

Social Sciences and Epistemic Colonialism: Liberal Epistemology, Knowledge Power, and the Case for Decolonization

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Abstract

Political decolonization did not end coloniality; it relocated much of its operation from direct political rule to the production, validation, and institutionalization of knowledge. This article argues that dominant liberal formations of the social sciences continue to reproduce epistemic hierarchies through the categories, theories, methodologies, and evaluative standards by which societies are understood, compared, ranked, and governed. Drawing on decolonial theory, critical philosophy of science, and Islamic epistemology, the article examines how dominant formations of sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics universalize historically situated commitments to individualism, methodological secularism, positivism, and the fact–value separation. It demonstrates how these assumptions shape disciplinary boundaries, research methodologies, conceptions of human agency, and development discourse, often positioning non-Western societies as objects of analysis rather than sources of theory. The article argues that genuine decolonization requires epistemic reconstruction, not merely inclusion or diversification. Descriptive and comparative analysis is used to find out the main features and compare with Islamic epistemology. As a substantive model, it outlines an Islamic epistemological approach grounded in revelation, reason, empirical inquiry, and maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, illustrating its implications through poverty measurement.

Keywords: Epistemic Colonialism; Liberal Epistemology; Decolonial Theory; Islamic Epistemology; Knowledge and Power; Objectivity; Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah

1. Introduction: The Myth of Neutral Knowledge

According to modern liberal social sciences, describing social phenomena objectively is a purely descriptive, value-neutral endeavor. These social scientists often claim that they are methodologically rigorous and that they are not overtly moral or metaphysical. This article will analyze this claim to neutrality and dig

deeper into the reason behind that claim. Neutrality does not mean that there is no value in the system; it means that this value is hidden behind method.

This criticism is not just about bias. The categorization of social phenomena of a certain nature as “modern,” “traditional,” “developed,” and “rational” isn’t simply a description of social phenomena; they classify and rank societies and become a technology of social control rather than a pure social description.¹ This social control relies on a deeper and nearly invisible assumption: the universality of liberal reason. In social scientific concepts, the commitments of liberalism: the autonomy of the individual, rationality, and secularism, as well as the notion of social progress, are all implicit.²

The author of this article calls this epistemic colonialism. This occurs when the social sciences of the West dominate other social sciences through claims of universality and scientific authority, and this occurs not through the domination of land, but through the domination of the curriculum, research methods, and the criteria used to evaluate science. Non-Western social sciences enter the arena of liberal social sciences primarily as the objects of research and analysis, rather than from the perspective of critique. Theory is built on them, and their principles are integrated into the discipline, but within a framework of subordination.³

This article makes three interrelated arguments. First, dominant liberal formations of the social sciences assume general ontological and epistemological viewpoints without defending them. Second, these assumptions establish criteria for Description disciplines, methods, and evaluations which privilege liberal knowledge systems at the expense of non-liberal knowledge. Third, decolonization isn't just about adding new elements to liberalism. The most productive approach isn't simply to be critical, but to engage in positive reconstruction. Sections 2 through 7 elaborate the critique, Section 8 argues that decolonization, which is certainly necessary, falls short of what is required for such reconstruction; Section 9 elaborates an Islamic epistemological alternative as one of the many possibilities that does what reconstruction is about.

2. Epistemic Colonialism: A Conceptual Framework

2.1 Defining Epistemic Colonialism

Epistemic colonialism refers to the domination of knowledge production by a tradition that presents itself as universal and neutral while marginalizing alternative ways of knowing. The concept builds directly on Aníbal Quijano's account of the coloniality of power, which showed that the racial and civilizational

¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, 1972–1977, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

³ Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

hierarchies established during colonial rule did not depend on formal political control alone, but were reproduced through a specifically epistemic hierarchy: European categories of reason, history, and knowledge were installed as the standard against which every other tradition's rationality would subsequently be measured.⁴ Epistemic colonialism operates primarily through categories and standards of validity that determine what counts as knowledge, theory, and rationality. In this sense it does not merely exclude non-Western knowledge; it reorders it hierarchically, translating indigenous concepts into the dominant epistemic language or dismissing them as belief or culture rather than theory a subordination through inclusion rather than a silence.⁵

