

Exploring Abdu'l-Bahá's insights on strikes and labor movement within the framework of an integrated global economy

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This paper originally formed a segment of a series of articles in Persian commemorating the centenary of Abdul Baha's Some Answered Questions. I adopted a normative-prescriptive approach when composing this article.

One of the chapters in Abdu'l-Bahá's "Some Answered Questions" delves into the topic of workers' strikes. This inclusion may raise questions among readers, as the book primarily addresses religious and philosophical matters. However, it's essential to remember that this book was compiled in response to Mrs. Clifford Barney's inquiries. One of her specific questions pertained to workers' strikes, prompting Abdu'l-Bahá to offer his insights on this subject.

Furthermore, it's worth noting that the Baha'i Faith places significant emphasis on economic matters, the pursuit of social justice, and the eradication of extreme economic disparities. Abdu'l-Bahá has elaborated on these teachings in his various writings and statements. During his historic journeys to Europe and America, he shared the spiritual ideals of the Baha'i Faith as a means of fostering social transformation worldwide. Among these teachings, the resolution of economic issues was considered crucial for achieving global peace and human unity.

Abdu'l-Bahá stressed that establishing public peace and international brotherhood necessitates the expansion of the foundation of social justice and the elimination of severe economic inequalities. At the turn of the 20th century, workers' strikes and economic disparities had emerged as pressing social problems in industrialized nations. These challenges, which have persisted and even become global issues in the present day, prompted Abdu'l-Bahá to address economic matters from three distinct angles in his writings and statements.

1- In this discourse, Abdu'l-Bahá delved into the dynamic aspect of humanity's spiritual and moral evolution, without delving into the intricate technical details of economics. He regarded this spiritual and moral transformation as the ultimate solution, an essential prerequisite, and a comprehensive remedy for all of humankind's problems and challenges. He viewed humans,

when spiritually enlightened and their character elevated, as naturally resolving economic issues, eradicating societal conflicts, and restoring equilibrium to social forces.

From this standpoint, Abdu'l-Bahá underscored that the fundamental prerequisite for addressing economic problems is the transformation of human motives. Importantly, his perspective on the role of spirituality and ethics in the economy was not a mere fanciful idealism or wishful thinking. Rather, it was founded on the belief that solving economic issues aligns with God's divine will and represents a historical imperative for reshaping the world and ushering in a new global civilization.

To comprehend how spirituality and ethics can tangibly and practically alter economic motives, it becomes necessary to explore their views on the nature and status of individuals, as well as the principles governing the spiritual and moral evolution of both individuals and societies.

Abdu'l-Bahá did not perceive nature and society as random phenomena; instead, he viewed their interconnected existence as mutually indicative. Furthermore, he recognized that this evolutionary movement was directed toward spiritual and moral perfection, which should manifest prominently in a flourishing global civilization.

This civilization, in Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective, represents the culmination of an old order that has lost its spiritual and moral creative vigor and harbors the latent potential for a superior civilization. While each historical era exhibits its own unique manifestations and institutions in the course of social evolution, a common feature endures across all societal systems: the tension between two driving forces.

One force is the self-centered, aggressive material motivation, driven by the pursuit of survival. The other is the spiritual motivation, centered on cooperation, submission, and mutual survival. Abdu'l-Bahá contended that in humanity's social evolution, a civilization grounded in materialistic motives is in decline, while one founded on ethics and cooperation is burgeoning and prospering.

These two contrasting tendencies or motivations can be perceived as the underlying principles that distinguish economics from natural sciences. Consequently, in the discussion of spirituality

and the economy, we are addressing the historical and creative interplay between these motivations.

In essence, social evolution encompasses two aspects: the visible façade manifesting in economic and social interactions among individuals, and the motivations and values that drive these relations. Therefore, while the economy plays a pivotal role in structuring relations related to production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, at the level of motivations and values, it serves as a means to refine behavior along the path toward moral ideals and the realization of a civilization characterized by cooperation and coexistence.

In conclusion, within the spiritual themes of this book, discussions on economics are not out of place but rather intrinsic to understanding the intricate interplay between human motivations and societal progress.

2- The second dimension of Hazrat Abdu'l-Bahá's statements and works concerning the economic issue revolves around the explanation and elaboration of other spiritual and social principles inherent in the Baha'i Faith. He envisions that as these teachings are fully embraced and implemented, many of the economic challenges faced by human society will find resolution. For instance, as wars cease, as equal rights for men and women are established, as global public education becomes compulsory, as linguistic and script unity is achieved, as international civil society takes root, and as a culture of peace and coexistence is promoted, it becomes evident that the combined impact and interplay of these teachings provide a foundation for adapting livelihoods and addressing economic issues.

