

Syed Farid Alatas. *Applying Ibn Khaldūn: The Recovery of a Lost Tradition in Sociology*. London & New York: Routledge, 2014. 224 pages. ISBN: 9780415678780.

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Translated by Elif Acar**

Examining a thinker as the subject, founder, and practical source of the theories that can be applied to the current issues and research areas of the field to which he belongs by going beyond certain definitions, determinations, and descriptions about him is no easy task. The difficulty becomes much more apparent if this thinker is one who has caught “permanent actuality in history” or “universal actuality in history” but his understanding was noticed by researchers much later, like Ibn Khaldūn. The difficulty usually results in two misreading styles or in two illusions, one that occurs in response to the other: *Eurocentrism* and *locality(ies)*. In the last stage of today’s social sciences, Eurocentrism is not only a dominant methodology applied by European researchers, but also a methodology that non-European researchers insist on using while examining their own culture, history, and thoughts. The dominance of this method either excludes non-European origins from the social sciences altogether, assuming it to be universal in such a way that no need exists for any theories, concepts, or categories apart from the European ones, or includes them in review only as the object and material of the field, not as subjects that know/establish any of the fields. Although this method codifies non-European thinkers and theories with a certain *locality* as objects that only give some historical data, it can also be mentioned that some localities developed as a method with their own style. These *localities*, which tend to emerge as a method less dominant than Eurocentrism, assume European and

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non-European societies to differ from one another to the extent that they have no relationship between them. According to this method, any information should be vaccinated with local elements and concepts after being cleared of basic European elements and concepts.

With his book *Applying Ibn Khaldūn: The Recovery of a Lost Tradition in Sociology*, Syed Farid Alatas aims to overcome the difficulties mentioned above and views Ibn Khaldūn as a kind of victim of these two methods. He claimed to examine Ibn Khaldūn's theories as the subject and source of contemporary social sciences without falling into strict localization. This can be considered as the general claim of the book. The more specific claim of the book is the application of Ibn Khaldūn's theories and concepts, especially his theory of *state formation*, to certain examples, most of which have developed beyond his time and geography, and making them a current source of contemporary social sciences, sociology in particular. According to Alatas, "this book goes beyond merely proclaiming that Ibn Khaldūn was the founder or precursor of sociology" for this very reason (9). This is because the author thinks that a Khaldūnian sociology, being closely related to both historical and contemporary social events and phenomena, can be rebuilt based on the works of Ibn Khaldūn, but as Ibn Khaldūn has generally been ignored as a subject theorist, this rebuilding and applying has not been done yet. His notion derives not only from the idea that an important non-European thinker like Ibn Khaldūn should be included in the social sciences as a current subject and resource, but also that the European concepts, theories, and categories are insufficient at explaining non-European societies. This makes Alatas' starting point extremely powerful and important.

The content of the book, which is organized in 10 chapters explaining this claim, is as follows: The first three chapters identify the conceptual tools of the Khaldūnian theory intended for application in current situations. The author reveals his findings in Chapter 1 regarding the methodological errors of previous historians to show how Ibn Khaldūn introduced a new science by avoiding the errors of historians up to his time. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical context of *state formation*, which the book has chosen as the primary research and application area by giving the general epistemological scheme of *the Muqaddima*, particularly its conceptual framework on social theory. Chapter 3 on one hand associates the failure to develop a Khaldūnian sociology with Eurocentrism and the locality tendencies as the two extreme positions mentioned above; on the other, it discusses how Ibn Khaldūn was perceived among modern sociologists in the 19th and 20th centuries,

particularly during the formative period of the discipline of sociology. Chapters 4-8 provide examples of how Ibn Khaldūn's theory of *state formation*, the conceptual tools of which were identified in the first three chapters, can be applied to historical and contemporary situations. By concentrating on the pre-modern forms of this theory, Chapter 4 provides some examples regarding how thinkers belonging to both the east and west of the Arab-Islamic and Ottoman Empire applied Ibn Khaldūn. Chapter 5 discusses the possibilities of considering Ibn Khaldūn's theory of *state formation* as an Islamic reform theory. Chapter 6 integrates the modes of production approach into Ibn Khaldūn's theory of *state formation* and in this context tries to apply this combined theory to the example of Ottoman political economy. Chapter 7 tries to apply the integrated form of the same theory to the example of the Safavid state. Chapter 8 brings the integrated theory to modern states and applies it to examples from Saudi Arabia and Syria. The last two chapters consist of some suggestions regarding the readings of Ibn Khaldūn and his forms of application. In this sense, while Chapter 9 makes some suggestions about reintroducing Ibn Khaldūn into the sociology curriculum and applying his method to current sociological issues, Chapter 10 consists of bibliographic explanations and further readings regarding Ibn Khaldūn's interests and claims.