The term should be distinguished from other, more familiar senses of colonialism with which it overlaps but does not coincide. Political colonialism denotes territorial and administrative domination; economic colonialism, the control or extraction of resources and labor through structural dependency; cultural colonialism, the imposition or displacement of meanings, symbols, and collective identity. Epistemic colonialism names a further and more durable form: domination not over territory, resources, or cultural expression as such, but over what counts as legitimate knowledge, theory, rationality, evidence, and truth. Political colonialism can end formally while epistemic colonialism persists, since the categories through which a society continues to understand and evaluate itself may remain those inherited from the colonial encounter long after direct rule has ended. This is the specific and narrower claim this article develops.

2.2 Knowledge, Power, and Authority

Knowledge is not a neutral mirror of reality; it structures social life by producing categories and regimes of truth treated as authoritative. The capacity to determine what counts as rational or scientific operates as a subtle form of power, shaping institutions and public policy and, through peer review and disciplinary convention, setting the limits of what can be legitimately known.⁶

2.3 Universalism as an Epistemic Strategy

Within liberal knowledge traditions, concepts such as rationality, autonomy, and progress are routinely treated as culture-neutral truths about human existence, though they are intellectual products of a particular historical experience rooted in European modernity. Universalism, on this account, operates through abstraction: it detaches concepts from the conditions that produced them while

⁴ Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580.

⁵ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁶ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.

preserving their authority as benchmarks, so that other societies are judged deficient by criteria derived from a different civilizational trajectory.⁷

2.4 Epistemic Violence and Conceptual Translation

This process often includes what has been called epistemic violence. This occurs when concepts are forcibly translated into alien categories. Religious law is dubbed “custom” and metaphysical ethics are labeled “belief.” “Culture” is used to define community based moral reasoning. Such translations do not merely rename concepts. They relocate moral authority away from the tradition that created it.⁸

2.5 Epistemic Colonialism versus Intellectual Exchange

Epistemic colonialism should be distinguished from ordinary intellectual exchange. It is not defined by the circulation of ideas but by asymmetrical conditions of intelligibility: when one framework alone sets the terms of debate, comparison collapses into assimilation. Genuine exchange presupposes epistemic parity recognition that different traditions may generate theory from different ontological premises a parity epistemic colonialism forecloses by treating liberal reason as the default horizon of intelligibility.⁹

2.6 From Categories to Governance: Why This Matters Beyond the Academy

The argument developed in this article would carry a narrower significance if disciplinary categories remained internal to scholarly debate. They do not. Social-scientific concepts travel along a specific and traceable chain: epistemology shapes disciplinary theory; disciplinary theory certifies expertise; expertise is commissioned by and supplies the working vocabulary of policy; policy authorizes institutional intervention; and institutional intervention reshapes the social arrangements it was commissioned to study. Development indices, educational curricula, gender programming, and governance benchmarks are not applications of social-scientific knowledge external to it; they are the point at which the categories examined in Sections 3 through 7 acquire the capacity to reorganize the societies those categories were built to describe. This chain is what distinguishes epistemic colonialism from an ordinary academic disagreement about method: a mistaken theory of gender or development does not merely misdescribe a society, since its categories can be, and regularly are, translated into the funding criteria, benchmarks, and reform mandates through which that society is subsequently governed. Sections 4 and 7 return to this mechanism directly, tracing it through discipline formation and through specific cases of development and gender policy.

⁷ Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*.

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

⁹ Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 211–223.

3. The Liberal Epistemological Foundations of Dominant Social-Scientific Traditions

3.1 *Ontological Assumptions*

At the ontological level, dominant liberal formations of social sciences presuppose a particular conception of social reality. Society is understood as an aggregation of individuals; individuals are conceived as autonomous, self-interpreting agents; and social order is treated as the outcome of interactions among rational actors, rendering the individual, rather than community, law, or moral order, the primary unit of analysis. These assumptions are rarely defended explicitly; they are treated as self-evident, and communal or theocentric ontologies are reclassified as cultural residue rather than as alternative foundations of social order.¹⁰

