

Article

The Priority of Interior Life: Berdyaev and Lonergan in Dialogue on Democracy

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the priority of interior life for democracy, imagining a dialogue between Nicolai Berdyaev and Bernard Lonergan. My claim is that Berdyaev and Lonergan converge on the same perspective, while affirming that only a subject who considers the spiritual life as the source of her own life and actions and is open to conversion, is able to collaborate with others in building what Lonergan calls a cosmopolis, which represents a core aspect of democracy.

Keywords: interiority; community; cosmopolis; conversion; democracy; communion

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to imagine what Nicolai Berdyaev and Bernard Lonergan would say about democracy, and to offer an innovative perspective on the role of interior life considered as pervasive and as nurturing a subject's actions in the community. My claim is that both philosophers converge on the necessity that only a subject who considers the spiritual life as the source of her own life and actions and is open to conversion, is able to collaborate with others in building a democracy. The priority of interior life represents *a conditio sine qua non* through which a democracy can be built and flourish. With the expressions "spiritual life", "interior life", and "inner spiritual life" I refer to the interiority of every subject who, recognizing herself as a creature, nurtures her own interiority through her own faith and in a dialogue with God. The choice of the authors is due to the fact that all of them witnessed the rise to power of the totalitarian regimes of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century: Berdyaev, in particular, gave a specific contribution to the political and philosophical reflection of that time, through the lenses of his faith. Lonergan provides an underlying framework with his concept of cosmopolis. Furthermore, several scholars have analyzed the political philosophy of Berdyaev and Lonergan, and their thought on democracy in particular (see (Jedliński 2023) and (Leszek 2010) on Berdyaev; (Berger 2021) on Lonergan), but it seems that an even preliminary study that compares the specific role of interior life as constitutive for community, communion, and democracy in these authors' reflections is still missing. In fact, as for Berdyaev, Jedliński considers the role of power as exercised in democracy according to Berdyaev's reflection (Jedliński 2023, pp. 41–42) and Leszek refers to "spiritual rejuvenation" needed in contemporary society (Leszek 2010, pp. 76–77), whereas for Lonergan, more recently Berger focuses on individual and communal authenticity in Lonergan's thought and in relation to institutional authenticity (Berger 2021, pp. 281, 378, 481). This article does not intend to analyze in depth these or other accounts of specific aspects of Berdyaev and Lonergan's reflection on democracy, rather, as already stated, to highlight the role of interiority and spiritual life in the development of an authentic community and democracy, imagining a dialogue between the Authors and underlining the new perspective that arises from it.



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In this article, first I consider Berdyaev's reflection and perspective starting from his *On democracy*, written in 1918, where he claims that "for the first time in our epoch the issue of democracy has become an unsettling issue on a religious level. It is not posed on a political level, but on the spiritual one" (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 27).¹ According to Berdyaev, the problem of democracy has to be understood in terms of culture as well. This leads to the following section, where I briefly consider Lonergan's reflection on the role of cosmopolis (Lonergan 1951, p. 109)² in reversing contemporary society's decline in order to promote progress (Lonergan 1973, p. 5). Moreover, according to Lonergan, the subject who acts in history has first of all to take care of her own interiority and spiritual life in order to become an *authentic subject* and to make decisions for the common good (Lonergan 1972, p. 104), and this is the only option to build cosmopolis. In the final section I compare the two positions and highlight a possible solution: the nurturing of spiritual life.

