

# Rebuilding the World in the Post-Pandemic Era: Spatial Inequality and the Ethics of Radical Communion in the Thought of Teilhard de Chardin

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What follows is a synthesis of my reflections on the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and the fruits of my current research on spatial inequality in the urban centers of the Philippines. Drawing inspiration from Teilhard's ruminations on the evolution of the world and humankind, I interrogate the state of precarity which characterizes the lived experience of the less fortunate. Specifically, the plight of the marginalized stands in stark contrast to the idea of progressive human development towards an Omega point embodying fraternal and transcendent communion. This is compounded by the social and economic upheaval brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only sheds light on already-existing inequalities, but deepens them as well. It is in this regard that de Chardin's thought opens up possibilities to rethink and reflect on the prevailing moral rationalities which govern our world and leave so many vulnerable to existential shocks such as climate change and the current pandemic. By charting de Chardin's exposition of the movement from *geogenesis* to *biogenesis* to (a hopeful future) *noogenesis*, I aim to delineate an ethics of radical communion as a possible response to the social and spiritual fragmentation that typifies the present age.

This essay will proceed in four parts. The first section sets the stage by detailing the uneven geographies of vulnerability in many cities in the developing world, and how COVID-19 has exacerbated inequalities. Afterwards, I will conduct a survey of Teilhard's thinking on evolution, giving particular attention to his vision of a fraternal, unified society in order to draw out a sketch of his moral philosophy. The third section applies the resulting ethics of communion to the spatial inequalities made bare and worsened by the pandemic, seeking to contextualize de Chardin in the present age whilst showing that humanity has much work to do if it is to evolve into a truly loving and Christ-like society. Finally, a brief conclusion connects de Chardin's notion of "co-reflection" to the sociopolitical idea of deliberative democracy, highlighting the need for a profound sense of optimism and societal inclusiveness in our outlook towards the future. It is my hope that this essay will add to the scholarship on Teilhard de Chardin's thought and its power to inform multidisciplinary approaches which seek to (re)build the world.

The day will come when, after harnessing the ether, the winds,  
 the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love.  
 And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world,  
 man will have discovered fire.

—Teilhard de Chardin, *Toward the Future* (1975)

## COVID-19 AND UNEVEN VULNERABILITIES

As I write these words, I cannot help but feel a certain sense of dread. A new, possibly more transmissible variant of the coronavirus has made its way across the continents. Borders have once again been tightened, and renewed calls for caution and social distancing have threatened to plunge the world back into a state of fear and hysteria.

It is, then, quite the pleasant surprise that I have spent a considerable amount of my recent time reflecting on the life and scholarship of one very optimistic and hopeful man. The thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin has, in a very real sense, tempered many of my fears regarding pandemic-related developments in the last few weeks. I do not mean to say, of course, that reading about de Chardin and his work has resulted in a sort of blind, blanket optimism. Quite the contrary, the seeming bleakness of the present situation can be framed in a new, more pressing light. In other words, it is precisely the fragmentations—socially, geopolitically, economically, morally, etc.—made explicit by the COVID-19 pandemic which must *incite* and *ignite* in us a sense of hope to rebuild the world in a more socially just and loving way. With this hope comes the impetus to act, and de Chardin provides one avenue for doing so.

In question form, this essay aims to address the following: What might Teilhard's life and body of work teach us about the directionality or *telos* of the universe in general and human society in particular? How might his thinking enrich our understanding of the ways in which contemporary ethical discourses are structured and how they can be altered to be more inclusive and just? And, finally, considering the difficulties of the present time, how might Chardinian thought inform our efforts to restructure the world into one which more closely resembles a society of "fraternal love" (de Chardin, 1959: 323)?

At this point, it is important to note that one need not be a Catholic—indeed, one need not be a believer in any higher faith or power at all—to desire a state of affairs in which life and love take primacy above all else. It is in this sense that de Chardin's thinking can be thought of as universal, touching on matters which concern the human and the non-

human, the material and the spiritual (Langford, 2021). Having said that, I am deeply moved by his faith and find much inspiration in his hopeful vision for the future of creation, humanity included.

