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Does The Legacy of Colonialism Define Islamism? Analyzing Hallaq's Critique of Islamic Political Modernity

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Danyal Ahmad*
Universitas Islam International Indonesia, Indonesia
Corresponding Author: danyal.ahmad@uiii.ac.id

Manzoor Ahmed Kalwar
Universitas Islam International Indonesia, Indonesia

Hafiza Sana Rehman Khan
International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan

Bashir Ahmed Kalwar
University of Lusofona, Lisbon, Portugal

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Wael Hallaq's argument that contemporary Islamist movements are structurally shaped by colonial modernity and that the modern Islamic state is a hybrid formation rooted in Western political epistemologies rather than an extension of classical Islamic governance. While compelling, these framing risks underemphasize the heterogeneity, agency, and adaptive capacities of Muslim reformist actors. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and a decolonial framework, the study interrogates the ideological and epistemic assumptions underlying Hallaq's "impossibility thesis." The textual analysis reveals that his lexical, modal, and metaphorical choices construct a narrative of structural closure that minimizes reformist creativity. In contrast, the discursive-practice analysis shows how his arguments circulate within Western academic paradigms, which can unintentionally reinforce epistemic hierarchies. The socio-ideological analysis demonstrates that, although Hallaq exposes the colonial genealogy of the modern state, his emphasis on rupture sometimes obscures how Islamist movements creatively reinterpret *shūrā* (consultation), *maṣlaḥah* (public interest), and *khilāfah* (caliphate), within contemporary political contexts. The findings argue for a more nuanced account of Islamic political agency and situate Islamism within broader debates on decolonial praxis, epistemic plurality, and emerging frameworks such as Islamic multiple modernities, ethical-political subjectivity, and multi-scalar engagements with state power.

Keywords: Islamism, Coloniality, Hallaq, Islamic State, Decolonization.

Introduction

The legacy of colonialism continues to influence the political and intellectual developments in Muslim society. It is particularly clear in post-colonial Islamist reformist groups. The emergence of these movements and the rupture caused by colonial dominance are profoundly interconnected. In addition

to changing the political boundaries, colonialism also transformed the legal and epistemological frameworks of societies with most Muslims. The project of Islamic reform in the aftermath of empire speaks the language of modernity, statehood, and legal logic. As Hallaq explains, these factors are deeply implicated in colonial histories of power and knowledge, as also discussed by Hallaq.[1]

Additionally, the entanglement mentioned above has generated a critical debate. This debate centers on the extent to which Islamist movements now constitute an autonomous expression of Islamic political agency. Furthermore, to what extent are they influenced by the secular and colonial paradigms that they appear to oppose?

Moreover, the crucial thesis of Wael B. Hallaq is at the forefront of these investigations. He presents a compelling argument that the modern Islamic state is not a natural heir of classical Islam. He argues that this phenomenon is a multifaceted enclave that has been mostly grafted onto the Western systems of law and politics. According to him, it is the very architecture of the modern state that is defined as a type of bureaucratic rationality, centralized sovereignty, and codified legal systems.

Additionally, for him, the characteristics of the modern state are a product of colonial modernity and are therefore intrinsically incompatible with the ethical and epistemic pillars of the Islamic tradition. He asserts that the attempts of current Islamist reformists to Islamize the state can only be limited by the coloniality structural logics. This kind of effort makes Islamist projects imitative instead of emancipatory.[2]

In the abovementioned regard, Hallaq's critique has raised very strong counterarguments. The analytical depth of the criticism and its implications for interpreting Muslim reformist agency are the concerns that these challenges raise. Critics contend that his strong emphasis on rupture may, at times, lend itself to interpretations that overstate Islamism's dependence on colonial disruption. In this way, it ignores the way Islamist movements can draw on and reshape pre-modern concepts of Islam.

These include *shūrā*[3] (consultation), *khilāfah*[4] (caliphate), and *maṣlaḥah*[5] (public interest) in new political forms. These are also discussed by scholars such as Asad[6] and Moosa.[7] For example, the Jamaat-e-Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood do not merely emulate colonial structures; they purposefully frame current projects through inherited discourses, thereby claiming tradition and its contemporary relevance.

The recent scholarship has highlighted the fact that Islamism cannot be perceived as a simple reproduction of the inherited colonial patterns. These researchers suggest considering Islamism as a type of strategic action, which is determined by the practicality of choosing the institutional and political circumstances of post-colonial statehood. They argue that Islamist reformists often do not compromise ideologically when using modern institutions, such as parliaments, political parties, and constitutions. Instead, it is a rational and dynamic approach. Therefore, this plan aims to navigate the opportunities and limitations of modern governance landscapes.

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[1] Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 6–13.

[2] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 21–25.

[3] A consultative mechanism in Islamic political thought in which collective deliberation is employed to formulate decisions, grounded in the ethical principle of communal participation and accountability.

[4] A moral–political steward entrusted with maintaining justice and implementing the objectives of the sharīʿah, historically referring to the leader of the Muslim polity tasked with administering communal affairs on behalf of the ummah.

[5] A juristic principle that prioritizes public welfare and the preservation of essential human interests when deriving legal rulings, provided such benefits do not contradict explicit textual evidence.

[6] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford University Press, 2003), 14–22, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804783095.

[7] Ebrahim Moosa, ed., *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 192–95.

Salman Sayyid conceptualizes Islamism as a decolonial gesture. He sees Islamism in the context of modernity as the attempt of Muslim actors to reclaim political subjectivity and agency.[8] This movement, therefore, as described by Sayyid, goes beyond the simplistic definition or characterization of Islamism as mimicry. This viewpoint emphasizes that Islamist reformists are innovative, idealistic, and future-oriented. Thus, the idea that colonial disturbance can have total influence over them is weak. Instead, they are seen as dynamic forces that may negotiate and reshape post-colonial politics.

Additionally, critics highlight the risk of homogenizing the diversity within Muslim reformism. By positing a general structural entrapment in colonial modernity, Hallaq's framework may obscure the pluralism and internal contestations that characterize contemporary Islamic political thought. Reformist thinkers such as Rachid Ghannouchi, Muhammad Iqbal, and Ali Shariati represent divergent trajectories.[9] Some are deeply critical of Western models; others are more reconciliatory. Also, some are ethics-based, while others are law-centered. Framing such diverse trajectories as uniformly mimetic may inadvertently flatten their internal diversity. Additionally, it may overlook important ethical and political innovations. Thus, it erases the creative and pluralistic dimensions of Muslim reformist agency.

