

MAREK JEDLIŃSKI

ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY, POZNAŃ, POLAND

E-MAIL: MARJED7@AMU.EDU.PL

ORCID: 0000-0002-9823-7254

Russian Yearning for Elite Power: Nikolai Berdyaev's Reflections on the Metaphysics of Democratism

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to present Nikolai Berdyaev's view of power and how it is exercised in a democracy. The Russian thinker treated power as an evil that the democratic system was not free from. Berdyaev regarded the metaphysics of democratism as a manifestation of human hubris and a fall into what is mediocre and devoid of deeper spirituality. He argued that power should be aristocratic, not egalitarian. In his view, only the chosen, few, the eminent, possessed the ability to guide the masses toward the highest values.

Keywords: Nikolai Berdyaev, power, democracy, metaphysics, elitism

Introduction

One should discuss the issue of democracy considering the current political background of the war in Ukraine, because both sides of this armed conflict define the issue of democracy extremely different: as a form of good and a form of evil. However, I will not make a simple analogy between the views on democracy of Russian thinkers (representing the Russian Religious-Philosophical

Renaissance) and the anti-democratic attitudes of the contemporary Russian politicians. I think it would not be a valid interpretation from a historical perspective. Nonetheless, the perception of power and democracy in Russian culture and the views of leading Russian thinkers are worthy of notice. The Russian invasion of Ukraine forces us to ask: do Russian people are prone to contesting democracy? Have they 'shorn off' any sense of democracy? What was the role of Russian philosophers in shaping anti-democratic attitudes? Certainly, we can say that those questions are difficult to answer. This query might very quickly mire us in controversy. Perhaps some clues to the answers may be found in the oeuvre of one of the Russian thinkers: Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) – a thinker who is very popular in President Putin's circles of power.¹ The relevance of Russian alternative cultural and political perspectives is subjective and up to the reader's interpretation. Contemporary Russian traditionalism can offer valuable insights on the matter. I should mention that Western liberalism, democracy, and individualism were challenged by Slavic traditionalism the incarnation of which was Soviet communism. Berdyaev was immersed in Russian tradition, in Russian 'anti-democratic spiritual collective'. As Edward Richards notes, Russian thinker defends the old world and the meaning in terms of spirit in the face of the modern secular emphasis on economic, material, and individual concept.²

Nikolai Berdyaev, in an excerpt from his book *Tsarstvo dukha i tsarstvo kesarya* (*The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*) pondered the mystery of power. The author recognizes a profound connection between power and evil: while compelled to combat it, power also generates and becomes a new source of darkness. The infernal turnstile seems to have no end: the new power that is supposed to put an end to the old power ravaging the world with evil over time, by virtue of some inevitable diabolical dialectic of enticement, begins to do evil itself. Thus, the philosopher concluded, "every power, in a more or less pronounced form, contains some venom"³ This harsh judgment also applies to the mechanisms of democracy, especially in its liberal version, devoid of the beauty

¹ Vladimir Putin suggests Berdyaev's work (*The Philosophy of Inequality*) to his high functionaries in the administration.

² See Edward B. Richards, "Nicholas Berdyaev. Christianity and History", *Journal of Bible and Religion* 4 (1960): 432–433.

³ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Tsarstvo dukha i tsarstvo kesarya* (Paris: YMCA-PRESS, 1951), 73.

of elite spiritual leadership, according to Berdyaev. Power elected by popular vote - in the opinion of the Russian philosopher - was also to be marked by evil. In the works of Berdyaev, at different periods of his philosophical activity, it is difficult to find statements sympathetic to democracy, in the conditions of which during his emigration - it is worth recalling - he was able to write and express his views freely, away from Bolshevik totalitarianism. The purpose of this article is to subject to interpretive analysis Berdyaev's reflections on democracy; however, the Russian author had not changed his views over the years. His statements in numerous works are arranged in a single sequence of argumentative style, showing his aversion to democracy. In Berdyaev's eyes, democracy was an example of 'metaphysical evil'. In the article, I will present the anti-democratic argumentation style based on quotations from primary sources. This will allow me to present the essence of Berdyaev's thought by pointing out certain linguistic subtleties in his works.

