Controlling academics: Power and resistance in the archipelago of post-COVID-19 audit regimes

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Abstract
Government response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic promises to entrench austerity politics deeper into the organization of academic life, and audit regimes are the likely means of achieving this. Redoubled efforts to understand the operation of audit as a strategic technology of control are therefore clearly a priority. A distinctly anthropological literature has emerged over recent years to analyse and understand audit culture in academia, but what seems to be missing are analyses capable of bringing the disparate techniques experienced in academic audit together into coherent technologies, and identifying how these technologies thereby constitute a distinct audit regime within the broader audit culture. While the anthropological literature implicitly calls for further historical and conceptual exploration of the rationality to these techniques, what is required is the translation of our understanding of audit rationality into a presentation of the concrete techniques of control as they are experienced, so that more effective counter-conducts and resistances can be conceived. This article indicates how an excursion into the Soviet Gulag, and the political technology of the ‘camp’ that is its principal apparatus, can reveal not merely how the techniques of audit operate, but also indicate how those techniques might be engaged tactically in the academic setting. This kind of analogic analysis can allow us to understand audit in ways more promising for resistance to its idiomatic power, replacing demoralized and helpless resignation with inspirational exempla. Politically, the article argues that ‘techniques of the self’ are not only necessary to engage audit techniques through particular kinds of counter-conduct, but how these counter-conducts are contributory to the

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organized and concerted kind of resistance that we so desperately desire. The practice of *tukhta* is singled out and introduced as an illustrative means for combining survival strategies with the development of critical rationality in praxis.

**Keywords**
Austerity, control societies, gulag/camp, higher education, historical capitalism, labour and precarity, political anthropology, surplus accumulation, techniques of the self, *tukhta*

If, in phenomenological terms, hunger in concentration camps meant transferring to the other the scarcity that one feared for one’s own, in practical terms it was the result of the authorities’ attempt to economize expenditure. (Toker, 2019: 88)

**Introduction: A post-COVID-19 conjuncture**

For those unfamiliar, let us be clear at the very outset upon what the academic audit regime actually is. Briefly, academic audit is an attempt to render academic activities, institutions, and decisions accountable through the application of quantified indices, rankings, and other measurements of quality. In Britain and elsewhere, an entire population of universities, departments, and even individuals have become subjected to periodic assessment of their ‘output’ by government review bodies (i.e. publications, teaching outcomes, social impacts, etc.), such as in the UK *Research Excellence Framework* (REF), which is then periodically quantified according to certain criteria and presented either as indexed scores and/or tabular rankings that are published by newspapers (e.g. *Times Higher Education, Guardian,* and *Newsweek*), government agencies (e.g. REF and *Exzellenzinitiative*), or specially tasked ranking publications (e.g. *Centre for Higher Education* and *Academic Ranking of World Universities*). Governmental decisions over the allocation of ever-dwindling public resources are then made on the basis of these rankings. However, the objective is also to establish the quantifications necessary both to raise production (in processes of commodification) and to facilitate the penetration of so-called ‘market forces’ (capitalization) into the academic space (see Welsh, 2020a, 2020b, 2021c, 2021d).

Beyond these governmental bodies and their ‘monitoring techniques’, the broader notion of ‘audit culture’ refers to the saturation of objectifying, quantifying, and ongoing ‘rituals of verification’ implanted into the lifeworld of academics (Strathern, 2000: 3–4), and which have increasingly been effective at transforming both the working conditions and the individual subjectivities of those able and ‘willing’ to survive in those conditions.¹

The effect of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis upon the governing of academic life is already apparent and threatens to deepen the strategic thrust of ‘Austerity’.
Most academics have become well-versed in the long story of dispossession, devaluation, coordination, and loss of autonomy that has accompanied the longer neo-liberalization of academia, and so the fiscal and governmental effects of COVID-19 (initially at least) are unlikely to arouse much shock or surprise. The ground has been prepared, the strategic technologies emplaced, appropriate discourses inculcated, and now yet one more conjunctural crisis emerges through which the screws of austerity politics, neo-liberalization, and the zero-sum political economy of redistributive dispossession will be tightened. The inevitable governmental reaction need not innovate many novel techniques to achieve its increasingly acute ends, for these are already firmly emplaced by the technologies of the academic audit regime.

However, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic does perhaps presage a new and distinct ‘historical conjuncture’ within the brackets of neo-liberalization: the emergence of an even more ‘authoritarian disposposessive governance’ (Glick Schiller, 2020: 5, 15), which is poised to intensify the paradigmatic accumulations-by-dispossession that already characterize neoliberal political economy and the ‘illiberal governance’ implicit in audit culture (Shore, 2008; Shore and Wright, 2000; Kipnis, 2008). The crisis effects of this COVID-19 conjuncture revolve around: (a) the budgetary consequences of economic contraction, the resultant public deficits, as well as the financial restructuring of universities; and (b) the technological reorganization of labour processes that has emerged in response to the pandemic itself. The further reduction in funding and resources for the academic population is already underway, and audit regimes will play a central role in policing these reductions into the mid-term. The technological reorganization of labour in the short term will likely show the way for government and management to handle politically the implementation of further austerity programmes post-COVID-19 and to re-double its production of an academic ‘dispossariat’ (Glick Schiller, 2020). The replacement of physical and face-to-face interaction with digital and online communications might seem practical, but it is also a boon for practitioners of post-panoptic technique who wish to combine stringent economies with the destruction of existing subjectivities in the vocation. The further erosion of secure and long-term contracts of employment, justified by shrinking budgets, will correspond to the emergence of enhanced techniques of governing ‘at a distance’ (Gill, 2014: 22), and they shall doubtless play upon affective investment, extra-economic commitment, and fear in precarity (McClaurin, 2020).

This economically driven and politically prosecuted reorganization of technique in labour control will require coherent expression in analysis, if we want to arrive at an anthropologically contextualized understanding of what we are experiencing. In the post-COVID-19 conjuncture, it looks like we shall face ‘intensifying capital accumulation by dispossession in ways that now require repressive governance, surveillance, control, and racialized, gendered, nationally configured oppression’ (Glick Schiller, 2020: 6). This means that ‘we need explanations of the relations of power that constitute and restructure our world’ as it is being transformed. To this end, anthropologists ‘need to theorize the processes and temporality of capital
accumulation by dispossession’ (Glick Schiller, 2020: 4), while recognizing that ‘it is not enough just to describe or map connections’ (Glick Schiller, 2020: 8). Something at once more striking, coordinated, conceptual, and more penetrative is needed, something more capable of bringing a sharper resolution and greater clarity to our critical diagnoses, and something that can inform counter-conduct and resistance by contextualizing in stronger terms what is being experienced.

The implicit contribution to ‘anthropological theory’ offered here is not therefore as a means of modelling or establishing ideal types forming the bases for programmatic research or the parameters for scientific discovery in isolation from practice and action. Rather, what is offered here is theory understood ‘like a box of tools’ (Deleuze and Foucault, 2004: 208). Intellectually and critically, such theorizing in practice ‘must be useful... it must function’. This is ‘theory’ contrived as a political ‘weapon’ of conceptual praxis and counter-conduct to be ‘turned against the heavy arms of the state’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 329), rather than providing the neutral epistemic basis for making disinterested scientific statements. The object of this practical theorizing is therefore not ‘government of the state’, but rather ‘government of the self’ as part of an emancipatory project (Lemke, 2002: 50), which is surely a decisively anthropological objective.

It is in this spirit that I want to bring our academic audit regime into juxtaposition with the quasi-governmental or meta-disciplinary technology of the ‘camp’ (see Welsh, 2018, 2021a). In their work on academic audit, Shore and Wright want us to analyse the effects of audit regimes ‘on the conduct of human action’ and how they ‘do not so much steal our subjectivity as actively constitute it’ (Shore and Wright, 2015b: 27). It is in the analogy of the camp that we can both identify and engage with the kind of ‘power at a distance’ that has become typical of our increasingly virtual audit regimes, power that is not exercised simply by fiat, sovereign command, or by the disciplinary formation of habits, but that combines a certain spatial dispositioning of its objects with transformation of the very subjectivity of the object of that power. It is through the image of the camp that we can understand how positive power elicits complicity and ‘willingness’ on the part of those subjected to it in ways that disciplinary power no longer encompasses (see Welsh, 2021a).

