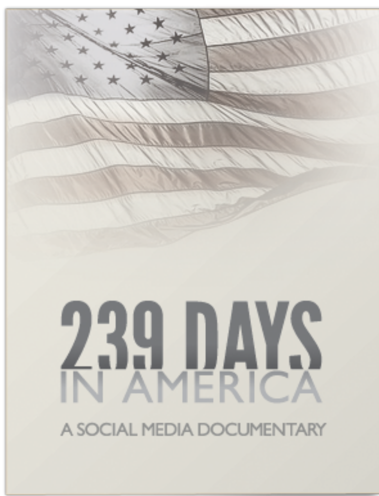

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ayn Rand, and the Poor

By Robert Sockett

Published: October 6 2012 | Last modified: June 24, 2013
Permalink: http://239days.com/2012/10/06/reflections-on-poverty-and-the-example-of-abdul-baha/

AYN RAND, THE LIBERTARIAN philosopher and novelist, has enjoyed enormous press coverage this past year. For those of you who haven’t encountered Ms. Rand, her corpus of fiction and non-fiction works, published in the mid-twentieth century, are a triumphant celebration of capitalism, of heroic class competition, and of individuals emboldened by an unapologetic commitment to selfishness.

Rand’s 1957 novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, grabbed the bulk of the coverage. It imagines an era when the world’s “productive” people go on strike, withdrawing their services from an ungrateful society. The novel’s social vision rests on a binary opposition between “producers” who generate wealth and “moochers” who feed off them. It also contains a sixty-page-long social Darwinist fantasy — a speech by John Galt, the novel’s protagonist — which argues that making life hard for the poor is good for them.

The novel’s resurgence this year was prompted by a budget resolution introduced in the House of Representatives, which included deep cuts to programs that aid the poor. The budget triggered a series of letters from the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, including one to the sponsor of the resolution, himself a Catholic. “In short,” the letter concluded, “your budget appears to reflect the values of your favorite philosopher, Ayn Rand, rather than the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” Jesus, of course, had been very clear regarding the treatment of the poor: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was a young man, his father wrote a series of letters to the world’s political and religious leaders. He called them to account for their treatment of the powerless. “Fear the sighs of the poor,” he wrote to Sultan ‘Abdu’l-‘Azíz, ruler of the Ottoman Empire, “and of the upright in heart who, at every break of day, bewail their plight.” The poor, Bahá’u’lláh stated, “are thy treasures on earth. It behoveth thee, therefore, to safeguard thy treasures from the assaults of them who wish to rob thee. Inquire into their affairs, and ascertain, every year, nay every month, their condition, and be not of them that are careless of their duty.”

In America, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke regularly of the means of alleviating poverty. Legislation must protect the poor, he said, and work to limit extremes of poverty and wealth. But more essential, he argued, was a change in people’s hearts — something that would demonstrate itself through material generosity and sacrifice. Moreover, he called on people to associate with the poor. It was something he had spent a great portion of his life doing.

When Myron Phelps — one of the first Americans to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá — visited the prison city of ‘Akká in 1902, he told of a street scene that unfolded beneath his window. A group of men and women wearing tattered garments had gathered. “Many of these men are blind,” Phelps wrote, “many more are pale, emaciated, or aged. Some are on crutches; some are so feeble that they can barely walk. Most of the women are closely veiled, but enough are uncovered to cause us well to believe that, if the veils were lifted, more pain and misery would be seen.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá emerged and approached them. “He knows them all,” Phelps wrote. “He caresses them with his hand on the face, on the shoulders, on the head. Some he stops and questions.” For those too proud to be seen, Phelps added, “he sends bread secretly.”

On April 19, his ninth day in America, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited the Bowery Mission in New York, a homeless shelter for men. “Tonight I am very happy, for I have come here to meet my friends,” he told them. “I consider you my relatives, my companions; and I am your comrade.” Then he asked them to accept him, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as their servant.

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

Robert Sockett, " 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Ayn Rand, and the Poor," *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, October 6, 2012, http://239days.com/2012/10/06/reflections-on-poverty-and-the-example-of-abdul-baha/.

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Sockett, Robert. " 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Ayn Rand, and the Poor." *239 Days in America*. Edited by Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett. October 6, 2012. http://239days.com/2012/10/06/reflections-on-poverty-and-the-example-of-abdul-baha/.

HOW TO CITE THE *239 Days in America* WEBSITE IN A BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Menon, Jonathan, and Robert Sockett, eds. *239 Days in America*. http://239days.com/.

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