2. Berdyaev: Democracy as Peril?

A brief introduction

Nikolai Berdyaev (Herberg 1958)³ is a philosopher and theologian rooted in the charism of the Orthodox Christian Church, and develops a thought that reveals a mystical and eschatological perspective (Foni 2012, p. 23)⁴ even when dealing with current events of historic import. I have chosen to consider his "On Democracy", an article that he wrote in the summer of 1918 immediately after the Russian revolution. This article is part of *Filosofija neravenstva. Pis'ma k nedrugam po social'noj filosofii* (Philosophy of inequality. Letters to enemies on social philosophy) (Foni 2012; Markovic 1978),⁵ an inflammatory pamphlet, one of the most controversial among Berdyaev's writing, where he passionately attacks all those (Bolsheviks, revolutionaries) who contributed to the events that occurred in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution (Foni 2012, p. 11). The book was published in Berlin in 1923. Berdyaev later (in particular in his *Spiritual Autobiography*) rejected this writing, affirming that he wrote it overwhelmed by feelings due to the post-revolution situation—which he found himself unable to detach from due to his own preconceptions. This work is important for different reasons: first of all it represents a synthesis of his thought up to that moment, and second it draws a line between the "Russian" Berdyaev and the "European" Berdyaev, who will be later exiled and will spend all his life outside Russia (Foni 2012, p. 12).⁶ Despite his later rejection of the work, I believe it is important to bear in mind the distinction that Berdyaev makes about democracy, which he does not reject as a concept per se (Berdyaev [1939] 1944).⁷ There is democracy as a form of the State system and there is democracy that becomes a religion, the "self-deification of man" (Dell'Asta 2007, p.11), an abstraction that wants to become the solution to the problem of man, and he believes that this definition is wrong, because it sets up a surrogate account of truth, trying to rationalize everything related to subject and society (Dell'Asta 2007, p. 11).

It is with this brief introduction in mind that it is possible to understand what Berdyaev wanted to express in his writing *On Democracy*.

2.1. Democracy: Issue, Nature and Peril

According to Berdyaev, the issue of democracy has to be considered on a spiritual level rather than on a political one (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 27). First of all because a "democracy as an abstract self-sufficient idea, not subordinate to anything superior" (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 28) becomes the self-deification of man and the denial of the divine source of power, so that the people are self-sufficient. At this point the will of the people is considered divine, regardless of its aim, not excluding a radically evil one, and since there is no divine source of power anymore, justice and truth defined according to the whims of the majority.

In the article, addressing his political opponents, Berdyaev affirms: “You have believed in democracy because you have lost faith in justice and truth” (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 29). And he adds also:

The democratic revolution in the world raises a religious terror because it witnesses the spiritual decay of humanity, the growing of atheism, a terrible skepticism, the loss of all the qualitative criterions of justice and truth. Democracy is a social skeptic gnoseology. (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 29)

He claims that this account of democracy is accepted by those who lost the sources of spiritual life (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 29),⁸ and the more democracy grows, the more the souls are emptied, since, as he affirms “democratic equality means the loss of the ability of discerning the qualities of spiritual life” (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 29).

What is the role of the people in all this? And first of all, what is the “people”, how could we define it? What is its nature? Berdyaev is very clear in defining the nature of the people, of the “collective called people”, that according to him, in the democracy he just described, it is considered as a mechanical sum (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 31), whereas, in Berdyaev’s view, the people are not a mechanical sum but a “mystical organism”, a “communal person”: these words translate the words he uses in his writing, *sobornyj/sobornost*. According to Seaver, this word, this concept is one of most complex to translate from Russian. He recalls Zernov’s definition: “It means gathering, collectivity, integrity; it denotes oneness, but without uniformity or loss of individuality” (Seaver 1950, p. 84),⁹ and defines it as “an attitude of fellowship with all our neighbors” that we have to cultivate (Seaver 1950, p. 90).

Therefore, Berdyaev thinks that democracy does not represent “the spirit of the people” (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 32), because the spirit of the people expresses itself in an organism and not in a mechanism, whereas in the democracy he insists that “the people as organic unity is crumbled in atoms and then gathers as mechanic collective” (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 32).

