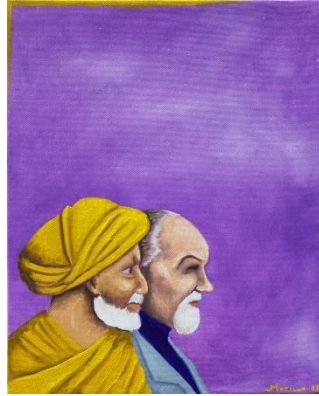


Ibn Khaldun Views Olitski



Stephen R. Morillo

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The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

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EXCERPT

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The LaFollette Lecture Series was established by the Wabash College Board of Trustees to honor Charles D. LaFollette, their longtime colleague on the Board. The lecture is given each year by a Wabash College Faculty member who is charged to address the relation of his or her special discipline to the humanities broadly conceived.

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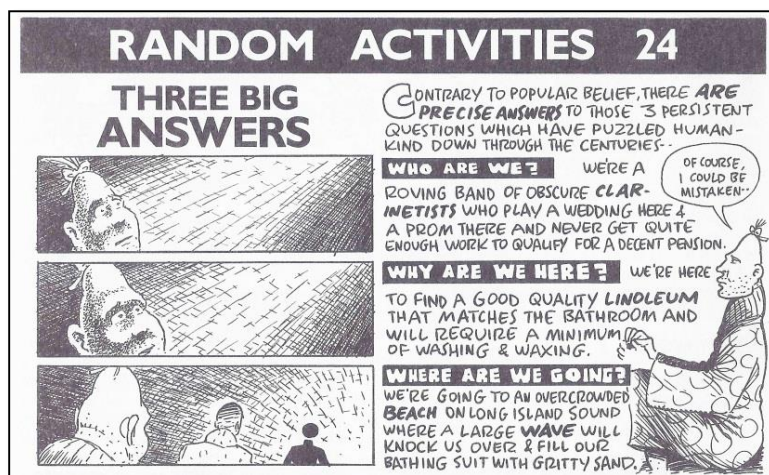
The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

Ibn Khaldun Views Olitski

Stephen R. Morillo
Department of History

Thank you, Dwight, for that generous introduction. It's an honor to speak to you here this afternoon. I'd like to thank our former LaFollette professor, Leslie Day, for inviting me to join the illustrious list of LaFollette lecturers. I have to admit that, when she extended the invitation after Awards Chapel a year and a half ago, my initial response was trepidation. I'd sometimes asked myself, "Stephen, what would you talk about if you were ever asked?", and I'd always answered myself, "Stephen, I have no idea." I had therefore been grateful that I'd never been asked. Now Leslie had made my response to myself inadequate. I had to come up with something.

For inspiration, I turned to the formal charge of the LaFollette lecturer, which is to "address the relationship of his or her academic discipline to the humanities broadly conceived". I understand the "humanities" part of this charge to mean engagement with the Big Questions—the Enduring Questions, as our new Freshman course puts it. Fortunately, the "academic discipline" part of the charge eliminated one possibility: I will not approach the humanities today as a cartoonist, because that would lead to a very short lecture along lines already sketched by Bill Griffith and his comic creation Zippy the Pinhead in Random Activity 24 from *Are We Having Fun Yet?*¹



Zippy is right in at least one way. He recognizes that he could be mistaken. And in his openness to new answers—indeed, to new questions—Zippy has got to the essence of the humanities, or the Liberal Arts tradition on which this College is founded. But this still left open how I was to address such questions.

For the charge raised another question for me: what is my field? When I was hired here in 1989, the History Department consisted of two Americanists and a Modern Europeanist. My charge was to teach “everything else”. I figured that the relationship of “everything else” to the humanities – already broadly conceived!—might produce a somewhat vague lecture. On the other hand, the relationship of my original scholarly field, medieval military history, to the humanities, even broadly conceived, might produce a lecture as short as my cartoonist’s version. Even if I combined them.



Never mind opening up the danger of gratuitous cross-disciplinary teasing.



So I was back to “everything else” as my academic discipline. Which, I must admit, seriously, it really is, in the guise of that relatively new branch of the House of History, World History. When I was hired to teach “everything else”, my specific charge was to create Wabash’s first world history course sequence. I did that, and also created upper level world history courses, remade the History Department into one focused on world history, wrote a military world history textbook, then finally wrote a world history textbook which I finished in May.

And I think I can do something with the relationship between world history and the humanities. World history and the humanities are both built around asking Big Questions and proposing Big Answers. Maybe the same questions. And even if they aren't exactly the same, exploring the relationship may tell us something interesting. My exploration is in two parts that, I hope, will explain my title.

IBN KHALDUN

Abū Zayd ‘Abdur-Raḥman bin Muḥammad bin Khaldūn Al-Hadrami, better known as ibn Khaldun, was born in Tunis, in North Africa, in 1332 to a prominent Arab family that had come to Spain with the Islamic conquest in the 700s, and had returned to North Africa in the mid-1200s when Seville fell to the Christian Reconquista. From childhood his intellectual curiosity proved insatiable. Over the course of his long career he wrote about and practiced a huge range of topics, from astronomy, medicine, and mathematics to economics, sociology, demography, and military strategy. Indeed, he is often said to have invented sociology. His *Muqaddimah*, the prologue to a universal history, is a masterpiece of philosophy of history.² Between classical times and the great Enlightenment historians of the late eighteenth century, Edward Gibbon and the under-appreciated David Hume, ibn Khaldun was certainly the greatest historian the world knew.

According to his autobiography, he was in and out of jail or exile many times, an inevitable consequence of involvement with the politics of Muslim North Africa, as turbulent then as now. In 1401, at the age of 71, ibn Khaldun became advisor to a Mamluk army sent to Damascus to face the invasion of Timur, who was creating a steppe empire to rival that of his ancestor Ghengiz Khan, whose own conquests had ripped the Baghdad-centered heart out of the Islamic world a century and a half earlier. The old man was lowered down from the walls of the besieged city to negotiate with the conqueror directly. He died in 1406.

