

MODERNITY IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER: THE CASE OF IBN KHALDUN

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My purpose in this paper is to analyze rationalism¹ as a cultural presupposition, which is often projected to Ibn Khaldun's celebrated work *al-Muqaddima* by Western authors² in order to make the work appear "modern". I make no attempt to issue any judgements on the historically "correct" understanding of *al-Muqaddima*; at present the exegesis of the Arabic original is hardly comprehensive enough for such a task. However, it can justifiably be argued that the significance of Ibn Khaldun's thought does not lie solely – not even primarily – in any hermeneutically sound interpretation of *al-Muqaddima*. I would even state, that the Arabic original and Western interpretations are two different things, and when it comes to the formation of the current image of Ibn Khaldun, the latter is actually far more important than the former.

THE PROBLEM STATED: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT OF IBN KHALDUN

In 1406 CE a *mālikī*-judge, Abū Zayd ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Khaldūn al-Ḥaḍramī, died in Mamluk-Cairo. Like countless other Muslim scholars both before and after him, he had travelled widely, reached an advanced age and composed many works – and like most of the individual scholars he did not leave a significant imprint in the Arabo-Islamic culture and scholarship. He had some undisputedly original thoughts, presented in *al-Muqaddima*, originally the introduction to his universal history, but it appears that after his death, these themes were not elaborated further by his colleagues or pupils. It can be said that among his natural peer group of Medieval Muslim scholars he was regarded more or less as

¹ Rationalism is here loosely defined as "a systematic belief in reason alone as the only method of finding truth". Murray 1978: 8.

² Not all representatives of these presuppositions are from the West in the geographical sense. Some of them are actually Muslims who have received a Western education and hold degrees in secular sciences. Although a bit more sensitive to Ibn Khaldun's cultural roots, they still tend to emphasize the rational aspect of his thought and picture it as compatible with modern science as possible. They take pride in him being a Muslim (or Arab) but strive to show that he somewhat exceeded Islamic learning by turning it into a modern science.

a mediocre chronicler.³ Of course in Ibn Khaldun's day it was hard for any scholar to achieve the veneration of the great savants of the previous centuries, but in fame and prestige, he clearly did not measure up to many eminent *'alims* who actually succeeded him, such as 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūfī (1445–1505) or Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1732–1791).

Nevertheless, there is something in Ibn Khaldun which sets him apart from the Medieval Muslim scholars. There is hardly a dispute of the fact that though he did not impress his Muslim colleagues, he certainly impressed a number of Western scholars hundreds of years later. According to the bibliography collected by Aziz al-Azmeh and published in 1981 he had by then already been the subject of more than 850 dissertations, books, papers and articles in many languages and of various themes.⁴ Measured by fame in the West, he is rivalled only by the most eminent thinkers in Arabo-Islamic scholarship, such as Ibn Sīnā or Ibn Rushd. Truly an amazing feat, keeping in mind the fact that, unlike these great philosophers, Latinized and culturally incorporated already during the Middle Ages, Ibn Khaldun did not contribute to the formation of the nascent Western culture.⁵ There is not even a mention of him in the European sources before the sporadic remarks at the turn of the 18th century⁶ and all attempts to show his influence on Western thinkers before the 19th century are on shaky ground at best.⁷

The other noteworthy aspect in Ibn Khaldun is the strange niche he carved out for himself within the Western academic world of the latter half of the 19th century and which he has held – at least to a degree – ever since.⁸ The greatest enthusiasts of his thought, such as Ludwig Gumplowicz (1838–1909)⁹ and Guglielmo Ferrero (1871–1942)¹⁰, were not interested in Middle Eastern studies. They were social

³ Ibn Khaldun's star did rise somewhat in the Ottoman realms of the late 18th century, but to my knowledge nobody has ever claimed that he had any followers to speak of among the generations directly following him.

⁴ Al-Azmeh 1981: 233–318. Naturally, even this excellent bibliography was incomplete. Since the early 1980s the volume of Ibn Khaldun-related publications has not shown any signs of ebbing.

⁵ Nor could he have. In Ibn Khaldun's day the great translation movement from Arabic to Latin was already a thing of the past. On the other hand, the new kind of interest, the intellectual curiosity of the age of Orientalism was not yet even in the offing.

