

A SOUTHERN DIALOGUE ON THE “ISLAMIC FRAME”

Instituting Life in the Ecumene

Confronting the Insider–Outsider Dichotomy in Knowing Islam

Increasingly vocal and largely persuasive arguments have been developed for the determination of observers’ and researchers’ “positionality” in knowing Islam. Such claims have been advanced in the wake of the Orientalism critique, of which Edward Said was the intrepid and intellectually sophisticated hero, even though by far not the initiator. This critique is as old as the movements, which were both intellectual and political, resisting Western colonialism and imperialism. However, in the last two decades or so, we have been witnessing a new shift marked by an increasing urgency to create new frameworks that specify the positioning of authors. This has occurred between residual commitments to Western (“orientalist”) hegemonic conceptual frameworks and the uncertain onset of a post-Western and decolonial scholarship, ushering in a predicament, more than a paradigm, that has been termed “post-Orientalism” (Turner 2023, 107). In this chapter, I should provide selective elements that illustrate my own trajectory within post-Orientalism. Hopefully, this will not be seen as an idly self-referential exercise. I consider this clarification essential for presenting my approach to shaping an Islamic frame in the analysis and conceptualization of the instituting process within the Islamic ecumene, reaching up to the level of statehood. This brings us to the methodological crucible of the chapter, to be built on transparency about how my trajectory of dialogic repositioning relates to the present, if unstable, epistemic conundrum of post-Orientalism. The trajectory culminates in the critical transition I underwent between the completion of Volume I and the start of work on the present one.¹

The question of epistemic repositioning—a dynamic concept that I prefer to the more current, identitarian idea of fixed “positionalities”—has been broached by Bryan Turner, an early champion (even before Said) of a critical approach to Orientalism as well as a pioneering advocate of a sociology of Islam (Turner 1974; 1978). He has done so in a crisply written volume on *Understanding Islam*, with the eloquent subtitle *Positions of Knowledge* (Turner 2023). In this book, he provides valuable signposts for navigating the tension between purportedly “insider” and “outsider” approaches to Islam. This brings us directly to the core methodological stakes of this chapter’s discussion, for in an online lecture he gave to thousands of students in Qom, Iran, in October 2021, where he first presented ideas that would then flow in the book, Turner gave Hodgson pride of place in addressing the insider–outsider dichotomy.² The leading British sociologist, who in his youth had authored a quite critical review article on Hodgson’s trilogy (Turner 1976), now emphasized how, through his empathic historical hermeneutics of Islam, the US historian was able to challenge almost single-handedly the European exceptionalism that masqueraded as universalism.

Following Turner, I am not succumbing to a rhetoric that emphasizes the self-enclosed positionality of the researcher, as if reflecting a fixed identity. Nevertheless, I embrace the strategic importance of a sociology of knowledge approach to understanding how institutional involvements, trans-institutional collaborations, and intellectual fellowships nourish our own trajectories. The outcome is a continuous and largely open-ended process of repositioning, rather than an anchoring on identity-based and unflexible positionalities. While assuming static identities and invariable “origins” is implausible from a sociological perspective, particular moments or stations on the way can provide watersheds and sliding doors within evolving trajectories. At this juncture the conceptual implications of situating one’s own trajectory come to the fore. I completed Volume I immediately after arriving at McGill University in 2014, following years of toil and tribulation spent at the Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” in Naples, Italy. Not less notably, my time at McGill has been punctuated with an intermittent learning process about the unique, if often erratic, trajectory of McGill’s Institute of Islamic Studies (IIS).³ Only after completing Volume I, and while engaging the history of IIS, I realized that the phrasing of an “Islamic perspective” I had committed to in that volume had been famously claimed by key proponents of the broader project of Islamization of knowledge associated with leading Muslim scholars whose trajectory included

important stations at McGill. They are Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, who completed his MA at McGill's IIS in 1953 with Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and returned to McGill as a Visiting Fellow between 1959 and 1961 on invitation by his mentor, and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, who earned his MA at McGill's IIS in 1962 after being awarded a Canada Council Fellowship.

Al-Faruqi's Islamic perspective (1982) was much more holistic and theologically grounded than what I had suggested in Volume I, following Hodgson's historical hermeneutics. Thanks to his seminal approach, al-Faruqi became the paramount inspirer of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) in Kuala Lumpur in 1993 under the auspices of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference—the prominent international Muslim body (now called the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation). Alongside al-Faruqi, or perhaps even before him, and further deepening its implications via a broader philosophy of knowledge, al-Attas (1995) invoked the necessity of an Islamic perspective or worldview linking epistemology with ontology. He founded a smaller but extremely influential institution of advanced studies, today affiliated with IIUM, namely, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC). Together, IIUM and ISTAC are considered global strongholds of the Islamization of knowledge project, even if via different articulations of an "Islamic perspective." My usage of "Islamic frame," however, bears no relation to that programmatic effort, since it arises inductively from historical-sociological analysis rather than from a prescriptive reorganization of knowledge.

Yet, in July 2023 I visited both IIUM and ISTAC and gained insights into how working through the lens of an Islamic frame (which I now prefer to "perspective," for the reasons specified in the Introduction) can be enriched by crossing the paths and trajectories of fellow scholars across the purported insider–outsider divide in the knowledge of Islam. At IIUM, I had the privilege to engage in a discussion with several colleagues affiliated with its Sociology, Political Science, History, and the originally named "Usul al-Din and Comparative Religion and Philosophy" departments. For the methodological implications of this chapter, what made the discussion at IIUM a promising, if tentative, test of how shared an Islamic frame can be across the purported insider–outside boundary is the fact that IIUM was built and works as an intellectual powerhouse of knowledge production. This role closely reflects the complex transition from the precolonial strength of the Islamic ecumene to the world of modern capitalism and bureaucratic state

steering hegemonized by the West, but within which Malaysia, both as a dynamic society and as a powerful Muslim-majority state, actively participates.⁴

While the moment of dialogue at IIUM in Kuala Lumpur included a promising, if preliminary, spell of discussion, which I hope will continue as the trilogy unfolds, it is essential to acknowledge that such occasions, regardless of their immediate results, are themselves propaedeutic to the participants’ repositioning. In my case, it certainly contributed to demystifying the ghost of the insider–outsider boundary, which was explicitly addressed in the discussion. In that sense, I am joining Bryan Turner (a scholar, incidentally, with an excellent degree of familiarity with Malaysia) in questioning the rigidity of positionalities and appreciating the virtues of a continuous repositioning. On the other hand, dialogue can also nourish a shared reflexivity on the legacy of unbalanced constellations of power relations in the building of epistemic constraints, which continue to privilege anglophone academia. Therefore, it cannot be mortified into a hypocritically irenic reproduction of the same power relations. Neither can it be reduced to a sanitized mapping of dislocated positionalities, followed by theatrical manifestations of goodwill to mutual empathy and nonbelligerence. A dialogue can only be productive if it works as an epistemic trigger facilitating sound explanations,⁵ even if not necessarily shared—as will be argued shortly. This shift from mere understanding to the explanatory register is crucial, and in the meeting at IIUM no participant seemed to question that—probably also thanks to the prevalence of social scientists in the meeting room, significantly named after Ibn Khaldun and underscoring the centrality of his legacy in cultivating an Islamic frame.

More than presenting, or criticizing, bits of old and new methodologies, one could detect in the flow of the discussion an emerging understanding of “method.” Like in the Greek etymology of the term (*methodos*), it is a continuous, if bumpy, path to be shared with fellow travelers, rather than a prepackaged toolkit to be imposed on docile learners. Seen from this angle, the methodological focus shifts to the shared itineraries themselves, given that being together on such a path requires awareness of crisscrossing—if often contentious—routes and encounters, as well as readiness to process knowledge–power crucibles, both inherited and ongoing. To be sought is some measure of an overlapping consensus or a lowest common denominator on ways to be on this path by managing the knowledge–power entanglements. This task should be approached piecemeal, by tentative steps and small-scale practical moves, as if performed on a broad

construction site where no single worker can claim to command an exhaustive view (indeed, a "perspective" of sorts) over the entirety of the site. The emphasis thus shifts from imposing an authoritative method to cultivating a disciplined readiness for situated movement along a continuous and open-ended path.

