

CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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II

CONFUCIUS AND IBN KHALDUN

Introduction

There is no doubt that as an academic discipline sociology is a child of the Enlightenment and as such it develops and proliferates only in modernity. However, this does not mean that sociological thought emerges suddenly and out of nowhere. On the contrary, and as argued in the Introduction and Chapter 1 to this book, sociological thinking has deep roots in the ancient world. In many respects the latter-day intellectual movements such as the Renaissance, Rationalism and the Enlightenment, owe a great deal to the ancient social philosophers and scholars who provided elaborate conceptual frameworks aiming to understand and change the social world. While the traditional accounts have emphasised the role ancient Greek and Roman thinkers had in the development of social and political thought, less weight has been given to the non-European scholars. This chapter focuses on the two leading social thinkers that have made profound impacts on the development of social thought in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and further afield. Although they lived in different time periods and in very different parts of the world, both Confucius and Ibn Khaldun have made significant marks on the rise of social thought worldwide. This chapter highlights their main contributions and historically traces the broader social contexts that shaped their intellectual development.

Life and Intellectual Context

Confucius (551–479 BCE)

Since over the past centuries Confucius has become a subject of worship and myths it is difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction in the various

accounts that describe his life and work. Some sources emphasise his aristocratic lineage (a descendant of the royal Chou dynasty), others insist that he was born in poverty. There is very little trustworthy information on his childhood. Nevertheless, according to most records Confucius (full name Kong Qiu) was born in 551 BCE in Zou, the state of Lu (in today's Shandong province, China). Despite having relatively privileged origins his father's premature death confined the rest of the family to poverty. Confucius's father was an officer in the Lu military, which meant that his family were neither aristocrats nor commoners but were part of the middle social stratum (*shi*).

In addition to losing his father at the age of 3, Confucius also lost his mother at the age of 23. Struggling to avoid utter poverty he worked as a cow herder, a shepherd and later as a keeper of granaries, the director of public pastures, a book-keeper and a clerk. He married his wife Qiguan at the age of 19 and they had two children: a son, Kong Li, and a daughter whose name, indicatively, has not been recorded. Although there is no reliable information on his education the traditional sources indicate that Confucius was a bright, hardworking and inquisitive student and that he studied ritual with the 'fictional Daoist Master Lao Dan, music with Chang Hong, and the lute with Music-master Xiang' (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2010). Upon completion of his studies Confucius became gradually known for his teachings and was apparently followed by a group of disciples. The records indicate his gradual rise in the state administration: in 501 BCE he was appointed to the relatively minor position of the town governor and through time rose to the much more influential and prestigious position of Minister of Crime. After the failed attempt to reform decentralised state power and establish a more legitimate system of aristocratic rule, Confucius created many powerful enemies and as a result was forced into self-imposed exile from Lu. From then on, he and his disciples, undertook a long and torturous series of journeys around the kingdoms of northeast and central China, spending most time in the states of Wei, Chen, Cai and Song. Although Confucius's reputation remained high and he was occasionally welcomed to the courts of these small states, his philosophical principles were largely ignored. Near the end of his life at the age of 68, as the political situation in Lu changed, Confucius returned home. His last few years were spent in teaching the Five Classics set of texts to his remaining 70 or so faithful disciples.

Although Confucianism today is a well-established, and in some parts of Asia dominant, philosophical, and some would argue religious, tradition of thought, for much of Chinese history Confucian ideas were countered by several other philosophical traditions. Among these the most influential were Legalism, Mohism and Daoism. During the Spring and Autumn period (770–480 BCE) and the Warring States period (479–221 BCE) these four intellectual traditions were competing for supremacy. Although initially Mohism and Confucianism were more prominent with the unification of China under the Qin dynasty (in 221 BCE), Legalism was adopted as the official doctrine of the state with Confucianism, Mohism and Daoism being largely suppressed.

Nevertheless, once the Han dynasty gained power over the Qin dynasty (206 BCE to CE 220), Confucianism replaced Legalism as the dominant belief system of the Chinese state and, with a few exceptions, Confucian principles remained an official state philosophy until the communist takeover in 1948.

This centuries-long symbiosis between Confucianism and the Chinese state often conceals the complexities and doctrinal conflicts that have shaped the early history of China. The Spring and Autumn period and the Warring state period were highly turbulent, violent and socially dynamic times that stimulated intellectual creativity and ultimately produced highly distinct and competing schools of thought. Even though three out of these four philosophical traditions shared some key principles such as piousness towards rulers, the glorification of Tian (the 'mandate of heaven') and respect for the hierarchical order, they developed very different understandings of social and political life. Legalism, most forcefully articulated by Han Fei and Shang Yang, is a utilitarian philosophy that emphasises stringent obedience to the legal system. In this view state power rests on the transparent and public system of laws that apply equally to all citizens.

