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Ibn Khaldun and the Arab Origins of the Sociology of Civilisation and Power

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## Chapter 1 The Rediscovery of Ibn Khaldun's Work

ABSTRACT: The first chapter deals with the connections between the genesis of *Muqaddima*—Ibn Khaldūn's masterpiece—and the most significant moments in its author's eventful life.

It then traces the history of the rediscovery of his work, first through Ottoman culture, and then through Orientalism of Europe, until its first translations, published precisely when European sociology was taking its first steps.

Space is also devoted to contextualising the *Muqaddima*, considered here against the backdrop of its author's Islamic culture and the tradition of philosophical rationalism, that he gathers and reinterprets. Particular attention is devoted to the examination of the hypothesis, put forward by some exegetes, of a possible influence on the basic structure of the *Muqaddima* of Aristotle's *Physics*.

Finally, attention is paid to the ambivalence of the attitude taken, in successive waves, by Ibn Khaldūn's critics, both in Europe and in the Arab world, as well as to the thesis of the direct influence of the *Muqaddima* on the works of the fathers of European sociology.

### 1.1 Ibn Khaldūn and His Time: A "Nomad" in Space and in Thought

Born in Tunis on 27 May, 1332, Ibn Khaldūn ('Abd-ar-Raḥmān Abū Zayd ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ḥaldūn al-Ḥaḍramī) was not only one of the most important historians from the Arab world of all times, but also one of its greatest thinkers. At once a man of thought and action—politician, diplomat, historian, man of letters, poet, scholar, law teacher and Maliki judge—, next to Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) and Averroes (Ibn Rušd) he can be regarded as one of the Muslim theorists whose thought has most deeply penetrated and influenced the general culture of the West.

In fact, the depth of his thought, nourished by the richness and variety of his direct experiences, not only made him an attentive and enlightened expert of the past and present of his own world, but also enabled him to transcend the specificity of his contingent time and space, comprehending it within the framework of a more general scheme endowed with constant elements, encompassing, in a process of continuous transformation, both the history of the past and its projection into the future.

Not unlike the great traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, with whom he was acquainted, Ibn Khaldūn himself was exposed to the broader cultural experience of those whose circumstances, by personal or family fortune, destined them to a life constantly on the move, and, thus, develop an eager curiosity to make sense of the world about them. In this respect, there was a twofold aspect to his travels—at once geographic and intellectual.

His family, that of the Banū Ḥaldūn, had also been accustomed to moving from place to place for generations, and was, thus, alert to the instability that seemed to mark its fate<sup>1</sup>. Originally from Yemen, as is attested by the last part of its name (i.e., its *nisba*, indicating that one of Ibn Khaldūn's ancestors, named al-Ḥaḍramī, came from Ḥaḍramawt, a coastal region of Yemen), in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the early age of Muslim conquest, with its troops on the Prophet's side, his family made its way to the land of al-Andalus<sup>2</sup>, which, in 712, was wrested from Visigoth rule. There it settled and, until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it held some of the highest government posts, first in Carmona and then in Seville.

Reference to this family is also made by Andalusian historian Ibn Ḥayyān, who, in his extensive *al-Muqtabis*, traces the long Sevillian history of the Banū Khaldūn family, which maintained a position of power (al-Yaaqubi 2006, 320) not only throughout the Umayyad period—and so until 1031—, but also in the subsequent politically fragmented period of the *Reyes de Tayfas* (kings of the principalities in the territories held by the Umayyad Andalusian dynasty),<sup>3</sup> the independent sovereigns who ruled for about half a century.

But even after this five-century span, the comfortable position the family had secured did not quell its distinctive propensity to cast a wider, restless searching gaze on the world. So, in 1228, it took the farsighted decision to leave its possessions behind and migrate once again, heading for Tunis (at the time, the capital of Ifrīqiya, held by the Hafsid dynasty, which came into power after the Abbasid dynasty) just before the Christian *Reconquista* of Andalusia and, in particular, the reconquest of Seville in 1248.

Having reached Ifrīqiya, the prosperous Banū Khaldūn acquired various territories south of Tunis, as well as many houses in the Tunis district where the Andalusians resided.<sup>4</sup> In one of these, to this day still marked with a plaque, in 1332, Ibn Khaldūn was born. The young man, following in his father's footsteps, was destined to be brought up as an *adīb*—a “man of culture”—in Islamic law and in all sciences. He thus studied classic Arabic, the Koran, law and literature with the best scholars of the time. Particularly important, in light of the strong influence he exerted on his pupil (Nassar 1964, 103–14; Pizzi 1985, 29), was philosopher Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ābilī<sup>5</sup>, descending from a family originally from Avila, in Spain (whence he was named). Mathematician and philosopher, al-Ābilī had moved closer to the great thinkers Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) and Averroes (Ibn Ruṣd)—despite the strong anti-rationalist bias that dominated the region at the time of the

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of his family, see al-Yaaqubi 2006.

<sup>2</sup> For this reason, as had been promised, blessings would remain on its family and descendants until the day of resurrection.

<sup>3</sup> The *Reyes de Tayfas* “opened the gates” to the later arrival of governors of non-Arab descent coming from the Maghreb, enlisted to provide military support in fighting the threat posed by Spain's Christian Muslims.

<sup>4</sup> To this day, this remains the name of the Tunis road that runs from the Zaitūna Mosque to the Husainid mausoleum.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Ābilī was deeply knowledgeable about the works of Averroes, Avicenna, al-Fārābī, and al-Rāzī, and commented on all of them. Cf. Lacoste [1966] 1998, 55.

Hafsids in Tunis and the Marinids in Fez (Nassar 1964, 29). His rational approach, which can be appreciated even in the path he planned to follow when teaching the intellectual sciences to the young Ibn Khaldūn, proved to be crucial for his training. Starting out with mathematics (Ibn Khaldūn [1980] 1995), logic (Aristotelian logic, known through the Arabic translations of the *Organon*) and the study of other curricular subjects, he methodically guided his pupil to the study of philosophy. Thus, he progressively disclosed to his quick intellect the very “encyclopaedic” breadth of views that would later be reflected in Chapter VI of the *Muqaddima*: a chapter devoted to offering, after a comprehensive overview of the level reached by the arts (in Chapter V), a full picture of the sciences developed in his time, examined in relation to the dynamic characteristics of the society which produced them<sup>6</sup>.

At the age of twenty Ibn Khaldūn was hired by Abū Ishāq to serve as *khaṭīb al-alāma* in the Hafsid court in Tunis, where, in this capacity, he was entrusted with writing the ritual formula of the praise to God as an epigraph, between the *basmala* and the main body of text, in fine calligraphy, in correspondence and official documents. At this court he began to become acquainted with the reality of government, an institution that—as he would later stress himself—is designed to prevent all injustices “except its own.”<sup>7</sup>

In Tunis, however, between 1348 and 1349, in the short span of a couple of years, the traumas of the black plague, and the famine that followed it, radically changed the reality of his world. This ravaging turn of events proved to be decisive in prompting him to move elsewhere once again. As he himself commented in the introduction to his *Muqaddima*, “the entire inhabited world changed.” (*Muqaddima*: The Introduction. Ibn Khaldūn 1958, Vol. I: 64. Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 30).

[A destructive plague] devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilizations and wiped them out. It overtook dynasties at the time of their senility, when they had reached the limit of their duration. It lessened their power and curtailed their influence. It weakened their authority. Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilizations decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. (Ibid.).

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<sup>6</sup> In Ibn Khaldūn’s scheme—anticipating, in a sense, the much later project which, through a different perspective, prompted Auguste Comte’s *Treatise on Sociology*—the sciences are framed as a sort of “luxury” that can be developed only at the more mature stages of civilisation.

<sup>7</sup> *Muqaddima* II, 7. Ibn Khaldūn 1958, Vol. I: 262. Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 97: “Mutual aggression of people in towns and cities is averted by the authorities and the governments, which hold back the masses under their control from attacks upon each other. They are, thus, prevented by the influence of force and governmental authority from mutual injustice, save such injustice as comes from the ruler himself.”

The plague, soon followed by a terrible famine, killed his kin, many of his friends, and nearly all of his teachers. The words Ibn Khaldūn uses to describe the great pestilence are strong—a rare occurrence in his lean and “mathematical” prose—and filled with quivering emotion, although, as is the rule in his thought, never too far from a ratiocinating endeavour: “It was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world had responded to its call.”<sup>8</sup>

Shortly thereafter, without any feeling of regret, the young Ibn Khaldūn left his first position, which he perceived to be much below his abilities, with the ambition to find a more active role in the politics of his time. This marked the beginning of his life as a traveller, but also as an attentive and keen observer of a world that, between destructions and rebirths, was going through an utterly critical phase in its history, before his very eyes. As we can read in the *Muqaddima*, the destructive reach of the black plague had already set in motion his urgency to find explanations for the unfolding of historical events, and this urgency was soon to lead to something innovative.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in the face of such sweeping changes in conditions, Ibn Khaldūn writes, “there is need [...] that someone should systematically set down the situation of the world.” (*Muqaddima: The Introduction*. Ibn Khaldūn 1958, Vol. I: 65. Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 30).

His decision to leave would soon cause him to take part in the administrative, political and legal life of the different reigns that stretched across North Africa and Granada, but also, inevitably, in that world’s power intrigues and alliance games. In the pell-mell of such affairs, not only did he play a direct role—owing to which he would intermittently be elevated to the greatest honours or (depending on the alternating play of political forces, as they vied for power) forced into prison—but he also, and especially, acted as an attentive and analytical decoder of the dynamics and deeply underlying causes of the changes taking place in such contexts.

His activity is historically situated in the period which followed the fall of the Almohad caliphate (al-Muwahhīdūn), which had managed to unify Tunisia, Morocco and Spain into a single powerful reign where the intellectual sciences had prospered: in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Almohad courts had provided the environment in which thinkers like Averroes (Ibn Rušd) and Abubekar (Ibn Ṭufayl) could develop their theories. Once this dynasty fell, North Africa was split up (and would continue in this way until the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century) among various Arabised Berber dynasties (Turrone 2002, 29), such as the Hafsids, based in Tunis and ruling over Ifrīqiya (present-day Tunisia, beyond the region east of

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<sup>8</sup> *Muqaddima: The Introduction*. Ibn Khaldūn 1958, Vol. I: 64. Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 30. Even then, with words of great evocative power, Ibn Khaldūn tried to offer a somehow rationalising explanation for the phenomenon: in this passage, his explanation takes on a singularly Malthusian cast.

<sup>9</sup> A parallel can be drawn here with Boccaccio: in his *Decameron* the same pestilence was the backdrop against which his Florentine story-tellers retreated to the countryside, where they would fill their time and thoughts with novellas.

Algeria); the Zayyanids (Abd al-Wadids), based in Tlemcen; and the Marinids, in the Maghreb, based in Fez.

Luckily, a specific record of Ibn Khaldūn's quicksilver ups and downs in this constantly changing world comes to us by his own hand: in fact, he was also the first Arab author to write an autobiography<sup>10</sup>. His *Ta'rīf bi-Ibn Ḥaldūn wa-riḥlatuhu ġarban wa-šarqan* (*Biography of Ibn Khaldūn and of his travels across the West and the East*)<sup>11</sup>, updated by Ibn Khaldūn until the year before his death, in 1406, is an exceptional document that matches the chronicler's work with a conscious and intelligent<sup>12</sup> "intersectional" glance comparing the Maghreb and the Mashriq (as the title itself specifies).

Aimed at documenting the importance of the historical and geographic contexts to explain political events, his *Ta'rīf* represents a very important basis to understand the world in which Ibn Khaldūn operated, both physically and intellectually. In part modelled after the *riḥla*, a classic travel-writing genre made famous by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, Ibn Khaldūn's *Ta'rīf* departed from its model taking on characteristics of its own, that make it even more valuable: instead of turning to curious and marvellous elements, it focuses on particular details and seemingly irrelevant "fine-grained" elements of everyday life that, however much they may generally have been considered unworthy of a savant's attention, turn up to be actually profoundly revealing of his world. Likewise, not only are dates and events reported in his *Ta'rīf*, but also systematically arranged (with scientific attention, as always) along the conceptual axis of the transition from rural to urban society (Pomian 2006, 185), thus ideally intertwining the themes and reflections developed in his main work.

So, thanks to this document, we know that Ibn Khaldūn, as an active player in the government politics of the majority of the North African and Andalusian dynasties of his time, necessarily witnessed, directly and at first hand, their continuous, fragile and critical series of alternating successions. In particular, he was a direct participant in the political events that developed in the Marinid court of Abū 'Inān in Fez (where he first arrived in 1352 after al-Ābilī, his only teacher and friend to have survived the plague), where he served as judge in the *Mazālim* court;<sup>13</sup> in Mohamed V's Nasrid court in Granada (in 1363), where he served as a court diplomat; in the Castilian court of the Christian king

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<sup>10</sup> But he was not the first *Muslim* autobiographer: cf. Fischel 1952, 14–17.

<sup>11</sup> As Fischel (1952) has clarified, the *Ta'rīf* was initially conceived as an integral part of the *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, and only towards the end of his life did Ibn Khaldūn decide to treat it as an independent work. The *Ta'rīf* was published in 1370 in Cairo in an Arabic version edited by Muḥammad Tawit at-Tanji. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a French translation was published, prefacing De Slane's translation of the *Muqaddima* (Ibn Khaldūn 1862–68). In 1980 Abdesselam Cheddadi provided a new French translation as a self-standing work (Ibn Khaldūn 1995), but leaving out its poetic part, which was then included in a newer translation in Ibn Khaldūn 2002. On his "intellectual biography," see also Irwin (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Baali (1988, 3–4) writes that Ibn Khaldūn seems to have been the only Muslim author to have written frankly, in his *Ta'rīf*, about his secular activities, and that this unprecedented feature of this work, realistic and absolutely not idealised, is likely to have subsequently made him the object of much criticism.

<sup>13</sup> The *Mazālim* court had been instituted to protect ordinary citizens from abuses of power.

Peter the Cruel (in 1364), who offered to return his family's ancient possessions to him if he accepted a move to Seville; in the court of emir Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad in Béjaïa, in Algeria (in 1365), where he served as chamberlain and Malikite judge (*qāḍī*); and then in the court of emir Abū l-'Abbās of Constantine, in Algeria and in the court of Abū Ḥammū Mūsā II of Tlemcen, also in Algeria, where he succeeded in establishing important relations with the local Berber tribes (the Banū Khaldūn family may itself have had a Berber kinship (Lawrence 2005, vii)), following a mission ordered by the sovereign, and where he was offered a position as prime minister.

In fact, not only was the world he knew and in which he moved wide, but also particularly varied, unstable and complex.

One of Ibn Khaldūn's first European commentators, Gaston Bouthoul<sup>14</sup> (1930, 49–50), clearly described the political and social fragmentation which characterised North Africa at the time, and the profound challenge of the effort to manage all those different political alliances. In fact, the cities, especially along the coast, did enjoy a sufficient level of civilisation, but the countryside was vulnerable to the violent incursions of the nomadic tribes,<sup>15</sup>—warlike, untameable, and ever-ready to stake claims to power—, which represented for all governments a worrisome element of unpredictability. The mountain Berbers (Khroumirians, Kabyls, Chleuhs and so on), for their part, lived in almost complete independence, considering that rarely did the troops of the ruling powers dare to venture into their areas. Finally, the desert lands were inhabited by peoples who were even more disquieting, fierce and prone to religious fanaticism in the form of the cult of those who would later be known as *Marabouts*.<sup>16</sup> As Ibn Khaldūn would later stress, the inhabitants of the cities, albeit culturally more advanced, revealed by contrast a more pliant character and had completely lost their warlike inclination. On the contrary, they were accustomed to entrusting their own defence to the city militia<sup>17</sup> and to the city walls (as, unlike the nomads, they did not have the option of fleeing in retreat if they lost in battle), and so they found themselves having to yield to whatever group might take power. In fact, for the same reasons, they proved to be extraordinarily passive even when confronted with Tamerlane's conquests (Lavissee et Rambaud 1898).

