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## The Concept of Democracy in Simon Frank's Philosophy of Liberal Conservatism

**Abstract:** The article analyses the concept of democracy by a Russian philosopher Simon Frank. It considers the main features of the liberal-conservatism as they appear in the works of Petr Struve and Simon Frank. The main focus of the paper is on the evolution of Frank's views on democracy. It is noted that Frank emphasised the need to combine democratic mechanisms of power with legal mechanisms for protecting the freedom of a person, as well as the dependence of democracy on the level of cultural and moral development of society. The paper demonstrates that Frank considered democracy not so much as an external political order, which inevitably turns out to be antinomic, but in the context of the basic principles of social life and, first of all, the principle of service (in a religious, Christian sense). The social life ontologically presupposes that the principle of democratic equality must be combined with the principles of hierarchism and aristocracy.

**Keywords:** Simon Frank, democracy, service, liberal conservatism, Christian realism, political ontology, Russian philosophy

## Introduction

Starting a talk on Simon Frank's political philosophy, including his concept of democracy, we should bear in mind three initial points.

First, Simon Frank (1877–1950) was not a political (or social) philosopher *par excellence*. He was a metaphysician, and his philosophical perspective developed from an initial philosophical intuition that discovered the presence of Absolute Being. In all areas of philosophical cognition, accordingly: the general ontological doctrine of being and knowledge, philosophical psychology (or anthropology) and social philosophy,<sup>1</sup> as well as in philosophy of religion, social ethics and philosophy of creativity – his main focus was on the ontological dimension of cognition. The realm of social (socio-political) life he considered as a special *ontological* sphere – that is, the sphere of concrete spiritual life, or spiritual being, distinct from material or mental being. Therefore, speaking of Frank's "political philosophy", one should always bear in mind that we are primarily talking about the ontology, or *metaphysics of politics*.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, one should take into account a certain evolution of Frank's philosophical perspective. Without dwelling here on the general characterisation of this evolution,<sup>3</sup> it should be noted that in the sphere of social cognition we can conventionally speak of three periods of Frank's work. At the early stage (1900s), he relied on the methodology of social psychologism. His mature social philosophy (1920s–1930s) is, as already mentioned, an ontology of spiritual being. In his later works (1940s), the philosopher conceptualises socio-political problems mainly from the standpoint of Christian social ethics. At the same time, turning specifically to the notion of democracy, we will see further that Frank's transformations of the interpretation of this phenomenon do not coincide in all respects with the outlined stages of his socio-philosophical research. These transformations were significantly affected by specific historical circum-

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<sup>1</sup> Frank outlined these three parts of his philosophical system in his book *Man's Soul*, published in 1917 (see Simon Frank, *Man's Soul. An Introductory Essay in Philosophical Psychology* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993), xxxii).

<sup>2</sup> Among recent works on this topic we should mention Dar'ia Dorokhina's dissertation *The Political Aspect of S. L. Frank's Ontology* (Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2020); however, this work does not analyse Frank's attitude to democracy.

<sup>3</sup> On this issue see Gennadii Aliaiev, *Simon Frank* (Saint Petersburg: Nauka, 2017), 20–29.

stances and conditions – the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, followed by the civil war, WW1 and WW2, as well as his life in exile in the conditions of the crisis of European democracy.

Finally, thirdly, we should bear in mind the ideological component of Frank's worldview. In this respect, too, he underwent a certain evolution, the starting point of which (as early as the late 1890s) was *critical* Marxism, and the mature expression of which was *liberal conservatism*. A prominent representative of this political trend was Petr Struve, with whom Frank had a long-standing friendship. At the same time, it should be emphasised that Frank was never inclined – unlike many other Russian philosophers – to launch into historiographic speculations about the “Russian idea” and Russian messianism. If it were correct to define Russian philosophy as “the philosophy of the Russian idea”, Frank would be set outside Russian philosophy.

### Liberal Conservatism: Actualisation of the Concept by Peter Struve and Simon Frank

Liberal conservatism (conservative liberalism<sup>4</sup>) can be defined as a synthesis, on the one hand, of the idea of the priority value of the human person in relation to the value of the state, and on the other hand, of the idea of stability and predictability, continuity of the political and legal order. The recognition of human dignity as the supreme value and the inalienability of basic human rights and freedoms are combined with a clear understanding of the need for social organisation, the crucial role of the state and law as guarantors of these rights and freedoms. At the same time, unlike classical liberalism, which also sees the guarantee of freedom in system of law, conservative liberalism emphasises the organic nature of the state and law, the inseparability of their connection from historical tradition, and the rootedness of law in morality and religion. In short, liberal conservatism, or conservative liberalism, is “the

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<sup>4</sup> These two concepts have, of course, their own nuances, reflecting either the ideological evolution of this or that thinker, or ideological emphases. But these nuances can be left aside, given the aims of this article.

belief in the inseparable link between the free creation of progress and the continuity of life and culture”.<sup>5</sup>