From this perspective, Abdu'l-Bahá does not regard the Baha'i Faith as a narrow economic doctrine but rather as a comprehensive framework. He extends the concept of economy to encompass all the conditions and requisites necessary for the creation of a global civilization grounded in principles of justice, unity, and genuine freedom. In essence, the economy must be in harmony with the conditions, needs, and developments of the new era, which leads the way in the human society's progression towards an international system. This ensures that the economy can effectively address the material requirements, social well-being, and growth of human societies.

Failure to consider each component of this international system leads to uneven and what might be described as "cancerous" economic growth, rendering it inadequate in meeting the full spectrum of human needs. However, from this juncture, the economy becomes intertwined with ethical theory, political philosophy, and educational systems, becoming an integral part of the components and interrelations within a comprehensive worldview. This holistic approach aims to transform both individuals and collectives and integrates the economy into a broader framework that facilitates the advancement of individuals and society as a whole.

3- Abdu'l-Bahá's third perspective encompasses teachings with a distinct economic dimension. These teachings encompass topics such as the equitable division of inheritance, the implementation of progressive taxation, the roles of peasants and other societal strata in economic reforms, the distribution of wealth for the common good, and the reverence for private property. The inclusion of the issue of strikes in one of the chapters of *Some Answered Questions* reflects practical references of this nature.

In this chapter, Abdu'l-Bahá delves into one of the most crucial economic and social issues of the contemporary era, providing a comprehensive examination of its intricacies and technical aspects. Through this, he adapts the Baha'i perspective into the principle of moderation. When discussing livelihoods, it is emphasized that societal peace remains elusive as long as the majority of people endure economic hardships and deprivation of life's essentials in impoverished areas, while a minority enjoys extreme prosperity and comfort.

This socio-economic disparity leads to crises and social imbalances that erode the foundations of social cohesion and cooperation. Consequently, it hinders the prospect of attaining peace and reconciliation within society.

The issue of strike and labor movement

During the lifetime of Abdu'l-Bahá, spanning the late 19th century and well into the third decade of the 20th century, the world was undergoing significant social and political upheavals. These times witnessed deepening social disparities, with traditional values fading under the influence of new beliefs, and reform movements advocating innovation, freedom, and equality gaining prominence. One of the most notable of these movements was the labor movement.

It was only natural for Abdu'l-Bahá, as both the spiritual leader of the Bahá'í community and a social thinker, to respond to these emerging trends and developments. During his lifetime, the socialist movement gained momentum in Europe and rapidly spread worldwide as a catalyst for societal transformation, economic justice, equitable wealth distribution, and the protection of workers' rights. Simultaneously, capitalism solidified its foundations, driving unparalleled economic growth. In Europe and America, essential infrastructure for economic expansion, such as transportation and communication systems, was developed. Discoveries in new energy sources and the advent of machinery revolutionized mass production, leading to an increase in consumer goods. Banking and investment systems expanded significantly, empowering capital owners and extending their influence into politics and executive branches.

The economic advancements that accompanied the growth of industrial capitalism created a chasm between capital interests and the demands of laborers. Profit and productivity took precedence over economic justice and social equality. Workers were compelled to toil long hours for meager wages to keep the wheels of production turning. This backdrop set the stage for the emergence of labor strikes. Workers, facing unfavorable working conditions and inadequate pay, protested collectively by staging strikes and work stoppages, demanding improved conditions and higher wages. Labor unions played a pivotal role in organizing and leading these strikes.

The genesis of labor unions can be traced back to the European Industrial Revolution, which mechanized production, established factories, and disrupted the labor supply-demand equilibrium as populations flocked to urban and industrial centers in search of work. This led to intensified competition for employment and a surge in unemployment, accompanied by its social and economic consequences. Factory owners, benefiting from this labor surplus, accumulated wealth at the expense of their workers. This conflict between workers and factory owners was a primary catalyst for the labor movement, with protests and strikes becoming the means to improve working conditions.

As this conflict intensified, it escalated into wider-scale confrontations, including violent clashes, in Europe and America. Law enforcement and security forces entered the fray, exacerbating the tensions, which soon took on revolutionary undertones. During Abdu'l-Bahá's lifetime, the issue

of strikes became one of the most pressing social concerns. The growing strife between laborers and employers increasingly pushed societies toward crises and social revolutions.

For instance, in 1892, in Pennsylvania, workers at the Carnegie Steel Company staged a strike to protest their working conditions, facing strong resistance from the company, which aimed to dismantle the burgeoning trade union movement. The encounter between workers and police and security forces hired by the company resulted in casualties among the workers. Consequently, the strike failed to achieve its objectives, and workers not only failed to secure better conditions but also experienced increased working hours and decreased wages. Nevertheless, this event marked a turning point in the expansion of labor unions in America, which reached their zenith in the 1930s following the stock market crash and ensuing economic recession.