⁶ The first known mention of Ibn Khaldun is in *Bibliothèque Orientale* by Barthélemy d'Herbelot de Molainville, completed in 1697. Alatas 2006: 402.

⁷ To mention one example: Warren Gates speculates that he might have influenced Montesquieu. However, he does not have much tangible evidence to support this claim. Gates 1967.

⁸ Among the main-line sociologists, Ibn Khaldun has not been in vogue since the latter half of the 20th century. He is championed mainly by some individual scholars, e.g. Fuad Baali and Mahmoud Dhaouadi. On the other hand he has found a new home in the history of economics, where he has been a subject of studies from time to time. The latest specialized study to my knowledge is Soofi 1995.

⁹ Gumplowicz 1899.

¹⁰ Ferrero was actually as much a historian as he was a sociologist, especially well versed in the history of Antiquity. The personal history of Ibn Khaldun was of some interest for him, but some of his curious remarks in the paper show that he did not understand much of Islamic culture

theorists puzzled by the historically unprecedented social fabric of the modern age – of Ibn Khaldun’s intellectual and cultural background they had only a vague understanding, nor did they concern themselves much with such bagatelles.¹¹

The outcome of these peculiarities is a strangely displaced Ibn Khaldun. He became popular – not in his own time, not even in the Arabo-Islamic culture that produced him – but in the West of the Industrial Age. Furthermore, he became popular among an unlikely audience. The secular social scientists, his most ardent protagonists, certainly did not share his Islamic worldview and probably would have strongly disagreed with most of what he actually thought about supernatural phenomena, such as revelation and divine intervention.¹² Evidently this did little to curb their enthusiasm, since in most papers published in sociological journals since the turn of the 20th century, Ibn Khaldun is hardly regarded much as a Muslim scholar at all, but more like an early predecessor, or even a founding father, of some secular social sciences such as sociology and economics.¹³

AL-MUQADDIMA – PRE-MODERN WORK AND THE MODERN AUDIENCE

At first glance the reasons behind the popularity of Ibn Khaldun among Western scholars seems quite easy to perceive. Clearly, there are features in his thought that are open to “modern” interpretations. In *al-Muqaddima* two factors especially stand out:

or history nor did he consider these in anyway essential. For him *al-Muqaddima* was clearly about sociology: “Questa introduzione – due volumi in folio di 400 pagine – è un vero trattato sistematico di sociologia; una teoria generale della società.” Ferrero 1896: 223.

¹¹ There is a tangible shift in the discourse when social scientists take over Ibn Khaldun from the Orientalists. For example, Alfred von Kremer (1828–1889), who was fluent in Arabic (among some other “oriental” languages) and had sojourned in the Middle East, did not notice any distinctly modern features in *al-Muqaddima*. His interest was mostly historical and philological. Von Kremer 1879.

¹² In the first half of the 20th century, among the most celebrated aficionados of Ibn Khaldun was Pitirim Sorokin (1889–1968), one of the leading sociologists of the time. He frequently mentioned Ibn Khaldun in his works, though he never produced any specialized studies in the subject.

¹³ Nearly all early Western proponents of Ibn Khaldun saw him as an early sociologist as Gumplovicz and Ferrero clearly did. Later authors have shifted the definition somewhat: e.g. Dhaouadi calls him “the founding father of eastern sociology”. Dhaouadi 1990. The interpretation of Ibn Khaldun as an early economist received a great boost when he was mentioned in Joseph Schumpeter’s classic *The History of Economic Analysis* in 1954. Soon Ibn Khaldun was turned into a modern economist by several authors. To quote Jean David Boulakia: “Ibn Khaldûn discovered a great number of fundamental economic notions a few centuries before their official births. He discovered the virtues and the necessity of a division of labor before Smith and the principle of labor value before Ricardo.” Boulakia 1971: 1117.

1. Ibn Khaldun not just reported historical incidents but he also strived to establish a pattern behind them. Principally, Ibn Khaldun's work was about the dynastic cycle, ruling houses rising and falling and affecting the society at large.

