Sabir[1] – On the boundaries of knowledge, nation and language

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Abstract

Political and institutional boundaries (empire, nation and academic disciplines), and boundaries to communication (language and script) enclose empirical knowledge. A series of investigations, all relevant to the Middle East and the Mediterranean, are presented here. They lay the ground for a detailed discussion of how scope conditions, previous research and misreading can explain Ernest Gellner's use of the concept of 'asabiyya, *forged by the 14th-century scholar Ibn Khaldūn, and the transfer of it from its general context to his own modelling of a particular, Muslim, society – a move totally foreign to Ibn Khaldūn's own intentions and thinking. Paradoxically the boundaries of knowledge can serve their very transgression, but when including knowledge from across the border it has to be done on its own terms. Ibn Khaldūn's work, from a time before modern nations and academic disciplines, can serve as an example and an inspiration.*

Introduction

What happens when knowledge from another time and place is made use of in modern social science? The main focus in this chapter is on a specific part of the work by Ibn Khaldūn, the great Maghribian 14th century polyhistor of Andalusian descent, and Ernest Gellner's influential reception and use of it in modern social science and the – insufficient – critique of Gellner's reception. The arguments in the chapter turn around limits put to empirical research: first, by

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[1] The French historian anthropologist, Jocelyne Dakhlia, whose book on *lingua franca* in the Mediterranean I refer to in this article, puts forward this word, used by the French-speaking population in North Africa to denote the mixed languages used colloquially by the "indigenous", sometimes with contempt. She reminds us that the word comes from the Spanish "*saber*", which has the original meaning of *knowledge* and *learning*. For linguists the different "sabirs" are perceived as real languages by those who use them, when in need, while those who listen grasp them as a phenomenon particular to a determined group of *alloglotte* speakers (Dakhlia 2008: 495, note 42).

the *de facto* structuring of some of the social and human science disciplines resulting from the imperial and later the nation-state political projects; second, by the absence of access to contributions in unknown and untranslated languages; and finally, by the general universalist claim of modern social science theory.

The challenges put to the practice of empirical research by these boundaries of knowledge cannot be easily accepted. They can, however, be scrutinized in their impact on previous research and used to put questions to on-going scholarly work. This is why this chapter begins with an overview of some recent scholarly works that address the boundaries of knowledge in terms of disciplines and of language and script, before discussing in some detail in its second part one central concept in Ibn Khaldūn's theoretical construction and its later use. The works referred to in the first part all relate to knowledge in the context of the Middle East/North Africa or the Mediterranean region. They either discuss previous research or aim to overcome boundaries raised by earlier research. The presentation of them here permits an illustration of different boundaries drawn around knowledge. It is at the same time an invitation for reflection on research in progress, and also projects which cannot be directly associated with the more specific arguments developed in the section on Ibn Khaldūn.

Boundaries of knowledge

Disciplines

To begin, the foundation of modern empirical knowledge in this region. The development of modern natural and social sciences was, as is well known, intensely promoted by the many scientific travels and expeditions in the 18th and 19th centuries. Among these, three major French undertakings took place on the shores of the Mediterranean, the most well-known, of course, the one to Egypt in 1798. Less known are the scientific "commissions" sent in 1829 to Morée, as Peloponnesos was known at the time,[2] and the one to Algeria lasting between 1829 and 1831.[3] The latter ones have been brought forward in two publications by French and Greek historians (Bourguet et al. 1998, Bourguet et al. 1999). The many earlier travelogues from the region published "organized impressions and highlighted curiosities". The work of the commissions of the early imperial and colonial period was, in contrast, based both on detailed observation, "peer-reviewing" and on the search for regularities and patterns, and hence *scientific* (Bourguet 1998: 9). Natural scientists, geologists, geographers, biologists, ethnographers, as well as other human scientists, archaeologists and also architects and historians of art established and developed their sciences during those expeditions and the subsequent reporting and scrutiny in the scientific academies.

At stake, when searching for regularities and patterns, were the structuring effects of the conception of the region surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, or in

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[2] This took place at a time when France also had a military involvement in that region.