Whereas Legalism was a doctrine that appealed to the rulers, military and traditional priesthood, Mohism become more popular with the technical intelligentsia, craftworkers and some merchants who were determined to challenge the status quo. Mozi, the founder of this ethical tradition, is often considered to be China's first philosopher. He condemned the use of offensive warfare and advocated a doctrine of 'impartial care', which was seen in utilitarian terms, long before Bentham and Mill, as something that 'will bring the greatest benefit to the largest number of people' (Mozi, 2003: 10). The concept of impartial care stands for the view that an individual should care equally for all human beings regardless of their actual relationship to that individual (i.e. one's own children should not be loved more than the children of other people). For Mozi, social conflicts arise from the absence of moral uniformity: in the original state of nature a human being cannot differentiate between right and wrong. It is the presence of the state hierarchy and especially the righteous leaders and their followers that guarantees the creation of social harmony able to balance right and wrong. Daoism (or Taoism) shares this focus on establishing harmonious relationships between human beings, but in contrast to Mohism and Legalism, Daoists oppose hierarchy and state power. For Laozi, the intellectual father of this doctrine, Dao (or Tao) is a metaphysical concept that stands for 'the way' or 'the path' behind everything that exists. It is conceived as a powerful force that generates all existence. Unlike Legalists and Mohists (and Confucians) who venerate order, discipline and division of labour, the Daoists advocate simplicity, spontaneity, moderation, humility, harmony with the nature and 'action through non-action' (*Wu-Wei*). As some sources indicate, the young Confucius was a student of Daoism and his teachings originated in dialogue with the key Daoist principles.

Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406)

In contrast to Confucius, whose biographical details are less known and shrouded in mythology, Ibn Khaldun's life and work are well documented. Although Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis in 1332 (AH 723) his family had aristocratic, Arab-Andalusian, origins. The Banū Khaldūns were part of the ruling elite in ninth-century Seville. Ibn Khaldun's family emigrated to Tunis just before the fall of Seville in the Reconquista in 1248. While most of his male family members held political offices under the Hafsīd dynasty in Tunis, Ibn Khaldun's grandfather and father abandoned politics and became members of a mystic order. This highly privileged family background allowed Ibn Khaldun to be educated by leading North African scholars and imams. His main teacher was Al-Abili, a proponent of both the rational sciences and the occult arts. In addition to classical Islamic texts, his early education included Arab linguistics, law and jurisprudence, mathematics, poetry, logic and philosophy. He memorised the Qur'an by heart and was well versed in the works of the world's leading philosophers of his time including Averroes, Avicenna, Razi and Tusi. Similarly to Confucius, Ibn Khaldun lost his parents when he was relatively young (aged 17).

For much of his life Ibn Khaldun was a skilful politician who managed to survive, and navigate, the tides of the complex, chronically unstable and unpredictable world of medieval North Africa and the Middle East. He came to age in the midst of protracted inter-dynastic conflicts in the region where loyalty to a current ruler regularly indicated a high probability of being beheaded by his successor. Ibn Khaldun started as an official at the court of Ibn Tafrakin with responsibility for calligraphic writing, marking and ratification of royal correspondence. Although this position gave him direct access to state secrets, he considered it to be beneath his talents. To further his political career he moved to the city of Fez where he worked at the court of Abu 'Inan. He was soon accused of treachery and imprisoned for nearly two years, to be released upon the king's death. The new king, Abu Salim, appointed Ibn Khaldun to several senior posts, but once the ruler was murdered Ibn Khaldun had to flee the city. Following this he spent several years as a high official at the court of Ibn al-Khatib in Grenada, but after a serious quarrel had to leave the city. For the next nine years Ibn Khaldun travelled around the Maghreb collecting tribal levies and negotiating with the various tribal groupings on behalf of several rulers. It is this period that has proved central for Ibn Khaldun's intellectual development: during one of his expeditions into the Dawawida tribal region he decided to retire to the Sufi shrine, near contemporary Mascara in Algeria, and devote his time to scholarship.

The result of his four-year retreat to this shrine was *The Muqaddimah* (1377), the most significant proto-sociological study written before the modern era. The search for more extensive library resources and ill health forced Ibn Khaldun to move to Tunis in 1378, where he spent the next four years as a

teacher and scholar. The persistent court intrigues and intellectual animosities with other scholars and imams led to another period of exile – this time to Alexandria where Ibn Khaldun was appointed a grand Maliki judge at the Mamluk court of Abu Sa'id Barquaq, in 1384. During his stay in Egypt he held several high positions including the Superior at the Baibarsiya Sufi lodge and the professor of Maliki law at Quamhiyyah College in Cairo. However, most of his time was devoted to research and the writing of what he considered to be his main work, to which *The Muqaddimah* was merely an introduction – *The Book of Exemplaries and the Record of Narrative and its Principles concerning Arabs, Persians, and the Berbers, and those Nations of Great Might Contemporary with Them*. During his time in Cairo Ibn Khaldun made pilgrimages to Mecca and Jerusalem and had highly eventful visits to Damascus where he experienced the siege and destruction of the city by Tamerlane. The famous conqueror invited Ibn Khaldun to spend time in his company and to write a geographical report on North Africa. Ibn Khaldun died in 1406 and was buried in the Sufi cemetery outside Cairo's main gates.

At first glance it might seem that, unlike Confucius whose ideas developed in a protracted struggle with competing schools of thought, Ibn Khaldun was an intellectual loner removed from the leading scholarly networks of his day. Some commentators insist that because he was 'remote from the intellectual centres' and 'without significant structural ties of his own' Ibn Khaldun's teachings had little impact on the development of Islamic philosophy (Collins, 1998: 428). It is true that, unlike Confucius, Ibn Khaldun did not have any recognisable followers and that his work has largely been forgotten for centuries (Lacoste, 1984: 1). Nevertheless, the creativity of his social thought did not emerge in an intellectual vacuum. On the contrary, for much of his life Ibn Khaldun was in a dialogue with the dominant intellectual perspectives of his time.

