

The Political Structure of Society: *Christian Ethics* as the ‘Love for the Other’ in the Midst of Violence

Christopher Ryan Maboloc, Ph.D.
Ateneo de Davao University
Davao City, Philippines
ryanmaboloc75@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study discusses the old problem of democracy in the Philippines in the light of Paul Ricoeur’s critical analysis of the dual-nature of the State. It also seeks to explain the dissolution of human persons in the phenomenon of mass civilization. According to Leovino Ma. Garcia, this can be observed on three levels – the technical, the socio-economic and the cultural. The author thinks that the subjugation of individuals in modern society comes from a colonial logic. In order to restore our humanity in the midst of all violence, people are called to live as true Christians – ethical and just.

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The Dual-Nature of the State

Politics in today's world challenges the values that define for all people the meaning of their humanity, values that "all at once permeate us, support us, limit us and yet subsist only by our consent and action."¹ Indeed, in very precarious and radical political situations such as now, human civilization simply has to determine both what is necessary and possible, or in the words of Paul Ricoeur, "a nature and a task."² The paradigmatic reality of the state requires that we understand it as some form of a living power structure. The fate of human civilization depends on the survival of our democratic ideals. For Ricoeur, the character of modern civilization is a "will-to-live."³ People need to reflect on the role of political power in their lives and see how and why the misuse of this power may erode the dignity of those who are constituted outside the state.

Ricoeur thinks that for the very first time in history, "we experience ourselves as a single humanity which enlarges its capital, its instruments and means of working, living and thinking."⁴ Yet, radical situations determine the way people think and live. Ricoeur explains to us that "for one, the state, has the face of the magistrate; for the other, it has the face of the beast."⁵ Thus, for him, the state is both the face of justice and oppression.⁶ The state, in this respect, is a modern day

¹ Leovino Garcia, "The Meaning of Human Existence in Paul Ricoeur's Socio-Political Writings," in *BUDHI* 2 (3) 1998: 3.

² Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. Translated by Erazim Kohak, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 125; as cited in Garcia, "The Meaning of Human Existence...," 3

³ Paul Ricoeur, "Christianity and the Meaning of History," in *The Journal of Religion* 21 (1952): 242; as cited in Garcia, "The Meaning of Human Existence...," 3.

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Tasks of the Political Educator* (1973): 274; as cited in Garcia, "The Meaning of Human Existence...," 7.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Political and Social Essays*, (Ohio: Ohio State University, 1974), 201

⁶ Ibid.

paradox. Theoretically, Ricoeur presents herein a two-fold conception of the state – the ‘Pauline’ and the ‘Johannine’ interpretation. On one hand, the *Pauline* nature of the state is that image of a just, benevolent ruler who puts the interests of his subjects above everything. On the other, the *Johannine* nature of the state is the image of a powerful monarch who punishes and kills, if necessary. Thus, Ricoeur says that “politics is to be identified with the history of power.”⁷

Ricoeur says that “St. Paul invites his correspondents to obey not out of fear, but by reason of conscience: the state which carries the sword, which punishes, is instituted by God and for the good of the citizen.”⁸ Indeed, “the magistrate is God’s minister for good...ruling justly...when he faithfully fulfills his duty.”⁹ In the ideal sense, just laws are made in order to protect the weak from the strong. By its nature, political power is not corrupt. Power is meant to serve the good. The powerful possesses a moral obligation to uphold what is just and reasonable. The concept of the common good in this sense can mean that form of solidarity wherein the guilty must face the wheels of justice. But on this note, Leovino Garcia is right in saying that “while the history of technology is characterized by progress, the history of power is characterized by ambiguity.”¹⁰

Garcia further explains that the above appeal “sounds paradoxical, immediately coming after St. Paul’s celebration of the love which creates reciprocal bonds, whereas the State does not pardon, and returns evil for evil. The magistrate punishes those who do wrong.”¹¹ Garcia says that what becomes apparent is the tension between “love and justice,” between “affection and fear,” and between “authority and