[3] Hence at the precise time when the colonization of Algeria had its starting date, 1830.

terms used two centuries later: *the scope conditions*. Two conflicting views existed. For some of the commission members, the Mediterranean was a natural separation between the three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia. For others, it was, on the contrary, thought to originate in a break-through from the Atlantic Ocean having divided what was initially a united and continuous territory. In the process of "inventing the Mediterranean [region]", the latter had to struggle with the contrasts between the Northern and the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean established by their colleagues, and in their stead put forward their discovery of a fundamental *sameness* of the region. The landscape, the fauna and flora, the place of the Mediterranean in history, drawing on the work by the archaeologists, in Egypt, Greece and, most of all, Rome, founded a commonness and – why not? – a common future.

Hence, parallel with their contemporaries', the Orientalists', shaping of an otherness on the grounds of language, history, society and religion, some scholars laid the ground for a scientific sameness distinguishing and bounding the Mediterranean region and separating it from the rest of the world, cutting it off from Africa and Asia as well as from continental Central and Northern Europe. Up to this day these two parallel strands have put boundaries around pieces of research and continue to nurture theories and discourse in the human and social sciences, one producing knowledge about Muslim, Arab and Islamic societies in contrast to their non-Muslim neighbours, and the other establishing a corpus of social and human scientific knowledge on a *Mediterranean* region distinct from its continental hinterlands.[4] Both are present in academia and in the public domain, with variation over time.[5]

Bridging the colonial and the post-colonial periods in the Mediterranean comes another example of the bounding of knowledge. As a major trans-border phenomenon, the "lingua franca", a latin mixture with lexical loans from other languages, nowhere sovereign, was largely in use for several centuries around the Mediterranean. After having disappeared as an object of knowledge, except among the most specialized scholars, it was brought back to our attention by two publications, one edited and the other authored by the French historical anthropologist Jocelyne Dakhlia (2004, 2008). As related by Dakhlia, it was once taught to French soldiers and administrators with the help of a dictionary of "la langue franque ou petit mauresque", published in Marseille in 1830, the very year of the beginning of the French colonial campaign in Algeria. Some decades later, however, the lingua franca disappeared as such from the public domain, both as an object of knowledge and as part of the public consciousness. As explained by Dakhlia in her historical reconstruction and analysis, colonialism

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[4] Some telling titles are referred to by Fanny Colonna (1999), such as G-J. Peristiany, *Honour and Shame, The Values of Mediterranean Societies*, Chicago 1966, or J. Pitt-Rivers (ed.), *Mediterranean Countrymen. Essays in the Social Anthropology of the Mediterranean*, Paris 1963.

[5] As an example, a Swedish book from 2010 on the Calabrian *n'drangheta* refers to the Ancient Greek family structure, supposedly transferred to Calabria through Greek domination before the Roman conquest and later Greek influence, in order to "explain" the social structure and the values of this "criminal organization" (Thomas Lappalainen: *N'drangheta. En bok om maffian i Kalabrien*, 2010).

instead established the existence of only two languages, Arabic and French, set against each other as "blocks" (Dakhlia 2004: 266).[6]

In the place of lingua franca, which was a language of communication linked to no centre of power, came *sabir*, a term used to contemptuously denote the "bad French" spoken by the non-French in North Africa during colonialism. A lingua franca, used by both colonizers and colonized, had become impossible, and in consequence also the knowledge about it. Following the independence of the former colonies on the Mediterranean, language planning and policies became integral parts of the nation-building and development efforts. No space for any "mixed" language existed. When linguists and historians half a century later, in a laborious exchange, brought this topic back into research and the public realm, it was ground-breaking and politically still highly controversial.[7]

A further example of how political national bounding can impact on the empirical research that can be undertaken within a discipline, and thus render some knowledge "impossible", comes from Algeria. It concerns a widespread phenomenon of informal international trade never taken into account by the discipline, economics, that could be expected to cover it. When Algeria finally obtained its independence in 1962, it had legally been an integrated part of France. For the succession of states and the consolidation of territorial sovereignty to take place within the borders of Algeria, the establishment of a national market and economy was essential. State agencies controlled all foreign trade and granted foreign currency only for specified purposes. One element of the national integration policy failed, however: the initial prospect of the return to their liberated country of all the Algerians who had emigrated did not take place. Instead emigration, mainly to France, increased.

