomes increasingly thing-like. As Scarry (1987) notes, when experiencing physical pain, we exist in-the-world is via this pain: the body becomes less a lived body, less transparent and more salient; it moves out of the background, becoming the focus of attention. Individuals suffering from pain no longer perceive the world through the lived body, because this body has become an obstacle, and they long for their body to be an implicit part of their experience again, to cease being an IT and become a lived-body once more.

Furthermore, pain shapes the structure of the phenomenological field, reducing space and time to the bodily dimension (Leder, 1990; Ratcliffe, 2015): it shrinks the I-can horizon and radically modifies the sense of belonging to the world. In addition, pain destroys the social sphere: individuals suffering from pain feel that others cannot fully understand them. Likewise, they are unable to describe their experience (Scarry, 1987). However, such individuals not only feel isolated from others but also to some extent disconnected from themselves. This dissociative kind of experience occurs as the body becomes the intentional object of perception. Changes in the sense of body as a result of suffering require that the individual adjust to a new way of being-in-the-world (Ataria, 2019a). Leder (1990) argues that during illness the intentional structure is directed towards the body and that this may result in alienation from the world. When the body does not facilitate action but rather becomes an obstacle, the I-can phenomenological field is transformed into an I-can-not kind of field. Moreover, we start to feel disabled, restricted and immobilized, as though external forces are hindering our actions in-the-world (Ataria, 2019b).

Thus there clearly exists a tension between the body-as-subject and the body-as-object, expressed in structured ambiguity. Note, however, that Merleau-Ponty does not try to avoid this tension. Rather, the opposite is true:

> The enigma derives from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself.
>
> MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964, p. 162

This tension is necessary for our existence: "A human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs." If, however, this sensing-(being) sensed structure collapses, the very essence of



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being human will lose its meaning and there "would not be a human body." Moreover, should this subject-object structure collapse, meaning that we can no longer touch and be touched at the same time, this signals not merely the end of the human body but in fact the end of humanity: "Such a body would not reflect itself; it would be an almost adamantine body, not really flesh, not really the body of a human being. There would be no humanity" (pp. 163–164). Indeed, in cases of severe and ongoing trauma, this twofold structure may collapse (Ataria, 2019a), with destructive consequences: the individual ceases to be human.

Before progressing to the testimonies themselves, please allow me to present a question that was posed during a lecture on this topic: *Within the thought of Merleau-Ponty is there any possibility of considering such a complete breakdown?* Indeed, according to Merleau-Ponty (2012):[7]

> Even when it is cut off from the circuit of existence, the body never completely falls back on itself. Even if I am absorbed in the experience of my body and in the solitude of sensations, *I do not achieve a complete suppression of every reference to the world that is included in my life*; at each moment some new intention springs forth from me, whether it be toward the objects that surround me and fall before my eyes, or toward the instants that arrive and push back into the past that I have just lived through. *I never fully become an object in the world* … (p. 168, my emphasis)

This may lead us to think that Merleau-Ponty regards a process a complete breakdown of the subject-object structure as impossible. I believe that this is not the case. Indeed, elsewhere Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that he is fully aware of such a possibility:

> Man does not ordinarily show his body, and, when he does, it is either nervously or with the intention to fascinate. *It seems to him that the alien gaze that glances over his body steals it from him* or, on the contrary, that the exhibition of his body will disarm and deliver the other person over to him, and in this *case the other person will be reduced to slavery*. Thus, modesty and immodesty take place in a dialectic of self and other that is the dialectic of master and slave. Insofar as I have a body, *I can be reduced to an object beneath the gaze of another person and no longer count for him*

7 Both these quotations are taken from a new translation of Merleau-Ponty, which is more precise with regard to the issue discussed herein.



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> *as a person*. Or again, to the contrary, I can become his master and gaze upon him in turn. But this mastery is a dead end, since, at the moment my value is recognized by the other's desire, the other person is no longer the person by whom I wanted to be recognized: he is now a fascinated being, without freedom, and who as such no longer counts for me. *To say that I have a body is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object* and that I seek to be seen as a subject, that another person can be my master or my slave, such that modesty and immodesty express the dialectic of the plurality of consciousnesses and that they in fact have a metaphysical signification (ibid, 170, my emphasis)

Although Merleau-Ponty's philosophy begins with the hand that can at once touch and be touched—the fact that we are both subject and object—he recognizes that under certain conditions this structure breaks down completely and the individual can be reduced to an object. As we will see, this is the exact process that occurred in the Gulag.

## 3 Becoming a Pure Object[8]

### 3.1 *Ongoing Torture*

Upon arrival at the forced labor camps, prisoners were stripped naked and forced to stand in a long line waiting to be bathed and shaved. Afterwards, they were given clothes that made them indistinguishable from one another. At this stage, the process that began with imprisonment and the journey to the Gulag intensified, and consequently the prisoners began increasingly to lose their human characteristics (Ataria, 2019c). The guards looked at the prisoners as though they were hollow objects. The guard's gaze was estranged, as if looking not at *someone* but at *something* that is no longer (and thus never was) a member of the human race, a non-human, not even a sub-human. To reframe this notion in the context of Sartrean phenomenology (1956), we may suggest that, at this stage, the gaze of the other increasingly turned the prisoners into nothing—a pure object. Even the medical examination was humiliating, underscoring the prisoner's status: "*The female doctor carefully inspected my eyes,*

8 Note that in this paper I 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 quite a radical picture. While such generalizations may be problematic for those interested in understanding the nuances of the Gulag, they are of no significance to the arguments made herein.



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*ears, teeth, tongue, and throat as if she were examining a horse on the market*" (Bardach & Gleeson, 1998, p. 198).[9] Olga Adamov-Sliozberg describes her reception at the camp as follows:

> *We undressed and handed over our clothes for treatment and were about to go upstairs to the washroom when we realized that the staircase was lined from top to bottom with guards. Blushing, we hung our heads and huddled together. Then I looked up, and my eyes met those of the officer in charge. He gave me a sullen look "Come on, come on," he shouted. "Get a move on!"*
>
> ADAMOV-SLIOZBERG, 1993 translated within Applebaum, 2004, p. 176

From the moment they entered the Gulag, everything the prisoners had experienced previously seemed like a distant and unreal dream,[10] as Shalamov describes in his story *In the Night*:[11] "The time when he had been a doctor seemed very far away. Had it ever existed? Too often the world beyond the mountains and seas seemed unreal, like something out of a dream." He further continues: "Real were the minute, the hour, the day—from reveille to the end of work. He never guessed further, nor did he have the strength to guess. Nor did anyone else." Indeed, the future dimension ceased to exist beyond the next moment and the next meal, as Shalamov describes in his story "Condensed Milk": "Inside there was only an empty scorched sensation, and we were indifferent to everything, making plans no further than the next day."

