

*Ibn Khaldun: A Dialectical Philosopher for the New Millennium<sup>1</sup>*

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If we were asked to describe in a word the central concerns of Western philosophy, high on everyone's list of responses would be the individual. No doubt the formation of the autonomous individual is one of Europe's lasting contributions to world civilization. How then are we in the West to comprehend other forms in which the individual appeared in history? How should we read philosophers for whom the individual's place was foreshadowed by the group? The answer to both questions is: with difficulty. In this paper, I seek to synthesize philosophical first principles capable of orienting us in our rapidly changing world and guiding us in the future. In my view, it is imperative that we open our horizons to include thinkers like Ibn Khaldun. The dire effects of European individualism have been so great that we desperately need to rethink the categories of individual and group.

Any attempt to draw parallels between the philosophies of Europe and of Islam runs the risk of obscuring what is original in Islamic traditions, since we in the West are vastly more familiar with the former than the latter. Particularly in the case of Abu Zayd Abdel Rahman Ibn Khaldun, a fourteenth century philosopher whose life was intricately interwoven with the great political and military dramas of his times, a veritable fountain of original thought could be dammed up by imposing the categories of

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Pan African Conference on Philosophy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in December 1996. In its original form, it appeared in **Perspectives in African Philosophy**, edited by Claude Sumner and Samuel Yohannes (Addis Ababa: Rodopi Publishers, 1997). I wish to thank Eliza Dame, May Farhat, David Gullette, Teodros Kiros and participants at the Pan African Conference on philosophy for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

European thought. Five centuries before Darwin discovered the specific features of evolution, Ibn Khaldun wrote that humans developed from "the world of the monkeys" through a widening process in which "species become more numerous."<sup>2</sup> Nearly half a millennium before Karl Marx sketched the systematic implications of the labor theory of value, Ibn Khaldun wrote that "labor is the real basis of profit."<sup>3</sup> Four hundred years before Auguste Comte's "invention" of sociology, Ibn Khaldun unveiled his "science of culture."<sup>4</sup>

Unlike scholars in the industrial West, where the division of labor marginalized them from the corridors of power, Ibn Khaldun served as chamberlain, secretary, ambassador and advisor to various sultans, emirs and princes in Andalusia (Spain) and throughout the Maghreb (the Arabic word for "Occident" that refers to Africa north of the Sahara--the "Island of the Sunset" from the perspective of Arabia proper). Wherever he went, revolutions, invasions and political upheavals seemed to be the order of the day. Born in Tunis in 732 (1332 C.E.), he lived there much of his youth and was educated by some of the world's finest teachers in what was then one of the centers of learning in the world. Ibn Khaldun's life was thrown into turmoil by the plague (from which both his parents and nearly all his teachers died in 1349). He left Tunis and embarked upon a promising political career. Among his many interventions in history can be counted a meeting with Timur (also known as Tamerlane--the Chaghatai

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2.Ibn Khaldun, **The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History**, translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal, 3 volumes (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986) 1:195. Hereafter, citations from the **Muqaddimah** are abbreviated and listed as volume number:page number.

3.1:303.

4.Muhsin Mahdi, **Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History** (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957). Explication of his sociological system also can be found in Amal Almawi, "Ibn Khaldun: A Pioneer Sociologist," unpublished Master's Dissertation, Boston University, Department of Sociology, 1988.

Turkish chieftain whose forces conquered much of the world). When Timur's cavalry surrounded Damascus, Ibn Khaldun was one of the notables who slipped out of the city to negotiate with him. Ibn Khaldun wrote a history of the Maghreb for the Mongol, and Timur showed his appreciation by sparing the lives of some of the city's elite when his men ravaged Damascus. He was the ambassador of the Sultan of Granada to Pedro the Cruel, the Christian king of Castile in 1363. Although once imprisoned for nearly two years, he was blessed with good luck and traveled extensively at a time when few people could find the means to do so. Soon after his entire family died in a shipwreck, he made the Hajj to Mecca. In 1377, in the short period of five months, he wrote the **Muqaddimah** (or **Prolegomena**) while secluded at a palace of Sultan Abu Hamu near Tujin.<sup>5</sup> Although he added to his work over the next five years, the whirlwinds of political change and courtly intrigue compelled him to set aside his Prolegomena and move to Cairo, where he became a noted professor, judge and sheikh (manager) of Baybars, the greatest Sufi institution of that age. His final work, an autobiography, has yet to be translated into English.