When Algeria, a decade after independence, in a final move nationalized its main assets, only the normal ties between two sovereign states seemed to be left between this country and its former colonial power, and, at the level of individuals, only their trans-boundary family relations. But, instead, an intense and totally undocumented cross-border exchange developed, involving both products and services, and currency.[8] In 1984 the economist Mohamed En Nacer Bourenane wrote a piece about these phenomena, shocking at a time of confidence in a state-led and -controlled national development. In spite of his contribution, the issue was ignored and remained unknown in the academic description of the Algerian economy and its external trade and currency relations. Hence a widespread knowledge in society of a phenomenon of both social and economic importance was neither introduced nor dealt with in the otherwise intense academic research and debate on the Algerian economy.

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[6] According to Dakhlia similar processes took place in other colonies.

[7] Recently linguists have started to work on contemporary "hybridization" in both spoken and written language, see the articles by Doss and Mejdell in the review *al-logha* (2000) and the survey by Kebede et al. (2013).

[8] Services and products could be delivered in each countriy, but paid for in the other one and with the other, "foreign", currency. Commodities could be imported into Algeria, formally as part of the resettlement of an expatriate, immigrant in France or elsewhere, but in reality bought and paid for by someone else. This developed even further as the chosen "socialist" and state-controlled development policy led to severe shortages of many consumer goods.

Analytical findings and empirical observations can be assembled to establish within the different disciplines an object of knowledge as exemplified by the polemics surrounding the early research on the Mediterranean region. For the scholars involved in the great French 19th-century expeditions, the *lieu*, the place from which they spoke (de Certeau 1975:11), was to a large extent to become Rome, center for an empire that had covered and left traces over the whole Mediterranean region - and which could easily be transposed into their contemporary Paris. The loss or the expulsion of the *lingua franca* and the "informal" French-Algerian trade as objects of knowledge were in their turn a result both of the drawing of colonial hierarchies and national boundaries and of the ensuing structuring and bounding of the different disciplines within the human and social sciences. For linguists the *lingua franca* became, as Dakhlia explains, a marginal phenomenon dealt with by a few specialists interested in creole languages, while historians who were specialists on the region noticed it, but were interested in the messages contained and not the vehicle. In the last example, the "unofficial" trade could not be taken into account either by the Algerian Plan Secretariat or the economists in general, in spite of being known and used by the population.

So far we have examples of how at the very beginning the burgeoning empirical research struggled with the *scope conditions* which, like nowadays, were influenced by the political conditions of the time, and how later the colonial and national frameworks expulsed from the relevant disciplines the study and knowledge of important social phenomena. We shall see to what extent these boundaries within and around disciplines are at play in the reception of Ibn Khaldūn's work. That the language and script used by him, Arabic, has meant something for its accessability in modern social science comes as no surprise. It raises, however, a much larger issue which goes far beyond the knowledge presented by this specific author, in fact it is decisive when it comes to the boundaries drawn around knowledge, and more generally around and within culture in a series of societies in the hinterlands of the Mediterranean.

Languages

Historians and linguists remind us that in earlier times, generally, several languages could be used within a community for different purposes, without necessarily any hierarchy or power balance between the languages involved (Lentin 2004: 347). This was, of course, before the national language and the nation-state of the 19th century. Then, as put later in Josef Stalin's famous definition, *language* comes as the nation's first foundation, before "territory, economic life, and psychological 'makeup'", which all together were described as manifested in a "community of culture" (Smith 1998: 3).

Language and script put boundaries around knowledge. A striking example of knowledge turned largely inaccessible due to these two aspects is given by the Senegalese scholar Ousmane Kane. Kane contests the claim put forward by some

influential African scholars[9] that the conceptualization of Africa and African societies had its origins entirely within the colonial project and its accompanying scholarly production, and was taken over as such by the African scholars of the post-colonial generations. In a book with the telling title "Non-Europhone Intellectuals" (2012) Kane gives, in contrast, an overview of the establishment of libraries and books produced in Muslim Africa since the very early arrival there of Islam in the 8th century. Much of the material he refers to is connected with religion and religious law, but there are also works of history, politics and literature. It is all in Arabic script, but cannot always be read by an Arab reader because part of it is written in several different African languages.