Drawing on my training as a student of global studies, I consider Teilhard's thought to be valuable for the development of a multidisciplinary approach in understanding pressing, real-world phenomena. In particular, my current research has focused on the workings of border-spanning forces like climate change and global capitalism, and how these forces affect the lived experiences of human beings on the ground. At present, what is clear is that globalization has simultaneously brought about unprecedented levels of wealth *and* widened the gap of socioeconomic inequality between different sectors in society (Berner, 1998; Chen and Shin, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has not only shed a spotlight on these existing inequities, it has likewise intensified them, as the poor and the marginalized are most vulnerable to the shocks brought about by measures to contain the spread of the virus. Instances of hunger (Ongcal, 2021), unemployment or loss of livelihood (Quijano et al., 2020), and exposure to the worst effects of natural calamities (Aguilar, 2020) disproportionately affect those at the margins of society. While my scholarship is focused on the plight of the urban poor, I do not doubt that those in rural areas face similar—if not worse—conditions. Moreover, these circumstances are not unique to the Philippine setting; they are, unfortunately, common global concerns, especially in cities (Davis, 2006).

The thought of Teilhard de Chardin opens up the possibility to rethink the ways in which our world is structured, and compels us to hope for a better, common future. In this light, I contend that de Chardin's optimistic articulation of evolution allows us to conceive of an ethics of radical communion which can serve as a guide in (re)building a more just and loving society in the post-pandemic era. I will use the case of contemporary spatial inequality in the urban centers of the Philippines to show that humanity is, for the time being (and especially during the current pandemic), not quite on track to evolve into the fraternal, Christ-like society which Teilhard had envisioned.

## **TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF RADICAL COMMUNION**

As with virtually all influential thinkers, Teilhard's convictions and later scholarship were greatly influenced by transformative life events. While he had set his sights on becoming a priest and scientist, the shock that was the First World War planted in Teilhard a burning conviction to make sense of the directionality of humanity (Cunningham, 1997). The sheer

brutality and senselessness of war compelled him to delve into the ultimate purpose of creation as a whole. It is in this instance that his unique background as a Jesuit and man of science proved to be instrumental. Among his numerous contributions to paleontology and philosophical thought, most pertinent for this essay's discussion is Teilhard's attempt to integrate the phenomenon of evolution with his faith in a purposeful, loving God.

Not unlike the conventional—if stereotypical—idea of a scientist, de Chardin made it a point to interrogate the ontological and metaphysical implications brought forth by his work in the field. As previous scholars have noted (see Curtis, 1962; Salmon and Schmitz-Moormann, 2012), it is possible to retrace the mental steps which Teilhard took as he was developing a unifying theory linking evolution with his Christian faith. Crucial here is an acknowledgement that, for Teilhard, creation and its myriad different constituents were in a constant, forward-moving process of unification and “greater cohesion” (de Chardin, 1964: 63-64). In his scientific findings, he noted the “tendency for matter, under favorable conditions, to construct naturally organized and elaborate arrangements” (Salmon and Schmitz-Moorman, 2012: 570). This is, perhaps, a point of cleavage between Teilhard and a number of his scientific colleagues, who were more familiar with the propensity of matter to break apart and be *disorganized*, as postulated by entropy theory. And yet, the very existence and continuing complexity of sentient, conscious life was proof positive that creation is more than just a process of *geogenesis*—rather, matter *also* coalesces to form organic life, or what can be termed *biogenesis* (Cunningham, 1997).