This is why integral to the dialogic reflections at the IIUM session was a first attempt to address how my process of repositioning—particularly after the publication of Volume I of the trilogy—required awareness of how one's trajectory can factor into the knowledge–power equation, especially as shaped by the postcolonial asymmetries that continue to structure "who speaks for Islam," from where, and with what authority—and so into the production, and potential sharing, of an Islamic frame.⁶ This was a significant omission in the preparation and writing of Volume I. Of course, self-reflexivity cannot be a self-referential, or, worse, narcissistic exercise. In our case, it requires an empathic, if resilient, effort at reformulating the open question *What is Islam?* Once raised, and scholastically answered, by the Scottish orientalist and Presbyterian minister W. Montgomery Watt (1959), it was boldly inherited and radically cracked open by Shahab Ahmed (2016), as we saw in the Introduction. Setting on such an open-ended and shared, if bouncy, path of method seemed the only practical alternative to either taking the idea of Islam and the quality of "being Islamic" dangerously for granted or dismissing it as an essentialist ruse of the continuing Western colonial hegemony (see Introduction). It is a fair level of mutual, if contentious, recognition that keeps us together on the road and secures a shared, if at times shaky, epistemic ground. This is not tantamount to seeking a positivistic objectivity based on the binary of true vs. false, which violently conceals relations of domination, but a process that warrants a modicum of consensus on what "valid" (i.e., scholarly plausible and agreeable) knowledge is—a momentary consensus from which participants in an epistemic dialogue can again depart, individually or in smaller groups, on their own pace and in various directions.

Looking back at my trajectory of continuous repositioning on the path—often blessed by good company, even though at times solitary and jumpy—I cannot name any clear "origin" determining an unambiguous "identity." And yet, as I also shared at the IIUM dialogue session, the fact that I was socialized into academic life in Naples, while coming from its immediate surroundings (quite in the middle of the Mediterranean), did affect my sense of direction. It sensitized me to fissures in how the insider–outsider binary is artificially derived from the postulation of a selfsame "Western"

orientalist perspective. This is where the epistemic implications become relevant, since my departure point affected not just my positioning in but also my appreciation of the knowledge–power equation in specific ways, given that it was geographically and historically located within and outside the West simultaneously (cf. Chambers 2008). The peculiarity of Southern Italy as a site of collective life, politics, and knowledge production is that it has been subjected to a process of inner colonization since the unification of the Italian peninsula through the armies and militias of the Northwestern Italian Duchy of Savoy. The enterprise was supported by a comprehensive Northwestern European discourse on the defectivity of the modern European credentials of Southern Europe in general and Southern Italy in particular (Dainotto 2007). This asymmetrical positioning—at once inside and at the margins of the European project—intensified my sensitivity to how epistemic authority is unevenly assigned and withheld. This tension is summarized by a joke that colleagues from the Northwestern part of Italy—from where the conquest of the South started in the 1860s, followed by a brutal repression of a fierce insurgency—often love to crack, according to which “Naples is the only Middle Eastern city without a European quarter.”

The encompassing notion of Western colonialism is surely justified by its (often genocidal) techniques of exploitation and capitalist extraction, and concomitant forms of supremacism, racism, and orientalism, transcending differences between, say, British, American, and French practices of hegemony. And yet, such general notions risk concealing forms of colonial exploitation and orientalist stigmatization within the “West” itself. In the case of Italy and its “Southern question,” scholars have aptly spoken of “Orientalism in one country” (Pandolfi 1998; Schneider 1998; Chambers 2008). This is why it would be a historical and cultural misunderstanding to locate Naples, its region (Campania), and Southern Italy in general (roughly matching the conquered and colonized Kingdom of the Two Sicilies) by default and without specifications within hegemonic Europe, or, even more problematically, the imperialist “West.” However, it cannot be denied that Southern Italy, and more specifically Naples, as its foremost center, also operated as a site of production of both orientalist knowledge and Enlightenment thought. The former occurred most notably through the Collegio dei Cinesi, founded in 1732, which, after the forced unification of Italy in the 19th century, became first the Real Collegio Asiatico and, in the following century, the Istituto Universitario Orientale (now rebranded Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”)—nothing less than the oldest orientalist institution of higher learning in

Europe. Walking through downtown Naples, where this university is located, one can appreciate—also through the prism of a global tourist gaze on Southern exoticism—the place’s living paradox of belonging simultaneously to the knowledge apparatus of the colonizers and suffering from a subaltern status derived from the structural disadvantages of life in a “domestically” colonized (and “orientalized”) region. This dual role complicates any easy mapping of colonizer and colonized positions in the very context from which my own trajectory departed.

The reasons why I decided to undertake social-science-oriented Islamic Studies at the just-mentioned university in Naples were also a consequence of how as a teenager my first, uncertain steps on an educational and intellectual path were affected by a sequence of local, national, and international vicissitudes peaking in the late 1970s with the Iranian revolution. I vividly remember how the role played by Islam in that revolution and its aftermath was feverishly discussed within political and intellectual circles, most notably on the Italian left-wing spectrum. It is worth noting that, in the political context of the time, the two main Italian intellectual camps that dominated various institutions, including academia—the Catholic and the Marxist—were both mutually antagonistic and intensely intertwined and almost complicit. This intense relation reached the point of configuring an intersecting, if minoritarian, “Catholic–Marxian” (in Italian, *cattocomunista*) current that was particularly influential in public intellectual debates. It presented itself for a while as a synthesis of thought and engagement that could heal the country from its fascist past and play a role in support of anti-imperialist movements. In the Italian context of the time, this constellation rendered the Islamic dimension of the Iranian revolution—which unfolded simultaneously with the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, itself sustained by religious commitments through currents of Catholic liberation theology—far from contradictory or illegible. This stood in contrast to how it appeared when filtered through the intellectual and media circuits of other Western countries.

Living through such events from what is clearly a frontier zone between Europe and what Europe tagged as the Middle East (Salvatore 2022) started to sensitize me—along with a few companions of study and discussion or fellow travelers through the events of the late 1970s and 1980s—to how our peculiar, if subaltern, situatedness in a Mediterranean frontier zone harbored an original potential to generate and cultivate a type of interstitial knowledge with border-crossing virtues that could help healing the insider–outsider fracture in knowing Islam. It is indeed intellectual forces

developing in such liminal areas that often play a role in unsettling, if not subverting, dominant paradigms and facilitating new ones, also through transversal dialogues with intellectual forces from other subaltern regions of the “Global South.”⁷ Liminal does not mean marginal, but productively interstitial (cf. Bottici and Challand 2021). Seen in retrospect, this frontier positioning anticipated what I would later articulate, in a different register, through the notion of a *barzakh*-like epistemic stance—an intervalled way of inhabiting knowledge positions without collapsing into either side, the substance of which will be discussed in the next chapters. From this standpoint, the rise of a conceptual opportunity out of an interstitial positioning gains sharper contours.

It was probably also thanks to this unstable and liminal type of early intellectual socialization that, rather than unilaterally trashing mainstream sociological theory—and notably Weber—wholesale as irremediably colonial (which it is undoubtedly true in many crucial respects; see Bhabra and Holmwood 2021), I started to appreciate the potential upside of eccentrically navigating various straits of sociopolitical thought between the hegemonic and the subaltern. Through the long years I spent at Humboldt University in Berlin after completing my PhD at the European University Institute in Florence, I had the chance to confront leading voices within German thought and political and intellectual history. This legacy harbored a strategic value given Germany’s prominent, if politically decentered, role in Western thought overall. What proved particularly instructive was how German thinkers crafted sociopolitical conceptualizations that drew on the broader Western experience while remaining, for extended periods, less directly entangled in the colonial and imperial agendas that shaped Anglo-American and French intellectual traditions. I benefited from discerning the way the sociopolitical conceptualizations produced by German thinkers ingeniously elaborated foundational themes drawn from more generally Western (or, as Weber unabashedly had it, “occidental”) historical experience—while also, for long stretches, less immediately reflecting the political agendas of Western colonialism and hegemony than, say, Anglo-American or French thought.