Since Ibn Khaldun's life was so thoroughly connected to historical events, his theory organically links the realms of ideas and actions. Thus to pose the categories of his thought in the scholastic tradition of Western philosophy (particularly the idealism/materialism schism) completely fails to deal with the unity of these domains in Ibn Khaldun's system. The prevalence with which Europeans have compared Ibn Khaldun to Western scholars has led Franz Rosenthal, Ibn Khaldun's

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5.M.A.Enan, **Ibn Khaldun: His Life and Work** (Lahore, India:1975) pp. 51-2.

translator and one of the principal Arabist scholars in the United States, to coin the term "forerunner syndrome" to describe and simultaneously criticize this tendency.<sup>6</sup>

Praise, too, can be a means of obscuring the contributions of Ibn Khaldun. In his three volume **Study of History**, Arnold Toynbee calls Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history "the greatest work of its kind that has ever been created by any mind in any time or place."<sup>7</sup> For Toynbee, Ibn Khaldun was the "sole point of light" and "the one outstanding personality" of Islamic thought, absurd ideas that illustrate centuries of the West's utter disregard of the Islamic intellectual tradition. His cultural context incapacitated Toynbee, but his own system places Ibn Khaldun within the prevailing Western viewpoint that modern history begins with the Renaissance, an assumption that clearly transposes Western historical conditions onto world history. Toynbee fails to comprehend Ibn Khaldun's continuity with Hellenistic and Byzantine philosophy, or with Islamic historians who produced comprehensive world histories like that of Tabari (died in 923), Al Masudi (died in 945), and Idrisi's **Book of Roger** (written for the Norman king of Sicily in 1154). Early in his life, Ibn Khaldun became familiar with the philosophies of Farabi (died in 950), Avicenna (died in 1037), and Averroes (died in 1198), and much of his own work can be understood as a dialogue with these voices from the past.<sup>8</sup> Nor are Ibn Khaldun's contemporaries counted by Toynbee, thinkers like Rashid-ad-din Fadlallah (died 1318) who published a General History, the Iberian Ibn al-Khatib, and the Persian Muhammed b. Ibrahim al Iji,

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6. See his essay, "Ibn Khaldun and his Time" in **Ibn Khaldun and Islamic Ideology** edited by Bruce B. Lawrence (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984) p. 15.

7. Toynbee, **A Study of History: The Growth of Civilizations** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) Vol. 3, p. 322.

<sup>8</sup> See Muhsin Mahdi, op.cit., p.33.

whose treatise on historical methods appeared in 1381. Toynbee's ignorance of this tradition is curious since its importance is immediately apparent to any reader of Ibn Khaldun because of his reliance on dozens of thinkers from Aristotle to the seminal minds that produced the many localized histories that he critically examined in the course of constructing his own system.<sup>9</sup>

During the same century that Ibn Khaldun lived, there was not one Christian Arabic scholar in Europe.<sup>10</sup> Long before Europeans became acquainted with Muslim thought, Turkish scholars delighted in the treasures they found accessible to them. Despite Europe's ignorance, Europeans "discovered" the importance of Ibn Khaldun in the nineteenth century, thereby elevating his status from just another "footnote to Islamic historiography...As the foremost Muslim historian of Ibn Khaldun, M. Talbi, remarked, 'It was in Europe that Ibn Khaldun was discovered and the importance of his Mukaddima realized.'"<sup>11</sup> Once the thought of Ibn Khaldun became known in Europe, however, a growing list of admirers appeared, and fawning admiration and inclination toward the appropriation of Ibn Khaldun into a preexisting system of Eurocentric categories accelerated.

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9.Continuity -- not interruption as in Western Europe -- marked the character of the Arab and Islamic intellectual traditions. For discussion of some of the sources used by Ibn Khaldun, see 2: 157, 187-8; Enan, op. cit., pp. 123-9, 148, 155, 164, 172, 180. Ibn Khaldun's student Taqi al-Din al-Makrizi adopted the methods of Ibn Khaldun in his own treatment of the history of Egypt. See Enan, op. cit., p. 98-100.

10.R.W. Southern, **Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages** (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1962) p. 88.

11.quoted from Bruce Lawrence's essay "Ibn Khaldun and Islamic Reform" on p. 69 of **Ibn Khaldun and Islamic Ideology**.

