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The Senility of Group Solidarity and Contemporary Multiculturalism: a Word of Warning from a Medieval Arabic Thinker

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The Senility of Group Solidarity and Contemporary Multiculturalism: A Word of Warning from a Medieval Arabic Thinker

ANNALISA VERZA

Even if an individual tribe has different “houses” and many diverse group feelings, still, there must exist a group feeling that is stronger than all the other group feelings combined, [...] and in which all the diverse group feeling coalesce, as it were, to become one greater group feeling. Otherwise, splits would occur and lead to dissension and strife.

—Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah* III, 16

Abstract. This paper discusses the thought of the medieval Andalusian-Maghrebin thinker Ibn Khaldun through the prism of the philosophy and sociology of law and politics. I will first try to illustrate how, even if Ibn Khaldun wrote in the 14th century, he anticipated many core concepts that are characteristic of modern Western sociological and philosophical thought. The argument is thus made that his thought can, and indeed must, be rescued from the wide neglect that, outside the specialized field of Khaldunian studies, it has so far suffered in our treatment and teaching of the history of politico-legal sociological thought. I will then claim that the scheme he devised to explain the rise and fall of civilizations can also, with due care, be used to frame and understand the political and cultural landscape in which the West and the Islamic world are presently engaged in a difficult dialogue. The discussion is in this sense offered in the hope of making a contribution to the current politico-legal philosophical and sociological debate on multiculturalism, and on the limits of its scope.

1. Premise¹

In this essay I illustrate two salient features of a conception at once philosophical, sociological, and political that in the 14th century was developed by Ibn Khaldun. For about a century now he has increasingly been attracting the interest of philosophers, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and politicians, especially in the West. For as much as he is properly described as an Islamic thinker, this Andalusian-Maghrebin thinker has anticipated certain core concepts that are characteristic to Western

¹ This paper has been written as a contribution to the PRIN project “Soggetti di diritto e vulnerabilità: Modelli istituzionali e concetti giuridici in trasformazione.”

thought—concepts classically associated with the work of Montesquieu,² Vico,³ Marx,⁴ Weber,⁵ Durkheim,⁶ Oppenheimer,⁷ and others.

Beyond pointing out the interest this thinker sparks, and the need to give him his due place in the current expositions of the history of political-legal sociological thought, I will be focusing on the scheme he devised for explaining the rise and fall of civilizations, proposing it as particularly useful even today in framing and understanding the current political and cultural landscape that in a difficult dialogue is now engaging the two sides in question: the West, and that very Islamic world that almost seven centuries ago was home to Ibn Khaldun.

In delving into his thought, we will not be looking through the prism of the Arabist or the historian of Islam or of Muslim thought. Rather, we will be approaching the subject with an interest in the philosophy and sociology of law and politics, from a vantage point that will enable us to pick out the universalizable parts of this theory which can still be found to hold good even today, so as to see whether the insights they offer can be brought to bear on the current debate on the multicultural paradigm of justice, and on the related problems.

2. Cultures in Comparison

Today more than at any previous time—with politics and law following a path of growing internationalization, and the long wave of migration showing its full impact—we are increasingly witnessing a blurring of the distinction

² Like Montesquieu, Ibn Khaldun proceeds in his theorizing from the premise that man's character, attitudes, and abilities are the product of the environment and of habits steeped in the social culture. This explains why one of his first Western commentators, Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, in an 1812 study called him the "Montesquieu of the Arabs" (von Hammer-Purgstall 1812, 360).

³ Ibn Khaldun's account of historic cycles bears a clear resemblance to Vico's, even though in place of Vico's "providence" we find in Ibn Khaldun the idea of an intrinsic law of social development. On this point, see in particular Ben Salem 1973; Gumpłowicz 1899–1928, 90–114; and Soyer and Gilbert 2012.

⁴ Like Marx, Ibn Khaldun underlines the key role played by the material elements—first among which labour and the various aspects of making a living—in explaining the passage from one way of life, with its core values, to another. On this question, see esp. Lacoste 1984.

⁵ Like Weber, Ibn Khaldun insists from the first pages of his *Muqaddimah* on the importance of the distinction between scientific description, and moral/political evaluation. Moreover, he makes wide use of concepts that fall neatly within the Weberian category of ideal types.

⁶ Most striking, to my mind, are the resemblances that Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiyya* and its dynamic transformation in rural and urban situations bears to Durkheim's famous distinction between mechanic and organic solidarity: This deep resemblance can actually be explained by pointing out that Durkheim was perfectly aware of Ibn Khaldun's theory. Some authors have in fact suggested that Ibn Khaldun's theory might actually have been the source of Durkheim's intuition. See Gellner 1996, 202. Other important similarities lie in the two authors' descriptions of the dynamic of domination and in their analysis of the cohesive role of religion. For an overall comparison, see, e.g., Baali 1988.

⁷ See the enthusiastic appraisal of Ibn Khaldun's theory in Oppenheimer 1922–35, vol. 2, pp. 173ff., and vol. 4, pp. 251ff.

between the rule and the exception when it comes to framing the relation between the cultural majority and cultural minorities.

Indeed, in Western multicultural states, different moral, political, and cultural traditions are intersecting, and this intersectionality is driving a deep wedge into the most traditional Western paradigms of justice. It is in particular the symbolism enmeshed in such questions that pushes them into the foreground, sparking the most heated debates in society on the allegiances that it is legitimate or right to show and uphold, as well as on their religious, political, and cultural reflections.

In 1989 in France we saw the first important debate on the issue of whether to allow or prohibit the hijab in the classroom, a debate that climaxed into a “national case.”⁸ Then, in 1995, the “case of the crucifix” erupted in Germany,⁹ with some spectacular aftershocks in Italy, when in 2003 Adel Smith, president of the Italian Muslim Union, launched a new crucifix case in a school in the Abruzzo region, and a similar and difficult case—*Lautsi v. Italia*—was brought to the European Court of Human Rights, coming to an end only in 2011 (see Bin et al. 2004). Today, such predicaments involving matters of justice (and law) on a cultural basis have become almost commonplace. In the summer of 2016 came the polemic on whether it is legitimate to prohibit the *burkini*, and if past winters are any indication, this winter we will be witness to another heated exchange on whether it is appropriate to decorate Christmas trees in preschool. In the meantime, the English neutral-sounding locution *season’s greetings* has made its way to Italy, where it is rendered as *auguri di stagione*, and where, through its lack of connotations, it has taken hold as the politically correct thing to say for the winter festivities.

But for some time now these dilemmas of justice have been crossing over into territory that lies well beyond the politically correct and the symbolic. In 1982 in England, the possibility was introduced of (voluntarily) substituting the rulings of ordinary courts with the jurisdiction of dozens of *Sharia Councils* in controversies concerning family and neighbourhood law, while under the Arbitration Act 1996, a Muslim Arbitration Tribunal has jurisdiction over matters of commercial law (see De Angelo 2014, esp. 399–400; cf. Bano 2012 and Bowen 2016). Likewise, an increasing push to relativize justice and even criminal law—a push that many welcome as a sign of progressivism and inclusion (see Basile 2008 and Monticelli 2003)—has materialized in the “cultural defences” practice, invoked and often adopted in various Western countries (sometimes even with paradoxical outcomes, as in the *Pusceddu* case decided on 14 March 2006 by the Landgericht Bückeburg).¹⁰

In light of that debate, it becomes increasingly essential for the social sciences to gain a direct knowledge of the culture informing the conceptions of the good that present themselves as the main interlocutor with which to engage in dialogue at this historical moment. Equally essential is the need to engage with the culture on which basis the identity of “the other” has

⁸ For a discussion that frames the case well see Galeotti 1994, and for a critical comment see Verza 1997.

⁹ See Belvisi 2004; Caygill and Scott 1996; Denninger 1997; Gozzi 1998; Luther 1997.

