

gists like Ibn Khaldun can provide us a route to such understanding.

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## Theorizing from Within: Ibn Khaldun and His Political Culture

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Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) must have been an extraordinary individual: Scholar and diplomat, wide-ranging theoretician, and clear-eyed political operative, a man who literally climbed down a citadel wall in the middle of the night to confer with the "barbarian" Tamerlane and figuratively scaled a wall of incomprehension and tribal isolation to understand his fellow men. But in the process of rendering Ibn Khaldun so like thinkers in the West and by melding his particularity into Western ideas of the universal, we risk losing his insights into the distinctiveness of political cultures and the greater lessons he may still teach us about the need to understand the specificities of one's own time and place.

Commentators like Akbar Ahmed have rightly emphasized that Ibn Khaldun is very much an *Islamic* thinker.<sup>1</sup> I want to consider two correlative points: that Ibn Khaldun is also very much an *Arab* thinker whose views about Arab political culture have special cur-

rency in our times, and that the distinctiveness of the social and political forms he analyzes may be lost if seen only as a contribution to grand historical theory. More particularly, I want to consider three points: (1) that Ibn Khaldun's theory of history is deeply embedded in an appreciation of the contexts of human actions and their highly pragmatic consequences, rather than constituting some stratospheric vision of cyclical social movements; (2) that his way of both considering and finessing the role of individual leaders is consonant with the orientation of one coming from an *Arab* (perhaps especially North African) background; and (3) that for these and other reasons, the Western tendency to emphasize the similarities between the historiography of Ibn Khaldun and that of many Western analysts obscures the distinctive style of his own form of theorizing.

Though commonly known for his grand theory of state formation—that tribes well up out of arid regions to take over cities where in turn they lose their collective solidarity—Ibn Khaldun alternately assumes and asserts that in his new science human nature manifests itself not as an automatic response to forces of climate and necessity but in relation

to highly contingent circumstances. His concern for larger social forces in no way effaces his intensely pragmatic feel for the ways in which social solidarity, economic advancement, or the flourishing of arts and crafts takes place: They are not, he repeatedly indicates, dependent on inevitable forces but emerge as local circumstances permit. He is, in this respect, partaking of a viewpoint that was, and is, characteristic of much of Arab/Islamic thought, that (to borrow a common Arab saying) "men resemble their times more than they do their fathers," that the course of events depends on the degree to which particular collectivities employ their God-given reason to place themselves in contexts where the forces of history *may* assert themselves, and that the achievement of what he called a "rational regime aimed at the common good" versus one aimed at the selfish interests of a single ruler only comes about through the actions of men operating in a world of highly pragmatic and connected associations.

In such a world, the role of the leader becomes essential. It is, therefore, sometimes forgotten that when Ibn Khaldun posits a form of solidarity that may propel a group to great acts, what he called '*asabiyyah*,' this occurs not through some obscure Durkheimian effervescence but has at its heart, as Franz Rosenthal includes in his definition of the term itself, "man's innate psychological need to belong and give political support to a group *dominated by one or more leading personalities* . . ." (Rosenthal 1987:566, emphasis added)<sup>2</sup> "*Asabiya*," says Yves Lacoste (1984:102), "refers to the influence of leaders of men in a very specific historical context."<sup>3</sup> This problem of the leader

is, however, one that Ibn Khaldun at once addresses and evades. His personal history of disappointment with the numerous political leaders he served may well have been critical in leading him to a form of explanation that seemed to erase their importance. And yet he never fully frees himself from their role in history: As Muhsin Mahdi (1957:197) indicates, for Ibn Khaldun, superordinate groups, for example, "cannot form a harmonious whole except when arranged hierarchically with an undisputed leader at the top." Indeed, since it is the qualities of a person, not the limitations of institutionalized offices, that are crucial, it is not surprising to see Ibn Khaldun assert that even the Messiah will have to have the qualities of a leader.<sup>4</sup> However, Ibn Khaldun never quite addresses the role of these individual leaders directly, and it is in this avoidance, as in his explicit comments on the subject, that Ibn Khaldun is, I would suggest, being very characteristically Arab. Let me explain.

