

Economic Life

Reflections on the House of Justice Message of 1 March 2017

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22 April 2018

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

1 March 2017

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

In an increasingly interconnected world, more light is being cast on the social conditions of every people, giving greater visibility to their circumstances. While there are developments that give hope, there is much that should weigh heavy on the conscience of the human race. Inequity, discrimination, and exploitation blight the life of humanity, seemingly immune to the treatments applied by political schemes of every hue. The economic impact of these afflictions has resulted in the prolonged suffering of so many, as well as in deep-seated, structural defects in society. No one whose heart has been attracted to the teachings of the Blessed Beauty can remain unmoved by these consequences. “The world is in great turmoil,” Bahá'u'lláh observes in the *Lawḥ-i-Dunyá*, “and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion. We entreat the Almighty that He may graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice, and enable them to discover that which will be profitable unto them at all times and under all conditions.” As the Bahá'í community strives to contribute at the level of thought and action to the betterment of the world, the adverse conditions experienced by many populations will more and more demand its attention.

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. A stubborn obstruction,

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The Universal House of Justice

Activities of the Bahá'í Community

This section of the website collects together letters and extracts of letters of the Universal House of Justice concerned with the global plans of the Bahá'í community since 1995. The central theme of these communications is the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community itself.

- Oct-2017 [Marking the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh](#)
- 1-Sep-2017 [Marking the dedication of the Battambang House of Worship](#)
- 1-Mar-2017 [Regarding economic life](#)
- 14-Oct-2016 [Marking the dedication of the Mother Temple of South America](#)
- 26-Mar-2016 [Letter regarding the Tablets of the Divine Plan, to the Bahá'ís of the United States and of Canada](#)

- New Directions for Economics
 - Forthcoming in the
 - *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*
 - Manuscript available at
 - <https://dahls.net/gregdahl/home/cv/>

- Some key concepts
 - Bahá'í context
- The message of 1 March 2017

Some key concepts

- Mental frameworks / habits of thought
- Systems versus process
- Knowledge and learning

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- ...raising communities whose habits of thought and action are rooted in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

(The Universal House of Justice, 29 December 2015)

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- 2. O SON OF SPIRIT!
- The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice...
- (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Arabic Hidden Words*, no. 2)

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- 2. O SON OF SPIRIT!

- The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice... 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.

- (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Arabic Hidden Words*, no. 2)

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- Matthew 16:18
- And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church...
- Peter (Greek *petros*, a stone)
- Rock (Greek *petra*, a massive rock)
- “The word ‘church’ (Gk. *ekklesia*, from the verb meaning to *call out*) is used of any assembly and in itself implies no more than a gathering of people who have been called forth...”

● Scofield, C.I., D.D., ed. *The New Scofield Reference Bible*. Oxford UP 1967, p. 1021

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- False dichotomies
- Every effort is being exerted to ensure that the [institute] process reflects the complementarity of “being” and “doing” the institute courses make explicit; the centrality they accord to knowledge and its application; the emphasis they place on avoiding false dichotomies...
- (The Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010)

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- If long-cherished ideals and time-honored institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines... For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine. (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 42)

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- What is defective and what valuable?
- Bahá'u'lláh refers to the present order as “lamentably defective”. How defective do we think “defective” really is? Which constituents of the present order are, and are not, defective? Which parts are we to keep, and which are we to reject completely? How deep do we have to go into the foundation of the present order to find the real causes of its defective ways?
- (Dr. Farzam Arbab speaking at the Association for Bahá'í Studies Conference 2016)

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- What are our mental frameworks for economic issues?