Personal aversion to democracy. Searching for beauty

I put forward the thesis that Berdyaev's reluctance to respect democratic rule resulted from his own elitism and his adoration of beauty. The author considered himself one of the representatives of the "spiritual aristocracy". He declared that if he were a democrat, he would be less complex (complicated) and lack the qualities he highly valued in himself.⁴ He argued that power is not due to everyone and the rule of equality should not be applied. In the original, the thought was articulated as follows: "The distribution of power cannot be universal or homogeneous. Rather, it should be allocated to those who are most capable".⁵ Democracy could only be saved by hierarchicalism. It needs, he argued, an upbringing in a truly hierarchical spirit; a democracy that recognizes itself as the sole and highest principle of life, not subordinated to anything, is a mere lie and delusion. Power should be exercised by better,

⁴ See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Samopoznanie. Opyt filosofskoi avtobiografii* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1990), 39.

⁵ Own translation. Primary source: "Vlast' ne mozhet prinadlezhat' vsem, ne mozhet byt' mekhanicheskii ravnoy. Vlast' dolzhna prinadlezhat' luchshim". Nikolai Berdyaev, *Sud'ba Rossii. Opyty po psikhologii voiny i natsional'nosti* (Moscow: Izd. G. A. Lemana, S. I. Sakharova, 1918), 232.

noble-born, talented and spiritually stronger people.⁶ This statement could suggest that Berdyaev saw himself among the chosen people entitled to rule. However, he never aspired to real power, did not participate in any political struggle and did not hold any significant public positions.

The Russian thinker – like other traditionalists – was an apologist for aristocratic, spiritual and spiritual-hierarchical power. According to traditionalist thinkers, power was perceived as a mystery. Power was given to people by supernatural forces. Therefore, it had a hierarchical dimension. Democratism, Berdyaev wrote, negates the inner, metaphysical hierarchy of the world on which all that appears qualitative and individual is based. Berdyaev was convinced that democratism mechanically nullifies all that is exceptional and unique, killing the “inner” man in the name of the “outer” man. The metaphysics of democratism reduces man to a social unit, deeming just the idea of universal equality. Meanwhile, equality in itself is not a value, and on the contrary, it becomes an evil when it begins to annihilate creative individuality, all greatness, uniqueness (and the highest creativity is not democratized⁷). Berdyaev would say that democracy seems formal and empty (Allen).⁸ Democratic equality has led to ‘an aesthetic flattening’ of the world: the world has thus become dull and colorless, devoid of beauty.

The main objection to democracy would be its egalitarianism and indifference to genius. In the book *Smysl tvorchestva* (*The Meaning of the Creative Act*) Berdyaev emphatically declared that the metaphysics of democratism combats the element of genius and rejects the leadership of the great (in the original, the words read as follows: “The philosophy of democratism opposes the notion of innate talent and refutes the notion of following the guidance of exceptional individuals⁹”). The metaphysics of democratism would like to give power to what is common, trivial and worthless, and which is not free from

⁶ See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Dukhovnye osnovy russkoi revolyutsii. Opyty 1917—1918 gg.* (Saint Petersburg: RKHGI, 1998), 252.

⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, 355.

⁸ See Edgar L. Allen, *Freedom in God. A Guide to the Thought of Nicholas Berdyaev* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 30.

⁹ Own translation. Primary source: “Metafizika demokratizma protivoborstvuyet stikhii genial'nosti i otvergayet voditel'stvo velikikh”. Nikolai Berdyaev, *Smysl tvorchestva. Opyt opravdaniya cheloveka* (Moscow: Izdanie G.A.Lemana i S.I.Sakharova, 1916), 282.

the temptation of tyranny.¹⁰ Tyranny is born of ugliness and lack of honor, indifference to beauty, chivalry, and creativity. Therefore, Berdyaev urged the rejection of democratic absolutism, according to which the masses could rule over outstanding individuals.¹¹ Berdyaev had no doubt that metaphysical hierarchy and aristocracy were the source of everything great in this world, the cause of all creative movement.¹² In the article *Sotsializm kak religiya* he wrote: “The aristocracy had many noble qualities dear to us that are sadly absent in the emerging democracy: it has no chivalry and little reverence for the sacred”.¹³ In his book *Ya i mir ob’ektov* (*Solitude and Society*), the author explained that the very idea of the human person is aristocratic:¹⁴ in the sense that it adores spiritual beauty, individuals who are valuable, exceptional, brilliant, who can lead the masses forward, toward a better future, educate them and shape them creatively. Meanwhile, the democratization of society can turn out to be extremely unfavorable to the individual, can level him or her, reduce them to the level of mediocrity, and threatens to shape transparent, indistinct, depressingly average individuals. Democracy creates people with no sense of beauty. Democratic metaphysics does not understand the gravity of the problem of the person.¹⁵ Liberal democratic ideology ignores the depth of the human person, which is absolutely non-existential.¹⁶ Berdyaev thus spoke in typically traditionalist terms,¹⁷ in an anti-egalitarian tone. It was not so much wealth or origin that predestined one to power, but above all a certain superiority or “spiritual” uniqueness, spiritual beauty. From the point of view of a Christian theologian, Berdyaev’s concept could raise reasonable doubts: Vernon Joseph

¹⁰ Cf. Nikolai Berdyaev, *Filosofiya svobodnogo dukha* (Moscow: Respublika, 1994), 111.