In his early years Ibn Khaldun was profoundly influenced by the leading logician Abelli. His education in philosophy and theology was largely built on the works of leading ninth-, tenth- and eleventh-century rationalist philosophers such as Al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rochd (Averroes). He was very well versed in historiography, which at that time was a highly developed research field in the Islamic world. In this context much of Ibn Khaldun's work represents a direct or indirect engagement with rationalist philosophy and logic, mysticism, theology and the historiography of his day. Although all his main works are rooted in the rationalist principles derived from the work of Ibn Sina, Ibn Tatmiyah, Ibn Rochd or al-Kindi, he is also a fierce critic of their philosophies. In contrast to the dynastic narratives and hagiographies that dominated the historiography of his day Ibn Khaldun advocated the development of historical science rooted in the principles of causality and rationality. For Ibn Khaldun, history is an empirical endeavour that relies upon observation with a view of generating universalist findings. History is not to be viewed as a branch of literature but 'is firmly rooted in science' (2005: 6). More specifically he distinguishes between conventional views of history and its scientific purpose:

On the surface, history is no more than information about political events, dynasties, and occurrences of the remote past, clearly presented and spiced with proverbs. It serves to entertain large, crowded gatherings... The inner meaning of history, on the other hand, involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanations of the causes and origins of existing things, the deep knowledge of the how and why of events. (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 6)

In a similar vein to Confucius, Ibn Khaldun was deeply responsive to the dominant intellectual currents of his period. He wrote commentaries on the works of leading philosophers such as al Roushd and Razi and he was involved in stringent debates in theology, history, logic and politics. Although he too, just like Confucius, was living in times of civilisational decline characterised by continuous political and ideological conflicts, he was an heir of the highly advanced Islamic civilisation. His ideas and teachings were well known and debated throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Although the rationalist discourses were on defence as much of the medieval Muslim world was gradually moving away from rationalism towards religious mysticism, the cities Ibn Khaldun inhabited, namely Fez, Grenada, Bougie and Cairo, were still important university centres with prolific intellectual life. These intellectual disputes have found their reflection in many of Ibn Khaldun's works where he continuously attempts to reconcile his analytical rationalism with the religious mysticism that was slowly but surely gaining the upper hand all over the Maghreb and the rest of the Islamic world.

Historical, Social and Political Context

Ancient China

As Collins (1998) argues, intellectual creativity is rarely if ever a product of an individual genius. Original and influential thinking is regularly created in direct or indirect collective interaction. Scholars develop new conceptual and analytical models in dialogue with others and in many historical instances the rise of influential and competing schools of thought tend to reinforce each other. Confucianism is no exception as its key principles have developed in creative disagreements with Mohism, Legalism and Daoism. Furthermore, the new ideas also often entail the presence of historically turbulent times. In this context the origins of Confucian ideas owe a great deal to the blustery social and historical context of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. In contrast to the previous age of relative stability, rooted in the dominance of the Western Zhou dynasty that was focused on fighting the 'barbarian tribes' in the north while maintaining peace among its feudal fiefdoms at home, the Spring and Autumn periods initiated a new era defined by protracted violent conflicts. When the 'barbarians' inflicted a decisive blow to the Zhou, the internal geopolitical stability crashed: from 771 BCE onwards a series of wars

led to the emergence of several relatively powerful states which had managed to subdue their weaker neighbours and were competing between each other for supremacy. These two long periods were defined not only by incessant warfare and political instability, but also by organisational and intellectual creativity as the competing local powers tried to build a sturdy state and powerful military apparatuses. Hence they all attempted to recruit the best scholars, soldiers, scientists and engineers in order to achieve the ultimate military victory. In the Spring and Autumn periods the key states were Jin, Chu, Qin, Qi, Wu and Yue, most of which also controlled smaller, tributary states in the Central Plains. By the end of this period some states such as Jin had collapsed and others emerged from their ruins. Thus during the Warring States period the key players were Qin, Qi, Wei, Zhao, Han, Chu and Yan. This period was characterised by intensive military, technological and organisational developments including the invention and mass use of the crossbow, the shift from chariots to massed infantry and the establishment of efficient bureaucratic institutions (Tinbor-Hui, 2005).

By the end of the Warring States period Chinese states were world leaders in state formation and in the development of military capacity. The seven leading states were able to field massive armies and provide complex logistical systems, and establish effective bureaucratic structures capable of training, supplying and controlling hundreds of thousands of soldiers. In other words this period was defined on the one hand, by intensive warfare with an unprecedented number of human casualties and, on the other, by substantial organisational advancements, economic growth and significant bureaucratic, legislative and military reforms. Some of these developments, such as the Shang Yang reforms, were instrumental in eventually bringing about a unified and centralised authority for the whole of China. Before unification in 221 BCE, the rulers of the Qin state tended to avoid major conflicts with other states, using their unique and beneficial geographical position to build alliances, trade and play off other states against each other. It is only in the last decades of the Warring States period as the Qin evolved to become the most powerful polity that war was used as the principal device for expansion and control. From 238 BCE onwards the rulers of Qin devised a concrete strategy to conquer the other six states. The key idea behind this plan, devised by Ying Zheng, was to attack and annex each state individually along the principle of 'allying with distant states and attacking nearby ones' (Tin-Bor Hui, 2005).

