

UNITED WISDOM

The Thieves' Code: A Dark Mirror

Relationships and Shared Life

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A dark mirror — where the Stoic, the wanderer, and the thief meet

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> ***Archival editor's note.*** *This full translation preserves the supplied Russian essay's polemical comparisons. Its chronology, proposed lines of cultural inheritance, quotations, account of criminal organizations, and claim of an anthropological constant have not been independently reverified. Similar practices do not by themselves prove direct descent. The comparisons do not equate religious communities, nationalities, prisoners, or men generally with criminal conduct. Prison caste names below are historical slurs and stigmatizing labels used by the systems being described, not endorsed descriptions of people. The archive's language of "destroying" the criminal world is reproduced as an attributed polemic, not an instruction to harm anyone. This is cultural analysis, not practical criminal guidance.*

Criminal "understandings" are neither philosophy nor religion, yet they grow from the same deep questions: what to do about the state, work, violence, belonging, and oneself. A dark mirror in which Stoics, Cynics, Gnostics, Old Believers, and the peasant commune can be recognized — but turned toward violence rather than liberation.

I. The underground order

Varlam Shalamov, who spent seventeen years in the Kolyma camps, left a formulation we cannot pass over: "A thief is not someone who has stolen; one can steal, even steal systematically, without belonging to the criminal caste." To be *blatnoi* is to belong to an underground order, a closed caste with its own language, hierarchy, tribunal, and prohibitions on work, family, and the state.

Shalamov described this order as an ulcer to be cut out. Yet he was also the first to understand that it was more than criminality: it was a cultural form. Like any cultural form, it was assembled from recognizable elements: the collective responsibility of the Russian commune; the world-renunciation of wandering priestless Old Believers; the ascetic hierarchy of monastic rules; pagan notions of ritual impurity; Gnostic hostility toward an "alien" world. These elements form a code calling itself *poniatiya*, "understandings," and claiming to be a law older and stronger than the state's law.

II. Why examine this?

Not to justify it, and not to romanticize it as nineteenth-century Russian literature and late-twentieth-century popular music so often did. Shalamov exposed that romanticism once and for all. We examine it for another reason: to see how the same deep questions of human existence — violence, belonging, the self, the state — take very different forms. And how a form turned through 180 degrees can look exactly like its opposite.

This inquiry belongs to the series' logic. One source, many languages. Sometimes the same source speaks a language turned against the human being.

III. What are the “understandings”?

The understandings are an unwritten behavioral code developed in Soviet corrective labor camps during the 1930s. Codified by the late 1940s. Substantially reformed in the 1970s at the initiative of the thief Tolya Cherkas. After the Soviet Union's collapse, the code spread into civilian life and became entwined with the shadow economy and the state.

Historically, there were about ten central rules. Do not work for the state or cooperate with it in any form. Do not serve in the army. Avoid having a passport where possible. Have no family, permanent home, or property. Earn money only through the thieves' trade. Contribute a share to the *obshchak*, the common fund. Submit to the internal tribunal, the *skhodka*. Keep your word to another thief. Observe the caste hierarchy. Remain silent before outsiders.

Each rule has a history, and that history begins much earlier than the 1930s.

IV. A brief chronology

Prerevolutionary Russia had a “thieves' world”: an urban subculture of the margins with its own jargon, tattoos, and hierarchies. Rural crime followed another line — horse thieves, outlaws — and did not develop into an order.

In 1917, the revolution released criminals while also putting them in cells with political prisoners. This produced a new phenomenon, the *zhigany*: young rebels who borrowed criminal customs while giving them a political meaning of opposition to Soviet authority. Refusal to work, have a family, or perform military service initially sounded like ideological protest.

By the early 1930s, the zhigany and older *urki* had converged within a shared code. In the Gulag camps, the caste of *vory v zakone*, “thieves-in-law,” took shape. The state, needing prisoners' internal self-government on the great construction projects, paradoxically helped it emerge: criminals were declared “socially close,” political prisoners “socially dangerous.”

During 1941–45, some thieves went to the front, breaking the central taboo. After the war they returned to the camps and were greeted by the old guard as *suki*, “bitches.” The “Bitch Wars” began. Extermination was mutual and nearly complete.

By the late 1950s few traditional thieves remained, but the institution survived. According to Aleksandr Gurov, Tolya Cherkas introduced reforms by the 1970s: allowing family and housing, exacting tribute from underground entrepreneurs, and permitting tactical contact with law enforcement. After 1991, the old code spread into the Russian mafia and the state's infrastructure of corruption.