¹¹ See Berdyaev, *Sud’ba Rossii*, 227.

¹² Cf. Marko Markovic, *La Philosophie de l’inégalité et les idées politiques de Nicolas Berdiaev* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1978), 104–110.

¹³ Nikolai Berdyaev, “Sotsializm kak religiya”, *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* 85 (1906): 530–531.

¹⁴ Georg Nicolaus writes on the subject of Berdyaev’s personalism: Georg Nicolaus, *C.G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev: Individuation and the Person. A Critical Comparison* (London: Routledge, 2011), 20–60.

¹⁵ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Ya i mir ob’ektov. Opyt filosofii odinochestva i obshcheniya* (Paris: YM-CA-Press, 1934), 156–157.

¹⁶ See Nikolai Berdyaev, “O sotsial’nom personalizme”, *Novyi Grad* 49 (1933): 54.

¹⁷ I discuss the assumptions of traditionalist thought in my book: Marek Jedliński, *Ku przeszłości! René Guénon, Julius Evola i nurty tradycjonalizmu* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2019).

Bourke, an American philosopher and prominent expert on Thomism, explicitly referred to Berdyaev's vision as Gnosticism.¹⁸ Bourke made a very serious allegation: he had cast doubts about Berdyaev's religious orthodoxy. Berdyaev, according to Jean Faurot, was not a conventional Christian.¹⁹

Freedom and democracy

In Berdyaev's eyes, democracy was not only deprived of beauty, but also took away personal freedom. The feeling of freedom and 'true freedom' were 'stolen' by democracy. The Russian thinker also claimed that freedom is aristocratic, not democratic ("Freedom is aristocratic, not democratic"²⁰). It is the freedom of genius, of artistic expression, of freedom of spirit, and of creativity of a free man. Freedom is not what man could demand from God, but what God demands from man – the thinker conceded, adding that for this reason freedom cannot be democratic.²¹ There is also bourgeois freedom, but it is a perversion and profanation of the spirit.²² Similarly, capitalist democracies with their money power deprive people of freedom.²³ Therefore, capitalism is a moral problem (*Slaatté*).²⁴ In this sense, capitalist democracy is anti-personalistic. Matthew

¹⁸ See Vernon Joseph Bourke, "The Gnosticism of N. Berdyaev", *Thought. A Review of Culture and Idea* 11 (1936): 409–422.

¹⁹ See Jean H. Faurot, *The Philosopher and the State. From Hooker to Popper* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1971), 328.

²⁰ Own translation. Primary source: "Svoboda aristokraticzna, a ne demokraticzna". Nikolai Berdyaev, *O naznachenii cheloveka. Opyt paradoksal'noi ehiki* (Paris: Sovremennye zapiski, 1931), 103.

²¹ Cf. Piama P. Gaidenko, "The Philosophy of Freedom of Nikolai Berdiaev", in: *Russian Thought after Communism. The Recovery of a Philosophical Heritage*, ed. James P. Scanlan (Armonk: Sharpe, 1994), 104–120.

²² See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Opyt ehskhatologicheskoi metafiziki. Tvorchestvo i ob'ektivatsiya* (Paris: YMCA-PRESS, 1947), 187–188; cf. Nikolai Berdyaev, "O dukhovnoi burzhuaznosti". *Put' 3* (1926): 3–13.

²³ See Berdyaev, *Tsarstvo dukha i tsarstvo kesarya*, 93. As James Wernham put it, Berdyaev saw little to commend either in the economic system of capitalism or in the associated political system of liberal democracy. See James C. S. Wernham, *Two Russian Thinkers. An Essay in Berdyaev and Shestov* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 37.

²⁴ Cf. Howard A. Slaatté, *Personality, Spirit, and Ethics. The ethics of Nicholas Berdyaev* (New York: P. Lang, 1997), 104–105.

Spinka's opinion is worth quoting here: "money and capitalist economics are anti-personalistic". He says, money and capitalist economics have led to the destruction of human personality through its bourgeoisization of man.²⁵ As a Russian religious thinker, Berdyaev perceived money as a symptom of sin. Lev Shestov expressed a similar opinion in his works. He always emphasized the tragic consequences of man's fall, of his pride. This was an essential theme of Russian religious philosophy that was more intuitive than rationalistic. According to Shestov knowledge is the rotten (sinful) fruit from the tree.

