

Enacting Thought: Divine Will, Human Agency, and the Possibility of Justice

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Abstract

This paper argues that in the Writings of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith, social structures are viewed as embodiments of thought which gather substance through generations of human decision making. The processes that create both injustice and justice are gradual, almost imperceptible in their operation, and they shape our reality. Oppressive social structures are the result of generations of self-interest, while social structures which facilitate justice result from deliberate, continuous effort to implement the will of God. Two examples, one of political transformation and one of economic transformation, illustrate this argument. The paper outlines the history of political practice in Uganda over three centuries, then examines the transformations of productive activity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England which strongly influenced industrial capitalism.

Résumé

L'auteur de l'article soutient que, selon les écrits des figures centrales de la foi bahá'íe, les structures sociales sont vues comme la concrétisation de pensées émanant de prises de décisions échelonnées sur plusieurs générations. Les processus qui créent l'injustice tout comme ceux qui créent la justice opèrent de façon graduelle, voire imperceptible, et ils façonnent notre réalité. Tandis que les structures sociales oppressives découlent d'intérêts personnels maintenus sur plusieurs générations, les structures sociales favorisant la justice résultent d'efforts délibérés et continus pour faire la volonté de Dieu. Deux exemples de processus de transformation sont fournis pour étayer cette thèse, l'un de nature

politique et l'autre d'ordre économique. Après un survol historique de trois siècles de pratiques politiques en Ouganda, l'auteur se penche sur les transformations qu'a subies l'activité de production en Angleterre au XVIIIe et XIXe siècles, des transformations qui ont grandement influencé le capitalisme industriel.

Resumen

Este trabajo sostiene que en los escritos de las figuras centrales de la Fe bahá'í, las estructuras sociales se perciben como una forma tangible del pensamiento y que estas mismas estructuras adquieren más sustancia tras generaciones de decisiones humanas. Los procesos que crean tanto la injusticia como la justicia son graduales, casi imperceptibles en su funcionamiento, y dan forma a nuestra realidad. Las estructuras sociales opresivas son el resultado de generaciones de egoísmo, mientras que las estructuras sociales que facilitan la justicia son el resultado de un esfuerzo deliberado y continuo de poner en práctica la voluntad de Dios. Dos ejemplos, uno de transformación política y el otro de transformación económica, ponen de manifiesto este punto debatido. Este artículo describe la práctica política durante trescientos años de historia ugandesa, y examina las transformaciones de la actividad productiva en los siglos 18 y 19 en Inglaterra, que influenciaron de sobremanera al capitalismo industrial.

High hopes and bitter disappointments shaped the theory suggested by social critics in the second half of the twentieth century. They had experienced communism without equality, nationalism without freedom, and modernism without prosperity. In order to explain these failures and chart directions for future action, many focused on the power of deeply ingrained habits of thought to shape social structures. Antonio Gramsci, seeking to understand the complacency of Italian factory workers, wrote about hegemony: the uncritical assent given by mass society to its own domination by a few (Femia 44–45). Probing humanity's responsibility for the Holocaust, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that the commodification of culture and a misplaced faith in rationality had deprived human beings of moral consciousness and will. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and Michel Foucault's description of a power/knowledge nexus also explored the heavy social weight of accumulated thought.

These diagnoses of social stagnation resonate with some aspects of

Bahá'í ideas regarding how humanity created its current problems. It can be argued that critical social theory and Bahá'í scripture share the concept that thought shapes structures, which then influence thought; the recognition that self-interested actions have consequences over time; and the perception that unquestioned imitation of the past perpetuates and facilitates oppression. The fundamental difference between the Bahá'í perception of the relationship of thought and action and that of critical social theory is the Bahá'í recognition of humanity's capacity to transcend oppressive thought and create structures that embody justice using the power of the Word of God.

Social action builds on a theory of social reality. The belief that social structures embody injustice and shape people's experience of reality leads to a strategy focused on breaking oppressive structures. On the other hand, the belief that structures develop gradually, as an expression of human thought, leads to a strategy of social transformation based on changing the way people think and act. This paper argues that the theory of social action inherent in the Bahá'í Revelation focuses on human action as the agent of Divine Will. Human beings utilize the transforming power of the Word of God to envision and enact social structures that embody God's intentions for the world.

It is possible to see in the Writings of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith the view that social structures are embodiments of thought, which gather substance through generations of human decision making. Once those structures are created, they influence both the thoughts and actions of the people who live inside them. The character of thought determines the character of the social structures. Self-interested, turning-away-from-God thought gradually creates social structures which hold people in unproductive, oppressive patterns of action. Humanity is liberated from oppressive social structures by thought that comes from God: human beings responding to the Will of God create social structures which reshape human thinking, purify human actions, and gradually develop alternative patterns of interaction and new social structures. In this perspective, religion is not a set of beliefs; rather it is a divine energy, a will, that becomes realized in human action (Dunbar 10–11).

The concept that Divine Will acts on human agency to shape social structures can be traced through the Authoritative Writings of the Bahá'í Faith. The Universal House of Justice, asserting that solutions “for every social problem” can be found in spiritual principle, explained that “[t]he essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures” (*Promise* par. 38). Shoghi Effendi wrote to the Bahá'ís struggling to build the first House of Worship in North America that worship would not be its “sole, nor even the essential” function. Rather, the force generated by worship and the energies focused on service to humanity would have to be in “direct and constant interaction” to “provide the necessary agency capable of removing the ills that have so long and so grievously afflicted humanity” (*Bahá'í Administration* 186). The necessity of giving concrete form to spiritual truth is implied in a letter written on Shoghi Effendi's behalf: “We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions” (qtd. in *Conservation* 15).