2. Ibn Khaldun presents many sharp observations regarding the function of the body social, some of which appear to be fully applicable to the modern society. The most celebrated example is the economic phenomenon later named as Laffer Curve. Ibn Khaldun noted that an increase in the tax-rate does not yield any extra income to the treasury after a certain point, due to the fact that the populace becomes impoverished and the economic activity fades away.¹⁴

It is small wonder that many early Western readers were genuinely impressed by his work. Ibn Khaldun simply appeared to be much more than anybody should expect from a pre-modern scholar. In his work – although embedded in curious expressions and amongst strange topics – they saw a rationalist thinker, reasoning on a naturalistic basis in order to formulate a fully-fledged social theory.¹⁵ The widely held idea of Ibn Khaldun as a predecessor of modern social science was born out of these notions, from seemingly solid foundations in *al-Muqaddima*.¹⁶

However, here the finger of warning should be raised. This epistemological foundation is actually rather treacherous since there were other factors involved.

One must bear in mind that *al-Muqaddima* is a highly complicated composition, which does not fit into any clear-cut category within the Arabo-Islamic scholarship. This meant that there was no established way of interpreting it as there was in the other genres of Islamic learning, such as *ḥadīth*-literature, *ta'rīkh* or *tafsīr*, which would hardly have caught the interest of persons such as Gumpłowicz or Ferrero. Apparently, the intention of Ibn Khaldun was to found a new genre along these lines,¹⁷ but this failed to materialize. Consequently *al-Muqaddima* was left in isolation on the fringes of the Muslim literary culture, without commentaries or offspring that would have determined the general framework of interpretation. When Western scholars found this piece of Arabic scholarship without any apparent pigeon hole to classify it into, they were free to connect the dots as they saw fit. Unsurprisingly, they resorted to their own preconceived ideas of rationalism and progress, the great themes of the late 19th and the early 20th century.

In industrialized, post-enlightenment Europe the supreme current in the cultural climate was the unwavering faith in the human capability to reason, analyze and

¹⁴ Ibn Khaldun 1980: 308–309.

¹⁵ e.g. Gumpłowicz 1899: 152–153.

¹⁶ Perhaps the best-known protagonist of Ibn Khaldun in the field of sociology is Fuad Baali. His interpretation of *al-Muqaddima* is basically the same as that formulated at the turn of the 20th century in its tendency to read the work from the horizon of the modern social sciences. According to Baali Ibn Khaldun's method can be described as "theoretical", "empirical", "cumulative" and "nonethical" (objective). All these terms he apparently means to be taken more or less at face value. Baali 1988: 16–21.

¹⁷ Ibn Khaldun 1980: 3–9.

control physical and social phenomena. Society itself, previously taken as divinely regulated and unchangeable, became a subject of critical study and easily changeable by means of political decisions.¹⁸

From the beginning the new social thought was also highly self-reflective. It was unambiguously aware that in the process of modernization, not just the physical environment and the mode of production had morphed, but the human mind as well. To the Western intellectual elite of the modern era, this change was anything but neutral. The past was viewed as oppressive, irrational and superstitious, conquered by the age of reason, free from supernatural beliefs and irrational dogmas.¹⁹

Since the 19th century this general concept of progressive society from the dark past to rationalism and prosperity was everywhere. The most well known manifestation is the Marxist model of human history as a gradual march from the primitive society to the communist society.²⁰ Max Weber (1864–1920) placed even more stress on the rationalization in his analysis of history; for Weber *Rationalisierung* was a technical term, the key feature of the ethos of the modern society.²¹ On the other hand, he saw – as did nearly all of his contemporaries – the progress of rationalization inevitably leading to the demystification of the physical world and the disappearance of the supernatural; even religions themselves were steps on the ladder that led to the increasingly secular worldview of his time, and gradually ostracized magic outside the modern human mind. Weber coined a very telling term for this phenomenon: *Entzauberung*.²²

When the Western audience acquainted itself with the French translation of *al-Muqaddima*²³ and found there undeniably rational reasoning and argumentation not based on supernatural revelation, that was more than enough to make Ibn

¹⁸ Sociology itself was very much a child of this *Zeitgeist*. A very thorough study on the formation of the discipline: Lepenies 1988.

¹⁹ Eric Hobsbawm presents an elegant description of the secular mind of post-revolutionary Europe: “For in a sense there was only one *Weltanschauung* of major significance, and a number of other views which, whatever their merits, were at bottom chiefly negative critiques of it; the triumphant, rationalist, humanist ‘Enlightenment’ of the eighteenth century. Its champions believed firmly (and correctly) that human history was an ascent, rather than a decline or an undulating movement about a level trend. They could observe that man’s scientific knowledge and technical control over nature increased daily.” Hobsbawm 2003: 286.