Berdyaev, in typical aristocratic style, claimed that the most free and therefore creative eras in the history of mankind were those that were aristocratic, not democratic; egalitarian passion always led to the humiliation of the human person and culture, that is, to enslavement.²⁶ Egalitarianism imprisoned man in a world of necessity. The author claimed that democratic culture is not characterized by any high qualities, and is even characterized by vulgarization.²⁷ The thinker accused democracies in their liberal version of ossifying freedom, of depriving it of its true shine; this was because "[...] freedom was understood exclusively individualistically [non-personalistically] and was often associated with the attitude: «leave me alone»".²⁸ Whereas freedom was the eternal principle of the human spirit, and the spirit is freedom, the philosopher argued. Therefore, he explained to his readers, one must not equate the eternal principle of freedom with transient political forms – such as democracy. As put by George Seaver, Berdyaev demands unconditional freedom for man's spirit from all social and political forms.²⁹ Some authors have called Berdyaev the 'mystical anarchist' (Heinemann).³⁰

²⁵ See Matthew Spinka, *Nicolas Berdyaev. Captive of Freedom* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), 80.

²⁶ See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Filosofiya neravenstva. Pis'ma k nedrugam po sotsial'noi filosofii* (Berlin: Obelisk, 1923), 144–145.

²⁷ Nikolai Berdyaev, *O rabstve i svobode cheloveka. Opyt personalisticheskoi filosofii* (Paris: YMCA-PRESS, 1939), 174.

²⁸ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Sud'ba cheloveka v sovremennom mire. K ponimaniyu nashei chpokhi* (Paris: YMCA-PRESS, 1934), 26.

²⁹ See George Seaver, *Nicolas Berdyaev. An Introduction to His Thought* (London: J. Clarke, 1950), 73.

³⁰ See Fritz H. Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 154–164.

Against the masses and against the realm of quantity

Berdyaev was very determined in his rejection of the power of the masses: he was therefore a typical representative of twentieth-century traditionalist thought. His vision is similar to Romanesque traditionalism – characteristic of René Guénon (1886–1951) and Julius Evola (1898–1974). Berdyaev was in favor of the validity of the spiritual censure belonging to the chosen ones. He lamented that no one in modern times any longer identifies the realization of their dreams of the rebirth of humanity with genius; instead, modern man dreams of a new life, depending on power based on quantity and the mechanics of forces.³¹ According to Evguene Lampert, Berdyaev in his criticism of democracy was a continuation of the writing tradition of 19th century Russian thinkers.³² At this point, it is necessary to recall such figures as Aleksey Khomyakov (1804–1860), Ivan Kireyevsky (1806–1856), and Konstantin Aksakov (1817–1860). They were representatives of classical Russian Slavophilism. They criticized Western (liberal) democracy, contrasting it with the idyllic image of Russian *mir* and *obshchina*. Russia, explained Khomyakov and Kireyevsky, is an example of spiritual and political unity which is the antithesis of Western democracy. Despite their intellectual influences, Berdyaev undoubtedly preserved his independence of thought.

Now, bringing the Romanesque traditionalism into our narrative, we should say a few words on their vision. We find related thoughts in a French traditionalist working in the same historical era as Berdyaev. What do I mean exactly by arguing that Berdyaev was a traditionalist like other French and Italian reactionists? I mean that René Guénon, like Berdyaev, wanted to make the spirit of the past present. The French thinker claimed that this could only be done by an organized and most excellent intellectual elite, a kind of spiritual-intellectual aristocracy: superior people, distinguished from the gray, formless human mass. This was to be its, as the traditionalist thinker Jean Robin rightly interpreted the intentions of the traditionalist thinker, main goal,

³¹ Cf. Nikolai Berdyaev, *Dukhovnyi krizis intelligentsii* (Saint Petersburg: Tip. tov-va “Obshchestvennaya pol’za”, 1910), 165.

³² See Evgueny Lampert, *Nicolas Berdyaev and the New Middle Ages* (London: J. Clarke & Co., 1945), 86.

giving it a sense of existence, the supreme task carried out by those highest in the hierarchy.³³ The restoration of the old traditional orders was not able to be initiated by the masses of ordinary people, who, according to Guénon's opinion, in terms of their indifference, their treatment of religion as a custom, a ritual, a daily routine, were not at all different from the crowd of aggressive revolutionary atheists. The democratically governed masses remained blind to the spiritual wealth of the past. Therefore, democracy, with its ideology of egalitarianism, was a system that was not only worthless, but also detrimental to the sublime goals pursued in the long term.³⁴ Their political philosophy was patriarchal and aristocratic.