Ibn Khaldun does recognize the critical importance of the leader as the embodiment of certain qualities that, for better or worse, will propel his group to greater heights or, in that most natural of tendencies, lead him, once successful, to undercut the solidarity of his own supporters as he seeks to assert his royal dominance. But Ibn Khaldun is also being characteristically Arab when he finds it difficult to relate the question of personality to historical trends: The Islamic conception of history is not one of proof in this world of that which Allah has foreordained so much as it is the story of individuals creating a community of believers as an expression of humanity's God-given capabilities. Ibn

<sup>2</sup> In a related vein Albert Hourani goes beyond the common translation of '*asabiyyeh*' as 'group feeling' to speak of it as "a corporate spirit oriented towards obtaining and keeping power." (Hourani 1991:2 and 449). Rosenthal, like many others, uses the shorthand translation of '*asabiyyeh*' as "group feeling"—see, e.g., (Irwin 1997:35) and (Mahdi 1968:56)—but the fuller definition that includes leadership is undoubtedly vital to an understanding of Ibn Khaldun's usage.

<sup>3</sup> Lacoste argues that Ibn Khaldun restricts his concept of *asabiya* to North African tribes, and indeed to those in which some form of hierarchy of chiefs has arisen: "*Asabiya*' does not

therefore mean social solidarity in general, but rather a very specific form of social organization which allows a tribal aristocracy to control the forces of a military democracy." (Lacoste 1984:108).

<sup>4</sup> "[T]he expected Messiah will not come to power automatically because of the cyclical motion of the stars. He will have to possess the qualifications necessary for a leader and must be born in circumstances conducive to the creation of a powerful state, which in turn must follow the natural course of rise and decline." (Mahdi 1957:256) The necessary qualities of leadership include being just, competent, and knowledgeable. See (Mahdi 1957:242–48).

<sup>1</sup> This essay was first prepared for the celebration in honor of Akbar Ahmed's inauguration as the first Ibn Khaldun Professor at American University. It is a pleasure to rededicate it to him.

Khaldun is unusual in that he feels the need to go beyond the question of personality in order to discern the forces that propel an individual and a community to the next stage of development. But it is precisely the intermediate idea of an institution—in the sense used by Western social scientists to refer to the performance of a role that is not a function of personal attributes—that forms no part of his theory. And that, I believe, is itself due to two factors: That he does not (1) view the individual as acting separately from his personal attributes because (2) the self, in Arab culture, was not envisioned as fractionated—through religious, cultural, or political history—into a set of roles, reinforced as extant and natural by drama, theology, or conceptions of time and space. Seeing the person as unitary rather than fractionable, Ibn Khaldun does not see limitations on power through the segregation of multiple roles played by a single person or that the fractionation of the self might contribute to the development of depersonalized institutions.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Ibn Khaldun leapt over this problem and went directly to the question of the ebb and flow of larger historical trends. Yet it is precisely his commonsense orientation as an exemplar of Arab culture that may account for his emphasis on the unitary person in his overall theory.

Indeed, it may be that Westerners have often misconstrued the very nature of Ibn Khaldun's theory of history because they have claimed to see in it some of the same elements that are present in theories that have gained currency at various times in the West itself. Thus eighteenth century writers, like Arnold Toynbee in the twentieth, could find in Ibn Khaldun a congenial theorist because his apparent vision of historical cycles mirrored the level of abstraction, if not always the specifics, of their own theories.<sup>6</sup> Some Westerners could also find resonance with their own views of revolutionary change in his assertion: "When general conditions change it is as though creation changes from its very foundation and the whole world is turned around. It is like a new creation, a

renewed birth, a novel beginning, a newly made world" (Ibn Khaldun 1987:181). And since Ibn Khaldun clearly wanted his "science of culture" to be a guide for future action, he was certainly giving voice to the important role the historian should play in the practical affairs of the day.