The first European biography of Ibn Khaldun was published in 1697 in French,<sup>12</sup> and excerpts from the **Muqaddimah** were first translated in 1806. In 1812, a German synopsis of Ibn Khaldun's theory of the decline of dynasties appeared, followed by another extract of the original.<sup>13</sup> Although de Stacy published a complete French translation in 1856, it was not until 1957 that a complete English translation of the Prolegomena was published.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not Vico, Hegel and Marx read about Ibn Khaldun in summaries of Arab philosophies is unknown (although H. Simon speculates that Marx and Engels may even have seen the French translation of his Prolegomena).<sup>15</sup> It seems quite likely that Machiavelli knew of Ibn Khaldun, although Enan insists that Machiavelli "undoubtedly knew nothing about him."<sup>16</sup> Hegel was well aware of the contributions of Arab scholars in both medicine and philosophy, and in his brief synopsis of their thought, he praised their "assistance" to Europe:

Philosophy, like the arts and sciences, when through the rule of the Barbarians of Germany, they became dumb and lifeless, took refuge with the Arabians, and there attained a wonderful development; they were the first source from which the West obtained assistance.<sup>17</sup>

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12.Enan, op. cit., p. 150.

13.Enan refers to the Austrian Von Hammer-Purgstall's **Über den Verfall des Islams nach den ersten drei Jahrhunderten der Hidschrat** (1812) in which Ibn Khaldun was called the "Montesquieu of the Arabs."

14.Among others, Hodgson is quite critical of Rosenthal's translation.

15.See H. Simon, **Ibn Khaldun's Science of Human Culture**, translated by F. Baali (Lahore, India: 1978) pp. 92-3.

16.Enan, op. cit., p. 158. Also see Barbara Stowasser, "Religion and Political Development: Some Comparative Ideas on Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli," (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1983).

17.Hegel, **Lectures on the History of Philosophy** (Englewood Cliffs: Humanities Press, 1983) Vol. 3, p. 25. Hegel's remarks on Islamic thinkers are minimal and can be found on pp. 27-9.

Hegel included little of Arab philosophy in his three volume **Lectures on the History of Philosophy**, and he paid even less attention to Byzantine thought, giving the entire history of Byzantium only two passing mentions in his **Philosophy of History**.

In these brief remarks on Ibn Khaldun, I pay particular attention to two facets of his philosophy: the role of the individual and the place of group in history. I examine what he wrote explicitly in relation to these two dimensions of history, and I also seek to situate him in his cultural context, thereby affording some sense of the implicitly understood values of his day. By so analyzing Ibn Khaldun, the cultural background of his philosophical thinking moves to the foreground. In his own day, he was a celebrated teacher and philosopher as well as a player in the political dramas of societies whose place in the trajectory of world civilization is not to be minimized. He was a dialectical thinker for whom spirit was a material force, a staunch advocate of justice (which indicated to him the need for strong government), and a partisan in the struggle to ennoble the human species. I seek to illuminate his contributions to the forging of a contemporary understanding that is both spiritual and historical. While universalizing themes of importance in his cultural tradition, I try not to diminish his shining contributions and originality. Following the lead established by Marshall Hodgson, I seek to locate Ibn Khaldun in the "Oikoumene"--the whole Afro-Eurasian historical complex from the beginnings of history to today.<sup>18</sup>

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18.Hodgson thereby is able to avoid understanding Islamic history from the point of view of the West as well as to avert the more common view today that Islam represents something completely new rather than transforming an existent civilization and taking it in a new direction. See Marshall Hodgson, **The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization**, (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1974) Vol. 1, p. 50. For an appreciative reading of Hodgson's concept of Oikoumene, see Albert Hourani, **Islam in European Thought** (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 79.

## Philosophical Foundations

The tension between religious orthodoxy and philosophical inquiry continues today to animate Islamic thinking, just as it has for generations. In the middle of the fourteenth century, Ibn Khaldun rejected all previous attempts to reconcile the natural order of worldly events and the divine character of the cosmos. The Ash'arite understanding posed religious principles that were dogmatically defended, a theological philosophy that bordered on the rejection of reason altogether.<sup>19</sup> Using the newly-developed science of logic, more 'modern' thinkers used metaphysical doctrines from Aristotle and the Greeks to refute the Ash'arites. While Ibn Khaldun, like nearly all Islamic philosophers, regarded Aristotle as the "first teacher," he parted company with the moderns and differentiated between the physical world and the divine world, insisting that philosophy could not comprehend divinity.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, he clearly believed that logical thought could not completely grasp all facets of life.<sup>21</sup> In this fundamental precept, he upheld the traditional Islamic notion (one that marked a major point of divergence from the Western synthesis of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus) which had been central to the philosophy of Avicenna. According to Ibn Khaldun:

Man is composed of two parts. One is corporeal. The other is spiritual, and mixed with the former. Each one of these parts has its own perceptions, though the (part) that perceives is the same in both cases, namely the spiritual part. At times, it perceives spiritual perceptions. At other times, it perceives corporeal perceptions. However, it perceives the spiritual perceptions through its own essence without any intermediary,

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19. Mahdi, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

20. 2:52.

