

The Bridge of Becoming: Reimagining Work and Capital through Ibn Khaldun and Western Economic Thought

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Abstract:

This study reimagines the foundational role of work in economic life through a comparative analysis of Ibn Khaldun and key Western economic thinkers, including Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Max Weber, and John Maynard Keynes. Drawing on the Systems Thinking Framework, the research positions work not merely as an economic activity but as a structuring principle that shapes civilizations, value systems, and social organization. Unlike modern paradigms that prioritize capital accumulation, this study explores how Ibn Khaldun's pre-Enlightenment perspective centers work as the original and enduring source of value, production, and moral order. By contrasting this with Western theories that progressively decouple wealth from labor, the paper proposes a re-evaluation of economic systems toward a more equitable, sustainable, and human-centered model. The study also underscores the determinant role of the State in shaping dominant worldviews, offering a critical perspective on the institutional forces that legitimize or marginalize work within political economies.

Keywords: Ibn Khaldun, Work, Wealth, Capital, Islamic Economics

Introduction

“It is from work that men are rich in flocks and wealthy, and a working man is much dearer to the immortals.” – Hesiod¹

In this introduction, I aim to situate the readers so that they frame some controversial claims they might encounter throughout this study.

First, this study is focused on “work.” In it, I explore the origins, meanings, and functions of related concepts such as money, wealth, trade, and debt, but such explorations are limited to the relationship of work to these other concepts and systems.

Second, work, as discussed here, should not be interpreted within the modern-day dichotomy that frames work in the socialism-capitalism binary. When this study appears to prioritize work and workers, such a perception should not be interpreted as an endorsement of socialism or communism, nor as a critique of capitalism or the result of socialist influence. That would be a narrow reading—limited by modern conceptualizations of work and capital. This research cannot be the product of modern Western influence because the central figure, through whom I am examining the place of “work” in society and the world, is Ibn Khaldun—a thinker who lived not only before the Enlightenment era, which produced the socialism-capitalism dichotomy, but even before the Renaissance, which informed the Western Enlightenment.

Ibn Khaldun, as a preserver, interpreter, and producer of knowledge, was a product of Islamic civilization, which did not endeavor to elevate economic life to a level warranting the sustained attention of thinkers, scholars, and political leaders. Leading up to Ibn

¹ Hesiod, *Theogony and Works, and Days* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46. Subsequent references will be abbreviated following their initial use.

Khaldun's time, and for more than seven hundred years, Muslim thinkers did not specialize in economics; learning institutions did not create academic disciplines focused on business, finance, or economics; and political leaders did not appoint political economy thinkers to economic councils or finance ministries. When Ibn Khaldun turned his attention to economic life, he allocated no more than seventy pages of his multivolume collection of writings to how people make a living and by what means they build wealth. In summary, economics was not the central prism through which national policies and international relations of the Islamic civilization were processed, unlike how economics shapes the worldview of modern nation-states today.

Third, this study is not an uninterested, dispassionate endeavor that robotically presents all significant ideas and theories on “work” in Islamic thought and contrasts them with related modern ideas. This research is shaped by a professional commitment to human rights advocacy—a bias informed by over two decades of teaching and writing on the subject. Because of this “profession,” and true to Ibn Khaldun's theory on the power of vocation to imprint certain traits (*sibgha*²) in the person, I am likely to process every topic through a rights-based lens.

Theoretically, while this study engages with the place of “work” both conceptually and practically, it remains a limited endeavor, focused primarily on analyzing Ibn Khaldun's ideas on work to assess their relevance to today's challenges. This study should not be seen as a comprehensive survey of theories on work, labor, money, and wealth. It is best understood as a contribution to the generative application of the Systems Thinking Framework³—an approach I adopted mainly due to Ibn Khaldun's influence—to the concept of “work” by expanding the scope to cover at least six hundred years of accrued knowledge and its application. In other words, this study explores some of the practical consequences of adopting certain conceptual frameworks and privileging them through the determinant systems of the State to achieve specific outcomes—outcomes we can now evaluate with the benefit of hindsight spanning two civilizations, not just one. The aim of this study is to understand “work” as an idea and a necessary function of systems, and to explain the implications of applying this understanding to issues that shape our worldview.

Organizationally, this study consists of three sections. Section one functions as both a literature review and body of evidence. In it, I identify the ideas and concepts that distinguish Ibn Khaldun from some Western economic philosophy thinkers since the Enlightenment. Section two offers analysis and interpretation of the key ideas and concepts

² Ibn Khaldun used this concept to refer to traits, characteristics, ethics, and tendencies. See Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddima* (USA: MAJALLA, 2024), pp. 103–106, 125, 144, 202–203, 228, and 258–259. The term also appears in the Qur'an (Sura al-Baqara 2:138). All references to Ibn Khaldun's work are cited from this source: Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddima* (USA: MAJALLA, 2024), unless otherwise specifically indicated. This edition will be referred to hereafter as *al-Muqaddima*. In cases where the wording is disputed or comparison is necessary, I will refer to the 2000 Beirut edition: 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2000), which will be abbreviated as *al-Muqaddima* (2000).

³ Describing Ibn Khaldun's approach as a systems thinking framework does not suggest he invented it. Even today, despite scientific advances, systems thinking remains limited in scope and rarely applied in the social sciences or humanities. The framework itself is still evolving and lacks standardization. Yet, Ibn Khaldun clearly relied on core principles of systems thinking to develop theories he viewed as universal. His analysis draws on integrated knowledge to explain interconnected conceptual and practical systems, with attention to forms of energy (potential, conceptual, spiritual, *al-Muqaddima*, 302, 233, 287, and 213).

presented in section one. Section three explores the implications of comparing Ibn Khaldun's thought to that of some of the most influential Western thinkers. Collectively, these three sections introduce and engage with ideas that highlight the similarities and differences between late Islamic and Enlightenment thinkers in political economy and economic philosophy, with a focus on "work."

In terms of literature review, notably, scholars who worked on Ibn Khaldun's economic philosophy often placed him in the same category as later Western thinkers, emphasizing his being a trailblazer who introduced conceptual innovations more than three hundred years before Enlightenment thinkers.⁴ This view seems to be interested in elevating the status of Ibn Khaldun, and in so doing, accepted Western economic thought as the natural development and inevitable worldview.⁵ This work does not accept this evolutionary discovery theory, which implies, among other things, that the current worldview is necessarily the only correct position, which ignores the determinant role played by political economy systems. The rejection of this position is rooted in systems thinking principles, derived from Ibn Khaldun's analysis, one of which recognizes the extraordinary power of the State, as a determinant system. This principle hierarchizes systems, distinguishing among determinant and contributory systems, and identifies the State's power as the most determinant system, in creating a reality through political choices made by considering a menu of options, each one of which could be made the dominant worldview had the State adopted it and implemented it through the multitude of systems under its control. Therefore, Ibn Khaldun's thought is presented here as an alternative conceptualization of work that was never realized because none of the dominant political orders adopted it.

Given that Ibn Khaldun's thought is used here to critique and respond to Western thinkers' ideas, several facts and assumptions must be disclosed to better understand this study.

One, Ibn Khaldun lived more than two centuries before the Western Renaissance. This fact is significant, in that, while it is true that he lived on the outer edges of the Islamic civilization's period of dominance and the start of the militaristic imperial stage (Sultanate), he nonetheless did not experience the presence of an alternative worldview that was challenging the Islamic one, and that made him far from being a reactionary figure despite his being in a world in transition.⁶ His idea of cyclical decline of civilizations attributes the conditions that produce the decline to internal systemic forces, and

⁴ S. A. Shaikh, *A comparative study of views and the role of labor in Marxism, mainstream, and Islamic economics*; Chapter 10 in Necmettin Kizilkaya and Toseef Azid (eds.), *Labor in an Islamic Setting* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 134. See, also, See, Syed Farid Alatas, *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography*, (NYC: Oxford University Press, 2014); Rana Kabbani, *A Wall of Two: The Social Thought of Ibn Khaldun and Its Contemporary Relevance*, (NA: Islamic Institute for Research and Education, 2005); and Sue Mouton, *Ibn Khaldun: The Father of Sociology and Economic Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁵ See this representative claim about the place of Ibn Khaldun as a philosopher of modern economics: "some scholars regard him [Ibn Khaldun] as the real father of economics, whose ideas have been taken up by Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx." Yasien Mohamed, *The Division of labor and its theoretical foundations*; Chapter 3 in Necmettin Kizilkaya and Toseef Azid (eds.), *Labor in an Islamic Setting* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 29.

⁶ Ibn Khaldun lived in an area with many power centers, characterized by the decline of the Islamic civilization, which was governed by the Abbasid Dynasty, which transitioned the Umma to the Imperial phase under the Ottoman Sultanate (Empire).

less to competing or alternative outside forces. In this view, the rise of communities from outside is decided by the imperatives of the vacuum created by the declining social energy and less by outside forces.

Two, as his words at the end of *al-Muqaddima* suggest, Ibn Khaldun recognized the natural and political limits of his thought. In terms of natural limits, Ibn Khaldun believed and appreciated that knowledge is an accretive, collaborative, and collective legacy. He understood that his knowledge is built on the foundation of the discoveries of scholars and thinkers who came before him, and that his knowledge benefited from theirs, and that his contribution is but a small drop that could be augmented by the stream of future discoveries. As to the political limits, from his constant travels, his associations with dynasties spread from the west to the east of the Islamic world of his time, his official positions that he abandoned or forced to abandon, and his desire to record history, we should deduce that Ibn Khaldun could not tell us all that he wanted to tell us. For his ideas to be published and to be preserved for future generations, we ought to assume that he was forced to leave out some ideas or not be as explicit with his ideas.⁷ He hoped that his readers in the distant future might be freer than he was and that they might augment their knowledge to the extent that they will be able to read between the lines to reconstruct the missing pieces or incomplete pieces to produce a more complete body of knowledge and sound explanation of human nature and human behavior.

Three, Ibn Khaldun cannot and should not be perceived as a Muslim thinker writing for Muslim readers of his time or Muslim readers of the future. He was a thinker writing for everyone, and that can be derived from his approach, his selection of topics, and from his assumptions about the applicability of his ideas in terms of time, culture, and geography. There is a crucial matter that must be borne in mind to fully grasp Ibn Khaldun's thought: He was not theorizing in isolated systems through a limited disciplinary undertaking like micro or macroeconomics of his time and his culture. Ibn Khaldun theorized in the context of civilizational lifespans. In other words, his conceptual framework transcends the singular to holistic analysis and predictions. After he finished writing *al-Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun left for his readers these concluding thoughts:

*We have decided to rein in what is being said in this first book, which is about 'umrān for we have said enough about the issues that fall under this theme. Perhaps whoever comes after us, whom God supports with sound thinking and clear science, will draw from such issues more than what we have written for it is not up to the discoverer of an art to account for all its aspects, but rather he should identify the applicable science and its relevant categories. It is the work of those who come after him to incrementally augment the body of knowledge until it is complete. And God knows, and you do not know.*⁸

Regardless of how his contemporaries and his successors saw him, Ibn Khaldun clearly saw himself as a thinker whose mission was to bridge generations of producers and

⁷ Ibn Khaldun must have been aware of the fate of his fellow Andalusia thinker, Ibn Rushd, who came before him (1126 - 1198 CE) and who was forced out of al-Andalus to live and die in the Maghrib, whose writings were ordered to be burned by the caliph, and whose (or some of his) work survived only because they were translated into Latin, Hebrew, and other languages, before these translations were used to rebuild these works in Arabic centuries later.

⁸ *al-Muqaddima*, 477.

preservers of knowledge. He gracefully gives credit to those who came before him and humbly acknowledge the lack of tools and information that would allow him to take credit for producing a complete knowledge while declaring that human knowledge does not compare to that of God. Although translators often ignore the closing sentence Ibn Khaldun asserts at the end of chapters, as mere formality intended for signaling piety, the variance of those concluding declarations suggest that they play a more significant practical function in Ibn Khaldun's thought: they articulate a conceptual framework.

Ibn Khaldun's era is significant for many reasons, but most importantly, for it being a turning point in human history. It marked the beginning of the decline of one civilization, the Islamic civilization, and the start of a new one, the Western civilization. Nothing represents the contrast between these two civilizations more than their prioritization of economic life or lack thereof.