In this instance, it would do us well to emphasize that Teilhard had a deep affinity for both God and the physical world. He was, in other words, concerned not only with the materialist implications of his research but also the metaphysical (de Chardin, 1964; Faricy, 1988). It is not, therefore, farfetched to consider that the scientific discoveries of his time—not least of which was Darwin's theory of evolution—drove Teilhard to argue that the consciousness of various lifeforms was intentional on the part of a divine creator (de Chardin, 1961). There is, in his view, a purpose behind creation and evolution, as evidenced by the fact that there exist conscious beings which are typified by an internal sense of unity and oneness. An ant, for example, may lose an appendage, but its consciousness remains intact, which points to the need to look beyond the material and consider the spiritual. That is, as Curtis (1962) asserts, “[s]omething in the cosmos escapes from entropy” (327). This—I believe Teilhard would contend—is a salient feature of what he calls “hominization,” which entails the spiritualization of the human (de Chardin, 1961: 179-180).

Although evolution is popularly thought of as a phenomenon which occurs at the individual or, at most, species level, de Chardin is notable in that he busied himself with the wider, societal implications of this aforementioned growth of consciousness. In this regard, it is precisely de Chardin's deep faith in the Word become flesh (Faricy, 1988) that allows his thought to be developed into a far-reaching social and moral philosophy. Echoing his concern for both the material and the spiritual, Teilhard makes it a point to integrate the divine and the mortal, the sacred and the profane, matter and spirit (de Chardin, 1959; Salmon and Schmitz-Moormann, 2012). The incarnation of Jesus Christ, therefore, signals for Teilhard a sort of culmination or high point in the journey of humankind: by assuming human form and partaking of the human condition, God has paved the way for humanity to partake of heavenly life. And so, to be human is to share, however minimally, in the experience—i.e., *both* the humanity and divinity—of Christ. Crucially, the invitation to partake of the incarnation experience is universal and, for Teilhard, the divine is the *telos* of the human story (de Chardin, 1961). The Omega point, then, to which humanity and, indeed all of creation, is converging, entails the development of a growing consciousness *beyond* the individual (Cunningham, 1997). Simply put, in the Chardinian ethos, evolution necessarily involves the growing process of socialization.

So far, we have detailed a rough sketch of evolution, from *geogenesis* (generally speaking, the creation of matter) to *biogenesis* (in the broadest sense, the springing forth of individual, biological consciousness). The social turn comes in Teilhard's conceptualization of the noosphere, a plane "above the animal biosphere, a human sphere, a sphere of reflection, of conscious invention, of conscious souls" (de Chardin, 1966: 63). It is this sphere of conscious connection and unity among human beings that, Teilhard believes, will bring all of creation closer towards the Omega point.

Beyond the terminology, what might human society look like given de Chardin's conception of evolution—from *geogenesis* to *biogenesis* to a communal, as-yet-unrealized *noogenesis*? The answer, in the simplest, most poignant formulation, is a society built on love and a genuine "respect for the other" (Salmon and Schmitz-Moormann, 2012: 571-572). This comes as no surprise, as the endpoint of humanity according to Teilhard is the divine, from whom love springs eternal. Evolution can thus be understood as not just an outward expansion and proliferation of matter, but also an intimate process of a convergence of the spirit. If the noosphere is ever to be attained, human society must be structured in such a way as to foster communion—the same communion embodied by the perfect divinity and

humanity of Jesus. As it stands, and due to the current pandemic, humanity is far from the fraternal, Christ-like society which Teilhard had envisioned. That said, however, it is now possible to sketch a rough ethics of radical communion resulting from de Chardin's life and body of work. Such a moral philosophy is built on the exposition of a possible and desired noosphere in which all of humanity (and creation) is invited to grow in consciousness and partake, collectively, of eternal life in the divine, which includes the desire to emulate Christ's sense of service and altruism. Critical here is the willingness or intentionality to go beyond the self, to choose to fraternize, to dare to love the other (de Chardin, 1959). It is for this reason that I call this an ethics of *radical* communion—the radical act is to reach out and care for someone other than ourselves, something which the present world has made increasingly difficult to do.

### **SPATIAL INEQUALITY AND CHARDINIAN THOUGHT**

This section attempts to apply the ethics of radical communion born from the thought of de Chardin to the long-lived spatial inequality in the urban centers of the Philippines, all the while recontextualizing the status of the marginalized in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on this localized example, I hope to show that human society has thus far been unable to “evolve” beyond its exclusivist notions of love, which ultimately hold it back from attaining a deeper consciousness (in the Chardinian sense).