21. 3:89; 3:253-4.



while it perceives the corporeal perceptions through the intermediary of organs of the body, such as the brain and the senses.<sup>22</sup>

In posing such a model of human beings, Ibn Khaldun distanced himself from what was in his day the most recent philosophical legacy within Islamic thought. Unlike more traditional Ash'arites, however, he insisted that logical abstraction of universals (not the application of dogma) could lead to an understanding of the essential nature of the physical world. In this way, he opened the door to his new science of human culture.

The problem of the relation of the actions of human beings to the divine world was not a simple one to resolve. Ibn Khaldun understood the realm of Spirit as prior to and influencing the world of the body:

...there is something that exercises an influence and is different than bodily substances. This is something spiritual. It is connected with the created things, because the various worlds must be connected in their existence. This spiritual thing is the soul, which has perception and causes motion. Above the soul...is the world of angels.<sup>23</sup>

For Ibn Khaldun, the soul had form and substance<sup>24</sup> since its existence materialized in the exchange of “potentiality for actuality with the help of the body and (bodily) conditions.” After the soul had materialized in actuality, it had “two kinds of perception,” one through the body and the other “through its own essence, without any intermediacy” when the “veil of the body was lifted.” Soothsaying, dream visions, augury and divination constituted parallel forms of consciousness alongside sensuous

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22.3:253.

<sup>23</sup> 1:195.

<sup>24</sup> 1:214.

observation of empirical reality. In these forms as well as in everyday events like the transition from sleeping to waking or in certain Sufi exercises, he located the possibility of transcending the senses and opening the door to the realm of spiritual perception.<sup>25</sup>

Having established empirical reality as an important object of inquiry, Ibn Khaldun wrote the **Muqaddimah** as an exposition of the patterns of human relationships in connection with environment and history. In the fourteenth century, the Islamic world – particularly in North Africa – was in decline from its glorious past, and Ibn Khaldun attempted to understand the causes of the changes around him. In the Maghreb, various rulers rose and fell, while to the East, Baghdad had fallen to the Mongols in 1258. Ibn Khaldun undoubtedly heard of the European cultural revival (the Renaissance) underway in Italy. Although he had faith that one day Constantinople would be an Islamic city, his own experiences convinced him of the need to ground scientifically his analysis of human beings in order to transcend the particular histories of any one group. By 1377, his own failures in active political life had produced disgust with courtly intrigue and petty rivalries, and thus his Prolegomena is an attempt to produce a history at a universal level, one that would not be situated in the personal needs of any ruler or the narrative history of any particular group.

A central issue in Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history was the possibility of human beings understanding forces beyond their control. He sketched an historical process which, in the final analysis, was not simply a history of external events but rather that of human beings becoming who they in essence are. As such, he offers valuable insights into the character and conduct of our species. Ibn Khaldun comprehended specific actions as existing within an internal and invisible rational structure

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<sup>25</sup> See 1:202-239.

through which external facts could be understood. Narrative history, i.e. the recounting of specific events, was inferior to philosophical history through which the inner causes and remote origins of events could be understood.

### **The Nature of Human Beings**

What then was Ibn Khaldun's view of human beings? In a phrase, he was unambiguously negative. "Man is ignorant by nature..."<sup>26</sup> Royal authority, a "natural" quality of humans, was necessary to insure proper behavior.<sup>27</sup> But what of a transforming process through which humans might elevate themselves? For Ibn Khaldun, the unchanged individual might ascend to angelicality, but he was never transformed into an angel (the equivalent of self-transformation in secular thought). Moreover, where history might have a direction, a telos, for Ibn Khaldun, a natural cycle of growth and decay operated, a natural cycle of three generations for dynasties. For him, the rigors of desert life compelled toughness and puritanical self-restraint, the opposite of "urban weaklings" amid the "stupid mass." As Muhsin Mahdi summarized Ibn Khaldun's view:

Man is by nature a domineering being; and his desire to overcome (*qahr*) others, and subdue and coerce them, is the source of wars and of trespassing the properties of others. It moves those desiring victories to struggle for political supremacy and for establishing the state in which they intend to be leaders. Those who are conquered and enslaved, on the other hand, wither away, since to be enslaved is contrary to human nature and leads to the loss of hope.<sup>28</sup>

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26.1: 215, 266.