But much of this may be misleading, for the levels of abstraction at which Ibn Khaldun was operating and at which many Western commentators operate are only partially similar. For Ibn Khaldun, theory is not separable from action: Contemplation without involvement would not yield insight to operative patterns. His motto might well have been the Wall Street saying: "To know but not to act is not to know." Moreover, he has such a fine feel for pragmatic circumstance that what might seem like an inability to reconcile necessity and chance is actually harmonized by the implicit cultural assumptions to which he, as an Arab, clearly subscribes: the vision of the unfractured self, the centrality of personal leadership, the larger forces of history having no meaning as abstractions about the nature of society without also serving as statements about the concrete course of circumstantial events.<sup>7</sup> Thus we may lose the sense of Ibn Khaldun as a distinctive kind of Arab theoretician if we try to make him over in a Western image, and we may subject him to unfair judgment if we find in him a proponent of the kind of cyclical historicizing no longer favored in the West when, in fact, he used such configurations as descriptions of processes based on quite different assumptions about human nature and human action than seem familiar only from his discussions of biosocial types.

One must, of course, be careful not to project onto the past the circumstances one

<sup>7</sup> On his view of chance versus necessity, Mahdi (1957:260) writes: "Ibn Khaldun's rejection of absolute necessity does not then mean that he refuses to give necessity a place in history, for that would have meant the reduction of all historical events to accidental events, i.e., to events that have no cause and, therefore, are unintelligible. Rather, he follows a middle course between two extreme and simple, though illusory, explanations: an explanation based on universal necessity and the negation of chance, and an explanation based on universal chance and the negation of necessity."

claims to see in the present, much less to suggest that any culture, least of all that of the Arabs, has somehow remained unchanged over the course of 600 years. But there are perduring, if variant, themes in Arab culture that go beyond those of religious precept or artistic style alone: Understanding the assumptions about the nature of human beings and human society is vital if we are to see the distinctively Arab aspects of Ibn Khaldun's approach and how much it can still speak to our own times. For if we see Ibn Khaldun as a prescient student of his own culture and not just as a Western-style theorist, we can appreciate several elements of his insight that have great currency. If, in a view that still has force in Arab culture, politics is of necessity bound up in personalism, then we in the West must make a concerted effort to understand how this affects the interpretation of events in a fundamentally different way than Westerners bring to the same circumstances. If the components of a person's identity are not comprehensible when analytically fragmented and shorn of context then we in the West need to understand more carefully what an "institution" means in the political cultures of the Arab world. Indeed, if a theory is a statement of the common threads of events and not an abstract version of them, we may be able to understand that a different kind of social science sensibility is consistent with Arab/Islamic thought than we had imagined and that it is, therefore, all the more unfair, as some commentators have maintained, to assert that Arab culture lacks a view of social forces that are not implicit in religious doctrine. In sum, if we simply measure Ibn Khaldun and other thinkers who partake of his cultural traditions against theorists from the West, we will miss the enormous vitality of their distinctive contributions to social thought.

Indeed, reading between the lines of Ibn Khaldun—for his culture, his type of theorizing, his view of humanity—can enrich our view of history and of the social ideas of our Arab contemporaries as well as remind us

that we do neither scholarship nor cross-cultural understanding a favor if we simply merge all of culture and history into a common theme. The tendency, particularly prevalent among Americans, to presume that all cultures are basically the same should have been brought up sharp by current events: Globalism has by no means eliminated the local, indeed it may have exacerbated it. Between making everyone like "us" and making any one culture better than another there lies, however, the wiser and truer proposition, nowhere more cogently expressed than in the Prophetic Tradition that says "there is no distinction except as to knowledge," and in that common Arab saying, "a difference is not a distinction." It would be unfortunate to lose Ibn Khaldun's appreciation of the distinctive nature of each society in an attempt to render him the grandfather of a very Western-style grand theory of history and society.

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<sup>5</sup> This issue is explored in greater detail in the essay entitled "Constructing Institutions in a Political Culture of Personalism" (Rosen 2002: 56-72).

<sup>6</sup> See (Toynbee 1948).