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IBN KHALDŪN AND VICO
A comparative study

Mi'raj Muhammad

Ibn Khaldūn has been compared with a great many Western thinkers, such as Machiavelli, Bodin, Vico, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Condorcet, Hegel, August Comte, Herbert Spencer and others. Franz Rosenthal rightly observes that 'there is hardly any thinker with whom he might not be compared'. Most of the modern critics consider him as the one exception in this respect and consider Vico as the first European philosopher of history and as Ibn Khaldūn’s equal in this field. In view of the high place occupied by Vico in Western thought, we intend to compare some aspects of his thought with the corresponding views of Ibn Khaldūn, especially in the domain of the nature and development of human society.

I

Ibn Khaldūn (1332 - 1406), statesman, jurist, historian and scholar was born in Tunis in an aristocratic family. After completing his early education at the age of twenty, he entered into public life and always kept moving from one place to another throughout South Spain and North Africa, changing his employer, allegiance and career. He lived in a society dominated by war, intrigue, and endless changes of dynasties and rulers. His own fate as a political official with many ups and downs of fortune gave him unusual opportunities for analyzing the events around him and organizing his observations and formulating his theories. This he did when, tired of politics and public life, he lived for three years (1375-1377) in the solitude of a fortress village, Qal’at Ibn Salāma. There he wrote the celebrated Muqaddima (Introduction) to his History of the world (Kitāb al-Ibar), in which this cloistered scholar attempted to inquire into the nature of human history, historical meaning, truth and method.
In the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldūn explicitly calls history a science—an independent science, for, in his view, on the surface, history is no more than a narrative of the events and changes that take place in human society; but in its internal characteristics it is the examination and verification of facts, the attentive investigation of their causes, and profound and comprehensive insight into the way in which social phenomena have been produced. He points out various causes of the errors of historians, and avers that the student of history requires a good speculative mind, numerous sources and much varied knowledge. For instance, he should be familiar with the principles of politics, the fundamentals of geography, the nature of civilization, etc. Ibn Khaldūn regards the knowledge of the nature of civilization or the laws of social change as the best and most reliable criterion to distinguish right from wrong in historical information on the grounds of inherent possibility or absurdity.

This Tunisian scholar of the fourteenth century proffers significant ideas concerning the origins and development of human social organization. He regards society and government as natural and necessary to mankind, and emphatically refutes the view that no rule or society can be constituted without a Divine Law revealed to a prophet. He maintains that a sanction can be provided by the power of the king, or of a ruling group, without there being any Divine Law—as took place, for instance, among the pagans who did not have a Revelation or Sacred Book.

The Arab thinker further elaborates this point by tracing the genesis of society and government. Following the earlier thinkers and philosophers, he maintains that man is a 'thinking and political animal' who sees the advantage, rather inevitability, of mutual cooperation of his fellow men and living in groups in order to be able to satisfy his requirements and to provide protection from wild animals. Group living begins with the family which expands to tribal proportions. This tribal stage is the beginning of human social organization when people live in small communities, villages and deserts, and make their living through agriculture and animal husbandry. At this stage, Ibn Khaldūn observes, new problems crop up, among which the most crucial is that of defence against the aggressiveness of human beings towards each other. In order to maintain proper order among men, they need a person who exercises a restraining influence and possesses authority. He is their ruler.
The restraining influence among these nomadic and primitive tribes, Ibn Khaldūn asserts, comes from their loyalty to their chiefs and elders who are leaders of closely knit groups of common descent. And it is their ‘aqabtya (group feeling or solidarity), a natural urge to defend one's family and blood relations, which inspires their joint effort to make a living and offer resistance to any aggression.14

Because of their peculiar way of life and occupation, the nomadic people or Beduins, as Ibn Khaldūn calls them, restrict themselves to the bare necessities of living, such as food, shelter and warmth, and live a hard life. Subsequent improvement of their conditions and acquisition of more wealth and comfort than they need, cause them to rest and take it easy. Then, they cooperate for things beyond the bare necessities. They build large houses, and lay out towns and cities, or conquer the cities and towns already built by other developed, civilised peoples. This is followed by an increase in wealth, comfort and ease, which leads to sedentary life and formation of the most developed luxury customs and civilised states.15

After the establishment of a state, Ibn Khaldūn avers, human society undergoes further changes. He traces the development of society and state on the analogy of the life cycle of the microcosm, the human individual. As the human individual is born, grows young, attains adulthood, passes into dotage and then dies; the state also goes through the corresponding five stages: birth, growth, peak, decline and fall, within three generations of 40 years each.16 The ruling group and the supporters of the dynasty acquire in each stage peculiar traits of character which are the natural result of the peculiar situations in which they are found.

