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Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddima*, 1377

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Ibn Khaldûn's *Muqaddima*, or "Introduction," has long been hailed as a unique contribution both to classical Islamic learning and to the (otherwise modern) social sciences. Strictly speaking, it is only the introductory discussion of an even more voluminous work, the *Kitâb al-ʿibar* (Book of examples), a chronicle of—primarily—Northern African Muslim dynasties; but from early on, it has been recognized as a major work in its own right. Its modern consecration started in the mid–nineteenth century, when the first modern printed editions were produced almost simultaneously in Egypt (al-Hûrînî 1857) and in France (Quatremère 1858); a French translation appeared in the 1860s (De Slane 1863–1868); a century later, a complete English translation (at present the only one in existence) was published by Franz Rosenthal in 1958. The consecration of this work was completed, so to speak, by the inclusion of a new French translation by Abdesselam Cheddadi in the prestigious Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in 2002; in 2005, Cheddadi also produced a critical edition (the first ever) of the Arabic text.

Despite this rapid, and seemingly solid, consecration, the *Muqaddima* has remained peripheral both to discussions in social-scientific methodology and in the history of knowledge. This contribution attempts to define the innovative character of this work and trace the history of its reception.

Its author, Abu Zayd Ab al-Rahmân ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldûn al-Hadramî (1337–1406), had, to put it mildly, a checkered career, the details of which are described in his memoirs, *At-taʿrîf bi-ibn khaldūn wa-riḥlatihi gharban wa-sharqan* (Presentation of Ibn Khaldûn and his travels west and east). Unfortunately, this work has not yet been translated into English; but a French rendering is available in the first volume of Cheddadi's Pléiade edition.

Born in Tunis, Ibn Khaldûn worked as a government official or judge in the service of various local rulers; but he did not always endear himself to his masters or to his townsmen. In 1357, he was imprisoned by the ruler of Fez on suspicion of treason; in 1366, he had to flee Bougie after surrendering the city to rebels who had killed the local king. Thus

An online version of Rosenthal's complete translation of the *Muqaddima* is available at http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ik/Muqaddimah/index.htm (accessed September 15, 2023).

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he wandered from one court or city to another, driven both by the instable and capricious dynastic politics of his time and by his own excessive ambition. In the mid-1370s, however, at the remote Qal'at ibn Salâma fortress, he found a tranquility that allowed him to work on both his chronicle and its theoretical introduction. Subsequently, his ambitions led him further east; in 1382, he arrived in Egypt, where he would serve as a judge (*qadi*) in the service of the Mamluk sultan Barquq; and in 1400, he encountered the Central Asian conqueror Timur Lenk, as the latter was laying siege to Damascus. In his memoirs, he describes how he conversed and exchanged gifts with Timur—even as the latter's troops were looting and killing in the city. He was obviously fascinated by this conqueror, whom he saw as a figure of world-historical significance, possessing the ability to destroy as well as to save Arab-Islamic civilization. In this respect, this encounter may be likened to Hegel's, who saw in Napoleon passing by his house the "world spirit on horseback."

WAS IBN KHALDÛN A PHILOSOPHER OF HISTORY?

The *Muqaddima* constitutes the first of the seven books of the *Kitâb al-'ibar*, the others dealing with world history (books 2–5) and with the history of North Africa (books 6–7). In turn, it is itself divided into six lengthy chapters, which discuss, respectively, civilization (*'umrân*) in general; rural society (*badâwa*); different forms of dynastic and royal authority; urban societies (*hadâra*); agriculture and crafts as ways of making a living; and, finally, the sciences in an urban setting. The final two chapters, in particular, form a uniquely valuable source of ethnographic information on urban life in the premodern Islamic world; but it is primarily for its theoretical contributions that the *Muqaddima* continues to be discussed.

As he was well aware himself, Ibn Khaldûn is distinct, if not unique, among classical Islamic authors: he is far more interested in general and theoretical questions than any other historian or chronicler; and unlike philosophers such as al-Fârâbî and Ibn Sîna, he does not present normative principles for an ideal society but rather a description of real societies and of the ways in which they are governed. As a result, in modern studies he has been compared primarily not with Islamic contemporaries but with Western authors—both with premodern and early modern historians and philosophers such as Thucydides, Vico, and Hegel and with modern social theorists such as Comte, Marx, and Durkheim.

The great, and quite self-conscious, innovation of the *Muqaddima* is its outline of a "new science" that crosses the then conventional conceptual boundary between the so-called Arab or traditional (*naqlî*) sciences, such as historiography, which are based on reports and analogous reasoning and yield plausible results at best, and the ancient or rational (*'aqlî*) sciences, which proceed using demonstrative syllogisms based on first principles and yield indubitable conclusions (for more on this division, see Hämeen-Anttila's contribution on al-Suyûtî to this issue). Ibn Khaldûn tries to turn history writing from a

traditional into a rational science: he does not merely develop a method for the verification (*tahqîq*) of historical reports but also tries to provide a basis for indubitable results.