So, what new things has Syed Farid Alatas done and are they as new as he claims? In order to answer this question, readers need to take a closer look at where the author positions his work. In this context, Alatas evaluates the literature on Ibn Khaldūn, which has been put forth so far on various occasions though incompletely, by categorizing it in terms of his interests and claims in order to clarify the position that brings innovation to his work (156–64). The category that the reader should take a closer look at is the one in which Alatas includes his own study, "Applications of Ibn Khaldūn's Theoretical Framework." In this category, Alatas mentions various names and related works such as José Ortega y Gasset (d. 1955), Ernest Gellner (d. 1995), Abdallah Laroui, Gordon N. Newby, Gerard Michaud, Gabriel Martinez-Gros, and Yves Lacoste and identifies the shortcomings in these works. Alatas states that some were only generally inspired by Ibn Khaldūn without relating to his self-integrity and rationality, others applied specific concepts and theories from Ibn Khaldūn directly to certain historical and modern events without integrating them into modern approaches, and still others only took a vague step while trying to integrate Khaldūnian concepts and theories with the current concepts and theories of modern social sciences. The step is vague because these studies were unable to determine well what to integrate; in other words, these studies were unable to clearly determine what is missing in Khaldūnian theory and what the

modern theoretical framework has to complement this lack. This is where Syed Farid Alatas's book positions itself differently, originally, and innovatively from other studies on Ibn Khaldūn. Nevertheless, the author associates this deficiency in the literature on Ibn Khaldūn and the vague character of the related steps taken to overcome this with the lack and silence that arises from Ibn Khaldūn himself. According to Alatas' determinations, the deficiency in question is that Ibn Khaldūn does not consider the political economy context of the issues examined in the *Muqaddima*, or he remained silent on this matter (81, 87). Therefore, Alatas, differentiating his work from the other studies he examined, tries to integrate the political dynamics of *state formation* that the *Muqaddima* examined with the *modes of production* approach using various historical and contemporary application areas such as Morocco, the Ottomans, the Safavids, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. The book's claim of originality rests on applying this integrated theory to these areas.

Such an attempt of integration and its application to the aforementioned examples are obviously original, as the author claims. However, the fact that he justifies the need of integration on the basis of the supposed lack of the political economy context in Ibn Khaldūn's work is indeed relied on the author's unsatisfactory evaluation of it. This is because when carefully examining and tracing back Ibn Khaldūn's theory of *state formation*, this theory is seen to be based on two constituent elements: political power and economy. Through the result of a careful examination, seeing the relationship between these two constituent elements "as a matter-form relationship," as Ibn Khaldūn put it, is easy. Namely, they are based on an inseparable association in terms of their practical existence.¹ Moreover, Ibn Khaldūn does not leave this determination only as an assumption or only in a theoretical context; he also discusses the function of economy in his theory of *state formation* in a significant volume of the *Muqaddima*. This relationship in the *Muqaddima* is so solid that, regardless of Ibn Khaldūn's analysis and determinations on the role of economy in this theory, particularly the political economy contexts, following the change and transformation in his most important theories and concepts such as *aṣabiyya*, *mulk*, *ʿumrān*, *badawī*, and *ḥaḍarī* are not even possible. Nevertheless, what led Alatas to this misunderstanding is that Ibn Khaldūn talks about the matter of the theory through its form as a requirement of his theoretical context. Therefore, according to the context of the matter-form

1 See Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ed. Ali ʿAbd al-Wāḥid Wāfi (Cairo: Dār Nahdat Miṣr, Egypt, 1981), vol. 2: pp. 737, 740, 755, 817, 922.

theory, Ibn Khaldūn takes economy, which is positioned as matter, to be immanent in politics, which is positioned as form. In this sense, concepts such as *aṣabiyya*, *mulk*, *ʿumrān*, *badawī*, and *haḍarī* are economic concepts as well as political, and this is due to the necessary requirements of the political economy context of the *Muqaddima*. In this context, the author himself reflects the illusion that has occurred in the literature on Ibn Khaldūn. Despite this shortcoming, the author's attempt is precious and unique in and of itself.

Finally, after noting how the book sometimes falls into repetition because of Alatas' inclusion of previous articles about Ibn Khaldūn is an editorial deficiency, one can also say that the effort Alatas put forth is a promising step on behalf of the project of applying Ibn Khaldūn, which has become well-known recently. However, that the project of applying Ibn Khaldūn has not yet reached a correct method or accurate formulation needs to be stated because of the intended integration between Ibn Khaldūn and the area in which it will be applied.