



Economics Begins with the Farmer

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IN 1912 AMERICA, THE long process of twentieth-century urbanization was just beginning. In spite of the rapid growth of urban industries — the garment factories of the East Coast, the automobile manufacturing plants in Detroit, the steelworks of Pennsylvania and Indiana — most Americans still lived and worked on farms. Such rural vitality was on dazzling display during the National Irrigation Congress in Salt Lake City.

After spending the day on September 30, 1912, attending the opening convention at the Mormon Tabernacle in Temple Square, visiting the State Fair, and watching the bright lights of the electrical parade that evening, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá departed Salt Lake City on October 1 at 2:50 p.m. for the final leg of his long train journey to San Francisco. The train steamed forty miles north to stop in Ogden, Utah, then headed due west over the briny waters of Great Salt Lake on the Lucin Cutoff Railroad Trestle, a fifty-one-mile long shortcut built across the middle of the lake in 1904.

Throughout his trip in America, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had spoken in general terms about the economic issues that plagued the nation’s growing industrial society: widespread poverty, industrial slavery, the need to avoid coerced equality, and the missing moral principles — such as generosity and service — that were required to balance competing interests. But in Montreal on September 3, to a meeting of Socialists, he had laid out economic prescriptions in more detail. As the train sped toward San Francisco on October 2 and 3, he wrote to clarify his position to Agnes Parsons. “My explanation,” he told her, “has been mis-reported in the papers.”

Unlike the presidential candidates, whose arguments began with the macro-economic debates of national industrial growth and international trade, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá placed farming at the center of the discussion. “The question of economics must commence with the farmer,” he wrote, “and therefrom reach and end with the other classes . . . for the farmer is the first active agent in the body politic.” A self-sustaining rural economy, he seemed to say, must underlie a sound national one.

In 1912 the primary source of government revenue was the protective tariff: a tax levied on foreign goods at the national level in order to protect American industries. What to do with the tariff was the most important issue in the presidential election. But at the local level ‘Abdu’l-Bahá identified seven sources of income for the local treasury, perhaps the largest of which was a set percentage of the harvest and one-third of the value of all mining activities, presumably including oil. He also proposed a tax on personal net income after necessary living expenses were deducted.

Out of this balanced income, the local treasury would be responsible for funding education, the infirm, and the department of public health. It would also use its funds to supplement the incomes of the poor. Anyone whose income could not meet “his absolute needs essentially necessary for his liv[e]lihood . . . provided he has not failed in effort and exertion,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote, “must be helped from the General Storehouse that he may not remain in need and may live in ease.” Any excess revenues remaining locally after these expenditures were made, would be forwarded to the national treasury.

“When such a system is established,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá told Mrs. Parsons, “each individual member of the body politic will live in the utmost comfort and happiness.” And, as he had explained to the Socialists in Montreal, such a mechanism on the local level would retain differing levels of wealth in each community. Although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá opposed legislated equality, the *Montreal Daily Star* reported on September 4, “all had the right to share in the general well-being.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s bottom-up approach to a self-sustaining rural economy, and his emphasis on its priority in each nation’s economic health, counters much of twentieth-century development thought. It was only in 2007 that the urban population of the planet surpassed the rural. The urban bias of development thinking around the world over the past half-century has impoverished rural communities, drained resources from agriculture, reduced the status of farmers and their political power, and driven the destruction of the global environment.

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FOOTNOTE/ENDNOTE:

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