



## Sufism, Attention and Digital Colonization

### *Tasavvuf, Dikkat ve Dijital Sömürgecilik*

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#### Abstract

The contemporary world is being transformed by digitization with social life, politics and economics all in a process of flux. In this article we examine three key concepts, namely attention, the commons and digital colonialism. Attention economics argues that we have far too much information, but not enough attention. The received wisdom goes that attention has become a commodity in extremely short supply compared to the huge quantity of information available. However, the notion of digital commons allows us to imagine attention as a shared resource to be available to all, just as water or air that must be. The notion of digital colonialism allows us to imagine data and attention as resources which huge companies are extracting from human consciousness just as oil and coal are extracted from the earth. Attention is harvested and data extracted from humankind's activities on digital media to generate profits for giant tech companies such as *Meta* and *Google*. However, the deeply rooted 'mind and body cultivation' practices of traditional cultures provide another perspective on attention which may not be in such short supply. Indeed, these suggest a different model of attention based on abundance and not scarcity. Foucault refers to such practices as 'technologies of the self'. This article suggests that Sufi theory and practice can provide creative solutions to the over-solicitation of our minds by the global digital media platforms. The Sufi practice of *tawajjuh* (turning towards the eternal often through the intermediary form of a guide) allows us to consider the art of orientating attention spiritually as a technology beneficial to the self and others. Furthermore, Sufi practices, while active in knowledge production, are also underpinned by a theory of knowledge, *ma'rifa*. An object of knowledge for the social sciences, they are very much active in the production of knowledge. From a normative point of view, the development of a dialogue between Sufism and the social sciences may allow us to imagine the generative abundance rather than an inevitable scarcity of attention.

**Keywords:** Sufism, attention, data colonialism, commons, epistemology, technologies of the self.

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## Öz

Günümüz dünyası dijitalleşme yoluyla dönüşüyor. Sosyal yaşam, siyaset ve ekonomi devamlı bir akışkanlık içinde. Biz de bu çalışmada konuyla ilgili üç anahtar kavramı incelemeye çalışacağız: Dikkat, müşterekler ve dijital sömürgecilik. Dikkat ekonomisi, etrafımızda çok fazla sayıda bilgi olduğunu, ancak bunun aksine bir meta haline gelen ve kendisine oldukça nadir rastlanan dikkatin yetersiz kaldığı tezini savunur. Bir diğer deyişle, mevcut devasa bilgi miktarı ile dikkat oranı arasında bir uyumsuzluk vardır. Dijital müşterekler, dikkati, hava veya su gibi insanların ortak paylaşması gereken bir kaynak olarak tasavvur etmemize imkan verir. Dijital sömürgecilik, tıpkı petrol ve kömürün toprak altından çıkartılarak insanlığın hizmetine sunulması gibi, büyük miktarda verinin ve dikkatin büyük şirketler tarafından insan bilincinden çıkartılan kaynaklar olduğunu düşünmemizi sağlar. Artık Meta ve Google gibi dev teknoloji şirketlerinin kârları için dikkat odakları toplanıp içeriden gerekli veriler çıkarılmakta. Bu anlamda tasavvuf teorisi ve pratiği, konuyla ilgili sorunlara yaratıcı çözümler ve farklı bakış açıları getirebilir. Sufilerin “dikkati yönetme”ye ilişkin uygulamaları bize farklı bir bakış açısı sağlar. Foucault’nun “benlik teknolojileri” olarak adlandırdığı şey ile dikkati, mânevî olarak yönlendirme sanatı olan tasavvuftaki *teveccüh* uygulaması arasında bir ilişki kurmamıza zemin hazırlar. Sufi pratikleri, bilgi üretiminde etkin bir rol oynar; bu anlamda tasavvuf *marifet* denilen bir bilgi teorisine de sahiptir. Bu pratikler, antropoloji gibi sosyal bilim dalları için sadece birer bilgi nesnesi değil, aynı zamanda bilgi üretiminde de aktif rol oynayan pratiklerdir. Tasavvuf ve sosyal bilimler arasında bu anlamda kurulacak bir diyalog bize, dikkat kıtlığı yerine bolluğu imkanını sunabilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tasavvuf, dikkat, dijital sömürgecilik, müşterekler, benlik teknolojileri.

*“Attention, taken to its highest degree,  
is the same thing as prayer”<sup>1</sup>*

Simone Weil

## Introduction: the Importance of Attention

In this paper we compare two different conceptions of attention, one based on an economy of scarcity and the other on an economy of abundance, two different perceptions of the commons, one material and the other immaterial and two different conceptions of power, one of domination and one rooted in the generation of energy and productive force through spiritual practice. Faced with the digital transformation of our world, we wish to compare knowledge derived from reason and mental logic with knowledge derived from the heart and spiritual practice. How can different epistemologies speak to each other in the context of a radical transformation of society and habits provoked by the new communication technologies of the twenty-first century?

<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil: *An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles, (London: Virago Press, 1986).

