

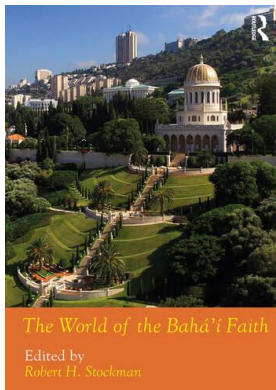
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RESPONDING TO INJUSTICE WITH CONSTRUCTIVE AGENCY

Michael Karlberg and Derik Smith

The past century has given rise to a searching global conversation regarding nonviolent approaches to social change. Bahá'ís are increasingly contributing to this conversation in ways that draw on an accumulating body of experience. In this regard, the Bahá'í community comprises a growing movement of people across the planet, representing a microcosm of humanity, working to translate commonly held spiritual principles into a new social reality through an evolving framework of action. This chapter examines salient elements of this framework in relation to insights from the theory and practice of nonviolent social change. It begins by considering how Bahá'ís understand the root causes of oppression. The dual problems of complacency and contentiousness in the face of oppression are then discussed, followed by an examination of the constructive and resilient means by which Bahá'ís work for social transformation and justice. The chapter concludes by examining those means through the lens of movement building.

Root causes of oppression

Oppression is a significant theme across the entire corpus of primary Bahá'í Writings. As Bahá'u'lláh wrote in the late nineteenth century, 'Justice is in this day bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression. The thick clouds of tyranny have darkened the face of the earth, and enveloped its peoples' (*Tablets* 84). Elaborating on this theme, the Universal House of Justice explains that still today, over a century later, 'humanity is battered by forces of oppression, whether generated from the depths of religious prejudice or the pinnacles of rampant materialism' (2008).

The Bahá'í Writings allude to both generalised and acute forms of oppression. The former include the perversion of truth, lack of access to education and knowledge, the cultivation of materialistic worldviews and lifestyles, and the burden of excessive military spending—all of which inhibit the development of human potentialities across entire populations. The latter include violence or discrimination targeted at specific groups through racism, sexism, xenophobia, caste systems, and other forms of bigotry, social exclusion, or exploitation.

The Bahá'í teachings suggest, however, that all forms of oppression arise from similar underlying causes, which tend to be understood through two metaphors. First, oppression is understood as a symptom of an underlying spiritual disease that can exist at the level of individual hearts and minds, social structures and institutions, and entire cultures. Second, oppression is

understood as an expression of immature stages in humanity's collective spiritual development, which is again understood at the level of individual hearts and minds, social structures and institutions, and entire cultures.

The dual problems of complacency and contentiousness

Given the preceding understanding, complacency in the face of oppression constitutes neglect of a fundamental spiritual obligation. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

My hope for you is that you will ever avoid tyranny and oppression; that you will work without ceasing till justice reigns in every land, that you will keep your hearts pure and your hands free from unrighteousness. This is what the near approach to God requires from you, and this is what I expect of you.

(Paris Talks 17)

Likewise, commenting on 'the dangers of complacency', the Universal House of Justice urges Bahá'ís to consider that

a small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterised by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society.

(2010a)

While Bahá'ís are urged to overcome complacency in the face of injustice by becoming 'protagonists of change', they are also exhorted to avoid contentious means as they work for justice (Universal House of Justice 2012). Bahá'u'lláh states, in the most unambiguous terms, that 'conflict and contention are categorically forbidden' (Tablets 221). This theme, which echoes repeatedly throughout the Bahá'í Writings, can best be understood in light of the Bahá'í teachings on the oneness of humanity—the pivotal principle of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation.

In this context, unity and justice are understood as reciprocal, or co-requisite, principles. They constitute both the ends and the means of the Bahá'í Cause. As the Universal House of Justice explains, 'Means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means. Specifically, it is not possible to build enduring unity through endeavours that require contention' (2013). Elaborating on this theme, the House of Justice explains that 'conflict and contention ultimately yield more conflict and contention. Eliminating social problems, rather than merely ameliorating them to an extent, requires unity of thought as well as action' (Universal House of Justice 2017). Bahá'ís are thus exhorted, on the one hand, to overcome complacency in the face of widespread injustices and, on the other hand, to work for justice in unifying ways that do not foster conflict. Every Bahá'í is called to a life of consecrated action characterised by coherence between means and ends.