In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, written to “produce fundamental changes in the thinking and the behavior of society” (106–7), ‘Abdu'l-Bahá asserts the constructive power of human thought and will,¹ identifies religion as the source of qualities which benefit society,² and defines lack of religious faith and education as “the primary cause of oppression and injustice, of unrighteousness, irregularity and disorder” (18).³ He cautions against unthinking imitation of the past; describes the inculcation of just patterns of political order as a slow, organic process; and prescribes education as the mechanism that sets that process in motion.⁴ Bahá'u'lláh identifies the spiritual power that makes social transformation possible when He states that human beings live, move, and have our being *inside* of the love of the Manifestation of God and His law: “It is the warmth that these Luminaries of God generate, and the undying fires they kindle, which cause

the light of the love of God to burn fiercely in the heart of humanity. . . . Through Him all things live, move, and have their being" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 34). Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh writes of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, "[I]t hath encompassed all men ere their recognition of it" (16). Our human lives are, potentially, a movement outward from God's will for us, which is the center of our reality. When we achieve this, when our actions express the love of God which animates us, we create societies characterized by justice.

Understanding humanity's relationship to God in this way gives people power to shape the world, while a more limited view of religion renders people impotent. This paper argues that social structures which facilitate justice would result from deliberate, continuous effort to implement the will of God, and that oppressive structures are the result of generations of self-interest, building on top of each other through imitation of the past. After noting how materialism limits our perception of human capacity in the present, the paper examines two examples of historical processes through which assertions of self-interest, imitated by following generations, established social structures. The first example examines the origins over three centuries of lack of political accountability in a sub-Saharan polity. The second example uses 'Abdu'l-Bahá's comments on economy in the West and Shoghi Effendi's description of the characteristics of prevailing economic systems to view the well-known story of industrialization in England as a "history of forgetting" the spiritual bases of social organization. Having specified the "the hardened clay out of which this perverse generation is molded," the paper considers the actions of newly enlivened human beings which would be "the touch of moisture" capable of dissolving the oppression and tyranny which Bahá'u'lláh deplored (*Gleanings* 93).

HOW MATERIALIST THOUGHT LIMITS OUR CONCEPTION OF HUMAN CAPACITY

Currently predominant theories of human nature and social reality are so profoundly materialistic that the logic of social action based on humanity's effort to conform to the Will of God may be difficult to grasp. It is worth pausing, therefore, to examine how the Bahá'í Writings associate

humanity's inability to act to solve its problems with a materialistic conception of human nature. A spiritually dynamic civilization depends, of course, on material means, but the excessive focus on the pursuit of material things—and sometimes the denial that any other reality exists—profoundly impedes human capacity. As the authors of *Century of Light* observe, “Whether as world-view or simple appetite, materialism’s effect is to leach out of human motivation—and even interest—the spiritual impulses that distinguish the rational soul” (89–90). In *The Promise of World Peace*, the Universal House of Justice identified “the social and economic ills that blight every region of our world,” “apathy,” and “the extinction of hope” as the consequences of “the substitute faiths” which have preached “the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or the west, whether of capitalism or socialism” (par. 20). In order to build a new world, the House of Justice suggests we must clear away “the falsehood that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive” (par. 22). Shoghi Effendi in 1956 described the disorientation and powerlessness that characterizes people focused on material pursuits: “[t]he gross materialism that engulfs the entire nation at the present hour; the attachment to worldly things that enshrouds the souls of men; the fears and anxieties that distract their minds; the pleasure and dissipations that fill their time, the prejudices and animosities that darken their outlook, the apathy and lethargy that paralyze their spiritual faculties. . . . (*Citadel of Faith* 149). Engulfed, enshrouded, distracted, and paralyzed: without the vitalizing force of faith, people cannot act.

Failure to understand our own true nature undermines humanity's capacity to create justice, and this is why keeping humanity from knowledge of God is the greatest form of oppression. Bahá'u'lláh wrote that there is no greater oppression than to be blocked from perceiving reality: “What ‘oppression’ is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 31). He described this condition, writing that although the fingers of divine power have unlocked the portals of the knowledge of God, the leaders of people, who busy themselves with selfish calculation, maintain that the door of knowledge is closed (29–30). He wrote: “[V]oracious beasts have gathered and preyed

upon the carrion of the souls of men" (31). He used this image to describe the powerful religious leaders of Iran, who told people that Bahá'u'lláh was not a Messenger from God. They maintained that the door of knowledge was closed. Political leaders who focus attention on themselves as the only hope for the people of their country are doing the same thing. The leaders of thought who, through blind imitation, insist that humanity's future is the same as its past, hold the door of knowledge closed. Advertisers who tell people that the only route to happiness is through the purchase of particular products are also acting in self-interest, asserting a falsehood about human reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also described this condition: "For the helpless masses know nothing of the world, and while there is no doubt that they seek and long for their own happiness, yet ignorance like a heavy veil shuts them away from it" (*Secret* 110). This description, of humanity wrapped in ignorance and therefore unable to create happiness, resonates with the profound description of the consequences of oppression supplied by the Universal House of Justice, that over the long term oppressed people "lose confidence in their own perception of themselves" and become "drained of that spirit of initiative that is integral to human nature" (Letter to the Followers).

According to the Bahá'í teachings, materialism can sometimes also characterize religious communities. Although most people in the world believe in God, the extreme materialism which orders our intellectual lives distorts and diminishes even our perception of religion. We live in a world characterized by functional atheism. This means that even though people believe in God, they may not recognize or utilize the power of God to illuminate and transform every aspect of reality. In his travels in the United States in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá defined religion which does not result in action that benefits the world as a form of materialism:

Consider to what a remarkable extent the spirituality of people has been overcome by materialism so that spiritual susceptibility seems to have vanished, divine civilization become decadent, and guidance and knowledge of God no longer remain. All are submerged in the sea of materialism. Although some attend churches and temples of worship and devotion, it is in accordance with the traditions and imitations of

their fathers and not for the investigation of reality. . . . They are holding to certain imitations which have descended to them from their fathers and ancestors.

. . . [T]he darkness of imitations encompasses the world. (*Promulgation* 221).