In this study, I focus on one of the foundational elements of economic life, work, over the span of more than six hundred years, starting with Ibn Khaldun who transmitted to us the legacy of civilizations in which he lived and ending with current events. While attempting to cover this timespan, I will attempt to provide a grounding of Ibn Khaldun thought independent of later development, and then I will use his arguments to analyze some of the most consequential ideas of thinkers who came after him—some of whom built the foundation for the modern Western civilization.⁹

SECTION ONE

Economics in Late Islamic and Western Intellectual Thought

"You should work; for God will see your work, and so will the Prophet and the Believers." – Quran¹⁰

Variation in conceptual frameworks is partly due to the coining of keywords and the assigning thereto of meanings and functions. For instance, "work" meant something for Ibn Khaldun, and it meant something else for Enlightenment thinkers and beyond. Subsequently, the different meanings of work resulted in different applications of work and such difference produced variations in the meaning and functions of related words including labor, money, capital, wealth, and debt. Therefore, we will start this section by defining work and related words.

Meanings and Functions of Work

⁹ The apparent imbalance in coverage between Ibn Khaldun and Western economic thinkers is deliberate. Given the widespread engagement with Smith, Ricardo, Weber, and others in academic and public discourse, this study devotes more attention to Ibn Khaldun's lesser-known but equally foundational insights, which remain underexplored in modern economic philosophy.

¹⁰ A portion of *āya* 105, *sūra al-tauba* (Qur'ān; 9:105). Generally, in the Qur'an, work is presented as the standard by which each human being will be judged. Each person is accountable only for their own actions—no one will bear the burden of another. Everyone will receive the reward or consequence of their own work. "No one will be burdened by the act of someone else; the human being has nothing but the outcome of his own work; his hard work will be seen; and then he will be reward for his work the most complete and full reward." (Qur'an; Sura al-Najm (The Star), verse 53:38-42).

Work encompasses a vast spectrum of human experience. It is the foundation of economic life—what people do to sustain themselves and the people under their care. However, work is also a source of meaning, purpose, and identity, making it both a functional and existential concept. To clarify the use of terminology in this study, it is helpful to distinguish among three often overlapping terms: work, labor, and job. “Work,” as used here, refers to any effort—physical, mental, or systemic—exerted to sustain or alter the state of something. It includes not only human action but also the operations of systems in nature and society. “Labor” typically denotes strenuous, often physical effort—what might be called “live work”—though it can also encompass intense mental exertion. “Job” is the most specific of the three, describing a defined role within an organization performed in exchange for compensation. To illustrate: building a house involves “work” broadly; the physical act of laying bricks is “labor”; and the bricklayer’s formal position is a “job.” These distinctions will not be repeatedly elaborated but will remain implicit throughout the analysis, except when “labor” is used by most Western thinkers in reference to what Ibn Khaldun describes as “work.” Now that we have a sense of the meaning of work, let’s examine it in Ibn Khaldun’s thought and contrast it with ideas of some Western thinkers since Enlightenment.

Approach and Theory Considerations

To understand Ibn Khaldun’s views on work,¹¹ his theoretical lens must be understood first, because without it, it is difficult to appreciate his ideas and contextualize them. Ibn Khaldun is a systems thinker. His understanding and application of the Systems Thinking Framework as we understand it now may be limited to the principles developed and applied during his era. Nonetheless, I estimate that his work cannot be understood and fully appreciated if it is not judged according to the principles of the framework. Therefore, we must start by defining the framework and identifying the basic principles that Ibn Khaldun must have applied.

What can be derived from Ibn Khaldun’s thought and the ideas of systems thinkers who preceded him is this: to be a systems thinker is to believe that events are not random, events are outcomes of purposeful systems, that outcomes require work over time, and work requires energy. This understanding spells out at least four specific principles:

1. a system must be designed and applied to maintain, to change, or to produce an event;
2. a system achieves outcomes (events) through work;
3. work requires energy (force, power, potency...); and
4. a system performs its work over time; there is no event if time is zero.

Furthermore, Ibn Khaldun may have concluded that systems, thus defined, are necessarily connected, and that the source of the needed energy for each system to achieve its outcome cannot be internal to the system. To understand an event, one must identify the

¹¹ Ibn Khaldun uses the word *amal* (عمل) for work to refer to all human actions, not just those related to employment. This is consistent with the Qur’anic usage, as reflected in the verse: “And say, work; for God will see your work, and so will His Messenger and the believers.” “وَقُلْ أَعْمَلُوا فَسَيَرَى اللَّهُ عَمَلَكُمْ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ” (Qur’an, Sura al-Tawba, 9:105).

system or systems that produce it and to identify the system that is determinant to the event, one must identify the elements that do the work and the source of energy that powers the system to achieve its outcome through work.

Being a systems thinker is about establishing a foundation for one's arguments and theoretical models. A sound foundation can be established on principles that are derived from the broadest generalized rule possible, with minimal exceptions. The foundation of Ibn Khaldun's views is established on two broad assumptions (let-it-bes): (1) The human (*insān*) is created weak (born weak and ages weak),¹² making the human being a necessarily social being (*madanī*) who is dependent on others;¹³ and (2) work (*`amal*)¹⁴ is necessary for the human being to exist—he must perform work or someone must perform work on his behalf when unable.

Ibn Khaldun grounds all the complex and interconnected ideas that he discusses in his multivolume body of work in his view of the nature of the human being (weakness) and the necessity of work (*`amal*) which he addresses in his *Muqaddima*.¹⁵ He succinctly states all the foundational elements that provide his theories with the grounding that would allow them to withstand logical and reason-based challenges.

1. Social living (*al-ijtimā' al-insānī*)¹⁶ is necessary. Ibn Khaldun references the saying of earlier philosophers who concluded that the “human being is civil by nature.”¹⁷ He explains the quote saying that humans by nature are drawn to urban living (*`umrān*),¹⁸ which refers to humans establishing a society in the city. He then establishes a reason for why humans are compelled to live collectively in urban settings: God created the human being and configured him in a form that cannot live or be sustained except through nutrition.

2. Securing nutrition requires *work*. Ibn Khaldun held that God provided the human being with the instinct and power to seek nutrition. However, the power of one human being is not enough to secure nutrition sufficient to sustain his life.¹⁹ Ibn Khaldun argues that even if we were to consider nutrition for just one day that can be derived from some

¹² This view human limitedness, dependency, and vulnerability is also rooted in Islamic fundamental characterization of the human species: the human being is born weak and as he ages becomes weak again. “The human being was created weak.” The Qur'an acknowledges the inherent vulnerability of human beings. In Sura al-Nisā' (4:28), it states: “وَخُلِقَ الْإِنْسَانُ ضَعِيفًا” [And the human being is created weak.” (al-Nisā', 4:28). Similarly, in Sura al-Rūm (30:54), the progression of human frailty and strength is described: “اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ ضَعْفٍ” [It is God who created you in a state of weakness, then made after weakness strength, then made after strength weakness and gray hair. He creates what He wills, and He is the Knowing, the Powerful.” (al-Rūm, 30:54)]. From here, Ibn Khaldun establish the first principle that guide his systemic thinking: The human being is lacking by nature (الإنسان مفقر بالطبع). *al-Muqaddima*, 265.

¹³ *al-Muqaddima*, 25, 265.

¹⁴ Be it for meeting the very basic needs or to acquiring additional objects, the human being must perform human work (فلا بد من الأعمال الإنسانية في كل مكسب ومتمول); see *al-Muqaddima*, 266).

¹⁵ *al-Muqaddima*, 25.

¹⁶ *al-Muqaddima*, 25-6.

¹⁷ The proposition “the human being is civil by nature” can be traced back to Aristotle (“Man is by nature a social animal”; *Politics*, Book 1, Chapter 2.), and likely echoes the thoughts of earlier thinkers in both the Greek and Islamic philosophical traditions.

¹⁸ *al-Muqaddima*, 25-6.

¹⁹ See Chapter 1, Book 1 of *al-Muqaddima*, 25.

grain, for example, still the grain cannot be used without work needed to process the grain including harvesting, grinding, kneading and cooking; and that “each of these three works” would require vessels and tools, all of which cannot exist without work by various “crafts of blacksmith, carpenter, and potter.” Anticipating objections to his reasoning whereby one would contend that a person could consume the grain as is, without processing, Ibn Khaldun asserts that such a person would still need to secure it (*taḥṣīl*) through “sowing the seeds, harvesting, and threshing, which extracts the grain from the kernel (*sunbul*); and each one of these activities requires multiple tools and many crafts, much more than the first, and it is impossible for the ability of one person.” This problem can be solved by a human being entering into association with his kind “in order to secure sustenance for him and for them, through cooperation.”²⁰

To understand Ibn Khaldun’s notion of the inevitable need for work, one must keep in mind that Ibn Khaldun sees work as the original source of any existence—a thing exists because a system (or systems) performed some kind of *work* to produce it.²¹ In this sense, knowledge, which allows the individual human being to overcome inherent weakness and external challenges, is in and of itself the outcome of work: parents teaching children basic and complex ideas and activities. Here, even a complex work performed by an experienced craftsperson is itself the outcome of someone else’s work—mentors, teachers, trainers, and guides. Therefore, what a human being would come to acquire and attribute to his own hard work is in fact the outcome of a plurality of systems that perform (and have performed) work over time. In the end, the human being will sustain his existence or build wealth through his own work and the work of others.

Ibn Khaldun recognizes only two paths for producing basic wealth or subsistence (*rizq*)²² or supplemental or acquired wealth (*kasb*).²³ He also reduces the paths to acquiring wealth (or property in general) to two: through usurpation (*ghaṣb*)²⁴ or replacement (*ʿiwaḍ*).²⁵ He posits that only commerce (*tijāra*)²⁶ is a legitimate way of acquiring wealth without productive work.²⁷ He sees *tijāra* as an activity undertaken by a person who would acquire a tradable object and resell it for a price higher than for what he acquired it for, and the difference in price becomes his earned income. In this system, the trader does not actually produce the object of trade; some other worker does; the trader

²⁰ Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddima*, 25.

²¹ This is consistent with Ibn Khaldun’s general view that things are either the work of God—creation—or the work of humans—intervention; humans cannot even consume what God provided for them without work in many stages, states, and processes.

²² *al-Muqaddima*, 267.

²³ *al-Muqaddima*, 267.

²⁴ *al-Muqaddima*, 197.

²⁵ Ibn Khaldun uses the word “*ʿiwaḍ*” to state a general rule; although the context may suggest that it is referring to trade (*tijāra*). To clarify, *tijāra* is the Arabic term that has been coined to refer to trade and commercial exchange. Ibn Khaldun uses “*ʿiwaḍ*” to refer to replacement of one thing with another; and modern use refers to “compensation”, “reparation”, or “replacement”. See *al-Muqaddima*, 265.

²⁶ *al-Muqaddima*, 275.

²⁷ Ibn Khaldun writes that wealth is often acquired through commerce and exchange, which he sees as legitimate and useful for the society at large (*al-Muqaddima*, Chapter 5); but he warns against the negative impact of usurpation—individuals or groups who acquire wealth through forceful means or exploitation (*al-Muqaddima*, Chapter 6).

(merchant) becomes an intermediary between the workers who produce objects that are needed by others.

Producers of goods and services do work, therefore, the value of their goods and services is the combined cost associated with material and labor. The margin of price of goods and services at the level of production is known: the cost of material plus the cost of labor spent processing the material. This is calculable whether the goods are material goods (e.g., a table), or a service (e.g., like teaching, or entertaining through singing or playing music). In a system where producers of goods and services supply the consumers directly with the goods and services as they are produced, the generated income is likely to be limited. Ibn Khaldun would classify this income as *rizq*. This will be an economy of subsistence in that the wealth generated is directly connected to work. In this kind of economy, the producer of the goods and services would do the extra work of storing and distributing their goods and services to the consumers. Practically, production of goods and services is a labor-intensive event on its own, which forces the producers to hire others to do the work of distributing their goods and services to others. It is through this added step that trade became an economically necessary system. In its pre-capital form, the trader, a merchant, would agree with the producer on a cost price (supply price) for a product and then “borrow”²⁸ the product (goods and services) from the producer. The merchant would then offer the product for sale and ask for a price that is higher than the cost price, and the consumer may pay the asking price or a negotiated price, which falls above the cost price. The merchant pays back the producer the cost price, and the merchant keeps the difference. In this economic system, although the merchant did not do the work to produce the product, the merchant nonetheless did some work placing the product in the market. Therefore, the income is not all *rizq* because it did not result from direct work producing the goods and services; rather, it is mostly *kasb* because he *profited* from the work of the producers through trade (*tijāra*). The distinction becomes significant when considering the processes and institutions human have developed to build wealth through the work performed by others—be it enslaved human beings, animals, or tools—an ethically and legally significant yet unresolved matter from the point of view of remedial justice. Although he did not address the specific examples mentioned here, clearly, Ibn Khaldun makes a clear distinction between the source of income because of ethical and legal considerations. Making a living through work (*rizq*) by producing goods and services is a fair and legitimate practice, for it compensates for work. He argues that it is praiseworthy because it enshrines the value of work. On the other hand, Ibn Khaldun considers making a living through *kasb* to involve ethical and legal risks. It is in this context that Ibn Khaldun inserts the determinant function of the State into the economic equation: the State controls the power of the market.