Moreover, some scholars, such as Kecia Ali[10] and Lena Salaymeh,[11] have cautioned against the romanticization of pre-colonial Islamic governance that sometimes underpins Hallaq's critique. They argue that pre-modern Islamic systems were themselves marked by hierarchies, exclusions, and contestations. Also, ethical authenticity cannot be exclusively located in the past. These perspectives, therefore, call for a more nuanced understanding of both historical and contemporary Islamic governance.

The paper analyzes the main thesis of Wael Hallaq by posing the question: How does Hallaq's theorization of the modern state give rise to a structural blind spot that blurs the agency, diversity, and heterogeneity of contemporary Islamist and Muslim reformist actors? Hallaq acknowledges that Muslims continue to reform and pursue ethical renewal. However, he maintains that such efforts remain structurally impossible within the epistemic, legal, and bureaucratic architecture of the modern nation-state. This article argues that framing impossibility as an ontological condition risks collapsing the plural strategies, political imaginations, and discursive innovations of Islamists into a single, predetermined outcome. Hence, the research problem here is not whether Hallaq's critique of the state is convincing or not, but rather whether his theoretical framing inadvertently restricts the analysis space to recognize reformist agency in post-colonial Muslim societies.

In this context, the theoretical question guiding the research in this paper is as follows: To what extent does Hallaq's theorization of the modern state produce a conceptual blind spot that limits his capacity to explain the heterogeneity, creativity, and agency of contemporary Muslim reformist thought? Although Hallaq presents a compelling account of how Islamism can be traced to the structural legacies of colonial modernity, this study asks whether his impossibility thesis inadvertently narrows the analytical scope for understanding how reformist actors reinterpret, negotiate, or subvert those very structures.

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[8] Salman Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonization and World Order* (Hurst Publishers, 2022), 67–72.

[9] Rachid Ghannouchi, *Public Freedoms in the Islamic State: = Al-Hurriyyat al-ʿAmma Fi-l-Dawla al-Islamiyya*, trans. David L. Johnston, World Thought in Translation (Yale University Press, 2022), 15–22, https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300252859; Muhammad Iqbal and Javed Majeed, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. M. Saeed Sheikh, Encountering Traditions (Stanford University Press, 2013), 56–62; Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam : Lectures*, with Internet Archive (Berkeley : Mizan Press, 1979), 101–10, http://archive.org/details/onsociologyofisl0000shar.

[10] Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qurʾan, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*, Reprint (Oneworld, 2012), 41–45.

[11] Lena Salaymeh, *The Beginnings of Islamic Law: Late Antique Islamicate Legal Traditions* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 112–17, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316459485.

Moreover, this work had the potential to promote decolonization, Islamic political philosophy, and epistemic justice, making it interesting even in its current state. It identifies the plurality and agency of Muslim reformist movements, while simultaneously criticizing the merits and shortcomings of Hallaq's analysis. Through this approach, the study will offer more complex and multidimensional insights into Islamic political subjectivity in the post-colonial era.

Literature Review and CDA–Decolonial Method: Engaging Hallaq and His Interlocutors

In addition to changing paradigms, the recent literature about Islamism, Muslim reformism, and the impact of colonialism is marked by intense debates. The conducted studies of Islamism are mainly based on the orientalist views, such as the work of Bernard Lewis.[12] He positioned the Islamist movements as regressive and primitive and painted them as irrational and essentially incompatible with modernity. In such perspectives, Islamism was considered a retrogression that consolidated the superiority of Western civilization and thus rationalized colonial and post-colonial interventions.

These essentialist views were refuted by post-colonial theorists such as Edward Said and Talal Asad. Many other researchers argue that Islamism can be comprehensible only if it is perceived as having disrupted colonial modernity. It did not merely change the power structure across political borders but also transformed the epistemic and ethical premises of the Muslim world.

In continuation of the above, many scholars have recently left behind the binaries. Islamist movements are diverse and adaptable. They do not view Islamism as monolithic or merely reactive. Recent studies, including one by Moosa, underline its potential for creativity, bargaining, and engagement with contemporary political forms.[13] Islamist actors use traditional Islamic notions like *shūrā*, *khilāfah*, and *maṣlaḥah* for their projects. It refers to efforts that integrate tradition with modernity. Therefore, this literature has shifted the focus from authenticity versus mimicry to the plural trajectories of Islamic reformism in the post-colonial era.

Within the above-mentioned context, Hallaq's *The Impossible State* has emerged as a pivotal intervention. In his view, the contemporary Islamic state is not a natural outgrowth of classical Islamic governance. On the contrary, for him, it is a hybrid formation that is fundamentally embedded in Western political epistemologies and secular legal paradigms. He believes that the modern state's structural design is based on bureaucratic rationality, centralized sovereignty, and codified legal systems. These forces are derived from colonial modernity. For this reason, according to him, it is structurally in opposition to the Islamic tradition's ethics and knowledge. In his view, contemporary Islamist reformist projects, despite their intentions, are unable to escape the paradigms of the Western nation-state.[14]

One of the many strengths of Hallaq's work is its genealogical analysis. The modern state originates from colonialism, and it is incompatible with Islamic ethical and legal traditions. His criticism has prompted a re-examination of the underlying assumptions of secular modernization and Islamist reformism. However, many scholars have raised several serious concerns about it. Scholars, such as Talal Asad and Moosa, argue that this kind of emphasis on rupture may lead to interpretations that overemphasize Islamism's dependence on colonial disruption at the expense of its internal dynamism, overlooking the continuities and creative adaptability that linger in Islamic political thought.[15]

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[12] Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam : Holy War and Unholy Terror*, with Internet Archive (New York : Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004), http://archive.org/details/crisisofislam00bern.
[13] Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*.
[14] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 21–45.
[15] Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, 67–72.

On the other hand, scholars such as Ali and Salaymeh note that this reliance on Western critical theory, particularly Foucauldian genealogy and Weberian sociology, raises questions about the epistemic foundations of the critique. There is also concern that Hallaq's idealization of pre-modern Islamic governance may romanticize the past. It also possibly obscures the hierarchies and contestations that characterized historical Muslim societies.

Besides his dependence on Weberian sociology and Foucauldian genealogy, Hallaq implicitly relies on Said's concept of how Orientalism has been re-negotiated and how it is based on secular-humanist assumptions. Although Hallaq does not mention Edward Said directly, his interpretation of the modern state's role in expanding its influence to all parts of the world through colonialism is quite intriguing. It repeats Said's point that Western power creates epistemic categories in which the "Orient" is rendered governable, intelligible, and inferior.