Although the comparison might seem prima facie suspect to the sober mind, it is first of all the zero-sum quality to audit regimes that makes of the ‘camp’ a highly pertinent formation for understanding the neoliberal technology of audit. The steady and constant diminution of resources is what undergirds these two technologies. As Leona Toker has pointed out, the ‘common denominator of sociocultural development’ in the labour camps of the twentieth century was starvation. Endemic starvation was not just ‘routine’ in the camps (Bardach, 1998: 133), but there pervaded ‘an endemic fear of the scarcity of food and resources... a fear that led the ruling powers to inflict starvation on others’ (Toker, 2019: 16). This environment of enforced scarcity was the kernel of control in the technology of the camp, in order to achieve the primitive accumulations with which it was tasked. In effect, camps distributed not food, but hunger (Snyder, 2015: 194), and they did so
not from negligence, but design. This common denominator is shared by neoliberal audit regimes that first established the accumulations-by-dispossession and redistributive dispossession typical of early-onset neo-liberalization (Bin, 2018; Andreucci et al., 2017; Harvey, 2004; Welsh, 2020d). They have more recently entrenched this model of political economy in ‘Austerity’ (Loher and Strasser, 2019), and now threaten an even more punitive turn in the response to the looming fiscal and distributive crisis resulting from COVID-19.

If both the camp rezhim and our contemporary audit regimes share a common denominator – the enforcement of scarcity – then it is not unlikely that, as modern technologies of control and primitive accumulation, they would also share apposite techniques that both enforce and play off the theme of scarcity, which of course they do. This means that a fleshed out understanding of the camp will help us to understand the techniques of our audit regime. It will help us to describe the common political technology constituted by those techniques, how that technology operates, and the recurrent rationality that suffuses both. Finally, if we desire a more stimulating glimpse into how the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic will convert what was chronic to the neoliberal paradigm into something even more acute within the extant rationality of audit culture, then we must articulate the concrete regime of academic audit within the less well-defined rationality of audit culture. This way we can position the techniques of audit in the more tangible terms that are necessary for us to meet them in counter-conduct and resistance.

A critical anthropology of audit regimes?

As it appeared on stage contemporary with financialization and privatization through the 1980s–1990s (Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000; Shore and Wright, 1999, 2000), the rationality of audit has metastasized into the fabric of higher education institutions, just as it has into the military, medical and governmental complexes (Shore and Wright, 2015b). While touted as great engines of competition, efficiency and accountability, the sense is becoming widespread among those subject to them that audit regimes are actually oppressive nightmares of ‘systematic stupidity and ruthlessness’ that fail in their explicitly stated objectives (Hovland, 2011). If the effects of ‘audit culture’ are indeed de-humanizing (Smith, 1999; Sparkes, 2007; Selwyn, 2010: 94; Whelan et al., 2013; Lewin, 2014: 39; Taubman, 2017; Spooner, 2015, 2018; Ruth et al., 2018), then what could be a more pressing anthropological concern than the search for ways of simultaneously understanding and resisting their realization in such regimes? In this case, the regime of academic audit.

A growing body of writing and research on audit culture has been steadily crystallizing over the last couple of decades in this journal and elsewhere that is distinctly anthropological, and which inflects the problem of audit in deliberately anthropological terms (Strathern, 2000; Shore, 2008; Anders, 2015; Gilbert, 2015; Guyer, 2010; Sampson, 2015). In contrast to the sociological literature, anthropological studies have taken audit culture not as a ‘type of society’, but as a
'condition' (Shore, 2008: 279), and have focused on the ‘the new kinds of relationships, habits and practices that this is creating’. What is significant is how ‘the discipline has recognized that seemingly mundane routines often have the most profound impact upon the manner in which people are governed’ (Shore and Wright, 2015a: 421), and ‘these mundane practices also provide critical insights into regimes of governance and the operations of power’. Anthropological study has tackled the techniques of audit ‘not as neutral methods for understanding the quality or value of education’ (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012: 283; Star, 1999: 381; Erne, 2007: 307), but as part of the ‘politicoid-ideological technologies of valuation and hierarchization’ (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012: 283), which operate ‘panopticon-like’ (Erne, 2007: 306), and that not only reproduce the asymmetrical power relations experienced daily by the inhabitants of academia (Sparkes, 2007), but ‘undermine the classical idea and purpose of the university’ itself (Erne, 2007: 306).

In contrast to much of the policy literature that erroneously emphasizes the irresistibility and permanence of ‘here to stay’ rankings and audit (see Welsh, 2019), anthropologists more than others have tried to temper the intimidating spectre of what Steven Sampson has called the ‘audit juggernaut’, so as to open up contingent possibility and the scope for agential counter-conduct (Anders, 2015: 40; Sampson, 2015: 80). If ‘theory in social and cultural anthropology is dependent on what questions anthropologists ask’ (Barnard, 2004: 13), then we must ask questions more fitting to a critical anthropology, should we wish to open up this space. As we shall see, most prolific in the anthropological literature on rankings is the work of Cris Shore and Susan Wright, and their questions are probably the most pertinent to a critical anthropology of audit (Shore and Wright, 2015b: 23). They ask the key question of ‘how should we theorise the rise of measuring, ranking and auditing, and what are their effects’? Most importantly, they call on us to ask ‘where are these developments leading and how might they be contested’?

The agenda is clear for a critical anthropology of academic audit: to develop the research on audit culture by examining the ligature that translates audit culture into audit regime; to understand how the principles and logic of audit find expression in the micro-political tactics of academic audit as a regime; and to represent this expression in terms more helpful for counter-critical engagement with post-COVID-19 developments? There seems to be a need for us to describe effectively how the strategic rationality of audit is concretized in our lived experiences, but in such a way as to penetrate more trenchantly into its operations than would be forthcoming from straightforward description. Most importantly, though academic audit is a historically novel phenomenon, the broader historical quantifications, commodifications, and objectifications of social and material relations immanent to the rationality of modernity are not. To shift our gaze from audit culture to audit regime allows us to cast our eyes historically over past experiences, recurrent themes, familiar templates, partial fragments, resurfaces techniques in the long story of social control in modernity, and thus to re-territorialize our experiences of audit in more historical materialist terms.
Historical materialist anthropology coordinates the more Foucauldian critique of power-techniques with what is clearly a ‘renewed interest in studying capitalism, and its long-term transformations’, so as better to explain ‘the spreading social cleavages outside the factories, the new collective identities being forged, and resistance to the hierarchical work order of society and the market’ (Casalini, 2017: 498; Della Porta, 2017: 457). To understand in this anthropology how audit works to secure compliance, the techniques by which it operates, together with the rationality in which its power can be characterized, I argue that we must turn to the genealogy of power modalities (see Foucault, 1984, 1991, 2003: 239–264; Foucault, 2010; Fendler, 2010: 43–47), and bring this genealogy into relation with the emergence of audit technologies outside and beyond the disciplinary institutions (see Welsh, 2017, 2018). We must discover parallels and similarities in historical technologies of social control for inspiration and ideas. We must identify the recurrent political techniques of labour subordination and subsumption in historical capitalism, so as to derive effective critical vocabularies for both the imminent post-COVID-19 present and the longer-term future.

This brings us finally to the Gulag, and to the recurrent political technology central to its repertoire of social control: the camp. In ethnographic terms, it is through the literary genre of gulag memoir literature that this technology can be approached in an anthropological paradigm of analysis (see Toker, 2000, 2019). Works such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974), *Alexander Dolgun’s Story* (1975), Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales* (1994 [1980]), Herling’s *A World Apart* (2005 [1951]), Ginzburg’s *Journey into the Whirlwind* (1967), Bardach’s *Man is Wolf to Man* (1970), and Lev Razgon’s *True Stories* (1997), variously offer an insightful and succinct source for critical inspiration, as well as a powerful diagnostic of the camp’s operative techniques and rationality. I want therefore to draw upon this literature, in order to address the problematic of the emerging anthropological literature on audit: how we can understand effectively its techniques, so as to engage the broader rationality of its power.

The critical agenda then is to explore anthropologically the potential counter-conducts and ‘techniques of the self’ to be found in recurrent historical contexts (Foucault, 2000a, 2000c; Burchell, 1996; Pels, 2000), counter-conducts which correspond most promisingly to the ‘techniques of domination’ that control us by reconstituting our subjectivity through the audit rationality of academic capitalism. As we shall see, in the rationality of audit, the prospect of concerted action, solidarity, and organized resistance are dependent upon the counter-conducts and techniques made available to us by both the toolbox of theory and purposive historical investigation of anthropological experiences.