Investigation of reality, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts, would enable people to transcend the oppressive stagnation of imitation and the world would change:

Were these various nations to investigate reality, there is no doubt they would attain to it. As reality is one, all nations would then become as one nation. So long as they adhere to various imitations and are deprived of reality, strife and warfare will continue and rancor and sedition prevail. If they investigate reality, neither enmity nor rancor will remain, and they will attain to the utmost concord among themselves. (*Promulgation* 221–22)

These passages demonstrate the power of thought in the construction of social reality. If we were not “overcome by materialism,” we would perceive a different reality than the one we perceive, and that would give us the capacity to make the world different than it is.

THE ACCRETION OF IMPEDIMENTS TO POLITICAL AGENCY AND VOICE

The power of self-interested thought and actions to shape social structures is particularly evident in the realm of politics, as people in most nations, even those that are putatively democracies, struggle to achieve their aspiration to live in a well-governed society. In a 2007 letter, the Universal House of Justice observed that

One of the signs of the breakdown of society in all parts of the world is the erosion of trust and collaboration between the individual and the institutions of governance. In many nations the electoral

process has become discredited because of endemic corruption. Contributing to the widening distrust of so vital a process are the influence on the outcome from vested interests having access to lavish funds, the restrictions on freedom of choice inherent in the party system, and the distortion in public perception of the candidates by the bias expressed in the media. Apathy, alienation, and disillusionment are a consequence, too, as is a growing sense of despair of the unlikelihood that the most capable citizens will emerge to deal with the manifold problems of a defective social order. (Letter to the Bahá'ís)

In order to trace one example of the layers of self-interested action that have created this dynamic, we will examine the history of political accountability in southern Uganda, where citizens have seemed to attain greater political agency, but then lost it, more than once in living memory. Readers who are more familiar with the recent political history of other world regions will undoubtedly find points of similarity.

The thoughtful, well-educated middle class of Uganda has many reasons to be dissatisfied with the structures of governance they experience. Standards of living for most Ugandans are still lower than they were one and two generations ago, before the nation experienced massive social disorder and war under a series of self-serving rulers. When President Yoweri Museveni took control of the state in 1985 after fifteen years of civil war, Ugandans hoped to create a nation that was accountable, free from corruption, and that gave voice to the populace. While ordinary citizens appreciate the peace that prevails in most of the country, many people have come to feel that responsible government is an unattainable dream.

Museveni instituted a new form of governance, the lowest level of which is the local council, a nine-person body which was, when it was first created, elected from among all the people in a village or section of a town with no electioneering. The local council (LC) was responsible for settling local disputes, initiating activities for community well-being, and some administration. Every person in the local district was supposed to participate in regular meetings and people did so with great enthusiasm in the

first years after the system was introduced in the early 1990s. LCs organized water systems, punished local touts, and held their elected leaders accountable. Over time, however, the Ugandan state changed the system: some LC members became appointed rather than elected and people began to perceive the LC as an instrument of the ruling party. The perceived legitimacy of the system declined, and attendance at council meetings dropped off.

Thoughtful Ugandans describe corruption as a highly infectious disease. "Eating" means taking the benefits of state office for one's self, and a prominent Ugandan parliamentarian, Winnie Byanyima, observed a few years ago:

Sections of the press and some politicians have made "eating" acceptable and have placed it right at the centre of political debate. Struggling for the trappings of power is now at the centre stage, it has become acceptable and even fashionable. This eating is crude, self-centered, egoistic, shallow, narrow and ignorant. . . . we must do away with it if we are to start a new nation. (qtd. in Tripp 1)

Sectarianism, which in Uganda means sharp political divisions between Catholics and Protestants, and between people from different regions, is also a concern. Again, Winnie Byanyima said, "What I observe is that ethnicity is being used to provide platforms from which the amenities of modernity can be competed for." She said it was playing "a perverse role" in political development, and that "we politicians are sometimes promoting [it] for narrow self-interest" (qtd. in Tripp 124).

Like the citizens of many nations, Ugandans who want to contribute to the well-being of their country through participation in its governance face severe structural constraints. Their choices as voters are limited, as members of the ruling party have clearly gained from their positions, but the leaders of all other political parties seem to be focused entirely on their own benefit as well. People who see the misuse of public funds may risk their jobs if they speak out. The transfer of wealth from rural agricultural producers to the urban elite, a facet of the Ugandan economy for a

century, continues, with rural people distracted and pacified by the ethnic and sectarian slogans of politicians (Kasozi 43).

The political constraints that Ugandans now face have a history. The problem is not, as some would assert, that Ugandans have not yet learned how to rule themselves in an effective way. Nor is it valid, as others would assert, to entirely blame colonial rulers for their deliberate destruction of African forms of governance, as significant as that was. Several hundred years of the assertion of self-interest, and significant moments of uncritical imitation, created the political conditions of the present. In the kingdom of Buganda, now part of Uganda, people lost important forms of political accountability as a consequence of war in the eighteenth century, other practices fundamental to good government were lost under British colonial rule, and post-colonial politicians have also made their own contribution to the current situation.

In the kingdom of Buganda, kings ruled with the consent of their people until the eighteenth century, when kings began to bring home war captives and settle them as their personal slaves in private provinces that benefitted only the ruler himself. This led to almost one hundred years of upheaval, as various factions in the kingdom fought to control the kingship and its spoils. As a result of these wars, people lost their ability to make their rulers accountable, kings became despotic, and chiefship became much more rigid and hierarchical than it had ever been before. The actions of eighteenth-century kings created the absolute power of the king and the increased power of chiefs over their people, but people do not remember a beginning to these conditions. The kings' assertion of self-interest became part of the structure of the society (Hanson, *Landed Obligation* 86).