3.2 *Methodological Secularism*

Another level of commitment is methodological secularism, or the putting aside of transcendence as an explanatory category. Religion may be studied as a belief or as a social force, but in this context, it cannot be a source of truth or ontological basis. This bracketing goes beyond simply suspending theological claims; it relocates them as subjective claims, thereby asserting that moral orders derived from revelation are, analytically, of a lower order than secular rationality, which is adopted as the primary logic of intelligibility, a logic which, it might be noted, is a substantive, ontological judgment, as opposed to a neutral procedural choice.¹¹

3.3 *Positivism, Empiricism, and the Fact–Value Separation*

Epistemologically, certain dominant methodological traditions within the social sciences — those most influenced by positivist and empiricist assumptions — model social inquiry on the natural sciences, validating knowledge through observation and measurement while treating normative or metaphysical claims with suspicion unless operationalized into variables.¹² This is not a claim that interpretivism, critical realism, or phenomenology are absent from the field; it is a claim about which traditions have historically held disciplinary and institutional dominance, and about the effect of that dominance on what counts as rigorous method. A related device is the separation of fact from value, on which social science claims to describe “what is” without engaging “what ought to be.” The issue is not that this separation is universally maintained without qualification Hilary Putnam and others have shown the distinction to be far less stable than its everyday use suggests — but that institutional and methodological practice often continues to

¹⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

¹¹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹² Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1998).

reproduce it in a way that obscures the normative assumptions embedded within categories presented as merely descriptive, such as progress, development, and equality.¹³

3.4 From Epistemology to Hierarchy

The combined effect of these commitments is the naturalization of liberal norms: individual autonomy becomes rational agency, secularism becomes neutrality, and liberal democracy becomes political maturity. Because these norms are embedded within disciplinary concepts, they rarely appear as contestable moral claims, and societies organized around communal ethics or religious law appear, by comparison, traditional or incomplete rather than differently rational — a hierarchy reproduced through academic disciplines, policy expertise, and development indices rather than asserted outright.¹⁴ The following two sections examine how this architecture becomes institutionalized, first through discipline formation and then through method.

4. Discipline Formation as Colonial Ordering

4.1 Disciplines as Epistemic Architectures

Each academic discipline has its own criteria for legitimate questions and answers. Such criteria provide a framework which defines the ontologies and epistemologies that endure across numerous generations of scholars. In the case of the social sciences, this process has historically occurred within the context of social liberalism, embedding social liberalism within disciplines to the extent that they not only study social phenomena, but provide their own theories of social order and define what is normal and rational, and what is/is not modern.¹⁵

4.2 Sociology and Anthropology

Modernity within Europe was used by the founders of sociology as a template for understanding all societies and the process of social evolution, and so Western societies were placed at the more “modern” end of the spectrum, and non-Western societies at the “less modern” and “more traditional” end.¹⁶ Classical anthropology, in an equally paternalistic manner as sociology, failed to see non-Western societies as sources of theory and relegated them to the more “primitive” realm, with a focus on the religious “law” as “order” and “custom”, and “reason” and “belief”, respectively.¹⁷

¹³ Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*.

¹⁵ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.

¹⁶ Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*.

¹⁷ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

4.3 Political Science and Economics

Political Science has worked to universalize the liberal state as the final destination for all political projects, evaluating authoritarian systems of rule based on liberal concepts of institutional design, instead of evaluating them on their own terms. In theory, deviation from liberal democracy becomes a pathological phenomenon, instead of a legitimate alternate form.¹⁸ Meanwhile, by removing the moral and cultural components of economic activity and representing alternate moral economies as inefficient, economics turns most of the world's moral and ethical systems into inefficient market hypotheses. This process of global economic liberalization tends to marginalize markets constrained by ethical values, be it religious or communal.¹⁹

4.4 Boundary Maintenance and Governance

Knowledge systems that are too heterodox, too normative, too metaphysical, or too ethically grounded tend to be excluded from disciplinary practice and relegated to the margins of Area Studies or Theology. In this way, we have justified and expanded our epistemic colonialism through boundarism. Non-liberal knowledge systems are studied, but are unauthorized to reorganize disciplines in their own terms; therefore, when we expand through inclusion, it actually means control.²⁰ This colonial order extends to the community beyond the academy along the chain described in Section 2.6: development and governance policies and the international institutions that govern the world order draw upon disciplinary knowledge to define problems and prescribe solutions, resulting in liberal transformation of societies.