In the eyes of Berdyaev, democracy appeared as an abstract idea, devoid of any higher, lofty goal, autonomous, but in a negative sense. Therefore, it is first and foremost "a deification of man and a negation of the divine source of power".³⁵ Has Berdyaev's vision cast a doubt on the Christian concept of dignity of man and on believe in the value of a man? The thinker, in fact, adores the power of the state and ignores the status of man and his freedom. This, we may say here, is an interesting feature of Berdyaev's views. The thinker explained that only the state in democratic republics retained its mystical dimension, incomprehensible to reason. In this way, Berdyaev sacralized the state.³⁶ This incomprehensible dimension resulted from the power of fear immanent in the mechanism of power. Power by very nature must use fear as its tool.³⁷ The very idea of democratism often led to *sui generis* debauchery, to the disappearance of the fear of power of prominent people. Berdyaev claimed that masses indulged in debauchery and were a 'democratic herd'. We should turn our attention to this opinion, as from today's political perspective, it had contemptuous overtones. Traditionalist thought, unlike conservative thought, contained harsh, sharp statements. Traditionalist thinkers acted as defenders of tradition, of the old hierarchical world, and did not accept 'nuanced' politics.

³³ See Jean Robin, *René Guénon. Témoin de la Tradition* (Paris: Éditions Trédaniel, 1978), 177.

³⁴ See René Guénon, *La Crise du Monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, Paris 1956), 79.

³⁵ Berdyaev, *Filosofiya neravenstva*, 133.

³⁶ See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Svobodnaya tserkov'* (Moscow: Moskovskaya prosvetitel'naya komissiya pri Vremennom komitete Gosudarstvennoi Dumy, 1917), 24.

³⁷ See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Ehkzistentsial'naya dialektika bozhestvennogo i chelovecheskogo* (Paris: YMCA-PRESS, 1952), 82.

They believed that conservative policy is a compromise or a capitulation to the chaos of the modern world. They argued that mindless mob rule (the sheer overwhelming number) demanded a policy of equality and thus led to chaos.

How did the Russian thinker describe the mass domination effect? Berdyaev argued that the growth of democratic tendencies, the spread of democracy in the world follows in direct proportion to spiritual impoverishment, “the loss of God by the soul”.³⁸ The author argued that democratic equality means the loss of the ability to distinguish and recognize the quality of spiritual life. Democracy, therefore, leads to the sterilization of the soul, and is embraced enthusiastically by these people who have stopped living the highest values. Therefore, in his book *Filosofiya neravenstva*, the Russian philosopher wrote about the “democratic ideology of quantity” that leads to the construction of a “kingdom of the inferior”, the realm of the masses. Similar intuitions can again be found in the work of the Romance traditionalists. Their statements complement Berdyaev’s thoughts. Guénon argued that the scandalous and mind-boggling illusion of an equal democratic ideology was the popular vote and the enactment of binding laws on the basis of the support given by completely incompetent masses guided not by higher ideas, values, but only by a mathematical, primitive majority. This was a manifestation of the full triumph of the kingdom of quantity and the simultaneous decline of the kingdom of quality. These masses, Italian traditionalist Julius Evola argued, exerted the pressure of mediocrity.³⁹ But let us return to the French traditionalist. Guénon also described democratic egalitarianism as a manifestation and effect of intellectual anarchy in the broad social dimension.⁴⁰ According to Guénon, the democratic tendencies of the modern world were evidence of the abandonment of spiritual culture and man’s flight into a reality constructed from an infinite number of atoms. Traditionalist thought made a distinction between spiritual culture and material civilization. According to Berdyaev, the crisis of spiritual culture was the result of the expansion of material civilization – with its technology, mechanics, worship of reason and pragmatism. Civilization,

³⁸ Berdyaev, *Filosofiya neravenstva*, 135.

³⁹ See Julius Evola, *Men Among the Ruins. Postwar Reflections of a Radical Traditionalist*, transl. Guido Stucco (Rochester–Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 2002), 131.

⁴⁰ See René Guénon, *Orient et Occident* (Paris: Éditions de la Maisne, 1987), 148.

unlike culture, was not symbolic, hierarchical or organic; it was a space for the triumph of gross economism.⁴¹ The processes of technicization, mechanization and mass democratization were to lead to the transformation of culture into a technical civilization.⁴² Democracy in the world of civilization caused sadness, because democracy was devoid of creative energy and killed hope. It was a view typical for traditionalism, which drew inspiration from Eastern doctrines. Matter was described as a dark force, killing the spirit and the joy of waiting for the flourishing of the spirit world. Civilization was the antithesis of the Sanātana Dharma world.

