



Innovative ideas of Ibn Khaldun to Sociology & Philosophy of History

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Abstract: Ibn Kaldun, Sociologist, was a renaissance man, the real father of sociology. He defined the foundations of sociology more than four centuries before Augusta Comte 'discovered' them (Comte, a French philosopher was a founder of Positivism). He lived in an era when the Muslim Nation in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula disintegrated into a multitude of city-states fighting against each other. At the same time the Spaniards were uniting their kingdoms and steadily taking over the Muslim city-states in Iberia. He was directly involved in the political intrigue and several Muslim rulers in different capacities ranging from diplomatic envoy to minister. His first hand observations led him to believe that resources or policies do not control societies. He concluded that societies are living organisms that experience cyclic birth, growth, maturity, decline, and ultimately death due to universal causes (in the dynamic marketing concept today, the gurus associate it with a business, product or service life cycle). He also described the process through which peaceful or violent migrants blend with the native population to form a homogeneous society subject to the universal cycles. He correctly associated the maturity stage of any social system with affluence, luxury and reluctance to perform menial task. This leads to the employment of foreigners and mercenaries, which initiated the conflicts that lead to the decline phase. He identified the impact of climate and available resources on migrations and social changes. He also identified the impact of governmental policy and taxation on social change. The chief concern of his monumental work was to identify psychological, economic, environmental and social facts that contribute to the advancement of human civilization and the currents of history.

Key Words: Ibn Khaldun, Sociology, History, Innovative Ideas, Philosophy,

Introduction: Some consider the Italian philosopher Vico (1668-1744) to have been the founder of philosophy of history; others give the credit to the French philosopher Montesquieu (1689-1755). In fact, the Arabic philosopher and historian ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) was the first pioneer to discover that

history, like any other science, required research. “It is the science of circumstances and events and its causes are profound, thus it is an ancient, original part of wisdom and deserves to be one of its sciences.”

In his *The Introduction* (1377), ibn Khaldun also wrote, “History is an art of valuable doctrine, numerous in advantages and honourable in purpose; it informs us about bygone nations in the context of their habits, the prophets in the context of their lives and kings in the context of their states and politics, so those who seek the guidance of the past in either worldly or religious matters may have that advantage.

Short biography of Ibn Khaldun: Abu Zayd 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Khaldun came from an illustrious family and enjoyed an excellent education in his youth. Both his parents died when the Black Death struck Tunis in 1349. At the age of 20, he was given a post at the court of Tunis and later became secretary to the sultan of Morocco in Fez. In the late 1350s, he was imprisoned for two years for suspicion of participating in a rebellion. After being released and promoted by a new ruler, he again fell out of favor, and he decided to go to Granada. Ibn Khaldun had served the Muslim ruler of Granada in Fez, and Granada's prime minister, Ibn al-Khatib, was a renowned writer and a good friend to Ibn Khaldun. A year later he was sent to Seville to conclude a peace treaty with King Pedro I of Castile, who treated him with great generosity. However, intrigue raised its ugly head and rumors were spread of his disloyalty, adversely affecting his friendship with Ibn al-Khatib. He returned to Africa, where he changed employers with unfortunate frequency and served in a variety of administrative posts. In 1375, Ibn Khaldun sought refuge from the tumultuous political sphere with the tribe of Awlad 'Arif. They lodged him and his family in a castle in Algeria, where he spent four years writing the *Muqaddimah*.

Illness drew him back to Tunis, where he continued his writing until difficulties with the current ruler prompted him to leave once more. He moved to Egypt and eventually took a teaching post at the Quamhiyyah College in Cairo, where he later became chief judge of the Maliki rite, one of the four recognized rites of Sunnite Islam. He took his duties as judge very seriously -- perhaps too seriously for most of the tolerant Egyptians, and his term did not last long. During his time in Egypt, Ibn Khaldun was able to make a pilgrimage to Mecca and visit Damascus and Palestine. Except for one incident in which he was forced to participate in a palace revolt, his life there was relatively peaceful-until Timur invaded Syria. The new sultan of Egypt, Faraj, went out to meet Timur and his victorious forces, and Ibn Khaldun was among the notables he took with him. When the Mamluk army returned to Egypt, they left Ibn Khaldun in besieged Damascus. The city fell into great peril, and the city leaders began negotiations with Timur, who asked to meet Ibn Khaldun. The illustrious scholar was lowered over the city wall by ropes in order to join the conqueror. He spent nearly two months in the company of Timur, who treated him with respect. The scholar used his years of accumulated knowledge and wisdom to charm the