That is the short chronology. Within it, however, much deeper layers are at work.

V. Prerevolutionary layer I: the artel

The Russian *artel* was a voluntary association of workers based on collective responsibility. Russian artels lacked the compulsory guild structure of the Western model: nobody forbade outsiders from working. An artel assembled for a task — construction, a trade, driving cattle — and dispersed when it was finished.

Its central principle was: “Whichever of us is present answers for the money.” The artel was collectively responsible to the customer; internally it decided how responsibility would be distributed. If someone incurred a debt, the artel paid and then dealt with its member. Its internal judgment was often harsher than the external state's. The artel had the right to judge a member who had wronged the community and execute its own sentence. External authority effectively recognized that right.

Here lies a defining feature of the future understandings: horizontal mutual assistance together with internal judgment kept at a distance from the state.

VI. Prerevolutionary layer II: the commune

The peasant commune, the *mir* or *gromada*, lived by the same collective responsibility, but more broadly: not for a task, but for life. Land belonged to the commune rather than an individual household; redistribution followed the ability to cultivate it; taxes fell on the commune, and neighbors covered a defaulting debtor.

The assembly settled internal disputes, allotted land, and punished. The state recognized the commune as its counterpart and collected from it rather than from each cottage separately. Collective liability in the commune was formally abolished only in 1903–1905.

Artel and commune were two horizontal forms of Russian social life. They existed alongside vertical state authority, with a boundary between them. Not a hostile boundary, but a working

one: within the community, its own law; outside, the sovereign's. This duality became the soil in which a third, parasitic form later developed.

VII. Prerevolutionary layer III: the fugitive wanderers

Among priestless Old Believers in the eighteenth century, a radical community developed: the *beguny*, fugitives, or *stranniki*, wanderers, also called hiders, underground dwellers, and *golbeshniki*. They believed the Antichrist already ruled in the form of the Russian state: its passport, taxes, military service, and documents. Salvation required a complete break.

Their tenets were: no passport, no taxes, no military service, no property, no permanent dwelling, no work for the “reconciled,” those who had made peace with the Antichrist's world. The wanderers lived in hermitages, traveled the roads, and were supported by a network of hosts: sympathizers who did not wander but hid and fed them.

Priestlessness generally rested on the idea that priestly grace had been interrupted, the hierarchy had collapsed, and the Antichrist ruled the world. The wanderers carried this thought to its limit in everyday arrangements.

Reading the thieves' code — no documents, no army, no state cooperation, no property in the ordinary sense, constant movement — one finds an almost literal structural correspondence with the fugitives' tenets. The resemblance is so exact that it is difficult to regard it as accidental.

VIII. What the criminals took, and what they replaced

They took the structure. They changed its meaning.

The wanderer rejected a passport to avoid the Antichrist's mark and traveled the roads to pray. The thief rejects it to avoid police tracking and travels the roads to steal. The artel used collective responsibility to complete work and settle debts. The thieves' world used it to evade accountability together. The communal fund collected for illness and fire. The obshchak collects for lawyers and bribes.

The outward gesture is the same. Its direction is reversed. This substitution is structural, not cosmetic: what served in the commune and hermitage to free people from chaos and fear serves in the criminal world to enslave others through fear and chaos.

IX. A Stoic in captivity

Epictetus was a slave, a lame slave, traditionally because his master broke his leg. After being freed, he became a Stoic teacher, leaving the *Discourses* and *Enchiridion*. Their central thought is that a platform and a prison are both places in which freedom of choice can be preserved. Circumstances do not make a person; they reveal them.

The captive Stoic accepts the world's order as rational even when it presents the face of imprisonment. Freedom is inward: not identifying the “I” with what can be taken away. Body, property, reputation, life — none is mine; all can be lost without losing oneself.

Here there is a point of contact with the criminal. The thief too avoids identifying with what can be taken. He despises property because it ties him to a world in which he does not want to live. He despises fear of imprisonment because the camp is “home”: “Heaven is home to angels; prison to a thief.” He despises work because working means consenting to the world he rejects.

The difference is the direction of freedom. The Stoic relinquishes externals to remain faithful to cosmic order. The thief relinquishes them to be free of any order, including moral order. The Stoic accepts the world to become good within it. The thief rejects it to obtain the right to be evil within it. Similar posture, opposite meaning.