**Audit, gulag, and legitimacy in the juxtaposition**

Over recent decades, British academia in particular has been no stranger to comparison with the institutions of the Soviet Union, particularly with Soviet bureaucracy (Amman, 2003; Radice, 2008; Brandist, 2014, 2016; Brown, 2004: 4, 9–34). It
is claimed of ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) that it ‘ironically shows extremely
interesting similarities to the type of managerialism found in former Communist
states’ (Lorenz, 2012: 600, 622), constituting a kind of ‘privatized heir of state
Communism’ (Lorenz, 2012: 609). Its disingenuous and ‘bullshit’ newspeak ‘is
Orwellian in nature’ (Lorenz, 2012: 625), and it is ‘totalitarian because it leaves
no institutionalized room for criticism, which it always sees as subversion’ (Lorenz,
2012: 608). Mary Evans also is unabashed in her denunciation of the ‘totalitarian-
ism and authoritarianism’ that can be seen in the pressures toward ‘conformity
and bureaucractic control’ in academic life (Evans, 2004: 35–36). Michael Burleigh
has likened university reforms to ‘Stalinist measures’ (Burleigh, 2003: 12), and
Thomas Docherty has noted ‘certain structural similarities’ to Stalinist leadership
methods (Docherty, 2011: 118). The discourse of ‘Responsibility-Centred
Management’ has been decried as a ‘Stakhanovite regime’ of publication quotas
(Evans, 2004: 135), which functions primarily through techniques ‘more closely
resembling the planned economy of the Soviet Union’ than those appropriate to a
free society of self-governing individuals (Geiger, 2004: 243). Chris Lorenz sum-
marizes the general sentiment:

Once again there is a worrying similarity between management under state
Communism and under NPM. Because both discourses leave no place for legitimate
criticism, the response to what many of those affected see as bullshit are mixtures of
cynicism, hypocrisy, self-exploitation, inner immigration, and dissidence. (Lorenz,
2012: 620)

There is then a pedigree to my own gulag-audit analogy. Of course, there are
stark differences to the analogy. The physical coercions of gulag are not charac-
teristic of academic life. There is no literal starvation. There are no executions.
There are few explicit and random acts of sadism, nor are there perimeter fences to
keep people in (though such were not ubiquitous in the camp system either). The
academic space is not one of incarceration, and the confinements of the penolog-
ical institution do not apply. Academics still enjoy basic civil rights, and are nom-
inally ‘free’ in the prevailing Hobbesian understanding of the word. Most
importantly, academia is a place in which one wishes to be, at least initially.
Though this assumption is more problematic in actuality than is often thought,
it does contrast clearly with the camps of the gulag archipelago. What makes an
anthropological juxtaposition of the two social contexts not just informative, but
even possible in the first place, is the way in which a similar modulation of control
operates upon the affects of the inhabitants of those spaces. It is the way in which
similar parameters of contingent necessity, established by the common dynamic of
enforced scarcity in a population, place a similar decision-making framework over
the individual subjectivities produced in those populations – zek (inhabitant of the
gulag camps) and academic.4 It is essential to be able to parse what is somewhat
obscene about the comparison from what is a potentially penetrative cross-
fertilization of insight and understanding regarding a distinctively modern technical repertoire of social control.

One must then be cautious with these comparisons, take care to control the critical themes one wishes to unravel, and calibrate deliberately the particular argument being made. Although Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974) notoriously influenced Foucault’s own ‘carceral archipelago’ as mapped in *Discipline and Punish* (see Plamper, 2002), in his collection *Power/Knowledge* (1980) Foucault did express a forceful concern over ‘a certain use that is made of the Gulag-Internment parallel’ (Foucault, 1980: 134). By this, he seems to fear ‘that under the pretext of “systematic denunciation” a sort of open-ended eclecticism will be installed which will serve as a cover for all sorts of manoeuvres’. A salient point and a worrying prospect: we must govern our analyses as we wish to govern ourselves. However, the manoeuvre I am attempting in my own enlistment of the gulag parallel is neither opportunistic nor eclectic, but one that works through a particular and focused kind of analogic analysis.

It was Oswald Spengler, no less, who saw in analogy the ‘means whereby to understand living forms’ (Spengler, 1962: 4), something doubtless close to the anthropological investigation of mundane social conditions. Although Leona Toker reasonably warns that ‘drawing analogies is the most perilous of analytic procedures’, in her own juxtaposition of Nazi camps and the gulag, she goes on to point out how the operation can be justified, if ‘the prominent features of one of the terms provide a comment on the veiled features of the other’ (Toker, 2019: 9–10). Similarly, for Jürgen Kocka, comparison is the study of ‘two or more historical phenomena systematically with respect to their similarities and differences in order to reach certain intellectual aims’ (Kocka, 2003: 39, emphasis added), which if legitimate can include ‘heuristic, descriptive, analytical and paradigmatic’ aims. Properly handled, analogy therefore does have a legitimate place in anthropological analyses of the social.

Finally, for those sceptical about an anthropological analysis of labour, dispossession, and surplus accumulation in advanced capitalist societies that makes comparison with the Soviet Union, one can only say that the latter was just as much influenced by modern capitalist rationality as either the liberal bourgeois democracies or the Fascist regimes of the mid-twentieth century (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997; Fromm, 2002; Marcuse, 2002). The former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) never left world-capitalism, and so it is entirely possible that the imprint of that world-system can be found in Soviet society’s constitutive social formations, especially in the case of the camp system, an apparatus that arose to satisfy the twin imperatives of capital to govern and to accumulate in that historical setting (see Herling, 2005 [1951]: 65). Though he is not alone, Harry Braverman summarized the connection pretty well:

The Soviet Union had a revolution, but a revolution under specific social conditions, and almost all of its subsequent history combines progress in technology and production with a retreat from its original revolutionary objectives. . . Whatever view one
takes of Soviet industrialization, one cannot conscientiously interpret its history, even in its earliest and most revolutionary period, as an attempt to organize labor processes in a way fundamentally different from those of capitalism. (Braverman, 1974: 22)

One cannot lift the USSR unambiguously out of capitalist modernity in the way that has dogged scholars from Calvin Hoover (1931), through émigré Mensheviks such as David Dallin and Boris Nicolaevsky (1947: x), to card-carrying socialists such as Paul Sweezy (1970). The Soviet Union in which Solzhenitsyn and other dissidents fought, laboured, and wrote was reproduced by, within, and according to modern capitalist imperatives (though not exclusively), and therefore an archaeological return to the Soviet camp system through various texts can actually tell us quite a lot about the logic, reproduction and social relations that are recurrent in modern capitalism.

**Governmental power in audit regimes and the technology of the camp**

If we can grasp how techniques of social control were contrived in the technology of the camp to meet the changing needs of surplus accumulation, and if we can identify the operation of the same kind of power and techne in academic audit, then we can understand academic audit better by examination of the camp. Once this is done, we can begin to see how the power of audit can be countered or reversed in ways similar to those worked out in the camp system.

Perhaps the first pertinent question then is ‘who – or what – is driving the spread of these audit technologies’ (Shore and Wright, 2015b: 23)? Audit culture is not merely the narrow product of financialization and privatization, it is a technological apparatus of Deleuze’s ‘societies of control’, and a strategic response to the crisis of disciplinary power identified by him in the famous Postscript (Deleuze, 1992: 7):

We ought to establish the basic socio-technological principles of control mechanisms as their age dawns, and describe in these terms what is already taking the place of the disciplinary sites of confinement that everyone says are breaking down. It may be that older means of control, borrowed from the old sovereign societies, will come back into play, adapted as necessary. The key thing is that we’re at the beginning of something new. (Deleuze, 1995: 182)

To understand audit, why it has emerged and metastasized, and how it can be resisted, we must depart, at least partially, from the disciplinary rationality through which we have been schooled (quite literally) to think, act, and react to power and domination in the industrial age. Although coercions perhaps closer to disciplinary power are both present and increasingly likely in the post-COVID-19 context, audit regimes integrate but exceed the ‘disciplinary technology of labour’ (Foucault, 2003: 242), and so must be rearticulated in meta-disciplinary terms that
are closer to, but not synonymous with, the governmental power identified by Foucault in his genealogy of power. Similarly, the camps of gulag emerged because of the insufficiency of the disciplinary prison as a technology of labour control (Solzhenitsyn, 2007a, 2007b: 75; Welsh, 2017, 2018), and because of the need to fashion and mould more appropriately governable subjectivities for capital (Welsh, 2018: 38–41; Welsh, 2020c, 2021a; see also Lazzarato, 2014).

The objective in the establishment and growth of the camp system was to effect a ‘real subsumption of labour’ (Marx, 1993: 400–401; Negri, 1992: 92), whereby the ‘integration of labor into capital becomes more intensive than extensive and society is evermore completely fashioned by capital’ (see Hardt and Negri, 2000: 254–256). The camp system began as prisons and quickly expanded under the need for an ‘intensified exploitation of prisoners’, which was euphemized in official discourses (frighteningly reminiscent of the audit-speak in NPM) as the ‘utilization of internal reserves’ (see Khlevnyuk, 2003: 118; see also Gregory, 2003; Alexopoulos, 2015; Bacon, 1996; Dallin and Nicolaevsky, 1947). It was ‘intended primarily not to punish the criminal, but rather to exploit him economically and transform him psychologically’ (Herling, 2005 [1951]: 65; see also Razgon, 1997: 154; Toker, 2019: 154). The rendering of ‘docile bodies’ in the disciplinary institution of prison marked merely the formal subsumption of labour familiar to us from the disciplinary factory, barracks, school and hospital of industrial production and Taylorist management. The affective mobilization of energies was to be realized in the camp as a modulation of control, and it was more effective at meeting the need for a real subsumption of labour (see Lordon, 2014: 1–48). For the Soviet government of accumulation, not only was it ‘not practical to keep such multitudes in prison for ten or twenty years’ (Ginzburg, 1967: 266), but prison was also inconsistent with the tempos of Soviet production. Thus, the ‘qualitative leap’ from prison to camp experienced by Eugenia Ginzburg marked a genealogical shift in the modality of power from disciplinary towards a quasi-governmental power (Ginzburg, 1967: 266; see Foucault, 2010). The camp graduated from the static panopticism and somatic dispositions of prison into a dynamic economy of the will that more effectively bound its inhabitants into willing compliance with its rationality (Welsh, 2021a). The result was a somewhat ‘meta-disciplinary’ modulation of control, which was more subtle and efficient in its application (Welsh, 2018), and which was more congenial to the capitalist imperatives both to govern more effectively (Foucault) and accumulate more successfully (Marx).