In a subsistence economy, the source of wealth can be accounted for: work. In a trade-based economy, wealth can be generated without productive work or with minimum

²⁸ Ibn Khaldun explains that a trader could “borrow” goods from a worker, selling them and then paying the producer afterward. This process illustrates that wealth can be built without initial capital. The significance of Ibn Khaldun’s perspective lies in the fact that it challenges the common Western notion that capital is the only means to generate wealth. His view shows that trade can begin and prosper without upfront investment, offering a different framework for understanding economic growth.

work and that is where the ethical and legal risks become issues that would require the involvement of the State (*dawla*),²⁹ or rulers in less established societies.

Ibn Khaldun holds that Islam allows for both subsistence and trade-based economies. However, the trade-based economy is governed through at least three systems: (1) usury (*ribā*), (2) debt (*dayn*), and monopoly (*iḥtikār*).³⁰ Ibn Khaldun goes further by recommending the centrality of work as an overarching value system that must be applied at the universal ethical and policy levels. Work, Ibn Khaldun suggests, must be deployed as a standard not only for ruling on the legitimacy of wealth but for determining the social value of the individual human being and the activities in which they engage. Work ought to be the standard because every human being is ultimately a worker, it happens that some work might be less intensive or less expensive in terms of energy consumption, or less demanding in terms of time, to produce a particular outcome.

Ibn Khaldun's views on work are not limited to the social context, as in human labor. Work, for Ibn Khaldun, is what makes our world and all it consists of exist. Life is sustained on Earth because of and through work. A thing exists in a particular form because there is a system at work to govern its existence and its functions. To alter the existence of a thing or to modify its functions, the system that maintains it must be reconfigured, or a new system must be plugged in to produce such an outcome. In human society, individual human beings cannot exist without doing work to sustain themselves or relying on someone else to do work that will sustain them. Work, then, according to Ibn Khaldun, can be used as metric to determine a person's standing in society and, importantly, a value system.

In Ibn Khaldun's mind, it would stand to reason that, if every person must do some work, then there must be an equitable system for allocating resources and assigning rights and duties in society. It follows then that one's social value, not just economic value, is connected to one's work. It is possible that one through work, can build wealth, but such wealth must be justified and accounted for through work—their own work, or the work done on their behalf through hired workers who are equitably compensated for their work (*iwaḍ*). In other words, if a person acquires wealth in the form of gold and silver, land, buildings, tools, or any other form of property, such wealth should be auditable to determine the work done, by whom, and whether the work was properly compensated. This understanding of the meaning and function of work necessitates other social and institutional structures that must exist to make accountability and audits possible—State (*dawla*) and market (*sūq*).³¹

Ibn Khaldun declares in more than one context that the State (*dawla*) is the Power (*sulṭān*)³² that creates and regulates the market. The market is the space where work and the outcomes of work are managed and exchanged. The State can determine the value, terms, and limits of the activities and events that take place in the market. If the

²⁹ The State is the grandest of markets (الدولة هي السوق الأعظم), *al-Muqaddima*, 281.

³⁰ *al-Muqaddima*, 253.

³¹ The State is the grandest of markets (الدولة هي السوق الأعظم), *al-Muqaddima*, 281; State and Power are the greatest market for the world (الدولة والسلطان هي السوق الأعظم للعالم), *al-Muqaddima*, 196.

³² *al-Muqaddima*, 196.

State values wealth over work, demand for wealth increases and social attitudes towards wealth become praiseworthy and desired. If the State values work over wealth, quality of work improves and social attitudes towards work and craftsmanship become praiseworthy and desired. The difference between the two paths is consequential.

Notably, Ibn Khaldun did not provide a specific system that would enshrine “work” as standard. He concluded his *Muqaddima* by acknowledging the need for future generations of thinkers, armed with an even richer body of accumulated knowledge, to produce new frameworks. Indeed, in the post-Enlightenment era, not only were new systems introduced, but their deployment created a vast body of data that established some of the consequences of such systems and the priorities that empowered national and global political economic systems. To assess the relevance of Ibn Khaldun’s thought to modern developments, we must consider the common themes with which he, and later thinkers, engaged.

Ibn Khaldun is often compared to Adam Smith, the author of the influential book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Like Ibn Khaldun, Smith prefaces his ideas by theorizing that humans initially supplied themselves with what they needed through their own work.

Every man endeavours to supply by his own industry his own occasional wants as they occur. When he is hungry, he goes to the forest to hunt; when his coat is worn out, he clothes himself with the skin of the first large animal he kills: and when his hut begins to go to ruin, he repairs it, as well as he can, with the trees and the turf that are nearest it.³³

In terms of the relationship between work and capital, Smith posits that one cannot, at once, acquire what he wants by his labor; instead, his labor must result in the accumulation of “stock” over time until he is able to sell the products of his labor with enough “stock” that can be used to acquire what he wants or to use it to improve his “business.” From this, there is little difference between Smith and Ibn Khaldun regarding the primacy of work and about the fact that work is the source of “stock”, or capital. Yet, at some point, Smith transforms this understanding of work into one that highlights the primacy of wealth not as something generated by labor, but as something rooted in stock, the accumulation of resources. For Smith, stock becomes the true source of wealth—stock is what allows a person to move beyond mere subsistence and begin to generate income independently of their labor. To explain this shift, Smith illustrates the path to prosperity as one starting with the laboring poor, who possess only a minimal amount of stock³⁴—enough to last a few days or weeks. Because their stock is so limited, they cannot afford to invest it. Instead, it will be used for their “own immediate consumption”³⁵ and sparingly, using their labor to replenish what is lost. In this condition, work is not a path to wealth, but rather a necessity for survival. It is a means to delay starvation, not to build prosperity. The laborer works because he must. Here again, work, in Smith’s mind,

³³ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Paris: Decker, 1801), 2:1.

³⁴ The origin of this stock is left out.

³⁵ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:4.

is a momentary activity whose function will disappear once capital becomes abundant and large enough to produce wealth.

However, once a person possesses a larger stock—enough to sustain themselves over a longer period—a transformation becomes possible. Now, they can afford to set aside a portion of their wealth not for consumption, but for investment. This portion becomes capital, a productive part of stock that is expected to yield revenue over time.³⁶ The remainder is reserved for immediate needs—whether in the form of liquid savings, regular income, or durable goods like clothing and furniture.³⁷ This distinction between capital and consumption stock is crucial to Smith’s understanding of how wealth functions. Wealth, in his view, grows not from labor itself, but from the ability to turn stock into capital. Labor is what the poor rely on because they lack stock. But capital is what allows the wealthy to generate more wealth without labor. In this narrative, labor is reactive—a response to need—while capital is proactive, a deliberate use of existing resources to create future income. This way, Smith reframes the relationship between work and wealth: it is not work that builds wealth, but wealth—stock—that builds more wealth. Labor, in this thinking, is a response to necessity not a source of prosperity.

Ibn Khaldun and Adam Smith both grappled with the question of how wealth is created from the natural world. At the heart of their thought lies a shared recognition: nature, on its own, offers no value to human society unless it is transformed by human effort. Yet while they agree on this principle, they diverge in how they understand the systems by which this transformation occurs.

Recall that Ibn Khaldun argued that all natural resources—land, minerals, crops, animals—are inert and crude and of no use to humans until work is applied to them. Work, in his view, is the essential and universal condition of economic value. It is only through human work—through farming, mining, crafting, planning, and building—that raw materials are made consumable. This insight reflects a worldview in which human activity is not just useful but absolutely necessary to extract benefit from the natural environment. Adam Smith, suggests a critical shift: what truly enables the productive use of natural resources is capital. In a key passage, Smith writes, “Lands, mines, and fisheries, require all both a fixed and circulating capital to cultivate them; and their produce replaces, with a profit not only those capitals, but all the others in the society.”³⁸

For Smith, labor may be necessary for some time and under certain circumstances, but it is capital—tools, machinery, buildings, wages, and raw materials—that makes labor effective. A miner cannot dig without equipment, a farmer cannot sow without seed and plow, and a fisherman cannot cast nets without a boat. Capital is what equips labor to act on nature in ways that are productive, sustainable, and profitable. Smith’s view marks a fundamental reconfiguration of processes. While he acknowledges the role of labor, he sees capital as the true engine of wealth creation. Capital allows labor to scale, to specialize, and to act efficiently on the natural world. It is through the application of capital that nature yields not just subsistence, but surplus—profit, reinvestment, and

³⁶ By what means? Work does not seem to be the source according to Smith.

³⁷ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:5.

³⁸ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:14.

economic growth. Importantly, Smith sees this process as self-reinforcing: the produce of land, mines, and fisheries not only repays the capital invested, but expands the stock of capital throughout the entire society.³⁹

While the utility of capital is evident, the source of capital and the timeline for deploying the capital, in Smith's thinking, is unclear or unimportant and this lack of clarity or guidance contributed to the embrace of debt. If capital is necessary and sufficient to build wealth, then acquiring that wealth to jumpstart the process of producing and increasing wealth is open to all possibilities, most notably to borrowing money (or even labor) with the promise of a big pay-off in the future. The divergence of the moral, legal, and cultural standing of debt in the view of Ibn Khaldun and that of Western thinkers is clear. In addition to their difference in relations to debt, Ibn Khaldun and Smith (and other Western thinkers) also hold quite divergent views in relation to the place and functions of the State. The powerful and determinant role Ibn Khaldun ascribes to the State is limited in Adam Smith's view to providing a secure space for protecting capital.

Smith makes it clear that political stability and protection of property are essential preconditions for economic prosperity. Where the rule of law is weak and people live in fear of arbitrary power—particularly the violence or predation of political superiors—economic behavior changes fundamentally. Instead of investing their wealth productively, people hide it, hoard it, or prepare to flee with it at a moment's notice. Smith cites examples from Turkey, India, and other countries in Asia⁴⁰ under despotic rule—where insecurity forces the wealthy to conceal their stock rather than use it to generate capital or trade. The implication is profound: without security, capital cannot function, and wealth becomes a liability rather than a tool for growth. The fear of confiscation or persecution distorts economic incentives, preventing investment, discouraging accumulation, and stalling the engine of prosperity.

Functions of Money and Capital

Modern economists conflate Ibn Khaldun's understanding of the definition of money as a “store of value” with that of Enlightenment thinkers who use the same or similar phrase to define money. However, some thinkers of the West came close to seeing work as a storable outcome of systems that produce excess output through efficient or scaled up work tasks or as a result of an unusual abundance of goods produced by nature (latter only in Ibn Khaldun's thought). Mario Tronti, in *Workers and Capital (Operai e Capitale)*, elaborating on Marx's ideas on work and capital, connects capital to labor and distinguishes between living work and “past work.” Nonetheless, he does not consistently and exclusively connect work to money in terms of store of value. For instance, Tronti discusses how the labor invested in creating tools and machines continues to serve capital without additional cost, once produced. He emphasizes that these “dead” forms of labor, when activated by current workers, enable capital to reproduce and expand itself.⁴¹ This perspective highlights the dynamic interplay between past and present labor in the capitalist system. In contrast to Smith who viewed labor as a productive input

³⁹ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:14-5.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:16.