Let us emphasise that we are not talking here about a specific political programme of any party. We are talking about the basic principles of socio-political order, about the very ontology of spiritual existence, on which a responsible policy can be based. Certainly, Petr Struve actualised this concept in close connection with his energetic political activity, which he continued even in emigration. In spite of this, he spoke about liberal conservatism not in a timely political manifesto, but in “Materials for a Reading Book in the History of Russian Thought”, which he began to publish in 1927 - the first part of these “Materials” was the paper “On Liberal Conservatism in Our Past”. Struve drew attention to the specific combination of the ideological motives of liberalism and conservatism in the spiritual and political image of some historical figures of the 19th century’s Russia. This symbiosis was embodied, in his opinion, in the views of Pyotr Vyazemsky and Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Pirogov and Alexander Gradovsky; it was Prince Pyotr Vyazemsky who coined the formula “liberal conservatism”, which he applied to Pushkin.<sup>6</sup> This perspective was most organically developed by Boris Chicherin.<sup>7</sup>

It should be said that such a mind-set was rare in Russia. Struve himself, as a “conservative liberal” or “liberal conservative”, was, according to Frank, “a political type well known and perfectly understood in England, but rare and almost exceptional in Russia”.<sup>8</sup> Frank characterised Struve’s “state-thinking liberalism” as one that transcends the traditional opposition between “right” and “left” and fundamentally overcomes this dilemma. Frank considered one of the bases of this ideological construction to be the ancient category of *measure*, which means “the conviction that every extreme and excess is fatal in human life and, on the contrary, that agreement, concessionality, ‘compromise’ in relations between the opposing principles and forces of social life is

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<sup>5</sup> Simon Frank, “Vospominaniya o P. B. Struve”, in: *Neprochitannoe... Stat'i, pis'ma, vospominaniya* (Moscow: Mosk. shkola polit. issledovani, 2001), 491.

<sup>6</sup> See Petr Struve, “O liberal'nom konservatizme v nashem proshlom”, *Russkaya Mysl'* 1 (1927): 64-68.

<sup>7</sup> See Petr Struve, “O mere i granitsakh liberal'nogo konservatizm”, *Polis* 3 (1994): 131-134.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Frank, “Umstvennyi sklad, lichnost' i vozzreniya P. B. Struve”, in: Simon Frank. *Russkoe mirovozzrenie* (Saint Petersburg: Nauka, 1996), 514.

necessary and beneficial”.<sup>9</sup> According to this approach, the search for peace and tranquillity in society is not in vain – it is based on the solid foundation of the objective reality of society as the spiritual unity of people; and if the ideal embodiment of this unity in current politics is impossible, it does not cancel the duty of man (and above all, the politician) to seek this unity, to serve its formation, not its destruction.

Frank also attributed Alexander Pushkin to this political type, dedicating a special pamphlet in 1937 to his characterisation as a political thinker. Frank characterised the great poet's political outlook as “*conservatism*, combined, however, with an intense demand for free cultural development, secured system of law and individual independence – i.e. *in this sense* sharing *liberal* principles”.<sup>10</sup> The philosopher saw three main points in Pushkin's conservatism: elitism (the belief that history is not made by the crowd or ordinary people, but by the chosen ones, the leaders – a kind of anti-democracy and aristocratism); a fine sense of historical tradition as the basis of political life (*glorification* of the historical past, “*Pochvennichestvo*”); concern for peaceful political and cultural development, which is not interrupted by violent upheavals. As for liberal principles, it is the demand for personal independence and freedom of cultural and spiritual creativity (imposed not only on other people, but also on self-perception: “*to honour oneself*”), supplemented by the demand for a firm *rule of law*. Pushkin did not demand from the authorities the right to active participation in political life; he demanded only spiritual independence of the individual, freedom of spiritual life and creativity.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in the context of our topic, we can already note that the perspective of liberal conservatism includes a certain kind of anti-democratism and, accordingly, a certain elitism. However, before we talk about it more specifically, let us dwell on the above-mentioned evolution of Frank's views on democracy.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Frank, “Pushkin kak politicheskii myslitel’”, in: Simon Frank. *Russkoe mirovozzrenie* (Saint Petersburg: Nauka, 1996), 240.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, 242.

## Quest for the Cultural and Moral Foundations of Democracy

Frank began his journey as a political thinker at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when, as he later wrote, it did not occur to anyone in Russia to criticise socialism and radical democratism.<sup>12</sup> Tsarist autocracy was seen as the source of evil, and the struggle against it united many political forces, sometimes were very different in their positive preferences. Frank himself moved quite quickly from the position of critical Marxism to the position of constitutional democratism, and from the First Russian Revolution he expected, first and foremost, a democratic renewal of Russia. These hopes were particularly expressive in the spring of 1906, during the elections to the First State Duma – in the victory of the Party of People’s Freedom he was ready to see “the beginning of a new cultural and historical epoch – the epoch of the *triumph and flourishing of democracy in Russia*”, and even predicted that “our country, perhaps in the not too distant future, is destined to become *an advanced country of democracy*”.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, however, the peculiarities of Frank’s “democratism” during this period should be noted.