By putting forward a largely unknown, but prolific, scholarly tradition, Kane challenges the post-colonial perspective and claims the existence of another conceptualization of Africa and its societies. The city and symbol of this tradition – Timbuktu – had, like all the other places and persons referred to in his book, a local setting but were, at the same time, as Kane forcefully argues, linked to a larger space of learning and "meaning".[10] Nowadays, however, these texts are inaccessible not only to international social and human science, but also to many of the African scholars. Access to them is a problem related not only to the numerous manuscripts not archived, or to the threat to these from politics and war as seen in Timbuktu in 2012, but also to the script that is used. Even if, in African Muslim contexts, the teaching of the Qur'an remains and gives access to the script, its use either in Arabic in historical texts for non-religious purposes, or to render other languages, is not easily deciphered. The result is that the authors Kane is referring to and the knowledge present in their books are unknown not only to the international "Africanists" but also to African scholars themselves.[11]

The decisive issue of how language and its use in a more or less standardized script constitute a boundary for knowledge can also be exemplified by the changing policies in the Muslim parts of the early Soviet Union. Here the fierce fight over the choice of script both opened and closed relations to scholarly traditions over time and space. The knowledge produced by Soviet-Russian linguists was, as Michael Smith[12] writes, enhancing "practical successes on its [the Soviet government's] state-building and nation-making fronts" (Smith 1998: X). Together with the choice of a language and script and its principles, come both politics and the state and a system of education.

As Smith explains, on the Southern fringes of the Russian empire, the literate elites among the Muslim populations largely used the Arabic script to render

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[9] Kane is explicitly referring to V. Mudimbe: *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (1988) and K.A. Appiah: *In My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992).

[10] The interesting book by Fanny Colonna, *Les Versets de l'invincibilité. Permanence et changements dans l'Algérie contemporaine* is, empirically and locally, establishing this 'universe of meaning' in the specific case of certain Muslim scholars in Algeria.

[11] In a confused age of perception of global threats, real or imaginary, even Arabic letters sometimes seem to raise fear and anguish.

[12] The monograph by Smith is an exhaustive and detailed account of linguistic scientific input in the communist nation-building at the time, and the resistance to it.

their different Turkic and other vernacular languages.[13] Already before the Russian revolution there had been both educational and scriptural modernizing reforms to teach reading and writing in these languages on phonetic grounds.[14] In the first decade after the revolution neo-Arabic scripts were also developed for several of the Central Asian and Northern Caucasus languages (Smith 1998: 122). Parallell to this, however, other reformers turned their backs on both the Arabic script and the so-called Russian Linguistic Alphabet which was equally in use, and preferred the Latin-based International Phonetic Alphabet.[15] Later in the Soviet era, all this was erased and a general return to Russian-based alphabets imposed. Decades later, however, after the dismantling of the Soviet Union, the question of what script to use for the "national" languages came back on the agenda with diverging decisions, expressing nationalist stand-points as well as international alignments.[16] Beyond the strict question of the language policy, as a consequence of the choice made of a certain script comes the relative ease or difficulty of deciphering earlier texts in the language in question, and also the more or less easy access to texts in other languages using the same script. This, in turn, has implications for the inscription in a larger cultural sphere.

The experiences of language policies and their involvement with the choice of the script in the Soviet Union have their parallels when the choice of a language and a script comes forward as another sign of the sovereignty of a sometimes new-born state. They are equally contentious and politically far-reaching also within movements acting for cultural and political recognition.[17] Hence, within the Kurdish and the Berber (Amazigh) communities and movements for example, there are controversies and diverging policies as regards the choice of script for their respective common languages.

Ibn Khaldūn and Ernest Gellner: universal or particular?

To what extent will the *scope conditions* and the disciplinary boundaries raised by colonial hierarchy or nation-building play a part in the reception of Ibn Khaldūn's work in modern social science? How did his work transgress boundaries of language and script? Was there a *loss in translation*, and if that was the case, what kind of loss?