Hallaq's insistence that modern state institutions "cannot operate without a bureaucratic-legal structure that is inherently secular"[16] further aligns his work with Said's critique of the secular humanist tradition, which universalizes Western norms while marginalizing non-Western political imaginaries. The call to replace the moral subject with the legal-bureaucratic subject, as advocated by Hallaq in his analysis, resonates with the idea of secular humanism as a disciplinary power that objectifies and controls Muslim subjectivity, as put forward by Said. In this way, Hallaq can be read as an intellectual lineage that intersects with Foucault and Weber, as well as Said's approach, in which the convergence of Orientalism, secular humanism, and colonial statecraft structures the epistemic limits of his critiques.

Although Hallaq presents his critique of the idea of post-colonial genealogy, grounding it in Weberian sociological theory and Foucauldian power analytics, his work also intersects with important insights from decolonial theory. Similar to the coloniality of power in the work of Quijano and the epistemic disobedience in the work of Mignolo, Hallaq reveals how the modern state universalizes Eurocentric categories of law, ethics, and subjectivity. His point that the contemporary state is not capable of functioning without a bureaucratic-legal apparatus that is secular in nature[17] is similar to the decolonial argument that Western modernity imposes its epistemic way of thinking as the sole horizon of political rationality.

However, in contrast to decolonial theory, which focuses on the potential of subaltern agency and epistemic decolonization, Hallaq's impossibility thesis tends towards structural entrapment. It creates tension between his analytical critique of colonial modernity and the decolonial commitment to plural, insurgent, and creative epistemic futures. It is precisely where his work intersects and diverges from decolonial thought. Thus, it makes the dialogue between the two frameworks both productive and necessary.

The question of Muslim political agency is central to the work of scholars such as Asad,[18] Fazlur Rahman,[19] and Moosa.[20] Asad's anthropological interventions have challenged static and essentialist accounts of Islam. He emphasizes the historical and discursive construction of Islamic traditions and the ongoing negotiation of religious authority and political subjectivity.[21] Moreover, Fazlur Rahman's works on Islamic modernism are also a significant contribution. It sheds light on the moral and intellectual aspects inherent in tradition, enabling adaptation and renewal. Specifically, it suggests the values of *ijtihād*[22] and *maṣlaahah*.

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[16] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 68.
[17] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 68.
[18] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.
[19] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1982).
[20] Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*.
[21] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.
[22] The disciplined process of independent juristic reasoning employed by qualified scholars to derive legal judgments in cases

Furthermore, Moosa conducted this investigation. In offering an analysis of how modern reform thinkers address not only Islamic texts but also modern political theory, Moosa expresses new visions of ethical and political community. Collectively, these scholars challenge the definition of Islamism as being reactive and imitative. Rather, they foreground pluralism, creativity, and agency, which are characteristic of Muslim reformist thinking.

Another significant contribution comes from Andrew F. March, whose works on Islamic political ethics provide a sophisticated account of the reasoning of reformism that directly complicates Hallaq's impossibility thesis. In *Islam and Liberal Citizenship*, March demonstrates that Muslim thinkers employ context-sensitive ethical reasoning, utilizing *maṣlaḥah*, juristic discretion, and public reason to negotiate their position within contemporary political regimes.

Similarly, in *The Caliphate of Man,* modern Islamist theorists describe popular sovereignty as a form of collective moral agency, rather than mimicking the forms of state seen in the West. These claims demonstrate that contemporary Islamist thinkers reinterpret classical Islamic ideas imaginatively to come up with new political imaginaries. The interpretive plurality as well as practical reasoning highlighted by March thus foregrounds these types of agency, heterogeneity, and creative political thought, precisely what Hallaq's structural determinism tends to obscure.

There is a rich existing literature around Hallaq's discourse of the modern state. However, a significant gap remains in analyzing his claim systematically through the lens of CDA and decolonial theory. Although his arguments have been subjected to scrutiny by many other researchers based on content and the genealogies of his ideas, little has been done to examine the strategies of discourse, rhetorical devices, and epistemic positioning that constitute his critique of Islamism. In turn, the lack of correspondence between the three-dimensional application of Fairclough's CDA framework to the Hallaq texts and the need to analyze how his arguments are produced, circulated, and received in academic and political discourses are present.

Moreover, the current scholarship has not fully challenged the extent to which Hallaq's discourse reproduces or resists the colonial logic it seeks to critique. A CDA-informed methodology would help identify the complexities and contradictions of his critique, thereby explaining its consequences within the broader domain of Islamic political thought and decolonial praxis. This kind of analysis would focus on the textual, discursive, and social layers of his arguments.

To analyze these debates rigorously, this study integrates the above intellectual trajectories with a methodological lens rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and decolonial theory. The conceptual interventions of Hallaq and his interlocutors, therefore, not only provide the substantive literature for this inquiry but also constitute the discursive field through which the methodological framework operates. Accordingly, the following methodological approach is presented as a continuation of, rather than a departure from, the intellectual debates outlined above.

The study is anchored in a robust decolonial theoretical framework. Specifically, it draws on the foundational concepts of *coloniality of power* by Quijano and *epistemic disobedience* by Mignolo. According to Quijano, colonialism continues to have an impact on Western epistemologies, social hierarchies, and cultural standards, in addition to its political dominance. According to him, this persists in structuring knowledge and power relations worldwide. This approach is essential for examining the ways in which post-colonial Muslim cultures continue to struggle with the colonial systems they inherited, as these shape their political imaginaries and legal systems, particularly in the context of Islamic reformism.

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where explicit textual guidance is absent.

Moreover, Mignolo's notion of epistemic disobedience complements Quijano's analysis. His concept advocates for the active refusal of Eurocentric standards as the exclusive arbiters of legitimate knowledge.[23] He calls for the reclamation and amplification of marginalized epistemologies. In this way, it positions them as acts of resistance against the colonial matrix of power. It has particular relevance to the debates on Islamism that see the boundaries of authenticity, tradition, and modernity contested. It is also needed because Muslim reformist thought is often evaluated against Western theoretical indicators.

Building on the above-mentioned foundations, Sayyid's work redefines Islamism as that particular decolonial gesture. He emphasizes the agency of Muslim actors as they reclaim political subjectivity within the constraints and possibilities of modernity. Sayyid expresses disagreement with the limitation of Islamism to mere copying. On the contrary, he discusses its potential as a site of epistemic innovation and resistance.[24]

Additionally, the decolonial scholar Lena Salaymeh further extends this critique. She questions secular epistemologies that inform Western and Islamic legal histories. She asks academics to focus on the pluralism and contestation of Islamic traditions.[25]

This structure enables a critical examination of Hallaq's argument in post-colonial Muslim societies. It places him in the broader context of continuing epistemic struggles, preempting the question of whether Hallaq's critique of Islamism as a product of colonial modernity challenges. Or, whether it inadvertently reproduces the very colonial logic that it seeks to critique itself. Thus, the study is positioned to explore the content of Hallaq's arguments. Also, it engages with these aforementioned theorists, revealing their epistemic location and implications for Islamic political thought and agency.