ferocious conqueror, and when Timur asked for a description of North Africa, he gave him a complete written report. He witnessed the sack of Damascus and the burning of the great mosque, but he was able to secure safe passage from the decimated city for himself and other Egyptian civilians. On his way home from Damascus, laden with gifts from Timur, Ibn Khaldun was robbed and stripped by a band of Bedouin. With the greatest of difficulty, he made his way to the coast, where a ship belonging to the Sultan of Rum, carrying an ambassador to the sultan of Egypt, took him to Gaza. Thus he established contact with the rising Ottoman Empire.

The rest of Ibn Khaldun's journey and, indeed, the rest of his life were relatively uneventful. He died in 1406 and was buried in the cemetery outside one of Cairo's main gates.

His valuable Works

Ibn Khaldun's most significant work is the *Muqaddimah*. In this "introduction" to history, he discussed historical methods and provided the necessary criteria for distinguishing historical truth from error. The *Muqaddimah* is considered one of the most phenomenal works on the philosophy of history ever written. He also wrote a definitive history of Muslim North Africa, as well as an account of his eventful life in an autobiography entitled *Al-ta'rif bi Ibn Khaldun*.

His innovative ideas:

Ibn Khaldun's theory divided history into two main parts: the historical manifest and the historical gist. According to him, history should not limit itself to recording events, but should examine environments, social mores and political bases: "True history exists to tell us about human social life, which is the world's environment, and the nature of that environment as it appears from various events. It deals with civilisation, savagery and tribalism, with the various ways in which people obtain power over each other, and their results, with states and their hierarchies and with the people's occupations, lifestyles, sciences, handicrafts and everything else that takes place in that environment under various circumstances."

Ibn Khaldun's method relied on criticism, observation, comparison and examination. He used scientific criticism to analyze accounts of historical events, the sources of these accounts and the techniques used by historians, examining and comparing various different accounts in order to get rid of falsifications and exaggerations and obtain some objective idea of what had actually happened. Many accounts contained lies because they had been written to flatter some ruler or to further the interests of some sect, the newsmakers and storytellers deliberately cheating and falsifying things for their own purposes. Ibn Khaldun, therefore, urged the historian to become erudite, accurate in observation and skilled in comparing text with subtext in order to be capable of effective criticism and clarification.

Although ibn Khaldun strongly believed in God, he never mentioned any celestial aim for history, or any divine end at which history would come to stop. He states, in fact, the “past is like the future, water from water”, which seems to imply that human history has no end. Ibn Khaldun went further to criticise other historians for imposing metaphysical ideas upon historical events to make the latter appear subordinate to the gods or to divine providence, turning history, properly a science, into something more closely akin to the arts and literature.

As a result, some Muslims and Westerners seized his concept of history to denounce ibn Khaldun as an atheist, a charge of which he was innocent; his point was that the science of history was not subject to metaphysics and could not be made so. Ibn Khaldun never questioned the existence of God. His work, according to him, was “inspired by God, pure inspiration”, which should be evidence enough of his belief in God.

However, his views on prophecy are crystal clear, unlike those of certain of his predecessors in Muslim philosophy, in particular Alfarabi (870-950) and Avicenna (980-1037). As an experimental philosopher he was interested in the holy experiments of the Prophet Mohammed (570-632), which means he cannot have seen history as having no end. If the existence of God is regarded as an absolute fact and His prophets and their religious experiments as proof of this fact, then the statement that in history the past is just like the future must mean it consists of a continuous series of events not stopping with any nation, but continuing in cycles.

