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FIFTY YEARS AGO was the 600th anniversary of the birth of Ibn Khaldun. Some notice was taken of the event in the Muslim world but it does not seem to have amounted to very much: at least, nothing approaching the number of publications that nowadays would be routinely expected, as the result of an important anniversary, came out of it. In England, H. A. R. Gibb published a brief article on the Islamic background of Ibn Khaldun's political theory. It was the first of Gibb's seminal publications on political thought and practice in Islam, which continue to be much appreciated. His argument was that the background of Ibn Khaldun's theory was to be found in the discussion of contemporary Muslim jurists as to the relationship of "the ideal demands of the Sharia with the facts of history." Ibn Khaldun was seen here as thoroughly traditional and in complete harmony with this times and his intellectual environment.

In his article, Gibb expressed astonishment at the fact that the number of substantial publications then in existence and devoted to Ibn Khaldun was small. It seemed to him to indicate a new departure that within the preceding two years, 1930-1932, no less than four fullsize books had been published, three of them monographs dealing with special aspects of Ibn Khaldun's thought. Gibb wondered why there had not been much more scholarly activity of that sort in the past century, considering that Ibn Khaldun's work had been quite well known and appreciated all those years. However, things changed during the following half a century, and what a change it has been! If there is anything to be astonished about, it is the flood of publications that has descended upon us and threatens to engulf us. Many are the scholars and writers, quite frequently scholars at the beginning of their careers writing their doctoral dissertations, who examine and dissect, try to make us understand, and also attempt to popularize the man and his work, naturally with varying success. As would be expected, some of the literature is of a more general nature, but much of it deals with special aspects of Ibn Khaldun's work.

* A lecture presented at a symposium held at Duke University to celebrate the 650th anniversary of Ibn Khaldun.
The forerunner syndrome—the tendency, which has been around for a long time, to find in Ibn Khaldun a forerunner of later intellectual developments—has, it seems, not yet run out of steam and is still going strong. This is hardly surprising and should not be dismissed as improper. It is, after all, one of the most satisfying experiences for an historical scholar to be able to discover unexpected and significant parallels to ideas commonly believed to have had their origins in a much later time. And, in particular, if those ideas happen to be viewed as “modern” and are believed to contain some important new truth cherished by large numbers of contemporaries, evidence for their earlier attestation and existence could indeed be illuminating and deserving of wide attention.

In the recent Ibn Khaldun literature, we can also observe a marked tendency to look at his work from the vantage point of some scholarly theory fashionable at the moment and to measure him, as it were, with the yardstick of modernity to see how he holds up. I must admit to occasional doubts about the value, even the legitimacy, of an enterprise of this sort. It may constitute a stimulating exercise, but it injects an arbitrary and fleeting element into the discussion and is at times likely to mislead and result in historical distortion. Gibb rightly insisted that Ibn Khaldun, by training and experience, was a Malikite faqih with all that involved, and was faithful to Muslim tradition in life as well as thought. He was thus first of all a man of his times. He might have digressed from and advanced beyond the usual norms of his environment. Yet, to begin to understand him is to place him as securely as possible within that environment. This is a commonplace approach applicable to all historical study. In fact, one frequently reads claims that it is practiced in Ibn Khaldun studies. There, however, it is something to which often no more than lip service is paid. An Ibn Khaldun scholar may pretend to be aware of the deep-seated changes in the intellectual climate that divided the world of today from that of fourteenth-century Islam, but by no means can it be taken for granted that the same scholar is prepared to recognize and transcend the limitations imposed by his own accustomed habits of thought, or even that he is willing to make a serious attempt to do so.

It may indeed be doubted that understanding the past purely in terms of the past is a desirable goal. Desirable or not, it remains an unattainable ideal. Nobody can entirely escape from the larger perimeters of his own cultural milieu and the ways in which he has been conditioned to look at the world. And this is as it should be. The scholar dealing with past periods and different peoples must possess full awareness of his own cultural assumptions and limitations, in order to achieve an effective understanding of other times and conditions. The more clearly he understands this, the better the results of his scholarly research are likely to be. An attitude of simultaneous involvement and detachment—involve in one’s own intellectual environment and detachment from it—is necessary for studying phenomena distant in time and geographical location. The possession of such an attitude has always been, and remains, central to the labors of Orientalists and accounts for the remarkable success of their work. Needless to say, it is a difficult intellectual balancing act.