The Black Death had killed ibn Khaldun's parents in 1348, when he was 17. In the *Muqaddimah*, ibn Khaldun wrote about the causes of plagues, with his usual wide scope and theorizing based on observed evidence. For him, plagues stemmed—ironically—from the *success* of civilization. In his view, “the kindness, the safety, and the light taxation” that exist at the beginnings of a dynasty leads to “a dense and abundant civilization” in the later, corrupt and declining years of the dynasty. This in turn leads to “the growth of putrefaction and evil moistures” which cause outbreaks of plague. Sorry, one more cartoonist's intervention:



Ibn Khaldun's theory of plague is informed by his general theory of history, which he viewed as a set of patterns to be recognized and decoded, patterns made up of the structures of social interaction that arose from the fundamentals of human nature. In the *Muqaddimah*, ibn Khaldun first wrote on historiography, that is, the history of writing history. Next he developed a theoretical framework for the analysis of history, a framework based in the influences of geography, climate, social organization, and numerous other factors on the rise and fall of different kingdoms and civilizations. Finally, he finished this introduction to his world history with a systematic discussion of the trades and crafts by which humans make a living and the sciences by which they understand their world, including the nature and functioning of the human mind itself.

Ibn Khaldun came by his mode of analysis honestly: his major non-Islamic intellectual influence was Aristotle, that classifier and knower-of-everything *par excellence*. His theory of human cognition is Aristotelian to the core. Remember that Arab-Islamic civilization was one of the three heirs of Greco-Roman civilization, along with the Byzantine Empire and Catholic Europe ... and the last of these was without question the poor, uneducated cousin in the family. Arab scholars for centuries had had access to much more of Aristotle's corpus, as well as the rest of classical Greek scholarship, than medieval Europeans did; indeed, much of what Europe knew in 1350 had come across the Iberian frontier where ibn Khaldun's family had lived for centuries until the advancing Christian Reconquista had driven them to Tunisia. Ibn Khaldun represents both the high point and the end point of Greek influence in Islam. The twin disasters of the Mongol invasions and the plague were already turning the Islamic world generally away from science and towards mysticism and faith in the inexplicable will of Allah. Aside from a handful of 16th century Ottoman historians, ibn Khaldun had little subsequent influence on Islamic thought, though his *Muqaddimah* remained known and admired for centuries.

Where ibn Khaldun not only learned from but added significantly to Aristotle was in the realm of political, sociological, and historical analysis. History is not usually included among Aristotle's fields, but his *Politics* is history in the schematic, synchronic form now known as political science. Ibn Khaldun drew on much broader and deeper historical evidence to construct the schema that lies at the center of his historical analysis, the analysis that informs his view of the plague. It focused on the constant creative tension between "civilization," or the settled, sedentary, agrarian societies where commerce, science, and the arts flourished on one hand, and pastoralist nomadic peoples on the other. While civilizations were the center of most that was good about human society, nomads, whether from the desert or the steppe, played a crucial role. When success led civilizations inevitably down the path of corruption, it was nomads who periodically conquered corrupt civilizations and renewed their virtue, literally clearing the air not just of plague but of foul moral winds. Nomads were the source of true religion. This was, of course, the role filled by the Prophet himself at the initiation of Islamic history and periodically re-enacted by desert nomads across the Islamic world over many centuries. From the symbiosis of nomadic and sedentary values, the very identity of Islam emerged, molded by its earliest scholars and jurists in conscious opposition to the "degenerate" imperial civilizations of Orthodox Byzantium and Zoroastrian Sassanid Persia. In other words, for Islamic history, ibn Khaldun's schema, his analysis of structure and pattern, works excellently.

From an even broader perspective unavailable to ibn Khaldun in the 14th century, it appears overgeneralized as the central pattern of world history. Chinese historians and rulers would certainly take issue. For them, steppe nomads were pure barbarians, to be walled out of the Middle Kingdom symbolically and materially, and to be Sinified if they did get in—no moral virtue inhered in them at all. Western Europeans barely knew the impact of true steppe or desert nomads, nor would their few experiences have inspired thoughts about religious renewal.

But the failure, or more accurately the only partial success, of ibn Khaldun's schema, his model of history, does not invalidate his method. His model fit the data that he had. The generally wretched state of historiography in the 14th century globally, never mind the limitations of global cross-cultural communication, make his Islamocentrism far more excusable than the Eurocentric historiography born in the universities of 19th century Europe. Furthermore, his model of states and societies, a model built on foundations as universal as ibn Khaldun could make them, foundations made up of analysis of human cognition, and of patterns of trade and commerce, this model stands up better than the national histories bequeathed to us by the 19th century, whose foundations rest in the pseudo-folk myths of racist nationalism.

I introduce ibn Khaldun, however, to show the venerable lineage, tracing back through the *Muqaddimah* to Aristotle, of a style of history that I have attempted to pursue in my own world history textbook, *Structures and Systems: Conceptual Frameworks of World History*. Like ibn Khaldun, and like Aristotle, I believe there are patterns to be recognized in world history, structures to be delineated and analyzed. Like them, I'd like to know everything, and making a manageable pile out of everything (or, if we confine this to my academic discipline, of "everything else") requires that it be systematized, classified, organized. Otherwise, it would be like the Steven Wright joke: "I wouldn't want everything—where would you keep it?"

Like ibn Khaldun, I have tried to ground my world history first in the history of human cognition. For we think differently from any other species. We think differently even from our closest relatives and ancestors. Let us take *Homo erectus* as an example.