Ibn Khaldun believed even the minutest of facts should be scrutinised in analysing historical events, since these were not simple phenomena, but complex. He regarded history as far from easy to study, being “the knowledge of qualitative events and their causes in depth.” Since metaphysical theories of history were in his view irrelevant, Ibn Khaldun imported the idea of causality from the theoretical field of philosophy into the practical arena of history by concentrating on the worldly ‘causes and reasons’ of historical events. His method was directly inductive, relying on the senses and the intellect without referring to any other norm. There was, in his view, a yawning void between the abstractive and the experimental, the first being based on logic and second on the reality of the sensible world. The subject of divine knowledge was an invisible spirit unable to be subjected to experimentation and of which there was no sensory evidence, so there could be no certain proof of it in this world. Since the sensible and the non-sensible thus had no terms in common, ibn Khaldun banished the abstractive or divine world from his logical syllogisms. This is precisely the approach taken by modern positivism, and even pragmatism followed in ibn Khaldun’s footsteps during its early stages.

In his diagnosis of “the causes of lies in history”, ibn Khaldun identifies a number of reasons, such as: sectarianism, misplaced trust in the sources, ignorance of some hidden purpose and the wish to flatter rulers. Hence, many historians, copyists and tellers have made the mistake of accepting untrue accounts or recording events that did not take place because they have relied on report alone, without bothering to research its sources closely for truth or falsehood, compare it with anything else or apply their own intelligence to it. In this they have showed themselves to be poor historians. For example, al-Mas’udi and various other Arab historians accepted that the Israelite armies led by the Prophet Moses numbered 600,000 or more men aged twenty and upwards. If we examine this tale carefully it is clearly false. When Jacob and his kinsmen entered Egypt there were only seventy of them. Only four generations separated Jacob and Moses. Where, then, did Moses get this huge multitude of youths and men? The Israeli themselves, moreover, reported that Solomon’s army numbered 12,000 and his horses 1400, while calling his kingdom the vigour of their state and an expansion of their reign.

Al-Mas’ud also succeeded in ignoring physical reality. How exactly was this huge army squeezed into the maze? How could so massive a force have been lined up and moved in so limited an area of land? In the area of historical knowledge al-Mas’ud did no better. Historically each kingdom was manned by a certain number of garrisons according to its size. A kingdom having six hundred thousand or more fighters would have had borders far exceeding the limits of the ancient kingdom of Israel.

In his prescription of “requirements for a historian”, ibn Khaldun stated that several things were essential if a historian were to be qualified to deal with historical events and stories:

1. An understanding of the rules of politics and the nature of people.
2. Knowledge of the natural environment and how it differs according to time and place.
3. Acquaintance with the social environments of the various different nations in terms of way of life, morals, incomes, doctrines and so forth.
4. An understanding of the present time and an ability to compare it with the past.
5. Knowledge of the origins and motives of states and sects, their declared principles, their rules and major events in their histories.

To achieve a critical understanding of historical events, then, the historian must study the general circumstances of the period with which he is dealing and compare the particular events in which he is interested. He should then explore any similar events that have taken place at other periods along with the general circumstances of these periods. When he has completed these two main stages he should be

able to recognise events as reasonable and probably true, or unacceptable and almost certainly false. Certain events need only be studied separately, along with the general circumstances of their periods, to know which parts of them must be true or false.

In his analysis of 'the intellect', ibn Khaldun believes the intellect has limits it cannot exceed and that these prevent it from reaching a complete understanding of God and His attributes. This is its reality, and man cannot upgrade it or increase its level of capability. Ibn Khaldun insisted that the intellect could not be aware of "the reality of the soul and the divine" or of anything else existing in the higher world, because it was incapable of reaching, knowing or proving it. We can be aware only of what is material; if a thing is immaterial we can neither prove it nor base any proof upon it.

Ibn Khaldun offered the intellect little encouragement to dwell on metaphysics, preferring to emulate Algazel (1059-1111), by dealing a final and near-fatal blow to philosophical thought by the Arabic-Islamic intellect. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that in closing one door ibn Khaldun threw open to the human mind an entirely new one: the sociology and philosophy of history.

