



**International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)**

A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)

Volume-X, Issue-II, March 2024, Page No.95-101

Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.v10.i2.2024.95-101

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## **A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE REALISTIC AND HISTORICAL IDEAS OF IBN-KHALDUN AND MACHIEVALI**

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### **Abstract:**

*Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), and Machiavelli (1469-1527), though roughly contemporaries, lived and worked in vastly different political, cultural and intellectual environments. Ibn Khaldun, standing in isolation at the end of the medieval Islamic civilization just as it was slackening its pace, developed his science of society and politics in a stagnating and decadent environment. Against the background of a tumulus North African tribal society that lacked the power and the institution to achieve unity and renewal, and aware of the gravity of this political decline and the intellectual sterility accompanying it, he took up the theme of development in history as a subject of theoretical consideration. Machiavelli, on the other hand was a Florentine of the Florentines, and the citizens of his city were the quintessence of the new spirit that was then stirring in Italy. He was imbued with the spirit of the new civic humanism of his native city that came to alter the whole lone of Italian thought. Against the backdrop of the Florentine wars and the diplomatic negotiations, the bickering and haggling, accompanying them, he recorded in literary form the fresh altitude of his age toward statecraft and the conduct of relations among the global villagers.*

*This article is instigated by the obvious and intriguing similarities as well as dissimilarities of Ibn-Khaldun and Machiavelli's views on socio-political phenomena and their effect upon the political fate of groups and nations.*

**Keywords: Muqaddimah, realism, Prince, philosophical, rational, enlightenment, similarity.**

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**Introduction:** *Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), a British historian, after pointing out the comparability of Ibn-Khaldun's work with those of Thucydides and Machiavelli in this vein, noted; Ibn Khaldun's star shines the more brightly by contrast with the foil of darkness against which it flashes out; for while Thucydides, Machiavelli and Clarendon are all brilliant representatives of brilliant times and places, Ibn Khaldun is the sole point of light in his quarter of the firmament. He is indeed the one outstanding personality in the history*

of a civilization whose social life on the whole was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'. In his chosen field of intellectual activity he appears to have been inspired by no predecessors and to have found no kindred souls among his contemporaries and to have kindled no answering spark of inspiration in any successors; and yet, in the Prolegomena (*Muqaddimah*) to his *Universal History* he has conceived and formulated a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place. It was his single brief 'acquiescence' from a life of practical activity that gave Ibn Khaldun his opportunity to cast his creative thought into literary shape.

The similarities of Ibn Khaldun's and Machiavelli's ideas are enhanced by Ibn-Khaldun's apparent 'modernity.' He insisted on knotting history, man and society "as they really are" by investigating the actual conditions of man and society through the ages in a pronouncedly secular, realistic and political manner. The same realism was the hallmark of Machiavelli's thought as he elaborated his science of politics on the basis of the actualities of human experience.

**Realism:** Ibn Khaldun has been cited as an alternative progenitor of realism and social constructivism in the academic world of relations among the sovereign nations. Dr Susan Strange, for example, offers him as an alternative to Machiavelli as an inspirer/foundational text author for the discipline of international relations. It is generally believed that along with Thucydides and Hobbes, Nicolo Machiavelli is another foremost prominent figures often mentioned in the realist theory. In this area, there are observable similarities between Ibn-Khaldun and Machiavelli. Once again, it is unclear if Machiavelli was knowledgeable of Ibn-Khaldun, or if Machiavelli was familiar with the latter's works. Yet it must be noted that the political situation in Europe, and specifically in Italy, during Machiavelli's own time in many ways resembles the condition of North Africa in Ibn-Khaldun's time. The personalities of Machiavelli's *Prince* also look like that of Ibn-Khaldun himself, because as Enan observed, "Ibn-Khaldun was an opportunist; he seized opportunities using all sorts of means and methods, and to him the end justified the means. He did not hesitate to return evil for good." After chronicling Ibn Khaldun's political opportunism and how he rationalized it, Enan thus concluded:

"In all his plans and actions Ibn-Khaldun exhibited deep despise of sentiment and of moral principles; he was moved by that strong spirit which Machiavelli later admired and imagined in his ideal prince—that audacious stubborn spirit which overcomes every human weakness and leads directly to the coveted end by all means."

Machiavelli had also argued that "men do you harm [among other things, by disobeying you] either because they fear you or because they hate you." The reverse of this can be formulated as follows: men obey you because either they like you or they respect you. From the Ibn Khaldunian perspective, on the other hand, men obey you for either one or any combination of three reasons: benefit, fear, reciprocity. In addition to the above randomly

selected European thinkers and philosophers, there were others for sure who had advanced ideas analytically comparable to those of Ibn-Khaldun.

As indicated earlier, Ibn-Khaldun's philosophy had won admiration from some of the more recent eminent Western scholars, such as from Arnold Toynbee, the renowned historian, and Robert Cox, the noted scholar of international relations. In fact Cox even claimed: "Toynbee certainly borrowed from [Ibn-Khaldun] some of his leading ideas, including the principle that physical environments must not be either too hard or too lush in order that they stimulate the development of civilization." In any case, one can go on and document other such parallelisms. But suffice it to say that without a doubt Ibn-Khaldun's philosophical themes and ideas substantially overlap with those advanced by the post-enlightenment thinkers of Europe.