The Bahá'í constructive programme

Although there is no perfect historical analogue for the pattern of social 'restructuring' that Bahá'ís seek to create, the literature on nonviolent social change would likely characterise the Bahá'í approach as a *constructive programme*—as Gandhi used the term (1945). Though the work

of the Bahá'í community began decades before Gandhi's work, and the former evolved independently of the latter, Gandhi's work was premised on the same principle of coherence between the means and ends of social change, which is why he was committed to nonviolence. As Gandhi gained experience with nonviolent methods, and as his thinking matured, he recognised that the most radical dimension of nonviolent social change was the active construction of a more just society, from the bottom up, that could displace the oppressive social order. He referred to this as the constructive programme—the internal work an oppressed population must do to build a more just order. Gandhi contrasted this constructive work with more contentious forms of nonviolent action such as civil disobedience—which were externally focused tactics intended to resist and disrupt specific elements of the oppressive order. Moreover, he came to view the latter as secondary. 'Outward agitation', he wrote, 'cannot be given the first place. It is of subsidiary importance and it depends for its success entirely on the success of that which is internal, viz. constructive work' (1925: 362–363). Gandhi thus came to view social 'agitation' as merely 'an aid to constructive effort' (1945: iii). Moreover, he argued that 'civil disobedience is not absolutely necessary . . . if the cooperation of the whole nation is secured in the constructive programme' (1945: 21).

Since Gandhi was unable to engage the masses in his constructive programme, he continued to employ confrontational forms of nonviolence in many contexts. But he recognised the latter unleashes passions that can easily devolve into cycles of conflict and violence; and he also understood that without an adequate constructive programme, a movement dependent on confrontation and conflict can throw off old forms of violence and oppression only to leave a vacuum in which new forms of violence and oppression will emerge (Mantena 2012).

The Bahá'í teachings, resonant with some of these aspects of Gandhian philosophy, suggest that the most effective way to pursue social transformation is through constructive agency—by consciously, intentionally, and systematically building a new social order amidst the violence and oppression of the prevailing order. This Bahá'í commitment does not entail criticism of others who employ consciously conflictual methods in the pursuit of justice. Rather, Bahá'ís have faith that their purely constructive programme will, over time, make a vital contribution to the transformation of society alongside other movements struggling for justice in their own ways.

The Bahá'í community has learned to understand its constructive work in terms of three broad overlapping spheres of activity. First, Bahá'ís are focused on the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community itself. Through this work they seek to create new patterns of individual life, new institutional structures and practices, and new cultural forms, on an ever-expanding scale across the planet. Second, as these community-building processes advance, the community's capacity to engage in diverse forms of outward-oriented social action, focused on the social and economic needs of the wider populations Bahá'ís reside in, increases. Third, as the Bahá'í community develops in both these ways, its capacity to participate in the discourses of society also increases, and Bahá'ís thereby seek to contribute to the evolution of thought and the advancement of knowledge within wider populations. On this third point, Bahá'ís hope to play their part in helping to lay—at the level of human understanding, knowledge, and systems of meaning, or at an epistemic level—the foundations of a more peaceful, just, and mutually prosperous social order (for an important elaboration of this point, see Danesh and Musta 2019).

Through all three of these spheres of activity, Bahá'ís are actively seeking to address the root causes of injustice and oppression. Given that the Latin word *radical* denotes getting to the *root* of a problem, it could be said that Bahá'ís are seeking to exercise a radical form of constructive agency. Yet, this radical constructive agency does not seek to confront existing power structures directly; instead, it is premised on an expanded conception of *power* that opens new possibilities for overcoming oppression (see, for example, the discussion of power in Karlberg 2020).

Contemporary conceptions of power tend to focus narrowly on its competitive, conflictual, and oppressive expressions. Even Michel Foucault, in his influential effort to reconceptualise power, ends up reinforcing this tendency. Foucault understands power as a relational property or force that permeates society, constituting all forms of social organisation and hierarchy. In this regard, he sees power as a constitutive phenomenon that is simultaneously productive and oppressive. However, Foucault's analyses invariably focus on oppressive expressions of power and he calls others to do the same. 'We should direct our researches on the nature of power', he thus writes, 'towards domination and material operators of power', and we should 'base our analyses of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination' (1980: 102).

To Bahá'ís, this narrow focus obscures the unifying and mutualistic powers of the human spirit that can be marshalled by individuals, institutions, and entire communities, for the purposes of constructing a more peaceful and just social order. Bahá'ís believe these unifying and mutualistic powers are, among other things, powers of *attraction* that are capable of drawing in ever-expanding numbers of people who want to participate in the construction of a new order. This approach is based on an understanding that the present-day order, which embodies so many conflictual and oppressive expressions of power, is already in crisis and cannot be sustained because of its internal contradictions and dysfunctions. In this context, Bahá'ís believe that as growing numbers of people recognise the inadequacies and injustices of the extant social order, they will be attracted to participate in efforts to construct a more peaceful and just order. Radical social transformation can thus be achieved, Bahá'ís implicitly believe, through nonadversarial processes of *construction and attraction*.