An alteration in the dimension of time is one of the dramatic process that occurred upon arrival at the Gulag. This phenomenon can be explained, among other ways, from Heideggerian perspective. According to Heidegger (1996), death is the only event in our lives that no one can take from us, hence death (through anxiety) can lead to authentic existence (while dividing us from the masses). Being-toward-death is our basic structure; as such, it is responsible, so Heidegger argues, for the dimension of time and the experience of time. It is thus possible to suggest that when being-toward-death becomes increasingly present in our daily experience, even to the extent that the "toward" ceases to

9 Quotations representing subjective experiences appear in italics. In certain cases some of the quotation is italicized, while other parts of it are not. The reason for this is the transfer from third person to first person (subjective experience) while writing. When a quotation appears in italics, emphasis is indicated using bold.

10 I have demonstrated elsewhere (Arieli & Ataria, 2018; 2015d) that among other things this entails a breakdown of the sensory motor circuits—however, of course this experience cannot be reduced to damage to the sensory motor circuits.

11 All the quotations from Shalamov are from a collection of stories published posthumously (Shalamov, 1994).



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exist (and we remain only with being—death; in this stage we are separated from our own death merely by "—"), so too the prisoner's horizon of time is reduced to an action that must be performed in order to survive for one more moment. This affects not only the way in which we perceive our future but also the way in which we view our past, and of course the present.

In the Gulag, past and future lost their meaning, and the nightmare became the only reality, as Margolin[12] (2013) describes: "If at first everything happening around us seemed to be a dream, after a short time a dramatic change occurred and what seemed like a dream was our former life." He continues, "To live each day, without past memories or thoughts of the future: that was the extent of our wishes and the degree to which we had lost the humanity that every prisoner deserves" (pp. 173–176).

The breaking point at which the prisoner's former life turned into a dream, leaving the reality of the work camp as the only possible reality, represents the sharp transition from the past, which contained concepts such as humanity and in which people could still be treated as subjects,[13] to a present devoid of subjects, devoid of subjectivity. In this new reality, former laws became meaningless and there was no place for humanity. Let us develop this notion further. Inspired by Heidegger (1996), Dreyfus (2017; 1991) highlights the notion of situatedness: we are absorbed into a certain situation and we act within it,[14] thus it is impossible to perceive and to act while not being situated. Note that this situation is exposed through the mood we are in, or, more accurately, the mood which we are (in that sense, at least to some extent, we may suggest that mood and situatedness are two sides of the same coin; to be absorbed into situation is to be in some kind of mood). The situation itself creates a field of possibilities, and it is even possible to say that, at least to a certain extent, it activates us. To be more precise, it seems that a certain situation (which always represents systems of different powers that shape reality) also exposes the bodily horizon: "But precisely because it can shut itself off from the world, my body is also what opens me up to the world and places me in a situation" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 168).

It seems that in the Gulag, the field of possibilities is reduced—in particular the possibility of acting in a way that can be defined (albeit quite vaguely) within the human range. Dreyfus also emphasizes that when we are in a certain mood, it is difficult to understand how it feels to be in another mood: for

12 All the quotations from Margolin were translated by the author of this article.

13 Indeed, in the case of the Stalinist reality, we should be more careful with such statements.

14 A situation is never an IT but rather an ongoing process.



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example, when we are freezing in the snow it is difficult to imagine how nice warm weather feels. Similarly, in certain situations, such as the Gulag, a certain mood develops and it is simply impossible for the prisoner to imagine the meaning of being a person outside the Gulag. It is important to remember that this process begins upon arrest (Ataria & Neria, 2013; Ataria, 2019c).

To begin to understand the Gulag, we must attempt to penetrate the core of this absolutely arbitrary system. According to Jacques Rossi (1989): "The main trait of the Soviet prison system is its systematic intensification, with the gradual elevation of pure sadism and the condition of arbitrary law" (p. 370). It is important to distinguish between systematic sadism on the one hand and on the other cruelty devoid any method or direction from above. Solzhenitsyn underlines this distinction. Indeed, despite the incredible cruelty, during his first years in the Gulag, no oiled machinery or systematic meat grinder was yet operating:

> In the first years of Solovki both slavedriving the workers and allotting back-breaking work norms took the form of periodic outbursts, transitory anger; they had not become a viselike system. The economy of the whole country was not based on them, and the Five-Year Plans had not been instituted. In the first years of SLON there was evidently no firm external economic plan. Yes, and for that matter there was no very careful calculation of how many man-days went into work for the camp as a whole. This was why they could suddenly switch with such frivolity from meaningful productive work to punishment: pouring water from one ice hole into another, dragging logs from one place to another and back. There was cruelty in this, yes, but there was also a patriarchal attitude. When slave driving became a thought-out system, pouring water over a prisoner in subzero temperatures or putting the prisoner out on a stump to be devoured by mosquitoes had turned into a superfluity and a useless expenditure of the executioners' energy.
>
> SOLZHENITSYN, 1975, p. 54

Note how even during torture the system remained indifferent. The circumstances and objective conditions were left to do the work without any special effort, for example, simply tying a prisoner to a stump to be devoured by mosquitoes. Under such conditions the enemy is almost transparent. There is no specific person that can be blamed. The prisoner's very presence in the world becomes an ongoing nightmare. The body is the source of the suffering. Indeed, the body suffers and is systematically and constantly tortured, yet there is no one to blame.



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Work hours in the Gulag became longer and longer, reaching 14–16 hours per day, and the work often resembled a methodical form of murder: "That's what our gas execution van consisted of. We didn't have any gas for the gas chamber" (Solzhenitsyn, 1975, p. 91). Similarly, Shalamov's story "The Lawyers' Plot" depicts the work as torture: "We worked the night shift in December, and each night was a torment. Sixty degrees below zero was no joke." He continues: "In the winter we lined up in the barracks, and it is torturous even now to recall those last minutes before going into the icy night for a twelve-hour shift." Indeed, going outside into the freezing cold often meant certain and inevitable death, as described by D. P. Vitkovsky, who survived the Solovetsky Islands and worked on the White Sea Canal:

> *At the end of the workday there were corpses left on the work site. The snow powdered their faces. One of them was hunched over beneath an overturned wheelbarrow, he had hidden his hands in his sleeves and frozen to death in that position. Someone had frozen with his head bent down between his knees. Two were frozen back to back leaning against each other.*
>
> VITKOVSKY translated within Solzhenitsyn, 1975, p. 99

Indeed, "during the war years (on war rations), the camp inmates called three weeks at logging 'dry execution'" (ibid, p. 199). Often, someone who did not meet the unreasonable quotas was put to death using the simplest means possible:

> But whoever did not fulfill the norm, even in these circumstances, was given the carriage—a frame of sixteen by ten by six feet on a tractor sledge, made of rough beams, fastened together with construction staples. A small door, no windows, and inside nothing at all, not even any bed boards. In the evening those to be punished, sunk into a torpor and already indifferent, were taken from the penalty isolator and packed into the carriage, locked in there with an enormous lock, and hauled off by tractor to a vale two to three miles from the camp. Several of those inside cried out, but the tractor unhitched them and left them there for a day. After a day it was unlocked and the corpses were tossed out. The winter storms would bury them (ibid, pp. 127–8).

