Fromherz, Allen J. "Conservatism and Ibn Khaldun." *Conservative Moments: Reading Conservative Texts*. Ed. Mark Garnett. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 19–24. Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350001565.ch-003>>.

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CHAPTER THREE

Conservatism and Ibn Khaldun

Allen J. Fromherz

Group feeling ('asabiyya') produces the ability to defend oneself, to offer opposition, to protect oneself, and to press one's claims.

Whoever loses it is too weak to do any of these things. The subject of imposts and taxes belongs to this discussion of the things that force meekness upon a tribe ... Imposts and taxes are a sign of oppression and meekness that proud souls do not tolerate, unless they consider (paying them) easier than being killed and destroyed . . .¹

It should be known that a quality belonging to perfection, which tribes possessing group feeling are eager to cultivate and which attests to their (right to) royal authority, is respect for scholars, pious men, noble (relatives of the prophet), well-born persons, and the different kinds of merchants and foreigners, as well as the ability to assign everybody to his proper station.²

Luxury wears out royal authority and overthrows it. When a dynasty is wiped out, power is taken from that dynasty by those whose group feeling has a share in the (established or pre-existing) group feeling, since it is recognized that people submit and are subservient to (the established group feeling) ... Eventually, a great change takes place in the world, such as the

transformation of a religion, or the disappearance of a civilization, or something else willed by the power of God. Then, royal authority is (definitively) transferred from one group to another – to the one that God permits to effect that change.³

Ibn Khaldun (1333–1406) advised against planting orange trees. Orange trees, especially the Sevillian orange, known for its powerful and luxurious scent, risked moral and social decline. They did not bear edible fruit (anybody who has visited Seville to this day knows how bitter the oranges are). They are an ultimate symbol of what happens when the pleasures of urban life take over and weaken the ‘natural’ and divinely ordained state of humans. While part of a divine plan, civilization, like the Sevillian orange, contains the bitter seeds of its own destruction. Luxury enervates the body and the soul, making a dynasty and a people prey to more powerful, more cohesive groups, tribes on the outskirts of urban power. These tribes may know less, they may have primitive beliefs and understandings about the world, but they will prevail again and again over the urbane and the elite of the city. Yet there was more to Ibn Khaldun than the condemnation of orange trees and taxes (see the quotes above). We need to look deeply into his writing and his historical context to understand what his ‘conservatism’ may have meant.

Before discussing the ‘conservatism’ of Ibn Khaldun, the famed Tunis-born world historian, it is important to limit and define how ‘conservatism’ might be understood in the context of fourteenth-century North Africa. After all, this was the fractured political and social world that inspired Ibn Khaldun’s most important writing. For the most part, conservatism seemed to mean returning to the models of the past, to the original vigor, be it mythical or actual, of the founders. As with Ibn Khaldun’s renunciation of orange flowers, conservatism meant praising the morals and virtues of the countryside over the luxury and depravity of the city.

The various warring dynasties and rulers of fourteenth-century North Africa, the Hafsids, Marinids, Zayyanids and the Nasrids in Granada, divided and fought among themselves even as they formed alliances with rising Christian Mediterranean powers. Ibn Khaldun was a minister to all these powers. He faced the devastations of plague and pestilence in their cities, a pestilence that seemed divinely ordained. Conservatism was a return to the sources – not simply in religion but in social organization, a return to the virtuous simplicity of tribal life. After all, almost all the dynasties of North Africa as well as Granada, the last bastion of Islam in Spain, came from the countryside, from tribes outside of the city. The passages quoted at the beginning of this chapter seem to indicate that Ibn Khaldun’s beliefs were in line with a classical definition of conservatism, the importance of

long-accepted 'moral' standards, the martial prowess on 'group feeling' of natural groups, in his case the Bedouin and Berber tribes, and the need to respect the example and divine providence of the founding generation of any state or dynasty.