¹⁰ Case KLS 205 Js 4268/05 (107/05). See Parisi 2008.

historically been constructed, taking especially into account its conceptions of politics, power, and social order. However, if this knowledge is to be genuine and reliable, it will have to proceed from a reading of the works it has produced, a reading that will have to be as direct and firsthand as possible, rather than being mediated and reframed (see Verza 2012).

From this perspective—considering that the most challenging conversation we face today, in the fragmented cultural landscape in which we are set, is probably the one with Arab-Muslim culture—I believe there is great benefit to be had by trying to understand a thinker who figures centrally in this culture. And that, as suggested, is the Tunisian thinker of Andalusian background Ibn Khaldun (b. Tunisi 1332, d. Cairo 1406), the father of the *Muqaddimah*,¹¹ a masterwork of thought that, perhaps because it was so advanced in the modernity it expressed, remained in a latent state for centuries, engendering no schools of thought and no concrete theoretical applications (making exception for its wide use in Turkish historical and political culture, as in the example of Katib Çelebi), until it was rediscovered by French scholars in the early 19th century. And indeed—despite the growing, copious, and remarkably diverse scholarship devoted to Ibn Khaldun,¹² and perhaps precisely on account of his uncanny modernity—his work still struggles to earn its place in classic courses on Western or world sociological or philosophical thought (be it general or legal).

Precisely because Ibn Khaldun has been excluded from the ranks of the great thinkers—expunged like a misprint from the official narrative that takes us through the history of ideas and the history of the theories devoted to society and its forms of government—it is incumbent upon us to study his work and enter into conversation with him as a source of insights. Indeed, as long as his ideas will not be integrated into the general framework of theoretical thinking on government and society, there will remain an important gap to be closed and unfulfilled theoretical potentialities of great import to be explored.

Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* provides the initial theoretical premise (and hence, from a socio-philosophical standpoint, the most interesting part) of a much longer and more complex work of history: It is the first, introductory volume to the seven-volume *Kitab al-'ibar*, or *Book of Lessons*.¹³

¹¹ In 1812 a work was published in Vienna (von Hammer-Purgstall 1812) making broad reference to translated parts of the *Muqaddimah*. In 1858 the first complete edition of the Arab text was published in Europe by Étienne M. Quatremère (Khaldun 1858). In 1862–68 a complete French translation was published in three volumes in Paris by William MacGuckin (Khaldun 1862–68). Also important are, more recently, the translations by Vincent-Mansour Monteil (Khaldun 1967) and Abdesselam Cheddadi (Khaldun 2002), as well as the excellent English translation by Franz Rosenthal (Ibn Khaldun 1958). It is this last work that I will be referring to here. There is also an Italian translation of parts of the *Muqaddimah* by Giancarlo Pizzi (Khaldun 1985).

¹² In 1981 a bibliography came out already listing more than seven hundred works devoted to him: See pt. IV (Bibliography) in Al-Azmeh 1981, 229–324.

¹³ The full title can be translated thus: “Book of lessons, record of beginnings and events in the history of the Arabs and the Berbers and their powerful contemporaries.”

The importance of directly engaging and familiarizing with this thinker is in part owed to the fact that his theory is a core and direct expression of Islamic culture—a culture that needs to be recognized as being of special import to us, particularly today, considering the urgency of the exchange it prompts us to have. In this sense, his theory is a valuable source we can turn to in trying to understand this culture and its internal dynamics, foundational values, and specificities.

No less importantly, however, I would claim that we also have a *direct stake* in gaining an appreciation of Ibn Khaldun, this for at least two reasons.

In the first place, his work offers a viewpoint from which to engage in self-reflection, all the more so if we consider that—preceding the founders of sociology by half a millennium, and through that *forma mentis* which the Arabs call *aql-naql* (see Dale 2015 and Dhaouadi 2005), capable of reconciling the religious and the rational in thought¹⁴—he developed concepts and reflections that we consider to be distinctive to our scientific and rational thought. Indeed, he addressed a range of topics and issues including social solidarity, the method for scientifically investigating phenomena involving collective action, and the relation between society and power, between power and its symbols, between such symbols and the desires that may be elicited through the availability of luxury goods, or between these goods and the economic phenomenon associated with what is now known as the Laffer curve.¹⁵

We should therefore recognize a direct interest in being able to reconstruct Ibn Khaldun's theory, if only because, as noted, many of the most important sociological concepts we identify with our own Western tradition had in fact already been worked out by this monumental Maghrebin and Muslim thinker half a millennium earlier, and because he interestingly did so proceeding from an "Eastern" basis, and hence independently of the secular historico-cultural premises that would shape our own Enlightenment. And from this fact alone—namely, that in his theses are developed some of the most important concepts later independently developed in Western culture and its sociology of politics and of law, which concepts we otherwise think to be peculiarly "our own"—we can draw the important consideration that the East and the West are not necessarily separated by that irreducible and essentialist cultural otherness

¹⁴ As Mohammed al-Jabri has commented, while the "Orient" embraced the path beaten by al-Ghazali and Ibn Sina, and thus found itself caught up in the problem of the relation between religion and faith, Ibn Khaldun, and indeed the Western world, instead inherited the legacy of Ibn Rushd, embracing a rationalism capable of keeping philosophy apart from religion: "And in fact, ever since Averroes, we Arabs have lived at the margins of history (in a state of inertia and decline), because from the time that Ghazali recognized Avicenna as a citizen of Islam we have clung to the Avicennan tradition. The Europeans, by contrast, stepped into the history we had stepped away from, for they knew to appropriate Averroes and proceed along the Averroistic path until the present day" (al-Jabri 1996, 135; my translation)

¹⁵ Looking at the economy as a phenomenon embedded in its social container, the Laffer curve shows that there exists a point beyond which higher taxation will bring in not greater but lesser revenue. Writes the economist for whom the curve is named: "The Laffer Curve, by the way, was not invented by me. For example, Ibn Khaldun, a 14th 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, 1-2).

on which an insistent emphasis is placed by the most vociferous fringes of Islam (see Verza 2013), as well as by many in the West: On the contrary, this fact shows that the two cultures are bound by close ties that grow out of common roots.

But in the second place, and even more importantly, his theory should matter to us because I believe it can help us understand what is happening in our civilization today, and what point we are now crossing in the arc of its development.

I will claim that, given the universal content of Ibn Khaldun's thinking, his theory really deserves to be integrated into the toolkit of the sociological and philosophical theories that are part of the history of the universal political-legal thought. And, especially, I will claim that his theory can also be fruitfully applied today—an application that I will myself explore after its brief exposition.

Indeed, as I will be claiming, the ancient but still extraordinarily valid paradigm he built—once abstracted from the 14th-century Maghreb context in which it was developed (and steering clear of any anachronism)¹⁶—shows a fecund and revealing possibility of universal applicability, and can quite usefully be brought to bear on the current political moment in our history (see, e.g., Aubert 2016, 54).

In fact, long before Durkheim,¹⁷ Ibn Khaldun identified as the main binding core of a political society the sense of solidarity built on the culture of group membership (a sense rooted in bonds that in the simplest groups take the form of family and kinship ties, but that in larger groups is anchored to the

¹⁶ It bears mentioning in this regard that Khaldunian studies have come in two “waves.” The first of these was marked by an enthusiastic embrace of Khaldun as an anticipator of ideas worked out much later in the West. The second wave, still current, instead started out in the 1930s through a series of analyses (among which Croce 1932), but an even greater impetus came from a “colloquium” on Ibn Khaldun held in Rabat in 1979. In contrast to the first wave, the second one is marked by a rigid insistence on the “philological” need to contextualize Khaldun's work (see Forte 2005, 182–6). Regrettably, this philological contextualization is curiously often understood to preclude any new application of his thought. However, while there is no doubt that any author's thought needs to be set in its time and place if it is to be properly understood—all the more so when dealing with theories of society, thus including those of Aristotle, Marx, Weber, and so on—this philological focus came down on Khaldunian thought with a singular “sterilizing” force that has hardly been applied to any other sociologist or social scientist. So much is this the case that the approaches shaping the two historical waves just outlined in reality seem to act as mirrors held up to their own proponents, revealing much more about the exegetes themselves and their cultural frame of mind than about the thinkers being interpreted, or about any inherent limits barring the applicability of their theories and theses. So, for example, in different readings of Khaldun we can detect the influence of colonial policy; or we can see the West's need for self-legitimation at a time, in the mid-18th century, when it was discovering sociology; or again, more recently, we can see the push to Islamize education through initiatives like those of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ismail al-Faruqi (see Alatas 2014, 58–62).