One can see in the sustained accumulation crisis that is the neoliberal regime of political economy (Harvey, 2005; Overbeek and van Apeldoorn, 2012; Duménil and Lévy, 2011), at least in states such as Britain, how the techniques of audit culture are ‘creating new forms of power and governance, and new kinds of subjectivity’ that are similarly more appropriate for the real subsumption of labour (Shore and Wright, 2015b: 22). One can also see how they operate on an economy of the will that is more effective in securing the compliance of academics to its agenda. As from prison to camp, audit regimes constitute a genealogical movement
toward more effective techniques of control in academia than were the case in the disciplinary paradigm of welfare state capitalism.

As the twin crises of disciplinary power and capital accumulation draw us from the enclosures of the factory to the apparatuses of the ‘social factory’ (see De Angelis and Harvie, 2009: 4; Arvidsson, 2011: 43; Negri, 2018), the metadisciplinary techniques of the camp become more helpful for understanding our new audit condition than are institutional settings (the ‘formelle Institution’, see Vonderau, 2015: 36), to which we usually look for critical, analytical, dissentient, and organizational inspiration (see Welsh, 2021b). Much more than ‘a desire for punishment’, this technology creates a ‘nightmare of a different kind, in which the horrors of force, violence, physical coercion and hardship are replaced by the slow suffocation of the spirit, the intellect and the capacity to resist’ (Evans, 2004: 52), what Solzhenitsyn called ‘soul mange’ (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 621–622, 640).6

Whereas disciplinary power is predicated upon the moulding of an isolated individual within a rigid institutional confinement, the operation of governmental power sees the individual placed into a population, and it is through that population that the individual is thereby controlled by agencies that have an interest in creating more malleable objects of governmental power (Foucault, 2007, 2010).7 Audit regimes function by orchestrating a particular set of relations in a given population, and it is this feature that characterizes them as governmental rather than disciplinary technologies. When governmental and disciplinary power are combined practically in hybrid forms, the outcome is a species of ‘meta-disciplinary’ technique (see Welsh, 2018: 33–38), as exemplified in the technologies both of camp and of audit:

Like Foucault’s argument about modern forms of power, the audit system is simultaneously individualizing and totalizing, as it orders the whole system while ranking everyone differentially within it. (Shore and Wright, 1999: 569; see Foucault, 2000b)

The way in which the individual is positioned in a population by a technology contrived and implemented by university managers, government agencies, or camp bosses, and how that population comes thereby to be divided against itself, is therefore key to understanding its power both to control groups and to transform individual subjectivities (Foucault, 1991: 102; Shore and Wright, 2000: 61–62). We must come to see how both audit and camp regimes are specific species of ‘midway terrain’ (Negri, 2018: 14–23). Despite the schematic in which these technologies are often ascribed to one rationality of power or another, they ‘typically constitute a hybrid assemblage’ of power modalities (Prasse-Freeman, 2020: 3). What is important is how that hybridity is exploited by government ministers, university vice-chancellors, and even some academics in fairly idiomatic ways.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has opened up governmental possibilities for this kind of ‘dovetailing’ (Foucault, 2003: 242), as the material coercions of intensified state-sponsored austerity are alloyed with a growth in power techniques ‘at a distance’ (Gill, 2014: 22). It will be difficult for authorities to pass up the
opportunity presented by the increased digitization and virtualization of activities such as teaching or inter-departmental communication that has emerged during the epidemic. Added to the repertoire of control, the migration of more and more activities online can at once further the material exploitation of academic labour, while retarding the organized resistances that were possible in the more intimately collegial disciplinary institution.

Counterintuitively, these COVID-19 developments make the camp into an even more appropriate analogue for audit regimes. Anthropologists have tended to overemphasize the role of disciplinary power in audit regimes (Shore, 2008; Hamann, 2020; Sauder and Espeland, 2009), and thus their critical interrogations misfire somewhat by losing sight of its ‘meta-disciplinary’ quality between discipline and government. To get the meta-disciplinary character of the modulation common to both the camp and academic audit regimes, one must see how enforced scarcity, a manufactured external void, and panopticism are combined with techniques that play upon affective investment, commitment, and identification engendered in the transforming subjectivities of individuals through their relative position in the target population. In these terms, the differences between a system in which workers, deprived of any liberty and right, were forced to labour and risk their lives, and a system in which people enter, and often remain, because of the love they have for the academic vocation, are not that far apart.

The kind of control technology one finds in both the camp and the academic audit regime is a positive kind of power that works along with the affects, desires, and even the choices of those subjected to it, rather than against them. Resistance to such a technology is therefore much more difficult to organize, escape is almost impossible, and direct confrontation is rendered practically ineffective. The prohibition, the command, or the enclosure of the prison wall makes an immediate suggestion as to how that power is to be obviated. However, to put it in Foucauldian terms, in place of the ‘let live and make die’ of sovereign power, the positive and less directly confrontational power of audit becomes the biopolitical ‘make live and let die’ characteristic of the camp (Foucault, 2003: 241), which is frequently experienced as compulsory participation, endless Hobbesian choices, and offers-that-can’t-be-refused. In this kind of power, the prospective evanescence of walls and bounded spaces promised in the virtualization of post-COVID-19 academic life does not lead to greater freedom, for the power at a distance functioning in audit does not require such crudities in the first place.

This is something recently addressed in this journal by Prasse-Freeman, who explicitly distinguished ‘resistance’ from ‘refusal’ in the context of this very problem. The problem revolves around the positivity of governmental power, and it questions the conventionally negative concept of resistance against that kind of power. For Prasse-Freeman, resistance is ‘opposition to direct domination (sovereign modes of power, . . .)’, which is less effective against the positive and coordinating mobilizations of governmental power. On the other hand, refusal signifies ‘the disavowals, rejections and manoeuvrings with and away from diffuse indirect
forms of power (governmentality), which suggests a more efficacious means of arriving at counter-conducts (Prasse-Freeman, 2020: 3). If we accept this distinction, it then becomes an imperative in the anthropological study of audit to identify the space of manoeuvre between ‘direct confrontation’ and ‘governmental navigation’ (Prasse-Freeman, 2020: 4), as well as the ways in which that space is produced by certain technologies of domination and then counter-produced by ‘techniques of the self’. Study of the ethnographic experiences of this kind of quasi-governmental technology, which was typical in the camp, can provide invaluable anthropological insight into precisely this manoeuvring space.

The techniques of gulag and academic audit

The corollary of the foregoing section is that the camp system can supply inspiration and tools to understand the meta-disciplinary (quasi-governmental) power techniques common both to the camp and audit regimes. The suggestion is that we must stop thinking and acting like prisoners of the factory and start thinking and acting like the zek. Though ‘each governmental regime has different contours’ (Prasse-Freeman, 2020: 4), and refusal therefore takes different forms depending on those contours, the rationality common to those regimes provides a certain stability to those contours. Historical and contemporaneous exploration of different governmental regimes will clarify what is stable across them and enable identification of the ‘porous regularities’ common to the typifying relations of camp and audit regimes (Toker, 2019: 28). Let us now take a look at some key techniques of control in the camp system as a regime of mobilization, their analogues in the audit regime, and the potential for counter-conduct to those techniques.