For gathering data, the empirical foundation of this research is a carefully constructed corpus from Hallaq's *"The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament."*[26] This book serves as the principal text. Additionally, secondary literature is incorporated to contextualize and critically engage with Hallaq's discourse, including works by Asad,[27] Moosa,[28] Rahman,[29] Sayyid,[30] and Salaymeh.[31] Additionally, it draws on critiques from feminist and post-colonial scholars who interrogate both the assumptions and implications of Hallaq's framing. Consequently, this dialogical approach allows the research to map the broader discursive field in which Hallaq's arguments circulate and are contested.

For analysis, the methodological core of this study is CDA. Fairclough's three-dimensional model follows this. The ability to question discursive features makes this object of study worthy of consideration. Furthermore, this is particularly notable, as it challenges the manner in which discourse is imbued within and formative of wider social and ideological structures.

The first dimension of textual analysis examines the lexical choices, rhetoric, and key terms employed by Hallaq, such as "modern state," *"sharīʿah,"* "ethics," and "colonial constructs," which are key terms. Consequently, the layer attempts to understand how these choices position Islamism and its perception of legitimacy, authenticity, and agency.

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[23] Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Latin America Otherwise Languages, Empires, Nations (Duke University Press, 2011), 54–62, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394501.
[24] Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 67–72.
[25] Salaymeh, *The Beginnings of Islamic Law*, 112–117.
[26] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 21–45.
[27] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.
[28] Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*.
[29] Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*.
[30] Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*.
[31] Salaymeh, *The Beginnings of Islamic Law*.

The second-dimensional analysis focuses on the discursive practice. This section explores how Hallaq's texts are produced, circulated, and received within academic, intellectual, and political contexts. It explores intertextual relations of Hallaq's works and engages with the classical sources of Islam. Additionally, it contextualizes it in relation to contemporary reformist thinkers and the criticism of Western theory. Additionally, it examines how various groups utilize, discuss, or respond to his criticism.

The third dimension of social practice contextualizes Hallaq's discourse within the broader socio-political and historical context of post-colonial Muslim societies. It examines how his criticism relates to debates about colonialism, Islamophobia, and the production of knowledge globally. Also, it considers the implications for the empowerment or marginalization of Muslim reformist agency.

Discussion

As articulated most comprehensively in his book *The Impossible State*, Hallaq's perspective on Islamism is anchored in the central claim that the modern Islamic state is not an authentic continuation of classical Islamic governance. For him, it is a structural product of colonial modernity and secular legal frameworks. He argues that the very concept of an "Islamic state" is a contradiction in terms because the modern state is inherently secular, centralized, and disciplinary in nature. It emerged in Europe and was exported globally through colonialism. He contends that this structure is fundamentally incompatible with the ethical and epistemic foundations of the Islamic tradition. For him, this has historically operated through a decentralized, jurist-led system grounded in *sharīʿah* and ethical autonomy, rather than bureaucratic legalism.

Moreover, Hallaq's critique of the modern nation-state is rooted in his analysis of its secular and disciplinary character. He maintains that the state's centralization of legal authority, its monopoly on violence, and its bureaucratic apparatus are all products of a Western epistemological paradigm. This privileges legal-rational authority over ethical and communal forms of governance. The nation-state's genealogy, according to him, is inseparable from the colonial encounter. It imposed these forms on Muslim societies and, in this way, restructured their political and legal imaginaries.[32]

Furthermore, central to Hallaq's argument is an important claim. He claims that contemporary Islamist reform movements are engaged in an essentially imitative project, despite their intentions. He contends that these movements adopt the institutional and conceptual tools of colonial governance, such as constitutions, parliaments, codified laws, or even the rhetoric of rights. However, they attempt to "Islamize" them.

Additionally, Hallaq criticizes one underlying contradiction. According to him, the forms and logics of the modern state are so deeply embedded in Western secular and colonial epistemologies. Thus, any effort to infuse them with Islamic content ultimately results in mimicry rather than genuine reform.[33] He is particularly critical of the way Islamist projects treat *sharīʿah* as a body of positive law to be codified and enforced by the state. Rather, he considers it as an ethical-legal tradition rooted in juristic interpretation, communal practice, and moral subjectivity.

Moreover, Hallaq argues that the transformation of *sharīʿah* into state law represents a profound colonial deformation of the Islamic legal tradition. For him, the classical Islamic governance was not based on the state's imposition of law. However, it was on the cultivation of ethical subjects through a decentralized network of scholars and communities. The modern state's reduction of *sharīʿah* to a set of codified statutes marks a collapse of the tradition's core principles, stripped of its ethical and

[32] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 36–44.
[33] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 45–56.

epistemic foundations. Thus, he argues that this legal positivism is not only alien to the Islamic tradition but is itself a legacy of colonial legal engineering.[34]

Furthermore, one additional key philosophical dimension of Hallaq's critique is his distinction between the moral subject and the legal subject. He asserts that pre-modern Islamic governance was fundamentally oriented toward the formation of the moral subject. In this way, according to this, an individual whose ethical self-cultivation was central to the social and legal order. The modern state, in contrast with its legal-rational bureaucracy, produces the legal subject. Thus, according to this, an individual is defined by compliance with codified statutes and external regulations. Therefore, Hallaq argues that this shift is at the heart of the incompatibility between Islamic governance and the modern state.[35]

To further develop this point, Hallaq employs a genealogical approach. Michel Foucault influences this. In this way, he traces how colonial power restructured Muslim societies at the level of institutions, knowledge, and subjectivity. He contends that even well-intentioned Muslim reformists, in his view, often struggle to escape the epistemic frameworks that shape the modern state fully. Hallaq suggests that their projects are circumscribed by the very colonial logic they seek to overcome, rendering true epistemic autonomy elusive.[36]

Lexical Framing and Rhetorical Strategies in Hallaq's Critique of Islamism

A textual analysis of *The Impossible State* by Weal Hallaq reveals that his impossibility thesis is not only theoretically constructed but also linguistically produced through specific lexical, modal, and syntactic patterns. Based on a focused corpus of Chapters 1, 3, and 7, this CDA examines how the phrasing of the Hallaq wording reinforces a conceptual framing of reformist agency as structurally foreclosed. In Chapter 1, he says, for example, that "it is impossible to adopt modern state structures and still think, act, or personify like a pre-modern subject." This application of the absolute adjective "impossible", which is not softened with the modal qualifiers like might, may, or could, creates a discursive field of closure. The same lexical absolutism is present earlier when Hallaq characterizes "the multilayered contradiction inherent in any concept of 'Islamic state"[37] as inherent as opposed to contingent. This kind of continuous use of totalizing terms creates a discursive mood in which any act of Islamic governance is linguistically pre-empted.