Medieval North Africa

Just as with Confucius, Ibn Khaldun's intellectual project owes a great deal to the historical, political and ideological turbulence of his times. The fourteenth century was a period of protracted crisis in North Africa, a region which in many respects was unlike the rest of the medieval Muslim world. Since the large-scale rebellion of the 730s, inspired by the egalitarian heretic teachings

of Kharijism, the rulers of the Maghreb were politically independent from the caliphs of Baghdad and Damascus. This autonomy was rooted in economic strength, as the region was the epicentre of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean trade for centuries. In addition the rulers of the Maghreb kingdoms controlled the gold trade as they had a monopoly on the routes to the Western Sudan's gold, destined for European and Middle Eastern merchants (Lacoste, 1984: 16). The direct consequence of this trading monopoly was the substantial growth of towns such as Fez, Tlemcen, Bougie, Constantine, Tahert or Kairouan, the centres of prominent medieval kingdoms. However, unlike the relatively centralised imperial orders of the Mamluk Sultanate in Cairo or the Ottoman Empire, the North African kingdoms were largely decentralised entities where the rulers controlled the towns and the main trading routes, while the local tribal groupings maintained a wide degree of autonomy. More specifically, unlike feudal Europe where warrior lords controlled vast swaths of peasantry and were all in turn immersed in personal vassalage relations, in North Africa the tribe was the locus of power and solidarity.

Hence, it was not individuals but 'the tribe that was subject to the chieftain who had granted the right to raise taxes' (Lacoste, 1984: 21). In this context, the power of individual rulers was heavily dependent on their ability to negotiate with the chieftains of different tribes and their power base was firmly rooted in their tribal group. Simply put, the kings were essentially tribal leaders who assumed control of a confederation of several tribes. The rise of the Almohad Empire in the twelfth century temporarily changed the political landscape of North Africa as the Almohad dynasty unified the Maghreb in 1120. The Almohad period was characterised by a degree of cultural renaissance and the establishment of new universities teaching Greek and Roman philosophy, science, geometry, astronomy and the arts, development of novel artistic and architectural forms, and advancements in jurisprudence and Islamic theology. The leading philosophers of the medieval world found their intellectual home in the Almohad Empire including such distinguished neo-Aristotelians as Averroes (Ibn Rusd), and the Jewish philosopher Maimonides. This period was remembered as the golden age of the Maghreb.

Ibn Khaldun was coming of age at the time when the well-established stability of the Hafsids' dynastic order was dramatically and substantially undermined by the rising Marinid dynasty, and the neighbouring Zayyanid powers, all struggling to establish entire control of North Africa. Furthermore the inter-dynastic claims within the Hafsids' royal court triggered internal conflicts which led to the fragmentation of Hafsids' territories under different claimants to the throne. This situation triggered a scramble for territories between different political actors including neighbouring kingdoms, distinct dynastic claimants, and nomadic and semi-nomadic tribal groupings inhabiting the Maghreb region. All these radical geopolitical changes created long-term instability with constant shifts in alliances between rival sides. More significantly, the geopolitical volatility brought about new social realities where on the one hand, no single political power could establish its hegemony and, on the other,

the rulers were forced to compromise with different social groups and extend some rights and privileges to non-aristocrats. More specifically, various dynastic claimants welcomed to their courts talented individuals, some of which were without patrician credentials.

Arguments and Ideas

Confucian Social Philosophy

Confucius's ideas have occasionally been described as a predecessor of sociological thought. For example, Cho (1996: 112) argues that 'Confucianism was, in a sense, Durkheim's "moral education" and Weber's "ethic of responsibility" combined into a single set of doctrines'. However, unlike nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sociologists whose principal focus was to explain the changing dynamics of social life, Confucius's interests were more prescriptive: to identify the ultimate ethical principles that should govern human conduct. In this Confucius was not unique as nearly all pre-modern thinkers tended to privilege prescription over description and explanation. In a similar vein to Mohists, Confucianism emphasises cosmic harmony between heaven and earth (*tian*) and endeavours to establish such harmonious relationships in social life: 'This equilibrium is the great root from which grow all the human actions in the world, and this harmony is the universal path which they all should pursue' (Confucius, Chung Yung 1, 1991).

For Confucius, the key guiding moral principle was to strive towards achieving and maintaining virtuous behaviour on both the individual and collective level. In his understanding the social and political virtues directly reflect personal virtues, and virtuous society can only be composed of virtuous citizens. In this context, Confucius advocated traditional values including ancestor worship, the preservation of rituals, respect for the elders by their descendants, clearly defined filial and gender duties, and strong family loyalties. Moreover, the family was seen as the cornerstone of society and the ideal government was to resemble family relationships of love, responsibility and mutual interdependence. Nevertheless, in addition to his moral prescriptions, Confucius was also an astute social analyst who developed a highly influential social philosophy that centred on the importance of self-cultivation and discipline, topics that dominate the latter-day sociologies of both Weber and Elias. For Confucius, a superior human being is defined by his or her ability to exercise self-restraint and to engage in permanent self-cultivation. In his own words, 'the gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without trial' (Confucius, 19 in *The Analects*, 1979).