If conservatism meant advocating a return to the 'mythical founders' and a desire for stability, and a realist understanding of politics, and even faith (God favors the powerful over the weak dynasties), Ibn Khaldun seemed to be largely a conservative thinker. He had one historical dynasty in particular in mind: He regularly advocated a return to the spirit of the twelfth-century Almohad Empire. The Almohads, an example of success and power to whom he frequently alluded, served as a stable reference for Ibn Khaldun's unstable world. They established one of the first successful states in North African and Iberian history, but their power waned and they fractured into warring states and dynasties. The last Almohad Caliphs, increasingly dependent on Christian mercenaries sent from Spain, planted orange trees in Marrakech, encouraged cosmopolitanism and renounced the original Almohad doctrine born among the Berbers of the Atlas Mountains. To Ibn Khaldun, the Almohads, who once had great promise as rulers of an empire that could defeat the rising Christian tide in the West, fell victim to their own wealth and luxury. Ibn Khaldun also referred to the original, virtuous spirit of the Prophet Muhammad and the Rightly Caliphs, the first four successors of the Prophet: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and 'Ali. But these beliefs in the inspired past as a model for the present were such a commonplace aspect of fourteenth-century writing that they are not so remarkable, and do not necessarily stand out. What was remarkable about Ibn Khaldun were his nuances, and his beliefs in new methods for understanding the past and human society. The case for Ibn Khaldun's conservatism is actually not as clear as it may at first seem. Was Ibn Khaldun largely conservative or was he actually progressive within a conservative age?

In fact, it has been argued that Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars and thinkers of the medieval period from Maimonides to Averroes to Ibn Khaldun, hid their actual beliefs under a veil of conservatism. Although still the subject of raging controversy, this idea is associated with Leo Strauss and the Straussians of the University of Chicago, who tried to parse the 'true', deep beliefs of Maimonides from his political context. In this interpretation, outward conservatism was a survival tactic, a way of pleasing the ruler and avoiding rivals in claustrophobic, inquisitorial court cultures while remaining free to pursue philosophical ideas. One of the favorite means of deposing a rival wazir or minister was to accuse him of breaking conservative norms, or dabbling too much in the realm of heretical ideas. One could outwardly renounce challenges to the norm as a means of understanding them. But it was unclear to what degree Ibn Khaldun was 'forced' into conservatism in a Straussian way. An examination of his texts does not completely solve the mystery.

Ibn Khaldun, as the individual revealed in his writings, was almost as highly complex as he was highly educated. Ibn Khaldun left us with a rich corpus of writings, not only his famed *Muqaddimah*, or ‘Introduction to History’, quoted earlier, but also his *Autobiography*. From these texts, it seems clear that Ibn Khaldun not only had conflicting, even contradictory ideas, but also different personalities and perspectives that evolved over time. He really did seem to believe in the decline and fall of dynasties and power due to moral and social decadence. There was no indication in his writings that this stance was simply a ploy or an attempt to pull wool over the eyes of the rulers who sponsored him. In his position as minister of the tribes under Abu ‘Inan in Fes and as ambassador to tribal groups under Abu al Abbas in Tunis, Ibn Khaldun had his own reasons to remind rulers of the importance of tribal power, which increased the importance of Ibn Khaldun’s own political role. He was also once robbed of all his clothes by a mountain tribe and forced to roam naked through the hills until he finally found shelter. Only miraculous ‘interventions from God’ saved him.⁴ This embrace of the tribes, even though he did recognize their dual ability to both found civilization and destroy it, sometimes landed Ibn Khaldun in trouble as a type of Cassandra who was too outspoken in warning about the consequences of inaction and the steps that were necessary to secure power – reaching out to the tribal groups on the margins of urban power. But while he condemned urban luxury and centralized education, and even, at times, Greek ‘philosophy’, Ibn Khaldun also seemed to know a great deal about education and Greek philosophy, and exhibited an encyclopedic range of other topics, listed exhaustively in his *Muqaddimah*. He also noted, uneasily, the rise of Western science. ‘We further hear now that the philosophical sciences are greatly cultivated in the land of Rome and along the adjacent northern shore of the country of the European Christians.’⁵

While Ibn Khaldun’s real attitude towards philosophical thinking may never be known, he clearly advocated a radical new way of thinking about history. Instead of simply relaying ‘what happened’ in a chronological approach with minimal analysis and respect for God’s ‘written book of fate’, Ibn Khaldun sought ‘the meaning behind events’. As a man of many contradictions, Ibn Khaldun was perhaps no different from other profound thinkers of different ages and places mentioned in this volume. His conservatism was contextual and his ideas, even those that seem explicitly conservative, were actually nuanced, betraying a certain ‘progressive’ tendency towards the study of history itself. He gave us the main reason for this new approach to history: the plague of 1348–49 CE (Ibn Khaldun, born in 1332, was in his teens at the time) that bore away almost every person he knew and destroyed familiar landmarks. The reason for the plague, according to Ibn Khaldun, was the ‘dense and abundant civilization such as exists at the end of a dynasty’⁶ Describing the plague, he wrote,

Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed ... It was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world had responded to its call. God inherits the earth and whoever is upon it.⁷

Civilization and urban luxury, it seemed to Ibn Khaldun, were what killed his mother, his father, much of his family and friends and the old certainties of his youth. But, as it was to Boccaccio and other Mediterranean writers, the plague was also a key motivation of his writing. It sent Ibn Khaldun out on a search for meaning, a search to understand the brutalities of the world around him, a world that could not simply be the result of inscrutable, divinely ordained events in the book of God. Ibn Khaldun boldly dared to seek out the 'meaning behind events'. In doing so he challenged one of the most important conservative ideas of his era: the belief that, in time, God knows best. Yet it should not be assumed that Ibn Khaldun did not wish to play God, or he wished only to separate the affairs of man, subject as they were to greed, luxury and excess, from those of God. He did this by advocating a return to a mythical, original and pure understanding of human society, an idealization of the tribe and family ties and an idealization that restored some semblance of the world he lost to the plague.

Having lost confidence in the rulers of North Africa and Al-Andalus later in life, Ibn Khaldun went to Egypt. Tragically, his wife and children, who were sent on a separate ship, perished in a storm. Faced by yet more personal tragedy, his autobiography revealed snippets of his increasing sense of disillusion. Although he regularly was named Qadi, or head judge, of the Maliki, or mainly North African community in Egypt, a high role in Cairo society, he was also subject to frequent dismissal and the conniving of corrupt colleagues and rulers, the Mamluks, the 'slave rulers' of Egypt. Although he wished he could follow the example of his father, whom he idealized as embracing the 'spiritual life', he could not resist the allure of politics. He was regularly sent as an envoy for Mamluk interests.

In 1401 CE, in the last five years of life, Ibn Khaldun was secretly lowered in a basket, like St Paul, from the besieged walls of Damascus, one of the last bastions against Mongol power, to meet the terrible and infamous Timur the Lame (Timurlane). After showing deference to the great Sultan, Ibn Khaldun exclaimed rather cryptically, 'May God help you sir! It has been today thirty or forty years since I have hoped for this encounter.' Obviously puzzled and intrigued, since Ibn Khaldun could not have known about him so long ago, Timurlane asked, 'For what reason?'

'For two reasons', Ibn Khaldun responded, 'The first, is that you are the Sultan of the world, the King of the Earth; I have never known a king since the creation of Adam who is comparable to you.' Ibn Khaldun continued,

I do not base this observation on something out of thin air for I am a man of science ... Here is the explanation. Power does not exist without tribal solidarity ('asabiyya). Power is at its greatest extent among mainly tribal peoples, those whose lives are mostly governed by tribal solidarity. Men of science agreed on the fact that the two nations most tribal on earth are the Turks and the Arabs. You know of the great power of the Arabs after they were united by the religion of their prophet [Muhammad]. As far as the Turks, their [successful] rivalry against the Kings of Persia is sufficient witness to their power ... No King on earth, neither Chosroes, nor Caesar, nor Alexander nor Nebuchadnezzar had at their disposal a sense of tribal solidarity such as theirs.⁸

Scholars debate whether Ibn Khaldun really saw Timurlane, the great enemy of his Egyptian masters, who was also a major threat to the North African dynasties he once served, as the promised unifier of the Islamic world. He did not reveal his true opinions. Perhaps he was keeping his options open and protecting his life. Perhaps he was hoping for a man and a movement that might start a new, unified Islamic era.

Ibn Khaldun then gave the second reason for his mysterious foreknowledge of Timur's rise to power. Although dismissed by most modern scholars, I believe it was almost as interesting as his historical analysis: 'The divine predictions of the saints of North Africa: this was the second reason why I hoped I would see you.'⁹ Ibn Khaldun saw no contradiction between his belief in the predictions of saints and the systemic and rational approach to historical analysis.

This conversation with Timur, as sincere or insincere it may have been, furnishes a clue to the nature of Ibn Khaldun's world view. Conservatism, for Ibn Khaldun, should not be blind. It was not only recognition of the patterns of the past, it was an embrace of radical change in pursuit of reviving that past and recognition of the mysterious nature of fate and events. In his old age, Ibn Khaldun sought to reconcile the two competing forces of his personality: a desire to understand the vagaries of this world with a resignation to the inscrutable forces of spirit and the divine. Ibn Khaldun was none other than the epitome of the traditional conservatism of his age; he was also its most radical opponent.