⁴¹ Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital* (London: Verso, 2029), 13.

essential to creating wealth, emphasizing its role in market exchange, specialization, and efficiency within a harmonious economic system,⁴² Mario Tronti saw labor not just as a source of value but as a political force that actively shapes and resists capital. Specifically, Tronti framed labor and capital in conflict, with capital constantly seeking to manage and exploit living labor. For Tronti, even past labor—embodied in machines—continues to serve capital for free, but only when animated by workers, whose struggles ultimately drive historical change.⁴³ Importantly, Tronti also sees labor as connected to the origin of value, framing labor as the exclusive creator of value and the antagonist to capital.

Smith saw labor (with land) as the ultimate source of value, grounding the economy's real wealth — but he did not treat labor as a store of value. The “value” circulates through money, but its origin lies in what land and labor produce. For Smith, money's only use is to circulate consumable goods. The amount of money a country can use depends on the value of goods circulated each year and those goods come from either the product of land and labor, or from things bought using that product.⁴⁴ In Adam Smith's view, real prosperity comes from the annual production of goods—what land and labor generate—not from the accumulation of money or precious metals. Money, including gold and silver, merely circulates this real wealth; it does not create it.⁴⁵ In fact, Smith argues that the quantity of money in a country naturally grows in response to the value of goods produced, not the other way around. Even the value of gold and silver reflects the labor used to extract and transport them. Nonetheless, in his view, while money may store value, labor itself does not—it is the engine that creates value, not the vessel that holds it.⁴⁶

The food, clothing, and lodging, the revenue and maintenance, of all those whose labour or stock is employed in bringing them from the mine to the market, is the price paid for them in Peru as well as in England. The country which has this price to pay, will never belong without the quantity of those metals which it has occasion for; and no country will ever long retain a quantity which it has no occasion for.⁴⁷

Among Western thinker, David Ricardo, too, saw labor as the origin of value, but unlike Smith, Ricardo developed a more consistent and rigorous labor theory. While Smith believed that labor creates wealth, he also allowed value to be shaped by wages, rent, and profit, and treated money as a necessary tool for circulation rather than as just another commodity. Ricardo, by contrast, argued that all commodities—including gold and silver—derive their value solely from the amount of labor required to produce and deliver them.⁴⁸ He rejected explanations based on demand or scarcity, insisting that labor alone determines value. In doing so, Ricardo stripped value down to its labor content, applying

⁴² Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:108.

⁴³ Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, 13-4.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:108.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:111.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:107-9.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:108-9.

⁴⁸ David Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (New York: Cosimo, 2006), 244.

the principle universally and laying the groundwork for Marx's later critique of capitalism.

Ricardo acknowledged that capital is ultimately “accumulated labor,” but his framework often treats capital as a force distinct from the workers who produced it. This separation allows capital to appear self-sustaining, generating wealth independently of the labor it encapsulates. In doing so, labor's role becomes foundational but invisible—recognized in theory yet bypassed in distribution. Tools, machines, and infrastructure—all results of human effort—are reframed as capital inputs rather than stored work. Ibn Khaldun, by contrast, never breaks this link. For him, tools and institutions are crystallized labor, and the legitimacy of wealth is contingent on the traceability of work behind it. Capital, in this view, is not autonomous; it is simply the historical residue of work—morally and economically accountable to the systems that produced it.

The distinction between the real price of labor and market price of labor, in Western thought, mirrors the distinction between the natural price of and the market price of any commodities,⁴⁹ though the market price of labor is less determined by markets. In fact, in Ricardo's worldview, labor collapses into a single category whose value is determined by the cost of “necessaries” consumed by laborers.⁵⁰ When the cost of “necessaries” fall, the value of labor falls and that could also reduce the value of commodities. Any excess of value or capital, in this scheme, can only be claimed by “the master”⁵¹, the capital holder.

When the value of commodities fall, it would be “in consequence of the fall of necessities,” and when such decrease happens, “the net income of the master would be in no degree impaired, and therefore, he could with just as much facility pay the same amount of taxes after as before the reduction in price.” This is the case, according to Ricardo, because the variance in value is governed by variance in the value of commodities, which leads to the fall of the price of labor, “because the absolute necessities of the laborer formed a part of those commodities.”⁵² Even when they argued that it is labor that bestow a value on any commodity,⁵³ Western thinkers like Smith and Ricardo still insist that capital is necessary for any commodity to become useful to consumers.

Even in the early state to which Adam Smith refers, some capital, though possibly made and accumulated by the hunter himself, would be necessary to enable him to kill his game. Without some weapons, neither the beaver nor the deer could be destroyed, and therefore the value of these animals would be regulated, not solely by the time and labor necessary to their destruction, but also by the time and labor necessary for providing the hunter's capital, the weapon, by the aid of which their destruction was affected.⁵⁴

Ricardo avoids assigning work any credit beyond live labor. To achieve this intellectual jump, Ricardo classifies and categorizes the weapon that a hunter would use to kill his

⁴⁹ David Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 66.

⁵⁰ Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 65.

⁵¹ Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 291.

⁵² Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 291.

⁵³ Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 17.

⁵⁴ Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 25.

game as “the hunter’s capital.” He does so despite the possibility, as acknowledged by Ricardo, that such “capital” was “accumulated by the hunter himself.”⁵⁵ In the context of evolving society invoked here, the possibility that the hunter “accumulated” the capital himself is more than a possibility, perhaps a certainty—the hunter knowing what is helpful for the hunt in which the hunter is an expert, is likely to have worked himself to fashion the weapon and design it in a way that will make him an efficient and perhaps safe hunter. In other words, the hunter, through his work, created an instrument that enables him to save time during the hunt, and to kill the animal from a safe and economic distance, saving the hunter time, energy, and worry. In this scenario, the hunter performs live work when hunting, and would have performed a storable work when the hunter, or someone in his family, worked on designing and creating the weapon. This analysis, however, would not be convenient for Smith and other Enlightenment thinkers, because they had already committed to crediting capital with all progress made in the production of goods and services. For them, capital can be stored, not work; gold (or money) stores the value of exchangeable goods and gold ends up storing wealth. For them, there is no conceivable system that could allow for the worker to store the outcome of their work and creation. Even in the event where a “worker” manages to build some wealth through hard work, the outcome is immediately severed from work, and categorized as capital.

Recalling that Ibn Khaldun holds that trade is a legitimate way of building wealth despite it being non-productive work, and that trade must be governed by ethical rules, he found another path to increased wealth in cross-border trade. The function of cross-border trade comes up in Western thinking as well. Ricardo connects cross-border trade to the management of wages and the labor market. He held that “the rate of profits can never be increased but by a fall in wages, and that there can be no permanent fall of wages but in consequence of a fall of necessities on which wages are expended.”⁵⁶ Therefore, “foreign trade... has no tendency to raise the profits of stock unless the commodities imported be of that description on which the wages of labor are expended.”⁵⁷

The role of capital and work in informing the worldview of a society are foundational. The way capital and work, and their effects on related systems, are defined, categorized and remunerated set the stage for creating the social and economic systems that govern society. Criticality in approach works in many ways: it can be used to promote a particular worldview, to reject a worldview, or to simply challenge the popular established worldview. Western thinkers, under the force of their cultural influences and political circumstances, use the systems they had and the systems they would like to preserve to limit the scope of interpretation of the facts. For instance, almost all Western thinkers since the Enlightenment recognize the foundational status of work. However, they remunerate work in a way that makes it a commodity, or an instrument that can only have value when empowered by capital. Ricardo, only parenthetically, acknowledges that capital is nothing more than “accumulated labor.”⁵⁸ But he does so under the exigence of

⁵⁵ Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 25.

⁵⁶ Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 92.

⁵⁷ Ricardo, Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 93.

⁵⁸ Ricardo, Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 286.

consistency—he defined value of commodities as being a function of labor only. Therefore, he would naturally resist another variable, capital, in another context. To that end, he stresses that capital is a form of accumulated labor. However, to remain uncritical of institutions that developed in countries that are built on strict control over land, he defines rent⁵⁹ in a convenient way:

Rent is that portion of the produce of the earth which is paid to the landlord for the use of the original and indestructible powers of the soil. It is often however, confounded with the interest and profit of capital, and in popular language, the term is applied to whatever is annually paid by the farmer to his landlord... whenever I speak of rent of land, I wish to be understood as speaking of that compensation which is paid to the owner of land for use of its original and indestructible powers.⁶⁰

Since the Enlightenment, Western thought on work and capital continued to evolve as thinkers with different training and different interests introduced new elements to the discourse. For instance, Max Weber's view of work stands apart from thinkers like Adam Smith and David Ricardo by focusing not on labor as an economic force, but as a cultural and moral phenomenon shaped by religion.⁶¹ While Smith and Ricardo developed labor-based theories of value grounded in market or production logic, Weber traced the rise of capitalism to the religious ethic of Protestantism, particularly Calvinism. He argued that the disciplined, rational, and duty-bound approach to work promoted by Protestant belief helped shape the distinctive "spirit" of modern capitalism—prioritizing delayed gratification, frugality, and constant productivity. Where the others saw labor as what creates wealth, Weber saw work as what gives life meaning within a specific historical and religious framework, shifting the discussion from economics to culture. Weber proposed the idea that modern capitalism is a new forum of capitalism different from the one that existed prior to the Enlightenment and in other civilizations; those forms of capitalism he calls capitalism of traditionalism. Capitalism, according to Weber, existed in other societies like China, India, and Babylon in the classical world and in the Middle Ages but in each case the road to economic rationalism was barred by "magic and religious forces."⁶²

Moreover, about work, Weber distinguishes between what is done by a merchant and what is done by a craftsperson. He draws a clear line between craftsmen, who labor within traditional, communal, and moral economies, and merchants or capitalists, who embody a new, rationalized approach to work aimed at profit and expansion. While both

⁵⁹ Critically speaking, rent is a system by which an individual or a small number of individuals (families), using their control over land acquire wealth without doing any work. Instead, they leverage their monopoly over natural resources or access points to profit from the work and labor of others. This is a form of exploitation that is built into the systems that encourage the acquisition and control of capital through the control of the natural resources or the means of accessing the natural resources.

⁶⁰ Ricardo, Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 46.

⁶¹ Max Weber, in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), explores the ways Protestantism, particularly the Calvinist doctrine of the "Protestant work ethic," influenced the development of capitalism in the West. He argues that work and economic activity are not merely driven by material self-interest (as Adam Smith would argue) but are deeply intertwined with cultural and religious values. This concept of "work as a moral and religious duty" is key to understanding Weber's distinct perspective on labor.

⁶² Alex Law, *Key Concepts in Classical Social Theory*, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2022), 156.

engage in productive activity, only the capitalist-merchant type represents the “modern worker” in Weber’s Protestant ethic—one whose labor is a calling, oriented toward continuous accumulation and moral discipline. In Weber’s sociology, not all who work are equal—it’s the cultural meaning of their work that matters.⁶³

Not just Max Weber, most influential Western thinkers—from Locke and Montesquieu to Tocqueville, Hayek, and Habermas—have explored how religion, commerce, and liberty are intertwined. For Locke and Montesquieu, commerce and religious tolerance create the conditions for civil peace and political freedom. Tocqueville saw religion and commerce as dual stabilizers of democratic life, while Weber traced capitalism’s origins to religious ethics that sanctified labor and self-discipline. Even modern secular thinkers like Habermas recognize that the moral underpinnings of liberal society often stem from religious traditions. Across these perspectives, there’s a recurring theme: liberty and economic development do not arise in a vacuum, but from a moral and cultural foundation in which religion, as the most enduring social control institution, plays a key role.⁶⁴ Even Ibn Khaldun draws from religion to formulate his social theories.

From a Weberian perspective, Ibn Khaldun’s economic ideas can be seen as reflecting a form of “traditional capitalism,”⁶⁵ in which labor is valued but constrained by subsistence needs, moral obligations, and social norms. Although he might agree with Weber’s idea of traditional worker, the individuals in Ibn Khaldun’s analysis, nonetheless, do not seek endless profit, but rather what is necessary to maintain a stable life within a culturally and politically ordered society. As such, this is not capitalism in Weber’s full sense, which requires the rationalization of work, the abstraction of labor, and a cultural ethic oriented toward systematic accumulation and reinvestment. Ibn Khaldun describes economies that involve trade, labor, and wealth, but they are embedded in a pre-capitalist social structure, governed by dynastic rule, religious morality, and communal obligations—much closer to Weber’s idea of traditionalism than to the modern capitalist spirit, since Weber contrasts traditional and modern capitalism by focusing on how each system relates to workers’ motivations and behavior (... “the common people will only work because they are poor and only as long as they remain so.”⁶⁶).