The original title of the world-famous work by the 14th century judge and scholar Ibn Khaldūn, is, in its most recent Arabic (1983) fourteen volumes

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[13] This was the case despite the fact that the Russian alphabet had been adapted and used to transcribe the same languages within the pre-revolutionary imperial bureaucracy.

[14] Earlier the script was taught by learning to read and recite the Qur'an in Arabic.

[15] This took place several years before the Turkish script reform.

[16] As one example among others, Azerbaijan in 2001 adopted Latin letters, hailed for example in neighbouring Turkey (see *Turkish Daily News.* Dec 12, 2013).

[17] And, of course, the sociology of language which is only touched upon here is, as Bourdieu states, logically impossible to dissociate from a sociology of education (Bourdieu 1982: 53).

edition, *The Book of Examples* (al kitab al ibar).[18] The very first manuscript known, a much shorter one, had, however, another title: *The Translator (turjumân) of the examples and the Register of the beginning and the history of the Arabs and the Berbers and their great contemporary sovereigns.*[19] Following Abdessalam Cheddadi, the main contemporary specialist and critical editor, Ibn Khaldūn should be considered as an heir to those of the Arab historians who moved Muslim historiography away from the legacy of Christian Byzantine authors and their ideological and interpretative approach. Ibn Khaldūn and his predeccessors joined instead the authors of Antiquity like Herodotus, Polybius and Thucydides, in a vision which was explicitly rationalist. Like them he naturalized society and history, moving both away from the playgrounds of metaphysical forces (Cheddadi 2002: XLVI).

As is made clear by the title of his early work, Ibn Khaldūn's concern was universalist, his history was about both Arabs and Berbers, *and* their contemporary sovereigns. Ibn Khaldūn was for several reasons very close to Aristotle, but, in contrast to the latter, his ambition was to discuss neither the best form of government nor the foundations for the functioning of one specific existing *polis*. He aimed to find out what governed life in society and the development of civilization in general, and to ground his general statements in empirical demonstrations.[20] With this purpose in mind, he coined several new and abstract concepts or changed the content of existing concepts: *ijtimā'* used by the Arab philosophers for *community* was used by Ibn Khaldūn to mean *society*, *'umrān* used in a concrete meaning by the Arabic geographers to talk about cultivated and inhabited lands was transformed into an abstract concept that is generally translated by the word *civilization*, although etymologically it could be closer to *culture* (Cheddadi 2006: 69), and, of course, among several other transformed concepts, the one that has been most largely spread: '*asabiyya*.

'*asabiyya* is central to Ibn Khaldūn's conceptualization of how social force may be turned into political power. Since the first translation in the 19th century it has been rendered in several different ways: "l'esprit de corps" (de Slane), "group feeling" (Rosenthal) or, as Cheddadi proposes, "solidarité" (Cheddadi 2002: XXIX). It is often left untranslated, willingly or unwillingly giving an "Arab" touch to the concept itself. Furthermore, this "mother idea", as Gabrieli characterizes it (Gabrieli 1930: 511-12), can, in Ibn Khaldūn's texts and according to the setting, be understood as referring either to the *quality* of this particular feeling, or to the *group* animated by such a feeling (ibid: 474, note 1).

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[18] Best known, perhaps, is his introduction, *al-Muqaddima,* sometimes rendered by the Greek term *prolegomena*.

[19] One can wonder if the use of the word *turjumān*, which has given the French word *truchment*, for translator (Dakhlia 2008) and later for intermediary (*truchement*), and, of course, the European *dragoman* from Turkish, have a bearing on Ibn Khaldûn's initial epistemological approach.