However, as the experience of the Bahá'í community demonstrates, a radical constructive programme also requires *resilience* because it will encounter repression. For instance, as the Bahá'í programme has advanced in Iran, it has become clear to those who are privileged by the oppressive dynamics of the current social order that there will be no place for such privilege in the new order Bahá'ís are constructing. In some cases, the hearts and minds of privileged individuals have been attracted to the Bahá'í Cause and they have thrown in their lot with the constructive programme. Others, however, have attempted to repress this constructive programme, sometimes through violent means, to maintain their privileges. Therefore, radical constructive agency needs to be coupled with resilience in the face of active and often violent repression. In this context, the resilience of the Iranian Bahá'í community offers provisional evidence of the human capacity to continually advance a transformative constructive programme even in the face of violent repression.

Bahá'ís have thus sought to adopt a posture of 'constructive resilience' under conditions of repression (Universal House of Justice 2007). For instance, in recent decades, Bahá'ís have been systematically denied access to higher education in Iran, as part of the current regime's policy to block the progress of the community. In response, Bahá'ís constructed a decentralised university, the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), in homes and offices across the country. BIHE now offers over 1,000 distinct courses within five associate degree programmes, 18 baccalaureate degree programmes, and 15 graduate degree programmes ranging across the arts and sciences. It is supported by approximately a thousand voluntary faculty and staff, including roughly 250 faculty from 21 countries outside Iran who teach through online courses. Inside Iran many faculty, staff, and students are continually arrested and imprisoned, and university materials are repeatedly confiscated in raids. But the Iranian regime has been unable to destroy BIHE because of its decentralised and resilient nature. And the regime is unable to marshal any moral or legal argument in support of their efforts to destroy the university because of BIHE's purely peaceful and constructive nature.

The Bahá'í movement

The Bahá'í Faith is not merely a social or political movement. It is an emerging world religion that cannot be understood purely within a secular philosophical framework or a Gandhian non-violent framework. As Bahá'ís understand it, the Bahá'í Faith is the next chapter in humanity's unfolding response to progressive dispensations of divine guidance throughout history. Yet to Bahá'ís, this response constitutes *a cause* or *a movement*. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

In this world we judge a cause or movement by its progress and development. Some movements appear, manifest a brief period of activity, then discontinue. Others show forth a greater measure of growth and strength, but before attaining mature development, weaken, disintegrate and are lost in oblivion. . . . There is still another kind of movement or cause which from a very small, inconspicuous beginning goes forward with sure and steady progress, gradually broadening and widening until it has assumed universal dimensions. The Bahá'í Movement is of this nature.

(Promulgation of Universal Peace 43–44)

The emergence of every new religious dispensation can be understood as a socially transformative movement. Consider, for instance, the socially transformative nature of Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam within their respective historical contexts. Moreover, religious commitments and organising capacities have made significant and well-documented contributions to most progressive movements of the modern era—including abolitionist movements, suffrage movements, labour movements, and movements for civil or human rights. Bahá'ís are thus asked to recognise that

All the spiritual and social movements existing in the world, and undoubtedly there are many of them, have some spark of the divine truth. Their very existence shows that they have something to offer to man and fulfil some purpose. But what the world needs, at such a critical moment in its history, is not a mere palliative. It needs a movement that goes deep into its social and spiritual illness and brings about a complete, fundamental change—a change that will include in its scope both the social and spiritual reform of man.

(Shoghi Effendi 1933)

The Bahá'í Writings are therefore replete with the language of movement building and the movement of populations. Though the community does not derive its approaches from the contemporary literature on movement building, it has developed many methods and approaches that are recognisable to movement scholars and activists.