In his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber specifically discusses how traditional labor practices were exemplified by female workers, particularly unmarried ones. Weber observed that these workers often adhered to inherited methods of work and showed reluctance to adopt more efficient practices. Employers frequently noted their inability to adapt to new methods or increase productivity, even when offered higher wages. However, Weber found that women with a religious, especially pietistic, background demonstrated a stronger sense of commitment to their work, greater adaptability, and a more disciplined approach to labor. This religious upbringing, he argues, fostered a mindset that viewed work as a calling, aligning with the capitalist ethos of rational labor and economic success.

⁶³ Weber, *The Protestant Ethics*, 6.

⁶⁴ Weber, *The Protestant Ethics*, 7-8.

⁶⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethics*, 16.

⁶⁶ Weber, *The Protestant Ethics*, 17.

Today, the traditionist form of labor is often best explained by female workers, especially unmarried ones. Almost without exception, those who employ girls, especially German girls, complain of their absolute inability, or at least reluctance, to give up the traditional ways of working... The exception are girls with religious education... their ability to feel a sense of commitment to the work, is commonly found.⁶⁷

What moves a person to do something or to embrace capitalism is important for Weber. He identifies the “spirit” as the motivating force that transforms a human being into a wealth building machine.

That is in fact their only true motivation, and it expresses at the same time the irrational element of this way of conducting one’s life, whereby a man exists for his business, not vice versa... he “gets nothing out of” his wealth for his own person other than the irrational sense of “fulfillment his vocation.”⁶⁸

Comparing Ibn Khaldun’s ideas about how work changes the person’s psychology and Weber’s assumption that rationality is a driving force, should be illuminative. Weber cites the argument that “division of labor forces each individual to work for others, an extremely otherworldly argument which is almost grotesquely at variance with Adam Smith’s well-known dictum.”⁶⁹ This appears to be a critique of Smith’s assertion wherein he declared that “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”⁷⁰

Residues of occupational ethics that Ibn Khaldun described as acquired ethics are present in Durkheim’s work, although present on a limited scale as a consequence of the division of labor that was born with industrialization. Durkheim conceives of occupational ethics resulting from trade unions and professional associations. While both Emile Durkheim and Ibn Khaldun recognized that work shapes ethical character, they differed sharply in focus and interpretation. Durkheim emphasized how shared occupations generate collective ethics: individuals working in the same trade form bonds through cooperation or even competition, creating moral norms rooted in group interdependence.⁷¹ His concern was with the social fabric—how work sustains cohesion in modern, specialized societies. In contrast, Ibn Khaldun focused on how specific types of work (professions; *sanāʿi*) cultivate distinct personal ethics, often tied to the moral health of civilizations. He argued that merchants, for instance, develop traits like *tamalluq* (obsequious flattery) and *dhillā* (humiliation or submissiveness) because their survival depends on pleasing customers, charming investors, and navigating unstable markets. These traits, in his view, are not incidental but are imprinted through the practice of trade itself. Where Durkheim highlighted how labor fosters group-level moral order, Ibn Khaldun

⁶⁷ Weber, *The Protestant Ethics*, 17-20.

⁶⁸ Weber, *The Protestant Ethics*, 23-24.

⁶⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethics*, 29.

⁷⁰ This seems to be derived from *Wealth of Nations*, Book 1, Chapter 2, referenced/cited in Weber’s *The Protestant Ethics*, 60.

⁷¹ “To be sure, individuals working at the same trade have relations with one another because of their similar occupation. Even competition puts them in relationship.” Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1933; 3rd printing 1949), 5-6.

was concerned with how the moral character of individuals, shaped by their work, contributes to either the strength or the decline of societies over time.

Occupational ethics and morality, in Durkheim's thought, are possible within occupational groups only. The carpenter is bound by the morals and ethics of carpenters because of his association with carpenters. Consequently, Durkheim's view gives prominence to organizational entities, which create behavioral code that persists in different forms, from basic traits in individuals, to influential norms of behavior in associations manuals, to binding codes in policies and legal documents. The group ethics and morality, thus conceived and perceived, end up not being limited to occupational considerations. That is, while labor unions produce occupational morality, membership in trade unions, business chambers, professional associations, and private clubs, too, produce group ethics and morality that are imprinted on their individual members.⁷²

Durkheim is certain that "once the group is formed, a moral life appears naturally carrying the mark of the conditions in which it has developed. For it is impossible for men to live together, associating in industry, without acquiring a sentiment of the whole formed by their union."⁷³ The group morality, according to Durkheim, when formalized to take the form of policies and procedure, becomes "systems of rules" that are designed to "guarantee occupational honesty."⁷⁴ Conceptually, this understanding of group dynamic, independent of occupational activities, argues for systems that derive the needed force to achieve their outcome as wholly internal to the boundaries of the system—the occupational group or individuals who do similar or same things. It should be noted, as a substantive difference, that Ibn Khaldun does not believe that the force of any system to be internal to it. Ibn Khaldun, as a systems thinker, holds that the energy or force that enables a system to achieve its outcome must be external to the system for it to reliably and continuously produce its outcome. For example, according to Ibn Khaldun, an individual engaged in a specific occupation (craft), would acquire specific ethics because of the forces of exerted clients and suppliers, who are not involved in the same craft, which stands in contrast to Durkheim's contention that a carpenter acquires the morality of carpenters because of his association with other carpenters. This difference can be explained by the fact that Ibn Khaldun sees the locus of power outside the group, whereas Durkheim sees the locus of power inside the group, and this is a significant difference between the two thinkers. On a practical level, group morality is possible, in Durkheim's view, like the morality of merchants, only when there are many merchants. Ibn Khaldun would not require the existence of a group of merchants for the merchant to acquire certain ethics. Even if a society existed with only one merchant, Ibn Khaldun would argue that the merchant eventually would acquire the morality and ethics of merchants. Durkheim's theory does not allow for that eventuality.

We should not close this section highlighting the economic thought of Ibn Khaldun and key Western thinkers without referencing a 20th century influential figure—John Maynard Keynes. Since Ibn Khaldun saw the economy as embedded within the cycles of dynastic rise and fall, he was skeptical of sustained State expansion, warning that as

⁷² "Whatever it may be from this standpoint, the preceding facts sufficiently prove that the occupational group is not incapable of exerting moral action." Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 14.

⁷³ Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 14.

⁷⁴ Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 13.

the State promotes the systems that generate more revenues, life in such a state becomes increasingly centralized and promotes excess and pursuit of luxury, actions that often result in the stifling of the very economic vitality they depend on. Keynes, writing in the 20th century amid one of the many crises of capitalism since, argued for a far more active and constructive role for the State. In Keynes's view, modern economies are prone to cycles of boom and bust due to insufficient aggregate demand, and only the State has the capacity to intervene counter-cyclically—through public spending, investment, and fiscal policy—to stabilize markets and ensure full employment. Rather than eroding economic vitality, State intervention, for Keynes, is necessary to preserve it. Ibn Khaldun recognized the State to be more than that. He saw the State as the creator of new realities and the enabler of systems regardless of the systems' ability and capacity to operate sustainably and autonomously governed only by the rules of the Market. Ibn Khaldun's theory was rooted in a historical-sociological view of social and moral decline, while Keynes offered a technical-economic response to the failures of modern capitalism. Their views reflect different diagnoses of economic fragility—one moral and systemic, the other structural and demand-based. But they both shared the view that the State has power that can overcome all limits otherwise experienced by individuals, professional associations, or any organized social group that did not have the characteristics of the State. Keynes' belief in the power of the State has been vindicated with all action Western governments have taken, especially the US government since the start of the second half of the 20th century, whenever an economic crisis took place.

Closing this section with a survey of Keynes on economics is most appropriate given the clarity of his conviction that the State is the ultimate creator of economic conditions, because that is what Ibn Khaldun left us with, too. Ibn Khaldun's economic philosophy and his association with ruling dynasties in the Islamic west and east territories led him to conclude that the markets of ideas and goods are not determinant spaces for the soundest worldview or discovering scientific truths. It is the State that powers the markets and renders the conceptual a reality regardless. Keynes ideas and belief in the State intervention and political leaders' embrace of his prescriptions whenever their countries faced economic challenges bridges Ibn Khaldun's world with the modern in ways that are yet to be explored by modern scholarship.

There is an equally important reason why Keynes's worldview on the role of the State in economic life is critical: debt. Considering that Western thinkers overwhelmingly advocated for capital-centered economic systems and given the historical impossibility of capital generating more capital without work, it becomes necessary to legitimize investment of capital, whatever its source—usurped property, exploitation-based capital, or speculative capital. Throughout history, the State has used its power to accumulate debt or, especially in modern times, to print money to stimulate the economy and direct it in the direction it desires. The State, with this immense power, creates systems that connect work, wealth, debt, and markets; topics that will be discussed further in the analysis section of this study.

This descriptive overview of some key ideas related to economic life since the Ibn Khaldun provides basic data, which will be the subject of a critical analysis that makes the case for the argument that Ibn Khaldun had envisioned a work-centered world order and worldview.

SECTION TWO

The Forgotten Labor: Reconceiving Work in Conceptual and Practical Contexts

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” – Smith⁷⁵

Before we start this analysis section, it might help to alert the reader to some critical issues related to the subject matter and to some assumptions about classical Islamic thought, including Ibn Khaldun’s.

In the West, one of the reasons few scholars are engaged with Ibn Khaldun’s thought is access to Ibn Khaldun’s work. There is a very limited number of translations of Ibn Khaldun’s books, perhaps one or two translations in a few major languages. The secondary literature on Ibn Khaldun’s thought is based on this limited body of translations. As such, secondary literature represents commentaries on the translations, with limited engagement with the original texts. Scholars who are proficient in Arabic and read Ibn Khaldun’s work in Arabic are steeped in modern Western conceptions and ideas and they end up speaking to how Ibn Khaldun was the “first sociologist” or the “true” pioneer of some social theories comparing him to Niccolo Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Auguste Comte, Adam Smith, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Those who place Ibn Khaldun in the same line of thought as post-Renaissance thinkers assume that scientific knowledge is linear, progressive, and that today’s findings represent the decisive scientific “truth”. That position would be ironic given that the man they are discussing, Ibn Khaldun, believed in the accretive but fallible nature of knowledge, and also believed in the cyclical trajectory of human development. Therefore, making Ibn Khaldun to be a precursor to any future philosophical trend betrays the very ideas and ideals Ibn Khaldun appeared to have championed.

It is more instructive to study Ibn Khaldun in his own context on his own terms, fully independent of his successors but critically dependent on his predecessors. For these reasons, access to Ibn Khaldun’s work in the original language becomes more urgent and necessary. However, reading Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima* in Arabic presents at least three challenges.

First, Ibn Khaldun revised *al-Muqaddima* many times, and each revision introduced new content, removed content, and edited content. It is reasonable for us to give more credence to the editions of the East (Syrian editions) than to the editions of the West (Algeria and Tunisia).

Second, Ibn Khaldun coined new words to express new concepts that he was proposing, and sometimes he coined new words to be economic in his language. The coining of new words was easy and acceptable because in most cases, it involved the “activation” of an Arabic form that was not in use, or the combination of two words to produce a new word that is more expressive of the idea Ibn Khaldun is interested in presenting. This

⁷⁵ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).

practice of using Arabic forms or combining words to capture new ideas were common among Arab speakers and scholars before Ibn Khaldun as well. It was made more challenging in the case of Ibn Khaldun because he used regional dialects and Berber words as well. Additionally, he applied scientific language commonly employed in chemistry and physics to topics outside those disciplines.

In addition to the challenges associated with the nature of the texts with which this analysis engages, conceptual issues are also critical and deserve explanations. I argue in this analysis section that the difference between Ibn Khaldun's worldview and Western paradigms of economic life is driven by conceptual considerations. While Ibn Khaldun holds that every area of life is ultimately connected and integrated in ways that create a dynamic equilibrium driven holistically by the most determinant system of the civilization in question, Western thinkers understand and process information about each subject matter in isolation from one another to the extent that each commodity or rule is specific to it. In his extensive discussion of capital, work, and wealth that engages with other economic philosophers of his era, David Ricardo is explicit in thinking within isolated systems.⁷⁶

Although the systems Ricardo and other Western thinkers of that era are discussing, including land ownership and rent of land, are not universal systems, these thinkers assumed that these are universal systems. Still, even within the timeframe and place they are familiar with, rent agreements are not always tied to the price of products derived from the land. Rent, a contractual system, and its terms between the landlord and the user of the land may or may not be contingent on the amount, quality, or value of the product derived therefrom. Even when the rent terms are connected to the product derived from the land, landlords would secure their fees immediately after the produce is collected, not after it is sold and after its market (exchange) value is established. These are factors that make the connection between produce (corn), land (fertility thereof), and work a factor, but not a determinant factor as suggested by Western thinkers.

