

# Climatic Determinism and Race: A Comparative Analysis of Ibn Haldūn's and I. Kant's Racialist Anthropologies

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This paper attempts to examine and compare Ibn Haldūn's and I. Kant's racialist theories. The paper shows how the theories of Avicenna, Shā'ib al-Andalusī and Ibn Haldūn contended that the interplay of climatic determinism and humoral constitution of humans produced human phenotypic and behavioural differences. The study shows a conceptual overlap between the European racial theories as found in Comte de Buffon and I. Kant and the ideas found in Arabic texts. Their fundamental differences lie in the treatment of ethnic groups. While Ibn Haldūn positioned the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions as the civilisational centre, European racial geography is Eurocentric. Kant placed Europeans at the pinnacle of human excellence. This conceptual shift largely reflects a changed historic and political context. Thus, the article illustrates how power generates a racial discourse that legitimises the existing relations between the masters and slaves, between the colonisers and the colonised.

**Keywords:** Ibn Khaldun, racist theory, slavery, colonialism, genealogy of racism, Arab thought, Eurocentrism, Africa, ethnocentrism, Slavs, Kant, Buffon

## INTRODUCTION

Racism of the classical Arab authors and racism in the Arab world in general is not a popular topic in the Middle Eastern studies departments with a few notable exceptions, namely El Hamel (2013), Hall (2011), Khadem (2023) and Lewis (1992). In contrast, this subject has been extensively examined in the West from various perspectives for many years. One of the most comprehensive conceptual analyses of racism is found in the Critical Race Theory, Crenshaw, Kimberlé, et al. (1995), Mills (1997), Gordon (1995), Bernasconi and Cook (2003). Ibn Haldūn's racial ideas have been discussed by Khadem (2023), El Hamel (2013) and Bashir (2019). Due to the controversial nature of his views about Slavs and Sub-Saharan Africans, Ibn Haldūn's racialist views are rarely discussed outside of studies that focus on racist notions in the Islamicate tradition. On the other hand, I. Kant's theory of race is a contentious issue due their seeming contradiction to the thinker's ideas on moral philosophy and also because Kant seemingly changed his views or downplayed his racism in his latter works. For an in-depth treatment of the current state of the debate on Kant's racial theories, see Lu-Adler

(2023). Kant's racialism has been studied by Kleingeld (2012), Lu-Adler (2023), Bernasconi (2023), Gray (2012), Sandford (2018), Hoffman (2016) and Storey (2015).

This paper will not seek to settle the dispute regarding Kant's racialist views or propose another analysis that would contend Kant to be consistently racist or having 'second thoughts' on the matter in his latter life. Rather, this paper attempts to demonstrate a continuity, similarity, and overlap between racialist ideas articulated by authors from distinct historical periods and cultural contexts. Racism here is understood as a belief that links human phenotypical differences to presumed innate hierarchies of superiority and inferiority. In this sense, one can already discern racist thought in authors of the Islamicate intellectual tradition, such as Avicenna and Ibn Khaldūn. Although those medieval thinkers did not employ the term race – a concept developed in early modern Europe – their classifications of human groups align with this definition and can therefore be regarded as racialist.

This paper seeks to demonstrate a specific continuity and overlap of thought by focusing on two comprehensive racialist anthropologies emerging from the Islamicate and modern Western contexts – namely, Ibn Ḥaldūn's theory of human differences and Immanuel Kant's classification of races. In both cases, racial classification is grounded in climatic determinism, and in both we encounter the notion that a 'moderate climate' produces the most 'moderate' humans, while any deviation from this climatic norm negatively affects human physiology and psychology. In classical Arab scholarship, the concept of human nature follows a humoural framework. Although Kant does not entirely dismiss humoural theory, he introduces a new concept of 'seeds' (*Keime*).

Although both thinkers identify somewhat different nations as 'moderate', this divergence, the paper argues, can be explained through a Foucauldian genealogical approach – specifically, by examining the underlying dynamics of contemporary power relations. Consequently, the identification of distinct geographical regions, and thus different human groups, as 'moderate' or 'superior' in the Islamicate and modern European traditions, reflects differing geopolitical configurations.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to establish a continuity between two authors belonging to distinct 'civilisational' (for lack of a better term) contexts. Second, it endeavours to account for the ruptures and divergences in their theories by situating them within the historical power relations from which they emerged.