¹⁷ Émile Durkheim was actually fully aware of Ibn Khaldun's theory of solidarity/*asabiyya*, so much so that, together with the orientalist Paul Casanova, he tutored a Ph.D. thesis on Ibn Khaldun assigned to his pupil Taha Hussein. Durkheim died one year before the thesis was to be discussed.

main sets of shared political and legal values on which the political contract rests).

I will suggest that this theory offers an important tool for interpreting the legal-political developments that have taken place over the last twenty-five years. Indeed, this last quarter century saw a paradigm shift in dealing legally and politically with diversity: From a model that conflated justice with neutrality (a neutrality still understood within a liberal-democratic frame),¹⁸ a transition took place that brought in a different multicultural model premised on the principle that due recognition should be accorded to all different cultural traditions. This latter model was introduced in 1992 with two seminal works by Charles Taylor (1992) and Joseph Raz (1995),¹⁹ and then it flourished in both practice and theory: It became policy in the liberal West (the United States, Canada, and Europe), and theoretically it flourished as a rich, self-standing stream in the panorama of contemporary political-legal thought.²⁰

I think that such an exploration of a possible application to the current political climate of a theoretical system produced in another culture, such as Ibn Khaldun's, would in itself instantiate a multicultural enterprise in its highest sense: Beyond the current tendency to reduce multiculturalism to an exercise in the inclusion of "other" cultures as an "object" of scientific study, this exploration would instead endeavour to take from that same culture its own point of view as a lens through which to understand our own world, thereby embodying the very theoretical perspective of the "other" as a viewing subject, as an epistemological tool.

By doing so, we could discover that this original perspective could offer an enlightening contribution to the debate on the limits and conditions of multiculturalism. This light could usefully be cast in particular on our own time to illuminate the likely trajectory (an axiological trajectory, as well as political, economic, and historical) that our society is taking through its current (and almost self-complacent) disaffection with its own moral, cultural, religious, and political values.

The hope is that, through such an ancient/modern investigation, we could find a way to discern the trends that are shaping our world, in such a way as to spot the mistakes we might be making, and to identify the courses that may be found (if at all) in steering toward a safer management of society.

3. Forces of Cohesion and Centrifugal Forces: The Drivers of Social Development

¹⁸ Of course, the main paradigm I am referring to here is given by John Rawls's theories as expounded Rawls 1999 and 2005.

¹⁹ An extended version of a talk that Raz gave in Leiden in October 1992.

²⁰ The literature on multiculturalism is now quite extensive, and though we cannot offer a survey here, a few milestones in this debate can be highlighted apart from Raz and Taylor. These include Benhabib 2002; Kymlicka 1995; Malik 2015; Okin 1999; Parekh 2002; and Phillips 2009.

Only in a dedicated monograph would it be possible to provide an exposition that completely covers Ibn Khaldun's "entirely original science" (Ibn Khaldun 1958, vol. 1, Preliminary Remarks, p. 78), bringing out its full richness and the gamut of its nuances and implications (and no doubt such an exposition would be very much worthwhile).

In this paper, then, we will be focusing on only some of the most significant implications of his thought in view of the use I want to make of his perspective in relation to present-day culture.

3.1. *The Spiraliform Cycle of History*

Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* is a theory of depth and perspective, and it would be mistaken, in my view, to strain to box it into a single labelled container, highlighting only his work as a "gatherer" of useful historical and empirical data (thus pigeonholing him under a sociological label),²¹ or only highlighting the theory's philosophical import,²² ascribable to what, according to many, is the para-Aristotelian mould into which is cast his cyclical vision of the life of societies.²³ For in this way we would fail to appreciate the wealth and depth that comes precisely from the continuous and mutual feedback through which both of these dimensions take shape. Then, too, this mutual feedback unfolds on a broader scale. For it can be appreciated not only in the back-and-forth between the sociological and the philosophical dimension but also in relation to the third way in which the *Muqaddimah* is set up, namely, as a work of history, and a history conceived in the modern sense, that is, with an eye to investigating civilizations as cultural entities, too, where societies, in a completely innovative way, are conceived as *sui generis* units of study, each shaped by dynamics of its own.

The theses on the dynamics of the political history that Ibn Khaldun has handed down to us in his work reconstruct the complex game of intersecting political forces that by turns come to power, in accordance with a spiraliform scheme looking to which we can try to infer general (and in this sense universalizable) laws on the functioning of civilization, which is a broader and more complex entity than society, encompassing not only the population but also its symbolic and cultural universe.

The history of this new collective entity, namely, civilizations, is driven by laws allowing for the possibility of predictive accounts, just like the laws that govern the natural world, and it proceeds along a course set in an ever-renewing scheme consisting of three phases:

- We start out in a specific "backward" environment at the margins of civilization (an environment that in the time and place in which Ibn Khaldun is

²¹ See, for example, Alatas 2014; Baali 1988; Dhaouadi 2011; Faridah 2006, 1–23; Megherbi 1971; Soyer 2010; and Soyer and Gilbert 2012.

²² See, among many others, Bouthoul 1930; Dale 2015; Hussain 1918; and Mahdi 1957.

²³ On Ibn Khaldun's Aristotelianism see, for example, Bouthoul 1930; Cheddadi 2006; Dale 2015; Mahdi 1957; Pomian 2006; and Turrone 2002.

writing was defined by the ideal type of the *badawa*).²⁴ In this environment, social groups begin to form that live in a subsistence economy and whose culture is comparatively unrefined. Even so, the members of these groups share a sense of cohesion and pride; they are a mettlesome lot and do not perceive themselves to be (nor are they) subject to the rule of a sovereign; rather, they feel *bound* by the pride they take in supporting a natural leader, someone chosen from their own ranks whom they elevate to the status of first among equals (*primus inter pares*), one who is seen as a “champion” of their group and embodies the virtues and values cherished by the group.

- Having built up “fortitude” and cohesion (a concept referred to as *asabiyya*),²⁵ and having thus become predisposed to pursue individual glory as well as the glory of the group, even at the cost of sacrificing oneself—all virtues nurtured in the unforgiving desert environment—a close-knit group manages to take down the previous dynasty and conquer and build the city. In the urban area (*hadara*) that has been taken over, power consolidates into the hands of a leader; at the same time the arts and sciences find the ground on which to gradually flourish.

- In the third phase, however—in virtue of a number of factors that include the individualistic atomism attendant on urbanization; the mutual dependence resulting from an increased division of labour (a description that feels like we are reading Adam Smith: Ibn Khaldun 1958, vol. 1, chap. 5; Smith [1776] 2008); the inevitably corrupting effect of power (as evidenced by an unreasonable increase in taxes, which in any event cannot sustain the level of public spending);²⁶ an accustomation to luxury that becomes compulsive (Ibn Khaldun 1958, vol. 1, chaps. 11–12); and above all a progressive, albeit predictable, detachment from the group’s own foundational values—the social group as a collective entity becomes depleted of its own vitality and so loses its abilities and control. This, in turn, will set the stage for another conquest by other social groups, newer and more cohesive, that once more will be emerging out of the *badawa*.

In this third phase, the civilization expressed by the social group enters into senility—a debilitating condition where the once-strong cohesion comes apart and the pristine virtues are lost—thus paving the way for emergent groups to sweep in, prodded by the poverty of the *badawa* and eager to establish a place for themselves in the comfort and security of the *hadara*.