²⁰ For Marx of course, the ultimate age of reason, that is, the communist society, had not yet arrived; but his model was very much in line with the current view of the progressive society growing less metaphysical in the course of history.

²¹ Weber’s writings have been a source for somewhat varied interpretations. This is due to the fact that after his famous work *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1904–1905) he developed his ideas mainly in a body of writings, which he did not have time to revise himself. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, which is often regarded as his main work presenting his mature thought, was compiled posthumously by his wife in 1921.

²² Weber dwells on *Entzauberung* mainly in his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, which he barely finished before succumbing to the Spanish flu in June 1920.

²³ This would be the translation by Baron William McGuckin de Slane in 1863.

Khaldun a rationalist, and thus by default, a modern thinker.²⁴ Consequently, such things as faith in revelation, prophecy and magic, could not coexist in the same cognitive universe as rationalism. Actually a number of topics in *al-Muqaddima* fall to the category of the supernatural and in many instances the reasoning is based on revelation,²⁵ but these features were simply shrugged off as purely stylistic mannerisms,²⁶ if acknowledged at all. There just could not be *Rationalisierung* without *Entzauberung*.

The new authors followed the generations of 19th century scholars and in their reading of Ibn Khaldun they stayed on the beaten track. Ibn Khaldun's cultural background and the influence of the Islamic heritage were never much of an issue, not to mention something that should be given serious consideration in interpreting his thought. In short, they simply set aside what they saw as remnants of mystical, religious Islamic culture, from which Ibn Khaldun was paradoxically both emerging and separated. When the Western Ibn Khaldun image was fully formed, its sculptors had discarded from *al-Muqaddima* everything they did not deem compatible with rationalism, or what they simply did not understand, and this was not an insignificant portion.

IBN KHALDUN AND MUSLIM SCHOLARSHIP

Perhaps the established one-sided image of Ibn Khaldun as a theorist totally isolated from his culture and era – or at least certainly not owing anything to them – is the principal reason for the utter scarcity of comprehensive studies on Ibn Khaldun's thought.²⁷ Mostly Ibn Khaldun-literature is still a loose body of concise papers, wildly contradicting and ignoring each other, freely using a pick- and-choose method in order to seek support in *al-Muqaddima* for their own preconceived views. They add little if anything to our hermeneutical understanding of Ibn Khaldun's thought.

²⁴ It is important to note that rationalism was never a theme specially addressed in the studies on *al-Muqaddima*. The modern quality of Ibn Khaldun's thought was labeled in many terms: rational, empirical, objective etc. The scope and function of these words was in any case essentially the same. They serve only one purpose and that is to exclude the supernatural (theological, Islamic) from the analysis. The fact that Ibn Khaldun was a rationalist is not so much accounted for, but simply preconceived, as in, e.g. Soofi 1995: 3–4.

²⁵ Ibn Khaldun dwells at length on many supernatural practices, among others, prophecy and dream visions. Some of these he rejects; with others he has no problems at all. Especially those endorsed by Islam, he accepts as self-evident. Ibn Khaldun 1980: 101–134.

²⁶ "Das Werk enthält neben geographischen Ausführungen und historischen Darstellungen allgemeine geschichts-philosophische Betrachtungen, welche als soziologisch im engsten Sinne des Wortes bezeichnet werden können, insofern sie eine Theorie der Wechsel-seitigen Beziehungen menschlicher Stämme und Gruppen enthalten. Allerdings sind diese Betrachtungen mit Koransprüchen verbrämt, ähnlich wie theologische Schriftsteller des Abendlandes ihre Traktate mit Bibelzitate spicken." Gumplowicz 1899: 152.

²⁷ One rare exception is Aziz al-Azmeh's twin works, which penetrate very deep into the structure and logic of *al-Muqaddima*. Al-Azmeh 1981; 1982.