The brigade is the collective in which one labours. It is the population into which the individual is inserted to take them beyond the framework of disciplinary power and to make them into more appropriately governable subjectivities for capital:

‘Only by basing itself on collectives can the multitudinous camp administration rework the consciousness of the prisoners’... ‘The brigade is the basic form of re-education’ (A DmitLag order, 1933.). ‘This means trust in the collective, ...the spontaneous initiative of the camp inmates in the cause of re-education! This is psychological enrichment of the personality by the collective!’ (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 116, quoting OGPU Order of 28 November 1933)

The principal technique of the work brigade is no longer really the panopticism of prison, but is now the malveillance typical of camp. The principle of ‘malveillance’ is a development of control technique beyond mere surveillance (Foucault, 1980: 158). Straightforwardly, malveillance is the principle of mutual observation and is a technique of inserting the individual into the collective through the transformation of their subjectivity away from the formation of habits and toward the mobilization of energies (Rancière, 2012: 31). Where surveillance is the observation
of the isolated individual from the ‘utterly dark spot’ of the unseen inspector, so as to render bodies docile and malleable (Foucault, 1980: 146–165; Bentham, 1995), malveillance sees the gaze shifted into the social relations of the population itself – ‘in camp there is nothing but work and only in a collective!’ (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 156; see also Herling, 2005 [1951]: 257). By moving from prison into the camp, it became general that ‘for long, long years to come, none of us could dream of being alone with herself for one moment’ (Ginzburg, 1967: 266), and that from the day ‘on which we crossed the threshold of our cells for the last time [to go to camp], we were obliged to do everything together’.

This reconfiguration of togetherness and isolation calls into question an emerging platitude about the supposed effects of the organizational response to COVID-19. As teaching and faculty work move into the virtual online space, some are consoling themselves with the benign view that ‘we are in this together’ (Allen et al., 2020: 233). However, this collegial assessment does not recognize the collective divisions generated by the meta-disciplinary brigade system of audit control (omnes et singulatim). Far from one of ‘the silver linings that emerges from the current crisis’, the spatial dispositioning effects of online technology will be able more effectively to collectivize our activities in internecine malveillance, while making it harder for collaborative disobedience. One has to question how ‘a reconnection with those around us and a stronger sense of shared empathy and kindness for one another’ will be forthcoming from a technology that physically separates sensuous mammals from one another. As the necessity and effectiveness of surveillance in institutional settings declines, virtualization moves control into a space where energies can be mobilized through the collective malveillance of audit. Dissent is isolated and production collectivized through auditable online labour.

Playing on the principle of malveillance, the brigade functions by removing the zek from the clear binary of domination in panopticism, against which they can more clearly struggle by escape or invisibility, and places them instead into a complex calculus of choice in enforced visibility. It induces compliance and leaves the zek without the options of refusal, malingering, cooperative solidarity that are available in the disciplinary setting of prison:

Oh, without the brigade one could still somehow manage to survive the camp! Without the brigade you are an individual, you yourself choose your own line of conduct. Without the brigade you can at least die proudly, but in the brigade the only way they allow you even to die is in humiliation, on your belly. From the chief, from the camp foreman, from the jailer, from the convoy guard, from all of them you can hide and catch a moment of rest; you can ease up a bit here on hauling, shirk a bit there on lifting. But from the driving belts, from your comrades in the brigade, there is neither a hiding place, nor salvation, nor mercy... [Because of an individual’s resistance or refusal through malingering], everything the brigade does today will be divided not by twenty-five but by twenty-six, and because of you the entire brigade’s percentage of norm will fall from 123 to 119, which makes the difference between the ration allotted record breakers and ordinary rations, and everyone will lose a millet.
cake and three and a half ounces of bread. And that is why your comrades keep watch on you better than any jailers! And the brigade leader’s fist will punish far more effectively than the whole People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs. (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 117)

The malveillance of the brigade parallels a neoliberal regime that emplaces ‘a generalization of mistrust and fear of the other’ (Lazzarato, 2017: 64), and in particular it parallels the transformation of academic labour from the Faustian cell of discipline to the brigade of the audited department. As in the camp system (Shalamov, 2004: II/347; Toker, 2019: 112–113), failure to meet the norms of audit brings down upon the academic’s head the wrath of department fellows, whose collective budgets, job security, and pay are threatened by that individual’s failure. It is not just the ‘brigade leader’s fist’ that one need fear, nor the Ministry for Education, but also one’s colleagues and the ‘ambitious demands’ of one’s ‘academic community’ (Rogler, 2019: 75).

Andrew Sparkes’ portrayal of the weasel in academic life is as succinct in encapsulating the operation of the brigade as it is familiar to our experiences (Sparkes, 2007: 530–532). Though reminiscent of the operations of scientific management (see Taylor, 1998 [1911]), this technique is closer to the orchestrations of post-Fordist and neoliberal capitalism, for Frederick Taylor’s ‘Little Dutchman’ did not find himself in the brigade and Taylorism remained confined within the disciplinary mould of assembly line production. The weasel is that fellow inhabitant of academia who willingly participates in the audit techniques and transmits the power of those techniques to their fellow academics. They are the ‘driving belts’ of audit. A member of the brigade for whom ‘everything is about impact factors’ (Sparkes, 2007: 531), the weasel is he or she who has willingly committed themselves to the instrumentalization of their work toward the audit metrics, just as the brigade member of camp labours to fulfil the norm at any cost. As a member of the brigade, the weasel is ‘an academic bully’, an agent of malveillance, who is ‘always putting down younger staff by inferring [sic] that the lower impact journals they published in were inferior and not worthy of attention’. Looking back at these kinds of situations, one can see how the weasel reproduces the power of audit, for whom only ‘these numbers actually counted in defining academic worth’ and which in turn ‘confirmed and valorized the weasel’ (Sparkes, 2007: 531). Is the weasel really then an ‘ultimate docile body’ (Sparkes, 2007: 532), or rather the ‘willing slave’ to a ‘regime of mobilization’ (Lordon, 2014), whose coercions cannot be understood in disciplinary terms alone without insertion into a population in the manner typical to the twisted pastorate of malveillance?

At the core of the malveillance of the brigade stands the differentiated-ration pot (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 154–156; see also Ginzburg, 1967: 403–409), also called the ‘cauldron system’ (Herling, 2005 [1951]: 35–37; Gilboa, 1968: 42–43, 56). Within the strategic distribution of hunger, this technique of collective labour incentivizes production in individual workers by establishing a ratiocination of ‘choice’ in the worker’s commitment to achieving set norms of output, which is rewarded with
means of subsistence in camp. For Solzhenitsyn, ‘instead of the club, the ration scale’ (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 103); for Lev Razgon, the ‘big ration’ (Razgon, 1997: 155); for Janusz Bardach, the ‘full ration’ (Bardach, 1998: 222). It was predicated upon an ingenious insight: as ‘one of his eternal, disastrous traits the human being is incapable of grasping the ratio of an object to its price’ (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 156). The result, as with audit, is self-destruction in conative complicity with the incentive structure of camp. In conditions of enforced scarcity or ‘austerity’, this mechanism of affective servitude is more effective when placed within the choice structure of individual workers themselves than would be realized through any external mechanism of direct physical or semiotic coercion on the body of the worker.

The differentiated-ration pot in the framework of the brigade is perhaps the most difficult of techniques to engage in counter-conduct as well as overt resistance, for in the pastoral power that ‘makes live and lets die’ the differentiated ration pot of audit places the academic zek into the situation where ‘you cannot not want to work. You cannot...prefer death from hunger to work’ (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 117; see also Herling, 2005 [1951]: 36–37; Bardach, 1998: 204–209). Simply, you cannot not want to have your contract renewed, or get paid, or get references from colleagues, or avoid the discredit of your peers. The result is ‘a demented race for percentages’ that replaces ‘any feeling of mutual friendliness’ (Herling, 2005 [1951]: 37):

The daily fight to survive – to make the norm, keep the full ration, prevent frostbite, remain strong in spite of the gnawing hunger, get along with the brigadier and his friends, avoid clashing with the urkas ['thieves/gangsters'] and being singled out by the guards – often made me think only of myself. 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 anger. (Bardach, 1998: 222)

Is this the camp at Burepolom, or is it someone’s metaphorically lurid account of life in an audited academic department? While misanthropic competition among academics is hardly a novel feature of the vocation, this aspect of academic life has been balanced hitherto by the kind of collegiality engendered by the common intellectual and pedagogic enterprise, as well as by the identifying framework of the university institution, made possible by stable and long-term levels of funding. It is the gradual application of austerity, enforced scarcity, and shrinking finances that has sharpened the internecine conflict, just as it is the divisive techniques of audit that have broken the bonds of collegiality and turned long-standing competition into egoistic survival. Though academics have always struggled among themselves, there was still possibility for mutual support and political combination. Audit technology at the very least makes this much more difficult, if not impossible. By ‘mercilessly breaking the only natural bond between prisoners – their solidarity in the face of their persecutors’ (Herling, 2005 [1951]: 37), the consequen
effect upon the capacity to resist collectively is a potent one. Do we imagine that the reorganizations provoked by the COVID-19 crisis are going to help reconstitute these social bonds? If not, what will be the consequence for our capacity to ‘refuse’ the coercive suasions of the audited academic brigade?