However, history will repeat itself once more along the same lines, because the nascent power—having found strength and common cause in the very privations from which it emerged, and prompted by that same condition to

²⁴ The term is tied to a trilateral root that stands for the desert and its inhabitants, which is to say the Bedouins.

²⁵ The word *asabiyya* derives from the Arab root Arab’*ayin*, *sa*, *ba*, which is common to a number of related verbs designating actions such as tying, swathing, and fastening, as well as joining ranks with someone, supporting them, rooting for them, and fanaticizing. The same root also accounts for nouns that can be translated as “nerve” and “nervousness”; “tendon,” “league,” “association,” “collegiality,” and “group spirit” (*asabiyya* itself); “bandage” and “band”; and “zealousness,” “fanaticism,” and “intolerance”; as well as for adjectives that translate to “neurotic,” “intolerant,” “fanatic,” and “partisan.” See Baldissera 2006.

²⁶ For a recent editorial on the Laffer curve, see Orsi, Raggi, and Turrino 2013.

seek power and comfort—will itself lose its compass once that objective is achieved. Hence, precisely in virtue of its acquired amenity, it will slide into a corruptive process destined to take it down, causing it, in turn, to succumb to a new group from the *badawa*.

The only element that in this cyclical pattern of advances and retreats suggests the possibility of taking a course of continuous linear progress is culture. For this reason subsequent cycles of civilization will almost never start anew from scratch. That is because culture does not necessarily wither away along with the human groups that have caused it to flourish, but can be passed onto the next generation. And indeed it is normally appropriated, this in accordance with a mimetic principle whereby the more backward cultures, coming out of the subsistence world of the *badawa*, and seeking the power gained by the civilizations that have managed to move into and take over the *hadara* (Ibn Khaldun 1958, vol. 1, chap. 3, sec. 13), will imitate what the latter in that process have established as the dominant or winning model (ibid., chap. 2, sec. 22).

And, as Ibn Khaldun implies and maybe hopes will happen, among the sciences that will have a chance at surviving the changes there will also be his own “new science”—a rational and empirical science, with a “multilayered” and composite structure, that can be put to use in coming up with an enlightening or “educative” interpretation making it possible to uncover the “inner meaning” (Ibn Khaldun 1958, vol. 1, Foreword, p. 6) of social dynamics.

This science is also “original” in its endeavour to bring to light the instructive lesson (*ibar*) ensconced in history and give it a new interpretation, a kind of account that—in contrast to the fanciful, self-praising narrative rhythmically set in the predefined rigidified canons of the *taqlid* (traditional rules) and designed to exalt the sovereigns, dynasties, and ruling houses of the moment (amounting to a literary form rather than a science)—indeed offers itself as a rational interpretation of the past;²⁷ a close, accurate record of the present; and a cautious instructional projection of such past and present onto the future.

3.2. *The Asabiyya as Engine of the History of Civilizations*

In the picture just outlined, as we have seen, society is conceived by Ibn Khaldun as a complex system in which multiple factors (economic, political, cultural, religious, familial, and so on) come together and interact in such a way as to shape the unfolding of history.

But even though these factors act concurrently in bringing about this outcome, there is one factor in particular that plays a key role. For him, the true driver of history—the dynamic element that more than any other can

²⁷ Indeed, as Abdallah Laroui (1999, 144 n. 11) points out, distinct from any rigidly rule-bound narrative that draws meaning from itself, historical explanation (in classic Arab historiography, the *khbar* is understood to be at once an event and a *recounting* of external events) requires a *correspondence* to events, meaning that the historizing needs to be verified.

account for the cyclical dialectic of the events making up the history of civilizations—lies in the *asabiyya*.

Ibn Khaldun's keen analysis of the solidarist concept of *asabiyya* perhaps owes many of its underlying insights to the very horizon out of which they were understood by him to emerge at the time he was writing, in 1377.

Indeed, Ibn Khaldun was steeped in the tribal, "patchwork" reality of the desert in the Berber stronghold of Ibn Salama (near Oran),²⁸ where he managed bring into focus a factor of social aggregation whose critical role, by contrast, would elude European thought for a long time to come, so concentrated as this thought was on developing the classic but strict (*tertium non datur*) dichotomy of natural law that, from Hobbes ([1651] 1985) onward, forced a binary alternative between, on the one hand, a totally abstract state of nature (a state of disaggregation) and, on the other, a state of associative life governed by a form of justified power voluntarily conferred on the sovereign in virtue of the benefits that this state of affairs would bring to its rational subjects.

Ibn Khaldun takes a different course. For he does not just *theorize* about political power (or what in his lexicon is termed *mulk*): He also *observes* it, pointing out that not only does it not exhaust, on its own, the list of the sources of social cohesion, but that it belongs to only one of the two phases in the cycle of a civilization—the more advanced of the two, but also the weaker one.

Indeed, the "imperative" phase of the *mulk* is set up—and in fact dialectically produced—by the development and transformation of the "attractive" form of cohesion that characterizes the previous stage. And, crucially, this preceding phase constitutes not an imaginary, asocial state of nature, but a form of sociality itself—indeed a mightily powerful one, capable of engendering a sense of unity among the people much stronger than the cohesion induced by political power (here contextualized by Ibn Khaldun in his time- and place-relative form of the *dawlah*, the dynasty).

This is the state of the *asabiyya*: a "concrete" and nonstratified social form organized according to a hierarchy of nobility and virtue that does not reflect any coercive power but rather expresses the group's own unity and espousal of values.²⁹ The *asabiyya* that forms in the *badawa* connects individuals through a kind of group membership which is not "imposed" but rather felt as

²⁸ From Ibn Khaldun's autobiography, or *tarif*, we know that it took him five months to complete his masterwork. The autobiography has been translated into French: Khaldun 2002.

²⁹ It is true that the idea of the *asabiyya* analysed and narrated in Khaldun's history finds concrete form in the social relations that prevailed in his own time and culture (foremost among which was the agnatic and blood relation, even if this relation cannot have any cohesive "force" without an underlying narrative), but it would be a mistake to collapse the idea into its application—reducing a conceptual tool to one or another of the different forms in which it can take on substance at a particular time and place—for that would amount to devitalizing it and robbing it of the ability to find any further application, thereby also stripping Ibn Khaldun's thought of its fecundity. This essay accordingly proceeds from the view that such pliant use of the idea is not only possible but also desirable (of course taking all due historico-sociological precautions and steering clear of anachronisms).

valuable. By the same token, individuals in such a state relate to one another as “peers,” all equally participating in the collective enterprise, pulled together by a shared sense that they make up a whole, united not by fear or by a rational pursuit of self-interest, as if in a zero-sum game, but by a proffering of reasons that are in large part irrational (here Francesco Gabrieli speaks of a feeling of connectedness)³⁰ and grounded in emotion, affection, and transport—and yet productive of real consequences.

Indeed, Ibn Khaldun underscores that the *asabiyya* (be it familial, tribal, or of a different kind) rests not only on a web of concrete, face-to-face relationships but also—in good measure—on the power of imagination (Ibn Khaldun 1958, vol. 1, chap. 3, sec. 18, p. 374), that is, on a sense of empathetic commonality triggered by founding “narratives” capable of forming a brotherly bond among people who could otherwise even be strangers to one another.³¹ Indeed, without these imagined ties, even kinship “on paper” alone would not form any actual connection.

When a group is held together by the force of the *asabiyya*, it will be committed to fighting for itself, for its own glory: Its members will have a much stronger self-sacrificing devotion to their perceived common cause than they would if they formed the rank and file on the bottom rung of a pyramidally organized group, in which case they would fight out of a sense of duty, or for fear of punishment, or, if they are joining a mercenary army, for recompense.