1. He believed that the driving force, and at the same time an indicator of the level of democratic development is the power of *public opinion*. In accord with his social psychology, he included in this concept “not only conscious thoughts and moods of society, but also its unconscious, instinctive experiences and feelings”. As a result, “public opinion” turned out to be the force that actually shapes and legitimises power – in the sense that power is ultimately held not by bayonets and guns, but by “the entire social and psychological atmosphere”.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the philosopher still distinguished “what is called ‘*public opinion*’ in the ordinary, specific meaning of this word” from “unconscious social and psychological force” – if the latter forms are “the essence of power”, then “conscious public opinion” corrects this force “by its open pressure on

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<sup>12</sup> See Simon Frank, *Krushenie kumirov* (Berlin: YMCA-Press, Amerikanskoe izd-vo, 1924), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Simon Frank, “Molodaya demokratiya”, in: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo PSTGU, 2019), 404, 413.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Frank, “Problema vlasti. (Sotsial’no-psikhologicheskii ehtyud)”, in: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo PSTGU, 2019), 283–284.

power”.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the main indicator of the success of democracy was not even so much its establishment “in institutions and law”, but rather that “democracy is established *in public opinion* – moreover: *in social consciousness*”.<sup>16</sup>

2. Institutions and laws, of course, were also important, but Frank was not only talking about popular representation as such. He consistently pursued the idea of the need to combine democratic mechanisms of power with legal mechanisms for the protection of individual freedom. Even before the revolution, in his article “The State and the Person” (1904), he criticised the postulate of legal positivism about the unlimited sovereignty of the legislative power. Unlimited sovereignty of even the most democratic parliament would mean the arbitrariness of state power, which under such conditions “can easily express itself in despotism”.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, he considered it necessary – in order to prevent such a danger – along with positive laws and constitutional norms regulating the state structure, to adopt a special act proclaiming “*general principles of political legal consciousness*”. The meaning and task of such an act would be “to define the relationship between state power and the human rights, to ensure the human rights by distinguishing them from the legitimate rights of the authorities”. In other words, it was a “declaration of rights”, and Frank himself proposed in early 1906 a draft “Constituent Law on the Eternal and Inalienable Rights of Russian Citizens”.<sup>18</sup>

3. Frank's political intentions were based, in the end, not on the absolute significance of the power of the people, but on the ideal of culture as the embodiment of the person's absolute values and the significance as the creator of culture.<sup>19</sup> Frank defined culture as “*the aggregate of objective values realized in social and historical life*”.<sup>20</sup> These values – truth, goodness, beauty and sacred-

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, 286.

<sup>16</sup> Frank, “Molodaya demokratiya”, 405.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Frank, “Gosudarstvo i lichnost'. (Po povodu 40-letiya sudebnykh ustavov Aleksandra II)”, in: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo PSTGU, 2019), 200.

<sup>18</sup> See Simon Frank, “Proekt deklaratsii prav”, in: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo PSTGU, 2019), 364–372.

<sup>19</sup> See Konstantin Antonov, “Kontsepty ‘kul'tury’ i ‘politiki’ v filosofii rannego S.L. Franka: vopros ob ikh vzaimootnoshenii v kontekste dukhovnoi i intellektual'noi biografii myslitelya”, *Voprosy filosofii* 4 (2018): 52–62.

<sup>20</sup> Simon Frank, “The Ethic of Nihilism: A Characterization of the Russian Intelligentsia's Moral Outlook”, *Canadian Slavic Studies* 3 (1971): 336.

ness - correspond to the main spheres of human creativity - science, morality, art and religion. Culture is a complex integrity, which cannot be denied as an integrity, although it is possible to deny and disbelieve in its individual manifestations. The fundamental connection between culture and the person was justified by the fact that the person is “the living and eternal laboratory of spiritual creativity”, “the only real point on earth in which and through which the divine spirit works”.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the person’s freedom is the first condition of culture, and the idea of external organisation turns out to be a kind of “enlightened despotism”: “The wisest government does not concentrate in itself all the culture of its time and does not exhaust all the cultural wealth contained and born in the personal souls. The collective culture of the people and humanity is always higher, fuller and richer than the culture of the leaders, and this common culture by the very essence of the matter can mature and develop only through unorganised fermentation, through the clash of spiritual forces and aspirations”.<sup>22</sup>

If we look closely at these features that characterise Frank’s philosophical and political positions in the period of the First Russian Revolution, we can already see in them, at least, the rudiments of the *liberal*-conservative attitude towards democracy that he would later develop. The *conservative* element of this attitude intensified with the accumulation of experience in the radicalisation of political life, the unbridling of revolutionary elements and violent methods of political struggle. Frank considered the *idea of infallibility*, the claim of this or that political ideal - including the ideal of democracy - to absolute truth as a precondition for such radicalisation; this leads to political fanaticism, the identification of certain political positions with the ideas of good and evil, and socio-political utopianism. “Democracy cannot be based on *the belief in the infallibility of the majority*”, he wrote in 1907, “there is no basis for this belief, and it is even less convincing than any other belief. Democracy rests, on the contrary, on *the denial of all infallibility*, whether it be the infallibility of one, or of a few, or of the majority; it opposes to all infallibility the right of every human person

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<sup>21</sup> Simon Frank, “Politika i idei (O programme ‘Polyarnoi zvezdy’)”, in: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo PSTGU, 2019), 329.