The triumph of scepticism

The main idea of traditionalist writing is that sadness, hopelessness, and widespread skepticism infect the modern world. Democracy is devoid of beauty and hope that comes from the contemplation of spiritual beauty. It causes a state of deep melancholy and resignation from life. In the writings of Berdyaev, democracy (founded on the principles of majority and quantity) was described as the result of pervasive skepticism. The state of pervasive skepticism is combined with extreme relativism and the negation of all that is absolute: “Democracy is skeptical. It was born in an age of skepticism and disbelief, when nations have lost the criteria of Truth and are no longer capable of professing any absolute Truth.”⁴³ Only people who are doubtful, spiritually desolate, detached from the ontological foundations of life are forced to resort to majority solutions, to quantitative criteria. Meanwhile, the philosopher maintained, in the realm of quantity includes neither truth nor *istina*. The equalitarian democratic revolution was to testify to the spiritual decline of humanity, the rise of godlessness and monstrous skepticism, creating its own

⁴¹ See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Smysl istorii. Opyt filosofii chelovecheskoi sud'by* (Paris: YMCA-PRESS, 1969), 258.

⁴² See Nikolai Berdyaev, “Dukhovnoe sostoyanie sovremennogo mira”, *Put'* 35 (1932): 63.

⁴³ Nikolai Berdyaev, “Novoe srednevekov'e. Razmyshlenie o sud'be Rossii i Evropy”, in: *Filosofiya tvorchestva, kul'tury i iskusstva*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, ICHP 'Liga', 1994), 466.

gnoseology (“Democracy is a sceptical social epistemology”⁴⁴). Skepticism and the idol of equality were to reign indivisibly in the realm of quantity. Democratic equality, according to Berdyaev, was to prove the debasement of man and the highest values of life: it treats man as an arithmetical unit, mathematically equal to any other (democracy therefore kills spiritual individualism), while members of society are united only mechanically.⁴⁵ Democracy appeared in his eyes as a great fraud: “It is a hypnosis of the idea of equality. It has come to believe that equality, not proportional but mechanical, is the great truth and the great good, and that everything is good that is associated with it”⁴⁶ Berdyaev argued that a society built on quantitative mechanics, the universal right to vote, treats human beings like mathematical units and is extremely rationalized, which also gave rise to skepticism. He therefore referred to democracy as the democratic ideology of extreme rationalism.

Democratic rationalism. Indifference to evil and truth

In this part, I will discuss Berdyaev’s views on consequences of democratic rationalism. The state of deep skepticism and melancholy was treated, according to traditionalism, as the result of the dominance of reason tainted by pride. Russian culture treated reason as a consequence of the Fall of man (Lev Shestov described it perfectly). In his book *Novoe srednevekov’e (The End of Our Time)* Berdyaev derived a content coincidence between democracy and rationalism (adding to them humanism, legal formalism and liberalism) – he regarded them as forms of thought and life that are based on the hypothesis that Truth (which he capitalized) is unknown and perhaps does not exist at all. Democracy and rationalism do not want to know the Truth.⁴⁷ They are the children of humanism, which has given a godless shape to democracy.⁴⁸ Thus, their indifferentism towards higher, lofty goals was also striking. Berdyaev

⁴⁴ Own translation. Primary source: “Demokratiya est’ skepticheskaya obshchestvennaya gnoseologiya”. Berdyaev, *Filosofiya neravenstva*, 135.

⁴⁵ See *ibidem*, 137–138.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 139.

⁴⁷ See Berdyaev, *Novoe srednevekov’e*, 416.

⁴⁸ See Berdyaev, *Dukhovnye osnovy russkoi revolyutsii*, 341.

believed that democracy knows only formal principles, values them above all else and does not want to subject them to anything – the source of democratic anarchism that threatens eternal principals was revealed here. In the Russian philosopher's view, democracy is indifferent to the content of the will of the people and to what that will turn toward; it contains no criteria or even premises that could determine the truth or fallacy of the direction in which the will of the people should manifest and follow. It cannot assess the quality of change, it only registers quantitative adjustments. Democracy, therefore, drifts on a sea of spiritual indifference, succumbing to the force of the waves, currents drifting in an unknown direction.⁴⁹ Rationalism would not give a sense of order, but it would cause chaos. Chaos then would open the doors to the triumph of evil. This was another paradox of democracy, concluded Berdyaev.