It is therefore the coalescent force of the *asabiyya*, especially as influenced by a bleak, punishing, deprivative environment, that acts as the original wellspring from which the group draws its strength. To be sure, as Ibn Khaldun points out, there is never just a single *asabiyya* at play: At work in a large social group will be a number of different loyalties, often overlapping and even competing with one another. But the success of a dynasty, of a governing force, lies precisely in its ability to layer on top of all these many lesser “*asabiyyat*” a stronger *asabiyya*—we might venture to call it a *super-asabiyya* relative to the former—capable of containing and ultimately unifying them. In Ibn Khaldun’s words, “Group feeling is something composite that results from (amalgamating) many groups, one of which is stronger than all the others” (Ibn Khaldun 1958, vol. 1, chap. 3, sec. 10, p. 336).

And among the elements that play a key role in unifying the group, we can find that very basic mimetic principle previously discussed that works as a catalyst in the process of unifying the multiple *asabiyyat* into a higher whole: In words that seem to anticipate René Girard’s (1961) theory of mimetic desire, Ibn Khaldun describes this process as driven by the tendency of the “conquered” to be drawn to the winning model and to accordingly imitate the customs of the group that has come into power. (Once more, then, it is an ideal force of attraction, not a brute one of coercion, that underlies the strongest cohesive dynamics.) Again, quoting one of Ibn Khaldun’s headline

³⁰ Originally *suggestione di colleganza* (Gabrieli 1984, 214).

³¹ I suppose it would not be too rash to trace to such an analysis the tragically contemporary example of “brothers in arms” rallying behind the banner of the “caliphate,” uniting fighters from all over the world, no matter how different their backgrounds may be.

propositions, “*The vanquished always want to imitate the victor in his distinctive characteristics, his dress, his occupation, and all his other conditions and customs*” (Ibn Khaldun 1958, vol. 1, chap. 2, sec. 22, p. 299).

The *asabiyya*, however, in its own turn, gets weakened in the urbanized life of a society rationally modelled by the ruling power, especially in the outlying parts of the area under control. The more extensive the “nation,” the more its sense of unity—its *asabiyya*—will become diluted. The leader—who, in the stage leading to the *hadara*, as we saw, was supported by the *asabiyya* of his peers—now by natural inclination will be led to concentrate all power in his own hands, seeking more and more power, thus giving rise to a deepening rift between himself and his peers.

If, as I would suggest, this crucial passage is reformulated with the help of Weber’s ideal types, this is when the passage is effected from the authority of the charismatic leader to the (qualitatively different) authority of the ruler endowed with coercive force.

What is more, the ruler’s natural tendency to rationalize control over his subjects will prompt him to turn into coercive obligations what have hitherto been rules and values the group was espousing as a matter of interior belief. This coercive government, or *mulk*, will thus wind up altering from within the mindset, affections, and springs of action that underpin the social life of the group as a cohesive unit—a process that in turn will stifle the *asabiyya*, which can only thrive in an environment where it is free to express itself, free of the constraints of coercive power. And so there will come a point at which the authority of the new ruler will work against the very *asabiyya* on which basis his power was gained, as the logic of an inherently asymmetric power contradicts the logic of the shared feeling out of which it grew.

3.3. The Downward-Spiralling Phase of the Cycle: The Logic of Power and the Dynamic of Desires Lead to Corruption and “Senility”

The key element in Ibn Khaldun’s cycle, as we saw, is the *asabiyya*, which alone can determine and sustain the success of any collective human enterprise. But in the unfolding of this narrative lies a deep paradox, for if the group’s objective in the political arena consists in getting hold of control and power, or *mulk*, in order to securely exercise it, the very achievement of this objective sets the stage for the soon-to-come breakup and demise of group itself.

In many pages rich in detail, Ibn Khaldun (1958, chap. 4, sec. 5) enters into what Mohamed Talbi (1973, 79–86) has termed “l’*étiologie des déclin*,” setting out to explain how in establishing a successful political enterprise and achieving the much-sought-after urban civilization (the *hadara*), the group reaches a stage that, because of its inner characteristics, will ultimately lead to the breakup of its own original sense of group cohesion (a sense of solidarity which grows proportionally stronger as the environment puts individuals to the test, and which gradually fades away with senility and once luxuries are at hand).

Indeed, in the *hadara*, individual desires are triggered, the social whole is atomized, and the sense of mutual dependence and responsibility on which the group’s members had to rely on is worn away.

It is precisely in virtue of the luxury and peaceful stability attendant on the attainment of civilization that the organic whole winds up collapsing, having smothered the *asabiyya* of society (a virtue which grows out of the need for mutual support, and which rests on a bedrock of shared values). Synchronic symptoms will come along in the stage of senility: Factors of economic and demographic crisis will set in, while the central power, absorbed in its own *libido dominandi* and in the cult of its own image, will have to resist attempts to steal its power, especially from the periphery, in the far reaches of its sphere of control (ibid.).

In turn, these signs of decadence will pique the interest and attract the aggression of other groups, in a mounting process that will ultimately lead to the ruling dynasty being overthrown by the new incoming forces, still crude but precisely for that reason propelled by the sweeping *élan* of the *asabiyya* and charged with that primal, intrinsically ascensive inner tension that springs from the grassroots provenance of the *badawa*.

As can be appreciated, Ibn Khaldun's theory merges two elements. On the one side, we have what may be properly described as an early sociological method, a method developed through the empirical analysis of historical and factual details. On the other side, this is coupled with a general, universalizable philosophical theory of civilization constructed on the basis of those factual data and is checked against them, in an intense internal dialectic between the two. If in the *Muqaddimah*, and in the subsequent volumes of his long *Kitab*, Ibn Khaldun keeps recording and sifting through reliable data from different times and different countries, and from different political situations within the same countries, it is because he seeks to ultimately arrive at a general, universal, and intelligible account, capable of consistently encapsulating such data, and finding validation in all of them, even in their wide variety. In other words, as Bozarslan writes, there is an interplay, in Ibn Khaldun's work, between "the 'essential,' which points to the universal, and the 'accidental,' revealing the perils of a necessarily complex political chronology" (Bozarslan 2014, 12; my translation).³²

It is this "essential" theorization, with the constantly recurring scheme that Ibn Khaldun distils from his sociological enterprise, that enables us to claim that his theory (like all universalisable philosophies), and the *'ibar* (lessons) it gives us—however much formulated in a specific context, and more than five centuries ago—can still be pertinent and useful as an interpretive tool for a dynamic assessment of the state of our civilization, even today.

4. The Khaldunian Cycle and Our Civilization

In light of the Khaldunian theory, it is tempting to contend that the changes our civilization will go through in the 21st century will be shaped in no small

³² The French original: "l'essentiel, qui renvoie à l'universel, et l'accidentel, relevant des aléas d'une chronologie politique nécessairement complexe et aux configurations imprévisibles."

part by its *asabiyya* and by its capacity to stave off and counteract the forces that lie behind the downward spiralling vortex of civilizational senility.

Indeed, if we look at the present day through the lens of a Khaldunian sociology, we will see that most of the basic symptoms that Khaldun listed as evidence of decadence are afoot: political corruption and the cult of image, coupled with social atomization and economic and demographic crisis—all signs that seem to clearly foreshadow a phase of senility, a phase that sooner or later, on a Khaldunian conception, is bound to set in.

Ibn Khaldun has taught us that, on the one hand, civilization and culture, owing to the force of compactness that enables them to blossom, push in a direction that creates windows of opportunity making it possible to gain power, dominate the environment, and achieve luxury and security, but at the same time this very luxury and security, once gained, will begin to wear away at that same compactness by tearing it asunder, thus undermining the very foundation on which the group managed to gain its initial strength.

In very much the same way, the opulent Saturn—the god that in Greek mythology symbolizes the age of gold—twirls his mantle around a sickle and eats his own children.

