



Economics and Spirituality

Tony Michel

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“THE GREAT QUESTION raised by the Socialists was of paramount importance,” the Montreal *Daily Star* reported Abdu'l-Baha telling a packed parlor at the Maxwell home at 716 Pine Avenue West, on the evening of September 4, 1912. One night after receiving enthusiastic press coverage of his talk on economics, Abdu'l-Baha explained that while the Socialists asked the right questions, they were unable to provide society with any permanent settlement to its most important problems.



The street market in Jacques Cartier Square in Montreal, circa 1900. (Detroit Publishing Company)

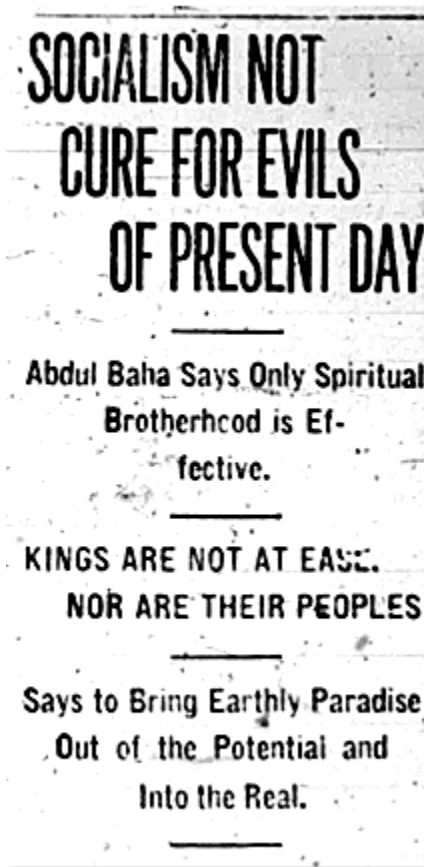
Unfortunately, Abdu'l-Baha noted, although the question of economic disparity was of great importance, “the governments of the world had failed to give it the earnest attention it deserved.” In 1912, weak labor laws and the absence of social benefits throughout the industrializing world meant that many members of society lived in conditions of abject poverty. Growing expectations of economic justice had to be met, Abdu'l-Baha said, “otherwise disorder everywhere would be the culmination.”



Vladimir Illyich Lenin, on the eve of the Russian Revolution, 1917.
(Sourced from lacrememagazine.co.uk)

In the same way that Abdu'l-Baha's repeated warnings of a catastrophic war in Europe were prescient, so too his 1912 forecasts of widespread social disorder preceded by five years the world's first Socialist Revolution in Russia. By the late 1910s and early 1920s, labor strife was ubiquitous in industrial societies worldwide.

To adequately address the "the economic ills of the nations," the paper reported Abdu'l-Baha saying, would first require the "establishment of a great spiritual brotherhood worldwide." He noted that political movements such as socialism were unable to do this. And the Socialists had extreme views. While some people idealized the notion of a classless society, Abdu'l-Baha commented that "grades in society could not be abolished. . . . Public order was impossible without this conservation of degrees." On many occasions throughout his time in North America, Abdu'l-Baha argued in front of audiences that governments could not mandate absolute economic equality. Different degrees in wealth were desirable, necessary in fact, but the significant disparity between poverty and wealth had to be resolved.



Headline on page 2 of the Montreal Daily Star, Sept. 5, 1912. (Montreal Daily Star)

The evening before, Abdu'l-Baha had spoken about what governments could do to help reduce this disparity. At the Maxwell home today, he added that a lasting remedy must be based on a "true brotherhood amongst all the people of the earth." The basis of such a brotherhood, however, could not be based on blood, or nationality, or class. While "families quarreled," nations had civil wars, and "even socialists fought each

other,” there could be no unity that would be lasting “save that of the spiritual type.” That is, a unity based on our common qualities as human beings instead of material considerations like politics, culture, or class. The reporter from the Montreal *Daily Star* wrote that Abdu’l-Baha told the audience how the establishment of “a great brotherhood for the illumination of the human heart” had been planned out by Baha’u’llah in his works.

Earlier that afternoon, when the Maxwells and their friends were commenting on the positive press coverage of the previous evening’s talk, Abdu’l-Baha told them that explaining his father’s economic prescriptions in theory was insufficient: their implications couldn’t be fully grasped unless they were put into practice. “Not one of a hundred has as yet come into force,” he said.

Abdu’l-Baha’s talk at the Maxwell home that evening closed with an encouragement for his listeners to take this concept of a global spiritual brotherhood and make it a reality. “Let us bring the kingdom, the earthly paradise, out of the potential and into the real.”

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WRITTEN BY



[Tony Michel](#) is a writer and cultural historian living in Ottawa. [Read more](#)

