

## Postmodern Strategies of Resistance: Solzhenitsyn and Havel

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### Abstract

Using two lenses on postmodernism, a leftist perspective articulated by postmodern art theorist Hal Foster and a more right-wing perspective proposed by political philosopher Peter Lawler, this paper explores strategies of resistance arising from the oppression of Eastern Bloc communism during the late twentieth century. Through an exploration of the dissident ideas and practices of Russian novelist Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and Czech playwright and essayist Václav Havel, the paper advances the hypothesis that, despite key ideological differences, a series of significant similarities in the ideas and practices of the two men made them postmodern “fellow travellers” in their stands against the state oppression of the now expired Soviet empire.

**Keywords:** dissident, Eastern Europe, Havel, postmodernism, reaction, resistance, Russia, Solzhenitsyn, Soviet Union

As we draw toward the close of the first decade of the 21st century, it is easy to forget that a mere generation ago the Eastern Bloc stood as the world's most ossified example of state oppression. In spite of being challenged by the East Germans in 1953, the Hungarians in 1956, and the Czechoslovakians in 1968, Soviet hegemony with its attendant police state mentality appeared to be an ongoing and oppressive fact of life in Eastern Europe and Russia. Although I remember professors in the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Toronto during the mid-1970s identifying serious internal contradictions that might have an impact on the regime's longevity, few of us thought the collapse would happen so soon and so rapidly.

These internal contradictions were a part of daily life in the Eastern Bloc, and most citizens accepted them begrudgingly. Dissident thinkers, however, drew attention to these tyrannical contradictions by circulating critiques in *samizdat* and, very occasionally, by demonstrating in public. In this paper I examine the strategies of resistance of two well-known but very different

dissidents: the noted Czech playwright and essayist Václav Havel (b. 1936) and the important Russian novelist Alexandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008). I argue that, by considering these two men through a postmodern lens and paying attention to their parallels and areas of commonality, they can be regarded as postmodern “fellow travellers” in their stands against the institutionalized oppression of the Soviet empire. Moreover, if we understand their strategies and practices within a postmodern continuum that extends into the present time, Havel and Solzhenitsyn remain highly relevant today.

Before delving into the connections between Havel and Solzhenitsyn and the common ground they shared with respect to strategies of resistance, we may find it useful to understand how very different they were from each other. Havel was and is a progressive thinker, optimistic about the future and intimately connected with Western culture in both its popular and more intellectual forms (Briton, 1996, pp. 101-102; Christensen, 2007). Heralded as one of the few artist–philosophers able to navigate the difficult path into statecraft and nation building successfully, Havel became the president of Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic. Solzhenitsyn, on the other hand, was conservative, apparently pessimistic, and purposefully disconnected from Western popular culture (Ericson, 1999, pp. 5, 6). He was scornful of the relativism normally associated with postmodern thinking and was a fervent Russian nationalist. While viewed as a brilliant novelist of rare abilities during his prime, he slipped into relative disrepute in the West after issuing a number of seemingly reactionary essays and speeches during his two-decade exile in the United States. The Russian writer has been variously labelled as an out-of-touch proto-modernist, a Slavophile, and a reactionary (Carter, 1977). It is hard to imagine a writer more different from the worldly and engaging Havel.

### **Two Versions of Postmodernism**

To explore the connections between these two very different members of the Eastern Bloc intelligentsia, one first must consider that there are different viewpoints on what constitutes postmodernism. I will look briefly at two versions of the paradigm: Hal Foster’s leftist perspective, as transmitted through Derek Briton, and Peter Lawler’s more conservative viewpoint. Although at odds in some respects, the two viewpoints provide a rich and broad context in a consideration of Solzhenitsyn and Havel and strategies of resistance.

Citing Foster’s preface in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (1983), Briton (1996) advances the theory that there are two types of postmodernism: one of resistance and another of reaction. According to this interpretation, the postmodernism of resistance is aimed at deconstructing the status quo through deconstructing modernism; the postmodernism of reaction, on the other hand, “repudiates” modernism with the purpose of celebrating the status quo (p. 92). Drawing upon Havel’s thoughts and actions, Briton identifies two key aspects of the postmodernism of resistance. First, there must be an acceptance that the individual has a

personal level of responsibility to expose and deny state-created fictions. This is the core of the “living in truth” maxim advanced by Havel, and it extends, for Britton, into a pedagogy of engagement. Second, there is the understanding that no universal solution exists for the ills in society, but there is “hope” engendered through “positive and creative actions that give birth to and nurture new social structures” (pp. 101-102). In contrast, Foster suggests that the reactionary version of postmodernism is simply an argument for “a resurrection of lost traditions set against modernism, a master plan imposed on a heterogeneous present” (as cited in Britton, 1996, p. 92). Additionally, he asserts that the postmodernism of reaction blames the culture of modernity for society’s problems and seeks, effectively, to cut off these modern impulses from further polluting humanity.