Even if they were not murdered, the prisoners were transformed into inanimate objects by this constant work in unbearable conditions. Solzhenitsyn (ibid) describes how first his hands became tools, just like a spade for digging: "Even our hands became heavy, like spades, and hung down" (p. 194). In the



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story "Typhoid Quarantine," Shalamov describes a similar situation in which a character's hands hardened:

> In a year and a half at the mines, both of Andreev's hands had molded themselves around the handles of a pick and shovel. He never expected to be able to straighten out his hands again. When he ate, he would grasp his spoon by pinching the handle with the tips of his fingers, and he even forgot that a spoon could be held in any other manner. His living hand was like a hook, an artificial limb. It fulfilled only the functions of an artificial hand.

When Shalamov describes Andreev's hand as an artificial hand, the prisoner no longer owns his body. His body is a work tool that the prisoner attempts to control, often unsuccessfully. Yet this is just the beginning of the process by which a human being is turned into stone. After the hands become work tools, the entire body hardens, just like the stones the prisoners extracted from the earth with their bare hands:

> *Our hands had grown numb from the cold clay, and by this time they couldn't even throw anything into the car. And then we left this futile occupation, climbed up higher to the grass, sat down there, bent our heads, and pulled the collars of our coats up over the backs of our necks. From the side we looked like two reddish stones in the field.*
>
> SOLZHENITSYN, 1975, p. 195

At the end of the day, even before the nightless and sleepless night, the man who is no longer a man, but rather a work machine, is interested in one thing only—his death:

> *And in the barracks—total darkness. We lay there dressed in everything wet on everything bare, and it seemed it was warmer not to take anything off—like a poultice. Open eyes looked at the black ceiling, at the black heavens. Good Lord! Good Lord! Beneath the shells and the bombs I begged you to preserve my life. And now I beg you, please send me death* (ibid, p. 197).

Indeed, in a constant state of torture and lacking strength, to end one's life—to die—was the only hope:

> In the lives of some prisoners there is something inexplicable, some unsuspected revelation; their final hope seems to be that they will eventually



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> be killed by their own hopelessness, and the silent torment of their lives comforts them with momentary happiness which the thought of death gives them.... *Every day I pray for death*.
>
> HERLING, 1951, p. 146

Those that did not manage to sleep near the stove often froze during the night. The huts were freezing, crowded, mildewed and damp. The stench was unbearable. The prisoners needed sleep in order to survive, but as Vardi describes, this was no simple matter:

> People were asleep in the barracks at any time of the day. Fighting to be able to sleep was a fight for life. Arguing over sleep, people swore at one another, fought one another, even killed one another. The radio in the barracks was on at full strength all the time and was much hated. Precisely because the question of where one slept was so crucial, sleeping conditions were always an extremely important tool of prisoner control, and the camp administration consciously used them as such.
>
> VARDI, 1971, translated within Applebaum, 2004, p. 198

The fight for life was a fight for sleep, and the fight for sleep was a fight for space, because those in the lower berths often did not survive, as Petrus describes:

> This level was called the "kolkhoz sector" and it was to this level that the thieves forced the kolkhozniki—various aged intellectuals and priests, and even some of their own, who had broken the thieves' moral code. On to them fell not only things from the upper and lower bunks: the thieves also poured slops, water, yesterday's soup. And the kolkhoz sector had to tolerate all of this, for if they complained they would receive even more filth ... people became sick, suffocated, lost consciousness, went crazy, died of typhus, dysentery, killed themselves.
>
> PETRUS, 1996, pp. 58–65 translated within Applebaum, 2004, p. 201

The prisoners had not one moment of relief. The battle was fixed and constant. The torture did not stop at the end of the work day, because sleep—the only remaining district outside this world—was lost to the prisoner, enslaved to the destructive system. Yet here again, no special effort was needed. The mixture of political prisoners and criminals, the overcrowding, the basic struggle to survive—all these accomplished the job alone. Under such circumstances, the prisoner's enemy was another person in the exact same situation and competing for the same resources. With a few exceptions, the weak/political prisoners



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could not compete with the criminals, so they battled against those whose status was similar to their own. When there are not enough places to sleep, the prisoner needed to push another prisoner out of his spot. A prisoner that does not push will in turn be pushed. However, since the prisoner cannot push those who are stronger (and possess a higher status), but only those who are weaker (and of lower status), it is impossible to avoid becoming party to the systematic destructive machine simply in order to sleep. As a result, the prisoners cannot think of themselves as innocent victims: in order to survive they necessarily harmed someone weaker. In this situation, the prisoners cannot maintain even a minimal set of values.

Keeping this in mind, we may advance a step further and suggest that the fight for a place to sleep, like the battle for another portion of food, no matter how small it may be, shatters and destroys the basic solid structure of human relations, breaking the intersubjective shared world into which we are usually thrown.

In many cases, the laborers were simply starved. Hunger ruled in the Gulag. The testimony of Vladimir Petrov, a prisoner at Kolyma, is no exception: "Real famine set in at the mine. Five thousand men did not have a piece of bread" (Petrov, 1951, p. 257 translated within Applebaum, 2004, p. 248). Hunger controlled everything. Yet in extreme circumstances, the prisoner could not even digest the little bit of food he had. Indeed, hunger drove people crazy:

> *Constant hunger destroys the human psyche. It is impossible to stop thinking about food, you think about food all of the time. To your physical incapability is added moral weakness, as constant hunger removes your sense of self-respect, your sense of self-worth. All of your thoughts run in one direction: how to get more food? That's why on the garbage pit near the dining hall at the entrance to the kitchen the dokhodyagi were always milling about. They wait to see if someone won't possibly throw something edible out of the kitchen, for instance some scraps of cabbage.*
>
> YAKOV ÉFRUSSI translated within Applebaum, 2004, p. 336

According to Herling, hunger destroys humanity:

> *Hunger … Hunger is a horrible sensation, which becomes transformed into an abstraction, into nightmares fed by the mind's perpetual fever. The body is like an over-heated machine, working at increased speed and on less fuel, and the wasted arms and legs come to resemble torn driving-belts. There is no limit to the physical effects of hunger beyond which tottering human dignity might still keep its uncertain but independent balance. Many times*



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> *I flattened my pale face against the frosted glass pane of the kitchen window, to beg with a dumb look for another ladleful of "thin" soup from the Leningrad thief Fyedka who was in charge. And I remember that my best friend, an old communist and the comrade of Lenin's youth, the engineer Sadovski, once, on the empty platform by the kitchen, snatched from my hand a canful of soup and, running away with it, did not even wait until he reached the latrine but on the way there drank up the hot mess with feverish lips. If God exists, let him punish mercilessly those who break others with hunger.*
>
> HERLING, 1951, p. 136 my emphasis

Clearly, then, hunger is a technique of torture, and it would be a mistake to regard it as anything else. It is the simplest and least expensive form of torture: a minimum of food, unreasonable work conditions and sleep deprivation, together with a social structure in which those who are strong have total and unlimited control, inevitably lead all those who are not at the top of the pyramid to starve. Thus, the individual loses not only dignity but also the ability to be part of any human society. Absolutely isolated, the individual is only interested in eating, even if this means harming someone close who was considered a "friend." According to Bardach, even if prisoner were to find a true friend in the Gulag, this friendship would not the request for a bit of food. More than anything, this point underscores how hunger dismantled the basic human structure:

> *Hunger made it difficult to share any food, and I often wondered what I would do if Vadim asked me for half of my paika* [*ration*]. *I didn't think I could give it to him. Fortunately, neither one of us ever asked the other for food, nor did we offer it. We both knew that this sanctum could not be violated if we were to remain friends.*
>
> BARDACH & GLEESON, 1998, pp. 207–8

Hunger thus breaks down all human alliances—it destroys the shared intersubjective space, transforming it into a place in which there exist various objects that feel no association with the prisoners around them. This system is particularly cruel because, rather than struggling against those who are stronger, the prisoners are only able to fight against equals or those weaker than them. Thus, ultimately, the prisoners come to despise those closest to them. Those who should be friends become bitterest enemies. In addition to the hostile environment, the prisoner's own body is transformed into an instrument of torture: the world tortures the prisoner by means of the body. This unbearable



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pain does not originate outside the body but rather comes from the inside, as the prisoner is consumed by hunger. Moreover, because the starved prisoner is only capable of looking at the world through starved eyes, the world is colored by hunger. Hence, unsurprisingly, under conditions of extreme hunger prisoners began eating meat from human cadavers.

> *Not only wild animals were desperate for food. The vermin-eaters huddled around the stove in the tent, boiling and eating meat that smelled rancid and foreign. I was told they'd gotten the meat from the cadaver pile, which was hard for me to believe and deeply disturbing … At first I thought I would rather die from hunger than eat human flesh, but when I started to decline, I couldn't be so sure.*
>
> BARDACH & GLEESON, 1998, pp. 235–6

In some camps during the difficult times of World War II, bread became sacred, as described by Petrov:

> In the hungrier camps, in the hungrier years, bread took on an almost sacred status, and a special etiquette grew up around its consumption. While camp thieves stole almost everything else with impunity, for example, the theft of bread … earned a death sentence.
>
> PETROV, 1951, p. 99 translated within Applebaum, 2004, p. 211

There were two ways to improve the daily food ration. One was to climb the status ladder, usually via some sort of cooperation with the camp authorities.[15] Once again, this involved betraying one's beliefs. Yet it is almost inconceivable to imagine a prisoner who did not collaborate in some way in order to survive (Applebaum, 2004). Thus it is quite clear why "almost every long-term zek you congratulate on having survived was a trusty. Or had been one for a large part of his term" (Solzhenitsyn, 1975, p. 252).

The second way to increase one's rations was to be an outstanding worker. To achieve this, one had to find a way to join a highly productive work brigade. Members of such brigades had absolutely no tolerance for weak workers, because the latter harmed their chances of reaching the imaginary quotas that would enable them to obtain a larger food ration, often including 1.2 kg

15 Primo Levi introduced the notion of the "gray zone," which certainly applies to the Gulag as well.



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of bread, thick soup, oil and more.[16] Thus it was not easy to join such a brigade. According to Yuri Zorin, "You can't imagine how willingly and well they worked … If they thought you working badly, you got kicked out of the Lithuanian Brigade" (translated within Applebaum, 2004, p. 220). Those who failed were destined to join a weak brigade and live on starvation rations. In such cases it was preferable not to work at all, because the portion allocated to those who did not work was preferable to that of those who worked but did not meet the quotas, taking into consideration the amount of energy they expended (Applebaum, 2004; Rossi, 1989; Solzhenitsyn, 1975).

Unlike in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps, the goal of the work, at least in most cases, was not torture for torture's sake. Yet in certain cases, that was indeed the goal. Susanna Pechora recalls one of the bosses specifically telling her: "I don't need your work, I need your suffering" (translated within Applebaum, 2004, p. 221).

In addition to the hunger, sleep deprivation and ongoing physical labor, climatic conditions in some of the camps were particularly difficult, particularly those in the far north. Under such conditions even breathing was painful: "Breathing became painful when the temperature plummeted to minus 25 or minus 30, piercingly so as it approached minus 40 or minus 50" (Bardach & Gleeson, 1998, p. 233). Indeed, minus 30 was considered a warm day, and a fall in the snow could be deadly:

> *It was dangerous to stop moving. During head count we jumped, ran in place and slapped our bodies to keep warm. I perpetually kneaded my toes and curled my fingers into a fist … touching a metal tool with a bare hand could tear off the skin and going to the bathroom was extremely dangerous. A bout of diarrhea could land you in the snow forever.*
>
> PETROV, 1951, pp. 233–4 translated within Applebaum, 2004, p. 121

All the rank and file political regular prisoners (those who did not become functionaries in one way or another) found their bodies ruined in a fundamental way. Yet, essentially, they could not be diagnosed with a particular disease. Indeed, in the Gulag people did not die of diagnosable diseases; rather, their bodies simply collapsed. This total collapse of the body was not defined as an illness precisely because this was the prisoner's natural state. Furthermore, not

16 Yet it is worth mentioning that in many cases outstanding workers also eventually lost their strength.



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only was this bodily collapse a "natural state," but it was the end point of the industrial process that begins with the loss of humanity and ends with physical collapse and death while still alive. The objective of the method and its ultimate success was to turn someone into a living-dead person while deriving maximum benefit from this individual at minimum cost:

> A prisoner, after a time, found himself in that stage of decomposition where he breathed with difficulty, could not control his bowels but performed his natural functions where he lay, wept without cause whenever he was left alone for a moment, gripped his heart, squeezed in an iron band of pain, with a trembling hand, stumbled and tripped on a smooth path, swelled up with alarming speed, and vainly tried to chase fiery flakes from before his eyes. He went to the medical hut, and was told that he was perfectly well, that there was nothing wrong with him; but he knew what was wrong even if it was no disease with a name and symptoms.
>
> HERLING, 1951, p. 149

For good reason this living-dead man was deemed *perfectly well*. As noted, this is the moment at which the system can be declared a certain success: it is the state the system aspires to reach. The individual is shattered and destroyed, even lacking the strength to die. There is no comfort even in death. In such circumstances, death itself loses its importance and dignity. One cannot be positioned between life and death because one is neither alive nor dead. Rather, the prisoner becomes a third type of entity (Agamben, 1999). Ongoing torment is all that remains. Being in the camps must therefore be defined as ongoing torment without beginning, end or any purpose. It was a matter of total and absolute suffering until the prisoner's last breath, which also was not redeeming. "All hope had vanished, there was left only the torture of an empty life" (Herling, 1951, p. 146).

From the prisoners' perspective, every act of the Gulag administrators was designed to increase and prolong their suffering. The prisoners had no moments of peace. They always felt a hostile eye watching them, waiting for them to make even the simplest mistake: "*You never knew who was watching you, but you always felt someone's eyes controlling your steps*" (Bardach & Gleeson, 1998, p. 231).