The very instability intrinsic to this situation<sup>18</sup> might have worked as a key element in stimulating Ibn Khaldūn's need to steer his analysis not so much (as in the Platonic-Aristotelian philosophical

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<sup>14</sup> Along with Louise Weiss, Bouthoul was the founder of polemology. He also wrote (Bouthoul 1934) the preface to the second edition of De Slane's translation.

<sup>15</sup> There were also seminomadic, equally insubordinate tribes.

<sup>16</sup> Men shrouded in a halo of sacredness, regarded as "saints" and equipped with magical-religious powers, venerated even in their tombs.

<sup>17</sup> In some cases, under specific agreements, protection was also entrusted to the nomads who surrounded the cities.

<sup>18</sup> Bouthoul (1930, 50–51) suggests that this instability can in part explain both the progressive decadence of North Africa, and the fact that the only moments of stability in its history were determined by the support of foreign powers (as in the case of Byzantine domination, or that of the Aghlabid princes backed by the emirs of the Orient).

tradition) toward a reflection on the characteristics of the best possible form of state, as toward an examination of the actual processes through which political power is gained and the dynamics through which it is subsequently lost.

It was precisely after gaining so much experience, in the Maghreb as well as in Europe (a context which, to his eyes, had shown the same power dynamics which he had observed in the Maghreb, and which had also been struck, to an even greater degree than the Maghreb, by the same wave of the black plague), that the urgency of his scientific “mandate,” and his need to set down the details of his historical analysis, pushed him toward a truce.

In 1375, the sultan of Tlemcen sent him on a mission to the tribe of the Awlād ‘Arīf, in western Algeria, close to present-day Oran. Once he got there, however, Ibn Khaldūn asked to stay, as a guest and friend of the tribe. This stay, spent with his family in the Berber fortress of Qal‘at Ibn Salāma under the protection of the Awlād ‘Arīf, lasted almost four years, from 1375 to 1378.

During this period, in a few very intense months of feverish inspiration<sup>19</sup> from July to November 1377 (as stated in his autobiography, but also in the closing lines of the *Muqaddima* itself),<sup>20</sup> far from libraries, texts and schools, Ibn Khaldūn wrote the first draft of the *Muqaddima*—the first volume of his massive *Kitāb al-‘Ibar (Book of Lessons)*<sup>21</sup>. This seven-volume historical work was meant to revolutionise the structure and function, and consequently also the style, of history writing itself.

In his *Ta‘rīf* Ibn Khaldūn (2002, 151) describes the torrential flow of the rapture that, in the short span of those few months, prompted his hand to pen the *Muqaddima*, when speaking of “words and ideas pouring into my head like cream in a churn, until the finished product was ready.”<sup>22</sup>

Once he completed his *Muqaddima*, however, Ibn Khaldūn fell seriously ill (Ibn Khaldūn 2002, 152), to the extent that he was afraid to die. For health reasons, then, but also because of the need to consult other writings for his inquiry, after this moment of retreat he decided to return to urban life, and hence, inevitably, back to the rough and tumble of political life: in fact, as he writes in the *Muqaddima*: “It

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<sup>19</sup> In several places in the *Muqaddima*, as well as in his autobiography, Ibn Khaldūn insisted that he did write his work in a spell of exceptional inspiration.

<sup>20</sup> *Muqaddima*, Concluding Remark. Ibn Khaldūn 1958, Vol. III: 481. Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 459: “I completed the composition and draft of this first part, before revision and correction, in a period of five months ending in the middle of the year 779 [November 1377].” From his autobiography (Ibn Khaldūn 2002) we know that he went back to expanding the *Muqaddima* from 1378 to 1382, and that he continued to refine it until his death in Cairo in 1406.

<sup>21</sup> The title, in its extended form, might be translated as follows: “*Book of Lessons, Record of Beginnings and Events in the History of the Arabs, Persians and Berbers, and Their Powerful Contemporaries.*”

<sup>22</sup> Franz Rosenthal 1958, liii. The torrent metaphor—the idea of words flooding in—is retained in the French translation: “J’en achevai l’introduction [al-*Muqaddima*] selon cette manière originale qui me fut inspirée dans cette retraite: des torrents de mots et d’idées se déversèrent sur mon esprit et y furent agités jusqu’à ce que j’en eusse extrait la crème et élaboré les produits” (Ibn Khaldūn 2002, 151).



should be known that it is difficult and impossible to escape (from official life) after having once been in it.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, at the end of 1378, he first returned to Tunis, at the court of the Hafsid sultan Abū l-‘Abbās, to whom he offered a copy of his work. Abū l-‘Abbās granted him the honour of being appointed as a teacher at the University of al-Zaytūna—which he did with great success. However, he soon came to realise that he was privy to too many political secrets to be able to safely stay in the city for long, and so, in order to escape the envy and plotting of local government circles (in Ibn Khaldūn’s own words, “*the scorpions of intrigue*”) (Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 20. *Muqaddima*, The Introduction. Ibn Khaldūn 1958, Vol. I, 31), he took leave, with the excuse of carrying out his pilgrimage to Mecca, when in fact he was heading for Egypt. He arrived there in the Autumn of 1382.

Ibn Khaldūn settled first in Alexandria and then, permanently, in Cairo (enthusiastically described as the “metropolis of the world, garden of the universe”: Ibn Khaldūn 2002, 162), where, precisely in that fateful year 1382, power had passed from the Turkish Mamluks of the Bahri dynasty to the Circassian Mamluks under al-Zāhir Sayf al-Dīn Barqūq. In Cairo Ibn Khaldūn, apart from his pilgrimage to Mecca (which he actually accomplished later on) and various diplomatic missions entrusted upon him, spent the rest of his life. Here he was well received by the sultan, but at the same time, almost because of an implacable nemesis, he attracted deep resentments among the courtiers. In 1384 Ibn Khaldūn received the honour of being appointed *gran qādī*, but in July of the same year he had to endure the terrible tragedy of the loss of his family in a shipwreck off the coast of Alexandria. His wife and five sons, along with some attendants who were very close to them, having set sail from Tunis, were going to join him in Cairo. In fact, there are still doubts whether their death in the shipwreck was merely bad luck, or whether it was somehow connected with the hatred from which Ibn Khaldūn had just fled (Horrut 2006, 96). According to Goumeziane (2006, 27), Ibn Khaldūn was left with only two children, who had not left with their mother, and who would reach him a few months later.

In Egypt, Ibn Khaldūn once again found himself thrust into the fray of political life and of its highs and lows. Once more, he found himself being cyclically honoured and envied: honoured as a Malikite *gran qādī*, as a highly regarded and followed teacher of law at the al-Qamḥiyya *madrassa*, and also as a diplomat, serving the local sovereign; then envied, as is reported in detail in his autobiography, as he ended up attracting animosity by his rigorous and incorruptible spirit, closely adhering to Islamic

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<sup>23</sup> Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 236; *Muqaddima* III, 39; Ibn Khaldūn 1958, Vol. II, 99–100. In fact, as Ibn Khaldūn explained, “rulers [...] want to avoid the chance that someone (outside) might come to know (their secrets) and their circumstances (through such persons), and they are averse to letting them become the servants of others.”

law and unwilling to give in to favouritism or to make the pretrial agreements customarily entered into by the local powerful men.

In fact, Ibn Khaldūn, on account of his intransigence, drew the ire of a high number of highly placed individuals who, being accustomed to rigged trials, could not countenance the prospect of losing a case. As he wrote in his *Ta'rif*,<sup>24</sup> it was standard practice for emirs to resort to “loyal” judges who would confine themselves to seconding and giving written form to the judgements prepared in advance by the emirs’ secretaries. As a result of the complaints raised in reaction to his “inconceivable” and uncompromising stringency, Ibn Khaldūn would regularly be relieved of his duties, and he was even brought to trial (fortunately, with a favourable outcome). His cherished independence of judgment and his freedom from conformism was also reflected in his outward choices, such as his continuing to wear a “different” garb even in Egypt, signalling his Maghrebini-Andalusian origin (Franz Rosenthal 1984; Fischel 1952, 70–71 n. 54), rather than blending into the new context by wearing the lighter Egyptian attire.

Ibn Khaldūn also directed one of the leading Sufi convents in North Africa—that of Baybars—and Sufism, which he discusses with great proficiency even in his *Muqaddima*<sup>25</sup>, became the subject of a separate work (Ibn Khaldūn 1990; 2017) which he wrote with the title “*Šifā’ al-sā’il li-tahqīb al-masā’il*” (*The Satisfaction of Those Who Inquire into the Solution of Problems*).

In the last three decades of his life he never stopped revising and perfecting his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, writing several manuscript versions, slightly different from one another, which were entrusted to different libraries across the Maghreb and Egypt. Even his eastbound pilgrimage to Mecca, which he made in 1387, thereafter visiting Jerusalem, Hebron and Bethlehem, became a source for his historical investigation, enabling him to fill some gaps in his historical knowledge relating to the non-Arab rulers of these lands and to the Turkish dynasties.

In 1394 Ibn Khaldūn sent a copy of his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* to Merinid sultan Abū Fāris ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in Fez. This two-volume manuscript, still held in Fez in the library of the Qarawiyīne mosque, is distinguished by a peculiarity: at the end Ibn Khaldūn placed some poems and songs, written in the

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<sup>24</sup> As he himself wrote in his autobiography: “Je respectais strictement l’égalité des parties, défendant le droit du plus faible, repoussant toute intercession, j’examinais soigneusement les explications des plaideurs, vérifiais l’honorabilité des témoins. Car parmi ceux-ci, il y en avait d’honnêtes et de malhonnêtes, le bon grain se mêlant à l’ivraie. Et comme ils se prévalaient de leurs liens avec les puissants [ahl ash sahwka], les juges fermaient les yeux sur leurs vices et se gardaient de les censurer [...]. Le mal empirait sans cesse; les prévarications, les falsifications répandaient partout les scandales” (Ibn Khaldūn [1980] 1996). Cf. Ibn Khaldūn 2002, 154.

<sup>25</sup> As Fromherz emphasises (2010), Ibn Khaldūn learned much about Sufism from his older friend and colleague from Granada Ibn al-Khaṭīb, who wrote a treatise on the subject (*The Garden of the Definition of Supreme Love*). See Fromherz, Allen James, 2010. *Ibn Khaldun: Life and Times*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 95, n. 68. See also Al-Azmeh, Aziz, 2003. *Ibn Khaldun: An Essay in Reinterpretation*, Budapest: Central European University Press, p. 6, n.8.

local dialect. In 1396 (the same year in which he visited Jerusalem) Ibn Khaldūn sent another copy of his work to Marrakesh as a gift for the city's library.

In the meantime, the first volume of the *Kitāb*, the *Muqaddima*, was gaining currency as a book taught in separate lessons to large numbers of students.

Finally, in 1400, towards the end of his life and aged almost seventy, Ibn Khaldūn, still serving as a diplomatic representative, met face to face with the greatest and most feared conqueror and destructor of his time (who, in addition, vividly and powerfully exemplified Ibn Khaldūn's own theories about the destructive and conquering power of nomadic groups): Tamerlane. Tamerlane, of Tartar descent, for two decades, through a series of military conquests accompanied by destruction and cruel massacres, and following in the footsteps of his Mongol predecessor Genghis Khan, had been pursuing a plan of universal sovereignty.

In that year Ibn Khaldūn was assigned the task of accompanying the successor to Barqūq, Nāṣir al-Dīn Faraj, to the city of Damascus (which was then under Egyptian protection), as Tamerlane, leading his Tartar troops together with the Mongol tribes whose lineage went back to Genghis Khan, was making his way back to conquer Aleppo, and Damascus was at risk of falling under his attack. Yet, as soon as Ibn Khaldūn and Nāṣir al-Dīn Faraj entered Syria, rumours of a series of attempted revolts in Egypt reached the ear of the sovereign who, thus, found himself forced to hastily return to Egypt, along with most of his retinue, entrusting Ibn Khaldūn, left with a few other courtiers, with the extremely sensitive and perilous diplomatic mission of interacting with the great and cruel conqueror. The intense meeting with Tamerlane took place on 10 January, 1401, in a tent outside the walls of Damascus (Speake [2003] 2014, 582), and is recounted in minute detail in Ibn Khaldūn's autobiography. As he arrived, with a wealth of gifts to tilt the negotiations in favour of Damascus, Tamerlane had him immediately placed under arrest along with his entourage, with the intention, as was expected, of putting all of them to death.

But then, the historical and political theories he had developed about *'aṣabiyya* and the dynasties' cycle of conquest and demise, properly hinted at by Ibn Khaldūn, intrigued Tamerlane, who became captivated by the discussion. Certainly interested in these theories' practical applications in view of his project of conquest, Tamerlane—who would later be described by Ibn Khaldūn ([1980] 1995, 246) as “very intelligent and perspicuous, and tireless in discussing what he knew and even what he didn't know”—wanted to learn more from the scholar he was conversing with.<sup>26</sup> After all, Tamerlane himself could not, in turn, fail to fascinate Ibn Khaldūn. In fact Tamerlane, with the story of his

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<sup>26</sup> Ibn Khaldūn's autobiographical account of his meeting with Tamerlane has been translated into English in W. J. Fischel 1952, who enriched the text with interesting comments. A partial Italian translation can be found in Pizzi 1985.

conquests, seemed to embody the central thesis set out in Ibn Khaldūn's theory (Ibn Khaldūn [1980] 1995, 234), according to which a leader's rise to power (and also, proportionately, the extent of the realm he will conquer) is linked to the intensity of the solidal cohesion (what Ibn Khaldūn calls *'aṣabiyya*) of the group from which he emerges as a "champion." Thus Tamerlane, keen to gain a better understanding of this uniquely original theorist of power, withdrew his earlier order to have him killed, and for thirty-five days took him along as a guest and interlocutor in a quick-paced, tightly strung dialogue. In those days, among other things, he also asked Ibn Khaldūn to write a historical and geographical treatise on North Africa for him.

Despite this, Damascus was destined to go up in flames, and that is precisely what happened. Still, it was perhaps because of the influence of Ibn Khaldūn that Tamerlane continued his advance by steering towards Anatolia, without heading first for Egypt, which consequently was spared from the destruction.

Tamerlane was so impressed by these theories and information that, in the end, he proposed that Ibn Khaldūn stay permanently with him; nevertheless, Ibn Khaldūn succeeded in diplomatically declining the offer without consequence.

In the winter of 1401 Ibn Khaldūn took leave from Tamerlane and, in mid-March, he could go back to his teaching in Cairo. Here, the *Muqaddima* had already become the subject of a specifically dedicated theoretical course for throngs of students.<sup>27</sup> In addition to his teaching, he also went back to serving as a judge.

In Cairo five years later, on 17 March 1406, after his sixth appointment as *qāḍī*, the life of a man who, in words and deeds, had taken up in an exceptional way the challenges of an exceptional time, came to an end. His body still rests there, in the Sufi cemetery in Cairo, just outside the Bāb al-Naṣr gate. His writings also lay to rest—mostly consigned to oblivion in the libraries of North Africa, where he had ensured their preservation—until they were rediscovered half a millennium later.