5. The Colonial Function of Methodology

5.1 Methodology as Gatekeeping

Methodology is never neutral. Assumptions about what qualifies as rational and what should be considered legitimate evidence are encoded in the methods that we deploy.

Where methodological legitimacy calls for empiricism and measurability, traditions or morals anchored in forms of reasoning that are trans-regional, or of tradition-based authority, are excluded. The only way to make them available is by translating them into measurable variables— a translation which is not an adaptation of knowledge to a method, but a complete reconstruction of the knowledge within the framework of liberal epistemology.²¹

¹⁸ John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944).

²⁰ Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.

²¹ Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*.

5.2 Quantification and Comparison

What is measurable is taken as real, and complex moral or spiritual phenomena are quantified and reduced to simplistic numbers in order to ‘evaluate’ ethical depth. Such a ‘measurement’ allows the ‘authority’ of numbers to take the place of wisdom.²² Comparison, likewise, is thought of as a positive hallmark of scholarship, but it is often done with an implicit goal of placing liberal modernity at the center and measuring the ‘distance’ of other societies.²³ Consequently, rather than ‘understanding’ these societies, comparison becomes synonymous with ‘deeply criticizing’ these societies in order to place them on a ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ rung.

5.3 Naturalism and Institutional Censorship

Methodological naturalism, which privileges the natural sciences and causal explanation over the social sciences, tends to reduce social phenomena to the realm of the meaning and ethic systems where it is included as an essential element of social order.²⁴ As a result of this, meaning and ethics are treated as ‘adjuncts’ to social order. This is reinforced value system: in peer review, journal rankings, and funding criteria the ability to conform to the dominant methodological norms is rewarded. This means that, in practice, research that challenges liberal epistemology is deemed ‘poorly researched’, and non-Western academics are pressured to adopt Western methodologies, while their data and case studies are used to meet the needs of dominant theories.²⁵

6. Subject Formation and Epistemic Violence

6.1 The Liberal Subject as Normative Ideal

At the heart of dominant liberal social science lies a specific model of the human subject: autonomous, rational, and self-authoring. This model is rarely treated as a philosophical claim; it is embedded within methodological categories, so that agency becomes synonymous with autonomy and alternative forms of subjectivity grounded in duty, obedience, or transcendence are rendered secondary or unintelligible.²⁶

²² Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

²³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

²⁴ Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²⁵ Syed Farid Alatas, “Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labour in the Social Sciences,” *Current Sociology* 51, no. 6 (2003): 599–613.

²⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

6.2 *Autonomy as Unstated Standard*

Autonomy is rarely treated as one moral ideal among others; it operates as a background standard already in place before interpretation begins. Individuals are taken to be rational and morally complete to the extent that they are self-governing, and moral orientation drawn from tradition or revelation is read not as an alternative ethical logic but as dependence, and therefore as deficiency. Practices of religious obedience are consequently interpreted through the language of false consciousness, and adherence to divine law as evidence of diminished agency so that what presents itself as neutral analysis already carries a strong evaluative charge.²⁷

6.3 *Misrecognition and Gendered Agency*

This model does not merely describe social actors; it reshapes how they are understood, producing what may be called epistemic harm through misrecognition, where individuals are read through frameworks that do not correspond to their own moral self-understanding.²⁸ The pattern is especially visible in gender analysis. Saba Mahmood's ethnography of the women's piety movement in Cairo mosques shows agency being defined in much liberal feminist scholarship as resistance to authority distancing oneself from tradition and asserting an individually authored self, so that women whose sense of self is built through piety and religious discipline are read as exhibiting internalized oppression rather than a differently structured form of ethical agency oriented toward cultivating a virtuous disposition rather than exercising choice against constraint. What is presented as emancipatory analysis, on this account, performs a further move: it reassigns the authority to define a meaningful moral life away from the tradition and toward a liberal normative standard the women themselves did not adopt.²⁹

6.4 *Subject Formation as Governance*

The liberal subject is not merely an epistemic construct but a technology of governance: policies of development and gender reform presuppose subjects who can be managed through incentives and behavioral modification, and those who do not conform to this model become targets for intervention rather than interlocutors in their own right.³⁰

²⁷ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.