Under these unbearable conditions, prisoners rapidly reached the endpoint of humanity. They are dead while still alive, with no one to care; they are of no importance and absolutely helpless, they are nothing—a trivial object that can be destroyed by anyone higher up on the food chain:



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> *I wanted to see or talk to someone, to know I hadn't been forgotten, wouldn't be left to die. The minutes felt like hours; the hours, like weeks and months. Is this unbearable, or is it something I can survive? I wondered. What is unbearable? How am I to decide where my limit is? How much can I bear? How much suffering must I take before* ***I reach the point of self-destruction****? No one can tell me where the edge is. Only I know how much physical and mental torture I can take. One day the cold, hunger, work, vicious guards, and urkas are bearable; the next day they could break me down. What is it like to break down?... I felt the limits of my endurance approaching when I couldn't fulfill the norm, when Gromov assigned me the most difficult jobs, when hunger made me weak and defenseless, when the wind blew in my face and through my clothes. I still wanted to live,* ***but I thought about injuring myself as so many other prisoners had done,***[17] *hoping to win several days in the hospital, to be assigned to a lighter job, to be transferred to another camp.*
>
> BARDACH & GLEESON, 1998, pp. 219–20, my emphasis

Thus many soon became walking corpses. Failure to meet the quota for receiving a reasonable food ration was enough to turn someone into one of those walking corpses:

> *It was becoming more and more difficult to make the norm. Would I reach the day, as so many others had, when I'd look for extra food in the garbage piles? It was the most common form of degradation. Rummaging through the garbage, eating rancid scraps of meat, chewing on fish skeletons—such behavior was so common that no one noticed. Dokhodyagas searched for food with half-human expressions and ate everything chewable. I was surprised by how quickly some prisoners fell into this state.*
>
> BARDACH & GLEESON, 1998, p. 221

The camp was crowded ad nauseam with such walking corpses. Herling describes an encounter with one of them:

> *I cannot explain the feeling I had then that I was looking into the eyes of a man who was dead although he still continued to breathe, who knew that he had been dead for a long time although his shriveled heart continued to beat in the empty sack of his body. I saw in those eyes not the active despair*

17 Note that the purpose of this kind of self-injury was to be released from unbearable work rather than as behavior intended to harm the self.



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> *of a man helpless before approaching death, but the passive hopelessness of one who, despite everything, continues to live.*
>
> HERLING, 1951, p. 145

Helplessness, hopelessness, pointlessness and unending suffering characterized the lives of the living-dead in the Gulag. More than anything, these were the symbols of the Gulag and its systematic methods.

### 3.2 *Man Is Wolf to Man—Survival of the Fittest*[18]

Existing in sub-human conditions, the most basic form of human solidarity disintegrates: "For in camp they are very fond of beating up the weak—not only the work assigners and the brigadiers, but the ordinary zeks as well—so as not to feel completely weak themselves" (Solzhenitsyn, 1975, p. 213). This comment is important: the way to preserve one's status as not among the weakest was to harm someone else who, at that particular moment, could be identified as weaker. This meant that the prisoner was at least one level above someone else, no matter who that might be. Indeed, in the climate of absolute power in the Gulag, being weak was tantamount to being dead. For this reason Bardach titled his book *Man Is Wolf to Man*. In the story "An Individual Assignment,"[19] 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."

Accordingly, the notion of a common fate and shared community, which under ordinary circumstances would have led to friendship, breaks down. The prisoner is in a constant state of war, not against the system as a whole but rather against other prisoners in precisely the same situation. Furthermore, when

18 I would like to emphasize that I apply here the concepts of the theory of evolution only in the context of the Gulag and the reader should not derive from this any conclusions regarding the theory itself.

19 Paradoxically this book, like many others on this topic (Toker, 2000), includes many moments of humanity and a certain sense of human cooperation.



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battling for existence at each and every moment, it is impossible to trust anyone. As Solzhenitsyn (1975) puts it, "The supreme law of conduct had already become: Trust no one!" (p. 53). Indeed, as "the old zeks admit and the former prisoners of war 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 captures what is required of a prisoner existing in certain circumstances in order to survive in the Gulag. Everyone knew this, and those who did not internalize it died quickly. In the story "Typhoid Qarantine," 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 prisoner must cease to be human and turn into a beastly predator devoid of all inhibitions. ~~Beyond being beastly, the prisoner is no longer human.~~ The alienation between the prisoners occurred precisely because the gaze of the other reveals the extent to which one has become inhuman and what the future holds: "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 symbolized the only, and apocalyptic, fate of all those who failed to employ dramatic measures to survive. These dramatic measures were tantamount to relinquishing one's humanity.

As conditions became more difficult, for example in the far north, it became necessary to act more selfishly and more violently to survive the day, without thinking about tomorrow. Indeed, the motto was: "You can die today, I'm going to die tomorrow." This again exposes the changes that occurred in the dimension of time, a result of a fundamental change in the prisoner's experience; to be more precise, it is a change in the way in which one is being-thrown-towards death. In fact, it seems that in the conditions depicted here, the entire Heidiggerian structure breaks down, with the "towards" diminishing almost into nonexistence. Consequently, the prisoner remains with being—death (or maybe being-thrown-into-death).

When the prisoner is isolated and must 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*



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> *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 & GLEESON, 1998, p. 222

To survive, the prisoner needed to undergo a reincarnation, a transformation, to relinquish all dimensions of humanity, to understand that the greatest enemy in the Gulag is the attempt to express humanity. Indeed, the only alternative to indifference is hostility. Any emotion other than basic hostility is forbidden if you are interested in surviving. 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 & GLEESON, 1998, pp. 218–19

Often the prisoners themselves, and particularly the criminals among them, adopted the attitude that political prisoners were not human beings. Indeed, the weaker one becomes, the less human one is. This reached its extreme when, due to a shortage of guards, the criminal prisoners in effect became all-powerful leaders (Bardach & Gleeson, 1998, p. 201).

In the climate of the Gulag, ~~the concept of humanity underwent a revolution.~~ Those who were strong were human, while those who were weak were no longer human. In other words, those who were stronger were also more human, even more moral and more 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, under the distorted conditions of the Gulag, the willingness to harm another made those who engaged in such behavior seem more human (and thus even more moral). In parallel, those who were weaker were less human, making it natural for them to be harmed: "The dokhodyagi, 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." Thus naturally, "those who had soiled themselves were often beaten and thrown out" (Bardach & Gleeson, 1998, p. 234).



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None of this is coincidental. Systems that revere the concept of power create situations in which solidarity becomes practically impossible. In the Gulag, the only existing division was between masters and workers, between strong and weak. There was no longer any room for human contact. The balance of power made it impossible to resist. Thus, 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 & 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 and there were the dead. Herling describes how when a prisoner's needs were met, that prisoner was in a position of strength, even if only for one evening or for a single moment. Such a prisoner could longer tolerate the presence of the living corpses begging for a portion of food, no matter how meager, despite the fact that these were the prisoner's 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



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This testimony is of the utmost importance because it clarifies that when one finds oneself in a position of strength, no matter how low and how briefly, one rapidly develops that same hostility toward the weak. Immediately, those who are weak become repulsive, and one ceases to see them as human.