The issue of strikes initially emerged as part of the labor movement to enhance working conditions and wages but evolved over time to encompass broader dimensions. Economic demands took on a political dimension, becoming a tool to challenge the existing social system. The labor movement and the issue of strikes were closely intertwined with the socialist movement.

The socialist movement, which encompassed a wide spectrum of opinions and ideas, sought to protest any form of exploitation and social oppression. It promised a new world characterized by social justice, the empowerment of marginalized groups, women's rights, freedom, and was influenced by the revolutionary spirit of the 19th century. Socialist founders pledged to eliminate war, expand education, and establish a society free from exploitation and alienation. Socialism can be viewed as a form of social idealism and a reaction against individualistic systems, criticizing the pursuit of self-interest and profit at the expense of society.

Socialists believed that the production and distribution of wealth should be collective, with society – and the government acting on its behalf – intervening in the wealth production process to prevent wealth concentration and monopolization, thereby ensuring fair wealth distribution. This alignment between the labor movement and socialist goals was a natural consequence. Marxism, a philosophy within socialism, considered itself scientific socialism, emphasizing the historical role of the working class not only in trade union protests and improving working

conditions but also as having a destiny to lead social evolution and establish a new era free from exploitation and alienation in human society.

The labor movement and its evolving ideas during the 20th century exerted profound influences on the social, economic, and political systems of nations. Some countries embraced socialist systems, rejecting free-market principles and private ownership, while capitalist systems underwent internal transformations. For example, after the stock market crash, which triggered a severe capitalist crisis in the 1930s, the role of the government in the economy expanded over the three terms of Roosevelt's presidency. Laws were enacted to enhance workers' benefits, provide unemployment insurance, improve working conditions, raise wages, and address retirement and other labor-related issues. The government recognized the right of workers to negotiate with company owners and managers to safeguard their rights and interests, including the option to halt work if necessary.

During the Cold War, the labor movement played a pivotal role in the competition between the communist and capitalist systems. In the latter half of the 20th century, the communist system experienced a crisis, with uprisings against it occurring in countries such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia. In Poland, workers took the lead in protest demonstrations. This wave of change rapidly spread to other Soviet satellites, ultimately resulting in the collapse of the communist system in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In the Western world, governments employed tax and monetary mechanisms, as well as stock market and banking oversight, to stave off a crisis similar to the 1930s. However, the inherent cyclical nature of capitalism, characterized by alternating periods of stagnation and prosperity, led to various forms of crises. This bipolar tendency, akin to a rollercoaster ride, caused economic actions and motives to oscillate between depression and euphoria. On numerous occasions, stock markets teetered on the brink of collapse, and banks and financial institutions faced bankruptcy.

While economic prosperity soared, a consumer society emerged in which thrift and savings lost significance, and many individuals maintained their standard of living through loans and credit. Despite amassing immense wealth, millions remained trapped in poverty, unemployment, and

lacked access to healthcare. The globalization of markets, facilitated by technological advancements and new technology, brought about a fundamental shift in economic activities. Free trade offered the potential for global economic prosperity but also exposed labor forces to global exploitation.

Multinational corporations could easily transcend national borders, particularly in the absence of effective international mechanisms to regulate their operations.

Abdu'l-Bahá's view on the strike issue

Abdu'l-Bahá referring to the huge problems caused by the issue of strike, considers it to be the lack of adjustment of livelihood and says:

" You have asked about strikes. Great difficulties have arisen and will continue to arise from this issue. The origin of these difficulties is twofold: One is the excessive greed and rapacity of the factory owners, and the other is the gratuitous demands, the greed, and the intransigence of the workers. One must therefore seek to address both.

Now, the root cause of these difficulties lies in the law of nature that governs present-day civilization, for it results in a handful of people accumulating vast fortunes that far exceed their needs, while the greater number remain naked, destitute, and helpless. This is at once contrary to justice, to humanity, and to fairness; it is the very height of inequity and runs counter to the good pleasure of the All-Merciful.”¹

At the same time, Abdu'l-Bahá did not consider complete equality to be permissible and considered it to be the cause of distress and disruption of the people's livelihood and the affairs of the people. He says:

However, absolute equality is just as untenable, for complete equality in wealth, power, commerce, agriculture, and industry would result in chaos and disorder, disrupt livelihoods, provoke universal discontent, and undermine the orderly conduct of the affairs of the community. For unjustified equality is also fraught with peril. It is preferable, then, that some measure of moderation be achieved, and by moderation is meant the enactment of such laws and regulations as would prevent the unwarranted concentration of wealth in the hands of the few and satisfy the essential needs of the many.²