As noted, if at any given time we are to understand the stage at which a given socio-cultural conjuncture is positioned, and hence how far off the critical point it is likely to be in the cycle of a civilization described by Ibn Khaldun as a natural process, we will have to take the *asabiyya* as the benchmark—its strength correlating with the compactness and vitality of civilization. When the *asabiyya* begins to falter, that means that the danger threshold has been crossed, and there is no turning back.

But the *asabiyya*, which works as the unifying cultural element, is characterized, in the West, by a kind of communitarian bond that is singularly *sui generis*. It is indeed a “special” *asabiyya*, or, going back to the previous neologism and setting it within a broader frame, a unifying *super-asabiyya* that, in virtue of the distinctively open values it embraces through its liberal and democratic model, is developing with the peculiar goal of also accommodating under its umbrella a range of other minority *asabiyyat* grounded in different principles (sometimes even opposite to its own), recognizing their otherness in the name of the specific open, liberal, democratic nature of its values. Which values are not only constitutionalized, but also, at the policy level, enacted, however imperfectly, in the multicultural space toward which the Western social world is driving..

However, with regard to these distinctive values, the Western society of opulence, coupling individualism in the personal sphere with multiculturalism in the political, now seems to be finding itself in a deep crisis as far as the sense of its internal identity is concerned: As Amartya Sen observed more than a decade ago,³³ the project of promoting the coexistence of different minority groups within the same political space (the nation-state), where each group would be recognized and respected in its own protected, distinctive cultural identity, having been dissociated from any serious plan for cultural

³³ Sen 2006a and 2006b. See also, e.g., Touraine 1997; Sartori 2000; Barry 2001; Shachar 2001; and Malik 2015.

integration, has instead in many cases produced a push towards antagonism and contraposition.

Indeed, this society looks weakened from within, in its pride and sense of belonging. And this may very well be due to the very abstractness of its identitarian contents, which in their present configuration are hardly capable of providing its members with a distinctive “communitarian,” reassuring embrace and a clear, “thick” measure of their own identity.

In this regard there are two main signs, it seems, of the degree to which the agglutinative fabric of Western society is fraying.

On the one hand, on an individual level, is the effect of the consumerism that has unrelentingly been pounded into us over the last fifty years, with its promise of inebriating experiences that ultimately come down to nothing: This has made for a splintered society of disconnected consumers sucked into a constant push to upgrade their luxury in an unceasing effort to satisfy an ever-renewing stream of desires.³⁴

On the other hand, even on the macro level of the basic attitudes inspiring policies today, there comes into being a perverse, rupturing effect. This is the unintended upshot of a multicultural policy that, to be sure, originated out of a noble Kantian ideal of equal respect for the autonomy of each individual,³⁵ yet was planted in an ethico-cultural seedbed already bound towards a progressive weakening of its cohesive force—an *asabiyya*, that is, that, in a deepening “katabasis,” in its striving to embrace the culture of “the other,” is nearing the end of its tether.

In other words, there is a case to be made that Western society, in its support for the value of respect for other cultures and their *asabiyyat*, which it feels bound to catalyse and keep together in a liberal unity, has at the same time neglected the need to nourish its own core ethos and culture as a specific, substantive standard. As a consequence, it is increasingly struggling to coherently ensure its role as a unifying *asabiyya*. So, unless it does bolster its wide inclusionary embrace by subsuming it under the umbrella of a higher, unifying solidarity—whose contents (in a somehow perfectionist way) are to be found in the very liberal values of tolerance and inclusion by which the project is informed—it risks becoming vulnerable and losing its strength.

At the same time, this multicultural policy is paradoxically also fuelling in another way a parallel push toward a splintering loss of social cohesion. Indeed, in striving to recognize the different minority groups under its umbrella, the multiculturalist effort to label and define these groups, and even to protect them from change, has contributed to a rigidification of their identity. In this way, these “frozen” group identities have in turn been led to oppose one another in an identitarian labelling process that is ultimately turning difference into contraposition (see Malik 2013), thus pitting one group against another. In a multicultural frame where differences are “put on

³⁴ At work here is the phenomenon of human psychology in virtue of which our happiness tends to plateau soon after we upscale our material wellbeing, setting in train a ceaseless effort to satisfy desires that will never be fulfilled. On this phenomenon see Verza 2015.

³⁵ I am referring to this ideal specifically as stated in Kant’s 1785 (1998) *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*..

stage” to be asserted, the trans-ethnic boundaries which help to more accurately fix and define each group’s identity end up doing so in ways that tend to be essentialist and oppositional.

As we know from the specific dynamics of the *asabiyya*, however, the high vulnerability and potential weakening of the democratic and liberal culture is not engendered only by the breadth of its special “hospitality” to other cultures. What exposes it to risk is also its spatial expanse. To appreciate as much, we need only consider, for example, how the great enlargement of its borders to the international (if not globalized) level fails to take into account the dynamics of the *asabiyya*.³⁶

Indeed, as Ibn Khaldun (1958, vol. 1, chap. 3, sec. 7–8) suggests, there is no sliding scale in virtue of which the greater the expansion of a polity’s *asabiyya*, the greater its strength and intensity. On the contrary, the more it grows in size, the less will its fabric have holding capacity (ibid., chaps. 4 and 5): As its perimeter widens, its internal centripetal strength will fade, prompting individuals to retreat into smaller groups to form the bonds and relationships needed to lead a meaningful life underpinned by a clear and coherent set of reliable values, which the larger group can no longer provide.

Therefore, on the one hand, on a macro level, there lingers a continental European community that is spatially so overstretched and culturally so inclusive as to lose sight of its own subjectivity, while on the other hand, on a micro level, lies the solitude of the individual, no longer supported and validated by the liberal myth of autonomy (see Fineman 2004)—itself evidently crumbling, along with the accompanying welfare state. In light of this vacuum, it is possible to appreciate how the fascination exerted by a more tight-knit form of community can take hold, drawing in the individual with the force of its *asabiyya*—thicker, warmer, and more palpable than this all-inclusive rendering of the liberal culture—embedding the individual in a concrete context of values, certainties, and relationships.³⁷

But while the group’s dynamics forge and preserve identities under the multicultural umbrella, providing assurance and promoting trust within each group,³⁸ at the same time they set themselves in potential conflict with the

³⁶ As Ed West (2015) points out, a country of five million people is not ten times stronger than one of fifty. Its size, like that of a dilating soap bubble, will end up undercutting its ability to hold together.

³⁷ As Farhad Khosrokhavar (2003, 233) argues, the foreign fighters who join the Islamists in their treatment of women are driven not so much by hate as by a need to find certainties in establishing a solid frame of reference within which to forge their identities and those of others. What they are looking for, in other words, is rather a stable order that will put an end to the “liquid” vagueness—Zygmunt Bauman’s (2000) *liquid modernity*—we find ourselves navigating as unmoored individuals having to constantly negotiate our identities.

³⁸ See, in this sense, the idea of trust expounded by Francis Fukuyama (1995), highlighting the essential role that trust plays in society in maintaining cohesive bonds among citizens and fostering social capital, and ultimately in achieving the wellbeing of society itself. Trust is defined by Fukuyama as “the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community” (ibid., 26), in which connection he speaks of “communities of shared ethical values” (ibid.). In this sense, the norms being shared are moral norms that, if anchored to trust, would enable the community to counteract such practices as clientelism,

broader drive toward cultural integration that is supposed to sustain them. Yet the unifying background culture should always be able to keep these forces of tension in balance, lest it should meet its own demise (with the parallel risk, bringing Ibn Khaldun's lesson to bear, that the same process should also fuel the rise of other more bellicose and less tolerant forms of *asabiyya*).