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- What are our mental frameworks for economic issues?
- Self-interest
- Competition
- Measuring progress in terms of money
- Maximizing consumption

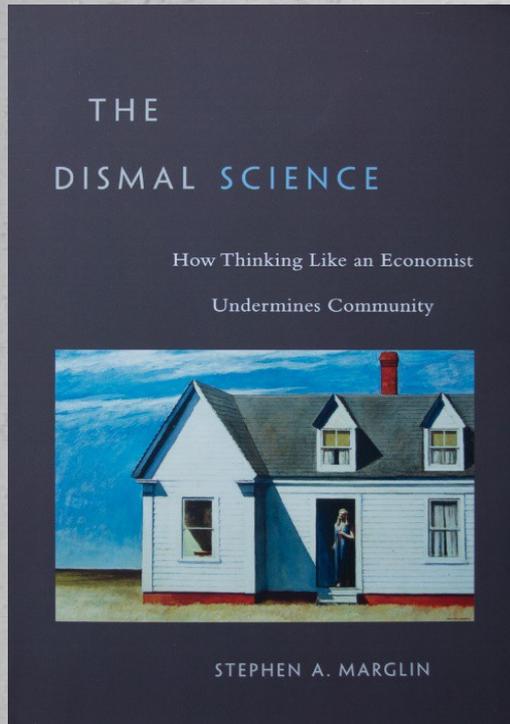
Mental frameworks / habits of thought

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- Bahá'ís believe in

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- What are our mental frameworks for economic issues?
 - Self-interest, Competition
 - Measuring progress in terms of money
 - Maximizing consumption
- Bahá'ís believe in
 - Altruism and service to others
 - Cooperation, reciprocity and mutual help
 - Developing spiritual qualities
 - Detachment from material things

Mental frameworks / habits of thought



- Marglin, Stephen. *The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community*. Harvard UP, 2010.

Mental frameworks / habits of thought

- Is inequality an issue for politicians to solve?

Some key concepts

- Mental frameworks / habits of thought
- Systems versus process

Systems versus process

- Also a question of our mental framework
- Dr. Farzam Arbab (1982)

Systems versus process

- To address inequality, do we need a system,
 - or a process?

Some key concepts

- Mental frameworks / habits of thought
- Systems versus process
- Knowledge and learning

Knowledge and learning

- Knowledge is one of the wondrous gifts of God. It is incumbent upon everyone to acquire it.
(Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 39)
- Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone.
(Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 51)

Knowledge and learning

- Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities.
- (The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010)

- Some key concepts
 - Bahá'í context

Bahá'í context – Bahá'í teachings on economics

Bahá'í Teachings
on
ECONOMICS

JOHN FERRABY

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Bahá'í context – Bahá'í teachings on economics

- The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. ...
- (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 203)

Bahá'í context – Bahá'í teachings on economics

- As regards the activities of the economic committee of the National Assembly; Shoghi Effendi fully sympathizes with the desire of some of the members to see the Committee find ways and means to put into practice the economic teachings of the Cause, as explained in some of the recorded Writings and Sayings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master. But he believes that the time is not yet ripe for such activities. First we have to study the economic teachings in the light of modern problems more thoroughly... Secondly, the Cause is not financially in a position to launch itself in such undertakings at present... In time, Shoghi Effendi hopes all these things will come to pass. For the present we have to consolidate our basic institutions and spread the teachings and spirit of the Faith among the public.

(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi 11 January 1933, *Bahá'í News* 73:7)

Bahá'í context – Bahá'í teachings on economics

- There are practically no technical teachings on economics in the Cause, such as banking, the price system, and others. The Cause is not an economic system, nor can its Founders be considered as having been technical economists. The contribution of the Faith to this subject is essentially indirect, as it consists in the application of spiritual principles to our present-day economic system. Bahá'u'lláh has given us a few basic principles which should guide future Bahá'í economists in establishing such institutions which will adjust the economic relationships of the world.

● (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 25 January 1936, *Bahá'í News* 103:2)

Bahá'í context – Bahá'í teachings on economics

- The primary consideration is the Spirit that has to permeate our economic life and this will gradually crystallize itself into definite institutions and principles that will help to bring about the ideal conditions foretold by Bahá'u'lláh.
- (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, December 20, 1931, *Bahá'í News* 90:2)

Bahá'í context – social action

- The Office of Social and Economic Development was established in 1983 “to assist the Universal House of Justice to promote and co-ordinate the activities of the friends throughout the world in this new field.”
- “From the beginning of His stupendous mission, Bahá'u'lláh urged upon the attention of nations the necessity of ordering human affairs in such a way as to bring into being a world unified in all the essential aspects of its life... The oneness of mankind, which is at once the operating principle and ultimate goal of His Revelation, implies the achievement of a dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth.”

