



History and Cyclical Equivalence: A Comparative Approach Between Ibn Khaldun and Vico

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Abstract:

There is a clear overlap between the thought of Ibn Khaldun and that of Vico, despite the differences in their historical and cultural contexts. Both thinkers considered history a science governed by cyclical laws. They believed that nations follow similar stages of emergence, flourishing, and decline. Ibn Khaldun emphasized tribal solidarity and the political cycle of civilizations, while Vico proposed a cultural and historical model of repeated societal development. This similarity reveals an early awareness in both thinkers of the cyclical nature of history and the idea that civilizations follow patterns that can be studied and understood scientifically.

Keywords: Tribal solidarity, Civilizational equivalence, Ibn Khaldun, Vico, Civilizational development

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Introduction

Ibn Khaldun viewed history not as a mere collection of events, but as a science based on understanding the rules of human society and the patterns of its development. In his *Muqaddimah*, he introduced the concept of the historical cycle. According to him, every state passes through three stages: emergence through tribal power, followed by prosperity and stability, and finally indulgence and decline, which leads to collapse. This cyclical view suggests that history moves in repeating patterns rather than a linear progression. It is shaped by social, economic, and political factors, especially tribal solidarity, which he saw as the driving force behind the rise and fall of states.

In contrast, Giambattista Vico's notion of civilizational equivalence is a central part of his historical philosophy. He argued that all nations go through similar civilizational phases, regardless of time and place. According to Vico, each civilization experiences three stages: the age of gods, dominated by myth and religion; the age of heroes, marked by nobility and heroic values; and finally, the age of humans, characterized by law and rationality. This sequence represents a universal law of historical development and affirms the shared human experience across ages. It also positions history as a science that can be interpreted through recurring patterns in the rise and transformation of civilizations.

This raises key questions: How did Ibn Khaldun and Vico each perceive history? How did they understand the cyclical evolution of civilization and the nature of the state?

Abdurrahman Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) considered history an art practiced by nations. Today, we seem to be moving away from his historical vision. Ibn Khaldun wrote: *"Know that the art of history is a noble science, rich in benefits and lofty in purpose. It informs us about past nations, their morals, the lives of prophets, and the politics of kings and their states, offering lessons for those seeking guidance in both religious and worldly matters."*

This shows that Ibn Khaldun saw history as more than just a record of events. He assigned it a scientific and educational role. He defined history as *"the study of events and incidents, their causes, contexts, how they occurred, and the purposes they served."* This approach gave history significant value in understanding the development of civilizations. He sought not only to recount

past events, but also to explain and analyze them, aiming to provide lessons for practical life.

He stated that history may appear to be simply stories of days and past kingdoms, yet beneath the surface lies deep inquiry, careful reasoning, and scientific exploration of events and their causes. For this reason, he regarded it as a fundamental part of philosophy, worthy of being included among its sciences.

Ibn Khaldun believed that history clarifies the inner workings and causes behind the rise and fall of states. From the *Muqaddimah*, it is clear that he sought to differentiate history from other disciplines like jurisprudence and Hadith. He noted that those sciences deal with individual cases, whereas history, in his view, investigates broader social phenomena—revolutions, wars, and the collapse of states. Such events signal deeper shifts within societies, marking the beginning of their decline.

His approach focused on the human and social dimensions of these phenomena. He did not examine them as part of a cosmic order but as processes rooted in human society. For him, humans are deeply connected to the forces driving civilizational change. All these ideas are discussed in the *Muqaddimah*, which forms the foundation of his intellectual framework.

From this perspective, Ibn Khaldun strongly criticized earlier historians who collected narratives without a clear methodological framework. He distinguished between verified historical accounts and mythical ones.

Ibn Khaldun's Historical Methodology

Ibn Khaldun is among the first scholars to establish general principles for understanding history. His approach was critical and analytical. He opposed the uncritical narrative style adopted by earlier historians, who simply transmitted stories without verification. He emphasized the need to distinguish between reporting and verifying. For him, historical accounts are only credible when they align with rational indicators. Their purpose, in his view, is to draw lessons from the past to shape the future. He argued that transmitted reports must undergo scrutiny based on reason and logic.