Machiavelli has been eulogized for being the first realist thinker who has set a new trend in replacing "ought" and "should" with an analysis of real politics. This is mainly because of his association with active public life. He was secretary to the Council of Ten which looked after foreign relations and the wars of Florence. Machiavelli was entrusted with a series of missions, diplomatic administrative and even military. He gained wide experience of real *politik*, which shaped his views. Ibn-Khaldun too had he gained wide experience of real *politik*, which shaped his views. Like Machiavelli he also belonged to a period in history as agitated as chaotic as that of Italy. Ibn-Khaldun travelled far and wide, served many a princes, kings and states of his times and gained firsthand knowledge of their functioning. He has seen more state capitals, interacted with more men of power and tyrants than that of Machiavelli. Nathaniel Schmidt rightly observes, "His agitated life had brought him in touch with Pedro the Cruel in the west and Timur the Lame in the East. It had taken him into the huts of savages and into the places of kings, into the dungeons with criminals and into the highest court of justice; into the companionship of illiterates and into the academies of scholars; into the treasure houses of the past and into the activities of present; into deprivation and sorrow and into affluence and joy. It had led him into the depth where the spirit broods over the meaning of life." No wonder, the views of Ibn-Khaldun, like that of Machiavelli reflected their experiences. "It was his single brief 'acquiescence' from a life of practical activity that gave Ibn Khaldun an opportunity to cast his creative thought into literary shape."

Moreover, Ibn Khaldun abhorred political idealism of philosophers. He writes "we do not mean here that which is known as political 'utopianism'..... They do not mean the kind of politics that members of social organisation are led to adopt through laws for the common interest. That is something different. The ideal city (of philosophers) is something rare and remote. They discuss it as hypothesis. The concern of both are the factors which goes to make a state stable and powerful. Thus, Ibn Khaldun speaks of "rational politics" which is concerned with the interest of the ruler and how he can maintain his rule through the forceful use of power. This is, in fact practiced by all rulers. Similarly, Machiavelli was concerned more with political strength and stability of a state than anything else. His reflections on importance of public spirit, religion, liberty, on the need of a native army, on

importance of strict and impartial administration, maintenance of security for life and property, or importance of large population, bear directly on the creation of a power state. Ibn Khaldun also had stressed similar points that make a state powerful. Both are strikingly similar on many a points which weakens a state. On both strength and weakness, rise and fall of a state Ibn Khaldun's reflections are more elaborate and convincing than Machiavelli's.

**Historicism: (Common Grounds):** Ibn Khaldun, (the fourteenth century historian,) in the tradition of the Islamic enlightenment from the Tunisian shore of the Mediterranean studied the history of dynastic regimes since the inception of Islam.<sup>9</sup> The regions he covered ranged from the Oxus to the Nile, and from the Tigris to the Guadalquivir. He detected patterns of behavior which either added to social cohesion, or participated in its disintegration. In his *Muqaddimah* (1377), he concluded that ruling groups sustain their power by a sense of solidarity, or *Asabiyyah*, which unites both rulers and ruled. *Asabiyyah*, both a structure of consciousness and a structure of feeling, which via education and socialization assumes the power of a *habitus*, or a spontaneous common sense, obtains as long as the ruling groups refrain from attempting to gain exclusive control over all the sources of power and wealth. However, as soon as the ruling groups gain such exclusive control, conflict breaks out. The old regime will soon be displaced by a new dynastic regime. Order, followed by disorder, produces new order in Ibn Khaldun's cyclical understanding of the political histories of regions under Muslim majority control.

About a century later, Niccolo Machiavelli (a Florentine republican statesman and historian) also studied the role of social facts in historical patterns of order and disorder. Pondering on the ability of political elites in France and England to unify a territory, establish its borders, centralize its governing structure, and command it in the name of a religion, language, culture, and nation, he arrived at the conclusion in *The Prince* (1513) that political power stabilizes with the extent of the "consensus" provided by its constituents. More precisely, he contended that since the legitimacy of political power ultimately resides in its command of a military force, those soldiers who believe in or identify with values attached to a territory, language, and culture in the form of a "myth" embody superior military capability as compared to those who are not organized around a "myth."

Hence Machiavelli preferred, as Republican Romans had before him, native militias to foreign mercenaries. This consensus or a set of values, embodied by a particular symbolic system such as the myth of the exceptionality of a nation, culture, religion, economy, and language, can function as a cohesive force. In Machiavelli's estimation, its presence in Holland, France and England led to the formation of a modern nation state in the sixteenth century, while its absence in Italy prevented it. What Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli then have in common is their study of the social facts of political history that condition the rise and fall of power. Yet whereas Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli, as historical witnesses to the decline of their particular princes, primarily reflected on the patterns that produce anarchy.