This species emerged about 1.8 million years ago, was the first in the hominid line to spread out of Africa, and lasted until a couple hundred thousand years ago. The members of this species were just about as large as we are, and their brains were a good three quarters the size of ours. They were smart. And yet, their minds were clearly not like ours. Their main—indeed, virtually only—technology was stone hand axes like these two,



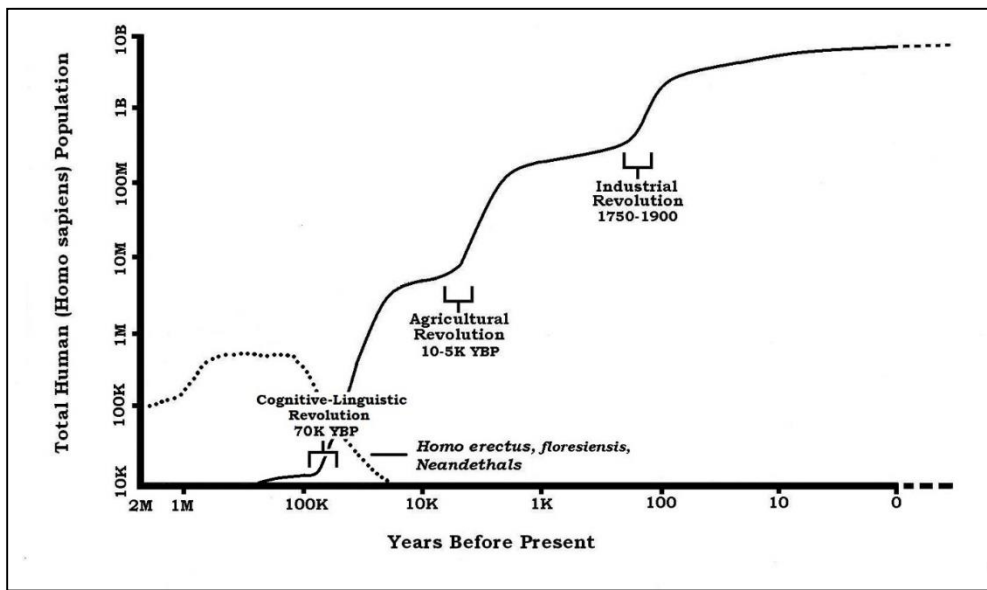
which are separated by well over a million years. A million years, and these people could make no improvements, create no specialized regional variants, nothing? The same also applies to *Homo erectus*' even larger-brained descendants, *Homo heidelbergensis*, currently the favored contender for our own immediate ancestor, and the famous Neanderthals, whose brains are actually fractionally larger than ours. Both species' hand axes got more finely flaked, but they didn't get beyond hand axes and, probably, wooden spears. Not even stone points on wooden spears. More tellingly for differences in mental life, there is no evidence of any sort of symbolic or ritual use of materials or associated behaviors, such as burying the dead, with any of these big-brained close cousins.

One window into this “smart, but not smart like us” conundrum may be to understand how such people communicated. Paleoarchaeologist Steven Mithen has posited a communication system which he dubs HmMMM (H followed by five Ms), which stands for holistic, manipulative, multi-modal, musical, and mimetic—essentially vocalizations rich in tonal and rhythmic changes, but not broken into individual words, and accompanied by gestures and body language (including something like dance?), all of which produced expressions of whole ideas.³ HmMMM would have been quite good when individuals wanted to motivate group action or facilitate group bonding, and it must have been useful in communicating basic intra-group gossip, given the high levels of social intelligence our cousins' activities indicate. But it clearly could not handle abstractions such as thinking about technology, the production of which must have been learned mimetically. Nor could one group's particular version of HmMMM “translate” into another's, as no individual words or syntactic structures linking them existed. You had to learn everything from scratch.

Mithen thinks that at some point in the history of our own species, which first appeared about 200,000 years ago in east Africa, HmMMM split, with the non-musical vocalizations becoming discrete words—made possible by subtle anatomical changes that allowed a broader range of vocalizations—and the rest becoming both music and dance, forms of cultural expression as

universal in human communities as language. He does not propose a date for this breakthrough, but a combination of genetic and linguistic evidence suggests one, at least approximately. Before around 70,000 years ago—that is, for more than half of our existence so far—our species was confined to a smallish part of east and south Africa, and was not very numerous. The genetic evidence also suggests that those small numbers lived in even smaller, relatively isolated groups. Between 75- and 70,000 years ago, our situation had become pretty desperate, as an interglacial period of global warming and climate change threatened even those few —evidence of a genetic “bottleneck” around that time suggests that there were fewer than 10,000 of us at that point, perhaps fewer than 5,000.

Then, suddenly, just about 70,000 years ago—because we started talking and so thought differently?—our species exploded out of Africa, first into southwest Asia, then by at least 40,000 years ago along the Indian Ocean coasts into Southeast Asia and Australia as well as into Europe. By 12,000 years ago, humans occupied almost the whole planet outside of Antarctica, Madagascar, and the Pacific islands. The demographic history that started with a Cognitive-Linguistic Revolution among those 5,000 or so modern talky people can be presented in one graph, with time and population plotted logarithmically to compare rates of change. The graph tells one story, one Big Narrative, of world history all by itself.



It’s a story of three great revolutions in humanity’s relationship to our environment. The cognitive-linguistic revolution was the first and arguably the biggest. It was followed by the agricultural and industrial revolutions. Each revolution was successively smaller than the previous one. It’s a story that takes us from a species threatened by climate change to ... well, perhaps the more things change ... I do sometimes refer to my topic as everything from the cooling of the earth to the warming of the earth.