Ibn Khaldun's theory of society was put forward in *The Muqaddimah* "Prolegomena" (which contained the 'Introduction'). The core aspect of his theory involved the explanation of human cooperation and conflict. He wrote that men are incapable of complete self-subsistence as individuals. They need to specialize and to exchange goods and services because differences of condition among people are the result of the different ways in which they make their living. Social organization enables them to cooperate toward that end and to start with the simple necessities of life, before they get to conveniences and luxuries. Books two to five cover the history of mankind up to the time of Ibn Khaldun. Books six and seven cover the history of the Berber people and of the Maghreb, which for the present-day historian represent the real value of the *Al-Kitabu l-ibar*, as they are based on Ibn Khaldun's personal knowledge of the Berbers. The last volume deals largely with the events of his life and is known as *Al-Tasrif*. This was also written in a scientific manner and initiated a new analytical tradition in the art of writing autobiography.

4. Self-definition as a 'sociologist' For sociology it is interesting that he conceived both a central social conflict ('town' versus 'desert') as well as a theory (using the concept of a 'generation') of the necessary loss of power of city conquerors coming from the desert. Following a contemporary Arab scholar, Sati' al-Husri, it can be suggested that the *Muqadimmah* is essentially a sociological work, sketching over its six books a general sociology; a sociology of politics; a sociology of urban life; a sociology of economics; and a sociology of knowledge. The work is based around Ibn Khaldun's central concept of 'asabiyah social cohesion. This cohesion arises spontaneously in tribes and other small kinship groups; and it can be intensified and enlarged by a religious ideology. Ibn Khaldun's analysis looks at how this cohesion carries groups to power but contains within itself the seeds of the group's

downfall, to be replaced by a new group dynasty or empire bound by a stronger (or at least younger and more vigorous) cohesion. Perhaps the most frequently cited observation drawn from Ibn Khaldun's work is, in layman's terms, the notion that when a society becomes a great civilization (and, presumably, the dominant culture in its region), its high point is followed by a period of decay. He identified an almost rhythmic repetition of rise and fall in human civilization, and analyzed factors contributing to it. His contribution to history is marked by the fact that, unlike earlier writers' interpreted history largely in a political context, he emphasized environmental, sociological, psychological and economic factors governing the apparent events. This revolutionized the science of history and laid the foundation of Umraniyat (sociologist). As part of this new science, Ibn Khaldun aimed to analyze objectively issues and to show the consequences of various policies. He thought that those things mandated by God can be shown scientifically to be the best social policies, and that this is the natural consequence of the fact that God created the foundation of the good life. 5. Definition by others as a sociologist. Fischel (1967) lists 4 specific topics, which Ibn Khaldun detailed his meetings with Tamerlane from Damascus in 1403 on: a. Maghreb and Ibn Khaldun's Land of Origin b. Heroes in History c. Predictions of things to come d. The Absid Caliphate the Western world although recognizes Khaldun as the father of Sociology but hesitates in recognizing him also as a great economist who laid its very foundation. Khaldun wrote about the logic of history. Marxists greatly admire him. Ibn Khaldun's influence on the subject of history, philosophy of history, sociology, political science and education has remained paramount ever since his life. His books have been translated into many languages, both in the East and the West, and have inspired subsequent development of these sciences. For instance, Prof. Gum Ploughs and Kolosio consider Muqaddimah as superior in scholarship to Machiavelli's The Prince written a century later, as the former bases, the diagnosis more on cultural, sociological and psychological factors.

Conclusion:

The great sociologist Ibn Khaldun was one of the most remarkable Muslim scholars of the pre-modern period. He founded what he called the science of human society or social organization, as well as a new methodology for writing history and a new purpose for it, namely to understand the cause of events. While his ideas had little impact on the development of Muslim thought for several centuries.

He came to produce the science of history and applied sociology to receive to current harms of civilization and their future, which can still be used by any historian and sociologist anywhere in the world. The reliability, pervasiveness, and permanence of sociological theories depend on their internal and external validation. And this helpful use of Ibn Khaldun's theory by scholars in twenty-first century is same as external validity of this theory because findings of scholars in modern societies confirm his claims and represent true text of his data.

Just as Ibn Khaldun Since the 18th century, the western world has taken him seriously, especially as his scientific ideas were very much like those that were to develop much later on in human history. He has, however, still not taken his rightful place as the founder of philosophy of history and the pioneer of sociology, although translations of his historical and social treatises have helped to some extent.

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