X. A Cynic in the square

Diogenes of Sinope lived in a large clay barrel in the Athenian agora. He paid no taxes, did not serve, owned nothing, rejected marriage, ate in the square, urinated publicly, and called himself a “citizen of the world,” *kosmopolites*. Cynicism is a practical philosophy rejecting *nomos*, convention, in favor of *physis*, nature. Freedom lies in needing nothing. Strength lies in *parrhesia*, blunt frankness that speaks truth to power, and *anaideia*, deliberate shamelessness tearing through the web of petty proprieties.

The criminal world also rests on a break with nomos. A prison tattoo publicly declares membership in a world outside the law. Jargon is a parallel language deliberately opaque to outsiders. The ostentatious refusal of employment, family, and documents is a Cynic's posture repeated in Kolyma two thousand years later.

The difference lies in where the break leads. The Cynic returns to nature and to the human being as such: everyone is a citizen of the world, equal in animal sufficiency. The criminal returns not to nature but to another, even harsher hierarchy: four castes, ritual impurity, death for breaches of etiquette. The Cynic strips away conventions to liberate people. The criminal strips away one set to replace it with another, more frightening set.

XI. The Gnostic and the alien world

In second- and third-century Gnostic systems, the world was created not by the good God but by a lesser being: the Demiurge, an Archon, or Yaldabaoth, depending on the school. The true God is far away, beyond. The material world is a prison in which a spark of light, *pneuma*, is enclosed in matter. Gnosis, secret knowledge of one's estrangement from this world, is a pass home to the *pleroma*, the Father's fullness.

Historically, this scheme gave rise to opposite forms of behavior. Ascetics rejected body, food, sex, and property: everything material is a prison and must not become an attachment. Antinomians took the opposite course, despising material law: my “I” is spiritual, bodily acts do not concern me, I stand above morality. The so-called Borborites mentioned by heresiologists interpreted gnosis in precisely this way, as an indulgence.

Criminal consciousness is closer to the second version. The world of *fraery*, outsiders, is alien, inauthentic, estranged. I am a stranger within it, and its laws do not bind me. Stealing from it is not a sin but reclaiming what was taken. The same mythical structure appears: within is light, outside alien matter, and the moral rule operating outside does not apply to me.

The genuine, ascetic Gnostic used the world's alienness as a motive to return to God. The antinomian Gnostic used it as a license for cynicism. The thieves' idea inherited the latter: not liberation through knowledge, but absolution through alienness.

XII. The Old Believer and the passport

We approached priestless Old Believers in the section on wanderers. Here is the central point: the overlap between their behavioral repertoire and the thieves' code is so exact that direct continuity suggests itself.

No passport: a fugitive's tenet and a twentieth-century thief-in-law's rule. No army service: a fugitive's tenet and a thief's rule, one whose breach in 1941–45 ignited the Bitch Wars. No taxes: a fugitive's tenet and a thief's rule. No work for the “reconciled”: a fugitive's tenet and a thief's rule, “do not work for the state; have no employment record book.” No family: the constantly moving wanderer's tenet and the thief's rule before the 1970s reform. No permanent dwelling: the wanderer's tenet and the thief's rule.

This does not mean thieves-in-law read Old Believer writings. It means the same set of forms arose twice within one culture: first as religious world-renunciation, then as criminal renunciation. The second time it acquired the opposite meaning. The wanderer leaves the world to pray. The thief leaves it to live parasitically upon it.

XIII. Ninkyo and the oyabun

The Japanese yakuza has its own code, *ninkyo*, a path of honor derived from *bushido*, the warrior's way. The clan's structure is *oyabun*, father, and *kobun*, son. The code forbids stealing from ordinary people, selling drugs, robbery, and violence against women. Violations are punished through *yubitsume*, cutting off a segment of the little finger and sending it to the oyabun as a sign of remorse. In its idealized self-image, the yakuza regards itself as a “just force” helping the weak: after the Kobe and Tohoku earthquakes, yakuza offices were the first to open to those affected.

Much resembles the thieves' code: an internal hierarchy with almost familial rhetoric, a taboo on cooperating with authority — admittedly added to the yakuza code relatively recently — prohibition of internal feuding, and ritual punishment for violations.