The modality of prose by Hallaq also reinforces structural determinism. He employs high-certainty, epistemically maximal constructions throughout the sampled chapters. As an example, he explains that the modern state "cannot operate without a bureaucratic-legal structure that is inherently secular".[38] Additionally, he argues that Muslims "can only reproduce the modern state, not transcend it".[39] By using the words "cannot" and "only" on several occasions, his language limits the discursive space to other possible readings. Additionally, it restricts the imagination of new/hybrid forms of Islamic political agendas. These modal structures present the modern state not as historically emergent, but as an unavoidable epistemic horizon controlling all possible political futures.

This depiction of inevitability is further enhanced by the transitivity patterns in Hallaq's writing. He frequently employs passive constructions that obscure the agency of colonialism in his writing. For example, he states that the modern state "was exported globally through colonialism".[40] The sentence

[34] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 80–91.
[35] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 100–108.
[36] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 120–131.
[37] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 17.
[38] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 68.
[39] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 70.
[40] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 13.

form naturalizes the dominance of colonial state forms because it foregrounds processes, but not agents, thereby presenting an autonomous force as opposed to the action of particular historical actors or choices. Meanwhile, when Hallaq describes pre-modern Islamic governance, he emphasizes ethical subjectivity and juristic agency. He asserts that classical *sharīʿah* governance "produced a moral subject whose ethical formation was the center of political life."[41] This sharp syntactic contrast—between de-agentivized accounts of colonial imposition and agent-oriented portrayals of pre-modern government is linguistically reinforced to the rupture he is trying to pre-empt.

Additionally, Hallaq's practices of nominalization also play a significant discursive role. His abstractness in the use of nouns, in most cases, which includes terms such as "colonial modernity", "legal codification", and "bureaucratic governance", turns dynamic historical processes into fixed objects. Through this reification of these abstractions, he constructs the colonial-modern structures to be monolithic, fixed, and impermeable. This rhetorical strategy reinforces the sense that modern reformists operate within a closed system, with limited possibilities for significant reinterpretation or negotiation.

Moreover, another level to this textual economy is provided by intertextual references. Hallaq always appeals to Weberian and Foucauldian genealogies. For example, he claims that the modern state's "moral and epistemic foundations contradict those of the *sharīʿah* at every level."[42] He places his argument in these Western analytical frameworks, and therefore, he grounds his critique in Euro-American categories of statehood, ethics, and legality. This intertextual stance implicitly privileges Western theoretical languages as the standard form of diagnosing Islamic political actualities. Thus, it serves to reinforce the central blind spot identified in this study: the marginalization of indigenous reformist agency and interpretive plurality.

This binary is further enhanced by the oppositional lexical fields that Hallaq develops between the terms "state" and "*sharīʿah*". He identifies the state by the terms of bureaucracy, centralization, and disciplinary power.[43] *Sharīʿah*, on the other hand, is characterized as moral, organic, and community-oriented. This opposition linguistically erases the historical fluidity and inner difference in the state tradition as well as the *sharīʿah* tradition, producing essentialized categories that can only intersect through contradiction. The contrast also restricts the conceptual space for perceiving reformist co-operations, which re-read classical ideas like *shūrā*, *maṣlaḥah*, or *siyāsah* in terms of contemporary institutional limits.

Moreover, metaphor also shapes the textual structure of inevitability. In chapter 7, Hallaq writes that modern reforms "gutted the *sharīʿah* of its ethical core"[44] and that the Muslim societies are currently living in a "deformed political order".[45] These metaphors of mutilation and deformation construct Islamic political modernity as irrevocably corrupted. They linguistically foreclose the interpretive creativity observed in present-day Islamist movements. It ultimately tends to incorporate ethical vocabularies into the modern institutional forms. The metaphors, instead, suggest that a reformist project is a necessarily degraded imitation as opposed to a site of innovation.

Taken together, these lexical, modal, and metaphorical patterns construct a discursive environment. In this environment, the impossibility of Islamic governance is portrayed as structurally and epistemically inevitable. This CDA therefore explains why Hallaq's theoretical framing is likely to generate the conceptual blind spot that has been identified in this study. Some of the language

[41] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 15.
[42] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 18.
[43] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 13–14.
[44] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 17.
[45] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 120.

structures in his argument pose a risk of shrinking the discursive space for imagining alternative forms of reformist possibilities. Although Hallaq acknowledges that Muslims still strive to achieve renewal of their ethics, his textual framing creates a structurally predetermined nature of such initiatives, limiting the landscapes of the reformist agency and neutralizing the heterogeneity of modern Islamic political thought.

Discursive Analysis of Hallaq's Critique

Hallaq's critique of Islamism has sparked significant discourse in various intellectual and political contexts. How his arguments are produced, circulated, and received determines the intricate mechanisms by which they are disseminated. In his scholarly work, particularly *The Impossible State*, he composes from the epistemic position of a scholar educated in Western traditions of scholarship and critical theory, while engaging deeply with Islamic law, ethics, and political thought. This positionality shapes how he navigates between Islamic intellectual history and Western critiques of modernity. This interaction fosters a critical and academic attitude, informed by an extensive background in Western educational systems. Moreover, his academic positioning allows him to navigate and bridge the Islamic intellectual traditions and the Western critical theory.

Additionally, his analysis is grounded in his profound engagement with Islamic intellectual traditions, yet he remains analytically detached due to his education in Western critical theory. Hence, his intellectual career is on the borderland of these two different traditions of epistemology. It allows him to scrutinize contemporary Islamic political formations with a fine fraction of careful examination.

The attitude of reformist Muslim intellectuals towards Hallaq's critique is quite ambiguous. He highlights the genealogical analysis of the colonial nature of the modern state and the thesis about the irreconcilability of the modern state with the Islamic traditions of ethical and legal thought. He resonates with those who are critical of the uncritical adoption of Western models in Muslim societies. However, many reformist scholars contest his characterization of Islamism as primarily mimetic. In this context, they argue that such a framing risks overlooking the diverse forms of agency, creativity, and heterogeneity within contemporary Muslim political projects.

An example of this is the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami. These movements are often said to use pre-modern ethical vocabularies. These vocabularies include *shūrā* (consultative decision-making), *khalīfah* (moral-political stewardship), and *maṣlaḥah* (juristic principle of public welfare). They frame modern political projects that are not simply mimetic but are creative rearticulations of classical concepts within new constraints.[46] In these readings, the focus on the rupture emphasized by Hallaq is underestimated due to the strategic engagements, ethical innovations, and diversity of reformist methodologies that define contemporary Muslim reformism.