This paper will employ philological, hermeneutic and analytic analysis, and the employed approach is largely in line with the tradition of comparative philosophy that adopts a complex methodology to analyse and synthesise ideas from different traditions. The paper has a tripartite structure: 1) analysis of the racialist ideas found in Ibn Ḥaldūn's and his precursors' works; 2) exposition of I. Kant's theories of race; 3) a comparative analysis of both theories.

### **Main Objectives:**

- To examine Ibn Ḥaldūn's racial theories and some of its precursors found in classical Arab scholarly texts and reveal their conceptual structures.
  - To identify the early forms of modern European science of race in the racial theories of Comte de Buffon and Immanuel Kant.
  - To compare Ibn Ḥaldūn's and I. Kant's racial theories in order to demonstrate their continuities and ruptures.

## RACIAL THEORIES IN ANTIQUITY AND PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

The classical orientalist Bernard Lewis authored what is perhaps the most comprehensive study on racism in the context of Islamic civilisation, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry*. As the author notes, in the ancient world, race was not a significant criterion for classifying people into higher and lower categories. A similar perspective on black people, most of whom were of ḥabašī origin, was found in pre-Islamic Arabia (Lewis 1992: 22–23). Since the Aksumite Empire had the ability to project its political power into southern Arabia, Arabs recognised the civilisational equality or even superiority of Ethiopians. However, this perception changed under the rule of the caliphs, particularly during the Umayyad dynasty. Lewis provides numerous examples of black poets from the 7th–8th centuries and their experiences of contempt directed at their skin colour and appearance. Black individuals were often considered unintelligent and unattractive (ibid.: 27–36).

The claim that racial theories were absent in antiquity has become almost axiomatic. However, Benjamin Isaac, in his study *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, attempts to demonstrate how the imperial Greek and Roman cultures shaped what he calls *proto-racism*. As he observes, the origins of theories that derive race from environmental factors can be traced back to antiquity (Isaac 2006: 10). According to Isaac, the earliest known instance of this theory appears in a text attributed to Hippocrates, *On Airs, Waters, and Places* (ibid.: 61). In the twelfth chapter of this work, the author discusses European and Asian peoples, attributing their behavioural and physiological traits to their environment. Topography shapes temperament, which in turn influences societal structures. The author of this Hippocratic text notes that due to the mildness of the seasons, Asians are less warlike and more delicate, which affects their institutions, as most Asian societies are ruled by kings (Hippocrates 1923: XVI. 3–18). He applies a similar reasoning to the Scythians and Egyptians, whose physiological traits are shaped by extreme cold (in the case of the Scythians) or extreme heat (ibid.: XVIII. 1–5). Europeans, according to the text, live in conditions of constantly changing climates and radical seasonal shifts, making them braver and more inclined toward independence (ibid.: XXIII. 2–9; 19–25).

In pre-Islamic rabbinic Judaism, the first recorded instance of black-related stereotypes linked to the Curse of Ham appears. According to this interpretation, the descendants of Ca-naan would be black, unattractive, naked and have tightly curled hair (because Ham turned to look at Noah's nakedness), as well as large genitals. This idea of Ham's curse later entered Islamic texts through the *Isra'iliyyāt* corpus. Consequently, the notion that black people's status and physical traits were linked to the Curse of Ham appears in the works of some of the most authoritative Muslim historians, from Ibn Qutayba to al-Ṭabarī. However, as noted by Chouki E. Hamel in *Black Morocco*, later scholars such as Shams al-Dīn Abū 'Abd Allah Muḥammad al-Dimašqī and Ibn Ḥaldūn (whose theories will be discussed later) rejected this Hamitic myth (Hamel 2013: 70–73). As William M. Evans (1980) demonstrates in his study, this idea of Ham's curse was later adopted by Europeans and used in the Americas to justify black slavery and the brutal treatment of enslaved black people.