It seems that more than anything this phenomenon testifies to the importance of the situation into which the individual is thrown. In his book *The Periodic Table* (1984), Primo Levi attempts to clarify whether there are some basic elements that make man either "good" or "bad." Levi concludes that no such elements can be found. We seek to reinforce this insight, suggesting that not only is it impossible to reduce us to some kind of basic element, such as a neuron or a gene, but rather the situation in which we find ourselves is of great importance. Every situation opens before us opportunities and closes others. In certain conditions we discover ourselves acting in a way we never believed possible—however the situation itself, so it seems, changes the I-can field (although, of course, this does not absolve the individual of responsibility for his actions). The situation affects the mood in which we find ourselves and the mood in turn affects the field of perception, which subsequently fundamentally changes the manner in which we understand the world and ourselves, and, of course, the way that we act in the world.

This process is inevitable within a setting that focuses on the one hand on the concept of power and on the other on isolating the subject. Those 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, there is nothing the prisoner fears more than those walking corpses. For them, even death is no longer accessible.

### 3.3 *The Dokhodyagi*[20]*—the Perfect Outcome of Absolute Power*

With profound insight, Jacques Rossi (1989) claims that the dokhodyagi were the ones who attained true socialism. Perhaps it would be even more accurate to say that the dokhodyagi were the ones who understood the system completely. They embodied the full and perfect implementation of the socialistic system. Hence, it is simply impossible to understand the system in full without understanding (a) how people turned into dokhodyagi and (b) how it felt to

20 To describe them, an entire sub-dialect emerged in the jargon of those places. Sometimes the deceased was called fitili (wicks), a reference to the wick of a candle about to go out. They were also known as gavnoedy (eat shit) or pomoechniki. More often, they were called dokhodyagi (goners or last-leggers) (singular, dokhodyaga), a noun derived from the Russian verb dokhodit (to reach).



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be one of the dokhodyagi, though, as we will see below, this is a fundamental rather than a technical problem. In effect, the entire Gulag was based on the bodies of the dokhodyagi, which were quickly and shockingly eroded and annihilated: "The Archipelago could not keep swirling about without precipitating to the bottom its principal form of waste—the last-leggers," Solzhenitsyn says. He further stresses that "everything built by the Archipelago had been squeezed out of the muscles of the last-leggers (before they became last-leggers)" (1975, p. 208).

Those who had turned into 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 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. Petkevich describes them in the following fashion:

> There behind the barbed wire was a row of creatures, distantly reminiscent of human beings … there were tens of them, skeletons of various sizes covered with brown, parchment-like skin, all stripped to the waist, with shaved heads and pendulous withered breasts. Their only clothing was some pathetic dirty underpants, and their shinbones projected from concave circles of emptiness.
>
> PETKEVICH, 1999, pp. 223–4 translated within Applebaum, 2004, p. 335

However, as in the case of the Muselmann and the Nazi concentration and death camps, here too it would be a fatal error to consider the dokhodyagi as representative of a physical state alone (Ataria, in press a; Shoah Resource Center, 2014; Sofsky, 1996; Toker, 2019). Beyond the difficulty involved in presenting a physical description of them, it is not at all clear that they can still be described using the terminology used to describe human beings. One reason for this is that, from the perspective of the totalitarian regime, in their extreme state they ceased to be human and thus could no longer be described using terms and methods relevant to human beings: "In the final stages of starvation, the dokhodyagi took on a bizarre and inhuman appearance, becoming the physical fulfillment of the dehumanizing rhetoric used by the state." Thus, "In their dying days, enemies of the people ceased, in other words, to be people at all" (Applebaum, 2004, p. 335).

Reducing this phenomenon to its purely physical aspects, assuming that doing so is even possible, strongly contravenes our attempt to understand what



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it means and how it feels to be one of the dokhodyagi. More importantly, doing so precludes us from understanding the dokhodyagi as the most representative symbol of a system which took delivery of each individual as a human being yet released that individual as something that could not be defined as either living or dead, someone who forgotten by everyone, including oneself.

The dokhodyagi were not merely weak, sick and hungry. Not only had they arrived at a state of absolute neglect. They symbolized the end of the road, the end of all roads. The dokhodyagi were absolutely crazed with hunger. ~~They lost their human dignity, so humiliation meant nothing to them.~~ They became repulsive and abject creatures that should be abused. Not only was it possible to abuse them, but under the conditions of the Gulag this was a matter of necessity, because they symbolized the fears and anxieties of all the other prisoners. When the current dokhodyagi died, they would be replaced. So long as the current dokhodyagi stayed alive, they ostensibly safeguarded all those who were one small degree above them. Thus, abusing the dokhodyagi was permitted, even necessary. They were the magnetic black hole of the Gulag that every prisoner necessarily feared.

The dokhodyagi were incapable of seeing the world around them. They were totally focused on obtaining another crumb of food. The body contains no observing subject. From a phenomenological perspective it is crucial to stress that dokhodyagi can no longer be touched. This process leads to a situation in which the twofold structure of touching/being-touched collapses. As a result the very structure of being a human being breaks down. ~~Let us develop this notion further.~~

The dokhodyagi lost all interest in life, yet what is truly telling is that they lost all interest in death as well. They were absolutely and equally indifferent toward both life and death. They forgot their own names, forgot who they were, forgot how they had come to be in this place. The dimension of time shrank to the current moment and the possibility of a crumb of bread. There was no future perspective, no thoughts of the past, no thoughts of why or how. Their world was reduced to the body—a body that was dissolving, that could no longer be touched. We have also seen that when touch is no longer possible, the entire structure of touching and being touched falls apart, and this is the extremism of the disintegration of the human structure.

Many have stated that those who have experienced such a situation have difficulty writing about it (Ataria, 2017~~, p. 1~~). This appears to be an inherent problem (Agamben, 1999; Levi, 1993). Indeed, Solzhenitsyn begins the second volume of his monumental project, *The Gulag Archipelago* (1975), with the following statement: "And from this it follows that all those who drank of this most deeply, who explored it most fully, are already in their graves and cannot



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tell us. No one now can ever tell us the most important thing about these camps." Yet some attempt to describe the camps. For example, Janusz Bardach remembers that after eight months in Kolyma, "*I wasn't in the best physical condition. I felt dizzy upon awakening, and my mind was foggy. It took more time and effort to pull myself together and go to the mess hall in the morning*" (Bardach & Gleeson, 1998, p. 236). In his story "Dominoes," Shalamov describes himself as a bony skeleton: "*I indicated with my eyes that I could. I* was *saving my strength. I could only pronounce words slowly and with difficulty, as if translating from a foreign language*."

In circumstances such as these, it seems that thoughts were conducted in a foreign language and the cognitive system appears was on the brink of collapse (Ataria, in press a; Ataria & Gallagher, 2015). The spoken language was severed from the language of thought. What was cognitively obvious became an impossible assignment. This is perhaps the reason that these living corpses (almost) did not commit suicide.[21] Such an act is simply beyond the bounds of their physical and mental abilities. "*After this incident I wanted to die, to kill myself, but I was too weak and injured to move*" (Bardach & Gleeson, 1998, p. 221).