The first stage is that of establishment and appropriation of political power from the preceding dynasty. In this stage the ruler appears to be the exemplary leader of his people. He is just in his taxation policies and in his defence of property. He is still largely their chief rather than their master and king; for he has to accommodate their sentiments and desires, and to share his power with them. The first generation of an empire's people thus retains in full vigour the tribal spirit, the desert qualities of roughness and toughness, and warlike character and courage of nomads.
The second stage coincides with the attempt of the ruler to monopolize power and to create absolute kingship. With the appearance of this stage, the ruler shows himself independent of his people, and in order to thwart their endeavour to share the rule with him, he strives to hire men who prevent his kinsmen from seizing power or from participating in government. In this stage the despotism of the absolute ruler crushes his antagonists who then become lazy, humble and servile; and consequently, the strength of the polity is partly broken.

The third stage is one of leisure and tranquility. After having acquired complete power the ruler now uses his authority to gather the fruits of rule and dominion. He collects taxes and regulates income and expenses. The increased income enables him to spend lavishly on erecting large buildings and lofty monuments, and on beautifying the cities. He gives sumptuous gifts to foreign embassies, pays his soldiers and mercenaries liberally and regularly, and in general dispenses bounty to his family and followers who in turn start living a life of luxury. This is a period of rest and self-indulgence in which men enjoy the comforts and pleasures of the world.

The fourth stage is one of contentment and conciliation. The ruler in this stage is content with what his predecessors have built. He tries to live in peace with friendly and hostile rulers of his time, and strictly follows the traditional patterns established by his predecessors. Luxury, comfort, and the gratification of their desires become a habit with the people of this generation; and the solidarity and toughness of desert life disappears completely.

The fifth stage is one of waste and extravagance. In this stage, the ruler wastes on pleasures and amusements the treasures accumulated by his ancestors. He is generous towards his inner circle of bad, low-class followers, and disregards the noble and distinguished followers of his predecessors and loses their support. He neglects the affairs of the state. Despite the exorbitant taxes, his income declines and expenses multiply. The unpaid and neglected troops desert him. Luxury reaches its peak among the people of this generation, it corrupts them and generates physical weaknesses and moral vice. They become a liability on the state, like women and children who need to be protected. In this stage, the dynasty
is seized by senility and the chronic disease from which it can find no cure, and, eventually, it falls a prey to internal or external aggression. Then the new dynasty proceeds upon the path of power, only to suffer the fate of its predecessor.17

Ibn Khaldūn thus upholds the idea of the continuity of history. To him history is a continuous collective movement, an incessant and inevitable development which, when reaches its climax, is necessarily followed by a period of regress and extinction, and then a new civilisation arises.

In his *Miqaddima* Ibn Khaldūn has elaborately discussed and applied the laws that govern the development of human society. In fact, the whole book dilates upon this subject. Charles Issawi has succinctly described some of the main principles on which the Tunisian scholar wanted to base Sociology, namely:

"First, that social phenomena seem to obey laws which, while not as absolute as those governing natural phenomena, are sufficiently constant to cause social events to follow regular, well-defined patterns and sequences. Hence a grasp of these laws enables the observer to understand the trend of events around him.

Secondly, that these laws operate on masses and cannot be significantly influenced by isolated individuals....

Thirdly, that these laws can be discovered only by gathering a large number of facts and observing concomitances and sequences; and, broadly speaking, these facts can be gathered from either, or both, of two sources: records of past events and observation of present events. Explanation then consists in relating the correlations thus observed to accepted principles of psychology (individual and group), biology etc.

Fourthly, that much the same set of social laws operates in societies with the same kind of structure, however much these societies may be separated by space or time....