(The Universal House of Justice, 20 October 1983)

Bahá'í context – social action

- The steps to be taken must necessarily begin in the Bahá'í Community itself, with the friends endeavouring, through their application of spiritual principles, their rectitude of conduct and the practice of the art of consultation, to uplift themselves and thus become self-sufficient and self-reliant. Moreover, these exertions will conduce to the preservation of human honour so desired by Bahá'u'lláh.
- (The Universal House of Justice, 20 October 1983)

Bahá'í context – social action

- A natural outcome of the rise both in resources and in consciousness of the implications of the Revelation for the life of a population is the stirrings of social action...
- Figures of authority from the wider society start to draw on the insight and experience arising from initiatives of social action inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings...
- For this to occur, the generality of the friends must be invited to consider afresh the responsibility of all believers to support the work of the Faith through their own means and, further, to manage their financial affairs in the light of the teachings.
- (The Universal House of Justice, 29 December 2015)

Bahá'í context – learning about growth

- Learning—consultation, action, and reflection on action in light of divine guidance—over the course of our lives and over the course of the dispensation is the means by which we find our way forward toward Bahá'u'lláh's intended purpose for humanity....
- The culture of learning that is emerging is characterized by... constructive experience at the grassroots level rather than elaborate planning from the top...
 - (Paul Lample, “Learning and the Evolution of the Bahá'í Community”, ABS 2008)
 - (<https://bahai-studies.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/ABS2008PaulLample.pdf>)

Bahá'í context – learning about growth

- What should be apparent is that, if the Administrative Order is to serve as a pattern for future society, then the community within which it is developing must not only acquire capacity to address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements but also become larger and larger in size. How could it be otherwise. A small community...can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society.

● (The Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010)

Bahá'í context – learning about growth

- [As the Bahá'í community grows:] Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another begin to stand out as features of an emerging, vibrant culture among those involved in activities.

● (The Universal House of Justice, 29 December 2015)

Bahá'í context – learning about growth

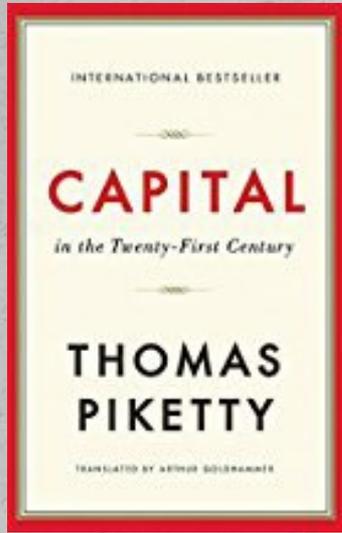
- Concern yourselves with one another. Help along one another's projects and plans. Grieve over one another. Let none in the whole country go in need. Befriend one another until ye become as a single body, one and all ...
- (*Abdu'l-Bahá: Consultation: A Compilation*, from a previously untranslated Tablet)

- Some key concepts
 - Bahá'í context
- The message of 1 March 2017

Message of 1 March 2017

- To the Bahá'ís of the World
- Dearly loved Friends,
- In an increasingly interconnected world, more light is being cast on the social conditions of every people, giving greater visibility to their circumstances... Inequity, discrimination, and exploitation blight the life of humanity...
- (The Universal House of Justice, 1 March 2017)

Message of 1 March 2017



Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Belknap, 2014.

Eight men own the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity.

(Oxfam International, press release 1/16/2017)

Message of 1 March 2017

- ...deep-seated, structural defects in society.
- There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples.

Message of 1 March 2017

- The vision of Bahá'u'lláh challenges many of the assumptions that are allowed to shape contemporary discourse—for instance, that self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity, and that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition. To view the worth of an individual chiefly in terms of how much one can accumulate and how many goods one can consume relative to others is wholly alien to Bahá'í thought. But neither are the teachings in sympathy with sweeping dismissals of wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral, and asceticism is prohibited.