As is well known, Aristotle does not consider historiography a science, since it deals with individual persons and events rather than universal patterns, as—in his view—proper knowledge should. Seen against this Aristotelian background, the significance of the *Muqaddima* is that it promises to provide the foundations for a rigorous discipline of history by developing a fully deductive (or, more precisely, demonstrative) science of society. This science, which Ibn Khaldûn calls *'ilm al-'umrân*, aims at capturing the law-like processes underlying the rise and demise of dynasties and peoples. It does so by outlining the four Aristotelian causes of *'umrân*. Its material cause is either urban life, or what we would nowadays call the economy; its formal cause is the state, or government (*dawla*); its efficient cause is tribal solidarity, or *'asabiyya*; and its final cause is either material affluence or moral well-being. The strictly demonstrative character of this theory can be doubted, however. As already noted by al-Azmeh, Ibn Khaldûn appears to waver in his identification of these causes, which indicates that he does not actually deduce or define them in any rigorous manner.[1] Indeed, al-Azmeh also notes that central terms of the *Muqaddima*, such as *'umrân*, *badâwa*, and *hadâra*, are only apparently analytical in character and rigorously defined as part of a demonstrative argumentation; instead, he emphasizes, they retain their everyday, informal meanings.

All this suggests that Ibn Khaldûn, despite having been celebrated as "modern" and "scientific" by various present-day readers, remains firmly within the epistemic boundaries of his own time, and can hardly be said to be a systematic social scientist; neither does he quite succeed in turning historiography, or even *'ilm al-'umrân*, into an actual Aristotelian science, that is, a rigorously demonstrative body of knowledge. This conclusion, however, emphatically stated by al-Azmeh, may be too uniformly negative, as it leaves unclear how or why the *Muqaddima* may have, and has in fact had, any relevance for later readers at all.

EARLY MODERN RECEPTION

The history of the reception of the *Muqaddima* has been as capricious as the scholarly and political career of its author. In different times and places, the actual influence of the *Muqaddima* has been quite impressive; and its apparent epistemological weakness may have proved to be precisely its historical strength. As Ibn Khaldûn himself already notes, history—unlike the strictly demonstrative sciences—is sought after both by the educated elites and the uneducated masses (I.6); and in fact, the most important readers of the work have been government administrators and policy advisers rather than pure scholars.

1. al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn*, 107–119.

As noted, the *Muqaddima* was originally drafted in the late fourteenth century CE. Initially, it appears not to have attracted much attention; rather, the *Kitâb al-ʿibar* was seen, and read, as a run-of-the-mill chronicle. In the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire, however, reform-minded authors and officials, such as Kâtip Çelebi, Naʿîma, and Mustafa ʿAlî, started using the *Muqaddima* in their attempts to explain the causes of what they perceived to be the stagnation of their empire, and in their efforts to deflect or postpone further decline.[2] In fact, Ibn Khaldûn's popularity among the early modern Ottoman elites was such that an Ottoman Turkish translation of the *Muqaddima* was produced in the eighteenth century. Unlike earlier Arab readers, that is, these Ottoman readers *did* perceive the significance of Ibn Khaldûn as making a distinct and innovative contribution to the understanding of the causes of social change.

MODERN ORIENTALIST RECEPTION; OR, WAS IBN KHALDÛN A SOCIOLOGIST?

In the early nineteenthth century, French orientalists, some of whom were involved in the early French colonial administration of North Africa, claimed to have "rediscovered" Ibn Khaldûn and to have rescued the *Muqaddima* from oblivion. Moreover, they appropriated him as a precursor of the French positivist sociology developed by—in particular—Auguste Comte, who had the aim of better knowing, and more effectively governing, contemporary societies. Non-French orientalists such as Ignaz Goldziher likewise hailed Ibn Khaldûn as the "founder of sociology." Modern French readers, both academics and colonial administrators, have long read, and used, Ibn Khaldûn as anticipating modern positive social science and as providing the means to govern modern Muslim societies more efficiently. Thus, in colonial Morocco, his distinctions between Arabs and Berbers, and between *badâwa* and *hadâra*, were projected onto, and used to legitimize, racialized French administrative policies.[3]

The performative effects of these colonial uses of Ibn Khaldûn would be worth a study of their own; but it should be emphasized that notions such as *ʿumrân*, *badâwa*, and *hadâra* share neither the communitarian assumptions of the Romantic notion of *culture*, nor the linear temporality presumed in the Enlightenment notion of *civilization*, nor the positivist assumptions of the concept of *society* as a distinctly modern phenomenon.

WAS IBN KHALDÛN AN ECONOMIST?