He wrote: *"The great historians of Islam did not aim to rewrite the events of days past. Rather, they transmitted the reports they had heard from their teachers and recorded them in their books as they had received them."*

Most historians, according to Ibn Khaldun, lacked objectivity and scientific rigor. He believed that the soundness of social development is tied to the accuracy and reliability of historical information. History, in his framework, is not just the collection of facts but a science that depends on rational investigation rather than mere reception.

While earlier historians may have failed in terms of transmission fidelity and excessive reliance on unverified materials, Ibn Khaldun advanced historical interpretation by offering two major contributions in the *Muqaddimah*. First, he introduced a distinction between history, its causes, and its philosophy. Second, he explored the underlying factors and logical explanations for events, using his deep understanding of societal development.

In the *Muqaddimah*, he writes: *"History has become a book that lifts the veil from the minds of young generations and clarifies..."* [the text continues].

Ibn Khaldun also made an important point regarding sovereign states and political power. He stated: *"It is a common misconception that the state belongs solely to the ruler, that the ruler is the state and its sole authority. People often equate the state with the king, believing it exists through his person. But they fail to realize that the state is an abstract entity with its own essence. It is more closely linked to the nature of the ruler and society. It represents a structured system that governs the population and protects against external threats."*

His theory of cyclical historical thinking contributed significantly to the development of human thought, both socially and philosophically. Through his thought, Ibn Khaldun initiated a shift in the understanding of the state and civilization, placing them in a dynamic framework between humans and the world.

The idea of cyclical development is central to Ibn Khaldun's thought. He did not merely propose a model, but outlined the stages a state passes through. According to him, a state begins with the nomadic phase.

He saw the state as a civilizational entity. This perception was based on a specific philosophical vision rooted in religious values. Ibn Khaldun wrote: *"The state has a natural lifespan, like that of individuals."*

He thus argued that states pass through phases, just as individuals do. He divided the life of the state into five stages. In the *Muqaddimah*, he stated that the first stage is *"The phase of victory and domination—this is the*

initial phase, which begins in the context of tribal life."

At this stage, the state is newly established and built upon tribal cohesion. Its foundations are still forming.

According to Ibn Khaldun, the movement of history is a continuous process from nomadism to urban civilization. This process takes the form of a cycle, composed of five stages. Each stage marks a transformation in the state until it reaches its peak.

In the second phase, the state moves beyond tribalism and starts overcoming divisions among tribes. In the third phase, it enters a period of stability and peace, marked by luxury and reconciliation.

In the fourth phase, the state begins to lose its prestige. Its authority weakens gradually. It transitions from the stage of cohesion to the stage of indulgence. This phase, characterized by extravagance, signals the beginning of decline.

The five phases of the state, according to Ibn Khaldun, are:

1. **The phase of victory and power acquisition.**
2. **The phase of despotism and the pursuit of legitimacy through religious frameworks.** In this stage, people begin to imitate the ruler, believing in his achievements. Imitation becomes a societal habit, and the ruler believes in the legitimacy of his position and accomplishments.

The Third Stage: Comfort and Ease

The third stage is the phase of comfort and ease. In this phase, the ruler becomes a mere imitator of what his predecessors had established. He is no longer a founder but a maintainer. At this point, the state begins to show signs of aging. It develops psychological ailments that are hard to reverse.

Although the state passes through five phases, it does not go beyond three generations: the generation of nomadism, the generation of civilization, and the generation of luxury that appears during the time of decline.

The first generation is the nomadic generation. The people of this phase are known for pride, bravery, strength, and unity. They support one another and stand together. Once they reach a state of stability and order, they move into governance. They take over sedentary populations and rule them. Those who do not adapt to these changes are left behind. However, once the nomads shift to settled life, their condition soon begins to change.