Also related to Western thinkers' lack of appreciation of systems thinking employed by Ibn Khaldun is the idea that cross border trade that brings in one commodity, e.g., corn, would not have a lasting impact on the value of corn or other commodities. This argument assumes that each commodity is an isolated system governed only by the internal forces that drive it, mainly the cost of labor and the amount of capital invested to produce it. That thinking, Ibn Khaldun would argue, is simplistic, based on his view that all systems are ultimately integrated through determinant and contributory systems, with the State interventions being the most consequential and powerful system. First, if imported corn that was produced in more fertile land and through less expensive labor were to remain available over a long period of time, the presence of such cheaper commodity will necessarily suppress the value of domestic commodity that is produced using more costly process and labor. Even in the case where cheaper imported corn and expensive domestic corn manage to exist side by side through adaptation, such as market segmentation and clientele distinction, the cheap corn will allow consumers to save money otherwise spent on expensive corn to either purchase more of something else, or invest

⁷⁶ David Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (New York: Cosimo, 2006), 287-90.

in some other commodities, and both developments would have an impact of the market value of other commodities and on value of labor.

Work, usually generalized in Western thought as labor, is not conceptualized the same way Ibn Khaldun thought of work. Smith for instance, limits work to labor performed by human beings, be it producers and craftsmen creating things or enslaved humans doing the work from which a wealth holder profits. Simply, it is the activity humans do to produce something even if the bulk of the work is done by machines or animals. For Smith, machines facilitate labor by making tasks easier, faster, or possible at a larger scale; the active “doing” of labor, however, remains human. The machine is an extension of human productive power, not labor itself. Therefore, Smith talks about increasing productivity by adding machines—by which he means investing in capital that helps laborers work better—not that the machines replace or are equivalent to labor. Today, we often say a robot “does labor” because it performs tasks we usually associate with human work. But from Adam Smith’s perspective—and in classical economics—labor specifically means human effort and activity. From Adam Smith’s classical perspective,⁷⁷ labor is inherently human effort—physical or mental. Even if machines (or AI in today’s context) perform tasks without immediate human intervention, they are still considered capital goods, not laborers. This view of “work” or “labor” is unique to the Western world. Ibn Khaldun defines work as any activity or intervention that sustains or transforms human existence. In this view, work is uniquely human when it directly contributes to human existence. But work is also done by non-humans and such work ultimately benefits humans because of both the interconnectedness of systems and because humans ultimately derive benefits from them. Moreover, because Ibn Khaldun examines phenomena across culture and over time, work becomes a generational asset whose benefits are stored and inherited in the outcome of the systems that do work, including work performed by humans or by instruments and aids employed by humans over time.

When contrasting the two views it becomes clear that Smith’s definition of work is problematic. On one hand, he and many economists after him see labor as foundational to economic life, just like natural resources are. He nonetheless commodifies work and diminishes its long-term outcomes in favor of capital, which is, in his view, necessary and even sufficient to keep the wheel of the economy turning. This, despite repeated reference to “land and labour” as the original sources of all wealth, placing them at the very foundation of productive activity. At the same time, he emphasizes the central role of capital in increasing productivity and enabling economic growth, and he treats labor as a commodity, bought and sold in the market like any other output. In *Wealth of Nations*, Smith couples “land” and “labour” (“annual produce of the land and labour”) 100 times.⁷⁸ Smith’s vision of work is one in which the human being becomes a cog in the system of production, part of the conveyor belt economy. The human being, in Smith’s view, becomes an instrument of production in a world dominated by machines designed to increase production. Ibn Khaldun, in contrast, sees work as a defining activity that

⁷⁷ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:114.

⁷⁸ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:224.

every human being must perform each according to their physical and skill level, when able. Work, in Ibn Khaldun's thought, can be basic and material, and it can be sophisticated and abstract. As such, work can be legitimate or not legitimate given its outcome's influence on and contribution to other systems.

Evidently, Smith recognizes that ownership claims of land and exploiting other human being through slavery are the primary systems that consolidated the wealth generated by work and exploitation of natural and human resources in the hands of members of society. Slavery and usurpation of land are the two determinant systems that created modern capitalism. In other words, the modern stage of development of human society, in Smith's thought, is disconnected from the "original state of things" through an era that benefited from usurpation of land through conquest, colonization, and slavery. One would expect that this unprecedented accumulation of wealth through exploitation of peoples, land, animal, and machine would allow for the creation of an economy where the accumulation of capital would make it possible to pay for labor and raw materials needed to produce goods in advance. Such an accumulation of wealth gave rise to an economy driven by debt. In the post "original state of things", work as a defining human activity became so fragmented and misconfigured. Work can be performed mindlessly, thanks to the resulting division of labor, which Smith connected to efficiency, is owing to three different circumstances:

1. Increase of dexterity,
2. Saving of time, and
3. Invention of a great number of machines.

Smith sees work as a function of productivity, a reason thereof, as opposed to Ibn Khaldun's idea of work being a craft, requiring many sets of skills that allow one person to produce a complete product. Smith's efficient and qualified worker is one capable of just cutting a wire from which a pin is made. Ibn Khaldun's deliberate choice of the word crafts (*sanā'i*) to account for work must reflect a completely different worldview on work, not just a description of the idea of work in transition from the "original stage of things" to the advanced state of doing work.

While Adam Smith emphasized labor's role in production and exchange, and while David Ricardo developed a strict labor theory of value, Ibn Khaldun went further in connecting work to the rise and fall of civilizations, warning that when societies abandon productive work for luxury and when the State creates or allows the creation of systems that promote excess, they undermine their own economic foundations. Unlike Smith's optimism about commercial society or Ricardo's analytical focus, Ibn Khaldun viewed work not only as an economic instrument but as a moral and civilizational value system. Like Ricardo, Ibn Khaldun believed that all wealth arises from human effort, but that even gold and silver have value only because of the labor required to extract them, transform them, and renumerate their utility. Ricardo argues that the value of a commodity as determined by the relative quantity of labor which is necessary for its production, and he supports his theory by referencing Adam Smith's illustrative example of Beaver versus Deer—the gist of which contends that, if it "cost twice the labor to kill a beaver which it does to kill a deer, one beaver should naturally exchange for, or be worth, two deer. It

is natural that what is usually the produce of two days' or two hours' labor should double of what is usually the produce of one day's or one hour's labor."⁷⁹ Ricardo confirms this logic for setting the value of a commodity, arguing that, "it is really the foundation of the exchangeable value of all things, excepting those which cannot be increased by human industry", and that it "is a doctrine of the utmost importance in political economy."⁸⁰ This theory of value, as the deer versus beaver illustrates, is based on the reductionist, presumptive, and simplistic analysis, as it leaves out or ignores many critical factors. As discussed earlier, the labor invested in tools and skills is overlooked in traditional accounts of capital.

The notion of value in use and value in exchange, too, is very simplistic, and Ibn Khaldun, as a systems thinker, would challenge it arguing that gold was made to have a utility value by determinant systems created by the State. In that, gold, as an intermediate instrument, is meant to create a standard cannot be compared to barter economy setting. Gold has an exchange value because it was created for exchange. Water has a utility value, because it is necessary, and society did not want to subject it to competition and monopoly rules that determined the value of other commodities. Moreover, water, the second most important element for sustaining human life requires very little processing work for it to be consumable: humans can drink water from a spring, a river, or a lake with minimum processing. But humans must hunt, clean, cook, and then consume deer. While food is as necessary as water for sustaining human life, water requires less work and is needed more frequently than food. A human can go days and perhaps weeks without food but would die without water within hours under some circumstances. The proposition that some things with strong utility have no exchange value, like water, compared to things that have no utility but strong exchange value, is flawed, yet it was used and conceived as an illustrative example to justify and promote systems of excess and control.

First, as a matter of fact, gold is not a commodity without utility all the time. Throughout history, gold was used, and perhaps specifically needed, for some functions in medicine, tool making, and more recently for conductivity purposes in many industries. Therefore, gold was not always used exclusively as an instrument of trade or for the store of value of other more useful commodities.

Second, water, being a necessary commodity with high utility value and lacking exchange value, is not an outcome of markets, labor, or competition considerations. Ibn Khaldun would explain the lack of exchange value of water by the principle of extremes reverting to their opposites, and a general maxim that states that "when a thing reaches its extreme, it turns into its opposite."⁸¹ Here, water, like breathable air (oxygen), is an element the demand of which reached its extreme: it is necessary for life and its supply cannot be withheld or delayed. As such, given the extreme utility of water, water became exempt from all rules governing the supply and "enumeration" of all other commodities. In other words, it is not that it does not have an exchange value; it is more like it cannot be exchanged at all. In fact, this principle prohibiting the exchange of water for profit is

⁷⁹ Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 19.

⁸⁰ Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 19.

⁸¹ *itha balagha al-shay' ashuddahu inqlaba ila diddah.*

enshrined in many indigenous cultures and traditional legal systems, including Islamic law and cultures.

Here is where Ibn Khaldun's worldview becomes a useful critique of post Enlightenment thought on work and capital. Ibn Khaldun held that work is the only standard by which not only the value of a product can be determined, but even the value of the human being can be established, because work is the only necessary activity that every human being must perform not only to sustain themselves, but also to sustain life on Earth in general. Without work, performed by themselves or by someone else, a person cannot be fed, sheltered, and sustained. Because work is necessary, it must have a value in and of itself, Ibn Khaldun contends. Work so described is not exclusively a human activity, it is a natural activity.

Humans and other natural beings collaboratively work to create the conditions that allow them to extract the necessary things for life. In this worldview, and to respond to the Deer versus Beaver illustration,⁸² Ibn Khaldun would argue that hunting is only one aspect of "work", that enable the human being to use that resource—the deer—for sustenance, clothes, etc., but other natural beings, including dirt, water, air, plants, other animals, all performed necessary work to create the conditions for the deer or beaver to come into existence, to grow, and to become what it is to the extent that a human or another animal would rely on it to sustain themselves. Nature does much of the work, before the hunter does, and not to forget the butcher, cook, and other preparers who would have performed all the other needed work before the deer meat and skin is "consumed" by the human being who would purchase it.

It should not be assumed that the primacy and privileging of work can only be attributed to and supported by Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Khaldun's thinking. Post-Enlightenment thinkers, too, acknowledge the primacy of "labor". The difference is that Western thinkers, notwithstanding the function and standing of work, choose to build economic and values systems that prioritize, privilege, and promote capital and reduce labor to a mere commodity. David Ricardo, whose work was introduced already spoke of the primacy of work. However, nearly a century before him, John Locke made "labor" the means for legitimizing private ownership of land. While doing to, Locke may appear to echo similar ideas about "labor" as a legitimizing and legitimating form of human intervention. However, his position is radically different from the Khaldunian theory on work and wealth. Before explaining that difference, I will begin by justifying why I believe Ibn Khaldun's position merits more attention than Locke and may be more grounded in fact and reason. This characterization is not driven by cultural bias but by the benefits of hindsight and historical lessons.

First, Ibn Khaldun argued that every human civilization is driven by a dominant social group with a dominant worldview—and that all such civilizations are destined to decline and be replaced by a new civilization with a new dominant group and worldview (a cyclical theory for which modern scholars often credit him). Second, Ibn Khaldun lived during the decline of Islamic civilization. He witnessed its transition from a dominant civilization to a nervous empire relying on its material and intellectual legacy to sustain itself—eventually maintained primarily through coercion. In this sense, Ibn Khaldun's

⁸² Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 25.

knowledge was more complete; he had access to accumulated knowledge and political experience spanning nearly a thousand years. The circumstances in which Locke was writing were almost the opposite.

Locke lived during a period of transition shaped by the legacy of the Renaissance—an intellectual movement that curiously excluded Islamic contributions. While Ibn Khaldun investigated the causes of civilizational decline, Locke focused on constructing a foundation for an emerging modern Western civilization. Consequently, Locke's ideas lacked the benefit of inter-civilizational knowledge and were informed primarily by European experiences with labor, land, and capital.