It is true, in fact, that societies are not made of atoms, but they are hierarchic organisms within which every subject is “a different being, unique in her own quality”. A people is, as he defines it, “an organic unity provided with a communal spirit”. This is the reason why the will of the people cannot be expressed by a sum, as the “opinion of the majority”, and in Berdyaev’s view even universal suffrage cannot express the quality of the life of the people (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 34),¹⁰ because it is a mechanical, quantitative and abstract principle, and it is therefore based on a false equality through which one cannot choose “the sound and gifted” (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, pp. 33–34). Berdyaev does not want to cancel democracy and reinstate a previous system, but he intends to underline the perils of the democracy he was seeing at the time: What he argues is, first and foremost, that a democracy is not such when it is ruled by the will of the people that is the will of the quantity (of the people) and not of the quality (of the person), since the will of the quantity is “dust carried by the whim of the wind” and so it is not reliable at all. This kind of democratic government is just pretense, appearance, but it could also become a democratic autocracy (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 33)¹¹ and therefore the worst of the tyrannies (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 37).¹²

And for this reason, Berdyaev outlines the perils of democracy (ruled by the will of the people), which in his view are: the autocracy of the people, the intent of lowering the cultural level in society, and the threats against human freedom, dignity and rights. The first is the peril of the autocracy of the people, “of the obscure instinct of the masses” that leads also to homogenization/standardization, and intends to create uniformity within society. This is the worst autocracy, because it tends to make the subject a social subject and to flatten and level out all the society, preventing everyone’s capacity for creativity and contemplation, while giving the illusion of creating a society of free men.

The autocracy of the people is the worst autocracy, because in this one the subject is at the mercy of the brute quantity, of the obscure instincts of the masses. The will of one person or the will of some cannot extend their demands as the will of all. (Berdyayev [1923] 2007, p. 38)

He underlines the fact that everything was different in the past, when, even during the worst tyrannies, there was what he called “the blooming of personality” (geniuses, saints. . .) and that this is not possible in the kind of democracy he cited, for the reasons that have been already stated. The second peril is the intent of lowering the cultural level: This kind of democracy is realized as a realm without soul, a materialistic one (Berdyayev [1923] 2007, p. 39), where the subject becomes a slave to social utility, to the majority of the votes, to public opinion, even to his own interests (Berdyayev [1923] 2007, p. 39).¹³ Furthermore, Berdyayev affirms: “The problem of democracy can’t be addressed in an abstract and isolated way, but has to be related to the problem of culture” (Berdyayev [1923] 2007, p. 35). In fact, according to his view, this democracy is not open to creativity and wants to lower the cultural level of the person (and so of society), the cultural level of the human species introducing bourgeois ideals (Berdyayev [1923] 2007, pp. 35, 39–40). This point is very much pertinent to Lonergan’s reflection on cosmopolis, on which I’ll expound in the second part of my paper. There is also another peril, the third: this democracy threatens human freedom, dignity and rights (Berdyayev [1923] 2007, pp. 40–41),¹⁴ since the subject is here submitted to human will (the will of people), not to the Church, or State or nation, or to a higher reality or values, a submission that would be “noble and sweet”. And this is perilous because “the power of people is the power of man” and could become a threat to freedom and rights, which are guaranteed “only by principles with a supernatural nature, that raises above human free will”. Berdyayev is very clear while stating:

The power of people is the power of man. The power of man, after all, does not know boundaries and threatens freedom and rights of the person. Freedom and human rights are guaranteed only by principles with a supernatural nature, that rises above human free will. (Berdyayev [1923] 2007, p. 40)

In fact, if there is nothing above man, above the will of people, the only hope is that this will of the people is oriented towards the good, truth and justice (Berdyayev [1939] 1944, p. 150).¹⁵ Nevertheless, his criticism underlines the fact that this was not the case in his time.

2.2. *The Crisis of Democracy*

In order to define the crisis of democracy, Berdyayev in fact recalls his reflection upon the fact that the will of the people is the will of the quantity (of the people) and not of the quality (of the person), and, as I mentioned, it is not reliable since, being expressed through a mechanical and abstract principle (universal suffrage), it leads democracy towards its present crisis (Berdyayev [1923] 2007, p. 33).¹⁶ To further support his position, he affirms:

A society crumbled into atoms, in mathematical entities, can’t be recomposed, collected, and can’t retrieve a harmonious form due to a mechanical motion, counting the votes and conferring the power to the majority. The will of people is a quality that can’t be gained with any quantitative combination. (Berdyayev [1923] 2007, p. 33)

According to Berdyayev, the will of the people is not expressed through universal suffrage, which does not express “the voice of the people”, because it is based on a false idea of equality, the “hypnosis of the idea of equality”, where the crisis of democracy is rooted. Equality, in its deification, becomes the original sin, claiming “to replace the concrete, qualitative, individual nature of the person with an abstract, quantitative, impersonal nature” (Berdyayev [1923] 2007, p. 34).