How then can we begin to counter the operations of the brigade and the economy of malveillance common to both camp and the academic audit regime? Contrary to widespread belief, there is no way around. As with the endless steppe surrounding the camps (Dolgun, 1975: 234; Solzhenitsyn, 2007c), or more often the endless taiga (or ‘green prosecutor’), escape from audited academia is precluded by the void of scarcity established by chronic austerity outside the academic population once one is inside it (Welsh, 2021a: 12–14). Professional exit is very much more difficult than is generally recognized, given both the paucity of equivalent jobs and the monopoly over those jobs enjoyed already by those ensconced in them. The further one is down a career path, the truer this becomes. In the absence of viable exit, a way through must then be forged. Long is the way and hard to take this difficult and demanding path, but in the camp it is perhaps more propitious than the direct confrontation of refusal or demonstrated disobedience. So, what do the strategies of survival and dissent look like in this modulation of control?

Firstly, there was the practice in camp of stretching the rubber (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 511), or sometimes ‘dimming’ (Conquest, 1978: 167–168), and it was supposedly ‘the zek’s main salvation and achievement’. Quite simply, the zek listens carefully to all the orders he is given and nods his head affirmatively. And... he goes off to carry out those orders. But... he does not carry them out! Most often of all... he does not even begin! This sometimes leads to despair on the part of the purposeful and inexhaustible commanders of production! (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 511)

This kind of resistance is evidently similar to the go-slows and shirking familiar from Taylorist production tempos in the institutions of pure disciplinary surveillance such as the factory. As such, there was and is something inadequate about ‘stretching the rubber’ as a tactic in the context of both audit and camp, for it still savours too much of disciplinary conditions and works on the assumed effectiveness of the (admittedly indirect and clandestine) refusal. The confrontation entailed often in ‘stretching the rubber’ is too manifest, for ‘no sooner has the chief rushed in for the second time than the zek obediently bends his back beneath the cursing and immediately begins to carry out the orders’ (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 511). It relies too heavily upon the absence of panoptic surveillance, and a hope that ‘the chief won’t come around for the third time’. A shift in resistance must therefore take place from direct refusal to counter-conduct and ‘strategic reversibility’ in the subjectivity of the zek itself (see Gordon, 1991: 5). In characteristically sarcastic tones, Solzhenitsyn intuits the problem with ‘stretching the rubber’ in the genealogical shift of power technique that the camp realizes, as do the zeks:
The *zek*ks have an absolutely false concept of work as something designed to suck their whole lives from them, which means that their chief salvation is this: while working, not to become absorbed in the work. It is well known to a *zek* that you can’t do all the work (never rush, thinking that the sooner you finish, the sooner you can sit down and take a rest; the moment you sit down, you will immediately be given other work to do). *Work loves fools.* But how do you do it? Do you flatly refuse to work? That is the worst thing the *zek* can do! He will rot in punishment blocks, die of starvation. Going to work is unavoidable. But once there, during the workday, what he has to do is not slog away, but “fiddle about”, not bend the back, but loaf, goldbrick. (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 510–511)

In this passage, Solzhenitsyn is only half way to the key point. Though the indication of pastoral malveillance is present, he nevertheless remains beholden to a negative–passive rather than positive–energetic self-defence and is clinging somewhat to the tempos of a Taylorist orchestration. There is then a problem in the effectiveness of ‘stretching the rubber’ against the pastoral/governmental power of audit, and as with the development of technique to dominate there is a like imperative to develop counter-conducts to that technique. This brings us to *tukhta*.

Allied to the good old-fashioned malingering in ‘stretching the rubber’, *tukhta* (sometimes *tufta*) is a key counter-conduct of gulag from which the audited academic can learn much. But what is it actually? Though a somewhat involved and intricate activity, *tukhta* was the ‘wide proliferation of padded statistics and false reports’ (Khlevnyuk, 2003: 126). However, *tukhta* was more than just the ‘work done only for appearance’ or the ‘deliberately falsified, inflated indicators in an official report’ (Rossi, 1989: *Tukhta*). It went beyond being merely ‘a whole system of ingenious cheating’ (Herling, 2005 [1951]: 41), and to say that it is simply ‘filling your work quota without really doing any work’ is rather to miss the point (Dolgun, 1975: 167). Both similar to, and inverse to, gaming the system, *tukhta* is a demanding counter-conduct specifically tailored to the kind of numerical and statistical apparatuses of governance found in audit regimes, specifically one in which a person is forced to participate, in one way or another, as in the brigade. It starts with the recognition that it is fatally self-defeating to work faithfully within the parameters or rules of a system, which is not merely irrelevant to the autonomous wellbeing of the individual in question but actively destructive of it. It is to make a conscious identification of the maleficence and injustice of a given system of reproduction in which one must participate to survive, but to the systematic advancement and perpetuation of which the individual is ethically and existentially obliged not to contribute. It is the response of an individual or group placed in a paradoxical position where straightforward and sincere participation means both their sustenance and their destruction. As should now be clear, *tukhta* is evidently an appropriate tactic in the face of audit technology:

And all this was a matter of attempting to *survive*, not to enrich oneself, and certainly not to plunder the state. The state cannot be so excessively fierce – and force its
subjects into deceit. And here is what the prisoners used to say: ‘Without “tukhta” and ammonal, never could we have built the canal!’ So all that is what the Archipelago stands on. (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 167)

_Tukhta_ might therefore seem either like a pernicious and self-serving practice, or as a classic example of straight corruption, especially to those who have not felt the driving belts of the audited brigade ‘on their pelts’ (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 145). The problem of the corrosive effects of _tukhta_ in the context of Soviet society has been noted (Khlevnyuk, 2003: 126–127). However, in the academic context, it is precisely on the dedications, good will, and social conscientiousness of academics that the technology of audit preys (Rogler, 2019). As with the imprisoned scientists, engineers, and professionals of gulag (Panin, 1976), who often could do no less than work ‘hyperconscientiously’ in their new-found callings (Ginzburg, 1981: 63), so the academic is crushed between the hammer of audit and the anvil of their vocational pride and sincerity by techniques that draw them into grudging complicity with the regime that orders them. When production is destructive, to be counter-productive takes on a new complexion.

But is _tukhta_ actually an effective means of counter-conduct that might justify its practice and assuage our instinctive reservations? Can _tukhta_ be genuinely political and more than an egoistic opportunism? Solzhenitsyn evidently thought so, and in this he was not alone. Quoting from a 1933 telegram issued by none other than Genrikh Yadoga himself:

‘Tufta is the most dangerous weapon of counterrevolution... an attempt to destroy the entire corrective-labor policy of the OGPU’ (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 95).

Not just a personal practice of counter-conduct in the audit system of gulag, _tukhta_ was also integral to the general leadership of struggle in the camp, for ‘the authority of a [zek] brigadier among his workers was measured by his talents in this direction’ (Herling, 2005 [1951]: 41; see also Bardach, 1998: 228, 236; Dolgun, 1975: 168, 206–210). Solzhenitsyn’s narrative presentation of the Vlasov case is instructive, both in this particular respect and for _tukhta_ itself as an activity in general, and it is worth absorbing at length.

Vasily Grigoryevich Vlasov had been the head of the District Consumer Cooperatives for the Kady region in the late 1930s, before being arrested for refusing to cooperate in local Party corruption. He distinguished himself, not merely by his great probity but by courageously denouncing in full session the court that sentenced him and was thus assigned to general labour in the camp system, through which he rose against the odds to a position of responsibility. Leaving the unsuccessful demonstration of open dissent behind in the courtroom, Vlasov found his way in camp to a more successful means of counter-conduct in that context, while retaining an autonomous subjectivity in keeping with his defiant ethos. His case is illustrative of how _tukhta_ works, of why it requires a certain ethical practice to be realized, and of the subtlety and power in its technical operation. It is worth recounting at length the courage and ingenuity that _tukhta_
demands, as well as its eminent plausibility and possibility in the face of great domination:

In the forties, on one of the Ust-Vym logging camp sites (and UstVymlag was distinct from the general pattern in that it had only one unified set of bosses: the camp itself ran its logging, did its own auditing, and was responsible for plan fulfilment to the Ministry of the Timber Industry), Vlasov simultaneously combined the duties of norm-setter and planner. He was the head of the whole thing there, and in winter, in order to provide support for the sloggers out logging, he credited their brigades with fictitious cubic yards of wood cut.

One of the winters was particularly severe; and working just as hard as they could the zeks fulfilled the work norms by only 60 percent but received rations for having fulfilled 125 percent of norm; and with the help of these beefed-up rations they managed to last out the winter without halting work even one day. However, shipments of the “felled” (on paper) timber were far behind schedule, and the camp chief heard some evil rumors. In March he sent a commission of foremen into the woods – and they turned up a shortage of 10,500 cubic yards of timber! The enraged chief summoned Vlasov, who heard him out and then said to him: “Give ’em, chief, five days in the brig. They’re all sluts. They were too lazy to get out into the woods because the snow there is still deep. Set up a new commission with me as the chairman”. And thereupon, with his own sensible troika, Vlasov, without leaving his office, drew up an official document and “found” all the missing timber. The chief was quieted down for the time being; but in May there was more trouble: they were still shipping out too little timber, and the higher-ups kept asking questions. So the chief called in Vlasov again.