This repositioning from dwelling in an interstitial and subaltern space to exposure to a singularly (de)centered cradle of Western thought alerted me to the ambivalence of hegemonic notions of historicity and modernity, like those that marked the rise of modern statehood, capitalism, and selfhood. In their German articulations, such concepts appeared imbued with distinctive world-historical diagnostic insights, and yet friable to the point

of self-implosion. Ideas were not seldom articulated via a modicum of self-criticism and even a vein of dark pessimism on the trajectory and destiny of "the West." Seen from this angle, a further epistemic opening becomes visible, for the broader venture of German thought—Marx included, or even typically—appeared to me as quite unique for being both pivotal and liminal. It certainly did not impose itself as the unproblematic evolutionary apex of the self-complacent trajectory of modern Western rationalism. Not entirely unlike its Italian counterpart, German thought was fed by the ambivalence of the aspirations and fears of a latecomer to statehood and colonialism. This also impacted their respective, and quite thriving, orientalist traditions. As such, these peculiarly Western knowledge traditions, and even more, the ambivalent historical experiences that generated them, invited a judicious reconstruction of some of their intellectual debris—elements which, if adequately processed, could acquire a "recycling" value within the construction site hosting multiple points of departure for the envisaged post-Western epistemic dialogue.

To recapitulate, being intellectually socialized first in (Southern) Italy and then in Germany, both in Islamic Studies and sociology, I grew into occupying a doubly liminal, if complex and shifting, position toward anglophone academia. It is quite well-known that Edward Said admitted the limitation of his critique of Orientalism for not taking into account these two countries. While this applies to the knowledge of Islam discussed by Said, the same concerns *a fortiori* mainstream sociopolitical thought, which provides an essential background to their respective national orientalist traditions (cf. Staath 1993). It is also by navigating the tricky waves of German theory, before a full immersion in what I will discuss shortly as Southern/Italian thought, as well as steering through their mutual gulfs, that I gained a healthy distance from (and a matching sensibility to cope with and process) the anglophone academic discourses on Islam, which have been ever more hegemonic in the current post-orientalist phase marked by the eclipse of classical continental European Orientalism. This equipment I took with me on the path, and it helped me take decisive, if critical, steps toward an Islamic frame.

The path, however, was far from smooth. Admittedly, and given the political-intellectual climate of the 1980s and early 1990s, I was first captured by a post-structuralist view on the production of knowledge on Islam and its purported politicization. Poststructuralism (to which also Edward Said's work should be counted) did impact some significant waves of the first tentative surge of postcolonial thought. Yet here a crucial conceptual

limit emerges, for its being caught in a rather inner-Western, immanent critique of (colonial) modernity. The doctoral dissertation that I defended in 1994 at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, with two German supervisors (a sociologist, Klaus Eder, and an Islamic Studies scholar, Reinhard Schulze), was decisively influenced by this methodological orientation. In that work, I maintained that, while Islam is not the product of essentialist abstractions and reductions, and as such cannot be just “deconstructed,” its global apprehension (including, if not mainly, the view of how it may get “politicized”) is the outcome of overlapping hermeneutic circles. These stretch across the purported insider–outsider boundary and are determined by imbalanced power relations largely influenced by Western imperialism, colonialism, and Orientalism.

The fact that this PhD thesis, whose topic was sharply eccentric to the mushrooming works on “political Islam” of the time, was awarded the 1994 Malcolm Kerr Dissertation Award in the Social Sciences of MESA (Middle East Studies Association of North America)⁸ could be taken as a clue that, by the early 1990s, the anglophone Middle East Studies establishment had started to pay attention to continental types of “critique” (see Salvatore and Obuse 2022, 16–18). Indeed, the unexpected (and surely undeserved) recognition of my early work came at a moment when the, by that time, American-hegemonized studies of Islam appeared increasingly invested in the chimera of a paradigm change—as if one could nimbly vault beyond the European orientalist legacy by just faithfully trailing the critique launched by Edward Said. He was invited as a very special guest to the annual MESA meeting in 1998 in Chicago on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of his *Orientalism* and was celebrated as the inspirer of the coveted novel paradigm. What struck me at the meeting was the heightened, almost millenarian mood—an expectation that Said’s imposing presence might somehow inaugurate a new epistemic order, embodied in his undeniable charisma and moral authority. The atmosphere at that meeting made the mood unmistakable: an innocently intense, almost messianic expectation of the coming of a new dispensation of knowledge, heralded by the intellectual stature of Said. Of course, I felt swayed too. And yet, as every even minimally self-conscious area studies practitioner is painfully aware of, in the present post-orientalist limbo a new paradigm is not in sight and is quite unlikely to see the light any time soon. The fact itself that a poststructuralist move facilitated the critique of Orientalism did not forebode the replacement of an old ideological certainty with a new one. This is also evident if we acknowledge the volatility of the new politics of positionality,

which decolonial aspirations struggle to turn into consistent patterns of method. What follows is a sobering recognition: methodological heterogeneity, if not fragmentation, is the best antidote to ideological conformism. In this sense, the invocation of an Islamic frame has the potential to accommodate a healthy plurality of approaches while responding to the need to take parallel, if discreet and realistic, steps in decolonizing the global conceptualization and knowledge of Islam.

Understanding vs. Explanation?

Bryan Turner (2023) has convincingly argued that to navigate the present post-orientalist waters, one needs to develop and manage a suitable sense of distance from what we explore and engage. This modicum of distance allows us to move swiftly from understanding what we study to explaining it, but also from there back to understanding. Crucially, however, we should see understanding and explanation not as the opposite extremes of an epistemic gulf separating the understanding insider from the explaining outsider, but as a continuous spectrum of epistemic engagements. Undoubtedly, however, the understanding position requires an interpretive mode that presupposes a congruent degree of empathizing with an insider’s predicament. In our case, and in analogy to Hodgson, this positioning helps weave an Islamic frame, allowing us to appreciate the world-historical “importance of being Islamic.” Once such attunement takes hold, it enables a fluid shift along the spectrum, making explanation a deepening—rather than a departure from—understanding. Through this movement one can explain the dynamics of *‘umran* and the unfolding of *ma’mura* (see Introduction), that is, the multicausal and multidimensional becoming of the Islamic ecumene, including the process of building institutions and crafting statehood.

A bright example of an explanation of the development of the Islamic ecumene grounded in a sensible modulation of empathy can be found in the work of Mohammed Bamyeh (2019, 139–190). His approach yielded an explanatory prism encompassing the three foremost and dynamic dimensions of the ecumene. They are the partial control exercised by political authorities over social relations, the long-distance movement of people, goods, and ideas, and the coexistence of several registers of speech—or heteroglossia, a term Bamyeh borrowed from Bakhtin. Seen from the vantage point adopted here, Bamyeh’s prism becomes a useful prelude to grasping

the salient patterning forces of the ecumene—forces we can interpret through the dynamics of *‘umran* and its instituting processes. However, following Bamyeh, examining these explanatory factors will only yield deep insights into the workings of the precolonial Islamic ecumene if one apprehends the becoming of the ecumene as undeniably Islamic, while not *sui generis* or exceptional: as a shared patrimony of humanity. This recognition becomes all the more urgent in a moment of planetary crisis determined mainly by the Western combination of extractive capitalism and a bureaucratic, if often neo-colonially violent steering of populations. These key factors of what is generically—and confoundingly—labeled “globalization” have hollowed the historical venture of the Islamic ecumene, without, however, obliterating either its memory or the resilience of its civility patterns and instituting processes. That is, the component of understanding that plays a role in the explanation is here addressed not even to “Islam as such,” which never existed, if not in many an orientalist (and, regrettably, post-orientalist) fantasy, but to Islam as an expression of the human quest for felicity. The Islam in question is not smoothly aligned, to say the least, with the historic and current “globalized” predicament of humankind, which, by contrast, has privileged the free movement of goods over people, the unlimited control of states over borders and populations, and the imposition of uniform legal codes (not least through the fictive cage of the “person”: see Chapter 9).