27.1:92

28.Mahdi, op. cit., p. 178.

At best, Ibn Khaldun hoped governments would rule as uncorrupted representatives of the divine laws, a belief that earned him a reputation as a harsh puritan while he served as a judge in Cairo.<sup>29</sup> For Ibn Khaldun, authority was one of the four attributes that distinguish humans from animals (the others being thought, labor and civilization), a view that flows from his perspective that individuals were "savage" and the mass "stupid."

Humans were so tragically stuck in their God-given status that imagination in Ibn Khaldun's schema could not be a source of transformative behavior that might uplift individuals. Rather it gave familiar molds to inspired forms of knowledge. Imagination linked the spiritual and the secular.<sup>30</sup> In his understanding of the mind, Ibn Khaldun differentiated external sense perception and inward perception, the first type of which was common sense. In his schema, common sense transferred perceptions to the imagination, "the power that pictures an object of sensual perception in the soul, as it is, abstracted from all external matter."<sup>31</sup> Following Avicenna's psychology, imagination was then understood as leading to memory and the association of related abstract ideas, all of which culminate in thinking. In his typology of souls, there were three kinds: weak ones limited to the body, intermediate ones moving in the direction of angels, and ones like the prophets capable of attaining angelicality. Ibn Khaldun limited imagination to souls of the first kind. Intuition was characteristic of the second, revelation of the third.<sup>32</sup> Imagination was most strongly developed in soothsayers and augurs, persons whose "inferior"

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29. See. 1:84.

30. 1:216.

31. 1:196-7.

32. 1:197-199.

souls constrained their perfection but who nonetheless sought visions.<sup>33</sup> Imagination was an important resource for the common people since they were not capable of even glimpsing divine reality. Only prophets like Jesus and Mohammed could see God and the angels. As one analyst summarized:

...the seeming naturalism of Ibn Khaldun's accounts does not proceed from appeals to a 'nature' whose independent existence controls interpretation of it, not to a 'nature' capable of cultivation and refinement. His realism, better called tragic realism, invokes a conception of the mundane as a sad, fallen approximation of the sublime. Ibn Khaldun's man is not the child of nature of nature nor the master of culture but the creature and creator of the mundane...<sup>34</sup>

In Ibn Khaldun's view, neither philosophers nor speculative theologians properly understand the character of imagined pictures constituted during dreams. The former "assume that imaginary pictures are transmitted by the imagination through the motion of thinking to the 'common sense' which constitutes the connecting link between external and inner sense perception."<sup>35</sup> The problem for Ibn Khaldun was that this view was incapable of distinguishing between divine and Satanic inspiration. The theologians, on the other hand, understood imagined pictures (dreams) as "a kind of perception created by God in (the realm of) the senses." In this case, although we are unable to perceive how dreams take place, they provide evidence that sensual perception operates independently of the active senses--i.e. on the level of the soul. In this fashion, Ibn Khaldun posed the theologians as correct, even to the point of urging that no attention be paid to the psychology of Avicenna.<sup>36</sup>

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33.1:203-4; 217-8.

34.Jon W. Anderson, "Conjuring with Ibn Khaldun," in Lawrence, op. cit., p. 119.

35.3:72.

36.3:73.

Unable to ground imagination in secular processes, Ibn Khaldun poses an ascension to the realm of angels rather than an elevation of human social organization as the direction for human perfection. For Ibn Khaldun, the power of thinking

...wants to be free from the grip of power, and the human kind of preparedness. It wants to proceed to active intellection by assimilating itself to the highest spiritual power group (that of the angels), and to get into the first order of the **spiritualia** by perceiving them without the help of bodily organs. Therefore the soul is constantly moving in that direction. It exchanges all humanity and human spirituality for angelicity of the highest stage, without the help of any acquired faculty but by virtue of a primary natural disposition that God has placed in it.<sup>37</sup>

But in the real world of history, individual savagery and anarchy were continual dangers, all the more so since, "People have no desire for virtue."<sup>38</sup> They have no special interest in virtuous people, and there is a general absence of individual virtue.<sup>39</sup> Ibn Khaldun was unafraid to state straightforwardly just how little regard he had for his fellow humans:

One may compare the swarms of human beings with the swarms of dumb animals, and the crumbs from tables with the surplus of sustenance and luxury and the ease with which it can be given away by the people who have it, because as a rule they can do without it, since they have more of it.<sup>40</sup>

For Ibn Khaldun, the group, not the individual, was history's focal point and determining factor. Individuals seldom--if ever, unless they were divinely inspired--have more than a minor influence on the

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37.1:197.