To further this discussion, many other researchers interpret Hallaq's work as a sophisticated intervention that complicates simplistic binaries of tradition and modernity. Many argue that it complicates simplistic binaries of tradition and modernity. Other orientalists, though, risk appropriating his critique to reinforce the narrative of Islam's incompatibility with modernity, unknowingly contributing to the Eurocentric rationales that Hallaq attempts to combat. Thus, these dynamic highlights the risks inherent in the circulation of his arguments within academic and policy-making circles because his critique can be selectively mobilized to either critique or reinforce dominant paradigms in these circles.

Additionally, decolonial critics engage Hallaq's work with both appreciation and skepticism. They acknowledge his powerful exposure of colonial legacies in shaping Muslim political imaginaries. They add, nevertheless, that the structural determinism of his impossibility thesis creates a conceptual blind

[46] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 14–22; Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, 192–95.

spot that constrains acknowledgement of Muslim agency and of the heterogeneity of reformist strategies.

For instance, to deepen the previous analysis, Salman Sayyid frames Islamism as a "decolonial gesture". He emphasizes that reformist movements often adopt modern institutions not out of ideological surrender but as tactical responses to the realities of post-colonial governance.[47]According to this perspective, Islamist reformism can be viewed as a border thinking, where Muslim actors can bargain and maneuver around established epistemic structures creatively.[48] Thus, it works from within dominant frameworks to challenge and expand their epistemic boundaries. In this way, Sayyid and others argue that Hallaq's critique risks delegitimizing the very forms of agency and resistance that decolonial theory seeks to empower.

In the recurring counterargument, Hallaq's framework homogenizes Muslim reformism. Therefore, it suggests a general structural entrapment in colonial modernity. Moreover, reformist thinkers such as Ghannouchi represent diverse ideological trajectories. Some of these are deeply critical of the West, while others are more reconciliatory in nature. Also, some are ethics-based while others are law-centered. To label all these as "mimics" of colonial forms may unintentionally obscure or underrepresent the creative plurality within Islamic political thought.

Andrew F. March reinforces this argument by demonstrating that modern Muslim reformists are engaging in various levels of moral reasoning that cannot be reduced to imitation or a form of structural dependency. According to March, Islamic political thinking in the present-day world can be defined as an extended arena of moral reasoning, where reformists can reinterpret classical ideas to adapt them to contemporary political challenges. When analyzing Islamist theories of popular sovereignty, March demonstrates that theorists such as al-Banna, Maududi, and Ghannouchi develop new models of moral and political responsibility. It neither replicates Western political norms nor reverts to static pre-modern templates. These interpretive inventions directly challenge Hallaq's framing of Islamism as structurally foreclosed, revealing instead a tradition of dynamism that can give rise to new possibilities in politics. In this way, March's work offers both empirical and philosophical evidence of the very heterogeneity and agency that the impossibility thesis by Hallaq tends to marginalize.

To deepen this analysis, another significant critique is the romanticization of pre-colonial Islamic governance. Hallaq's conception of classical Islamic rule as ethically cohesive may overlook internal discussions, hierarchies, and competitions that were already navigated by pre-modern Muslim societies.

Ali and Salaymeh, feminist and critical Muslim thinkers, caution against treating *sharīʿah* as a monolithic or static ethical order. They challenge the assumption that pre-colonial systems were inherently more authentic or just.[49]

Moreover, critics argue that a genuinely decolonial approach should empower, not delegitimize, Muslim reformist projects. By presenting their projects as structurally foreclosed, the impossibility thesis developed by Hallaq could inadvertently obscure the diversity of strategies by which modern Muslim actors reimagine, negotiate, and reformulate Islamic political possibilities. Decolonial theorists urge a focus on how Muslims resist coloniality from within modern forms. Scholars, including Sayyid and Mignolo, negotiate, subvert, and transform inherited logics rather than being wholly determined by them.[50]

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[47] Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 67–72.
[48] Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 54–62.
[49] Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 41–45; Salaymeh, *The Beginnings of Islamic Law*, 112–17.
[50] Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 67–72; Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 54–62.

Furthermore, a further point of contention is Hallaq's reliance on Western critical theory. Particularly, he relies on Foucauldian genealogy and Weberian sociology.[51] These frameworks provide powerful tools for analyzing the modern state. Nevertheless, critics question how Eurocentrism, as a critique, is justified on Western theoretical foundations, including those of Foucault and Weber, as this may create the same tendencies of epistemic asymmetries that Hallaq attempts to address. Additionally, someone can also construct a critique by asking why Hallaq privileges European standards for defining "modernity," "ethics," or "law" and whether this approach forecloses the possibility of genuinely indigenous Islamic alternatives.

In Hallaq's analysis, grassroots Islamism and popular legitimacy are also neglected. His focus on intellectual and state-level reformism overlooks the ways in which many Islamist movements derive their legitimacy and relevance from bottom-up mobilizations. These engage local ethical, cultural, and spiritual vocabularies. Examples—from Turkey AKP in its early years, Tunisia (Ennahda), and Sudan (1960s)—demonstrate that Islamism is often built from lived realities. Rather, it did not rely on elite political engineering but rather responded to the immediate needs and aspirations of Muslim communities, as presented by Sayyid in his study.[52]

Hallaq considers Islamism as a response to post-colonial failure and presents another layer of critique. Many Islamist movements do not arise as mere continuations of colonial logic. But some of these arise as moral responses to the failures of post-colonial secular elites, those who adopted Western models but failed to deliver justice or authenticity. For instance, movements such as Hizb Ut-Tahrir or the early phases of the Iranian Revolution articulate discourses of economic justice, spiritual renewal, and anti-imperialism. Thus, they position themselves as alternatives to both colonial and post-colonial state paradigms. This point of analysis aligns with March's view of Muslim reformists who develop political ethics in response to not only colonial legacies but also the failures of post-colonial administrations.

To further elaborate, the critique of Hallaq's assumption that modernity is synonymous with Western modernity is also salient. Scholars of "multiple modernities," such as Eisenstadt and Bhambra, argue that Muslim societies—like their East Asian or Latin American counterparts—are generating hybrid and context-sensitive versions of modernity. These approaches reinforce the thesis that Muslim reformist movements are not only reactive but also proactive in creating alternative and pluralized ways of Islamic modernity. In this view, Islamist reformism is part of an attempt to forge "Islamic modernities" that are not simply derivative. However, these are negotiated and innovative. Moosa also makes this discussion.[53]

Moreover, Hallaq's sharp binary between "pre-modern Islamic governance" and "modern statehood" is further challenged. It has been challenged by those, such as Asad and Rahman, who point to the temporal dynamism of Islamic thought[54]. Islamic political theory has historically demonstrated flexibility and adaptability. It evolves across empires, sultanates, caliphates, and now nation-states. Treating pre-colonial governance as static misrepresents the plural and evolving nature of *fiqh,*[55] *siyāsah,*[56] and ethical reasoning.