¹ Some Answered Questions, Section on Strikes

² Some Answered Questions, Section on Strikes

He highlighted certain aspects of these laws aimed at promoting moderation. For instance, he emphasized the importance of providing workers with wages and salaries that adequately meet their basic needs and allow them to sustain their lives while also enabling them to save for their old age and in case of disability. Abdu'l-Bahá proposed that workers should also share in the benefits generated by the factory. For instance, a portion of the profits, typically a quarter or a fifth, depending on the factory's size, should be allocated to the workers. This way, they could truly enjoy the fruits of their labor. Furthermore, Abdu'l-Bahá stressed the need to secure the future of workers and their families in case of old age, illness, or death.

Abdu'l-Bahá envisioned the relationship between workers and employers as one based on "mutual and equitable rights of both parties according to the laws of justice and compassion."³ He further suggested that if either party were to violate these rights, they should face condemnation following a fair hearing and be subject to a decisive verdict enforced by the executive branch. This approach to dispute resolution and regulation is a crucial topic discussed in this chapter, deserving of more in-depth exploration.

The involvement of the government and the judicial system is considered legitimate in this context because while the worker-employer relationship may seem like a private matter, the problems arising from it have ramifications for the entire nation. Therefore, laws grounded in principles of justice, fairness, and moderation should apply. The judiciary, acting as a neutral third party, can resolve disputes between the two parties and, if necessary, issue rulings with the authority and enforcement capacity to address these issues.

In summary, the relationship between workers and the managers or owners of economic institutions should be based on shared and mutual rights, along with collaboration and consultation. Workers should have a stake in the success of the factory, and the issue of strikes should be resolved through negotiation and peaceful means, supported by just laws. All of these principles and methods should contribute to an economy where achieving a balanced standard of living and social justice is the primary objective. Ultimately, the cultivation of morality and spirituality should reach a level where reconciliation occurs naturally, and the affluent willingly

³ Some Answered Questions, Section on Strikes

assist the less fortunate and the vulnerable without the need for government intervention to distribute their wealth. He says,

Gracious God! How can one see one's fellow men hungry, destitute, and deprived, and yet live in peace and comfort in one's splendid mansion? How can one see others in the greatest need and yet take delight in one's fortune? That is why it has been decreed in the divine religions that the wealthy should offer up each year a portion of their wealth for the sustenance of the poor and the assistance of the needy. This is one of the foundations of the religion of God and is an injunction binding upon all. And since in this regard one is not outwardly compelled or obliged by the government, but rather aids the poor at the prompting of one's own heart and in a spirit of joy and radiance, such a deed is most commendable, approved, and pleasing.⁴

The concept of labor/work

In Baha'i worldview, thinking and actions are intimately interconnected, constituting the very core of human identity. This symbiotic relationship is often referred to as "praxis," a concept that underscores the dynamic interplay between our thoughts and deeds, highlighting the fusion of theory and practice within our lives.

Praxis signifies the seamless integration of thinking and action, where our cognitive processes inform our behavior, and conversely, our actions shape and refine our thoughts. This holistic approach to human existence recognizes that we don't merely think in isolation; our thoughts drive our actions, and our actions, in turn, feed back into our thought processes. Through this ongoing interrelation, we construct our individual and collective identities.

Thoughts have their origins within the inner faculties of a human being and find external expression through actions. This intricate interplay between thought and action is the catalyst for personal and societal evolution. As humans are inherently social creatures, the intersection of thought and action occurs within the domain of society. In essence, actions emerge from individuals and provoke responses within their social interactions. These interactions, in a cyclical manner, meld with the continuous stream of thought, ultimately giving rise to actions that are more comprehensive and refined. This iterative process is profoundly influenced by human experiences and is etched into the collective memory of humanity across the annals of history.

⁴ Some Answered Questions, Section on Strikes

In praxis, thought becomes the compass that guides our actions, giving them direction and purpose. At the same time, actions serve as a laboratory where our ideas are tested, refined, and transformed into lived experiences. This reciprocal relationship between thinking and action is what propels our personal and societal development, allowing us to adapt, learn, and grow.

Moreover, praxis extends beyond the individual to encompass the broader context of human society and culture. It underscores the significance of putting our beliefs and values into practice, recognizing that true understanding and transformation emerge not merely from contemplation but from the tangible impact of our actions on the world around us.

In essence, praxis encapsulates the profound interdependence of thought and action, emphasizing that they are not isolated realms but rather inseparable facets of human existence. This concept invites us to navigate our lives consciously, aligning our convictions with our conduct and fostering a deeper connection between our inner worlds and the tangible realities we create through our actions. This concept is influenced by two powerful forces:

The first force at play is the intrinsic selfish motivation that resides within individuals, deeply rooted in their biology and the natural and material aspects of human existence. This motivation drives individuals to maximize personal gain and extract benefits from their social interactions.