38.1:72.

39.1:72.

40.2:275-6.

overwhelming forces of history. Indeed, the individual for Ibn Khaldun is practically neglected as a philosophical topic.<sup>41</sup>

### **Individual and Group**

Given the lack of virtue and low level of intelligence accorded to humans by Ibn Khaldun, how then could societies hold together? His answer was social solidarity, or *assabiyah* (translated as "group feeling" by Rosenthal). For Ibn Khaldun, those groups with a strong sense of *assabiyah* are destined to be strong and to rule--at least as long as they are able to maintain their sense of identity and solidarity. Thus, groups composed of blood relatives (as in the case of many Bedouin communities) have the strongest possible ties since they are based on kinship, while urban settings predispose any group to an eventual weakening of its group feelings. For Ibn Khaldun, *assabiyah* is the basis for political power and cultural hegemony, while unrestrained individualism was one source of the downfall of groups. He comprehended revolutions as consisting of the struggle for power between outsider groups struggling to overthrow insider groups whose "group feeling" was declining due to the comforts that ruling provided. (The outcome of revolutions often depended upon luck or astrological conditions.<sup>42</sup>)

Having committed himself to an understanding of political power as resting upon group strength, Ibn Khaldun went on to portray groups in stereotypical fashion. He was enormously critical of the impact of nomadic Arabs on the civilizations they came to dominate. As examples of their destructive impulses, he gave their continual pulling out of foundation stones in buildings to make

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41. Charles Issawi, **An Arab Philosophy of History: Selections from the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun of Tunis (1332-1406)** (London: The Darwin Press, 1987) p. 7.

42.2:213.

campfire circles, and their burning of finished roofs and other wood in the fires. Perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, he was extraordinarily critical of Arabs.<sup>43</sup> In Ibn Khaldun's words:

...because of their savagery, the Arabs are the least willing of nations to subordinate themselves to each other, as they are rude, proud, ambitious, and eager to be the leader. Their individual aspirations rarely coincide. But when there is religion among them, through prophecy or sainthood, then they have some restraining influence in themselves.<sup>44</sup>

He considered Arabs savage by "character and nature"-- a "natural disposition that is the negation and antithesis of civilization." The transformation of these tough, desert dwellers into "urban weaklings" is one explanation for the destruction of dynasties.<sup>45</sup> His criticisms of the Arabs can partially be understood here as a critique of the failure of any group to maintain a sense of inner solidarity.

Ibn Khaldun's **Prolegomena** also suffered from a stereotypical view of Africans:

We have seen that Negroes are in general characterized by levity, excitability, and great emotionalism. They are found eager to dance whenever they hear a melody. They are everywhere described as stupid.<sup>46</sup>

Ibn Khaldun was a dialectician, but the nature of his dialectical method was limited to the first of two kinds of dialectic generally understood as comprising dialectical thought. It was external rather than immanent. (In the former, fixed assumptions and widely-held propositions are made to totter by reasons external to them; in the latter, one delves into the object in question, discovering the black in its

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43. There is some doubt exactly whom Ibn Khaldun meant to refer to in his use of the terms translated by Rosenthal as "Arab." Some maintain he meant Bedouins, while others insist he means Arabs as they existed before the rise of Islam.

44.1:305.

45.1:458.