## RACIAL THEORIES IN CLASSICAL ARAB SCHOLARLY TEXTS

Beyond the Hippocratic and Galenic humoral theory, Arab scholars, in formulating their theories on the ethnogenesis of peoples shaped by their environment, also drew on Ptolemy's *Geography*, which divided the world into seven climatic zones (*klimata* in Greek, *al-aqālīm*

in Arabic). The first climatic zones were located in Africa, while the last zones were situated in northern Eurasia. One of the earliest thinkers whose works exhibit a racism grounded in humoural theory is Avicenna. In the final chapter of the metaphysics section of *The Book of Healing* (*K. al-Shifā*), Avicenna discusses prophecy, astrology, religion and politics. Following the ideas of the virtuous city found in the works of al-Fārābī, Avicenna asserts that the property and women (*al-amwāl wa l-furūg*) of the inhabitants of non-virtuous cities (which resist the divine law revealed by the Prophet) constitute legitimate spoils for the residents of the virtuous city, as these assets are not used according to virtuous laws and therefore do not yield their proper benefits. In connection to this, Avicenna adds that since the service of some people to others is necessary, such individuals should be compelled to serve in the virtuous city. Furthermore, he maintains that the same principle applies to those who are incapable of attaining virtue. Avicenna refers to such individuals as natural slaves ('*abīd bi-t-tab'*). As examples of such natural slaves, he identifies the Turks and black Africans (*zāng*) as well as all those who, in his view, originate from 'ignoble climatic zones' (*gāyir al-aqālim al-sharīfah*), where nations with good temperament (*al-amzīja*), sound judgment, and intellect do not arise (Avicenna 2005: 376).

A similar line of reasoning can be found in the work of another Arab scholar from roughly the same period, Sā'īd al-Andalusī. In his *Categories of Nations* (*K. tabaqāt al-Umām*), he classifies nations into two categories: the first category includes those that have contributed to scientific progress and knowledge, while the second consists of those that have not. He assigns to the first category the Indians, Persians, Chaldeans, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Arabs and Hebrews. On the other hand, among the nations that did not contribute to scientific progress, he considers the Chinese and Turks the most advanced. According to Sā'īd al-Andalusī, all other nations belonging to the second category are closer to animals (*al-bahā'īm*) than to humans. He asserts that some of them live so far north that they are distant from the sun, where the air is cold and the sky overcast. As a result, their temperaments (*al-amzīgah*) are cold, and their humours (*al-aklāt*) coarse. This, he argues, explains why their skin is so white and why they are ignorant, lazy, weary and dull. Such characteristics, he claims, are exhibited by the Slavs, Bulgarians, and other neighbouring peoples. Conversely, he states that nations farthest to the south live in a zone that is excessively hot, rendering their temperaments hot and their humour fiery. Consequently, they lack patience and are ruled by foolishness and ignorance. Among these, he includes the peoples of Black Africa (*as-sūdān*) (al-Andalusī 1912: 8–9).

## IBN HALDŪN'S RACIALIST ANTHROPOLOGY

The theoretical framework of these theories perfectly aligns with the reality that the Turks, Eastern European and African peoples were the primary sources of slaves in the Islamicate. Nevertheless, the most developed racial theory is found in Ibn Haldūn's *al-Muqaddimah*, where the author expounds his sociological theory of history and civilisation. His theory of climatic zones is based on Ptolemy's *Geography*, while his ethnological knowledge is largely derived from Muhammad al-Idrīsī's *Tabula Rogeriana* (*Nuzhat al-Muštaq fi iktirāq al-Āfāq*). According to Ibn Haldūn, the first and second climatic zones are less civilised. Civilisation, he argues, is found between the third and sixth zones (Ibn Haldūn 2001: 63). However, due to the diminished effects of heat, civilisation is still present in the sixth and seventh zones, as cold is not as detrimental as heat. Beyond the seventh zone in the North, civilisation ceases to exist (ibid.: 64–65). In discussing the first zone, Ibn Haldūn states that beyond the Niger River live the Lamlam people, who are captured and sold into slavery in the Maghreb by the inhabitants of Ghana and Takrur. He

claims that south of these people, civilisation vanishes, and those living there are 'closer to dumb beasts' (*al-hayawān al-āğam*), to the extent that they cannot be considered human (ibid.: 68–69).