The present-day digital communications revolution is often compared to the huge changes wrought by print from the fifteenth century onwards. The book reached unimagined publics, new forms of media appeared. Today, digitization is transforming all sectors of society. Money is being replaced by digital payment systems, books by electronic texts, physical classes by online ones, public libraries by virtual learning commons and letters by email. Capitalism is increasingly dealing in dematerialized commodities such as options, data or online platforms. Gazing at the screens of their smart phones, human beings spend endless hours online; digital devices are available to vast swathes of the world’s population. With this new digital literacy, based in social media such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Pinterest*, *Tumblr*, people have endless opportunities to make images and distribute them. They are often images of themselves. The spread of pathologies such as anorexia and bulimia are attributed by some to the obsession with obtaining others’ attention through excessive cultivation of the self-image. Sufism, the interior branch of Islam which claims to be the knowledge of the heart and of the imag-

ination, would seem to present an ethical practice of developing love, deep generosity and a spiritual attention towards others. How can a dialogue be built between such different yet co-existing bodies of knowledge, between two different practices of attention?

The world's contemporary culture, economy and society are increasingly dominated by highly mediated communication and a materialism facilitated by digitization, brands, the smart phone and social media platforms. Zuboff describes this paradigm as surveillance capitalism and delineates how powerful corporations can predict and control human behavior by managing attention.<sup>2</sup> Much of our economy is now concentrated not in material objects but in abstract networks and social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Bit Coin*, *Google*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *Tik Tok*. Many recent contemporary mega-fortunes have been built through controlling these media platforms. *Uber* is a major provider of urban transport but owns no vehicles; *Airbnb* controls much of the world's temporary accommodation but owns no property. These organizations encourage, monitor, and manage digital habits and transform them into economic value. These habits are in fact habits of attention which generate vast quantities of valuable data. Therefore, the study of communication networks is absolutely central to understanding power and domination, and much work has sought to understand this process. This has confronted the social sciences with new challenges and driven a relatively new discipline, communications, to the center of our intellectual life.

This is all happening at an accelerated pace. The world has seen nothing like it since the invention of moveable type hence the printed book by Gutenberg in Europe in the fifteenth century. Print transformed religion, political and economic systems and, along with other technological developments, led ultimately to the colonization of much of the planet

2 See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, (London: Profile Books, 2019).

by European monarchies and eventually to the hegemony of the North Atlantic powers. Elizabeth Eisenstein claimed that print transformed capitalism and set the stage for the new world of print capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson argued that the nation state was sustained by new media forms, notably the novel and the newspaper.<sup>4</sup> Today, just as when print was invented six hundred years ago, few if any can see where the digital revolution is taking us. In all the speculation about the digital revolution, it is very clear that our world is in a state of mutation, but towards what sort of state we remain very unsure.

The scholar Manuel Castells emphasizes that communications is the discipline central to understanding power relations. Following Marshall McLuhan, he argues that media shapes our behavior due to the very nature of a given medium, a position summed up by McLuhan's famous adage "The medium is the message". This is most clear in the development of technologies underpinning the organization of our societies with global multi-modal networks.<sup>5</sup> Castells argues this creates what he calls a network society and that networks have become our model regardless of the content they communicate.

"The struggle for power is a struggle for our minds, and our minds function in a communication environment. Communication, because of the kind of society we are in, has become the core field of social sciences at large."<sup>6</sup> This struggle for our minds is linked to the digital networks we use. Our use of digital networks can be monitored and recorded to produce data which can in turn be sold. This usage is highly managed, stimulated, and encouraged. The data so generated is then used to modify habits

3 See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (2nd ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

4 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (revised and extended ed.), (London: Verso, 1991).

5 See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

6 Terhi Rantanen, "The Message is the Medium: An Interview with Manuel Castells", *Global Media and Communication* 1, 2 (2005): 135–147.

and encourage new ones. Recent years have provided spectacular examples of this, for example, the Cambridge Analytica scandal which broke in 2018, revealing the scale to which data obtained from social media had been used to identify potential voters in the USA's presidential elections, manipulate their emotions and hence change their voting intentions.<sup>7</sup>

Such manipulations show major changes in the ways in which human beings are being trained to behave and imagine their place in a world where emotional reactions, attention and subjective self-awareness can be constantly solicited and managed. These new patterns of media domination are superseding older religious, ethical and political ways of forming and training the self and, as Castells said, of shaping minds. Social scientists have a contribution to make to our understanding of the current situation through the study of how different notions of the self may arise, examining how individual practices sit in relationship to the media and social structures.<sup>8</sup>

Spiritual and religious practices that once lay at the core of the self's formation have been slowly eroded by media habits. This point was made by Hegel in the mid-nineteenth century when he said that newspapers were the modern man's prayers.<sup>9</sup> Many sociologists, most notably Max Weber, argued for a link between spiritual education (the practices central to Protestantism, Taoism and Judaism) and the formation of the self.<sup>10</sup> Now however media

and internet play a similar role in the cultivation of personal orientation.

In what ways can human beings find autonomy from the increasingly hegemonic practices of manipulation of modern capitalism? If we agree that human subjectivity is increasingly subject to shaping by communications networks, social scientists must ask how individuals may gain agency within these digitally shaped social structures.