Memory, which forms the basis of the narrative self, collapses. Thus, in his story "Dominoes," Shalamov stresses, "*I had forgotten everything. I didn't even remember what it was like to remember*." In essence, those who reached that point, passing the point of no return, already belonged to the world of the dead, even if by some miracle they ultimately survived, as Shalamov describes in his story, "Typhoid Quarantine":

> They should not know everything that he had seen. Nothing could be avoided or foreseen. What use were extra fears? These were living people, and Andreev was a representative of the dead. His knowledge, a dead man's knowledge, was of no use to them, the living.

### 3.4 *Overwhelmed by Indifference*

In his story "Carpenters," Shalamov writes:

> Potashnikov felt his strength leaving him every day. A thirty-year-old man, he had difficulty in climbing on to an upper berth and even in getting

21 The issue of suicide in the Gulag is a matter of debate (Krysinska & Lester, 2008). Due to the chaos in the documentary evidence, there is no agreement about the prevalence of suicide. Note, however, that some "Autobiographic memoirs from survivors of that camp note that several prisoners were driven to suicide by the severity of their existence, and that suicide was more common than murder" (Krysinska & Lester, 2008, p. 175).



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> down from it. His neighbor had died yesterday. The man simply didn't wake up, and no one asked for the cause of death, as if there were only one cause that everyone knew … total indifference written on every face.

Even anger is interlaced with indifference, as Shalamov describes in his story "Typhoid Quarantine": "Did he think of his family? No. Of freedom? No. Did he recite poetry from memory? No. Did he recall the past? No. He lived in a distracted bitterness, and nothing more." This overall indifference makes one indifferent even to one's own fate. In "Individual Assignment," Shalamov describes this as follows: "Dugaev sat down on the ground. He was already exhausted enough to be totally indifferent to any change in his fate." We must not be mistaken: absolute indifference is the outcome of absolute power, which isolates the individual and acts against him with all its force.

In another story, "Dry Rations," Shalamov provides a detailed description of the consequences of such indifference:

> We'd all learned meekness and had forgotten how to be surprised. We had no pride, vanity, or ambition, and jealousy and passion seemed as alien to us as Mars, and trivial in addition. It was much more important to learn to button your pants in the frost. Grown men cried if they weren't able to do that. We understood that death was no worse than life, and we feared neither. We were overwhelmed by indifference.

In the story "Berries," Shalamov extends the notion of indifference to one's own body, which apparently no longer feels any pain.

> *I had reached the stage of absolute indifference. I could not tolerate rosy-cheeked, healthy, welldressed, full people. I curled up to protect my stomach, but even this was a primordial, instinctive movement; I was not at all afraid of blows to the stomach. Fadeev's booted foot kicked me in the back, but a sudden warm feeling came over me, and I experienced no pain at all. If I were to die, it would be all the better.*

When one becomes completely indifferent to one's own life, the metamorphosis has been successfully completed. The prisoner has ceased to be a human being and is instead an exemplary model, a creature worthy of the system's trust:

> So long as the prisoner felt sorrow and pain, longing and compassion, his human character had not yet been totally crushed. The ability to



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> suffer is a major human quality, but the moment comes when the prisoner becomes the equivalent of everything that happens to him, when he becomes so dulled that he feels nothing that is not related to his lowest bodily functions. At that moment he turns into someone "worthy of trust" in the eyes of the Education and Culture Division. After his humanity has been taken from him, he can also be relieved of his armed guard without fear that he will escape.
>
> MARGOLIN, 2013, p. 176

In this final state, even the inner objecting voice is muted, even totally disappearing. That is, even the inner world falls apart. It is impossible to safeguard one's autonomic inner horizon any longer, becoming instead a dead body, an object in the hands of the system: "Subject to such incredible pressure, the individual's inner entity becomes distorted and annihilated." Under such circumstances, "The survival instinct forces millions of people not only to lie but also to adapt themselves to be deceitful from the inside." Thus, "the reeducation in the camps was based on the fact that the individual's opinions, thoughts and feelings, which had not been expressed outwardly for many years, will necessarily be extinguished and will die from within as well." In the process, "Consciousness undergoes a general degeneration and the soul becomes routinized." Consequently, "the consciousness becomes smooth, flat and gray, dead and completely passive" (Margolin, 2013, p. 177).

The system of the Gulagone of absolute and pure power, led the prisoners to absolute indifference, a state in which they were no more than robots, as Margolin describes:

> *I myself lost everyone who fate put me in contact with and who I saw as a friend and comrade.* In the camp it was not a good idea to get close to people. No one knew where he would be tomorrow. At any moment the work commander could come in and scream: "Present yourself at the exit gate with your belongings" sending you to another camp that needed working hands. These transfers took place regularly, also to prevent people from being accustomed to the place and to each other so that they would not forget they were merely robots—the faceless members of the work force belonging to the state.

In such a state of absolute indifference, the prisoner is only a body, nothing more. The body is reduced to an object and the dual structure of being simultaneously a subject and an object collapses. This is the individual's point of collapse as a human being. The absolute power dismantles the concept of subjectivity, turning the prisoner into a body that is a dead object. At this point



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the body can only be treated with disgust and revulsion. These are the conditions under which body-disownership can develop. Indeed, after being detached from everything that makes us humans, we are left only with brutal bitterness—as Shalamov stresses in his story "Sententious":

> *I had little warmth. Little flesh was left on my bones, just enough for bitterness—the last human emotion; it was closer to the bone … What remained with me till the very end? Bitterness. And I expected this bitterness to stay with me till death … Bitterness was the last feeling with which man departed into non-being, into the world of the dead.*

This insight is extremely important. Having been broken into pieces, the prisoner is reconstructed based on bitterness and hate—Shalamov outlines that "love *didn't* return to me." If bitterness stands at the very core of those who are totally broken, we can understand why, and how, body-disownership can develop.

With this in mind, the current paper argues that the breakdown into an object is not a passive and neutral process, in this process what remains of the prisoner is a sense of radical bitterness. Moreover, should any such prisoners recover physically and cognitively, they cannot shake off this bitterness, which has accumulated deep in their flesh. Such an individual is reconstructed on the basis of bitterness and anger, which develop into a hostility that can, under certain conditions (when it is impossible to express the anger externally) evolve into body disownership.

### 3.5 *The Ruin of the Body*

In the novella *In the Penal Colony*, Kafka describes a huge machine that carves the guilt of the accused onto his body (Kafka, 2007). Similarly, the Stalinist machine engraved its mark onto the prisoner's body. The body was the focus of the Gulag. Here we can make a generalization that the body is the objective of a totalitarian regime, the sole ideology of which is to exert terror and exploit its power to the maximum against each and every individual. Like the Kafkaesque machine that brands the body, the Stalinist machine pulverized the body of the helpless prisoner, as Shalamov describes in his story "Typhoid Quarantine":

> His frostbitten fingers and toes began to ache, as did his ears and cheeks. Andreev shifted his weight more and more frequently from one foot to the other. He raised his shoulders and breathed into his clasped hands, but it was no easy thing to warm his numb hands and sick feet. It was all of no use. He was helpless in the struggle with the monstrous machine whose teeth were grinding up his entire body.