A case in point is one of the best-known examples of Ibn Khaldun's "rational" reasoning, the Laffer Curve. It is often interpreted that he followed here strictly rational reasoning, determining a culmination point where the tax-revenues are at the maximum level.²⁸ Actually Ibn Khaldun spells out clearly that the reason for large revenues, as for the prosperity of the community as whole, is the observance of the God-given rules (*sunan al-dīn*). He even states that these are the limits not to be overstepped (*wa hiya hudūd-un lā tuta 'addā*). Consequently, the cause of the diminishing revenues is breaking the divine rules and imposing extra taxes, not dictated by the religious law.²⁹ There is no abstract curve that would help to fix the tax rate to the proper level, nor was there any reason for Ibn Khaldun to try and formulate such a statistical device. The optimum tax rate was already known to him, and it was known by revelation.

This passage, which greatly boosted the rather unsubstantiated idea of Ibn Khaldun practicing some sort of a theory of public finance, is most illustrative regarding the problem stated in this paper. After more than two centuries since the scientific revolution and Enlightenment the coexistence of reason and revelation (among other "supernatural" modes of thought) is very prone to escape a modern reader.³⁰ In short, the line of reasoning is that if reason is detected, that indicates pure rationalism, and thus the supernatural must step outside the perimeter of interpretation – even when appearing in the very same passage, such as in the case of the Laffer Curve! To quote Suphan Andic as a demonstration:

Yet Ibn Khaldun, in the fourteenth century, had conceived social and economic phenomena as subject to laws which cause them to follow clear and discernible patterns. Unlike his contemporaries, his sociology and economics did not form part of his theology or ethics;³¹

The example is a rather archetypical representative of the mainline Ibn Khaldun discourse in its tendency to begin the presentation by listing "modern" features of *al-Muqaddima* and then using this as a pole in order to vault over those features that do not suit the modernizing interpretation well.³² However, unlike most authors, Andic takes the trouble to even address the topic of the supernatural, if only *en passant*, and in order to dismiss it as a factor in analysis. This is still more surprising, because Andic actually dwells at some length on the passage where Ibn Khaldun deals with the topic of taxation. Yet he still overlooks that in the very passage in

²⁸ e.g. Soofi 1995: 12.

²⁹ Ibn Khaldun 1980: 308.

³⁰ The history of Medieval European thought processes contains problems of the same kind. It is quite obvious that the great savants of the pre-industrial age demonstrated unquestionable ability for reasoning and logical thinking, but, at the same time, they had absolutely no problem to take miracles for granted. Murray 1978.

³¹ Andic 1965: 25.

³² Curiously enough, this line of reasoning rarely goes in the opposite direction, that is, to claim that the presence of the supernatural indicates the lack of rationalism.

question, as in the *al-Muqaddima* on the whole, “sociology” and “economics” very much indeed form “a part of his theology and ethics”. Even more so, they are inseparable from it, as Ibn Khaldun himself clearly states.³³

It is quite obvious that the only way forward from this dead lock of enforced foreign presuppositions is to bring the historical context back. In other words, the question of Ibn Khaldun’s rationality or “modernity” can be solved only within the framework of the Islamic scholarship of the late 14th century. As a provisional hypothesis I would claim that Ibn Khaldun was no more “rational” or “modern” than any other Islamic scholar of those days. The uniqueness of *al-Muqaddima* is in the composite nature of the work. It combines two elements in different fields of Islamic scholarship: the method for establishing the soundness of historical information from *ḥadīth*-studies and the topic of history from the *ta’rīkh*-literature.³⁴ The feature the Western audience saw as rationalism – that is reasoning without the apparent interference of the supernatural – had actually been soundly established in Islamic scholarship for centuries. Basically, all Ibn Khaldun did was take a method from a branch of Islamic scholarship and apply it to another branch. Both the method and the branch he applied it to, were quite familiar to his colleagues, and not radical novelties as such.

In my view there is not much in *al-Muqaddima* – its curious composite nature notwithstanding – that would drastically differ from other Medieval Muslim works in tone, terminology, or worldview. Rather Ibn Khaldun’s thought is so intermingled with the various branches of Islamic scholarship that it cannot be severed from it without brutally mutilating both *al-Muqaddima* and the literary culture that produced it.

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³³ Andic uses the English translation of Franz Rosenthal (1958) without consulting the Arabic original. However, the passage in question is unambiguous in this translation as well. There is nothing in the wording that would justify the notion that Ibn Khaldun differentiated between “secular” and “theological” reasoning.

³⁴ This notion originates with al-Azmeh’s excellent studies on *al-Muqaddima*. Al-Azmeh 1981; 1982.

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