[20] If the justification for developing his own science was to rectify earlier historians and evaluate their sources (Is what they relate possible and credible?), as he himself claimed, or if he was moved primarily by his own failures as a politician and and a wish to lay the ground for more efficient policy making, as advanced by Mahdi (1957) in his seminal contribution, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

The translation into European languages (French, German, Latin) of parts of Ibn Khaldūn's *Book of the Examples* and its step-wise introduction into scholarly works began in the second half of the 19th century.[21] Thus Engels used him, probably without having read any of his work himself.[22] More importantly, the ethnographic and anthropological research which accompanied the colonial endeavour and answered to its need for knowing and understanding the peoples it was to conquer and rule, made extensive use of selected parts of what had been translated. On the threshold of the colonial and the post-colonial period, and both an heir to this use of Ibn Khaldūn and a major figure in the reception of him, is the prolific British scholar Ernest Gellner. Initially a philosopher, Gellner made his way into anthropology through his research on the Berbers living in the Moroccan Atlas mountains.[23] In his works there are extensive references to Ibn Khaldūn, accessed apparently first through the accounts given by other authors, but in later publications, in particular the articles published in his influential book *Muslim Society* (1981), Gellner used the first comprehensive translation by Franz Rosenthal into English of Ibn Khaldūn's introduction to his work, *The Muqaddimah* (1958).

The validity of the model of a "Muslim Society" that Gellner develops in the book of the same name and elsewhere,[24] has been thoroughly and critically discussed by the sociologist Sami Zubaida. Zubaida acknowledges certain cultural themes common to Muslim lands and epochs, but states that it would be a mistake "to think that the concepts and entities specified by these themes are sociological or political constants" (Zubaida 1995: 151). He brings forward a number of these "themes" and demonstrates both their various and changing contents over time and space.[25] It is easy, however, concedes Zubaida, to cite facts and examples to support objections, but that does not necessarily diminish what he calls "the cognitive hold of a good model" (Zubaida 1995: 152). However, Zubaida means that Gellner's model does not have this quality. Instead, he challenges "the very idea of a homogeneous 'Muslim society'" (ibid.), i.e. in our terms the claim by Gellner to construct a bounded object or a field of study named "Muslim society" with its specific patterns.

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[21] Before that he had been read and commented on by authors in the Ottoman Empire already from the late 16th century, and in the following one not least by the famous polyhistor Katib Çelebi, and from the late 19th century onwards in several Arab countries. Famous intellectuals as the Egyptian Taha Hussein and the Moroccan Mohammed Abed al-Jabri wrote their doctoral theses about Ibn Khaldūn, albeit in different languages and different epochs, the former in French in the 1920s and the latter in Arabic in the early 1970s.

[22] Probably through the works by Maksim Kovalevski that at least Marx had consulted (see *Marx, marxisme et Algérie. Textes de Marx-Engels,* presented by Galissot and Badia 1976: 196).

[23] He introduced them first in 1953-54, i.e. before the Moroccan independence (1956), and continued throughout the 1950s.

[24] For example in his *Conditions of Liberty. Civil society and its Rivals* (1994), and that he anticipates in his *Saints of the Atlas* (1969).

[25] On the contrary, a category such as ʿulama, for example, is assigned different meanings and different roles in different socio-political contexts, and Zubaida thoroughly grounds this empirically for several of the main building-blocks in Gellner's model. From a similar perspective, and equally relating to empirical findings, I have myself questioned other building-blocks in the Gellner model, such as civil society (Brandell 1997).

Zubaida has no reason – and no need - to question Gellner's reading of Ibn Khaldūn. The latter is presented by Zubaida as an historian of the past. Gellner should at least have historicized his utterances, writes Zubaida, following here Aziz Al-Azmeh's critique of the Orientalist use of Ibn Khaldūn, and of Ibn Khaldūn himself as an historian (al Azmeh 1981 and 1982; Zubaida 1995:154). However, Zubaida hereby unfortunately perpetuates the reduction and misreading of Ibn Khaldūn made by Gellner.

The latter part of Ibn Khaldūn's work consists of separate histories of the Arabs and the Berbers. But the guiding principles of human society and power established in his Introduction were drawing on and exemplified by what was known to him about many "nations" both of his own time and in history: the Greeks, the Romans, the Franks, the Persians etc. Hence it is both noteworthy and surprising when Gellner writes that Ibn Khaldūn, when he thought that he was analyzing human society as such, was "in error" (Gellner 1981: 88). Gellner acknowledges Ibn Khaldūn's "superb interpretation of *his own world*" only to immediately continue contemptuously "*believed* [by him] to be the human world in general" (Gellner 1995: 204, my italics). How is this taking place? What is the argument?