## 1.2 The Rediscovery of the *Muqaddima* Five Centuries Later

Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddima* is the theoretical introduction<sup>28</sup>—and hence, from a socio-philosophical standpoint, the most interesting volume—of a complex, seven-volume work, the *Kitāb al-'Ibar* (*Book of Lessons, Record of Beginnings and Events in the History of the Arabs, Persians and Berbers, and*

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<sup>27</sup> Even the pace of the *Muqaddima*, based on a pattern of propositions and demonstrations, shows that it might have been conceived from the outset by Ibn Khaldūn as a textbook to be taught.

<sup>28</sup> This is the meaning of the term *Muqaddima*.

*Their Powerful Contemporaries*), aimed at analysing, with surprisingly modern and innovative criteria, the history of the rise and fall of civilisations, with particular—but not exclusive—reference to North Africa.

Across its 1,600 pages,<sup>29</sup> this *Introduction* develops an original and detailed thesis aimed at explaining the dynamics that shape the historical spans of the political forces that take turns in the government of society. In it we find a paradigm of social history at once universal, in the eternal cyclic progression it depicts, and granularly fragmented in the manifold makeup of the environmental, cultural, technological and religious variables by which every single cultural-spatiotemporal crossroads is defined.

In the preface to his work, Ibn Khaldūn expressed the hope that in the future it might be studied, improved and perfected in light of the consolidation of the philosophico-historico-sociological discipline that he was aware he was pioneering: if “the capital of knowledge that an individual scholar has to offer is small” (*Muqaddima*, Foreword. Ibn Khaldūn 1958, Vol. I, 14. Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 9), it is to the entire community of scholars that Ibn Khaldūn wished to entrust the development of his great insight.

This heartfelt hope in a future development of his “new science” is also reiterated in the closing lines of the *Muqaddima*, where Ibn Khaldūn wrote:

Perhaps some later (scholar), aided by the divine gifts of a sound mind and of solid scholarship, will penetrate into these problems in greater detail than we did here. A person who creates a new discipline does not have the task of enumerating all the problems connected with it. His successors, then, may gradually add more problems, until the discipline is completely (presented). (*Muqaddima*, Concluding Remark. Ibn Khaldūn 1958, Vol. III, 481. Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 459).

However, it would be a long time before his hope could be fulfilled. In fact, for almost two centuries, his theory would be doomed to exist only in a “latent state,” without giving rise to any school of thought, finding almost no theoretical or concrete application (Cheddadi 2006, 169–88), and failing to find fertile ground on which to flourish and give fruit. In a word, the trade-off for his originality and his extreme modernity, which he evidently expressed too early, was that for a long time he should remain a sequestered “voice in the desert”—not understood, much less culturally integrated in his environment, and destined to be heeded and put to use only many centuries later.

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<sup>29</sup> The French translation runs to 1,632 pages. Rosenthal’s three-volume English translation is 1,547 pages long.

It may be that some responsibility for sealing this fate for his work lay with its scarce or even non-existent inclination to praise the sovereign or idealise the ruling powers—and, in fact, the political realism expressed in the work was scarcely flattering to the Arab élite its readers belonged to. It is certainly plausible to think that, in an authoritarian context which, for political reasons, was interested in an apologetic history (*tā'riḥ*), complacent and conventional, a reading of history like Ibn Khaldūn's, at once rational and tied to real facts, could prove unseemly and even disturbing. So, the many manuscripts he sent around would remain virtually ignored until their rediscovery several centuries later.

Until then, there would be only a few, well-known exceptions to this “shelving” of his oeuvre.

The themes and structure of Ibn Khaldūn's work have been used, for example, in the *Badā'i al-silk* (*The Wonders of State Conduct and the Nature of Kingship*), by Abū Muḥammad Ibn al-Azraq (15<sup>th</sup> century), who was himself a Malikite *qāḍī*, and who, like Ibn Khaldūn, spent the last years of his life in Cairo. In fact, not only does his work on power echo Ibn Khaldūn's arguments, but, in many passages, it quotes directly from the *Muqaddima* (Abdesselem 1983).

The most important exception to his oblivion, however, undoubtedly lies in the wide use made of Ibn Khaldūn's theory in Turkish historico-political culture (Bombaci 1969). In fact, various scholars in Istanbul, interested in understanding the way the empire might evolve in light of the predictive power provided by Ibn Khaldūn's model, gathered dozens of manuscripts of the work (four of which written when Ibn Khaldūn was still alive), still kept today in the Topkapi Palace (Pizzi 1985, 60).

It was especially famous historian and geographer Kātib Çelebi (1609–1657) who engaged with Ibn Khaldūn's theory by explicit reference to his texts. As Fleischer (1983) notes, for example, he took up Ibn Khaldūn's analogy between the phases in human life and those in political life. He did so for the purpose of showing how the Ottoman Empire proved to be the exception to the rule—in virtue of its ability to flourish anew after Tamerlane's conquest, reaching its highest splendour in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and to escape the grip of the Khaldunian “fate” of the dynasties' inevitable fall in ordinary times<sup>30</sup>. In the same way, Ibn Khaldūn's scheme was widely used by historians inspired by Çelebi,<sup>31</sup> such as Muṣṭafa Na'imā (1655–1716) and 18<sup>th</sup>-century historian Ahmed Resmī Efendi (1700–1783). Again, in Turkey—the empire which seemed to represent the most successful embodiment of Ibn Khaldūn's rational state—Pirizāde Efendi (1674–1749), in 1730, worked on the first translation of Khaldūn's work (a partial translation, limited to the first five chapters), written in Turkish and

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<sup>30</sup> This argument is presented in particular in the work *Kaṣf al-zunūn*.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn Khaldūn's work inspired Muṣṭafa Na'imā's *History* (*Tā'riḥ*), which discusses the cyclical theory of history and the conflict between sedentary and nomadic civilisations, and, in general, influenced the thought of Ahmed Resmī Efendi.

published in Cairo (Franz Rosenthal 1958, cvii–cviii): this translation would subsequently be an important waymark on the path to the European discovery of Ibn Khaldūn.

Although, in the meantime, a Latin translation of Tamerlane’s biography by Ibn ‘Arabšāh (1389–1450) was published (in 1636 in Leiden, printed by Jacob Golius), and this translation mentioned Ibn Khaldūn by name, it was decidedly mainly through the mediation of Çelebi that Ibn Khaldūn’s work truly came to be known in Europe. In actual fact, this did not happen, as one might think, through Spain, which in the Old Continent was the historical heir to Arabic culture. The relaunch came by way of France, where Barthélémy D’Herbelot (1625–1695), an Orientalist who was studying the work of Çelebi, inserted Ibn Khaldūn’s name and a short and rather basic biography in his 1697 *Bibliothèque orientale, ou dictionnaire universel contenant tout ce qui regarde la connaissance des peuples de l’Orient*. This biography largely consisted of an abridged translation of the *Kašf al-ẓunūn*, a great bibliographic work written by Çelebi. However, the French Enlightenment of the time was not yet ready to appreciate culture coming from Islam. At best, a few decades hence, this culture would come to be regarded as the “exotic” backdrop to Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*.

Not until the subsequent century, with a weakening Ottoman Empire and the connected prospects of European conquests, would an interest in the East be rekindled. And in this period, too, it was thanks to the European contacts with Turkey that, once more, Ibn Khaldūn’s ideas resurfaced in Europe, finally igniting interest in him in the West—and thence, retroactively, also in the Arab world itself. In fact, as early as 1810, Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), a professor of Persian and Arabic, published his *Relation de l’Égypte par Abdellatif, médecin arabe de Bagdad*, which contained the first French translation of excerpts from the *Muqaddima*, together with an introduction to his work. Then in 1816, in his *Biographie universelle* ([1816] 1843), he published a biography of Ibn Khaldūn, and finally, in 1826, he translated other excerpts of Ibn Khaldūn’s work in his *Chrestomathie arabe* (Silvestre de Sacy [1826–1827] 2012).

In the same period, precisely on the basis of that partial Turkish translation of Ibn Khaldūn’s work which had been done almost a century earlier by Pirizāde Efendi, Austrian scholar of Islam and historian of the Ottoman Empire Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856) also devoted new attention to Ibn Khaldūn. In two studies (Hammer-Purgstall 1812; 1818) which, for the first time, dealt with Ibn Khaldūn directly and made extensive reference to translated parts of the *Muqaddima*, he presented his theories (Hammer-Purgstall 1812, 360), describing Ibn Khaldūn (with a curious chronological inversion) as “*the Montesquieu of the Arabs*.”

And while, between 1867 and 1868, the Arab world had received its first complete edition (Ibn Khaldūn 1867–68) of the *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, based on the original manuscript that Ibn Khaldūn had sent

to Fez, edited by Naṣr al-Hūrīnī and published in Būlāq/Cairo<sup>32</sup>, another complete edition had come out a few years earlier in Europe: Étienne Quatremère (1782–1857) had published the unabridged Arabic text of the *Muqaddima* (Ibn Khaldūn 1858), planning to work on its first French translation later on.

Unfortunately, before he could devote himself to this project, he died. A few years later, however, on the basis of Quatremère’s edition and of the previous Turkish translations, this project was undertaken and brought to completion in three volumes (Ibn Khaldūn 1862, 1865, and 1868) by his disciple, Baron William Mac Guckin de Slane (1801–1878). A French-speaking Irish Orientalist, de Slane had previously published not only a translation of the *Ta’rīf* (Ibn Khaldūn 1844), but also, between 1847 and 1851 (at the request of the French minister of war), the Arabic edition (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–1851) of the “Maghrebīn” historical part of the *Kitāb* (corresponding to Books VI and VII).

Later on, some scholars (Pizzi 1985, 93; Hamès, 1999, 171; Salama 2011, 77-101) pointed out the profound influence of the colonialist perspective of the period on this translation. For example, they showed how eager de Slane had been to highlight the criticisms that Ibn Khaldūn addressed at the “nomads.” Furthermore, he had translated the corresponding term with “Arabs” (Pizzi 1985, 63), in such a way as to justify—apparently, with the backing of Ibn Khaldūn, himself an Arab—the possible arguments in favour of colonial government that were directed against the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East, regarded as politically immature and incapable of self-government.

For a long time, de Slane’s translation of the *Muqaddima*, commented in detail by Reinhart Dozy as early as 1869 and by Alessio Bombaci in 1949, remained the only European translation available: it was republished as a photostatic reprint in Paris in 1934–38 with an introduction by Gaston Bouthoul, and it would serve as the basis for Khaldunian studies for almost a century, until other important translations came out.

A first abridged translation into English by Charles Issawi came out in 1950 with the title *An Arab Philosophy of History*. The most important complete translations of the *Muqaddima*, however, would be carried out in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by Franz Rosenthal (Ibn Khaldūn 1958) into English and by Vincent Monteil (working with experts appointed by a UNESCO committee) (Ibn Khaldūn 1967–1968) into French, respectively. Both were based on a 1402 manuscript containing an initial note signed by Ibn Khaldūn, discovered by Rosenthal himself in Istanbul at the Ātif Efendi library. This is the last of Ibn Khaldūn’s manuscripts to have survived and is regarded as the most accurate of them all, since it had been completed only a few years before his death.

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<sup>32</sup> This seven volumes edition reproduced, in its first volume, the text of the *Muqaddima* which had been previously published, always in Būlāq/Cairo, in 1857: this was one of the first works published by an Arab publishing house.



In particular, the excellent English translation done by Franz Rosenthal, director of the Semitic languages department at Yale University—a translation expressly conceived to adhere as close as possible to the linguistic form of the original, and to the particular terminology that Ibn Khaldūn accurately developed for his “new science”<sup>33</sup>—proved to be decisive in giving currency to Ibn Khaldūn’s thought in the English-speaking world.

A further and later translation which, too, is worthy of note, is the one done in 2002 by Abdesselam Cheddadi (Ibn Khaldūn 2002), who, in addition to being a translator, ranks among the most respected contemporary experts on Ibn Khaldūn’s thought<sup>34</sup>.

Starting from these translations, Khaldunian studies have been increasing. There have been some scholars, such as Bruce B. Lawrence,<sup>35</sup> who have claimed that the success of Ibn Khaldūn’s rediscovery was essentially only due to European Orientalism and to its desire to discover the exotic expression of a culture “other” from Western culture in his work, rather than an important piece of a shared intellectual tradition binding together ancient Greeks, Muslims and Europeans.

But to debunk this hypothesis it should suffice to point out (in addition to the previously mentioned influence and deep regard that Ibn Khaldūn’s masterpiece already enjoyed since the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Ottoman political culture) that, after its rediscovery, a great number of studies flourished in which Ibn Khaldūn was considered as a modern thinker and a precursor of Western sociology. These acknowledgements, paid by numerous European scholars to the Maghrebin thinker, went well beyond an Orientalist perspective, recognising his clearly anticipative import instead, and from the outset. Moreover, in the Muslim world, by that time, he was recognised, directly, as the “founder” of Arab sociology.<sup>36</sup>

It is true that his work has sometimes been interpreted as a brilliant but idiosyncratic product of Arab culture, stressing its “otherness” relative to Western thought: we can see this in the first commentary of Ibn Khaldūn’s work. written in 1834 by Swede Gråberg Graf von Hemsö (1776–1847), an Arabist and consul in Morocco and Tripoli, but also in the 1907 commentary by Reynold A. Nicholson (1868–1945). Both are certainly laudatory, but are aimed at underlying the uniqueness and specificities of Ibn Khaldūn’s thought against the backdrop of a Muslim landscape described as bleak and dispiriting.

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<sup>33</sup> In relation to the language he chiselled, Ibn Khaldūn wrote in his autobiography (Ibn Khaldūn 1951: 240 l. 10) that he had to “domesticate” the raw and refractory Arabic language, to make it useful for his work.

<sup>34</sup> It bears mentioning, too, that there is also an Italian translation of part of the *Muqaddima*, carried out by Giancarlo Pizzi (1985), and a translation of ch. 4 edited by Francesca Forte (2020).

<sup>35</sup> “To speak of Ibn Khaldūn and Islamic Ideology [...] is to acknowledge [...] the emergence of Ibn Khaldūn within Orientalism” (Lawrence 1983, 154). Cf. Lawrence 1984.

<sup>36</sup> This is so even if some sociological traits can also be found in Averroes’s commentary of Plato’s *Republic* (Cruz Hernández 2003, 72).

On the contrary, however, he has more often been acclaimed, in light of the wide-ranging scope of his insights (encompassing much more than the Maghrebin context of the time), as a precursor of sociology and as a “philosopher” of history and of society.

In fact, the *Muqaddima* had made its debut on the official scene of the European socio-political debate precisely at the time of the incubation, and subsequent birth, of the sociological sciences in Europe. At the time of the first translations by Silvestre de Sacy and von Hammer-Purgstall, the spread of Saint-Simon’s thought in France was still in full swing. At the time of de Slane’s unabridged translation, Saint-Simonianism was still guiding the *Société d’Études du Canal de Suez*, founded in 1846 by Prosper Enfantin, Saint-Simon’s main disciple; likewise, Auguste Comte’s *Course in Positive Philosophy* (1855) and Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* (1848) had only recently seen the light. Similarly, precisely in those years the publication of Spencer’s *Synthetic Philosophy* was being undertaken in England (its ten volumes would be published between 1862 and 1897), while Durkheim in France was still working on his *Division of Labour in Society* (1893).