²⁸ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

²⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³⁰ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16–49.

7. Case Illustrations of Epistemic Colonialism

7.1 Religion as Analytical Residue

Classical secularization theory anticipated the decline of religion with modernization, assuming that modern, rational social orders would be incompatible with religion. Despite numerous disconfirmations of this theory based on empirical evidence (e.g., religion may actually become more intense with modernization), its legacy has inspired several new ways to study religion that consider it as something arbitrary (e.g., religious beliefs may be studied as social identifiers rather than as truth claims). Religious beliefs are studied as culture, beliefs as opinions, and claims as meanings. Consequently, religious traditions appear in the study of social orders only when they fracture and bend to fit the secular. There is a systematic omission in the study of social orders, where normativity is derived from revelation.³¹

7.2 Gender, Agency, and Moral Translation

The ethnography of Mahmood, described above, illustrates the dominant trend in the discourses of development and rights concerning Muslim women. “Empowerment” of women is equated with the exercise of measurable autonomy from the family and the state’s religious systems. Viewing this as a component of women’s emancipation, the program they are adopted in considers the rejection of economic dependence, marriage, and veiling as primary goals. The emancipation of women who express their moral life as religious discipline and social responsibility is not recognized in these programs. Instead, their moral life is evaluated in a framework that is alien to their social reality, and thus their moral reality is dismissed.³²

7.3 Development as Technocratic Governance

Development studies exemplify the epistemic colonialism described in Section 2.6 with great clarity. In this case, the colonializing epistemic system uses technocratic instruments of liberal theories of economics and politics, and evaluates respondent societies’ positions based on an assessment of their gap in achieving that ideal.

Measures of development treat the moral and social dimensions as insignificant unless they can be quantified. Therefore, development is seen as a technical concern of formulating the appropriate policy to resolve it. This creates a framework of development that justifies external intervention because local ethics become irrelevant.³³

³¹ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.

³² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

³³ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

7.4 A Recurring Structural Pattern

Across these cases a common pattern emerges: non-liberal traditions are included as objects of analysis but excluded as sources of theory. Religion is studied but not believed; gender is measured but not ethically pluralized; development is assessed but not morally debated. This mode of inclusion reinforces epistemic colonialism by preserving liberal categories as the unquestioned horizon of intelligibility difference is managed rather than engaged, and inclusion becomes a technique of control rather than a step toward epistemic justice.³⁴ These patterns should not be read as failures of individual scholars; they are structural features of the epistemological foundations traced in Sections 3 through 5, and will persist even within well-intentioned reformist scholarship so long as those foundations remain unexamined.

8. Beyond Critique: Toward Epistemic Decolonization, and Its Limits

8.1 From Inclusion to Epistemic Sovereignty

Calls for decolonizing the social sciences often emphasize inclusion adding marginalized voices or case studies to existing frameworks. Such efforts diversify representation without challenging the epistemic architecture of knowledge production, leaving liberal ontology and methodology intact and requiring alternative traditions to translate themselves into dominant categories. Epistemic decolonization, by contrast, demands epistemic sovereignty: the capacity of a tradition to generate concepts and standards of validity from within its own ontological horizon, understood here not as isolation from dialogue but as self-determination within it.³⁵

8.2 Methodological and Institutional Reform

Decolonization at the level of method requires recognizing interpretive, normative, and tradition-grounded reasoning as legitimate forms of knowledge rather than pre-scientific supplements to empirical method, and it requires institutional change — in curricula, peer-review standards, and the criteria by which scholarly rigor itself is defined — since universities, journals, and funding bodies continue to reward conformity to dominant methodological norms even in ostensibly critical scholarship.³⁶ None of this implies abandoning rigor; it implies refusing to treat one tradition's criteria of rigor as the only possible criteria.

8.3 Decolonization Is Necessary but Not Sufficient

Decolonization, on its own, clears space: it exposes the false universality of a dominant framework and creates room for alternative traditions to be heard on their own terms. It does not, by itself, fill that space with a positive account of truth,

³⁴ Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*.

³⁵ Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.

