

Book Reviews

Applying Ibn Khaldūn: The Recovery of a Lost Tradition in Sociology

Syed Farid Alatas

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The intellectual legacy of Ibn Khaldūn is unique among Muslim historians, and yet he is not fully appreciated in the East. Many Muslim scholars—including Muhammad Abdullah Enan, Muhsin Mahdi, and Mahmoud Dhaoudi—have written about Ibn Khaldūn in English. Their treatment of him was either comparative or historical, but none presented his theory as a valid framework for sociological analysis today as Syed Farid Alatas does in his *Applying Ibn Khaldūn*.

‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406), a medieval North African scholar, can be regarded as the father of sociology. Centuries before modern European scholars such as Adam Smith and Émile Durkheim conceived of the theories that would become the foundation of the discipline of sociology, Ibn Khaldūn pioneered ideas on social solidarity and the division of labour. However, he has not been acknowledged for his contribution, partly due to the Eurocentric bias of dominant Western education.

Alatas laments the fact that Ibn Khaldūn has been neglected in sociological studies. He mentions the example of Harry Barnes (*Sociology before Compte*, 1917) and Howard Becker (*Ancient and Medieval Social Philosophy*, 1948) who, due to their Eurocentric approach, consider Ibn Khaldūn to lack an empiricist mentality, because they observe that he weaves supernatural elements into his work. Alatas, however, argues that Ibn Khaldūn’s citation of the Qur’an and Prophetic traditions is peripheral to his theory of social change. Alatas’s book is an attempt to revive the importance of Ibn Khaldūn as a social thinker on par with any other modern social scientist:

His importance as a social thinker lies not in his exhaustive treatment of a wide range of materials but rather in his peculiar treatment of this material. In that sense, he was much like Durkheim, Weber and others, a human mind trying to comprehend rather than catalogue the specifically social factors in man's living and doing. (48)

Again, many scholars have written on Ibn Khaldūn, but most treat him as an historical figure or present him as a precursor to modern social thinkers. For Alatas, however, Ibn Khaldūn is not only a historical phenomenon, but presents a social theory that is applicable today. He states that only a few studies have "gone beyond mere comparison of some ideas and concepts in Ibn Khaldūn with those of modern western thinkers, towards theoretical integration of his theory into a framework that employs some of the tools of modern social sciences" (49).

Contemporary attempts at the Islamization of the social sciences have failed because the focus over the last four decades has been on a syncretism between Islam and the social science disciplines, and the trend was usually to show that scientific or social facts had already been mentioned in the Qur'an or by some early Islamic thinker. This kind of comparison may be of historical interest, but stems from a sense of inferiority, since scholars such as Ibn Khaldūn are still treated as objects of study, rather than as subjects with independent theories to be considered. Comparisons of this nature can also be rather misleading: for example, attempts to show that Ibn Khaldūn's theory of the division of labour preceded that of Adam Smith can lead to misunderstanding Ibn Khaldūn as an early proponent of capitalism. But he was analysing the tribal society of North Africa, and not the market economy of modern Europe.

Ibn Khaldūn lived in a tribal society characterised by *ʿasabiyyah* (social solidarity), which is central to understanding his science of civilization (*al-ʿumrān*) as expounded in his *Prolegomena (Muqaddimah)*, which is a scientific description of the economic and social life of his time. His theory of social solidarity (*ʿasabiyyah*) resonated with the Ottoman scholars who noted the parallels between the rise and fall of North African dynasties and the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire. This is a departure from the classical mystical scholars, including al-Ghazālī, who tended to espouse an abstract view of the happiness of the afterlife at the expense of the empirical realities of this world.

Applying Ibn Khaldūn is not Alatas's only book: he also authored *Ibn Khaldūn* (Oxford University Press, 2012), an introductory work on the sub-

ject. *Applying Ibn Khaldūn* is his more scholarly contribution that provides a systematic exposition of Ibn Khaldūn's social theory based on primary Arabic sources, including the Arabic *Muqaddimah (Prolegomena)* and the English version by Franz Rosenthal. Alatas has rearticulated Ibn Khaldūn as a model for sociological analysis, not only for Ibn Khaldūn's time but also for ours. He demonstrates the applicability of Ibn Khaldūn's theory to Ottoman and Safavid history (chapters 6 and 7), and also employs the theory to explain the rise of the modern Arab state of Saudi Arabia.