⁷ Garcia, “The Meaning of Human Existence...,” 8

⁸ Ricoeur, *Political and Social Essays*, 202

⁹ Romans 13:1-7

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Leovino Garcia, “The Political Structure of Society,” in *Philosophy of Man*, (Davao City: ADDU, 1996), 2.

submission”.¹² But Ricoeur believes that “the state is this dual-natured reality, simultaneously instituted and fallen.”¹³ The problem, however, is that the human person is all lost in the political equation insofar as the state has become an untamable beast. According to Garcia, as an institution, “the state is not a stable order but a dangerous power.”¹⁴ For him, “the state is that reality which up to now has always included murder as the condition of its very existence, of survival, and first of all, of its inception.”¹⁵

According to Garcia, the state’s sly charm is the mark of its violence.¹⁶ It does so as it tries to perform the types of “marvels by which it enslaves men who succumbed to its lie, flattery and mystification.”¹⁷ The state is morally tasked to use power based on its stabilizing role. But since power means coercion, for this matter, only reasonable coercion is what the law permits, without which the state is nothing but a monster. In the end, our brand of democracy must come to terms with the reality of pluralism and of violence in our midst. In this regard, it is important to examine Philippine society beyond its colonial hangover. Given the reality of radical violence brought forth by the saga of the kind of political life Filipinos have, this paper works under the premise that the moral good must remain as the normative standard in the establishment of a just and humane society.

The Phenomenon of Mass Civilization

In the phenomenon of mass civilization, the human person as a poor worker is either promoted or degraded.¹⁸ Machinations by the elite, all in cahoots with government instrumentalities and vested interests, mean that the Filipino

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ricoeur, *Political and Social Essays*, 202

¹⁴ Ricoeur, “The Political Structure of Society,” 3

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Garcia, “The Meaning of Human Existence...,” 18

worker is simply reduced to the production of goods for consumption, and nothing more. In such a world, a day in the factory is never an instance of self-actualization. The clear exploitation of the Filipino can be observed in the life of a gas boy manning the pump. He is diminished into a mindless subject. In this modern world such as ours, the individual who does not have enough education is degraded by means of low pay, often branded as dumb or imbecile, or in Garcia's words, "an abdication of one's personality and thus, one's claim on history."¹⁹

The value of every human being, his dignity or moral worth, is demeaned in favor of the interests of the powerful and the moneyed. Poverty, which results to constant hunger and at its worst, perpetual starvation, can point to that one insidious culprit – massive income inequalities. Further, it reveals something more onerous – disrespect for the moral worth of the poor Filipino. Massification also points to the diminution of the worker into a mere number, a nameless face or a faceless name. Every poor man out there is no more than a small part of a colossal whole – society's industrial megamachine – but he is not an indispensable component of it.

Firstly, on the technical level, mass civilization means that human persons have become integrated into the evil that is consumer capitalism. Positively, Ricoeur thinks that this includes the "whole network of organized mediations which are put into the service of science, politics, economics, and even ways of living and means of leisure."²⁰ But this also points to millions of young individuals whose lives are controlled by a materialist conception of the world. In such a world, there is a price tag to everything, including the very happiness of persons. This reinforces the massification of people who are reduced into mere commodities.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 275; as cited in Garcia, "The Meaning of Human Existence..." 7

Secondly, on the socio-economic level, mass civilization is the “capitalist society’s own requirement and partial effect to maintain a competitive system,” which is at the same time, “its antagonist through class warfare.”²¹ Society is linked to the movement of financial markets and the consumption of consumer goods. Globalization is just another name for the way advanced societies dominate international markets by stifling competition. The policies of the IMF and the WB have actually destroyed rather than help improve Third World economies. This is the domination found in the models of growth that only serve the interests of developed nations.