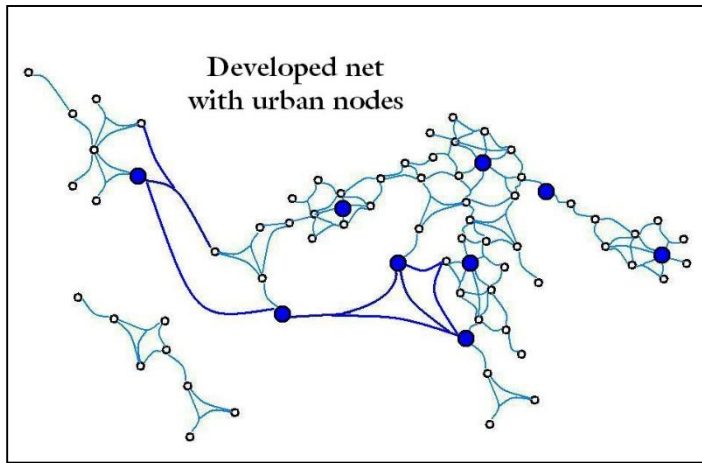
This fundamental demographic history was and still is powered by the cognitive tools that language unleashed and, undoubtedly, partly created. Language seems to have linked together previously separate domains of intelligence. Instead of specific (and in many cases mimetically reproduced) knowledge of social interactions, plants and animals, technology, and basic physics, language tied together and related all these domains. And since social intelligence was in all probability already the key domain exerting selective pressure for bigger brains, everything became social: people now saw the weather, other animals, just about everything, through the basic tool of social intelligence, theory of mind. This automatically thought equating of the cosmos with the human mind was the foundational metaphor upon which all other metaphors were subsequently built. And metaphor linked to pattern recognition not only turned people into far more efficient hunters and inventors of new technology—thus, in part, the demographic explosion—it gave us the ability to become artists, scientists, mystics, merchants, and historians, and so to generate texture and complexity in the story of world history. For, as ibn Khaldun saw in his own way, the cognitive-linguistic revolution made possible the structures of human societies.

Remember when I mentioned earlier that ibn Khaldun surveyed in his *Muqaddimah* the trades and crafts by which humans make a living? We may see this as his introduction to the first sort of structure basic to human history: networks. Networks—of economic trade but also of cultural exchange—emerged only with the invention of word-based, syntactically compositional language that could be translated from one version to another, unlike Hmmmmm. The translatability of modern language made humanity a common enterprise, and has kept it that way even as languages themselves became central markers of the history of cultural divergence and diversity.

We need not wait long in the world story to guess at the power of networks. Cognitively and linguistically modern humans entered Europe about 40,000 years ago, as I noted a minute ago. They met a population of Neanderthals who had been there for 250,000 years. By 27,000 years ago, the Neanderthals were gone, leaving their trace in less than 5% of the modern non-African genome. Why? There is no evidence in the (admittedly scarce) archaeological record of mass violence—the invention of warfare would have to wait until about 10,000 years ago and involved talky people on both sides. The genetic evidence rules out massive interbreeding.

A few years ago, a team of economists ran a simulation of this encounter.⁴ Their model assumed only one difference between Neanderthals and the newcomers: that the latter traded among their communities, while Neanderthal communities remained largely isolated. This agrees with the archaeological record and is also massively kind to the Neanderthals, who had inferior technology, no sewn clothing, and were probably less effective hunters. The model predicted that the Neanderthal population would disappear by about 27,000 years ago. The future belonged to our networked species. Human networks gradually developed urban centers of gravity and expanded to connect Egypt and Mesopotamia to the Indus valley, to connect Rome to Han China, to connect Eurasia pervasively enough to spread the Black Death that killed ibn Khaldun's parents, to connect the Americas to Eurasia and its vast disease pool, to connect continents through human diasporas both forced and free, and eventually to connect all six billion plus of us in the common stew pot that the energy demands of our global network of economic activity have created.

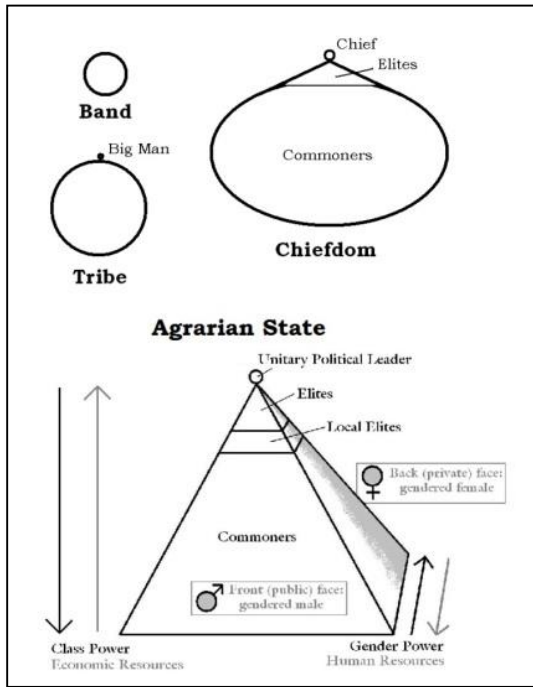
Here's an abstract representation of a developed network.



Ibn Khaldun's survey of states, kingdoms, civilizations, and their dynamic interactions with nomadic tribes and chiefdoms introduces the second basic sort of structure of human societies. Let's call them hierarchies, because even simple hunter-gatherer bands, usually egalitarian in both practice and ethos, display hierarchies of status and power. Furthermore, as social complexity increases from bands to tribes, chiefdoms, states, and empires, hierarchical differentiation tends to increase, despite our evolved distaste for extreme disparities as a form of injustice.