As Turner argued, the living remedy to the (often rhetorically amplified) constraints of the insider–outsider boundary lies in a cosmopolitan vocation of border-crossing embodied by free-floating intellectuals. This is not necessarily an enviable condition, as it is often triggered by exile, persecution, or other vicissitudes accompanying repositioning processes in their life and work trajectories. Yet in the history of sociopolitical thought, scholars who were exilic, liminal, or interstitial often played a significant role. This was the case, for example, with the Jewish scholars who escaped Nazism or Muslim scholars who suffered displacement due to colonial oppression and the inequalities and injustices of postcolonial knowledge–power constellations, often reflected in authoritarian rule exercised on behalf of neo-colonial interests supportive of privileged local elites. Such conditions compelled several scholars to leave the former colonies and embark on critical intellectual paths within the former metropolises—no doubt also, if involuntarily, contributing to an impoverishment of the knowledge production in the former colonies and accruing to the bubble of global anglophone and francophone academia. I am referring to intellectual personalities of a

high caliber, ranging from Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno, through Edward Said himself, to Ali Shariati, Mohammed Arkoun, Fatima Mernissi, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Saba Mahmood, among others. Turner (2023, 167) is therefore keen to underscore a complementary point, namely how a leading metropolitan personality like Pierre Bourdieu, throughout his stellar career at French elite academic institutions, could become, and remain, committed to migrant rights and the Algerian liberation from the French colonial yoke. While doing so, he never ceased to plead for the strategic value of explanations—even more so when one needs to stand up against oppression and exploitation. Even when starting with an empathic understanding of, and solidarity with, the pleas of the exploited and colonized, one should be able to account for plausible causalities of colonial oppression. This is a major example disproving the existence of an unbridgeable epistemic gap between understanding and explanation. Seen in this light, an Islamic frame—supported by the recognition of “the importance of being Islamic” and triggered by the pledge to an empathic understanding—can facilitate the move toward sound explanations of post-colonial conditions.

The knowledge process unfolding in such liminal spaces and the concomitant reflexive repositioning undergone by those scholars indicate why we should not view the process as centered on a type of subject safely buffered from the object of knowledge and therefore seeking “objective” knowledge. The process is inherently interactive, dialogic, but also epistemically challenging for the scholars who produce such knowledge. This is especially the case if their subject position is not institutionally entrenched and is therefore exposed to a certain degree of desubjectivation and alienation. Such recognition should help dissolve the relatively static notion of positionality within knowledge production and shift the focus to continuous processes of repositioning, of which free-floating scholars are the most extreme, yet visible, foil. Indeed, nobody can ever be a self-consistent subject dwelling in a stable position despite the illusion provided by the Cartesian fallacy that might delude us into perceiving a secure shielding, by default, of the subject position. When the illusion prevails, we pay a heavy price by abstracting subjectivity from its intrinsic impermanence and exposure to the often unsettling unpredictability of knowledge processes.

Therefore, within an approach guided by a sociology of knowledge emancipated from the ideology of subjective buffering and abstraction, what matters is less individual identity and positionality than mutual interactions and cumulative adjustments on a path. No doubt, such interactions are constrained by the spectrum of possibilities allowed within

a given articulation of the knowledge–power equation discussed in Volume I. Surely, in the precolonial dynamics of the Islamic ecumene knowledge was already, and quite consciously, a fundamental source of power. However, since the rise of Europe to colonial hegemony and the imposition of modern capitalism and Westphalian statehood on the conditions for the production of knowledge, the knowledge–power equation has been subjected to unprecedented constraints that continue to bestow a superior power on Western institutions and their methodologies. These transformed conditions significantly narrow the options for a dialogic repositioning across the epistemic grid linking understanding and explanation. In a nutshell, the relatively open knowledge–power equation, which had for long fed the instituting process in the Islamic ecumene, has been transformed into a power–knowledge cage dependent on the corporate norms and institutional disciplining of a Western-dominated world order (on institution as corporation, see Chapters 4 and 9). This order is trapped in the power mechanisms that produce and legitimize the abstraction of “the knowing subject” and regiment it through unflexible institutional control and corporate forms of “line management.” In this constrained landscape, what becomes imperative is a mode of inquiry capable of slipping between fixed epistemic positions and reopening the space for dialogic repositioning that Western institutional regimes have progressively eroded.

Seen also through this lens, one could discover a deep epistemic affinity between the trajectories and commitments of Marshall Hodgson and Shahab Ahmed. They shared a continuing repositioning in pursuing a study of Islam that was both empathic and critical, regardless of their diverse starting points and shifting institutional constraints. Their combined achievements suggest that embracing the importance of being Islamic should help view such binaries as insider–outsider as being themselves the outcome of exploitative orientalist views and nativist reactions against them. As stressed by Yücesoy (2023, 11), these dichotomizing categorizations end up creating an environment that “empowers oppressive practices in the misleading guise of ‘socially and culturally authentic’ traditions in the name of religion.” In this regard, the avoidance of an objectification, if not “reification,” of Islam as a “religion” was central to the attempt to harmonize insider and outsider positions that became the privileged methodological battleground in the trajectory of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and his founding of the previously mentioned McGill’s IIS in 1952. He envisaged this academic institution as an epistemic laboratory radically alternative to the Centres of Middle East Studies that were mushrooming in America at the

time. These institutions focused on producing knowledge, when not outright "intelligence," finalized to the domestication of what was left of the Islamic ecumene after colonialism via the imposition of capitalist patterns of dependent modernization (Salvatore and Obuse 2021; see also Brankley Abbas 2021, 52–91). Smith's critical approach survived his move to Harvard in 1964. It was enriched by his increasing interaction with the leading American sociologist and social theorist Robert Bellah, who, after postdoctoral studies at IIS in 1956–1958, inherited from the Scottish orientalist Hamilton Gibb the teaching of "Islamic Institutions" classes at Harvard. Smith's intensive exchanges with Bellah sharpened his sense of how non-objectifying approaches could sustain sociopolitical explorations and explanations—an insight that Bellah, for his part, was developing in his own work (Bortolini 2021, 65–69, 91–94).

Following this thread that reconciles understanding with explanation, even if we were to keep our original label of the "sociology of Islam," the "of" in the genitive "of Islam" should then be intended in a double sense. The first offsets the objectifying risk by having the inquirer embrace the sense-making tools developed in the trajectory of Islam's making as simultaneous with its ecumene; this would amount to a frame vowed to understanding. The second sense would result from shifting toward an explanation of the heteroglossic, if often conflicted, sociopolitical unfolding of the Islamic ecumene. In this movement between the two senses, the task and method of the inquirer are not fixed but repeatedly refashioned through an interactive engagement with Islam's protean and ever-unfinished venture. Bracketing out "Islam" altogether for fear of incurring the sin of essentialism would, instead, entail neglecting the dynamic and open-ended venture in history that elicited the importance of being Islamic across the insider–outsider divide.

Walking on such a path bridging understanding and explanation and healing the insider–outsider dichotomy, as done through different trajectories by Hodgson and Ahmad, I took further steps to inflect my own version of an Islamic frame. They were inspired by the emergent appeal of a line of Southern/Italian sociopolitical thought that has recently enjoyed increasing attention in non-mainstream anglophone academic circles, partly supplanting the attraction of French-style poststructuralism. Within the Italian thought tradition, I would like to single out three authors who are particularly well-known internationally and are linked together by their intersecting legacies, namely, the already mentioned Giambattista Vico, Antonio Gramsci,⁹ and Roberto Esposito. What these three authors share, spanning

a trajectory of almost three centuries—from the early 18th to the early 21st—is an emphasis on the primacy of civility and institutions over statehood, as well as the role of broader popular (including, at large, “religious”) cultures in shaping civility. As a result, the type of civility they focused on cannot be reduced to a top-down civilizing process initiated by political elites, as emphasized by Norbert Elias (a stalwart in German sociological thought, whose work I profusely referenced in Volume I) when addressing Northwestern Europe. Rather, these Italian thinkers foreground a more open-ended and relational pattern of how civic and political cultures take shape—one that binds thought and experience, knowledge and life, and history and theory, without prioritizing (let alone absolutizing) either pole.¹⁰

Charting the Path: Conceptual Maps from Southern/Italian Thought

In Volume I, I was certainly remiss in clarifying my trajectory of repositioning. Nevertheless, I did start to draw from intellectual sources from the above-considered frontier region when I evoked counter-notions of civility elaborated by the 18th-century Neapolitan thinker Giambattista Vico (Salvatore 2016, 67–69). I compared these notions with those developed by his roughly contemporaneous Scottish authors, often labeled “Scottish moralists.” This comparison has been more recently corroborated by works juxtaposing the Scottish and the Neapolitan Enlightenment currents as equally influential and sharing common themes, yet moving toward different, if not diverging, conclusions, as exemplified by Hume and Vico, respectively (Robertson 2005). In particular, I contrasted Vico with the Scottish author who incorporated ideas of human agency into a hegemonic discourse on the nature of *homo economicus* aligning with British imperial hegemony, namely, Adam Smith (Eriksson 1993). I probably do not need to spell out again, as I did in Volume I, the reasons why Vico’s notion of civility should be seen as much more resonant with the conception emerging from the study of the Islamic ecumene and therefore can be counted as a potential asset in the development of a shared Islamic frame. What requires emphasis here is that my appeal to Vico—when viewed through the prism of my own trajectory—gains further weight from the often-noted affinity between his thought and that of Ibn Khaldun (Gabrieli 1975; Dayeh and Messling 2020; Trabandt 2021; Messahel 2025). Whether consciously or less so, I came to treat the Vico–Ibn Khaldun constellation as a post-orientalist

springboard for embracing an Islamic frame and recalibrating my own repositioning.