<sup>22</sup> Petr Struve, Simon Frank, “Ocherki filosofii kul'tury”, in: *Neprochitanoe... Stat'i, pis'ma, vospominaniya* (Moscow: Mosk. shkola polit. issledovani, 2001), 57.



to participate in the judgement of the public good”<sup>23</sup> But the realisation of this right is possible “only on the basis of internal, spiritual evolution, on the basis of the development of moral and philosophical contemplation and mind-set”.<sup>24</sup>

Frank spoke even more definitely about *the moral basis* of democracy in 1917. For him, the February Revolution in Russia marked not the “triumph and flowering” of democracy, but its “crossroads” – either the fulfilment of the religious ideal of democracy as the nationwide free construction of the highest truth on earth, or the path of materialist life-understanding, leading to the brutal Jacobin tyranny of the uncultured masses.<sup>25</sup> The philosopher connects the historical origin and the guarantee of the sustainability of modern democracies with religious ideas, and – characteristically – not so much with the ideal of “Holy Russia” as with the English Puritan movement,<sup>26</sup> namely, with the idea of *freedom of human conscience*, which – this freedom – “is necessary for the fulfilment of obligation, for service”. It is about both personal freedom (conscience, speech, assembly) and the freedom of the people – their power or self-determination. Thus, it is no longer enough to say that “the value of democracy is not that it is *the rule of all*, but that it is *the freedom of all*”<sup>27</sup> – it is necessary to define *the meaning* of this freedom. This meaning, and at the same time the basis of democracy, is seen in the idea of the “universal service” (*sobornoye sluzhenie*) – both individual and national service – service to the public good, understood, first of all, not as material well-being, but as moral justice.<sup>28</sup> The idea of moral and religious service becomes, in fact, the basis of the philosophical and political construction of liberal conservatism.

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<sup>23</sup> Simon Frank, “Filosofskie predposylki despotizma”, in: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo PSTGU, 2019), 477-478.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, 478.

<sup>25</sup> See Simon Frank, “Demokratiya na rasput'e”, in: *Neprochitanoe... Stat'i, pis'ma, vospominaniya* (Moscow: Mosk. shkola polit. issledovaniy 2001), 200-206.

<sup>26</sup> Frank emphasised this connection in his last work as well: “It will be remembered that the ideas of the inalienable rights of man and of self-determination as the basic of social life – i.e. the principles of modern humanistic democracy – are the historical progeny of puritanism” (Simon Frank, *Reality and man. An essay on the metaphysics of human nature* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 121).

<sup>27</sup> Frank, “Filosofskie predposylki despotizma”, 477.

<sup>28</sup> See Gennadii Aliaiev, Tat'yana Rezvykh, “S. L. Frank o religioznom smysle i npravstvennoi osnove demokratii”, *Vestnik PSTGU. Seriya I: Bogoslovie. Filosofiya. Religiovedenie* 82 (2019): 119-124.

## Relative Value of Political Organisation

Starting to define the place of the concept of democracy in Simon Frank's mature philosophy, let us focus, first of all, on the idea of the relative value of all external political forms, which is combined with the idea of the absolute (or, more precisely, objective) value of the organisation of society as such. The idea of the relative value of politics was expressed by Frank, first of all, in a negative form, as "the collapse of the idol of politics". The bitter experience of the Russian revolution and civil war convinced us that there is no such thing as an absolutely true political or social order. The meaning of human life lies in another plane of existence, in relation to which political and social order have a service, technical character, but do not embody absolute good and absolute justice. The search for absolute justice in the ways of external - state, political, social - organisation of life leads to political fanaticism: "all those who believed in monarchy or republic, in socialism or private property, in state power or in powerlessness, in aristocracy and in democracy, as *absolute* good and *absolute* meaning - all of them, wishing for good, did evil, and seeking justice, found injustice".<sup>29</sup>

It was not, however, a question of completely devaluing political (including democratic) mechanisms as such. Frank, of course, did not limit himself to a purely negative statement of the question - he justified the *relative* but *valuable value* of the political organisation of society. The starting point of this justification was the clarification of the very nature of society as an objective spiritual life. Without considering here the entire logical course of the philosopher's thought, let us only mention his conclusion. Frank argued for the existence of *ontological* (as opposed to *empirical*) necessity, which, when applied to the living organism, can be called *teleologically organic* necessity.<sup>30</sup> Society is a peculiar - spiritual - organism, and it is characterised by organic-teleological laws derived from the very human nature. To such natural and unconditionally authentic connections in social life Frank attributed the presence of *some* organisation and order at all, respectively of *some* power and authority, en-

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<sup>29</sup> Frank, *Krushenie kumirov*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> See Simon Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society. An Introduction to Social Philosophy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), 26.

sureing the unity of social life and the operation of social rules, which impose obligations on the participants of this social life and grant them subjective rights.<sup>31</sup> In empirical terms, these regularities can be violated in the same way that a particular individual can consciously or unconsciously harm his or her health; and such violations – wars or class feuds, despotism or anarchy – can easily be justified or explained by *empirical* necessity, but they will not cease to be forms of *destruction* of society rather than its creation.<sup>32</sup> Characteristically, it was in this context that Frank accepted the criticism of democracy as an expression of the will of the people – insofar as this will does not take into account objective-teleological, essentially divine laws, and thus turns into the pride of self-confidence that leads to destruction.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the ontological regularity is the existence of organisation and order in society, i.e. the very *existence* of society as such, for outside of organisation only spontaneous social forces can exist, but there will be no society itself. This justifies the value of external political order, state and law. Following Vladimir Solovyov, Frank emphasised that “the task of the state can never be to establish heaven on earth; it has another task, not less essential: *to prevent the appearance of hell on earth*”, and the same thing can be said about the sphere of “law” in general human life.<sup>34</sup>

This task of protecting the world from evil should not, however, be seen as purely negative. Frank rejected the theory of the state as a “night watchman”, seeing in it a diminution of the role of the state, a denial of its organic character. The state has not only a negative but also a positive task – “in its essence, it is

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<sup>31</sup> See *ibidem*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> An example of the perverted logic of such justifications is the current reasoning of A. Dugin that Stalinist repressions ensured the greatness and strength of the country, and as soon as they stopped, everything began to rot, decay and die out. However, this logic is by no means new – it is well known, at least since the time of the founder of Legalism, Shang Yang.