Fifthly, that societies are not static, that is to say, that social forms change and evolve...."
Lastly, that these laws are sociological and not a mere reflection of biological impulses, or physical factors... although he allows the environmental factors, such as climate and food, their due share, he attributes a much greater influence to such purely social factors as cohesion, occupation, wealth, etc....”

II

As we have noted earlier, Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) enunciated his philosophy of history in North Africa. Now, three centuries after him there flourished on the opposite side of the Mediterranean, another distinguished philosopher of history, named Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). He lived most of his life in Naples, and was largely self-educated. After completing the traditional course of education at Naples he went to Salerno where he passed nine studious years, chiefly devoted to classical reading, Plato and Tacitus being his favourite authors. In 1697 he became professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples, and in 1735 Charles III of Naples made him historiographer — royal. Vico had originally been interested in jurisprudence and then he turned to the study of history. Under the influence of Bacon and Grotius he was stimulated to investigate certain great problems of history, jurisprudence and philosophy. During his professorship he worked out a philosophy of history which he set forth in his great work, Principii d'una Scienza Nuova. This book initially appeared in 1725 and was republished in a definitive edition in 1744, after having been rewritten twice.

In his book, Vico endeavoured to provide a history of the development of all nations and to analyze the systematic cultural differences in different historical periods. He attempted this by reducing the whole course of history to conformity with his law of cycles or theory of Corso Ricorso which, after the fashion of the ancient Egyptians, divided history into three stages: divine, heroic and human. “The Scienza Nuova was,” says Flint, “a most original work but probably Vico deemed it more original than it was”. After mentioning the predecessors of, and contributors to Vico's philosophy of history, he adds: “... but none of these writers had any notion of there being a special science of human
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history. These authors viewed history in relation to politics... (or) religion. Vico was the first to treat of it as the proper and exclusive subject of a special science.”

Hence the title of his work, the New Science.

Vico draws a line between history and natural science and he makes start in trying to characterize the distinguishing features of historical enquiry in contrast to other branches of knowledge. He says that since the history of human life is the work of man, then man himself can know it. On the other hand, man cannot have demonstrative knowledge of the physical world since the physical world is made by God and therefore known to Him alone.

Like Ibn Khaldûn, Vico warns the historians against some prejudices and sources of error, and lays down certain principles and methods of historical thinking. He believes that the study of linguistics, etymology and mythology can help us in understanding the mental and social life of an old people. He averts that all the traditions are true, but they should not be taken literally true as they represent confused memory of facts. They should be interpreted according to the intellectual and social background of the narrators. The principle of this reinterpretation is that minds at a given stage of development will tend to create the same kind of products. Thus we can use the myths and legends of the modern savages in learning what ancient savages were like. Repudiating the Cartesian philosophy, he called in question the belief that what had been done in remote ages could be interpreted and judged according to yardsticks supplied by contemporary standards of rational thought and action.

Like Ibn Khaldûn, he takes the modern sociological approach to the development of a civilization and
tries to establish a definite pattern to such development. As an individual man develops in the stages of childhood, adolescence and maturity; a nation or culture develops also in three stages: the Age of the Gods, the Age of Heroes and the Age of Men.

Every Age of the Gods, Vico theorizes, is an age of childhood of a human society. The original Age of the Gods at the dawn of human history, Vico thinks, began after the Biblical Deluge when the descendants of Ham and Japheth, (i.e., the gentiles, as Vico calls them\(^\text{23}a\)) without the religion of their father, Noah, which they had repudiated (and which alone, in what was then the state of nature, could have held them by marriages in a society of families), were lost from one another by roving wild in the great forest of the earth, pursuing shy and indocile women, and fleeing from the wild animals with which the great ancient forest must have abounded. They scattered further in search of pastures and water, and as a result of it, all were reduced, at the end of a long period, to the condition of beasts, and their stature became as great as it was before the Deluge. This is why they became known in my thes ‘giants’. These beastlike men wallowed in sensuality, forgot their languages and religion, and lost all human characteristics.