³⁶ Alatas, "Academic Dependency."

moral order, or human purpose. A discipline that has successfully decolonized its categories still faces the further question of what should replace the framework it has set aside, and answering that question requires more than critique — it requires a tradition willing to state, and defend, its own account of reality, knowledge, and moral purpose. For a civilizational tradition seeking not merely inclusion but reconstruction, decolonization and reconstruction are therefore related but distinct projects, and conflating them risks leaving the second undone once the first has been achieved. Section 9 develops one such reconstructive project from within the Islamic epistemological tradition, not as the only possible answer available, but as a demonstration of what a positive answer looks like.

9. Toward an Islamic Epistemological Reconstruction of the Social Sciences

9.1 Revelation as Objective Ground

An Islamic epistemological reconstruction begins from a specific premise that distinguishes it from decolonization considered purely as critique: that revelation (waḥy) discloses truth (al-ḥaqq) that is objectively real rather than one culturally particular construction among equally valid alternatives, while the human process of understanding that revelation remains fallible, historically situated, and open to correction — a distinction between the objectivity of the source and the fallibility of interpretation that the classical tradition itself developed at length.³⁷ This is what allows the Islamic alternative to do more than expose liberal universalism as a false universal: because tawḥīd grounds a single, coherent reality accessible through several coordinated sources, the critique of liberal epistemology can proceed from an affirmative claim about what is true rather than only a negative claim about what liberal reason cannot justify.

9.2 Reason, Empirical Observation, and Human Experience

This reconstruction does not require rejecting reason or empirical method, both of which classical Islamic epistemology treats as genuine, if bounded, sources of knowledge operating alongside revelation rather than in competition with it.³⁸ What is rejected is the more specific claim, examined in Section 3, that empirical and rational method exhaust the domain of legitimate knowledge, such that normative and metaphysical claims must be either operationalized into measurable variables or excluded from science altogether. A social science reconstructed on these terms could use quantitative and qualitative empirical method without

³⁷ The distinction is worked out systematically in the classical uṣūl al-fiqh tradition; see, for a modern account, Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

³⁸ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* [*Deliverance from Error*], trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1980).

conceding that meaning, obligation, and moral purpose are analytically secondary to what such method can capture.

9.3 Fiṭrah and an Alternative Anthropology

Where dominant liberal social science begins from the autonomous, self-authoring subject examined earlier, Islamic epistemology begins from fiṭrah: an innate human disposition toward recognizing moral and religious truth, given specific content and direction by revelation rather than constituted solely through the subject's own choice. On this account, the piety and religious discipline Mahmood documents need not be read as internalized oppression requiring liberal translation to become intelligible; they are, on their own terms, an exercise of an agency oriented toward cultivating a disposition already latent in human nature — a different starting anthropology, not a deficient instance of the liberal one.

9.4 Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah as Integrating Purpose

What dominant liberal social science brackets as normatively out of bounds — the question of what social life is ultimately for the maqāṣid tradition makes central. Classical jurisprudence identified the preservation of life, intellect, lineage, property, and religion as the higher objectives Islamic law is understood to serve, providing an integrating framework within which economic, political, and social arrangements are evaluated not only for efficiency or procedural legitimacy but for their contribution to these ends.³⁹ A development framework organized around maqāṣid would not simply add religion as an additional variable to existing indices, as inclusion without transformation typically does; it would ask a different, prior question about what development is for, before asking how to measure progress toward it.

9.5 A Worked Illustration: Poverty Measurement

The contrast can be made concrete through a single, deliberately narrow example. Dominant liberal development practice measures poverty chiefly through income thresholds, the World Bank's international poverty line, denominated in dollars of daily consumption at purchasing-power parity or through multidimensional indices that add health and education indicators to income while still reducing each to a discrete, measurable proxy: years of schooling completed, whether a household cooks with clean fuel, whether a child has survived to a given age. The research question such instruments generate is essentially technical: by what policy intervention can the largest number of households be moved across a defined threshold at the lowest cost, in the shortest time?