In Ibn Ḥaldūn's theory of civilisations, the climatic zones are divided into temperate (*al-mu'tadil*) and non-temperate (*al-munħarif*) regions. The fourth climatic zone is considered the most temperate, while the third and fifth zones, which border it, are also relatively temperate. For this reason, according to Ibn Ḥaldūn, both culture and nature in the three most temperate zones exhibit a balanced and moderate nature. Among these populations, Ibn Ḥaldūn includes the inhabitants of North Africa, the Levant, the Hijaz, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Sindh, China, Spain, France, Italy and Greece, as well as other groups residing in adjacent temperate zones. Iraq and the Levant, according to the historian, are situated at the very centre of this climatic zone, making their inhabitants the most temperate of all.

Conversely, the inhabitants of the other zones are non-temperate. Because black Africans (*as-sūdān*) from the first zone and the Slavs are distant from temperateness, their temperament and moral disposition (*al-amzīgah wa l-ahlāq*) resemble those of unintelligent animals. The same applies to their religious state, as Ibn Ḥaldūn asserts that prophecy and divine laws are unknown to them. However, he makes an exception for certain peoples within these zones who have embraced Islam (e.g. the inhabitants of Mali in Africa) or Christianity (e.g. the Ethiopians and some Slavic groups) (ibid.: 103–104). Thus, it becomes clear that in Ibn Ḥaldūn's theory, racial and climatic determinism is not absolute, and it can be partially mitigated through revealed religions. In this respect, Ibn Ḥaldūn, being not only a scholar but also a devout Muslim and Sufi, creates a pathway through which one can escape natural determinism.

## I. KANT'S RACIAL THEORY

The roots of European racism lie, to a significant extent, in the cultural space of Andalusia, where the cultures of Arab-Muslims interacted with those of Catholic Portugal and Spain. Although initially, slave markets were filled with people from Eastern Europe, Slavs, Circassians and possibly even Balts when the Ottomans captured Constantinople and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Grand Duchy of Moscow gained dominance in Eastern Europe, the number of white slaves in Western Europe drastically decreased. Consequently, slavery became exclusively associated with black Africans. As J. H. Sweet notes in his study, racial stereotypes about black people first appeared in Spanish and Portuguese texts (which were not present in medieval Europe). Living in contact with Muslims, the Spanish and Portuguese adopted certain views about black Africans from them (Sweet 1997).

On the other hand, it was the Europeans who coined the concept of 'race'. The first to use the term race in the West was François Bernier in his 1684 work *Nouvelle division de la terre par les différentes espèces ou races qui l'habitent*. However, despite this, the text does not present a racial theory beyond discussing the aesthetic differences between various races (with a preference for Eurocentric beauty standards). A much more developed form of racial theory was introduced by George-Louis Leclerc, Comte du Buffon, in his work *Histoire Naturelle*. Buffon is famous for introducing the term 'degeneration' into his racial theory, claiming that all races had degenerated from the white race due to the effects of climate, diet and customs. According to R. Bernasconi, it was I. Kant who first systematised the science of racism in the West by presenting a complete racial theory (Bernasconi 2023: 53).

Kant formulates a theory of human nature based on the concept of monogenesis. In various texts, Kant presents different racial taxonomies. The most developed racial theory is found in his 1775 essay *On the Different Races of Men*. Kant defines race as subspecies of different

animal species whose characteristics remain unchanged over many generations, even when relocated to different environments, and whose inbreeding results in hybrid offspring (Kant 2016: 12). He divides humanity into four different races: 1) whites, 2) Negroes, 3) the Huns, and 4) the Hindus (ibid.: 14). All living beings, including humans, contain the seeds of various dispositions (*Keime*), which, when influenced by different climatic conditions, form distinct races with unique characteristics (ibid.: 17). Kant acknowledges that climate is necessary for the expression of these seeds, but it can only affect what already exists within a living being (ibid.: 19). In this way, these seeds allowed humanity to adapt to various climatic conditions, which, in turn, brought about significant physiological and psychological changes, creating different races.