The Italian philosopher Remo Bodei (2017) has characterized the approach exemplified by Vico—antedating any post-structuralist “linguistic turn” by a few centuries—as envisioning concepts as metaphors and “crystals” poetically susceptible to continuous metamorphosis and qualitative leaps. This is an alternative path to considering the meaning of any key concept (say, between “life” and “politics”) as ultimately sanctioned by a corporate authority, be it the Church or the state. To be sure, the intellectual posture represented by Vico was enabled by the political fragmentation of the Italian peninsula, which was only overcome with a late nation-state formation in the second half of the 19th century. This is when Italy began a tortuous process of aligning with the hegemonic structure of Westphalian nation-states—a process that was never fully completed. Its incompleteness owed much to the persistent resistance to homogenization in Italy’s Southern regions after they were subjected to a form of domestic colonialism-*cum*-Orientalism, as previously suggested.

The outcome of this original trajectory has been the assembling of an epistemic space that endured beyond nation-state formation, woven by a brand of Southern/Italian thought eccentric to the prevailing European understanding of the civilizing process as integral to the emergence of modern statehood, as famously theorized by Elias ([1939; 1968] 2000). Instead, this type of sociopolitical thought is invested in a civic vocation: citizenship in weak states, the carving out of spaces of autonomy vis-à-vis the Church, and, above all, a sense of the impermanence and open-endedness of instituting processes. It also exhibits a marked skepticism toward purely theoretical speculations that lack solid historical grounding. Southern/Italian thought is at its most incisive where ambivalence is operative—between the universal and the particular, the ideal and the concrete. It is vividly anti-Cartesian in its attention to the dialectic of tradition and innovation. This dialectic works through a *habitus* nourished by bustling life—signally, one of the key meanings of *‘umran* (see Introduction). Here practice is continually enriched by renewed interpretations of the circumstances, needs, and aspirations of human life. The focus is on thought as living and lived and, most vividly in Vico, embodied—almost as a “philosophy of impure/spurious reason” (Bodei 2017, 36–37).

Broadly speaking, this was also the approach of Vico’s most prominent 20th-century heir, Antonio Gramsci. Of partly Albanian ancestry, Gramsci hailed from Sardinia, an even more subaltern region than peninsular

Southern Italy. Yet, he socialized into political life in the industrial Northwestern city of Turin, which had been the capital of the Duchy of Savoy that ruled over Sardinia as its periphery for centuries before the conquest of the peninsular South. Gramsci was able to integrate the Southern Italian Enlightenment tradition (also by a critical appropriation of another towering, albeit much less progressive, Neapolitan thinker, Benedetto Croce) into the most significant international movement of liberation from imperial, colonial, and capitalist exploitation of the early 20th century, namely Marxism. Gramsci was an original Marxist thinker eager to engage in an in-depth analysis of the specific cultural configuration of post-unitary Italy, where Catholic intellectual and political forces rivalled the workers’ movement in claiming to represent “the people”: not only the industrial working class but the wider popular and subaltern sectors of society. Gramsci, who died in prison under the Italian fascist regime, has become a globally influential icon in the wake of the decolonization movement, including in the Muslim-majority world (see Gervasio and Teti 2024). As observed by Bryan Turner (2023, 156), he has also been increasingly influential in European postwar sociology. As previously alluded to, at the time of the revolution in Iran, a pristine moment of my intellectual socialization—with its fueling new ways of understanding Islam emancipated from colonial and postcolonial Orientalism—was represented by debates in the Gramscian Left in Italy on whether Islam could be a force of change to fight inequality and poverty—indeed, if it had the potential of a revolutionary force. While this idea was shared by several generations of anti-colonial activists from the Islamic ecumene—mirrored by the movements and political forces that in the West supported resistance to colonialism—in the late 1970s the debate took a new turn, thanks to the questions raised by Michel Foucault, the iconic critical European intellectual of the era. He did so upon visiting Iran during the revolution and commenting on what he saw and experienced on the pages of the leading Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* (Salvatore 1997, 133–161; see also Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016).

A combination of Foucauldian and Gramscian motives happened to feed into a quite standardized type of criticism within anglophone academia that peaked in the 1990s. Largely outside this trend, Southern/Italian thought experienced a new blossoming and international renown throughout the post-9/11 early 21st century—no doubt also through its original reception of several masters of French theory, Foucault included. It was in this context that the tradition acquired the ambitious label of *New Italian Theory*. Its success owed decisively to the writings of the third among the

Southern Italian thinkers I enlisted, namely Roberto Esposito, the author—among several bestsellers—of *Living Thought* (Esposito [2010] 2012) and *Vitam Instituere* (Esposito [2023] 2025a).¹¹ Over his trajectory, Esposito has synthesized multiple theoretical strands to develop a distinctive approach to the mutual entanglements between life, community, and the instituting process. In discreet yet strategically placed parts of this book, I will invoke Esposito’s work for the way it resonates with our search for an Islamic frame. This resonance is not only due to neglected affinities with the conceptual implications of Ibn Khaldun’s *‘umran*, but also to Esposito’s delineation of a path to statehood that—while often shunned or dammed in the West—flourished in the early modern, precolonial configurations of political modernity in the Islamic ecumene.¹²

Although Esposito was never directly involved in research on Islam or the Islamic ecumene, it is worth noting that he taught for a long time at the previously mentioned Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale.” This might have provided him with a modicum of familiarity with both the local configuration of Islamic Studies and the decolonial perspectives that were clearly antagonistic to classical Orientalism, not least through his academic acquaintance with the leading scholar of Mediterranean coloniality, Iain Chambers, who taught at the same university for several decades and whose exquisite elaborations on decolonial Southern thought (Chambers 2008) were often inspired by thinkers of the caliber of Walter Dignolo. For this reason, despite the conspicuous absence in Esposito’s work of an explicit problematization of the colonial dimension of Western modernity—or of what constitutes a distinctively Southern/Italian difference in relation to that dimension, a gap that, alongside Chambers and others, I certainly miss—Esposito’s approach remains invaluable for helping, if indirectly, mediate, as I will do throughout this book and especially in its last part, between the legacy of Ibn Khaldun and an alternative view of civilizing and instituting processes resistant to the normative requirements of Westphalian nation-statehood. The centrality of life in Esposito’s work, via concepts like bare life, life forms, and biopolitics (as the politics of managing life), as well as his more recent focus on instituting life (see also Esposito 2021a), has offered crucial inspiration for shaping the trajectory of repositioning that I sought to transform into a path leading to a viable Islamic frame.¹³

It should be stressed, however, that my appropriation of themes and ideas from Southern/Italian theory is not a way to claim that the above-mentioned Catholic–Marxian nexus is an antidote to the orientalist aberrations of, say, the liberal and Protestant mainstream in knowing Islam.

Quite the opposite. I regard the most recent and successful phase of Southern/Italian thought as a precious asset for inquiry into the Islamic ecumene precisely because it can help redeem our interstitial appreciation of an Islamic frame from any residual Catholic–Marxian accretions that may have been preponderant at the time of the Iranian Revolution. Embracing Southern/Italian thought in building an Islamic frame, as I am doing in this book, can function as a therapy against lingering Western hubris and conceptual complacency, from which both Catholicism and Marxism have historically been far from immune—given their deep, if often critical, involvement in the European formations of modern capitalism and statehood (see Chapters 5 and 9 in this volume).