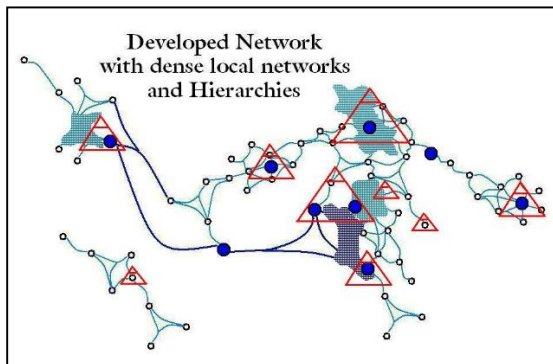
And like networks, the human capacity to create such hierarchies is a product of the cognitive-linguistic revolution. Unlike the temporary dominance hierarchies that characterize other primate social groups, the sort of status that human individuals can achieve is not based in repeatedly asserted physical force. Physical prowess, as a hunter, for example, might have played a role in elevating some members of early human bands, but that prowess was given effect through leadership of cooperative hunting bands and the social act of distributing resources, such as the hunt's bounty, to the whole group. And if our non-talky cousins had this kind of status, the cognitive-linguistic revolution added status that could be symbolically represented and reinforced through differences in clothing and bodily decoration, status that could be ascribed through kinship, real or fictive, and prestige derived from specialization in certain skills, including—indeed perhaps headed by—specialization in interpreting the intentions of the cosmos and of the spirits that, with the cognitive-linguistic revolution, we saw so readily. These sorts of status and prestige originated in the actions of minds, not bodies, and so could be made features of a human society's social landscape that could outlast death.

The capability to create these new forms of status meant that a few minor changes to a human community's relationship to its physical environment created the potential for major effects in the group's social and economic organization. Changes such as settling in one place instead of wandering, accumulating possessions, and domesticating plants and animals rather than relying on their appearance in the wild. Bands became villages, villages grouped together into tribes which grouped together into chiefdoms, and cities arose at the center of states headed by religious, bureaucratic and military elites. Here's an abstract representation of different levels of hierarchies.



The power of states to organize collective action by truly massive numbers of people, partly through coercion but mostly by convincing many, many people that an abstract entity mattered more than their individual lives, ensured that state-level organization of human societies gradually, haltingly, but inexorably spread from a few ancient river valleys to claim, today, nearly every carefully mapped square meter of land on the face of the globe.

Back for a moment to ibn Khaldun. At the conceptual heart of his history of the world is the creative tension between nomads and civilization. This tension between nomadic tribes (or chiefdoms) and sedentary states, considered as two competing sorts of hierarchies, may not succeed as a model outside of the medieval Islamic world. But consider the structure, the patterns. If we take his nomads more abstractly, as representing the operations of networks, then the great Islamic historian's model is again on target. For the central creative tension running through world history sits at the intersection between networks and hierarchies.



This intersection was tense because, while both sorts of structure arose from the cognitive-linguistic revolution, they served contradictory purposes and so were organized in contradictory ways. Networks are made up of horizontal connections across social space, and are geographically extensive. They are urban-based, and are built on cooperative, relatively equal exchange. Hierarchies, on the other hand, are made up of vertical connections in social space and are geographically focused and limited. They may have urban centers, but are grounded, literally, in rural agricultural production, at least down through industrialization. And though every human society is cooperative, coercion plays a much more central role in the organization of hierarchies than of networks. Networks, in short, are built to facilitate motion and fluidity, hierarchies are built to contain motion and promote stability. Thus, although networks provide resources vital to hierarchies, and though hierarchies can create stable conditions in which networks flourish, the two are at the same time in fundamental opposition, creating a relationship of tension and creativity much like that described by ibn Khaldun between nomads and civilization.

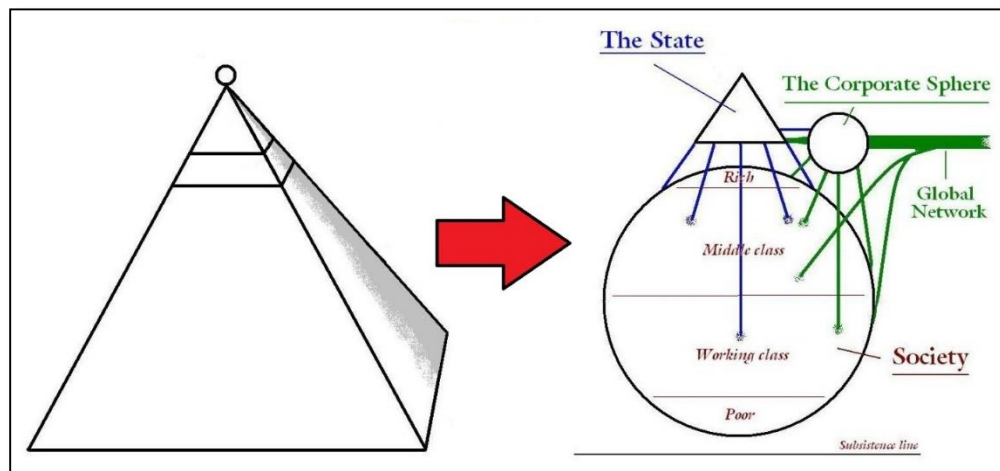
This tension was most often expressed in the views about merchants, those quintessential inhabitants of the network, held by the traditional elites of agrarian societies, the priests, scribes and warriors who ruled over peasant-based communities. For such elites, merchants were at best parasites, whose wealth seemed based on trickery, not honest labor (or not on honest coercion of peasant labor). At worst merchants were potentially subversive sources of dangerous foreign ideas and goods. Thus, almost every traditional agrarian society created mechanisms to contain the potential of merchant subversion and diffuse the tension of the network-hierarchy intersection. Whether these were administrative mechanisms embodying brute force, such as restrictions on merchant mobility, sequestered merchant quarters, and outright confiscation of merchant fortunes that grew too large, or cultural mechanisms that coopted merchants and merchant wealth into supporting traditional values, or some combination, varied greatly. But they were always there and almost always worked, subordinating economics to politics.