Awakening from the brute to the human level began with the religious fear and awe excited in these creatures by violent thunderstorms which happened when the deluvial earth dried up. They sought shelter in caves out of terror of the ominous ‘power’ in the storm. They solemnized marriages and begot acknowledged children and so founded families. No other principle than religion, it seems to Vico, can reasonably be deemed sufficiently powerful to subdue savage men and to unite them into a social group. Reason, at this stage, was as weak as imagination was strong.

In this settled life, they had to defend themselves and their families by killing the wild animals and to find sustenance by tilling the earth and sowing grain. This resulted in the ownership of land and property. In this age the gentiles believed they lived under divine government and everything was commanded them by auspices and oracles. Government was by one, the father-despot, who had powers of life and death over his family.
This was followed by the Age of Heroes. Vico observes that the above mentioned development did not take place among all the gentiles; for great numbers of 'giants' still wandered through the plains and valleys and lived an impious and wicked life. In the long run, their nefarious common ownership of personal property and women gave rise to violent combat, and the defeated ran to seek refuge with the 'fathers', who by sheltering them extended their family kingdom to this inferior group of 'clients'. In this way, Vico asserts, communities of householders and their slaves were formed. This was the beginning of the Age of Heroes; for their rule was based on the heroic virtues: piety, temperance, physical strength and magnanimity.

But finally, the 'fathers' or patriarchs, after acquiring great power through the labours of their clients, began to oppress their clients. So as the number of the clients grew, they rebelled against the patriarchs. Providence, then, led the patriarchs to unite and form aristocratic commonwealths in which government was the business of the few nobles, having certain superiority of nature. In order to pacify the subject class of the plebeians, they gave them some rights, e.g., usufruct of the fields. But the plebs were not allowed to form families or participate in government. Thus the first cities came into being, and the natural order was replaced by a civil order.

The Age of Men followed upon the Heroic Age. With the passage of years these arrangements, as described above, proved to be inadequate to bridle the aspirations of the plebeians who now realized that they partook of the same human nature as the nobles and wanted to have share in the government. Since eventually, Vico says, the people were to become sovereign, Providence caused the plebeians to wage a long struggle with the nobles for winning their public and private rights. Consequently, the people became sovereign in cities, and the people's commonwealths were born. In this age a man's financial status was the yardstick of his fitness for public office, and religious beliefs were replaced by philosophies.

But the commonwealths were gradually corrupted, and so were the philosophies; skepticism became the rule and learned fools attacked truth. People became slaves to their passions—luxury, effeminacy, avarice,
envy and pride. They chose to use their riches not merely to preserve their social standing but to attain power. Civil wars created disorder, and the commonwealths lapsed from perfect liberty into the worst form of tyranny, that is anarchy, or the unbridled licence of so-called free people.  

The Neapolitan thinker asserts that when a people suffers from this dire disease, either a monarch emerges among them and puts an end to the civil war, or any stronger nation comes to conquer them, or ultimately, Providence imposes a radical cure, the final fall and extinction of their civilization. Then, the few survivors in a land of plenty quite naturally amend their behaviour; they return to old-time simplicity and the cult of religion, faith and truth; and, then, like phoenix, they start with a new civilization.  

All this development convinces Vico of the wider role of Providence in human history. He concludes that men themselves have made their history; but the affairs of the world are directed by divine power, wisdom and goodness, without the assent or advice of men, and often contrary to their plans, and always superior to the particular ends which men intend to achieve, turning them to larger purposes. Men, for instance, meant to satisfy their bestial desires and abandon their offspring, and instead they found themselves devising the chaste institution of marriage. The fathers started to abuse their paternalistic power over their clients and dependants, and they ended up by making them subject to the civil powers which gave birth to cities. The reigning orders of nobles meant to take advantage of their lordly power over the plebeians and they found themselves obedient to the laws which created popular liberty. Free peoples wanted to free themselves from the restraint of their laws and they fell into the hands of monarchs. Monarchs sought to strengthen their position by leading their people into vice, and, by so doing, they prepared them to submit to the dominion of other and stronger nations. Whole nations attempted to lose themselves, and a few survivors fled for safety to the wilderness whence, like phoenix, they arose to a new life.  

