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SOCIAL ATOMISM OF IBN KHALDUN

By Dr. Mehmet BAYRAKDAR

The purpose of this short article is that Ibn Khaldûn regarded social phenomena as atoms or monads. Since he made philosophical speculations and historical and sociological researches on human culture, no one other than him as a sociologist or as a historian could discover atomistic structure of social and historical events. So his views are still new and original. He was the first to originate social atomism.

Social atomism of Ibn Khaldûn can be regarded as a social doctrine concerning the structure of social phenomena and as a sociological method. Our study will proceed by attempting to bring to light his social atomism as a social doctrine.

Ibn Khaldûn thinks that every single social phenomenon, or every historical event, is identical with itself and that whatever is particular of some event is particular of it. According to him every social phenomenon, has particular characters. Really speaking, there is no similarity and analogy between social phenomena; they are all independent. They not only must be distinguished particularly from the concepts of spatio-temporal and cultural continuity but also from the concept of their structural features. Indeed it is difficult to schematize and illustrate Ibn Khaldûn’s social atomism as a doctrine concerning the structure of social phenomena, however we can say that it is like the doctrine of Monad of Leibnitz. As monads, or as atoms of Democritus, social phenomena in the view of Ibn Khaldûn are independent of each other. In a remarkable statement Ibn Khaldûn says: “In fact, no social phenomenon should be judged by analogy with other phenomena, for if it is similar to them in certain respects, it may yet differ from them in many others.”

What is the reason that Ibn Khaldun, a Muslim genius, originated such a doctrine? The reason for this is that he made dialectical criticism of human culture and historical events from the following points of view:

Firstly, according to him, social phenomena are all the products of human thought; inasmuch as every thought is different and particular in its structure and its manifestation it follows that its product can be different, like thought itself: That is why every social phenomenon as product of thought is particular. Every social event, has own characteristics, which are traceable not to apparent similarities but to inherent radical differences.

Secondly, according to him, social phenomena are all not static, that is to say that social forms and events change and evolve; Ibn Khaldun says: "... for everything changes with successive generations and nothing remains constant."; he further says: "... Another hidden source of error in historical writing is the ignoring of the transformations that occur in the condition of epochs and peoples with the passage of time and the changes of periods. Such changes occur in such unnoticeable way and take so long to make themselves felt, that are very difficult to discern or observed only by a small number of men." Because of this perpetual social evolution, no social phenomenon should be static; and dissemblence and particularity of social phenomena also are due to the inner change of events. In the history a very same social event cannot repeat two times.

Thirdly, according to him, every social phenomenon is conditioned by psychological, physical, moral, and economic environment of the members of a society in which it appears. And that is why biological impulses and morale, physical and economic effects of a social event can be different from the effects of another.

Because social phenomena are not identified as such in accord with prevailing or preferred social rules, norms, conventions, they exhibit so certain distinctive structure and features. If social phenomenon, then, is a particular or atom in the series of historical and sociological events, its causal explanation will have to be admitted as entirely in order: that is to say that the causal explanation might be restricted only to the nature of every Social event itself. As a result of this, we

2 Ibid., Vol., I, p. 154.
3 Ibid., Vol., I, p. 44.
can say that with Ibn Khaldûn no social phenomenon should be cause for other phenomena.

So, for Ibn Khaldûn, the Structure of social phenomena can be explained by the social atomism. He teaches an atomistic doctrine concerning the Structure and Causality of Social phenomena.

After explaining as briefly as possible the Social atomism of Ibn Khaldûn as a social or Sociological doctrine, we can now examine it as a sociological method.

If there is no analogy between social phenomena as a whole, it follows that there is no universal common laws between and for them. According to Ibn Khaldûn social phenomena do not seem to obey laws which are sufficiently constant to cause than to follow regular, well-defined patterns and sequences. It is therefore false to generalize them and to try to find constant and universal sociological laws and general methods.

However, for Ibn Khaldûn, all the events only obey a common natural law, which is evolution, or transformation of social phenomena. Ibn Khaldûn says: "The seventh cause of error, and the most important of all, is the ignorance of the laws governing the transformations of human society. For every single thing, whether it be an object or an action, is subject to a law its nature and any changes that may take place in it."4

An expert historian or sociologist must determine the methods when he decides to approach social phenomena; because, as we have said, for Ibn Khaldûn, no common and general sociological methods should be employed for all social phenomena. Ibn Khaldûn thinks that the traditional methods of ancient philosophers, historians and sociologists, such as analogy, induction, deduction, and all the other speculative approaches, cannot discover us the truth of social phenomena and their nature. He starts his methodological enquiry by criticizing these methods of ancients.

According to Ibn Khaldûn, men naturally use these methods, which are very natural for them, but indeed they easily lead men to error. He says: "Now men are naturally inclined to judge by comparison and by analogy; yet these are methods which easily lead to error."5 In this very remarkable text he further says: "... they (scholars) are accusto-

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5 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 44.
med to intellectual speculation, the search for concepts, and their abstraction from sense-data and clarification in the mind. All these operations aim at attaining the universal aspect of things, not those particular to their material content, or to a person, generation, nation, or particular class of men. They then seek to apply these Universal concept to external objects; moreover, they judge things by analogy with similar things, as they are accustomed to do in Jurisprudence. Their judgements and views, then, remain purely speculative and do not seek to conform themselves to things until after the thought process is complete.

Moreover, they do not, in general, seek to make their thoughts conform to external reality but rather deduce what ought to exist outside from what goes on in their minds. Thus jurisprudence is built upon texts memorized from the Koran and Tradition and seeks to make outside things conform to its norms, unlike the positive sciences whose validity depends on their conforming to the outside world. In brief, they are accustomed to base their views on speculation and ratiocination, and do not know any other method of approach.

Now those who engage in politics must pay great attention to what goes on outside, and to all the circumstance that accompany and succeed an event. For politics are tortuous and may contain elements which prevent the subsumption of a given event under a universal concept or maxim or its comparison with another similar event. In fact, no social phenomenon should be judged by analogy with other phenomena, for if it is similar to them in certain respects it may yet differ from them in many others. Hence men of learning, who are accustomed to generalizations and the extensive use of analogy, tend, when dealing with political affairs, to impose their own framework of concepts and deductions on things, thus falling into error – hence their unreliability. 6

Therefore Ibn Khaldūn denied the validity of all kind of speculative methods. His positive and empiric outlook concerning the structure of social phenomena brought up on an atomistic sociological method which must be different from a social event to others. The nature of atomistic sociological methods is to be positive and empiric, i.e., scientific. So the methods of sociologists, economists, historians, and politicians cannot be built upon analogy and speculations but upon sense-data and experiences.

6 Ibid., Vol., III, p. 268.