The Buganda kingdom lost other dimensions of government accountability during British colonial rule. For many years after a British Protectorate was declared in 1896, Ganda chiefs thought of British officers as their friends and partners. They invited the British officers to prayers, Bible study, and tea, and tried to model to the British how good rulers behaved toward their people. The character of chiefship changed as the British gained power over the people of Buganda. The British government required colonies and protectorates to be financially self-sufficient,

so Ganda people paid taxes and performed forced labor to provide salaries and services for colonial officers. This work, especially the forced labor, impoverished many people because they did not have time to do that work and also raise their own crops and take care of their affairs. Chiefs had to stop doing what chiefs were supposed to do in Uganda—which was to protect their people—and instead took the action of calling out forced labor, which harmed their people. Chiefship became coercive. Precolonial chiefs had demonstrated their power through redistribution, giving feasts and gifts to followers. Colonial chiefs began to assert their power through fines, and, for the first time, people were forbidden to leave their chiefs. Colonial officers, and some postcolonial rulers, have shown their power by having fabulous wealth in comparison with the people they rule. A fundamentally self-interested way of thinking—that rulers needed comfortable, somewhat ostentatious lifestyles, whatever the cost to the people they were ruling—became the pattern for African rulers who took over from the colonizers. It was an assertion of self and also blind imitation that benefited a few at the expense of the whole society.

One of the premises of good government in Buganda in the precolonial period was that decisions should emerge from consensus, and long, long discussions about every issue were part of governing. The British introduced Westminster-style parliamentary practice, which enabled one faction of Ganda chiefs to completely dominate the parliament. In 1927, a diverse group of Ganda thinkers brought a case against these dominating chiefs. The essence of their complaint was that Ganda government had been better before the British came, and if the British really wanted progress for the country, they would allow a return to Ganda practices. They said the collaborating chiefs had “upset everything and as the results of that mistake caused the present ill feeling which exists among our people as a whole, shattering also our country from its former foundation and destroying all our good customs of helping and loving each other, thus putting us under a form of Government which we cannot understand. We feel as if we were under the hybrid customs.”⁵ Early in the twentieth century, Ganda thinkers saw that the premise of Ganda government, which focused on drawing people into a group and convincing them to stay there, had been undermined.

The politicians who came to power after independence in 1962 perpetuated the extreme differences in wealth and power which had characterized colonial rule. They exercised power through domination, rather than through consensus, as Okot pBitek describes in his famous poem, *The Defence of Larwino*:

If the party bosses have dedicated themselves to developing our land
Why don't they discuss it in peace?
Family conferences, do people usually shout when holding them?
Don't elders deliberate at length, taking turns?
Whoever shouts in such discussions is possessed;
His sense has left him: he's beside himself!
For, that's not the way to make peace and communal understanding
The true leader is humble, at peace with all, listens to complaints!
(93)

The modern right to vote sometimes gives ordinary people a less significant voice in governance than they had in precolonial practices of extensive consultation. As M. Owusu observes,

Beyond the ritual exercise of their right to vote, which often has very little meaning, most poor and powerless Africans, especially illiterate women, have very little say in the formulation and implementation of policies which directly affect their welfare. The truth is, of course, that the electoral system benefits immediately only the members of the educated middle classes and the rich, because they are generally the "bosses" of any party apparatus. (qtd. in Abrahamsen 85)

The lack of political voice and power which most non-elite Africans experience stands in significant contrast to the level of their participation in earlier times in their history, when women and men contributed in consultative groups, anyone concerned participated in the judgment of cases, and chiefs and people could hold their rulers accountable by choosing to withhold necessary labor and tribute.

The lack of political accountability in Uganda in the present is the result of a long heritage of self-interested thought and blind imitation. Explaining that national and racial distinctions originate in selfish behavior, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "These boundary lines and artificial barriers have been created by despots and conquerors who sought to attain dominion over mankind, thereby engendering patriotic feeling and rousing selfish devotion to merely local standards of government." He went on to point out that "[a]s a rule they themselves enjoyed luxuries in palaces, surrounded by conditions of ease and affluence, while armies of soldiers civilians and tillers of the soil fought and died at their command upon the field of battle, shedding their innocent blood for a delusion. . . ." (*Promulgation* 354). Political vitality in Uganda is impeded by many artificial boundaries created by people who sought dominion over others. The practice of chiefship as domineering rule over others is a residue of the self-interested action of eighteenth-century kings. The willingness of British imperial entrepreneurs, colonial officers, and post-independence politicians to absorb a preponderating share of national resources has bred a culture of corruption. The nineteenth-century fights between Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims, and the exploitation of those differences by twentieth-century politicians, has divided Ugandan society and curtailed political expression.

Structures that direct the aspirations of political leaders to focus on the well-being of the whole society are needed to move Uganda's public figures to act on behalf of all the people, not only of the people who voted for them. Spiritual and moral discipline would allow public figures to be content with modest remuneration, and not seek to benefit financially from their positions. If Ugandans and international agencies could see their own well-being in the well-being of the whole and focus resources on the least-developed regions of the country, the sources of sectarian tension would be removed. Such spiritual and moral discipline might enable development agencies that design their forms of assistance to attract attention to themselves to let go of their need to control, abandon the unquestioned assumption that their own way of doing things is superior, and provide long-term support to fund infrastructure.

People everywhere face the challenge faced by Ugandans, which is to

express their innate capacity to contribute to the stable organization of society, without waiting for their leaders to assent. Although our habits of thought imagine political power as narrow, sectarian, and state-centered, the power to organize people and influence the way they think and act is available to all those who recognize their capacity to do so. Political power in its deepest sense—the agglomeration of the will of people to organize themselves in a particular way to further social order—would be, if we chose to perceive it, an arena of human activity that is deeply amenable to the promptings of the spirit. This reordering of human motivations and relationships is at the heart of the activities carried out by Bahá'ís and their co-workers in neighborhoods and villages. Shoghi Effendi foreshadowed this potential when he described that community as aware of the “society-building power that their Faith possesses” (*World Order* 194). Groups of people who devote themselves to furthering a vision of social justice with pure intentions, humility, a sense of responsibility, and a deliberate avoidance of distinctions among people have influence far beyond their numbers.