In connection with this, the philosopher also establishes the concept of the 'original race' or the stem genus (*Stammgattung*). This race contains all the seeds that, when influenced by different climatic conditions, generated racial changes. In a certain sense, Kant follows Buffon's theory of degeneration, which Kant acknowledges at the beginning of his text, thus recognising Buffon's influence on his own theory. It is likely from Buffon that Kant adopted the concept of a temperate climate zone, which also appears in the works of classical Arab thinkers. Buffon, in his *Histoire Naturelle*, asserts that the most temperate climate (*le climat le plus tempéré*) is found between latitudes 40 and 50. According to Buffon, this is the zone where the most beautiful people are found, and it is from here that the idea of the natural colour of humanity (*vraie couleur naturelle de l'homme*) should be derived, as this is the standard by which all other beauty and colour nuances should be judged. Buffon assigns to this group the Georgians, Circassians, Ukrainians, European Turks, Hungarians, South Germans, Italians, Swiss, French, and Northern Spaniards (Buffon 1749: 528).

Kant's boundaries of the temperate climate zone are much broader and largely align with Ibn Haldūn's theory. According to Kant, between the 31st and 52nd latitudes of the Old World, we find the most favourable mix of colder and warmer regions, where humans are least distanced from the stem genus and, therefore, can be transferred to any climate (ibid.: 27). This sentence embodies the logic of colonialism, where colonialism creates legitimising and normalising thought structures. The white race, according to Kant, colonised the world because it can be moved to any climate. In other words, the European race is the most naturally predisposed to colonising the globe. Thus, Kant here presents a naturalistic equivalent of the Manifest Destiny.

While Kant's geographical boundaries nearly perfectly match those of Ibn Haldūn's 'temperate climate' zones, there are a few significant differences. Firstly, there is nothing like Kant's postulated 'seeds' in the Arab texts. In Ibn Haldūn's case, the humoural constitution of the human body can be to a certain extent considered an equivalent of Kant's seeds. Nevertheless, this aspect of Kant's theory establishes a more anthropocentric racial theory, where the racial characteristics are not imprinted on the body but rather is the response of the body itself to the different climatic conditions. On the other hand, with this concept comes another, more important shift in the theory. While the civilisational latitudes in both the Arab and Kantian theories almost overlap, the treatment of different cultures is entirely different. Ibn Haldūn's temperate zone coincides with the centre of economic and political power at the time, so it is no coincidence that he considered the Levant and Iraq – the cradle of Semitic civilisation – to be the most temperate regions.

Moreover, Kant's theory is extremely Eurocentric, where only European cultures are considered the most civilised. In Kantian anthropology, all non-European cultures are placed

on lower rungs of the ladder because all of them, without exception, have something that is lacking as compared to the Europeans. Kant considered the white Europeans to be the most perfect and best race, as they possess all human talents and are closest to the original human race, i.e. the trunk of humanity. All other races have their flaws. Therefore, it is better for them to be ruled by whites. On the third level of the racial hierarchy, Kant places African blacks, who, in general, lack intellectual abilities and talents but are strong and fear beating, making them suitable for slavery (Kant 2012: 320).

One of the most contentious issues among scholars of Kant has been the contradiction between his racism and his moral universalism. According to H. Lu-Adler, Kant's racial theory does not contradict his ethical universalism. The author argues that in Kant's theory, moral universalism is not a given but a goal, a guide for civilisational progress. Therefore, his anthropology supplements, rather than contradicts, his ethics, since large groups of people are incapable of pursuing the moral imperative (Lu-Adler 2023). Emmanuel C. Eze shares a similar perspective (Eze 2011: 98). Other researchers believe that there is a contradiction, but only because Kant was an inconsistent universalist. Pauline Kleingeld, however, asserts that in his later years, Kant changed his opinion and abandoned his earlier views on the talents and value of different races. Nevertheless, she also acknowledges that when writing his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant still held racist views. In other words, he believed that a person cannot be used as a mere tool unless they are non-European (Kleingeld 2012: 106). Kleingeld observes that Kant's views on racism changed around the same time that he became a proponent of Liberal Cosmopolitanism and Republicanism. These views are reflected in his political and legal writings, which embody these principles (ibid.: 116).