<sup>33</sup> See *ibidem*, 27–30. In particular, Frank cited T. Carlyle’s reasoning that “Your ship can not double Cape Horn by its excellent plans of voting” if it does not reckon with “ancient Elemental Powers, who are entirely careless how you vote” (Thomas Carlyle, “The Present Time”, in: *Latter-day Pamphlets* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1850)).

<sup>34</sup> Simon Frank, *The Light Shineth in Darkness: an essay in Christian ethics and social philosophy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), 180. See “The task of law is not that the world lying in evil should be converted into the kingdom of God, but only that it should not turn into hell before the time has passed” (Vladimir Solovyov, “Pravo i npravstvennost’. Ocherki iz prikladnoi ehtiki”, in: *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2 ed., vol. 8 (Saint Petersburg: Prosveshchenie, 1914), 548).

not only *defense*, but also *construction*"; the task of the state is not exhausted by the assurance of *security*, but also includes the assurance of social *well-being*.<sup>35</sup> *The well-being* or *good* here is understood by Frank in the Platonic manner – not only and not so much as the material good (Frank was far from preaching asceticism, however), but as the spiritual good, an “integral *truth*”. But this task is not *only* the task of the state – it is the task of society itself. At the same time, the state, having the same goal as society, is limited in the *ways and means* of achieving it, namely, “state power is necessarily limited by *the presence of civil society and the uneliminability of the latter*”.<sup>36</sup> The state should not intervene into the sphere of spiritual freedom and creativity; “the state measures are inapplicable to that mysterious laboratory of the social spirit in which *faith*, the ideospiritual foundation of social being, is created”. If it can be said that the state is “*the organization of freedom*”, then the state organization of faith, idea, worldview is unthinkable.<sup>37</sup> “Unthinkability,” however, does not mean impossibility in practice here – state intervention in this sphere can always be justified by empirical necessity; however, such a violation of ontological necessity – the necessity of spiritual freedom – ultimately destroys both society and the state.<sup>38</sup>

In principle, one can say that the relative value of external political organisation can be brought to naught by *self-organisation*, coming, so to speak, from within, from the depths of society, and in this sense – by true, *non-political* democracy. The condition for such self-organisation, however, is the moral level of its bearers, which is obviously must be much higher, or fundamentally different, than that required for ordinary, political democracy. If this level is insufficient, i.e. the ability of moral *self-binding* has not yet entered the flesh and blood of people, such *self-organisation* is simply impossible, but anarchy and

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<sup>35</sup> See Simon Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society*, 169–170.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 170.

<sup>37</sup> See *ibidem*, 171.

<sup>38</sup> The expression “organization of freedom” used by Frank should be recognised as ambiguous – taken out of context, it can easily be used to justify totalitarianism, i.e. the general suppression and destruction of freedom. The logic of Frank’s reasoning, however, is fundamentally different; here we will only point to his thorough criticism of socio-political utopianism as a conception of the “forced guidance of social life”, the forced salvation of the world, which – this salvation – is possible only in the form of free self-education and self-determination of the individual (see Simon Frank, “The utopian heresy”, *The Hibberts Journal. A Quarterly Review of Religion, Theology and Philosophy* 206 (1954): 213–223).

then despotism as a means against anarchy are very possible. Here works the law of social equilibrium, which Frank formulated as follows: "In the plane of stable, enduring being, *the level of the social order is a function of the moral level of the people who make up the order*".<sup>39</sup> This law allows us to approach social reforms not from the point of whether they are "progressive" or "reactionary", "democratic" or "anti-democratic", but from the point of whether they correspond or do not correspond to the actual moral level of society, or whether they lead to an increase in this level or, on the contrary, morally corrupt people. Only in this consists the true - ultimate - efficiency of any social reforms.

## Democracy as a Service

If in 1907 democracy for Frank was "not the rule of all, but *the freedom of all*", this formula sounds different in 1930: "Democracy is not the *rule of all*, but the *service of all*".<sup>40</sup> A literal comparison of these two statements without their further analysis could give rise to the opinion that the Russian philosopher has abandoned freedom and justifies slavery. But such an opinion would be biased and distort Frank's thought. In order to demonstrate this, it is necessary to explain how he understands the concept of "service".

Frank defined service as "the most general expression of the ontological essence of man", and therefore "the highest normative principle of social life".<sup>41</sup> It is about understanding the human being as a being that *extends beyond the self*, as a bearer of spiritual life, who has precisely tireless creativity, continuous self-overcoming through striving to attain what is better.<sup>42</sup> This understanding Frank strongly opposed the assertion of the sovereignty of the individual and collective human will, the claim of human being to be the supreme governor of human life, i.e. the claim to unlimited freedom. The doctrines of "human rights" and the supremacy of the "will of the people" - if they forget this essential feature of human being - are at best self-deception, and at worst - as was

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<sup>39</sup> Frank, *The Light Shineth in Darkness*, 223.