Discipline and Morality

Self-control is understood to be a precondition of individual and social development. In Confucian teachings the lack of discipline is likely to create conditions

leading to corruption, abuse of power, inequity and poverty. The prosperity and well-being of a particular social order are premised on the morality and self-restraint of individuals constituting that social order. Since in this view 'the perfecting of one's self is the fundamental base of all progress and all moral development', there is a great emphasis on education. For Confucius, education involves the acquisition of knowledge which helps develop moral capacity so that individuals can recognise ethical absolutes, and strive towards creating better social order built on such absolutes. Another role of education is to stimulate self-discipline by learning how to observe and enact proper forms of behaviour. In this context, the strict observation of rites (*li*) is seen as the way to overcome the urge towards self-gratification and fulfilment of one's self-interest. Hence the performance of particular rituals is not an empty gesture that indicates one's submission to the rulers or ancestors, but has a specific and functional role: it generates self-restraint and discipline that foster individual and social development. For Confucius, sages are envisaged as the leading lights of moral cultivation. An ideal sage would be someone who constantly aspires towards ethical perfection while also guiding others on the same path towards greater virtuousness. The sage is also understood as a self-critic who espouses the particular ethical principles of Confucianism (which literally means 'the confession of literati') and as such articulates high moral standards for the entire society.

Whereas sages are conceptualised as the moral guardians of people and moral supervisors of the rulers, the gentlemen or literati, were understood to be individuals most likely to influence the everyday lives of most people. In contrast to sages who are exceptional but very rare, the gentleman is a more concrete ethical exemplar. For Confucius the gentleman is defined by his moral excellence, self-discipline and a genuine concern for the welfare of others. In this sense the gentleman is a morally superior person who can command and receive obedience on the grounds of his own morality and ability to help others: 'the nature of the gentleman is like the wind and the nature of the small people is like the grass; when the wind blows over the grass it always bends' (Confucius, 1979: 12, 19).

In this way the literati provide an indispensable service to both the state and civil society: their teachings help hold the behaviour of rulers in (moral) check while aiding the autonomy and continuous ethical development of the civil society groupings. Confucius distinguishes between the office-holding literati, whose role is to make sure that the state is governed according to high ethical principles, and the 'backwoods literati'; that is, sages without an office who act as social leaders for specific local communities (Cho, 1996: 113). Nevertheless, the gentlemen are not born as such; instead anyone has the potential to become a gentleman. In Confucian teachings the educational processes that mould individuals into gentlemen are envisaged as open to all regardless of their origin. Hence one's ability to guide others rests exclusively on one's capacity and willingness to learn and to achieve self-cultivation and self-control.

The rulers too require self-discipline and humility and are more likely to be trusted and followed if leading virtuous lives. The stability of social and

political orders depends on the willingness of all citizens (including the rulers) to obey the 'rites' (*li*) and to act morally. As Confucius (1979: 87) emphasises:

If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of the shame, and moreover will become good.

Thus, in contrast to Legalism, which highlights the coercive pressure of the laws, Confucianism stresses the emotional and moral sense of responsibility: once duty is internalised, shame is a much more powerful deterrent of vice than the state's threat of violence. Confucian social philosophy perceives social order through the prism of well-established hierarchies where every individual and social strata fulfil their requisite role to the best of their ability.

For Confucius self-discipline ultimately leads to benevolence. In his own words: 'To discipline self to fulfil the rites is benevolence. The day when self-discipline fulfils the rites, all under heaven would be with benevolence. Indeed, the practices of benevolence originate from self and not from others!' (Confucius, 12: 1). Confucian social philosophy prioritises refined and morally superior judgement over knowledge and skill even when that knowledge involves the advanced command of existing rules. Confucius's ideas give clear primacy to organisational form and group morality over knowledge and individual freedom.

Ibn Khaldun as the First Proto-sociologist

Much premodern social and political thought obsessed over normative questions such as: What constitutes a good life? How can group morals be maintained? Or how can a social harmony be achieved? The tendency was also to provide moralistic, usually religiously inspired, answers to such questions. In sharp contrast to these perspectives, Ibn Khaldun focuses on the causal relations between different social processes. Instead of advocating a particular course of action, Ibn Khaldun is one of the first social thinkers who aims to explain how the social world works. Although his studies contain extensive passages that resemble religious sermons or glorify mysticism and anti-rationalism, his main contributions are uniquely couched in the language of what we would today call social science. Drawing on wide historical, geographical and philosophical knowledge, Ibn Khaldun articulated the first proto-sociological theories of state formation, power, solidarity and urban and rural dynamics. Moreover, *The Muqaddimah* is often described as the first sustained work of historical science (Lacoste, 1984: 160; Schmidt, 1967).

At the heart of Ibn Khaldun's project is the ambition to explain long-term social change. In this context, he explores the macro historical processes that

impact state development, violent conflicts, urban life, civilisations, religious beliefs, social stratification and power configurations. At the same time he also tackles the micro interactional social world as he assesses the patterns of group solidarity, the role family and kinship play in nomadic and sedentary groups, personality transformations, and the dynamics of sociability.

The Rise and Fall of Civilisations

In *The Muqaddimah* the author presents us with a cyclical philosophy of history that analyses the development of civilisation through the prism of a dialectical relationship between the city and the countryside, both of which are indispensable for long-term social advancement.¹ In this view civilisations gradually rise through the interdependence of two principal and distinct ways of life: (1) sedentary populations able to develop the new skills, ideas, knowledge and economic environment necessary for social development; and (2) nomadic tribes capable of providing the coercive might, solidarity and moral fibre required for the establishment, protection and long-term stability of a particular civilisation.

