Ever since Solzhenitsyn left the Soviet Union, his ideological views have been a subject of controversy in the West. He has been called an authoritarian by some commentators, a liberal democrat by others, and has been compared to Tolstoi, Dostoevskii, the Slavophiles, and the Vekhi writers. There is much merit in Solzhenitsyn’s complaint that various labels have been erroneously attached to him as a result of superficial interpretations of his views by newspaper reporters and journalists.¹ But even more serious scholars have exhibited a tendency to look for neat formulas which would make it easy for us to understand him. I propose to examine some of Solzhenitsyn’s basic socio-political and moral-philosophical views to show that he cannot be adequately explained in terms of any one doctrine or school of thought and to determine in what ways he is like or unlike the thinkers whose ideas are reflected in his writings.

Solzhenitsyn has been compared to the Slavophiles and pochvenniki because he seems to accept the organicist theory of history. This theory, according to which each nation develops like an organism obeying its own laws of growth, was advanced by the German Romantic School; it opposed the Enlightenment thinkers’ view that all nations develop according to universal laws. The Slavophiles emphasized the individuality of each nation in order to dispute the Westerners (zapadniki), who insisted that Russia had to follow the path of the West European nations in its development. Solzhenitsyn agrees that Russia has her own special character, but in order to argue against those who advocate revolutionary methods of social change, he stresses a different aspect of the organicist theory: the need for continuity and gradual development in the life of a nation. He also bases his argument on pragmatic sociological considerations and thus transcends the organicist theory of the Slavophiles and pochvenniki.

An extensive treatment of this topic is found in August 1914 in which Varsonofief, during his conversation with the two students, discusses the nature of the historical process:

History grows like a living tree. And as far as that tree is concerned, reason is an ex: you will never make it grow better by applying reason to

it. Or, if you prefer, history is a river, it has its own laws which govern its flow, its bends, the way it meanders. Then along come some clever people who say that it is a stagnant pond and must be diverted into another and better place and dig a new river bed. But the course of a river cannot be interrupted—break it off only an inch and it won't flow any longer. And we are being told that the bed must be forcibly diverted by several thousand yards. The bonds between generations, bonds of institutions, tradition, custom, are what hold the banks of the river together and keep the stream flowing.2

“History grows like a living tree” is a traditional Romantic simile suggesting the organic nature of the historical process. But, the historical continuity that Varsonofief so strongly urges is not synonymous with the Slavophiles’ concept of organic growth; after all, by 1914 Russia was clearly following the Western pattern of development. Generally speaking, Varsonofief’s argument could be used against any social reformers who believe in simplistic solutions and think nothing of destroying existing social institutions and established ways of life in order to implement their theories. In fact, the river metaphor bears a definite resemblance to Dostoevskii’s extended metaphor in the article “Two Camps of Theoreticians” (“Dva lageria teoretikov”); in it he castigates both the Westerners and the Slavophiles for wanting to change Russian society according to their theoretical notions without regard for prevailing conditions.3 Varsonofief’s polemic is presented in response to a student who finds Hegel’s leap theory of historical development appealing; thus Varsonofief appears to be speaking in opposition to that concept. But Solzhenitsyn’s real target is Lenin, whose revolutionary programs depended so much on the leap (skachok) theory.4

An attempt has been made to explain Solzhenitsyn’s opposition to the revolutionary method of social change in terms of the organicist theory: “Since laws and institutions are legitimate only insofar as they grow organically from the national essence, they [Solzhenitsyn and pochvenniki] reject violent social and political transformations and insist on historical continuity.”5 Actually,

3. Dostoevskii uses the process of digging two canals as a metaphor to illustrate the two different directions in which the Slavophiles and the Westerners wanted the country to develop. F. M. Dostoevskii, Polnoe sobranie khudozhestvennykh proizvedenii, 13 vols. (Moscow: Gos izd, 1930), XIII, 245.
4. Varsonofief’s admonitions are thematically linked with Lenin through the ax images which reappear in connection with Lenin’s plans to change the structure of Russian society by violent revolutionary means: “passion for the ax,” “the sweep of his ax.” Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Lenin in Zurich (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), pp. 102,110. Parvus, who rivaled Lenin in planning and organizing revolutionary activities in Russia, is referred to as “an ax hacking at the Russian trunk.” Ibid., p. 134.