Vlasov was a short fellow, but he always retained his vigorous rooster-like bearing, and this time he didn’t even pretend: the timber just didn’t exist. “So how could you have drawn up a false document, blankety, blank, blank, blank!”?… Vlasov replied: “Do you think it would have been better for you to go to jail yourself? After all, ten and a half thousand cubic yards is a full ten-ruble bill [10 year sentence] for a free employee, and even for a Chekist it’s a fiver”. The chief cursed him out, but by this time it was too late to punish Vlasov; the whole thing depended on him. “Well, what’s to be done now?…” Vlasov answered: “Just wait till the roads have completely dissolved in mud”. And the time came when the winter roads had all dissolved completely, and the summer logging trails were still impassable too. And at this point Vlasov brought the chief a detailed and watertight report for his signature, to be sent on to the administration higher-up. In it he proved that because of the highly successful timber-felling operations of the past winter it had been quite impossible to move 10,500 cubic yards out of the forests on the sledge trails. Neither could this timber be hauled out through the swampy forests. Next he gave estimates for the cost of a corduroy road to get the timber out, and he proved that the haulage would cost more than the timber was worth. So that in a year’s time, because the logs were going
to be lying there in the swamp for a whole summer and autumn, they would be unsuitable for lumber and acceptable to any possible customer only for firewood. And the administration agreed with these literate conclusions, which they were not ashamed to show any other commission – and therefore the whole 10,500 cubic yards of timber were written off.

And so it was that the trees were felled, and eaten up, and written off – and stood once again erect and proud in their green coniferous garb. And, in fact, the state paid very reasonably for these dead cubic yards: a few hundred extra loaves of black, gluey, watery bread. The thousands of trees and the hundreds of lives which were saved were of no account on the profit-and-loss sheet. Because this kind of wealth was never counted in the Archipelago’. (Solzhenitsyn, 2007b: 162–164)

Beyond the short-term necessity of survival in camp that tukhta affords its practitioner, what is it that distinguishes tukhta from the time-honoured practices of sabotage or theft, and how can it contribute to a more strategic plane of struggle and possible transcendence? The difference, and the importance of tukhta as a tactical counter-conduct, is that the practice of tukhta both recognizes and works through the immanent contradictions produced by the instrumental rationality of the audit regime. It is informed by a species of immanent critique (see Marcuse, 2002; Habermas, 1971, 1984; Horkheimer, 2013a, 2013b).

Immanent critique means ‘identifying the internally conflicting tendencies’ in a given position, practice, or other social object (O’Connor, 2004: 26; see also Jaeggi, 2008). It explores the contradictions entailed in that object (Antonio, 1981: 332), which is derived from experiences and oriented towards practices (Stahl, 2017), and which is constitutive of a sublative motion towards transcendence (Marx, 1967: 46; Antonio, 1981: 333). As a counter-practice it ‘pushes with the force of a position’s commitments to where that position “cannot afford to go”’ (O’Connor, 2004: 26; Adorno, 1970: 14–15), and thus ‘exacts the truth from it through the confession of its own untruth’:

Genuine refutation must penetrate the power of the opponent and meet him on the ground of his strength; the case is not won by attacking him somewhere else and defeating him where he is not. (Hegel quoted in Adorno, 1970: 14)

Most significant: although often activated by reference to normative predicates and commitments, this is a mode of ‘critique that refrains from using independently justified moral principles but instead relies on a reconstruction of the implicit normative premises of modern social practices to criticise forms of oppression and domination’ (Stahl, 2017: 2). This makes of it a more appropriately indirect and non-confrontational form of potentially transcendent counter-conduct that works through, rather than against, the power it encounters. Whereas sabotage is merely a normative collision with its object, a direct confrontation of the kind we have already problematized, tukhta can bring its object indirectly into crisis by pushing
through its internal contradictions. For counter-conduct to be effective within a totalizing power, it must work through and with the mobilization of affect, but without reproducing that power (in the way that ‘gaming’ does, for example). To engage in *tukhta* then is to engage in a hyper and exaggerated form of instrumental rationality. It is to take the instrumental rationality of audit to its logical conclusion in a way that hastens the crisis of its contradictions. This is what makes of *tukhta* neither a collaboration, corruption, nor an ineffectively direct form of resistance, but a sublative form of strategic counter-conduct that has the added benefit of enhancing survival chances in the short run.

If academic audit did not ‘value’ and prioritize superficial and instrumental metrics, it would not be possible to manipulate it counter-productively through *tukhta*. The ‘stupidity and ruthlessness’ Jon Hovland (2011) correctly identifies in audit’s core assumption – that intellectual and critical activity can be quantified, commodified, and ordered through metrics without deleterious civilizational consequences – is an immanent one. Just as in the Soviet Union, the technique of audit will ultimately fail in its stated objectives, even if it is successful in its more sinister unstated ones. This means that immanent critique has the potential to hasten systemically this failure. As the punitive situation becomes more acute, we have to ask ourselves what we really have to lose. We ought not to exaggerate the effects of *tukhta*, but in a time of resignation and despair it is a good place to start. Though not a sufficient condition for bringing an end to the audit regime, and certainly not a satisfying prescription for the political enthusiast, *tukhta* is a necessary condition in the struggle with the rationality of audit. As later with the Soviet Union in *toto*, the camp archipelago did pretty much founder in the post-war decades through more conventionally ‘evental’ politics (i.e. Stalin’s death and *zek* risings), but the necessary crisis ‘conditions of possibility’ would never have materialized without the development of the contradictions immanent to the control technology of the camp itself (Khlevnyuk, 2004). Whatever concessions, improvements, or abolitions were ultimately achieved through organized resistance, they were made possible by countless individual and collective counter-conducts, such as *tukhta*, over a longer period of time.

Through *tukhta*, academics can bridge the gap between survival strategies and the development of critical rationality in praxis. By backing Vlasov-like brigadiers among us, by identifying other opportunities for *tukhta* ourselves, and by marginalizing the weasels, the academic *zek* can roll up their sleeves for *tukhta* in their engagement with audit technique and its ‘governing by numbers’. In practice, *tukhta* is going to have to be contrived in detail by the *zeks* themselves, but tentative (and admittedly somewhat hybrid) suggestions might include the purposive overvaluing of colleague’s REF scores, the intentional trashing of elitist institutions through reputational survey returns, the public shaming of malignant departmental stool-pigeons, or maybe the orchestrated pooling of departmental authorship. The possibilities are numerous but must be worked out *in situ*. 
Conclusion

All this has not been to say that refusal, escape, evasion, confrontation, etc., are impossible in the contemporary university, for we are not confronted by the pastoral power of audit techniques alone and unalloyed. It is rather to say that they are insufficiently effective to engage the rationality of audit, and that while the former tactics still have effectiveness against the sovereign impositions of command and control, more germane counter-conducts must be taken on to engage the subtleties of all those techniques we have corralled under the rubric of ‘audit’. This is what the foray into the camp system can teach us, and the lesson is one in personal ethical practice informed by a critical rationality that aspires to an imminent critique. However, it is also about survival – material, vocational and psychological – of the autonomous self.

As mentioned earlier, the regimes of audit and camp are predicated upon enforced scarcity, and that means austerity politics. This entails a number of things. First, it means we have to survive, individually and collectively, in the production regime within which we find ourselves. Second, it means we must take a materialist view of the technologies by which our labour is controlled in that regime. Third, we have to understand how the changing imperatives of accumulation in that regime, such as the current tendency toward primitive and dispossession accumulations, are implicated in those technologies. Finally, we should bear in mind that as those accumulation imperatives change, so too do the prospects for transformative (counter)action. Austerity will not go on forever, and though the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic will likely lengthen its shadow, struggle toward a transcendent horizon can and should be coordinated with material survival strategies in the present.

As we negotiate this difficult path with patience and perseverance, the political objective is to gain control over our own subjectivity production through ‘ethico-political experimentation’, through ‘acts of enunciation’ such as ‘self-positioning, self-production, and a capacity to secrete one’s own referent’ (Lazzarato, 2014: 18). We have to carve out the space for action in our labouring activities. In the academic setting, this can take the form of discussion groups, diary keeping, blogging, poetry expressing experiences, or even redirecting our official academic research (God forbid!) into critical analysis of academic life. It can also be to discuss in coffee rooms, to occupy prohibited spaces, and of course to engage in tukhta.