The Bahá'í Revelation contains numerous references regarding the power wielded by groups united to assert spiritual principle. One tremendously significant example is the statement by the Universal House of Justice in *The Promise of World Peace* that the consequence of the people of the world asking their leaders to gather to make arrangements for a stable world peace, and those leaders doing so, “can release such a salutary spirit among the peoples of the earth that no power could resist the final, triumphal outcome” (par. 47). In *The Secret of Divine Civilization* 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that when people are “genuinely religious and are literate and well-schooled” (18), they cannot be oppressed because they would know how to ask authorities for redress in a way that would evoke a positive response. In a world in which most of our practices of governance are perverse, corrupt, unjust, and polarizing, the possibilities for providing alternative models derived from the Will of God are immense.

The modern nation state of Uganda is imprisoned in social structures which are encrustations of self-interest. Some of the oppressive structures are modern, some come from the period of European imperialism, and others are older, a consequence of actions of this generation's African

ancestors. The unquestioned assumption that the partisan politics of Europe and North America provide the best model for humanity burdens the citizens of polities all around the world. But even people who live inside these structures can invoke spiritual principle, create alternatives, and act on them.

MATERIALIST MODERNITY: A HISTORY OF FORGETTING

Our second example of the creation of social structures as an assertion of thought concerns the creation of the modern world economy. In the nineteenth century, the discovery of new technologies caused one of the greatest transformations in human history. Physical distances lost their meaning through railroads, steam-powered ships, and the telegraph; the industrialized production of cloth and other goods reduced the labor necessary for subsistence to a fraction of what it had previously been. These new technological capabilities gave humanity the capacity to create a tightly integrated, dynamic, and prosperous world civilization, and Bahá'u'lláh associated them with His Revelation, writing: "Such arts and material means as are now manifest have been achieved by virtue of His knowledge and wisdom which have been revealed in Epistles and Tablets through His Most Exalted Pen—a Pen out of whose treasury pearls of wisdom and utterance and the arts and crafts of the world are brought to light" (*Tablets* 39) Contemporary observers, although unaware of the real source, recognized the profound and all-encompassing nature of the change: the influential diplomat and author Henry Adams dated it to 23 May 1844, when the first telegraph message was sent.

It is essential to carefully consider the spiritual import of this profound social transformation. The exchange of goods in markets in which individuals and groups of individuals organized as corporations operate on their own initiative (which is the essence of capitalism), and the industrialized production of goods, contain great potential for human progress. But the promise of these innovations has not been met, as the authors of *Century of Light* attest:

[W]hat Bahá'ís see in present-day society is unbridled exploitation of the masses of humanity by greed that excuses itself as the operation of “impersonal market forces.” What meets their eyes everywhere is the destruction of moral foundations vital to humanity’s future, through gross self-indulgence masquerading as “freedom of speech.” What they find themselves struggling against daily is the pressure of a dogmatic materialism, claiming to be the voice of “science,” that seeks systematically to exclude from intellectual life all impulses arising from the spiritual level of human consciousness. (136)

In the early twenty-first century, we see all around us the fulfillment of Bahá'u'lláh's warning, that “[i]f carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation” (*Gleanings* 342–43).

One way of thinking about the transformations that brought us to our current organization of society is that they were inevitable, they have had overall positive consequences, and their current shortcomings are in the process of being corrected. History textbooks tend to describe the industrial revolution in this way. Illustrated with advertisements seeking “families with many children for factory work,” quoting journalists’ exposés concerning the squalid conditions in early industrial cities, and with a drawing of the cotton gin next to one of slaves on a plantation, the message conveyed might be formulated as, “Yes, many people suffered in Europe and around the world to create modern industrial society, but the end result was positive: we are all the beneficiaries of this increase in material wealth and freedom for individuals.” An interpretation of the Bahá'í writings which adopts a similar view of nineteenth-century economic history emphasizes the positive: the conditions in factories in Europe eventually improved, and the working class won political rights. From this perspective, the economic structures humanity created to make use of new technology are evolving, and the necessary modification will be made gradually as humanity becomes aware of the standard of justice inculcated by Bahá'u'lláh.⁶

An alternative interpretation of economic history is also possible. Applying the theory regarding the construction of social structures proposed in this paper, the structures of industrial capitalism, which we take for granted, and which appear to be utterly natural, can be seen to be the creation of people who allowed self-interest to dominate their actions. The effects of those actions endured, solidified over generations, and we live inside of them. Humanity could have had the positive dimensions of industrialization and economic intensification without the negative social consequences if people had made different moral choices about how they used the new technologies they had created. The impoverishment and debasement of the masses of workers who produced cloth and other goods on a large scale would not have happened if the dignity and worth of laborers had been respected in the organization of factories. The global economic imbalance caused by the production of commodities in the tropics and the production of industrial products in the north would not have happened if all the participants in the emerging world economy had been treated equitably.

To observe that failures of moral judgment contributed to the shape of our current world economy, which is largely a product of capitalist forms of economic organization, does not imply that communism or socialism, especially as we experienced them in the twentieth century, were superior—they were not.⁷ Humanity has not yet created an economic system which uses our vastly increased technological capacities in ways that are conducive to human well-being. And while it may be true that the economic conditions of some people in some parts of the world are evolving for the better, the gap between the poor majority and the rich minority continues to widen. A system which allows 10 percent of the world's population to control 85 percent of the world's wealth (which means that 90 percent of the world's people control only 15 percent of the wealth) (Davies et al.) does not meet Bahá'u'lláh's standard, "If thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbor that which thou chooseth for thyself" (*Tablets* 64).

In order to perceive the role of self-interested thought in the creation of the structures of our current world economy, it will be useful to first consider the characteristics of economic structures delineated in the Bahá'í Writings. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated: "The fundamentals of the

whole economic condition are divine in nature and are associated with the world of the heart and spirit,” and He goes on in the same talk to exhort His listeners to “[m]anifest true economics to the people. Show what love is, what kindness is, what true severance is and generosity” (*Promulgation* 239). The concept that economic conditions are associated with the world of the heart and the spirit and that true economics is love, kindness, true severance, and generosity becomes easier to understand when we place it in the context of statements made by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. There ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote that “[w]ealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual’s own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes,” and He continued: “Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy.” He stated that unless wealth was dedicated to the welfare of society, it would only prove a liability to its possessor (24–25). Explaining that the true purpose of civilization is to create human happiness through the instrumentality of virtue, He wrote that despite “their [European] vaunted civilization . . . all the phenomena of their culture come to nothing” (*Secret* 60).