My current research is focused on the plight of the urban poor, especially with regard to how moral boundaries are created between the wealthy and the less fortunate. Based on recent estimates, there are anywhere between 4 to 6 million slum dwellers in the Greater Metro Manila region (Garrido, 2019). Considering the social and economic impact wrought by the coronavirus pandemic, this number has, in all likelihood, increased over the last two years. Urban precarity is typified by such issues as tenure insecurity, a lack of access to basic public services, greater vulnerability to environmental shocks and public health risks, and overall malnutrition and hunger.

As a global studies student, I have a keen interest in the workings of transnational phenomena which have a profound effect on the lives of everyday people like the urban poor, despite the fact that [1] they might not fully comprehend the global forces at play and [2] they are virtually powerless to influence the decisions being made even though those decisions directly affect them. In Teilhard's time, the competing ideologies of democracy, communism, and fascism loomed large in the social consciousness (de Chardin, 1959), as it

seemed that powerful nation-states would stop at nothing to expand their influence and spread their chosen system of governance. Presently, however, the Western model of the liberal democracy has precedence (Chen and Shin, 2019). Although there are a number of states which tend towards a communist or even fascist model, the world has generally seen the rise of free trade and the growing power of multinational corporations. The last fifty or so years, in particular, can be described as the age of neoliberal capitalism. As mentioned at the start of this essay, globalization of this sort has undoubtedly resulted in economic growth. Still, the concern remains that wealth is not equitably or fairly distributed, which means inequality has likewise intensified (Davis, 2006). For a relatively straightforward description of the logic at play, Harvey (2005: 2) deserves a lengthy quotation:

Neoliberalism is...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. ... [I]f markets do not exist...then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture.

The neoliberal ethos, therefore, is adamant in its claim that the way forward is to place full trust in the logic of the free market. The oft-cited “invisible hand” will ensure that everyone will, at some point, receive their due. There is a need, at this point, to proceed with caution and, to that end, I must emphasize the nuances involved. It is undeniable that rates of gross domestic product (GDP) and economic growth have been higher in the past few years—especially before the pandemic—than at any previous point in history. And yet, poverty and resource inequality are similarly at an all-time high (Chen and Shin, 2019; Seki, 2020). Clearly, then, there is a need to subject neoliberalism to critical inquiry, if for no other reason than to make sense of such a blatant and unfortunate paradox (i.e., great suffering amidst great wealth).

Due to the limitations on physical movement brought about by the pandemic, my research has been more theoretical in nature. Once again, I am concerned with the creation and durability of moral boundaries between the wealthy and the urban poor—the former are often described as upright and disciplined, while the latter are frequently characterized as uncouth, uneducated, and undisciplined. As per Harvey (2005), there is a tendency in

neoliberal thinking to assign responsibility almost exclusively to the individual rather than to systemic or structural causes. Specifically speaking, the plight of the urban poor is the result of a complex matrix of different factors, many of which are beyond their control. To cite just one example, housing conglomerates which cater to the upper and middle classes in the Philippines take it upon themselves to bid for government housing projects, despite intending all along to create highly priced gated communities that ultimately shut out the less fortunate from a dignified space to live in the city (Ortega, 2018). In the slums, the poor are forced to subsist on unhealthy, packaged food for survival (Ruiz-Tafoya, 2019). Taking into consideration the fact that there is a dearth of employment opportunities available for those living in impoverished areas (Kusaka, 2017; Garrido, 2019), it is no wonder that the marginalized seem to be trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and suffering.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, almost undeniably, been hardest on those living in the margins of society. Though there have been some bright spots of camaraderie and mutual aid, for the most part, the fraternal, loving society which Teilhard had envisioned has failed to materialize. The Philippine government's punitive, disciplinary pandemic response has, in a very literal sense, been deadly to the urban poor. Directed to stay home despite not having any food, the poor are forced to break the law or starve to death (Aguilar, 2020; Quijano et al., 2020). Even if they are to take a short stroll outside their shanty houses, slum dwellers are disciplined with heavy fines and even deadly, physical action (Kusaka, 2020; Hapal, 2021). It must be noted that even though the exact same pandemic restrictions are applicable to affluent city dwellers, practically all of the (life- and livelihood-threatening) disciplinary measures enacted by the state are experienced by the urban poor.