Thirdly, the cultural level shows how certain hegemonic structures hide “mass civilization as product of a bourgeois civilization’s invitation for general consumption.”²² Today, internet connectivity determines how people engage with each other in a superficial way. The element of the inter-human has suddenly disappeared, with people replacing their warm bodies with cold, humorless avatars. Whereas the television in the past served as the anchorage point of cultural assimilation, including the brainwashing of people, the internet today defines for us what mass society is all about – *Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter*. Trending is just another term for ‘not thinking’. Human lives are absent in the modern world. In this way, “the public is the mass.”²³

In sum, mass civilization is the tragic picture of the diminished value of the interpersonal dimension of human existence. While people bask in the luxury and comfort of modern life, the poor worker remains in industrial farms, women agonize in sweatshops and hazardous factories, and children continue to suffer in dangerous work places. This is the sad picture of a society that has failed to recognize the

²¹ Paul Ricoeur and J.M. Domenach, “Persons and Mass,” in *Cross Currents* 2 (1952): 57.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 60

moral worth of persons. The Philippines is a country that falls fittingly into that description. Given this, people must have the conviction to do what is necessary in order to dismantle systemic corruption and a cultural divide that has pushed the often conflicting lives of the people into utter meaninglessness

Mass Society and ‘Technological Rationality’

The progress of Western societies can be largely attributed to the development of effective constitutional democracies. Autocratic rule is now widely rejected in the West. This development came to be understood as part of the evolution of reason as inspired by the *Enlightenment*. The modern state has now come to symbolize the life of Hegel’s *Spirit* through the emancipation of the individual. Garcia thinks that “Ricoeur warns us against the illusion of viewing our human society exclusively on the basis of a growing rationality.”²⁴ As stated by Ricoeur, the desire for power can be attached to absurdity. This absurdity is the diminution of many aspects of human life into a form of technological control. By reducing everything into the instrumental, including human relationships, Garcia says that “we render our whole existence meaningless.”²⁵

For Ricoeur, any Constitution “is the legal expression of the movement by which the will of the State stabilizes itself in a law which defines power, distributes it and limits it.”²⁶ The state in this sense possesses the sole authority to be able to determine how citizens are to meaningfully engage in civic interaction, including how they are to distribute society’s resources and prevent the few from oppressing others by acquiring their largesse. The modern state is just and fair insofar as it seeks to divide on equal terms the resources of

²⁴ Garcia, “The Meaning of Human Existence...,” 24

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *Social and Political Essays*, 202

society. Yet, the state is the face of oppression because formalistic rules, policies, and practices are dubious ways that can prevent the bureaucracy from reaching out to persons. This impersonal development of the apparatus of the state is the “rationalization of power through the instrumentality of the administration.”²⁷

The bureaucracy is the manifestation of Max Weber’s notion of a legal-rational authority. All types of authority for Weber are a form of domination. In this regard, the state must perform its duties and responsibilities on the basis of laws and fair rules. Laws require free and organized public discussion.²⁸ Without fair or just procedures, persons in authority can abuse their position. The state should define the citizenry’s “different roles, their rights and their obligations.”²⁹ But the above moral configuration requires citizens who are mature and are able to plan, decide, and act reasonably. But without the benefit of authentic education, a mass civilization is precluded from possessing the needed competence to mature as citizens and thereby govern themselves using democratic principles.

For this reason, the reduction of society into a mass may catapult the modern state into a dubious entity that is ready to devour the lives of innocent civilians. Without true democracy, people will be deprived of their unfettered choices and as such, they can be easily manipulated. In this regard, in a weak democracy, the state emerges as a violent beast that will dominate the multitude. The technocrats will lord it over in a society where the masses do not have control of their political will. Consequently, the state then becomes a diabolical apparatus of violence, a tool for the rich and powerful that allows them to encroach into the lives of people or even violate their basic human rights with impunity. The state can perpetuate this type of violence

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 205

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 206

because fanaticism in a mass society will fuel the blind obedience of the many to extra-judicial approaches.

Rationality dangerously regresses into the pretentious reasoning of the strong and the influential. As a result, what is considered as legal-rational authority is nothing but authoritarian rule. In fact, technocracy is no more than a tool of deception employed by the elite. Mass society can easily fall prey to those armchair analysis, statistics, surveys and propaganda. Expert knowledge simply doubles as another form of exploitation insofar as it reduces human life into technical variables. In the civic sphere, some ideologies act as masks for the latent desire of some to control the lives of people. For this reason, mass societies are like a herd.