The particularization of Ibn Khaldūn's work operated by Gellner lies in the latter's handling of the concept of 'asabiyya. 'asabiyya is indeed the pivot of Ibn Khaldun's explanation for the rise and fall of dynasties in history. In a section of his Introduction entitled "L'esprit de corps ('asabiyya) results from the fusion through blood relations or something equivalent", Ibn Khaldūn explains that 'asabiyya is grounded in the affection that a person has for those close to him, and the shame "that comes to a person when one of his neighbours, relatives or relations is in any degree humiliated" – a feeling, he pursues, that also extends to clients and allies with whom one has a close contact, similar to the one within the family (Ibn Khaldūn 1958/1967 I: 264). In contradiction of this definition, Gellner's reading immediately attaches to the concept of 'asabiyya the concept of "tribe", the issue becoming as a result about the "tribal 'asabiyya". And Gellner explains that, already at the time of Ibn Khaldūn, there were no longer tribes in Europe, except in Switzerland. Hence Ibn Khaldūn's theory about 'asabiyya, the social cohesion that paves the way to power and then disintegrates over time, had no validity there (Gellner 1995). In spite of what Ibn Khaldūn himself wrote, his theory had to be turned around, made particular, and was valid only "for his own world".

This specific, and reductionist, reading of Ibn Khaldūn then constitutes a central element in what Gellner presents as "Muslim society", and serves to legitimize his model, Ibn Khaldūn being both "indigenous" and famous. When other scholars engage with Gellner's work, even critically like Zubaida, they tend to adopt this reduction. The analytical charge of the concept is lost; instead it returns again and again to make sense of politics and "tribes" in varying settings of Arab politics, as in Iraq after 2003, or in Yemen and Libya during the events following the Arab Spring in those countries.

Fortunately, and thanks in particular to the seminal work presented by Abdesselam Cheddadi in his two critical editions in Arabic and in French, younger scholars reading Arabic as well as English and French, are now returning to Ibn Khaldūn for more precise and accurate readings. Other central concepts of

his work, not like 'asabiyya lost in particularist Arab-Muslim validity, are investigated, such as 'jah (prestige, fame), and its origin and function within the realm of political power (Cheddadi 1980; Ben Salem 2008). Earlier more marginal readings of Ibn Khaldūn that accepted his work alongside other social scientists beyond any particular North African or Muslim setting, and discussed his contribution with regards to certain general issues (for example "irrational solidarity groups", Ritter 1948), are becoming more common (concerning international relations see Kalpakian 2008; concerning post-modernism see Boukraa 2008). A more sustained acknowledgement and use of Ibn Khaldūn's contribution beyond "his own world" will probably have to wait for the more extensive and intensive critical analyses made possible by the new editions. The impact of Gellner's bounding of knowledge through the concept of "Muslim society" and the introduction into scholarship and the public realm of something called 'asabiyya mysteriously connected to "tribes", and made credible by the reference to Ibn Khaldūn – a non-European scholar – is, however, still with us. Meanwhile, we are still missing Ibn Khaldūn's potential contribution to our contemporary debates over society, political power and government, where he should have his place on the same terms as, for example, Aristotle, Plato and Machiavelli.

To what extent can Gellner's reductionist use of Ibn Khaldūn's work be illuminated or put into perspective by the boundaries of knowledge as identified earlier in this chapter? First, the issue of *scope conditions* is adressed explicitly, with Gellner taking the Orientalist stand of erecting a boundary between, on the one hand, North Africa and, on the other, Europe at the time of Ibn Khaldūn's writing. He does it, however, by referring to the presence or absence of *tribes*, which, as already explained, is not part of the scope conditions in khaldūnian theory.[26] Second, the boundaries drawn around disciplines are not necessarily at work in Gellner's thinking. He was, as shown by his many publications, eagerly transgressing disciplinary boundaries when establishing grand theories on nation, civil society and Muslim, or for that matter Marxist, society. At another level, the meticulous empirical research on *the tribes* in ethnography, anthropology and more generally in the colonial documentation of North African societies[27] preceding Gellner's own work, very clearly put a boundary around what was considered relevant and well-grounded social science. This might have constituted a boundary preventing him from grasping the very meaning of Ibn Khaldūn's general statements. Finally, the fact that the theory reached Gellner initially at second or third hand, and anyway through translation, underlines the uncertainties that characterize the process when knowledge presented in an unknown language and script is moved into a new linguistic setting, in this case even preventing the debate from going back to the original source.