Conversely, the second force is composed of the values that shape these social interactions. These values are essential for the survival and continuity of society. In the absence of these values, social interactions lose their cooperative nature, leaving behind individuals driven solely by personal interests.

Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective maintains that human thought and action are profoundly influenced by these two forces, and their intricate interplay forms the moral compass guiding our actions. Consequently, the social reality we observe emerges from the complex interweaving of thought and action, influenced by both individual motivations and broader societal values.

What sets the Baha'i perspective apart is its steadfast belief that social values are not fixed or unchanging but instead evolve over time. As human societies progress, these values undergo a refinement process, becoming more just and equitable. This perspective not only recognizes the

diverse stages and facets of social evolution but also underscores the presence and evolution of moral principles within the framework of social and economic structures.

Historical progress serves as a compelling illustration of this moral evolution, as seen in the transition from the brutal system of slavery in the nineteenth century to its eventual abolition and the subsequent declaration of human rights in the twentieth century. These milestones signify the enduring presence and growth of the moral force throughout the annals of history.

From the vantage point of the Baha'i perspective, economic activities should be driven by a broader societal purpose, with their utility measured by the values derived from the spiritual and moral advancement of human society. These values evolve in tandem with historical progress and find expression in the exchange of goods. It's essential to recognize that the mere exchange of products doesn't inherently generate value. For instance, the scarcity of gold in the market can inflate its exchange value. However, in a society where spiritual and ethical values take precedence over material possessions, the value of gold may diminish over time.

In today's globally-integrated economic landscape, institutions such as banks, financial organizations, and the entire free-market mechanism heavily rely on moral values like trust, integrity, and honesty. Macroeconomic crises often stem from a moral crisis where unchecked greed corrodes the foundations of economic institutions. Upholding these values necessitates a dual approach—fostering the spiritual and moral development of individuals and implementing regulatory measures that safeguard collective interests while curbing unchecked avarice.

In this context, the economic concept of work/labor can be defined within the dynamic and historical interplay of five pivotal factors: the substantive essence of value (aligned with the common good of existence), thought, action, natural motivation, and social ethics. These factors together form the foundation upon which economic activities should be built to serve the betterment of society and humanity at large.⁵

⁵ The Baha'i concept of praxis takes a distinctive approach that differentiates it from the Marxist definition. While it acknowledges the interconnectedness of thought and action and recognizes labor as a form of self-expression for humanity, it places a special emphasis on the human spirit and its intellectual faculties, which are invigorated through divine revelation, as how human identity is expressed.

The five pivotal factors - the substantive essence of value, thought, action, the innate/instinct, and social ethics - represent a holistic perspective on how labor is defined in the broader context of the betterment of society and humanity. Let's break down these factors:

1. **Substantive Essence of Value:** This factor emphasizes that the value of work or labor is not solely measured in monetary terms but should also consider its contribution to the common good of existence. It suggests that work should aim to enhance the well-being and quality of life for individuals and society as a whole, going beyond pure profit-driven motives.
2. **Thought:** The role of thought implies that work should be a product of careful consideration and planning. It suggests that labor should be purposeful and guided by a well-thought-out strategy to maximize its positive impact on society. This aligns with the idea that meaningful work involves critical thinking and problem-solving.
3. **Action:** This factor emphasizes the importance of translating thought and ideas into concrete actions. It underscores that labor is not just about theory or intention but also about practical implementation. Effective action can lead to tangible outcomes that benefit society.
4. **The Innate/Instinct:** In contemporary society, the innate instincts of self-preservation and self-interest are powerful driving forces within individuals. These instincts are essential for survival and personal well-being, and they often guide people's decisions and actions. However, when these instincts are purposefully directed through education towards the common good, remarkable transformations can occur. Education plays a pivotal role in shaping individual perspectives and values. When individuals are educated about the broader implications of their actions on society and the environment, they can begin to see the interconnectedness of their self-preservation and self-interest with the well-being of others. This shift in mindset is a crucial step towards a more sustainable and equitable

In this Baha'i perspective, praxis encompasses the dynamic interplay between thought and action, much like the Marxist understanding. It acknowledges that human labor is a mode through which individuals express themselves and engage with the world. However, what distinguishes the Baha'i view is the belief that the human spirit, enriched and enlightened by divine revelations and teachings, plays a central role in shaping human identity. For Baha'is, the human spirit, guided by divine wisdom and spiritual insights, drives transformative actions. Through this spiritual connection, individuals can rise above the limitations of self-interest and strive for higher moral and ethical standards. The fruits of this spiritual awakening reflected in thinking and action, become the essence of human identity.

society. In essence, when self-preservation and self-interest are harnessed through education for the greater good, it has the potential to create a positive feedback loop where individuals, communities, and economies thrive in harmony. This approach fosters a more compassionate and sustainable world where economic growth serves as a means to an end – the betterment of society as a whole.