In short, if an enveloping *super-asabiyya* is to be able to sustain a multicultural universe within, it needs to foster, first and foremost, the strength of its own embracing *asabiyya*: a liberal and welcoming culture, to be sure, but a culture which also needs to have a lifeblood and conscious identity of its own, otherwise—quoting Arnold Joseph Toynbee, who, not incidentally, was a keen interpreter of Ibn Khaldun—the risk is that it will go down a slippery slope to its own suicide.³⁹

5. Neutrality and Equal Respect: Metaethical Values or Part of the Very Content of Western Liberal Ethics?

As we have just seen, the increasing pull exerted by the prospect of a return to the dimension of intermediate groups is, in its growth, intersecting with the waning force of the higher-order *asabiyya*—that very liberal, democratic, and inclusive culture that was supposed to cut across and transcend all particular cultures under its umbrella.

In fact, over the last half-century, the liberal ethic that was supposed to serve as a foundation for this project went through a rapid transformation in consequence of which it now seems to have lost sight of its core values, turning into an adjudicative metaethic engaged in a constant effort to negotiate impartially between the other ethical vantage points and its own, and to apply the principle of equal respect and neutrality among cultures to such an extreme that it has wound up forsaking its own standing—its own, liberal, perfectionistically concrete core of substantive values by which the multicultural project itself was initially launched.

And yet this is precisely the key to understanding the risk of senile involution now looming in our cultural horizon. Indeed, as Khaldun's analysis teaches us, the onset of this process comes when the relation among individuals who make up a society, and the psychosocial glue provided by their specific culture (that is, their culturally determined *asabiyya*), is no longer nurtured and vital.

Several voices on the political stage today are pointing to immigration, globalization, or the crisis of the nation-state as the primary culprit for the enfeeblement of the West.

But as Ibn Khaldun teaches us, the primary reason for the senile decline of the West, if this is the path that will be followed, is not to be found in any

nepotism, tax evasion, absenteeism, and speeding. Only on the basis of such mutual trust, he argues, can humans maintain complex forms of organization that work.

³⁹ I am referring here to the famous motto apocryphally attributed to Toynbee, "Civilizations die from suicide, not murder."]

external factors: not in any excessive extent of the European Union's borders, nor in the unpredictable effects of globalization, nor in immigration, nor in the well-intentioned mistakes and unintended consequences of the multicultural policies we are pursuing. On a Khaldunian reading, these are all *effects* of the crisis, accompanying us as "travel mates" on a path whose origin, the root cause of senescence, lies in the involution in the cycle of the *asabiyya*—an involution owed to the moral implosion of the liberal culture, which is an *internal* implosion owed to the fact that Western society is losing its moral compass and sense of self, and the consequent sense of attachment.

Indeed, a distinctive trait of Western ethics today seems to lie in its having turned metaethical, in a vaguely sensed metamorphosis that seems to have appeased the old striving of its neutralist project to ascend to a superior point of view, self-critically impartial and equidistant from all conceptions of the good, "thin" and not "thick,"⁴⁰ an old striving that has never been set to rest.⁴¹ For while the shift to a multicultural discourse seemed to have academically pushed the neutralist project aside, this project never subsided, and in fact is being put into effect, dragging along also the self-defeating consequences of its *hubris*: its pretention to (an impossible) superiority.

This is a project that got underway with John Rawls's 1971 *Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1999): It became the focus of an intense debate that raged all through the 1980s, until the multiculturalist "revolution" broke out in 1992. Its most ambitious idea was that it would be possible to reach a maximally detached viewpoint from which to objectively adjudicate among the different moral views—a *view from nowhere*, as it has been famously described (Nagel 1986), a kind of ascent pulled by a Kantian universalism, advanced as a unique high ground that could only be reached through our "superior" liberal moral openness.

In this neutralist endeavour, however, what was once the mainstream European culture ended up neutralizing itself, thus dismantling the very basis on which this process was supposed to get underway.

It did so perhaps out of self-conceit, accounting itself to be so far above the fray, so strong and superior, that it didn't have to defend its own ground—an attitude analogous to the supererogatory stance of the saint, who understands himself to be living by a higher standard of justice and refuses as unavailable to himself, on account of this higher standard, concessions that he instead believes to be perfectly and understandably allowed to others. Be that as it may, in its ambition to "purify" itself from partiality, in a progressive recalculation of its own "square root," in an unrelenting attempt to strike an even balance between competing cultures, including its own in this panorama, it got caught in an "upsloping slippery slope": not the value-laden descent that entrenches one deep into a concrete culture, but the value-neutral *ascent* that takes one to a position so rarefied and unbiased that it gradually but inevitably "vaporizes" into the abstraction of sheer contentlessness.

⁴⁰ The use of this oppositional pair as a tool for describing moral thinking is owed Michael Walzer (1994).

⁴¹ As a clear countermelody to my own *La neutralità impossibile* (Verza 2000), see *La neutralità necessaria* (Del Bò 2014), still supporting this other view of neutrality.

Indeed, when a theory committed by definition to tolerance and neutrality (like the liberal one) engages a theory committed to the binding force of its own content, the latter—for that very reason, and in virtue of the combinatorial logic involved—is bound to win out, progressively depriving the former of the content it needs for its own nourishment.

To exemplify, consider the recent burkini controversy on the scope of a woman's freedom to wear what she chooses. If on one side we have the liberal stance—committed to the view that women are free to subscribe to any view on that matter, and so also to the view that imposes on them an obligation *q* to wear a prescribed list of outfits—while on the other side we have the nonliberal stance consisting in precisely that obligation *q* (whose deontic modality by its very nature does not admit of any option other than itself), it follows that the only practical solution consistent with *both* stances is to recognize *q* as obligatory, for this is required by the illiberal stance at the same time as it is tolerated by the liberal one (see Taleb 2016).

In a matchup between a principle of freedom and one of obligation, in other words, it is the latter that will almost systematically come out on top. It will do so in virtue of its greater determination—as a result of its being clear in its content and thick, and bound to socially ensconced customs to which concrete cultural meanings are ascribed—for these attributes will overpower the rarefied abstractness of any principle of freedom (a principle whose range of options includes that of the obligation in question), especially so when understood in its contemporary sense as an empty catchall principle welcoming of all possibilities—provided only that they be reasonable—rather than as a first-level value to be supported in its own right.

In sum, unless the structural principles of liberalism itself are supported in a substantive perfectionist sense in virtue of their content rather than in virtue of any assumedly superior neutrality, the meta-contentual, or content-neutral, logic of tolerance and liberality will always give the upper hand to any illiberal stance dialectically opposed to it.

And yet even freedom and tolerance started out as first-order, content-bearing (or thick) principles, not at all to be taken for granted. They gradually took shape in a long struggle against illiberal systems, and they, too, therefore, had to assert themselves as principles of substance against the opposite illiberal principles, before fading into the gossamery metaethical hologram into which contemporary liberalism has morphed.

This thinning-out process is clearly illustrated, for example, by the way the hard-won freedoms gained by the first- and second-wave women's movements are gradually turning into wallpaper, as it were, no longer being valued with due awareness by the newer generations. Indeed, we are now looking at a scenario in which, on the one hand, the advances made in the struggle for gender equality are taken as political givens,⁴² and have become part of the standard academic syllabus, while on the other hand, in counterpoint to that

⁴² Feminism, as well as multiculturalism, seems to have become a default position one is politically expected to subscribe to as a matter of course, at least in academe. But, self-defeatingly, the very dogmatic and anodyne armour these positions have put on, regardless of whether they prove to be fair on the merits, ends up enervating them.

development, a “grassroots” culture has sprung up which complacently shies away from any identification with feminism (making exception for its flashier, but in reality less feminist, manifestations, as in the case of the Femen initiative), and which does not in any way seem intent on asserting and defending equality for man and woman,⁴³ taking this as an already settled matter.

But as John Stuart Mill warned, “even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds” (Mill [1859] 1991, sec. 2, p. 59).

Hence, no longer the object of hard-fought struggles, the gains of earlier generations have reduced themselves to the status of “metamoral” freedoms silhouetted against a background of indifference, and are therefore ready to yield to the much more combative and peremptory demands by which they are contrasted.