This network-hierarchy tension provides the framework for a second Big Narrative of world history, one that grew out of and contributed to the three-stage demographic story we told a few minutes ago. This is the story of the slow but transformative growth of the power of networks *vis-à-vis* the power of hierarchies. The growing reach, carrying capacity, and penetration of networks into the inner workings of hierarchies transformed an early world of human societies that can be described as *hierarchies connected by networks* into our modern global world that can be described, with inverted emphasis, as *a network divided into hierarchies*.

In broad terms this result may have been inevitable. The specific form of our modern global network and its component hierarchies, however, is a highly contingent result of the context in which network organization and values finally broke through the common agrarian constraints that subordinated them to hierarchies. That breakthrough, that failure of traditional agrarian elites to keep things properly organized (from their perspective), happened in England, for reasons too complex to go into here. The breakthrough subordinated politics to economics, and so created the conditions in which industrialization could happen. Industrialization in turn sent a power surge

through the global network that blew up traditional constraints everywhere—a sentence that admittedly condenses all sorts of economic and imperialist history into one dense abstraction.

The central mechanisms of network organization that infiltrated the English hierarchy, broke through it, and then shaped the world were capitalism and corporations. This was both a product of the peculiar English socio-political landscape, and shaped that hierarchy's further development into the first of a new industrial type.



No longer a rigidly structured socio-political pyramid, as agrarian states had generally been, industrial hierarchies combine a state that acts as a professional managerial organization over a social sphere that is socio-economic, with a separate corporate sphere, all robustly connected to the global network. The inhabitants of that corporate sphere are corporations which are legally people, but people who are, potentially, immortal. It turns out, moreover, that if the state gives corporations the same rights as flesh and blood talky people, then it has set up a game, something like a World of Warcraft scenario, pitting a class of mortals against a class of immortals. Guess who has the advantage. Or, in the terms with which I began this brief survey, corporations are people who don't die, who have no socially embodied cognition—a classic definition of sociopaths, by the way—and which therefore don't ask the same Big Questions of life that fleshy talky people do. Which is a good reminder of something.

So far, I have offered you a brief, very structuralist and materially grounded outline of world history, in the venerable tradition of ibn Khaldun. But I have left unasked a crucial question. And I need to ask this question now, not just because I've given you an incomplete story, but before one of you interrupts me to exclaim, "Who let this unreconstructed social scientist into this humanities lecture?"

The question? Are the structures I have built this story around real? Or are they tricks of perception, metaphorical inventions spawned by the pattern recognition software we've run in our heads since the cognitive-linguistic revolution?

OLITSKI

Jules Olitski was born Jevl Demikovski in the Ukraine, in March 1922. Like ibn Khaldun, he was born into a difficult political world. His father, a commissar, had been executed by the Russian government several months before Jevl's birth. His family reacted as ibn Khaldun's had, by moving. The network of the early 20th century, more powerful and pervasive than that of the thirteenth, took the boy with his mother and grandmother to New York City when he was a year old. His first name was Anglicized to Jules, and when his mother remarried in 1926, he took his step-father's last name.

Young Jules showed a talent for art and studied at various art schools in New York until he was drafted into the army in 1942. After the war Olitski continued his art education. In Paris in the late 1940s, his encounter with contemporary European modernism challenged him to re-examine his assumptions and even his technique: he experimented with painting blindfolded in order to disrupt his reliance on his learned skills. After returning to New York in 1951, Olitski finished his formal education and, until his death in 2007, enjoyed a successful career.

I want to focus here on Olitski's paintings from the 1960s, when he developed the style he is most famous for. This involved staining vast canvasses with brightly colored dyes. Many of these canvasses were virtually monochromatic, the dominant color marked only by subtle variations in tone and hue. The result was his own version of Abstract Expressionism, paintings of breathtaking non-narrative beauty, paintings apparently devoid of pattern, patches of disembodied gorgeousness that just *are*. Like this.



Jules Olitski, Instant Loveland
(acrylic on canvas, 294.6 x 645.7 cm, 1968)

Allow me a few more examples.

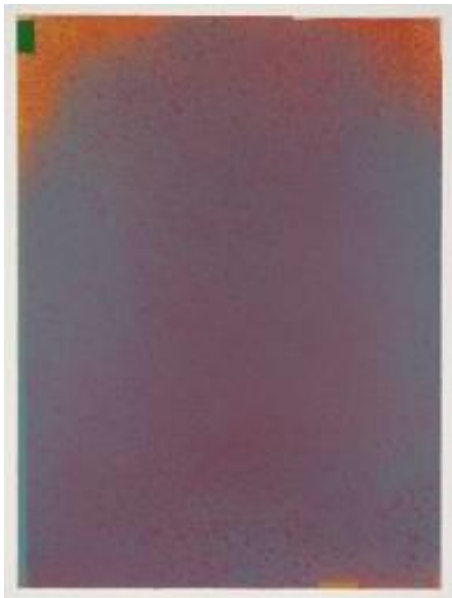
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2.



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1. Jules Olitski, Heat Resistance (acrylic on canvas, 234.6 x 161.6 cm, 1968)
2. Jules Olitski, Comprehensive Dream (acrylic on canvas, 286.4 x 234.6 cm, 1965)
3. Jules Olitski, Mauve-Blue 1 (screenprint on paper, 89.1 x 66.1 cm, 1970)
4. Jules Olitski, White Magic (acrylic on canvas, 217 x 125 cm, 1973-74)



Jules Olitski, Lysander-1
(acrylic on canvas, 245.5 x 317 cm, 1970)

As you can see, not only is there no obvious narrative, Olitski's color field abstractions have barely any compositional structure, no obvious line, no obvious pattern. They are built almost exclusively around that most subjective of sensory experiences, color. I say subjective, because while the spectrum of visible light may be divided up and defined very precisely in terms of wavelengths, the experience of color varies for individuals. It is also culturally malleable: Russian speakers, with two basic color terms for the range of hues that English speakers would call blue, notice distinctions within that range more acutely than their Anglophone counterparts. Not to mention the color experiences of people who are color blind, that is, who have missing or odd receptors. My friend Fred Welden is an anomalous trichromat: he has three kinds of color receptors just as normal people do, but their peaks of receptivity are at anomalous wavelengths. To Fred, his small orangy dog is the same color as the grass of his backyard, and moonlight is blood red. Like me, he loves Olitski's paintings, but they must be different paintings from the ones I see.