The reception of Ibn Khaldûn's work among modern Arab and/or Muslim readers has been generally enthusiastic, if not apologetic; and a work like Fatima Mernissi's *Forgotten*

2. See Fleischer, "Royal Authority."

3. See Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldoun*.

Queens of Islam also refers to Ibn Khaldûn's work with the greatest respect (see Coquery-Vidrovitch's contribution to this issue). Post–World War II and postcolonial scholars with Marxist affinities have claimed that Ibn Khaldûn is a precursor to (or practitioner of) historical materialism; that he developed a dialectical method; and that he discovered the value theory of labor. But Marxists were not the only ones to claim Ibn Khaldûn as a forerunner. Famously, in a 1983 speech, former US president Ronald Reagan, one of the pioneers of neoliberal economic policies, hailed Ibn Khaldûn as a precursor of supply-side, or what would nowadays be called trickle-down, economics.

This apparently equally effortless appropriation by defenders of radically opposed modern economic doctrines should in itself act as a warning against any overhasty identification of his views. Against such anachronistic readings, Aziz al-Azmeh has forcefully argued that Ibn Khaldûn's categories for the description of crafts, trade, and affluence are incommensurable with those of modern political economics. He goes even further in arguing that Ibn Khaldûn speaks in terms not of value but of wealth, which, he claims, is a moral, political, and theological rather than a purely economic notion.[4]

WAS IBN KHALDÛN A RACIST?

Very different, however, has been Ibn Khaldûn's reception among modern readers focusing on the sub-Saharan or non-Islamic parts of Africa or those dealing with Africana. In these circles, Ibn Khaldûn is nowadays widely brandished a racist, and generally brushed aside, even though his *Kitâb al-'ibar* is a valuable source for the premodern history of Africa.[5] It may be useful to conclude a discussion of the *Muqaddima* as a classic of the humanities in Africa with some cautionary comments concerning this African context.

At first blush, the critics seem to have more than a point here: consider such comments in the *Muqaddima* as "the Negro nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because Negroes have little that is (essentially) human and possess attitudes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals."[6] Abhorrent as they are to modern sensibilities, such views were not at all unique either to Ibn Khaldûn or even to Islamic authors. The idea that both the physical and the mental constitutions of peoples are crucially conditioned by climate factors, of course, goes back to ancient Greek geography and medicine. In fact, however, in this passage Ibn Khaldûn precisely *criticizes* conventional religious—and

4. al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn*, 167–68. The influence of Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* (esp. chap. 6) on this part of al-Azmeh's argument should be obvious.

5. For a translation of relevant passages, see Hopkins and Levtzion, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, 317–42; cf. Cheddadi, *Le livre des exemples*, 309–20.

6. Rosenthal, *Muqaddimah*.

racist—narratives that justify the enslavement of Black Africans as the result of Noah's curse, which allegedly turned his son Ham black and his descendants into slaves (I.169), a point acknowledged in volume 3 of the *General History of Africa*.[7] Likewise, he explicitly rejects the idea of inherited racial traits, dismissing descent as the sole cause for differences between peoples and arguing that both the character and the skin color of people who move from one climate zone to another may change (I.171). Thus, one should resist the temptation to brush aside Ibn Khaldûn as a racist merely on the basis of a few isolated remarks in (often inadequate) translation, without any discussion of their discursive and intellectual context or comparing them with the Arabic original.[8]

But there may be further reasons for caution concerning racialized readings of the *Muqaddimah*. Most importantly, Abdelmajid Hannoum argues that modern readers have turned Ibn Khaldûn into more of a racist than he actually was. Both De Slane's French translation and Rosenthal's more recent English rendering, he argues, have racialized Ibn Khaldûn's categories, in particular by translating the Arabic terms *jîl*, *umma*, and *tabaqa* as "race." None of these Arabic terms, however, indicates the biologically given and largely unchanging physical or mental features of a living collectivity. Neither does Ibn Khaldun strictly or consistently distinguish between Berbers and Arabs, Hannoum adds: it is De Slane's translation, in particular, that attempts to rigidify and racialize this opposition.[9] And indeed, it was in French colonial times that a strict discursive and political distinction was made between Berbers as an indigenous (Aryan) population and Arabs as Semitic invaders.

Ibn Khaldûn's dispersed comments on sub-Saharan peoples still await a balanced and contextualized analysis based on the Arabic text; but it should be clear that the racialized rhetorical opposition between enslaving Arab-Islamic invaders and enslaved indigenous Black African populations, too, originates in nineteenth-century Europe, as does the opposition between invading Arabs and native Berbers. Both have served to legitimize European imperialist intervention and colonial rule; hence, such distinctions should be carefully unpacked—and so should any arguments based on them.

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7. El Fasi, *General History of Africa*, 722. Cf. Goldberg, "Curse of Ham"; and see also Schulte Nordholt's contribution to this issue.

8. As an example of this reductionist approach, Ochonu, "Slavery, Theology, and Anti-Blackness," purports to reproduce Ibn Khaldûn's most outrageous claims concerning black Africans but clearly provides only second-hand examples, singularly failing to provide precise references for *any* of its alleged quotes.

9. Hannoum, "Translation and the Colonial Imaginary," esp. 72–78.

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