<sup>40</sup> Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society*, 148.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, 126.

<sup>42</sup> See ibidem, 126-127; Frank, *The Light Shineth in Darkness*, 190.

the case with the Jacobins in France and the Bolsheviks in Russia - "have led only to the horrors of universal poverty, slavery and decay".<sup>43</sup>

Rethinking, or rather developing, his own "draft declaration of rights", Frank now argues that "the highest and most primordial category of the sociomoral life of man is not *law* but *obligation*": "All human rights are ultimately grounded, directly or indirectly, in one 'innate' right: *the right of man to demand that he be given the opportunity to fulfil his obligation*".<sup>44</sup> It is a moral and religious obligation - the obligation to fulfil the will of God as the will for the moral perfection of man and society. The "eternity" and "inalienability" of individual rights, as well as the supremacy of the "popular will", are not self-contained axioms - in this capacity, incidentally, opposing each other. They are justified only insofar as a person, an individual, participates in that service of the truth and goodness, which is the obligation not only of every individual but also of society as a whole.

Here we can note a certain difference in the justification of the liberal-conservative worldview of Simon Frank and Petr Struve. With Struve, this justification did not have a religious character; only indirectly this character was manifested in his understanding of the mystical nature of the state. In Frank's case, liberal conservatism has its final foundation in religious faith, and therefore takes the form of *Christian realism*,<sup>45</sup> which, on the one hand, considers the inevitable presence of evil and imperfection in the world, determined by the fallen human nature, and on the other hand, means "*the absolute, unlimited striving to attain the free perfection of life and relations between people*".<sup>46</sup>

The philosopher saw the religious source of the doctrine of "eternal human rights" in the "authority" that was given to people through Christ - He gave "power to become the sons of God" (John 1:12). This authority combines - on the ontological level - the first principles of democracy (equality) and aristocracy. The Gospel proclaims "not the insignificance and frailty of man, but his *eternal aristocratic dignity*", this is dignity "of every man in the primordial

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<sup>43</sup> See Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society*, 127.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, 128-129.

<sup>45</sup> See Philip Boobbyer, "A Russian Version of Christian Realism: Spiritual Wisdom and Politics in the Thought of S. L. Frank (1877-1950)", *The International History Review* 36(1) (2016): 45-65.

<sup>46</sup> Frank, *The Light Shineth in Darkness*, 180.

ground of his being”, i.e. it is determined by “the Divine-human ground of human being”.<sup>47</sup> Frank particularly emphasised the commandment of Christ, which, in his opinion, had been undeservedly forgotten or misunderstood in historical Christianity and therefore most violated – the covenant *to be free*: “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. [...] For, brethren, ye, have been called unto liberty” (Gal. 5:1,13); “where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty” (2 Cor. 3:17).<sup>48</sup> The service to which Christ calls man is a free service, and freedom is understood, first of all, not as an “absolute right”, but as the primordially *obligation* of man. Freedom “is the ontological primordial-ground of human life”, and the denial of it, or an attempt on the freedom of another, leads to the destruction of the spiritual being of man. This understanding of freedom as an ontologically grounded obligation is, according to Frank, primary in relation to the commonly declared rights and freedoms of the person.<sup>49</sup>

### The Hierarchical Principle and Equality, Conservatism and Creativity. Antinomies of Democracy

Along with the general ontological-teleological regularity of *any social organisation* and the principle of *service* as the basis of social unity, Frank distinguished a number of other normative principles of social life, in particular, the principles of hierarchy and equality, conservatism and creativity. Let us pay attention to the fact that the philosopher considered these principles in pairs, emphasising, on the one hand, their contradiction, sometimes irreconcilability in empirical life, and on the other hand, their unity, inseparability from the ontological dimension of social existence. Democracy as an external political order is inevitably contradictory, antinomical, but this contradiction does not mean its failure, if and only if one can see the ontological unity, hidden behind the external antinomy.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, 66.

<sup>48</sup> See ibidem; Gennadii Aliaiev, Tereza Obolevich, Tat'yana Rezvykh, “*Cvet vo t'me*” i “*S nami Bog*”: *neizvestnye knigi S. L. Franka* (Moscow: Modest Kolerov, 2021), 388.

<sup>49</sup> See Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society*, 135–136.

The unity of society as a living organism, or a living functional system, presupposes the beginning of *hierarchy*, or *inequality*. In a complex whole, such as society, its constituent parts fulfil certain functions, and their fulfilment is ensured by their correct distribution, which is possible thanks to the hierarchical system of power and subordination. Frank states a regularity that is very reminiscent of Konstantin Leontiev's doctrine of "blossoming complexity" and "secondary maxing simplification": "The richer and fuller a society, the more complex it is, i.e. the longer the chain of links that connects the higher agency with the lower ones. Simplification of this hierarchy is tantamount to the decay of society, and the destruction of the hierarchy is tantamount to the decomposition of society, its transformation into an inorganic mass".<sup>50</sup>