As some of you know, I'm a painter as well as an historian. This aspect of my existence is serious enough that I have over the years named my cats after my favorite painters. And nothing is more serious than one's cats. Here is a picture of Jules Olitski, a Russian Blue who is one of my two current cats.



The importance of cats, of course, lies in the Zen of cat existence, which, like Olitski's paintings, points towards the Zen ideal, the state of *satori*, sometimes described as the immediate apprehension of reality, unmediated by preconceptions or the illusions of conscious thought. I don't think that's actually possible, but as a painter and an admirer of Olitski's paintings, I certainly do think that there are, at the least, thoughts, impressions, experiences, and realities that are neither obviously patterned nor readily expressible in words.



So how do my historian and my artist work together? What do I see here, and why do I see it? To answer this question, and to explain why I don't believe in the possibility of unmediated

apprehension of reality, we must return to our friend, the cognitive-linguistic revolution, and the missing piece of my model of world history.

The cognitive-linguistic revolution did not simply make modern humans better hunters capable of building networks and hierarchies, inventing agriculture and industry, and otherwise living out the materialist history implied by this formulation. It made us *homo sapiens*, the species wise enough to recognize our own individual mortality, and variously to wonder about that fate, to rage against it, to attempt to escape it, and sometimes to accept it. And it gave us the tools with which to wonder, rage, attempt escape, and accept, or put another way, the tools with which individuals and communities began to construct identities for themselves, project identities onto others, and tell the stories that might make meaningful the vast, mysterious cosmos that seemingly imposed the fate of mortality. The construction of identity and the making of meaning have taken many forms since the process of creating modern human symbolic culture began among those 5000 or so talky people of 70,000 years ago. As I noted earlier, the cognitive-linguistic revolution made us, among other things, artists, scientists, mystics, and historians. And merchants, yes. Merchants of ideas. The origins of the Liberal Arts lie in the cognitive-linguistic revolution.

How then, to incorporate the realm of culture into a history of human societies built around structures? How to show that the relationship of networks and hierarchies to this realm was not one of Ideal to instantiation, as Hegel postulated, giving primacy to Ideas, nor of base to superstructure, as Marx postulated, but a reciprocal one? How to bring together Olitski and ibn Khaldun?

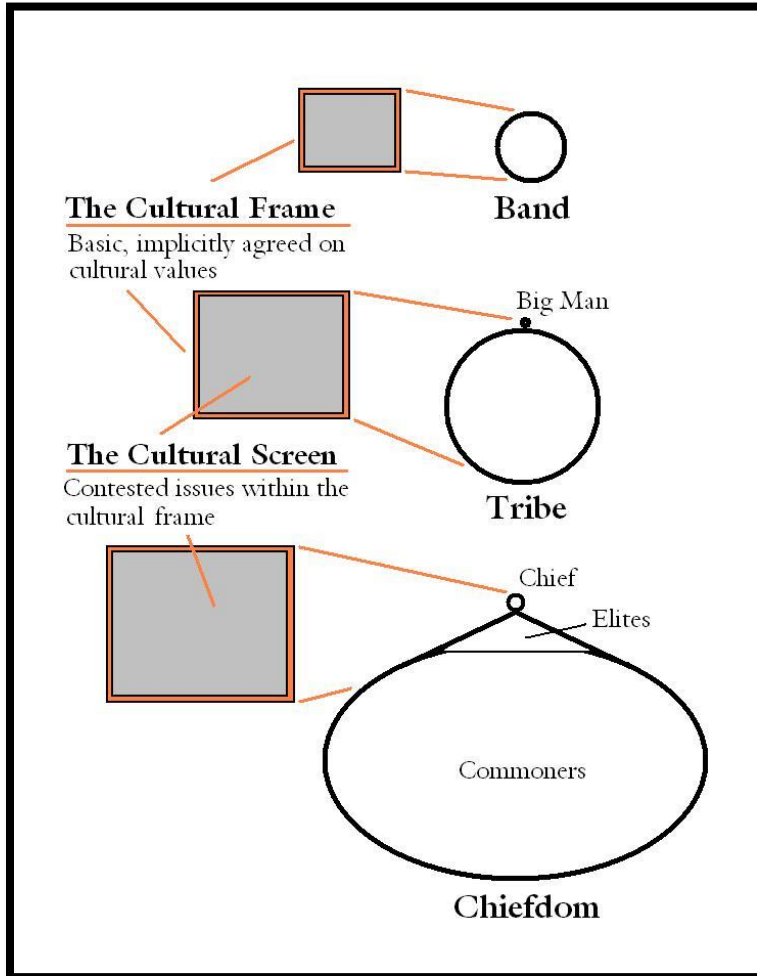
We are social animals. We necessarily see the world metaphorically, thanks to our friend the cognitive-linguistic revolution. Necessarily: there is no way for us to apprehend reality directly. We modern humans live in communities that generate collective understandings of the world, aggregates of the individual understandings of the society's members. These communal cultures become powerful, central, elements in the cultural identity of the individuals in the community. Indeed, there is no primacy, chronologically or logically, for the individual views: community and individuals are bound by cultures from the start.