One way to the subject's freedom might be a return to traditional practices of self-training. In his article of 2022, Muhammad Faruque takes a comparative approach to notions of the self (or the non self), comparing modern notions of the self with traditional ones, notably Islamic and Sufi ones. A similar approach is taken by Ganeri in his 2017 book in which he develops a specific theory of attention and self linked to ancient Buddhist philosophy. All of this work participates in the slow emergence of a post-enlightenment theory of the self by which traditional systems of knowledge are linked to modern theories developed by the social and cognitive sciences.

Before we move to look at Sufism in this light, let us consider the ways in which spiritual practice is linked to the human subject's autonomy in the work of Michel Foucault.

### Foucault and Technologies of the Self

Foucault's monumental scholarship showed how language and linguistic forms controlled the thought and self-perception of humans, how they shape what they believe to be true. The existence of spiritual transformation of the human being was certainly not one of his concerns. In his work, truth found its place in discourse and allowed power to be exercised. However, to the great surprise of Foucauldians at the end of his life, Foucault took a sharp turn and acknowledged the role of spiritual practice in creating power or agency. He described

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*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2002).

7 See Christopher Wylie, *Mindf\*ck: Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America* (New York: Random House, 2019).

8 Jenny Odell's popular book of 2019 is an example of how we might react to the ever persistent calls of the digital platforms. See Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York: Melville House, 2019).

9 "Reading the morning newspaper is the realist's morning prayer. One orients one's attitude toward the world either by God or by what the world is. The former gives as much security as the latter, in that one knows how one stands." *Miscellaneous Writings of G.W.F. Hegel*, translated by Jon Bartley Stewart, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 247.

10 See Max Weber, Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells,

this as “technologies of the self” when he theorized a fourfold system underpinning the production of power. Firstly, power could be established by physical force or domination, secondly, through industrial production and thirdly by media and sign systems. He forged a new category: “technologies of the self”, that is the capacity for individuals to access divine contemplation and hence free themselves from domination. He expressed this succinctly in a lecture given at the University of Vermont in 1982:

The technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. The soul cannot know itself except by looking at itself in a similar element, a mirror. Thus, it must contemplate the divine element. In this divine contemplation, the soul will be able to discover rules serve as a basis for behavior and political action.<sup>11</sup>

Foucault, whose previous work was largely about genealogies of systems of domination and marginalization, of punishment and surveillance, opened a whole new field of inquiry. These techniques of the self are similar to Sufi practices of meditative contemplation. Foucault opened a new way to consider the role of spiritual practice in theorizing the social sphere and thinking about empowerment. What is particularly interesting is that it uses a number of terms, among them ‘mirror of the self’, ‘soul’, and ‘divine contemplation’, all foreign to Foucault’s earlier work. This opening to the discussion of spiritual practices by the major theoretician of power of the late twentieth century authorizes us to consider Sufism and Sufi practices outside their original confessional religious confines and think of them in relationship to contemporary social theory.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, Lectures at University of Vermont, October 1982, in *Technologies of the Self*, (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

Foucault demonstrates that in classical Greece and Rome, individuals under the guidance of a teacher used such activities to transform themselves through spiritual practices to develop a certain power which freed them from domination. Foucault’s purpose is to historicize, showing how the concept of the self has changed over time. He is concerned to trace the history of practices of the self in the classical period from the ancient Greeks and Romans, from Plato to the Stoics to the Neo-Platonists and Albinus. He is particularly interested in the relationship between Marcus Aurelius and his teacher Fronto which bears all the hallmarks of a dialogue between spiritual teacher and disciple which involves the empowerment of the individual by mediative and spiritual practices.

In this article, we wish to consider how individuals can achieve autonomy from a communications system that increasingly dominates them and explore the nature of the intellectual instruments available to them for a process of autonomization. In Foucault’s terms we live in a world where power operates largely through media and sign systems. We have described how this is linked to surveillance capitalism. Foucault allows us to think of emancipation through disciplining and managing attention, by power brought through the soul looking at the divine element in contemplation. So even in a world where there is little agency, there is the possibility of freeing oneself from domination and acquiring agency through attention and contemplation.

### **Sufism: a Technology of the Self**

Much of what Foucault says about technologies of the self is also true of Sufism. Unlike much academic work on Sufism, the present study seeks to invigorate contemporary discussions in the social sciences with the input of traditional knowledge, in this case from Sufism. Rather than having Sufism as an object of anthropological, historical, or theological study, it considers how Sufism can provide knowledge in a way that complements the social sciences and how its epistemology can provide some

insights into the study of attention and data.