An altogether different version of postmodernism is articulated by conservative scholar Peter Lawler (2002). He maintains that what is identified in this discussion as the postmodernism of resistance is in fact “hypermodernism.” To Lawler, the paradigm focuses on relativism, freedom from anything except personal standards, the arbitrariness of authority, and the death of God and nature. Lawler’s so-called hypermodernists “shout that everything modern—in fact, everything human—is nothing but a construction” (p. 2). He argues that they merely seek to complete the project of modernity through critical deconstruction and through freeing humanity’s subjective side from rational and moral constraint. Lawler suggests that the only real or authentic postmodernism is that of conservative thinkers. Standing outside modernism, these conservatives see the project of modernity as a failure. Instead of dwelling on deconstruction, however, they look to “acknowledging and affirming as good what we can really know about our natural possibilities and limitations” (p. 2). He goes on to state that the “beginning of the postmodern world is the replacement of the individual by the whole human being, and the using of our natural capabilities for thought and action to make the world worthy of him [or her]” (p. 9).

### **Solzhenitsyn and His Strategies of Resistance**

Alexandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn’s friction with Soviet authorities dates back to the final days of World War II, when he was accused of sending anti-Communist Party correspondence to a fellow Red Army officer (Solzhenitsyn, 2008). Sent to prison in Moscow and later to penal camps within the Gulag system, Solzhenitsyn started writing plays and short stories during a period of internal exile in central Asia. Released in 1956 during the de-Stalinization period, he worked one of his stories into a novella about life in the camps, which was published in 1963 as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Regarded as a groundbreaking exploration of life in the camps, the small book stimulated a flurry of similarly critical writings. In the early- to mid-1960s, however, the pendulum swung the other way, and more repressive attitudes to publishing resurfaced. Denied the right to publish in the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn’s works were circulated in *samizdat* and published abroad to wide critical acclaim. His reception of the

Nobel Prize in literature in 1970 and his continuing barrage of criticism made the author a high-profile embarrassment to Soviet leaders. Following the publication of the first volume of *Gulag Archipelago*, a masterful exploration of the Soviet system of prison camps, harassment of Solzhenitsyn increased and he was charged with treason in 1974. He was expelled and settled into exile in Vermont, where he continued to voice his challenges to what was going on in the USSR.

Solzhenitsyn's thoughts on resisting Soviet tyranny were articulated in his novels, essays, open letters, and addresses later given during exile from the Soviet Union. These thoughts can be broken down into three major categories: his belief in the harmfulness of ideology (specifically the totalitarian varieties), the concept of "the lie," and the practical ways that "the lie" can be resisted.

The first category, his disdain for ideology, is in fact a generalized critique of the concept of meta-narratives. But it is also a specific criticism of how ideology has been a continuing barrier to human development, as well as the chief cause of "dehumanization" in the communist East (Ericson, 1999, p. 2). Underscoring this discomfort with the dehumanizing aspects of ideology are religious and moral concerns. Solzhenitsyn believed that ideology in its various forms had developed into an unacceptable substitute for faith and religion. A deeply religious man, he saw humanity's "'craving for faith' as a key part of the appeal of ideology" (Ericson, 1999, p. 3). The substitution was a moral affront to him.

Tied in with his general critique of ideology is a more specific admonishment of totalitarianism, a blight he believed "threaten[ed] the integrity of human nature" (Mahoney, 2001, p. 45). For Solzhenitsyn, this most brutal application of ideology is played out insidiously through efforts to manufacture a "different 'logic' of social life" (Mahoney, 2001, p. 41). It is not based on complete control over the individual citizen, but rather on "the creation of a 'surreal' world of ideological discourse and practice" (Mahoney, 2001, p. 42). This works into the concept of "the lie"—the most central element of Solzhenitsyn's critique of the Soviet communist system.