The cultural landscape in which the *Muqaddima* made its entrance, then, was primed to take a keen and particular interest in a work that, though it had been written five centuries earlier, presented some aspects of surprising topicality and unexpected intersection with the theories on society that were being developed or discussed precisely at that time. So much so, that some scholars have also advanced various hypotheses on the possibility that the fathers of sociology might have been directly influenced, in their thinking, by their acquaintance with Ibn Khaldūn’s theses. And in fact, the similarities, including structural ones, with the work of Auguste Comte, for example, are undeniably surprising, so much so that in 1879 a scholar like Alfred von Kremer (1828–1889) carried out an in-depth investigation into Ibn Khaldūn’s “science of cultures”: not only did it hail Ibn Khaldūn as the true founder of the science of civil societies (sociology), but also speculated that Auguste Comte might have had first-hand knowledge of his ideas.

In turn, Gräber de Hemsö, in his study, hypothesised that Niccolò Machiavelli might have come to know of Ibn Khaldūn’s work through Ḥasan al-Wazzān (a Berber-Andalusian scholar who was baptised in Rome as Giovanni Leone de’ Medici, also known as Leone l’Africano (1485–1537), and who taught in Bologna in the 16<sup>th</sup> century), and that this knowledge might have profoundly influenced Machiavelli’s thought.

The conflict-theory sociologist Ludwig Gumplowicz, for his part, deeply impressed by Ibn Khaldūn’s “social philosophy” and clearly influenced by it in relation to his own theory of the “cycles of conquest,” published in Innsbruck a work containing an essay where Ibn Khaldūn was defined as an “Arab sociologist,” and also as one who had superseded Vico ahead of Vico’s time (Gumplowicz 1925, 90; 113).

Similar appreciations of Ibn Khaldūn as an *ante litteram* Arab sociologist have come from Franz Oppenheimer (1922–1935, vol. II, 173ff.; vol. IV, 251ff.); René Maunier (1915); Pitirim A. Sorokin (1962: 20), who defined the *Muqaddima* as “the earliest systematic treatise both in sociology and in rural-urban sociology”; and Harry Elmer Barnes and Howard Becker (1961, vol. 2, 706–8), who saw in him a conflict theorist and who particularly appreciated his ability to underline the causal explanations of social phenomena in an age when “providential” explanations of history still held primacy. Meanwhile, in Italy, in an 1896 essay published in *La Riforma Sociale*, Guglielmo Ferrero defined Ibn Khaldūn “an Arab sociologist of the 14<sup>th</sup> century,” greater than Vico and Machiavelli, and the inventor of the sociological concept of civilisation.

Nor should we discount the words of admiration written by historian Arnold Toynbee ([1934]1962, 322), who, after comparing Ibn Khaldūn to Thucydides and Machiavelli, was unconditional in his praise of Ibn Khaldūn’s work.

Other important authors also expressed high praise for Ibn Khaldūn’s work. A case in point is the great anthropologist Ernest Gellner (1995, 202), who described him as one of the great thinkers—perhaps *the* greatest—in the social sciences, supporting the idea that his work had influenced the thought of Masqueray, Durkheim and Evans-Pritchard.

Starting in the 1930s, however, other investigations—by Benedetto Croce (1932), in particular—focused on the importance of reading Ibn Khaldūn within the context of his age and his world, picking out, for example, his deep religiosity, also proven by his emphasising and fully hypostatizing, in seamless continuity with the Muslim tradition, the period of the first “well guided” caliphs. This was the direction taken, for example, in the investigations by Hamilton A. R. Gibb (1933) and Francesco Gabrieli ([1930]1984).<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile Islam, in its modernising push, had been receptive to the Western writings where, through the distorting lens of colonial interests, Ibn Khaldūn had been depicted as the “Montesquieu of the East.” Now, especially as the former colonies were gaining their independence, it started reclaiming Ibn Khaldūn’s legacy as its own, celebrating it, at the same time, as the original source of all sociological knowledge, whose beginnings were, accordingly, proudly stated as having been conceived in North Africa, and, hence, as “homegrown,” rather than as imported from Europe.

In particular, one of the founders of the *Nahḍa* (Arab modernism), Egyptian Rifā’a Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801–1873), not only reimagined Ibn Khaldūn’s idea of *‘aṣabiyya* by likening it to the patriotism of his own nationalist view (Hourani 1962, 78ff.; see also Lahbabi 1987<sup>38</sup>), but also, significantly and

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<sup>37</sup> Francesco Gabrieli’s father, Giuseppe Gabrieli (1923), also devoted much attention to Ibn Khaldūn.

<sup>38</sup> Lahbabi (1987, 138): “Son manichéisme dénote la réaction d’amertume d’un penseur ‘patriote’ et aigri.”

provokingly, turned the old and well-known judgment expressed by von Hammer-Purgstall on its head, defining Montesquieu “a Western Ibn Khaldūn.” At the same time, he stressed the important role that in Ibn Khaldūn’s thought is played by the peculiar balance between religious faith and rationality, which in Arabic is termed ‘*aql-naql*’.

Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then, even the Arab world took a renewed interest in Ibn Khaldūn’s political ideas. In 1910 in Cairo, next to the “traditionalist” University of al-Azhar, a new “secular” university opened, which in 1914 awarded its first PhD to the blind scholar Taha Hussein. Hussein was then sent to Paris, to the Sorbonne, to work on a doctoral dissertation on Ibn Khaldūn’s thought with the supervision of Émile Durkheim<sup>39</sup> and orientalist Paul Casanova. This study (Hussein 1918; Celarent 2013), which decisively relaunched Ibn Khaldūn’s “reappropriation” by the Arab world (Pizzi 1985, 75), interpreted Ibn Khaldūn (also quoting Francesco Gabrieli’s work) by situating him in a rationalist current that had been running through universal thought, yet, at the same time, establishing his deep roots in the Islamic culture of his time and suggesting that he was not so much a sociologist as a “philosopher of society.”

Furthermore, an important role in giving life to this current of “rediscovery” of Ibn Khaldūn has been played by the international colloquia devoted to him that were held in Cairo and in Rabat in 1962, in Rabat and in Algiers in 1978, and in Tunis in 1980 and 1982<sup>40</sup>. In these colloquia the tendency was increasingly to emphasise not the aspects in which Ibn Khaldūn was directly “in dialogue” with Western culture, but rather the contextual aspects and the historical, geographic, religious and linguistic specificity that marked him out as an Arab thinker. An example of this orientation can be found in Ahmed Abdesselem’s work (1983) on the *Muqaddima*, where he has forcefully insisted on defining Ibn Khaldūn’s thought as being clearly articulated within the cultural categories of his own time. According to Abdesselem, even in the construction of his innovative intellectual science Ibn Khaldūn was likely to have drawn his material entirely from the sedimented cultural legacy of his world, without betraying the cultural heritage that it was part of.

Meanwhile, the understanding of Ibn Khaldūn as a “forerunner” of Western sociology and an inspiring force behind it continued to be debated, especially in Europe.

Assessing whether the knowledge of Ibn Khaldūn’s thought actually influenced the thinking of various Western precursors, fathers and developers of sociology in a determining way, is something that would require not only an in-depth comparative analysis of the various points of contact and

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<sup>39</sup> As Barbara Celarent (2013) reports, Durkheim died shortly before Hussein could discuss his thesis in January 1918.

<sup>40</sup> Further colloquia devoted to him were subsequently held in France as well: Horrut 2006, 222–23.

assonance between Ibn Khaldūn's ideas and those of these other authors, but also specific historico-biographical data.

At any rate, the element that apparently most astonished the Western thinkers who looked at Ibn Khaldūn's writings (and also, in many cases, the North African thinkers) was precisely the clear comparability of his theses—in terms of methods, themes and basic intuitions—with the more advanced Western sociological thought of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In fact, half a millennium in advance, this monumental Maghrebin and Muslim author developed and integrated in his work many of the most important sociological concepts which would be theorised much later in the West (even while proceeding from an “Oriental” basis, and regardless of the secular historico-cultural presuppositions that informed our Enlightenment): from Montesquieu's idea of the fundamental influence that the geographic, climatic, economic and cultural environments exert on the character of populations, to the idea of the generative importance of social solidarity and of the different quality that the latter assumes in different demographic contexts (clearly, a Durkheimian theme); from Vico's idea of the existence in history of a cyclical scheme of renewal and decay (*corsi e ricorsi*), to Marx's idea that the historical transition from one form of social and economic organisation to the next dialectically derives from the contradictions (especially those tied to material factors) intrinsic to each single phase; and much else besides.

With this—which represents one of the most stimulating aspects of his thought—Ibn Khaldūn provides the historical demonstration of how it has been (and still is) possible to arrange these same concepts by linking them up within a unifying theory, not only original, but also perfectly compatible with the deep and unshakeable Muslim faith of an incorruptible and sincere Shariatic judge of the Malikite school, despite the peremptoriness with which our culture regards secularism as the *conditio sine qua non* for the birth of the social sciences.

### **1.3 The Cultural Context of the Time**

#### **1.3.1 Ibn Khaldūn Against the Background of the Islamic Tradition**

There is certainly no doubt that Ibn Khaldūn's “new science,” despite its great originality and the absolute novelty of its objectives and methodology, must have been fostered by the categories of thought, sensibility and concerns of the society of its own time. Reflecting the debates present in that society and its intellectual atmosphere, it certainly helped, as the scholar Abdesselam Cheddadi (2006, 461) has commented, to make “his society visible to itself.”

Through a particularly effective simile, Cheddadi (2006, 462) has compared the *Muqaddima* to the great mosques of the early centuries of Islam such as the Umayyads in Damascus or the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba, the Mezquita. These mosques are, indeed, both uniquely original, but equally eclectic by virtue of their ability to include, in an “Arab” way, building techniques, materials and motifs borrowed from other traditions (Syrian, Byzantine, Visigoth, and probably also Roman), while finally achieving an impression of great harmony in their individuality.

In the same way, the originality of Ibn Khaldūn’s thought certainly relied on the foundation of his own culture, developed in previous centuries and continually revisited—to the extent of incorporating elements from other traditions—by a pan-Arabic world which, as Ibn Khaldūn himself observed with thinly veiled bitterness,<sup>41</sup> was at that time beginning to decline. In fact, while 14<sup>th</sup>-century Islam was increasingly losing its dynamism, at the same time Christianity, having left the long Middle Ages behind, was leaping forward into modernity. There were already some 40 universities in Europe, and by that time—after their first flourishing (Pomian 2006, 23) prompted by the ground-breaking teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Saint Bonaventure (1221–1274), Roger Bacon (1214–1294), Duns Scotus (1268–1308) and great jurists such as Accursius (1182–1260)—they were progressively developing. As Cheddadi comments, Islam was therefore experiencing a distressing sense of being “eclipsed”—a sense that, by reaction, translated into distinct hostility toward philosophy, coupled with a defensive retreat into religion.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the study of “traditional” sciences—that is, those based on a religious-legal foundation—was the first essential element in the education of the young Ibn Khaldūn. As Franz Rosenthal (1958, lxxxvi) among others has observed, much of the foundational material used for his work is directly drawn from Islamic legal tradition (in particular, the Malikite tradition) or, in any case, inspired by it. However, if Ibn Khaldūn certainly started out from such material, it is also true that—“a brilliant and errant thinker” as he has been described (Brunschvig 1947, 391; Talbi 2002, 854)—, he used it creatively as no one before him had done, and this originality enabled him to contribute to building a science based on an entirely new investigative perspective. As Rosenthal (1958, lxxxvi) comments: “Yet [...] the *Muqaddimah* was profoundly original and constituted a new departure in scholarly research.”

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<sup>41</sup> See the text of one of the first versions of the *Muqaddima* written in Qal’at Ibn Salāma between 1375 and 1377—Manuscript A, VII preamble (Ibn Khaldūn 2002, 1207)—subsequently removed from later versions of the work completed in Cairo between 1385 and 1396 (perhaps, owing to the hope aroused in him by the lively and active vitality that could be sensed and experienced in that city): “A notre époque, nous constatons une sorte de déplacement de la civilisation du sud vers le nord.” For a comment on the order in which the different versions of the work were written, see Ibn Khaldūn 2002, 1292–1301.

<sup>42</sup> See Cheddadi 2006, 225, speaking “d’une crispation autour de la religion.”

In fact, it was the ingenuity of his insight that enabled him to couple the disciplines that had formed his spirit with the very many political experiences he had known, and through which he had become aware of the inner meaning of history. In this way, he managed to channel these disciplines and his experience into a broad scientific project which opened up a range of different research avenues, not only historical but also philosophical, sociological, economic and beyond, thus melding into one coherent picture the two great streams of scientific research that the culture of his time endeavoured to keep separate: the traditional sciences, on the one hand, and the intellectual sciences, on the other. In fact, while the traditional sciences certainly merged together in the genesis of his work, equally important to it was the contribution that came from his study of grammar, rhetoric, mathematics and above all—thanks to his teacher al-Ābilī<sup>43</sup>—philosophical method and perspective, which greatly informed Ibn Khaldūn’s work, despite the great scepticism towards philosophy expressed by the socio-cultural environment in which he was working.

It is precisely this happy convergence of many perspectives, gathered during his education and life experiences, coupled with his open, analytical spirit and his own uncommon freedom of thought, that perhaps explains how he came to conceive such an innovative project as the scientific study of human history, society and civilisation. Such a project, distinct, in its originality, from both Aristotelian philosophy and the thought of great Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna, Averroes and al-Rāzī, had to wait for a figure such as Saint-Simon to be envisaged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Western world. The Arab world had come to know philosophy almost fortuitously in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The first translations of the Greek authors were born initially out of an interest in the Greeks’ knowledge of the natural sciences (physics, astronomy, mathematics etc.). After that, for completeness’ sake, various theoretical works of the Greeks were translated as well. Until that time (and even later, until about the 10<sup>th</sup> century) the ethical and political world views of both Islam and Christianity were articulated mainly in religious terms, bypassing rational research—if not, often, even discouraging it. In fact, as Ibn Khaldūn stressed in the *Muqaddima* (VI, 42), the most important philosophical contributions in Arab culture were developed in the preceding centuries by non-Arab Muslim scholars, or by thinkers of Arabic lineage but not language, educated by non-Arab teachers. Ibn Khaldūn explains this phenomenon on the basis of the fact that the Arabs were initially devoid of a sedentary culture, and that subsequently, even after they had taken power, they continued to disdain intellectual work, considering it as a “craft” and, hence, an occupation whose standing lay below the dignity of their lineage. It was not only the case that the fundamental translation of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, in his autobiography, described al-Ābilī as a “great master of the sciences based on reason” (Khaldūn [1980] 1995, 48).

Greek works, done in the early centuries of Islam (especially in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, spurred on by the Abbasid caliph of Baghdad al-Ma'mūn,<sup>44</sup> who in 832 founded the Bayt al-ḥikma, or *House of Wisdom*), had mostly been made possible by the work of mainly Christian, Jewish and “pagan” Arabic-speaking translators.