In this regard, Bahá'ís are responding to forces of injustice and oppression in an organised manner that draws on powerful moral or spiritual commitments—as have many other movements for social change. Gandhi saw nonviolent social change as a nascent science and he viewed his efforts as early experiments in the science of nonviolence. Since Gandhi's time, a robust literature has emerged on the ways social movements generate knowledge (see, for example Casas-Cortés et al. 2008; Cox 2014). Similarly, Bahá'ís are increasingly coming to understand their efforts in terms of the systematic generation of knowledge regarding the application of spiritual principles to processes of social transformation. Toward this end, the Bahá'í Cause is steadily gaining momentum through a reflective mode of learning in action—as have many other relatively effective movements, from the Indian independence movement to the U.S. civil rights

movement. Bahá'ís also have an evolving framework for action, or a framework for activism, within which growing numbers of people are being mobilised—as have some other relatively effective movements, from African-American economic cooperative movements of the early twentieth century to the Serbian Otpor movement at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Each of the movements alluded to immediately before also illustrate that many effective movements develop forms of training to advance in coherent and disciplined ways. In this regard, the Bahá'í community has developed a world-wide system of training institutes that empower ever-expanding numbers of people to take initiative within the community's framework for action, with focus and discipline, in ways that respond creatively to local needs and opportunities. These training institutes foster decentralised modes of organising through which people across the planet are being mobilised in a series of shared, overarching, global plans. These institutes foster the capacity, in people from all walks of life, to collectively analyse the social forces acting on them so they can figure out how to translate a universal plan into forms of action that are relevant to particular circumstances and conditions. These institutes foster close relational bonds and friendships that serve as a source of courage and mutual accompaniment for collective action. And they foster the capacity to stay focused on long-term transformational goals rather than short-term transactional gains. Though Bahá'í training institutes are unique in other ways, all the characteristics alluded to earlier have been identified as important to movement efficacy in the literature on movement building and nonviolent change (see, for example, Engler and Engler 2017).

Moreover, the work of the Bahá'í community is simultaneously focused on transforming individual hearts and minds, transforming structures and institutions, and transforming the cultures of entire communities. Each of these has been identified as an important locus of change in the literature on nonviolent movement building (again, see Engler and Engler 2017). According to Bahá'ís, attending to change at any one of these levels at the exclusion of the others will not lead to deep or lasting change because change at each level shapes, and is in turn shaped by, the others. Perhaps more than other movements, the Bahá'í constructive programme thus focuses simultaneously on empowerment and capacity building at the level of individuals, institutions, and communities—along with the harmonisation of relationships among them.

The literature on social movements and nonviolent change has also noted the important role music and the arts can play in inspiring, motivating, and sustaining participants in the face of hardship. For instance, the songs of the U.S. civil rights movement, which were rooted in the spiritual and gospel traditions of collective worship in African-American churches, demonstrated this in powerful ways. A similar dynamic finds expression in the Bahá'í community, dating back to the birth of the Cause in the dungeon of the Siyáh Chál when Bahá'u'lláh led His fellow prisoners in a call and response chant that echoed through the surrounding streets of Tehran. Since that time, music, the arts, and collective worship have taken on the diverse cultural characteristics of the populations around the world that are being drawn into the Cause.

A long-term perspective

As the preceding discussion illustrates, Bahá'ís are increasingly able to contribute to the global conversation on nonviolent social change in ways that draw on the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and their accumulating experience in learning how to apply those teachings within a transformative constructive programme. But the Bahá'í movement is still in its early stages and Bahá'ís are not

naïve about the vast scale of the work that lies ahead or the multi-generational nature of the struggle. As the Universal House of Justice states,

The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

(2010b)

In this regard, Bahá'ís are increasingly coming to appreciate that these processes depend on the systematic generation, application, and diffusion of relevant forms of knowledge. Elaborating on this theme, the House of Justice writes that

there are certain fundamental concepts that all should bear in mind. One is the centrality of knowledge to social existence. The perpetuation of ignorance is a most grievous form of oppression; it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers to the realization of the oneness of humankind, at once the goal and operating principle of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. 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. Justice demands universal participation.

(2010b)

It is in this context that Bahá'ís increasingly understand the role of their training institute, the framework for action it supports, and the global plans within which their constructive action advances, in the struggle to overcome oppression. As the House of Justice explains,

The process set in motion by the current series of global Plans seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized.

(2010a)

Recognising that there are no shortcuts or simple formulas that can bring on the global change that they advocate, Bahá'ís eschew practices that compromise principles of unity and justice in the quest for swift change. Partisan politics, civil disobedience, and revolutionary tactics may seem to offer expedited paths to social transformation, but because these strategies necessarily involve the 'conflict and contention' that Bahá'u'lláh forbade, they play no role in the social activism of the Bahá'í Faith. In their commitment to a unifying constructive programme wherein means are consistent with ends, Bahá'ís accept that substantive social change may take

time to achieve. However, complacency is also inconsistent with Bahá'í practice; instead, the Bahá'í community is asked to respond to injustice through the exercise of constructive agency characterised by an 'urgency' that is 'impelled by the world's desperate condition' (Universal House of Justice 2015).

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