In this *ontological* sense, every society is by nature an *aristocracy* or *oligocracy* - the power of the minority. Referring to the "law of small numbers" formulated in sociology (Friedrich Wieser),<sup>51</sup> Frank emphasised that every society - regardless of the principles it officially professes - "is marked by the fateful *domination of the minority over the majority*".<sup>52</sup> External democratic procedures - universal suffrage, parliamentary debates and party struggles - are ultimately reduced to the realisation of the will of the governing social groups, the ruling minority. In this sense, political democracy is not *fundamentally* different from other political orders that openly reject the participation of the people in state governance (monarchy, aristocracy, dictatorship) - because "in a parliamentary democracy the people are ruled by the parliament, the parliament is ruled by the dominant parties, and the party is ruled by the party leadership, the political bosses".<sup>53</sup>

Affirming this fundamental similarity, however, did not mean that Frank disregarded the distinctions between the different political systems. But this distinction does not take the form of a categorical (and inevitably one-sided) opposition of the ideal of democracy, the power of the majority, to the ideal

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<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, 141. Frank devoted a large article in German to the teachings of Konstantin Leontjev: Simon Frank, "Konstantin Leontjev, ein russischer Nietzsche", *Hochland. Monatsschrift für alle Gebiete des Wissens der Literatur und Kunst* 26(6) (1929): 613-632.

<sup>51</sup> Where "the small number held the upper hand over the multitude" (Friedrich von Wieser, *The Law of Power*, transl. W. E. Kuhn (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1983), 1-2.

<sup>52</sup> Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society*, 142.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, 142.



of aristocracy or monarchy. First, the criterion for distinguishing forms of government is not an abstract ideal, but concrete practical efficiency: “The best form of government (e.g. monarchy or republic, aristocracy or democracy) is that which, under given conditions, insures the best administration (e.g. that which has the most energetic, best informed, most honest administrators) and the best balance of state control and private enterprise”.<sup>54</sup> Secondly, this effectiveness is predetermined, as one may remember, by the extent to which public management and reform corresponds to the moral level of society and contributes to its improvement. And this moral perfection, in turn, is possible only in the form of free service.

As a result, the traditional “democratic”/“anti-democratic” distinction between political forms takes on a different configuration. The principle of democratic equality is possible and justified insofar as it “has as its genuine foundation the commonality of the *aristocratic* nature of all people as the children and free collaborators of God”.<sup>55</sup> In other words, we are talking about the combination of “aristocratic” - in the religious sense - democracy with aristocratic (better to say meritocratic) hierarchy as the ontological beginning of social unity. Such, to put it briefly, “aristocratic democracy” is opposed by Frank to all forms of despotism, i.e. the suppression of freedom and the transformation of *service* into *slavery*, including the despotism of the “will of the people”, in which “the principle of equality becomes a source of the forced, *unnatural* (i.e. opposed to natural law) abasement of the higher, the suppression of the higher by the lower”.<sup>56</sup>

Another limiting mechanism of political democracy is the ontological unity of the supertemporality and the temporal current of being, what Frank called, in another context, “concrete-supertemporal all-unity”.<sup>57</sup> When applied to society, it is a combination of conservatism and creativity. This combination is classically expressed by Edmund Burke’s formula - “the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation and a sure principle of transmission, without at all excluding a principle of improvement”, or otherwise - “people

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<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, 123-124.

<sup>55</sup> Frank, *The Light Shineth in Darkness*, 176.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>57</sup> See Simon Frank, “Predmet znaniya. Ob osnovakh i predelakh otvlechnogo znaniya”, in: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo PSTGU, 2023), 112, 437.

will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors". Understood literally, democracy means the undivided power of one, given generation, i.e. its active majority, which in reality (if we take into account the historically continuous nature of social development) is an obvious minority in relation to past and future generations. Under the pretext of "the requirements of the time", "the urgent demands of today", the "will of the people" ones can easily break traditions and discard the ideals of previous generations. Similarly, however, the search for a *true* tradition can only mean an arbitrary choice in the past of one or another social ideal that meets the immediate interests of the current generation, i.e. its active political majority. Accordingly, all other social ideals in which past generations, including the immediately preceding ones ("fathers") could believe, are rejected as false, discredited, and the periods of their domination are deliberately blotted out of the historical memory.

According to Frank, power which adequate to the nature of society must be built on the unity of the principles of supertemporality and temporal development, it "must combine the principle of the mystical supertemporal unity of society with the action of the interests and demands of the present day, with free social self-determination".<sup>58</sup> Only if this principle is observed, the question of the superiority of certain specific political forms can be raised and resolved. From the standpoint of socio-political ontology, within the framework of which Frank's thought was developed, the most perfect embodiment of this particular duality can be considered the forms of constitutional monarchy or presidential republic. This is not, however, the absolute perfection of the form as such. It is a relative perfection, which is justified only insofar as the general principle is realised: "the ruling power that is adequate to the nature of society must combine to a maximal degree the conservation of the continuity of social being with free social self-determination and must be realized in forms that insure the most peaceful, harmonious cooperation of these two principles".<sup>59</sup>

It should be noted that such a religious-ontological justification of democracy and individual freedom may seem too abstract. However, it was connected, as it has already been noted, with Frank's personal experience of revolutions and wars, observation of the crisis of Western democracy and the onset of

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<sup>58</sup> Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society*, 159.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

totalitarian regimes. Thus, the idea for *The Light Shineth in Darkness* was born at the end of 1938 amidst the assertion of National Socialism and Fascism, against which the ideal of democracy was powerless. This ideal, in Frank's view, was compromised by its affinity with socialism and through it with Bolshevism, resulting in a loss of *faith* in democracy. But this did not mean, for the philosopher, discarding the idea of democracy – it meant understanding it as a derivative value that had *to be proved*. National Socialism, Bolshevism, fascism, which are “the apotheosis of insolence, the apotheosis of pure evil”, can be opposed not by derivative values, but “only absolute values”.<sup>60</sup>