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[51] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 120–131.
[52] Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 67–72.
[53] Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, 192–195.
[54] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 14–22; Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 3–12.
[55] The human, interpretive understanding of the sharīʿah, produced through systematic reasoning, which results in detailed legal rulings governing ritual, ethical, and social matters.
[56] The discretionary sphere of governance in Islamic political jurisprudence through which authorities implement policies to secure justice, welfare, and public order.

Furthermore, in Hallaq's analysis, critics also highlight the absence of internal critique within Islamist thought. Many Islamist thinkers, such as Abul A'la Maududi and Ghannouchi, engage in self-criticism and reflexivity. These acknowledge the limits of state-based Islam. Additionally, these promote models of civil society, moral community, and limited government. These discussions reflect internal reform and adaptation, rather than just dependence on colonial rule, one of the important points that March puts forward in his works on Islamic political ethics.

Finally, an additional counterpoint is that Hallaq positions Islamism as fundamentally reactive. He considers it a response to colonial disruption. At the same time, many Islamist projects are aspirational and future-oriented. These movements often envision utopian futures rooted in Islamic values, rather than seeking a nostalgic return to the past or mimicking Western influences. This futurity challenges colonial temporality and opens up space for decolonial world-building, a concept also suggested by Sayyid.

Intertextually, Hallaq's engagement with both classical Islamic tradition and modern Islamic thinkers is marked by a selective appropriation. He draws extensively on pre-modern juristic sources. In this way, he reconstructs an idealized vision of Islamic governance.[57] Additionally, he critiques contemporary reformists for their entanglement in colonial paradigms. His analysis, however, sometimes underplays the extent to which modern Islamic thinkers themselves engage critically with both tradition and modernity. These negotiate multiple inheritances, which shape new intellectual trajectories.

Overall, the discursive practice of the critique presented by Hallaq is worth considering. A dynamic interplay of production, circulation, and contestation defines it. His role as a scholar with training in Western institutions enables him to bridge several worlds of epistemology, but also exposes his arguments to intensive questioning by an extremely diverse group of interlocutors. His critique convincingly demonstrates that the colonial past determines the formation of modern Islamic politics. However, the fact that his analysis is received in different ways also suggests how the epistemic authority, reformist agency, and plurality of Muslim political futures continue to be debated.

The multiplicity of counterarguments demonstrates that the discipline remains vibrant, and Muslim reformist thought continues to negotiate, resist, and reshape the boundaries of tradition, modernity, and decolonial praxis.

Hallaq's Critique within Socio-Ideological Debates

The social practice analysis of Hallaq's critique of Islamism should be put in the context of the broader knowledge production of Islamism and political Islam. The post-9/11 academic environment, increased securitization, and lasting Western anxieties have a tremendous impact on the production of knowledge in the field.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, security paradigms have dominated the global discourse about Islam and Muslim political agency. This framing often portrays Islamism as a threat to the existence of liberal democracies and the international order. The securitized milieu has influenced popular opinion and had a significant impact on academic and policy discussions, a fact that Hallaq himself acknowledges. Such circumstances preempt issues of incompatibility, validity, and the perceived threats of Islamic political subjectivity. Moreover, Hallaq's argument operates within and responds to the post-9/11 discursive environment.

His argument regarding the structural impossibility of the Islamic state engages with dominant anxieties surrounding political Islam. Occasionally, it is even read in such lenses when it is not intended

[57] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 163–175.

to be. Parts of his argument, consequently, can be selectively mobilized to portray Islamism as politically unviable or perpetually out of sync with modern state structures, even though Hallaq's own focus is on the structural logic of the state rather than on Islamism's moral orientation. He foregrounds the colonial genealogical history of the state. He challenges a simplistic binarial duality of Islam and the West. Still, his framing may inadvertently be read as implying that genuine Islamic governance is increasingly difficult to envision within modern state structures.

Additionally, this aforementioned positioning can be utilized as a two-sided intervention. On the one hand, it reveals how much colonial power was twisted in the formation of the current political patterns of Muslims. In contrast, it may unintentionally reinforce a sense of structural fatalism. Thus, it possibly can obscure the variety of strategies by which Muslim reformist actors negotiate, reinterpret, and contest inherited political orders.

As a result, the influence of Hallaq's discourse is deeply ambivalent on Muslim political thought. His rigorous critique empowers reformist agencies and provides a robust intellectual framework that critiques the superficial Islamization of Western political forms. Also, it resists the co-optation of Islamic concepts by authoritarian or neoliberal regimes. His genealogical treatment of the historical transformation of *sharīʿah* reveals the epistemic violence embedded in the colonial restructuring of law. Instead of restoring an ethical system that had been lost, his discussion anticipates the ways in which ethical reasoning was reshaped under colonialism.[58] In this regard, Hallaq's work can be regarded as a useful source for scholars who redefine Islamic governance beyond the boundaries of the nation-state and positivist law.

Additionally, many critics, including Andrew F. March, argue that Hallaq's intervention risks constraining rather than empowering Muslim reformist agency. He frames Islamism as structurally entrapped within colonial and secular paradigms. Thus, his framework may leave limited analytical space for fully appreciating the plural, creative, and adaptive strategies that Muslim actors have historically deployed to respond to new political realities. Reformist thinkers and movements, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, have demonstrated a capacity to draw on pre-modern ethical vocabularies and to rearticulate them within modern contexts. Therefore, this challenges the reduction of their projects to mere mimicry or imitation. Critics argue that Hallaq's framework deemphasizes the dynamism and reflexivity of Islamic political thought. In some cases, it reduces its internal diversity by focusing on rupture rather than continuity because it emphasizes rupture over continuity.

The question of colonial continuities is central to evaluating whether Hallaq's critique resists or reproduces Eurocentric epistemes. His sustained critique of the colonial origins of the modern state[59] aligns with Mignolo's notion of epistemic disobedience[60] to the extent that it challenges the naturalization of Eurocentric legal-political forms.

Foucault probably influences Hallaq's genealogical approach. It seeks to denaturalize the state and to expose the contingent, historically situated processes by which colonial power reshaped Muslim societies. His work, in this respect, aligns with decolonial efforts to provincialize Europe and to reclaim subaltern epistemologies.