Running right through this article is the familiar and recurrent problem of the relationship between personal and collective political action. Those who see collective outcomes as something constituted only out of the autonomous and ethical thought–action of individuals stand opposed to others who see in this conduct mere isolated impotence and a non-trajectory that is doomed to social irrelevance. It is of course not exactly clear how socially conscious collaboration among spirited colleagues will emerge out of our enervating audit culture in a way that will allow us to act on the ‘selves’ to which I have drawn attention. Do we need collective and organized power as a prerequisite to create the autonomous space for
individuals to work upon their own subjectivities of struggle? Or is the former not possible in the first place without the latter, as was Solzhenitsyn’s intuition? In a spirit closer to that expressed in zek memoirs, my argument here claims no exclusivity but simply suggests modest steps toward certain objectives and conditions of possibility in the face of an apparently overwhelming and demoralizing power to coordinate the dissentient, frustrate combination, and kibosh critique.

Without taking sides in the debate, we ought not to underestimate ‘techniques of the self’ in our understandable impatience to organize and act in concert, as important as the latter doubtless is in the strategic mid-term. While we thirst for collective and concerted action in academia, the technology of audit acts against precisely this tendency. The wilful behaviour of individuals therefore really matters, and the prospect of organized purposive action stands the greatest chance when it coalesces out of the thought–action and practices of those individuals. This posits techniques of the self as a preparatory, pedagogic and constitutive counter-regime through which to travel into organized action, and these techniques can be counterintuitive. Keeping experiences of audit in mind, consider this extract on the experienced effect of the camp on the subjectivity of the zek:

The camps are in every way schools of the negative... There a convict learns to hate work. He does not and cannot learn anything else. There the prisoner learns flattery, falsehood, and petty and large-scale meanness... He becomes totally engrossed in himself. When he returns home, he sees not only that he has not grown during his time in camp, but that his interests have become meager and crude. Moral barriers have somehow been pushed aside. (Shalamov, 1994: 411; see also Herling, 2005 [1951]: 68, 103, 193–194; Conquest, 1978: 103)

Audit is having a similar effect upon our own subjectivities in academia, as we are steadily transformed into practitioners of a vulgar kind of neoliberal cynicism (Casalini, 2019; Berg et al., 2016). How can we turn our academic milieux around from being ‘in every way schools of the negative’? How can we contribute tactically to a strategic reversal of this cynicism?

What we see in a practice such as tukhta is not an egoistic gaming of the system to one’s own advantage. Although it is a method of group survival that requires collective and personal courage and ingenuity, it is also a practice of the self through a Diogenesian kind of Kynicism (Sloterdijk, 1987). As an ‘extreme form of self-defence’, it is also a counter-offensive ‘care of the self’ (Casalini, 2019). The apparent dishonesty in the kind of cynicism we witness in tukhta might seem like a personally corrupt and socially corrupting practice, but in the audit culture of both camp and academia it becomes a viable tactic of resistance when aimed against audit techniques of domination that highjack our honest dedication and commitment (see Lorenz, 2012; Carey, 2014).

Tukhta is the lie necessary for survival, but it is not an internecine or misanthropic cynicism practised upon fellow subjects of audit. It is cynicism practised alongside others and against the techniques of domination themselves, for ‘the
cynic care of the self involves care for others as well’ (Casalini, 2019). It is also a means of speaking truth to power (parrhesia) before potential allies in a conspiratorial way potentially more efficacious than the direct and open defiance of confrontation in ‘resistance’ (Prasse-Freeman, 2020; see Foucault, 2001).

Audit culture is extinguishing public intellectual activity, as well as grinding down the zeks of the academic archipelago. If we wish to defend lofty notions such as freedom, grounded knowledge, or reasoned debate in what some are calling a post-truth world, we must do more than merely indulge in normative criticism of audit culture. In a materialist anthropology, we must identify the workings of the audit regime, so that we can understand its particular rationality and engage its techniques in appropriate counter-conducts. This is because our more elevated concerns are really quite moot in a system of labour control that dominates the autonomous subject on the way to its ultimate objective of primitive accumulation. Academics have to use their courage and ingenuity to combine survival in this production regime with concern over the future of public education and the function of universities as institutions that can play a strategic role in defending a free society. This combination should be the focus of our post-COVID-19 political activity, and I hope the preceding pages have given at least some inspiration.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes
1. For a relevant treatment of the difference between ‘willingness’ and ‘wilfulness’, see Ahmed, 2014; Welsh, 2021a.
2. The ‘basic principle’ of the camp, which Robert Conquest formulates simply as that of ‘underfeeding and overworking the prisoner’ (Conquest, 1978: 125).
3. Gulag (ГУЛАГ) is an acronym for Glavnoye Upravleniye Lagerey (Главное Управление Лагерей), and was the governing entity encompassing the labour camp system of the Soviet Union from the latter’s inception to the early 1960s.
4. The term zek (зек) is abbreviated from zaključōnyj (заключённый).
5. This isomorph connecting the disciplinary armatures in the Soviet context was observed by Lev Razgon, for whom ‘the resemblance between prison and hospital does not stop with a certain external similarity’ (Razgon, 1997: 19). Razgon emphasized how the modality of the prison differed from the modulation of the camp.
6. Solzhenitsyn’s actual expression, borrowed from a certain A. Rubailo, seems literally to be ‘soul lichen’ (душеевой лишай). Rendered into Latinate as duševnyj lišaj, it is usually translated into the more felicitous English expression ‘soul mange’.

7. In Foucauldian terms, ‘pastoral power’ is ‘an individualizing form of power... concerned with the concrete lives and conduct of individuals’ (Burchell, 1991: 121), although the aim of such power is the government of a population (Foucault, 2002c). As its fatherly tone implies, pastoral power is aimed at the improvement of that population – its security, prosperity, and being – which of course masks the sinister implication in what has also been called ‘a universal assignation of subjects to an economically useful life’ (Gordon, 1991: 12).

8. Though there is a resemblance here to the piece work system, the brigade system differs from piece work in a subtle but decisive way. In the factory discipline of piece work, the exemplary work of one worker might well establish a higher rate of expected production on the part of other individual workers per unit of time, a standard which is then demanded and imposed on other workers and backed up with the threat of sanctions or lower wages for non-compliance. However, enforcement of this incentive structure on individuals comes from above, and is regulated through the contractual relationship that exists between employer and individual employee. This kind of workforce is not a collective as in the brigade. In the brigade, no such vertical or contractual relationship exists, and the orchestration of production and the distribution of the subsistence ‘wage’ itself is a horizontal matter entirely for the brigade itself. Naturally, the ‘driving belts’ in piece work are weaker, more implicit, flow directly from above, and so can be resisted somewhat by the mutual recognition of collective self-interest against the bosses. In the brigade, there is no such relationship, for your fellow workers do not embarrass you with their hard work, but threaten you for your failure.

9. General Derevenko, the Head of Dalstroy in the late 1930s, welcomed new arrivals to the infamous Kolyma camps with a variation on the theme: ‘Convicts! This is Kolyma! The law is the taiga, and the public prosecutor is the bear’ (Conquest, 1978: 66).

10. Director of the NKVD [People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs] (1934–1936).

11. As a former zek, Solzhenitsyn’s memoir is drawn from his experiences as a member of that population, but the question of whether or not this is ethnographic literature needs addressing. Is Solzhenitsyn here a mere storyteller, what kind of underlying truths are there here, and how historiographically accurate is this particular account? Anecdotes such as this are composed by Solzhenitsyn out of direct testimony provided by former zeks, as well as from his own experiences of analogous situations in a way quite conventional to the ‘autobiographical pact’ (Toker, 2019: 105). However, they are also the product of a ‘phantasmatic pact’ (Lejeune, 1989: 27), in which the narrator, focal character, and author-avatar become identified with one another in narrative and are collapsed into each other’s biographical space. These narratives function as testimony, yet involve identifiable elements of fictionalization. Nevertheless, in the ‘art of documentary prose... even the fictionalized narratives by survivors should be read for their attesting content’ (Toker, 2019: 105). Aside from being ‘almost inescapable in memoiristic works’, these ‘fictionalizing techniques may both enhance the direct cognitive process of the reader and bring him or her emotionally closer to those aspects of the camp ordeal that are unavailable to discursive testimony’ (Toker, 2000: 124).
and fictional narrative can be read ‘bifunctionally’ as testimony as well as literary works. Accordingly, Leona Toker outlines a space in this mode of telling between factographic and fictional writing in the ethnographic memoir literature of the zeks as a group (Toker, 2000: 123–140; Toker, 2019: 12–16, 105–109), and how that distinction allows a further distinction to be made between the typical and the typifying in that memoir literature. Whereas the ‘typical’ in literature is the ‘ideologically honed positioning of what was to be considered the right trend’, as in the official truth of socialist realism, ‘typifying’ denotes that which is ‘made possible by the system’, ‘serially iterative’, and generated from ‘recognizable actions’ (Toker, 2019: 28, 34, 106, 119). Rather than a pure factographic selection and recombination of material to reproduce an ‘exact sequence of the corresponding events’, this kind of narrative also offers a ‘sample convention’ of ‘serially iterative events’ distinct from the ideological projection of ‘typical’ events (Toker, 2019: 107).

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