While criticizing the method of universal suffrage, Berdyaev suggests that the representatives and the administrators must be chosen according to their “qualitative values” that he defines as “census” (without however meaning the material and economic aspect of it). This principle of census “in its substance, must be spiritual” (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 35), including all the human qualities, the quality of education, the social experience, the historical continuity, the higher cultural experience. In this way the representatives will be able to work for a structure of society that is an organic formation. Therefore, Berdyaev thinks that the democracy he was seeing destroyed the organic formations and left the subject isolated. It is in fact impossible to reconstruct an organic society on these bases, and therefore another solution must be sought. Could this be a solution, a “way out” from this crisis?

The aim of this first section of the paper has been to outline Berdyaev’s reflection on democracy from one of his most controversial and passionate writings, in order to highlight some specific aspects which might be considered in a study of present day democracies and for a reflection upon the subject’s contribution to community and the common good. I strongly agree with some of Berdyaev’s ideas: It is dangerous, it is a peril for society (and State) if democracy is rendered the mere submission to the will of people, when the people in charge do not consider power as a duty and service to community and common good, but they use it to reinforce groups’ interests. It is a peril when democracy flattens opinions and thoughts, suffocating the spirit of human creativity and freedom.

3. Lonergan: Cosmopolis as Promise for Democracy

There is also a specific concept in Berdyaev’s reflection on democracy and its perils, that comes close to Bernard Lonergan’s outline of the notion of cosmopolis: Berdyaev underlines the importance of culture (and education) for society and so does Lonergan.

3.1. *Cosmopolis: Culture and Community*

I believe that the best way to explain the importance of culture for society’s development in Lonergan’s thought is to consider his definition of cosmopolis. Here, I will briefly focus on few aspects of Lonergan’s reflection on cosmopolis. Lonergan outlines this concept in a couple of articles (Lonergan 1943; Lonergan 1951) before defining it more precisely in Lonergan (1957). According to Natalino Spaccapelo, cosmopolis is “the description of an ideal (but not idealistic) society, grounded on the educational project of general self-appropriation” and also the response of a community on the higher level of human culture, produced by the creativity and intelligence of the subject (Spaccapelo 2001, p. 55).¹⁷

Mark Miller recalls a similar concept, when he affirms that cosmopolis is “Lonergan’s term, within Insight’s philosophical context, for the social unit that work on the level of culture to reverse the cycle of decline” (Miller 2013, p. 178). Cosmopolis is not an organization, but “the cultural embodiment of the unrestricted eros of the human spirit” (Miller 2013, p. 178). A group of “creative personalities”, as Lonergan affirms, which all around the world are “engaged in various type of work, but united in their attempt to promote social change through culture” (Miller 2013, p. 179). These *creative types* include all sorts of jobs and activities worth our consideration (Miller 2013, p. 179).¹⁸ For that reason, cosmopolis is something that we can build, through education, through culture, thanks to our own human intelligence and freedom, even if it is not the work of the individual, but of a community.

In the 1951 article “The Role of Catholic University in the Modern World”, Lonergan outlines the notion of community and distinguishes it as “intersubjective community” (Lonergan 1951, p. 109),¹⁹ as civil community, and as cultural community, which he defines as follows:

Corresponding to judgments of value, there is cultural community. It transcends the frontiers of states and the epochs of history. It is cosmopolis, not as an unrealized political ideal, but as a longstanding, nonpolitical, cultural fact. (Lonergan 1951, p. 109²⁰)

Lonergan expands the reflection on cosmopolis in Lonergan (1957), recalling the connection to community and culture. He defines culture as follows:

The dramatic subject, as practical, originates and develops capital and technology, the economy and the state. By his intelligence he progresses, and by his bias he declines. Still, this whole unfolding of practicality constitutes no more than the setting and the incidents of the drama. Delight and suffering, laughter and tears, joy and sorrow, aspiration and frustration, achievement and failure, wit and humor stand, not within practicality but above it. Man can pause and with a smile or a forced grin ask what the drama, what he himself is about. His culture is his capacity to ask, to reflect, to reach an answer that at once satisfies his intelligence and speaks to his heart.