What we have witnessed, in other words, is a shift—one that has recently picked up speed—in virtue of which liberalism has wound up undercutting the premises of its own liberal qualities: The strategy of tolerance through which these virtues were initially promoted subtly transitioned to a strategy of impartiality and “impossible neutrality” (see Verza 2000), and then to a politics of multicultural openness interpreted in such a way as to swamp and progressively weaken the very liberal foundation on which it stood. For in the effort to find a superior lookout point from which to impartially observe the political landscape, multicultural liberalism went on a quest for what Thomas Nagel would have described a “view from nowhere,” hoping to achieve the highest Kantian ambition, only to find itself in a blind spot—a black hole that sucks in anyone trying to reach that view and deprives them of substance, a condition that seriously hampers society’s cohesion.⁴⁴ For, as Ibn Khaldun teaches us, the keystone and existential condition enabling a social group to thrive lies in the cohesive force that unites it under a shared system of values. Or, stated otherwise, with Talcott Parsons, what prevents society from breaking up is, in the first place, its ability to define the boundaries of its own identity—a primal function that Parsons, in his *The Social System*, called *latency*, performed by the whole of an identifying culture with its values.

No society, no matter how liberal or welcoming it may be, can exist by according equal weight to the multiple cultures it holds within. As Ibn Khaldun wrote: “When the elements are combined in equal proportions, no mixing can take place. One (element) must be superior to the others, and when (it exercises) its superiority over them, mixing occurs. In the same way, one of the various [...] group feelings must be superior to all, in order to be able to bring them together, to unite them, and to weld them into one group

⁴³ In fact, quite on the contrary, the model that seems to grip the young generations, in Italy, for example, is that of the so-called *veline*—the beautiful but totally passive TV showgirls whose only role is that of decorative props (see Verza 2014).

⁴⁴ Consider the difficult mediations with which the symbolic dilemmas we started from are addressed.

feeling comprising all the various groups” (Ibn Khaldun 1958, vol. 1, chap. 3, sec. 10, p. 336-337).

The very existence of a pluralistic society necessarily requires the presence of some external framework of general rules and cultural values, which need to be widely accepted by the social group itself—there needs to be a belief that they are obligatory, from what Hart (1961, chap. 5.2) called an “internal point of view”—and such rules and values cannot be neutral, but need substantive content.⁴⁵

Yet, on the other hand—as the laws and dynamics of the *asabiyya* tell us—it is not possible to fill this ethical *vacuum* by coercive means.

The solution favoured by a certain line of trenchantly stern political thinking that seeks to *authoritatively* inject and breathe new life into values and cultures through top-down political operations simply cannot work. Indeed, as the Khaldunian teaching tells us, if the *asabiyya* is to be real, it can only be so as a spontaneous sentiment shared by willing participants.⁴⁶ Otherwise, it would turn into something else and would thus vanish.

However, as Ibn Khaldun has also taught us, even before Durkheim alighted on a similar truth, the *asabiyya* also feeds on the imagination: While the *asabiyya* cannot be *imposed* from the outside, it can always be *nurtured* from the inside, especially if society manages to sustain and revive its contents before its tradition wanes, enabling people to identify and coalesce around them.

This, after all, is what—in an uptrend running parallel to the downtrend of the Western cycle—is already happening in other parts of the world in relation to values of an entirely different order: “Asabiyyat” conjured back into life from the past (as in the case of Salafism), and “put to market” by an appeal to emotion, are gaining much strength owing to the seduction of identity they exert, and to their inevitably ascending directionality, thus forming devotees ready to even sacrifice their own lives to them. It is significant that such conceptions can also entice the children of the liberal culture itself, foreign fighters in search of something that can impart meaning to their lives (Khosrokhavar 2003, 233)—such is the power of attraction, the deep sense of identity, belonging, and purpose they can elicit.

Clearly, this intersecting march of events, along with its underlying causes, is something that must inevitably be reckoned with, sooner rather than later.

I would submit that the only feasible resource available in giving fresh vigour to the liberal *asabiyya*—thereby re-enlivening the framework of moral values our civilization needs if it is to overcome the challenges of time and not lapse into the declining phase of its cyclical movement (or at least not yet, even though, on Ibn Khaldun’s conception, it is “natural” for this to eventually happen)—lies in an educative and cultural effort to achieve integration. And

⁴⁵ This can be described as a super-utopia: While the utopia criticized by Marx was one of equality among *individuals*, what multiculturalism preaches is a utopia of equality among *groups*.

⁴⁶ If the *asabiyya* is coercively enforced by way of obligations, it will wither and die. It will do so simply by reason of the enfeebling corrupting process that stifles its vitality from within, causing it to collapse.

such an effort could only be inspired by the very liberal values of tolerance, equal respect and freedom that constitute the axiological basis for a multicultural policy. Only in this way, through the gradual, cultural work of fostering such a minimal *super-asabiyya* as the only realistically possible common denominator, will it be possible to legitimize the effort to enhance the unifying, common heritage of the (substantive) liberal principles making up its cultural patrimony, and to do so not coercively (for, as noted, that would be extraneous to the very logic of the *asabiyya*) but by force of attraction, bringing out the morally compelling force of liberalism as a common legacy that we can all turn to as a basis on which to reproduce an *ex pluribus unum* dynamic and set in motion, even among nonliberal groups, that process of *mimesis* which, as Ibn Khaldun argues (1958, vol. 1, chap. 2, sec. 22), characterizes the success of the most *integrated* polities.

But this means that the liberal values to be supported should not be understood as those of a superior metamorality. For, as we have seen, the presumption of rising above all conceptions of the good in a state of content-independent neutrality is ultimately a self-defeating, self-annihilating expression of metaethical arrogance. Instead, liberal values need to be cherished in an open and humbly perfectionistic way as the *content* of a first-order conception of the good—a democratic and liberal conception—to be shared and defended precisely for its substantive import, for its ability to compellingly define a specific community and its values.⁴⁷

This is to say that the liberal culture—with the tolerance and freedoms it embraces—is to be supported, along with its own roots, not out of a pretended metaethical superiority it may claim, but precisely because of its content.

The reasons for the attachment a liberal culture so understood can draw, in other words, are to be found in its commitment to values which have been strenuously fought for, and which, though constitutionalized, still need to be nurtured and protected in themselves if they are to stay with us. Prominent among these values are those of equality between the sexes and among all persons, the protection of individual liberty, and the flourishing of the individual, this according to a notion of autonomy which is not to be understood as the solipsistic deprivation triggered by the disintegrating consumerism of recent decades, and which does not originate from relational solitude, but which draws on the deep humanistic roots of Western culture. And it is these very roots that, as Ibn Khaldun teaches, the liberal society needs to turn to as the vital source of its own *asabiyya* if its culture is not to wither away, and the society this culture supports is not to fracture.

As Lenn Evan Goodman has commented, “unless individuals are prepared to die for the group, the group itself will die” (Goodman 1999, 215). Only if the moral kernel of Western liberalism is sustained—and not as a point of neutrality among conceptions of the good, but as a perfectionist ideal itself—can it infuse vim and vigour back into the Western *asabiyya*, enabling it to provide (within the logical limits set by coherence with its principles) a home and habitat for the full range of other particular, minority *asabiyyat* included

⁴⁷ The essential reading on the foundational ideas of liberal perfectionism is doubtless Raz 1986.

within its sphere, before neutralist liberalism succeeds in completing its self-destruction.

But, as we know, a recovery of this kind—a resurgent pull to embrace the cultural and moral roots of our civilization—needs to spring from within: It needs to proceed in the first place from a civil society which can rekindle its own desire to be true to itself, and which can find the strength to assert its own partiality—a welcoming society, to be sure, but within the frame of its own substantive principles. As things stand, however, a revival of this kind seems at best a distant utopia.

Which is evidence, perhaps, that the senility theorized by Ibn Khaldun—that point beyond which a civilization loses its will to fight, and perhaps even to live—may be about to come, making way for great changes to come.

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