5. **Social Ethics:** Social ethics play a crucial role in shaping the nature and impact of labor. It implies that ethical principles, fairness, and a sense of responsibility towards others should guide economic activities. Ethical considerations help ensure that labor benefits society without causing harm or exploitation.

Taken together, these five factors provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the economic concept of work or labor. They advocate for a perspective where work is not solely driven by profit or self-interest but is rooted in values, thoughtful planning, meaningful action, intrinsic motivation, and ethical considerations. In such a framework, the aim is to create economic systems and practices that serve the betterment of society and humanity as a whole, promoting a more equitable and sustainable future.⁶

Work Coordinates

- Work is a uniquely human attribute, devoid of significance in the animal kingdom where actions are mere instinctual responses. The distinction between humans and animals arises from the human spirit, making work a manifestation of our spiritual capacities. In essence, work serves as an expression of spirituality and an interpretation of human spirituality in the realm of social interactions. With this conceptual framework, work within the Baha'i Faith is regarded as a form of worship, and its fruits are the tangible benefits that flow into the world through human labor.
- Work is inherently a social concept, deriving its meaning from communal relationships. Since humans are fundamentally social beings, they cannot fulfill even their basic needs in isolation from the web of social connections. Observing life on Earth, we can discern that the need for social interactions was the impetus behind the formation of societies.

⁶ For further exploration of the dynamics of spirituality and action, please see William Hatcher's *The concept of Spirituality*.

The purpose of work, therefore, extends beyond fulfilling individual needs for survival; it also encompasses the collective satisfaction of societal needs, ensuring the continuity of both individual and communal life. Hence, providing for personal necessities and advancing public welfare are interconnected and essential aspects of labor.

- In the realm of private economics, the interplay of supply and demand within the market, and in socialist systems, government intervention, have historically functioned as mechanisms to balance the needs of individuals and collectives. However, practical experience has revealed that extreme measures have often exacerbated conflicts between these two facets of the economy rather than achieving a state of equilibrium. A more detailed examination of Abdu'l-Bahá's economic teachings and perspectives on livelihood adjustment reveals a desire for a harmonious equilibrium: recognizing the significance of meeting individual needs through private ownership and the liberty to reap the benefits of one's own labor, while also acknowledging the interests of society. In a world rapidly advancing toward globalization, the Baha'i viewpoint advocates international oversight as a prerequisite for just economic governance. This evolving system, encompassing legislative, executive, and judicial functions, would safeguard the interests of all people, thus realizing the principles of development and global socio-economic justice. It is clear that, given the proliferation of multinational corporations, a market-driven economy in isolation is insufficient to ensure social justice. Consequently, even in nations such as the United States, known for their robust private sectors, governments supervise the market mechanism, and international trade is conducted under governmental oversight and agreements. This underscores the necessity for external monitoring beyond the inherent mechanisms of the market. From the Baha'i standpoint, advancements in communication, technology, and market expansion have paved the way for technical and organizational means to establish a global system. To realize the highest interests of humanity, the components of the global economy require global oversight and institutions that are aligned with the common interests and collective will of all nations.
- The ultimate and primary purpose of work is the intellectual, spiritual, and moral progress of humanity. Consequently, the production and exchange of goods should carry a value greater than their utilitarian worth. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the prevailing commercial and consumerist culture where human labor, and indeed human

existence as a whole, has been commodified. Money is elevated beyond a medium of exchange, becoming the embodiment of achievements and success and the yardstick for all values. In this context, even institutions such as education, government, and religion adhere to market principles, treating concepts like learning and research, national interests, or spiritual salvation as products to be marketed and sold. Social interactions mirror the dynamics of commodity exchange, leading to a state of alienation, as discussed in philosophical and economic discourse. Alienation from oneself signifies a disconnection not only from one's inner spiritual essence but also from the moral principles that define human nature. According to Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective, the pervasive sense of alienation prevalent in the contemporary world can be attributed to a crisis in values and the suspension of moral elements on a global scale. Abdu'l-Bahá not only wanted to change working conditions, but considered it a part of a larger change that includes the birth and evolution of a new world civilization and spirituality. This envisioned spirituality transcends mere notions of equality; it aims to cultivate profound manifestations of compassion and sacrifice. In essence, it calls upon individuals to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the service of humanity. This perspective challenges the prevailing cultural emphasis on materialism and self-interest and instead encourages a shift towards a more altruistic and spiritually enriched way of life. Abdu'l-Bahá's vision is not confined to rectifying work-related issues but seeks to address the very foundations of human existence, paving the way for a more harmonious and spiritually fulfilling world.