We must be careful, however, not to think that cultures are static or exist independently of the people whose individual perceptions form the collective. Cultures are always moving, being constructed and reconstructed as the individuals in a community interpret, and contest the interpretations of, events, discoveries, the past, and so forth. Furthermore, there are always divisions, or sub-cultures, within cultures (and further subdivisions of subcultures). Nor are cultures exclusive. Individuals can view themselves as members of different groups. No imagined group is any more real than any other, and many overlap.

But collective understandings, because they are the basis for the education of new generations, exert a powerful and historically significant, though not deterministic, influence on how the individual members of a community see themselves, others, and the world. As long as we bear in mind the collective, contested, and constantly reconstructed nature of cultures, and as long as we

focus on collectives that really were coherent, it is useful to think in terms of large cultural structures.

We can represent this by imagining that every society projects a set of pictures of itself and its place in the world onto a screen that's visible to the whole society.



As this illustration shows, there are two elements to this projection of a cultural self-image or collective identity. The obvious one is the cultural screen itself. This is where contested issues, debates among different schools of thought, competing religious faiths or political philosophies and factions, all show up. The multiplicity of issues and the emphasis on debates here reminds us that no culture is monolithic: a society's cultural screen will have numerous images projected onto it by different individuals and groups.

The less obvious but more important element is the cultural frame. This represents the cultural values that are so basic to a society's understanding of the world and itself that they are assumed, usually unspoken, and so are practically invisible to the members of that society. They are often

taken to be “natural”, or at least morally unquestionable. This frame shapes the debates within it, and is also a sort of lens that refocuses strange or foreign concepts. The frame thus shapes a society’s perception of other societies and the world in fundamental ways. Foreign ideas that don’t fit comfortably within a society’s cultural frame will tend to be ignored, misinterpreted, reinterpreted in more fitting terms, or marginalized. The same will tend to happen to the ideas of community members who refuse, transcend, or ignore the boundaries of the cultural frame.

The illustration also shows that in complex hierarchies, especially chiefdoms and states in the Agrarian Era, rulers and elites exercised disproportionate influence on both the values in the frame and on the images projected on the screen. But since the frame of most such societies assumed monarchical government and thus inequality, such disproportionate influence was accepted generally without comment. This is a fine example of the mutual influence of cultural perceptions on social structure and of social structure on cultural perceptions. The shift to industrial hierarchies thus involved not just a transition to material structures of mass politics, but a broadening of input into the cultural frames and screens of modern societies and an even greater range of images projected there, both as cause and effect of changing material structures.

I use this device of visualizing culture in terms of frames and screens to incorporate into a structuralist story the ongoing impact of the cognitive-linguistic revolution on the history of human communities. In other words, like ibn Khaldun I have again seen patterns, this time in the history of human cultural dynamics. This has led me to portray culture itself as a structure, or set of structures, that links up with the two other structures of my model, networks and hierarchies, to form a dynamic, evolving, self-reflective whole.

But I haven’t really answered the question posed by Olitski’s color field abstractions, have I? Are the structures I see really there? Or are they a trick of perception, images conjured from a patternless void by the nature of my own individual cultural frame, my own cognitive-linguistic lens through which I view the world? In short, what is really happening when ibn Khaldun views Olitski?

Let me make clear the central terms of my metaphor, now that we have fully arrived at it. I see an Olitski painting, in all its glorious subjective color and its non-narrative, non-representational indeterminacy, as what we can see of the past. The past is not with us to tell its own story. It presents itself to us only in scattered material remains, in fragmentary stories that have survived for us to read, or hear, or see. There is a huge amount of it—the past is a vast canvas—and yet very little is clearly delineated for us—the past is a subtle color field, not a figurative narrative. Olitski.

Before this canvas stands ibn Khaldun, the pattern-seeking historian attempting to impose narrative structure on this vast field. What does he see?



To begin with, he does not see an unvarying color field. There are subtle shifts of color, gradations of intensity, areas of different color emphasis. So things are going on. The texture of the canvas itself comes through quite clearly as an element of the visual impression, which our historian can read as the influence of the natural world on the human story it hosts. The size and orientation of the canvas itself might be read as the constraints of the natural world on the human story. In any case, the texture of the pigments, the presence of brushstrokes, however subtle or rare, are inextricably linked to the colors themselves, which flow and shift and simply are.

Moreover, if we look carefully, our Olitski presents us with more than just a color field. At the edges of the canvas (and this is true of most of Olitski's color field paintings), are straight edged intrusions of different colors. These have been called Olitski's "edge calligraphy". This is one of my favorite terms ever. It suggests a reading for our historian. Edge calligraphy represents the creative, revelatory margins—of societies, biomes, disciplines—that Bob Petty explored in the second LaFollette lecture. Here are the margins and the marginalized that social and cultural historians mine for rich insights into societies that at first glance present a simple, dominant, monochromatic story. Here is the startling reminder to look again: the color field is more complex than it first appears.

But is this what Olitski's edge calligraphy really means?

The question is impossible to answer. The past presents us with a vast color field. World history, like any field of history, is an ongoing creative interpretation of that color field in all its subtle variation, including its complicated margins. Our interpretations are constrained by the evidence the past presents to us, but not determined by it: there's both too much and too little of it. It can't tell its own story. Ibn Khaldun stands before a non-narrative color field and narrates it to give it meaning. We listen, we find parts of the story compelling, we want to retell other parts. And in a final complication, our tellings become part of the color field that future ibn Khalduns will view. We are ibn Khaldun, we are Olitski. We view ourselves.

My own narration of world history uses structures as characters in a story that tries to tell us who we are and what our world means. Which is what history and the liberal arts are all about. And stories invite counter-stories. Which is good. Because, of course, I could be mistaken.

Thank you.

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