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Between the Circle and the Line:

Ibn Khaldun's View of History and Change

Allen James Fromherz

Historians from many different eras and contexts have viewed history and historical change as either linear or circular in nature. Giambattista Vico (d. 1744 CE), the Italian philosopher and historian, organized history in a cyclical way as different nations and peoples rise and fall. At the same time, according to Vico (2000), humanity was destined towards equity. Sima Qian of China (d. 86 BCE) viewed the past as a series of circular attempts to restore the Mandate of Heaven and consolidate central power, attempts that were then followed by breakdowns into feudal states (Qian, 1995). For Qian, history seemed to favor evildoers as much as followers of Confucian principles; historians therefore had a moral duty to bring justice to the past. Leopold von Ranke (d. 1886) was the originator of modern, primary source-based historical science in Europe. He promoted a largely linear, narrative view of the past. Change occurred at a granular level. Events and peoples of the past should be described for their own sake, not as a tool for understanding or reifying a larger philosophical, moralistic, or deistic destiny (von Ranke, 2010). More recently, the French historian Fernand Braudel (d. 1985) combined both linear and the broader cyclical approaches. For Braudel, history occurred on different levels. There was the past of the long term, which tended towards patterns determined by geography, and the short term, which was more linear and event dependent (Braudel, 1996). Today, historians are sharply divided between progressivists and Marxists who see humanity on a line towards some destiny that will embrace a global vision, and relativists and determinists who view the modern and the postmodern system as a particular cultural artefact of the West, doomed to collapse and be replaced, in the optimistic view, by a cosmopolitan vision. For pessimists, however, the replacement of the West will be far more traumatic (Appiah 2019; Fukuyama, 2006, 2018; Pinker, 2019).¹

The circle and the line have never been farther apart, it would seem, than they are today. Historians attempt, in vain, to tackle the challenges of reconciling rapid

¹ For the progressivists see Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 2006 and Stephen Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: the Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, New York: Penguin, 2019. For a cosmopolitan vision see Kwame Appiah, *The Lies that Bind, Rethinking Identity*, New York: Liveright, 2018, and the counter argument by Fukuyama, *Identity: the Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, New York: FSG, 2018, who seems to abandon his linear vision of the end of history.

global change with the puzzling rise of identity-centered politics. It seems as if feelings of loyalty to the “tribe,” which were supposed to have disappeared with the rise of global institutions and mores, have not died, but only increased in an age of rapid global “progress.” This paradox, in fact, is not new. At its heart, it is a result of two ways of looking at human history, the circular and the linear.

Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 CE), the great North African historian and philosopher, seemed to be a partisan of the circle. Within the *Muqaddimah*, or his “Introduction” to history, written to describe the “meaning of events,” there seemed to be ample evidence that Ibn Khaldun saw the past in ways that would resonate with Qian, Vico, and some elements of Braudel. Ibn Khaldun engaged in more theory, more interpretation of history than any other known, pre-modern work of history written in Arabic. This has made him a modern hero of Arab nationalism, recognized in school names and street signs from Qatar to Casablanca. Much of Ibn Khaldun’s thought appears, at first, to fit a circular pattern based on a moralistic view of inevitable human failing. Looking more deeply at Ibn Khaldun’s writing, however, the picture becomes much more complex. There appear to be many exceptions to the circular rule. Ibn Khaldun’s understanding of history and change is, in fact, much more complex than a simple circular pattern of humanity doomed to a cycle of rise and fall. Ibn Khaldun also saw a line of history through religious prophecy and the importance of granular, exceptional events that could stand up to the rigors of von Ranke. Rather than seeing the linear and the circular patterns of the past in conflict or as cancelling one another out, Ibn Khaldun described a combined system, a spiral.

The Circle

According to Ibn Khaldun’s circular vision of the past, dynasties and states have a maximum life span of about 100 years, or five generations, roughly the same as individual human bodies (Ibn Khaldun, 2002). They start vigorous and young, founded on tribal solidarity, or *asabiyya*, of the first generation, which originates in the mountains or deserts, far from the enervating, and for Ibn Khaldun’s day, sickening and plague-ridden influences of the city. Each subsequent generation of rulers, however, becomes more and more dependent on urban structures of power, raising taxes, becoming more and more distant and detached from the original vigor of the founders and the people at large who flock to some new dynasty and new, vigorous ruler who can call upon the protection and loyalty of a different, rural tribal group. This seems to trap history into a perpetual cycle of doomed states. As Ibn Khaldun stated, although government is necessary for civilization, it is also the root of its own destruction. He cited multiple examples of dynasties that fit this pattern and that fill the chronicles of his much larger history, the *Kitab al-Ibar*. Indeed, both North African history and Islamic history, and even world history more generally, up until the 14th century, could fit this pattern, one that can be attributed to many large, agrarian-based economies and societies before the rise of modernity (Hodgson, 1974). Just in the far west of North Africa, known today as Morocco, for instance, there were the Idrisids, who ruled independently for around a century. They were initially supported by the Berber tribes around Fez. They fell to the Fatimids who rose in the region of Algeria with the support of the Kutama Berbers.