Furthermore, Hallaq has a reliance on Western critical theory, particularly Foucauldian genealogy and Weberian sociology. When a researcher critically examines the case, he might feel that the investigation casts serious doubts about the epistemic premises of the critique that Hallaq arrives at. This dependence on Western theoretical tools, however, raises the question of whether critiquing

[58] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 80–91.
[59] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 120–131.
[60] Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 54–62.

Eurocentrism within Eurocentric frameworks is problematic, as it tends to reproduce some of the epistemic hierarchies that the criticism seeks to destabilize.

To further elaborate on this discussion, his academic positionality further complicates the tension: his Western training situates him within certain epistemic traditions, even as his scholarship deeply engages Islamic intellectual history. On the one hand, this duality enables him to bridge between several traditions, but on the other, it presents him with the pressures and expectations of Western academic discourse.[61]

The rise of Islamophobia can mark the broader social context in which the arguments presented by Hallaq circulate. It is characterized by the securitization of Muslim identities, as well as the continued marginalization of Muslim political agency in the world discourse. In this context, the question of the skepticism of the viability of an Islamic state expressed by Hallaq can be co-opted to reinforce arguments that Islamism and modernity are inherently incompatible. However, that is not the theme of his argument. One might interpret it as an appeal to radical reconsideration and epistemic renewal. Still, his criticism may be used to enforce the marginalization of Muslim voices, thus making them unable to engage in meaningful politics and intellectual life.

Besides the above, the post-9/11 context has intensified the demand for moderation of Muslim voices and the need to have forms of political Islam that are perceived to be in line with liberal requirements and Western interests. The critique by Hallaq reveals the colonial logic behind these demands, and this is a productive resource for resisting the co-optation and domestication of Islamic political subjectivity. However, when his arguments are interpreted as closing the option of any possible Islamic alternative, they may inadvertently reinforce mechanisms of epistemic exclusion, as they narrow the conceptual space available for recognizing reformist agency and heterogeneity—precisely the issue highlighted in this study. Sayyid also suspected, as discussed in such cases.[62]

Even more nuance is provided by Andrew F. March, demonstrating that current Islamist ethical arguments often appear as a reaction to colonial pasts as well as directly to the failures of post-colonial states. According to March, reformist intellectuals develop moral and political paradigms that respond to justice, legitimacy, and community responsibility in a manner that transcends both colonial and secular-nationalist paradigms. The result of his analysis is that Muslim actors articulate political ethics based on obligations to the community, divine sovereignty, and public welfare, which cannot be reflected in the dichotomy of authenticity versus mimicry that Hallaq's thesis tends to produce. March's work, therefore, provides a critical counterbalance to Hallaq by foregrounding how Muslim reformists exercise agency through situated ethical judgment. Thus, it contests colonial-modern structures while simultaneously constructing new normative visions of political life.

In summary, the social practice surrounding this critique of Hallaq is an intricate entanglement of knowledge, power, and representation, within which the discourse of modern Islamism can be discussed. His work challenges dominant narratives by exposing the colonial genealogies of the modern state. Also, it challenges it by destabilizing uncritical assumptions embedded in policy and academic discourse. However, by focusing on structural rupture and basing his analysis on Western theoretical tools, his framework can replicate some of the Eurocentric assumptions of epistemology, thereby limiting the analytic space within which the heterogeneity, creativity, and agency of Muslim reformist actors can be identified. Thus, the impact of Hallaq's critique depends on how it is interpreted and mobilized—either as a resource for epistemic resistance and ethical reform, or as a rationale that unintentionally reinforces the marginalization of Muslim political subjectivity.

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[61] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 163–175.
[62] Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 67–72.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the influential thesis proposed by Wael B. Hallaq, which argues that contemporary Islamist reformist movements are structurally shaped by colonial modernity and secular laws, and that the contemporary Islamic state is a hybrid construction based on Western political epistemologies, rather than a continuum of classical Islamic government. Using a multilayered model of Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper sheds light on both the strengths and weaknesses of Hallaq's argument.

The findings suggest that Hallaq's genealogical critique offers a powerful examination of the colonial origins and epistemic violence underlying the modern state's constitution. Nevertheless, a more detailed textual examination also indicates that the linguistic and discursive structure of his impossibility thesis can sometimes be interpreted in ways that understate the diversity and interpretive creativity of contemporary Islamist thought. This framing is at risk of creäte a conceptual blind spot that obscures the heterogeneity, creativity, and agency that Muslim reformist actors use to negotiate, reinterpret, and challenge contemporary political formations.

This paper argues that Islamism can not be completely attributed to a product of colonial disruption. Rather, it can be interpreted as an evolving, contested, and multifaceted tradition that constantly navigates between traditional Islamic values and the realities of contemporary politics. Although Hallaq's critique is a significant form of epistemic disobedience against Eurocentric paradigms, aspects of his framework tend to emphasize rupture more strongly than continuity, which may overshadow other dimensions of reformist thought.

The wider implications for decolonial studies and Islamic politics are important. The article advocates for a more epistemologically plural and analytically capacious perspective, in other words, one that recognizes Muslim reformists' approach to structures of power in a diverse, situated, and internally contestable manner. This practice also invites scholars to look beyond the authenticity/imitation dichotomy and other dichotomies to examine how Muslim actors strategically reinterpret, subvert, and transform both colonial and Islamic legacies.

To move beyond the limitations of the impossibility thesis as developed by Hallaq, this paper proposes several concrete alternative analytical models. First, by relying on the framework of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000; Bhambra 2007), academics can conceptualize Islamic-based political projects as generating distinct, context-dependent modernities, rather than derivative responses to a singular Western model. Second, the tradition of Islamic political ethics—as articulated by Fazlur Rahman’s theory of moral renewal, Moosa’s ethical formation, and March’s analyses of practical reasoning is also valuable. It offers a productive framework for examining how Muslim actors construct political authority, communal obligation, and public welfare beyond statist paradigms.

Finally, decolonial border thoughts offer methodological instruments to foreground how Muslim reformists negotiate power within the modern framework and, at the same time, create new epistemic horizons. By combining these frameworks, we gain a broader prism through which to study Islamism. It enables scholars to analyze Islamism not as structurally foreclosed but as a site of ongoing ethical innovation, political creativity, and decolonial possibility. Thus, the perspective advanced in this study foregrounds the plurality, creativity, and contested nature of Muslim political imaginations, which enriches current debates on decolonial praxis, epistemic justice, and Islamic political subjectivity. It emphasizes the way reformist actors are engaged in negotiating, reinterpreting, and reconfiguring Islamic and colonial legacies in modern landscapes that are informed by coloniality, securitization, and global power asymmetries.

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