46.1:174.



white and the white in its black. This second kind of dialectical thought is diametrically opposed to rigidly posed black/white categories.) Clearly Ibn Khaldun's notion of dialectic was limited to the first kind.<sup>47</sup>

Not only did he formulate his notion of the individual and the specific nature of groups in rigid categories, but the philosophical framework within which his notions of individual and group are contained precluded the transformation of either. As we have seen, individuals were tragically stuck in predetermined fates while groups' natures were statically formulated in hypercritical terms. The above examples of group stereotyping reflect a deeper problematic: the tendency of philosophers to pose rigid categories. Hegel, perhaps the greatest Western philosopher of history prior to industrialization, was an unabashed racist:

Negroes are to be regarded as a race of children who remain immersed in their state of uninterested **naivete**. They are sold, and let themselves be sold, without any reflection on the rights and wrongs of the matter. The Higher which they feel they do not hold fast to, it is only a fugitive thought. This higher they transfer to the first stone they come across, thus making it their fetish and they throw this fetish away if it fails to help them. Good-natured and harmless when at peace, they can become suddenly enraged and then commit the most frightful cruelties.<sup>48</sup>

For Hegel, the Caucasians' "infinite thirst for knowledge" was "alien to other races."<sup>49</sup> On the Teutonic nations, the world-spirit imposed the task of developing an embryo into the form of the thinking man.<sup>50</sup>

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47.3:31-2.

48.G.W.F. Hegel, **Philosophy of Mind** (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) p. 42. In fairness, Hegel's preceding page contains the following: "Man is implicitly rational; herein lies the possibility of equal justice for all men and the futility of a rigid distinction between races which have rights and those which have none."

49.Hegel, **Philosophy of Mind**, op. cit., p. 45

50.Hegel, **Lectures on the History of Philosophy**, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 24.

What separated the Orient and Africa from the West was that for the former everything was explicit and so humans were "free", while the European were in the midst of a process of making the implicit real--of realizing self-consciously determined Ideals. In his words:

It is in the Caucasian race that mind first attains to absolute unity with itself. Here for the first time mind enters into complete opposition to the life of Nature, apprehends itself in its absolute self-dependence, wrests itself free from the fluctuation between one-extreme and the other, achieves **self**-determination, self-development and in doing so creates world-history.<sup>51</sup>

It is to Ibn Khaldun's credit that, unlike Hegel and so many other philosophers, he did not elevate his own group above others and thereby succumb to ethnocentrism. To this day, the universalistic dimension of Islam, legendary from the transformation of Malcolm X because of his encounters with non-racist whites during his pilgrimage to Mecca, contributes to its status as the world's fastest growing religion.

The group feeling of Muslims is surely one of Islam's noteworthy dimensions, but to return to an important issue: what is the status of the individual? Is there a relation between the Muslim prohibition of the human figure in art and Ibn Khaldun's understanding of the individual? Is *assabiyyah* a mechanical negation of the savage individualism of which Ibn Khaldun was so critical, not its determinate sublation?

There has yet to be an adequate analysis of Ibn Khaldun's notion of the individual. It appears that his unwillingness to thematize rigorously his notion of the individual reflects the prevailing cultural values of the context in which he lived. The paramount significance of the group in both Arab and Islamic civilization appears to have blocked the emergence of the autonomous individual. Franz

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51.Hegel, **Philosophy of Mind**, op. cit., p. 44.

Rosenthal informs us that autobiography is "not highly developed" among Arabs.<sup>52</sup> Even the name by which Ibn Khaldun has become known in history is not his own, but his father's. Arab patriarchy militates against the construction of autonomous individual identity today as much as 600 years ago, at least if we judge by names derived from Abu (father) and Ibn (son). Within an elaborate web of (continually reproduced) familial identities, strict social conventions and cultural obligations, individuals in Islamic societies remain bound by collective forms whose power has long since been diminished in the West. To be sure, an individual emerged in the Arab world, but it was a dependent individual confined in life-options and social possibilities. We can observe this dynamic in many domains. Hodgson tells us that even in love-poetry, "the realm of private sentiment, etiquette and courtesy reigned, and the poet's aim was to handle public images with grace and splendor."<sup>53</sup> (Of course, one consequence of poetry designed for public recitation -- not private reading -- is the forging of group solidarity and shared experience.) Other cultural links can be found: impersonality and collectivism are recurring features of Arab prose literature.<sup>54</sup> Arabic pedagogy is based on memorization and recitation, not individual creativity and thoughtfulness. Ibn Khaldun himself recommended memorization as the first step toward understanding the best of Arabic poetry and for acquiring literary taste.<sup>55</sup>

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52. Rosenthal in Lawrence, op. cit., p. 19.

53. Hodgson, op. cit., Vol. 2 p. 303 (quoted in Hourani, op. cit., p. 75).

54. Bernard Lewis, **The Arabs in History** (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) p. 142.

55. 3:392, 395.