## CONCLUSIONS

In classical Arabic scientific works, ethnic and phenotypic differences were attributed to the impact of climate on human humoral structure. Different climatic conditions were believed to shape people with different temperaments. This concept has its roots in ancient texts that were translated into Arabic. Classical Arab scholars considered the extreme North and South to be culturally impoverished regions due to their inhospitable climates. The inhabitants of those regions were referred to as natural slaves and were compared to animals. Those groups included Slavs and sub-Saharan Africans, who became the primary sources of slaves in Islamic civilisation. On the other hand, the inhabitants of temperate climates, such as those around the Mediterranean, the Middle East and China, were regarded as the most civilised.

In European texts, a similar climatic theory was used to explain racial differences. Just as in Arab thought, Europeans connected racial distinctions to climate. However, Europeans introduced several innovations to this theory, most notably the ideas of degeneration and the original race. Both Buffon and Kant spoke of a primordial race from which all other races are derived. It is no coincidence that Europeans were considered the closest to the original race. The theory of temperate climates also underwent a transformation, reflecting the changing geopolitical and economic situation, as these authors wrote during the period of European expansion and colonialism. As a result, the temperate races were almost exclusively white, and all other races were perceived to have certain deficiencies. Therefore, we can conclude that there is a correlation – or even an isomorphism – between existing power relations and racial theories. Specifically in the way nations are classified, relegating some to be the masters and others slaves and servants. In the case of Ibn Haldūn, the Islamicate regions are classified as an inhabitant of regions with a moderate climate and thus having

the right temperament to produce the best cultures and societies, with the Fertile Crescent being the cream of the crop, as it were. In the case of Kant, the most moderate and the most excellent groups reside in Europe. Such classification while betraying the ethnocentrism of the theorist, also reinforces the existing power dynamics. Therefore, it can be said that there is a pattern where certain ethnic groups who became slaves or were subjected due to existing historic, economic and political circumstances were also stripped of their humanity in the anthropology of the leading thinkers of the dominant cultures, thus reinforcing and legitimising the existing power relations. To mitigate such notions as mere scientific curiosity affected by prejudice is to miss its dire consequences and also to overlook the relationship between power and knowledge.

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## Klimatinis determinizmas ir rasė: komparatyvistinė I. Khaldūno ir I. Kanto rasinių teorijų analizė

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje analizuojamos ir lyginamos Ibn Khaldūno ir Immanuelio Kanto rasinės teorijos. Darbe parodoma, kaip Avicenos, Saido al-Andalusio ir I. Khaldūno teorijose klimatinio determinizmo ir humoralinės žmogaus prigimties sąveikoje buvo postuluojami žmonių fenotipiniai ir elgsenos skirtumai. Taip pat atskleidžiama, kad nemaža dalis europiečių rasinių teorijų persikloja su arabiškuose tekstuose aptinkama konceptualia struktūra. Kita vertus, pamatiniai skirtumai išryškėja skirtingoje etninių grupių traktuotėje. Arabų tekstuose civilizacinis centras yra Viduržemio jūros ir Artimųjų Rytų regionuose, o europiečių rasinės koncepcijos yra eurocentrinės. Šis konceptualus poslinkis daugiausia atspindi pakitusią konjunktūrą. Taigi darbe parodoma, kaip galia generuoja sau palankų rasinių diskursą, legitimuojantį egzistuojančius galios santykius.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** Ibn Khaldūnas, rasizmas, Immanuelis Kantas, Comte de Buffonas, komparatyvizmas, rasizmo genealogija, kolonializmas, arabų mintis, etnocentrizmas, eurocentrizmas, vergovė, Afrika, slavai, juodaodžiai