A maqāṣid-informed analysis does not reject income or health as relevant, but it does not treat threshold-crossing as the object to be explained. It asks, prior to

³⁹ Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt fī Uṣūl al-Sharī'ah* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1997).

measurement, what poverty actually threatens: not merely low consumption, but the preservation of life, intellect, lineage, property, and religion that maqāṣid names as the ends any social arrangement is answerable to. This reframing generates evaluative questions a purely technocratic index has no vocabulary for. Does a cash-transfer or labor-migration programme that raises household income above the poverty line, but requires long absence from family or forecloses religious observance through incompatible work schedules, constitute success? An income-based or even a standard multidimensional index would record it as such; a maqāṣid-informed analysis would need to weigh the gain in property against a corresponding loss to lineage or religion before reaching the same verdict. Historical Islamic institutions of poverty relief, zakāh as an obligatory transfer with specified categories of recipients, and waqf as an endowed, self-sustaining source of communal provision — were embedded in precisely this wider moral accounting, rather than designed as means-tested entitlements addressed to income deficiency alone.

The point of the illustration is not that maqāṣid-based analysis would necessarily recommend different policies in every case; it is that it generates different research questions, different evaluative criteria, and a different definition of what would count as having actually solved the problem which is precisely the kind of demonstrative content Section 9.4's more general claim requires to be more than programmatic.

9.6 Institutional and Methodological Implications

Concretely, this reconstruction implies at least three departures from decolonization understood merely as pluralism. First, classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship should be read in social-scientific curricula as theory generating its own research questions, not as area-studies data illustrating theories developed elsewhere al-Ghazālī, Ibn Khaldūn, and al-Shāṭibī treated as social theorists in their own right rather than historical curiosities. Second, the disciplined interpretive method already developed within uṣūl al-fiqh distinguishing general from particular textual claims, weighing transmitted report through documented criteria of reliability, reasoning from established cases to new ones through identified rationale offers social science an alternative model of methodological rigor that is neither positivist measurement nor unconstrained interpretation, and could be taught and evaluated as such. Third, evaluation criteria for scholarship should recognize normative and textual argument, conducted with the same discipline classical jurisprudence demanded of legal reasoning, as a legitimate basis for peer-reviewed publication rather than requiring translation into empirical variables before a claim can count as rigorous.

9.7 Distinguishing Reconstruction from Decolonization

It follows that Islamic epistemological reconstruction and epistemic decolonization, though allied, are not identical projects and should not be conflated.

Decolonization is a largely negative project: it exposes the false universality of a dominant framework and clears institutional space. Reconstruction is a positive project: it requires an affirmative account of reality, knowledge, and moral purpose capable of filling the space decolonization opens. A social science stripped of liberal epistemic dominance but filled with no alternative account of truth risks the plural relativism Section 8.3 identified as a genuine risk, not merely a rhetorical one. The reconstruction sketched here tawhīd, revelation, reason, fiṭrah, and maqāṣid read together as a coordinated epistemology is offered as one demonstration that the space decolonization opens can be filled with more than plurality for its own sake.

10. Conclusion

This article has argued that dominant liberal formations of the social sciences function not merely as instruments of inquiry but as technologies of epistemic power, universalizing a historically specific ontology while marginalizing alternative ways of knowing not chiefly through exclusion, but through translation and inclusion on unequal terms, absorbing difference while preserving liberal reason as the unexamined horizon of intelligibility.

Moving beyond this condition requires more than diversification of topics or voices. It requires epistemic decolonization: the recovery of plural ontologies and the recognition of civilizational knowledge traditions as theoretical equals rather than objects of study. But this article has also argued that decolonization, considered purely as method, cannot answer the question its own premises raise about its own standing and that a civilizational tradition seeking genuine renewal, rather than inclusion within an unreconstructed order, requires the further, positive work of epistemic reconstruction. The outline developed here, grounded in revelation, reason, fiṭrah, and maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, is offered as one such reconstruction, not as a claim that no other civilizational tradition could offer its own.

A more intellectually adequate future for the social sciences requires relinquishing claims to epistemic monopoly, whether liberal or otherwise, in favor of a plural field in which distinct traditions generate theory from their own foundations and are evaluated, in the first instance, on their own terms. Whether the discipline as presently constituted is capable of this shift, or whether durable change will instead require new institutions built outside its existing structures of evaluation, remains an open question this article has not attempted to resolve and one on which the future of the social sciences, as a genuinely global rather than globally imposed field of inquiry, substantially depends.

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