Much has been said about the need to decolonize the curriculum. The serious consideration of the epistemology of traditional knowledge systems such as Sufism would be a first step in this direction. Academic research into Sufism has drawn from a variety of academic disciplines including anthropology, political science and religious studies. There is also much detailed exegesis of the canonical Sufi texts while other research takes a political organizational view of Sufi orders and movements. In all this, there is little examination of a possible epistemological conversation between the social sciences and Sufism or other traditional forms of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> This article is concerned with this, aiming to show the applicability and creativity of Sufi concepts born from experiential knowledge to deal with contemporary intellectual and material problems. Indeed, the purpose of our research is to reverse the subject/object relations: Sufism for us is not an object of study but rather part of a greater project, the development of a fruitful dialogue between knowledge systems. Put simply, how can the study of Sufism transform the social sciences that study it?<sup>13</sup>

This dialogue between different cultures of knowledge has been pioneered by the Moroccan Sufi tariqa, the Qadiriya Boutchichiya,<sup>14</sup> which organizes every year at the commemoration of the Mawlid or Prophet's birthday the *Rencontres Mondiales du Soufisme* – the World Meeting on Sufism. This event assembles a heterogeneous group of professors and intellectuals from around the world to discuss

contemporary intellectual themes from a Sufi angle. Speakers include Moroccan, African and European social scientists trained in the disciplines of social sciences but also scholars from Muslim institutions such as al-Azhar as well as leaders of Sufi movements from around the world. Many of the speakers are university professors. While some often combine their research with a personal practice of Sufism, others are specialists of Sufism. Every year, a theme is chosen that generally has resonance in contemporary debates in the social sciences. In 2019, the theme was “the commons”. This event was where the question of the relations between the commons and Sufism arose.<sup>15</sup>

Three contemporary issues will be discussed in this article: the theory of attention, the theory of “the commons” and the theory of digital colonialism. All of these are related to the fundamental questions of the constitution of value, an important subject but one that we hope to explore in future articles. Linking the social sciences and western philosophy with traditional forms of Islamic knowledge practices of the twentieth century, scholars such as Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, Mehmet Ayni and Mehmed Maksudoğlu compared and contrasted the intellectual work of European philosophy with Islamic and Sufi ideas. Maksudoğlu, for example, sought to compare Sufi knowledge with the philosophy of Bergson.<sup>16</sup> All these thinkers believed deeply in the importance of integrating traditional Islamic knowledge with modern intellectual life.

12 See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Intellect and Intuition: Their Relationship from the Islamic Perspective”, *Studies in Comparative Religion* 13, 1 (1979): 6.

13 An interesting recent example of such an approach is to be found in Muhammad U. Faruque's article “Charles Taylor and the Invention of Modern Inwardness: A Sufi, constructive response”, *Religions* 13, 8 (2022): 674.

14 See Fadwa Islah, “Maroc: voyage au cœur de la Boutchichiya” *Jeune Afrique* 30 avril 2022, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1338309/politique/maroc-voyage-au-coeur-de-la-boutchichiya/>.

15 See Francesco Piraino, *Le soufisme en Europe. Islam, ésotérisme et New Age* (Paris, Karthala and Tunis, Institut sur le Maghreb contemporain, 2023). Piraino approaches the Boutchichiya from an ethnographic angle.

16 See Dilek Sarmis, “Variations bergsoniennes dans les écritures intellectuelles et littéraires turques”, *Annales bergsoniennes*, IX (2020): 155-175.

## Attention

In the book I co-authored with Claudia Roda in 2019, we stated in the introduction that:

Across the social order complaints are growing about a scarcity of attention. In the current context, attention is perceived as bearing a similarity to money: most of us do not have enough of it, we seek more of it, but it is unequally distributed across the board. We are yet to understand the full consequences of digitization and how it will change politics, ethics and economics, just as print may have done in the early modern period.<sup>17</sup>

Attention or how humans direct their minds has become a central notion in the social sciences. The American Psychological Association defines attention as “a state in which cognitive resources are focused on certain aspects of the environment rather than on others.”<sup>18</sup> It has become increasingly common to talk of ‘the attention economy’, a term coined by Herbert A. Simon which in general now refers to the fact that we have a surplus of information accompanied by a scarcity of attention. Simon claimed that attention was the “bottleneck of human thought” that limits both what we can perceive in stimulating environments and what we can do. He also noted that “a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention”.<sup>19</sup> Mintzer explains the contribution of theoretical physicist Michael Goldhaber who argues that the international economy is shifting from being material-based economy to attention-based, pointing to the many services online offered free of charge. As fewer people are involved with manufacturing and we move away from an industrial economy, Goldhaber argues that while information is not scarce, attention is.

17 Waddick Doyle and Claudia Roda, “Introduction” in *Communication in the Era of Attention Scarcity*, ed. Waddick Doyle and Claudia Roda (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

18 Ally Mintzer, “Paying Attention: the Attention Economy”, *Berkley Economic Review*, March 2020.

19 Ibid.

My own earlier work considered how television seeks to attract human attention and sell it to advertisers.<sup>20</sup> The economic concept of attention is that of a valuable commodity that can be bought, sold, and traded. In the attention economy, while attention is a scarce resource, information is conceived of as abundant and ‘free’, provided by online technologies such as *Google*, *Wikipedia* and *Baidu*. In reality, audiences ‘pay’ for information by letting themselves be tracked.