How does this reflexive discussion of my repositioning trajectory revise or integrate the approach I followed in Volume I? While this will be progressively shown throughout the present volume, some preliminary steps are in order. In the previous volume, I relied not so much on the academically popular notion of Islam as a “discursive tradition” associated with specific practices—as defined by what is increasingly identified as Talal Asad’s (or even the “Asadian”) school—but rather on how its unfolding generated patterns of civility, after which I preliminarily addressed how those patterns invigorated sociopolitical institutions. As the present volume is primarily dedicated to clarifying the relationship between Islam, institution-building, and statehood, both historically and conceptually, I follow Roberto Esposito in abstaining from providing a formalized definition of what an institution is and, more importantly, what an instituting process entails. Instead, I adopt a gradual approach to elucidating the type of process at stake—one that, because it is entangled with the building of human life, cannot begin by privileging a formal institutional dimension. After all, there would be no easy consensus for such a formal definition, even among sociologists. In this respect, I take an initial clue from a notable loose end in the conceptual apparatus associated with Asad’s school, which has quite radically shunned the formalism of the social sciences.¹⁴

A few reflections are needed to explain the significance of this loose end for the theme at hand. It is helpful to go back to Bryan Turner for a moment. He closely interacted with Talal Asad both during their shared endeavors in the 1970s to launch a critique of Orientalism (Salvatore 2021, 50–51) and more recently when both scholars held professorships at the Graduate School of The City University of New York (CUNY). This is why Turner (2023, 69) is well positioned to remind us of how Asad’s criticism of anthropology as a colonial science was instrumental in launching the

project of a new anthropology of Islam (Asad [1986] 2009). While the notion of Islam as a discursive tradition was its centerpiece, the project prominently included a view of "instituted practices" through which "Muslims are inducted as Muslims" (ibid., 21, also quoted in Turner 2023, 69). Now, it is well known that the approach of Asad's school has acquired merits for rightly critiquing the dominance of the Western notion of religion as well as its "secular" counterpart, exposing the way this hegemony worked not just conceptually and discursively but by being nested in colonial and orientalist institutions. However, while highlighting "instituted practices" among Muslims—rather than treating Islam as a reified "religion"—the approach tended to leave unexamined the very processes through which such practices become instituted, that is, the instituting process at the heart of this volume. This omission meant that Asad and his school implicitly relied on an inherited and largely Western notion of "institution," itself as tailor-made to Western disciplining discourses as the category of "religion." Such tacit acceptance of colonial vocabulary limits the project's capacity to interrogate the specific modes of instituting practices in the Islamic ecumene.

An even more problematic consequence is the assumption that practices are already and consistently "instituted," as suggested in the very quotation Turner draws from Asad—an assumption that brackets out the instituting dimension altogether. Shouldn't this Western colonial vocabulary be unpacked and reconstructed not merely through a "smart critique" (which Asad himself often admitted was insufficient) but through the adoption of a consistent Islamic frame? This step cannot be reduced to conceptual engineering, for developing an Islamic frame makes sense only if it blurs, rather than fortifies, the insider-outsider distinction. In other words, what social space could Islam's "discursive tradition" inhabit if it had not effectively instituted practices across centuries? Surely, we should acknowledge that Asad and his school are in excellent company in taking for granted, within the study of Islam, the notion of institution and, even more, the instituting process.¹⁵

The comparative historical sociologist and social theorist¹⁶ Johann P. Arnason (2003, 214) provided a preliminary, if illuminating, insight into this question. He suggested a distinction between a meta-institutional (or, we would say here more dynamically, "instituting") vs. an institutional (or "instituted") dimension of the process of creating and ordering the social bond. The process comprises imaginative and interpretative aspects, including reflections on how these two dimensions relate to one

another—operations that a deceptively compact and seemingly self-sufficient (but in fact quite tautological) concept like “practice,” which became popular in cultural anthropology between the 1970s and 1980s as a reaction against overly systemic and static models of “culture,” risks obscuring. Regarding this question, Asad’s school has unpacked the self-sufficiency of practice by invoking a theological conceptualization of the virtuous self’s dispositions, adapting it from Aquinas through the work of the Catholic moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1988). In this theological shortcircuit, the referral of practice to what Asad—largely following MacIntyre—called a discursive tradition fostered an under-conceptualization of the instituting process itself. The process of instituting practices—or, less tautologically and more sociologically, the instituting process—was particularly well defined and robust in the medieval Catholic tradition of Aquinas via the conception of the Church as a “corporate” institution (a mystical body, ultimately the instituted body of Christ) articulated through medieval canon-law jurists (see Chapter 4). By contrast, as I will argue in this book, the instituting process in the Islamic ecumene unfolded by shunning incorporation. Most crucially, it did not depend on the authority of any Church-like corporate institution, nor did it draw on the political theologies that legitimized such institutions (see Chapter 9). This is why it is highly problematic to extract the institutional bearings of the “Islamic tradition”—and the associated concept of “practice”—from a work like MacIntyre’s, which is explicitly tailored to the theological and institutional universe of medieval Roman Catholicism.

Arnason’s argument on the meta-institutional dimension to be distinguished from specific institutions helps fill the gap, or tighten the loose ends, left open by Asad and his school. The argument suggests that the type of socioreligious knowledge and habitus that enables “practice” in Asad’s sense operates as a meta-institutional—or, better, instituting—force. Arnason’s reflections thus reopen the question of the cultural and, potentially, “religious” (and in the European case, even “theological”) determination of what counts as an institution. From this enlarged viewpoint, one should then be ready to hypothesize that an institution is neither the telos nor the mere facilitator of practice. It follows that, within an Islamic frame—unshaped by anything comparable to Latin Christendom’s systematic theology and its nexus to a political theology that instituted the Church as a “corporation” (see Chapter 4)—what we can trace is a protean, continuous, instituting (and at times destituting) process. In other words, what matters most is the process-like dimension of what we imperfectly (and still

eurocentrically) call an "institution." Following Arnason's lead, in turn inspired by scholars of the caliber of Merleau-Ponty, Castoriadis, and Mauss—who also influenced Roberto Esposito's idea of "instituting life" (2020, 179–181)—we can discern that a possible key to conceptualizing the instituting process writ large, particularly in the Islamic context, lies in a notion of habitus animated by the twin forces of affect and imagination, which I will address in Chapter 2 (see also Bottici 2019).

Such preliminary reflections on the need to stop taking for granted what is an "institution" and its process of formation should be followed by turning to a recent trilogy of Roberto Esposito, on which I will selectively, if critically, draw to clarify the very process-like character of institutional formations in the Islamic ecumene—or, to paraphrase the title of the present volume, how the ecumene itself was instituted in ways that made it "Islamic" (Esposito [2020] 2021b; [2021] 2022; [2023] 2025a). Additionally, this trilogy helps clarify—and provincialize—the meta-institutional force of conventional Western notions of religion as shaped by the institutional history of Latin Christendom and its Church. Here "the Italian difference" becomes visible in its resolute and transparent handling of a political theology deeply ingrained in the history (and success) of Latin Christendom. In parallel, and by reflex, it helps disentangle from that trajectory both "religion" and the instituting process powered by its meta-institutional force. The combined effect of critically reassessing the Latin Christian articulation of "religion" and "institution" is to open alternate vistas that resonate with the Islamic frame, within which, as we will see, it would be moot to seek a sharp distinction between "religion" and "civility." In other words, the "Italian difference" sensitizes us to recognize the "Islamic difference" in articulating—and, to some extent, amalgamating—"religion" and "civility" as the meta-institutional engines of a Janus-faced instituting process.

I am suggesting that, by embracing an Islamic frame through the helping lens of Southern/Italian theory, we are enabled to focus on the nexus—however unstable—between life, civility, and institution without needing to predetermine which meta-institutional dimensions of "religion" can support that axis. Most crucially, this nexus activates an open-ended, non-teleological instituting process. This idea can be fruitful in loosening the grip of the conceptual religio-civilizational straitjacket that Western thought (and not merely what we call Orientalism) has imposed on the study of Islam and the Islamic ecumene. Through this approach, we can understand *'umran* as the expression of a meta-institutional force working through narrative and habitus and the ensuing enactment of life forms, as I will argue in

this book starting from Chapter 2. We will see how the process ultimately reflects a fundamental level of indistinction between what we have been educated to regard as “religion” versus “civility.” It would make little sense to single out either component as the preeminent meta-institutional force—as if we were pitting Durkheim (who privileged religion) against Elias (who focused on civility).¹⁷

This is how Southern/Italian thought offers an original, if robust, conceptual framework that enables us to circumvent Western dichotomous conceptualizations. We should, however, drop the somewhat naive hope that, with just one clever move of deconstruction, we could emancipate ourselves from the Western “religio-civilizational” straitjacket. This straitjacket has long provided the main prism through which non-Western traditions were objectified as comparatively imperfect instantiations of the very model the West tailored to itself (cf. Masuzawa 2005). This is also why, while embracing an Islamic frame in pursuing an alternative approach, our minds cannot be hijacked by an obsessive search for “the right” emic terms to match what an established Western conceptual vocabulary might take as the essence of religion or the ethos of civility, and the processes of instituting them. Rather than chasing isolated concepts to be listed in static encyclopedias, we should search for dynamic networks of key ideas—no doubt associated with emic terms—that designate original, open-ended processes. As an example, while invoking the authority of key thinkers like Ibn Khaldun and drawing on the growing insights of intellectual and institutional history, one could (at least provisionally) identify *‘umran* as the primary semantic terrain marking the instituting dimension of civility via burgeoning, shared life, given its linkages to other key concepts used by Ibn Khaldun and others. Conversely, the combined concepts of *adab-siyasa* (as alluded to in Volume I and further expounded in the present book) can be taken to represent another crucial aspect of what is meant by “civility” in its mildly instituted dimension: namely, as a habitus or cultural technique for managing self–other relations, with the potential to infuse the field of activities that we identify with governance.