By the third generation, many people hold on only to the appearances of luxury and civilization. They live by imitation and routine. Their spirit fades. Decay sets in. With the third generation, the state declines. It weakens and loses its vitality. It no longer holds to its founding principles. Ibn Khaldun wrote: *"Their souls become full of detachment from the values of nomadism. They return to lives of comfort and indulgence."*

Elsewhere, he adds: *"The people of the state remain in luxury and prosperity until their life becomes soft, and they are overtaken by indulgence and laziness."*

This, he argued, leads to the aging of the state. Its strength disappears. Its prestige vanishes. This is a key principle in Ibn Khaldun's theory of history.

Civilization, he explained, is part of the natural development of the state. But it also represents the onset of decline. It is the probable face of the state's future. Ibn Khaldun expressed this when he wrote: *"When the state reaches the end of its natural life and its appointed time comes, it rarely benefits from efforts to extend its life. Its aging is natural, and no remedy is effective."*

Civilization carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. As society becomes more indulgent, corruption spreads, wealth accumulates in the hands of a few, and rulers grow fewer in number. The state enters a stage of civilizational stagnation. Intellectual life begins to decline. Signs of collapse appear. Society loses its core values. People lose the motivation to continue building. They fall into complacency. The state becomes focused on consumption. It declines. What follows is inevitable decay.

The state is the face of civilization. And with civilization comes the threat of decline. Civilization is the end goal of social development, but it also marks its endpoint. Civilization is both the peak and the point of exhaustion—it carries within itself the cause of its own end.

The Third Phase: The Age of Comfort and Luxury

In the third phase, the state enters a period of comfort and luxury. The rulers become complacent, losing their initial vigor. This phase is characterized by indulgence and a decline in the values that once sustained the state. As a result, the state's strength diminishes, leading to its eventual downfall.

The Decline of the State

The decline is marked by a shift in the population's values. The initial virtues of the earlier phases give way to a focus on luxury and ease. This transformation erodes the state's foundation, making it susceptible to internal and external challenges. The once-vibrant society becomes stagnant, and the state's institutions weaken.

The Cycle of Civilization

This cyclical pattern reflects the natural progression of civilizations. Each state follows a trajectory from vigor to decline, influenced by internal dynamics and external pressures. Understanding this cycle is crucial for comprehending the rise and fall of civilizations throughout history.

Vico's Theory of Historical Cycles

Giambattista Vico, an Italian philosopher, proposed a cyclical theory of history in his work *The New Science*. He identified three distinct ages through which societies progress:

1. **The Age of Gods:** This is the foundational stage where societies are governed by religious principles and divine authority
2. **The Age of Heroes:** In this phase, leadership is characterized by heroic figures who establish laws and institutions.
3. **The Age of Men:** The final stage, where reason and human agency dominate, leading to the development of democratic institutions and the potential for societal decay.

Vico's theory emphasizes the recurring nature of these stages, suggesting that societies inevitably cycle through them, experiencing periods of growth and decline.

Conclusion

Both Ibn Khaldun and Vico offer insights into the cyclical nature of civilizations. Their theories highlight the importance of understanding the internal and external factors that influence the rise and fall of states. By examining these patterns, we can gain a deeper understanding of historical processes and the dynamics that shape societies.

Giambattista Vico's Historical Theory

In the field of history, new interpretations emerged with Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) in the seventeenth century. Vico established his theory in historical thought through his philosophical thesis centered on the philosophy of history. His perspective posited that history operates according to laws, and understanding these laws means recognizing the principles governing the emergence of civilizations. Consequently, Vico stands out as a foundational figure in the science of history. His thought undoubtedly paved the way for this discipline, as he introduced a novel philosophy of history.

Vico distinguished between natural history and barbaric history. He associated the former with the history of Jews and Christians, while the latter pertained to the history of pagan nations, which constituted the majority of world history.

Vico categorized human societies into three civilizational stages, conceptualized as cycles. His framework progressed from a stage of savagery to one of heroism, and finally to a stage of civilization. Thus, societies transitioned from a primitive phase characterized by the absence of laws and organized existence. They then progressed through successive stages of thought, beginning with savagery, advancing to heroism, and eventually entering a new phase governed by laws and crystallizing into social relationships, culminating in the stage of civilization, representing historical maturity. Progress is not coincidental but results from a

prolonged history of human struggle, with each generation succeeding the previous one. Human thought can derive methodologies leading to adversity. Based on this, Vico believed that society undergoes successive periods of prosperity followed by decline.