Alatas is not suggesting that we follow Ibn Khaldūn blindly, but argues that we need to distinguish the general principles of his ideas from the specific tribal context in which he lived. For example, the crafts of that time played an important role in tribal social solidarity and in the formation and decline of dynasties. Although not quite acknowledged by the author, there is an economic system implicit in Ibn Khaldūn's theory based on the development of the crafts. These crafts, because of their production of luxury goods, promote a lifestyle of opulence, which in turn leads to the weakening of social solidarity and the decline of the ruling dynasty (chapter 2).

As regards the premodern application of Ibn Khaldūn, the author provides the example of Pirizade Mehmed Sahib (1674-1749), who used Ibn Khaldūn's theory to justify the Ottoman claim to the caliphate. He held that the Prophetic tradition that the caliphate should be descended from the Quraysh tribe is no longer valid. Ibn Khaldūn's perspective is sociological, explaining the decline of the Quraysh in terms of their loss of social solidarity.

Chapter 9 is probably the key chapter of the book, in which Alatas calls for a Khaldūnian sociology of the state and the need to introduce Ibn Khaldūn into the sociology curriculum—not merely as a historical figure but as a theorist relevant for sociological analysis today. According to Alatas, Becker and Barnes already acknowledge Ibn Khaldūn as the first to “apply modern-like ideas in historical sociology” (145). The author is not proposing that Ibn Khaldūn should replace Western sociological theories, but that he should be placed alongside other social thinkers in the sociology curricula of modern universities. Moreover, his concepts should be integrated into modern sociology and should be applied in a modern context.

Unlike other books on Ibn Khaldūn, Alatas's goes beyond mere comparison; he attempts to formulate a modern Khaldūnian sociology and apply it to an analysis of premodern states (like the Ottoman empire) and modern states (such as Syria and Saudi Arabia). The concept of *‘asabiyyah* is definitely sociological, because it pertains to a social cohesion that is

founded on the knowledge of common kinship. The author holds the view that Ibn Khaldūn's theory lacks the concept of an economic system. He therefore tries to formulate an economic system in relation to Ibn Khaldūn's theory of state formation and integrate it into a theory of modes of production (146).

This integration of Ibn Khaldūn with modern sociology is not merely an exercise in historical survey but is also an attempt at integration at the theoretical level: "It can be said that Ibn Khaldūn's work was a study of the pattern and rhythm of history, while the modes of production framework emphasizes the modes of production in the study of the driving forces of history" (147). Alatas seeks to demonstrate a reading of Ibn Khaldūn's theory of state formation not just as an object of study but as a source of theory; not to replace any other theory but to add to the variety of theories:

Such a project should be undertaken not for the purpose of replacing European categories and concepts with Arab and Muslim ones but with the intention of enriching the social sciences by making available a great variety of ideas and perspectives. (151)

This point is significant in the light of recent calls for decolonized education in South Africa, whereby certain elements within the decolonized educational movement tend to be reactionary by attempting to replace Eurocentric education with African-centred education. Alatas does not agree with this kind of reaction to Eurocentricism, nor is it for him enough to simply add Ibn Khaldūn into the social science curriculum; he wants us to be open to the epistemologies of the South and to redress the cognitive injustice and failure to recognize different ways of knowing:

The problem is not the omission of references to Ibn Khaldūn, but the lack of consideration of Ibn Khaldūn in a non-European manner, that is, as a knowing subject and as a founder of concepts and categories for the social sciences. To a great extent, Eurocentrism remains a dominant feature because of the nature of the sociology curriculum. (152)

Alatas opens up new vistas for epistemological pluralism and a multicultural approach to the teaching of sociology that allows for variety, rather than one dominant Eurocentric approach. If there were such a variety and comparison with Western theories, students would adopt a more critical approach to the European theories of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, and not follow them blindly (153). Clearly, sociological studies should cultivate critical thinking among students, but this can only be achieved if they are

exposed to a variety of theories. A serious obstacle to multiculturalism in Africa and Asia is precisely the Eurocentric bias of the social sciences, and one way of overcoming this is to cultivate a multicultural sensibility among students (153).

Many decolonial thinkers come out of the Euro-American academy, but Alatas is one of those few scholars who come from the Far East, shedding light on a North African sociologist of the fourteenth century. Applying Ibn Khaldūn is a major contribution to the discipline of sociology, and is suitable for any social science course that seeks to adopt a multicultural approach.

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