As also shown by Ibn Khaldun, religion is not the primal force of social cohesion or solidarity (*‘asabiyya*). Nevertheless, at crucial historical junctures, religion remolds and redirects it via modalities that include, by default, a “civilizing” effect (see Chapter 5). As a concrete instantiation of how to loosen the religio-civilizational straitjacket in the analysis of the Islamic ecumene, Chapter 2 will begin by identifying the religious side of the coin with a concrete corpus, namely, *hadith*, and (political) civility with a distinct

body of knowledge and practice, namely, *adab-siyasa*, moving from their initial distinction toward a mutual dialectic. This process involving the two corpora turned out to ignite, in several periods and locales of the ecumene, a twinning narrative and discursive configuration feeding the fundamental grid of habitualization, which is in turn a condition for the instituting process. This process can be identified, analyzed, and tested much more directly than generic predications of Islam as religion and/or civility (or, even more bluntly and eurocentrically, as civilization) would allow for.

In parallel, one should be prepared to take a few more steps in liberating the idea of the institution and the instituting process from the strictures imposed on it by mainstream Western social theory, which has trapped it in a cloud of symbols generated from within a stubborn (if often unconfessed) Christocentric political theology. This shift is crucial if we are to avoid reinscribing in Islam the very eurocentric assumptions we seek to critique. After examining the two ubiquitous formations of the *tariqa* (Chapter 3) and the *waqf* (Chapter 4), we will turn to an appraisal of how a Khaldunian approach can contribute to reconstructing viable views of the instituting process in the Islamic ecumene (Chapter 5). We will continue by examining how, in the early modern, precolonial era, the process ushered in the production of original forms of statehood, thereby challenging the universality of the Western notion of sovereignty (Chapters 6–8). The last part of the book will deepen the key question initially broached in Volume I, namely, the reassessment of statecraft and statehood as the supposed pinnacles of the instituting process and integrators of the knowledge–power dynamics (Chapter 9 and Conclusion).

Without a focus on how statehood derives from instituting processes, any conceptualization of “sovereignty” in Islamic (or, as we will see, “super-Islamic”) terms would, at best, amount to a worn-out exercise in measuring deficits against Western Westphalian standards. What follows, instead, is an attempt to account for original and multilayered conceptions of rulership whose patterns of legitimation differed from—and were in many respects more complex than—those that culminated in Europe with Westphalian state formations. The trajectories and entanglements that produced early modern sociopolitical formations in the Islamic ecumene yield a multilevel type of statehood, nourished by distinctive institutional practices and notions of sovereignty that crystallized long before Western colonial encroachments on Muslim lands. They are therefore irreducible to the patterns prevailing within a postcolonial nation-state framework struggling to mimic Westphalian norms. Given the historical and geopolitical

centrality of the Islamic ecumene delineated in the previous volume, these processes offer a more plausible benchmark for interregional comparison—one that looks East rather than West. This orientation will hopefully come to fuller fruition in Volume III of the trilogy.¹⁸

Notes

1. This chapter provides the reflexive and methodological scaffolding for the volume. Readers primarily interested in the historical and conceptual argument may proceed directly to Chapter 2, returning here as needed for a discussion of the epistemic foundations of the Islamic frame.
2. Personal communication by the author (January 2021). See also <https://www.acu.edu.au/research-and-enterprise/our-research-institutes/institute-for-humanities-and-social-sciences/our-people/bryan-turner> (accessed 5 July 2025).
3. This study belongs to an intersecting yet distinct project underway (Salvatore and Obuse, forthcoming) envisioned as the volume completing our trilogy.
4. I refrain from reporting here on my visit to ISTAC solely because it pertains more directly to the book project referenced in the preceding footnote.
5. An example would be explaining how the centrality of the Islamic ecumene in human history was obliterated through its capitulation to Western colonial and imperial hegemony.
6. This was addressed even more explicitly in a paper I presented at the College of Islamic Studies, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Doha, in February 2025, as I was completing the final stages of work on this volume (Salvatore 2025).
7. As a prominent example from among the many colleagues and friends whose trajectories likewise begin in this region, I limit myself to mentioning Gennaro Gervasio and Andrea Teti, who through their numerous co-authored works have also foregrounded the influence of Southern/Italian thought, most notably via Gramsci (see, e.g., Gervasio and Teti 2024).
8. The dissertation was later reworked and published (Salvatore 1997) without altering its basic approach.
9. Gramsci has frequently been displaced from this trajectory through an overly facile “pairing” with Foucault in early anglophone engagements with continental critical thought and, later, in some emergent decolonial approaches—including, to an extent, in Edward Said’s own elaborations.
10. It cannot go unmentioned that the same historical conditions that produced the reflexivity of German and Italian sociopolitical thought—namely, their belated nation-state formation and the tension between universality and lateness—also incubated fascism in both contexts, culminating in the

Holocaust. As of autumn 2025, this unresolved legacy has resurfaced in the starkly divergent responses of the two countries to the ethnic cleansing, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocidal violence directed against the Palestinian people—most formally substantiated in Gaza, yet increasingly situated within a broader structure of occupation, forced displacement, and colonial erasure. On the one hand, both governments—supported by compliant media ecosystems—have distinguished themselves in Europe for adopting extreme positions that rationalize or downplay these crimes. Acting in concert, they have obstructed even minimal institutional responses, such as EU-level initiatives to suspend Israel’s access to those parts of the Horizon 2020 research program that support startups involved in military-related technologies, or to reconsider the preferential trade regime afforded under the EU–Israel Association Agreement and its human-rights clauses (to say nothing of their refusal to recognize the state of Palestine). On the other hand, the most glaring sign of continuity with the fascist past in Germany has been the systematic repression of Jewish voices—including students, faculty, and activists—who have denounced the genocide. Both those subjected to repression and numerous critical observers have identified these measures as a reiteration, under formally democratic and hypocritically moralist guises, of antisemitic policies (see Jewish Solidarity Collective, 2025). Far from facilitating redemption from the crimes of national socialism, this pattern has been aptly described as a new form of state antisemitism. As eloquently formulated by Dirk Moses (2025) in a piece published on the website of the American-German Institute:

In trying to exorcise its anti-Semitic demon, German leaders are inadvertently activating it as well as other German demons: in targeting progressive Jews and in using anti-anti-Semitism measures against Arabs and leftists, all the while undermining the *Rechtsstaat* in the name of state power and whiteness. Even Zionist Jews who oppose the Israeli government and its war are not spared. In this way, *Staatsräson* becomes a form of state anti-Semitism, driven by an army of non-Jewish, state-employed anti-Semitism commissioners.

This approach homogenizes Jews as a monolithic entity, ignoring the plurality of Jewish positions and thereby reproducing the very logic that has long underpinned antisemitism. Equally emblematic is the case of the most prominent living German thinker, Jürgen Habermas, who in 2003 helped mobilize a European intellectual front against the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq—an intervention he heralded as marking the emergence of a pan-European public sphere (Esposito 2016, 196), yet has now hastened to defend Israel’s actions in Gaza. His stance reveals how the German, time-honored project of “critical reason,” reaching back to Immanuel Kant, has become ensnared in a distorted ethos of *Staatsräson* and guilt management, today perpetuated with the active complicity of university leadership. On the racial underpinnings of Kant’s universalism, see Bernasconi

(2011); on the neocolonial ethnocentrism in Habermas’s own project, see Ahmad (2025).