Even the scholars belonging to the Muslim cultural sphere whose work had been opened up to Ibn Khaldūn by his teacher (Nassar 1964) were themselves, for the most part, non-Arab. For example, 12<sup>th</sup>-century thinker Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149–1209), who, in his *Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, or *Large Commentary* on the Quran, had maintained the rationalistic thesis according to which facts drawn from tradition alone (from the *ḥadīth*)<sup>45</sup> can only be considered as a basis of presumption and can never give any certainty<sup>46</sup>, was Persian. Another important rationalist thinker, antonomastically referred to as the “Second Teacher,” was Turkish logician and philosopher al-Fārābī (872–951). Al-Fārābī had commented on the *Organon* by Aristotle (the philosopher—*al-ḥakīm*—par excellence), assessing the use of logic as the main tool of scientific analysis. Thus, he had reformulated philosophy in such a way as to bring it into accord with the emphasis that Islamic culture places on the community, in view of the happiness of Muslims understood as a political group, rather than on the individual. Central to that aim was his work on the “ideal city,” *al-Madīna al-fāḍila*. In the thinking of al-Fārābī, philosophy found its place within religion:<sup>47</sup> hence, the true prophet-lawgiver should also be a philosopher-king.<sup>48</sup> Among other things, Ibn Khaldūn borrowed from al-Fārābī the cosmogony underpinning his vision of the unbroken chain, described in the first part of his work, that links up minerals, plants, animals and, finally, man.

Also of great importance was the Persian Neoplatonic encyclopaedic philosopher and physician Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, 980–1037). Avicenna wrote, among other works, the *Book of Healing*, where he refined al-Fārābī's work and held that the intellects which influence the events of the world, all of them created by God, are arranged within a descending ontological and normative hierarchy that also

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<sup>44</sup> As Ibn Khaldūn reminds us, Al-Ma'mūn was the same caliph who attempted, but failed, to take down the pyramids of Egypt (*Muqaddima* IV, 4).

<sup>45</sup> The *ḥadīth* (plural *aḥadīth*) is the tradition, generally handed down through a series of transmitters bearing the word of the original witnesses, that concerns the examples and sayings offered by the prophet Muhammad.

<sup>46</sup> In the context of Khaldunian historiography, this concept would then be reflected in his recommendation that historical tradition be used cautiously and selectively. Furthermore, in vol. IV of his *Maṭālib*, al-Rāzī advances the idea of the existence of an infinite universe (a multiverse) inhabited by many worlds similar to our own, all of them created by God.

<sup>47</sup> In the *Supreme Prayer of al-Fārābī* (*Du'ā' 'aẓīm*), for example, rationality as a tool of knowledge, philosophical thought and logical rigour are coupled with a recognition of the imponderable superiority of God, the first cause and prime mover of all things. Published in a critical edition by Muhsin Mahdi (al-Fārābī 1986, 89–92) on the basis of a manuscript found in the Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul, it reads as follows in the English translation by Ibrahim Kalin (2017): “Show me the truth as truth and inspire me to follow it. Show me the falsehood as falsehood and forbid me from believing and following it. Refine my soul with the clay of the hyle (the first matter). You are the Primary Cause!” and in its closing it reads: “O God! Show my soul the true forms of the invisible in its dreams and transform it from seeing nightmares to seeing goodness and veritable glad tidings in its dreams. Clean it from the dirt that has afflicted its senses and delusive imagination. Remove from it the muddiness of the natural world.”

<sup>48</sup> Al-Fārābī held that man is capable of understanding “intelligible forms” channelled through God by way of the sensations, the imagination, and the intellect. Cf. Strauss and Cropsey [1963] 1972, 184.



assigns a place to man, who is distinguished from these intellects by virtue of his material component. God gave his law to Muhammad for the benefit of man in a “dense formula,” and it was man’s task to understand it by using his intellect.<sup>49</sup>

Soon after, however, an increasingly rigid attitude towards philosophy found especially powerful expression in the occasionalist theology propounded by the Persian philosopher and Ash‘arite theologian al-Ġazālī (1058–1111). In his treatise *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ġazālī directly criticised al-Fārābī and Avicenna, and in so doing also indirectly dismissed Aristotelian metaphysics, however much he himself used Aristotle’s own logic in so doing.

According to the Persian thinker reason, and the principle of causality in which it grounds its own reconstructions of the real, should not be recognised as a valid and reliable tool of knowledge:<sup>50</sup> rather, it is God, the cause of all events, who is also, at the same time, a direct cause of our knowledge of them.<sup>51</sup> For this reason al-Ġazālī believed that even the observation of an appreciable relation of consequentiality between one element and another could never, in any event, entail the existence of a certain and necessary causal relation between the two elements. In other words, the causal nexus could not be considered a reliable source of knowledge.

An echo of this vision can be described in Ibn Khaldūn. In fact, in relation to his embracing of philosophical thought—particularly as far as Aristotelian philosophy is concerned—his attitude does show the ambivalence typical of his time. If on the one hand, in the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldūn based his study on logic and inductive reasoning—and this is precisely one of the great “revolutions” of knowledge he brought to the study of history—on the other he also explicitly held that logic could prove to be a source of ideas contrary to religion. Consequently, he argued that it should never be taught to students before instilling in them a firm knowledge of the religious sciences (*Muqaddima* VI, 30).

Furthermore, while his commitment to the universalism of reason and the rigour of logic can clearly be appreciated in the adoption of the method on which he founded his “new science,” on the other hand, in a partial move toward the theses advanced by al-Ġazālī, there also emerges in his work his concern to establish clear limits and borderlines between what it is possible for our human faculties to know, and what lies, instead, beyond their ken, such knowledge being reserved for divine revelation. In fact, Ibn Khaldūn himself stated that we are not endowed with an ability to know how

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<sup>49</sup> Other important representatives of the intellectual sciences—who also, strictly speaking, were non-Arab—were Avempace, born in Zaragoza, and Ibn Ṭufayl, born in Guadix.

<sup>50</sup> This position, after all, also found support in the judgments expressed by the Christian Church of the 12th century on the relation between religion and reason: only a century later would the two elements find, in scholasticism, a reconciliation that would allot a greater role to reason, all the while respecting religion.

<sup>51</sup> Compare the view much later taken by David Hume (2011).

causes “ultimately” truly affect the things which are caused, and that for this reason Muslims have rightly been commanded to renounce any speculation on such matters (*Muqaddima* VI, 30).

However, it is important to clarify from the start that in Ibn Khaldūn this limitation and this mistrust do not take over the whole of scientific and philosophical research, but are rather understood by him as being in force *only within the province of metaphysics* (for only this discipline is what, in a proper sense, he terms *falsafa*, isolating it, with pejorative overtones, from the rest of *ḥikma*, the general philosophical discipline). The world of natural phenomena is not involved in this.

Ibn Khaldūn, therefore, conceived reason as a legitimate tool, although only within the scope of its natural limits, which are set by the investigation and interpretation of the elements of the physical world and are based on empiricism and observation. For Ibn Khaldūn, the important implication of the non-necessariness of a radical epistemological break between the religious option and the rationalistic one (Hamès 1999, 175) comes from this “division” of spheres. As Stephen Dale (2015a, 103) has commented: “God, in this latter Greco-Islamic context is the prime-mover and not al-Ġazālī’s God of small things.”

In fact, in relation to the social and earthly phenomena that form the object of his inquiry, the idea that everything possesses a nature or essence which determines a development that can be rationally grasped is not only reflected, as we will see, in the entire model of his cyclical history of human civilisations. It also profoundly influences his own expository methodology, structured according to a rigorous architecture aimed at reproducing the order of anteriority that, on a synoptic level, is found in the objective world. This order is expressed not only in Ibn Khaldūn’s ordering and exposition of the domains of knowledge,<sup>52</sup> but also in the discussion of every single element in his explanations. These typically proceed from the framing of the problem to its solution in successive stages until its complete demonstration, closing (Talbi 1973, 37) with the formula *faqad tabayyana anna* (the Latin QED, or *quod erat demonstrandum*). In fact, Ibn Khaldūn employs the demonstrative method (*burhān*, or rational demonstration) in each minute analysis of facts,<sup>53</sup> staggered according to a rhythm of premises and demonstrations similar to that of mathematics.

If, then, Ibn Khaldūn’s thinking on the question of the metaphysical foundation of creation recalls that of al-Ġazālī, on everything else it reveals itself to be closer to the work of al-Ġazālī’s “great

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<sup>52</sup> In fact, in his work Ibn Khaldūn attempts to systematically present all the relevant topics of inquiry of his time, covering (in chap. VI) even alchemy, chemistry, astrology, and numerology. Hodgson (1974, vol. 2, 479–80) describes his work as “a self-consistent body of demonstrable generalisations about historical change, generalisations which would, in turn, be based on premises taken from the demonstrated results of ‘higher,’ i.e., more abstract sciences—in this case chiefly biology, psychology, and geography.”

<sup>53</sup> Following Aristotle, even Ibn Khaldūn considers rational demonstration as a procedure of reasoning aimed at yielding certainties—this, in contrast to dialectics (*jadāl*), or disputation, aimed at prevailing over a contender, as well as to rhetoric (*ḥiṭāba*), aimed at persuading others; poetry (*šīʿr*), aimed at providing inspiration; and sophism (*safsafa*), aimed at confusing one’s adversary.

adversary”: the Berber philosopher, physician and mathematician Averroes of Córdoba (Ibn Rušd, 1126–1198), the great proponent of Aristotle’s thought who, especially in his *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, used rational thinking to confute al-Ġazālī’s occasionalist theology<sup>54</sup>.

A jurist and theologian by training, Averroes had commented on the works of Aristotle for the caliph Abū Yūsuf Ya’qūb al-Manṣūr, making the point that if philosophy had continued to be regarded merely as theology’s maidservant, it would never have been able to find answers beyond what is literally described in religious terms. What Averroes was saying, in other words, is that, while it was a duty of all Muslims to follow Islam, those endowed with higher forms of philosophical ability were similarly duty-bound to develop their own thought by also pursuing this other form of knowledge.

In the Muslim world, the perspective which understood demonstrative rational reasoning as fully reconcilable with religious faith was greatly revitalised thanks to his teaching, so much so that, as the scholar Stephen Frederic Dale (2015a, 263) has commented, Averroes can be said to have been the first important link between the philosophical cultures of North Africa, Andalusia, and Europe.

However, the *opposite* orientation ineluctably prevailed in his world, and Averroes eventually fell into disgrace towards the end of his life, and saw his books burned at the request of the ‘*ulemā*, just before being forced to go into exile. He died in Marrakesh.<sup>55</sup>

Copies of his works, however, with his commentaries on Aristotle, were preserved by his students and went on to become some of the most authoritative textual sources on Aristotelian thought in Medieval Europe. They were read and discussed by Thomas Aquinas at the Sorbonne in Paris<sup>56</sup>—a university that played a key role in the spread of Greek philosophy—and through Aquinas they played an important role in the rebirth of universities in the Latin West, until they also came to influence—through a long chain of intellectual legacies, as cited by Dale (2015a, ch. VI)<sup>57</sup>—Italian Renaissance thought and, later still, the work of many European Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> On Averroes, see Campanini 2007; Butterworth 1972.

<sup>55</sup> The story is also the subject of a film titled *al-Massir* (1997), directed by the Egyptian director Youssef Chahine.

<sup>56</sup> His work would later be placed on the *Index of Forbidden Books* (see Horrut 2006, 142).

<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Dale brings out a whole series of interesting analogies between Ibn Khaldūn and Montesquieu as to the structure and method of their work, ascribing to both a common Aristotelian-Averroist root, generally characterised, as Dale says, by a deep interweaving of *logos* and *peira* and by a vision of society as a “natural fact” (Durkheim 1994, 45). This common root can also be found in the Scottish Enlightenment, and in particular in the work of David Hume (in view of the analogies between Hume’s view of human nature and the arguments expressed by Ibn Khaldūn); in Adam Smith (owing to his vision of the interconnection of economic and social factors in leading to the division of labour, a thesis that had been anticipated by Ibn Khaldūn); and, later, in Durkheim’s sociology (especially considering how his distinction of the two kinds of solidarity can be traced back to Ibn Khaldūn’s insight on the transformation of the force of social cohesion in the two models of social organization). Despite the differing politico-historico-social backgrounds of all these authors, they all “inhabited the same philosophical world” (Dale 2015a, 275), a world which, at root, was Aristotelian. On the influence of classical Greek philosophy on Montesquieu, see Shackleton 1961, 264–303.

<sup>58</sup> Durkheim (1999) himself expressly linked the ideas developed in sociology to the great classic philosophical ideas—foremost among them those of Aristotle.

In North Africa, on the other hand, Averroes's theses and, in particular, his articulation of the concepts of nature and causality, perhaps bore their main fruit precisely in the thought of Ibn Khaldūn, where, in the *Muqaddima*, they contributed to the formation of the new science of civilisation built on a rational basis.

Meanwhile, the contact with Aristotle's rationalistic philosophy had also set in motion a new current of rational study applied to the law. This current had especially found expression in an innovative theological school: that of the Mu'tazilites. Prominent here was al-Kindī (801–873), an Iraqi jurist and philosopher who commented on Greek, Persian and Indian thinkers: it was al-Kindī's view that "we should not [...] be ashamed to recognize truth and assimilate it, from whatever quarter it may reach us, even though it may come from earlier generations and foreign people" (Fakhry 1970, 23). As early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Mu'tazilites argued for the importance of using reason and logic in the interpretation of religious/legal concepts. This view, which later found a place to flourish in the Christian West,<sup>59</sup> came to a halt in the 10<sup>th</sup> century in the world in which it was born, when the stranglehold upon the interpretation of history known as the "closing of the gates of *ijtihād*"<sup>60</sup> (Verza 2008, 217–18) was reached. The rationalistic approach, then, met with serious opposition from several quarters: as the growing interest in philosophy threatened the hegemony of traditional theologians, both in Islam and in Christianity, an extensive and divisive debate on the relation between rationality and revealed religion sprang up (DeBoer 1965, 211–12).

In Christianity, these two divergent paths, eventually, came to be reconciled in the work of Thomas Aquinas, who argued that no necessary conflict existed between revelation and reason (both understood as valid pathways to God). In Islam, however, the traditional thesis, staunchly voluntarist and occasionalist, prevailed, championed especially by the towering figure of Al-Ġazālī, who placed philosophy below revealed religion (ibid.; Miller 1975, 46). The pejorative overtones (Horrut 2006, 142)<sup>61</sup> of the term *falsafa*, juxtaposed with the more neutral-sounding *ḥikma*, clearly testified as to this defensive entrenchment. We can also find this term in the *Muqaddima*, where Ibn Khaldūn is invariably careful to distance himself from it.

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<sup>59</sup> As previously said, it did so with scholasticism, which, in the universities, sparked the interest ignited by the commentaries written by Muslim philosophers who, like Averroes (Schacht 1974)—challenging the control exerted by theological authority over the limits of intellectual endeavours—had carried forward the work of the Mu'tazilites.

<sup>60</sup> Such is that phase of history beyond which *the ijtihād*, i.e., independent interpretation and reasoning in law—initially allowed to all members of the community of the faithful, later only to the class of doctors of the law—ceased to apply, to be replaced only by the "conforming imitation" of the interpretations produced up to that moment. It is interesting that Ibn Khaldūn called this phenomenon, instead, "closing of the doors of *khilāf*," where the latter is the opinion held on religious matters. See Ahmad 2003, 46.

<sup>61</sup> On the relation between *ḥikma* and *falsafa*, see also Cheddadi 2006, 204ff.

After that, in the early 13<sup>th</sup>-century Arabic-speaking world, that broader intellectual ferment produced by the impact of rationalistic philosophy lost its motive power,<sup>62</sup> both in the East (with the rise to power of the Seljuk Turks) and in the Arab West with the loss of Andalusia, which led to the break-up of the intellectual élite (including Ibn Khaldūn's family) (Horrut 2006, 142).