Observations ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made in His travels in the West amplify this statement. He explained, over and over again, that the material civilization of the West was not productive. He stated this explicitly: “Material civilization alone is not sufficient and will not prove productive” (*Promulgation* 166), and through analogies—it was a lamp that was not lighted, a beautiful body that was not alive: “Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit, otherwise it becomes a corpse” (*Selections* 227.22). By considering the implication of these statements together, it is possible to arrive at the conclusion that economic activity is only productive when it has positive spiritual consequences as well as positive material consequences. In order to breathe life into the dead body of material civilization, all our productive activity has to have positive social consequences.

Another way to understand ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that true economics is love, kindness, severance, and generosity is to recognize that all economic actions are also social actions; they involve people interacting with

each other. All economic activity, all of the things people do which involve production of things and exchange of things and adding value to things, create social relationships. The social consequences of economic activity can be positive or negative, but they are never neutral. Farming with the intention of sustaining people creates positive social relationships. Trading with a concern for the needs of the producers for a just price creates positive social relationships. In contrast, trading by squeezing producers and deceiving consumers creates negative social relationships. A factory which allocates all the profit to stockholders and leaves the workers with bare subsistence creates negative social relationships. But that same factory could be a source of positive social relationships if management provided for the workers adequately and shared profits with them. One way of understanding 'Abdu'l-Bahá's observation that material civilization alone is not productive would be that producing material things in a way that has negative social consequences does not count as production. The only forms of production that really count—the only phenomena that have results—are ones which enhance human relationships as well as producing goods. If we take this as the criterion for economic activity, it makes sense to think of true economics as love, kindness, and generosity.

Turning now to the modern history of economic transformation, we can see that before the technological, economic, and social changes that made the modern world, the concept that productive activity created social relationships was familiar to most people. Craftspeople produced crafts inside guilds; peasants produced crops in relationships with each other and, in some societies, in relationship with lords; and people carried gifts to their chiefs. In current thinking, economic production with the motivation of solidifying social relationships is often termed primitive, and economic production to serve the individual interests of the owner of the means of production is termed modern. Capitalism means the organization of economic activity in a way that individuals or corporations, not states, own the materials that produce wealth, make decisions about production, and the exchange of goods happens in a free market, without restriction. A reframing of modernity, along the lines outlined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, suggests there is another alternative approach to modern economic relationships. Truly modern economic activity would unite

the freedom of choice we associate with the present and the sense that economic activity always creates social relationships, which has at present been forgotten.

This forgetting is the intellectual history of the modern world. It is possible to see, as people wrestled with new technology and the new social structures that came with them, individuals making choices which privileged their own interests above those of a larger group. Furthermore, those choices of self over others were imitated unthinkingly by subsequent generations and led to an erasure of aspects of social order built on the recognition that economic activity manifests love and builds social relationships. In one of his last messages, Shoghi Effendi identified forgetting the spiritual bases of society as an aspect of the ever-increasing emphasis on material well-being of all the forms of modern economic organization, both capitalism as it was practiced in the United States and communism as it was practiced in the USSR. In a letter to believers in the US, he wrote about what humanity loses in a materialistically oriented economy:

Parallel with this [deterioration of morality], and pervading all departments of life—an evil which the nation, and indeed all those within the capitalist system, though to a lesser degree, share with that state and its satellites regarded as the sworn enemies of that system—is the crass materialism, which lays excessive and ever-increasing emphasis on material well-being, forgetful of those things of the spirit on which alone a sure and stable foundation can be laid for human society. (*Citadel of Faith* 124–25)

Shoghi Effendi highlights not only the ever-increasing emphasis on material well-being, but also the corollary of that materialism, which is that it causes forgetfulness of those things of the spirit which are the only stable and sure foundation for society. The self-interest of industrialists a century ago has hardened into economic theory and practice which diminishes our understanding of human possibilities in the present. To understand the reality of the modern world economy, therefore, we have to look for what we have forgotten regarding the spiritual foundations of a stable society.

A transformation in how people used natural resources in Northern Europe was a crucial part of the beginning of capitalism. Patterns of land use that involved many different people using the same land in complex ways changed into a pattern of land use in which one person was the owner and sole controller of a specific piece of land. One famous example occurred in Scotland: the Duchess of Sutherland claimed ownership of 794,000 acres, evicted 15,000 people by burning their homes and villages and destroying their crops, and replaced them with 131,000 sheep (Perelman 142). The people who succeeded in enclosing land—depriving anyone else of rights to use it—became very much richer, and the people who lost their rights to sustenance became very, very much poorer and entirely lost their capacity to control their productive lives. Enclosure was an assertion of self-interest. Its structural consequences have been profound. It criminalized forms of collaborative resource use, and the regions where sheep replaced communities of farmers carrying out high-intensity mixed farming never regained their capacity to create prosperity for large numbers of people.

Loss of common lands and rural communities, as well as the push into wage labor, eroded social networks and habits of cooperation. When most people lost their access to any productive resources except their own labor, and wealth became more concentrated, relationships between people that in the past had had social and economic dimensions became solely economic. This process is called *commodification*: it means that aspects of life which had many kinds of value, such as people's ability to work, came to have only a monetary value. When groups of people worked in turns on each other's fields, and worked together on common fields, that work had social value as well as productive value. It had maintained the connections among members of a community. Capitalist production replaced the social motivations for working with merely material motivations for working, which undermined or destroyed forms of community interaction. Karl Polanyi's influential analysis of modern economic history described this process as "the smashing up of social structures in order to extract the element of labor from them"; he asserted that what European powers did in their colonies in the early twentieth century "was done in

the eighteenth century to white populations by white men for similar purposes" (172).