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When the body crumbles and the flesh melts away, human emotions also cease to exist. In "Dry Rations," Shalamov describes this condition with terrifying accuracy: "All human emotions—love, friendship, envy, concern for one's fellow man, compassion, longing for fame, honesty—had left us with the flesh that had melted from our bodies during their long fasts." In the end this process yielded absolutely submissive creatures—non-human, robotlike, indifferent—who despised themselves in the most profound sense and were sure they had gotten exactly what they deserved. It could not be otherwise, because if it were, the prisoner "would not leave the camp overwhelmed with hatred for the executioners but rather imbued with the belief that the executioners and the torture were part of the world order" (Margolin, 2013, p. 356). Thus, the "camp became home, the natural form of existence" (Margolin, 2013, p. 355).

This sentence is of decisive importance: it reveals that after a certain period in the Gulag, all the systems of perception underwent adaptation and updating; the phenomenological field changed completely, meaning also that the I-can and the sense of what is accessible and possible were adapted to suit the new situation. In such conditions, the way in which the prisoners are thrown into the world, the way that they understands the world and themselves, constitute the only means of reality in the Gulag. One of the building blocks of this process is understanding that, for the prisoner being thrown into a world based on hatred, this is the only possibility. The world of the prisoner lacks humanity, it is a world in which the concept of "human" is empty of content:

> They expelled him and made fun of his idleness. The old man had tears in his eyes. This is the tragedy of someone who is incapable of keeping up with the others and gradually gets used to the thought that he is worse than everyone. This is another stage in losing one's humanity. The moment comes when the individual hates himself, hates everything that comprises his identity and what he really knows how to do. His only ambition from now on is not to be idle, to be an obedient tool in the hands of an alien will. He forgets today what he did yesterday—and does not know what he will be ordered to do tomorrow. He has lost his ability to have his own will and he knows how dangerous it is to demonstrate his lack of will. He is different from an animal only in that he can be used in more diverse ways: in the forest and in the fields, behind a desk in an office and beside a machine on a production line. But he is no different from an animal in his bestial obedience and his dependence on those who feed him and lead him to the 'point of distribution'.
>
> MARGOLIN, 2013, p. 175



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This result is not coincidental but rather inevitable. When imprisoned in inhuman conditions, the individual lost all remnants of humanity, because "man can be human only under human conditions" (Herling, 1951, p. 132). Surviving in inhuman conditions, in which one is systematically isolated and left alone to cope with the infinite power of a system that is destroying the self from the outside and the inside at once, the prisoner relates to the body as if it were simply another object in a hostile environment. The dual structure of being simultaneously subject and object collapses. Under such conditions, one inevitably begins to treat one's own body in the same way that one treats other objects in one's phenomenological field: objects intended for the sole purpose of torment. Thus, in settings marked by absolute and totalitarian powers, there are no more subjects, rather there are only objects. The human structure has disintegrated.

Many researchers believe (Herman, 1992; Nijenhuis, Vanderlinden, & Spinhoven, 1998; Nijenhuis, Van der Hart, & Steele, 2010; Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, Steele, & Brown, 2004; van der Hart, van Dijke, van Son, & Steele, 2000; van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989; van der Kolk, Pelcovitz, Roth, & Mandel, 1996; van der Kolk, Roth, Pelcovitz, Sunday, & Spinazzola, 2005; van der Velden & Wittmann, 2008) that, under such conditions, victims dissociate themselves from their bodies and thus disconnect from the experience. Yet, as we have seen in the case of the Gulag, there is another possibility. Under particularly difficult and extreme conditions, prisoners are unable, for a variety of reasons, to disconnect from their body. Indeed, the opposite is true: the prisoner is totally reduced to the body. That is, one's entire reality is reduced to the physical reality of the present moment. Thus, the body, which is simply another object in space, becomes the source of ceaseless torment. This is an object that the victim cannot avoid. Consequently, a victim who is *unable to disconnect* from the body *develops hostility toward the body—i.e., body-disownership*. This is the inevitable outcome when absolute power is systematically inflicted upon human beings.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

Schilder (1935) has suggested that "when the whole body is filled with pain, we try to get rid of the whole body" (p. 104). In cognitive terms, this mechanism can be defined as body-disownership. Body-disownership is a destructive mechanism that identifies the body as one's enemy and, at times, even tries to get rid of IT. Indeed, this issue has been discussed at length in phenomenological and cognitive literature. Yet, certain conditions must be fulfilled in order for



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this process to occur. The most important condition, as I have argued in this paper, is the collapse of the subject-object structure. Due to this collapse, one begins to identify the body as a pure object. Dissociation from the body can, in a way, save a person from this destructive mechanism. However, as we have seen, when ruled by absolute power, dissociation becomes impossible (Ataria, 2019a). Essentially, even the mind is totally controlled. In turn, a prisoner who fails to dissociate from the body is reduced to the body-as-object. Under such conditions, the phenomenological field lacks any kind of subject; indeed, the very notion of SUBJECT falls apart.

As Merleau-Ponty stressed, the collapse of the subject-object structure, namely, when we can no longer touch and be touched at the same time, signals not merely the end of the human body but in fact the end of humanity: "Such a body would not reflect itself; it would be an almost adamantine body, not really flesh, not really the body of a human being. There would be no humanity." (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 164).

As I noted in the introduction. I believe that there is a certain gap between the reduction of an individual to an object and the development of body-disownership. My previous studies have not tackled this problem comprehensively. This project, together with others (Ataria, 2019a; in press a~~; Ataria & Tanaka, in press~~), is designed to respond to this issue~~—as much as this concept sounds hackneyed (and perhaps even empty of content) following the comprehensive studies of Foucault (2002). In this process~~, the individual becomes completely apathetic, to others as well as his own fate. However, as Shalamov's testimony indicates, what remains of the individual, one moment before the individual is reduced to being only an object, is bitterness. As such, and individual that survives and is rebuilt will be molded by bitterness, anger and rage. There are many expressions of this rage, and, as I have demonstrated (Ataria, 2018), it can develop into inflicting harm on others, self-injurious behavior and even suicide. It seems that Sartre understood this well in his famous introduction to Franz Fanon's work *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 1968).

The breakdown of the subject-object structure is not a coincidental and unintended result of the system's actions. Rather, it is a direct attempt by those wielding power to harm the prisoner in the most extreme fashion. The present study reveals, and in this sense its contribution is crucial, that through a relatively simple process, without investing great efforts, the system creates an impossible situation, one in which only existence in a state of total indifference is possible. As such, the prisoner undergoes a transformation—the prisoner is reborn as an object, and, in the case of survival, the subjectivity is rebuilt not on the basis of a shared intersubjective space in which a shared fate exists, as described by Camus (1962), but rather on the basis of fundamental hostility. In



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this situation, body-disownership, the ultimate result of absolute power, can develop. As this article has demonstrated, this is not an accidental result.

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