This development of human society, as conceived by Vico, seems to him a sufficient proof to believe that it is the counsel of a superhuman wisdom and Providence that rules the affairs of men.
Having discussed briefly some of the basic ideas of these two remarkable thinkers, we are now in a position to institute a comparison between their theories.

We see a close resemblance between them as regards their cyclic theories. Both of them, anticipating the modern biological school of Sociology, compare human society to an individual organism, having cycles of life, from birth, childhood and maturity to old age and death.

Although Vico divides human history into three ages, and Ibn Khaldūn describes five stages in the life of a civilization; if we examine the details of the development of society as outlined by them, we shall find many points of similarity between them. It is true that Ibn Khaldūn totally omits Vico's Age of the Gods, and strongly repudiates the notion of the 'giants' held by Vico; but they agree on the typical movement from primitive to civilized culture, which in turn declines and reverts to primitive culture. In this respect the two scholars astonishingly resemble each other even in certain minute details. For instance, we see that Ibn Khaldūn describes the nature of man as developing from simplicity and toughness of desert life to luxury and effeminacy of sedentary life. Vico holds an identical view. He says, "The nature of people is first crude, then severe, then benign, then delicate, finally dissolute". Moreover, Ibn Khaldūn's four steps: necessities, conveniences, luxuries and extravagance correspond to Vico's six steps: "Men first feel necessity, then look for utility, next attend to comfort, still later amuse themselves with pleasures, thence grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad and waste their substance." (24)

The two men also resemble each other in their concept of the rise and decline of the absolute power of the rulers. Both the patriarchs in Vico's theory and the tribal chiefs in Ibn Khaldūn's theory gradually acquire absolute power and become nobles and despots. Vico's view that in the last stage the clients discomfit the nobles and establish popular commonwealths, corresponds to Ibn Khaldūn's theory that in the last phase of a state the clients and the new followers of the dynasty gain power over...
the king who then becomes a nominal ruler. The idea of a popular government or democracy is, however, not found in Ibn Khaldun's theory; for, according to him, the clients rule, not as leaders of common people, but as nobles and aristocrats.

Both of them hold a similar view of the characteristics of sedentary culture and the age of senility. Both observe that sedentary culture in its last phase with its sensuous luxury, its pleasures, its materialism and its over-intellectuality despiritualizes man, "corrupts man's character and religion, ... and he becomes, in effect, transformed into an animal". And "when this (situation) spreads in a town or nation God permits it to be ruined and destroyed" or to be conquered by an inside or outside aggressor.

A few of the principles of social change held by both scholars are practically identical. For instance, both observe that certain periods of history have a general character which reappears in other periods, so that two periods may have the same general character, and it is possible to argue analogically from one to another. Secondly, both men agree that these similar periods tend to recur in the same order. Thirdly, both thinkers show the interrelationships of society, culture and personality, and lay emphasis on society rather than on the individual. Fourthly, both scholars believe that social forms change and evolve and societies are not static. Fifthly, as we have noted earlier, both anticipate the modern biological school of Sociology, as they compare the development of human society to that of a living organism.

As regards the great question, whether human history is moving in a circle, in a straight line, or in a spiral movement, despite their agreement on the cyclic view of history, they are at variance with each other on this point. Ibn Khaldun seems to view history and culture as moving in perpetually repeated circles with a slight forward movement; whereas Vico conceives the process of history as a regular alternation between progress and regression in an upward spiral movement.

They also differ in the method adopted by them in their reasoning. Ibn Khaldun generally employs inductive method, and cites facts in support of his conclusions, whereas Vico sticks neither to inductive nor to deduc-
tive method. He claims to have adopted "geometric" method in his *New Science*, as he says "Thus our Science proceeds exactly as does geometry." 31 Under the influence of the Platonic school he gives much place to imagination in his study. Discussing Vico's method, Berry remarks:

Vico wrote many things in praise of induction...These tributes are more in words than in reality. For he really takes the principles of his thought from the Platonic world of eternal ideas... Although the *Scienza Nuova prima* has the least deductive element, still Vico insisted that it was reasoned out in geometric fashion... Vico presents a series of undiscussed axioms for acceptance at their face value. 32

In fact Vico proffers 114 postulates to his reader for acceptance before embarking on the discussion of his philosophy.