More specifically, he argues that nomadic warriors are the only group capable of founding or conquering the new states. The social sources of their military might stem from their unique lifestyle: a generally frugal and disciplined existence, sturdy and functional military organisation, and intense bonds of kinship and solidarity. The rigours of nomadic life, perpetual involvement in the violent conflicts, loyalty to their chieftains and tight group attachments enable tribes not only to establish states, but also to maintain the stability of state rule. While the tribal cohesion generates military power and security, city life remains crucial for economic productivity, day-to-day governance, and social and cultural development. Although the nomadic warriors are good at conquering lands, protecting and policing towns, they are quite feeble at generating 'luxury goods, clothing, sophisticated cuisine, refined pleasures, relatively sumptuous houses, and social accomplishment' (Lacoste, 1984: 96). Hence a prosperous and stable civilisation entails a symbiotic relationship between the two principal social strata – tribal warriors and urban dwellers.

Nevertheless, as civilisations advance, they also sow seeds of their own demise. As Ibn Khaldun (2005: 296) emphasises: 'The goal of civilization is sedentary culture and luxury. When civilization reaches that goal, it turns towards corruption and starts being senile, as happens in the natural life of living beings.' Since the state's stability is grounded in asceticism, moral purity, tribal solidarity and loyalty, once the tribal warriors settle in towns their frugality and social cohesion evaporate and they slowly, but surely, become corrupted by the luxuries of sedentary life. Hence all civilisations undergo cyclical transformations with periodic growth, expansion and inevitable decline.

For Ibn Khaldun the rise and fall of civilisations is determined by the complex social relationships rooted in the changing political dynamics. In his

view the durable social order entails not only coercion, but also a substantial degree of group solidarity. Life outside the state is dependent on the social cohesion of lineage, kinship and deep friendships. The nomadic tribes living in inhospitable environments where there is a chronic shortage of food and water and constant dangers of raiders, carnivorous animals and natural disasters would not be able to survive without strong group attachments. In his own words: ‘Those who have no one of their own lineage feel affection for their fellows. If danger is in the air ... such a man slinks away... Such people, therefore, cannot live in the desert’ (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 98).

Group Feeling

One of Ibn Khaldun’s central concepts is *asabiya*, meaning a strong group feeling, often associated with unity, group consciousness, social cohesion and intense solidarity. Although it is frequently rooted in kinship or tribal lineage, it is not reduced to ‘blood relations’. On the contrary, for Ibn Khaldun *asabiya* refers to a ‘capacity for collective will-formation and commitment to sustained action’, which is not necessarily linked with one’s family ties but can also include a sense of attachment that resembles blood relations (Arnason and Stauth, 2004: 34; Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 264). As Gellner (1981: 27) emphasises, “‘blood’ is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of cohesion; it is merely a way of *talking* about it’. This is explicitly stated in *The Muqaddimah*: ‘The affection everyone has for his clients and allies results from the feeling of shame that comes to a person when one of his neighbours, relatives, or a blood relation is in any way humiliated’ (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 273). *Asabiya* is expressed as the intense, mutual interdependence, affection and willingness to help one’s comrades. It involves a close-knit group solidarity, unity and determination to sacrifice for one’s tribe, clan or a circle of friends and neighbours. As such it generates particular group dynamics often articulated as a superior organisational might: ‘Group feeling produces the ability to defend oneself, to protect oneself and to press one’s claims. Whoever loses his group feeling is too weak to do any one of these things’ (p. 289). Moreover, strong *asabiya*, often created and reinforced in war and military struggle, is the principal source of political power and authority.

As Ibn Khaldun makes clear in one of his most quoted sentences, ‘Leadership exists only through superiority and superiority only through group feeling.’ In other words, social cohesion generated on the battlefields and in the harsh living conditions of North African deserts fosters a unique form of solidarity, which is an essential prerequisite for political power. Ibn Khaldun identifies the strength of *asabiya* as a crucial reason why the various imperial armies had difficulty in conquering Maghreb lands. In contrast to the Spain and Egypt of his times, which provided little resistance as ‘they are now free of tribes and group feelings’ (p. 334), the Maghrebian Berber tribes who possess a high degree of *asabiya* were able to repel the imperial powers. *Asabiya* provided a

mechanism for social cohesion, and hence military prowess, that no conqueror could easily destroy.

In this context, intense group feelings also tended to overpower other sources of identification, including religion. Although nearly all of the fourteenth-century North African tribes were pious Muslims, when directly confronted to choose between their tribal solidarity and the Islamic universalism of *umma*, the tendency was to opt for the former over the latter. Whereas the cities were the cradle of this civilising universalism, the countryside, was the beacon of diversity and civil virtue.

For Ibn Khaldun the tribal warrior vs. urban dweller dichotomy is at the heart of historical change. The urban centres generate economic growth, prosperity, civilisational refinement, religious and cultural development, but none of these advancements would be possible without the political stability and military protection provided by the tribal warrior groupings. Furthermore, unlike the tribal countryside, which is characterised by a defence-intensive egalitarianism of frugal and uncertain living, urban life is more comfortable but also deeply stratified and hierarchical. Paradoxically, the origins of this social stratification are to be found in the previous conquests of tribal warriors.