The Fatimids even took over Egypt. Next were the Almoravids who emerged among the Lamtuna, the Berber tribes of the Sahara. They created a great empire stretching across trans-Saharan trade routes, sending their valuable currency throughout the Mediterranean basin (Bennison, 2016). After the desert came the mountains as the Masmuda Berbers of the majestic, High Atlas valleys streamed into Marrakech in 1147, purifying the mosque of the Almoravids and declaring the beginning of a new era. Their movement began with the preaching of the Mahdi Ibn Tumart and was made a great success with the military genius of ‘Abd al-Mu’min who was the first ruler in history to conquer and control North Africa, including the Atlas Mountains, which served as a fortress for the empire. Over time, however, the solidarity of the original mountain Berbers, like that of the Saharan Berbers before them, began to diminish. Military defeats such as at Navas de Tolosa or Al-‘Iqab in 1212 and Christian incursions, including the adoption of a Castilian mercenary guard by the Caliph in Marrakech, seemed to confirm the end was near. After about a century of effective rule the Almohads also met their fate. Their empire broke apart, replaced in Morocco by a new, vigorous dynasty, the Marinids, founded by Zanata Berbers who came from the plains around the oasis of Figuig. It was the Marinid ruler Abu ‘Inan who employed Ibn Khaldun. In Granada, the Nasrids, famous for building the Alhambra, arose. Muhammad V, one of the more powerful Nasrid princes, also used the services of Ibn Khaldun. A remnant of the Almohads remained, in much changed form, as the Hafsid dynasty in Tunis; Ibn Khaldun worked there as well. Each of these broken and fragmented sections of the once great and unified Almohad Empire fell into war and rivalry with one another. While they tried to reassert the unity of the past, their divisions provided opportunities for Castilian and, later, Portuguese incursions. Nonetheless, Ibn Khaldun held out the hope for a restoration of the glories of the past, for a retaking of the lands lost in Muslim Spain, al-Andalus, which was the homeland of his ancestors, the Banu Khaldun.

As I argue in *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, he had many reasons for his pessimistic view of the past and for his strange mixture of revulsion and attraction towards urban life (Fromherz, 2016). In the light of the dizzying, damning, and distressing rise and fall of dynasties and the failure of a unified response to Christian incursions, Ibn Khaldun was one of the first Muslim chroniclers to note the rise of the Renaissance and Christian power in the Mediterranean. This pushed Ibn Khaldun against the idea of divine providence driving the events of his times. Rather, it seemed, humanity must be at fault. Human structures and especially large-scale urban life and government, with all of their luxuries and cosmopolitan compromises of identity, while the source of civilization, were also the source of plague. Ibn Khaldun (2002) wrote, “City air causes sickness as it is mixed with putrid vapors and a great quantity of odors” (p. 810). Air is that which gives vivacity to the spirit, and the air of civilization, of cities, ultimately weakens the body and the body politic. Thus, even as humanity builds culture, arts, and cities, it also builds the foundation of its destruction in the form of corruption, luxury, and sickness. The seeds of decline are planted with the founding ambition of every urban civilization. This plague had a profound impact on Ibn Khaldun and helped inspire him to think differently. As he stated, “it is as if the entire creation had changed and the whole world been altered ... a world brought into existence anew. Therefore, there is a

need at this time that someone should systematically set down the situation of the world” (Ibn Khaldun, 2015, p. 30). He tells us the plague, which wiped out what was before and cycled humanity back to a new beginning, was the reason why he decided to write the *Muqaddimah*. The cycle of history was not simply a theory for Ibn Khaldun, it was personal.

Ibn Khaldun lost his parents and most of his family to the pestilence. He was left alone at an early age, under the tutelage of his brother. The death of his father, a profound influence on the young Ibn Khaldun, especially due to his spiritual and Sufi tendencies, seemed to haunt him the rest of his life. Ibn Khaldun seemed unable to give up the ghost of his father. He described as an addiction his exercising power and politics in his various roles as minister, judge, and high functionary in Fes, Granada, Tunis and, finally, Cairo. He even met the great conqueror Tamerlane and explained to him the reasons for his success.