Moreover, while both thinkers wore their religious faith openly, they diverged in how they connected the divine with their theories. Ibn Khaldun's thought was deeply informed by Islamic teachings. Locke, though acknowledging a deity's role in the world's functioning, preferred to frame such interventions in terms of nature and natural law—expressed through a Christian lens. This difference in religious framing also influenced how they conceived the moral foundations of ownership and labor.

To establish the similarities and contrasts between the two, consider a key Lockean proposition connecting God, labor, and private property:

Though the earth, and all that is therein, be given to men in common, ... being given for the use of men, there must of necessity be a means to appropriate them some way or other before they can be of any use, or at all beneficial to any particular man.⁸³

In the broader context of his work, Locke argues that God has generously given natural goods to all people for their common use. However, he asserts that “there must of necessity be a means to appropriate them” for them to be beneficial. This transition from common use to private ownership is where Locke and Ibn Khaldun converge—and then diverge. Like Ibn Khaldun, Locke argues that labor legitimizes an individual's control over land: once a person works the land, it becomes theirs. This echoes the Khaldunian position that natural resources are of no benefit without human labor. However, the similarity ends there. Locke does not merely tie active labor to control over a resource made useful through work. Rather, he envisions private land ownership as a store of the value of labor itself.

By contrast, Ibn Khaldun sees the outcome of labor—not the resource—as the legitimate object of ownership. The distinction is significant. Locke's model necessitates institutional systems to manage the transfer and protection of land ownership. In Ibn Khaldun's model, control over land is contingent upon active labor, and only the surplus produced through that labor—not the land itself or natural resources in general—is treated as private property.

Ironically, Locke was correct that a coercive institution would be necessary to enforce private ownership of natural resources. If Locke were alive today, and witnessed the role of the coercive institution (the State) under both communist regimes (which prohibited private ownership) and capitalist systems (which sacralize it), especially in ways that

⁸³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government: An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), Chapter V (“Of Property”), Section 26, p. 19.

degrade soil, water, and air, he might reconsider his recommendations. In fact, many contemporary thinkers who support his principles of equality⁸⁴ and private ownership are now reinterpreting Locke's views to present him less as an absolutist individualist and more as a proto-communitarian.⁸⁵

Both Locke and Ibn Khaldun ground their logic in an imagined original state of nature, where natural resources are freely available to all. Both assert that labor gives individuals the moral—and eventually legal—right to draw sustenance from those resources. However, they part ways on the question of how much control individuals should have, and by what means that control is justified.

At a basic level, Locke's position seems reasonable: a man works a piece of land to grow food and raise livestock to sustain himself and his family. But this raises a deeper question: how does one man come to control not just 40 acres and a mule, but thousands of acres? Locke does not convincingly answer this. And that is the heart of the modern dilemma: how is it possible for a single person or family to control vast swathes of land through their own labor alone?

If labor is to justify ownership, then land ownership must be limited to the amount one person—or social unit—can work. In today's context, mechanization allows small families to “work” thousands of acres. But how did they acquire the capital to own machines that replaced thousands of laborers? Perhaps through so-called legacy (or generational wealth. Still, legacy wealth itself is problematic: how was that wealth built? Likely, it was built on systems of exploitation including slavery or usurpation. These likely origins of land control and wealth raise crucial ethical, legal, and practical questions that remain central to human coexistence and our shared reliance on the earth's finite resources. From the point of view of human rights, this is where our understanding of work, capital, and property becomes most consequential.

Returning to Ricardo, he, too, reaffirms the place of work (labor) “as being the foundation of all value, and the relative quantity of labor as almost exclusively determining the relative value of commodities.”⁸⁶ Not only that, but Ricardo goes as far as implicitly acknowledging the store value of work beyond the live work, or what he called “labor applied immediately.”⁸⁷ This is done when confronting the problem that is critical in modern economics, yet receiving little attention by Enlightenment economic philosophers: quality of work and work stored in durable instruments of work.

Perhaps Western scholars' need to overcome the consistency challenge forced them to adopt conveniently separated definitions for work and labor. This allowed the creation of determinant systems that allow certain workers to perpetually profit from their work, like an inventor profiting from patent laws, and deny other workers, like builders or

⁸⁴ Equality is a principle that is important for holding Locke's arguments on labor, property, and individualism together; and that too is another element that sets Locke and most Western thinkers and Ibn Khaldun apart: In Islamic thought in general, and in Ibn Khaldun's thought in particular, equality does not figure as a factor at all; quote the opposite, it is the difference and even inequality that create the dynamic environment that give “work” a true meaning and true value. However, given the space limitation, I will not discuss the details here.

⁸⁵ Matthew H. Kramer, *John Locke and the Origins of Private Property* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁸⁶ Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 23.

⁸⁷ Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 25.

instrument creators from profiting from their production beyond the profit from a single exchange. Such categorization of work has allowed for some workers to extend their profit from their production multiple generations, but other workers who create structures and tools that serve multiple generations are paid minimum wages and denied any future profit from their hard work. In this system, “creative work” is allowed to be considered a form of capital, but non-creative work, no matter how much time, skill, and energy it took, is not allowed to be considered a form of capital. It is commodified, instead.

Whatever the intentions of Western economic philosophers might have been, it is clear that later Western thinkers, through the new academic discipline of political economy, understood that they were engaged in the production of ideas that would shape national economic policies. They also understood that such policies must be founded on principles that prioritize capital and that influence the choices of the population. In this context, both Ibn Khaldun and later Western thinkers acknowledge the deep connections between economic behavior and human conscience. However, they disagree on the origins of and forces that create the individual psychology in reaction to economic behavior. While Ibn Khaldun sees the influence of economic behavior on human temperament and ethics as being organically connected to repeated economic actions and practices, some Western thinkers recommend concerted, deliberate, and specific actions that mold the individual mindset and psychology to behave in a predetermined way.

Coming to doubt the efficacy of free-market system, and provided an opportunity by the economic depressions of the early twentieth century to create a fork in classical economic theory, John Maynard Keynes called for government intervention to steady struggling economies. Unlike Ibn Khaldun who held that the State is always the master of markets, Keynes finds that there is place for free-market systems to self-adjust, but only after State intervention. In Keynes’ worldview, the State can and should act during challenging economic times through monetary policies to achieve full employment, which is, according to Keynes, a condition for economic recovery. Breaking with widely held view, Keynes came to think that demand—not supply—is the engine of an economy. In troubled economies, employment would be low, which results in low purchasing power. To reverse this trend, Keynes held, the government must step in to increase demand. Given that Keynes also believed that the government should spend more and save less, it follows then that the government must intervene even if it must go into debt to do so. Aware that demand is also dependent on the population reacting in the desired way—desiring more consumption, Keynes recommends another kind of State intervention:

[I]t may still be wise and prudent statesmanship to allow the game to be played, subject to rules and limitations, so long as the average man, or even a significant section of the community, is in fact strongly addicted to the money-making passion.⁸⁸

Keynes’ notion that the State can create rules and limitations on processes that make the population addicted to consumption is a perverse confirmation of Ibn Khaldun’s assertion about the power of the State, the master of markets. Ibn Khaldun recognized that

⁸⁸ John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936). Reprinted, (USA: BN Publishing, 2008), 241.

the State is *the* social determinant system, capable of creating non-existing social and economic reality just as it is capable of killing an existing and functional social or economic reality. With Keynes, however, the State is advised to go beyond the marketplaces and the public spaces, and create systems that would alter the psychology of individual human beings to make them desire more goods, which would (artificially) increase demand, a desired outcome in Keynesian economics.

Ibn Khaldun held that the State *is* the creator of the market, the market does not create itself. I suspect that Ibn Khaldun had more to say about the power of the State but was either unable or unwilling to say it then and there. However, to appreciate the creation-ability of the State, to which Ibn Khaldun alluded, we just need to look at recent major economic crises, the systems by which the State manages employment, and the manner in which the State embraced Keynes push for State intervention.

According to Keynes, the government boosting the economy through adjustment of the systems that determine employment rates will stimulate consumer demand, which in turn spurs production and ensures full employment. The full employment Keynes predicted was never achieved as a consequence of many of the State interventions since his time, the most recent of which were during the governments' reactions to Covid-19 pandemic (2020 CE). It nonetheless places emphasis on "full" employment, giving more credence to Ibn Khaldun's notions that work is the only system that creates value and that work is a necessary activity that must be taken by every human being—contributing to determining their social value as well.

Reacting to another significant economic event, in response to the Great Recession of 2007–2009, US President Barack Obama, acting on steps taken by his predecessor George W. Bush, took several steps that reflected Keynesian economic theory. The federal government bailed out debt-ridden companies in several critical industries—including the financial sector, the store and distributor of capital. It also took into conservatorship Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. In 2009, President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, an \$831-billion government stimulus package designed to save existing jobs and create new ones. It included tax cuts and credits and unemployment benefits for families. It also earmarked expenditures for healthcare, infrastructure, and education. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the US government under President Donald Trump and President Joseph Biden offered a variety of relief, loan-forgiveness, and loan-extension programs. The US government also supplemented weekly state unemployment benefits and sent American taxpayers direct aid in the form of three separate, tax-free stimulus checks. All these examples support Ibn Khaldun's contention that the State is never a passive actor who simply enforces the rules of the open and free market, the State creates the rules, the market, and ultimately (indirectly) the goods and services. Importantly, these events bring to the forefront the centrality of work not just as a producing process, but as the indispensable process that allows all systems to produce the desired and unintended outcomes.

Given the determinant function of the State acknowledged by Ibn Khaldun and economists of the 20th century and beyond, we must pay close attention to key propositions advanced by Ibn Khaldun that have been mischaracterized by later thinkers. Many

modern scholars, both in the Islamic and Western intellectual traditions, have characterized Ibn Khaldun's theory of dynastic cyclicity as his most significant contribution to socio-political thought. However, a closer reading of his work—particularly *al-Muqaddima*—suggests that this emphasis may be overstated or even misinterpreted.

First, there is little indication that Ibn Khaldun himself regarded the concept of dynastic cycles as more significant than his broader theoretical frameworks. In fact, the idea of historical cycles predates Ibn Khaldun and appears in earlier Islamic, Greco-Roman, and even Chinese historiographies.⁸⁹ Thus, attributing originality or primacy to Ibn Khaldun in this respect overlooks both historical precedent and the broader range of his intellectual contributions.

Second, modern interpretations of Ibn Khaldun's so-called "cyclical theory" often fail to capture the systemic and dynamic nature of his thought. What is frequently framed as a simple historical cycle is more accurately a manifestation of what Ibn Khaldun calls *tadāwul*—the circulation or turnover of power within society. This principle aligns more closely with systems thinking: societies develop institutions that grow increasingly efficient and goal-oriented, but once these institutions achieve their purposes (such as establishing dominance or economic prosperity), they tend to ossify or outlive their usefulness. As a result, new systems—more likely emerging from marginalized or peripheral groups—rise to recalibrate and re-balance social organization. Ibn Khaldun's emphasis on meaningful change occurring through external forces (e.g., conquest, environmental pressures, or tribal influxes) reinforces this interpretation. Civilizations, in his view, function much like natural organisms governed by the rules of the systems they construct. Once the internal logic of a civilization becomes exhausted or rigid, it invites transformation through systemic breakdown and renewal, rather than through arbitrary or repetitive cycles. Therefore, the prevailing interpretation of Ibn Khaldun's historical sociology as a "theory of cyclicity" diminishes the sophistication of his systems-oriented approach and risks flattening his insights into deterministic or mechanical patterns. A more accurate understanding recognizes Ibn Khaldun not simply as a theorist of historical repetition, but as a forerunner of complex adaptive systems theory applied to human societies. Establishing this understanding of Ibn Khaldun's overarching theory on social change is central to understanding the function of the State in creating the social, political, and governing systems that set its course.

Now that we have presented some of the key ideas and institutions relevant to economic life as stated by Ibn Khaldun and analyzed some of the most influential figures of Western civilization since Enlightenment, we conclude by summarizing the main

⁸⁹ Ibn Khaldun's so-called "cyclical theory" was neither unique in its structure nor his most original contribution; other thinkers from civilizations that preceded the Islamic civilizations have already suggested this idea, including Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. W. R. Paton (Harvard UP, 1922–1927); Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1968); Cicero, *The Republic and The Laws*, trans. Niall Rudd (Oxford UP, 1998); Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, trans. Burton Watson (Columbia UP, 1993); Ban Gu, Book of Han, in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary et al., vol. 1 (Columbia UP, 1960); and Dong Zhongshu, *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*, trans. Sarah A. Queen (Yale UP, 2015).

findings of this study and by exploring the conceptual and practical implications of these ideas in this closing section.