It appears that the Orientalist view of Arabs as "solitary, romantic men"<sup>56</sup> does not correspond to the inner reality of their group life. Indeed, the Orientalist view of unbridled Arab individualism appears to emerge from centuries-old European needs to defame Arabs and Islam in order to prepare for war against them:

Ishmael had been driven into the desert...Ishmael was a wild man whose hand was against every man's: could any better description of the Saracens be found than this?<sup>57</sup>

Even if we approach a contemporary example of what might be considered savage individualism, we find group feeling as the primary motivation. I refer to individuals who sacrifice themselves through actions like the "revolutionary suicide" of car bombers. As with Japanese kamikaze pilots, one result of such actions is the destruction of the individual who undertakes it. Such actions articulate an Eastern principle of the subordination of the individual to the group -- in this case, in the struggle against an externally-defined enemy.

No doubt, the tragic effects of Western savage individualism -- the plundering of the planet for individual greed and the imperialist conquest of its peoples -- should be mentioned at this juncture. In exploring the future potential of human freedom, however, it is important to distinguish between individuality and individualism. The former refers to a harmonious relation between the single human being's inward life and outward relationships to others while the latter denotes the individual as an isolated monad held in check by repressive groups (in which he/she may or may not claim membership). The determinate negation of the savage individualism of Western imperialism is not the mechanical imposition of group needs and identity but the metamorphosis of individualism into

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56.Herder (as quoted by Hourani, op. cit., p. 25).

57.Southern, op. cit., p. 17.

individuality and of collectivism into self-conscious collectivity (i.e., the transformation of groups through an immanent self-consciousness that they are part of the human family, not simply an identity defined in opposition to external Others). Ironically, the very scourge of the West -- its savage individualism -- may also contain within itself a noble contribution to global civilization. Finding the good in the bad, we might simultaneously locate the seeds of autonomous individuality in the West, (understanding the role of the individual in history as forging rights and imagination) alongside the savage pursuit of wealth and power. Similarly, a contribution of Islamic civilization is the potential of a universal group feeling among human beings that transcends racial, ethnic and even gender divisions. A dialectical sublation of Islamic group feelings synthesized with the determinate negation of Western individualism might result in an individuality that is simultaneously that of an autonomous thinking person and part of a species-cognizant group.<sup>58</sup>

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the species develops a new self-consciousness from the global synthesis of cultural traditions at the end of the twentieth century, the role of philosophical reflection is paramount in solving some of the radically pressing problems humanity has posed for itself. As we destroy Nature and our own natural identities, our problems increasingly demand the reformulation of first principles. The recent triumph of modern rationality and the continuing menace of savage individualism have diminished the significance of other cognitive forms. In this context, intuition becomes part of the subversive power of resistance. Ibn Khaldun's Aristotelian typology of altered states of consciousness (soothsaying, augury, divination, geomancy, etc.) provides one facet of the transcendence of

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58. See the discussion of Nature and history in my book, **The Imagination of the New Left: A Global**

materialistic sensuality and of consumer society. His attention to group feeling and spiritual values is one reason why his understanding of human beings is appropriate to a creative synthesis of tradition and modernity. It may well be that a New Age reading of his work may help produce waking dream visions that inspire action. Furthermore, his emphasis upon the group corresponds to the conditions of postmodernity, where the powers of the individual are diminished and those of groups enhanced. Today it is cultures and identities that are the subjects (and objects) of history; it is groups -- not gods or individuals -- that produce and situate our future.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the current fad of Fukuyama's "end of history," Ibn Khaldun provides a sense of the transitory nature of even the most entrenched social order. Unlike Fukuyama's flattened universe, one in which even its dialectical character is destroyed, the latent potentialities of the species mean reclaiming the thinking of Ibn Khaldun as part of the process of synthesizing philosophical first principles capable of reorienting and uplifting humankind.

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**Analysis of 1968** (Boston: South End Press, 1987).

59. My own particular concern with revitalizing imagination and the individual has been to decipher the meaning of revolts like May 1968 in France, to uncover the latent aspirations and imaginations of millions of people. In such moments of crisis, what I call the "eros effect" occurs, fusing individuals and groups together, and their individual imaginations become the basis for a new "group feeling" that is not tribal or national--but a newly-emergent species self-consciousness. In this context, the subversive irony of Hegel's immanent dialectic finds expression in the fact that identity politics contains within itself a new concrete universal. See my book, **The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life** (Englewood Cliffs: Humanities Press, 1997).