In such a world, companies that can capture and hold the most attention are the ones that are often successful, at least in terms of stock market values. This has led to a proliferation of attention-grabbing strategies, from social media notifications to new forms of advertising. The attention economy has been studied extensively in the field of economics. For the economist Richard Thaler, attention is a limited resource that is subject to the laws of supply and demand.<sup>21</sup> In other words, attention is a finite resource, and as demand for attention increases, the cost of obtaining it also increases. There is a huge supply of information but a lack of attention.

## Commons

Is this attention individual or collective, personal or transcendental? In the planet’s current ecological crisis, a key notion has been the maintenance of that which we share, namely the commons, which may be defined as “the cultural and natural resource accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water, and a habitable earth. These resources are held in common, not owned privately.”<sup>22</sup> The term can be used to

20 See Waddick Doyle, “From Deregulation to Monopoly: A Cultural Analysis of the Formation of a Private Television Monopoly in Italy” (PhD diss. Griffith University, 1990).

21 See Richard Thaler, “Mental Accounting and Consumer Choice”, *Marketing Science* 4, 3 (1985): 199-214.

22 Soutrik Basu, Joost Jongerden and Guido Ruivenkamp, “Development of the Drought Tolerant Variety Sahbhagi Dhan: Exploring the Concepts Commons and Community Building” in *International Journal of the Commons* 11, 1 (2017): 144.

refer to a broad set of resources, natural and cultural, shared by many people. While traditional examples of commons include forests, fisheries, or groundwater resources, increasingly we see the term commons used for a broader set of domains, such as knowledge commons, digital commons, urban commons, health commons, cultural commons, etc. Is there also an attention commons? Might there not be a spiritual commons?

Humanity faces the challenge of how to respond to the decline of the commons, which is taking place in many ways, notably through pollution. For example, the waters flowing in our streams and rivers, many privately owned, are becoming highly polluted. At another level, the pastures for animals which were once open to all have become private property. Even the air we breathe is increasingly polluted as humanity destroys the forests, the lungs of the planet. Good air itself will become rarer and rarer. Can we think of attention in the same way, as a natural resource that is being depleted and not regenerated? Our capacity for attention is being destroyed by a media system based on constant distraction, tempting humans away from concentration towards desire and the illusionary satisfaction of artificial needs.<sup>23</sup> Is attention a natural resource, which is now being extracted and transformed through algorithmic tracking of our data and digital lives? The commons have moved from being material things to the intangible. From streams of water to streams of words and streams of images.

As yet, the term ‘the commons’ has not been used to discuss attention, normally conceived of as individual rather than collective or as supra individual. In general, the concept of the commons refers to a shared resource or asset that is available to a group of people, rather than being owned by any one individual or organization. The idea of the commons has been the subject of much theoretical debate and discussion, with scholars and thinkers

23 See Razmig Keycheyan, *Les besoins artificiels : Comment sortir du consumérisme*. (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, coll. Zones, 2019).

exploring its various dimensions and implications. Hardin<sup>24</sup> argues that selfish exploitation destroys the commons; Ostrom argues that collective management of the commons can lead to more well-being.<sup>25</sup> However, to our knowledge, no one has argued directly that attention is a commons and a natural resource.

Our supposition here is that human attention is comparable to resources such as water, air and the oceans. Is human attention not a collective resource? In other words, if one of us loses their attention, might not the consequence be that we all lose some, too? We are living in a society where the distraction of populations on digital platforms is immensely profitable for corporations. However, as more and more of our population is distracted constantly, the poorer our collectivity is and the weaker our capacity to concentrate becomes. Our capacity to care becomes rarer. It would seem that the digital utopia promised when the Internet was new has not been borne out.

In terms of attention studies, rituals may be also understood as ways of maintaining collective attention towards the infinite, for example, in collective invocations of the infinite or of prayers.<sup>26</sup> This spiritual energy is drying up like our rivers.

### Data Colonialism

Colonialism was a process of world conquest where northern capitalist countries extracted value and commodities from the rest of the world including natural resources such as gold, iron and oil. Even people became commodities. This conquest was

24 See Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons”, *Science* 162, 3859 (1968): 1243–48, accessed 27 May 2023. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1724745>.

25 See Frank Van Laerhoven and Elinor Ostrom, “Traditions and Trends in the Study of the Commons”, *International Journal of the Commons* 1, 1 (2007): 3–28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26522979>.

26 The process of how such practices were transformed by secularized societies into invented nationalist rituals or civil religion such as commemorations is brilliantly described by Hobsbawm and Ranger in their book *Invented Traditions*.



combined with settler colonialism which seized land and exploited indigenous peoples, often destroying their cultures. This process of wealth extraction was accompanied by the enrichment and expansion of cities in the core capitalist countries. Ownership shifted from the collective towards the private; the commons were seized and transformed into private wealth. Above we have argued that attention was a type of collective natural resource that was transformed and dispersed. So far, this position has been explored by the academy in relation to data rather than attention.