SECTION THREE

Conclusions: Work Is Priceless

“It starts with Work—just like it always did.” – AS⁹⁰

Both Ibn Khaldun and Western thinkers agree that money, be it in its precious metal form (gold and silver coins), in its print form (currency or checks), or now in its digital form (blockchain and crypto currencies) is essentially a store of value instrument. What value money is used to store, however, is not clear or contested. It is suggested in this study that Ibn Khaldun suggested that money ought to be the store of the value of work and that work is the origin of all things, especially valuable things, because none come into being without work. When applying the systems thinking approach whose principles were invoked by Ibn Khaldun adopted, it becomes clear that understood the object whose value money represents and stores to be radically different from that proposed by modern thinkers and implemented in the global order.

Modern thinkers see money as an instrument that stores capital. That is, money represents the wealth of individuals and of nations. Here, money can represent the wealth associated with some natural resources under someone’s control. For example, money can be used to store the value of land, or used to convert the ownership of land into an ownership of money that can be stored or converted into ownership of some other property or land somewhere else.

It was established that Ibn Khaldun considered work to be the necessary element that enables existence in general. As such, work is the store of value of the individual human worth as well as the worth of nations. Without work, the individual human being cannot convert national resources into consumable products that can be used to sustain life, and society cannot store the outcome of work to benefit the larger community long term. In Ibn Khaldun’s worldview, work is necessarily a standard for determining value because individuals and communities can, and generally do, through hard work, create a surplus. Money is, then, needed to store the surplus of work and only the surplus of work. In Ibn Khaldun’s logic, money cannot be the store of its own value. Historically, such a worldview that made work the most needed and the most necessary process would explain the origins, pervasiveness and prevalence of exploitation throughout history and across cultures.

Ibn Khaldun’s story of humans living on earth is rooted in creation, adaptation, and knowledge building. Human beings were created and placed in the world on Earth. At first, they performed simple work catching, cultivating, processing, storing, and consuming things nature provided. Over time, the evolved human being invented tools to become efficient hunters and gatherers, which resulted in surplus outcomes of work: more food and goods. Humans, thereafter, trained and exploited animals to perform hard work

⁹⁰ Our concluding thought for this work.

needed to produce more products they needed or wanted, and that too helped them produce a surplus of goods. Work amplified by the exploitation of animals also resulted in more work, which produced more products, and these products either stored the value of the work or converted the outcome of work into portable stores of value in the form of gold and silver. From this evolutionary account, gold and silver (money) are outcomes, not the other way around. In other words, humans performed work not because they were paid money for their work, but because they needed to work, and hard, efficient work naturally results in surpluses in outcomes of work. The surplus of outcomes of work (goods) is stored directly for future use, like a surplus of grains cultivated from fields which are stored for future years, or stored in other means, like acquiring land, gold, silver, or any other preservable and tradable object.

Organized societies in larger (urban) communities, exploited tools, animals, and even enslaved other human beings to perform even harder and more complex work that enabled the mass exploitation of natural resources. The scaled-up work performed using efficient tools (tools produced by work, too), accomplished through the aid of trained animals, and done by enslaved human beings all resulted in large surpluses that needed to be stored, again, in the form of stored goods and products, or converted into a store of value instrument—money.

For Ibn Khaldun, from historical, logical, and practical points of view, the primacy and centrality of work is easily established. The same cannot be said about capital. Money must be a result of work; work cannot be the outcome of capital. To argue otherwise, requires logic and reasoning that must skip over evolutionary and developmental stages of human society. The idea of money storing the value of work is not entirely and exclusively Khaldunian. As shown in sections one and two, money being an instrument that catches surpluses resulting from hard and efficient work is present in post-Enlightenment Western thought as well. The notions of “past labour” and “living labour” in modern Western thought essentially acknowledge the fact that the outcome of work can be preserved as “past labour” proceeds. This view, however, did not result in creating economic, social, and cultural systems that enshrined work as a store of value and as a legitimizing standard for building wealth. Money, independent of work, became so.

It was only natural then, that systems designed on the premise that money is primal and a precursor to work would result in contributory systems that prefer, promote, and exploit debt. This is the reason why some of the richest companies and countries in the world today are also some of the most indebted entities in the world as well.

When comparing Islamic (Khaldunian) and Western thought in relation to economic life, many differences come to the forefront. However, only two differences are significant enough to the extent that they form entirely two different views: their respective positions on work and capital. These positions do not exist dialectically, and it is unlikely that they were ever in conversation with each other. The two positions are rooted in cultural and philosophical foundations and became empowered by determinant systems that imposed them from the top-down. While both worldviews contained analytical and conceptual errors, it is argued here that the assumptions upon which Enlightenment thinkers built their models are flawed, resulting in consequential outcomes that could

be in the long run, catastrophic, signs of which are seen manifested in many crises, from climate change, to global pandemics, and serious degradation of natural resources, all of which have uneven negative impact on vulnerable social groups. Here are some of the flawed assumptions:

1. Industrialization and division of labor increased productivity. It did. But along the way, industrialization and division of labor became means to increasing wealth through excessive production. The increased production did not feed the world; it only fed those who could afford to pay for it. Those who could not fell into deeper poverty and lost the ability to extract their basic needs from earth through traditional means, because industrialization made it impossible for human beings to compete against machines. But industrialization increased efficiency to levels never seen before, enabling those who control the means of production to hoard more resources—resources that are taken from other social groups and from future generations of people.

2. Capital is the origin, and without capital there is no labor. Historically, it is easy to conceive of the role played by hard work and savings in building capital. Nowhere in history did money come before work. Even today with excess capital, work has been and continues to be the origin, and *work* always precedes capital (money). A person who has capital and wants someone else to do the work for them would hire a person to do the job but pay them in full only after the work is finished—making work the origin of capital for both the employer and the employee. The employee's work produces capital in the form of wages that can be increased by more work. And the employer's capital was diminished by work of others upon completion, potentially exhausting all capital under certain circumstances. Work, on the other hand, cannot be exhausted by capital, though its value can, and has been, reduced with excess capital and excess laborers.

Work is the only equalizing system among all human beings, and capital (money) can never achieve equality among human beings. Everyone, poor or rich, must work; but not all can be rich and employ other human beings or machines to do all the work for them. The capital holders increase their capital by investing it in projects that produce goods and services through work. Capital is not increased sitting idle; it needs work to keep its value or increase it.

More than a century after predicting that capital will improve society and even increase the population, developed European nations now face the problem that cannot be explained by this very theory: accumulation of capital, high wages, and abundance of food did not result in population increase. To the contrary, the most economically developed nations, like Japan and Germany, are facing a serious economic threat due to decreased populations and increased cost of aging populations, forcing many governments to rely on controlled migration to address these problems. The flaw in Enlightenment thinkers' theories is that they accounted for a very limited number of variables and exaggerated the power of the systems (confusing State-imposed and empowered systems for organic, sound systems) they were advocating for, and that resulted in erroneous predictions. The holistic approach employed by Ibn Khaldun provides a sound critique and an alternative worldview.

From the point of view of Ibn Khaldun, the place and function of the State cannot be overstated, even if it may sound like idolatry in Islamic theology (*shirk*): The State is a Creator. In Ibn Khaldun's thought, the State does not just create things by allocating resources and even coercing people under its control to perform work with no pay or with reduced pay; the State creates conceptual, ethical, and legal standards, too, including the human capacity and ability to reason, use (or abuse) logic, and produce knowledge. And that is significant for many reasons. Here again, the difference between Western thinkers and Ibn Khaldun should not be ignored or downplayed: the place of reason, in Western thought, versus the power of systems and the power of the State to create and transform are very clear. There is no "market" that would filter out good reason from bad reason; there is the State that creates the markets and their terms and conditions, and that applies to reason as well. What is rational is what the State says to be rational, Ibn Khaldun would argue. In economic life, the market does not operate outside the dictates and power of the State, the State *wills* the nature and functioning of the Market. Modern thinkers, too, hinted at the invisible power that shapes the world. For instance, Weber acknowledges that capitalism needed much help/assistance to deal with the challenges. Capitalism, he argued, could not have achieved "its aim without powerful assistance."⁹¹ But Weber does not disclose who provided that assistance. Ibn Khaldun does: the State.

The conceptual, principled, and practical difference between Ibn Khaldun and Western thinkers results in two worldviews: one prioritizes capital and the systems that increase capital and the other prioritizes work and the systems that result from such prioritization. The result can be found in the outcomes of these systems: the capital-centered worldview promotes increased wealth through production and growth that results from the maximization of production. The other worldview also results in increased wealth, but because of trade and the exchange of produced goods, not the increased production of goods. These are radically different outcomes, with each having significant effects on other social, cultural, environmental, economic, and political systems.

Ibn Khaldun's theory of civilizational decline is premised on his proposition that, through the configuration and reconfiguration of determinant systems, every organized society creates the conditions that allow it to exploit resources to achieve its goals. However, in doing so, society fails to account for contributory systems and interconnectedness of systems, which create the conditions for the limits encountered by society as it achieves its desired goals. If society creates systems that are designed to achieve excessive production of anything, be it goods or wealth, over time excess always results in producing the opposite outcome, sometimes to catastrophic proportions.

Belief in deserved share of national wealth built on the backs of slaves and workers who were paid just a "real value of labor" aside, the fact that society did benefit from the work and systems of the previous generation is present in the thought of Enlightenment thinkers. They just do not see it as a moral or legal imperative. If past work was not properly compensated, fairness rules would call for remediation, and without remediation, Ibn Khaldun contends "corruption" becomes the necessary outcome. Here, work can

⁹¹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethics*, 17-8.

be the universal equalizer, capable of addressing historical and across culture grievances. After all, past grievance was invoked by Western thinkers already, albeit to benefit capital holders and masters, not workers and enslaved persons. But the justification could be invoked on moral and legal grounds to compensate those who have been exploited, with no systems in place to remedy their exploitation due to exclusion on the basis of class (workers) or status (enslaved).⁹²

When work is used as a basis for allocating and distributing resources, many of the perennial challenges facing the modern world, namely generational injustice, exploitation, and deprivation, can be addressed in a systemic way. We can start by looking at pre-Enlightenment thought for answers, and that is where we will find Ibn Khaldun, whose worldview prioritizes and instrumentalizes work. Work for Ibn Khaldun is what capital is for Western thinkers since the rise of Adam Smith.

In a world increasingly disrupted by environmental degradation, escalating economic inequality, and the disintegration of social fabric, the re-centralization of “Work” as the foundation of economic value—rather than the accumulation of capital—emerges as a morally grounded and environmentally sustainable alternative. Drawing inspiration from Ibn Khaldun's vision of Work as the generating and cohesive force of civilization, this shift in paradigm reimagines prosperity not as unlimited growth or wealth accumulation, but as collective well-being arising from meaningful, purposeful, and socially integrated work. By transcending the conventional dichotomy between capitalism and communism, this perspective calls for a restructuring of economic systems that rewards contribution rather than consumption, supports cooperative ownership, and measures success through well-being rather than quantitative production. It envisions an economy founded on the spirit of cooperation, care, and intergenerational responsibility, where Work not only sustains markets but also upholds the ethical and environmental foundations of society itself. The aim, here, is not to eliminate markets or wealth, but to reorient systems to value Work, social cohesion, and sustainability over speculative gains, infinite growth, and resource exhaustion.

A final thought: Enabling a human being to fully realize their potential, as Ibn Khaldun envisions, comes down to one essential thing: Priceless Work. Work is the foundation of all that has value. This perspective radically challenges the current worldview, which places capital and money at the center, treating them as both the origin and purpose of Work. If the modern worldview—the one that has shaped our successes and failures—has led us to where we are today, what could the future look like under the worldview of Ibn Khaldun? How might success and failure be redefined in a world that prioritizes Work as the origin and sustainer of everything? What systems would emerge in a world where Work, rather than capital, is recognized as the cornerstone of all value?

⁹² Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy*, 294-5.

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