Here is the explanation [for your rise]. 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 are 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.... (Ibn Khaldun, 1951, pp. 366-367)

His constant travelling and his diminishing hope of restoring the North Africa and Islamic governance to its former glories weighed on him. At various points in his life, he yearned for the purity of the countryside and the simplicity of the ascetic, Sufi *tariqa*.² He retreated to the remote fortress of Ibn Salama in Algeria to write his *Muqaddimah* and attempted to give up on political ambitions and become a simple Sufi, but to no avail. The city, which he blamed for so much of what went wrong in history, always drew him back.

The Line

There was both the line and the circle in the writings of Ibn Khaldun. Although his life was full of disappointments and his search for the meaning of history often only led to more paradoxes than answers, Ibn Khaldun was not simply a pessimist. He saw the possibility of a linear past. In particular he cited instances for the intervention of God in human affairs. Prophecy and prophets, in Ibn Khaldun’s view, created a way out of the circular inevitabilities. When a dynasty is founded by a prophet, according to Ibn Khaldun, it can last far longer. Also, there were some states, such as the Hafsids, that seemed to last, even without the invigoration of new tribal solidarity or prophecy. In this case, a type of dynastic inertia took over.

² A *tariqa* is a Sufi “path” or “order” usually with a Sufi Sheikh in charge who has authority over his pupils.

Generally, however, these dynasties, as was the case with the Hafsids, were limited to constrained geographic boundaries and did not expand outside a defined sphere of influence for long periods of time. Also, while he denounced the purely chronological approach to the past employed by some of his predecessors, the linear progression of one event after another, the traditional narrative history that was the mainstay of history both before and after him, still characterized the vast majority of his writing. The *Muqaddimah*, although a large work, stands out as the exception, the Introduction to a far larger ambition which was to write a Universal History of the world as he knew it. In this respect, Ibn Khaldun could be compared to another universal, world historian who wrote on the other end of the Islamic world in Ilkhanate Iran, Rashid al-Din Hamadani (d. 1318 CE). While he occasionally mentioned his historical theories within the body of his history, Ibn Khaldun, like Rashid al-Din before him, seemed as much caught up in his devotion to the line of events as the “meaning” or lessons he sought behind them.

Spiral Towards the Future

Although he noted the importance of the new technology of gunpowder, and he realized the rising power of Italian city-states, and he even sailed on a ship with a representative of Ottoman sultan Bayezid, little did Ibn Khaldun realize a new era was about to dawn soon after his death in 1406 CE. The Ottomans took Constantinople in 1453 and launched a great, diffuse, and cosmopolitan empire that would last for centuries, successfully fusing diverse geographic zones and putting down the revolts of tribal solidarity that would have been the seeds of new dynasties and rulers in the past. In Morocco, the cyclical history of Ibn Khaldun came to an abrupt end with the rise and fall of the Saadians who were eventually replaced by the Alaouite Dynasty. The Alaouites used gunpowder technology and elite military corps of soldiers, often from south of the Sahara, to break the ruler’s previous dependency on tribal solidarity. Founded in 1631, the Alaouites are still reigning today as one the longest living dynastic monarchies on earth. Throughout the rest of North Africa and the Middle East, the Ottomans would create a much larger “gunpowder empire” that lasted far longer than Ibn Khaldun’s cyclical theories would have predicted. This did not stop later Ottoman officials from studying Ibn Khaldun’s work in their search for ways to revitalize the empire (Lewis, 1962).

Was Ibn Khaldun disproven by these dramatic future events? Was he wrong to think that dynasties would inevitably fall based on their lack of solidarity? Perhaps, in some ways, he was. At the same time, and as discussed above, Ibn Khaldun did not view history in a purely linear or circular fashion. He left ample space for change and for the intervention of unknown forces. Also, the gunpowder empires did last, many of them well into the 20th century. They were replaced by global, capitalist cosmopolitanism, which negates the tribal solidarity of the past. However, identity politics has once again emerged onto the scene. Ibn Khaldun is today, in some ways suddenly, as valid and relevant as ever. Perhaps what seemed like a line or a circle was actually a spiral. A spiral allows for change in a way that a circle, as a closed system does not. It is also not a simple line with completely different and unrelated events happening one after the other. As the world becomes more interconnected and as technology advances, inherent risks are emerging, often in the shape of

peoples trying to assert their identities. It is increasingly possible that there will be a singular new event, something that changes the world entirely, that seems to wipe the slate clean, as the Great Plague did for Ibn Khaldun in the 14th century. At that moment, Ibn Khaldun's understanding of history and the destiny of humanity will be more relevant than it has ever been.

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