Now if men are to meet the challenge set by major decline and its longer cycle, it will be through their culture that they do so. (Lonergan 1957, pp. 261–62)²¹

It is clear that for Lonergan, culture is subject's capacity to ask, reflect, reach an answer that fulfills one's intelligence and communicate to one's heart. Culture is the expression of the subject as a whole, and I strongly believe that it is the expression of a whole community, where the subject takes action, since she is a "compound-in-tension of intelligence and intersubjectivity" (Lonergan 1957, pp. 261–62).²²

Furthermore, cosmopolis (Floyd 2023)²³ is a dimension of consciousness, and this is a pivotal aspect to consider in Lonergan's thought on cosmopolis. In fact, He affirms that cosmopolis "is a withdrawal from practicality to save practicality. It is a dimension of consciousness, a heightened grasp of historical origins, a discovery of historical responsibilities" (Lonergan 1957, p. 266).

In Lonergan's reflection, the subject who is attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible, before taking a course of action needs to "withdraw from practicality", to better acknowledge her own thoughts and desires, so to act not to reach out her own satisfaction but the good, and contribute in overcoming decline in contemporary society (Lonergan 1957, p. 261).

3.2. What Does Cosmopolis Do? A Support to Democracy as Promise

Cosmopolis has also some tasks to perform, and my claim is that it is possible to consider cosmopolis as a support to democracy considered as a promise: What does cosmopolis do? Among the other tasks, cosmopolis "makes operative the timely and fruitful ideas that otherwise are inoperative" (Lonergan 1957, p. 264)²⁴ and this is an extremely important action to perform in order to counteract decline. Moreover, cosmopolis "takes aim at rationalizations that restrict our viewpoints" (Lonergan 1957, p. 264), and this is even more foundational: cosmopolis is not "a busybody" but, as Lonergan says "intends to prevent dominant groups from deluding mankind by the rationalization of their sins" (Lonergan 1957, p. 264). In fact, if the mistakes of the dominant groups become the universal principles for all society, this represents a dangerous contribution to the longer cycle of decline, an outcome that cosmopolis has to fight ("ridicule, explode, destroy" as Lonergan says), in order to accomplish its mission, so to speak. Lonergan also affirms:

It is the business of cosmopolis to prevent the formation of the screening memories by which an ascent to power hides its nastiness; it is its business to prevent the falsification of history with which the new group overstates its case; it is its

business to satirize the catchwords and the claptrap and thereby to prevent the notions they express from coalescing with passions and resentments to engender obsessive nonsense for future generations; it is its business to encourage and support those that would speak the simple truth though simple truth has gone out of fashion. (Lonergan 1957, p. 264)

These words are very relevant for a reflection on democracy today. What kind of democracy do we build in our contemporary societies? Are we ready to prevent the falsification of history, to speak the truth even if this is not convenient for us? What is our contribution, as scholars, to cosmopolis and so to democracy?

Lonergan underlines the importance of cosmopolis as a force that can reverse decline that contemporary society experiences after a phase of progress. Furthermore, he stresses the importance of cultural expression as expression of the creativity of human intelligence and of its freedom. The subject, who is attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible, can't build cosmopolis on his own, but he needs to work with others: Lonergan himself underlines the centrality of community, that is "the ideal basis of society" (Lonergan 1972, p. 361). This is the promise for Lonergan: the power that the subject has in collaborating with others and realizing cosmopolis in a democratic contemporary society. Is that all?

I foresee a problem: despite all this description of aspects and tasks, cosmopolis is not a curriculum, a set of rules to follow, but it is rather a conversion, as Greg Floyd recalls (Floyd 2023). This leads me to the fourth section of this paper, where I introduce a possible solution to the problem considered.