Charismatic leaders often project a sweet plethora of expectations. But deep beneath are ill motives of suppressing freedom in the name of some absolute principle. In a mass society, public discussion is in fact useless since people participation is constrained by their dire situation. Things become mere formalities while citizens actually remain voiceless and thus, powerless and without hope. Indeed, what happens is that democratic consolidation is impossible since majority of our elected officials who are supposed to represent the interests of the disadvantaged possess the same self-serving motives. Exclusion, hence, becomes a fact of life in a society where political discourse is left in the hands of a cultured class that labels the masses as irrational outsiders.

Restoring our Humanity

What confronts the modern state today is the moral imperative to act in a Christian way. The refusal to embrace this responsibility bespeaks of the nihilist attitude that pervades many among us. Now, this challenge falls into the hands of the good Christian as "he gives witness to the

overabundance of meaning.”³⁰ Thus, according to Garcia, “in the face of this meaninglessness affecting our society, the challenge for us is to join in the struggle for meaning.”³¹ For Ricoeur, the proper function of the philosopher, “is to wage a battle against the forgetfulness of the origin and destiny of being human.”³² The essence of true Christian humanism “presents itself as the greatest chance for the unfolding of values that are most treasured by modern man.”³³

The Christian is tasked to build a community that is against the profit-centered way of life. It is a way of life that abhors violence and exploitation. To be a Christian, in this regard, “is to believe in the overabundance of sense over the abundance of nonsense.”³⁴ Being a Christian is about offering an ethical way of life. The political Jesus must be understood as that savior who will ultimately give preference to the poor, the hopeless and the marginalized. Garcia explains that “in sum, the Christian vocation in the present civilization is to wrest the positive from the negative, the human from the inhuman, and the sacred from the profane.”³⁵ All of such rests upon the idea of Christian hope, which intends to reshape history on the basis of meaning and mystery. It is by means of embracing life’s meaning that the Filipino can confront the threat of ambiguity in his present-day existence.

This is, however, a paradox since the meaning of history is often hidden from us, and it is for this reason that it rests in our belief in God as the true and only master of our destiny. Rightly so, Garcia also explains that “Christian hope neither renounces the tragic ambiguity of concrete history nor reduces itself to the optimistic rationality of abstract

³⁰ Garcia, “The Meaning of Human Existence...,” 25

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Paul Ricoeur, “L’Evangile et les intellectuels” (1951): 489; as cited in Garcia, “The Meaning of Human Existence...,” 27.

³⁴ Garcia, “The Meaning of Human Existence...,” 41

³⁵ Ibid., 29

history.”³⁶ Invoking the good politics of a Christian as a righteous citizen in the state, Ricoeur tells us that “what Christianity offers to the world is a certain vision of man, capable of bestowing a meaning to our action in the world.”³⁷ This meaning rests in the message of salvation that was proclaimed by Jesus Christ, i.e., “God loves the poor.” This, in essence, offers the possibility of real salvation.

To conclude, the restoration of our humanity is rooted in that attitude of openness to others and the recognition of their true worth as persons. From a political end, this comes in the form of institutional reform that a good Christian can initiate, or in the words of Karl Gaspar, a process of “social conscientization” in order to change human society. Ricoeur speaks of the same when he too advocates for a “critical vigilance.”³⁸ The true ethics of the Christian faith is one that enables us to view humanity as one single person who is “the subject of one unique history and one unique destiny.”³⁹ Christian ethics performs the *love for the other* through the sacrifice of one’s self. The survival of modern civilization rests in the perpetuation of this value.

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³⁶ Ibid., 34

³⁷ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 312; as cited in Garcia, “The Meaning of Human Existence...,” 41

³⁸ Ricoeur, *Political and Social Essays*, 212

³⁹ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 312; as cited in Garcia, “The Meaning of Human Existence...,” 41

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