Political economy and global ethics

The notion of sharing profits from economic enterprises with workers, alongside their regular wages, received serious attention towards the close of the 19th century. Starting around 1882, spurred by emerging ideas and published materials, certain economic institutions in England made the decision to implement this concept. Consequently, when we contemplate the pronouncements of Abdu'l-Bahá, it becomes apparent that we must gauge the extent to which he anticipated the future and comprehended the challenges of the impending era, especially when considering the period in which he lived as an Oriental thinker and religious leader, largely detached from the unfolding industrial revolution.

Over time, improvements in working conditions and increased worker participation in the benefits of industrial enterprises became evident. In the 20th century, particularly its latter half, advanced industrialized nations made significant strides in enhancing the working and living conditions of their labor force.

As the 19th century transitioned into the 20th century, these viewpoints and concepts were still in their early stages of development. This underscores Abdu'l-Bahá's role not only as a spiritual guide but also as a visionary thinker who advocated not only spirituality and ethics but also the reformation of society and the pursuit of social justice. In his treatise, the Secret of Divine Civilization, Abdu'l-Bahá addressed topics of freedom, democracy, and governance, emphasizing their integration with the rule of law. In essence, he highlighted that legal intervention should be accompanied by political reforms, signifying that society bears the responsibility for ensuring minimal conditions and standards for a decent life for all its members.

Abdu'l-Bahá advocates for workers' involvement in the affairs of the factory within the framework of a more encompassing theory. This theory's overarching goal is to establish a cooperative economy, wherein all participants in the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption processes actively engage in decision-making and formulating the economic foundation. In essence, Abdu'l-Bahá's principle of cooperation and partnership can be seen as a means to mitigate the inherent conflicts between capital and labor.

It is known that capital tends to consolidate control over the means of production, often concentrating power in the hands of a select few. Furthermore, the accumulation of capital and the centralization of production within the realm of monopoly capitalism exacerbate the ongoing tensions between capital and labor.

During the 20th century, we observed two distinct models of economic progress. The first was an economy founded on the principles articulated in the classic theory of Adam Smith. This economic model endorsed private property rights, profit incentives, and the freedom for individuals to engage in economic activities. It officially recognized competition as both permissible and essential for economic growth. In this framework, the role of government in the

economy was viewed pessimistically and was primarily limited to matters such as national defense and military administration.

The prevailing belief was that when individuals and institutions had the liberty to compete freely in the market and pursue their individual interests, a situation would emerge in which the collective interests of society would be optimally served. Public welfare would be achieved as producers, in their competition to fulfill the needs and desires of consumers, continuously strived to enhance the quality of goods and services to ensure consumer satisfaction. This competitive environment, it was believed, would ultimately lead to price structures that benefited consumers.

However, the advent of vast economic conglomerates in America and Europe challenged the notion of perfect competition. These developments gave rise to new economic theories, including the neo-classical theory, whose proponents integrated economic analysis with intricate mathematical models. They advocated for more robust government regulations on economic activities compared to their predecessors.

Neoclassical theorists also reinforced the notion that public welfare could only be achieved when each consumer pursued their individual benefit. They argued that in this scenario, the cumulative effect of these individual pursuits generated an invisible force that steered the economy toward collective benefits, thus attracting the public's interest. This theory initially aligned reasonably well with economic realities and human motivations, although this alignment started to wane as new social and economic dynamics emerged.

The reality was that the concept of perfect competition quickly faded into an illusion. Many goods that conferred collective benefits, such as infrastructure like roads and public parks, were inadequately provided for. Environmental pollution was often disregarded in pursuit of profitability. Furthermore, the concentration of capital in the economy, coupled with local crises leading to recession and unemployment, demonstrated the shortcomings of this model.

Following the widespread crisis of the 1930s, capitalism recognized the need for reform and reevaluation. The influential economist Keynes played a pivotal role in shaping this reform agenda. Keynes believed that the government should closely monitor the economy and intervene with monetary and fiscal policies to prevent crises akin to those of the 1930s.

Another 20th-century model that emerged and gained dominance in various forms across half of the world was the closed economy model, rooted in the philosophy and political economy of Marxism. Unlike the capitalist system, which emphasizes private property, this system regarded the production process as inherently incompatible with natural economic order. According to this ideology, the relentless pursuit of individual profit results in economic chaos, enabling a select group to amass vast wealth by controlling the means of production and exploiting workers. This, in turn, leads to societal class conflicts and crises.