4. Interiority: Nurturing Spiritual Life

In this section of my paper, I am going to present Berdyaev and Lonergan's point of convergence, so to speak, in order to reply to few questions: How is possible to heal democracy, what can be done to build a better community, what is the role of the subject in all this?

4.1. Lonergan and Authentic Subject/Centrality of Interiority

I will start from another question, then I will reply to it and then I will move on and reply to the other questions I posed in the introduction to this section. The first question is: Why do I claim that cosmopolis is a conversion? First of all, because without conversions (in Lonergan's perspective) one cannot be an authentic subject, and the interests of the individual, and of a single group will prevail. But conversion does not happen overnight, and it takes a lot of courage to be realized, it requires and it implies an internal, an interior battle.

As I stated already, Lonergan affirms that cosmopolis is a dimension of consciousness and as a fundamental task, it requires self-purification of subject's interiority: this means that everything starts in oneself, in one's own interiority. The more the subject purifies her gaze on reality, on one's desires, on one's aims, meaning that one will not act to pursue her own satisfaction but a value, in order to contribute to the common good. Otherwise, the subject can't (or we can't as a community) "prevent the formation of screening memories by which the ascending power hides its nastiness" (Lonergan 1957, p. 264) or "protect the future against the rationalizations of abuses and the creation of myths," without an interior/personal purification. In Lonergan's perspective, there can't be "any intelligent direction of history" (Lonergan 1957, p. 265), without a critique of history. But how could there be an unbiased analysis of historical facts, if there is no unbiased analysis of oneself first, a purification of oneself? This leads to the centrality and the importance of spiritual life, that I believe plays a fundamental and foundational part in the life of every subject who encounters the love of God (Lonergan frequently refers to Romans 5:5) and decides to live

according to the new life received through Baptism. Although this is not an easy task, it is the essential requirement to realize cosmopolis. For Lonergan the promise lies first of all in the freedom of the subject and in the certainty that she as attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible, will nurture her own spiritual life and will be open to conversion.

4.2. Berdyaev and Spiritual Democracy

All this relates to Berdyaev as well; in his article *On Democracy*, he states that in its own origin, democracy brings inside a lie, that is a spiritual lie, since democracies “are born from demagoguery” (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 42), and if they prevail, it means that the interests of some groups prevail, in their own fights to get power. And this is the start of the decay. A people go through the experience of democracy because of the death of the previous organic system, but they are not able to create a new justice and a new beauty; it will take a long time and many efforts to reach a new organicity, a new organic system. And before it could happen, democracy lives a crisis that is not political, but spiritual (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, pp. 42–44),²⁵ and Berdyaev claims that, in order to reverse the current situation, it is necessary to consider the “invisible and interior social life” that acts beyond the “visible and external” one (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 42). He affirms that it is the invisible and interior life that can “save the world from crumbling, preventing it from going back into chaos” (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 43). According to Berdyaev, the supreme principle has to be found in the “depths of the spirit,” because democracy has to be “circumscribed by spiritual life and submitted to spiritual life” (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 43), and there has to be an education of democracy from within, to that capacity of discernment that was lost and has to be gained again (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, p. 44).²⁶ Therefore, a possible solution, a way out of the peril of the democracy Berdyaev outlines, is first and foremost a renovated primacy of spiritual life and on this the subject should focus her own efforts.

I believe that he has a clear point and I support his claim, as I stated already: the way out of a troubled and unequal democracy passes through the interiority of the person, in her own recovery of the awareness of her own being in a relationship with God, acknowledging that there is a supreme principle above the materiality of life, and it is this “invisible and interior life” invisible but so powerful, that can lead the person, the subject, towards a new redefinition of democracy itself.

5. Conclusions

The peril can be overcome only by the promise of the authentic subject.

These authors, who had different life experiences and intellectual paths, share first of all a common passion for the human being, for the subject who can't achieve happiness as individual but only in a community and through the development of culture in society, but at the same time this same subject is challenged by the turmoil of history. The second aspect in common is faith: Berdyaev converted into the Orthodox Church and his faith shines through his work with an intense passion for God, Church and humanity, whereas Lonergan, as a Jesuit, expresses his profound faith with a comparable intensity.