Ibn Khaldūn, while still coming to terms with the gradual disappearance in the Maghreb of the cultivation of the intellectual sciences, learned that the philosophical sciences were flourishing in Christian lands to the north:

We hear that the intellectual sciences are still amply represented among the inhabitants of the East, in particular in the non-Arab 'Iraq and, farther east, in Transoxiana. [...] We further hear now that the philosophical sciences are greatly cultivated in the land of Rome and along the adjacent northern shore of the country of the European Christians.

This observation, however, came with an understandable tinge of hurt pride, prompting him to close the passage by wryly commenting, "God knows better what exists there." (*Muqaddima* VI, 18. Ibn Khaldūn 1958, vol. III, 117–18; Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 375).

### 1.3.2 A Possible Inspiration from Aristotelian Physics

For Ibn Khaldūn there is no innate knowledge:<sup>63</sup> yet, on an epistemological level, and by way of sound intuition, man can perceive that he is part of three different worlds (*Muqaddima* VI, 4).

The first is the world of sensory perception; the second, deducible from our observation of our capacity to think and gain scientific knowledge of things, is the intellectual world, that of ideas.<sup>64</sup>

Then there is a third, spiritual world, which can be accessed only in exceptional circumstances and expresses a supernatural knowledge inspired from above, voiced particularly by way of prophecy.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Moḥammed al-Jabri ([1976–1991] 1996, 135) observed that afterwards, while the Orient by and large embraced the path charted by al-Ġazālī and Avicenna, getting mired in the problem of the relation between religion and faith, Ibn Khaldūn inherited the legacy of Averroes and of that brand of rationalism that can treat philosophy separately from religion (the same legacy subsequently inherited by the West): "After Averroes, we Arabs effectively lived in the margins of history (in inertia and decline) because we clung to the Avicennian moment from the time that al-Ġazālī conferred on him a right of citizenship in Islam. The Europeans, by contrast, lived their own history, because they knew how to appropriate Averroes and to live in the Averroist moment up to our own time." (my translation).

<sup>63</sup> That is the comment that makes up the title of the sixth paragraph of chapter VI.

<sup>64</sup> Rational knowledge goes through three steps: external perception, internal perception and thought, the last of which involves three types of operations ('*aql*): discerning ones, from which we get concepts; experimental ones, yielding judgments; and speculative ones, through which concepts and judgments are combined to generate new knowledge. In both rational thought and supernatural knowledge (based on intuition, or *wijdān*), as well as in prophecy (a gift of God), sensory experience is bypassed. See *infra*, ch. IV.

<sup>65</sup> As Lakhsassi (1979) stresses, there are also some sciences, albeit imperfect ones, which can be traced to the third type of soul: these are the "spiritual" sciences of Sufism, and they also include the magical, talismanic and divinatory sciences, among others.

This distinction, as Turrone (2002, 84) observes, contributes to enabling Ibn Khaldūn's neat separation of the world of science, in its own boundaries, and the world of revealed religion—and this without bringing them into contradiction and without diminishing the value of either. In fact, while to Ibn Khaldūn philosophy is harmful to religion insofar as it improperly makes inroads into the metaphysical—this is the *falsafa* with which he takes issue—, the remaining area of speculation and the intellectual science of wisdom, belonging in the second world, is fully legitimate, as long as it does not encroach on metaphysics. This is the area of the *ḥikma* (*al-'ulūm al-'akliyya al-ḥikmiyya*), and it is precisely within it (*Muqaddima* Foreword), and no longer in the field of literary tradition, that he sets his work.

However, this framing of his own historical project, stated from the outset, in its Foreword, as a work of rational knowledge, entailed a re-drawing of its own meaning and underlying values: it would no longer have mainly stylistic goals but would rather be aimed at a rational search for the truth,<sup>66</sup> and at understanding the constant laws which, as a matter of fact, regulate political aggregates.

At that time the political outlook of Christian scholars (mostly clerics, jurists and university professors) was filtered, on a theoretical level, not only through the perspective of the *Corpus Iuris Iustinianum* (which was essential for the philosophy and practice of law and politics, as well as for the development of a secular spirit: see Lagarde 1956-1970), but also through reference to the three models of government presented in Aristotle's *Politics*. These models were already classic: Aristotle's political work had been known to Christian Europeans since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to a translation into Latin by Guillaume de Moerbeke upon which Thomas Aquinas commented shortly after its publication. Categories and themes were drawn from them which centred on the problem of types of government, on the relation between the ruled and rulers, and on the definition of the best form of government, justice, rights and citizenship. The models were a long way from dealing with the idea of society's cyclical growth and corruption: on the contrary, they were interested in promoting the idea of society's unity and endurance (Pomian 2006, 95).<sup>67</sup>

At that time, however, neither the *Corpus Iuris Iustinianum* nor Aristotle's ethico-political works had been translated into Arabic—although, under the title *Politics*, a book thought to be attributable to Aristotle was at the time in circulation. In fact, this was a completely different, spurious work, known as *Sirr al-asrār* (*Secretum secretorum*): Ibn Khaldūn himself makes a doubting reference to it

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<sup>66</sup> Pomian (2006, 78) observes that this assertion made in the Foreword to Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddima* may well mark the first time that history and science have ever been mentioned together within the span of the same sentence.

<sup>67</sup> Thus, for example, in that same period in Italy the Paduan professor and jurist Baldus de Ubaldis (1327–1400), in line with his teacher, Bartolus de Saxoferrato (1314–1357), was justifying self-government by cities such as Genoa and Venice by virtue of its effectiveness as “interstitial,” even within the *de jure* extension of the empire's jurisdiction. Bartolus had previously defined a city capable of self-government as an immortal corporation, continuing to exist even through the coming and going of the natural persons who make it up. His thought would later influence that of Ernst Kantorowicz (1989, 218).

in the foreword to his *Muqaddima*, showing that he did not believe that attribution to be accurate. From this perspective, then, Khaldūn's frame of mind, on the level of political reflection, was less "boxed in": he was freer and less constrained than the Latin clerics and university academicians.<sup>68</sup>

Some translations of the works of Plato and Galen (Turroni 2002, 80) were in circulation in the Arab world at that time, but, apart from his works on logic, the works of the "First Teacher" translated into Arabic and in circulation—and thus presumably known to, or knowable, by Ibn Khaldūn either directly or through commentators—were his scientific works: those on physics, for example, which had also been widely commented on not only by al-Fārābī, but also by Avicenna.<sup>69</sup>

It was precisely these writings on physics, if we are to follow the fascinating thesis advanced by scholars such as Pomian and Dale (and also Cheddadi 2006, ch. IV), that are said to have played an important role in Ibn Khaldūn's work, serving as a source of inspiration "exogenous" to the Arab world, in the general structuring of his thought. This influence could particularly have been exercised by the thesis set out in the *De generatione et corruptione*, an Aristotelian work devoted to understanding whether things come into being causally through being produced from prime matter, or whether everything is generated by way of alteration—a question previously addressed by Aristotle in his *Physics*.

In the *Physics*, having defined nature as the complex of all things that have in themselves "the principle of movement and rest," Aristotle argued that created things behave in conformity with their nature. As Dale notes, we could identify a main pillar of Khaldūn's theory<sup>70</sup> in the idea that it is possible to identify a proper nature of things—an essential condition for conceiving the possibility of predicting their future trajectory, physical or historical, in both an explicative and a predictive sense. Thus, according to Dale, Ibn Khaldūn had the ingenious insight of taking the Aristotelian idea that each thing possesses a nature by which its development is determined, and applying this idea to the study of the forms of transformation of society, joining the categories of Aristotelian physics to the data furnished by his own political experience and by his historical knowledge of life in North Africa, so as to ultimately arrive at a completely unprecedented theory of society and of its metamorphoses. Aristotle's *De generatione et corruptione*, which had been translated into Arabic in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, traced the causes of natural things' cycles of generation and corruption to the

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<sup>68</sup> As Pomian (2006, 221) observes, at that time in the Christian world a freer spirit, closer to Ibn Khaldūn's, can be found in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in Franco Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle*, and in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>69</sup> In the section devoted to physics (*Muqaddima* VI, 23), Ibn Khaldūn makes reference, for the most part, to the popular *Book of Healing*, in which Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) had, in his own turn, assigned a central role to the notion of causality. This work too, according to Dale, could have been used by Ibn Khaldūn as a source through which to access the Aristotelian concepts of causality, nature and accident.

<sup>70</sup> As Dale (2015a, 24) notes, Ibn Khaldūn uses the term *ṭabi'a* (meaning, precisely, "nature") more than any other Muslim thinker of the time, and he also often uses the Aristotelian expression *al-taqaddum bi 'l-ṭab'*, meaning "prior by nature."

circular movement of Earth's celestial sphere.<sup>71</sup> For Aristotle, the decomposition and re-composition of complex bodies and the transmutation of the elements into each other—that is, generation and corruption—follow each other in continuous succession because the eternal movement of the heavens along the ecliptic, by turns attracts and repels the principle that generates growth by proximity, and corrupts by distancing. On that basis, Aristotle concluded that there is, in effect, an order proper to each thing, and that the duration of each life is measured in a cycle, shorter or longer depending on circumstances (Aristotle 2013, 336b, 10–15).

Ibn Khaldūn thought that human societies also have a part to play in the order which God imparted on nature: so, there must be the possibility of applying the Aristotelian scheme to human societies, too.<sup>72</sup> In fact, in one of the first versions of the *Muqaddima* (what Cheddadi calls Manuscript A) Ibn Khaldūn writes:

The conditions of these elemental worlds are subject to generation and corruption. When something belonging to these worlds reaches a point of extreme corruption, we should expect it to make the passage to generation. In the same way, if it reaches a point of extreme generation, it must make the passage to corruption. [...] If that is how it goes for material things, it must be the same for conditions and for states. When conditions of corruption become prevalent in the world, and functions unravel, and that which makes it up, meaning the order of human society, becomes dispersed, and corruption in this whole process reaches an extreme point, then we have to expect the transformation of this entire order, union, and harmony, and the beginning of a new order.<sup>73</sup>

In Ibn Khaldūn's cycle of generation and corruption, as applied to society, various clues make it possible to understand the point in the cycle at which the polity lay. As we will see, the most important of these clues is the durability of the moral virtues especially developed at the tribal stage: those of group solidarity, courage and “fortitude/prowess”; the practice of living on what is necessary and no more; and the virtue of solidary closeness among society's members and between the leader and the governed. With the progressive weakening of these virtues, the phase of demise comes closer, in a

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<sup>71</sup> This does not, in any event, imply that any reference was being made to astrology, which was extraneous to the Aristotelian conception and was rejected by Ibn Khaldūn.

<sup>72</sup> Ibn Khaldūn writes that all created things—minerals, plants, and animals, including humans—are subject to this same law, and the same also goes for all human conditions. *Muqaddima* II, 14. Ibn Khaldūn 1958, vol. I, 278. Ibn Khaldūn [1967] 2005, 105: “The same applies to the conditions that affect created things, and especially to the conditions that affect man.” Pomian (2006, 96) notes that even the Paduan historian Albertino Mussato (1261–1329) used the categories of the *De generatione*, albeit not systematically, to compare human society to the human body, both being subject to corruption.

<sup>73</sup> Ibn Khaldūn (2002, 1244): “Les conditions de ces mondes élémentaires sont sujettes à la génération et à la corruption. Quand une chose appartenant à ces mondes parvient à la corruption extrême, on doit s'attendre à son passage à la génération. De même, si elle parvient à la génération extrême, elle passe à la corruption. [...] S'il en est ainsi dans les choses matérielles, il doit en être de même dans les conditions et les États. Quand les conditions de la corruption dominent le monde, que la fonction de direction se dérègle, que ce qui la constitue, c'est à dire l'ordre de la société humaine, se disperse, et que la corruption en tout cela atteint son point extrême, on doit alors s'attendre à la transformation de ce bon ordre, de cette union et de cette harmonie, et au retour au commencement de l'ordre.”



corrupting process affecting not only the community as a whole, but also its members, as well as their characters and dispositions.

In order to understand the characteristics of these social cycles, however, it is essential to have a good understanding of the present and a capacity for observation, together with a good knowledge of history, enabling us to understand the cyclic recurrence of the past—provided that its data be reliable and well checked. That is why another aspect that is central to Khaldūn’s work lays in the criterion of historical truth.

In fact, the cyclicity of time which, for Ibn Khaldūn, governs all things in our world, is not to be intended as a deterministic return to sameness but rather as implying a continuous “swing” between predefined phases, where transitions between the two occur. It is from this perspective that an understanding of the past—of history as a repository of useful examples—can be made to work as a source of instruction for the future. Hence the reasoning behind the title of his work, which refers, in its entirety, to the “instructive examples” of the past, thus underlying—in what today we might call a stimulus to “sociological imagination”—their potential usefulness as warnings and as training tools for the future.

Therefore, if Ibn Khaldūn qualifies at all as an “Aristotelian” author, this is not for reprising, or commenting upon, Aristotle (which he only occasionally does), but for taking advantage of Aristotle’s categories, albeit with the aim of investigating a topic to which Aristotle himself never considered applying them.

Is this enough to define Ibn Khaldūn as an “Aristotelian”? Perhaps. In any case, apart from this question, the idea that he could have drawn the initial insight for his socio-dynamic theory from a totally different area of investigation—that of the laws of physics—suggests a parallel with the insight that subsequently, in Europe, provided the basis for the birth of sociology: the idea that the same robustness of the method for investigating the laws of the natural world could be carried over to a new province—the investigation of society.

However valid this may be, the hypothesis of Ibn Khaldūn’s insight having an Aristotelian root is seductive, especially insofar as it makes it possible to rationalise and make comprehensible the analogy between Ibn Khaldūn’s ideas and those of the social thinkers active from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards to whom he has been compared.

In fact, this exceptional similarity has been explained by the scholars advancing this thesis as implied by the commonality of the logical and philosophical approach used by both—that is, the approach of the “first teacher” *par excellence*. Aristotelian thought influenced both the Maghrebin thinker (indirectly, through his “rationalist” teacher al-Ābilī, but also directly, through the works of Aristotle translated into Arabic that were, then, available) and European culture. In the latter, in particular,

Aristotelianism was disseminated through the research activity stimulated at the University of Paris (particularly from the second millennium on) by Averroes's commentaries on Aristotle, to which Thomas Aquinas, as we have seen, devoted his observations, ultimately exerting an influence lasting up to modern times.

Incidentally, this reduction of Ibn Khaldūn's cyclical theory (in which every state of affairs is understood as a mutation and development from a previous state) to an Aristotelian "seed" also seems to reaffirm, on a metatheoretical level, this very idea of causality, as it reframes Khaldūn's theory merely as a pre-programmed development of elements already present, *in nuce*, in Aristotelian thought.

However, this attempt to reduce the originality of this striking author to one of "our" schemes, treating it as a kind of "cultural *déjà vu*," is perplexing to the extent that it ends up "normalising" his originality, and diminishes his thesis to a development, however marginal it may be, of *Western* philosophy—that is, to an unfolding of ideas already present in classical thought.

Certainly, the seed of Aristotelian rationalism and its categories must inevitably have influenced *all* Western thinkers. Yet, it is singularly curious that great pains have been taken to stress that such a legacy exists in particular in the thought of Ibn Khaldūn (even despite the simple hypotheticality of the conceptual links said to underlie the possible passage from the sphere of physics to that of politics). It is almost as if this amounts to explain the "Khaldunian phenomenon" in a way which, more reassuringly, relocates its "phenomenonality" into the realm of the familiar.