Data colonialism refers to the exploitation and commodification of data from individuals and communities by powerful actors, often from the Global North, for their own benefit. It involves the extraction and appropriation of data, often without informed consent or compensation, and the imposition of Western data models and standards on non-Western societies where capitalism has less hold. Data colonialism can reinforce existing power imbalances and exacerbate social and economic inequalities. One example of data colonialism is the use of data from developing countries by large technology companies for their own commercial gain, without providing adequate benefits to the communities from which the data was sourced.

Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias have collaborated on several papers exploring the concept of digital colonialism. (The concept was first elaborated as ‘electronic colonialism’ by Schiller in 1976). In their 2019 paper,<sup>27</sup> Couldry and Mejias define digital colonialism as a process that “entails the appropriation of digital processes and products by capitalist powers to extend their control over societies and territories.”<sup>28</sup> They argue that digital colonialism involves the exploitation of data and the extraction of value from it, in ways that replicate and extend the historical dynamics of colonialism.

27 See Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, “Data colonialism: Rethinking Big Data’s Relation to the Contemporary Subject”, *Television & New Media*, 20 (2019): 768-782.

28 Ibid. 768.

Specifically, the term “data colonialism” refers to the ways in which data is extracted, processed, and monetized for the benefit of a few powerful actors, while the vast majority of people are left without control over their own data.<sup>29</sup> They also note that data colonialism often reinforces existing power imbalances, as those with more data and computing resources are better able to extract value from it. Couldry and Mejias suggest that data colonialism is not limited to any industry or sector, but rather is a pervasive feature of the contemporary digital landscape. Their argument runs that digital platforms are prime examples of data colonialism in action, as they have built their business models around the collection and exploitation of user data. Data colonialism highlights the ways in which power and control in the digital realm are deeply intertwined with historical patterns of exploitation and domination. They argue that digital colonialism is the way in which the power dynamics of colonialism have been reproduced and extended through digital technologies and platforms.

In other words, digital colonialism refers to the ways in which the control and exploitation of resources, labor, and data in the digital realm mirrors the patterns of colonialism in the physical world. Data and attention have replaced raw materials as things that are extracted for profit. According to Couldry and Mejias, digital colonialism is not limited to the exploitation of resources and labor in developing countries but can also be seen in the ways in which digital platforms extract and commodify data from users in developed countries. He argues that the power dynamics of colonialism are not just reproduced but intensified in the digital realm due to the unprecedented scale and scope of data extraction.

We would like to extend the concept of data colonialism to consider the practice of attention. Digital technologies allow for far more than just the basic extraction of data. They also work on our concentrated mental energy, absorbing our attention through the systems of distraction they vehicle.

29 See Ibid. 769.

Such systems, which function by habituating us to endlessly available visual and narrative pleasure, can be found replacing centuries old cultural forms which were based on spiritual practices and collective spiritual actions. Such traditions, despite their deep-rooted character, can be found declining in many different cultural frameworks: Buddhist meditative practices are less followed in Bhutan due to the introduction of television and the Internet; the traditional systems of Muslim societies are equally under attack through media in this process. We argue that it is not simply data that is being collected but that there is in fact an actual loss of a collective natural resource which takes individuals away from producing attention to being distracted from it. This argument needs to be developed further but a term like ‘attention colonialism’ might be very productive.

Traditionalist and perennialists have long argued that it is transcendental traditions which generate energy and attention. René Guénon argued that this relationship to a transcendental principle was preserved within different exoteric traditions and that in modern times it has come been threatened in the colonial western attack on traditional oriental cultures. Since, the Second World War, this attack has no longer been through military means but largely through the media. If we return to our quotation from Michel Foucault and his four technologies of power, we see that the West used (and still uses) violence to extend its domination. Secondly, its use of force is accompanied by the technologies of economic hegemony operating through industrial capitalism. Thirdly, power was exercised through the forces of cultural colonialism operating through seizure of the meaning systems of colonized peoples in a type of semiotic conquest. It is our contention that it is only the fourth type of power, the technologies of the self which remain capable of generating resistance to this.<sup>30</sup>

30 In *Attention, Not Self*, his monograph of 2017, Jonardon Ganeri has done remarkable work in linking the concept of attention in the sixth century Buddhist texts of the Buddhaghosa with the contemporary

Sufi rituals are examples of this type of power and can be individual but are also collective sharing attention directed towards a spiritual guide or ultimately a divine presence. Is human attention a natural resource that can be generated through the practice of *dhikr*,<sup>31</sup> the recall of God’s name? Like land itself, attention must be cared for and allowed to generate ever more resources, or it will dry up and its land become infertile. The world’s great spiritual traditions all had systems of meditation through which the infinite was recalled, remembered. Few of these survive. Nevertheless, one of the principal survivors among these traditions is Sufism. Might not its technologies of the self allow us a generative theory of attention in abundance?