Message of 1 March 2017

- Wealth must serve humanity. Its use must accord with spiritual principles; systems must be created in their light. And, in Bahá'u'lláh's memorable words, "No light can compare with the light of justice. The establishment of order in the world and the tranquillity of the nations depend upon it."
- Although Bahá'u'lláh does not set out in His Revelation a detailed economic system, a constant theme throughout the entire corpus of His teachings is the reorganization of human society. Consideration of this theme inevitably gives rise to questions of economics.

Message of 1 March 2017

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Message of 1 March 2017

- Of course, the future order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh is far beyond anything that can be imagined by the present generation. Nevertheless, its eventual emergence will depend on strenuous effort by His followers to put His teachings into effect today.

Message of 1 March 2017

- With this in mind, we hope that the comments below will stimulate thoughtful, ongoing reflection by the friends. The aim is to learn about how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts and how, in practical terms, collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance.
- Our call to examine the implications of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh for economic life is intended to reach Bahá'í institutions and communities but is directed more especially to the individual believer.

Message of 1 March 2017

- If a new model of community life, patterned on the teachings, is to emerge, must not the company of the faithful demonstrate in their own lives the rectitude of conduct that is one of its most distinguishing features?

Message of 1 March 2017

- Not content with whatever values prevail in the existing order that surrounds them, the friends everywhere should consider the application of the teachings to their lives and, using the opportunities their circumstances offer them, make their own individual and collective contributions to economic justice and social progress wherever they reside.

Message of 1 March 2017

- A foundational concept to explore in this context is the spiritual reality of man. In the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the nobility inherent to every human being is unequivocally asserted; it is a fundamental tenet of Bahá'í belief, upon which hope for the future of humankind is built.

Message of 1 March 2017

- Economic life is an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. The individual is not merely a self-interested economic unit, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources. “Man’s merit lieth in service and virtue”, Bahá’u’lláh avers, “and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches.”

Message of 1 March 2017

- Viewed in this light, many seemingly ordinary economic activities gain new significance because of their potential to add to human welfare and prosperity... “Wealth”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has affirmed, “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.” ... ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares that...wealth is most commendable “provided the entire population is wealthy.”

Message of 1 March 2017

- Examining one's life to determine what is a necessity and then discharging with joy one's obligation in relation to the law of Huqúqu'lláh is an indispensable discipline to bring one's priorities into balance, purify whatever wealth one possesses, and ensure that the share which is the Right of God provides for the greater good. At all times, contentment and moderation, benevolence and fellow feeling, sacrifice and reliance on the Almighty are qualities that befit the God-fearing soul.

Message of 1 March 2017

- The larger the presence of a Bahá'í community in a population, the greater its responsibility to find ways of addressing the root causes of the poverty in its surroundings.

Message of 1 March 2017

- Although the friends are at the early stages of learning about such work and of contributing to the related discourses, the community-building process of the Five Year Plan is creating everywhere the ideal environment in which to accrue knowledge and experience, gradually but consistently, about the higher purpose of economic activity. Against the background of the age-long work of erecting a divine civilization, may this exploration become a more pronounced feature of community life, institutional thought, and individual action in the years ahead.

Message of 1 March 2017

- A gradual learning process:
- deepening engagement with society
- over time
- ever more concentrated attention
- early stages of learning
- accrue knowledge and experience, gradually but consistently in the years ahead.

Message of 1 March 2017

- Of course, the future order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh is far beyond anything that can be imagined by the present generation. Nevertheless, its eventual emergence will depend on strenuous effort by His followers to put His teachings into effect today.

Message of 1 March 2017

- ...the friends everywhere should consider the application of the teachings to their lives and, using the opportunities their circumstances offer them, make their own individual and collective contributions to economic justice and social progress wherever they reside.

- What are you and I and our Bahá'í communities going to do to respond to this call from the Universal House of Justice?