Furthermore, there is no direct evidence that Khaldūn's cyclic scheme, as seductively suggested, is far from an original insight and merely an application (however ingenious) of something borrowed from Aristotle's *De generatione*. In point of fact, Ibn Khaldūn does at times also refer specifically to Aristotelian physics (*Muqaddima* VI, 23), but in doing so he does not make these links; more generally, he almost never mentions Aristotle as a source for his central ideas (even if, in general, scrupulousness in citing sources and rigour in referencing schemes and readings—especially, historical ones—is one of the key points of his methodology). In fact, the *Muqaddima* contains various and explicit statements to the contrary, where Ibn Khaldūn proudly distances himself from the *falāsifa*.

Most importantly, however, it is certain that Ibn Khaldūn repeatedly stresses the *absolute novelty* of his new science, thereby claiming originality for the insight and intellectual intuition which, coupled with attention to detail and rigorous observation, produced his masterpiece.

If we follow his narration of the genesis of the work to the end, one cannot fail to be impressed by his description of how he came to grasp these ideas. It is as if they had literally been "delivered" to him in a flood of inspiration during five months of work and creativity that we can imagine as having

been overwhelming. This almost suggests that this “onrush” of ideas never before conceived came to him and made his intellect—already tempered in the intellectual gymnasium of his mentor and teacher al-Ābilī and, therefore, already distinguished by the “colouring” imparted by familiarity with philosophical discipline—a human discharger of conceptual energies, perhaps plummeting from the heights of the world of “ideas.”

## **1.4 Overlaid Interpretive Currents**

### **1.4.1 Successive and Dichotomic Interpretive Waves**

As we have seen, Ibn Khaldūn was “rediscovered” in a period when the social sciences were going through a formative stage. An overview of the studies dedicated to him shows us how from the outset the first interpretations of his work were already polarised, as Alatas writes (2013: 104), around very different types of attitudes.

More to the point, it becomes apparent that at different times, and under the impulse of different ideological-cultural forces (Forte 2005), interpretations have been applied to his complex work in order to emphasise (or in some cases to devalue) some aspects instead of others—in a way that has revealed, in many cases, the political nature of these readings themselves above all (Boukraa 2008; Patriarca 2019).

For example, as Francesca Forte (2005: 185) points out, it is instructive to see how a different light is cast onto him even in the conferences devoted to him in the Arab world, especially from the 1960s onwards.

Thus, in the *Social Sciences Congress* on Ibn Khaldūn in 1962 in Cairo, perhaps in the wake of many European studies that in previous decades had been devoted to him as a “forerunner” of the new social sciences,<sup>74</sup> he was celebrated in precisely these terms: as a modern thinker, founder of sociology, author of the first sociological study in Arab civilisation and, because of the “law” of social phenomena he developed, as a precursor of theorists such as Montesquieu, Spencer and Comte.

In this context, Ibn Khaldūn was presented as an author who could stand on an equal footing with contemporary European authors—as had been argued by authoritative scholars such as Ludwig Gumplowicz (1925, 90–114), Franz Oppenheimer (1922–35, vol. II, 173ff.; vol. IV, 251ff.) (whom Becker and Barnes had even defined as a “resurrector of Ibn Khaldūn”), Guglielmo Ferrero (1896),

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<sup>74</sup> As Bouthoul had commented, European scientific thought was, at that time, eager to read itself through the image reflected in others. Bouthoul 1930: 172: “La pensée scientifique française et européenne est avide de se lire (en miroir) chez d’autres.”

and also Alfred von Kremer (1879) and René Maunier (1915), as well as Becker and Barnes ([1938]1961, 706–8),<sup>75</sup> who had hailed Ibn Khaldūn as the first of the sociologists.

In later years, by contrast, there increasingly emerged a Khaldunian exegesis concerned to reconnect him to the specificity of his Islamic culture, as if to imply that it was impossible to conceive a single cultural path of Greco-Arab origin characterised by similarities and variations, and that Arab culture necessarily had to be set in contradiction to Western culture, essentially transformed into something “other” and obdurately cleaving to its own distinctive traits. As early as the colloquium held in 1978 in Algiers, the emphasis fell on the ability of Ibn Khaldūn to couple rationalist endeavour with religion in his work, through its particular epistemology—a line of interpretation that was developed in particular by thinkers like Moḥammed ‘Abed al-Jabri ([1976–1991] 1996) and Nassif Nassar (1967). However, the “defensive” need to situate his work in its own historical, cultural and religious context most emphatically began to prevail at the 1979 Rabat colloquium, and continued through to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is still a thriving interpretive trend (elements of it can be recognised even in the work of contemporary exegetes like Claude Horrut (2006) and Robert Irwin (2018))—and such a line of interpretation has often reached the point of denying, or at least deliberately downplaying, the status of originality of his work. For example, the Arab (though British-trained) historian Aziz al-Azmeh (1981, 160; cf. Campanini 2005b, 21, n. 1) denies Ibn Khaldūn’s modernity, and confines his thought strictly within the cultural boundaries of his time. Even earlier, though, Taha Hussein (1918; cf. Celarent 2003)<sup>76</sup>—who was certainly influential because, among other reasons, he was among the first commentators to emerge in the Arab world after the “rediscovery” of Ibn Khaldūn—went in the same direction, minimising Khaldūn’s techniques as mere applications of the traditional *uṣūl al-fiqh*, the formal criticism of sacred texts. Even Enan (2007, 99–100) had claimed that some of Ibn Khaldūn’s themes had previously been treated by al-Fārābī and the Iḥwān al-ṣafā’<sup>77</sup> (in particular in their *Epistles*, as stated by Mahmud Isma‘il ([1976] 1996), who went so far as to accuse Ibn Khaldūn of plagiarism).<sup>78</sup>

We can therefore see how, in the face of the temptation to devise ideologically “colonising” readings of Ibn Khaldūn’s work (consider the influence that Europe’s colonial history may have exerted on

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<sup>75</sup> In the chapter “Struggle over ‘The Struggle for Existence,’” Harry E. Barnes (1948, 25–26) further argued that, preceding Vico, Ibn Khaldūn had founded the philosophy of history by underscoring the oneness and continuity of the historical process, in contrast to the staticness informing the Christian historiography of his time.

<sup>76</sup> Horrut (2006, 112) writes that Taha Hussein, finding Ibn Khaldūn’s project too unreligious, neglected to adequately appreciate its scientific merit, being instead concerned to judge Ibn Khaldūn as a man who was even willing to bend religion and morality to his own ambitious dreams (Hussein 1918, 23–24). Taha Hussein, furthermore, denied that Ibn Khaldūn could be described as a sociologist, insofar as his object of study was, in Hussein’s assessment, too narrowly defined.

<sup>77</sup> Literally, the “brethren of purity”: they formed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century an intellectual Muslim circle, particularly rooted in Iraq. This circle produced a sort of philosophico-religious encyclopaedia.

<sup>78</sup> In reality, as Alatas (2013, 21) critically points out, these themes were treated in a strictly philosophical way by these authors, whereas Ibn Khaldūn frames them within a scientific perspective.

the European reception of his work, or consider the ferment sparked by the birth of disciplines like sociology precisely at the time when his work was being rediscovered), an equal and contrary trend emerged from the opposite side—beginning, in particular, with the Rabat colloquium. This trend produced an onrush of readings geared toward dissolving the originality of his theory (an originality deriving from its overall view, its objectives and the mutual relations between its parts) into a meticulous analysis of its many components already present in the cultural context out of which it had emerged, in order to completely reabsorb it into the tradition on which it was founded.

As Cheddadi comments, this tendency can be understood if we consider how praise of Ibn Khaldūn's singularity, coupled with the tendency to read him as an utterly exceptional thinker (and the latter tendency was not only Western, but also Islamic), paradoxically helped overshadow the rest of Arabic-Islamic tradition, thereby “embodying, in the heart of the agonizing East, the triumph of the West” (Cheddadi [1908] 1995, 26).

It is true that, from the outset, there had been commentators capable of offering objective and non-Eurocentric assessments: Robert Flint ([1893] 2010), for example, enthusiastically described Ibn Khaldūn as a unique theorist of history for his originality in the overall landscape of Muslim and European classical and medieval thought; similarly, the historian of science George Sarton ([1927] 1962), in his *Introduction to the History of Science*, rated him as a “giant” among the pygmies of “our” common Greco-Arabic tradition.

We already find, however, a different tone in the commentaries of the earliest Khaldunian scholars. The previously cited Gråberg Graf von Hemsö (1835, 387–88) and Reynold A. Nicholson (1907, 438–39), for example, praised Ibn Khaldūn for being able, more than any other Muslim historian, to distance himself from the prejudices of Islam. Even the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset ([1934] 1976–78), in a 1934 article where he used Ibn Khaldūn's paradigm to explain the apparent chaos of the continual hostilities that had unfolded for four centuries in Melilla (a North African city that Spain conquered in 1497), exalted Ibn Khaldūn as a surprising anomaly within his own cultural landscape.<sup>79</sup>

In short, as an exception that proves the rule, the appreciation of the “modernity” and atypicality of Ibn Khaldūn's work seemed to have the effect of obscuring all the traditional (and, therefore, not “modern”) cultural apparatus from which it had emerged.

This “shadow effect,” for example, was certainly evident in the words of great praise with which Arnold Toynbee exalted Ibn Khaldūn, on the one hand comparing him to Thucydides and

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<sup>79</sup> Ortega y Gasset's essay considers the *Muqaddima* a work of both sociology and philosophy (actually the *first* philosophy) of history. In particular, according to Ortega y Gasset, Ibn Khaldūn's theory is the only one that can explain phenomena such as the emergence of the Saudi state and of Wahhabite religious fanaticism.

Machiavelli, while on the other juxtaposing his work with the intellectual output of the time, judged, by contrast, as being empty and depleted. In fact, as Toynbee commented:

The last member of our Pleiad of historians is ‘Abd-ar-Raḥmān Abū Zayd ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn al-Ḥaḍramī (1332–1406)—an Arabic genius who achieved in a single “acquiescence” of less than four years’ length, out of a fifty-four years’ span of adult working life, a life-work in the shape of a piece of literature which can bear comparison with the work of a Thucydides or the work of a Machiavelli for both breadth and profundity of vision as well as for sheer intellectual power. Ibn Khaldūn’s star shines the more brightly by contrast with the foil of darkness against which it flashes out; for while Thucydides and Machiavelli and Clarendon are all brilliant representatives of brilliant times and places, Ibn Khaldūn is the sole point of light in his quarter of the firmament. He is indeed the one outstanding personality in the history of a civilization whose social life on the whole was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In his chosen field of intellectual activity he appears to have been inspired by no predecessors and to have found no kindred souls among his contemporaries and to have kindled no answering spark of inspiration in any successors; and yet, in the Prolegomena (*Muqaddimāt*) to his *Universal History* he has conceived and formulated a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place. (Toynbee [1934] 1962, 321–22)

After all, these were precisely the years in which the debate on the “Orientalist” thesis advanced by Edward Said (1978) sprang up. He accused the reading and reconstruction of the culture of the Muslim world advanced by dominant Western thinking, and the accompanying literature devoted to that subject, of being essentially aimed, by way of contrast, at celebrating Western culture and furthering the imperialist and colonialist cultural subjugation of the “East.”<sup>80</sup>

It is precisely to such an approach that the Arab world responded, to a certain extent, by countering with a kind of rigid and defensive “nativism” (see, for example, the project of “Islamization of knowledge” launched in Mecca in 1977 on the basis of the ideas propounded by Seyyed Nasr and carried forward by al-Faruqi (Alatas 2014, 58–62)), aimed at denying any overlap between methodologies and concepts developed in the Western and Muslim worlds. In such an essentially culturalist undertaking, Ibn Khaldūn’s work could not but represent an “uncomfortable” hindrance because of the difficulty of easily placing it within an exclusive “box.”

So much so that, as Megherbi (1971, 44–49) observes, it is perhaps a consequence of Ibn Khaldūn’s atypicality and intellectual nonconformism that in the Arab world itself, even if the study of his work

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<sup>80</sup> In reality, as Miller (1975) observed, it is precisely through the appreciation and work of “enlightened Orientalists” such as Franz Rosenthal that Ibn Khaldūn’s work is now known.

falls within the curricular purview of many North African countries (such as Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco), he has often been taught and greeted polemically and censoriously.

This spirit led to the endorsement of theses such as those put forward by Taha Hussein (1918), Mahmud Isma‘il ([1976] 1996) or the jurist Ernest Enan (2007), which arraigned the Tunisian author as ignorant, egocentric and anti-Arab (particularly, on account of some of his observations on nomadic populations), and even went so far as to criticise him (because of the many places in which he lived) for alleged opportunism and *patriotic* disloyalty. Their bias, here, is clear: this last line of criticism is anachronistic in the extreme, as it relates to a time and space in history that are still far removed from the conceptualisation of the idea of “homeland” (Bouthoul 1930, 47–48, 79; Megherbi 1971, 28; Talbi 2002, 851), and in which “betrayal” was, accordingly, only conceivable in essentially inter-subjective terms, or as apostasy, but could certainly not be linked to the fact of serving one sovereign and then another.<sup>81</sup>

Therefore, as Alatas (2014, 43) observes<sup>82</sup>, if Eurocentric bias has in point of fact acted as an obstacle to including Ibn Khaldūn in the sociological curriculum taught in the West, on the other hand not even the “anti-imperialist” reaction, eventually, facilitated his popularity in the Arab world.

So it is that, torn between the vanity of the “theorising” trend on the one hand, and the intellectual jealousy (or, on the contrary, rejection) of the “contextualising” trend on the other (Forte 2005, 186), Khaldun’s work has often risked being alternately misunderstood and forced by some scholars into interpretations tending to overplay its secular nature, or, on the contrary, belittled in its originality and greatness<sup>83</sup>.

One example of this can be observed in the reading offered of his strictly empirical assertion that political unity does not necessarily require religion and prophecy. On the one hand, an author like Kamil Ayad (1930, 51–3, 143), interpreting this assertion in an anti-theological sense, went so far as to argue that in Khaldūn’s thinking religion figures as no more than a socio-psychological process. Similarly, even Erwin Rosenthal, while recognising that Ibn Khaldūn was a believer, considered his observation that royal authority can exist without religious backing as evidence of Ibn Khaldūn’s independent thought, “free of theological trammels” (Rosenthal 1932, 58, 12), and aimed at considering religion as only one factor among many in the study of the state.

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<sup>81</sup> On the contrary, precisely this very detachment of his may have been an important factor enabling him to observe and, thus, scientifically develop his new science.

<sup>82</sup> Precisely in order to restore Ibn Khaldūn’s deserved position in the sociological curriculum, in 2011 Alatas (2011) devoted the opening chapter of the *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists* (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2011) to him. Ibn Khaldūn has also been included in a few other anthologies (Chambliss 1954; Hughes-Warrington 2008; Heath and Kaldis 2017).

<sup>83</sup> Turrone (2005, 126) comments that the current tendency is to understate his originality owing to the limited scope of his historical categories, which, in her assessment, are mostly good for describing change in tribal societies.

On the other hand, the Orientalist Hamilton A. R. Gibb (1933) commented that in making this observation Ibn Khaldūn simply applied the methods of earlier Sunni jurists and philosophers such as the orthodox scholar Ibn Taymiyya, who had also argued, half a century before Ibn Khaldūn, for the possibility of human association and political power of being independent of the guidance of prophecy and religion.