Frank did not move from the field of political metaphysics to the field of political technology, but the problem of “proving” democracy remained relevant and important for him until the end of his life. In literally the last entries of his philosophical diary, made in the summer of 1950, we find considerations of an antinomy in the problem of democracy. This antinomy consists in the fact that, on the one hand, every human being (i.e. all human beings) is sacred, has the right to self-determination, is free; on the other hand, truth is the province of the minority, while “the majority is always blind and stupid”, and “the greater the power of the many, the greater the power of passions and evil”. This antinomy is logically insoluble, and therefore the good and just social order must be based on some compromise of democracy and hierarchy. But this problem is resolved fundamentally-ontologically by the fact that man “should not serve any external, alien to him, enslaving goals and values, but only that which is connatural and therefore necessary to him as forming his true being”.<sup>61</sup> Democracy is possible and necessary if one can freely choose his or her service.

## Instead of Conclusion: the Possibilities of Criticism

Simon Frank's views on democracy outlined in this article can obviously be criticised from various positions.

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<sup>60</sup> Aliaiev et al., “Svet vo t'me” i “S nami Bog”: neizvestnye knigi S. L. Franka, 115–116.

<sup>61</sup> Gennadii Aliaiev, Tat'yana Rezvykh, “Intuitsiya pervoosnovy bytiya: poslednie zapisi S. L. Franka”, *Istoriko-filosofskii ezhegodnik* 35 (2020): 257–258.

Defenders of the ideal of democratic equality may accuse Frank of actual rejection of the idea of democracy, of anti-democratism, of defending the aristocratic-oligocratic model of state power. Such a criticism can be easily proved with some quotations. However, it does not take into account that Frank's speech is about the dialectical unity of the principles of hierarchy and equality. Frank does not speak anything specifically in the field of political-state administration, but rather treats of the social order as a whole.

In connection with the "anti-democratism" of the Russian philosopher, the criticism may assign another "label" to his views - "traditionalism", meaning that the philosopher's gaze is turned to the past, that tradition is prioritised over innovation, and that traditional (i.e., in fact, archaic) forms of social life are prioritised over modern ones, failing to meet today's standards. Such a criticism would have to deliberately by-pass Frank's explicitly expressed relationship between the conservative and the creative, both in social life and in general ontology (the latter issue is beyond the scope of this article).

A variation of purely ideological criticism could be Frank's "attribution" to the current of Russian solidarism, represented by the famous National Alliance of Russian Solidarists. It cannot be denied that a number of fundamental ideas of Frank's social philosophy were used by solidarists, but again, it should be borne in mind that he was creating a metaphysical system, not writing political programmes. One of the theorists of the NARS and at the same time a Frank's student Roman Redlich is useful here. He wrote that the etude "I and We" and the book "The Spiritual Foundations of Society" "are a part of the golden fund of solidarist thought", but "S. L. [Frank] himself, maintaining full philosophical independence, did not take a direct part in the formation of Russian solidarism".<sup>62</sup>

A milder version of the criticism of the Russian philosopher's "anti-democratism" might be this: if Frank is right that the value of different political forms is relative, why not note that the degree of this relativity is different, and why not ultimately emphasise quite clearly that democracy is *relatively the most valuable* political form? In fact, the different relative value as well as the different *relative harms* of different forms of government are actually assumed in Frank's

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<sup>62</sup> Roman Redlich, *Solidarnost' i svoboda* (Frankfurt a. M.: Posev, 1972), 10.

social philosophy, and if this has not found some clearer expression, it is only because he did not purpose to describe political systems in concrete terms.

Another angle of critical attitude can be the claim that Frank's political philosophy bears the marks of its epoch, reflects the events of the first half of the twentieth century, including the real crisis of democracy at that time, which, however, is no longer relevant today. Taking this position, one can probably discard any socio-political teachings of the past, as they inevitably bear the mark of his time, while denying the presence of timeless ideas in truly great teachings. However, it would be premature to claim that democracy has completely got rid of crisis and resolved its inherent antinomies, and, in general, that the evolution of political forms has reached "the end of history" (F. Fukuyama).

Finally, Frank's political philosophy can be criticised for excessively mixing politics and morality, for "blurring" the political specificity in moral and religious oughtness, for "moral idealism" at the cost of "political realism". Note here in passing that the notion of "real politics" was often used by Frank, but this is better to discuss in another study. As for "moral idealism", in this case the criticism - from a Machiavellian perspective - goes beyond political philosophy to the general opposition between positivism and metaphysics. In defining his "philosophical faith", Frank classified himself as a member of the "Platonist sect",<sup>63</sup> and this metaphysical position is of course reflected in his socio-political philosophy.

Obviously, the list of positions from which one can criticise Frank's views on democracy and his liberal conservatism is not exhausted by those mentioned above. But it is also obvious that the philosopher himself never claimed to be infallible, but always searched for a grain of truth even in the most seemingly distant views.

Translated by *Dr. Victor V. Chernyshov*

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<sup>63</sup> Frank, "Predmet znaniya. Ob osnovakh i predelakh otvlechnogo znaniya", 114.

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