The concept of "the lie" can be found in the *Gulag Archipelago* (1973) and in his early 1970s manifestos and essays. "The lie" that Solzhenitsyn speaks of is an ideological matter and based on the mistaken belief that humans and society can be re-molded through a systematic distortion of reality (Mahoney, 2001). In the Soviet case, the distortion involves the re-writing of history, widespread political indoctrination, hollow claims of social and economic advancement, the creation of a Soviet "newspeak," sham elections, and a whole variety of other ideologically motivated social engineering. "The lie," however, is so deeply embedded in society that it cannot easily be shaken off, even though many in the population are aware of the inconsistencies and non sequiturs.

Solzhenitsyn's blueprint for personal resistance is laid out in *Live Not by Lies* (1974). In it, he called for Soviet citizens to use a form of passive resistance rather than revolutionary actions.

People are counselled *not* to write, say, or produce anything that distorts reality. Distortions of the truth are *not* to be engaged in for personal or professional gains. People who desire to live outside “the lie” should *not* attend political meetings or demonstrations reinforcing ideas of the regime. Neither should they vote for anything or anyone supporting the system. They should “immediately talk out” upon hearing “lies..., ideological nonsense or shameless propaganda,” and should *not* “subscribe to or buy a newspaper or magazine” that distorts or conceals the truth (pp. 2-3). It is an agenda defined by what *not* to do. But as the author’s own experience demonstrated, it is also an agenda with substantial personal cost. He notes that dissidents will lose their jobs, have privileges taken away, and be forced to live complicated, difficult lives. Solzhenitsyn maintained, however, that eventual and inevitable gains would occur as a result of this moral and civil disobedience. Because of the enforced participation in Soviet social and cultural life, he believed that passive resistance of this type would have great meaning and effect (Carter, 1977).

Solzhenitsyn’s own efforts certainly produced both meaning and results through the global attention to the Soviet transgressions he generated. His meaning as a dissident, however, hinged on residency in the Soviet Union, and in 1974, he was stripped of his citizenship and exiled. Effectively blunting his impact both in the USSR and abroad, the Soviet leadership understood that a voice coming from the West had far less resonance than one coming from within. He continued to criticize the Soviet regime from his new home in Vermont, but with his descent into reactionary Slavophilism (Carter, 1977; Ericson, 1999), Solzhenitsyn ceased to be a relevant advocate of the strategies and practices of resistance. Although the author returned to Russia in 1994, three years after the fall of the Soviet Union, with fully restored citizenship, he proved to be problematic figure for new Russian governments. While he opined that Vladimir Putin was engineering a “restoration” of Russia, he also pointedly identified the country as an oligarchy rather than a democracy. Alexandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn died of a heart ailment in Moscow on August 3, 2008, at the age of 89 (Kaufman, 2008). Perhaps tarnished as a critic of Soviet tyranny, his importance as a global literary figure remains unchallenged.

### **Havel’s Strategies of Resistance**

Like Solzhenitsyn, Václav Havel felt the sharp end of Eastern Bloc tyranny as he matured as a literary figure. Involved with theatre as of 1959, he wrote a number of plays that raised issues about the inconsistencies of life in a totalitarian regime. After the Prague Spring and the Soviet crackdown in 1968, his plays were banned and he was forced to work as a labourer. He was arrested several times but refused to be silenced, and his plays were performed underground and circulated in *samizdat*. Actively involved in the Charter 77 movement, he was one of the founders of The Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted. For his efforts he was imprisoned for four years of hard labour. During his imprisonment, the Czechoslovakian government distorted one of his letters to make it appear that he had betrayed Charter 77.

When released, he continued to attend anti-government demonstrations, speak his mind, and write open letters and essays criticizing the communist regime. Just before the Velvet Revolution in 1989, Havel was arrested one final time for involvement in demonstrations, the activist's last indignity at the hands of the regime (Havel, 2002).

Like Solzhenitsyn, Havel articulated his strategies of resistance in both theory and practice. The Czech playwright also repeatedly indicated his debt to Solzhenitsyn's ideas (Mahoney, 2001). Scholar Edward J. Ericson (1993) makes much of the connection and notes that "their views overlap much more than they diverge" (p. 350).