There are two differences. First, ninkyo formally prohibits profiting at “ordinary people's” expense. Although frequently violated, the myth of this prohibition remains a declared core. The thieves' code has no such ban: a fraer is anyone living in the world the thief rejects, and robbing a fraer is legitimate. Second, the yakuza grew from a Confucian and samurai foundation in which hierarchy and duty are positive values. The thieves' code grew through a break with the country's values; its hierarchy rests on fear rather than loyalty to a paternal image.

XIV. Omerta

The Sicilian mafia developed *omertà*, the code of silence. Do not cooperate with the state. Do not inform. Do not testify. Settle every dispute internally. The family is the highest loyalty, and “family” here means the mafia family rather than blood relations.

Its structural resemblance to the thieves' code is nearly complete. The difference is the wrapping. The mafia inherited Catholic rhetoric of family, godfather, and initiation by oath and blood. The thieves' code developed where Soviet power had torn away religious rhetoric and replaced it with its own: camp language, tattooed language, the language of the street.

Both operate by the same logic: a closed male group building a parallel state with its own tribunal, treasury, army, and silence code. This may be an anthropological constant: wherever central state authority is insufficiently rooted, such a parallel structure grows by itself. Sicily, the Caucasus, southern Italy, the southern United States during Prohibition, Russian camps — variations of one mechanism.

XV. Four castes

Soviet and post-Soviet camps developed a hierarchy of four main castes: *blatnye*, or “blacks”; *muzhiki*, ordinary prisoners; *kozly*, “goats,” those cooperating with the administration; and *obizhennye*, “the wronged,” or *petukhi*, “roosters.” Their boundaries are rigid: movement downward is possible, upward is not.

This strikingly resembles the Indian system of *jati*, birth-based varnas. The blatnye correspond to Brahmins and Kshatriyas: an elite carrying the “law.” The muzhiki correspond to Vaishyas: the working majority who labor and contribute a share. The kozly are renegades moving into service. The obizhennye correspond to Dalits, the untouchables, supposedly contaminating everything they touch.

The similarity is not literary. Any closed system without external exchange or outside appeal produces a caste structure. The groups differ, but the logic is the same: the upper caste carries the “law,” the middle implements it, the lowest carries ritual impurity, freeing those above from the burden of pollution.

XVI. Zapadlo

Zapadlo concentrates the whole of prison ethics in one word. It is not a legal prohibition but a taboo: doing it means ceasing to belong to one's caste. Taking food from a petukh is zapadlo. Sitting on his mug is zapadlo. Touching his bed is zapadlo. Taking an object from him is zapadlo.

This is the same concept as Levitical *tum'a*, Japanese *kegare*, Hindu *ashauca*: ritual impurity transmitted through touch, objects, words. The caste boundary protected from contamination.

In a religious system such a taboo has a meaningful function: separating sacred from profane, pure from the dead, ritual from ordinary life. In the criminal world the taboo remains without the sacred. There is a boundary, but nothing for it to protect. It protects the purity of a caste with nothing holy inside. This is empty purity, maintained by cruelty rather than meaning.

XVII. A person's word

“A thief's word” is the foundation of the understandings. Give your word and answer for it. Fail to answer and lose status. Fail to stand behind what you say and become an empty talker, who is nobody in the thieves' hierarchy.

Outwardly this resembles the medieval knight's oath, the Confucian virtue of *xin*, faithfulness to what is said, and Arabic *aman*, a pledge. The word as obligation is an anthropological universal.

Shalamov stripped this myth from the criminal version once and for all. Within the caste, perhaps a promise holds. Outside it, it does not. Deceiving a boss, an outsider, a woman is not breaking one's word but a virtue. The promise works by the same logic as taboo: only within the boundary. Outside, there is neither promise, face, nor obligation, because outside there is no recipient to whom one owes anything.

This is the crucial difference between ethics and a code. Ethics is an obligation to the human being as such. A code is an obligation to one's own people.

XVIII. Silence

Silence in the criminal world has two layers. Outwardly it is omerta, protecting the group from the state: do not betray, reveal, or say too much. Inwardly it is hierarchical: keep quiet when a senior speaks, answer only to the point, do not intrude into another conversation.

This outwardly resembles Zen silence and Christian hesychasm: silence as discipline, sheltering inner work from outside noise. Yet in Zen it protects practice, in hesychasm prayer, and in the criminal world an operation. Same form, different content.

Perhaps this is the most important principle to emerge from the whole comparison: outward form never proves content. Asceticism can lead toward God or serve as a caste's convenient economy. Silence can be meditation or collective complicity. Rejecting the world can mean monasticism or parasitism. Forms themselves are neutral. What fills them depends on whom and what they face.