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[26] Albeit of the historical account made by Ibn Khaldūn in the volumes relating the history of the Arabs and Berbers.

[27] Often for practical, administrative and military reasons.

Conclusions

Maintaining and dismantling the boundaries

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences come up against both empirical and theoretical boundaries of different sorts in their investigations and presentations of research results. From another perspective than the one developed by philosophy of knowledge and history of science, they have, as practitioners, to acknowledge the boundaries already set, in terms of language or nation, and also to handle the ones set by themselves or their predecessors, such as the boundaries between academic disciplines, between the researcher and the object of research, or between the investigation proper and the presentation of it.

Here I have given, first, a series of examples of how political conjuncture, in terms of colonial or national state-building endeavours, together with disciplinary boundaries, has contributed to render knowledge irrelevant and expel it from the field of science, or – on the contrary? – framed it within certain politically relevant boundaries. I have also brought forward some examples of the opening and closure brought about by the boundaries of language, in particular in the form/choice of a script, giving or denying access for the many in a scholarly community. Secondly, I have shown the mechanisms at work in the case of the Gellnerian reductionist reading of Ibn Khaldūn, largely still with us, and why the critique of it has not gone far enough. I have also pointed to the operation of particularization undertaken by Gellner when integrating knowledge from beyond the boundary in social science theory. This operation corresponds to the remark made by Michel de Certeau that in the West "authority" for the group or the individual lies in the expulsion of the other. This is the very basis, following Certeau, for "human science", and – one would presume – also "social science" (de Certeau 1975: 11).

The conclusions are accordingly paradoxical. Dakhlia and Bourenane brought forward what had been expelled or never rendered by their respective academic disciplines. Nevertheless, only within the boundaries of those disciplines, and at the same time against them, could their knowledge take shape. Critically scrutinizing, as Kane or Smith, the history of the scholarship in a certain field, or its present claims, is the stepping-stone to any new or other knowledge. The boundaries and traditions of disciplines have to be acknowledged and hence maintained, but also pushed and used as starting points.

When it comes to the boundaries brought about by language and script the conclusion is equally paradoxical. Most evidently, barriers of language and script should be dismantled through translation and the development of all possible multilingual expertise among scholars in all fields. Only then can a flow of knowledge, which is not science as "authority through the expulsion of the other", exist. On the other hand, this cannot take place at the expense of accuracy and of at least a sense of context. And, of course, not, which was the case with Gellner, without full acknowledgement of the terms of the knowledge presented on the other side of the language/script boundary. On the contrary, it has to be recognized and respected.

Another discursive practice?

This leaves us with many preliminaries. The scholar seems to face a Herculeian task but fortunately it is not a task for one individual alone. And there are predecessors, not only the ones who are close by. At a time before the boundaries raised by nations and by scientific and academic disciplines, Ibn Khaldūn used all accounts judged by him to be accurate of historical events organized within his explanatory framework. Without historicizing, contextualizing or particularizing human political experience and events, he engaged with all empirical examples available to him. They were particular, but they served a general analytical purpose. Can his work open up for the scholar a way of not bounding their knowledge, and even inspire another discursive practice?[28] If we meditate on the sense of his concept of "translator" as it stands in the first title of his work while, at the same time, elaborating on his principles for verification, there might be a reasonable way forward.

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[28] This was the burning question put by Roland Barthes in 1975 when he stated that "neither ideology nor the subconscious let me believe that with the help only of my will shall I, on any object in the world, make a discourse that is exterior, neutral, indifferent, sheltered from that which I am trying to uncover in the others", and he presents "a new discursive practice" as the main necessary effort of the humanities. This, of course, implies a radical challenge to the whole effort to construe a social and human *science* during the last one or two centuries.

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