It is no coincidence that the cities were regularly established, conquered and ruled by dynasties of militarised tribes and clans. The rulers establish their legitimacy through lineage with the particular tribes, and maintain their power through their tribal links and group solidarities. In other words, *asabiya* is not only a form of group cohesion but also a means of political power exercised by the tribal chiefs. Relying on this social device of group unity, the rulers impose their power in the cities. Nevertheless, as social hierarchies develop and grow in the urban environment, they undermine the egalitarian principles that underpin tribal social cohesion. It is a strong *asabiya* that allows the warrior tribes to acquire military might and it is this same cohesive quality that fosters political domination. However, as social solidarity is built in the harsh conditions of the countryside, once the tribal warriors settled permanently in the cities, the building blocks of social cohesion gradually erode. As the ruling groups embrace a life of luxury, stability, certainty and abundance their moral principles tend to change. Once the rulers lose their tribal ties and become highly corrupt, their political and ideological power is destabilised, leading to internal dissent and ultimately providing conditions for those new tribal invaders who are eager to establish their own dynasty.

Contemporary Relevance and Applications

There is no doubt that Confucius's teachings had much more impact on the state policies and the social behaviour of millions of people, than those of Ibn Khaldun. For one thing Confucianism was an official state doctrine of China for more than 2,000 years. From the second century BCE (during the Han dynasty) until 1948, Confucian teachings were institutionalised as the

principal state narrative and as such were integral to the system of education that reproduced the civil service structure of Mandarin bureaucrat scholars who were crucial for the shape of the Chinese state for centuries.

For another thing, in much of East Asia, Confucianism gradually developed into something akin to a religious doctrine and as such it has deeply influenced the behaviour of ordinary individuals for many generations. Even though the Chinese communists were initially hostile to what they regarded as a profoundly conservative ideology, recent years have witnessed a major re-evaluation of Confucius in communist China. The consequence of this top-down revision within the Communist Party of China is much more space being given to Confucius's teachings in the mass media, educational system, cultural diplomacy and even popular culture. The fact that Confucianism has a large and strong following throughout East Asia and continues to influence the behaviour of hundreds of millions of people would indicate that its contemporary relevance is enormous.

SOCIOLOGY, MODERNITY AND EUROCENTRISM

The critique of Eurocentrism reflects the need to go beyond established sociological perspectives in pursuit of a truly cosmopolitan sociology suited to contemporary globalised societies. That classical sociology was justified in assigning world historical significance to specific developments in European societies is not disputed. Instead, the critique of Eurocentrism problematises the generalisation of Western perspectives over other forms of knowing, with its implicit assumption of cultural superiority and exaggeration of difference. This is perhaps most pernicious in the postulates of modernisation theory, as it was developed in the 1950s. With the contemporary field of post-colonialism spearheading movements to 'decolonise' the literature and enable the voice of the subaltern to be heard, sociology may yet embrace non-European forebears.

However, while Confucian teachings have a substantial impact, as a form of state policy and society-wide cultural practice, these ideas had less impact on the development of social science in general and sociological analysis in particular. Although scholars have utilised Confucian concepts and principles to articulate a neo-Confucian sociological tradition (Seok-Choon et al., 2011; Cho, 1996); the deeply normative character of Confucius's writings has prevented development of an original and vibrant sociological school of thought.

In contrast, Ibn Khaldun's contributions have inspired generations of scholars to use and refine his original proto-sociological models and apply them to a variety of social contexts in the contemporary world. Hence scholars have made use of his theories of state formation to analyse the rise and fall

of civilisations in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and further afield (Alatas, 1993, 2007, 2014; Arnason and Stauth, 2004; Ortega y Gasset, 2000 [1976]; Gellner, 1981). Furthermore, Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiya* has retained much of its sociological relevance throughout the centuries and as such has been deployed to explain the dynamics of social cohesion in North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia among others (Abir, 1987; Alatas, 1990, 2014; Gellner, 1969, 1981) as well as to analyse the transformation of micro-level solidarities through time (Al-Azmeh, 1997; Lacoste, 1984; Malešević, 2015). More recently scholars have applied Khaldunian arguments to specific contemporary contexts ranging from issues such as the political legitimacy in Morocco (Cory, 2008), the contrasting state development trajectories in Algeria and South Africa (Wylie, 2008) and the social sources of the political disintegration in post-Gaddafi Libya (Elkeddi, 2015). The recent political fragmentation of Libya is particularly instructive in the sense that a Khaldunian-type analysis can help us explain the speed and direction of this unprecedented state collapse. The regional experts have emphasised how Gaddafi-era Jamahiriya was a rentier state that fostered re-tribalisation as a mechanism to maintain a hold on power. Thus instead of establishing organisational channels for the political participation of Libyan citizens, Gaddafi replaced the existing organisational structures with direct ties to the tribal leaders (Tabib, 2014). Hence, the Libyan polity had a very feeble organisational core while local power remained in the hands of the tribal chiefs. Consequently, the collapse of the Gaddafi regime was paralleled by state fragmentation along tribal lines, with the paramilitary units representing different tribal groupings, just as Ibn Khaldun would predict. Ibn Khaldun's work has also been used to explore the social dynamics of the frontier experience within and outside the Islamic cultural sphere (Newby, 1983).

Criticisms

Both Confucius and Ibn Khaldun were scholars of a pre-modern world and as such their ideas reflected in part their own times. Judging from a safe historical distance one can easily dismiss their contributions as being patriarchal, staunchly elitist, overly moralist, or state-centric. However, this type of criticism would be ahistorical in a sense that it would apply contemporary moral yardsticks to the ancient past. A much more beneficial form of critique would be to assess how sociologically adequate are the concepts and ideas developed by Confucius and Ibn Khaldun. In other words, can we still deploy some of these ideas to understand the social world? In this light it seems that Ibn Khaldun has to offer more than Confucius. While Confucius provides some insightful analyses on the social origins of virtuous behaviour and on the role of self-discipline in the development of society-wide civility, much of his work is deeply prescriptive rather than analytical.