The connections to Solzhenitsyn are demonstrated most pointedly in three parallel areas: Havel's attitude to ideology; his concept of "living in truth," a more activist response to "the lie"; and his strategy for moving the theory of resistance into practice. Like Solzhenitsyn, Havel underpinned his dissidence with an extreme uneasiness about ideology, something he notes as "a specious way of relating to the world" (Ericson, 1999, p. 351). This appears to be rooted in a postmodern sensibility as much as in his moral sense of personal responsibility and his specific distaste for Stalinist totalitarianism. "Havel, like the postmoderns, rejects grand 'emancipatory narratives' and adopts, instead, a pluralist ethic that privileges no specific discourse" (Bayard, paraphrased in Hammer, 1999, p. 143). However, the personal responsibility aspect is highly important with Havel. In the rejection of ideology-based thinking, Havel hoped to "regain control over one's sense of responsibility" (Havel, qtd. in Hammer, 1999, p. 152). He believes that ideology robs the individual of the ability to make personal choices, incorporating adherents into a pre-constructed moral and social framework. In the same way that Solzhenitsyn focused his discomfort with ideology on the excesses of the Soviet Union, Havel critiqued the ideological excesses of the communist Czechoslovakian regime. And, like the Russian author, he believed that the totalitarian practices in the Eastern Bloc were deeply harmful to human integrity (Mahoney, 2001).

The parallels with Solzhenitsyn continue with Havel's use of the phrase "living in truth" to encapsulate his version of identifying and combating the inherent "lie" that exists in communist society. Although semantically different from the Russian author's "live not with lies," the two phrases have similar meanings. Both identify the existence of a façade of untruths and distortions and the argument that living outside the despised framework is possible with the right moral attitude.

Havel identified the existence of the ideological framework of distortions early in his playwriting career in *The Garden Party* (1963) and two other works of the period. Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz notes that the plays deal with "the power of language as a perpetuator of systems, a tool to influence man's mind" (Havel, 2008). Havel would continue to explore aspects of life in a totalitarian regime in his plays, most of which had to be performed underground, and in his essays and open letters, the most important of which is *The Power of the Powerless* (1978). This essay was so reflective of the reality of the communist system in

Eastern Europe that Polish Solidarity leader Zbigniew Bujak noted “it gave us the theoretical underpinnings for our activity” (Howe, 1991, p. 1). And, as with the Soviet Union, the Czechoslovakian version of “the lie” was defined by propaganda, indoctrination, untruths, “newspeak,” and the other distortions intended to mold the “new man” and conceal the fact that the system was not working. Havel explored these as a playwright, as an essayist, and unlike Solzhenitsyn, as an engaged social activist. After the collapse of the communist state he more fully extended theory into practice by stepping into the political arena and offering his hand at nation building (Christensen, 2007).

### **Situating Solzhenitsyn and Havel Within the Postmodern Spectrum**

Situating Havel within the postmodernism of resistance paradigm is relatively straightforward if one uses Briton’s and Foster’s criteria. As a citizen living in communist Czechoslovakia, Havel attempted to deconstruct his own society through plays, essays, and speeches. He drew attention to societal distortions and untruths, the Czechoslovakian version of “the lie” that underpins life in a communist state, and accepted the personal level of responsibility to unmask and deny these state-created fictions. These attitudes and actions place him firmly within the postmodernism of resistance paradigm. This alignment is additionally expressed in his rejection of ideology and his acceptance of plurality; he demonstrates the belief that there is no universal solution to human problems (Ericson, 1999, p. 9). Finally, as a committed activist, he participated in building and nurturing new social structures through his later participation in political life.

Havel similarly fits into Lawler’s “hypermodernist” paradigm. His respect for plurality (Ericson, 1999, p. 9) and subjectivity might be construed as relativism. His discomfort with arbitrary authority is well demonstrated in writings such as *Audience* (1975), *The Unveiling* (1975), and *Protest* (1978)—all of which deal with the difficulties of living as a dissident (Christensen, 2007). And although he, like Solzhenitsyn, had difficulty with the anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment Project, and mused about the importance of “ancient” wisdom (Ericson, 1999, pp. 4, 9), Havel appeared to be fully engaged with the more laudable aspects of modernity in his role as a public intellectual and statesman. Finally, although Havel does not dwell upon the idea of the “death of God and nature,” his spirituality, which is related to the Gaia or Mother Earth hypothesis, is of the New Age variety, and something that clearly upsets conservative critics like Lawler (1977, pp. 6-7).