Is democracy perilous or a promise? This was the overall question of this paper. According to Berdyaev, it is perilous because it turns a *sobornost*, a mystical communion in a mechanical organization; it intends to homogenize the subjects and eliminates any supernatural source of power (with the possibility of dangerous outcomes). According to Lonergan, I daresay, it is a promise, thanks to the capacity of the authentic subject of reversing decline through culture and in community, promoting human freedom and creativity in society while edifying cosmopolis. I believe that a point of convergence among the two authors lies in the role of the subject and her own interiority: only a renewed

attention to spiritual life, and the openness to conversions (as intellectual, moral and religious) will change our thoughts and actions in our contemporary society.

If we imagine a dialogue between Berdyaev and Lonergan, we would immediately find out that they share not only a profound faith (Orthodox and Catholic), but also a passion for the human being who brings into society her own faith, as does the yeast of the parable in Matthew 13:33 “He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough”. The subject has a great responsibility in every community, but the first attention has to be towards one’s own interiority: it is from the nurturing of one’s spiritual life that community can be changed, cosmopolis can be built and democracy can be healed.

I would like to conclude with what Berdyaev writes in 1918: “Human being’s fraternal attitude toward another human being must be the spiritual foundation of any worthy society, (. . .) The subject’s experience in democracy must bring him back to God. This is the meaning of democracy” (Berdyaev [1923] 2007, pp. 43–44).

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Notes

- ¹ I used the Italian translation: Nikolai Berdyaev ([1923] 2007). *Sulla Democrazia. Pensieri controcorrente*. Milano: La Casa di Matriona, pp. 27–44. The translation into English is mine. Berdyaev argues that democracy should first of all be “defined and subordinated to the spiritual life, (43) whereas contemporary democracy lives a profound crisis, that is a spiritual one,” and, while promising liberty and equal opportunities it generates an autocracy of the people that leaves the subject at the mercy of the “obscure instincts of the crowd” (38).
- ² See also here Lonergan’s outline of the concept of community as intersubjective, civil and cultural.
- ³ Nikolai Berdyaev was born in Kiev in 1874 and died in Paris in 1948. See Herberg (1958). George Seaver states that his thoughts “well up from the depths of his consciousness with such freshness and rapidity that they overflow formal boundaries and overleap one another, wave after wave. (. . .) He is a thinker whose mind speaks through his pen” (Seaver 1950, pp. 9–10).
- ⁴ The translation into English is mine.
- ⁵ See also Berdyaev ([1923] 2007). *Filosofija neravenstva. Pis'ma k nedrugam po social'noi filosofii* Berlin: Obelisk. Foni’s research is based on the edition *Filosofija neravenstva*. 2006. Moskva: AST-Chranitel. See also Markovic (1978).
- ⁶ In his post-revolution thought Berdyaev will try to work again on the historical events from a spiritual perspective, and also an existentialist one.
- ⁷ See his *Slavery and Freedom* (Berdyaev [1939] 1944), where he outlines a different account of democracy. Seaver underlines that Berdyaev does not see any danger in the principle of free competition and liberty of the individual, in a system where “individual rights are considered more important than personal responsibilities.” (Seaver 1950, p. 78). Furthermore, according to Seaver, Berdyaev considers political liberalism as the “nearest approximation to a personalistic standard of values”. He refers to *Slavery and Freedom*, where Berdyaev affirms: “There is a sublime truth in the fact that man is a self-governing creature. He should govern himself and others should not govern him. A reflected glimmer of this truth is to be seen in democracy, in that positive side of democracy which in actual experience is always distorted”. (Berdyaev [1939] 1944, p. 148). See also the exchange between Berdyaev and Maritain on freedom in their letters in 1933. (Hubert 2022, pp. 105–106).
- ⁸ Berdyaev affirms: “If justice and truth don’t exist, we will consider as justice and truth what is such for the majority”.
- ⁹ Seaver recalls also Zernov’s book: Zernov (1944). According to Berdyaev, a change is needed, from community, (that is an aggregate of human units organized to subservise and maintain its own impersonal existence) to community, that is *sobornost*. See also Seaver (1950, p. 84).
- ¹⁰ According to Berdyaev, universal suffrage is based on a false equality and it is the denial of human being.
- ¹¹ Tyranny of the party; in the will of the people, the society itself dies in the mechanical quantity and cannot express its own “organic, intact and indivisible spirit” unless at an irrational level. There is no attention to the unalienable rights of man. See also on page 37: the unlimited power of the multitude (of all) is more terrible than the tyrannical power of one.
- ¹² According to Berdyaev this pure, abstract, autocratic democracy is the most terrible and “kills the man”.