### Sufi Techniques of Attention

Let us turn now to some key concepts in Sufism and its epistemology in relation to the economy of attention. Sufism might help us understand this new digitally based economic and social world and help us find appropriate ethical responses. Sufism is above all a spiritual practice which connects humans with the absolute, a divine presence often manifested in a love of others. It offers us a theory of transcendental knowledge which includes other forms of knowledge, bringing to us centuries-old techniques of managing attention, ways of achieving a deeper sense of connection to a source of meaning through disciplining attention and ethical practices that shape the self and the way of knowing. The techniques of Sufism are based on the idea of expanding attention or awareness and hence not simply directing attention towards information as attention economists would argue.

cognitive sciences. Ganeri does this by rejecting what he calls the authorship view whereby intention is attributed to a self. He imagines attention as something pure and abundant, unpredicated around a subject and their intentions. His notion corresponds to Simone Weil’s notion of pure attention or attention as prayer, mentioned above. See Jonardon Ganeri, *Attention, Not Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

31 For the translation of Arabic terms, we have used the lexis of Sufi terminology provided by the following site: <http://www.almirajsuficentre.org.au/qamus/app/single/2076>, consulted 17 April 2023.

The principle technique is *tawajjuh*<sup>32</sup> which, as William Chittick explains, can be translated as alignment, orientation, concentration, or attentiveness. Chittick prefers the literal meaning of the term, “to turn the face towards something”.<sup>33</sup> *Tawajjuh* is also used to refer to the spiritual concentration exercise between the spiritual guide (*murshid*) and his disciple (*murīd*) where the disciple concentrates on the spiritual guide’s *himma* (spiritual energy), sometimes imagining the name of God written on the forehead of the guide. In an authentic *tarīqa* this can lead towards “the truth of orientation”: *ḥaqīqa al-tawajjuh*.<sup>34</sup> The guide is described as having the power to orientate the heart of his disciple towards the guide, then to the Prophet, and ultimately towards the divine. This practice directs attention through looking or interior concentration and contemplation. Attention is directed towards a saintly person (*walī*), understood as a spiritual figure who through the illumination of his ego (*nafs*) is transparent to luminous energy and can transmit, thereby providing an infinite source of attention. A related principle is the attention focused on the visualization of Arabic letters which appear in isolation at the start of certain suras of the Qur’an.<sup>35</sup>

32 *Tawajjuh* can refer also to the spiritual concentration exercised between the *murshid* and his *murīd* (apprentice or disciple). On a higher level of meaning, *tawajjuh* is Allah’s Attentiveness towards the possible thing which brings that thing into existence. Also, through the attentiveness to a Divine Name, the traveler is drawn towards Allah. from <http://www.almiraj-suficentre.org.au/qamus/app/single/2076>, consulted 17 April 2023

33 See William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-Arabi’s Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 425.

34 *Ḥaqīqa al-tawajjuh*: the reality of Facing or Alignment, the power which enables the *murshid* to turn the heart of his *murīd* towards him, and through him towards the Holy Prophet Muhammad and ultimately towards Allah. Definition from <http://www.almiraj-suficentre.org.au/qamus/app/single/2076>, consulted 17 April 2023.

35 For a more detailed discussion of this see Kris Ramelan and Ana Ludovico, “Desiring the Sweet Perfume of Closeness in the Oscillating Tawajjuh of the Letter Rā”. *Religions*, 14 (2023): 69 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060692>.

From a Sufi perspective, *dhikr* is a key practice involving the repetition of sacred formulae principally *la ilaha illa Allah* (no reality outside the divine reality) to open consciousness to memory of the infinite. The word itself means memory. *Dhikr* implies memory of the divine which is infinite and limitless following Foucault’s description above: “The soul cannot know itself except by looking at itself in a similar element, a mirror. Thus, it must contemplate the divine element.”<sup>36</sup> Sufi practice works in a similar way concentrating on the transcendental and generating a “common” of attention by linking the microcosm of individual *dhikr* or remembering to the infinite world of the divine. This is perhaps one of the best responses to digital colonialism as it produces the very energy and resources that allow attention. Human beings can attain infinite attention by contemplation, by *tawajjuh* towards the infinite. This practice is designed to lead the adept towards knowledge understood as *ma’rifa*. Shah-Kazemi explains clearly that “[*ma’rifa*] entails the spiritual realization that there is but one Reality. Attainment of identity with the sole Reality is said to flow from this truth in the measure that the autonomous existence of the world and the ego is concretely effaced.”<sup>37</sup>

Nasr compares *ma’rifa* to other types of knowledge - the rational mind, the intuitive sense but says that they are all contained in *ma’rifa*, to be understood as ultimate direct knowledge in terms of expansion. He distinguishes between *ma’rifa* and *‘ilm*, between knowledge through direct perception of reality and knowledge through reason or logical deduction. He compares this distinction to Bergson’s differentiation between intellect and intuition.<sup>38</sup>

36 Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” Lectures at University of Vermont, October 1982, in *Technologies of the Self*, (Amherst, Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

37 Reza Shah-Kazemi, “The Notion and Significance of Ma’rifa in Sufism”, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13 (2002): 155-181.

38 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Intellect and Intuition: Their Relationship from the Islamic Perspective” *Studies in Comparative Religion* 13 (1979): 65-74.

The philosopher Simone Weil, a remarkable figure who converted to Christianity from Judaism in the 1940s following a mystical experience explains clearly how attention is linked to spiritual experience. What she says is also true of Sufism. Humans can gain access the infinite or divine through pure attention, through what she termed ‘negative effort’, an effort with egotism removed. This perception of attention is entirely similar to the definition of *maʿrifa* in Sufism as eloquently described by Shah-Kazemi above.