Vico extensively contemplated destiny. He adopted the view that the world experiences three temporal phases. He considered this division significant, as it categorizes eras into three periods: the age of the gods, the age of heroes, and the age of humans. Vico generalized this triadic conception to all nations across all eras. Each nation transitions in its history from the age of the gods to the age of heroes. Upon reaching the culmination of the latter, it returns to the age of the gods, initiating a new cycle.

This directly correlates with the divine cycle, forming a theoretical spiral. Vico applied these views and this organization to the history of the Greeks and Romans, as well as the Middle Ages.

Vico observed that history undergoes three phases: the successive stages of the religious phase, the heroic phase, and the regression after its flourishing. These phases are governed by absolute laws of human destiny, during which the nature of humans and nations remains unconscious.

The Age of Reason: In this era, authority shifts from religious figures and clergy to leaders and politicians. A new political system emerges, dominated by the aristocracy, where the common people achieve truth. During this phase, these aristocrats control values and orientations, leading to the crystallization of the democratic bourgeois class, forming a distinct class with rights and privileges within the state.

The Human Age: This era begins with people's awareness and recognition of their inherent equality in rights and duties. During this period, individuals realize their full rights concerning the state. Democracy is established, and equality and justice spread among people. During this age, despotism and aristocratic systems fall, replaced by democracy.

Oswald Spengler emphasizes the concept of the civilizational cycle, the idea of periodic succession, and the recurrence from generation to state until the state ends through historical repetition. Spengler asserts that the state undergoes phases and is subject to psychological factors unrelated to logical reasoning. It is governed by its destined fate, rather than objective causes, and the traditional connection between nature, environment, and outcomes. Spengler argues that Western civilization represents the final stage of decline for the Western spirit. It has fallen into a spiritual crisis, leading to the loss of its spiritual dimension. He notes that the family has lost its role, and humans have shifted from inward to outward. The imbalance of values has led society into corruption, prompting calls for religious reform, the emergence of materialistic philosophies, deviant ideas in society, moral decay, widespread violence, the appearance of a society without norms, and the rise of human tendencies toward control and dominance. This has led to the emergence of a migration movement that threatens the Western spirit and poses a direct danger to the existence of the Western state. He believes that the state has lost its purpose and justification for existence, becoming external or internally clashing with the Western nation. This scenario is not unlikely for Vico, as it can occur due to external or internal reasons.

Vico adopted these views based on the history of the Greeks and Romans and the Middle Ages of Europe. He considered the age of heroes in civilization to be long, while the emergence of ideas among them was a matter of education. Thus, the human nature of people was prepared to accept this civilizational role. The Middle Ages ended a new era for the Greeks, marked by its second phase of darkness and tragedies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both Ibn Khaldun and Vico place the state and history at the center of their thoughts, albeit from different perspectives. Ibn Khaldun views the state as a social phenomenon essential for organizing human civilization. It arises through group solidarity and flourishes through power, then weakens with luxury, making it the focal point of the historical cycle that explains the development of civilizations. In contrast, Vico sees the state as an expression of the development of collective intelligence. It emerges and grows through civilizational stages—mythical, heroic, and rational—that reflect the evolution of human consciousness.

As for history, for both thinkers, it is not merely a record of events but a science that explains the development of societies according to fixed laws. This reflects a deep belief in the existence of a cyclical and organized system governing the course of humanity.

The significance of the cyclical succession in both Vico and Ibn Khaldun lies in its role as a key to

understanding the movement of history and the transformation of civilizations. Ibn Khaldun believes that the historical cycle explains the emergence, flourishing, and fall of states due to changes in group solidarity and luxury, establishing history as a science based on social laws. Vico, on the other hand, highlights the cyclical succession as a fixed law through which all nations pass, from the stage of myth to reason, emphasizing the unity of human experience.

In both cases, this succession reveals that history is not random but governed by rules that can be studied, providing their thoughts with an interpretive and methodological dimension in understanding the past and anticipating the future.

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