Marxism viewed the capitalist system as a stage in the historical process of social evolution, one that inevitably generated internal opposing forces and needed to progress to a higher stage of social and economic formation.

The Marxist system did bring about some positive changes in the lives of workers, with countries adopting it experiencing increased industrial production, advancements in health, education, and significant progress in science and technology. However, many of Marx's predictions and analyses did not come to fruition. Workers' conditions in capitalist countries didn't worsen but rather improved. Class conflict didn't become a global phenomenon, as other factors like nationality and religion played significant roles in social relations. Most notably, the means of production, which were supposed to be nationalized and owned by society, often ended up under the control of government bureaucracies.

This state bureaucracy mirrored the state oligarchy criticized by Marx, and instead of reducing, the government's role expanded. The concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat became a tool for suppressing freedom. The entire system evolved into a massive apparatus where all its components were harnessed to demonstrate the Communist Party's supremacy. By resorting to artificial famines and coercive collective labor, this system diverged from its original goal, which was to foster a new kind of human being.

Marxism attained widespread acceptance not primarily due to its economic theories, such as surplus value, but rather because of its ethical slogans and idealistic vision of achieving social justice and eliminating oppression and tyranny. These ideals served as powerful motivators and sources of inspiration for millions of individuals. Interestingly, this subjective wellspring of

inspiration, considered a secondary consequence of production relations in Marxism's materialistic philosophy, ultimately became the primary driving force for millions of people worldwide.

The Marxist theory of labor, deeply rooted in a materialist interpretation of social reality and forming the foundation of its economic model, has encountered significant challenges. The advent of the knowledge economy and the profound impact of technology on the labor force have rendered Marxism's initial theory of labor untenable. Labor has undergone a profound shift toward subjectivity. The concept of immaterial labor, as pronounced by a newer generation of Marxist thinkers⁷, recognizes the significance of the production of services, intellectual and artistic output, professional work, and similar activities that have transformed traditional notions of production. These immaterial productions have given rise to a new definition of labor that operates autonomously from capital.

The failure of the communist experiment vividly underscores that genuine social change hinges on the internal transformation of individuals and the moral refinement of their character. During the era when Marxism held sway as the exclusive model for societal progress, there was a prevailing belief that those living under its system, behind the iron curtain, had somehow leaped ahead in moral development, almost belonging to a utopian realm. However, when the barriers crumbled, it became evident that they were simply ordinary people, possessing both virtues and flaws, with the same human weaknesses and aspirations as individuals worldwide.

Interestingly, those who had spent over seven decades under a system critical of capitalism, when given the opportunity, eagerly embraced the allure and illusory appeal of consumer society with heightened enthusiasm. This phenomenon echoes the insights of Plato, who, two millennia ago, recognized the complex interplay between economics and political power. He deemed a change in the mechanism of the relationship between economy and political authority as vital for achieving social justice. However, his solution did not lie in altering the social and economic structure; instead, he envisioned it within the realm of internal, psychological transformation

⁷ Michael Hardt and *Antonio Negri*

facilitated by the educational process. This very principle underpins the Baha'i approach to thinking and understanding.

As previously mentioned, Abdu'l-Bahá advocates for the involvement of workers in factory affairs and suggests the foundation of a cooperative economic model. However, he underscores that spiritual and moral transformation of the individual is a fundamental and initial prerequisite for these reforms to materialize. True social transformation, he emphasizes, will only be achieved when there is an internal change, a shift in human values, and a transition from self-centeredness to detachment, equity, and self-sacrifice.

It's important to note that the Baha'i moral worldview isn't mere idealism or wishful thinking; it's practical and grounded. This perspective envisions the emergence of a moral society as the natural outcome of societal evolution, a product of history progressing toward its highest and most perfect stages. Some may argue that any generalization or belief in an inevitable trajectory of societal and historical evolution can lead to rigidity and intellectual oppression. However, it's crucial to understand that generalization in the context of history becomes rigid when it transforms into an exclusive ideology. Yet, when we measure historical progress against the yardstick of spiritual and moral advancement, we avoid stagnation and rigidity because moral evolution has no limits; it continuously seeks higher levels of perfection.

The Baha'i moral and spiritual worldview offers a revolutionary perspective on religion within the context of historical evolution. It sees the essence of religion as relative, intertwined with social change. Thus, it doesn't merely promise heaven, peace, and justice in the afterlife but asserts that moral transformation should manifest in this world, leading to the emergence of new social, economic, and political structures. Consequently, religion can serve as a catalyst for societal progress and transformation, but it can also be co-opted as a tool for consolidating power and safeguarding the interests of a particular class.

Some Baha'i sources for further study:

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