If it is true that Ibn Khaldūn certainly needs to be understood and contextualised within his time and tradition,<sup>84</sup> this must not go so far as to obscure the originality and emphatically deny the innovative thrust of the complex syntax of his work (Capezzone 2019). That would amount to a great loss. In fact, many aspects of his theory, although rooted, in their genealogy, in the cultural fabric of their time and space (and that goes for any theory: every thinker is a child of his or her own time), can nevertheless be taken out of their context and applied to others (Walzer 1963). As Gierer (2001, 8) has stressed, “too much emphasis on particular details may obscure interesting general features rather than uncovering and elucidating them.”

Certainly, a failure to contextualise can lead to naiveté and hasty conclusions, both of which are to be avoided. On the other hand, though, even the unduly sterilising perspective of radical relativism (according to which culture is to be understood exclusively in its own context, where it must be enclosed and boxed up) should be avoided, especially with regard to such a theory as Ibn Khaldun’s—in itself, “an immense and complex work embodied in a text of extraordinary homogeneousness and coherence”<sup>85</sup>, abounding in intellectual surprises elusive to any form of synthesis. In actual fact, it is difficult, even today, to deny admiration to its astounding originality, even if we want to dampen the enthusiasm of his first discoverers and concede how much we owe to the needs of historical contextualisation.

#### **1.4.2 Ibn Khaldūn as a “Forerunner” of the Social Sciences**

There are many points of contact between Ibn Khaldūn’s ideas and those of the early sociologists. Many scholars have carried out studies comparing his work to that of other thinkers (Alatas 2013, 140–41). Thus, for example, Ibn Khaldūn has been compared to Durkheim by ‘Izzat (1952), Gellner (1981, 86–98), and Turner (1971); to Machiavelli by Stowasser (1983) and Laroui (1987b); to Comte

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<sup>84</sup> In reality, any theoretical work is obviously *also* the outcome and reflection of the cultural substrata out of which it grows. But that is not to say that it is *only* that.

<sup>85</sup> In the French original: “travail immense et complexe dans un texte d’une extraordinaire homogénéité et cohérence” (Cheddadi 2006, 241).



by Baali (1986); and to Marx and Engels by Baali and Price (1982) and Lacoste ([1966] 1998).<sup>86</sup> Ibn Khaldūn's historical method has also been compared to Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre's French school of the *Annales*.<sup>87</sup> In short, the idea that Ibn Khaldūn may have had a direct influence on Western sociological thought is certainly a recurrent hypothesis, and it undoubtedly stands on solid ground at least as far as one of the authors with whom a comparison most immediately suggests itself, Émile Durkheim, is concerned. In fact, Durkheim was certainly familiar with his work, having supervised the doctoral thesis on Ibn Khaldūn that Taha Hussein submitted at the Sorbonne.

We can only speak, instead, of the *possibility* that Auguste Comte might have been acquainted with Ibn Khaldūn's works—a possibility that, at any rate, is not to be ruled out, considering that at the time Comte was writing, not only was the *Muqaddima* already available in various Arabic, Turkish, French and German editions, but he also had Egyptian students. Therefore, as Fuad Baali has suggested, Comte might have become aware of Ibn Khaldūn (and discussed his ideas) through these students (Baali [1988, 24] makes explicit reference to a pupil of Comte named Mazhar Beg).<sup>88</sup>

In addition to the previously cited Alfred von Kremer (1879), even on the non-European side of Khaldunian studies there have been authors—such as 'Abd al-'Azīz 'Izzat, with his 1947 thesis titled "Ibn Khaldoun et sa science sociale"—who have specifically conjectured that Auguste Comte knew of Ibn Khaldūn's work and was influenced by it. Alatas (2014, 47) suggests that Comte may also have indirectly learned of Ibn Khaldūn's theses in another way, through the works of Montesquieu; the latter, in turn, may have come to know them not only directly through Arabic texts, but also, as Gates claims,<sup>89</sup> more indirectly, through Jean-Baptiste Chardin's then-popular *Voyages en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient* (1686), which was certainly familiar to Montesquieu, and which took up some Khaldunian theses, particularly those to do with climate.

Even some of Friedrich Engels' writings, such as his *History of Early Christianity*,<sup>90</sup> take up themes and even reproduce expressions that, as Alatas (2014, 47–48) maintains, appear to have been borrowed from Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddima*. Neither is it unlikely that Engels was familiar with this

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<sup>86</sup> By virtue of his historical method, he has also been compared to Thucydides, by Lenn Evan Goodman (1972).

<sup>87</sup> See Dale 2015a, 284–87. In fact, even Bloch, a pupil of Émile Durkheim, conceived history as the history of societies, that is, of groups organised by the core element of their social cohesion. Furthermore, Bloch too believed in the power of the social structure to mould its own characteristics, as reflected, for example in its laws, vocabulary, and human activity. And, finally, like Durkheim and Ibn Khaldūn, Bloch also linked the increase in social density to economic development and the division of labour.

<sup>88</sup> Fuad Baali (1986, 29–32) points out eight characteristics that Ibn Khaldūn shared with Comte: both believed they had forged a new science; both sought to mark the exit from a phase of metaphysical and non-rational explanations of the world; both wanted to discover the predictive laws of social life; both recognised the important contribution that history makes to an understanding of the past and the future; both used a historical and non-statistical method; both distinguished their sciences from what had come before; both held that human nature was everywhere the same; and both recognized the central importance of social change.

<sup>89</sup> Gates 1967, 422: "A theory of climate which had reached a dead end in Europe was suddenly revitalized by a contribution from the East, giving new impetus to western social philosophy."

<sup>90</sup> Engels [1894] 1975, 276: "All these movements are clothed in religion but they have their source in economic causes."

work (Bosquet 1969, 124-25), as he may have had access to it through French translations by Silvestre de Sacy and de Slane, as well as through von Hammer-Purgstall's German translation.

Even Karl Marx, as Hopkins (1990, 12) claims, was certainly familiar with de Slane's translation,<sup>91</sup> and expressed some ideas that had already been set out by Ibn Khaldūn, such as the thesis that human beings, embedded in their different modes of production, "inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely, relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production" (Marx [1859] 1970, 20).

The importance of Ibn Khaldūn's contribution is also recognised in the economic sciences. Joseph Schumpeter (1954), for example, mentions Ibn Khaldūn as the single exception to the "Schumpeterian gap"—referring to the long, five-century period following the development of Thomistic thought when economic analysis remained dormant—, and Joseph Spengler (1964, 285-86; 289; 297-303) hailed Ibn Khaldūn as the greatest economist of the Islamic Middle Ages. Moreover, Arthur Laffer, credited for theorising what has come to be known as the Laffer Curve, expressly declares he took the concept directly from Khaldūn's writings.<sup>92</sup>

However, as Gaston Bouthoul noted, when Western culture, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, became a seedbed for the social sciences, and the critical moment came to bring these sciences into comparison with the coherent and systematic framework developed by Ibn Khaldūn, it became a widespread response to approach this comparison not with an open, explorative mind, but by enveloping his theory within the West's own thinking, and subsuming it within its own categories (sometimes even, in certain respects, unscrupulously):

Steeped in an overabundance of secularising evolutionary ideas about the development of societies, the thinking Europe of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century co-opted from other cultures and continents those thinkers who seemed to confirm its own visions, repainting them in the guise of a general law.<sup>93</sup>

From this perspective, Ibn Khaldūn's thought—in the first phase of its "rediscovery," ranging roughly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1930s (Turrone 2002, 41)—was held up as a model that could "validate" the new theories, especially sociological, that were taking hold in the intellectual world. Even

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<sup>91</sup> Hopkins (1990, 12) points out that Marx mentions de Slane's translation in some of his notes written in Algeria in the early 1880s.

<sup>92</sup> "The Laffer Curve, by the way, was not invented by me. For example, Ibn Khaldūn, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim philosopher, wrote in his work *The Muqaddimah*: 'It should be known that at the beginning of the dynasty, taxation yields a large revenue from small assessments. At the end of the dynasty, taxation yields a small revenue from large assessments'" (Laffer 2004). For a recent article on the Laffer curve, see Orsi, Raggi & Turrone 2013.

<sup>93</sup> "Engagée dans une surenchère d'idées évolutionnistes sécularisantes quant'à la marche des sociétés, l'Europe pensante du milieu du 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle annexe les penseurs d'autres cultures et d'autres continents qui lui paraissent venir conforter ses propres vues en leur conférant une apparence de loi générale" (Bouthoul 1930, 173).

Bouthoul's own assessment is clearly reflective of this parallelism. For the father of polemology, just as the grand sociological system developed by Comte and Spencer marked the conclusion of three centuries of philosophical speculation in Europe, so the last grand system that closed the "season" of Arab thought had been the clearly sociological one developed by Ibn Khaldūn (Bouthoul 1934, xxv). Clearly watermarked and dominant in this image was Comte's classic tripartite scheme, under which the positive scientific system<sup>94</sup> was presented as "bookending" the journey that had begun with the most "immature" theological and metaphysical phases.

This underlying logic, thus, led Bouthoul, in his analysis, to stress Ibn Khaldūn's exceptionality in being able to "free himself," as Hamès comments,<sup>95</sup> from the Islamic theological interpretation of history.<sup>96</sup> Starting from the background of the Comtian scheme of progress, Bouthoul surreptitiously constructed a somewhat incorrect circular equation according to which if Ibn Khaldūn, labelled as a positivist thinker, based his theorising on rational thought, this could have only happened on condition that he uprooted himself from the theological and metaphysical thought that had preceded him. This was supposed to prove that theology needed to be set aside so as to make room for the intellectual sciences. That transition, as Bouthoul implied, never took place, in general, in Islamic culture, incapable as it was of culturally working toward a rebirth in the way that, instead, happened on the other shore of the Mediterranean.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, as Voyé and Billiet (1999, 15–16) observe, although Ibn Khaldūn embraced a non-contradictory view of the universe in which reason and religion could coexist without having to reduce one to the other (Hamès 1999, 174), the first encounter between Islam and sociology came, in some way, to be read in a de-Islamised way through the interpretative reach that portrayed him as an atheist, if not scientifically anti-religious, thinker.

Even in the Islamic world, a great thinker like Muhsin Mahdi,<sup>98</sup> facing up to the "double valence" of Ibn Khaldūn as a great representative of rational scientific thought on the one hand, yet, on the other, as a believer explicitly committed to the observance of religious dogmas with regard to revealed

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<sup>94</sup> Bouthoul (ibid.) compares Ibn Khaldūn to Descartes.

<sup>95</sup> As Constant Hamès (1999, 173) explains, the same kind of interpretation can later be described in Ernest Renan's account of Averroes (Renan and al-Afghani 1883), who is considered not in his entirety but only for his Aristotelianism, until the implicit conclusion is reached that if the secular scientific spirit, which in the West enabled the progress of philosophy and science, at one point in Islam died out, responsibility for that loss of vitality is essentially to be laid on the rigid influence of the Muslim religion.

<sup>96</sup> Bouthoul (1930) deliberately speaks of "theology" in this context, avoiding the term "religion," since the latter was reserved by Comte for his own positivist religion as expounded in his *Cathéchisme positiviste* (Comte [1852] 2009).

<sup>97</sup> With regard to this conclusion, Horrut (2006, 109) complains that: "La conclusion est fortement ethnocentrique et campe un historien musulman rétrograde." In reality, it is likely that Bouthoul merely reported and adopted an observation made by Ibn Khaldūn himself, who regretted (*Muqaddima* VI, 18) the fact that the stand-off of civilization in the Maghreb and Spain had also put an end, there, to the flourishing of scientific disciplines.

<sup>98</sup> Muhsin Mahdi (1957) holds that, owing to the characteristics of his study of society, Ibn Khaldūn should be situated within the Aristotelian philosophical tradition, and in particular in that of the *falsafa* associated with al-Fārābī and Averroes, in contraposition to the Neoplatonic tradition associated with Avicenna and al-Ġazālī.

truths, has felt prompted to conclude that Ibn Khaldūn must have been nothing less than a “crypto-philosopher”<sup>99</sup>. In other words, Mahdi depicted him as a philosopher through and through who, for reasons of social acceptability and prudence, had to “camouflage” and protect himself by inserting *ad hoc*, in the *Muqaddima* (especially in chapter VI), explicit and strong “injections” of orthodox religious thought.

In so doing Mahdi took up the interpretive lens of philosophy as “reticent writing” that, in the late 1930s, Leo Strauss ([1939] 1998, 294–305; 1941; Campanini 2004, 65–67) proposed, particularly for the purpose of interpreting other authors, such as Maimonides and Spinoza. According to this, two different discursive planes should be distinguished in the thought of many philosophers who lived in precarious times from the point of view of freedom of thought: one “esoteric,” for the “initiates,” and one “exoteric,” “camouflaged,” for others.

A similar kind of reading, according to Claude Horrut<sup>100</sup>, underlies the approach taken by various commentators such as Georges Labica,<sup>101</sup> Jamel Eddine Benchheick (1965), and especially Yves Lacoste (1984) (an anti-colonialist scholar mostly interested in a reading of the *Muqaddima* that might explain the reasons for the under-development of the Maghreb), who have offered a “materialist” and political reading of Khaldūn’s work. This reading is also aimed at unravelling the knot of the coexistence, in Ibn Khaldūn, of a strictly rational perspective and an explicit religiosity, minimising or denying the import of the latter.

In fact, on the one hand, these Marxist readings have highlighted the author’s ability to anticipate themes that would much later become characteristic of historical materialism, such as the dialectical concept of history, the close relation between modes of production and social structure, and the power that economic forces wield in shaping individual attitudes and social relations (Kalin 2016). On the other hand, though, they have solved the conundrum of the annoying coexistence in Ibn Khaldūn of two radically different perspectives—rationality and religious thought—by stripping out one of the two kernels of the discussion. Consistently with this, they read the frequent religious “interpolations” as no more than a facade aimed at making people accept a thesis which, in reality, is essentially based on Aristotelian and Averroist thought and on a pre-Marxist methodology, nourished only by materialism, dialectics and history.

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<sup>99</sup> With regard to this hypothetical crypto-philosophy, Leïla Babès (2011, 94) claimed that the same evident discrepancy between the absolute legal-theological purity of Islam (the kingdom of *da‘wa*, the mission and proclamation of truth) and its real history, characterised by violence, corruption and internal revolutions (the kingdom of *dawla*, the multi-faceted worldly management of power), could not but require an interpretative split.

<sup>100</sup> Horrut (2006, 104–8) condemns this operation as an act of “imperial colonialism.”

<sup>101</sup> Labica (1968, 202): “l’Islam du point de vue politique ne serait que l’expression idéologique d’une structure économique et sociale en voie de dépassement.”

A clarification is, however, in order: if the interpretive distortion that has been imposed on Ibn Khaldūn, in an effort to recast him as an “atheist,” or at least as a secular thinker, ought to be set aside as an anachronistic and imperialist conceit, this line of criticism should not, on the other hand, be extended to overwhelm the recognition of his role as a forerunner of sociology—or, better, as already a sociologist in his own right.

Claude Horrut, for example, encounters this difficulty in commenting on Fuad Baali’s claim that Ibn Khaldūn, the first thinker to have laid the groundwork for a sociology at once theoretical and empirical, anticipated Comte, Durkheim, and Malinowski. According to Horrut, reading an author like Ibn Khaldūn as a forerunner of these other authors is necessarily tantamount to unduly and forcibly projecting onto an author of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the standards of contemporary sociology (Horrut 2006, 110).

In reality, one thing does not imply the other. Highlighting an anticipation of insights and content cannot constitute, here, either distortion or anachronism, unless we assume a working definition of sociology as necessarily an Enlightenment product: precisely the assumption that Ibn Khaldūn’s work succeeds in disproving.