Solzhenitsyn is more difficult to fit into the postmodern paradigm. As noted above, he has many similarities to Havel in his strategies of resistance. Ericson (1993) also points out a whole range of additional crossovers: a common language of moral discourse, a full recognition that change must centre on the individual, and an understanding of the power of words and language. Moreover, Ericson identifies that both sensed democracy was in a state of crisis and the modern world perched on the edge of a significant paradigm change. But does the common

ground with Havel make Solzhenitsyn a postmodern thinker? I believe that trying to fit the Solzhenitsyn of the late 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s into a paradigm that is Western in focus is difficult at best. There are, however, some strong indicators that he can be broadly situated within the postmodern paradigm if one uses the criteria considered above in the case of Havel.

If Briton's and Foster's versions of the paradigm are used, Solzhenitsyn can be roughly situated in both the postmodernism of resistance and that of reaction. Solzhenitsyn's strategy of resistance included deconstruction of "the lie" that existed in the status quo of Soviet society. This is an implicit critique of modernism, of which Marxist-Leninism was a part. He accepts that the individual has a duty and a moral responsibility to expose and deny state-created fictions and to look for the truth. Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn's disavowal of ideology is an acceptance that universal solutions do not exist. After his exile he expanded on this by discussing what he believed were the unique authoritarian requirements of the Russian situation. Unlike Havel, however, he did not work to create "positive and creative actions that give birth to and nurture new social structures" (Briton, 1996, pp. 101-102). In addition, he tended to look back to old forms of rule and social relationship, perhaps "a resurrection of lost traditions set against modernism" (Foster, qtd. in Briton, 1996, p. 92). Clearly, elements of the postmodernism of resistance and that of reaction are both in evidence.

A consideration of Lawler's version of the paradigm produces similarly divided results. While Solzhenitsyn was certain that the Soviet system was bound for eventual failure, his post-exile writings indicate that he had much trouble with the ideas behind the project of modernity in general. He is critical of the ideas of the Enlightenment and voices proto-modern views that go back well before the tradition of modernity (Mahoney, 2001). This focus on proto-modern ideas, with his evident distaste for modernity, could place Solzhenitsyn in Lawler's conservative postmodern camp. On the other hand, his long history of active literary deconstruction of troublesome issues and scenarios, including Soviet rule, Western democracy, the United States, and postmodernism, suggests certain aspects of Lawler's hypermodernity. The confusion continues when we consider Solzhenitsyn's rejection of meta-narratives and ideologies, his criticism of relativism, and his Christian distaste of the moral laxity evidenced in the West. Again, Solzhenitsyn appears to be hard to pin down, displaying aspects of both Lawler's hypermodernity and his conservative postmodernism.

During the process of writing this paper, I wrestled for a long time over where to situate Solzhenitsyn within the postmodern spectrum. I even considered the proto-modernist label some critics suggest. The ponderous Russian just seemed to evade definitive classification. Then, after much thought, the answer finally crystallized after I reread Hammer's 1999 essay on how Havel may not be, in actuality, a postmodernist at all. In short, *variability and inconsistencies are the norm within the postmodern paradigm*. Solzhenitsyn's apparent cross-over between the two aspects of the paradigm—resistance and reaction—is entirely possible within the broad diversity of postmodernism. Despite the difficulty in classifying Solzhenitsyn,



his strategies of resistance, common ground with Havel, and straddling of two of the theoretical branches within the paradigm do place him, in my opinion, within the postmodern spectrum of thinking. But unlike Havel, who is clearly identifiable as a postmodernist of resistance, Solzhenitsyn demonstrates a unique and variable type of Eastern Bloc postmodernism that is difficult to situate more precisely.

Despite their differences, both Solzhenitsyn and Havel were successful in extending well-developed theoretical strategies of resistance into actual practice under the shadow of Soviet tyranny. In their criticisms of ideology, identification of the concept of “the lie,” and efforts to put theories into practice, the two thinkers were postmodern “fellow travellers” in the literary and actual deconstruction of the Soviet empire. Although the collapse of the communist Eastern Bloc can be attributed to a multitude of causes that will be debated for years to come, I firmly believe these two dissidents played roles in chipping away at the foundation of the Soviet communist system and accelerating change. In our 21st-century, postmodern world, a world in which state oppression continues to be a very real issue, examples of how strategies and practices of resistance can be effectively combined without resorting to violence should not be passed over lightly. The ideas and actions of these two brilliant thinkers deserve close study and consideration. We might have to draw upon their intellectual legacies in the future.

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