A characteristic which is common to both scholars is their "generalization" of the history of their respective civilizations. The generalizations, of Ibn Khaldūn are mainly drawn from the data of the North African Spanish or Islamic history which was accessible to him. On the other hand, "the philosophy of Vico is a generalization of the history of Rome; and hence the student of Vico must have the history of Rome always before his mind." 33

Another problem to be considered in regard to their theories is that of the role of religion in the organization of human society. Vico considers religion as fundamental to human cohesion. He says: "If a people loses its religion, it has no other basis for social life,...not even a form to shape its existence." 34 Ibn Khaldūn, on the other hand, though he does not deny the importance of religion for society; for, in his opinion, it provides a wider basis for society and consolidates the state: yet he contends that a society can be well organized even without religion and merely on the basis of human reason. 35

The idea of Providence is predominant in the *New Science*. Vico maintains that the historical events are directed and controlled by a transcendent, superhuman wisdom in opposition to the designs of men. The
concept of Providence is in fact, the basic idea of his philosophy, and Vico wrote his book mainly to demonstrate the role of Providence in the life of man. This is why most of the parts of his book cannot be understood if we omit this basic notion from it. As for Ibn Khaldūn, although he believes in the omnipotence and omniscience of God, he does not base his theories of social change on the working of any superhuman power. He rather interprets the historical phenomena in the light of social factors. He does not mention Providence and Divine Will, but in passing and generally at the end of a discussion. To put it in other words, Ibn Khaldūn views the development of human society proceeding from the interaction of a variety of mundane factors; whereas Vico deems it a result of a series of conflicts between human purposes and divine designs, in which man proposes, but God disposes.

The core of Ibn Khaldūn's political Sociology is his concept of asbabiyā (solidarity) which he considers as the driving force of history. There is no comparable notion in Vico.

Furthermore, Vico discusses in the second stage of history a class struggle, while Ibn Khaldūn does not mention a class struggle at any stage. Sarton observes:

"Ibn Khaldūn is all the time contrasting not urban and country life, or bourgeois and popular life, as Westerners do, but settled and nomadic life...."16

The works of these two thinkers also differ from each other in respect of the scope of study. The Muqaddima deals with human society in its entirety and discusses all its aspects. It inquires into its origins, development, environment, nature and various factors which affect human society. It also dilates upon various forms of government, modes of living, occupations, arts, crafts, sciences, creeds etc. On the other hand, the New Science discusses human society within a limited field. It confines itself to showing the role of Providence in history, delineating the three Ages, and discussing the three categories of government.
Apart from the similarities or dissimilarities between their concepts, methods, scopes and materials, the two thinkers shared one merit: in their respective civilizations both established a new branch of knowledge, the philosophy of history, which attempted to give a coherent, systematic explanation of the historical process. Both were aware of the originality of their thinking and agreed with each other in calling their approach to history a 'new science', although the priority must be attributed to the great Tunisian. It is also a strange coincidence that the contemporaries of both the thinkers failed to understand them fully and recognize their originality during their lifetime. It was almost two centuries after each of them that the future generations rediscovered them and recognized their works as the most original advance toward a philosophy of history.37

NOTES

4. For a detailed study of his life, see Enan, *op. cit.*
6. Ibid., I, 6.
7. Ibid., I, 15, 23.
8. Ibid., I, 76 f.
9. Ibid., I, 84, 89 ff.
10. Ibid., I, 92f., 93.
11. Ibid., I, 92, 380.
12. Ibid., I, 249 ff.
13. Ibid., I, 91f.
15. Ibid., I, 249ff.
16. Ibid., I, 343ff., 353ff., 278ff.
17. Ibid., I, 343 ff., 353ff.
19. For a detailed biography of Vico, see Giambattista Vico, *The Autobiography of
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23 (a)

It may be noted here that this treatment of the general course of human history excludes the descendants of Shem (esp. the Hebrews), who, in Vico's opinion, lived isolated from the descendants of Ham and Japheth, retaining all human characteristics and the religion and customs of their father Noah,


25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p. 70.
28. Ibid.
30. Ibid., III, 291-297.
33. Flint, Vico, p. 166.
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