The way we industrialized, and the ways cities grew in order to accommodate workers, intensified the destruction of social networks and the transition to an insistently individualistic organization of society. Suddenly, in the mid-nineteenth century, people had to figure out how to use the technological capacity of new kinds of engines and new kinds of tools. We had to create a new pattern of working to use these new technological capacities. We could have created industrial production with a sharing of profits between workers and owners, so that a new kind of production wove a more solid social fabric, instead of eroding it. We could have created working conditions for the new workers that allowed them to maintain relationships of mutual support, and forms of community solidarity, instead of grinding cooperative social practices into non-existence. The technology would have worked just as well that way. Instead, we created forms of industrial production in which all the profits went to owners and workers were barely able to stay alive as they worked. This assertion of self-interest has been perpetuated in the "hardened clay" of rigid extremes of wealth and poverty, social class conflict, and excessive individualism. While it is true that, over time, industrial workers in some nations did win rights of political representation that led to improved working conditions, the social and moral characteristics of preindustrial work organization never reappeared—those 'things of the spirit' had been forgotten.

The massive suffering and impoverishment caused by early industrialization created a moral dilemma for Europeans who observed it. Michael Perelman demonstrates in *The Invention of Capitalism* that Adam Smith's assertion of the autonomy of markets in *The Wealth of Nations* was actually a defense of the evolving economic order written in opposition to the work of contemporary thinkers who made a more determined effort to document the social consequences of enclosure and early industrialization (Perelman 174). Perelman describes the work of James Steuart, who observed that capitalist farming became profitable by depriving people of the capacity for self-provisioning, and suggested that statesmen were

needed to organize the population so that poor people would work but not starve: “[T]he more soberly our lowest classes are made to live at all times, the cheaper may our manufactures be sold” (qtd. in Perelman 154). Stuart’s point—that paying people less made manufacturing more profitable—was not easy for the early economists (who were called moral philosophers) to explain. Eventually, classical economic theorists repudiated the moral objections to the harm caused by early capitalism by arguing about economies using analogies of animal conflict. Their theories left out human capacity to transcend the self and to recognize and care for the social whole. They forgot the true purpose of work.

The immense productivity of industry created another problem. How could the production of goods continue to be profitable when so much had been produced that no one needed any more? If everyone had clothing, how could the textile mill that produced cloth keep operating? The extremely high costs of equipment for industry intensified the importance of this question. Over time, one solution to this problem that emerged was the advertising industry. If people came to believe that meeting their subsistence needs was not enough, that they would be better people, happier, freer, and more alive, if they bought more things, then a market could be created for any amount of industrial production. Part of the history of the past hundred years is our increasing commitment to this manipulation of our reality. We have developed forms of economic organization that require constantly increasing rates of consumption. It can be argued that everything about the productive systems in which we live, from the measure of gross national product to the advertising we see every day, to the way that we live on the landscape, asks us to think of ourselves as bundles of needs that can be met through purchases. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observed, “[M]aterial forces have attacked mankind” (*Promulgation* 12). The organization of the laws, structures, and habits of our economy, its forms of information and its built environment, all perpetuate this fabrication. Growth-oriented, consumption-driven capitalism endangers the planet and dehumanizes all of humanity while providing immense wealth to a few.

Critical social theorists argue that the modern world economic system dehumanizes people through replacing social bonds with economic ones

and through urging people to find satisfaction in consumption. For example, in 1964 Theodor Adorno argued that the economic, political, and cultural manifestations of advanced capitalism undermined the individual, destroyed personal freedom, and made critical thought impossible. People could not arrive at productive self-awareness because they used commodified culture to find escape from purposeless work (“Culture Industry Reconsidered”). In 1957, Shoghi Effendi had lamented “the evil forces which a relentless and all-pervasive materialism, the cancerous growth of militant racialism, political corruption, unbridled capitalism, wide-spread lawlessness and gross immorality, are, alas, unleashing, with ominous swiftness, amongst various classes of the society. . . .” (*Citadel* 154). Offered only materialistic ways of thinking about the purpose of work and the purpose of life, people in currently existing capitalist societies accommodate themselves to a grossly diminished experience of human reality.

To begin to create forms of economic interaction conducive to human well-being, we need to reassert the spiritual realities that our practice of unrestrained capitalism has caused us to forget. A fundamental step in this process is to recognize that economies are embedded in social systems: we cannot think about economic production as one reality and the rest of society as something distinct from it. Part of our blind imitation of the past has been to assent to the idea that economic prosperity and material well-being *require* that some people will be out of work and poor, but this is not the foundation of a stable society, and it does not conform to Bahá’u’lláh’s standard of justice. Although the habits of thought which are part of capitalism as it is currently understood tell us that economic activity can be beneficial even when its social consequences are negative, a more valid perception, one that pays attention to those things of the spirit which are the only foundation for a stable society, would be that economic activity is only productive when it has positive social consequences. If we consider what it means to follow ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s injunction to “[m]anifest true economics to the people. Show what love is, what kindness is, what true severance is and generosity” (*Promulgation* 239), possibilities for action open up to us.

The implications of these instructions are much more profound than merely retaining the capitalism we have but urging the rich to give more

to the poor. A deliberate and systematic permeation of economic interactions by love, severance, and generosity would transform human society in profound ways. If we all took care to ensure that our own interactions were characterized by love, severance, and generosity, it would change the way human beings think about themselves, because attention to love in our productive lives would make us aware that happiness does not come from owning things or satisfying desires, but from serving others. It would change the structure of wealth inside the nation, inside cities, and around the world, because the impulse towards generosity on the part of those who have more than they need would facilitate the creation of prosperity where it does not now exist. The elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty would create stability and lead to profound improvements in health. If economic interactions were characterized by love, severance, and generosity, it would restructure the geographical organization of economic activity because productive units that build positive social relationships would probably happen more fundamentally inside regions, rather than on a global scale. It would require a change in the structure of ownership, because stockholders would not be content to receive profits from companies that might be treating workers unjustly, and would demand more knowledge. Industrial processes would change, with a goal of drawing in the intelligence and creative capacity of workers, instead of seeking to replace workers with machines. We would have to redefine the measure of economic success because people seeking to show love, severance, and generosity might decide that efficiency is an empty goal. It might lead us to producing less, but of higher quality.