In the Sufi tradition, the intellect is also referred to as the heart or the spiritual center of the human being and like *maʿrifa*, it refers to a form of spiritual intelligence linked to union with the infinite. The cluster of concepts around the terms *maʿrifa* (intellect), *ḥaqīqa* (truth), *qalb* (heart) and *akl nūr* all refer to a single reality which I would term, to quote Simone Weil, ‘pure attention’.

Nasr draws upon the concept of the Luminous Intellect which he views as central in Islamic philosophy and theology. We could argue that this is related closely to the concept of *tawḥīd*, or the unity of God. In Nasr’s view, the intellect is not just a cognitive faculty of the human mind, but a spiritual power that enables human beings to perceive the underlying unity and coherence of reality. For Nasr, the term ‘intellect’ is “a spiritual power that is distinct from the rational or logical mind, and it is seen as the highest aspect of human consciousness.”<sup>39</sup> It is through this luminous intellect that the nature of reality and the mysteries of existence is revealed, that higher states of knowledge are attained. It is believed that the intellect must be purified from the influence of the ego through spiritual practices such as *dhikr* contemplation, and ethical self-reflection. The intellect is conceived a gift from God and is the means by which human beings can attain knowledge of the divine.

In so doing, Nasr follows the logic of French metaphysician and Sufi René Guénon, for whom intellect was not simply a cognitive faculty of the human

mind, but a transcendent principle that is present in all levels of reality. He believed that the intellect is the highest aspect of human consciousness and is capable of directly apprehending the infinite and the metaphysical realities that lie beyond the material world. Guénon saw the intellect as a unifying principle that integrates both the rational and intuitive faculties as well as the higher spiritual faculties.<sup>40</sup>

### A Possible Dialogue of Ways of Knowing

May a Sufi perception of attention as knowledge enter into dialogue with a social scientific perception? If attention has become central to both the digital economy and the power system based also on media and distraction, what can Sufism teach us about it? As we have seen above, much of the understanding of attention in the social sciences derives from the model of supply and demand underpinning liberal economic theory, based on the idea of scarcity. Whereas the fundamental idea of most academic attention studies is the scarcity of attention in the digital era,<sup>41</sup> Sufism contains a notion of the generation of attention by linking it to awareness of the infinite, an endless source. In Sufi practice, intellect or *maʿrifa* is cultivated by paying attention to the infinite universal rather than the particular. Hence attention is not to be considered scarce but abundant and renewable. This is important in the digital era, for as artificial intelligence rises to replace many mental and rational functions, it is through the pure or egoless vision of the luminous intellect or heart that abundant attention can be generated. Sufism, however, is not simply a means of increasing one’s capacity to pay attention to any subject at hand. Rather, it may enable one to experience an infinity of attention which, as in the Buddhist case described by Ganeri, is not predicated by any particular subject. This implies that attention is also linked to ethical practice, a topic which we needs to be explored in another article.

40 See René Guénon, *Perspectives on Initiation* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 114.

41 See Doyle and Roda, “Introduction”, 1-6.

39 Ibid.

Early in this article we quoted Manuel Castells who argues that communications technologies shape our minds. Sufi practices also shape minds, cultivating attention and regenerating it through the experience of concentration on the infinite, the unlimited and the unknown, all of which can be conceived of as the divine. This orientation towards the infinite would indicate a human capacity to produce an infinite quantity of attention and abundance whereas attention economists like Goldhaber, Thaler, Davenport and Beck, and Herbert A. Simon all conceive of attention as limited. This distinction is central: attention which is ego centered cannot regenerate in the way that ego effaced attention can. The scarcity of attention is not a result of too much information but rather of too much egotism, too much projection of the self into attention. The basis of the liberal economic theory of demand does not question the source of demand or desire but rather assumes it as natural. In fact, the narrow target-driven self limits attention. As Ian Gilchrist writes:

Attention is not just receptive, but actively creative of the world we inhabit. How we attend makes all the difference to the world we experience. And nowadays in the West we generally attend in a rather unusual way: governed by the narrowly focused, target-driven left hemisphere of the brain.<sup>42</sup>

The posture described here assumes ego-driven purposes to be the sole purpose of attention. Such a notion of instrumentalized attention is inherently linked to the logic of capitalist extraction and digital colonialism.

In contrast, the Sufi theory of *ma'rifa* assumes the source to be the infinite. While the *nafs* or ego restricts attention towards specific objects, a turning of the face towards infinite being empties the subject allowing it to attain, in Foucault's words, "a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or

immortality". We have argued this type of knowledge can be considered as part of a commons, a natural resource like water, and hence may enable us to avoid the reefs of the ego-centred attention's inevitable and grinding poverty.

Pure Attention is, as Simone Weil says, prayer.

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<sup>42</sup> Iain McGilchrist, *Ways of Attending: How Our Divided Brain Constructs the World* (Abingdon and London: Routledge, 2018).

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