Rationalism was in Berdyaev's opinion most often a temptation to choose evil. This is a very serious ontological objection by the thinker. As put by Michel Alexander Vallon, Berdyaev begins his prophetic and personal system of ethics with the problem of the origin and distinction of good and evil.⁵⁰ The axiological emptiness of democracy can create favorable conditions for the explosion of evil and simultaneous passive resistance to good. Thus, democratic authority may not have in itself any power to tame the most terrible evils of this world. A power incapable of calling evil directly evil can simultaneously transform itself into a destructive element of evil. Governments exercised by democrats are tolerant only because they remain completely indifferent to evil and have lost faith in Truth; moreover, democrats are no longer able to find it.⁵¹ This is another objection of Berdyaev to democracy – democracy does not know the Truth, and for this reason it leaves the discovery of the Truth to be decided by an abstract majority of votes. In this way, the Truth is put at the mercy of chance, the mathematical sum of the unconditioned private opinions of people usually devoid of spiritual and intellectual discipline. This procedure was what the thinker called "the tribute of the popular vote" or "the granting of the power of quantity".⁵² This type of quantity authority is usually characterized by a lack

⁴⁹ See *ibidem*, 465–466.

⁵⁰ See Michel A. Vallon, *An Apostle of Freedom. Life and Teachings of Nicolas Berdyaev* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), 220.

⁵¹ See *ibidem*, 466.

⁵² See *ibidem*.

of faith and ignorance of the Truth. A man of true faith and knowledge of the Truth would never allow a great idea to be soiled by making it dependent on a majority of quantity. In his reflections on the Russian Revolution, the author stated that the mission of the Russian revolt was to expose the lie underlying the democratic principal, absolutely unwilling to submit to a higher Truth.⁵³ Rationalism led to the mathematical calculation of truth. For the traditionalist, the mathematical calculation of truth was a scandal that proved submission to evil. Traditionalist thought 'felt the truth' from an ontological perspective: as an absolute being, an all-unity that cannot be subjected to relativizing procedures.

Traditionalism perceived the effects of the modern world – that is, e.g., democracy – in democracy subordinating the sphere of the sacred to the profane world. The profane world was devoid of sacred content and of authentic life. In Berdyaev's eyes, democracy is devoid of deeper content: everything is transitory in it, meanwhile, authentic ontological life is outside the boundaries of democracy.⁵⁴ For him, democracy is outrageously formalistic and depressingly skeptical – it has an exclusively secular dimension. Meanwhile, Truth is located in the realm of the sacrum. In the world of democracy, people are deprived of access to the Truth, politics is practiced as if the highest values did not exist. Moreover, even if political democracy endows man with some political rights, it provides opportunities to dispose of these rights only because these rights depend on the socio-economic sphere, and not purely political (Berdyaev in this regard acknowledged the Marxist and communist critique).⁵⁵ Instead of Truth, a falsely optimistic belief prevails that a mechanical reckoning of votes or some negotiation of pseudo-ideas can lead to positive conclusions; in reality, however, they are pathetic substitutes for truthfulness.

Human self-affirmation as falsehood

Traditionalism clearly emphasized the sinfulness of human nature and the tendency of man to take the place of gods. This was the reason for negotiating

⁵³ See Berdyaev, *Dukhovnye osnovy russkoi revolyutsii*, 230.

⁵⁴ See Berdyaev, *Novoe srednevekov'e*, 469.

⁵⁵ See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Khristianstvo i klassovaya bor'ba* (Paris: YMCA-PRESS, 1931), 24

the truth, which was likewise relativized by sinful man. This naive belief in the possibility of negotiating truth is the result of an even more naive humanistic belief in the goodness of human nature. What is the reason for this sad – according to Berdyaev – state of affairs? Well, according to the philosopher, the source of the democratic idea understood in this way is humanistic self-affirmation of man.