- 13 Freedom is aristocratic and not democratic. For these reasons, according to Berdyaev, democracy is against the spirit of freedom, that is for the person and not for the masses.
- 14 He refers to human nature created in the image of God.
- 15 In *Slavery and Freedom* (Berdyaev [1939] 1944) he affirms: “Liberation from slavery is in the first place, liberation from all will to power, from all power as a right. The right to power belongs to no one. Nobody has the right to exercise power, neither an individual man not a selected group of people, not the whole nation. What exists is not a right to power, but a burdensome obligation to power as an organic function for the protection of man” (Berdyaev [1939] 1944, p. 150; see also Seaver 1950, p. 81).
- 16 Also, according to Berdyaev, the seeking for a will of the people that is already dead is useless and it shows that democracy tries to recompose a will that has already crumbled.
- 17 Spaccapelo affirms: “It is the heuristic description of an ideal (but not idealistic) society, grounded on the educational project of general self-appropriation and resulting from the historical overcoming of the dialectic between secularist liberalism and materialistic Marxism on one hand, and the communal response on a higher level of human culture produced by the creativity of the intelligence and by the strength of freedom/liberty, on the other”. My translation.
- 18 Miller affirms also: “The members of a cosmopolis inhabit all the realms of meaning available to a culture: common sense, theory, interiority and transcendence. (...) To appeal to this area of human life, cosmopolis enlists multiple means of communication: fine arts and literature, theater and journalism, schools and universities, public opinion and “personal depth”. See also Lonergan (1957, pp. 264–66).
- 19 Lonergan recalls that intersubjective community is the community that corresponds to “experience and desire” and is based on a “spontaneous tendency” and manifests an “elemental feeling of belonging together”, with the family as a core, a center. Civil community corresponds to “intellectual insight and the good of order”.
- 20 Lonergan affirms: “Men are many. Their lives are not isolated but solidary. In the pursuit of the good they communicate, and so three levels of community follow from the three components of knowing and of the good. (...) Corresponding to experience and desire, there is intersubjective community. Its basis is spontaneous tendency. Its manifestation is an elemental feeling of belonging together. Its nucleus is the family. Its expansion is the clan, the tribe, the nation. (...) Corresponding to intellectual insights and the good of order, there is civil community. It is a complex product embracing and harmonizing material techniques, economic arrangements, and political structures. The measure of its development distinguishes primitive societies from civilizations”.
- 21 See also Miller (2013, p. 180): culture is “a set of meanings and values that informs a way of life. If cosmopolis is to transform a society through culture, it must change the meanings and values that informs its ways of life”.
- 22 See also Lonergan (1972, p. 238) and the mention of cultural community.
- 23 The reference to aspects and tasks of cosmopolis is from Floyd, Gregory (Boston College) *Educating for Cosmopolis*. 2023. Personal Communication.
- 24 See also 251: “Now fruitful ideas are of several kinds. They may lead to technical and material improvements, to adjustments of economic arrangements, or to modifications of political structure. As one might expect, technical and material improvements are less subject to the veto of dominant groups than are changes in economic and political institutions”. See also 254: “Finally, at each stage of the process, the general bias of common sense involves the disregard of timely and fruitful ideas”.
- 25 According to Berdyaev, a political crisis originates from a religious one.
- 26 See also 29: “Democratic equality means the loss of the capacity of discernment qualities in spiritual life”.

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