A small, wealthy segment of the world's population benefits from thickly encrusted structures of materialism that naturalize their wealth and the poverty of others. Deliberate, focused action can change those structures. We can act with love as participants in a local economy, building sustaining relationships with businesses that give life to our communities. We can act with love as consumers, making sure that the firms we endorse with our purchases act responsibly in their relationship with producers. We can act with love in creating meaningful bonds of support among people in our neighborhoods because economic vitality develops where links among

people are strong. If we are Bahá'ís, we can participate in a world-encompassing structure that counteracts the spiritual and physical effects of materialism by offering Huqúqu'lláh.⁸ We gain this power as economic actors by refusing to imitate, by rejecting the commodification of our reality in a consumption-oriented society.

HUMAN AGENCY AND DIVINE WILL

The processes that create injustice are gradual, almost imperceptible in their operation, and they shape our reality. This awareness illuminates the tremendous power of Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to see the world through the lens of justice:

O Son of Spirit!

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart, how it behooveth thee to be. Verily, justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes. (Hidden Words, Persian no. 2)

To strive to see with our own eyes and not through the eyes of our neighbors opens the possibility that we will recognize tyranny and oppression that masquerade as ordinary reality. Recognizing justice as the avenue of our connection to God, we are motivated to take actions that create it in the world.

An essential first step in putting into effect the interaction of Divine Will and human agency which facilitates justice is to consider whether we incorporate human agency in our explanations of how the Faith works in the world. For example, there is no causality in the statement "Bahá'ís believe in the equality of the sexes." It leaves out the implication of faith in the world, the dimension of human action. To highlight that agency, we

need to say: "We believe in the equality of the sexes, and we are confident that our love of God and our devotion to justice will enable us to overcome oppressive habits of thought and action, and allow us to create new and equitable patterns for our personal lives and the life of society." To perceive the Faith as a divine energy being imprinted on the world opens a realm of powerful action that is not present when we think and speak about the Faith as a set of beliefs.⁹

We also need to avoid making truncated statements, where we offer a beautiful vision but omit what Bahá'u'lláh says about the power of true religion to realize that vision. For example, we often quote "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" without the preceding sentences, which state that "the welfare, security and protection of mankind and the safety of human lives" require rulers and people to act with justice and equity (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 167). We often quote "Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch" but almost never include Bahá'u'lláh's wish, expressed in the next sentence, "We cherish the hope that the light of justice may shine upon the world and sanctify it from tyranny" (*Tablets* 164). What human beings are supposed to do is an essential part of Bahá'u'lláh's statements. The world becomes one country through human beings' actions to serve the entire human race. It is human beings' obligation to respond to Bahá'u'lláh's hope and eliminate tyranny that will demonstrate we are the leaves of one branch. In order to effectively assume the responsibilities that God has given us, we must be careful to incorporate Bahá'u'lláh's statements regarding human action when we think and speak about the Revelation.

CONCLUSION

Injustice is not inherent in societies. It is not inevitable, something that arrives like bad weather and there is nothing people can do about it. People create injustice through selfish thought that shapes human action and human institutions. Oppressive social structures build up, layer by layer, and people live inside them and consider them to be natural. At present, people generally do not question that rulers have vastly more wealth than

the ruled, that competition among politicians is the means of ensuring good governance, or that democracy requires voting but not consultation by the entire populace. They accept that media are dominated by advertisers, that the purpose of work is individual accumulation, and that a few people have extreme wealth and most have very little. They perceive religion as a particular form of possession that they can choose and use in ways that suit their personal spiritual inclinations, and they assign responsibility for changing the world to God and not to themselves.

This exploration of the history of social structures suggests that, all over the world, human beings live within the boundaries of hardened patterns of thought and habits of action which are the embodiment of self-interest and greed. Our political lives, productive lives, social lives, and even our experience of our own selves as believers in God are shaped by layers and layers of self-interest. We live inside them—engulfed, enshrouded, and paralyzed. This diagnosis need not alarm us, however, because we also live inside the reality of the will and love of the Manifestation of God. Human beings “live by the operation of Their Will, and move and have their being through the outpourings of Their grace” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 176).¹⁰ When we think and act in conformity with the Word of God in our own lives, we liberate ourselves. When we work in groups, systematically and deliberately, to implement the Word of God, we create social institutions which reflect God’s intentions for the world.

NOTES

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1. *Secret* 10, 105, 66, 109, 110.
2. *Secret* 60, 72, 74, 58, 27, 80–81, 94–98.
3. See also 60–62.
4. *Secret* 104, 107–8, 97, 110–12.

5. Appeal to Kabaka Daudi Chwa by the Buganda National Federation of Butaka, February 1922, qtd. in Hanson, *Landed Obligation*.

6. Farhad Rassekh's "The Bahá'í Faith and the Market Economy" is an example of this perspective.

7. Criticizing "extreme socialists and communists" as well as "the other extreme tendency represented by the 'Laissez-faire' or individualistic school of economics," Shoghi Effendi wrote: "[I]ndividualism and socialism, therefore do not offer the right solution to the economic problem. In both the democratic and fascist countries today, there is a growing tendency towards over-control, and even increasing ownership of the means of production, and such tendency cannot be fully sanctioned by the believers." He states that "In the Bahá'í economic system of the future, private ownership will be retained, but will be controlled, regulated, and even restricted" (qtd. in Badi'i 106–7).

8. See Holly Hanson, "The Process," 36–42.

9. See Dunbar 14, 30–33.

10. See also Dunbar.

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