Humanism – according to traditionalist vision – caused a mix of roles and hierarchical positions. In the history of the world the gods have ruled men. Men should be obedient and humble. The basis of the secular humanism is the idea of independence and self-sufficiency. The quality of interpersonal relationship is corrupted by the idea of absolute individual freedom and false self-affirmation. The manifestation of humanistic self-affirmation of man, that is, the falsity of democracy, is conceit, pride, self-confidence, contempt for the values of the fathers, for tradition, for the spirit of the past. The self-affirmation of man means the negation of eternity and paying homage to the destructive force of time.⁵⁶ As Laurent Gagnebin puts it, Berdyaev had an ambiguous attitude toward communism. He saw in it the end of Renaissance and humanism.⁵⁷ For Berdyaev, according to Oliver Fielding Clarke, communism was something better in situation when liberal democracy was on its death-bed.⁵⁸

Berdyaev warned that democracy could turn into a bourgeoisie if it clads itself in the religion of self-divinization of future humanity, if it recognizes only what is human as its temple, and thus transforms future man into nothingness, depriving him of the remnants of nobility.⁵⁹ To be intellectually honest, Berdyaev acknowledged that for the spiritually broken Western civilization, democracy was some sort of unifying factor.⁶⁰ Moreover, he tried, despite his criticism, to acknowledge that the liberation of man, the abandonment of slavery, which came at the expense of non-governance, showed that man is a being capable of disposing of himself, exercising power over himself, which

⁵⁶ See Berdyaev, *Novoe srednevekov'e*, 470.

⁵⁷ See Laurent Gagnebin, *Nicolas Berdiaeff, ou de la destination créatrice de l'homme* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1994), 190–191.

⁵⁸ See Oliver Fielding Clark, *Introduction to Berdyaev* (London: G. Bles, 1950), 158.

⁵⁹ See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Sub specie aeternitatis. Opyty filosofskie, sotsial'nye i literaturnye (1900-1906 g.)* (Saint Petersburg: Izdanie M.V. Pirozhkova, 1907), 413

⁶⁰ See Nikolai Berdyaev, "Wostok i Zapad", *Put'* 23 (1930): 100–101.

is a positive manifestation of democracy, albeit, he added with sarcasm, a manifestation of a certain subversion of the order.⁶¹ Yet, human hubris and belief in man's omnipotence were supposed to push the struggle for power – a struggle that is so characteristic of democracy.

Berdyayev believed that a defective man should return his power to God. This expiation and humiliation of man was an important theme of traditionalist thought. The thinker pointed to a system in which power was devoid of evil and its flawed human face: he contrasted democracy with theocracy, in which, he argued, “[...] there is no state power, there is no power but God's, and God's power is not violence and can only be called power because of the limitations of language”.⁶² God acts not in the name of power, but in the name of humanity.⁶³ This goal was inherent in his “nature”, as stressed by the Indian scholar of Berdyayev's thought – Ramesh Balasubramanian.⁶⁴ The Russian author by no means treated theocratic power as a utopia. In this sense, he represented a view of the world already quite alien, distant to Western European philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century. Berdyayev should definitely be included in the company of the religious philosophers and the political theologians. Berdyayev had a unique aversion to democracy, since he wrote that religion-fighting Bolshevism was seen as a utopia, and turned out to be more real than liberal and capitalist democracy.⁶⁵ Democracy, on the other hand, was the least utopian, the least absolute, and for this reason was the closest to sinful human nature, the thinker observed.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Berdyayev, *O rabstve i svobode cheloveka*, 124.

⁶² Nikolai Berdyayev, *Novoe religioznoe soznanie i obshchestvennost'* (Saint Petersburg: Izdanie M.V. Pirozhkova, 1907), 220.

⁶³ See Nikolai Berdyayev, *Istina i otkrovenie* (Saint Petersburg: Izd-vo Russkogo Khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 1996), 51–52.

⁶⁴ See Ramesh Balasubramanian, *The Personalistic Existentialism of Berdyayev* (Madras: University of Madras, 1970), 44–54.

⁶⁵ Berdyayev, *Tsarstvo dukha i tsarstvo kesarya*, 157.

⁶⁶ See Nikolai Berdyayev, “Dnevnik filosafo (O dukhe vremeni i monarkhii)”, *Put'* 6 (1927): 114.

Concluding thoughts

The purpose of this article has been to present Nikolai Berdyaev's anti-democratic views. He regarded democracy as a manifestation of metaphysical evil. Berdyaev's idea of power and criticism of democracy stemmed from his conviction that man, devoid of faith in God, was incapable of ruling justly. His position was based on his belief in the sinfulness of human nature, a frailty that leads to the spread of evil: man was incapable of exercising power even over his dark passions. In the eyes of Berdyaev, man was weak and succumbed to the temptation of self-indulgence. Democracy was to be the expression of this. I have argued that Berdyaev was against the power of the masses and therefore was a typical representative of traditionalism. According to traditionalist thought, democracy was perceived as a product of material civilization, which was the antithesis of the world of spiritual culture (culture was characterized by hierarchical and aristocratic power). Berdyaev's hostility to democracy is especially important in the context of Russia's current war against democracy (the war which wages inside Russia and the one Russia wages in Ukraine).

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