One could argue that Confucius makes a significant sociological contribution in a sense that he traces some specific social processes such as the moral capacities of social orders through time, or the way he identifies particular social types such as the sage or the gentlemen. However, as his focus is almost exclusively on moral guidance rather than on explanation, his contribution never reaches the level of a fully fledged sociological analysis. For example, when he explores the role of rituals in social life his focus is not on how ritualism contributes to social cohesion as such, but rather on what the performance of rituals does to one's own moral cultivation. These issues are clearly addressed in his statements that emphasise continuous ethical self-development: 'Ask yourself constantly, What is the right thing to do?'; 'those who are firm, enduring, simple and unpretentious are the nearest to virtue'; Or 'to practice five things under all circumstances constitutes perfect virtue: these five are gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness'. While these moral prescriptions have enduring moral value, they do not offer sociological tools to understand how the social world works.

Moreover, Confucius's overemphasis on the role of individual responsibility and the lack of engagement with the social structure has generated a great deal of criticism. Hence South Korean scholar Kyong-il has been particularly critical of the Confucian notion of filial piety. This concept, which stands for the virtue of respect for one's fathers, elders and ancestors, has been described as deeply conservative and hierarchical and in this sense poses an obstacle to social change (Sun Lim & Soriano, 2016; Riegel, 2013).

Although Ibn Khaldun provides a sociologically more robust conceptual apparatus, he too was not immune to critical assessments. There are three types of criticism levelled against his approach. Firstly, some scholars have focused on his epistemological and methodological contributions. Here the central issue is a deep tension between rationalism and mysticism that characterises his main work, *The Muqaddimah*, and is also present in his other publications. Ibn Khaldun's rationalism is notable in his approach to the social development of cities, his analyses of state formation, dynastic rises and falls, and the broader civilisational changes as well as his studies of group solidarity. However, this rationalist approach that centres on causal relationships is often countered by regular bouts of mysticism that fill many pages of his work. For example, in *The Muqaddimah* he criticises the hagiographic and myth-making-oriented historical scholarship by emphasising the centrality of 'the factual proofs and circumstantial evidence' (2005: 23) while denouncing logic as a mechanism to understand the origins of social relations: 'The philosophers say that happiness consists in coming to perceive existence as it is, by means of logical arguments. This is a fraudulent statement that must be rejected' (2005: 402). Some scholars argue that Ibn Khaldun cannot resolve the inherent tension between faith and reason, while others criticise his nominalism, which does not allow for an explanation of the particular from the general (Alatas, 2014: 161; Brett, 1972).

Secondly, Ibn Khaldun's cyclical theory of history has been challenged by much of post-Enlightenment social science that subscribes to more linear models of social change. The theories of social cycles in history have been popular over the centuries and have been recently revived with the development of new mathematical models of socio-demographic cycles (Turchin, 2010; Turchin & Hall 2003). Nevertheless, most pre-Enlightenment cyclical models do not make room for the theory of evolution and as such cannot account for a substantial degree of biological linearity that underpins more recent cyclical models of history.

Thirdly, and sociologically most importantly, Ibn Khaldun's theories of social change have been criticised as insufficient to explain the complexity of social relations outside of the Maghreb and the pre-modern Islamic world. For example, Gellner (1981: 88–9) argues that Khaldunian theoretical models are excellent but only applicable to a specific time and place: Ibn Khaldun 'was the sociologist of Islam; notably of Islam as manifested in the arid zone, an environment which encourages tribalism by favouring nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralism and which hinders centralising political tendencies'. In this context his theory of group solidarity is perceived to be valid for what Durkheim called 'mechanical solidarity' of small pre-modern groups but not adequate to account for the multifaceted nature of 'organic solidarity' that develops in the industrialised era. Some have also questioned the psychological postulates of Khaldunian arguments (Ritter, 1948). However other scholars have argued that although Ibn Khaldun could not envisage the emergence of modernity, his micro-sociology is still relevant and helps us understand micro-group dynamics in the modern world (Malešević, 2015; Alatas, 2014).

Conclusion

Together with most other social sciences, sociology has often been labelled as being deeply Eurocentric (Connell, 2007; Bhambra, 2007). In some respects this is true as the conventional sociological canon consists solely of European scholars (Marx, Durkheim, Weber or Simmel) and much of the sociological theorising over the past two centuries was produced by Europeans (or their descendants), for Europeans, and espousing a particular preoccupation with very European concerns. Moreover, sociological research has often benefited from the legacies of colonialism and imperialism and some non-European intellectual contributions have been deliberately ignored. However, as Hall (2001) and McLennan (2015) rightly argue, some of the post-colonial and de-colonial critiques also romanticise indigenous intellectual traditions and offer a rather static view of the contingent and contradictory historical processes. In this context one should not focus on recovering the non-European intellectual traditions just for the sake of some kind of quasi-equal representation or as a lazy form of political correctness. Instead sociological contributions should be analysed and judged on their intellectual merits. Both Ibn Khaldun

and Confucius qualify easily on this account: while Confucius's social philosophy has established a foundation for the analysis of complex social relations between the state and society and as such has influenced millions of individuals throughout Asia, Ibn Khaldun is the true pioneer of comparative historical sociology.

Note

- 1 This section draws in part on Malešević (2015).

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