In a different trajectory—and despite a government whose main coalition party’s very logo, a tricolor flame, is directly linked to post-war neo-fascist movements—the Italian grassroots has displayed a markedly different sensibility. Within the stream of Southern/Italian thought that informs this volume, Roberto Esposito’s latest intervention (2025b) insists that the fascist legacy cannot be sealed off as a past aberration in Western history. Rather, it must be confronted as a self-perpetuating metaphysical machine of modern power, one that captures bodies and life itself (see Chapter 9). As Rocco Ronchi (2025a) notes, Esposito descends into the darkness of these dynamics to expose an enduring matrix of Western modern rationality which, as he and others argue (cf. Chambers 2025), is inherently colonial and often genocidal. This emphasis on confronting rather than compartmentalizing the legacies of modern power directly resonates with the epistemic concern of this chapter: namely, how unresolved historical formations shape the conditions under which knowledge, critique, and political imagination become possible. This inflection of sociopolitical thought found a striking echo in Italy, the only European country where solidarity with the Palestinian people reached the scale of a national civic uprising. Early October 2025 witnessed multi-million demonstrations after the Israeli seizure of the Global Sumud Flotilla; a nationwide general strike in late November followed, with Genoa dockworkers hosting speeches by Greta Thunberg and Francesca Albanese—the Campania-born Southern Italian jurist who rose to global prominence for her unrelenting denunciation of the genocide as UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur. As the leading Sicily-born social scientist Donatella Della Porta emphasized in her analyses and public interventions, the mobilization brought together dockworkers, students, grassroots unions, pacifists, feminists, and faith communities (see also Ronchi 2025b). City councils—including that of Rome—raised the Palestinian flag in open defiance of the government. Such forms of civic insurgency demonstrate how alternative repertoires of political agency can emerge from subaltern or liminal sites—precisely the kinds of sites that, as argued throughout this chapter, enable epistemic repositioning beyond hegemonic frames. By contrast, the harsh repression of comparable mobilizations in Germany, as Della Porta argued, reproduced rather than overcame fascist-colonial patterns of domination (Della Porta 2024; 2025). Francesca Albanese likewise documented these dynamics in her 2025 report, identifying Germany as an “enabling” state whose military and political support for Israel contributes to what she terms a system of genocide—a characterization resonant with the ICJ case *Nicaragua v. Germany*, which alleges German breaches of the Genocide Convention. It is therefore unsurprising that several of Albanese’s speeches in Germany, including at universities, were cancelled or obstructed. During her February 2025

visit, she reported a pervasive climate of intimidation: venues changed at the last minute, heavy policing, vandalized event sites, and threats of arrest under German laws governing speech and assembly (Steinberg 2025). These contrasting trajectories between Italy and Germany thus provide an instructive lens through which to view the broader methodological argument of this chapter: namely, that epistemic repositioning is not an abstract stance but is conditioned by concrete histories of power, repression, and civic imagination. Where the German response reveals the closure of epistemic space through *Staatsräson* and guilt-management, the Italian case—however fragile—illustrates openings for alternative frames of understanding and critique.

My main concern here lies less in chronicling these movements of resistance than in showing how they articulate the only genuinely antifascist stance capable of denouncing the crime of genocide as integral to the reenactment of fascism and antisemitism—now reconfigured within a new geopolitical constellation—as forms of organized violence against the *damnés de la terre*. The genocidal violence exercised against the Palestinian people is both a culmination and a warning of further climaxes in fascist crimes, including those directed against migrants from the Global South. It is in this context that Southern/Italian thought—also thanks to its lucidity in diagnosing fascism as the belated, if predictable, spin-off of the metaphysical machine of Western political theology—emerges as a privileged, living critique of domination. It offers conceptual resources for problematizing statehood and the lopsided colonial normativity built into Western modernity. By exposing the continuities between the theopolitical machine, fascist repression, and the biopolitical rationalities that enabled the rise of the West and its colonial-imperial domination, this trajectory of thought retains a distinctive diagnostic power. Further discussions of these continuities—including the comparable Japanese case—will be developed in Volume III of this trilogy.

11. All major works of Esposito have been translated into English. In this volume, I will quote from English translations whenever possible; otherwise, I will reference the original Italian publications.
12. Yet as a sociologist I became accustomed to bringing this stream of scholarship into dialogue with another that has only recently attracted sustained attention in anglophone circles. This is the work associated with a fellow sociologist, the late Franco Cassano ([1996] 2012) from the University of Bari in Apulia. He termed it *pensiero meridiano*—“meridional” or “Southern” thought—in a deliberately provocative pun that inverts what, after the violent Italian unification (that is, the annexation of the South), came to be known as the *questione meridionale*, the Southern question. That label encapsulated the hegemonic Northern Italian view that the South was inherently backward (rather than rendered so through domestic colonial subjugation) and therefore in need of being civilized and developed. Where the *questione meridionale* casts the South as a bundle of

deficits to be remedied, *pensiero meridiano* refigures it as an epistemic resource—a vantage point from which to rethink categories, challenge hegemonic binaries, and articulate modes of thought not predetermined by Northern or “Western” norms. In contrast to the *questione meridionale*, which positions the South as a passive object of corrective intervention, *pensiero meridiano* foregrounds the South as a locus of conceptual autonomy and as a generator of alternative intellectual itineraries capable of unsettling the inherited epistemic grid.

13. The attentive reader will have noticed that these concepts have also—if not primarily—been popularized in the English-speaking world by another Italian thinker, this time from Rome: Giorgio Agamben. My decision to focus instead on Esposito reflects both the role he has played in my own intellectual trajectory and the shared sociocultural predicament of Naples and Southern Italy outlined above. We were also affiliated with the same university in Naples, though not at the same time.
14. My experience and appreciation of the Asadian school were not only mediated by readings, but also by sustained exchanges with members of its “second generation,” which proved formative for my own trajectory toward articulating an Islamic frame at a crucial stage. Foremost among these interlocutors were scholars of the caliber of Saba Mahmood, Charles Hirschkind, and Hussein Agrama, with whom I had frequent and searching conversations during overlapping periods of research in Cairo in the late 1990s.
15. A recent and particularly notable instance of this omission can be found in an otherwise valuable discussion of Sufi institutions (Green 2021).
16. Among mainstream Western sociologists, Arnason’s sustained engagement with Islam (and with Hodgson) renders him comparable only to Bryan Turner. This affinity also explains why Arnason acted at various stages of my intellectual trajectory as a mentor, and why our paths intersected in several collaborative undertakings.
17. In this sense, I am revising what I wrote in Volume I (Salvatore 2016, 7), where—under the influence of Arnason, himself drawing on Durkheim—I attributed a meta-institutional force to a robustly resilient “religion” that, as it unfolded through the knowledge–power equation, generated patterns of civility only as a derivative effect.
18. An important recent contribution by Hendrik Spruyt (2020) attempts to move comparative analysis beyond Western models of statehood. Yet it does so within analytical parameters that ultimately reproduce a “religio-civilizational” straitjacket and remain calibrated to the expectations of an International Relations audience. What thereby drops out of view is precisely the instituting process: the complex sociopolitical and cultural labor through which forms of rule take shape, stabilize, and become intelligible—a labor that cannot be reduced to the classificatory schemas of International Relations nor to the abstracted comparison of “civilizations.” A similar pattern recurs, albeit with different emphases, in Ayşe Zarakol’s more recent reconstruction (2022) of an

"Asian" or "Eastern" international state system preceding Westphalia and structured around post-Mongol polities. Situated even more firmly than Spruyt's contribution within the disciplinary limits of International Relations, this work tends to confine the genesis of statehood to dynastic organization and elite power structures, thereby underplaying the broader sociopolitical and cultural processes from which statehood emerges. Unlike Spruyt, however, Zarakol does discern how Khaldunian questions resonated within the early modern empires of the Islamic ecumene and how they gestured toward what I will call, in Chapters 5–9, the political cosmology animating their forms of statehood. Yet even here the relevance of these questions tends to be primarily situated within the sphere of dynastic ideology, which is taken to provide the principal contours of a non- or pre-Westphalian "world order." Seen from the vantage point of an Islamic frame—attuned to the meta-institutional dynamics of *umran* and to the instituting processes that exceed both dynastic politics and the conceptual grids of International Relations—these otherwise valuable studies highlight, by contrast, what is at stake in shifting the analytical focus from civilizations and dynasties to the open-ended processes through which life, civility, and institutions co-constitute one another.

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