XIX. The obshchak

The obshchak is the thieves' community's shared fund. It pays lawyers, supports prisoners' families, bribes guards, and finances operations. It is a vertical institution codified by the assembly and controlled by appointed overseers.

Its outward form is a mutual-aid fund, exactly like those once found in Soviet schools, clinics, and factory workshops: colleagues contributed to a common pot, and someone in need received support. Exactly like the prerevolutionary artel and peasant commune through collective responsibility.

Here is the precise anatomy of the substitution. The fund's form is not criminal. Its purpose is. When the common pot feeds a sick person, it is community. When it finances new crimes, it is the order.

In post-Soviet history the obshchak moved beyond the criminal milieu into economics and government. The black cash fund, reserve fund, or “common pot” of oligarchs and security

officials is structurally the same institution as in a 1950s camp. A curious fact: the thieves' way of organizing money outlived the thieves' world and now lives beyond it.

XX. Shalamov against Solzhenitsyn

Russian tradition has two principal witnesses from inside the Gulag: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov. They saw the same thing, the criminal world in the camp. But they saw it differently.

Solzhenitsyn saw it from an ethical distance, as a political prisoner whom criminals hunted as easy prey. He allowed that the criminal tradition contained remnants of older popular ethics, that some thieves kept their word and duty, that despite its cruelty the system still had moral contours of its own.

Shalamov saw it from within, across seventeen years. He allowed nothing. For him it was a “vile underground order” killing the human in the human being. There was no noble thief. Every myth of criminal honor collapsed at the first test. The criminal milieu was contagious like tuberculosis: contact destroyed. Therefore “the criminal world must be destroyed” was not a journalistic flourish but a moral diagnosis.

One must choose between these positions, and choose Shalamov. Not because he was angrier, but because he was more clear-eyed. Romanticizing the criminal world in Russian culture, from thieves' songs to today's television series, aesthetically concealed violence. Shalamov removes that covering. Beneath it is neither freedom, asceticism, law, nor honor, but an economy of fear living parasitically on those who work.

XXI. What can be learned here?

Certainly not the thieves' code. But its anatomy is worth learning.

Any closed male group without outside appeal or a higher framework of meaning generates caste structure, ritual impurity, a silence code, and a common fund. This is not uniquely Russian. It is an anthropological constant. Sicilian mafia, Japanese yakuza, Latin American prison gangs, military hazing, initiations in corporate cults, enclosed subcultures at any latitude: everywhere the same skeleton.

A practical point follows. If you find yourself in a group with an internal caste, taboo, common fund, and compulsory silence before outsiders, that is a signal. The group is not necessarily criminal. It is closed. Closure without a higher framework of meaning is a form automatically drawn toward the criminal pole: fear, ritual purity, parasitism.

Openness is the only remedy. Not naive transparency or the absence of privacy, but continual appeal to something larger than the group: work; the human being as such; truth spoken face

to face, as with the Cynics; God, as with the wanderers; dharma, as in Indian tradition; conscience, as in Russian tradition. Something higher that therefore places the group itself under judgment.

XXII. The dark mirror

The series is called “One source — many languages.” In most articles we saw different traditions expressing one thing. Here we encounter the reverse: one material turned in different directions produces opposing structures.

Artel and obshchak: one form of collective responsibility, different recipients. Wanderer and thief: one rejection of the world, different motives. Stoic and criminal: one freedom from externals, different directions. Cynic and criminal: one challenge to nomos, different horizons. Gnostic and criminal: one experience of alienness, different exits. Yakuza and criminal: one closed-caste code, different ethical wrapping.

This is the dark mirror. It shows that religious world-renunciation and criminal parasitism can coincide down to the gesture. Only what is not immediately visible distinguishes them: toward whom the gesture is directed, why it is made, what it rejects, and for what purpose.

For the Stoic, rejecting the world serves fidelity to the cosmos. For the wanderer, prayer. For the Cynic, humanity. For the Gnostic, light. For the thief, standing above those from whom he steals. In the first four cases rejection expands; in the last it contracts.

Understanding this means learning not to trust form alone. Asceticism proves nothing. Silence proves nothing. Rejecting the state proves nothing. A code of honor proves nothing. Only direction proves anything: toward freeing people, or toward enclosing others in fear.

One source, many languages. But not all those languages speak of freedom. Some speak of power disguised as freedom. We must learn to hear that too.

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