How would Teilhard react to such a bleak state of affairs? In what way has human society failed move towards some semblance of the noosphere? Teilhard warned of the excesses espoused by democracy and communism even before the start of the Second World War (de Chardin, 1959: 319-322). Democracy, according to him, was susceptible to a blind valorization of individual freedom to the detriment of broader social good. On the other hand, communism tended to be too materialistic, no longer valuing the uniqueness of the individual human being and instead treating him as just another cog in the greater machine. In the present age, I would argue that neoliberal globalization adopts both of these destructive characteristics. Market orthodoxy has ushered in the privileging of *homo economicus* (Ortega, 2018), or the idea of the human being who is economically productive and secure in his own right. There is an inherent individualism in this conception of the



human being, and a real tendency to disparage those who are not as wealthy or materially successful as oneself. Conversely, neoliberal rationality relegates so many of the destitute and desperate to lives of menial, impersonal work as easily expendable and replaceable laborers (Harvey, 2005; Davis, 2006; Seki, 2020).

Evolution, then, in the sense articulated by Teilhard, has been stunted by the current state of the world. The pandemic has laid bare the vast gulf in well-being between the haves and the have-nots. The drive towards the Omega point has, for the time being, been stalled because it has become difficult to enter into a state of radical communion with the humanity which exists beyond the self. Spatial inequality and the moral boundaries between groups of people in the cities of the Philippines illustrate how the noosphere is yet to be achieved. Still, despite all the seeming desolation, there remain possibilities of hope.

### **DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AS CO-REFLECTION**

It would seem defeatist to end on a somber note, especially given the profound sense of hope and optimism which radiate from Teilhard de Chardin's thought. In this regard, I will conclude this essay with a brief foray into the notion of co-reflection as an exercise in the process of evolution. In line with the ultimate purpose which Teilhard believed the progressive universe was moving towards, he likewise thought of evolution as not just a fixed state of being, but also one of becoming (Curtis, 1962). Framing it more personally, evolution—in the Chardinian sense—does not simply *happen to* me; rather, I take part in it. This, according to Langford (2021: 2-3), is Teilhard's notion of co-reflection, the act of engaging in meaning-making and explicitly incorporating the consciousness of others in the determination of evolution. The noosphere doesn't just spring forth out of nowhere; rather, there needs to be an intentionality pointing towards it.

In my view, this is a clear step towards radical communion, as the more common idea of reflection has to do with simple *self*-reflection, whereby individuals retreat into themselves to ponder their questions and figure out possible answers. *Co*-reflection, meanwhile, is radical precisely because one makes the conviction that decisions have to involve a consciousness greater than one's own. There is, in other words, the unequivocal acknowledgement that evolution is a *social* process.

As a way to rebuild the world in the post-pandemic era, I am of the view that Teilhard's thought can enliven and strengthen calls for a shift towards more inclusive forms of governance. In particular, the sociopolitical concept of deliberative democracy—

whereby communities and stakeholders create decisions via in-depth reason-giving (Chambers, 2012)—seems very promising. Democracy in this view is not just limited to voting, but to a constant process of and invitation to dialogue. This, I believe, carries the spirit which de Chardin envisioned when he thought of the noosphere.

If the world is to truly “build back better” as many governments are wont to say, there is a need to evolve from our current ethics which so easily categorizes and excludes other human beings. In the final analysis, we are called to enter into an evolutionary dialogue with one another—for doing so will not only benefit us, but creation as a whole.

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