However, both Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli were accustomed to seizing up political situations not only in terms of the conflicts of individuals, but in terms of the underlying forces propelling them. Hence, when they engaged in the study of history, they did so for practical ends. They turned to history because of its usefulness as a guide to political action. Both thought that history, if studied correctly, furnishes relevant facts which can be organized to reveal both the nature and causes of these facts and the lessons they can teach the man of action.

The present as well as the past can yield insights into the laws of history and furnish models for political action. For the most part, in the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn-Khaldun took as examples events that had occurred in the Islamic past in order to observe their relationships, explain their trends, analyze their regularity, and thus gain insight into the laws of historical development. He rarely referred to contemporary events, possibly because he felt that his proximity to some of these events necessitated some personal caution.

Machiavelli used both past (mostly Roman) and contemporary (mostly Italian examples to illustrate and substantiate his insights into the nature of the interplay of political and social forces. While there is a certain preponderance of modern examples in *The Prince* and of ancient examples in the *Discourses*, both books were intended to counsel contemporary men of action. The counsel is more specific in the case of the *Prince* which has been interpreted both as a case study of a specific political situation. i.e., a handbook of effective political behavior for a specific ruler 'and is a mixture of "treatise" (conveying a general teaching and 'tract for the times' conveying a particular counsel). 'Machiavelli was of the opinion, however, that the political modes and orders which should be imitated by his contemporaries were those of ancient Rome. Hence his most penetrating and engaging probings into history and political modes and orders in general are to be found in the *Discourses*, his commentary on the first Ten Books of Livy, the Roman historian of the glory of Rome. Livy 'simplifies the matter, on which Machiavelli impresses his form.

Both Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli centered their reflections on human affairs and the condition of man. Though both writers took man for what he is, selfish and desirous of power, neither reduced political questions to questions of psychology. However, in his preface to discourses Machiavelli claims to have opened a new route which has not yet been followed by any one. What was he thought of himself as doing for the first time? It was the use of historical data and its usefulness in real *politik*. "He insisted upon the need of studying history because for him the experience of himself and of others, past or present, was the only guide." He had great respect for history and he laments that for the purpose of founding a Republic, maintaining a state, governing a kingdom, organizing an army, conducting a war, dispensing justice and extending empires, no one, (neither princes nor a statesmen nor citizens) takes recourse to the examples of history. "A majority of those who read it", he maintains, "take pleasure only in variety of events which history relates, without ever thinking and imitating the noble action, deeming that not only difficult, but impossible." Like Ibn-Khaldun, Machiavelli also believes that history trends to repeat itself, with merely marginal differences, because human natures of a particular area always remain

more or less the same. But reasoning of a man of men goes with existing circumstances and ideas are reflection of one's reasoning.

In fact, Machiavelli's claim that he had resolved to tread upon a path hitherto untraveled by anyone could be proved incorrect. There are efficient references of accomplishing this task about a century before by the eminent African political thinker Ibn-Khaldun. He emphasized the significance of history in the interpretation of present and future events. Social phenomena seem to obey laws which, while not as absolute as those governing natural phenomena, are sufficiently constant to cause social events to follow regular, well defined patterns and sequences. With the help of history one can grasp these laws and employ them to understand the trend of events around us. Ibn-Khaldun also believed that new laws can be framed only by gathering a large number of facts and observing concomitances and sequences. Broadly speaking, these facts can be gathered either from the records of past events, but at the same time, he warns against too much "historicism". He elaborates, "the inner meaning of history... involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanation of causes and origin of existing things, and deep knowledge of 'how' and 'why' of events".

**Conclusion:** In a nutshell, we find that both Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli lived and worked in vastly different political, cultural and intellectual environments that shaped their similar as well as dissimilar views on socio-political phenomena and their effect upon the political fate of groups and nations. Although both are the brilliant representatives of brilliant times and places, Ibn Khaldun is the sole point of light in his quarter of the firmament. He is indeed the one outstanding personality in the history of a civilization and in his chosen field of intellectual activity he appears to have been inspired by no predecessors and to have found no kindred souls among his contemporaries and to have kindled no answering spark of inspiration in any successors; and yet, in the Prolegomena (*Muqaddimah*) to his *Universal History* he has conceived and formulated a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place. The similarities of Ibn Khaldun's and Machiavelli's ideas are enhanced by Ibn-Khaldun's apparent 'modernity.' He insisted on knotting history, man and society "as they really are" by investigating the actual conditions of man and society through the ages in a pronouncedly secular, realistic and political manner. The same realism was the hallmark of Machiavelli's thought as he elaborated his science of politics on the basis of the actualities of human experience. There even existed some discernible resemblance in the very personalities and careers of the two men. They seemed quite alike in the temperament and inclination. The fundamental vitality and a zest for politics were common to both. Again, Machiavelli's claim that he had resolved to tread upon a path hitherto untraveled by anyone could be proved incorrect. In fact, there are enough references of accomplishing this task about a century before by the eminent African political thinker Ibn-Khaldun.

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